Part Four

[Miniature] Mobile Cinematics

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Archaeology of Mobile Film: Blink, Bluevend, and the Pocket Shorts

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Introduction

Watching film on tablets and mobile phones is now commonplace but just over a decade ago, such experiences were still just an aspiration. In 2002, Nokia ran a "Future Applications" advertisement featuring a woman sitting on a bus, watching a horror film on her phone. As she watches, she gets more and more agitated, until in the end she lets out a scream and the ad ends with the tag line "One day you'll be able to watch videos on your mobiles."

Following its predecessors—cinema, television, and computers—what became known as the "fourth screen" is now an established feature of the contemporary media ecology (Miller 2014, 210). But the earliest mobile media services took the form of TV show extracts, UK Premiere League football match highlights, and film featurettes. Among them was Fox TV's *24: Conspiracy* in 2005, which was a spin-off from the successful TV series consisting of 24-minute-long "mobisodes"™—a term trademarked by News Corporation to describe a serial mode of programming designed specifically for the mobile phone (Clarke 2013, 116). Mobile film festivals began to emerge such as Pocket Cinema at the San Francisco International Film Festival, Pixelache in Helsinki, and the Mobifest in Canada, while notable filmmakers such as Shane Meadows and Sally Potter experimented with making films for viewing on phones. Looking back, much of this early mobile media looks rather rudimentary, but I suggest that these prototypes should not be just consigned to a footnote in the history of moving image culture as they are incunabula of prevailing cinematic formats today, and reflecting on them may throw light on the genealogy of contemporary digital film culture.

To investigate the first generation of mobile films made for the "fourth screen," this chapter proposes to take a media archaeological approach. Building on the work of Friedrich Kittler (1999) and Michel Foucault (1989 [orig. 1969]) in recent years, archaeological ways of thinking about media have gained traction with those interested in how the past informs the present and, depending on who you read, vice versa. Jussi Parikka has argued that although the discipline of archaeology emerged out of a nineteenth-century interest in antiquarianism, its focus on materiality provides a promising way for contemporary media culture to come to understand itself at a time when technologies are developing at such pace (2015, 8). Moreover, as the media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst observed, while media are often used to access historical evidence and think about the past, media technologies themselves may well be overlooked as material evidence of the past (2013, 6). As a method of enquiry into the past, Ernst proposes an examination of mechanisms to gain a clearer sense of how media aesthetics are shaped technologies (2013, 17). In the light of this, the chapter will begin by examining the affordances of third generation phones, which became available around 2005, with the promise of providing a platform for not only viewing audiovisual media, but for making films as well.

Third generation mobile phones

Following government auctions across Europe of third generation spectrum licenses in 2000, a new standard known as the Universal Mobile Telecommunications Service (UMTS) came into operation, which expanded bandwidth and improved network operation. UMTS would enable mobile telephony to deliver the kinds of services that hitherto had been restricted to landlines. With the aim of recouping investment in licenses and upgrading the network infrastructure, telecoms companies "rolled out" 3G services and set out to market a new generation of mobile handsets that would provide high-speed internet connection, email access, and most importantly, on-demand media entertainment by 2005 (Ofcom 2004, 22).

Of all the mobile phone manufacturers competing for their share of the market, Nokia was notable for the promotional strategy of its "N" mobile phone series. It sponsored an award at the British Independent Film awards for the "Best British Short Film" (Lights, Camera, Action 2003). It set up the Nokia Shorts competition in collaboration with the Raindance Film Festival accompanied

by an online "Mobifilm Academy" providing advice on how to make films on mobile phones. Entries were limited to 15 seconds' duration and a shortlist of the best, chosen by a panel comprising industry experts, were screened at the Raindance Film Festival and on the Nokia website (Mobile Film Makers 2006). Clearly, Nokia saw commercial potential in promoting links between mobile phones and film (Lights, Camera, Action 2003).

Launched in 2005, the Nokia N70 was one of a series of 3G multimedia phones. Its screen was approximately 5 cm by 5 cm and it shared the phone's front side with a number keypad. Screen size determines the way any display material may be seen. In the theatrical setting of a cinema, audiences look up at vast images projected onto a screen. By contrast, to view a film on a mobile phone, they must "peer" down into the device and look away from their immediate surroundings in order to focus on the small screen (Richardson 2005).[1] In this regard the mobile screen does not command the audience's attention in the way that a cinema screen does. Rather than a physical act of concentration, first and foremost, the mobile phone seems to demand a cognitive act of concentration.

