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(Re-)Imagining the *Caméra-Style* in a Contemporary Screen Culture of Social Media and Smartphone Mobilography

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Film Studies

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis resituates Alexandre Astruc's vision of a '*caméra-stylo*'/'camera-pen' from 1948 in contemporary digital screen culture. The 'camera-pen' imagines self-expression in audiovisual terms and would help give rise to notions of the auteur-director in French film criticism in the 1950s. However, Astruc also noted the rise of television and 16mm as screen technologies that could be handled, accessed, and viewed by the masses in their own homes and in the streets. Today, smartphones and social media platforms as tools for the creation and dissemination of screen media have revolutionised personal screen production for the masses. Mobile filmmaking – or 'mobilography' (literally *mobile writing*) – has become the mark of a screen culture where cameras are always at-hand.¹ I ask, how has the *caméra-stylo* been realised and re-imagined in contemporary digital screen culture, in a screenscape where 'auteur' filmmakers and the broader public use smartphones and social media for the creation and dissemination of personal screen media?

Informed by debates on the 'death' of cinema in the digital age, media archaeology, and concepts like 'post-cinema' and intermediality, my thesis aims to novelly coalesce studies on social media aesthetics and practices with Astruc's and related theories, offering the first major study on this topic. Using a case study approach and close textual analysis, I identify key instances where Astruc's vision is realised and re-imagined today, from auteur films to the mobilography of ordinary social media users.

In Chapter 1, I firstly theorise four key aspects of the *caméra-stylo* and contemporary digital screen culture that inform subsequent chapters – auteurism and authorship, the new avant-garde, mobilography, and hands, hapticity, and bodies. In Chapter 2, I find that the *caméra-stylo* has been re-imagined in contemporary auteur films that formally integrate the aesthetics of amateur smartphone footage and content creators, in case studies from *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017) to *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World* (Radu Jude, 2023). In Chapter 3, I also show that auteurs have personally adopted social media as informal extensions of their *caméra-stylo* and

¹ The term 'mobilography' can be attributed to: Richard Bégin, 'Mobilographie et Mobilogénie du Désastre,' *ArtPress* 2, no. 29 (2013): 50-52, https://www.academia.edu/32383506/Mobilographie_et_mobilogénie_du_désastre; Richard Bégin, 'GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,' in *Screens: from Materiality to Spectatorship, a Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, ed. José Moure and Dominique Chateau (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048531691-011>; André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Columbia University Press, 2015), 44.

subjective embodiment, with case studies on Nicolas Winding Refn's and Claire Denis's Instagram profiles. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate that the caméra-stylo has been re-imagined by fans in the digital age who co-creatively engage with auteurism, by analysing a case study on Wes Anderson fan media, including the viral 2023 TikTok trend and AI-generated media. And finally in Chapter 5, I consider the caméra-stylo in global struggles, looking at a case study on Palestinian activist mobilographers' videos on Instagram.

This thesis significantly informs our theoretical understanding of Astruc's 'old' film theory in the digital age, by showing the multiple aesthetic and historical connections between cinema and new media. This thesis contributes to novel understandings of Astruc's concept by expanding its application to new technologies, aesthetics, and practices outside of the film industry.

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Introduction: Re-Situating the Caméra-Style

It must be understood that up to now the cinema has been nothing more than a show. This is due to the basic fact that all films are projected in an auditorium. But with the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector.

– Alexandre Astruc (1948).¹

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, cinemas were shut down to varying degrees globally to quell the spreading of the virus. Film festivals were cancelled or postponed. Perhaps for the first time in its institutional history, the cinema medium could not be widely exhibited in the public location of the traditional auditorium, but only in private, domestic settings, on laptop and smartphone screens, and at safe outdoor gatherings. Major studio productions were halted for several months and releases were postponed or moved to streaming platforms.² Despite these disruptions, screens and cameras were ubiquitous. The pervasive presence of screens in everyday life is perhaps best represented by the smartphone – a lightweight dual camera-screen device that seamlessly moves with consumers in their hands and pockets. While cinemas and film productions were greatly impacted financially by the pandemic, streaming platforms and other Internet-connected media could continue functioning as normal for users. Social and workplace interactions were conducted over video calls and in virtual environments. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube continued as networks for communication and as creative outlets, offering seemingly endless content. Major global events, from wars in Ukraine and Gaza to protest movements like Black Lives Matter, were and continue to be captured on smartphones and instantly distributed online by ordinary people. And since 2020, applications of machine learning for synthetic media such as artificially generated videos became more mainstream. Cinemas soon reopened, but their closure brought a dialectical issue to the fore. Although cinema and television have shared the screenscape with Internet-based technologies for over three decades now,

¹ Alexandre Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Style*,' in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed., trans., Ginette Vincendeau and Peter Graham (BFI, 2022), 33 [first published in *L'Écran français*, no. 144, 30 March 1948]. This is the translation cited from hereon.

² See: Kate Formueller, *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID* (University of Texas Press, 2021); Wendy Ide, 'The Future of Film: Can Cinema Survive Covid-19?' *The Guardian*, 12 July 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jul/12/the-future-of-film-can-cinema-survive-covid-19>.

and problems such as cinema attendance and competition with streaming services existed prior to the pandemic, the halting of the film industry symbolically highlighted the paradoxical *death* of cinema and the vast quantity of moving images in the social media era.

Films had existed for little over half of a century when in March 1948, the French film critic and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc proposed that cinema, up until that point, had been nothing more than a ‘show’ because it had not left the theatre.³ It is in this essay, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*’ published in Nino Frank’s popular left-wing magazine *L’Écran français*, where Astruc formulates his most famous concept of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen). Astruc proposes that the camera should take on the expressive quality of a pen in one’s hand. For cinema to truly become a language and art form in its own right, it must break from theatre and the spectacle of fairground amusement. Directors would not be bound by the script but free to produce with the camera the purely *filmic*. Evoking the Romantic idealism of lone expression and artistic authority in writing, the *caméra-stylo* formula proposes that cinema is not just an industry or form of mass entertainment; crucially, cinema could also be authored and personal. This would bring on a ‘new avant-garde’, where the studio or screenplay narrative would not govern the production of films; filmmakers could articulate their own thoughts through film as flexibly and subtly as written language. Astruc distinguishes his vision of the avant-garde from what he calls the ‘old hat’ Surrealist and abstract films of the 1920s that he deems were no more than ‘cinematic adaptations of their experiments in painting and poetry.’⁴ Astruc concludes this essay with the view that cinema ‘is an art that cannot live by looking back over the past and chewing over the nostalgic memories of an age gone by’ and that cinema is already ‘looking to the future.’⁵ As this thesis will examine, Astruc’s prescient sentiment resonates today in a rapidly morphing screen culture, where smartphones and social media share the screen landscape with ‘traditional’ cinema.

On the one hand, Astruc is invested in famous directors in Hollywood or in the European film industries. He praises individuals of the time like Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, and Robert Bresson, who are still considered auteurs today. For Astruc, these figures promised the realisation of a *caméra-stylo* in their ability to express their personal vision through a mass medium. Astruc’s vision of a film that could be as personal and

³ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

⁴ Ibid, 35-36.

⁵ Ibid, 36.

expressive as the written word (but not be bound by the screenplay) was consciously or unconsciously taken up by several well-known filmmakers like Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, and Jonas Mekas. A belief in the ‘auteur’ continues to permeate much of broader film culture and mainstream discourses, as film directors of the past and present hailed for their technical competency and personal vision are still widely considered the true authors of and authority over film texts.

On the other hand, Astruc foresees that ordinary people would have access to mobile, light-weight camera equipment and home projectors. The production and consumption of cinema would be altered by the development of these new screen technologies, especially the rise of 16mm cameras and television by the 1950s. In ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde’, he posits that ‘the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector.’⁶ He even speculates that a modern incarnation of seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes would have ‘shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film.’⁷ For Astruc, these new technologies promise the expansion of screen production beyond the studio and the expansion of exhibition beyond the theatre. Television images would be broadcasted into people’s homes, becoming a widely available mass medium. The television set became a familiar commodity in the domestic space by the 1960s.⁸ In the future, this consumer choice would extend to the point where a seemingly endless selection of media will be made available: ‘[everyone] will go to the local bookstore and hire films written on any subject, of any form, from literary criticism and novels to mathematics, history, and general science’ and there will not be *one* but *several* cinemas, just as there are several literatures.⁹

Astruc consolidates this vision in his lesser-known second essay, ‘The Future of Cinema’, published eight months later in the literary journal *La Nef*. Here, Astruc proposes that filmmaking will move into the streets and homes of ordinary people. New screen technologies like 16mm and television will bring about a ‘new cinema’ and greatly enhance the possibilities of cinematic expression. He ambitiously declares:

⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷ Ibid, 32-33.

⁸ For example, in the same year of 1948 only 0.7% of British adults accounted for the ‘television public’ but by 1955 this increased to 39.8%. See: BP Emmett, ‘The Television Audience in the United Kingdom,’ *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (General)* 199, no. 3 (1956): 286, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2342738>. See, also: AD Bain, ‘The Growth of Television Ownership in the United Kingdom,’ *International Economic Review* 3, no. 2 (1962): 147.

⁹ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

Step by step, we will reach a state obliterating the clean demarcation line between amateur and professional cinema. [...] At the extreme, if the cost of filmmaking continues to drop, we can imagine a situation when all the studios will close, while streets and private apartments become the battleground for amateurs writing their confessions with a 16mm Paillard camera in their parents' dining rooms.¹⁰

In this formulation, the future of cinema promises flexibility and access. Ordinary consumers will record their own lives regularly and the domestic mundane will become a subject of films of the future. The studios did not completely close in Hollywood after 1948, although the Paramount Decision the same year certainly ushered in the demise of the old studio system.¹¹ But filmmaking would no longer be the privilege of a select few within the film industry. Indeed, by the 1960s consumers could increasingly access 8mm for making home movies and movements like *cinéma vérité* (using new synchronised sound technologies) and guerilla filmmaking would take to city streets and inside people's apartments with mobile, portable cameras.

Nearly 80 years since the publication of Astruc's two essays, his original vision – perhaps far-fetched or utopian at the time – finds resonance in contemporary screen culture. Today, screens come in even more shapes and sizes and are integrated into a broad range of social interactions. Digital screens are present on every surface, from streetscapes to largescale spectacles like the Las Vegas Sphere. Vast databases of videos on any subject have materialised via sites like YouTube and TikTok, while cameras have become more lightweight and subtle. A large portion of the global population has access to screens and cameras, and there are now more mobile phones than people worldwide.¹² Smartphones are always at-hand to capture events, however banal or significant, spontaneously and informally. They combine the camera apparatus with a screen interface that enables video and image distribution via the Internet, embodying Astruc's vision in one portable object.

¹⁰ Alexandre Astruc, 'The Future of Cinema,' trans. Adrian Martin, *The Third Rail*, issue 9 (2016): 48, <http://thirdrailquarterly.org/alexandre-astruc-the-future-of-cinema/> [first published in *La Nef*, no. 48 (November 1948)]. This is the translation cited from hereon.

¹¹ The Paramount Decision (*United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*) led to the separation of control over production, distribution, and exhibition in the studio system. See: Andrew F. Hanssen, 'Vertical Integration During the Hollywood Studio Era,' *The Journal of Law & Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 519-543, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/605567>.

¹² Felix Richter, 'Charted: There Are More Mobile Phones Than People Worldwide,' World Economic Forum, 11 April 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/04/charted-there-are-more-phones-than-people-in-the-world/>.

The concept of the caméra-stylo has unsurprisingly found revived interest among commentators in the digital era. On the wider availability of digital video recording devices by 2000, film critic AO Scott writes: ‘the camera has become less like a printing press and more like a pencil, something you can grab hold of when the mood strikes, and use to transform your impressions into art.’¹³ Laurence Allard argued in 2017 that for younger generations who have grown up with personal screens, the mobile smartphone ‘can be described as a caméra-stylo used to “live and capture life” simultaneously, following an expressive synchronicity. The social life of *screenagers* is thus mediated by writing-screens [‘écrans-scripteurs’].’¹⁴ In a manifesto on the essay film posted as a tweet in 2023, filmmaker Mark Cousins describes the digital era and its affordances as the realisation of Astruc’s ‘dream’.¹⁵ Also writing on the essay film, Laura Rascaroli has pointed enthusiastically to the realisation of Astruc’s vision in the digital era:

Thanks to new technologies, the possibility of using the camera as a pen, and of producing a fully personal *cinécriture* [cine-writing], has become much less utopian today than when Astruc coined the term ‘*caméra-stylo*’. At this time of proliferation of individual audiovisual narratives, especially on the Internet, the old dream of the camera-pen seems to have been finally realized – only that, of course, technology never ceases to promise to become more portable and more flexible.¹⁶

While comments such as these significantly represent existing interest in this topic, there is yet to be an extensive study on the caméra-stylo in contemporary digital screen culture. Expanding on these impressions, this thesis will thoroughly examine the re-imagining of Astruc’s ‘old’ theory in the age of social media and smartphone *mobilography* (literally ‘*mobile writing*’) – a mode of audiovisual production handled by *mobilographers* that is highly intimate, haptic, and flexible. The question of a caméra-stylo in contemporary

¹³ AO Scott, ‘Documentarians Become Talking Heads for a Change,’ *The New York Times*, 9 June 2000, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA62634553&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=03624331&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=tcd&aty=ip>. Perhaps fittingly, Scott mistakes Jean Rouch for Alexandre Astruc as the person who coined the term. See, also: Doug Dillaman, ‘Camera-Stylo 2019: the Osmo Pocket,’ *Filmmaker Magazine*, 7 March 2019, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107100-camera-stylo-2019-the-osmo-pocket/>.

¹⁴ Laurence Allard, ‘Partages Créatifs: Stylisation de Soi et Appspérimentation Artistique,’ *Communications et Langages*, no. 194 (2017): 35, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3917/comla.194.0029>. [my translation].

¹⁵ Mark Cousins (@markcousinsfilm), ‘Essay Films: A 14 Point Manifesto!’ Twitter/X, 2 March 2023, <https://twitter.com/markcousinsfilm/status/1631290354371526658?s=20>.

¹⁶ Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

screen culture is one that necessitates the inclusion of digital screen technologies, social media, and handheld devices.

As a researcher based in film studies, I approach new media technologies from an interdisciplinary perspective while remaining within the remit of screen studies. By Annette Kuhn's definition, '[in] screen studies, what we are seeking to explain or understand, very broadly speaking, are the moving image screen or screens, what is displayed on these screens, and the nature of our encounter with them.'¹⁷ With a wider scope than what *film* studies suggests, screen studies absorb new screen media, including social media platforms and interactive screen media, as they continuously develop.¹⁸ In correspondence with the digital shift in film production and the rise of the Internet, film studies have responded by amalgamating digital and new media into third-level curricula and scholarship. Many film departments in Ireland and the UK, for example, offer undergraduate and postgraduate modules and courses in digital media. As Kuhn notes, theorising should equip scholars and students with the tools to explain and understand the objects of study within that discipline and adapt to changes in those objects of study. The main epistemological issue for screen studies theorists is, 'to what extent do shifts in the screenscape enjoin us to devise new theoretical frameworks, force us to ask new questions of old ones, or even invent new ways of theorizing?'¹⁹

Indeed, re-imagining the *caméra-stylo* in the era of smartphones and social media is a matter of asking a new question of an old one, while developing its broader conceptualisation. Although Astruc's formulation has prompted different applications (particularly to *auteur* cinema), the state of contemporary digital screen culture invites further reflection and re-interpretation. My first research question is: (1) How has the *caméra-stylo* been realised and re-imagined in contemporary digital screen culture, in a screenscape where 'auteur' filmmakers and the broader public use smartphones and social media for the creation and dissemination of personal screen media? On a fundamental level, Astruc's metaphor presents a problem because it is exactly that – a *metaphor*. A camera that is also a pen has thus far not been invented, and if it were invented (what would it even look like?) a literal camera-pen would likely not suitably achieve expression in audiovisual terms. Rather, a set of implicit ideas are attached to its idealised

¹⁷ Annette Kuhn, 'Screen and Screen Theorizing Today,' *Screen* 50, issue 1 (spring 2009): 5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjp001>.

¹⁸ Organisations such as the British Association for Film, Television, and Screen Studies see film studies and screen studies under the same discipline. See: BAFTSS, 'BAFTSS Constitution,' 2020, <https://www.baftss.org/constitution.html>.

¹⁹ Kuhn, 'Screen and Screen Theorizing Today,' 6.

vision. Existing freely moving cameras such as smartphones that can be handled intimately by a lone cameraperson (or *mobilographer*) are perhaps the closest thing we have to a literal camera-pen. The *caméra-stylo* envisions the future of cinema (the ‘*new avant-garde*’) to be in personal, mobile, and handheld camera technologies and screen media *beyond* the confines of the studio that can capture the embodied subjectivity of the person wielding it. Authorship, a ‘new avant-garde’, mobility, and hands, hapticity, and bodies are four basic elements that can help to guide the analysis of the *caméra-stylo*. Thus, breaking down these key aspects of Astruc’s original formulation and its aesthetic and practical realisation in new screen technologies today, this thesis poses a second question: (2) Considering Astruc’s and related screen theories, what are the aesthetic, avant-garde, authorial, and haptic qualities of smartphone mobilography and video-based social media? This second question will be theorised more thoroughly in Chapter 1 and its findings will inform subsequent chapters and their case studies.

Framed by these questions, this thesis will examine how Astruc’s original formula is realised and re-imagined in contemporary digital screen culture by looking especially at how smartphones (as touchscreen camera devices) and video-based social media platforms (as creative tools and distribution sites) are embraced for self-expression, from the creative or co-creative to the desire to document one’s environment and embodied presence with their personal camera. As Astruc foresaw that screen media would expand into people’s homes and onto streets, this thesis re-situates Astruc’s *caméra-stylo* in the twenty-first century, where the moving image has indeed spread further into other media forms. To provide a comprehensive overview of this screenscape, I will use a case study approach to examine in-depth how the *caméra-stylo* has been imagined or, more precisely, *re-imagined* in contemporary digital screen culture. This will offer screen studies a new theoretical framework for examining the *caméra-stylo* in the current era. My analysis will be of special interdisciplinary value for film scholars who are new to the study of social media platforms. This thesis will also be of interest to scholars who have previously investigated the *caméra-stylo*, but have not yet analysed its application(s) in the social media era at length. This thesis will also benefit social media scholars whose research is informed by film theory and history. However, these technologies are not just a subject of enquiry for scholars and critics, but are also used daily by members of the public. These devices and their interlaced applications are meaningful sites of creativity, spectatorship, and communication for millions or even billions of users worldwide. Therefore, my

research integrates both academic and non-academic spheres of involvement and significance.

A Medium in Crisis: Key Issues

The study of the caméra-stylo in the digital age is implicated in a broader subfield of screen studies that addresses the digital shift. Just as Astruc observed the rise of television by the 1950s, critics have examined cinema's relationship with emergent technologies of the 1990s and 2000s. As Bjørn Sørenssen argued in 2008, Astruc's 'epiphany' on the eve of television culture resonates with contemporary discourse around 'new' media technologies that help create and change patterns in media production and distribution, as well as bring about new aesthetics.²⁰ By 1948, cinema had only reached its 50-year anniversary but had seen and was in the process of seeing major changes to its own form and its supreme position in audiovisual culture.²¹ Astruc points to the rupture of television: 'We cannot yet properly imagine what television will be like, but there is a good chance it will contribute to the creation of a new cinema addressed, above all, to our intelligence.'²² What Astruc means by 'intelligence' here is likely tied to television's promise of expanded agency and access to knowledge – a sentiment later shared by Marxist art critic John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (BBC, 1972) – and something new media technologies would eventually promise for consumers as well.

Although television is not the focus of this thesis, Astruc's original observations of this (then) new medium as the promise of a *new* cinema are still relevant to ongoing debates in screen studies. For Astruc, the coming of television signals a future that would inevitably include not one but multiple screen media formats. While Astruc is optimistic about such changes, this enthusiasm was not shared by other critics who saw television as a threat to cinema. Just five years after Astruc's essays were published, *Paris Match* published an issue titled 'Will Cinema Disappear?' highlighting Hollywood's battle with television.²³ Later, chief critic Serge Daney commented extensively on the characteristics of television for *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Libération*. James Tweedie notes that for Daney,

²⁰ Bjørn Sørenssen, 'Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc's Caméra-Stylo: The New Avant-Garde in Documentary Realized?' *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008): 48, DOI: 10.1386/sdf.2.1.47/1.

²¹ See: Stefan Jovanovic, 'The Ending(s) of Cinema: Notes on the Recurrent Demise of the Seventh Art,' *Offscreen* 7, no. 4 (April 2003), https://offscreen.com/view/seventh_art1?new_offscreen/death_cinema.html.

²² Astruc, 'The Future of Cinema,' 47.

²³ *Paris Match*, 'Le Cinéma va-t-il Disparaître?' no. 226, 18 July 1953.

television and the proliferation of screens marked a new era that would make ‘old’ cinephilia seem like a quaint anachronism and cinema just ‘a member of an ensemble cast’ among other formats.²⁴ Significantly, scholars often reflect on the coming of television to consider the contemporary era. According to Jacques Aumont, cinema’s loss of exclusivity to the moving image is a process of dispossession that began with television.²⁵ Francesco Casetti introduces his book *The Lumière Galaxy* (2015) with filmmakers’ thoughts on the rise of television at Cannes in 1982 as a gateway to understanding the digital age.²⁶

More so than the advent of television that preceded it, the ‘digital turn’ has provoked a flurry of scholarly re-evaluations of cinema’s very ontology or its essential ‘being’ as a distinct media form. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion contextualise these debates in *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (2015). They outline how cinema has been perceived to have ‘died’ eight times, while tracing diverging perspectives on cinema’s identity and how new digital technologies have been received by filmmakers and critics.²⁷ The authors observe how, since its own birth, cinema has been radically altered, such as the coming of synchronised sound or the remote control, while its uniqueness has come under scrutiny. They note of the present era:

This situation is at the very least paradoxical, because on the one hand cinema is seeing its modes of expression (let’s describe them in this way) spread into other ‘audiovisual’ practices [...], whereas on the other hand it is losing its hegemony in the very place, the movie theatre, that for the longest time had been dedicated to it alone.²⁸

Gaudreault and Marion’s claim certainly resonates with Astruc’s early outlook on cinema *spreading* into other media formats. As screens have become more domestic, mobile, and essentially part of the urban landscape, the cinema screen no longer holds hegemony over

²⁴ James Tweedie, ‘Serge Daney, Zapper: Cinema, Television, and the Persistence of Media,’ *October* 157 (summer 2016): 110, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00261.

²⁵ Jacques Aumont, *Que Reste-t-il du Cinéma?* (Vrin, 2012), 55.

²⁶ Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 1-2.

²⁷ André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Columbia University Press, 2015).

²⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

the moving image. They also observe that the boundaries of the discipline of film studies have expanded.²⁹

A key issue for scholars is the *apparat**us/dispositif* and the question of *where* or *when* is cinema. Much of this debate is concerned with the ontology of digital imagery, its indexicality (or lack thereof), and its realism. The decline and expense of 35mm film manufacturing and its gradual disappearance in favour of digital distribution and projection by the 2010s is a notable issue.³⁰ Scholars like Barbara Klinger, Stephen Prince, and Dudley Andrew repeatedly return to André Bazin's writings to ask, *what is cinema* if it is no longer produced photochemically with celluloid and light, but using computer data instead?³¹ With the gradual process of digitalisation since the 1990s, what we call 'cinema' has undoubtedly changed drastically. With the broad decline of celluloid and film projection and the rise of DVDs and computer devices, most moving images made today are now essentially computer data. As David Bordwell commented in 2012, 'films have become files.'³²

Some critics define cinema as strictly *analogue* and see digital cinema as a cold, poor imitation. Some lament the demise of the material qualities of film – its tactile photographic material that can be *felt* (its indexical warmth), rather than digital cinema that is stored as intangible data. The language applied to these existential changes often assumes biological terminology by lending cinema a *body*. Jean-Luc Godard has commented several times that cinema is dead or 'over' in response to the televisual image and, later, the digital image.³³ Critic Jean-Philippe Tessé even positively compares the chemical reaction of light producing images on celluloid strip to the 'effect of sun on the skin' in contrast with the digital image.³⁴ Ágnes Pethő refers to cinema's 'porosity' to other media, as though cinema has a cellular membrane or skin.³⁵ Furthermore, scholars often note how these technological developments might be seen as a 'decay', 'cancer', or

²⁹ Ibid, 146.

³⁰ See: John Belton, 'Introduction: Digital Cinema,' *Film History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 131-134, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.24.2.131>.

³¹ See, for example: Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2002); Stephen Prince, 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory,' *Film Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1996): 27-37; Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (University of California Press, 2006), 237; Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is! Its Quest and its Charge* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³² David Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies* (Irvington Way Institute Press, 2012), 8.

³³ Godard interviewed by: Alain Bergala, Serge Daney, and Serge Toubiana, 'Le Chemin Vers la Parole,' *Cahiers du Cinéma* 336 (1982): 8-14; Godard quoted in Fiachra Gibbons, 'Jean-Luc Godard: "Film is Over. What to Do?";' *The Guardian*, 12 July 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jul/12/jean-luc-godard-film-socialisme>.

³⁴ Jean-Philippe Tessé, 'La Révolution Numérique est Terminée,' *Cahiers du Cinéma* 672 (November 2011): 8 [quoted in Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 70].

³⁵ Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 5, 96.

‘mutation’.³⁶ Michael Witt surmises: ‘In the context of the cinema/body metaphor, the cinema, having acquired human form, is open to a variety of deaths, short, sharp and violent or slow and lingering.’³⁷

Others see digital cinema as a continuation of cinematic potential in, for example, computer-generated animation.³⁸ Laura U. Marks argues that despite the popular assumption that digital images are immaterial because they are not produced photochemically, ‘digital and other electronic images are constituted by processes no less material’ and that digital information can be indexically traced through the path of electron waves.³⁹ Gaudreault and Marion point out that most cinemagoers may not see a radical difference with digital projection.⁴⁰ This is not to say that there is *no* difference between a digital film projected in a theatre and, for example, a video on Instagram.⁴¹ However, in material terms, a film file now shares more in common with an Instagram video file than it does with film celluloid; both files can be edited together with editing software and played on a computer device. A smartphone video can be digitally projected in a film theatre and a digitalised classical film can be watched on a smartphone.

There are critics and scholars who propose that cinema is pervasive and there are those who vehemently define cinema by its strictly site-specific identity. Concepts of ‘expanded cinema’ and ‘extended cinema’ have been explored in-depth by scholars since at least the 1960s, with the rise of film and video installations in galleries. Sheldon Renan’s and Gene Youngblood’s conceptualisations of expanded cinema within the context of American underground cinema and the avant-garde in the 1960s counterculture remain influential in the digital era.⁴² Youngblood argues that ‘we’ve seen the urgent need for an expanded cinematic language. I hope to illustrate that profit-motivated commercial entertainment, by its very nature, cannot supply this new vision.’⁴³ Jonathan Walley summarises the breadth of expanded cinema, from multi-screen films, light art, installations, to computer-generated imagery that have all been included in expanded

³⁶ For example: Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 3; Michael Witt, ‘The Death(s) of Cinema According to Godard,’ *Screen* 40, no. 3 (1999): 331-346, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/40.3.331>.

³⁷ Witt, ‘The Death(s) of Cinema According to Godard,’ 336.

³⁸ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 302.

³⁹ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 163. Elsewhere, Marks also assertively describes audiovisual works made on videotapes (a different material) as ‘cinema’. See: Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

⁴⁰ Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 6.

⁴¹ For example, their different screen aspect ratios, screen sizes, and touchscreen function versus seated audience.

⁴² Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (EP Dutton & Co., 1967); Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 59. First published by EP Dutton & Co., Inc., in 1970.

⁴³ Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 59.

cinema: 'Expanded cinema is the most radical manifestation of cinema's ontological restlessness, instability, and alleged essence-less-ness.'⁴⁴

Notably, Philippe Dubois asserts that cinema is everywhere: 'More and more, cinema is in museums, art galleries [...] places we pass through or wait in. It is in homes, in every room. [...] On the walls of the city and on our mobile phones.'⁴⁵ Dubois recognises that moving images are no longer the focus of ritualised theatre attendance or dedicated 'events', but are normalised as the backdrop of everyday life. Similarly, Susan Sontag argued in her essay 'The Decay of Cinema' (1996) that '[i]mages now appear in any size and on a variety of surfaces.' But in her view, soaring production costs, the ubiquity of screens in public spaces (including sports arena mega-screens), the closure of cinemas, and the absence of cinephilia in modern culture have degraded the status of cinema as a popular art form.⁴⁶ For Sontag, the drop in theatre attendance signalled the death of cinema's special social significance, but for Dubois the proliferation of screens signals cinema's growth. While neither Dubois nor Sontag point to Astruc or the *caméra-stylo*, their insight into how the moving image has left the movie theatre and partly relocated itself in streets, homes, and people's hands is worth noting. This broad observation seems to align with Astruc's, who envisions that there will not be *one* but *several cinemas*.⁴⁷

For Aumont, the specific experience of cinema is defined, partly, by the passage of time in a dedicated space (theatre), to which the spectator pays sustained attention for the duration of the film.⁴⁸ The ability to interrupt or modify a film (with a television remote control, smartphone screen tap, or computer click) does not amount to cinema.⁴⁹ This definition makes clear distinctions between the spectatorial experiences of watching a film on Netflix, seeing a video installation in an art gallery, and a feature film in a cinema.⁵⁰ Aumont comments that 'cinema is far from having disappeared in its usual form and that, among the new forms of the moving image, it continues to stand out as one that

⁴⁴ Jonathan Walley, *Cinema Expanded: Avant-Garde Film in the Age of Intermedia* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

⁴⁵ Philippe Dubois, 'Introduction' in *Oui, C'est du Cinéma. Formes et Espaces de l'Image en Mouvement*, ed. Alessandro Bordina, Philippe Dubois, and Lucia Ramos Monteiro (Campanotto Editore, 2009), 7 [cited in Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 14].

⁴⁶ Susan Sontag, 'The Decay of Cinema,' *The New York Times*, 25 February 1996, 60-61, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/25/magazine/the-decay-of-cinema.html>.

⁴⁷ Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,' 33.

⁴⁸ See: Jacques Aumont, 'Figures aux Allures de Plans,' in *La Mise en Scène*, ed. Jacques Aumont (De Boeck Université, 2000), 109-126.

⁴⁹ Aumont, *Que Reste-t-il du Cinéma?*, 82 [quoted and translated in: Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 25].

⁵⁰ For more discussion on medium specificity and congruence, see: Jacques Aumont, *The Image*, trans. Claire Pajackowska (BFI Publishing, 1997), 119, 126-127.

combines certain values which are exclusive to it.’⁵¹ As Hilary Radner and Alistair Fox summarise, Aumont dismisses other uses of the moving image as ‘unspecified cultural or social practices’ that would include such ‘banal occurrences’ as Skype video calls.⁵² Aumont’s definition of cinema is therefore more specific than Dubois’ assertion that cinema can be found in our hands and city streets.

In response to enthusiasts for extended cinema such as Dubois, Raymond Bellour also emphasises the experience unique to cinema. For Bellour, cinema is defined strictly as movie theatre projection. The conditions of the movie theatre – its projection, darkness, collective seating arrangement, and large screen – are what define cinema. Bellour writes: ‘cinema will live as long as there are films being made to be projected or shown in a movie theatre.’⁵³ For Bellour, once moving images leave the cinema, they are no longer defined as cinema: ‘Every other viewing situation alters this experience to varying degrees. And this alone merits being called “cinema” (whatever meaning that word may have).’⁵⁴ This includes art gallery installations, videos on social media platforms, and films watched on televisions or computer devices.⁵⁵ In this way, Bellour aligns himself with Godard, Sontag, and others who affirm that cinema as an art form and institution is dying and has been transformed by social practices and new technologies to the extent that it is no longer recognisable as *the* cinema.⁵⁶

As an alternative to hard-line views on media specificity, this thesis is perceptive to approaches in intermediality that see the ‘in-between’ of media, especially the mutual porosity between cinema and social media platforms. Gaining prominence in the digital era, scholars of intermediality are broadly concerned with the in-betweenness and porousness of media. According to Lars Ellestrøm, intermediality can be seen as the precondition for all media forms, although some media may be seen as more ‘border-crossing’ than others.⁵⁷ Echoing philosopher Alain Badiou, who has contended that cinema is an ‘impure art’, Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik argue that cinema is and always has been intermedial. What we call ‘cinema’ is composed of all the inventions

⁵¹ Aumont, *Que Reste-t-il du Cinéma*, 12 [quoted in: Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 21].

⁵² Hilary Radner and Alistair Fox, *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 79.

⁵³ Raymond Bellour, *La Querelle des Dispositifs: Cinéma – Installations, Expositions* (POL, 2012), 14 [quoted and translated in Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 20].

⁵⁴ Ibid, 14 [quoted in: Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 21].

⁵⁵ See: André Parente and Victa de Carvalho, ‘Cinema as *Dispositif*: Between Cinema and Contemporary Art,’ *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies* 19, no. 1 (2008): 37-55, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/029498ar>;

⁵⁶ See: Radner and Fox, *Raymond Bellour*, 4.

⁵⁷ Lars Ellestrøm ed., *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

used to record and project moving images.⁵⁸ Pethő is similarly concerned with cinema's 'passion' for other media and the 'in-between'.⁵⁹ Intermediality can certainly be observed between cinema and new screen technologies. Alberto Hermida describes the formal integration of personal digital devices like smartphones and desktop screens in film and television as 'aesthetic transfers'.⁶⁰ As my research will show, intermediality exists between cinema and social media, including notable examples of auteur cinema. My research recognises that film, video, and new media are intertwined with overlapping practices, history, aesthetics, and identities.⁶¹

My research is also informed by the concept of 'post-cinema' as an alternative description of emergent screen forms. As Astruc envisioned, there is not one homogenous kind of moving image defined by the theatrical *dispositif*. Mobile and multiple-screen *post*-cinematic apparatuses are present in people's homes, streets, and hands. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda argue that although 'post-cinema' may seem reductive and too blunt to describe contemporary screen media, the term 'helps us to recognize this environment *as* a landscape, rather than merely a jumbled collection of new media formats, devices, and networks.'⁶² Unlike what the term suggests, 'post-cinema' is a way to describe a state of *transition* rather than an *end* to cinema. The authors highlight that previous interpretations of the digital shift that 'lamented or resisted the unfortunate passing of cinema' have found more relaxed responses in more recent theories that see in a 'more prospective mode the emergence of a new, properly post-cinematic regime.'⁶³ Thus, 'post-cinema' is a way to coalesce views such as Bellour's or Aumont's with the inevitability of cinema's convergence with digital technologies. Post-cinema is the collection of media 'that "follows" the broadly cinematic regime of the twentieth century [...] Accordingly, post-cinema would mark not a caesura but a transformation that alternately abjures, emulates, prolongs, mourns, or pays homage to cinema.'⁶⁴ José Moure and Dominique Chateau continue this line of enquiry: 'When measuring the scope of

⁵⁸ Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Polity, 2013); Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik, *Cinema Between Media: An Intermediality Approach* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 1.

⁵⁹ Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality*, 6.

⁶⁰ Alberto Hermida, 'The Aesthetic of New Media and Communication Devices in Film and Television Language,' in *Handbook of Research on Transmedia Storytelling, Audience Engagement, and Business Strategies*, ed. Víctor Hernández-Santaolalla and Mónica Barrientos-Bueno (IGI Global, 2020), DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3119-8.ch001.

⁶¹ See, also: Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁶² Shane Denson and Julia Leyda ed., *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (REFRAME Books, 2016), 1.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

post-cinema, we find a scale of radicality from “cinema death” to intermediality, through decay or metamorphosis.’⁶⁵

Among the commentators on post-cinema is Francesco Casetti, who argues that ‘we find many cases in which cinema, understood as a form of representation and spectatorship, not only continues to live, but expands beyond its traditional support and device.’⁶⁶ For Casetti, *relocation* is key to this expansion. In this way, Casetti’s approach echoes Astruc, who believed that cinema up until 1948 had been nothing more than a spectacle, owing to the basic fact it had been limited to projection in the theatre.⁶⁷ Undeniably, Casetti’s analysis departs somewhat from Bellour’s view. In *The Lumière Galaxy*, Casetti’s position on cinema’s fate is not so much defined by the apparatus of film projection. Casetti centres his analysis on the experience of the spectator rather than the technology, often describing in detail the specific feelings of engaging with different devices: ‘Cinema is no longer only a strip of film [...] it is also a DVD that I play at home to relax, or a video that I follow in a museum or gallery, or content that I download from the Internet onto my computer or tablet.’⁶⁸ Casetti claims that despite cinema’s transformations and convergence with new digital technologies, cinema has certainly not died and movie theatres continue to exist.⁶⁹ What we call ‘cinema’ nonetheless encompasses watching DVDs and streamed films at home, while travelling, and on computer devices.⁷⁰ Even as new technologies and environments shift traditional notions of cinema, from YouTube videos to IMAX screens, cinema *persists*.

For Casetti, this dialectic is not totally new, as technological novelties that have pushed cinema to its boundaries have nonetheless been historically subsumed by *the* cinema.⁷¹ As Radner and Fox summarise, Casetti asserts that ‘the extension of cinema into the home is not a departure from its original social or cultural purpose’ as he looks at proto-cinematic devices that were devised as home entertainment in the nineteenth century. For Casetti, cinema’s history of invention and mutation to the present day ‘has a coherency that suggests, perhaps, that the cinema that Godard and Bellour mourn was, in

⁶⁵ José Moure and Dominique Chateau ed., *Post-Cinema: Cinema in the Post-Art Era* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 14.

⁶⁶ Francesco Casetti, ‘The Relocation of Cinema,’ in *Post-Cinema*, ed. Denson and Leyda, 570.

⁶⁷ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

⁶⁸ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 4.

fact, a momentary aberration in its destiny.’⁷² This forward-looking sentiment about cinema echoes Astruc.

