

Filmmaking on a Smartphone

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Abstract: *The article presents a primary exploration into the world of entry-level digital cinema, that has reached the hands of aspiring filmmakers, enthusiasts of the new minimalist wave, who are not ashamed to use their personal phones as professional digital video cameras. When I say "filmmakers" I do not mean "videographers", as they are also known, as they are a completely different category of video content creators. Here we are talking about creators of fiction films, screenplays, actors, producers, all united under the same artistic goal. The concept is simple: if the chosen subjects are torn from the real life of the average man, then why not film with a simple camera, like the one we all carry in our pockets?*

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Technology is rapidly advancing. What ten years ago was considered to be the field of science-fiction, we already use today as cutting-edge technology. At a time when a telephone was a large plastic object with a receiver and a rotary dial, and a camera was a difficult concept for the masses, we could not have imagined that we would end up talking and filming with a portable device thinner than a pack of cigarettes that we take out of our pockets and that we call today a mobile phone. This small device connects us to the world through the internet and brings cinema as a mass audio-visual art much closer to us.

Although filming with such a device is in general predestined for the unprofessional area of the domestic user, the technology of these computer-phones called *smartphones* is playing an increasing role in the production, distribution and reception of new short and feature films. Even if filming with a mobile phone appears as a thoughtless gesture to a

professional filmmaker, many filmmakers consider that it does not matter how they shoot, but the visual experience through which you have to surprise the viewer.

Here, important names, such as Peter Greenaway, believe that the future of cinema no longer belongs to the word, but to the image. That we must set out from a visual, nonconformist perspective, to express ourselves strictly through image. And if image means *smartphone*, then why not?



Tangerine (2015)

In 2015, *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, became the first movie filmed on an iPhone that appeared at a prestigious film festival, namely at Sundance FF. This film, with a *low budget* of \$ 100,000, impressed with the humor and honesty of its cinematic discourse.

The main filming location for *Tangerine* was in Hollywood, California, on Christmas Eve 2013, and the production was completed on January 18, 2014. After watching the iPhone experiments on Vimeo,

Sean Baker and Radium Cheung (DP of the film), shot the material using three iPhone 5S. The money saved on filming equipment was used to pay for filming locations and bit parts. They used *FiLMiC Pro*, a video application (in order to control focus, aperture, and color temperature, as well as to capture videos at higher bit rates), and an anamorphic adapter from *Moondog Labs* (to capture widescreen). They also used *Tiffen's Steadicam Smoothee* to capture shots in slow motion.

Baker managed to get some of the equipment for free after arriving at Moondog Labs, whose anamorphic adapters were still in their prototype stage (he received three pieces for shooting). For post-production, Baker used *Final Cut Pro* for a preliminary editing of the film and *DaVinci Resolve* for final editing and to correct the contrast and saturation.

Tangerine presents a mixture of traditional codes and conventions associated with the typical film story, but through the eye of newer technical features specific to mobile devices such as: continuous shots, long tracking frames and manual operation of camera controls on a high-resolution video file format. The result is an impressive image on the screen, with unique characters and aesthetic of the screen – a hybrid of old and new methods of film storytelling.

But, if we are talking about the presence of a *smartphone* in the production of a motion picture, we must go back in time about six years before *Tangerine* and turn our



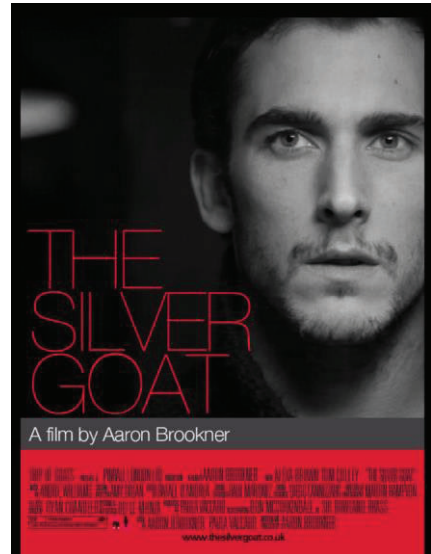
attention to independent cinema creations that set out from the beginning to break the patterns of the classic concept of *filmmaking*.

Rage, a 2009 film by director Sally Potter, was the first feature film with a cinematography designed for the mobile phone and one that symbiotically incorporated the mobile phone into production, distribution and consumption processes. Although the film itself was made using a conventional video camera, the mobile phone becomes not only a way of presenting the image, but an element of dramatic construction: each of the protagonists addresses a fictional camera operator who films each of the shots and reversed shots of the sequences using their own mobile phones. *Rage* was distributed simultaneously as a theatrical release and at the same time as a movie which was downloadable via *Babelgum* so that it could be watched on a mobile phone. The film presents itself as the cornerstone of a new cinema genre called *naked cinema*, according to the director, a kind of Dogma '95 reinterpreted from a new perspective specific to the 2000s.

The launch of the iPad from Apple in April 2010 opened up other possibilities for digital cinema storytelling. The *Silver Goat* (2012), Aaron Brookner's film, was the first feature film to be created exclusively for the iPad, the first to be released as an app in the UK and a few other countries, and the first in the world to have an iPad-only premiere. This took place in a London Route Master bus that crossed many of the film's locations in the city, while members of the public watched the film on their individual iPads.