Since then, mobile phones have become smaller and their screens have become larger. This is indicative of the shift from "traditional voice services" to visually based modes of communication and entertainment (Ofcom 2004, 9). This shift is evident in a number of defining changes in the design of screen technologies. The first generation of mobile telephone screens had favored a vertical aspect ratio, more commonly known as "portrait" mode, whereas on 3G phones, a "full screen viewing mode" with wide screen aspect ratio, known as "landscape" mode, became possible, reminiscent of the conventional letterbox ratio of cinema screens. The change of screen size and aspect ratio invited a move away from solitary modes of viewing (for a reflection on the "solitary screen," see Chapter 12). 3G phones like the Nokia N70 incorporated the same liquid crystal display (LCD) screen technology used in televisions. This made possible wide angle viewing with no distortion, enabling phone-based entertainments to become shared experiences.

The auditory features of the phone invited new forms of attention, too. At this time, mobile phone audio features worked in three different ways: through the phone's speakers; through ear plugs; and through loudspeaker mode for different situations. While the speakers and ear plugs are standard phone features, the introduction of the "loudspeaker" mode would seem to indicate again that mobile phone activity increasingly takes place *in front of* the phone

rather than *through it,* confirming the development of the phone as a tool not only for communication but for audiovisual entertainment too (Repo et al. 2004, 6).

In "The Stories Tools Tell," Tarleton Gillespie suggests that in order to understand a digital artifact, not only should its technical affordances be taken into consideration, but also the materials that circulate around it such as advertising campaigns, press releases, instruction manuals, websites, tutorials, and other textual supplements. Gillespie's argument is that an understanding of an artifact is articulated through such materials by its own manufacturers in a process of "self-interpretation"—identifying what it does (and, implicitly, cannot do), how it can be used and be made sense of. Taken together, such materials create a "discursive formation" around the mobile phone that determines the meaning of the technology at a given time (Gillespie 2003, 112).

For example, the Nokia 70 model came loaded with what was described as "Movie Director" software. The phone's instruction booklet explained that this software could not actually make "movies" as such, but made "muvees"™—a trademarked algorithm that combined video and images from the phone's photo gallery with music to make short sequences, adorned with animations to send as multimedia messages (known as MMS). In the words of the Nokia 70's website FAQs, "It's like playing dress-up with your video!" (muveeMobile, 2006). Clearly, this "Movie Director" software redefines film making. While the word "Director" suggests a goal-directed and visionary potential to *create* films, "muvees" can only *combine* images, sound, and text in a mechanical fashion, and personalize the results with opening and closing text to make video messages.

Yet, in spite of these limitations, the Nokia Shorts 2005 competition was championed by filmmaker Shane Meadows who sang the praises of the medium, pointing out how "it lets you get shots which might not be possible using larger camera equipment" (Mobile Film Makers 2006). Furthermore, the Nokia website was full of enthusiastic comments from Nokia Shorts competition winners. Taken together, these discursive "narratives" circulating around a 3G phone are indicative of the distance between aspiration and actuality for the "fourth screen" at the time. Quoting Philip Agre, Gillespie suggests that a reflection on the metaphors used in such discursive materials can provide insight into a medium as these discursive materials operate as "mediums of exchange" between different semantic fields and point to aspirations for the media they refer to (2003, 115).

Blink and Pocket Shorts

As the telecom industry was promoting 3G mobile telephony, a small independent creative technology organization called Blink in Huddersfield, United Kingdom, set up a project to explore the potential of the new handsets that were coming onto the market. With support from NESTA (National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts), Blink invited filmmakers to try their hand with this new medium and eight films were commissioned. At the outset, Blink's directors Lisa Roberts and Andrew Wilson admitted to having very few preconceptions of what a mobile film might look like. The project placed few restrictions on these pioneering mobile film makers. The films were to be given a cinematic mode of presentation with title and credit sequences, but the filmmakers were advised to make films for the medium and "not try to create miniature versions of *Schindler's List*" (Roberts 2006).