Numerous studies that examine the experiences of screening apparatuses beyond the cinema and in the home resonate with Astruc’s vision. For example, Haidee Wasson reflects on the standardisation of the 16mm film gauge in 1923 as a ‘deliberate attempt to increase the portability and marketability of films outside of movie theatres’ spurred further by the introduction of 8mm films and equipment in 1932.⁷³ Thus, by the 1950s, the experience of watching (projected) films included the small, domestic screen as well as the large, public screen – something Astruc is keenly aware of. This would be further articulated with technologies from television to VHS and DVDs to streaming platforms.⁷⁴ Sørenssen notes that Astruc’s ideas give an accurate description of general access to audiovisual materials such as DVDs (and their wider availability in supermarkets) as well as the ability to distribute videos on vast databases like YouTube.⁷⁵ Studies have uncovered the behavioural trends and psychology of watching films at home on small screens and it has been noted by scholars recently that streaming platforms have changed how audiences consume films.⁷⁶ Casetti describes in detail the solitary *bubble* of watching films on smartphones in public, often while commuting.⁷⁷ Kata Szita notes how smartphones ‘borrow a great deal from cinema and post-cinematic screens, but synthesise these features with the continuous interaction between the viewer’s body, the screen, and the interface.’⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Szita examines the commonalities and unique experiences of smartphone and cinema spectatorship, focusing especially on 360-degree narrative film experiences, arguing that ‘smartphone viewing involves spontaneous customizations, where narrative experiences become defined by one’s individual choices and bodily engagement.’⁷⁹

⁷² Radner and Fox, *Raymond Bellour*, 80.

⁷³ Haidee Wasson, ‘The Networked Screen: Moving Images, Materiality, and the Aesthetics of Size,’ in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, ed. Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 77-78.

⁷⁴ Barbara Klinger has examined how marketing for home technologies in the 1990s and 2000s emphasised the optimal home viewing experience. See: Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex* (2006).

⁷⁵ Sørenssen, ‘Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc’s *Caméra-Style*,’ 48.

⁷⁶ See, for example: Aras Özgün and Andreas Treske, ‘On Streaming-Media Platforms, Their Audiences, and Public Life,’ *Rethinking Marxism* 33, no. 2 (2021): 304-323, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2021.1893090>; Alec Tefertiller, ‘Moviegoing in the Netflix Age: Gratifications, Planned Behaviour, and Theatrical Attendance,’ *Communication & Society* 30, no. 4 (2017): 27-43, DOI: 10.15581/003.30.3.27-44.

⁷⁷ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 10, 48.

⁷⁸ Kata Szita, ‘New Perspectives on an Imperfect Cinema: Smartphones, Spectatorship, and Screen Culture 2.0,’ *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 32, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14317>. See, also: Kata Szita, ‘Smartphone Cinematics: A Cognitive Study of Smartphone Spectatorship,’ (PhD diss., University of Gothenburg, 2019), ISBN 978-91-85974-23-8.

⁷⁹ Szita, ‘Embodied Interaction and Immersive Film Experiences on Smartphones,’ in *Mobile Storytelling in an Age of Smartphones*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 205.

This broad reassessment of cinema and screen technologies in the digital era often invokes the past to investigate ruptures and sutures across screen history. As digital technologies presented a challenge for cinema by the 1990s, there was also a growing interest among scholars to uncover the richness of early cinema. Tom Gunning's re-evaluation of early cinema is perhaps the most notable. For Gunning, cinema is a 'phoenix-like medium' that cannot be truly defined because each technological innovation, as it lays out a path for the future, returns to the initial conception of cinema's invention.⁸⁰ Cinema entails cycles of both destruction and renewal, incorporating ruptures, like sound and colour, over the course of its history. In Gunning's view, this current state of transition 'involves not just a vision of the future, but a dynamic sense of our past.'⁸¹

Media archaeological approaches to film history are especially perceptive to these ruptures. Broadly speaking, media archaeologists are interested in 'forgotten' technologies or hidden histories and reject the notion that film history is strictly linear (with one technology necessarily replacing the one before it). For Siegfried Zielinski, media archaeology 'digs out secret paths in history, which might help us find our way into the future.'⁸² Walter Benjamin is considered an influential media archaeologist *avant la lettre* for his reconstruction of nineteenth century Paris and spectacles such as the diorama and panorama in his unfinished *Arcades Project*.⁸³ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka's edited collection *Media Archaeology* (2011) is a significant development in this area.⁸⁴ For example, Wanda Strauven proposes a revision of cinema's early incarnations as home entertainment and toys, focusing on the manipulation/touch of nineteenth-century arcade amusements and optical devices like the thaumatrope, kinetoscope, and mutoscope. She writes: 'Unlike the imprisoned cinemagoer of institutionalized cinema, the nineteenth-century observer is not fastened in a seat and does not merely look at the spectacle of the afterimage; on the contrary, he or she controls the spectacle by interacting directly, bodily,

⁸⁰ Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 18.

⁸¹ Tom Gunning, 'Let's Start Over: Why Cinema Hasn't Yet Been Invented,' paper presented at Film Studies Association of Canada conference, May 2012. This genealogical conception of cinema is shared by Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 18.

⁸² Siegfried Zielinski, 'Media Archaeology,' *CTheory* (July 1996) [cited in: Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*, 20].

⁸³ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (University of California Press, 2011), 6; Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016); Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 2002). While he did not examine cinema specifically, Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1972) and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Vintage Books, 1970) are also influential for media archaeologists in this respect.

⁸⁴ Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology*, 3.

with the apparatus.’⁸⁵ This view certainly diverges from Aumont’s definition of cinema as uninterrupted and unmanipulated by the viewer or Bellour’s strict definition of cinema as projection in a theatre – a space not yet institutionalised for the nineteenth-century viewer.⁸⁶ What Strauven describes as the bodily interaction encouraged by early cinematic devices resonates with the tactile interaction afforded by handheld smartphones and computerised devices today, which diverges from traditional cinemagoing.

Like Gaudreault and Marion, Elsaesser in *Film History as Media Archaeology* (2016) is interested in the broader debates at play in screen studies wherein, as Elsaesser argues, a paradox has unfolded. Although cinema is purportedly ‘obsolescent’ in the twenty-first century, it has become a kind of meta-medium and source of special aesthetic value for scholars.⁸⁷ Against the idea that cinema has always been a homogenised medium or social practice reliant on the theatre, media archaeology does not insist on cinema’s uniqueness or its media-specificity. Elsaesser recalls the panorama’s mobile spectator, the mutoscope’s solitary viewer-user who manually handled the moving images, and Pathé’s ‘Baby’ projector for living room use.⁸⁸ He sees instead that cinema’s past and future are firmly embedded in other media practices and technologies, including entertainment forms and military uses. Throughout its history, cinema has interacted with, has been dependent on, and been complemented by these other technologies.⁸⁹ For Elsaesser, the task of tracing cinema’s history is not a straight line but a going-against-the-grain that recognises divergence. He writes that to ‘ahistorically cordon off’ these other cinematic apparatuses would hinder our understanding of how cinema came about and indeed our present era, ‘thereby making the death of cinema a self-fulfilling prophecy.’⁹⁰ Taking this view of film history thus reveals alterity that is otherwise lost in the study of the more traditional cinema apparatus.⁹¹

Although the title of this thesis suggests an exclusive focus on contemporary screen culture, my research acknowledges the value in a media archaeological approach that looks to the pre-digital past to understand screen genealogies. The application of an ‘old’ theory to contemporary media has been demonstrated by major studies such as Lev

⁸⁵ Wanda Strauven, ‘The Observer’s Dilemma: To Touch or not to Touch,’ in *Media Archaeology*, ed. Huhtamo and Parikka, 150.

⁸⁶ José Moure and Dominique Chateau ed., *Screens: from Materiality to Spectatorship, a Historical and Theoretical Reassessment* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016) is a significant contribution to the study of both new media devices and pre-cinematic screen apparatuses.

⁸⁷ Elsaesser, *Film History*, 8 (footnote).

⁸⁸ Ibid, 261-262.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See, also: Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, xvi.

Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2002) and Andrew's *What Cinema Is!*, where the contributions of theorists such as Benjamin and Bazin are applied to technologies that neither theorist could have experienced in their lifetimes.⁹² Similarly, my analysis is concerned with understanding an 'old' concept in film theory – the *caméra-stylo* – by looking to contemporary digital screen culture in and beyond the theatre. And, like Manovich and others, I am concerned with understanding new media technologies and social media by invoking theories and practices from cinema's past.⁹³ Thus, this thesis will make novel connections between media technologies, aesthetics, and practices across periods in film history, although focusing primarily on contemporary examples in screen culture.

In light of these key issues in film scholarship, it is clear that the *caméra-stylo* in its contemporary iterations is implicated in a broader moment of *transition* for cinema. This moment of transition can be described as post-cinematic, wherein mobile screen technologies such as smartphones and the networked interfaces of social media platforms show the persistence of moving images beyond the theatre. I agree with Gaudreault and Marion's assertion that 'a film on a smartphone may not be "the" cinema,' but having to make this distinction shows that '*there always remains something of cinema* [original emphasis] in the supposedly degraded images' of these small devices.⁹⁴ It is not the aim of this thesis to argue that Instagram or TikTok videos are the same as *the* cinema. In this I share Aumont's perspective that there are distinct formal and social qualities to different media forms that ought to be studied respectively. But, this does not rule out the plasticity of moving images. And this is not to say that such technologies have replaced the cinema *dispositif*, but that cinema has demonstrated a desire to seep into and certainly be informed by other technologies. My analysis is concerned with the instances where cinema and social media cross-over, contrast, and borrow from each other, via the route of Astruc's formula. This thesis sees cinema as not a cordoned-off medium, or indeed social media platforms as cordoned-off interfaces. Just as cinema and social media are receptive to political and social stimuli, they are receptive to each other. Although figures like Sontag have lamented the death of cinema, the study of the *caméra-stylo* – a landmark concept in film analysis – is one that requires the introduction and integration of digital

⁹² Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 189, 175.

⁹³ See: Elsaesser, *Film History*, 36.

⁹⁴ Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 60.

and mobile technologies to understand its potential today. The caméra-stylo has yet to be investigated at length in this way.

Social Media and Screen Studies

When Astruc published his two essays, cinema was still in the early process of being theorised as a medium and art form.⁹⁵ The theorisation of digital media is still ‘new’ in comparison to film studies, but there are now more than three decades of theory dedicated to it. Significantly, scholars have looked to the theorisation of cinema (an ‘old’ medium) to assess the characteristics of digital and ‘new’ media.

In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (2000), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that in their quest for hypermediacy, new media technologies borrow from other, older media like print, photography, and cinema. Websites combine text, photography, windows, and graphics that resemble television broadcasts and print media. Digital visual media (and, by extension, social media platforms) ‘can best be understood through the ways in which they honour, rival, and revise’ older media; ‘No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media.’⁹⁶ Carol Vernallis’s concept of the contemporary ‘media swirl’ of accelerated aesthetics and mingled media resonates with this view. The transmedia aesthetics of YouTube, music videos, and digital cinema ‘ripple out maddeningly, creating interference, blendings, loosening of boundaries in ways we’ve never seen.’⁹⁷

Manovich notably traces the genealogical characteristics of new media to cinema in *The Language of New Media*, such as montage and compositing, while explaining how new media diverge from cinema (especially new media’s identity as data and reliance on user interaction). Manovich significantly states that Dziga Vertov’s avant-garde film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) serves as a guide to the language of new media and that his collection and manipulation of hours of film footage makes him a major proto-database filmmaker of the twentieth century.⁹⁸ Manovich further claims that avant-garde

⁹⁵ Before Astruc, Louis Delluc, Sergei Eisenstein, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Béla Balázs had made significant contributions to the theorisation of what separates cinema from the other arts, its mechanical reproduction, how cinema conveys a new language, and how it can be used for political mobilisation.

⁹⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT, 2000), 15.

⁹⁷ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

⁹⁸ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 239. See, also: Adelheid Heftberger, *Digital Humanities and Film Studies: Visualising Dziga Vertov’s Work* (Springer, 2018).

techniques like ‘cut-and-paste’ came to be materialised in the computer.⁹⁹ Manovich invokes Bazin to discuss perception and realism in computer-generated imagery and Benjamin to theorise vision and distance to discuss the computer screen, thus bringing ‘old’ theories into the digital era.¹⁰⁰

Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture* (2006) is useful for understanding multimodality and transmedia narratives as part of participatory culture, where boundary-crossing modes of reception and interactive participation have taken place, from early cinema to more modern instances of fans (or ‘textual poachers’) as ‘prosumers’ (producer-consumers) participating in paratextual and transmedia narratives online.¹⁰¹ According to Elsaesser, Jenkins’s approach aligns with media archaeology and proposes that cinema has ‘always been potentially and actually participatory.’¹⁰² Remix, convergence, and remediation culture have long been explored in experimental and DIY filmmaking and editing practices and are now fundamental to digital screen culture. Digital remediations of *Man with a Movie Camera* include Perry Bard’s global crowd-sourced remake (2007-2017) and scholar-practitioners Marsha Berry and Dean Keep’s smartphone remediation.¹⁰³ New media genealogies can be found in Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love’s *Fandom as Methodology* (2015) and Francesca Coppa’s *Vidding, a History* (2022), tracing fan editing on YouTube, for example, to early twentieth-century avant-garde practices of cut-and-paste and filmmakers like Joseph Cornell.¹⁰⁴ Such genealogies and experiments reveal the close ties between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media, while highlighting the creative possibilities of ubiquitous and personal screen devices.

The academic study of social media and mobile screen devices as sources of aesthetic and cultural meaning has rapidly integrated with screen studies in the past two decades. As social media platforms are accessed through the Internet and screen technologies (from smartphones to laptops), they are embedded as ubiquitous interfaces in the contemporary screenscape. Numerous publications are concerned with the aesthetics, affordances, and trends that develop on particular platforms. While it is not

⁹⁹ Ibid, 306-307.

¹⁰⁰ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 189, 175.

¹⁰¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006). The term ‘prosumer’ can be attributed to: Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (William Morrow, 1980).

¹⁰² Elsaesser, *Film History*, 61-62 [citing: Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (2006)].

¹⁰³ Perry Bard, ‘Man With a Movie Camera: The Global Remake 1.16.17,’ Vimeo, 8 July 2017, <https://vimeo.com/224732919?share=copy>; Marsha Berry and Dean Keep, ‘Remediating Vertov: Man with a Movie Camera Phone,’ *Ubiquity: The Journal of Pervasive Media* 2, no. 1/2 (October 2013): 164-179, DOI:[10.1386/ubiq.2.1-2.164_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ubiq.2.1-2.164_1).

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love ed., *Fandom as Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers* (Goldsmiths Press, 2019), 17; Francesca Coppa, *Vidding, A History* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

possible to draw on the existing exhaustive body of scholarship on social media from multiple disciplines, there are key publications and theories that are relevant to my research.

Early analyses of Internet platforms from a screen studies approach include *The YouTube Reader* (2009) where, for example, Joost Broeren compares YouTube videos to Gunning's account of early 'cinema of attraction(s)'.¹⁰⁵ It is in this volume, too, that Sørenssen ties Astruc's vision of increased media production and access to YouTube.¹⁰⁶ Manovich's historically-informed analysis of Instagram photography trends between 2015 and 2017 is still a useful approach to Instagram's visual culture. Manovich categorises three types of Instagram photo ('professional', 'designed', and 'casual'), which correspond with primary trends on users' highly curated profiles. Manovich crucially designates Instagram curatorship as a form of authorship – the expression of the 'self' online – which supports Astruc's vision.¹⁰⁷ In *Instagram* (2020), Crystal Abidin, Tama Leaver, and Tim Highfield examine how the platform has transformed into a commercial one for influencers, how its aesthetics have developed with the introduction of new features, its subcultures, and impact on society and real-world spaces.¹⁰⁸ Abidin's and Theresa M. Senft's contributions to the study of influencers, micro-celebrities, and Internet celebrities are also noteworthy.¹⁰⁹

The global emergence of TikTok since 2017 has been a major focus of analysis for scholars. As a solely audiovisual platform, the app is of special relevance to the development of screen culture. TikTok's 'For You Page' (FYP) is designed as one continuous (seemingly endless) algorithmically generated scroll of individual short videos. As Trevor Boffone writes in *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (2023), TikTok's temporality 'allows for mindless entertainment, pulling us in as we scroll to see what we'll get next. We need our fix, and the only way to get it is to continue to scroll TikTok,

¹⁰⁵ Joost Broeren, 'Digital Attractions: Reloading Early Cinema in Online Video Collections,' in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Wallflower Press, 2009): 154-65. See, also: Leah Shafer, 'Cat Videos and the Superflat Cinema of Attractions,' *Film Criticism* 40, no. 2 (2016): 1-14. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.208>.

¹⁰⁶ Sørenssen, 'Breaking the Age Barrier in the Internet Age: The Story of Geriatric 1927,' in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Snickars and Vonderau, 142-143.

¹⁰⁷ Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017), published online at <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>.

¹⁰⁸ Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Polity Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown ed., *Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame* (Emerald Publishing, 2019); Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Emerald Publishing, 2018); Theresa M. Senft, 'Microcelebrity and the Branded Self,' in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. John Hartley AM, Jean Burgess, and Axel Burns (Blackwell Publishing, 2013); Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks* (Peter Lang, 2008).

swiping up until we have lost track of time.’¹¹⁰ Numerous studies, special issues, and conferences have been organised by members of the TikTok Cultures Research Network founded by Abidin.¹¹¹ Studies have analysed the formal and aesthetic connections between cinema and TikTok, including comparisons to the spectacles of early cinema.¹¹²

Furthermore, the ‘selfie’ is a genre of photography embedded in social media use, especially image-based platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Senft and Nancy K. Baym reassess the selfie as a genre not based on narcissism (as is commonly believed), but as one that can empower people to represent themselves in self-portraiture.¹¹³ Ace Lehner also situates the selfie within the history of self-portraiture, arguing that selfies have shifted who holds the power to self-image; self-imaging has become a ‘defining factor of globally networked contemporary life.’ Their impact on visual culture should not be overlooked, especially concerning the ability for non-male and non-white individuals to represent themselves.¹¹⁴ Fiona Andreallo has recently theorised the selfie as a form of ‘Touch’ or ‘skin’, an embodied practice that ‘communicates and defines relationships of bodies in cultural and social structures.’¹¹⁵

Crucially, smartphones and social media platforms are integrated in the same dual camera-screen *dispositif* and thus diverge from the projector-screen apparatus of cinema where the production of the image functions separately from the surface on which the image is projected. The flat smartphone produces the image *and* is the surface on which the image is displayed, requiring touchscreen navigation. Camera lenses are built into the back and front of the screen device. This makes the smartphone *dispositif* ideal for mobile, spontaneous filming of one’s environment *and* one’s self as a kind of *mirror-screen-camera*. Because the digital touchscreen requires touch to function through skin contact or with a stylus, it clearly contrasts with the cinema screen that positions the stationary spectator further away.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Trevor Boffone, *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (Routledge, 2023), 4.

¹¹¹ See: TikTok Cultures Research Network, ‘Publications,’ <https://tiktokcultures.com/publications/>.

¹¹² Elizabeth Mears and Masha Schpolberg, ‘New Age, New Media: TikTok as Ritual Practice,’ *Media Fields Journal* 16 (2021): 1-8, <http://mediafieldsjournal.org/new-age-new-media/2021/4/18/new-age-new-media-tiktok-as-ritual-practice.html>.

¹¹³ Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym, ‘What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon,’ *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1590, DOI: 1932–8036/2015FEA0002. See, also: L.H. Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

¹¹⁴ Ace Lehner ed., *Self-Representation in an Expanded Field: From Self-Portrait to Selfie: Contemporary Art and Self-Representation in the Social Media Age* (MDPI, 2021), 1-6.

¹¹⁵ Fiona Andreallo, *Mapping Selfies and Memes as Touch* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 2.

¹¹⁶ This is not to ignore the possibilities of tactile or haptic audiovisual media regardless of the spectator’s ability to actually touch the screen. See: Marks, *The Skin of the Film* (2000); Marks, *Touch* (2002); Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (University of California Press, 2009); Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment in Moving Image Culture* (University of California Press, 2000).

Indeed, Heidi Rae Cooley observes the *fit* between the hand and ‘mobile screenic devices’, from which tactile vision and a visceral experience emerge.¹¹⁷ Miriam De Rosa and Strauven have analysed how digital screens as working spaces have re-oriented over time in communion with the positionality of the user’s *body*.¹¹⁸ Ryan Alexander Diduck observes that with the visual experience of the iPhone, there is a ‘fluid transmission of energy, a temporary circuit of electrons between the image, the material screen of the device, and the living body of its user.’¹¹⁹ Diduck argues that in this somatosensory framework, ‘there is no vision without touch, and nothing tactile manifests without its visual registration.’¹²⁰ Several essays in the edited collection *Studying Mobile Media* (2012) also address the tactility of the iPhone and how its marketing by Apple (as well as the unseen labour of mass production) is invested in touch.¹²¹ Thus, the realisation of the caméra-stylo today is intrinsically implicated in touch and hapticity via smartphones – a factor that will inform my analysis.

Phenomenological enquiries into embodiment and mobile technologies have been further articulated by scholars. Ingrid Richardson – via Maurice Merleau-Ponty – examines how the iPhone has impacted our embodied perception of space, place, and (tele)presence, looking especially at mobile gaming.¹²² Similarly invoking Merleau-Ponty in *Mobile Interface Theory* (2020), Jason Farman argues that the ubiquity of technologies like GPS, digital mapping, and augmented reality has produced a new sense of space and embodiment, wherein what is ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ are intertwined.¹²³ Farman defines an ‘interface’ as not just constituting the smartphone or computer object, but also ‘[t]he ways we use the device (i.e., the embodied practices of social space) as well as the ways the technologies of the device interact with other devices.’¹²⁴ Thus, interfaces are inherently interactive on the part of the user but their function is also determined by certain parameters set by tech companies.¹²⁵ The edited collection *Mediated Interfaces* (2021) is

¹¹⁷ Heidi Rae Cooley, ‘It’s All About the *Fit*: The Hand, the Mobile Screenic Device and Tactile Vision,’ *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004): 133-155.

¹¹⁸ Miriam De Rosa and Wanda Strauven, ‘Screenic (Re)orientations: Desktop, Tabletop, Tablet, Booklet, Touchscreen, Etc.,’ in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. Synne T. Bull and Susanne Ø. Sæther (Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

¹¹⁹ Ryan Alexander Diduck, ‘Reach Out and Touch Something (That Touches You Back): The iPhone, Mobility and Magic,’ *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 59-60, DOI: 10.3138/cjfs.20.2.55.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

¹²¹ Larissa Hjorth, Jean Burgess, and Ingrid Richardson ed., *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone* (Routledge, 2012).

¹²² Ingrid Richardson, ‘Touching the Screen: A Phenomenology of Mobile Gaming and the iPhone,’ in *Studying Mobile Media*, ed. Hjorth, Burgess, and Richardson, 133-152.

¹²³ Jason Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*, 2nd Ed. (Routledge, 2020).

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 64.

¹²⁵ See, also: Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation* (Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Emilio Vavarella, ‘On Counter-Mapping and Media-Flânerie: Artistic Strategies in the Age of Google Earth, Google

a significant contribution to the study of how bodies are articulated on social media.¹²⁶

There is also extensive research from various disciplines conducted on the role of the body and embodiment in extended reality technologies such as AR, where users can make body modifications that combine real-world and digitally generated imagery.¹²⁷

Scholarship that specifically addresses the practice of filmmaking on smartphones includes the edited collections *Mobile Story Making in an Age of Smartphones* (2018) and *Mobile Storytelling in an Age of Smartphones* (2021). These publications similarly position smartphone filmmaking within frameworks of documentary, narrative cinema, and interactive media, with the view that such devices can empower artists, activists, and ordinary users.¹²⁸ For example, Dean Keep celebrates the size and portability of the smartphone that promotes spontaneous and informal media production and requires no specialised skill.¹²⁹ Keep further proposes that the smartphone user who records urban life is a *flâneur*, invested in an autobiographical ‘evocative mode’ of documentary, citing documentary scholar Bill Nichols’s original ‘modes’.¹³⁰ Relevant to my research on the caméra-stylo and smartphone filmmaking, Szita has already contextualised smartphone filmmaking within the framework of Julio García Espinosa’s concept of ‘imperfect cinema’ in Cuban counter-bourgeois filmmaking, a vision wherein ordinary people possess the means to document their own surroundings, beyond the hegemony of ‘quality’ European auteur and Hollywood cinema.¹³¹

Richard Bégin uses the term ‘somatic images’ to describe the motion blurs in film and video mobilography (including smartphone mobilography) that reveal the corporeality of the filmmaker reacting to and moving through an environment while attached to or holding a small, mobile camera. Bégin positions the mobile camera as one

Maps and Google Street View,’ in *Error, Ambiguity, and Creativity: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Sita Popat and Sarah Whatley (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 137-166.

¹²⁶ Crystal Abidin, Katie Warfield, and Carolina Cambre ed., *Mediated Interfaces: The Body on Social Media* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹²⁷ See: Jennifer O’Meara and Kata Szita, ‘AR Cinema: Visual Storytelling and Embodied Experiences with Augmented Reality Filters and Backgrounds,’ *PRESENCE: Virtual and Augmented Reality* 30 (2021): 99-123, DOI:

https://doi.org/10.1162/pres_a_00376; Stefania Marghitu and Jennifer O’Meara, ‘Seamful Sutures: Gender Exploration and Identity Expression Using Augmented Reality Facial Filters,’ *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 4, no. 1 (2024): 45-85, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/gi.5628>.

¹²⁸ Max Schleser and Marsha Berry ed., *Mobile Story Making in an Age of Smartphones* (Springer, 2018); Max Schleser and Xiaoge Xu ed., *Mobile Storytelling in an Age of Smartphones* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021). See, also: pedagogically informed guidebooks like Bart Weiss, *Smartphone Cinema: Making Great Films with your Mobile Phone* (Focal Press, 2024).

¹²⁹ Dean Keep, ‘Smartphones and Evocative Documentary Practices,’ in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry, 42.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 42-46; Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

¹³¹ Szita, ‘New Perspectives on an Imperfect Cinema,’ (2020); Julio García Espinosa, ‘For an Imperfect Cinema,’ [*Cine Cubano* 66/67 (1969)] *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 20 (1979), para. 3, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.

of cinema's early promises, while connecting avant-garde film (namely, Jonas Mekas) and home moviemaking to new mobile cameras like smartphones. This is useful for my analysis of the caméra-stylo because, from a media archaeological perspective, Bégin connects the embodiment of handling the 8mm camera to the embodiment of wielding smartphones. The term Bégin uses – 'mobilography' – will also be a key terminology in this thesis to describe the practice of mobile filmmaking.¹³²

As an important aspect of widespread smartphone access, activist and socio-politically-motivated smartphone mobilography and social media use has been theorised by scholars in various global and social contexts, from the United States to South Africa.¹³³ There is extensive scholarship on the use of video, social media, and smartphones in relation to the recording of police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement, arising in the US in response to the killing of unarmed Black civilians by police.¹³⁴ Others have analysed protest movements such as the 2011 Arab Uprisings (the first major political movements organised and documented on social media and smartphones) and the Palestinian liberation movement.¹³⁵ The ongoing war in Ukraine has been deemed the 'first TikTok war' by commentators, as videos of bombings and military fire have been shared on the platform, while being the subject of misinformation on the same platform.¹³⁶ Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza has also been described as the first digital genocide as atrocities are recorded by Gazan civilians and Israeli soldiers on their smartphones and uploaded on social media.¹³⁷ Social media practices of expressing

¹³² Richard Bégin, 'GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,' in *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship*, ed. Moure and Chateau, 107-115, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048531691-011>.

¹³³ For example: Lorenzo Dalvit and Alette Schoon, 'Siyashuta! Capturing Police Brutality on Mobile Phones in South Africa,' in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry, 129-137; Chris Robé, 'Anarchist Aesthetics and US Video Activism,' *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 56 (2014/2015), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/RobeAnarchists/text.html>.

¹³⁴ See, for example: Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (Verso, 1994); Paula Rabinowitz, 'Street/Crime: From Rodney King's Beating to Michael Brown's Shooting,' *Cultural Critique* 90 (spring 2015): 143-147, DOI: 10.1353/cul.2015.a586905.

¹³⁵ See: Gary Bratchford, 'Performing Visibility: Representing the Palestinian Freedom Riders through Non-violent Protest and Visual Activism,' in *Mediated Interfaces*, ed. Abidin, Warfield, and Cambre, 113-129; Cristina Mislán and Sara Shaban, "'To Ferguson, Love Palestine': Mediating Life Under Occupation,' *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, issue 1 (2019): 1-18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1594325>.

¹³⁶ Kyle Chayka, 'Watching the World's "First TikTok War",' *The New Yorker*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war>; Kari Paul, 'TikTok was Just a "Dancing App". Then the Ukraine War Started,' *The Guardian*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/19/tiktok-ukraine-russia-war-disinformation>.

¹³⁷ Yousur Al-Hlou, 'The War in Gaza Is Also Unfolding on Instagram,' *The New York Times*, 9 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-instagram.html>; Yara Hawari, 'Why are Israeli Soldiers Sharing Snuff Videos from their Genocide in Gaza?' *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/24/why-are-israeli-soldiers-sharing-snuff-videos-from-their-genocide-in-gaza>; Marwa Fatafta, 'Genocide in the Digital Age: What Role do Social Media Companies Play?' *Association for Progressive Communications*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/genocide-digital-age-what-role-do-social-media-companies-play#:~:text=This%20is%20reflected%20in%20the,victims%20are%20broadcasting%20their%20own.>

solidarity with socio-political movements have been analysed in cultural and media studies.¹³⁸

Although ‘witnessing’ violence and state repression with cameras predates social media, the ubiquitous presence of camera-phones has brought on more globally networked and organised practices of recording and distributing videos online.¹³⁹ Indeed, Kari Andén-Papadopolous argues that the camera-phone has brought on ‘entirely new performative rituals of bearing witness’ such as ‘dissenting bodies en masse’ recording their own repression and ‘effectively mobilising this footage as graphic testimony in a bid to produce feelings of political solidarity.’¹⁴⁰ As Andén-Papadopolous asserts, the mobile camera-phone as an ‘extension of the self that is uniquely and intimately connected to global digital networks, has afforded individuals an extraordinary networking power they have never before enjoyed.’¹⁴¹ Andén-Papadopolous goes on to call these political activists who wield cameras *citizen camera-witnesses*; they put their lives at risk to ‘produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a critical bid to mobilise global solidarity through the affective power of the visual.’¹⁴²

Elsewhere, Andén-Papadopolous argues that citizen eyewitness recordings from conflict zones are increasingly employed for journalistic authority, but ‘video shot by involved citizens summons an immediate and embodied experience from “inside” the event’ and such recordings are not made within the context of best journalistic practice (i.e., fact-checked by a news team).¹⁴³ Alternatively, Josepha Ivanka Wessels describes camera-witnesses in the Syrian Civil War as ‘kinoks’ (‘camera-eye-men’) in reference to Vertov’s filmmaking practice of going out into the streets to film life ‘as it is’. Wessels proposes that these Syrian kinoks made use of YouTube and mobile cameras to present an

¹³⁸ Leila Abbas et al, ‘TikTok Intifada: Analysing Social Media Activism Among Youth,’ *Online Media and Global Communication* 1, no. 2 (2022): 287-314; Laura Cervi and Tom Divon, ‘Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance in TikTok #Challenges,’ *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1-13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157607>.

¹³⁹ See: Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*; Angela J. Aguayo, ‘Activist Street Tapes and Protest Pornography: Participatory Media Culture in the Age of Digital Reproduction,’ *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 56 (2014/2015), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/AguayoProtestVideo/index.html>; Vincent Lavoie, ‘War and the iPhone: New Fronts for Photojournalism,’ *Études Photographiques*, no. 29 (2012): 1-11, <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3480>; Sue Tait, ‘Pornographies of Violence? Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror,’ *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 1 (2008): 91-111, DOI: 10.1080/15295030701851148.

¹⁴⁰ Kari Andén-Papadopolous, ‘Citizen Camera-witnessing: Embodied Political Dissent in the Age of “Mediated Mass Self-Communication”,’ *New Media + Society* 16, no. 5 (2014): 753, DOI: 10.1177/1461444813489863.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 754.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Kari Andén-Papadopolous, ‘Media Witnessing and the “Crowd-Sourced Video Revolution”,’ *Visual Communication* 12, no. 3 (2012): 342, DOI: 10.1177/1470357213483055.

ordinary person's point-of-view that had not been expressed in mainstream Western media.¹⁴⁴

Despite the ubiquitous presence of non-fiction media production in the form of *citizen camera-witnessing* and documentary production, there are simultaneously anxieties about 'truth' in the digital age because of emergent synthetic media that proliferate on social media platforms. Deepfakes have been studied for their role in the dissemination of political rhetoric, the spreading of disinformation in global contexts, and their use in celebrity impersonation.¹⁴⁵ Since at least 2020, the rapid rise and mainstreaming of sophisticated AI-generated media presents a new challenge for the identity of cinema – something that was not included or perhaps even foreseen in the broader 'crisis of cinema' debates in the 2000s-2010s. Although AI is a trending topic across academic disciplines, screen scholars are now especially concerned with the rise of AI in film productions and what this means for the future of human labour and creativity.¹⁴⁶ Issues like the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes in 2023 and cases of scandals arising over the use of AI in film productions point to the enduring 'crisis of cinema' in the digital age.¹⁴⁷ The aesthetic qualities of AI-generated media have been theorised as well as AI's position in art and photographic history – in Joanna Zylińska's *The Perception Machine* (2023) most notably, and also in an article I co-authored on the surrealism of the DALL-E Mini AI text-to-image generator.¹⁴⁸

Evidently, the *caméra-stylo* is seeing its original conception extended into new screen technologies. Smartphones and social media present a new avenue for the study of moving image media and modes of filmmaking, and more specifically the study of flexible and accessible mobilography. At the same time, issues like synthetic media present new challenges for the role of authorship and authenticity in contemporary screen

¹⁴⁴ Josepha Ivanka Wessels, 'Video Activists from Aleppo and Raqqa as "Modern-Day Kinoks"?' *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 10 (2017): 159-174, DOI: [10.1163/18739865-01002005](https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01002005).

¹⁴⁵ See, for example: Lisa Bode, Dominic Lees, and Dan Golding, 'The Digital Face and Deepfakes on Screen,' *Convergence* 27, no. 4 (2021): 849-854; Christopher Holliday, 'Rewriting the Stars: Surface Tensions and Gender Troubles in the Online Media Production of Digital Deepfakes,' *Convergence* 27, no. 4 (2021): 899-918, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211034044>.

¹⁴⁶ Pei-Sze Chow, 'Ghost in the (Hollywood) Machine: Emergent Applications of Artificial Intelligence in the Film Industry,' *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 193-214, DOI: 10.25969/mediarep/14307; L. Kavitha, 'Copyright Challenges in the Artificial Intelligence Revolution: Transforming the Film Industry from Script to Screen,' *Trinity Law Review* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1-8, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48165/TLR.2024.4.1.1>.

¹⁴⁷ For example: BBC, 'London Cinema Drops AI-Written Film after Backlash,' 19 June 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjll3w15j0yo>.

¹⁴⁸ Joanna Zylińska, *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future Between the Eye and AI* (MIT Press, 2023); Jennifer O'Meara and Cáit Murphy, 'Aberrant AI Creations: Co-Creating Surrealist Body Horror Using the DALL-E Mini Text-to-Image Generator,' *Convergence* 29, no. 4 (2023): 1070-1096, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231185865>.

culture. The digital screenscape thus presents new perspectives for scholars on what the caméra-stylo can look and feel like.

Perspectives on the Caméra-Stylo

Since at least the 1960s, the caméra-stylo has been theorised in relation to a given filmmaker, practice, or camera technology. Astruc's long career as a critic in France writing about cinema, literature, and theatre offers a considerable body of work but is not of crucial relevance to the focus of this thesis.¹⁴⁹ Although he lived to the age of 92 in 2016, Astruc did not publish major writings about digital screen culture that might elaborate on the caméra-stylo – a theory he first proposed at the age of 25. And despite Astruc's hopes for the emancipatory qualities of television, the rise of television as a mass medium certainly resulted in pervasive domestic screen *spectatorship*, but not in pervasive television *creators*. Literature on the caméra-stylo has since paid little if no attention to television series as examples of its articulation. Legitimate reasons for this may include the corporate structures of the TV industry and now streaming industry, where creativity is partly determined by boardrooms and privileged access to capital; or, the highly collaborative environments of TV production. Therefore, my focus will likewise not be on television. Although Astruc could not have foreseen the development of screen technologies in 1948, it is through digital and mobile technologies that the caméra-stylo has found revived interest amongst scholars in recent years. It is important to outline these perspectives before my own analysis.

It is firstly vital to recognise the critical and cultural context in which Astruc was writing in the immediate post-war period. The caméra-stylo is known best for contributing to the formulation of the auteur and auteur theory in the 1950s and 1960s. For this reason Astruc has been hailed by critics as the 'father' or 'uncle' of the French New Wave.¹⁵⁰ Astruc was certainly not the first critic in France to propose this basic theory of the auteur. Louis Delluc was drawing similar comparisons between film-directing and painting in the 1910s and 20s.¹⁵¹ However, the devising of a clear metaphor in 'caméra-stylo' is what solidified Astruc's legacy, foregrounded repeatedly in obituaries

¹⁴⁹ See: Alexandre Astruc, *Du Stylo à la Caméra...et de la Caméra au Stylo: Écrits (1942-1984)* (Archipel, 1992).

¹⁵⁰ Ignatiy Vishnevetsky, 'R.I.P. Alexandre Astruc, "the Uncle of the French New Wave",' *AV Club*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.avclub.com/r-i-p-alexandre-astruc-the-uncle-of-the-french-new-w-1798247423>.

