The mobile aesthetics of cell phone made films: from the pixel to the everyday[1]

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Resumen

El artículo se enfoca en el análisis de la estética que han adquirido las cámaras de los teléfonos celulares, los cuales dadas sus limitaciones de captura, sonido, tienden a configurar un nuevo lenguaje. Tras revisar la obra de algunos artistas dedicados a la creación de films basados en la pobre característica técnica de los videos hechos en celular, como Roger Odin y desde la perspectiva teórica de autores como Camille Baker, Alessandro Amaducci, toma forma un aporte a la vertiente de los medios electrónicos y digitales y específicamente a las teorías de la imagen en movimiento, cuya utilidad permitirá a los creadores y estudiantes de cine o video tomar elementos que les sirvan a sus prácticas de creación.

[1]. Una versión previa del artículo fue publicado en http://cinemiz.net/cifj/?p=1385

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Abstract

The artcle focuses in the analysis of the aesthetics cell pone cameras have acquired which given their capture and sound limitations tend to configure a new language. After revisiing the work of some artists dedicated to the creation of films based in the poor technical characteristic of videos taken with the cell phone, such as Roger Odin, and from the theoretical perspective of authors such as Camille Baker and Alessandro Amaducci a contribution to the electronic and digital media aspects takes form whose usefulness will allow the movies or video creators and students to take elements that can serve in their creation practices.

Key Words: low images resolution, cinema, language, cell phones

Introduction

74

The first films shot with mobile phones appeared between 2005-2006. One of them is feature film SMS *Sugar Man*[2] (2005-2006) by South African director Aryan Kaganof. This film is regarded as a revolutionary alternative way of making films with the limitations imposed by the mobile phone. Another pioneering film considered amongst the first ones would be *New Love Meetings* (2006) by Marcello Mencarini and Barbara Seghezzi. The reception of these novelties highlight the use of the new technology and its limitations becoming assets; newspaper The Guardian reports about *New Love Meetings* on 14th of June 2006:

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[2]. To be seen online: www.smssugarman.com.

The limitations of filming with a mobile phone - having to film at close range, weak sound capture and the slightly shaky picture - turned out to be advantages for them, leading people to open up a little more easily[3].

Even though both films are very different, -the first one being a narrative ode to "film noire" and the second one a documentary film, an ode to Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1965 *Love Meetings*, -they made film's attention shift towards the issue of how reality, the world out there, is filtered through a cell phone's camera. Not only because of the low-resolution imagery but because a cell phone is such a domestic object everybody carries it in his or her pocket: fiction or reality both films feel very close to us, spectators. The fact is that mobile devices offer the user the possibility of making photos and videos. They "insert" a lens in everybody's hand: capturing reality at any moment and place of the day has never been so accessible. The possibilities this offers has not gone unnoticed, from common users to professionals: during the past years, films made with mobile phones have received the attention of not only the press but also film and media scholars. In order to better understand them, there is a tendency to root such practice within certain film traditions; moreover, scholars have attempted to define the aesthetic and stylistic characteristics of cell phone made films, resulting in the creation of categories and definition of possible tendencies.

The mobile, portable aspect of the filming device is of utter importance when it comes to understanding cell phone made films. Regardless of the device film-makers use, their mobile characteristic is what catches the attention of writers such as French scholar Roger Odin, one of the first ones to attempt to categorize cell phone made films. Odin brings forward a distinction made between *cinema uno*[4] , the photographic cinema of the "trace", "made to be seen in a room by a spectator invited to adopt a specific discipline of the eye" and *cinema due* or digital cinema which is consumed in many different kinds of "dispositiefs", "which

75

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[3]. Full-length film shot on phone, published on The Guardian, 14 June 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jun/14/news2

[4]. Odin constructs his argument based on Franceso Casetti's work L'occhio del Novecento. Bompiani, Milano, 2005.

are often inscribed within the communication of the multimedia, of the game
[…] or of the physical effect […] rather than with that of the narrative" (Odin,
2009). Within *cinema due* the camera phone stands out as a different element:
the camera as a prosthetic eye in the hand, as an extension of the body that makes
mobile made films different, as the camera slowly integrates in the human body
(Odin, 2009). This distinction deserves a special consideration since *cinema due*
is too vast, Odin comes up with a subcategory: p-cinema: "is the part of cinema
due which is made with a mobile phone"[5] . Odin's category is to be based on the
prosthetic aspect of the mobile phone, which translates into a shooting style. And
so with Odin a new category is born which opens the doors to new interpretations
and analyses of an emerging cinema practice. Today, seven years after the first
cell phone shot films, it is time to make a retrospective exercise. This paper will
revise the evolution of aesthetic characteristics and typologies of mobile made
films that have been suggested by several authors offering a short history of this
recent phenomenon. Every attempt to explain the style and aesthetics of cell
phone made films might define the characteristics of a possible new language.