Among the commissions were a series of four films lasting just over 30 seconds each, under the title *While you are Waiting* by Andrew Quinn and Gary McKeown (2005).[2] Contemporaneous research on uses of the mobile phone was indicating that mobile phones were already embedded into our everyday lives (Moore and Rutter 2004, 51), so the filmmakers took this as their starting premise. Each film took an everyday scenario: waiting outside a telephone box, waiting for a kettle to boil, waiting for the automated setting on the camera to take a photograph, or waiting for a friend. The films overlaid these familiar activities with rhythmic live action collage to reveal what can be done with idle moments, to entertain the "waiters" while they wait (see Figure 13.1 below). In this way Pocket Shorts adroitly incorporated themselves into the gaps around humdrum everyday activities (Roberts, 2006).

Figure 13.1 *While You Are Waiting* (Andrew Quinn and Gary McKeown 2005). Courtesy Lisa Roberts.

With the widespread adoption of sms (short message service), now more commonly known as text messaging, the second group of Pocket Shorts capitalized on 3G phone capabilities to send video messages. A series of four 15-second films by Matthew Austin titled *My Inner Shorts* (2005) were based on the four most popular text messages, "Imissyou," "Congrats," "Goodluck" and "Where r u?" (see Figure 13.2 below). By adopting the conventions of texting in the film's titles, the filmmaker's rotoscoped animations aimed to reclaim ownership of vernacular interactions from the standard auto-answers and emoticons. Of all the commissions, this group of ultra-short films highlighted how integrated into social relationships mobile phones were becoming and how these films could provide the materials for the practices of friendship resembling little "gifts" or souvenirs passed between friends (*A Film in your Pocket?* 2005[3]). This is a practice that finds a contemporary parallel in instant photo and video messaging applications like Snapchat, which have become a popular way of sharing a moment, mood, or experience. Even though messages are time-limited to no more than a few seconds, these micromovies generate a powerful sense of what has been described by Ekman as "a surprisingly effective illusion of living continuously with one another" across different spatial locations (2015, 100).

The Pocket Short that proved most popular at film festivals and went on to be aired on broadcast television was *Evil Fun with Zimmy* by Andy Sykes (2005), a minute-long animated monologue about a childhood encounter with a novelty toy (see Figure 13.3 below). Not content with exploring the potential of the medium for communication, Sykes reconceived mobile film for storytelling as a stripped-down sequence of events in the shape of the message, joke, aphorism, or quip—in short, compact forms of communication.

Figure 13.2 *My Inner Short: Where r u?* (Matthew Austin, 2005). Courtesy Matthew Austin.

While 3G phones were superseded by even smart(er) phones, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that these commissions were not just one-off experiments but actually prefigured a move toward compact media formats in entertainment. In response to new circumstances, films have been fashioned into clips, compilations, and mash-ups, as well as serialized, becoming "mobisodes," "webisodes," and "vlogs." These media formats share in common their increasing brevity, as can be seen in the development of shorter and shorter forms of video on platforms like Vine, Instagram, and Snapchat, with film length limited to a matter of seconds. What the Pocket Shorts lacked in length, however, they made up for in duration. All the films commissioned by Blink were presented in a format whereby once they came to an end, they would replay automatically: a circular form of presentation known as "looping." From GIF-based photographic loops to the built-in replay feature of QuickTime and VLC video players, and now software applications on Vine and other sites, looping has become an established feature of "post-cinematic" film (Poulaki 2015, 95).

Journalists, media analysts, and academics have all observed the growing significance of short form content in the online environment over the last decade (Miller 2007; Grainge 2011; Deloitte 2015). In *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Barbara Klinger has argued that the proliferation of short forms needs to be understood as a response to changes in the "attention economies" driven by contemporary media ecologies, in which

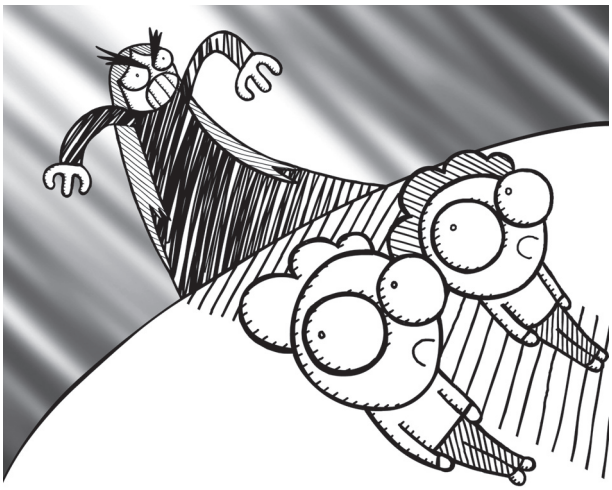

Figure 13.3 *Evil Fun with Zimmy* (Andy Sykes, 2005). Courtesy Andy Sykes.

short forms fit "seamlessly into both the surfing mentality that defines media experience and the multitasking sensibility that pervades computer culture" (2006, 199–200). Moreover, as Poulaki suggests, the looping structure used in the presentation of the Pocket Shorts has become a feature of compact forms as it enables them to expand in a "self-reproducing" duration to flexibly fill the time available (2015, 94).