¹⁵¹ Donna Kornhaber, 'Charlot as Cinema: Louise Delluc and Charlie Chaplin at the Dawn of Film Criticism,' *Film History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 148-149, DOI: 10.2979/filmhistory.27.2.140.

in 2016.¹⁵² As Bellour wrote in a pocketbook about Astruc published in 1963 amidst the New Wave, it was this ‘formula’ that had made him famous.¹⁵³ Over a decade after the publication of Astruc’s two essays, his concept resonated with the younger post-war generation of French filmmakers and critics for whom cinema promised a personal and liberated art form, as auteur theory became the dominant trend.¹⁵⁴

The origins of the ‘caméra-stylo’ must be contextualised at a point where cinema needed an *author* in order to cut through its industrial identity, but had yet to undergo major theoretical evaluation. Astruc’s writings predated the formalising of Anglophone film theory within universities and journals by the 1970s. Astruc’s evaluation of films on the grounds of their *aesthetic* and personal *style* (the articulation of a ‘caméra-stylo’ being the true personal expression of the *self*) contrasts with the mistrust in the image shared later by Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytical schools of thought in, for example, the influential work of Christian Metz or the journal *Screen* (and its so-called ‘Screen Theory’) in the 1970s. This also coincided with a movement away from auteurs and their *style* as the loci of meaning (often consisting of *mise en scène* analysis). A shift towards thinking about the camera-projector apparatus and spectatorship can be seen in, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry’s ‘Apparatus Theory’ from 1970.¹⁵⁵ Cognitive studies beginning in the 1980s such as those by Bordwell and Noël Carroll have played an important role in moving film studies away from psychoanalysis (as well as further de-centring the author) and focusing instead on audience cognition, perception, memory, and emotions.¹⁵⁶ The rise of phenomenological film studies included major interventions by Vivian Sobchack, Marks, and Jennifer M. Barker in the 1990s and 2000s, which further decentred the *image* in film analysis and instead on the *haptic* and embodied experiences of screen spectatorship.¹⁵⁷ This summary does not capture all schools of thought since 1948, but it does show how theoretical film analysis has increasingly moved away from

¹⁵² Vishnevetsky, ‘R.I.P. Alexandre Astruc’; Ronald Bergen, ‘Alexandre Astruc Obituary,’ *The Guardian*, 23 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/23/alexandre-astruc-obituary>.

¹⁵³ Raymond Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc* (Éditions Seghers, 1963), 9.

¹⁵⁴ This pocketbook series focused on individual auteurs, with names that are certainly more well-known in film culture today than Astruc’s – amongst them Orson Welles, Alain Resnais, and Fritz Lang – which nonetheless demonstrates Astruc’s importance within French film culture at the time.

¹⁵⁵ Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,’ *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (winter 1974-1975): 39-47, trans. Alan Williams, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1211632> [first published in *Cinéthique* no. 7-8 (1970)].

¹⁵⁶ David Bordwell, ‘A Case for Cognitivism,’ *Iris* no. 9 (spring 1989): 11-40; Bordwell, ‘Minding Movies,’ *Observations on Film Art*, March 5, 2008, <https://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2008/03/05/minding-movies/>.

¹⁵⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film* (2000); Marks, *Touch* (2002); Barker, *The Tactile Eye* (2009); Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (2000).

the image and auteur theory (despite the pre-eminence of auteurs in film culture more broadly).¹⁵⁸

Although impactful as a historical document on film culture, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde’ is a short essay and does not elaborate on certain key aspects. Indeed, Astruc’s polemical, manifesto-like approach to writing about cinema contrasts sharply with later approaches in film theory and the processes of peer-review favoured by many screen studies journals today. Adrian Martin aptly notes that Astruc passes from a ‘sober, “speculative” tone to outbursts of wild metaphor and sometimes outrageous associations’ in these early essays.¹⁵⁹ What Astruc sees as ‘avant-garde’ film lacks explanation when he states ‘[t]here is always an avant-garde when something new takes place.’¹⁶⁰ Astruc’s vision of the avant-garde does not seem to align with more accepted frameworks of experimental film history.¹⁶¹ Additionally, Astruc does not elaborate on quality and what it means for film as art when the masses have access to small, compact cameras. Astruc doesn’t go as far as suggesting that anyone with a camera can become an artist. It is these omissions that may open Astruc’s metaphor up to malleable application or even misinterpretation. Martin has usefully translated Astruc’s essay ‘The Future of Cinema’ and argues that Astruc’s ideas are further synthesised here. Martin notes that it is ‘virtually a rewriting of “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde” but longer and with extensive elaboration. It is here that we find the fullest expression of Astruc’s hopes for a free and democratic cinema.’¹⁶² Therefore, these two companion texts form the basis of the concept of the *caméra-stylo*.

The interpretation of the *caméra-stylo* is markedly flexible amongst different readers and scholars. According to Martin, the fundamental *practice* of the *caméra-stylo* was remoulded among critics and filmmakers to favour *mise en scène* in fiction narrative cinema. The ‘highly constructed, sufficiently financed, fiction feature’ that is (literally) *put in place* contrasts with the cheap, freewheeling, off-the-cuff films unsupported by the film industry (or indeed a sizeable film crew).¹⁶³ With its origins in theatre, ‘mise en scène’ suggests a pre-determined, highly controlled conceptualisation of what will unfold

¹⁵⁸ However, a post-Althusserian ‘return’ to film aesthetics is apparent in the writings of Jacques Rancière, for example. See: Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (Verso, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ Adrian Martin, ‘Introduction to “The Future of Cinema” by Alexandre Astruc,’ *The Third Rail*, issue 9 (2016): 43-45, <http://thirdrailquarterly.org/adrian-martin-introduction-to-the-future-of-cinema-by-alexandre-astruc/>.

¹⁶⁰ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 31.

¹⁶¹ See, for example: P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁶² Martin, ‘Introduction to “The Future of Cinema”,’ 44.

¹⁶³ Adrian Martin, ‘Turn the Page: From Mise en Scène to Dispositif,’ *Screening the Past*, issue 31 (2011), <https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-31-first-release/turn-the-page-from-mise-en-scene-to-dispositif/>.

before the camera, often determined by a screenplay or storyboard. This contrasts with the spontaneity and free-flow of expression that is imbued in the concept of *caméra-stylo*. Astruc later wrote of *mise en scène*: ‘The universe of an artist is not the one that conditions him, but the one that he needs to create.’¹⁶⁴ This idea, as Martin points out, corresponds with a Romantic ideal of individual creation of form out of the formless. A director organises actors, scenic elements, and a camera around on set or on location that were previously disorganised. Film criticism is still, despite alternative perspectives, entrenched in this belief.¹⁶⁵ Thus, an emphasis on *mise en scène* came to stand in for the initial hopes of the *caméra-stylo*.

Alternatively, in *Mise en Scène and Film Style* (2014), Martin explains that a *dispositif* is basically the ‘arrangement of diverse elements in such a way as to trigger, guide and organise a set of actions.’¹⁶⁶ With this distinction in mind, Martin’s analysis resonates with the many screen media formats analysed in this thesis where the term ‘*mise en scène*’ is insufficient to describe them. As my research will show, off-the-cuff smartphone mobilography does not implicate the construction of *mise en scène*. The smartphone *dispositif* comprises the handling of the physical object (the use of the touchscreen and camera, its visual, haptic, and audio interface) and the software applications contained within its computer. *Dispositif* may usefully describe both the content of the screen and acknowledge the apparatus of personal production.¹⁶⁷

In the early stage of cinema’s digital shift in 1990, Timothy Corrigan comments that promotional technology and production feats – rather than their film texts – have become the ‘new *caméra-stylo*’ for auteurs.¹⁶⁸ In the modern ‘commerce of auteurism’, an auteur can be received by audiences beyond their film texts and may even usurp them. The auteur’s ‘personal signature’ can comprise paratextual marketing materials and extra-textual discourses like interviews. Their persona can sell the film before it has even been released. Upturning Roland Barthes’ original statement, Corrigan surmises that ‘it is the

¹⁶⁴ Alexandre Astruc, ‘Qu’est-ce que la Mise en Scène?’ [*Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 100 (October 1959)] in *Du Stylo à la Caméra...et de la Caméra au Stylo*, 387 [my translation].

¹⁶⁵ Martin, ‘Turn the Page: From Mise en Scène to Dispositif,’ (2011).

¹⁶⁶ Adrian Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art* (Springer, 2014), 179.

¹⁶⁷ There has been notable widespread use of the term, including Foucault’s analysis of *dispositifs* (social apparatuses), such as prisons and judicial control. See: Gilles Deleuze, ‘What is a *Dispositif*?’ in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, trans. Timothy J. Armstrong (Routledge, 1992), 159-168. See, also: Giorgio Agamben’s inclusion of cell phones as *dispositifs* in: Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is an Apparatus?’ in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

¹⁶⁸ Timothy Corrigan, ‘The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority,’ *New German Critique* 49 (winter 1990): 49, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/488373>.

text that may now be dead.¹⁶⁹ Despite efforts to de-centre auteurs in, for example, reception studies or reassessments of collaboration in film production, the director-as-auteur remains a popular figure in film discourses. Just as the stardom of screen performers has been studied extensively, directors can also be studied as stars in their own right.¹⁷⁰ Auteurism and stardom are closely connected in film culture, especially amongst cinephiles. Alison Smith, in reference to Godard's rise to stardom during the New Wave, writes that *la politique des auteurs* 'attributed cinematic significance to the director as a personality. By highlighting the role of the film director as creative individual, it gave importance to his (or her) mental structures of the world, and therefore his (or her) life.'¹⁷¹ In response to Corrigan, Catherine Grant argued in 2000 that despite hesitancy amongst scholars in centring directors in film analysis, 'it is especially difficult now to disavow the effect, on both film culture *and* Screen Studies, of the increasingly reificatory and commodifying processes of contemporary auteurism.'¹⁷² The Internet has expanded access to auteurs and further commodifies auteurs as signature-brands.¹⁷³ Grant later added in 2008 that auteurism 'is a matter of supply and demand' and is increasingly a way of selling films.¹⁷⁴

What this re-evaluation of the auteur shares with Astruc's original formulation is a consistent emphasis on the auteur's *personality*. Grant examines the director DVD voice-over commentary track ('*auteur machines*') as an intimate paratextual extension of authorship for the viewer (who is interested in what the auteur *makes* but also what they're *like*).¹⁷⁵ Ginette Vincendeau has analysed auteur Céline Sciamma's celebrity status and her iconographic significance as a feminist auteur (in a largely male-dominated industry) bolstered by Internet discourses and memes.¹⁷⁶ Writing in 2007, Devin Orgeron revises Astruc's caméra-stylo as a more child-like 'camera-Crayola' to explore Wes Anderson's public 'brand'. Orgeron notes DVD collecting and campaigns that involve merchandising the auteur for commodity-based identification. Significantly, Wes

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 49; [citing: Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 142-148].

¹⁷⁰ See, also: Stella Bruzzi, 'The Performing Film-Maker and the Acting Subject,' in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: BFI Publishing, 2013), 48-58.

¹⁷¹ Alison Smith, 'The Auteur as Star: Jean-Luc Godard,' in *Stardom in Postwar France*, ed. John Gaffney and Diana Holmes (Berghahn Books, 2007), 129.

¹⁷² Catherine Grant, 'www.auteur.com?' *Screen* 41, no. 1 (2000): 101, DOI: 10.1093/screen/41.1.101.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 107.

¹⁷⁴ Catherine Grant, 'Auteur Machines? Auteurism and the DVD,' in *Film and Television After DVD*, ed. James Bennett and Tom Brown (Routledge, 2008), 101.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ginette Vincendeau, "'Why has Céline Sciamma Become so Iconic?': The Auteure as Celebrity,' *French Screen Studies* 23, no. 2/3 (2023): 231-247, DOI: 10.1080/26438941.2022.2151239.

Anderson fan media have exploded online in the nearly two decades since Orgeron's publication, producing viral trends and spreading onto different platforms.¹⁷⁷ Ordinary social media users have co-created Anderson's style and brand name in the digital era, using the simple tools at their disposal. This will be explored in-depth in Chapter 4 of this thesis, looking at the recent TikTok trend and generative AI mimicry of Anderson's style.

While the 'commerce of auteurism' has become increasingly relevant with the rise of social media, Corrigan's re-evaluation of the *caméra-stylo* departs somewhat from Astruc's original emphasis on the author's inscription of the self through audiovisual means. Corrigan's commentary does not align with more recent scholarly interpretations of Astruc's metaphor in relation to personal apparatuses or essay filmmaking, including Corrigan's own later reassessments. And as I will elaborate in Chapter 3, I do not entirely agree with Corrigan's perspective that the 'new' *caméra-stylo* consists entirely of *promotional* discourse. Despite the clear expansion of 'commerce of auteurism', some notable auteurs still engage in personal and mobile modes of production with the new affordances of casual digital technologies not necessarily tied to promoting their film work. In 2021, I began to develop the ideas in this thesis around the *caméra-stylo* and auteurism in the digital age, analysing a case study on Claire Denis's Instagram profile as an updated version of Astruc's vision.¹⁷⁸ Auteurs' creative uses of social media will be examined closely in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

As I mentioned in relation to Rascaroli's commentary on the *caméra-stylo*'s realisation today, Astruc's ideas have informed studies of the essay film as a first-person audiovisual form. Although Hans Richter and Soviet filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein had previously theorised essay films, Astruc's two essays are considered touchstones for the theorisation of cinema that could take on the expression 'I'.¹⁷⁹ In 'The Future of Cinema', Astruc foresees the essay film, where 'film replaces paper or canvas as the privileged material where the trace of individual obsessions are inscribed, where they unfold. The filmmaker will come to say "I" just like the novelist or poet.'¹⁸⁰ Astruc's early celebration of the film as a subjective medium has been noted by Rascaroli:

¹⁷⁷ Devin Orgeron, 'La Camera-Crayola: Authorship Comes of Age in the Cinema of Wes Anderson,' *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 2 (2007): 40-65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137181>.

¹⁷⁸ Cáit Murphy, 'The Filmmaker as Instagram Auteur: A Case Study on Claire Denis,' *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022): 258-284, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18820>.

¹⁷⁹ Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan ed., *Essays on the Essay Film* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 9.

¹⁸⁰ Astruc, 'The Future of Cinema,' 48.

The essay film, together with its cognate forms – the diary, the travelogue, the notebook and the self-portrait – is cinema in the first person. It is a cinema of thought, of investigation and self-reflection, in which the filmmaker, instead of withdrawing behind the camera, comes out into the open, to say ‘I’, to take responsibility, and to address and engage with the spectator within a shared space of embodied subjectivity.¹⁸¹

As illustrated by Rascaroli, the essay film renders embodied subjectivity and self-presentation in audiovisual terms. Informed by Astruc’s *caméra-stylo*, Corrigan argues that in the essay film, the filmmaker’s expressive subjectivity is typically signified by their voice-over or physical presence (or via on-screen surrogates).¹⁸² As a testament to Astruc’s legacy, ‘The Future of Cinema’ was later included in Corrigan and Nora M. Alter’s edited collection *Essays on the Essay Film* (2017). Here, Corrigan significantly makes the connection between mobile cameras and subjective expression, claiming that lightweight portable cameras available in the post-war period to digital devices today ‘encourage and underpin the active subjectivity and public mobility of the essay film’ that can be found in Astruc’s ideas in 1948.¹⁸³ In *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017), Rascaroli similarly observes the proliferation of flexible, individual audiovisual production in the digital era – ‘the old dream of the camera-pen seems to have been fully realised.’¹⁸⁴

Scholars have invoked the *caméra-stylo* to describe individual filmmakers and their films, many of whom were part of the French Left Bank. This is not surprising given the essayistic and cross-media tendencies of this set of filmmakers. In *What Cinema Is!* (2005), Andrew argues that Alain Resnais’s essay films fulfil the hopes that had driven Astruc’s manifesto and ‘can be taken as “compositions” in the literary sense.’¹⁸⁵ Bellour notes how Chris Marker’s techno pseudo-documentary *Level Five* (1997) is faithful to Astruc’s concept: ‘This film was made with the most modest of means, “in a room six foot by ten, with no crew, no technical assistance”, which seems to bring to fruition the prophecies of “comrade Astruc” on the *caméra-stylo* made fifty years ago.’¹⁸⁶ Indeed,

¹⁸¹ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (Wallflower Press, 2009), <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-personal-camera/9781906660123>.

¹⁸² Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne to Marker* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

¹⁸³ Corrigan, ‘On the History of the Essay Film: Vertov to Varda,’ in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Alter and Corrigan, 212.

¹⁸⁴ Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 47.

¹⁸⁶ Raymond Bellour, ‘“Cinema, Alone”/Multiple “Cinemas”,’ *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, issue 5 (summer 2013): 22.

Marker's general filmography may be usefully placed within Astruc's original framework.¹⁸⁷ Rascaroli draws the connection between Astruc and Varda's term *cinécriture* ('cine-writing').¹⁸⁸ Corrigan also refers to Varda's 'small digital caméra-stylo' in her essay film *The Gleaners and I* (2000), shot on a handheld video camcorder.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, in *The Gleaners and I*, Varda embraces the tactility and portability of the small camcorder and its stroboscopic, pixelated video images. And later she even embraced Instagram and smartphones. Significantly, for the purposes of my research, Liz Burke, writing in 2021, further connects the caméra-stylo to Varda's enthusiasm for portable camera-as-*cinécriture* with the affordances of smartphones.¹⁹⁰ On Varda's essay filmmaking, Lydia Tuan also makes an important connection between the caméra-stylo, corporeality, hapticity, and the *corps-stylo* or 'writing the self with and through the body.'¹⁹¹

The relationship between Godard's cinema and painting has been studied extensively, often drawing on Astruc.¹⁹² For example, Volker Pantenburg's *Farocki/Godard* (2015) cites Astruc's formulation of the caméra-stylo as an early indication of the desire to transform cinema into an expression that could parallel the expressivity of writing and – by extension – painting (i.e., the camera as a 'brush').¹⁹³ Godard can be said to have embraced a '*caméra-pinceau*' ('camera-paintbrush') – to invoke Pascal Bonitzer – especially in later works like his experimental narrative essay film *Adieu au langage/Goodbye to Language* (2013) with its almost 'impasto' and pointillist use of pixelated 3D imagery.¹⁹⁴

Steps toward the theorisation of videographic criticism as a form of caméra-stylo have also developed. In 2011, Christian Keathley claimed that 'due to developments in digital technology, film scholars also find themselves in a position to respond to Astruc's call – using new technologies to invent new audio-visual critical forms.'¹⁹⁵ In *The New*

¹⁸⁷ See: Martin, 'Introduction to the "The Future of Cinema"', (2016).

¹⁸⁸ Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 5.

¹⁸⁹ Corrigan, 'Of the History of the Essay Film,' 219.

¹⁹⁰ Liz Burke, 'Cine-Writing the Everyday: Walking with Agnes and Zelda,' in *Mobile Storytelling in an Age of Smartphones*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 191-204.

¹⁹¹ Lydia Tuan, 'The Texture of Time: Varda & the Possibility of a Feminist Essay Film,' *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, 7 November 2023, <https://maifeminism.com/the-texture-of-time-var-da-the-possibility-of-a-feminist-essay-film/>.

¹⁹² See: Angela Dalle Vache, *Cinema and Painting: How Art is Used in Film* (University of Texas Press, 1996); Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality* (2011); Sally Shafto, 'Leap into the Void: Godard and the Painter,' *Senses of Cinema*, issue 39 (May 2006), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2006/cinema-and-the-pictorial/godard_de_stael/.

¹⁹³ Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 77.

¹⁹⁴ See, for more discussion: Pascal Bonitzer, *Décadrages. Peinture et Cinéma* (Cahiers du Cinéma, 1985).

¹⁹⁵ Christian Keathley, 'La Caméra-Stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia,' in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (Routledge, 2011), 179.

Cinephilia (2020), Girish Shambu notes a connection between the caméra-stylo (writing with film) and criticism (writing *about* film), while highlighting the expanded modes of access online for people to express their thoughts on films.¹⁹⁶ However, Shambu does not go as far as suggesting that the two activities can be combined in videographic criticism or indeed other forms of cinephilic or fan-editing practices. The lines between ‘scholar’ and ‘practitioner’ or ‘scholar’ and ‘fan’ are blurred in many cases of videographic criticism.¹⁹⁷ Broader access to editing software in the digital age has transformed the ability for scholars to engage with the materials they study, by facilitating editorial malleability and filmic expression.

David Oscar Harvey argues that scholarly analyses of essay films (those by Resnais, Varda, Marker, etc.) informed by Astruc’s vision of individualistic expression typically do so via the study of voice-over (a vococentric analysis). Yet, Harvey surmises that Astruc did not initially have vococentrism in mind, whereby the voice is privileged over any other sound on the soundtrack, as first theorised by Michel Chion.¹⁹⁸ Harvey argues that Astruc’s ideas were more in line with ‘a mode of abstract intelligence available within specifically cinematic characteristic of the film medium; namely, its image and non-vococentric soundtrack.’¹⁹⁹ This suggests that Astruc’s concept was somewhat ocularcentric in origin, focused primarily on the aesthetic and non-verbal expression of the self. Thus, the analysis of sound (in and of itself) has rarely been explored in relation to the caméra-stylo, other than analyses of voice-over in essay films.

As a form of video essay, desktop documentaries alternatively use the laptop or smartphone screen as recording apparatuses to explore non-vococentric embodied experiences of Internet-use. Techniques include typing out text on screen instead of using voice-over. The methods and aesthetics of desktop documentary are essentially experimental. Similar to Vertov’s techniques in documentary filmmaking, the desktop documentary reflexively shows the apparatus itself in its own production. Furthermore, desktop documentary evokes the camera-less analogue filmmaking techniques of Stan Brakhage and others. This mode has been theorised by scholar-practitioners such as

¹⁹⁶ Girish Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*, 2nd Edition (Caboose, 2020), 32.

¹⁹⁷ See, for example: Catherine Grant, ‘Star Studies in Transition: Notes on Experimental Videographic Approaches to Film Performance,’ *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 4 (2017): 148-156, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44867850>; Catherine Grant, ‘Videographic Star Studies and the “Late Voice”’: Carrie Fisher, John Hurt and Jeanne Moreau,’ *In Media Res*, 1 September 2017, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2017/08/15/videographic-star-studies-and-late-voice>.

¹⁹⁸ David Oscar Harvey, ‘The Limits of Vococentrism: Chris Marker, Hans Richter and the Essay Film,’ *SubStance* 41, no. 2 (2012): 6-7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23260788>; Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (Columbia University Press, 1999), 5.

¹⁹⁹ Harvey, ‘The Limits of Vococentrism,’ 6-7.

Kevin B. Lee, Ariel Avissar, and others for its first-person subjectivity, writerly, and embodied qualities, but has yet to be connected to the caméra-stylo.²⁰⁰

Scholarship has gradually pointed to the realisation of the caméra-stylo among ordinary mobilographers and users of digital technologies.²⁰¹ From a pedagogical perspective, Alexandra Juhász encourages the use of YouTube in the classroom, remarking that students have been raised with digital technologies and ‘they come to class with a digital stylo in their hand’ that should be embraced as a learning tool.²⁰² Allard has argued that screenagers have adopted smartphones as their own caméra-stylo, where the tradition of writing meets the image on the touchscreen that also functions as a camera – a ‘camera-inkstand’ (‘écran-écritoire’).²⁰³ Allard argues that we must consider the mobile smartphone as medium of the inner voice and a ‘writing-screen’ (‘écran-scripteur’).²⁰⁴ Burke also sees the caméra-stylo and cinécriture as a useful way to think about her own daily smartphone use and its ‘linguistic and discursive registers.’²⁰⁵ Through the caméra-stylo, Burke situates the smartphone within the history of other mobile cameras like 16mm, suggesting not a linear progression of one ‘superior’ technology replacing another, but a close genealogical relationship between these humble devices.²⁰⁶ This perspective resonates with post-cinematic and media archaeological interpretations of screen culture and the caméra-stylo, and aligns with my own research approach.

Writing in 2008, Sørenssen uses Astruc’s formula to question if expanded access to digital production tools and distribution channels like YouTube also implies an enhancement of the democratic potential of these media, traditionally dominated by producers with access to capital and whether this development will change the dominating media structure.²⁰⁷ In his analysis of YouTube as a potential ‘public sphere’,

²⁰⁰ Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar, ‘Desktop Documentary as Scholarly Subjectivity: Five Approaches,’ *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023): 276-280. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19737>; Roberto Letizi and Simon Troon, ‘Teaching Writing with Images: The Role of Authorship and Self-Reflexivity in Audiovisual Essay Pedagogy,’ *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 181-202, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15347>.

²⁰¹ I use the term ‘mobilographer’ here, as with the term ‘filmmaker’ it is generally assumed that the person in question has chosen filmmaking as a dedicated career, may have extensive training, and is involved in the film industry or other artistic institutions such as galleries and film festivals.

²⁰² Alexandra Juhász, ‘YouTube Stylo: Writing and Teaching with Digital Video,’ in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies Volume II: Media Production*, ed. Vicki Mayer (Blackwell Publishing, 2013).

²⁰³ Allard, ‘Partages Créatifs,’ 37.

²⁰⁴ Laurence Allard, ‘Du Géofiltre à l’Égofiltre: Les Territoires de Jeu des Individus-Marques à l’Épreuve des Applications de Messagerie Sociale,’ *Questions de communication*, no. 34 (2018): 97, DOI: [10.4000/questionsdecommunication.15609](https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.15609).

²⁰⁵ Burke, ‘Cine-Writing the Everyday,’ in *Mobile Storytelling*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 193.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Sørenssen, ‘Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc’s Caméra-Stylo,’ 47; Sørenssen, ‘Breaking the Age Barrier in the Internet Age,’ in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Snickars and Vonderau, 140-151.

Sørenssen finds that one elderly creator born in 1927 has wielded his own caméra-stylo, albeit with the help of his online community of followers. Sørenssen argues:

Today, the Internet and the Web have opened up yet another channel for mass participation and production of audiovisual material. In a media-historical sense, YouTube seems to promise what Astruc hoped for half a century ago.²⁰⁸

Invoking Jürgen Habermas's theories on the 'public sphere' as well as Douglas Kellner's later interventions in the study of the Internet, Sørenssen finds that Astruc's vision provides three implicit conclusions: (1) new technologies provide a new means of expression that exceeds being the privilege of just a few to being a publicly available form of expression; (2) this opens space for more democratic use of the medium; (3) and it opens up new possibilities for an avant-garde.²⁰⁹ Usefully, Sørenssen's argument is centred around the caméra-stylo as essentially *documentary*-based in nature, taking YouTube as an example of a digital distribution site where documentary-adjacent media is widely proliferated. While Sørenssen's article is an important precursor to my research, his analysis predates the massive expansion of screen media production in the form of smartphones and platforms like Instagram and TikTok – audiovisual technologies that will be the focus of my research.

It is significant that Astruc's 'old' theory has inspired these varied interpretations in the digital era as it signals substantial interest among scholars in this subject. As scholars like Burke, Sørenssen, and Rascaroli have pointed to, the promise of Astruc's theory seems to be materialising in the form of new screen and mobile technologies that are portable and personal. However, there is still much to gain in understanding the caméra-stylo in broader contemporary screen culture. As the variety of scholarly perspectives highlights, the caméra-stylo has not since been defined by a single practical application, camera device, person, or era. As scholarship on auteur cinema, the essay film, videographic criticism, and YouTube have shown, the caméra-stylo is open to interpretation. This has arguably ensured its lasting resonance. While this malleability is useful to me and other scholars interested in assessing a wide variety of screen media, it

²⁰⁸ Sørenssen, 'Breaking the Age Barrier,' in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Snickars and Vonderau, 142-143.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 49 [citing: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press, 1991); Douglas Kellner, 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention,' in *Perspectives on Habermas*, ed. Lewis Hahn (Open Court Press, 2000)].

can also lead to overly liberal applications. A clear methodological framework is first required to assess the wide range of texts and case studies examined in this thesis.

A Methodological Framework for the Caméra-Stylo

Building on the existing body of literature on the digital shift, on social media and new screen technologies, and on the caméra-stylo itself, this thesis brings the concept of the caméra-stylo into the social media age and provides the first major study of its re-imagining in contemporary digital screen culture. Before moving on to my case study analyses, it is first important to outline a methodological framework for assessing a wide range of media. It is also important to outline key terminologies that appear frequently in this thesis.

While Astruc's concept has been somewhat revived in the digital era, the use of the term 'caméra-stylo' in film criticism and scholarship has not been narrowly defined, and may even be misappropriated in some instances. This is because it is essentially a *metaphor*.²¹⁰ There are consequently advantages and disadvantages to using the 'caméra-stylo' as a core concept in major research. One point is that Astruc's ideas are not entirely unique in writings about cinema. As I will show in this thesis, similar visions of filmmaking being as flexible and accessible as writing have since been shared by different writers and filmmakers: from Cesare Zavattini, Julio García Espinosa, Jonas Mekas, and Chris Marker, to Agnès Varda. By connecting these similar ideas for the first time in major research, this thesis will uncover parallel thinking over time about the promise of mobile devices in screen culture. One might ask, what is the value in taking the 'caméra-stylo' in particular as a core concept in this thesis, given that similar ideas have emerged since? Despite these subsequent writings, the historical impact of the 'caméra-stylo' can be seen in the development of auteur theory and remains influential in film culture more broadly. It is perhaps the most famous terminology used to describe the inscription of a 'personal vision' or 'voice' in cinema, and has recently prompted different applications to digital screen media. Thus, the term invites special consideration in screen research.

There remains the question: what *is* the caméra-stylo? Looking at the literature, there is a clear shift in thinking about the concept. The emphasis for auteur criticism by

²¹⁰ As Martin has noted, the use of metaphor abounds amongst filmmakers as it is a principle form of poetic reflection. See: Adrian Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking* (Sticking Place Books, 2024), 15.

the 1960s became *style*. The construction of *mise en scène* and the feature film narrative came to stand for what Astruc had initially envisioned, as Martin has argued. This question of *style* is important as it has erroneously become synonymous with the *caméra-stylo*. The metaphor of the pen in the *caméra-stylo* heavily implies the inscription of *style*, as like novelists or poets with their own techniques and flair, filmmakers should adopt a personal inscription of *style* according to Astruc. However, the use of the term ‘style’ in film analysis, more broadly, is not synonymous with what Astruc initially implied. ‘Style’ can encompass sound design, editing, costume, dialogue, camerawork, and so on – not to mention the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative ‘style’. Thus, while a contemporary auteur like Wes Anderson has a distinctive *style* and expresses his artistic vision in an industrial context, the use of the term ‘*caméra-stylo*’ to refer to his authorship must be qualified.

Considering Martin’s re-evaluation of Astruc’s concept, a director like Anderson who makes well-financed feature narratives does not align with the low-scale, personal, and non-fiction diaristic mode of production Astruc had in mind, as would be reflected later in the work of Mekas, who also had his own distinctive *style*. Scholarly perspectives on the *caméra-stylo* have clearly moved on from thinking about *mise en scène* and style, to thinking about mobile devices and accessible Internet platforms and the *style* of filmmaking they encourage and facilitate: often low-budget, imperfect, informal, and personal. At the same time, what constitutes types of ‘style’ in this thesis also includes the specific vernaculars of social media and smartphones, such as taking selfies, speaking to a front-facing camera, curating an Instagram profile with themes and colours, or using the editing tools of an app’s interface. These authorial choices undeniably result in a kind of *style* that is determined by the individual, but also by other factors like the formal affordances of the app’s interface and broader cultural trends.

A disadvantage in using the term ‘*caméra-stylo*’ as a core concept is that aspects of Astruc’s original theorisation were somewhat underdeveloped. For example, there is debate over the role of sound in Astruc’s formulation, exemplified by Harvey’s critique of vococentric analyses of essay films. It is fair to assume that speech and music were aspects Astruc had in mind, along with other vital components of filmmaking such as editing, but this is a point where Astruc’s essays no longer provide a helpful description to scholars. Therefore, aspects of sound will be mentioned in my analysis but sound will not be theorised in its own right, as scholars like Emilija Talić have done in a dedicated

manner in relation to auteur cinema.²¹¹ Sound is an inevitable factor in cinema and social media platforms as *audiovisual* media and undeniably contributes to the intimate and personal style of much of the videos examined in this thesis, often *fleshing* them out in conjunction with the bodily and haptic presence of the filmmaker or mobilographer. This aspect of hapticity has been largely neglected in literature on the *caméra-stylo* (other than Tuan's article), but is integral to the intimate handling of personal screen objects, from 8mm cameras to smartphones. Thus, while not explicitly examined by Astruc in 1948, hapticity and bodiliness will be a key aspect of my analysis throughout this thesis in relation to the personal handling of mobile devices – especially touchscreen smartphones.

Another problem to acknowledge is the meaning of the 'new avant-garde' in the context of undeniably commercial and corporate-owned social media platforms and their economies. My position in this thesis is that the articulation of the *caméra-stylo* is most recognisably achieved in a non-industrial context, in contrast with the dominant mainstream cinema that favours fiction narratives and sizeable budgets. Like the dominant mainstream film industry, social media platforms prioritise entertainment, profit, and consumerism. While many platforms like YouTube originated as not-for-profit distribution sites for consumer videos in the early 2000s, all major platforms today are corporate-owned and make a profit from ad revenue. Books like Chris Stokel-Walker's *Youtubers* (2019) are useful in this respect by updating concepts about YouTube's economic and participatory identity and even challenging Sørenssen's optimism in 2008 regarding the democracy of YouTube as a creator-distributor platform, since the platform has become highly professionalised.²¹² Popular content creators, Internet celebrities, and influencers have become a professionalised core of social media industry, generating money from brand sponsorship and idealised lifestyle imagery.

While the commercialism of social media somewhat contradicts the premise of Astruc's concept, it is worth bearing in mind that even if social media content is 'professionalised' within its own vernacular culture, it remains distinct from the *film industry*, where technical competency is celebrated and where auteurs are pre-eminent. And, although many auteurs use social media to promote their films and are implicated in the film industry, they are not commercially implicated in social media economies in the same way as influencers. I will study this issue more in-depth in Chapter 3 in relation to

²¹¹ Emilija Talijan, *Resonant Bodies in Contemporary European Art Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

²¹² Chris Stokel-Walker, *Youtubers: How YouTube Shook Up TV and Created a New Generation of Stars* (Canbury Press, 2019); Sørenssen, 'Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc's *Caméra-Stylo*,' (2008).

auteurs who use Instagram to express themselves creatively outside of the film industry. Similarly, while smartphone activists in conflict zones may command large audiences and be political ‘thought influencers’ online, they typically do not make brand endorsement deals, owing to the confrontational aesthetics and critical ‘point-of-view’ in their work, or due to their highly precarious socioeconomic situations. I will examine this in Chapter 5 in relation to Palestinian activism. My research will not focus on social media users who are major brand-sponsored influencers or the economies of social media platforms, as other studies have done. My focus will be on auteur filmmakers and ordinary social media users who are not commercially implicated in the platforms they are using.

It is evident from the literature that scholars have yet to tie Astruc’s concept to other digital audiovisual and interactive media such as videogames, extended reality (XR), and bodycams. Legitimate reasons for this may include the typically animated, computer-generated aesthetics of videogames that do not capture reality the same way as a camera would; and, similarly, the computer-generated identity of much of VR aesthetics, and VR and MR’s comparative inaccessibility. As of now, virtual reality (VR) headsets like Meta Quest and mixed reality (MR) headsets like the Apple Vision Pro are not as broadly popular, accessible, and relatively inexpensive as smartphones that are more visibly pervasive in society. Although VR headsets are mobile, they require fixed locations to create and explore virtual storyworlds safely, unlike smartphones. Mixed reality headsets can function as cameras, but their price tag and the challenges of using them safely while moving in the street has likely hindered their mass appeal.²¹³ By contrast, simpler augmented reality technologies such as Instagram filters are a common aesthetic element of social media videos and images and are more accessible to ordinary consumers via the interfaces of smartphone screens, and therefore will be discussed in this thesis. GoPros will not be discussed at-length in this thesis due to their more restricted association with sporting and leisure activities. Other bodycams remain largely the domain of state policing and military surveillance rather than personal and expressive audiovisual tools, and thus will not be the focus of this thesis.

Out of these technologies, the smartphone stands out as the most popular globally and the most flexible in the ways it allows both the creation and dissemination of audiovisual media through its integrated social media apps. Although the findings of this thesis may be relevant to these other forms of media, they do not fall within the scope of

²¹³ Julian Chokkattu, ‘Review: Apple Vision Pro,’ *WIRED*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.wired.com/review/apple-vision-pro/>.

my present research. My focus will remain on smartphones and their interlaced video-based social media platforms where personal expression is formally facilitated and socially encouraged. Although it is not my aim to narrowly define the *caméra-stylo* to one individual, group, technology, practice, or aesthetic, what constitutes the re-imagining of the *caméra-stylo* in this thesis largely concerns smartphone mobilography and digital screen and social media technologies and media objects (from Instagram selfies to desktop documentaries) that are articulated by users/authors to foreground their embodied subjectivity.

It is clear that the genesis of the '*caméra-stylo*' was rooted in Astruc's observations of the very *real* technological and societal changes that would usher in a growth in filmmakers using personal and mobile cameras outside of an industrial or commercial framework. This would give rise to new aesthetics that are more personal, intimate, and spontaneous. In line with scholars like Sørenssen, Burke, and Rascaroli, my own analysis will prioritise media that is broadly non-fiction in its production and/or aesthetic. When I refer to the concept of '*caméra-stylo*' in the following chapters, I am referring to the formulation of ideas presented in Astruc's two essays from 1948 that celebrate an accessible, portable, and personal screen or camera-based technology. Thus, my methodological approach must prioritise examples of screen media that are mobile and personal, and ideally wielded in a non-commercial context.

The re-imagining of the *caméra-stylo* in the present era necessitates focus not just on established 'artists' and 'filmmakers' who work in the industry, but also those who create audiovisual media outside of any media industries and arts institutions. The term 'filmmaker' is a loaded one. Generally, 'filmmaker' suggests that the person in question has either chosen filmmaking as their professional career path and is therefore commercially implicated in the industry and/or is considered a filmmaker by critics and audiences within institutional discourses.²¹⁴ The terms 'amateur filmmaker' and 'home moviemaker' are connected to different modes of filmmaking not considered broadly professional or commercial.²¹⁵ Martin points out Astruc's alternative use of '*filmeur*'/'filmer' in 'The Future of Cinema' and that Mekas has always referred to

²¹⁴ The term 'videographer' is similarly tied to professional documentation of events such as weddings, concerts, or commercials. Before the rise of digital cameras, 'videography' was a way to distinguish cinematography in the film industry (then typically shot on film) from video production that often doesn't involve a whole crew. Today, this distinction is blurred because cinematography is now also largely digital and because of improved quality in high definition cameras.