Mobile aesthetics

The way we perceive reality through a cell phone, built in camera has changed
through time: pixelated images due to the camera's low resolution, -so iconic in
the beginning, -have become a conscious choice and high definition (HD) is now
the new standard. The first films made with camera phones in 2005-2006 had no
other choice but to take advantage of the camera's shortcomings: low resolution
and the consequent pixelation of the image gave impulse to a low-res aesthetic.
Far from being rejected, this effect is embraced by makers and considered as
an asset to the end result. But low-res was soon superseded by better quality

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[5]. Translated from Odin's article in French: "telephone portable", therefore p-cinema.

cameras; for films made in the last years (2010 on) low resolution is an option as, for instance, the mobile device iPhone4 (and further models) records in HD where there is hardly any trace of the pixel. This phenomenon raises important questions about the quality of the image as a characteristic of cell phone made films. Is the pixelated image an aesthetic quality essential for the identity of cell phone made films? Is there such thing as mobile aesthetics beyond the celebrated shortcomings? Is the tool itself a unique asset when it comes to capturing reality, regardless of the amount of pixels? In their short life-spam, what seems to be true is that the very concept of cell phone film aesthetics is quite "mobile" itself as devices keep developing and changing very rapidly.

Media artists and scholars Camille Baker, Max Schleser and Kasia Molga support the idea of image pixelation as a defining characteristic in mobile aesthetics but they also consider other aspects that derive from the accessible character of the cell phone. In their common article *Aesthetics of mobile media art* they argue for the "existence of aesthetics unique to the mobile media" looking at the "mobile media specific qualities of immediacy and intimacy" (Baker et al., 2009: 101). Counter to the HD phenomenon, they consider mobile phones to have brought new standards when it comes to aesthetics. Moreover, considering filmmaking, German director and film scholar Max Schleser, has introduced a new category derived form the use of cell phones: the 'mobile-mentary'. Schleser writes: "The category can be defined through the characteristics of an original aesthetic signified by pixelated video images. Thus, it is the mobile phone's limitations that are the defining pattern for the establishment of this new format" (Baker et al., 2009: 102). His statement seems to define a timely image previous to the improvement of the cameras.

The image quality issue, as Italian scholar Alessandro Amaducci points out, has had a fluctuating course throughout the history of cinema. Low quality image is considered a way of artistic expression; for instance, experimental filmmaker

77

Jonas Mekas supports the "grammatical anarchy" of the "audiovisual avant-garde to defend the means that the market does not consider professional. In the 60s the Super8 or 16mm, abandoned formats of the *mainstream* production, become the new weapons of the artists who want to create moving images" (Amaducci, 2009: 143). Today, video artists such as Amsterdam based artist Raul Marroquin, exploit and defend the effect of low-resolution aesthetics, making the evident trace of the pixel the protagonist of the image[6]. Te thick quality of the pixels becomes an aesthetic filter through which reality is perceived.

Low resolution defines the aesthetics of the beginning period of cell phone made films; once there are better options, low-res becomes an aesthetic choice[7]. The quality improvement of built in cameras and generalization of HD video brings mobile made films closer to mainstream aesthetics. Thus, recalling the category of *p-cinema* (coined by Roger Odin) which refers to the portable, prosthetic character of the camera, can we say at this point that all the films shot with camera phones share aesthetic characteristics? Perhaps it is necessary to look beyond the question of the image quality to find unique traits of cell phone made films. Max Schelser refers to the new mobile aesthetics as "*Keitai*" aesthetics. In Japanese *Kaitai* means "hand-carry, small and portable, carry, small and portable, carrying something, form – shape or mobile phone" (Baker et al., 2009: 102). Given this definition of *Keitai,* the concept of aesthetics derived from it goes beyond image quality into more philosophical aspects of the mobile phone use. Schleser assigns three levels of *Keitai* aesthetics. To begin with, the visual level which is characterized by the pixelation of the image. Even though he doesn't mention HD built in cameras, he marks a certain periodization: "In mobile phone filmmaking, the period between 2005 and 2008 is characterized by advancement from the 3GP mobile phone video file format to the mpg4 compression format" (Baker et al., 2009: 102). Schleser's own work is a good example of this as it contains both

78

formats in one video: *Max with a Keitai* (2006)[8] produced with two cell phones during 56 days in 2006 (Baker et al., 2009: 102-103).