Bluevend

Having explored the affordances of the format, the next challenge facing Blink Media was to find an audience for these films. While the first mobile media services tended to favor a "shrink-to-fit" approach repurposing material designed for showing on TV and cinema screens, Blink Media wanted to remain independent of the telecom companies, and their solution was to design a bespoke distribution system called Bluevend—a name created from a splice of Bluetooth technology and a vending machine (Roberts 2006).[4]

Bluevend was developed to enable the Pocket Shorts to be viewed on the platform for which they were designed and showcase these mobile films at film festivals. A personal computer was encased in a sealed acrylic box with a touchscreen interface (see Figure 13.4). Using Bluetooth technology, the

Figure 13.4 Bluevend: a Bluetooth-enabled film vending machine. Courtesy Lisa Roberts.

Bluevend transformed a personal computer into a small broadcast unit that could communicate with other Bluetooth-enabled devices within a defined radius (Roberts 2006). To access the Pocket Shorts, all that was required was a curious owner of a Bluetooth-enabled mobile phone, and films were selected from a menu and delivered on request for free. Bluevend made its first public appearance at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2005 before touring to festivals in Finland, San Francisco, and Rotterdam.

So, contrary to the promise that mobiles could lead to a "cinema without walls," the implication of using Bluetooth was that "placedness" actually became critical to the reception of these films. By situating the Bluevend in film festival venues, these prototypes retained a specificity to the cinematic experience. Roberts' observations of audiences' engagements with the Bluevend suggested that people tended to collect the films and then go on to share them with friends, transmitting them by Bluetooth from phone to phone (2006). So, the Pocket Shorts were distributed along the contours of friendship in a similar way to social media platforms such as Facebook with its "like" recommendations today. In this way, this mobile form of cinema both aligned itself with conventional cinema and exploited social media and digital technology in their projection and distribution. By so doing, these films enter into a dialogue with the classic cinematic dispositive claiming the place of their compact cinematics in cinematic tradition.

Conclusion

Media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst has argued that technical media should be regarded as "active agents" conditioning what is possible at any given time (2013, 15). Through an exploration of the affordances of 3G mobile telephony, as well as the discursive materials surrounding the mobile phone in print and online, both the potential and limitations of 3G phones for film making and film viewing have been brought into focus. Working with the specificities of the medium, pioneering filmmakers took up the challenge of creating films for viewing on mobile phones. The resulting films prototyped short form visual and textual practices and played a part in shaping the prevailing trend of compact cinematics. Furthermore, the bespoke distribution system, Bluevend, turned film spectatorship into a social experience, presaging the engagement of social media with the cinematic today.

Notes

1 Characterizing the act of looking into a mobile phone as "peering" can be understood in contrast to the "glance" associated with the other small domestic screen of the television, and the "gaze" at the cinema screen (Ellis 1982, 24). Moreover, "peering" into a mobile phone is suggestive of the prevailing mode of attention today—connectivity.

2 Andrew Quinn and Gary McKeown. 2005. *While you are Waiting* (Series of 4). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWSb5FRlF0&index=8&list=PL36F45C87E8FA3D7F (Box), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6P66eX2unYg&list=PL36F45C87E8FA3D7F&index=7 (Feet), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CatJD7iFj3g&index=5&list=PL36F45C87E8FA3D7F (Photo), and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoXbiM7cQ70&list=PL36F45C87E8FA3D7F&index=6 (Tea) (accessed February 26, 2016).

3 "A Film in your Pocket?" 2005. *BBC* [Online]. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bradford/content/articles/2005/11/24/pocket_shorts_huddersfield_feature.shtml (accessed March 8, 2006).

4 Bluevend was invented by Blink's co-directors Lisa Roberts and Andrew Wilson in association with Daniel Blackburn.