²¹⁵ See, also: Liz Czach, 'Home Movies and Amateur Film as National Cinema,' in *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, ed. Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young, and Barry Monahan (Bloomsbury, 2014), 30.

himself as a ‘filmer’, which deviates from associations with the term ‘filmmaker’ and suggests a more spontaneous mode of simply *filming*.²¹⁶

The question of what ‘smartphone filmmaking’ as a practice (and its practitioners) should be called has been answered in different terms. I propose to use the term *mobilography* to describe the practice of filming with a small, portable, mobile camera such as a smartphone, that is held in the hand (or attached to the body). This term is already used by Bégin and Gaudreault and Marion in relation to smartphone filmmaking that is spontaneous and somewhat informal.²¹⁷ It combines the Latin word *mōbīlis* (*mobile*) with the Greek word *graphe* (*writing*), much like *photography* (*writing with light*) or *cinematography* (*movement-writing*).²¹⁸ Thus, in practice ‘mobilography’ is related to the caméra-stylo and *cinécriture*. It also evokes the colloquial term ‘mobile’ to refer to the mobile phone. I also propose to use the term *mobilographer* to refer to those wielding the camera. This is a more inclusive alternative to ‘filmmaker’, which is often associated with the film director. *Cinematography* and *mobilography* are etymologically similar, but cinematography is associated with a specific profession in the industry.²¹⁹ In practice, solitary mobilography can blur the lines between director, cinematographer, and editor, especially in the case of smartphones, where production and post-production capabilities are contained in the same interface. Mobilography is not specific to any location, digital or analogue camera, cinema movement, or profession. Mobilography primarily refers to the act of filming, but with the smartphone apparatus, which is multifunctional and Internet-connected, mobilography can also encompass other actions like posting or going live online.

Mobilographer is also a more inclusive alternative to terms such as ‘citizen journalist’ or Andèn-Papadopolous’s term ‘citizen camera-witness’. It is important to bear in mind that mobilographers who wield smartphones may not necessarily consider themselves journalists or ‘filmmakers’. In practical terms, they may not be citizens of the state that is oppressing them, as in the case for some migrants, refugees, or for the Palestinian mobilographers I will discuss in Chapter 5. Although the term ‘witness’ is useful for describing the documentation of atrocity by ordinary people (and by extension, its spectatorship), the term ‘mobilographer’ de-centralizes solely optic perception

²¹⁶ Martin quoted in: Astruc, ‘The Future of Cinema,’ [endnote 07], 51.

²¹⁷ Richard Bégin, ‘Mobilographie et Mobilogénie du Désastre,’ *ArtPress* 2, no. 29 (2013): 50-52, https://www.academia.edu/32383506/Mobilographie_et_mobilogénie_du_désastre; Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ (2016); Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 44.

²¹⁸ See: Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/-graph>.

²¹⁹ See: Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/cinema#etymonline_v_13710.

(‘ocularcentrism’) that has dominated much of film analysis and Western art and emphasizes instead the mobile body that also feels and hears sounds.²²⁰ The camera is often held in the hand and moves with the mobilographer’s body through an environment. Mobilography therefore encompasses three crucial elements: mobility, the body, and the ability to ‘write’ with the camera, by expressing one’s point-of-view, personal vision, or embodied presence.

By re-imagining Astruc’s concept in the contemporary context, this thesis will also find challenges and adjustments to its premise. As demonstrated through the history of camera-less techniques, from Brakhage’s analogue films to Godard’s digital scanning, the use of a ‘camera’ is not necessary in filmmaking. Video essays and many notable essay films rely on existing footage not originally filmed by the essayist, while desktop documentaries use the screen apparatus itself to record. Another adjustment that needs to be qualified is the individualism assigned to authorship. While this thesis does prioritise personally articulated expression on social media, many aspects of digital media and social media culture complicate the idea of the ‘lone’ creator. Participatory culture and digital media convergence, as theorised by Jenkins and others, rely very much on the borrowing of aesthetics and influences from other media, including cinema. Remix and DIY culture amongst fan communities especially complicate traditional ideas of ownership and authorship of works. Although social media platforms strongly encourage a sense of the individual self (curating a ‘profile’, for example), they also facilitate co-creation through their editing suites and resharing capabilities. The advent of generative AI, which algorithmically recycles other creators’ media from vast databases, has also introduced an unprecedented non-human component to the creation of images and videos.

Given Astruc’s original focus on auteurs and indeed the long-standing association between the *caméra-stylo* and auteurism, I am especially interested in how these aspects of film culture intersect with digital culture and social media trends. What is especially relevant to my analysis is when an auteur’s *style* inspires aesthetic mimicry amongst fans and ordinary social media users wielding their own personal cameras and digital tools. This directly challenges the popular view of Astruc’s concept, and ironically demonstrates the flexibility with which ordinary people create audiovisual media at home. Therefore, what I examine as a *co-creative* variation of the *caméra-stylo* in this thesis accommodates

²²⁰ See: Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 114, 117.

examples of screen media where lone authorship is blurred by the affordances of digital tools.

As a contemporary reflection on screen culture, it is also important to recognise in this thesis that Astruc's two essays focused solely on well-known *male* European and Hollywood filmmakers. As was commonly practised in film criticism at the time and for some decades thereafter, Astruc often refers to the hypothetical artist or writer as male, using masculine personal pronouns.²²¹ This suggests that Astruc imagines the masses (people of all genders) to have access to portable cameras, but invariably identifies the wielder of the *caméra-stylo* to be male. This is not surprising considering the context in which he was writing. However, there are present-day efforts to recognise the contributions of underrepresented women and LGBTQ+ individuals in screen history. Therefore, my focus is not limited to the scope of Astruc's initial context. Women filmmakers and mobilographers will feature in every chapter in this thesis.²²² Similarly, my focus is not just on younger generations of smartphone and social media users, who may be stereotypically associated with these technologies, but also older individuals. This is especially important for Chapter 3, where I discuss older filmmakers who have adopted social media.

Furthermore, much of the scholarship on the *caméra-stylo* still focuses on European filmmakers, European film history, or filmmaking that is still produced within Western artistic institutions. A narrow focus on this mode of filmmaking (be it called arthouse, auteur, or 'second cinema'), underrepresents the uses of cameras by groups in non-Western territories.²²³ As is practised in screen scholarship and many creative arts institutions currently, there is an effort to decolonise archives and humanities research and university curricula overall.²²⁴ While it is not always appropriate to apply Western film theories to non-Western production modes, there is a significant connection to be made between Astruc's ideas and filmmaking practices rooted in non-Western, counter-bourgeoisie thought, like Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema'. Academics have traced the broad

²²¹ While some pronouns are translated accurately from French to a gender-neutral 'their' in Vincendeau and Graham's English translation, there are passages in Astruc's original essay that refer specifically to pronouns such as *lui-même* (himself) that are maintained in their translation. Similarly, in Martin's translation of 'The Future of Cinema', Martin maintains the use of masculine personal pronouns in Astruc's original text.

²²² A queer film, *Rotting in the Sun* (2023), by a queer Chilean director, Sebastián Silva, will feature especially in Chapter 2.

²²³ See, for example: Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake ed., *Rethinking Third Cinema* (Routledge, 2003).

²²⁴ See, for example: Neema Begum and Rima Saini, 'Decolonising the Curriculum,' *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2019): 196-201, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929918808459>; James Muldoon, 'Academics: It's Time to Get Behind Decolonising the Curriculum,' *The Guardian*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/academics-its-time-to-get-behind-decolonising-the-curriculum>.

importance of mobile, compact cameras (and most recently, social media and online networks) for activists and political mobilisation in the Middle East and Latin America, for example.²²⁵ This leads me to examine Palestinian mobilographers in Chapter 5 of this thesis, by identifying historical, practical, and aesthetic connections between Palestinian national cinema, political cinema, and present-day smartphone activism on Instagram.

With this methodological framework in mind and acknowledging that social media platforms encompass an exceedingly vast scope of trends, forms, and economic cultures, this thesis takes a case study approach to examine a select range of texts. Each case study chapter will be informed by key aspects of Astruc's original formulation that I will discuss more in-depth in Chapter 1: authorship and auteurism, the 'new avant-garde', mobility and mobilography, and hands, hapticity, and bodies. Following this first chapter, the case study chapters explore significant examples where Astruc's concept has been re-imagined in digital screen culture for both auteurs and ordinary social media users. This dual focus reflects the original basis of Astruc's formulation and subsequent applications of the *caméra-stylo* to *both* auteurs and non-professionals. These case studies will reflect major issues in contemporary digital screen culture, including the rise of generative AI and the use of smartphones by civilians in ongoing global conflicts. The chapters are structured based on a conceptual rather than diachronic development: from 'auteur' filmmakers to more ordinary mobilographers. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I will discuss auteurs and auteurism and how they interact with more 'ordinary' screen culture in creative and co-creative ways. The idea of a *co-creative* *caméra-stylo* especially informs Chapter 4 and a case study on Wes Anderson fan media, where I examine the ways in which Anderson's authorship and style have been co-opted by fans online. In Chapter 5, I will discard the auteur and auteurism entirely to focus instead on mobilography practised by Palestinian mobilographers outside of any industrial framework and in one of the most precarious scenarios that personal filmmaking is conducted in the present day: amidst war and state oppression.

These case studies are intended to facilitate a balanced approach to examining the vast amount of social media content that is available to study. It ensures a diverse representation of the identities of filmmakers and mobilographers in terms of gender, age, race and ethnicity, economic means, and non-Western identities. This approach will allow

²²⁵ See: Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented* (1994); Matthew Holtmeier, *Contemporary Political Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 15.

a more in-depth exploration of the caméra-stylo in the digital era than what has previously been achieved in the literature. However diverse this range of texts is, common threads will nonetheless be indicated across chapters, including particular filmmakers, the aesthetics of mobilography, and the use of AI.

Research Parameters

It is important to outline the parameters of Internet-based research conducted for this thesis. My research project started in the autumn of 2021 and ended in the summer of 2025, but my analysis will refer to archived social media posts from before this period. As this research is based on contemporary global events, technologies, and topical issues that are continuously developing, it is not possible to foresee how these matters will develop from where they currently stand (as of submission for this thesis). For example, since research for this thesis began, generative AI systems became increasingly available to the public. The invasion of Ukraine and assault on Gaza developed during this period and are ongoing issues. These developments have deeply impacted the video content and platforms that I'm analysing. This includes my case study on Wes Anderson fan media in Chapter 4, which will show how fan trends cross over with the war in Ukraine and applications of AI generation, and especially my case study on Palestinian mobilographers in Chapter 5. My analysis of social media platforms was finalised in autumn/winter of 2024 for Chapters 1 to 4 and spring of 2025 for Chapter 5 (which addresses the ongoing war in Gaza).

While the scholarship that informs this thesis is multidisciplinary, I approach new media and social media practices and aesthetics first and foremost from the perspective of screen studies and film studies. This thesis applies conventional close textual analysis to the following forms of screen media: (1) films and videos (including experimental films, documentaries, home movies, desktop documentaries, video essays, essay films, feature-length narratives, and their intersections); and (2) specifically image and video-based social media platforms and posts (including in-built features like AR selfie filters and text captions), and where these media crossover. The contemporary film texts selected for analysis in this thesis, especially in Chapter 2, were produced after 2010 (which happens to be the same year of Instagram's public launch), with the most recent films released in 2023/2024. However, there will be references and comparisons to nineteenth and

twentieth century screen media, informed by media archaeological approaches to screen history.

The contemporary narrative films discussed in this thesis are broadly considered auteur or art films. These are films in which mobilography and social media play a significant aesthetic and symbolic role, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. My focus on art/auteur films – as opposed to blockbusters or genre films – intentionally reflects Astruc’s initial vision and its subsequent interpretation among scholars and critics who typically apply his theory to this category of cinema. Certain narrative elements such as fictional characters and plot are relevant to my analysis, especially the discussion of personal cameras as narrative features of films in Chapter 2. However, my overall analysis is not concerned with narrative conventions or mobile *storytelling*, as this is not a key feature (in and of itself) of the *caméra-stylo*.²²⁶ This thesis also addresses the importance of avant-garde films and filmmakers like Mekas, whose ideas on cinema intersected with Astruc’s. Non-fiction film formats like home movies, documentaries, political films, and what Scott MacDonald terms ‘avant-docs’ will also be discussed.²²⁷ Owing to Astruc’s interest in developing the subjective first-person ‘I’ in filmmaking, this thesis also discusses personal and critical film forms, including essay films such as those by Marker, Varda, and Godard, but also videographic criticism, digital remediations, and desktop documentaries.

Just as films are texts that can be analysed for their aesthetics, social media profiles and their contents are texts that can also be analysed for their stylistic trends and form. Social media images and videos are not uploaded in isolation and fundamentally combine image and text in the multimedia platform interface.²²⁸ Text captions on social media posts will be included in my analysis. Comments typically posted by other users underneath the original post are also helpful for understanding the reception and outreach of social media posts and will be included only minimally to indicate responses from viewers and followers.²²⁹ Research in this thesis was only conducted on profiles that are

²²⁶ Major studies on the narrative elements of mobile storytelling include *Mobile Storytelling in an Age of Smartphones* (2021). Recently, emerging research has addressed storytelling and fiction-based content on TikTok. See, for example: Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin, ‘Music Challenge Memes on TikTok: Understanding In-Group Storytelling Videos,’ *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 883-903, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18141>.

²²⁷ Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

²²⁸ Unlike theatrically released films that generate box office results and film reviews, the popularity of and responses to social media content are signified through comments, likes, reshares, and even reaction videos. Therefore, this thesis will make reference to follower counts instead to indicate the popularity of a given social media profile.

²²⁹ Although comments are important for discerning certain emotional and social reactions between social media users, this thesis does not take the approach of qualitative discourse studies.

publicly accessible, as opposed to private or restricted social media profiles and groups. In terms of managing sources and records, a restricted institutional Google Drive and an external hard drive were used to store URLs, screenshots, and account details for social media posts. Owing to the ephemeral and often unpredictable nature of social media content that can easily be deleted, I will include the dates of original posts.

The primary audiovisual social media platforms analysed in this thesis are Instagram and TikTok. There will also be references to YouTube and Twitter/X to a lesser extent and some mention of Reddit, Snapchat, and Facebook, bearing in mind users can share the same content across platforms.²³⁰ Instagram and TikTok are primarily image- and video-based platforms and are significant sites for pre-existing interest among screen scholars, likely because of their cinematic/photographic genealogies and global popularity.²³¹ Platforms such as Twitter/X or Threads are more text-based in their vernacular identity, although these platforms do have image and video sharing affordances. This is not to ignore the banning and restriction of these platforms in certain states, or indeed the variety of other, non-Anglophone platforms. Although half of the US population uses TikTok as of 2024, TikTok was temporarily banned by the US Congress in January 2025 to much controversy.²³² China has blocked Google, Instagram, Twitter/X and other sites, while fostering its own home-grown Chinese-language applications like WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok's sister app Douyin.²³³ There is considerable scholarship on the specific aesthetics and affordances of these platforms, such as research conducted by the TikTok Cultures Research Network.²³⁴ Without falling prey to the hegemonic notion that what is Western-based or Anglophone is essentially 'normative' or 'the rule', for practical purposes, the focus of my analysis is on apps that are based in the English language and that are broadly accessible.²³⁵

²³⁰ Since Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter in 2022, the site is officially called 'X', but 'Twitter' is still used colloquially by users and in publications. The site domain still uses 'twitter.com'. For clarity, I will use 'Twitter/X' from hereon.

²³¹ As a seeming rejoinder to more permanent and curated posts on other apps, Snapchats and BeReals are more ephemeral. Snapchat users can only watch images or videos for a limited amount of time. Launched in 2020, BeReal users only have a 2-minute window to respond to friends' images with their own image.

²³² See: David Remnick, 'The United States Passed a Ban on TikTok. Why?' *The New Yorker*, 10 May 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/the-new-yorker-radio-hour/the-united-states-passed-a-ban-on-tiktok-why>; Maziar Motamedi, 'Iran Unveils Plan for Tighter Internet Rules to Promote Local Platforms,' *Al Jazeera*, 24 February 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/24/iran-unveils-plan-for-tighter-internet-rules-to-promote-local-platforms>.

²³³ Li Yuan, 'A Generation Grows Up in China Without Google, Facebook or Twitter,' *The New York Times*, 6 August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/06/technology/china-generation-blocked-internet.html>.

²³⁴ See: Jin Lee and Crystal Abidin, 'Introduction to the Special Issue of "TikTok and Social Movements",' *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157452>; Jin Lee, Crystal Abidin, and DBV Kaye, 'Introduction to the Media International Australia Special Issue on "TikTok Cultures in the Asia Pacific",' *Media International Australia* 186, no. 1 (2023): 3-10, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221130126>.

²³⁵ This is also not to ignore inequalities in the ownership of new screen technologies and access to the Internet, known as the 'digital divide'. See: Jan Van Dyk, *The Digital Divide* (Polity Press, 2020).

It is also important to highlight briefly what this thesis is *not* aiming to achieve within its scope. In keeping with a screen studies – as opposed to social sciences – approach to digital media, there was no major data collection conducted on social media content based on quantitative dimensions for this thesis (although such studies can produce illuminating results that highlight patterns and trends in large amounts of data). This thesis is also not a cognitive analysis. Certainly, the line between ‘user’ and ‘creator’ is blurred in interactive or participatory screen technologies, where the smartphone apparatus, for example, facilitates perception and creation of media simultaneously. A large-scale study into the perception of the media discussed in this thesis would require a different research framework.²³⁶ Similarly, while existing phenomenological studies such as those by Sobchack and Marks provide valuable insights and context for the study of embodiment and touchscreen smartphones, a dedicated phenomenological study would also require a different research framework.

Chapter Outline

With this methodological framework for the caméra-stylo and these research parameters in mind, Chapter 1 (‘Theorising the Caméra-Stylo and Contemporary Digital Screen Culture’) will theorise, in more detail, four key aspects of Astruc’s original formulation and their broader significance in screen culture. Although considerable attention has been paid to Astruc’s concept, the caméra-stylo can be further connected to existing ideas in screen scholarship, aesthetics, practice, and history. As the most notable element of Astruc’s formulation (and its subsequent interpretation among critics), I will firstly theorise the continued and contentious place for film *auteurism* as well as the affordances of screen *authorship* for the general population in the digital age. This section will elaborate on old and new issues in film culture around the status of the film auteur, from auteurs and social media to the post-#MeToo era. The place of authorship in screen culture is newly under pressure with the rise of generative AI and machine co-creation. The second aspect I will consider is *the new avant-garde* (borrowed from Astruc’s essay title) and how film history and new media technologies fit into this framework. As Astruc does not elaborate on this point, it is important to establish what ‘avant-garde’ means in the context of digital screen culture as examined in this thesis. The third aspect is the

²³⁶ See, for example: Kata Szita and Brendan Rooney, ‘The Effects of Smartphone Spectatorship on Attention, Arousal, Engagement, and Comprehension,’ *i-Perception* 12, no. 1 (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2041669521993140>.

history and aesthetics of *mobilography and mobility* – a key component of Astruc’s formulation, as the metaphor of the caméra-stylo engenders portability, but is often overlooked in scholarship. Here, I coalesce Astruc’s ideas with reflections on early cinema and recent developments in mobile and body-attached cameras. The final aspect examined in this chapter will be *hands, hapticity, and bodies*, which has likewise been overlooked in the literature. Astruc’s caméra-stylo fundamentally involves the hand and the body of the person wielding a camera. The role of *touch* in broader screen culture will help to contextualise the caméra-stylo as essentially *haptic*. These four aspects will inform my analysis of case studies in the subsequent chapters.

Following this first chapter, the next case study chapters will develop a conceptual structure, moving from auteur cinema and auteurs towards ordinary social media users and mobilographers. In Chapter 2 (‘Smartphone and Social Media Aesthetics in Contemporary Auteur Cinema’) I will examine the insertion of smartphone mobilography and social media interfaces *into* auteur and arthouse cinema as aesthetic features. These are films where smartphones and social media are both *represented* in the diegesis or *mise en scène* and, importantly, *formally integrated* at the extra-diegetic level. This chapter will re-imagine Astruc’s dual focus on both auteurs and ordinary people in the contemporary context, where ‘cinema’ has borrowed from the aesthetics of more ‘ordinary’ audiovisual culture, revealing an intermedial relationship. I will firstly provide a historical overview of personal screen technologies in ‘dominant’ narrative cinema, including 8mm home movies and smartphone text communication. In a contemporary digital culture where ‘everyone’ has a camera, several notable auteur films reflect concerns about surveillance and privacy, political and social tensions, and the identity of cinema and auteurism itself as it mingles with new screen cultures, including social media content creators. As the first case study section will analyse, the use of smartphones as surveillance devices between characters and as apparatuses for the distribution of disturbing content is seen in Michael Haneke’s *Happy End* (2017), Todd Field’s *Tár* (2022), and Bertrand Bonello’s *The Beast* (2024). The second case study section will examine films in which amateur mobilography, from an external source, is inserted into the diegesis of a film, namely Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman* (2017), Claire Denis’s *Both Sides of the Blade* (2022), and Andrea Arnold’s *Bird* (2024). The final case study looks at films where film authorship and the rise of social media content creators are reflexively examined: Radu Jude’s essayistic satire *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World* (2023) and Sebastián Silva’s reflexive queer social satire *Rotting in the Sun* (2023).

Chapter 3 ('From Set to Selfie: Auteurs' Creative Uses of Social Media') will focus on auteurs who have personally adopted social media for creative purposes. Just as some auteurs in Chapter 2 are applying the aesthetics of smartphones and social media interfaces in their film work, a significant number are also publicly using these technologies to express themselves as ordinary social media users do. In this chapter, I especially focus on Instagram, which appears to be the most popular platform amongst a broad range of filmmakers from different backgrounds. Considering Timothy Corrigan's view from 1990 that promotional technologies are the 'new caméra-stylo' and more recent scholarship on auteurism in the digital age, I examine how the auteur as a commercial persona materialises on social media. I examine both 'personal' and 'promotional' posts uploaded on auteur profiles. To reflect the initial vision of Astruc's caméra-stylo, this chapter is primarily concerned with auteurs' use of the platform for the purposes of self-expression and self-representation in the form of filters, selfies, mobilography, and aesthetic curation.²³⁷ I focus on two case studies: Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn (@nwrefn) and French director Claire Denis (@clairedenis6) and their different approaches to Instagram aesthetics. These case studies reveal their tactile engagement with the smartphone *dispositif* and stylistic crossovers with their filmic work. Refn significantly embraces self-promotion on Instagram while playing with the platform's in-built editing features and AR selfie filters. Meanwhile, Denis significantly eschews commercialism on the platform, while embracing Instagram as an extension of her personal vision that is informal and personal. In this way, Astruc's caméra-stylo is re-imagined as smartphone mobilography and expression on social media for directors considered 'auteurs' who work in the commercialised (and collaborative) film industry.

In Chapter 4 ('The New Co-Creative Caméra-Stylo: Re-Imaginations of Auteur Cinema in the Age of TikTok and AI'), I will examine a co-creative variation of Astruc's theory, looking at online fan mimicry of auteur cinema. Like Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter is concerned with the relationship between new screen technologies and auteur cinema. But the focus in this chapter is on the production of works by fans, cinephiles, and ordinary social media users. Increasingly, audiences are gaining access to technologies that can mimic and remediate their favourite films, from access to digital filters, editing tools, and most recently generative AI. This is part of a broader culture of 'new cinephilia' in the digital age, as studied by Girish Shambu, Christian Keathley, and

²³⁷ This chapter is an adapted and extended version of an article I previously published. See: Murphy, 'The Filmmaker as Instagram Auteur' (2022).

others. I will firstly trace this co-creative current in notable examples of avant-garde editing practices, digital remediations of existing films, desktop documentaries, and AI ‘remakes’ of art films. This chapter will provide an extensive case study on American auteur Wes Anderson and co-creative imaginings of his style or ‘personal signature’ in works of fans on social media, with or without the assistance of AI.²³⁸ Unlike the directors discussed in Chapter 3, Anderson does not run a public social media profile, but his work is arguably subjected to more fan re-imaginings on social media than any other contemporary director. I will discuss the possible reasons for this and especially examine Accidentally Wes Anderson media, the viral Anderson TikTok trend in 2023, and AI-generated media. This suggests a contradictory relationship between an artist based in the film industry and an audience with access to editing and camera technologies (Astruc’s vision of future screen culture). The artist’s work is appreciated by fans but can also be co-opted by them, to the point where the original artist’s authority may not matter. Furthermore, the contentious issue of generative AI appears to corrupt Astruc’s initial (human-centred) metaphor. This chapter will offer the first scholarly theorisation of fan media and gen-AI in relation to the *caméra-stylo*.

The final chapter, Chapter 5 (“‘The Battleground for Amateurs’: The *Caméra-Stylo* Amidst Global Struggles”), continues my focus on ordinary social media users. It is dedicated to mobilographers who use smartphones and social media to express their subjectivity under oppressive circumstances. Political activist filmmaking has yet to be framed in the formulation of the *caméra-stylo* by scholars. As Astruc foresaw, filmmaking has taken to the streets and homes of ordinary people. Global conflicts and major events are documented in real-time by ordinary mobilographers. While Chapter 2 partly covers confrontational mobilography in feature films, the focus in this chapter is on this very mode of non-fiction mobilography. My case study will be on Palestinian mobilographers. I will focus especially on the crowdsourced Instagram video account Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine) and the personal Instagram account of Gazan vlogger and activist Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1) whose confessional, intimate style of address to her 4 million followers has made her a popular media personality.²³⁹ Since 2014, Eye on Palestine has gained over 12 million followers and has dedicatedly documented protests, the Israeli occupation’s violence, and the devastation in Gaza since October 2023. I argue that these videos reveal what Bégin terms ‘somatic images’ in mobilography – the

²³⁸ First presented as a paper at the Affective Intermediality Conference, Cluj-Napoca, 2023.

²³⁹ First presented as the paper at the UCD Humanities Institute PhD Conference, 25 March 2022.

presence of the mobilographer's bodily agitations behind and attached to the camera, often by putting their bodies on the line. This case study will be contextualised by the history of portable, handheld camera devices in other socio-political movements in Latin America and the Middle East, for example. This chapter is informed by Espinosa's concept of counter-colonial and counter-bourgeois 'imperfect cinema' and Wessels's analysis of Syrian video activists or 'kinoks'. I will finally outline how activists must increasingly navigate corporate powers, propaganda, and camera surveillance technologies, which hinder the full democratisation of screen technologies. This chapter re-imagines the caméra-stylo as a part of a collective struggle for making one's voice and presence known through mobilography. This provides a final alternative vision of the caméra-stylo typically tied to auteurs working within the film industry. This chapter will provide the first scholarly analysis, to my knowledge, of the caméra-stylo in relation to Palestine and activist mobilography.

With this case study approach, I do not aim to propose *one* definitive iteration or realisation of the caméra-stylo today. Rather, these chapters and case studies reflect significant examples where Astruc's original vision is repeatedly foregrounded and celebrated or even complicated, intentionally or not, via smartphones and audiovisual platforms. It is the aim of this thesis to provide the first major scholarship on the topic of the caméra-stylo in the social media era, by offering a heterogenous insight into its *handling* and malleability in the rapidly changing screenscape. My research will also make significant interventions in three key areas of screen studies research: the study of auteurism and auteurs, of film fan culture, and of smartphone activism amidst global struggles. It is through this framework informed by Astruc's formulation that similar practices and case studies may be examined in the future.

1. Theorising the Caméra-Style and Contemporary Digital Screen Culture

I am not an auteur, well, not now anyway. We once believed we were auteurs but we weren't. We had no idea, really. Film is over. It's sad nobody is really exploring it. But what to do? And anyway, with mobile phones and everything, everyone is now an auteur.

– Jean-Luc Godard (2011).¹

In 2011, Jean-Luc Godard claimed that with the coming of mobile phones, everyone is now an auteur. As a lasting figurehead of the flourishing cinephilia of the French New Wave in the new millennium, Godard's statement is seemingly a bittersweet reflection on cinema in his youth *as it was* while disparaging the current condition of screen culture. As smartphones offered means of audiovisual production for the masses, cinema had lost its position in the hierarchy of images. His statement echoes familiar debates about the *death* of cinema in the digital age. However, Godard's statement is also sharply self-reflective, as the title of auteur was no longer appealing to Godard and how he labelled himself by his 80s. Godard's observation symbolically points to the duality of Alexandre Astruc's vision: a filmmaker-as-author would truly 'write' a film with the camera, while the general population would increasingly access mobile consumer cameras and personal screens, without the influence of the industry or studio, bringing about *a new avant-garde*.

Indeed, new media technologies have opened pathways to forms of self-expression and media consumption that were not present in 1948 or when Godard started making films. Interviewed in 2023, French director Céline Sciamma stated that she loves that the means of production are now in our pockets as 'this is how the revolution of language occurs', namely in the form of smartphones and distribution platforms like TikTok.² It is significant that a female auteur of her generation welcomes expanded access to screen production that was once restricted to typically male professionals. Despite

¹ Jean-Luc Godard quoted in: Gibbons, 'Jean-Luc Godard: "Film is Over. What to Do?"' *The Guardian*.

² Céline Sciamma quoted in: María Cantó, 'Céline Sciamma: "Si Haces Películas de Tres Horas Estás Haciendo Activismo Para ti Mismo, no Para el Cine"', *El Español*, 21 November 2023, https://www.elespanol.com/el-cultural/cine/20231121/celine-sciamma-haces-peliculas-horas-haciendo-activismo-mismo-no-cine/811169160_0.html, [translation by Rafael Mendez].

being far-removed from the post-war context in which Astruc published his essays, both of which are centred on *male* directors, Sciamma's perspective echoes his sentiments. Godard and Sciamma both describe in different terms what Astruc imagined: cameras and screens are ubiquitous in contemporary screen culture. Thus, the concept of the *caméra-stylo* resonates now, perhaps more so than ever.

Drawing on film criticism and digital media studies, this chapter provides an extended introductory theorisation of the *caméra-stylo*'s place in film history and re-situates Astruc's concept in contemporary screen culture via four key aspects. The first key aspect is *auteurism and authorship* (the aspect perhaps most commonly associated with Astruc's metaphor), which will be contextualised with critical concepts of auteurism, other filmmakers' theories on film authorship, and broader conceptions of screen authorship in the digital age. The second aspect is *the new avant-garde*, derived from Astruc's more famous essay, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde'. In his vision of the *caméra-stylo*, Astruc argues that 'there is always an avant-garde when something new takes place.'³ But what constitutes an avant-garde in the age of 'new' media? I will consider how Astruc's vision resonates with the work of experimental filmmakers and digital platform culture. Astruc's vision was also tied to the emergence of mobile, portable cameras on the consumer market, and thus the third aspect is *mobilography and mobility*. I will trace the promise of mobile cameras to early cinema and consider their pervasiveness today. And the fourth aspect is *hands, hapticity, and bodies*. Perhaps the least-recognised element of the *caméra-stylo* is its tactility or proximity to the body of the person who wields it, re-imagined today by haptic and handheld screen technologies. These aspects intersect, as I will demonstrate.

As I aim to theorise in this chapter, these core components of the *caméra-stylo* and how it has been re-imagined today are also deeply engrained in contemporary digital screen culture. My position is that the *caméra-stylo* is most recognisably realised in the form of mobile or flexible filmmaking with a mode of production that is personal, intimate, broadly non-fiction, and ideally outside of a commercial framework. Therefore, this chapter will serve as a guiding principle for understanding contemporary case studies and examples of the re-imagined *caméra-stylo* that I will analyse in subsequent chapters.

³ Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,' 31.

Auteurism and Authorship

Firstly, Astruc's caméra-stylo is firmly embedded in the conception of the auteur director within film criticism, and it is commonly believed to be his legacy. Before Astruc, this view of the director-as-author dates at least as far back as Louis Delluc's film criticism during the silent era.⁴ As Donna Kornhaber notes, for Delluc 'the camera [was] seen as a new tool tied essentially to the mandate of the painter. [...] it was also a vision that demanded absolutely that the filmmaker be regarded as an artist and not simply a technician, and even more so that film be considered the subjective and singular expression of its creator.'⁵ Delluc's vision certainly aligns with Astruc. For Astruc, the defined roles of 'director' and 'scriptwriter' would ideally disintegrate – one would equal the other (this is not to say that film should become more literary in its structure or influences).

A growing emphasis on the poverty of the image or the mode of production in cinema can be seen in post-war Marxist thought. In the context of Italian neo-realism, the screenwriter and theorist Cesare Zavattini, known for his numerous collaborations with director Vittorio De Sica, published a manifesto on cinema in 1952 that shares clear similarities with Astruc's essays. Thinking about the limitations of his own work as a screenwriter, Zavattini writes (and I have shortened the long passage here):

The screen-writer as such should disappear, and we should arrive at the sole author of a film. Everything becomes flexible when only one person is making a film [...] Of course, it is possible to make films in collaboration. [...] Technique and capitalist method, however, have imposed collaboration on the cinema. [...] It is obvious that when films cost sixpence and everybody can have a camera, the cinema would become a creative medium as flexible and as free as any other.⁶

⁴ See: Eugene C. McCreary, 'Louis Delluc, Film Theorist, Critic, and Prophet,' *Cinema Journal* 16, no. 1 (1976): 14-35, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225447>.

⁵ Kornhaber, 'Charlot as Cinema,' 148-149.

⁶ Cesare Zavattini, 'Some Ideas on the Cinema,' in *Film: A Montage of Theories*, ed. Richard Dyer MacCann (EP Sutton, 1966), 226-227 [first published in *Sight and Sound* (October 1953): 64-69. Edited from a recorded interview published in *La Revisita del Cinema Italiano* (December 1952). Translated by Pier Luigi Lanza].

The phrasing of Zavattini's vision of filmmaking becoming individualised and available to the masses could be easily mistaken for Astruc's.⁷ Here, a clear vision for films being authored by individuals, as camera equipment becomes cheaper and more flexible, is put forward. Films would not be the province of the capitalist film industry, but would become tools for the masses.

However, with the development of *la politique des auteurs* in the 1950s, a vision for the filmmaker's close relationship with the cheap mobile camera apparatus was more or less forgotten. Instead, critics conducted selective analysis of films made by directors working within the collaborative and well-financed film industry who possessed *style* and *personal vision* despite these structures. After 1948, the development of *la politique des auteurs* would dominate French film criticism and later spread to the US. Following Astruc, François Truffaut's famous article in *Cahiers du Cinéma* from 1954 lambasts the 'tradition of quality' in French cinema. He describes a certain category of French films as so-called *screenwriters' films* adapted from novels by prolific screenwriters and handed to *metteurs-en-scène* (as opposed to an *auteur*) to direct: 'When they hand in their script, the film has already been made: in their view, the *metteur-en-scène* is the person who decides on the framing.'⁸ Truffaut makes a distinction between the 'tradition of quality' and auteurs 'who often write their own dialogue and in some cases think up the stories they direct.'⁹

In response to French critics in 1962, American critic Andrew Sarris insists that the first premise of auteur theory is 'the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value' (the contrary casts the director out from the pantheon of good directors). Secondly, the 'distinguishable personality' (i.e., 'personal vision' or 'signature') exhibits a personal style over a group of films. Sarris goes on: 'the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.' This sense of a 'signature' and subjectivity echoes the writer-li-ness embedded in Astruc's vision for the *caméra-stylo*. And finally, 'interior meaning' is, according to Sarris, what Astruc defines as *mise en scène*, but closer to an enigmatic '*élan*' of the soul that is almost indescribable in non-cinematic terms.¹⁰ By inscribing a 'personal vision', the concept of the *caméra-*

⁷ In a comment similar to Astruc's ahistoric vision of René Descartes, Zavattini even imagines Jesus Christ wielding a camera to film reality rather than fables (see: Ibid, 223).

⁸ François Truffaut, 'A Certain Tendency in French Cinema,' in *The French New Wave*, ed. Vincendeau and Graham, 52 [first published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 31 (January 1954): 15-28].

⁹ Ibid, 52-53.

¹⁰ Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,' in *Film Theory & Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 7th Ed. (Oxford University Press, 2007), 452-453.

stylo certainly lends itself to the idea of auteurism in the film industry. Auteurism may resonate with Astruc's formula, but it is worth noting that both Sarris and Truffaut are writing exclusively here about the collaborative feature film production. By this point, the idea of the 'caméra-stylo' has morphed into ideas of 'mise en scène' in the feature narrative, while Astruc's initial vision of mobile, cheap filmmaking for the masses has been forgotten.

According to Adrian Martin, many misunderstandings surround Astruc's contribution to film culture and its legacy, especially after his death. One such exaggeration is the idea that Astruc is the 'uncle' or 'father' of the French New Wave. For both Martin and Bellour, it is inaccurate to tie the *Cahiers* filmmakers too closely to Astruc's legacy. Martin points out that the creative path taken by the likes of Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, and Éric Rohmer 'was essentially the path of the highly constructed, sufficiently financed, fiction feature, not at all the kind of cheap, freewheeling, off-the-cuff "film essay" that Astruc first envisaged.'¹¹ Astruc himself defected somewhat from his own vision by making well-financed films, literary adaptations, and costume dramas (as many 'auteurs' do). As Martin comments: 'there was always a stark cleavage between two ideas or tendencies in Astruc's thinking, as distinct from his filmic practice.'¹² It is more accurate to suggest that a liberated, post-war, cinema-going generation, combined with a thriving ciné-club movement and Henri Langlois's screenings at the Cinémathèque, and the rich intellectual environment dominated by critics like Nino Frank and André Bazin, often looking towards Hollywood studio films, contributed more towards the cinephilic sensibilities of the New Wave. For Peter Wollen, it was these special conditions that made Paris the ideal setting for *la politique des auteurs*; it was Cinémathèque policy to show as many films as possible from the past to enrich the future of cinema by giving French cinephiles privileged access to Hollywood history and the careers of individual directors.¹³ Thus, it is indeed inaccurate to tie Astruc's legacy too singularly to the development of the theory.