Filmed in London over an 11-day period, with a Cannon 5D camera, *The Silver Goat* is a must-watch for anyone interested in making independent films, a story about comfort, nepotism, power struggles and questions about what is at stake in the art world, with Alexa Brown as Lydia Brass, actress and daughter of world-renowned playwright Sir Rowland Brass (Don McCorkindale), who has decided to leave the world of acting behind until she develops a relationship with an ambitious American playwright living in London (Tom Colley). After they get married, he begins to dominate her professionally, limiting her artistic freedom, and she finds herself gradually caught up in a psychological game between her father and her husband. The film has been downloaded and watched in over 25 countries, and the application has reached the top 15 in the UK.

The first film in history that was entirely recorded on an iPhone was *Night Fishing* in 2011 by the South Korean brothers who signed under the name PARKing CHANce. They attached a 35 mm lens to an iPhone 4 in order to get a cinematic aspect. *Night Fishing* is



The Silver Goat (2012)

based on the framing and language of the traditional film, avoiding features normally associated with portable recording, such as unstable images, camera shake, distorted and blurry sound.

The film, a short film, won the *Golden Bear* trophy at the Berlin Film Festival in 2011. Based on funding from telecommunications giant KT worth \$ 130,000, the film is apparently a showcase of the iPhone 4's technical capabilities, although the filmmakers attached Canon lenses directly to the phones used in filming and subjected the footage to an extensive and thorough post-production process. In any case, the end result is visually sumptuous and artistically bold: a satisfying addition to the Park brothers' filmography.

Night Fishing tells the story of a fisherman who catches a fish that turns into a young woman who becomes alive. She starts talking to him about his long-lost daughter and we gradually discover that in fact the girl is a shaman who acts as a medium between the world of the living and the dead. Switching back and forth between black and white and color and featuring a fascinating UhUhBoo Project soundtrack (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*), the film has a more sober and challenging tone than many of the other Park Brothers' films. The shamanistic image and themes are reflected in the previous works of acclaimed visual artist Park Chan-kyong, who also has another film, *Anyang, Paradise City* in the *Bright Future* section of the Rotterdam Film Festival.

Another example is the 2013 *APP* or *Android* film by Dutch director Bobby Boermans, for which the audience needed to download the accompanying app, *Iris*, before entering the cinema and then was encouraged to interact with it in the cinema. A horror film in which an application takes over the phones of the main protagonists and of the public, alludes to the consequences of our new dependence on digital devices and its subversion in our private lives. After Anna (Hannah Hoekstra) drinks at a party, she wakes up with a



APP (2013)

hangover and a mysterious app called *IRIS* downloaded on her phone. At first, the app seems harmless, but soon *IRIS* starts to change Anna's life in more and more destructive ways, and she doesn't seem to be able to do anything to uninstall the app from her phone. As Anna desperately tries to get rid of *IRIS* and understand why she is being targeted, she discovers that she is in the middle of something much bigger than she initially expected.

APP exemplifies how new forms of mobile cinema, through a selection of story, subject, and style, can explore the impact of computer-mediated communications on our daily lives.

The consequences of mobile technologies on our daily lives are explicitly explored in *#Starvecrow*, considered to be “the first *selfie* film in the world”.

James Carver's film is a mixture of improvised images, filmed entirely using the actors' mobile devices, with characters focusing their cameras on themselves and on each other. Blurring reality with fiction, the improvised material is cut with images found from the actors' own mobile phone libraries and from their personal home video archives, culminating in over 70 hours of shots. This material was then extracted and assembled, and other semi-fiction scenes were filmed to create narratives in several dramaturgical streams, in an 85-minute feature film.

It's a sick love story. *#Starvecrow* is the story of Ben and Jess. Ben is a strange, charming, aggressive and schizoid individual, a product of the digital age, a technology addict. He knows he has to film everything. Jess, on the other hand, has just come out of rehab. Their two worlds are dominated by each other, but Jess now needs space and time from him and is invited by her friends to their house in the forrest for the weekend. People arrive at the location and the party begins, but not all participants were on the guest list. *#Starvecrow* is a disturbing story about obsession, narcissism and complex relationships, in which friendships and families are irreversibly destroyed. Considered to be the first “*selfie*” movie in the world, *#Starvecrow* appears as a unique mix of “stolen” smartphone images and “pirated” CCTV footage.

This style, along with the provocative themes of the film, offers an uncomfortable viewing experience and is an apologetic social commentary on the dark side of the mass adoption of new technologies, the ubiquitous self-documentation, self-surveillance, social voyeurism.

Today, through the ubiquity of the smartphone, the behavior of a generation is recorded and made available to the public on social networks for the future audience. Through these social channels, lives can now be characterized, shaped and sometimes destroyed by naive behavior and petty *crimes* of the past, implications that we, as a society, must fully understand.

As with all emerging forms of media, content and themes reflect and exemplify the tools for making them, ultimately creating new ways of storytelling, new ways of production and new types of audience involvement. As such, these examples of visionary pioneering smartphone films will no doubt retain their place as significant innovations in the history of cinema.

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Filmography:

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