Moreover, Odin suggests certain "tendencies" that can add further meaning and information about the pixelation aspect within the visual level of *Keitai* aesthetics. Odin mentions contingent elements that depend on the pixelation of the image: constrains "which can be quite productive in terms of creativity" (Odin, 2009: 367). Having in mind the above-mentioned periodization, we can consider his examples as early works made with mobile phones with certain characteristics: first, *pictorialism*, in which we find a direct reference to painting, mostly due to the resemblance between the brush stroke and the pixel but also because of the correspondence between the vertical format of the painting and the mobile screen. Examples of this would be the short film *La Perle*[9] (Marguerite Lantz, 2006); in this short film a young girl uses a cell phone as a mirror to dress and compose herself as the lady in Johannes Vermeer's painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Odin argues this effect works as long as the pixel is visible to make reference to the brush stroke[10]. Another tendency would be abstraction; referring to the short film T*ourner en rond et se laisser consumer* (Vincent Moon, 2006)[11] Odin describes a "frenetic rhythm of lines and of spots which scroll at great speed on the screen, a visual sarabande on which he couldn't help adding violins" (Odin, 2009: 367). And last, *diegesis of the pixel effect,* this means the importance of the pixel within the narrative of the story. For example, in Nocturne pour le roi de Rome (Jean Charles Fitoussi, 2005) where the pixels gain a subjective character that supports the portraiture of the protagonist's physical and psychological state (Odin, 2009: 367).

79

The format chanhe 3G to 4G seems to point towards an improvement of the image quality, becoming this slightly less pixelated. An example that can illustrate the

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[8]. To be seen on: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jc2iLI5Mx0

[9]. To be seen on: http://www.margueritelantz.com/laperle.htm

[10]. Referring again to artist Raul Marroquin's work, he often mentions the fact that regarding pixelation we're dealing with a new form of Pointillism.

[11]. To be seen on: http://vimeo.com/3231136

change in quality image is the work by French filmmaker and producer Benoît Labourdette. Labourdette made a 64-minute feature film *Triton*[12] (2007) shot with mobile phones and HD cameras, as he explains on his website[13] . Within the film we notice different image qualities. If we take a later work from 2010, for instance *Etude pour main11*[14] , we don't find the pixelation from 2007. As I have suggested before, pixelation becomes an option at a certain point and therefore is not a continuous "unique" characteristic to mobile phone aesthetics but an optional trait. Dutch filmmaker Cyrus Frisch is an example of this, as he shot his film *Why didn't anybody tell me it would become this bad in Afghanistan* (2009) with a low resolution mobile phone (he purposefully bought the lowest resolution possible) in order to stress the alienation feeling the protagonist feels when he looks at the world from his balcony; in this case the narrative becomes stronger by the use of a pixelated image:

> *I started to film teenage immigrants. Because of the limitations of the medium, you can't hear them so well. It seemed a threatening and scary experience. […] It became a perfect metaphor for what was going on with society at that time. People are scared for things they can't name. […] I saw this view of the world through the images recorded with the phone. (Botella, 2011: 25-27)*

Intimate, immediate and everyday aesthetics

80

A year after the publication of his co-authored article, Max Schleser comments about the improvement of mobile technology and its influence in filmmaking. In a short period of time, camera phones have gone from not being recognised by

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[12]. To be seen on: http://www.quidam.fr/distribution/catalogue-de-nos-productions/triton-long-metrage-documentaire/

[13]. To be seen on: http://www.quidam.fr/distribution/catalogue-de-nos-productions/triton-long-metrage-documentaire/triton-presentation-du-film-et-de

[14]. To be seen on: http://www.quidam.fr/films-en-ligne/etudes-pour-mains/etude-pour-mains-11

manufacturers as filmmaking devices to having mini-jack connectors; this gives the possibility of recording diegetic sound and interviewing with microphones. Further than this, the focus can be manually adjusted and filters and add-on lenses are becoming available . Where does this leave the first level of *Keitai* aesthetics? The attention shifts from visual image quality to a deeper understanding of the identity of the image: intimacy, immediacy and everyday images which are available to us due to the portable, daily use of the device become now the elements to define mobile aesthetics; as Schleser writes: "as a portable and personal medium that one has always in reach every day and night, the notion of the everyday remains prominent". The attention shifts from low-resolution to the camera phone as a tool that captures our everyday reality.