A key issue for auteur theory is the collaborative nature of film productions, which challenges individual expression. Whether they are working on a Hollywood blockbuster production or arthouse film, directors generally require the craft, expertise, and financing of other personnel and entities to produce a work of art. Directors may collaborate

¹¹ Martin, 'Introduction to the "Future of Cinema",' 44 [citing: Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc* (1963)].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (BFI, 2013), 58.

frequently with the same cinematographer, editor, or screenwriter, and so on. Consistent collaborations between Martin Scorsese and editor Thelma Schoonmaker, Wes Anderson and cinematographer Robert Yeoman, or Ingmar Bergman and cinematographer Sven Nykvist contribute(d) nonetheless to the general oeuvres of the director in such partnerships. Duo director teams also complicate this matter, such as the Coen brothers and Safdie brothers, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, or Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (it is a point of interest for critics when such pairings work(ed) separately, as in the case of all four).¹⁴ Another issue is adaptation, where directors may interpret the written text of a novel or play for the screen.¹⁵

As a method of analysis, auteur theory is not without its critics then or since. In 1957, André Bazin critiqued the hardline belief in *la politique des auteurs* amongst other critics at *Positif* and *Cahiers*, by measuring the undeniable issues of quality, collaboration, studio influence, and bias towards certain favourite directors. Bazin writes:

The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next. It is recognised that there do exist certain important films of quality that escape this test, but these will systematically be considered inferior to those in which the personal stamp of the *auteur*, however run-of-the-mill the scenario, can be perceived even infinitesimally.¹⁶

Bazin's critique foreshadows later observations made by Michel Foucault in his lecture 'What is an Author?' (1969), where Foucault examines the importance granted to individualised authors (and their names) throughout history. He importantly poses the question, 'What is a work?' and is every piece of writing by an author (including drafts and notes) part of that author's body of work?¹⁷ The author as a 'discourse' is essential to understanding auteur criticism, where auteurs are shaped by potentially biased

¹⁴ Another issue, especially regarding the Hollywood studio system, is the input of producers and the studio. Forms of censorship, such as the influence of the Motion Picture Production Code in Hollywood, on what directors and screenwriters could show or say is also noteworthy. See, for example: David Boyd, 'The Trouble with *Rebecca*,' in *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adapter*, ed. R. Barton Palmer and David Boyd (SUNY Press, 2011), 117-127.

¹⁵ Many films by auteurs are adaptations of pre-existing texts, including several by New Wave directors like Truffaut, Chabrol, and Rivette. Astruc himself directed film adaptations of works by Edgar Allan Poe, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gustave Flaubert.

¹⁶ André Bazin, 'De la Politique des Auteurs,' in *The French New Wave*, ed. Vincendeau and Graham, 70 [first published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 70 (April 1957), 2-11].

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (The New Press, 1998), 207.

preferences for certain directors over others. Although Foucault's lecture concerns literature, this question of authorship and the qualities of a 'work' is especially pertinent for cinema where this sense of an identifiable individualism can be ambiguous, perhaps more so than other arts like painting and writing that are ostensibly more individualistic.

Several filmmakers have personally resolved this issue by proposing different theories that align artistry, penmanship, or sculpting with the director-as-author. Josef Von Sternberg writes in his autobiography *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965) that just as the written word has punctuation and style, the camera 'writes its own language' and has its own distinct grammar.¹⁸ He also comments: 'The director is the chief author of a film, and in many countries this is legally acknowledged. I myself attach little if any importance to the plethora of other credits that precede a film.'¹⁹ For Von Sternberg, this meant control over *mise en scène* – the blocking of performers (famously Marlene Dietrich), expressive close-ups, and decadent set decoration. A filmmaker with a very different style, Andrei Tarkovsky makes similar comments in his autobiography *Sculpting in Time* (1987):

Directing starts not when the script is being discussed with the writer, nor during work with the actor, or with the composer, but at the time when, before the interior gaze of the person making the film and known as the director, there emerges an image of the film.²⁰

Astruc's view that the script should not govern the filmic language is pursued further by Tarkovsky, even to extreme lengths of denying the roles of other collaborators in the final vision. Tarkovsky defines the director's role as *sculpting in time*: 'Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble [...] cuts off and discards whatever he does not need.'²¹ The metaphorical connection Tarkovsky makes between filmmaking and sculpting ultimately lends an idea of *individual* labour to the film production.

Scholars like Raymond Bellour have highlighted that Chris Marker's films, by contrast, denied the trappings of the feature film.²² The essay film, as articulated by

¹⁸ Josef Von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (Secker & Warburg, 1965), 54.

¹⁹ Ibid, 137.

²⁰ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, trans. Kitty Hunter Blair (University of Texas Press, 1987), 60.

²¹ Ibid, 63.

²² Bellour, "'Cinema, Alone'/'Multiple 'Cinemas'," 22. It should be noted that Godard also somewhat departed from the feature film narrative and towards more modestly budgeted, essayistic filmmaking by the 1970s during his 'radical' period, and certainly in his most recent 'late period' work also. His work with Anne-Marie Miéville, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and the Dziga Vertov Group embraced more collaborative and co-creative means of production.

Marker, does not require a large crew and a sizeable budget, but an intimate, solitary experience with the camera.²³ Even low-quality images recorded on modest cameras contributed to his filmic expression. Indeed, Marker has commented:

You could never make *Lawrence of Arabia* like this. Nor *Andrei Rublev*. Nor *Vertigo*. But we possess the wherewithal – and this is something new – for intimate, solitary film-making. The process of making films in communion with oneself, the way a painter works or a writer, need not be now solely experimental.²⁴

By comparing filmmaking to writing and painting, Marker seems to answer Astruc's call for a mode of expression that is free-flowing and truly personal. Above, Marker is signalling that even those considered auteurs, like Tarkovsky, have produced films that require considerable labour on a grand scale. But Marker was reluctant to take on the traditional role of 'auteur'. He rarely made public appearances and played with possessory credit by using various pseudonyms and avatars throughout his career. Marker recycled borrowed images in his most famous essay film *Sans Soleil* (1983) and created a fictitious cinematographer surrogate called Sandor Krasna, and filmed with a mobile 16mm Beaulieu silent film camera.²⁵ Thus, Marker can justifiably be said to have embraced Astruc's vision of writing with and through the camera, while denying the commercial aspects of auteurism.

Agnès Varda believed that filmmaking was not about the screenplay.²⁶ Authorship begins and ends with the assemblage of images, choosing lenses, recording, to editing and selecting music or no music.²⁷ This is what she calls *cinécriture* (cine-writing). Although Varda never published a manifesto, Bérénice Reynaud summarises *cinécriture*: 'every level of production: screenplay, shooting, script, casting, location, position and movement of camera, rhythm.'²⁸ While Varda's definition might apply more generally to the role of the director in many film productions, her own mode of production was often

²³ Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) echoes Astruc by being referred to as a '*photo-roman*' (photo-novel) in the opening titles.

²⁴ Chris Marker quoted in: Bellour, '"Cinema, Alone"/Multiple "Cinemas",' 22.

²⁵ Chris Marker, 'Notes on Filmmaking,' essay in booklet accompanying *La Jetée/Sans Soleil* DVD. Criterion.

²⁶ John Cassavetes criticised Hollywood directors who adapted best-selling books – 'a director should create his own films.' See: 'Playboy Interview: John Cassavetes,' *Playboy* (July 1971): 56.

²⁷ Agnès Varda quoted in: '30 Essential Directing Tips from 30 Master Filmmakers,' IndieWire, 27 June 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/gallery/directing-tips-filmmakers-christopher-nolan-wes-anderson-quentin-tarantino-advice/visages-villages-photocall-70th-cannes-film-festival-france-19-may-2017-2/>; Burke, 'Cine-Writing the Everyday,' in *Mobile Storytelling*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 191.

²⁸ Bérénice Reynaud quoted in: Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 79.

significantly low-scale. Varda consistently made features, essay films, and documentaries on location and with a small crew and small, mobile cameras. Timothy Corrigan describes Varda's camcorder in *The Gleaners and I* (2000) as 'a small digital caméra-stylo that intensifies the subjective fragments of this contemporary woman with digital recordings of a fleeting world.'²⁹

However, Martin has argued that 'cinécriture' is not synonymous with Astruc's 'caméra-stylo'. Cinécriture does not refer to the camera-writing of Astruc's formulation of 'spontaneously tracing movements or framing shots with the camera' as Jonas Mekas did.³⁰ Indeed, Varda's vision is more all-encompassing. Astruc does not go so far as to outline *these* creative decisions, like editing or sound, as components of the caméra-stylo. It can certainly be interpreted, by virtue of the practicalities of making films, that Astruc had in mind that such creative decisions would be implicated in the authoring of a film. As Martin argues, cinécriture might be better aligned with Chantal Akerman's view of the *dispositif* (as a 'practice aesthetic') of her films and installations, often made on a small scale. This is a means of 'describing the format, layout or set-up of a piece in space, and the parametric decision-making that necessarily accompanied it.'³¹

What Varda's vision of cinécriture offers to us in the contemporary context is the possibility of 'writing' with new technologies that are inherently handheld, multifunctional, and act as self-contained cameras, editing tables, and projectors. Indeed, cinécriture is a useful way to think about smartphone filmmaking, which not only implicates the action of recording but may also include such simultaneous actions as using an interactive interface, augmented reality filters, adding music, editing, or livestreaming video. Thus, the caméra-stylo is further fleshed out as a concept in the social media era if cinécriture is considered alongside it as a 'companion' concept. In reference to Varda's cinécriture, Liz Burke argues that Astruc's utopian promise of a tool that renders filmmaking as personal and subtle as writing is a useful way to think about the 'linguistic and discursive registers' of smartphone filmmaking.³² Indeed, as I will argue in the following chapters, the smartphone *dispositif* has helped to make possible the promise of a flexible, personal, and multi-functional mode of filmmaking for mobilographers, including well-known filmmakers like Varda.

²⁹ Corrigan, 'Of the History of the Essay Film: Vertov to Varda,' in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Alter and Corrigan, 219.

³⁰ Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 79.

³¹ Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 78.

³² Burke, 'Cine-Writing the Everyday,' in *Mobile Storytelling*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 193.

John Caughie and Catherine Grant respectively point out that despite measured hesitation in film scholarship surrounding the auteur, it is undeniable that auteurs remain central to broader film culture through marketing and paratextual discourses.³³ Although scholarship has contributed new understandings of overlooked creative roles and labour within the industry, director-focused monographs and edited collections are dominant, and more established directors often have several books dedicated to their body of work.³⁴ These are publications that analyse an auteur's *oeuvre* for stylistic consistency and often invoke the auteur's personal autobiography and production methods. Indeed, directors are still predominantly regarded as the primary authority over their films, irrespective of their 'auteur' or 'non-auteur' status. According to copyright scholar Pascal Kamina, although different countries enact different laws on creative authorship, the film director is the only contributor who is consistently recognised as the author or co-author. Kamina traces the pre-eminence of the film director to auteur theory and those at *Cahiers*, and perhaps too narrowly to the legacy of Astruc.³⁵ Although instances of 'possessory credit' (e.g., '*a film by ...*' or '*DW Griffith's ...*') date back to the silent era, this pre-eminence has certainly been normalised since.

This sense of singular authority has spread to the realm of television, where the concept of high-quality 'prestige TV' in the post-millennium borrows somewhat from *la politique des auteurs*. The series showrunner or creator of a 'prestige' series may be imbued with authorial status, personal vision, and sometimes autobiographical meaning by critics despite the collaborative nature of network television production and writers' rooms.³⁶ The concept of 'vulgar auteurism' coined by Andrew Tracy in 2009 broadly seeks to reappraise 'low-brow' directors like Paul Verhoeven.³⁷ Although critics disagree on what 'vulgar auteurism' is (as opposed to simply *auteurism*) and its hermeneutic value, this concept points to an important development in the post-millennium: there are now increased opportunities for audiences to collect DVDs, easily view a director's whole body of work, and engage in discussion about films and filmmakers online.

³³ John Caughie, 'Authors and Auteurs: The Uses of Theory,' in *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies*, ed. James Donald and Michael Renov (SAGE, 2007), 409; Grant, 'www.auteur.com?' 101.

³⁴ See, for example: Philip Cowan, 'Analysing Stylistic Patterning in Film to Establish the Cinematographer as a Coauthor: A Case Study of Gregg Toland,' *Projections* 11, no. 1 (2017): 16-37, 10.3167/proj.2017.110103; Alison Smith, 'Film-Making as a Collaborative Activity: The Contribution of Cinematographers, Screenwriters and Actors,' in *The French Cinema Book*, 2nd Ed., ed. Michael Temple and Michael Witt (Bloomsbury, 2018); Aaron Hunter, *Polly Platt: Hollywood Production Design and Creative Authorship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

³⁵ Pascal Kamina, *Film Copyright in the European Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155-156.

³⁶ See: Seth Friedman and Amanda Keeler ed., *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in 21st-Century America* (Rutgers University Press, 2023).

³⁷ Andrew Tracy, 'Vulgar Auteurism: The Case of Michael Mann,' *Cinema Scope* 40 (Fall, 2009), <https://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-online/vulgar-auteurism-case-michael-mann/>.

Auteurs are increasingly visible public figures or stars, bolstered by traditional print media, television appearances, digital publications, and interviews. Auteurs are still deeply embedded in cinéaste culture and what Girish Shambu has examined as ‘new cinephilia’ in the digital age, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.³⁸ As Corrigan surmises, the auteur’s brand-name may even supersede the text itself.³⁹ In the digital age, access to auteurs and their films is increased via paratextual materials like recorded interviews shared online and streaming services like Mubi or the Criterion Channel, where director-focused curated collections may be watched (Figure 1.1). Several famous auteurs also personally use social media, especially Instagram, for creative and promotional purposes, as I will discuss in Chapter 3. The film review app Letterboxd also encourages users to access a filmmaker’s filmography and even rank their films by creating tiered lists, thus affording more viewers the ability to express their taste on a public platform for others to observe – an affordance once reserved for films critics in print publications (Figure 1.2).

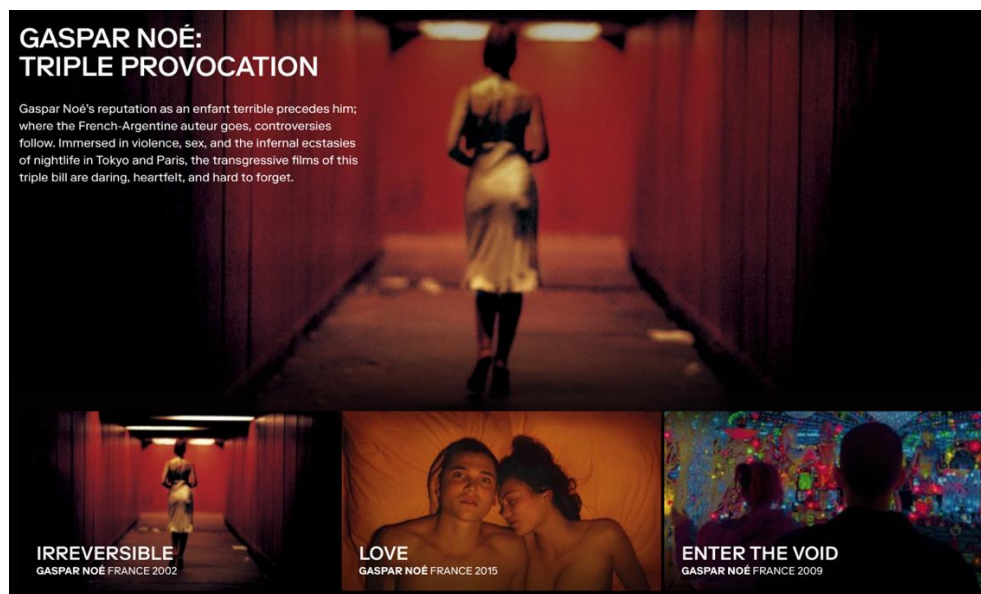


Figure 1.1: an example of Mubi's auteur-based curation (2025).

³⁸ See: Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (2020).

³⁹ Corrigan, ‘The Commerce of Auteurism,’ 49.

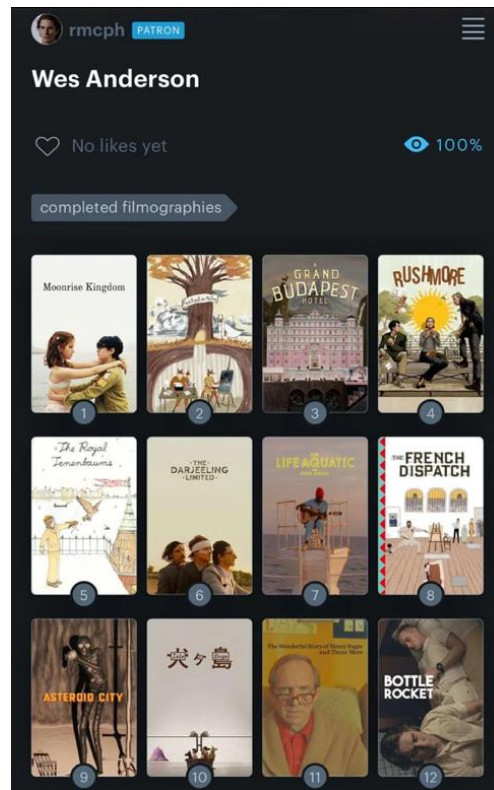


Figure 1.2: an example of a ranked director's filmography on Letterboxd by user rmcph (2025).

Also developing in contemporary screen culture is a heightened awareness of the pitfalls of holding auteurs in high regard. Recently, media discourse on ‘separating the art from the artist’ in the #MeToo era has propelled debates on the ‘artistic genius’ of mostly male film industry figures involved in past controversies or sexual crimes. Stefania Marghitu explains that it is standard practice in cultural fields to overlook the criminal acts of a male genius-artist, as the artist’s cultural context is often used as an excuse for his behaviours.⁴⁰ Although the #MeToo movement, driven by social media virality, resulted in the removal of certain high-profile figures such as producer Harvey Weinstein from the industry (but not his catalogue of highly regarded produced films), there is still contention over the continued support shown for other creators, including auteurs.⁴¹ Roman Polanski continues to work in the European film industry and is especially a topic of debate in France where he avoids extradition to the US. Voiced support for Polanski

⁴⁰ Stefania Marghitu, “‘It’s Just Art’: Auteur Apologism in the Post-Weinstein Era,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 491-494, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1456158.

⁴¹ The ‘Me Too’ movement was started by activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and became a viral movement on social media in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted about her experience of sexual harassment in solidarity with women who accused producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault and rape.

has often cited his artistic authority and filmmaking legacy.⁴² In 2020, Sciamma and several actresses walked out of the César awards ceremony in protest of Polanski receiving the Best Director award. At the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, actress Judith Godrèche staged a protest to highlight sexual abuse in the industry, following her allegations against directors Benoît Jacquot and Jacques Doillon.⁴³ Auteurism itself is therefore subject to criticism as a way of especially celebrating male filmmakers for whom the perception of genius might precede culpability in an industry that remains largely patriarchal.

Although Godard claims that *everyone is now an auteur* thanks to mobile camera technologies like smartphones (complicated by the translation of ‘auteur’ as simply ‘author’), there is still a distinction in film culture between ‘auteurs’ and ordinary people, for whom the mechanisms of an industry and commerce are not available. Yet, there is more to Astruc’s caméra-stylo than auteurism. There are forms of authorship that challenge the vision of the lone ‘auteur’. There are visions of the caméra-stylo that lie outside of the hegemonic Western film industry (what might be termed ‘First’/mainstream Hollywood cinema and ‘Second’/European art cinema).⁴⁴ As Martin points out, although the centrality of the director is axiomatic in all forms of cinema, from narrative to documentary to avant-garde cinema, some forms like militant political films are often made collectively and left unsigned by a single creator.⁴⁵ Despite his focus on Western film culture, Astruc’s ideas can be coalesced with Julio García Espinosa’s Third Cinema manifesto ‘For an Imperfect Cinema’ (1969) written in the context of revolutionary Cuban film. For Espinosa, the likelihood that cameras and screen technologies would become more accessible presented a new landscape where the lines between ‘filmmaker’ and ‘spectator’ or ‘consumer’ would become blurred:

We know that we are filmmakers because we have been part of a minority which has had the time and the circumstances needed to develop, within itself, an artistic culture; and because the material

⁴² Polanski was arrested for drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl in Los Angeles in 1977 and became a fugitive from justice. In 2009, a petition signed by filmmakers such as Alexandre Astruc, Wes Anderson, and others condemned Polanski’s arrest in Switzerland: Peter Knegt, ‘Over 100 In Film Community Sign Polanski Petition,’ IndieWire, 29 September 2009, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/over-100-in-film-community-sign-polanski-petition-55821/>.

⁴³ BBC, ‘French Actress Judith Godrèche Accuses Directors of Historical Abuse,’ 8 February 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68223976>.

⁴⁴ For more on the practical and cultural contradictions of the labels of ‘First’, ‘Second’, and ‘Third’ (and ‘Fourth’/indigenous) cinemas, see: Guneratne and Dissanayake, *Rethinking Third Cinema*, 14-15.

⁴⁵ Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 40.

resources of film technology are limited and therefore available to some, not to all. But what happens [...] if the evolution of film technology (there are already signs in evidence) makes it possible that this technology ceases being the privilege of a small few?⁴⁶

Against the assumption that ‘quality’ in film should be defined by European tastes, star auteurs, and elitism, Espinosa proposes instead that an ‘imperfect cinema’ would be a counter-bourgeoisie alternative to hegemonic practices of production and exhibition. Imperfect cinema, as he envisions, ‘rejects exhibitionism in both (literal) senses of the word, the narcissistic and the commercial (getting shown in established theatres and circuits)’ and ‘can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle.’⁴⁷ Espinosa sees that a truly revolutionary cinema would disrupt the barrier between ‘folk art’ made by ordinary people and the work of ‘artists’.⁴⁸ His dialectic points to an issue at the heart of Astruc’s two essays – the role of the filmmaker as elevated ‘artist’ (instrumental for auteur theory) and the ubiquity of cameras for the general public. Like Astruc, Espinosa saw that filmmaking and film-watching would break from the studio and theatre and exist in the environment of the filmmaker. Both critics certainly could not foresee the widespread use of smartphones, but their thoughts resonate with the present day.

Kata Szita has already proposed that current smartphone screen culture ‘is deeply embedded in the values that Espinosa’s imperfect cinema once meant for the Cuban film industry: the active presence of *ordinary* people behind the camera and in front of the screen.’⁴⁹ Indeed, Astruc’s vision of camera access and portability corresponds with this vision of imperfect cinema; via the smartphone, this vision no longer seems as far-fetched. Seeing Espinosa’s manifesto not as identical to Astruc’s manifesto, but nonetheless corresponding across time and distance, opens further consideration for filmmaking practices beyond the film industry and in scenarios of collective struggle. I will consider this connection further in Chapter 5 in relation to the non-fiction video

⁴⁶ Espinosa, ‘For an Imperfect Cinema,’ para. 3, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.

⁴⁷ Ibid, paras. 39-40.

⁴⁸ See, also: Glauber Rocha, ‘THE AESTHETICS OF HUNGER (Brazil, 1965),’ in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (University of California Press, 2014), 218-220, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520957411-068>.

⁴⁹ Szita, ‘New Perspectives on an Imperfect Cinema,’ in *Mobile Storytelling*, ed. Schleser and Xu, 33.

production of Palestinian activists on Instagram for whom portable cameras present a vital counter-hegemonic tool.

This leads to another consideration, which is the question of authorship and widespread access to new media technologies. Although Astruc sees in 1948 that television promised a cinema addressed to our intelligence by offering a screen format through which new forms of production could arise, it is also true that television corporations and news programming quickly asserted a hegemonic role in media representation by the 1960s.⁵⁰ Bearing in mind the availability of public access channels, it is certainly not true that *all* consumers of television can also produce television broadcasts or streaming shows, thus making television the creative realm of corporations. Contemporary Hollywood auteurs like David Fincher have also moved to ‘prestige television’ and streaming series, with David Lynch’s development of *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-1991) being an earlier precursor. However, new media can blur this consumer-producer binary.

In the early decades of computer technologies, from the 1950s to the 1970s, systems such as IBM computers were mostly institutionalised for the purposes of science and military use and far from the lives of ordinary people, as Jean Burgess notes.⁵¹ By the 1990s, consumers were using computers for various applications. According to Lev Manovich, ‘in contrast to cinema, where most “users” are able to “understand” cinematic language but not “speak” it (i.e., make films), all computer users can “speak” the language of the interface. They are active users of the interface.’⁵² He argues that unlike cinema, where consumers are merely spectators, in new media this distinction is blurred by the interactivity required by computer controls:

It makes end users *feel* [my emphasis] that they are not just consumers but ‘authors’ creating a new media object or experience [...] Even though a modern artist may only be reproducing, or, at best, combining preexisting texts, idioms, and schemes in new ways, the actual material process of art making, nevertheless, supports the Romantic ideal.⁵³

⁵⁰ Astruc, ‘The Future of Cinema,’ 47; television has played a vital role in the propaganda model of ‘manufacturing consent’ in the US. See: Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books, 1988).

⁵¹ Jean Burgess, ‘The iPhone Moment, the Apple Brand, and the Creator Consumer: From “Hackability” to “Usability” to Cultural Generativity,’ in *Studying Mobile Media*, ed. Hjorth, Burgess, and Richardson, 31.

⁵² Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 78-79.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 124-125.

Certainly, computers necessitate user interaction, whereas cinemagoing typically does not.⁵⁴ That being said, the production of films and the expression of filmic language has not strictly been the privilege of just a few professional ‘filmmakers’ as he implies, as home movies and amateur filmmaking demonstrate through film history.⁵⁵ And now, post-cinematic computerised camera devices like smartphones make screen production more easily accessible, require haptic interaction, and further resonate with Astruc’s vision. At the very least, the *feeling* of authorship in using new media technologies that Manovich describes is significant.

Despite the rise of new modes of expression on the Internet that were not present in Astruc’s time, it is too utopian to see computer use as a form of *universal* creative authorship in and of itself. While members of the public may certainly interact with computer devices in simple ways (such as using a search engine), this does not necessarily amount to creative *authorship* (whether literary, visual, or audiovisual). Users’ personal posts (images, videos, and text) are partly shaped by the in-built interface design, affordances controlled by corporations, and the algorithmically generated feeds that help determine what appears on screen. The question of Internet authorship is further complicated by the volume of programmed faceless bots, automatically generated posts, and now spammed ‘AI slop’ imagery infiltrating platforms. And although it is possible to say that computers are ‘everywhere’ because they are so mobile, there is still a ‘digital divide’ that restricts groups from participating as authors. Factors such as Wi-Fi service, geographic location, and socio-economic inequalities hinder universal access to new technologies and literacy in their use.⁵⁶ Even with expanded access to screen media production, there may still be groups and identities that can be described as the ‘digital subaltern’.⁵⁷ And as global populations do not equally experience democracy today – from citizenship rights to state surveillance and even genocide – in their day-to-day lives, the ability of new media technologies to manifest democratisation is not clear.

⁵⁴ Recent experiments in blurring this distinction include *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Netflix, 2018), in which narrative cause-and-effect is determined by the viewer’s input, by clicking on options in the style of role-playing videogames (RPGs) and ‘choose your own adventure’ media. Multiscreen projections and 360-degree films also offer the viewer more agency in determining what to watch.

⁵⁵ For discussion of class, labour, and access to the dominant film industry, see: Mike Wayne, *Marxism Goes to the Movies* (Routledge, 2020), 10-11.

⁵⁶ See: Van Dyk, *The Digital Divide* (2020).

⁵⁷ Mike Kent, ‘Digital Divide 2.0 and the Digital Subaltern,’ *Nebula* 5, no. 4 (2008): 84-96; Pramod K. Nayar, ‘The Digital Dalit: Subalternity and Cyberspace,’ *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 37, no. 1-2 (2014): 69-74, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/sljh.v37i1-2.7204>.

In *Digital Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere* (2023), Christian Fuchs invokes Jürgen Habermas to assess the limitations of democracy in our engagement with digital media. Like Manovich, Fuchs surmises that digital media change the traditional relationship between media production and media consumption, pointing to the example of YouTube’s user-generated audiovisual content.⁵⁸ Internet consumers can become what futurist Alvin Toffler defined as ‘prosumers’ (‘producing consumers’).⁵⁹ In this, it is possible to recognise what Astruc saw as the inevitable blurring of the strict producer-consumer binary.

Habermas observed how feudalism once restricted power to the ruling aristocracy and that the public sphere has been *re-feudalised* as corporations and media organisations exert power over the public sphere through their acquiring of vast amounts of capital.⁶⁰ This includes the film industry and even the auteurs who operate within it. Fuchs argues that the *digital* public sphere today is re-feudalised by asymmetries of power. Almost all dominant social media platforms are commercially oriented, and most Internet companies are privately owned. Our ‘digital labour’ online is extracted in the form of commodified data. We face digital surveillance culture, digital monopolies (such as Google’s monopoly as a search engine), a culture of individualism (‘I’ and not ‘we’), algorithms, fragmented ‘micro-publics’, and ‘fake news’.⁶¹ Furthermore, social media platforms have ushered in mass disinformation (about the COVID virus, for example), deepfakes, gore content, the mobilisation of the far-right, and toxic online culture of programmed anonymous bots.⁶² As Hito Steyerl reflects on Espinosa’s vision, the new economy of ‘poor images’ of the Internet ‘enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. But this does not mean these opportunities are only used for progressive ends.’⁶³

Alternatively, Bjørn Sørenssen (also invoking Habermas) writes optimistically of the democratisation of screen production via the Internet, seeing the contemporary realisation of the caméra-stylo in YouTube and its user-made content. Sørenssen takes the

⁵⁸ Christian Fuchs, *Digital Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere: Media, Communication and Society Volume Six* (Routledge, 2023), 250.

⁵⁹ Toffler, *The Third Wave* (1980).

⁶⁰ Fuchs, *Digital Democracy*, 246 [citing: Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991)].

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 247-249.

⁶² See, for example: Carole Cadwalladr, ‘“A Polarisation Engine”: How Social Media Has Created a “Perfect Storm” for UK’s Far-Right Riots,’ *The Guardian*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/aug/03/a-polarisation-engine-how-social-media-has-created-a-perfect-storm-for-uks-far-right-riots>; Justin McCurry, ‘South Korea Battles Surge of Deepfake Pornography After Thousands Found to be Spreading Images,’ *The Guardian*, 28 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/28/south-korea-deepfake-porn-law-crackdown>; Imran Rahman-Jones, ‘Taylor Swift Deepfakes Spark Calls in Congress for New Legislation,’ BBC, 27 January 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-68110476>; Tait, ‘Pornographies of Violence’ (2008).

⁶³ Hito Steyerl, ‘In Defense of the Poor Image,’ *e-flux journal* 10, no. 11 (2009): 6, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

example of popular elderly YouTube vlogger Peter Oakley (geriatric1927), whom he even goes as far as calling a ‘YouTube auteur’.⁶⁴ Sørenssen notes how despite sometimes struggling with YouTube video production techniques, Oakley took advice from younger fans on how to improve his autobiographical vlogs. Despite being a self-proclaimed geriatric who may be stereotyped as technologically disadvantaged, Oakley nonetheless embraced the technologies available to him, and he learned from his audience (Figure 1.3). Thus, Sørenssen argues, ‘[t]he dual character of collective support and individual presentation presents an interesting contrast to Astruc’s individualised vision of a future Descartes holed up in his room with his camera. Peter is writing his life with his camera pen, but he is not doing it alone.’⁶⁵ Indeed, this vision of co-creation and collaboration challenges notions of lone authorship that have dominated many interpretations of Astruc’s theory, and will recur as a theme in this thesis.

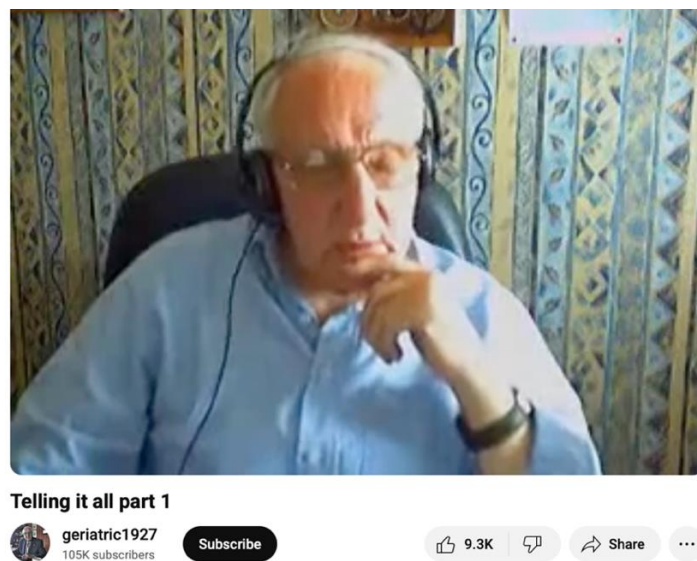


Figure 1.3: geriatric1927 on YouTube (2006).

Building on Sørenssen’s point, although solitary, personal use of a camera is a crucial element of the *caméra-stylo*, there is also room for a *co-creative* reframing. Crowd-sourced films like the documentary *Life in a Day* (Kevin MacDonald, 2020) or Perry Bard’s global remake of Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* as well as TikTok ‘stitch’ videos (an in-built editing feature in which creators can use and respond to

⁶⁴ Sørenssen, ‘Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc’s *Caméra-Stylo*,’ 47; see: geriatric1927, YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@geriatric1927>.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 57.

clips from other creators' videos) offer co-creative versions of Astruc's vision. Fan remakes and re-edits of screen media are indicative of the affordances of various platforms and technologies for encouraging participatory co-creation. Fan-editing predates the digital era, with the availability of home splicing technologies to suture reels of film together and even DIY colour tinting, evidenced by Joseph Cornell's experimental film *Rose Hobart* (1936). As audiences and fans gain access to downloadable files, editing software, and even in-built editing features on TikTok and Instagram, texts can easily be manipulated and remixed. Today, home editing software such as Final Cut Pro or DaVinci Resolve offer users the ability to re-edit film texts to make fan videos and even videographic essays that can then be published on video platforms like Vimeo. And, even if the original text that is being reconfigured (i.e., a film) is made within the structures of an industry backed by capital, an ordinary person's ability to manipulate that text is still significantly a sign of cinema's *relocation* (to invoke Francesco Casetti) to the home.⁶⁶ Whether or not these works are of 'quality' is perhaps not the point, as much as audiences' ability to formally and meaningfully re-imagine texts. This topic will be further examined in Chapter 4 in relation to fan media.

The recent rise of generative artificial intelligence has challenged traditional notions of human agency and Romantic ideals of expression.⁶⁷ The rather broad term 'artificial intelligence' may refer to systems of machine learning that vary from algorithmically generated YouTube recommendations, search engine results, and language translation to assisting governments with facial recognition and lethal drone strikes.⁶⁸ More specifically, generative AI systems produce outputs of still images and moving images (photographic, hyper-realistic, animated, painting, etc.), sound (voices, music, sound effects), and text (fiction, essays, information, etc.) gleaned from Internet databases. Systems such as OpenAI's ChatGPT have caused major concerns in the film industry. The SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes lasting for several months in 2023 were partly in response to Hollywood's turn towards using AI, as networks and studios may opt for the profit-driven use of AI instead of human labour in the future. As AI becomes more mainstream and large tech companies collaborate with festivals and film studios, the

⁶⁶ Casetti, 'The Relocation of Cinema,' in *Post-Cinema*, ed. Denson and Leyda.

⁶⁷ The brief popularity of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) in the 2020s also prompted debates over the ownership and authorship of copyrighted artworks. See: Andres Guadamuz, 'The Treachery of Images: Non-Fungible Tokens and Copyright,' *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 16, issue 12 (2021): 1367-1385, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jiplp/jpab152>.

⁶⁸ Middle East Eye, 'Israel-Palestine War: Israeli Army Relaxed Rules for Bombing "Non-Military Targets" in Gaza,' 30 November 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-army-gaza-relaxed-rules-bombing-non-military-targets>.

technology is being met with resistance and derision from cinema audiences. The use of AI for multilingual voice-cloning in the Oscar-winning film *The Brutalist* (Brady Corbet, 2024) and for promotional materials for *Civil War* (Alex Garland, 2024) stirred media controversy.⁶⁹ In March 2024, a promotional video for OpenAI was booed by audiences at South by Southwest festival.⁷⁰ Following public uproar on social media from regular patrons in June 2024, a screening at London's Prince Charles Cinema of an AI-written meta narrative film called *The Last Screenwriter* (Peter Luisi, 2024) was cancelled by management, despite plans for the (co-)creator to discuss the ethics of AI at the screening.⁷¹ As these cases demonstrate, the authenticity and *human* element of authorship is important for audiences, even if the film in question is presented as experimental or self-reflexive.

Although AI has yet to achieve hyperrealism that rivals *the real thing*, the basis of Astruc's formulation is being uprooted by the absence of a camera in the production of realistic moving images, contributing to an uneasy sense of a post-human point of view.⁷² But gen-AI is not alone as an 'automatic' creative process. Joanna Zylinzka describes photography as a *partly* non-human process, where a cameraperson is 'taken over' by the camera apparatus. Zylinzka quotes Steven Humblet who describes photographers (and indeed smartphone and other digital device users) entering 'a zone of mixed authorship' with their apparatuses – a process that Humblet describes as 'co-creation'.⁷³ If we are to consider Humblet's and Zylinzka's view, this means that the premise of Astruc's *caméra-stylo* could be considered *partly* non-human and co-creative *already* (like Vertov's conception of the 'kino-eye' as a superior mechanical eye). Certainly, nuance is required when referring to AI works as purely 'machine-made'. A key part of working with AI is having to train the system with text prompts, sounds, video, and images. Practitioners may have to struggle with AI systems to curate desired outputs, somewhat mirroring the

⁶⁹ See: Drusilla Moorhouse, 'Netflix True Crime Documentary Accused of Using Photos Generated or Manipulated by AI,' Huffpost, 19 April 2024, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/netflix-ai-photos-true-crime_n_6622d1f9e4b08151cac9f077; James Hibberd, 'A24's New AI-Generated "Civil War" Ads Generate Controversy,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/a24-civil-war-posters-controversy-1235876340/>.

⁷⁰ Michael Schneider, 'SXSW Audiences Loudly Boo Festival Videos Touting the Virtues of AI,' *Variety*, 13 March 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/sxsw-audiences-boo-videos-artificial-intelligence-ai-1235940454/>; Mary Swant, 'Why the Tribeca Film Festival Embraced AI Movies with OpenAI and Runway,' *Digiday*, 21 June 2024, <https://digiday.com/media/why-the-tribeca-film-festival-embraced-ai-movies-with-openai-and-runway/>.

⁷¹ BBC, 'London Cinema Drops AI-Written Film After Backlash,' <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjll3w15j0yo>.

⁷² Despite its disembodied nature, generative AI is often referred to in personified terms by corporate brands and users. AI is 'trained' like a pet or even employee to conduct tasks, and text-generators like ChatGPT 'speak' as an assistant would.

⁷³ Steven Humblet ed., 'Interview with Marc De Blicq,' in *Off Camera* (Roma Publications, 2021), ix [quoted in: Zylinzka, *The Perception Machine*, 129].

role of a film director. Much of the data that AI recycles derives from stock images photographed by uncredited humans, for example, which further complicates AI authorship. Although humans do co-create generative media by inputting text prompts and training the AI, the comparative lack of creative control is clearly an issue that challenges notions of authorship, and namely the *caméra-stylo* in contemporary screen culture.

As authorship is central to the *caméra-stylo*, contemporary re-framings of authorship (as it is traditionally or Romantically conceived) require consideration. The discourses about and tensions of contemporary screen authorship, that include film auteurism, increased access to screen technologies, and AI-generated media, help shape the re-imagining of the *caméra-stylo* today.

The New Avant-Garde

In ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde’ Astruc downplays the legacy of movements that are traditionally associated with avant-garde or experimental cinema, while celebrating Hollywood auteurs like Orson Welles. Although the *camera-pen* borrows a Romantic *literary* conception of free-flowing expression, for Astruc the true cinematic avant-garde must be purely *filmic*. Cinema should not borrow from ‘old hat’ Surrealist literary conceptions or Dadaist artists who emerged in the 1920s and 30s and worked across sculpture, painting, film, and poetry (assuming the contributions of artists like Man Ray did not sufficiently present a revolution of cinematic language for Astruc). Nonetheless, André Breton’s theories of consciousness and automatism in his ‘Manifesto on Surrealism’ (1924), resonate to some extent with the almost *automatic* nature of the *caméra-stylo*. Breton posits that Surrealism involves: ‘Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought.’⁷⁴ While the *caméra-stylo* that Astruc envisions would presumably require more conscious agency over the image and camera mechanism than what Breton proposes here, there is a similar desire to express one’s psychic thoughts faithfully in visual form. In Astruc’s construction, the camera (like a

⁷⁴ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969 [1924]), 26.

pen) can express the thoughts of the cameraperson (or mobilographer) despite and perhaps even aided by its mechanical and partly *automatic* nature.⁷⁵

While acknowledging Astruc's dismissal of avant-garde cinema, there are more tangible connections to be made between the avant-garde or experimental cinema with the *caméra-stylo* than he initially thought. The German Dadaist abstract filmmaker Hans Richter significantly envisioned cinema as not too dissimilar from painting. Laura Rascaroli points to the publication of Richter's article 'Der Filmessay' (1940), where Richter's ideas about the essay film seemed to predict the *caméra-stylo* by seeing film as a medium to express mental thought.⁷⁶ Key figures of the American avant-garde who were contemporary at the time in 1948 included Maya Deren. With Alexander Hammid, Deren embraced low-budget filmmaking with a Bolex 16mm and used her own home in Los Angeles to film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Mary Ellen Bute, who used painting, electricity, and light to create kaleidoscopic abstract moving shapes in her films, commented: 'By turning knobs and switches on a control board I could "draw" with a beam of light with as much freedom as with a brush.'⁷⁷ In the 1930s, Cornell was using DIY editing techniques to reconstruct discarded film reels to produce new meaning (an experimental precursor to videographic essays and fan edits today). These experimental filmmakers, unlike those mentioned by Astruc in his two essays, worked predominantly outside of the film industry. Their films were screened in exhibition spaces such as galleries, museums, film societies like Amos Vogel's Cinema 16, and private homes. These filmmakers captured the promise of cinema beyond the industry and beyond the theatre space.⁷⁸

Similarly looking towards the future of a distinctly *cinematic* language, in his pursuit of *kino-pravda* ('cinema-truth') Vertov sought methods of film production and post-production that broke away from popular genre conventions already established in Soviet cinema of the 1920s. Vertov attempted to make films that did not require actors and sets, which he associated with theatre. Vertov strove instead for capturing 'life taken

⁷⁵ For discussion on the possibility of 'art' in automated photography, see: Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 25.

⁷⁶ Rascaroli, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 2-3 [citing: Hans Richter, 'Der Filmessay. Eine Neue Form des Dokumentarfilms,' in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum Essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Sonderzahl, 1992), 195-198].

⁷⁷ Mary Ellen Bute, 'Abstronics. An Experimental Filmmaker Photographs the Esthetics of the Oscillograph,' *Films in Review* 5, no. 6 (1954): 3, <http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/ABSTRONICS.pdf>. Later, Stan Brakhage painted, scratched, and placed objects directly onto film strip and then projected the images, thus defying the role of the camera in the *caméra-stylo*.

⁷⁸ Sørenssen argues that these avant-garde film movements existed outside of the 'public sphere' of the film industry and would end up as marginalised phenomena that resounded more with cinéaste groups than with a general audience (2008: p. 52).

by surprise.’⁷⁹ In this sense, Vertov’s vision of cinema without well-financed theatricality seems to foresee Astruc’s essay published years later. While Vertov’s theories were applied in practice by the director (unlike Astruc) and conceptualised in the context of Soviet cinema of the 1920s (enmeshed with theories of montage), both filmmakers were thinking towards the future of cinema and its expansion. According to Vertov, the ‘kino-eye’ (*kinoglaz*) is enhanced vision like an X-ray or microscope, to be understood as ‘that which the eye does not see.’ The camera is personified as a disembodied organ and the filmmaker no longer a creator but an ‘engineer and constructor who must solve the technical problems of his artistic production in an active process.’⁸⁰ The eye-camera mechanism seems to be a more cyborgian version of the *caméra-stylo* by combining human and machine vision.

It is possible to recognise smartphone mobilography and its networked applications as a modern version of this construction. Dean Keep and Marsha Berry emphasise the camera-phone as seeing the world through a ‘*kino-glaz*’. Camera-phones are ideal for capturing ephemeral sights and sounds of everyday experiences (their use has become second nature) and enable filmmakers to extend their creative practice. They note that ‘[v]ideo captured on camera-phones is often perceived to be of a much lower quality than “heritage media” forms such as film’ but this ‘frees both the film-maker and the viewer from the intellectual baggage and conventions associated with more traditional media forms.’⁸¹ Smartphones and small cameras can be like *prostheses* that extend the body and agency. As Nathan Jurgenson argues, ‘the social camera makes more explicit that the machine is a creative partner in seeing and expressing’ by offering the ability to digitally record, edit, and share videos and images in the same device.⁸² This firmly resonates with the *caméra-stylo*.

‘Newness’ and the future are explicitly at the core of Astruc’s ideas in 1948. The avant-garde in Astruc’s terms is when something breaks from the norm; it has no institutional framework. As Manovich highlights, several books with the word ‘new’ in their title were published by modernist European artists and designers (like Ezra Pound’s famous cry to ‘Make it New!’), and the word ‘new’ reappeared again in the 1990s as a shortcut to describe all forms dependent on digital computers.⁸³ Invoking Vertov’s

⁷⁹ Heftberger, *Digital Humanities and Film Studies*, 66.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 65-66.

⁸¹ Keep and Berry, ‘Remediating Vertov,’ 165.

⁸² Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (Verso, 2019), 21.

⁸³ Lev Manovich, ‘Avant-Garde as Software,’ (1999), <https://manovich.net/index.php/projects/avant-garde-as-software>.

theories, Manovich posits that the avant-garde ‘materialised’ in the form of a computer in the late 20th century, with avant-garde techniques such as cut-and-paste being in-built in computer systems and the combination of animation, text, and live-action footage in film-editing software.⁸⁴ However, it is not sufficient to say that the avant-garde is simply what is always ‘new’, especially in the digital era, where ‘*new media*’ is a catch-all term for technologies that are now pervasive. Writing in 2000, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that ‘what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.’⁸⁵ And indeed, the term ‘new media’ is losing its ‘newness’ as these technologies become the very fabric of our everyday lives. Where these technologies may have been *newer* at the turn of the century, ‘new media’ are now firmly enmeshed in all strata of society – from healthcare, education, law, and warfare to the arts and culture.

The *newness* of digital media is also complicated by the idea that we are now living in a post-digital society, as some scholars propose. Like ‘post-cinema’, post-digital does not refer to a complete cessation of digital technologies. According to Florian Cramer, the ‘post-digital’ can describe either contemporary disenchantment with pervasive digital information systems and new gadgets or the historicising of our fascination with these devices. Vinyl records, analogue photography, cassettes, VHS tapes, and even early millennial flip-phones and camcorders have found new popularity as post-digital devices.⁸⁶ Simplicity may be an appealing quality to some consumers who wish to disconnect from high-speed smartphones and apps – resulting in the revival of ‘dumbphones’ that restrict access to social media.⁸⁷ Even corporations promote post-digital aesthetics. The Hipstamatic app was modelled on the 1980s camera of the same name and invites users to shake their smartphone to ‘develop’ their digital photos.⁸⁸ As Jurgenson notes, Instagram’s original logo replicated the analogue camera *body* that evokes photo-processing in a darkroom, when in fact the app’s software allows

⁸⁴ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 306-307.

⁸⁵ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 15.

⁸⁶ Florian Cramer, ‘What is “Post-Digital”?’ in DM Berry and M. Dieter ed., *Postdigital Aesthetics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13. See, also: Florian Cramer and Petar Jandrić, ‘Postdigital: A Term that Sucks but is Useful,’ *Postdigital Science and Education* (2021): 1-24.

⁸⁷ Katie Notopoulos, ‘Could a Dumb Phone that’s also a Vape Help Break my iPhone Addiction? I Tried the Swype Vape Phone that’s Going Viral,’ *Business Insider*, 20 July 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/vape-phone-swype-replace-smartphone-dumb-phone-iphone-review-2024-7>.

⁸⁸ The app’s brand slogan is ‘Digital never felt so analogue’. The app mimics the experience of film photography by showing a camera on the smartphone screen being loaded with a canister of film, while the smartphone makes haptic vibrations.

augmentation, editing, and instant sharing.⁸⁹ Instagram and TikTok filters that mimic the flaws and materiality of film photography, VHS tapes, and television electronic interference represent so-called ‘analogue nostalgia’.⁹⁰

Furthermore, what is ‘new’ can instantly seem *old* in a society where technological obsolescence drives innovation and vice versa. Social media trends and memes experience rapid turnover periods. Corporations like Apple intentionally build obsolescence into their devices by frequently introducing new software updates (while slowing down older models) and device modifications that drive consumerism. And as Carolyn L. Kane notes in her book *High-Tech Trash* (2019), ‘our rapacious appetite for “new and improved” gadgets’ hastens cycles of obsolescence’ to mass produce quick-and-cheap electronic commodities that exploit underpaid labour and inevitably end up in vast landfills outside of the West.⁹¹

Therefore, the term ‘new’ is not a satisfactory one to explain what the avant-garde means today. What can be considered ‘avant-garde’ in this media landscape is complicated by the workings of media industries, trends, and corporate interests. It is nonetheless important to trace the identifiable features of the avant-garde in contemporary screen culture to understand the development of screen aesthetics and practices. Scholars have theorised in different ways how digital practices and aesthetics represent the avant-garde or at least echo the spirit of the twentieth-century avant-garde. For example, Jennifer O’Meara historicises the sensory aesthetics of the popular practice of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) performed by numerous specialised accounts on Instagram within avant-garde film (especially the work of Bute and Stan Brakhage).⁹² O’Meara ties the synaesthesia of ASMR to avant-garde emphasis on tactility and a *caressing gaze*, in reference to Laura U. Marks.⁹³ Elsewhere, Steve Anderson identifies the ‘digital analogue’ as a mode of representation that ‘foregrounds material aspects of production seemingly in defiance of the conventional wisdom that digital media are characterised by dematerialisation and disconnection from the physical world.’⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Jurgenson, *The Social Photo*, 20.

⁹⁰ See: Katharina Neimeyer ed., *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁹¹ Carolyn L. Kane, *High-Tech Trash: Glitch, Noise and Aesthetic Failure* (California University Press, 2019), 4.

⁹² ASMR refers to various practices that include ‘satisfying’ videos of soap-cutting, whispering, crackling into a microphone, and handling slime that are meant to elicit a positive response in the viewer.

⁹³ Jennifer O’Meara, ‘Touchscreens, Tactility, and Material Traces: From Avant-Garde Artists to Instagram ASMRtists,’ *NECSUS* (autumn 2019), https://necsus-ejms.org/touchscreens-tactility-and-material-traces-from-avant-garde-artists-to-instagram-asmrtists/#_edn70 [citing: Marks, *Touch*, 6].

⁹⁴ Steve F. Anderson, ‘Aporias of the Digital Avant-Garde,’ *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (2007): para. 4, <https://dhq.digitalhumanities.org/vol/1/2/000011/000011.html#p12>. See, also: Christiane Paul, ‘Digital Art Now:

For Kane, the avant-garde has developed in digital culture through ‘glitch’ and ‘noise’ art that embraces computational failure and error. Kane traces glitch and noise to the avant-garde techniques of the twentieth century with Dada and Surrealism – ‘scratching, desaturation, illegibility, and broken materials were used to mark something askew in psychic and social registers.’⁹⁵ Kane refers to the importance of effects in experimental cinema that resembled errors and were not considered commercially viable. Techniques like jump cuts, scratching on celluloid, and showing the camera apparatus break the illusion of immediacy – rendering visible what is typically kept *invisible* or eschewed in dominant cinema.⁹⁶ According to Kane, digital art that embraces ‘error’ in a consumerist media landscape that privileges perfection and a sense of seamlessness can similarly achieve an avant-garde. What Steyerl describes as low-resolution ‘poor images’ such as reshared film clips, videos, and JPEGs on the Internet are relevant to this framework; what she calls the ‘lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution’ and the ‘debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores.⁹⁷ Significantly, Steyerl compares ‘poor images’ on the Internet (made and seen by many) to Espinosa’s vision of an ‘imperfect cinema’, where screen production and distribution have expanded to the masses and where ‘[u]sers become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images.’⁹⁸

Broadly speaking, the avant-garde employs experimentation with, disregard for, and bending of the dominant modes of aesthetics and practices in media creation, including ‘new’ media. The avant-garde is determined by the context in which media is produced and received. In his analysis of the *caméra-stylo* in the digital era, Sørenssen argues that an avant-garde can emerge once a medium has found mass participation and mainstreaming.⁹⁹ If we are to see the avant-garde as unconventional, the avant-garde on social media is what breaks from its established norms and vernaculars. The banality of taking photos of one’s lunch, for example, is a part of Instagram’s now established ‘social photography’ and visual culture, and this does not offer anything novel for the platform’s vernacular.¹⁰⁰ However, there are other ways of fixating on banality or the ‘everyday’ that

Histories of (Im)materialities,’ *International Journal for Digital Art History* 5 (2020): 3-11, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/dah.2020.5.75504>.

⁹⁵ Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 48.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, 54.

⁹⁷ Steyerl, ‘In Defense of the Poor Image,’ 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁹ Sørenssen, ‘Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc’s *Caméra-Stylo*,’ 49.

¹⁰⁰ Jurgenson, *The Social Photo*, 15.

are not as pervasive as these kinds of images. For example, artist Jeff Mermelstein's intentionally 'low-quality' smartphone micro-short videos in the streets of New York City zoom in on and glean typically unnoticeable minutia, such as people cooking in their apartments, pieces of rubbish, or the isolated hands and feet of passers-by (Figure 1.4).¹⁰¹ Significantly, close analysis of Claire Denis's profile in Chapter 3 reveals a similar approach to Instagram aesthetics. This banality and fragmentation stand out amongst the 'norm' of the platform vernacular.



Figure 1.4: Jeff Mermelstein's mobilography (Instagram, 2024).

Certainly, avant-garde aesthetics may be subsumed by dominant media in the digital era. The mainstreaming of glitch aesthetics in the 2000s (borrowed from amateurish, DIY experimentation) in music videos produced within the highly lucrative music industry is one example, as Kane points out.¹⁰² Recently, the music video directed by Sean Price Williams for 'Diet Pepsi' (2024) by pop singer and TikTok personality Addison Rae is an explicit homage to Bruce Conner's experimental short film and proto-music video *Breakaway* (1967).¹⁰³ The video subsequently drew both support and

¹⁰¹ Jeff Mermelstein (@jeffmermelstein), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/jeffmermelstein?igsh=OHp6bWl3MjJ6OHN5>.

¹⁰² See: Carolyn L. Kane, 'Compression Aesthetics: Glitch From the Avant-Garde to Kanye West,' *Invisible Culture: A Journal of Visual Culture*, no. 21 (2014), DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.8aebfcc0.

¹⁰³ Addison Rae, 'Addison Rae - Diet Pepsi (Official Video),' YouTube, 9 August 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hki6RqI-eMA&list=RDHki6RqI-eMA&start_radio=1.

criticism on Twitter/X from film enthusiasts for its repackaging of avant-garde aesthetics for mainstream appeal.¹⁰⁴

But, there are still commercially non-viable aesthetics that are not embraced in mainstream or corporate imagery. For Marks, the tactile opacity, graininess, or *fuzziness* of video produced by low-grade cameras in experimental cinema can create what she calls ‘haptic visuality’.¹⁰⁵ This eschews the clear, optimal, ‘quality’ films produced with capital in mainstream cinema. In terms of their aesthetics and production, these are ‘imperfect’ images in the vein of Espinosa. Imperfection is possible for even contemporary high-quality smartphone lenses that are limited in producing ‘professional’ aesthetics compared to more ‘cinematic’ digital cameras used in film productions. This may include images on Instagram that defy a sense of high definition and draw attention to the medium itself, by displaying their own digital *materiality*. Zooming in on objects with a smartphone camera (or other small digital camera) until they are unrecognisable or the resolution is ‘fuzzy’, owing to the smartphone camera lens’s varying limitations, draws attention to the perceived imperfection of digital photography or mobilography, even if such devices can now deploy HD and 4K vision. This practice goes against the polished (sometimes digitally smoothened or filtered), clear, and optimal quality of images like selfies posted by influencers and celebrities on the app and actively endorsed by the platform. Avant-garde aesthetics on Instagram can defy the commercially viable imagery that is explicitly consumerist through brand sponsorship, advertising, and lifestyle content like vacation retreats or beauty products that dominate the platform’s economy.¹⁰⁶

James Bridle’s counter-mapping project ‘Dronestagram’ (2012) is significant in this regard. Influenced by Marxist art historian John Berger, Bridle’s work challenges the optical hierarchies of ‘looking’ and our (in-)access to certain spaces.¹⁰⁷ ‘Dronestagram’ involved posting aerial images from Google Maps Satellite view of landscapes of

¹⁰⁴ See: Chris Osborn (@chris_osborn), ‘this is a crazy sentence to actually type out but,’ Twitter/X, 30 August 2024, https://x.com/Chris_Osborn/status/1829641775931408493. It is worth bearing in mind that avant-garde filmmakers like Andy Warhol and Conner were already interested in re-imagining mainstream iconography and pop culture in their work.

¹⁰⁵ See: Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 76.

¹⁰⁶ Examples may include imagery and video of objects and subjects considered grotesque or *unsellable* to a broad audience, from roadkill and rubbish to unappetising meals and digitally/algorithmically distorted bodies. These kinds of images reflect a twentieth-century avant-garde emphasis on haptic disgust, found objects, and refuse, evoking figures from Marcel Duchamp to Méret Oppenheim.

¹⁰⁷ See: Vavarella, ‘On Counter-Mapping and Media-Flânerie,’ in *Error, Ambiguity, and Creativity*, ed. Popat and Whatley.

recorded UK and US drone strikes on Instagram (@dronestagram) (Figure 1.5).¹⁰⁸ Their project lasted three years, using reports from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, with the aim of '[m]aking these locations just a little bit more visible, a little closer. A little more real.'¹⁰⁹ Significantly, the project combines 'drone' with 'stagram', playing on both the signifiers of 'Instagram' – a digital photography platform for lifestyle-based, personal, and even idealistic imagery – and the destructive, optical technology of the drone that has simultaneously expanded its omniscience in warfare, especially in the Middle East.¹¹⁰ By using corporate-owned technologies to create and disseminate this imagery, Bridle produced counter-aesthetics to dominant media and corporate interests.



Figure 1.5: James Bridle's project @dronestagram on Instagram.

¹⁰⁸ See: Dronestagram (@dronestagram), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/dronestagram/>. Bridle coined the term 'New Aesthetic' to refer to the increasing integration of digital technologies in the physical world.

¹⁰⁹ James Bridle, 'Dronestagram: The Drone's-Eye View,' booktwo.org, 8 November 2012, <https://booktwo.org/notebook/dronestagram-drones-eye-view/>.

¹¹⁰ Éléanore Weber's experimental documentary *There Will Be No More Night* (2020) similarly uses the roaming aerial POV of night vision targeting systems.

As another example, in resistant activist videos of protests or conflict on Instagram it is their *imperfection* (to further invoke Espinosa) and lack of posed, idealised, and commercially viable imagery and shots that disrupts the vernacular of that platform, on which sponsored influencers and celebrities are celebrated for their polished and heavily curated feeds. This video aesthetic is inherently confrontational (physically and socio-politically).¹¹¹ Activists and mobilographers in conflict zones may have to work against Instagram's algorithmic biases that prefer certain images, accounts, and faces over others. For example, campaigners have expressed frustration with Instagram's censorship of activism for Palestine.¹¹² Meanwhile, the Instagram corporation (owned by Meta) actively promotes influencers, vloggers, and entertainment-based and positive lifestyle-based content on their official @creators page.

Protest, anarchist, and guerilla aesthetics can certainly become subsumed and commercialised to become part of the wider mainstream culture in, for example, its mimicry in Hollywood cinema or major brand advertising and music videos.¹¹³ But, generally speaking, the avant-garde can be applied to those who work outside of the institutional frameworks of media industries (such as Hollywood in the case of American experimental filmmakers) and established social media economies of sponsorship and branding. These are individuals and groups who use social media to document what is not seen by the wider public or encouraged by monopolising and profit-driven media organisations, using modest camera equipment that is at hand, such as smartphones. Methods of 'guerilla projection' onto the façades of corporate and government buildings challenge media hierarchies, such as Indecline's projection of videos from Gaza onto the ArcLight cinema in Hollywood in September 2024.¹¹⁴ In this, there is a counter-hegemonic drive towards media production on grassroots terms, to produce counter-

¹¹¹ See: Robé, 'Anarchist Aesthetics and US Video Activism,' <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/RobeAnarchists/index.html>.

¹¹² See, for example: Human Rights Watch, 'Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook,' 21 December 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>; Lacey-Jade Christie, 'Instagram Censored One of these Photos but not the Pther. We Must Ask Why,' *The Guardian*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/20/instagram-censored-one-of-these-photos-but-not-the-other-we-must-ask-why>.

¹¹³ For example, a Pepsi TV ad featuring a protest and starring American model Kendall Jenner (2017); or the music video for 'No Church in the Wild' by Jay-Z, Kanye West, Frank Ocean, and The-Dream, directed by Romain Gavras (2012). See: Aguayo, 'Activist Street Tapes,' <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/AguayoProtestVideo/text.html>.

¹¹⁴ These large-scale projections encourage passers-by to photograph the installation with their own smartphones and post the image on social media. One description of the method goes as follows: 'Projections can be low-fi [sic] or hi-fi; mobile or stable. [...] Supporters on the street – or a continent away – can text, tweet, or email in their own messages to be projected in real time. [...] Seeing your own handwriting scrawled across a corporate headquarters upends the power dynamic.' See: Beautiful Trouble, 'Guerilla Projection,' <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/guerilla-projection>.

narratives to established media narratives on warfare, politics, and society by using ‘whatever-means-available’. This topic will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5 in relation to activism in Palestine.

Therefore, what Astruc means by ‘*the new avant-garde*’ in contemporary digital screen culture must be qualified by the context in which it is applied. Where certain avant-garde aesthetics might become mainstream today, other aesthetics remain largely eschewed by the dominant language of media industries. In summation, achieving *the new avant-garde* involves removal of screen production from an industrial or commercialised framework, where the line between ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ is broken down and the camera will become as liberated as the pen.

Mobilography and Mobility

Astruc signals that the future of the moving image is in mobility, as he observes the rise of smaller camera technologies like 16mm. In practice, the caméra-stylo is implicated in the camera’s flexibility, or at least liberation from the confines of a studio, large set, and cumbersome equipment. In historical terms, the appeal of *motion itself* has been a driving force in cinema’s technological development. From the proto-cinematic innovations of magic lantern shows and toys like flipbooks, the *phénakitiscopes*, zoetrope and early cinema trends like serpentine dances, to contemporary looping TikToks, GIFs, and AI-generated videos, the appeal of motion re-emerges (and remediates) again and again in screen culture.¹¹⁵ Mobility of the camera itself (and, indeed, home viewing devices) has long been a fascination for filmmakers and continuing to the present day. While the movement of performers’ bodies in early films (and even movement of spectators’ bodies) was expected, the camera itself was not as subtle and flexible. In the 1890s, Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope (viewing device) and kinetograph (camera) were boxy and cumbersome. Although the Lumière *Cinématographe* that could alternatively serve as a projector and hand-cranked camera mechanism featured a wooden tripod set-up, the equipment was not portable by modern standards and remained typically static.

¹¹⁵ As an anecdotal instance of this, cinema audiences were reportedly preoccupied with the visual rustling of leaves in the trees in the background of the Lumière Brothers’ early short *Le Repas de Bébé* (1895), ostensibly because its subtle kineticism represented cinema’s indexicality. See: Nico Baumbach, ‘Nature Caught in the Act: On the Transformation of an Idea of Art in Early Cinema,’ *Comparative Critical Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 373-383, DOI: 10.3366/E1744185409000858.

Richard Bégin points to the Lumière camera operator Alexandre Promio, ‘who was seemingly the first to express the desire to create a “mobile cinema” capable of producing the perception of a moving body, whether organic or mechanical.’¹¹⁶ Frustrated by the fact that mobile objects could be recorded only by an *immobile* camera, Promio envisaged (while in Venice riding a boat and watching the static banks of the canal recede), the tracking shot and pan as an answer to the problem of the device’s immobility.¹¹⁷ As Bégin surmises: ‘The extension of corporeal perception suggested by the manual properties of the device – its ease of handling, its (trans)portability – might thus be understood as the true promise of [cinema].’¹¹⁸ For Astruc, the true promise of cinema is similarly in its subtlety and flexibility; moving images (in and of themselves) were still merely a fairground attraction. Cinema required flexibility to become truly expressive.

Innovations in tracking shots in early cinema relied on machinery for cameras to be mounted on. Early ‘phantom ride’ films relied on trains or other vehicles to lend movement to the camera. Nanna Verhoeff argues that such films avoid revealing the mode of transportation ‘as to ensure that the spectator is transported through the screen as a ghost’ and that this method is still very popular in action cinema, for example.¹¹⁹ The sensation of being a ‘ghost’ would later be captured in Gaspar Noé’s first-person POV film *Enter the Void* (2009). City symphonies like *Man with a Movie Camera* and Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) demonstrate the use of trains and carriages for filmmaking at high-speed. In French avant-garde cinema, Man Ray’s *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (1929) presents innovative shaky shots taken from a mobile camera mounted to a quickly moving car that predate similar shots in celebrated New Wave films like Godard’s *Breathless* (1960). Since the 1970s, the Steadicam stabiliser has allowed camera operators to move smoothly with a camera by giving it independent equilibrium, without the need for a dolly track or crane. Similarly, the SnorriCam is attached to and faces the mobile actor, often used to create the effect of anxiety or disorientation.

By the 1960s, mobile cameras were used by filmmakers such as Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in ethnographic films and *cinéma vérité*, taking advantage of new equipment

¹¹⁶ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 108.

¹¹⁷ Ibid [citing: Alexandre Promio, ‘Carnet de Route,’ in *Histoire du cinématographe*, ed. Guillaume-Michel Coissac (Cinéopse/Gauthier-Villars, 1925), 197].

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 108-109.

¹¹⁹ Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens*, 41.

and synchronised sound technologies that could record life on streets and in people's homes. According to documentary scholar Bill Nichols, with 16mm and synchronous tape recorders, filmmakers had now acquired the mobility to allow them to follow subjects carrying out their everyday routines. Filmmakers could 'observe intimate or crisis-laden behaviour at a distance' or 'interact in a more directly participatory manner with their subjects', which gave rise to more observational and participatory modes of documentary, where a filmmaker's physical presence took on new and profound importance.¹²⁰ Portable cameras were also highly valued in Third Cinema practices and counter-hegemonic filmmaking in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s. Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi emphasise the importance of mobile cameras for Palestinian resistance filmmaking (as I will examine in Chapter 5).¹²¹

At the same time, portable mobile cameras were becoming more subtle and adapted to the broader consumer market. Those who were not 'filmmakers' in a professional sense could make home movies, from 8mm to video and later with digital camcorders and smartphones. Astruc's vision that cinema would relocate to the streets and homes of ordinary people has certainly materialised in home movies – still a relatively new concept at the time.¹²² As Rascaroli, Gwenda Young, and Barry Monahan outline, there is a firm connection between experimental film and the home movie, which gained prominence through filmmakers like Mekas, Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Marie Menken. They 'rejected the frameworks of professional cinema and tested the boundary between avant garde and amateurism, with a view to achieving full freedom of expression.'¹²³ Crucially, Mekas saw that the promise of cinema was similarly in its mobility and flexibility. His personal notes from 1963 propose:

It is the 8mm. movie that will save us. [...] The day is close when the 8mm. home-movie footage will be collected and appreciated as folk art, like songs and the lyric poetry that was created by the people. Blind as we are, it will take us a few more years to see it, but some people see it already. They see the beauty of the sunsets taken by a Bronx woman

¹²⁰ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 30, 159.

¹²¹ Gertz and Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema* (2008).

¹²² See, for the connections between home movies and cinéma vérité: Mark Rance, 'HOME MOVIES AND CINEMA-VERITE,' *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3/4 (1986): 95-98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20687741>.

¹²³ Rascaroli, Young, and Monahan ed., *Amateur Filmmaking*, 2.

when she passed through the Arizona desert; travelogue footage, awkward footage that will suddenly sing with an unexpected rapture.¹²⁴

It is fair to say that Mekas's observations explain in more detail what Astruc envisioned in the *caméra-stylo*. What Mekas is describing is essentially the *caméra-stylo* in non-fiction terms, encompassing the home movie, travelogue, diary film, essay film, and even the smartphone video, YouTube vlog, and so on. This deviates from what Martin has called the misappropriation of Astruc's theory to describe the 'well-financed *mise en scène*' of the feature film.¹²⁵ For Mekas, the future of cinema lay no less in smaller and more affordable devices that could move with the filmmaker and the shifting environment. Indeed, Mekas's notes from 1964 read as follows:

'Amateur' cinema is almost literally one-man creation, like painting or poetry – as opposed to the complex involvement of a large number of people in a 'professional' movie.

'Amateur' cinema has no producers: The film-maker usually is the sole author and sole producer, as opposed to the practices of the 'professional' cinema as a big business.¹²⁶

Even based on Mekas's choice of words ('*painting*', '*sole author*'), his proposal seems to expand on Astruc's sentiments, perhaps pointing to the true promise of the *caméra-stylo* that was misappropriated among critics and in film culture in favour of well-financed feature filmmaking.¹²⁷

Mekas's description points to an important distinction. Some uses of smartphones and other digital technologies align with explicitly *creative* authorship. Other uses of these screen technologies align more with the practice of merely documenting one's environment – what could be deemed 'raw' footage. But, echoing Mekas, Keep shares enthusiasm for the smartphone's mobility for non-fiction filmmaking, claiming that these portable cameras encourage more spontaneous audiovisual production, as they are always at hand to capture personal experiences, memories, events, and street life. Keep and Marsha Berry posit that smartphone filmmaking is inherently 'first-person' (a theory that

¹²⁴ Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema 1959-1971* (Collier Books, 1972), 83.

¹²⁵ Martin, 'Introduction to the "Future of Cinema",' 44.

¹²⁶ Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 140.

¹²⁷ What Scott MacDonald terms the 'avant-doc' encompasses the intersections of the avant-garde and documentary and documentary forms like the diary film or collage film, in which films by Vertov, Bruce Conner, and Jonas Mekas may usefully be placed. See: MacDonald, *Avant-Doc* (2015).

resonates with Astruc's caméra-stylo).¹²⁸ While Nichols posits that 'raw' footage (such as the Zapruder film) 'lacks any pronounced voice or perspective' and thus can't be defined as documentary in and of itself, Keep argues that the highly intimate and solitary nature of smartphone mobilography can produce a 'voice'.¹²⁹ Smartphones allow us to become both *flâneurs* and '*phoneurs*', intoxicated with life on the street. Keep even suggests a new mode of documentary – the 'evocative mode' – in the vein of Nichols's modes, to reflect this spontaneity. Similar to Nichols's original 'poetic mode' that emphasises tone, mood, and affect rather than exposition or argumentation, Keep's introduction of an 'evocative mode' can describe spontaneous smartphone mobilography that does not fit easily within the definition of documentary.¹³⁰

The ability to possess and transport cameras easily allows mobilographers to film real-world events as they are happening, and even capture significant political and social upheavals that news teams or journalists may not be on-site to document (as I will explore in Chapter 5 in relation to social media accounts like Eye on Palestine). According to Rascaroli, Young, and Monahan, from Abram Zapruder's 8mm film of the Kennedy assassination in 1963, to the Holliday tape of the Rodney King beating in 1991, to smartphone recordings of the Arab Uprisings, 'the public has come to rely substantially on amateur videomakers and activists for uncensored information from conflict zones.'¹³¹

As Bégin's theory of 'somatic images' illustrates, mobilography is often firmly enmeshed in the body of the solitary mobilographer.¹³² Significantly, the Zapruder film demonstrates what Bégin calls 'somatic images'. As Bégin explains, involuntary motion blurring present in some frames of the film made it possible to determine precisely the moment when the shots aimed at the president were fired, perceptible because of the mobilographer's (Zapruder's) neuromuscular reaction, likely caused by the sudden noise of a gunshot.¹³³ This is a 'somatic image' that captures the filmer's sensitivity to and corporeal perception of the environment as it is unfolding. Interestingly, director Alain Cavalier remarked that the Zapruder film was the greatest he had ever seen, likely

¹²⁸ See: Berry and Keep, 'Remediating Vertov: Man with a Movie Camera Phone.'

¹²⁹ Keep, 'Smartphones and Evocative Documentary,' in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry, 46 [citing: Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 146].

¹³⁰ Ibid, 42.

¹³¹ Rascaroli, et al ed., *Amateur Filmmaking*, 2-3.

¹³² Alternatively, the corporeal perception of machine vision and the machine body do not require a person to fully operate and wield the camera. This is demonstrated by Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1967) in which a mechanical arm operates a rotating camera. See, for example: David Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki: Machine Vision and the Posthuman* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹³³ Bégin, 'GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,' 107 [citing: Luis W. Alvarez, 'A Physicist Examines the Kennedy Assassination Film,' *American Journal of Physics* 44, no. 9 (1976): 813-827].

because of its connection between the body of the filmer and the handheld recording device. This is something he captures in the autobiographical documentary *Le filmeur* (2005), in which Cavalier ‘stubbornly remains as one with the camera’ where ‘the result is a raw, rough, and sometimes insignificant images.’¹³⁴ Consequently, a filmmaker like Cavalier can be said to privilege, as Bégin argues, the production of somatic images: ‘the viewer can sense the breathing of the person filming, the slight trembling of his body.’¹³⁵

Considering Bégin’s analysis, ‘somatic images’ can be found across different genres and modes of filmmaking. For example, GoPro cameras were used in the experimental ethnographic documentary *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), filmed on a fishing boat in the Atlantic, in which the chaotic motion of the sea creates a sensory experience akin to the perceptive conditions of motion sickness, while the GoPro lenses record wet, blurry, and imperfect images. Werner Herzog’s partly found footage documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005) edits together videos recorded by amateur filmmaker and activist Timothy Treadwell in the Alaskan wilderness, showing rain droplets and Treadwell’s fingers on the lens in sometimes off-centre or handheld shots, as well as the sounds of his breathing. Found-footage horror films like the *vérité*-inspired *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), that use small, mobile cameras and intentionally blur the line between the aesthetics of ‘reality’ reportage and horror, emphasise the bodily agitations of the cameraperson reacting to a hostile environment within the film’s diegesis.¹³⁶ With consumer-grade post-production technologies like Premiere Pro, it is even possible to add in artificial handheld camera shake effects that mimic such agitations.¹³⁷ Synchronised sound significantly contributes to the somatisation of such recordings, as heavy breathing, coughing, and speech can be heard from behind the camera’s lens — an element that should not be forgotten in the analysis of *audio-visual* mobilography.

A significant example of mobilography in feature-length form is the autobiographical documentary *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2016), which edits together Johnson’s spare ‘raw’ recordings from her work as a documentary

¹³⁴ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 108.