Schleser summons up two other kinds of aesthetic levels, which consider not only the surface of the image but the implications of new media's processes. The second aesthetic level is related to the effect cell phones have on body language and how this is assimilated in the viewing and screening process using cell phones (Baker et al., 2009: 103). This brings together new media aesthetics with the theory of embodiment: the experience of the world (as maker and audience) is not only limited to our vision but involves the whole body. A change of paradigm is suggested: from a "dominant 'ocularcentric' aesthetic to a 'haptic' aesthetic rooted on the embodied affectivity (Baker et al., 2009: 104) . This has changed media experiences incorporating "the capacity of the body to experience itself "as more then itself", and thus to deploy its sensorimotor power to create the *unpredictable, the experimental, the new* " (Baker et al., 2009: 104). These elements as characteristics are what the authors suggest to adapt "to the works produced for and by mobile devices. The mobile device incorporates the haptic notion as one touches the device actively to record/playback an audio-visual media file" (Baker et al., 2009: 104).

81

Both physical presence and interaction are embedded in Scheleser's ideas. By means of considering the mobile device's ability to link any location to a digital image, Schleser adds the "haptic sense of physical location" and "being there" which "allows the audience/viewer to identify with the location" (Baker et al., 2009: 105).

Finally, the third aesthetic level dwells in the previous one; it is "connected to qualities of a state of "in-betweenness" which refers here to "how mobile media operate in between photography, video and the internet, while simultaneously establishing new links. The mobile phone merges communication and lens based media" . This translates into a reflection about the private and multimedia role the cell phone has gained in the past years, not only as an object to take pictures or make movies but also as a tool for verbal communication. We can find a trace of these multi-media related levels in Odin's categories and examples. For instance: he suggests the tendency *the telephone and its different uses*. The cell phone is reflected upon in its GPS function in GPS *yourself* (Rémi Boulnois, 2008). In this movie where a man uses his own telephone in order to locate himself via satellite, we could find a metaphor to the second level of *Keitai* aesthetics which relates to the mobile device as locative media (Odin, 2009: 371) . Another example of the cell phone as locative media but in relation the haptic is *Fear Thy Not* (Sophie Sherman, 2010). The filmmaker's hand remains always in close-up and guides us through the space she finds herself into. By this means she is able to communicate her experience of a certain location .

82

It should be clear by now that defining mobile made films' aesthetics is an intricate and changing enterprise. It becomes clear that it involves different levels of and approaches to reality: on the one hand we consider how the cell phone filters the world through different types of lenses (low-res, HD), on the other how we experience our environment (and vice-versa) through a mobile device and even further what kind of communication and information we have access

to through the device. It is the combination of these levels and approaches that point towards a unique way of filmmaking. As Schleser point out, since the pixel is not a distinctive trait anymore and HD becomes the norm, cell phone films face the risk of blending with the rest of the video content and the challenge of remaining distinctive through developing their own image language and identity points towards the creation of "personal and autobiographical statements" . Therefore we find aesthetics that derive from the portability of the mobile device, such as the immediacy, intimacy and the everyday which a cell phone camera can deliver and which become a unique aspect of mobile filmmaking. This brings us back to Odin's subcategory of *p-cinema*: the size and mobility of the device stimulate a certain use of the camera phone which translates into what might be a new shooting aesthetics. Moreover, Baker et al., suggest that portability facilitates the movement of the camera which creates a gesture and blurring effect. On the other hand portability and size encourage intimacy which translates into personal images and a predilection for close ups. Finally, the portability factor brings the world closer to the user through the lens and the mobile screen which becomes a "window on the world" (Baker et al., 2009: 108-109). Thus, regardless of the image quality, Odin's *p-cinema* seems open to convey and embrace the three aesthetics levels mentioned here above. All important and enduring aspects of cell phone made films seem to derive from the accessible and portable characteristics of the filming device: it ultimately makes reality available to record (as it becomes the "window on the world") and therefore possible to construct personal narratives. An already epic example of how directors use a cell phone camera as a "window on the world" to construct a narrative is La Paura by Italian director Pippo Delbono. Delbono makes a "mobile-mentary" by filming things such as populist political and religious meetings, t.v. programs, the reality of poverty in Italy, etc. With this raw material he constructs a critical discourse about the current political and socio-economical situation in Italy.