¹³⁵ Ibid [citing: Alvaraz, ‘A Physicist Examines the Kennedy Assassination Film,’ 827].

¹³⁶ On the other hand, films like the school shooter narrative *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003) and the slasher movie *In a Violent Nature* (Chris Nash, 2024) place the mobile camera behind walking characters, seemingly mimicking the forward tracking ‘long takes’ of first-person shooter videogames.

¹³⁷ See, for example: Adobe, ‘Add a Shake Effect with Premier Pro,’

<https://www.adobe.com/creativecloud/video/hub/features/shake-effect-premiere-pro.html#:~:text=In%20film%20editing%2C%20a%20shake,impact%20and%20boost%20viewer%20engagement.>

cinematographer over 25 years. The shots place the viewer at Johnson's approximate eye- or body-level. Her off-screen voice is sometimes heard from behind the camera, although there is no voice-over narration (only intertitles structured like a diary). The film's one-word title combines the mechanism of the camera with the body, much like Vertov's kino-eye and even Astruc's caméra-stylo. By centring her body and physical labour in this film, as the person wielding the camera, Johnson *de-centres* the pre-eminent role of the director in film culture. Although she is not fully visible on camera (apart from her shadow), the camera often moves suddenly with her bodily agitations such as sneezes or slippages (Figure 1.6). In one piece of footage, her subject – the philosopher Jacques Derrida – even tells Johnson to be careful while crossing a street, showing the vulnerability of camerapersons or mobilographers behind the camera (as I will discuss in Chapter 5). Imperfect, uncentred shots that may be discarded or edited in most documentaries are alternatively the focus of Johnson's personal collage film and thus her 'somatic images' are, too.



Figure 1.6: Kirsten Johnson's shadow in *Cameraperson* (Johnson, 2016).

Contemporary digital screen culture is increasingly marked by the availability of wearable cameras on the consumer market. The body-worn GoPro is associated with the thrill of extreme sports, capturing experiences such as surfing and skiing from the approximate perspective of the wearer. In a very different context, mandated policy and military bodycams can capture arrests, combat, or even death from a first-person 'POV'. Recently, police bodycam and helmet cam video has been contextualised within

documentary theory, phenomenology, and gaming to assess the ethical, behavioural, or aesthetic implications of first-person point-of-view warfare and violence.¹³⁸ Such videos are often uploaded to sites like YouTube for the ostensive purposes of spectacle and public intrigue. Federico Selvini has theorised the proliferation of helmet cameras in modern wars like the war in Ukraine as ‘first person war’ through the lens of documentary theory.¹³⁹ According to Bégin, bodycams create the effect of ‘eyes in your body’.¹⁴⁰ Owing to the often unsteady situations in which videos are filmed, bodycams produce shots that are often off-kilter and even unintentionally resemble an avant-garde aesthetic compared to typical cinematographic conventions of framing subjects.¹⁴¹ Recently, ‘smart’ glasses such as Rayban’s that capture live video have fully embraced hybridised machine vision, while raising concerns for privacy.¹⁴²

Mobility is also implicated in the use of extended reality (XR) technologies, where the user’s movement through space can alter their augmented or virtual surroundings. With mixed reality (MR), the user can interact with a virtual environment while still being able to see real objects through their headset. The MR Apple Vision Pro, launched in 2024, is marketed on the basis that one could effectively navigate city streets while wearing the headset and using applications like Google Maps seamlessly (what Apple calls ‘spatial computing’).¹⁴³ By recording the experience, MR headsets like the Vision Pro can effectively become in-built body-worn cameras. However, problems encountered between the device’s sensors and the user’s mobility have been observed.¹⁴⁴ In this sense, Apple’s MR experience exceeds Astruc’s initial expectations of mobility and personal projection, while its efficacy of immersion, comfort, affordability, and mainstream appeal are still uncertain.

¹³⁸ See: Federico Selvini, ‘First Person War: Helmet Cameras Between Testimony and Performance,’ *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies* 12, no. 1 #Ports (2022): 188-211, <https://necsus-ejms.org/first-person-war-helmet-cameras-between-testimony-and-performance/>; Bryce Clayton Newell, *Police Visibility: Privacy, Surveillance, and the False Promise of Body-Worn Cameras* (University of California Press, 2021); Caren Myers Morrison, ‘Body Camera Obscura: The Semiotics of Police Video,’ *American Criminal Law Review* 54, no. 3 (2017): 791-842, DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.2826747.

¹³⁹ Selvini, ‘First Person War,’ 188.

¹⁴⁰ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 107.

¹⁴¹ These small cameras also use HD deep-focus vision and wide-angle lenses that are like the surveillance fish-eye lens in Ring cameras and door peepholes, contributing to a sense of illicit spectatorship and discomforting proximity to subjects on camera, including civilians in distressing situations.

¹⁴² AJ Dellinger, ‘Meta is Turning its Ray-Bans into a Surveillance Machine for AI,’ *Gizmodo*, 30 April 2025, <https://gizmodo.com/meta-is-turning-its-ray-bans-into-a-surveillance-machine-for-ai-2000596395>.

¹⁴³ Apple, ‘Press Release: Apple Previews New Entertainment Experiences Launching Apple Vision Pro,’ 16 January 2024, <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2024/01/apple-previews-new-entertainment-experiences-launching-with-apple-vision-pro/>.

¹⁴⁴ Chokkattu, ‘Review: Apple Vision Pro,’ *WIRED*.

Mobile cameras may alternatively be *disembodied* from humans. Car dashcams reproduce the early ‘phantom ride’ effect, while GoPros have even been attached to pets for entertaining social media content that aims to reveal the pet’s personal ‘POV’.¹⁴⁵ This offers a non-human alternative to anthropocentric vision, where the ‘human’ element of filmmaking is diminished and traditional concepts of intentionality and authorship are upturned. Meanwhile, flying drones represent our endeavour not to be defined by ‘earth and mud’ but to ‘achieve divinity’, according to Robert Campbell, allowing aerial shots that were once only imaginable with access to expensive aircraft.¹⁴⁶ Thus, mobility is a key factor in the widespread proliferation of cameras today.

As Astruc foresaw, mobility or flexibility has become a key component of screen culture, and audiovisual media have flexibly expanded beyond the feature film production and the theatre. It is possible to see the smartphone and the ubiquitous screen devices of contemporary culture as a continuation of this promise.

Hands, Hapticity, and Bodies

The personal screens that Astruc envisions differ from the screen apparatus of traditional cinema that eschews the viewer’s physical engagement with the production or projection process. In Astruc’s foresight for emergent domestic screen formats like television and handheld cameras like 16mm, it is fair to assume that physical proximity to screen devices is an implicit, if not central, aspect of the caméra-stylo. In historical context, tactile interaction with early cinematic apparatuses was necessary for consumers in the nineteenth century. Proto-cinematic illusion toys like the flipbook required the user to place pressure with their fingers on the sequential pages to create motion. Moving images inside the kinetoscope and mutoscope were watched in a continuous loop by the viewer who physically engaged with the equipment by hand-cranking the frames at a regular pace to *move forward*. The action of the mutoscope required the viewer’s own body to be mobile and solitary while viewing through an eyepiece, thus defying what would become the stationary position of collective cinema spectatorship.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example: Cats with GoPro, YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@catswithgopro>.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Campbell, ‘Drone Film Theory: The Immanentisation of Kinocentrism,’ *Media Theory* 2, no. 2 (2018): 55, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02047596>. See, also: Elisa Serafinelli, *Theorising Drones in Visual Culture: Views from the Blue* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

Television images are to be engaged with in proximity (typically at home), manipulated by the consumer in ways that traditional cinemagoing does not afford. The advent of television presented audiences with a new form of tactile engagement with screen devices, as buttons on television sets made the picture appear almost automatically, while the remote control soon made ‘zapping’ to change channels a widespread phenomenon by the 1970s. Serge Daney coined the term ‘*zappeur*’ to refer to these newly armed audiences.¹⁴⁷ ‘Zapping’ invokes a sense of the ‘infantile, tactile fascination’ of digitality.¹⁴⁸ Seemingly taking up Astruc’s vision, Daney saw ‘zapping’ as the extension of media consumption into a personalised experience that is defiantly more democratic.¹⁴⁹ This certainly extends to the ‘click’ and ‘tap’ of using a computer device, such as a smartphone.¹⁵⁰ Coincidentally, as Mel Alexenberg points out, the word ‘digital’ is derived from the word ‘digit’ (*digitus* in Latin) for finger, as fingers are used for discrete counting; the digital age reduced ten fingers to binary code.¹⁵¹

On a symbolic level, the metaphor of the pen (*stylo*) in the *caméra-stylo* is inherently connected to the hand. In its technical construction, handwriting is generally not possible without the hand and body of the person using it. As Barry Monahan argues, ‘[t]he hand can be understood as an entity that mediates between the material (body) and the immaterial (mind). Consequently, it carries both literal and metaphorical potential.’¹⁵² It is significant, therefore, that Astruc borrows the metaphor of the pen and not the popular mechanism of the typewriter at the time. Although the typewriter requires hands for its punching mechanism, the resulting writing is stylistically (and phenomenologically) different from handwriting. Reflecting on the history of automaton inventions, such as Jaquet-Droz’s mechanical writing doll from 1774, Vivian Sobchack highlights that writing is a potent signifier of human agency and consciousness. Writing is a concrete intentional *activity* as well as an *object*:

¹⁴⁷ Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du Zappeur* (P.O.L., 1993).

¹⁴⁸ Tweedie, ‘Serge Daney, Zapper,’ 122 [citing: Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Duke University Press, 1995), 28].

¹⁴⁹ Tweedie, ‘Serge Daney, Zapper,’ 122.

¹⁵⁰ William J. Mitchell has theorised that all digital images are inherently mutable or changeable because their data can be manipulated easily by computer, like a painter using different brushstrokes and pigments. See: Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (MIT Press, 1994), 7; Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 303-304.

¹⁵¹ Mel Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 35.

¹⁵² Barry Monahan, *Hands on Film: Actants, Aesthetics, Affects* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 14.

[T]he phenomenon we call writing also sufficiently (if not necessarily) implicates an embodied and enworlded *subject* – the one who writes, and in writing, not only through labour brings some ‘thing’ into material presence and social meaning that was not there before [...]. Which is to say that writing is as much about *mattering* as it is about *meaning*. Making things matter, however, requires both a *technology* and a *technique* [original emphases].¹⁵³

Automata and now gen-AI challenge this by not having an organic *body* with which to write with. Gen-AI uncannily apes the *human* experience of intentionally creating something out of nothing. Ironically and fittingly, some AI systems have struggled with the ability to reproduce images of text, human handwriting, and human hands, becoming a subject of humour online as gen-AI became more mainstream (Figure 1.7).¹⁵⁴ This suggests that despite AI’s threat to human creativity, hands and handwriting remain ‘human’ signifiers.



Figure 1.7: a meme shared by @weirddalle with examples of AI-generated hands (Twitter/X, 2023).

¹⁵³ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 110.

¹⁵⁴ O’Meara and Murphy, ‘Aberrant AI Creations,’ 1074; Seyedali Mirjalili, ‘If AI Image Generators are so Smart, Why do they Struggle to Write and Count?’ *The Conversation*, 4 July 2023, <https://theconversation.com/if-ai-image-generators-are-so-smart-why-do-they-struggle-to-write-and-count-208485>; no context memes (@weirddalle), ‘Everyone: AI Art Will Make Designers Obsolete,’ Twitter/X, 22 January 2023, <https://x.com/weirddalle/status/1617240690290839553>.

As Sobchack explains, different writing technologies, from pencils to computer keyboards, require different forms of bodily engagement. Writing with a pen creates an intimate ‘shell’ compared to the upright experience of typing (and may be closer to the intimate ‘bubble’ of smartphone use).¹⁵⁵ Therefore, by comparing the camera to a pen, Astruc is imbuing the camera with intimacy. As Sobchack elucidates, the pen may even exceed being an extension of the hand (like a prosthesis) and instead the person may become an extension of the pen, as words flow from the mind and consciousness is fixated in the tip of the pen.¹⁵⁶ That is to say, Sobchack’s observations engender bodily significance for the caméra-stylo as a metaphor. Astruc intentionally imbues the mechanical camera with more personal flair and agency of thought by attaching it to the pen (lending itself to later interpretations of the essay film). Comparisons drawn between filmmaking and painting, writing, or sculpting imbue the camera with intentionality that defies the automatic qualities of its apparatus.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, in Sarris’s model for the auteur, the ‘signature’ he describes is metaphorically tied to the hand. While the ‘pen’ in camera-pen may be metaphorical, there is a more tangible somatic element to the caméra-stylo that warrants analysis.

In the digital era, fingers and hands are used to operate an array of screen applications, controllers, and touchscreen interfaces. Computer keyboards, mice, and touch-receptive trackpads require the user to watch the screen and move their hands simultaneously, to the point where actions become intuitive and acutely proprioceptive. The first touchscreen ‘smartphone’ marketed to consumers was arguably the Internet-connected IBM Simon phone in 1994, which did not have a camera function. Later devices included the touchscreen LG Prada in 2006, the iPhone in 2007, closely followed by Samsung models, each with in-built cameras as well as haptic feedback. Practically speaking, smartphone touchscreens necessitate the use of fingers for electronic conductivity on the surface of the screen. The sensitive touchscreen does not react to all materials, exemplified by the difficulty of wearing gloves (although touchscreen-friendly adaptations exist on the market).¹⁵⁸ The action of zooming in and out of images, for instance, requires the user to pinch or expand the screen, while scrolling requires upward-

¹⁵⁵ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 113; Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 10, 48.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 112 [citing: Daniel Chandler, ‘The Phenomenology of Writing by Hand,’ *Intelligent Tutoring Media* 3, no.2/3 (1992): 69, DOI: 10.1080/14626269209408310].

¹⁵⁷ For example, Walter Benjamin differentiates the tactile arts, such as sculpting, from cinema. See: Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. JA Underwood (Penguin Books, 2008).

¹⁵⁸ iPhone apps that were available early-on included prank apps that created the illusion that the screen had cracked, drawing attention to the device’s own materiality and fragility.

downward sweeping motion. As Zylinska points out, ‘still’ images become *motile* as we can pinch, zoom in on, share, Airdrop, send, slide, alter, and drag them on our screens.¹⁵⁹

The functioning of these new devices is firmly embedded in human contact, and this has been actively promoted in advertising campaigns by tech companies like Apple and Nintendo. As David Parisi notes in *Archaeologies of Touch* (2018), these companies promote the narrative that ‘the sense of touch has been forgotten, left behind, and marginalised by a media interfacing schematic overdependent on audiovisual technologies’; campaigns such as Nintendo’s ‘Touching is Good’ slogan ‘sought to foster a desire in consumers to reconnect with their lost sense of touch.’¹⁶⁰ This utopian vision defies the popular view that digital devices are purely engaged with in an intangible cyberspace. The touchscreen offers something that *the* (traditional) cinema cannot. Alexandra Schneider posits that although the smartphone is a screening and filming apparatus derived from cinematic technologies, the touchscreen signifies a return to pre-cinematic tactility (i.e., before motion picture’s ability to visually capture material reality). The touchscreen is a hybrid object that enables a handcrafting function, while the digital objects on the screen are immaterial: ‘the iPhone marks a shift from the knob to the switch to the screen as a semantically loaded technical skin.’¹⁶¹ When the iPhone was first launched, there were even concerns over its hygiene, as oily finger smudges were visible on the darkened screen after use, signalling the undeniability of our somatic traces on these screens (the ‘*sin of the smudge*’ as Sarah Plotnick puts it).¹⁶² Indeed, the popularity of touchscreen interfaces in daily life is apparent, now that self-service tills in supermarkets, ticket machines in train stations, watches, controls on car dashboards, and even some disposable Bluetooth-connected nicotine vape pens possess interactive screens rather than knobs and buttons.¹⁶³ Thus, Astruc’s vision of multiple screens in multiple formats now heavily implicates human touch.¹⁶⁴ As the following chapters will highlight, *writing* and articulating one’s physicality with touchscreen smartphone technology has

¹⁵⁹ See: Zylinska, *The Perception Machine*, 120-121 [citing: Ingrid Hoelzl and Rémi Marie, *Softimage: Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image* (Intellect, 2015)].

¹⁶⁰ David Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 9-10, 265.

¹⁶¹ Alexandra Schneider, ‘The iPhone as an Object of Knowledge,’ in *Moving Data: the iPhone and the Future of Media*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vondereau (Columbia University Press, 2012), 55-58.

¹⁶² Sarah Plotnick, ‘You Must Touch It: Touchscreen Hygiene and the Sin of the Smudge,’ *Convergence* 29, no. 2 (2023): 536-551, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221118625>. See, also, for discussion on touchscreens and the body: Michele White, *Touch Screen Theory: Digital Devices and Feelings* (MIT Press, 2022).

¹⁶³ See, for example: Notopoulos, ‘Could a Dumb Phone That’s Also a Vape Help Break My iPhone Addiction?’ *Business Insider*; Drew Gooden, ‘Cars Are Getting Dumber,’ YouTube, 25 April 2024, <https://youtu.be/S7GU9IDpq8?si=dteyCMtWZMpJQyYH>.

¹⁶⁴ See, also: Sarah Pink, et al, ‘Tactile Digital Ethnography: Researching Mobile Media Through the Hand,’ *Mobile Media & Communication* 4, no. 2 (2015): 237-251, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157915619958>.

become a part of the re-imagined caméra-stylo for auteur filmmakers and ordinary social media users alike.

Despite opening ‘intangible’ online spaces for consumers, digital media devices are often engaged with in ways that are explicitly material. In terms of the *production* of electronic devices like smartphones, their processing involves the hands of low-paid and overworked labour. The mining of cobalt, required for battery devices like smartphones, has resulted in the mass suffering of workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁶⁵ Foxconn factory workers in China have lost their fingertips producing mobile phones and computers. Jack Linchuan Qiu surmises that these injuries are a cruel reminder of the iPhone’s material dimension that depends on physical labour.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, once these devices are obsolete or unwanted, the negative impact of e-waste (including micro-plastics) on human bodies again ironically points to the indispensable materiality of digital commodities.¹⁶⁷

The ‘old’ technology of the handheld pen in Astruc’s metaphor has even been remediated by tech companies. Styluses (related to the word ‘*stylo*’) are specially designed to stimulate touchscreens. The stylus was popularised by handheld devices like the Nintendo DS game console launched in 2004. In the DS flagship game *Nintendogs*, for example, players could caress, wash, and play with their virtual pets using their stylus. The Oculus Quill developed by Meta is a software used in virtual reality headset experiences to draw, paint, and animate virtual objects and worlds, using the keys on hand controls (Figure 1.8). Drawing and designing in detail on tablets is made possible by innovations like the Apple Pencil, which features pressure sensitivity (Figure 1.9). Jean Burgess remarks how Apple, from the beginning with its 1984 Macintosh ad, has promoted this ‘deliberate construction of human-centred and populist usability’ that supports non-conformist and ‘distinctly Romantic construction of creativity.’¹⁶⁸ In this, we might recognise the foundational element of the caméra-stylo, which is bound up in the Romantic idealism of individuality and *writer-li-ness*. With extended reality devices, there is an increasing effort by tech companies to fuse the body and technology so that experiences of screen media are seamless and even frame-less (a 360-degree experience

¹⁶⁵ Al Jazeera, ‘Mining of Cobalt, Copper in DRC Leading to Human Rights Abuses: Report,’ 12 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/12/mining-of-cobalt-copper-in-drc-leading-to-human-rights-abuses-report>.

¹⁶⁶ Jack Linchuan Qiu, ‘Network Labour: Beyond the Shadow of Foxconn,’ *Studying Mobile Media*, ed. Hjorth, Burgess, and Richardson, 173, 186.

¹⁶⁷ See: Matt Simon, ‘The World’s E-Waste Has Reached a Crisis Point,’ *WIRED*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/e-waste-recycling-cant-keep-up-precious-metals/>.

¹⁶⁸ Burgess, ‘The iPhone Moment,’ in *Studying Mobile Media*, 34-35.

that does not require a fixed location such as the theatre). At the same time, AI development companies are ostensibly minimising the need for human hands and bodies to make art works and perform labour in creative projects.¹⁶⁹



Figure 1.8: Oculus Quill demonstration by Oculus Story Studio (Sundance, 2016).

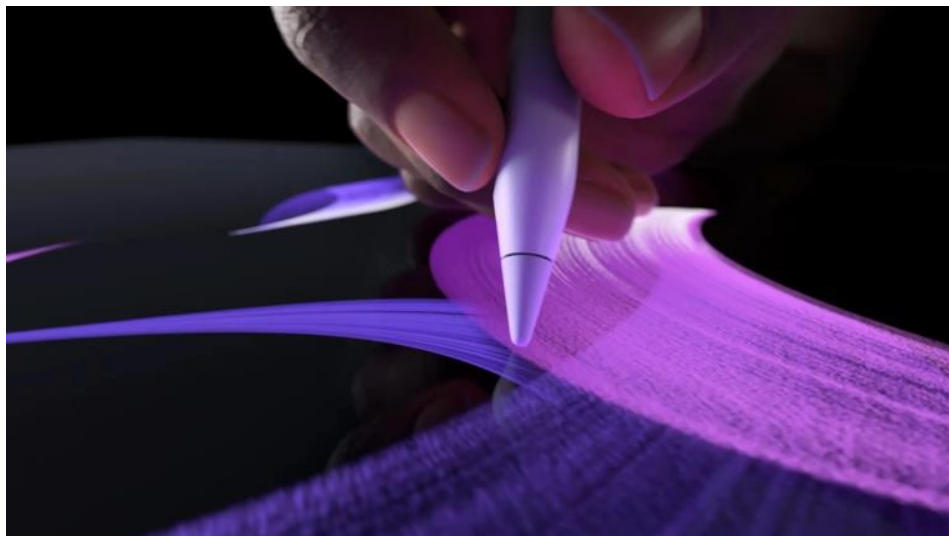


Figure 1.9: the Apple Pencil (Apple, 2024).

Popular discourses draw attention to the negative impact of *being online*. The popular phrase ‘*chronically online*’ implies a condition of being so acclimated to Internet culture that one’s existence is irrevocably connected to the online experience, even to the

¹⁶⁹ See: Gene Maddaus, ‘SAG-AFTRA Strike: AI Fears Mount for Background Actors,’ *Variety*, 25 July 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/biz/news/sag-aftra-background-actors-artificial-intelligence-1235673432/>.

point of bodily exhaustion.¹⁷⁰ As an apparent response to the problem of ‘doomscrolling’, the order to go ‘touch grass’ (often used as insult) suggests a need for someone to leave the toxic online space to engage in a tactile way with nature, and thus get a better grasp on reality.¹⁷¹ Alternatively, ‘lurkers’ – often applied with a negative connotation – are a group that form the majority of Internet users, who passively observe rather than make their presence visible by posting regularly.¹⁷²

New media scholar danah boyd argues, ‘unlike everyday embodiment, there is no digital corporeality without articulation. One cannot simply “be” online; one must make one’s presence visible through explicit and structured actions.’¹⁷³ Regular posting may include Instagram Story updates, videos, selfies, vlogs, and other explicitly *active* forms of expressing one’s presence in Internet spaces. Selfies are an entire genre of photography essentially fixated on one’s own face, either using a front-facing camera setting or taking a photo in a mirror and thus displaying the device and the hand holding it. Although selfies predate social media, the selfie has become an emblematic component of social media culture, starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Selfies have become a widespread form of self-portraiture to the point where, in conjunction with augmented reality filters, selfies have shaped how users view their own bodies.¹⁷⁴ The front-facing camera setting is also a feature of smartphone mobilography. Users may speak to the camera as they move through space.

For example, Twitch streamers (and ‘camgirls’ before them) and YouTube vloggers like Emma Chamberlain, who has over 12 million subscribers, centre their own bodies and faces (and voice) in their long-form homemade videos.¹⁷⁵ This re-imagines Astruc’s vision of ordinary people outside of the film industry *writing their confessions* with a Paillard camera in their own bedrooms and in the streets (Figure 1.10).¹⁷⁶ Rascaroli

¹⁷⁰ Julie Fenwick, ‘We’re All Chronically Online Now,’ Vice, 1 February 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgybvbk/were-all-chronically-online-now>.

¹⁷¹ See, for example: *Dazed*, ‘Elon Musk’s Daughter Responds to His Anti-Trans Comments: “Touch grass”,’ 26 July 2024, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/63234/1/elon-musk-daughter-vivian-jenna-wilson-responds-transphobic-comments>.

¹⁷² Na Sun, Patrick Pei-Luen Rau, and Liang Ma, ‘Understanding Lurkers in Online Communities: A Literature Review,’ *Computers in Human Behaviour* 38 (September 2014): 110-117, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.05.022>.

¹⁷³ danah boyd, ‘None of This is Real: Identity and Participation in Friendster,’ in *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*, ed. J. Karaganis (Social Science Research Council, 2007), 145.

¹⁷⁴ See: Tate Ryan-Mosley, ‘Beauty Filters Are Changing the Way Young Girls See Themselves,’ *MIT Technology Review*, 2 April 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/04/02/1021635/beauty-filters-young-girls-augmented-reality-social-media/>.

¹⁷⁵ See, for example: emma chamberlain, ‘attachment issues,’ YouTube, 16 March 2025, <https://youtu.be/0XFNIWT0nSU?si=qyScAQ39NyFUnczT>.

¹⁷⁶ Likewise, makeup tutorial videos and ‘daily routines’ typically show creators facing the camera while applying beauty products with their hands and brushes. ASMR and Mukbang (food-bingeing) videos emphasise the creator’s tactile engagement with objects on screen and are designed to elicit pleasurable sensorial reactions in the viewer. Like

has argued that social media platforms and Internet technologies give prominence to subjectivity as ‘veritable markers of the contemporary globalized culture and society.’ She writes:

Gestures of autobiography, autoethnography, and self-representation are to be found right at the heart of artistic practices, products of popular culture, and online forms of expression and communication. [...] the tendency to foreground the self is today ubiquitous, and is simultaneously facilitated and fashioned by new digital technologies and platforms.¹⁷⁷

Coincidentally, that strong sense of the ‘self’ is both foregrounded in social media culture *and* in auteurism, where a personal voice and subjectivity is ascribed to directors as authors (perhaps especially those who represent themselves in their work). This is particularly relevant to the auteurs’ Instagram profiles I will examine in Chapter 3. The importance of self-representation for marginalised groups will also be discussed in Chapter 5.

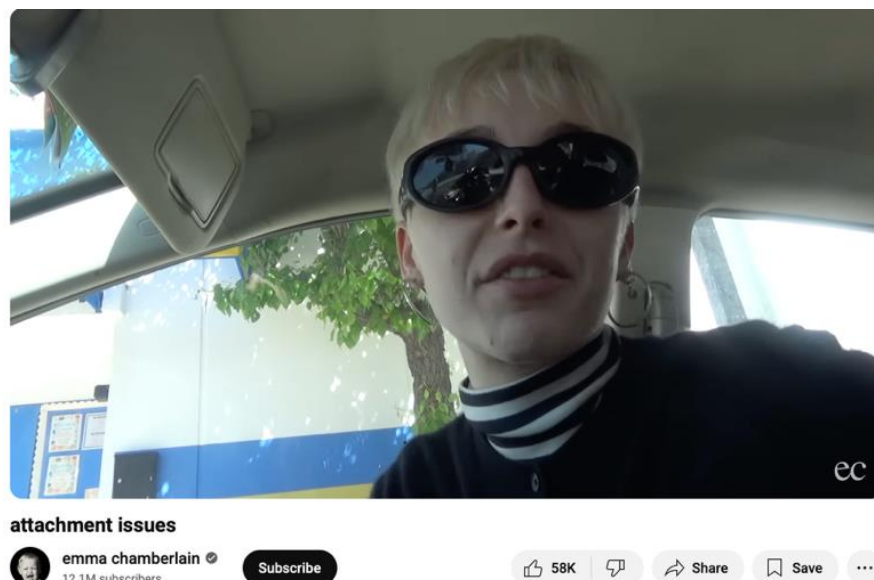


Figure 1.10: Emma Chamberlain's YouTube channel (2025).

early cinematic spectacles, these videos are very frontal and address the viewer's sensorial pleasure, while emphasising colour and textures (as well as tingling and crunching sounds). See, also: O'Meara, 'Touchscreens, Tactility' (2019); Haddas Schlusell and Paul Frosh, 'The Taste of Video: Facebook Videos as Multi-Sensory Experiences,' *Convergence* 29, no. 4 (2023): 980-996, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565231179958>.

¹⁷⁷ Rascaroli, 'Working at Home: *Tarnation*, Amateur Authorship, and Self-Inscription in the Digital Age,' in *Amateur Filmmaking*, ed. Rascaroli, Young, and Monahan, 229-230.

Just as hands are required for production – from manufacturing to screen production – hands have long been a special point of aesthetic interest for artists of the twentieth century and the present day. Fragmented hands have featured as the subject of avant-garde photography like Man Ray’s early twentieth century camera-less rayographs to the popular Instagram account of New York-based photographer Hannah La Follette Ryan (@subwayhands). Inspired by early twentieth century avant-garde photography and cinema, La Follette Ryan’s candid photographs of people’s hands on the subway (taken with her iPhone that allows her to be ‘sneaky and subtle’) capture a sense of a shifting but synchronous metropolitan life, especially when viewed as a grid (Figure 1.11).¹⁷⁸

Human hands perform important sensory and motor functions, including labour and creative endeavours like photography and writing. Thus, hands are potent signifiers of human agency, feeling, and subjectivity (even authorship). In their ability to signify, Monahan surmises that there is a ‘degree of resemblance in how both the camera and the hand “point”’. Perhaps the camera might be better anthropomorphised as a hand, rather than an eye, as Vertov’s *Kino-eye* suggests, or a pen, as Astruc’s *caméra-stylo* would hold.¹⁷⁹ However, owing to the semiotic (and phenomenological) connection between the pen and the hand, Astruc’s metaphor is still very much entwined with the hand. And while the *eye* was an organ of key importance for Vertov’s theory of cinema, hands are also evidently a feature of his work, especially to emphasise production in a modern society (including cinema itself). In *Man with a Movie Camera*, multiple fast-cut shots depict hands working with machinery of different functions – hands cranking a camera, the hands of workers using sewing machines, and editor Yelizaveta Svilova editing film strips (peeling back the skin of the film’s own production, in a sense).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ La Follette Ryan quoted in: Milk (@milk), Story highlights, Instagram, 28 September 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/milk?igsh=MWwxeXMxMnlnY3Fycg==>.

¹⁷⁹ Monahan, *Hands on Film*, 141.

¹⁸⁰ Harun Farocki’s short film *The Expression of Hands* (1997) examines and reproduces the language of hands from film history (a technique akin to the videographic essay). See, for more discussion: Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard* (2015), 251-252. The 4-minute newsreel *Hands* (1934), Pathé-produced for the American Work Projects Administration, is a montage of cropped hands engaged in various tasks to distil the greater economic and social value of hands, from writing to working with tools.

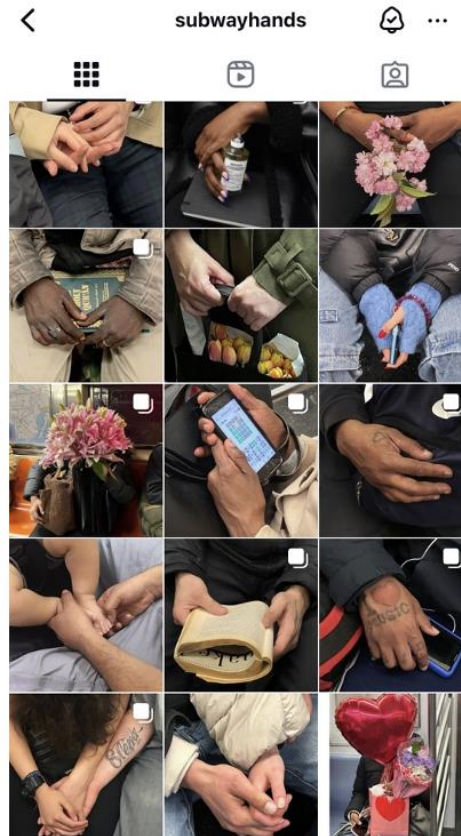


Figure 1.11: Hannah La Follette-Ryan’s project @subwayhands on Instagram.

A recurring focus on hands in Varda’s and Godard’s respective works is likely not coincidental, given their shared interest in exploring writer-li-ness, which has already been established in this chapter as an embodied, intentional activity tied to Astruc’s metaphor. In *The Gleaners and I*, Varda fixates in close-up on one ageing hand with her camcorder held in the other. In one shot, Varda forms a circular shape like an eye, periscope, or even ‘iris’ technique from early cinema with her hand while moving in a vehicle (Figure 1.12). This form of cinécriture functions as a kind of corps-stylo, according to Lydia Tuan, ‘writing with and through the body.’¹⁸¹ In a fitting nod to this, Varda is briefly seen wielding a small camcorder in a moving van later in the road documentary *Faces Places* (2017), and scenes show her creative partner JR photographing her ageing hands.

¹⁸¹ Tuan, ‘The Texture of Time,’ (2023).



Figure 1.12: Agnès Varda's hand in *The Gleaners and I* (Varda, 2000).

The visibility of smartphones in characters' hands in *Adieu au Langage* indicates Godard's interest in representing contemporary digital technologies as material objects that we handle. In the first part of the film, 'Nature', which follows a conversation between characters about Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and the meaning of the thumb, a woman's thumb swipes over Google Images of Solzhenitsyn on her iPhone 4. Two men at a bookstall similarly swipe on their touchscreen smartphones. The actions of swiping and pinching have given the thumb (an evolutionary biological advantage for humans) a new 'natural' function.¹⁸² Godard explores this further in the micro-short *Official Spot of the 22nd Ji.hlava IDFF* (2018), where his own hand is now seen swiping rapidly over images on an iPhone (Figure 1.13).¹⁸³

¹⁸² See: Kaleem Aftab, 'The Weird World of Jean-Luc Godard: As His New Movie Goodbye to Language 3D Launches, Two of its Stars Reveal a Bizarre Routine,' *The Independent*, 12 December 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/the-weird-world-of-jeanluc-godard-as-his-new-movie-goodbye-to-language-3d-launches-two-of-its-stars-reveal-a-bizarre-routine-9920166.html>.

¹⁸³ See: Mezinárodní festival dokumentárních filmů Ji.hlava, 'JEAN-LUC GODARD / Official Spot of the 22nd Ji.hlava IDFF/ EN subtitles,' YouTube, 2 July 2018, https://youtu.be/V_Sg31zxf38?feature=shared.



Figure 1.13: Jean-Luc Godard's hands in *Official Spot of the 22nd ...* (2018).

Godard's collage essay film *Le Livre d'Image/The Image Book* (2018) also shows the ageing hands of the filmmaker. The opening shot is an image of a pointing hand (Figure 1.14). Godard's hands join together spools of film on a Steenbeck editing table (Figure 1.14). In voice-over, Godard says: 'Man's true condition: to think with hands.' This statement is followed by an image of Alberto Giacometti's bronze sculpture 'The Hand' (1947) and a clip of the famous eye-slicing scene in *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929), which features both a hand and an eye (arguably the foremost body parts in the theorisation of cinema). Thus, Godard explicitly connects human hands and the production of images. *The Image Book* is an exercise in *thinking with hands* ('*penser avec les mains*'), as Martine Beugnet and Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli describe.¹⁸⁴ By thinking his way *digitally*, Godard is also thinking with his hands, which certainly contradicts the popular view that what is 'digital' cannot also be 'material'. This practice resonates with Catherine Grant's description of videographic criticism (of which Godard was an early innovator) as a form of 'material thinking' whereby the author *touches the film object* virtually and digitally with 'eye/ear-hand-touch pad-virtual object/screen coordination and interaction.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Martine Beugnet and Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, 'The Image Book: Or *Penser avec les Mains*,' *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 23 (2022): 10-31.

¹⁸⁵ Catherine Grant, 'The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking,' *Aniki* 1, no. 1 (2014): 52, <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23400746.v1>.



Figure 1.14: hands in *The Image Book* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2018).

Godard's posthumously released short documentary *Exposé du film annonce du film 'Scénario'* (2024) draws attention to the manual aspect of assembling images. Fabrice Aragno films Godard in one take with a small handheld camera in his home studio in Rolle in 2021. Godard presents a notebook showing preliminary images and text (like a storyboard) for an unmade feature, *Scénario*. Aragno predominantly frames Godard's hands and his notebook, with Godard's iPhone charging by his side (Figure 1.15).¹⁸⁶ As Godard narrates the foreseen layout of chapters in the form of pasted images and handwritten text, he notices a missing page. Aragno urgently scans and prints pages to re-arrange them under Godard's direction. In this moment of unforeseen error, Aragno's camera framing is off-kilter. This is indicative of informal mobilography, seen previously in *Adieu*.¹⁸⁷ In an obstructed close-up of the printer-scanner working in real-

¹⁸⁶ Scholars have noted the prevalence of hands in films by other notable directors. See, for example: Garry Bettinson, 'The Lumet Touch,' *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 1, no. 10 (2022): 1-10, <https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/171149/>; Barker, *The Tactile Eye* (2009), 1-2; Brian Price, 'The End of Transcendence, the Mourning of Crime: Bresson's Hands,' *Studies in French Cinema* 2, no. 3 (2002): 127-134, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.2.3.127>; Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (2007), 3-5.

¹⁸⁷ *Adieu* incorporates small digital mobile cameras (GoPros and Fuji and Sony camcorders). According to Aragno, he used old Leica lenses on the Canon cameras because the Canon lenses are 'too perfect'. See: Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, 'Godard in Wall-eyed 3D,' 16:9 filmtidsskrift, 11 May 2016, <https://www.16-9.dk/2016/05/godard-in-wall-eyed-3d/>

time, the Vertovian machine production of Godard's work is revealed in this very intimate film.



Figure 1.15: Jean-Luc Godard's hands in *Exposé du film ...* (Godard, 2024).