83

Mobile conclusions

The changing, unstable identity of the mobile phone as a multimedia device re-flects upon the works made and the theories written. The device's place within a cinematic tradition but also within the history of media calls for a multidisciplinary approach that will allow us to have multiple views and a better understanding of the uniqueness of cell phone made films. In this article I have brought forward several considerations which were coming from different disciplines: from film and media scholars to filmmakers and media artists. This transversal analysis is the key to regard cell phones made films within and beyond traditional film practices. The analysis and understanding of styles and aesthetics unique to cell phone films have become more complex as technology itself becomes more intricate. I have attempted to disclose this development: from the first observations that focused on the limitations of the camera and pixelated image to this last suggestions that encourage to look beyond the traditional use of the camera. Without entering the realm of other media platforms, the uniqueness of a portable camera phone with a screen offers already a wide range of possibilities. Curiously enough, an example of this can be found in Japan, Professor Masaki Fujihata founded his own film festival; honoring the land of *keitai*, the Pocket Film Festival in Yokohama, focuses on showing films on the small screen (Hart, 2009).

84

Finally, I would like to suggest two approaches to understanding and analyzing mobile made films: a traditional, film oriented approach (e.g. Odin, Amaducci) which places films within a historical tradition and attempts to differentiate tendencies and styles; and a second approach which integrates new media, the Japanese influence represented by Schleser's consideration of the cell phone's cultural roots and Fujihata's approach to unique viewing characteristics of the cell phone. Moreover, Fujihata, who also teaches young people to use the cell phone as filming camera, attempts to define a specific uniqueness to mobile phone filmmaking. His ideas are comparable to elements which have been brought up

here and underscore the fact that a mobile phone is not to be used for making a traditional film, they can offer a unique way of looking at reality. Simple and spontaneous films shot from the hip, almost like a "sketch or a memo": these are Fujihata's tips to develop a specific filming language for mobile phones. In his teachings, the movies to be recorded are simply not meant for the big screen but for the small, mobile screen (Hart, 2009). Whereas the first line of research robs cell phone made films of the aura of novelty the press so much likes to announce, the second one offers a path for exploring unique styles and aesthetics of mobile made films. Perhaps this will offer a set of ideas that come closer to the ontology of the images made with mobile devices as a reflection of our "mobile" existence. After all mobile devices are constantly changing the way we communicate with others and for us, most importantly, the way we filter our daily, everyday life through an incorporated camera.

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Filmography

GPS yourself by Rémi Boulnois, France, 45 sec., 2008 (Tags: Rémi Boulnois, GPS, cell phone, mobile phone, multimedia).

La Paura by Pippo Delbono, Italy, 69 min., 2009 (Tags: Pippo Delbono, mobilementary, personal medium, window on the world, realism).
La Perle by Marguerite Lantz, France, 4 min., 2006 (Tags: Marguerite Lantz, pictorialism, cell phone, mobile phone, pixelated image).

Max with a Keitai by Max Schleser, UK, 5 min., 2006 (Tags: Max Schleser, cell phone, mobile phone, mobile aesthetics, keitai, Japan).

New Love Meetings by Marcello Mencarini and Barbara Seghezzi, Italy, 93 min., 2006 (Tags: Marcelo Mencarini, Barbara Seghezzi, cell phone, mobile phone, pixilated image, documentary).

Nocturne pour le roi de Rome by Jean Charles Fitoussi, France, 80 min., 2005 (Tags: Charles Fitoussi, cell phone, mobile phone, diegesis of the pixel, feature film).

Pisa Asciano by Raul Marroquin, NL, 4:13 min., 2007 (Tags: Raul Marroquin, video art, cell phone, mobile phone, pixelated image).

SMS Sugar Man by Aryan Kaganof, SA, 81 min. 2005-2006 (Tags: Aryan Kaganof, cell phone, mobile phone, first feature film, pixelated image)

Tourner en rond et se laisser consumer by Vincent Moon, France, 4 min., 2006 (Tags: Vincent Moon, cell phone, mobile phone, abstraction, short film).

Triton by Benoît Labourdette, Fance, 62.02 min., 2007 (Tags: Benoît Labourdette, cell phone, mobile phone, abstraction, multiple frames, feature film).

Why Didn't anybody tell me it would get this bad in Afghanistan by Cyrus Frisch, 70 min, 2009 (Tags: Cyrus Frish, cell phone, mobile phone, feature film, pixelated image).