And while hands may be the *intended* focus for artists in their work, hands are also inherently implicated in the more accidental or less controlled conditions of mobilography. In mobilography, the mobilographer's outstretched hands are often visible, as well as the somatic motion of breathing, walking, etc. This is a result of its intimate mode of production. The smartphone camera can also be front-facing, acting as a kind of mirror-screen-camera. Thus, a mobilographer can record their environment and themselves simultaneously, making visible (and audible) their embodied presence in a space. The body of the filmmaker and the film's production is often disguised in conventional film narratives to encourage full immersion or verisimilitude (although numerous filmmakers and films have defied this). In most film narratives, the production, the crew (labour), and the apparatus remain offscreen (not within the camera's field of vision).¹⁸⁸ But where smartphone mobilography is concerned, the embodied presence of the creator (individual mobilographer) and the means of *production* are often not disguised.¹⁸⁹ The mobilographer's reflection may be seen in, say, a selfie set-up in a

[citing: Cécile Mella, 'In Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard: Filmmaker Extraordinaire,' video interview, Canon Professional Network, 2015, link inaccessible].

¹⁸⁸ Notable examples include *The Holy Mountain* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1973) and *Tout va bien* (Godard and Gorin, 1972).

¹⁸⁹ A similar visibility of the means of production might be seen in 'performative' documentaries, which typically don't disguise the production process, sometimes showing production challenges like failed interviews or legal issues.

mirror or the mobilographer's body may even cast a shadow on surfaces as in *Cameraperson* or *The Gleaners and I*. The body or hands *behind* the camera can also be *in front* of it by *enveloping* a small, thin, or flat camera apparatus like a smartphone. Because smartphones and other small cameras are held so intimately, 'somatic images' can be produced and the mobilographer's hands and fingers may appear in the camera's FOV on purpose or accidentally. This may provide a kind of avant-garde aesthetic intentionally or unintentionally. This is especially apparent in filmed confrontational scenarios such as war or protest, as I will discuss in Chapter 5.

What this means for the *caméra-stylo* is that tactility and physicality are enmeshed in its envisioning in the social media era through the many handheld and touchscreen technologies – especially the smartphone – and the social media platforms that facilitate the expression of subjectivity. As selfies and other examples demonstrate, social media is not totally bereft of *bodiliness*. Hapticity is both a condition of contemporary digital screen culture and the *caméra-stylo* or, more broadly, Astruc's vision of future screen media.

Conclusion: The Intersections of Authorship, the Avant-Garde, Mobility, and Hapticity

The historical and contemporary context of the *caméra-stylo* implicates aspects from authorship to the avant-garde to mobile camera devices and hapticity. Having considered the position of auteurism and, more broadly, authorship in contemporary digital screen culture, the *caméra-stylo* warrants further analysis through this lens. As technologies such as smartphones, social media applications, and artificial intelligence continue to develop, the traditional notion of authorship (including film auteurism) appears to be re-imagined and challenged simultaneously. Although auteurism is an important component of the *caméra-stylo* in its initial construction as well as its subsequent interpretation, there is more to the *caméra-stylo* than a select few famous names and their feature film productions. There are alternative considerations for more 'ordinary' means of wielding the *caméra-stylo* outside of an industrial framework. And, as this chapter has established, these include 'imperfect' modes of production.

Recording apparatuses may also be visible, such as filmmaker Nick Broomfield's mobile sound equipment. See: Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 187.

However, it would be too ambitious to claim that the caméra-stylo has been universalised or democratised via smartphones and Internet platforms, as those very technological infrastructures are limited in their openness and malleability. Working with smartphones and Internet platforms to articulate a ‘voice’ or creative vision requires engagement with the affordances of platforms and corporate decision-making. This includes monopolising platforms with their own regulations for users, from censorship and copyright to advertising, and so on. The articulation of a caméra-stylo is possible through smartphones and Internet-based social media platforms, but this is not to say that the caméra-stylo is equally accessible to everyone, or that increased media production does not rule out morally objectional content.

Historical references and contemporary issues considered, it is sufficient to say that how the caméra-stylo can bring about a ‘new avant-garde’ is determined by the context in which dominant audiovisual media is produced, whether it is cinema or social media platforms. This thesis does not share Astruc’s idealism in that I do not claim *there is always an avant-garde when something new happens*. Indeed, not all case studies and examples of media discussed in the following chapters will be necessarily representative of the avant-garde, despite being temporally *new* or recent. However, there is something of the avant-garde in the promise of mobilography, which is the ability to counteract dominant media aesthetically or by expressing one’s personal vision or bodily presence in the world with the means of production available and outside of an industrial framework. For several filmmakers like Varda and Marker, the future of cinema elaborates on a mode of production that is freewheeling and even achieved by humble means. Reflecting on Mekas, Bégin concludes:

[Mobilography] give[s] image to the experience of a world that is both gripping and grasped by the body of the filmer. And whether or not this body is that of a ‘filmmaker’ properly speaking matters little in the end, as long as what is recorded in images is the trace of an environment as it is seen, at the precise moment it provokes, agitates and stimulates.¹⁹⁰

Mobilographers, as described here, may not always be considered ‘filmmakers’ or professional videographers, properly speaking, but can possess the means to make

¹⁹⁰ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 109.

evocative works that enlist agency and self-expression. Going forward, this vision will inform much of the findings of this thesis.

The following chapters will elaborate further on the core aspects of the *caméra-stylo* outlined here, and develop a vision of how Astruc's metaphor has been re-imagined today. In Chapter 2, I will analyse the insertion of smartphone mobilography and social media into auteur films, emphasising the haptic aesthetics of smartphones and characters as mobilographers, including 'content creators'. In Chapter 3, I will discuss well-known contemporary auteurs who have adopted social media (especially Instagram) and smartphones to produce and disseminate personal creative media, including selfies and off-the-cuff mobilography, beyond the structures of the film industry. In Chapter 4, my focus will shift to ordinary Internet users, media practitioners, cinephiles, and fans in the digital age who have responded co-creatively to cinema by remixing, remaking, or mimicking the work of well-known filmmakers, with an extensive case study on Wes Anderson fan media. My focus in the final chapter will move away from auteurs and auteurism entirely and examine confrontational non-fiction mobilography by civilians in upheaval or conflict. I especially analyse its significance in Palestine, where smartphones and social media platforms offer an 'imperfect' tool of expression for ordinary mobilographers making their embodied presence visible online (including 'somatic images'), while navigating the Israeli government's omnipotent digital warfare technologies and disinformation, as well as platform censorship.

The realisation of Astruc's *caméra-stylo* in the social media era is two-fold. It implicates *both* auteurs and ordinary social media users who are engaging with flexible and intimate digital technologies in creative or co-creative ways, for the purposes of self-representation, or to document their environments as they unfold.

2. Smartphone and Social Media Aesthetics in Contemporary Auteur Cinema

[T]he medium is reaching beyond its own conventional boundaries and into ways of expression attributed to the other arts: cinema is displaying its passion for expanding ‘beyond’ cinema. The allure of such an inter-media ‘trespassing’ may prove threatening and disruptive.

– Ágnes Pethő (2011).¹

As Alexandre Astruc envisioned of future screen media, projection apparatuses are pervasive and exist beyond the film theatre, while cameras are more subtle than ever in an expanded audiovisual landscape that has especially developed since the rise of the Internet. These new technologies are what Marxist theorist Raymond Williams referred to as ‘formal innovation[s]’ or ‘new emergent cultural forms and practices [that] may arise that challenge or disrupt the cultural dominant.’² As cinema competes financially with these new creative technologies, it also integrates them at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition. From computer-generated imagery to streaming platforms, cinema has effectively integrated new media into its industrial mechanisms and form. Today, films made entirely with smartphones can be exhibited at film festivals on large theatre screens and feature films continue to be viewed on small, handheld smartphone screens, including via arthouse streaming apps like Mubi. As Kata Szita has observed, smartphones borrow a great deal from cinema and post-cinematic screens, but implicate continuous interaction between the viewer’s body and the screen interface (that might be compared to early cinema technologies).³ Ágnes Pethő, above, has already theorised (what she personifies as) cinema’s intermedial ‘passion’ for expanding beyond its media boundaries and into other art forms. And just as new audiovisual technologies like Instagram and TikTok show their ‘borrowing’ or remediation of cinema in formal and semantic terms, cinema is also ‘trespassing’ onto the aesthetics of social media and smartphones.

¹ Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality*, 6.

² Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Fontana Press, 1981), 200 [cited in: Trevor Boffone, *Social Media in Musical Theatre* (Methuen, 2024), 6].

³ Szita, ‘Smartphone Cinematics,’ (2019).

Over the past two decades, a broad range of films and television have been integrating smartphones and digital technologies as components of their narratives (as plot devices and communication technologies used by characters) and formal style. As consumers engage daily with new technologies in the real world, it is not surprising that films and filmmakers reflect these developments *back* to us as audiences in the form of aesthetic ‘borrowing’ to authentically portray contemporary life. Writing in 2020, Alberto Hermida comments that the increased visibility of new screen technologies in everyday life (especially smartphone and desktop screens) creates what he calls ‘aesthetic transfers’ or ‘formal loans’ in the visual language of fiction and non-fiction film and television.⁴ Over the past two decades or so, a range of older, established auteurs and younger filmmakers have responded to the influx of new technologies by incorporating smartphone and social media aesthetics in their films. This is especially significant; as personified representatives of cinema itself (even if auteur theory has its detractors), auteurs are often used as a kind of litmus test within film discourses to determine cinema’s future amidst new and uncertain technologies.⁵ Auteurs’ thoughts on cinema, coming from their practical expertise, are highly valued in film culture.⁶ Comments from directors are often prompted in discourses on the digital age. In 2007, the same year Apple launched its first iPhone, David Lynch stated his frustration with audiences watching films on their ‘telephone’, suggesting an uneasiness among established filmmakers with smartphones and a cinephilic nostalgia for the theatre.⁷ Other auteurs like Céline Sciamma and Radu Jude have recently voiced their enthusiasm for TikTok and new screen technologies as the expansion of cinematic language to ordinary people, with Jude applying this openness to his film practice.⁸

Considering that Astruc’s theory of the *caméra-stylo* is partly rooted in the study of auteurs and partly envisages the expansion of screen culture beyond the film industry, my focus in this chapter is on examples of smartphone and social media aesthetics in auteur cinema. Returning to the methodological framework in this thesis, it is first important to establish a rationale for the application of the concept of the *caméra-stylo* to

⁴ See: Hermida, ‘The Aesthetic of New Media,’ in *Handbook of Research on Transmedia Storytelling*, ed. Hernández-Santaolalla and Barrientos-Bueno.

⁵ See, also: Cannes interviews with directors on the topic of television in: Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 1-2.

⁶ Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, xv.

⁷ See: Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 21 [citing: Brittney Gilbert, ‘David Lynch on iPhone,’ YouTube, 4 January 2008, 0:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKilroiCvZ0>. Originally DVD bonus material for *Inland Empire* (2007)].

⁸ Cantó, ‘Céline Sciamma,’ *El Español*; Cici Peng, ‘Radu Jude: “Professional filmmakers are in crisis – which is good”,’ *Dazed*, 6 March 2024, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/62126/1/radu-jude-do-not-expect-too-much-from-the-end-of-the-world-film-interview>.

the material under discussion and any issues this may raise. A point to consider is the industrial context in which the feature narrative films discussed here were produced. While many auteur films made in this manner (i.e. collaborative, well-financed narrative films) have been commonly assessed by critics such as Andrew Sarris as demonstrations of the ‘caméra-stylo’, I argue that this mode of filmmaking diverges somewhat from Astruc’s initial observations of personal, mobile filmmaking with the first-person ‘I’. With the aim to re-imagine and even recover the concept of the caméra-stylo, I am interested in examining cases where auteur films formally incorporate the aesthetics of more ‘ordinary’ audiovisual culture. Considering the ‘crisis of cinema’ debates of the past two decades, these films represent a significant rupture (and suture) between what we call ‘cinema’ and what we distinguish as the audiovisual culture of non-professional mobilographers. In a sense, these films represent a symbolic ‘return’ for auteurs to the initial focus of Astruc’s concept. It is clear from a wide range of films that the mobile and informal style of smartphone filmmaking and the social and aesthetic vernaculars of social media platforms have become appealing forms of expression for auteurs. These are films in which smartphones and social media are both *represented* in the diegesis or mise en scène as tools (or props) used by characters (or performers) and, importantly, *formally integrated* into the very language of the film texts themselves. This second aspect especially highlights an intermedial audiovisual relationship between cinema and smartphones/social media.

This chapter firstly historicises the integration of consumer screen technologies in cinema as narrative and formal elements, mainly as filming and communication devices for characters. From 8mm and 16mm cameras to videotapes and camcorder video, the ‘aesthetic transfers’ from these technologies to dominant narrative cinema can be coded in these films as personal and nostalgic (especially the home movie format), as a nefarious obsession for disturbed mobilographers, or as surveillance devices. At the formal level, these technologies often blur the distinction between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking aesthetics, owing to their codification in screen culture with the home movie, *cinéma vérité*, or at the level of production (i.e., their mode of production is made visible or haptic). This section will establish essential themes and technological features that recur in the following case study examples.

The following case studies demonstrate three broad approaches to smartphone and social media aesthetics taken by auteurs in their recent films. The first case study section will discuss three films that narratively and formally incorporate smartphones for the

purposes of inter-character surveillance and/or as disturbing video material. I will firstly examine Michael Haneke's dark family drama *Happy End* (2017), in which a young girl's smartphone surveillance highlights contemporary detachment from filming morbid events. In Todd Field's drama *Tár* (2022), a fictional high-profile composer's reputation is damaged by smartphone surveillance. In Bertrand Bonello's science-fiction romance *The Beast* (2023), the disturbing socio-politics of real-world alt-right Internet culture is manifested in a character's self-videoing. These are films in which fictional characters within the film diegesis are mobilographers, and in the case of *The Beast*, this handling of smartphones even extends to the viewer via the use of a QR (Quick Response) code.

The second case study section will discuss three films that incorporate the raw footage of non-professional mobilographers: Spike Lee's historical crime drama *BlacKkKlansman* (2017); Claire Denis's dark romance film *Both Sides of the Blade* (2022); and Andrea Arnold's magical realist coming-of-age film *Bird* (2024). While these films are different in their genre and style, they each share the element of externally sourced mobilography filmed by a non-professional. In Lee's and Denis's films, the raw footage shows tumultuous events pre-recorded (before the film's production) by unnamed mobilographers, demonstrating what Richard Bégin calls the 'somatic images' of spontaneous mobilography in confrontational environments. In Arnold's film, it's the young protagonist (and actress) who has filmed poetic videos of her environment with her smartphone during production.

The third case study section will analyse films where authorship and auteurism itself are explored and interrogated via smartphones and the rise of new social media 'creators'. Jude's recent Romanian satire *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World* (2023) sees authorship and traditional notions of 'quality' (and indeed 'cinema') challenged by lead actress Ilinca Manolache's mobilography using a Snapchat augmented reality filter that is incorporated into the film's aesthetic. Auteurism itself is also challenged in the queer social satire *Rotting in the Sun* (2023), by Chilean director and visual artist Sebastián Silva, where Silva plays a semi-fictional version of himself confronted with social media culture.

While smartphones and social media are normal features of many films today, these particular examples were selected for several reasons. These directors range in age, gender, and artistic background and range geographically (from the UK, Western Europe, eastern Europe, the US, and Latin America). Directors like Haneke and Lee have previously incorporated amateur cameras in their films and have significantly extended

their formal preoccupations into the social media era. Meanwhile, directors like Denis and Arnold are incorporating smartphone mobilography for the first time in their work, thus representing new creative departures. Intersecting features such as amateur mobilography and the figure of the ‘content creator’ will be made apparent across these case studies. Certain films and filmmakers are discussed more in-depth, based on the extent to which smartphones play a prominent role in their film(s). These films are also selected on the basis of linkages between chapters in this thesis, such as the case study on Denis’s own social media profile in the next chapter and discussion of amateur mobilography in Chapter 5.

Regardless of the formal approach taken by directors, these smartphone and social media aesthetics in contemporary cinema reflect a broader screen culture in which ordinary mobilographers have access to mobile and ever-present recording devices to document their environments. What emerges in these films is an intimate and haptic aesthetic that foregrounds the handheld, mobile, and spontaneous mode of production that mobilography entails. Certain films entirely or partly frame this new screen culture in a foreboding and negative context for their characters, while other examples demonstrate the liberating (co-)creative affordances of smartphones and social media for those outside of the film industry and perhaps equally for auteurs themselves.

Personal Screen Technologies in Cinema: An Overview

In 1948, Astruc envisioned that television and 16mm promised the relocation of cinema to the home.⁹ As mobile and personal consumer screen technologies expanded to the middle classes by the 1960s, television and home moviemaking indeed became a much more ‘ordinary’ aspect of everyday life. Personal screens and mobile cameras have long been an aesthetic feature of ‘dominant’ cinema, seemingly in parallel with innovations in society more broadly. Emergent technologies were reflected in films like *All that Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), where a television set gifted to widow Cary (Jane Wyman) by her children presents a foreboding bourgeois commodity for her *solitary* spectatorship. Films that explore television as a mass medium include *Ici et ailleurs/Here and Elsewhere* (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1970), which features a French family watching television news broadcasts in the comfort of their living room, observing

⁹ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

Palestinian resistance fighters from afar. A new-found (or return to) tactility with screen media was dramatized to a sensual extent in David Cronenberg's body horror film *Videodrome* (1983), where Debbie Harry's mouth on the television screen becomes an undulating, breathing hybrid. The same year, Godard's *Prénom Carmen* (1983) similarly sees Joseph (Jacques Bonaffé) caress a television screen filled with static (which seems to anticipate the caressing of smartphone touchscreens in Godard's later films) (Figure 2.1). Meanwhile, in *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), the television set assumes a supernatural quality.



Figure 2.1: television static in *Prénom Carmen* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1983).

Analogue mobilography has been creatively incorporated into several notable film narratives from the 1960s onwards. In the British thriller *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960) a serial killer's portable 16mm camera has a profoundly scopophilic function when he films his female victims through his eyepiece – seemingly a dual perversion of Dziga Vertov's 'kino-eye' and Astruc's 'camera-pen' (turned 'camera-knife').¹⁰ The New Hollywood era *vérité*-style political drama *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969) follows a TV news cameraman with a handheld 16mm camera, who coldly documents gruesome car crashes and violent clashes for a Chicago news channel (discussed in Chapter 5).

¹⁰ Brian De Palma's *vérité*-style comedy *Hi, Mom!* (1970) sees Robert De Niro play a peeping tom and pornographic filmmaker who secretly records his neighbour.

Wexler's prescient film pre-dates the ubiquitous cameras of the social media era by decades and the more recent Hollywood thriller *Nightcrawler* (Dan Gilroy, 2014), about an unhinged freelance videographer who sells his exclusive footage of morbid events to news channels. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the found footage horror film *Cannibal Holocaust* inserts the shaky, *vérité*-style 16mm footage recorded by a fictional film crew in the Amazon. Krzysztof Kieślowski's Polish tragicomedy *Camera Buff* (1979) sees a father and amateur home moviemaker, madly obsessed with filming with his 8mm camera, develop creatively to the point where he becomes an artist in the public eye, and it destroys his family life. In Kieślowski's film, the initial mass consumerist appeal of the 8mm camera (for making home movies of private domestic life) is seemingly corrupted by cinephilia and cinema as public 'art'.¹¹ In these films, the ability to film freely becomes a morbidly creative obsession for protagonists and the camera acts a mediating (and perhaps distancing) lens through which life is viewed. Significantly, these narratives each present male characters as the wielders of cameras, and thus obsessive (and even auteuristic) filmmaking is gendered as male, perhaps reflecting biases in the film industry itself.

The insertion of 8mm films in feature filmmaking is especially apparent in the mimicry of the home movie aesthetic. For example, *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984) contains short excerpts of Super 8 footage from a family day out at the beach, filmed by protagonist Travis's (Harry Dean Stanton) brother Walt (Dean Stockwell) of Travis's now estranged wife Jane (Nastassja Kinski) and their son. Walt projects the film for Travis, and thus the home movie is intradiegetic. Owing to the mobility and formal features of Super 8 cameras, the look of the footage is visibly different from DOP Robby Müller's dominant style of cinematography in the film (which consists of notable wide, static shots of the Texas landscape). The silent 8mm footage features rapid manual zooming likely achieved with the action of hand-turning a knob (or depending on the camera model). The images are jerky and 'imperfect' with framing askew. The frayed, 'squiggly' edges of the film strip are also visible (Figure 2.2).¹²

¹¹ It is worth noting that the film's Polish title *Amator* translates as 'amateur' and the film's theatrical release poster features a camera lens bursting from a man's face, exceeding the anatomical machine vision of Vertov's 'kino-eye'.

¹² The nostalgic and aesthetic aspects of the footage have spawned multiple fan-edits on YouTube. See: Cosmic Radiation, 'Beach House - Myth,' YouTube, 7 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfBmizHxJec>.



Figure 2.2: Super8 film in *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984).

This intradiegetic film in *Paris, Texas* is clearly signalled as a *memory*. The insertion of a ‘home movie’ in narrative cinema may trigger in the spectator what Jaimie Baron describes as the ‘archive effect’, as the film-within-the-film (‘then’) exists in a different temporal register to the film’s primary diegetic temporality (‘now’), watched by the characters (and audience) as a documentation of the past. In this context, 8mm film conveys a sense of ‘*pastness*’ or *the* past because of the common association between the often ‘imperfect’ aesthetics of 8mm and home movies that ordinary consumers produce to record their own families with the intention of archiving these images as memories.¹³ Because 8mm cameras are handled close to the body of the mobilographer, the effect is intimate and intrinsically ‘bodily’. The mode of production of 8mm is made visible by the jerking images and their imperfections, producing what Bégin calls ‘somatic images’.¹⁴ While avant-garde filmmakers like Jonas Mekas and Marie Menken worked dedicatedly in the handheld home movie format, this format is unusual as the dominant aesthetic in feature filmmaking – even art cinema. The dominant language of narrative cinema generally eschews the visibility and physicality of the non-diegetic cameraperson or the materiality of the film apparatus to achieve diegetic verisimilitude. 8mm is a format that is coded as *personal* rather than industrial. In film narratives, this personal mode of production is often assigned to diegetic characters who are also home moviemakers. As for *who* the actual bodies were – whether members of the cast, Müller, or Wenders

¹³ See: Jaimie Baron, ‘The Experimental Film Remake and the Digital Archive Effect: A Movie by Jen Proctor and Man with a Movie Camera: The Global Remake,’ *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 53, no. 2 (2012): 481, DOI: 10.2307/41850984.

¹⁴ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ (2016).

himself in the case of *Paris, Texas* – does not matter so much as the aesthetic codification that this film-within-the-film is *personal* and *intimate*.¹⁵

One basic realisation of Astruc's vision was the rise of the television set and – by extension – the remote control and VHS. A key difference between video and analogue home movie formats like 8mm is video's ability to record for much longer in single takes and its proximity to the look of CCTV footage (which once commonly used video tapes rather than digital systems). Video tapes feature as prominent plot devices, physical objects, and aesthetic features in notable films from the 1990s. An eerie videotape (slowed down and paused) serves as evidence for police in the Laura Palmer case in *Twin Peaks*. And later, in Lynch's surrealist neo-noir film *Lost Highway* (1997), illicitly recorded VHS tapes are sent anonymously to a couple's home with threatening connotations. *Caché/Hidden* (Haneke, 2005) similarly sees a bourgeois couple tormented by anonymous tape recordings of their home shot in a surveillance style, but in the context of postcolonial apathy in modern France. These kinds of films creatively treat home viewing technologies (Astruc's vision of home projection apparatuses) as politically charged, threatening, or foreboding objects for the fate of their characters. In these two films, to be filmed is to be personally violated, and specifically by a personal consumer-grade camera. An intimate, private setting is disrupted by a stranger's use of a video camera.

The physicality of tapes as *tactile* objects (and, by extension, production props) that can be mailed, personally *handed* to someone, or stowed away is an important factor in their dissemination and handling as 'old' media and catalysts within the plot. A key example is the horror film *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its spin-offs, which play with the physicality and isolation of home spectatorship among consumers (in the original film, whoever watches the cursed tape dies after seven days). Digital video lacks this overt physicality and is malleable as mutable data that can be uploaded, reshared, tweaked, and leaked to potentially millions of viewers instantly. Thus, the 'threat' of videotapes may be somewhat lessened now, considering this greater contemporary threat.

Haneke's creative interest in representing camera surveillance precedes the rise of smartphones and social media. In *Benny's Video* (1992), the teenage protagonist Benny (Arno Frisch) is an obsessive mobilographer and avid renter of violent action movies,

¹⁵ A similar effect can be seen in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991) and *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), and more recently the opening titles of the series *Succession* (HBO, 2018-2023), where 8mm aesthetics are used to convey possibly fabricated 'memories' or the 'past'.

whose bedroom is fitted with high-tech surveillance video monitors and cameras financed by his wealthy parents. The film notably opens with Benny's home video of a real pig being slaughtered with a captive bolt gun while on a family holiday. Benny pauses and rewinds the tape so that the pig 'comes back to life' via technology.¹⁶ Catherine Wheatley notes the televisual 'snow' as the tape comes to an end, with the video's rewinding being the element that reveals it to be intradiegetic (being watched and manipulated by someone).¹⁷ Benny's ability to manipulate video is indicative of what Serge Daney called the newly armed '*zappeur*' at home with their remote control.¹⁸ Benny's ability to 'kill' and 'revive' also echoes director Federico Fellini's view in the 1980s that the remote control acts like a 'firing squad that deletes faces and words' and was a sign of the audience's lowered attention span – a phenomenon extended today with streaming services that cater towards audience's distracted screen use.¹⁹ In a scene that parallels the opening, Benny kills a teenage girl in his bedroom with the same captive bolt gun while recording the murder (off screen) and the aftermath with his static camera. Benny's parents attempt to cover up his crime, but Benny has illicitly recorded them discussing their plans. Some videos shot by Benny are static long takes that verge on the snuff film (and seem to foreshadow Haneke's *Caché*). Other examples are no different from typical home movies in their content, such as Benny's handheld videos of a house party or holidays.²⁰ This duality suggests that Benny's passion for filmmaking can be quite ordinary, highlighting the unnerving banality and detachment of his more sadistic impulses.

The use of mobile phones for surveillance in film and television narratives precedes the major expansion of social media platforms as we know them today. The popular series *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-2012) about an elite group of New York teenagers was created before the release of the iPhone and the rise of major platforms like

¹⁶ This echoes a similar sequence with a cow in Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye* (1924), which demonstrated to audiences early-on the affordances of cinematic editing to 'turn back time'.

¹⁷ Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (Berghahn Books, 2009), 61.

¹⁸ See: Tweedie, 'Serge Daney, Zapper,' (2016).

¹⁹ See: Ralph Jones, "'Not Second Screen Enough': Is Netflix Deliberately Dumbing Down TV So People Can Watch While Scrolling?' *The Guardian*, 17 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2025/jan/17/not-second-screen-enough-is-netflix-deliberately-dumbing-down-tv-so-people-can-watch-while-scrolling>; Federico Fellini quoted in: oksimoronko, 'Federico Fellini – Don't Interrupt an Emotion,' YouTube, 27 April 2020, 0:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1NmsEUqf0I>; see, also: Matilde Nardelli, 'Outside Television: Federico Fellini On Exposure and Attention in the Age of Abundance,' *Screen* 65, 1 (Spring 2024): 25-46, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjae005>.

²⁰ Haneke's film contains multiple screen formats, including TV news coverage of war, violent action movies on VHS, and finally CCTV footage in the police station – each conveying a sense that all aspects of life (and death) are now filmed. See: Susana Viegas, 'Death Images in Michael Haneke's Films,' *Philosophies* 9, no. 5 (2024): 1-10, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9050155>.

Instagram. Characters are often punished or blackmailed by compromising images and video footage recorded by enemies and bystanders on mobile phones and camcorders, under the eyes of an anonymous admin of the eponymous gossip blog website.²¹

Significantly, teenagers represented in the show are the early adopters of mobile technologies, using the Internet to their advantage and governing the social hegemony of an increasingly panoptical and technologically mediated society, where having cameras and screens *at-hand* can have detrimental effects.²² This theme appears in several films discussed in this chapter, as the integration of smartphones as surveillance devices tends to serve as a catalyst for darkly toned drama and an unnerving aesthetic.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, the emergence of digital camcorders on the market was seen in the low-budget found footage horror film *The Blair Witch Project*, as well as low-budget American independent ‘mumblecore’ films like *Yeast* (Mary Bronstein, 2008) and *Kissing on the Mouth* (Joe Swanberg, 2005), where Swanberg and the cast served as the only crew.²³ As ‘mumblecore’ filmmakers embraced cheap consumer technologies that were modern at the time, critics characterised these films for their bad sound quality, while the images produced in the early films, especially, were often ‘imperfect’.²⁴ In recent years, there has been a minor resurgence in the use and appearance of ‘low-grade’ digital camcorders in contemporary media.²⁵ As noted in Chapter 1, this may be tied to a broader trend of ‘analogue nostalgia’ albeit for devices that are *digital* but lo-fi in comparison to smartphones and modern 4K cameras.

In this vein, Charlotte Wells’s partly autobiographical drama *Aftersun* (2022) sees 11-year-old Sophie (Frankie Corio) on summer holiday with her father (Paul Mescal) in the late 1990s, during which Sophie films with a small MiniDV camera. In one scene, a layering effect is created when Sophie records her father on the balcony and uses a cable to simultaneously transmit the video images live on the TV screen in their hotel room, while a mirror shows Sophie with the camera in hand (Figure 2.3). The video is

²¹ See: Julie Beck, ‘Gossip Girl’s Prophetic Relationship With Technology,’ *The Atlantic*, 6 October, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/three-words-eight-letters/542172/>.

²² *Gossip Girl* seems to predict real-life social media accounts like the anonymous gossip Instagram account Deux Moi (@deuxmoi) and celebrity ‘stan’ accounts that function in much the same way by publishing exclusive images and stories about famous people.

²³ The shoestring-budget independent film *Four Eyed Monsters* (Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, 2005) was also filmed with a MiniDV and innovatively utilised online distribution, becoming the first feature film to be released on YouTube.

²⁴ See: Nessa Johnston, ‘Theorizing “Bad” Sound: What Puts the “Mumble” into Mumblecore?’ *The Velvet Light Trap* 74, no. 1 (2014): 67-79, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/553705>.

²⁵ For example, the promotional and behind-the-scenes materials, including a documentary, for pop singer Charli XCX’s homemade DIY album made during the COVID-19 pandemic, show the singer filming her life in isolation with a camcorder. See: Jake Fittipaldi, ‘Enjoying Your Brat Summer? You Need to Send it Off with Charli XCX’s Must-See Documentary,’ *Collider*, 25 August 2024, <https://collider.com/charli-xcx-documentary-alone-together/>.

imperfect, as ‘fuzzy’ pixels create a meshwork of speckles on the screen. While the small camera used in Wells’s film is *digital*, time has elapsed to such a point where older digital cameras are now considered ‘retro’. The film’s historicization of the MiniDV conveys a sense of post-digital nostalgia for a pre-smartphone past and glitchy low-quality images that defy the polished look of now familiar images on social media platforms. *Aftersun* may also be considered a reflexive film *about filmmaking*, as this young filmmaker-coming-of-age documents her environment intimately and inquisitively, wielding Astruc’s envisioned camera-pen.



Figure 2.3: MiniDV footage in *Aftersun* (Charlotte Wells, 2022).

The 2010s saw the high-profile use of the iPhone as the primary camera apparatus in theatrically released films. Notably, Sally Potter’s experimental satire *Rage* (2009) was the first feature film to be released on mobile phones, and its central framing of actors supports the vertical format of smartphone spectatorship.²⁶ For the independent comedy-drama *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), shot on an iPhone 5S, Baker and cinematographer Radium Cheung used apps, adaptive anamorphic lenses, and a special Steadicam model to shoot more ‘cinematically’ and in free-flowing movements to follow the film’s precarious protagonists who spend much of the film on the move. Reminiscent of the lo-fi aesthetics

²⁶ It is worth noting the integration of video mobilography in the final scenes of *Orlando* (Potter, 1992) in which a young girl poetically films her natural surroundings and her mother played by Tilda Swinton. Thus, Potter adapts and extends the theme of women’s agency and authorial expression from Virginia Woolf’s original novel to include the authorship of filmmaking. Potter is also highly active on Instagram. See: Sally Potter (@sallypotter), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/sallypotter?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

of Dogme-95, *Tangerine* had a small budget of \$100k and required less than a month of shooting. Baker also edited the film himself on Final Cut Pro and DaVinci Resolve, which are relatively accessible to ordinary consumers.²⁷ Similarly shot on an iPhone 7 Plus, *Unsane* (Steven Soderbergh, 2018) portrays a victim of stalking confined to a psychiatric institution against her will (Figure 2.4). The formal features of the small-sized smartphone lens with harsh lighting adjustment and a wide angle field of vision creates distortion in close-ups of faces especially (like a fish-eye lens), which appropriately conveys constriction and instability.²⁸



Figure 2.4: smartphone lens distortion in *Unsane* (Steven Soderbergh, 2018).

‘Screenlife’ films are one significant example of narrative cinema’s aesthetic borrowing of digital technologies.²⁹ Much like desktop documentaries (examined in Chapter 4), screenlife films use the screen apparatus of the desktop itself as the entire ‘mise en scène’, so to speak. Minchol Cha and Sanghoon Lee use the term ‘computational mise-en-interface’ to refer to desktop cinema, including desktop documentaries.³⁰ What is

²⁷ Mekado Murphy, ‘Sean Baker Talks “Tangerine,” and Making a Movie With an iPhone,’ *The New York Times*, 5 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/06/movies/sean-baker-talks-tangerine-and-making-a-movie-with-an-iphone.html>.

²⁸ Danny Boyle’s zombie sequel *28 Years Later* (2025) was also shot on multiple iPhones.

²⁹ It is worth noting Sofia Coppola’s crime film *The Bling Ring* (2013) as a film where screenlife aesthetics are partly incorporated. A desktop view of the teen characters’ profiles (that resemble Facebook’s interface) are integrated formally in the film during several montages. The teenagers also use gossip sites and satellite imagery to find the homes of Hollywood celebrities to break into.

³⁰ Minchol Cha and Sanghoon Lee, ‘Desktop Documentary and Database Narrative,’ *The Journal of the Convergence on Culture Technology* 4, no. 3 (2018): 75, <https://koreascience.or.kr/article/JAKO201828458533635.page>.

‘put in place’ by the filmmaker(s) and performers on screen also functions as an interactive interface both intradiegetically for the characters and extra-diegetically at the level of production. Characters interact with each other primarily or exclusively through video communication platforms like Skype or by typing out messages on social media in real time. The screenlife films *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014), *Searching* (Aneesh Chaganty, 2018), and *Profile* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2018), each produced by Bekmambetov, are perhaps the best-known examples. Crucially, these films *aestheticize* and are *about* surveillance. In the supernatural horror film *Unfriended*, a teenager who died by suicide, after being publicly humiliated by a secretly filmed online video of her drunk at a party, haunts her friends over Skype, and we see them killed one-by-one. In the thriller *Searching*, a man tries to find his missing daughter through her digital paper trail; while the thriller *Profile* sees an undercover journalist use Facebook and Skype to romantically connect with an ISIS recruiter (Figure 2.5).



Figure 2.5: a Skype call in *Profile* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2018).

Because of the format, long takes of extended periods of silence, moments of glitching, screen navigation, typing, and the sounds of the desktop are incorporated into its form. This technique bolsters feelings of anxiety, suspense, and cyber surveillance in an age of increasingly technologized warfare and Western media discourses on terrorism. Its essentially *haptic* mode of production may also contribute to a sense of unease, as the audience is privy to the characters’ bodily experiences on the interface. Hermida argues

that the critical success of screenlife films ‘lies in the extent to which the audience identify with the characters, plus a certain feeling of voyeurism that they experience while watching these films.’³¹ However, the screenlife film has not taken off as a mainstream style in horror or thriller cinema. It remains a somewhat experimental mode of production that narrativizes and reflexively formalises the possession of personal home screen devices.

Social media cultures are often dramatised in satires, social critiques, and dystopia fiction. Media that satirise influencer culture and Internet celebrities include the notable *Black Mirror* episode ‘Nosedive’ (Netflix, 2016), about a dystopic pastel-coloured society in which ‘likes’ on an Instagram-like platform determine all citizens’ economic status in a very material sense (everyone has essentially become an ‘influencer’ in this social system). The dark comedy *Ingrid Goes West* (Matt Spicer, 2017) sees an obsessive and mentally disturbed follower, Ingrid (Aubrey Plaza), befriend a popular influencer under a false identity, leading to Ingrid taking extreme lengths to achieve her desired lifestyle. *Sweat* (Magnus Von Horn, 2020), follows a fitness influencer coping with intense fame and loneliness. An influencer protagonist features in the social satire *Triangle of Sadness* (Ruben Östlund, 2022). These examples explore parasocial relationships with Internet influencers and the performance of the ‘self’ online. Smartphones feature prevalently as screens in these films *and* as key plot devices that represent obsessive entrapment for characters.

As well as borrowing from cinema and post-cinematic screens, smartphones also still function as telephones. The formalisation of telephone communication in films like *Paris, Texas* has notably been theorised by David Thomson as an ultimately intimate technology.³² A film like *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) formally plays on this intimacy by using split-screen to bring the two leads on the telephone ‘closer’ together in frame.³³ As per Marshall McLuhan’s definition of ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ media, a classic telephone (‘cool’) requires more participation and vocal feedback from the user to fill in the blanks of a conversation, while traditional cinema-going (‘hot’) requires the viewer to perceive the artist’s *complete* creation.³⁴ The smartphone problematically converges the

³¹ Hermida, ‘The Aesthetic of New Media,’ 10.

³² David Thomson, ‘Telephones,’ *Film Comment* 20, issue 4 (1984): 24-32.

³³ See, also: Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (Oxford Academic, 2008).

³⁴ See: Marshall McLuhan, ‘Media Hot and Cold,’ in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Gingko Press Inc., 2013). This view is challenged by Noël Carroll’s concept of the ‘creative audience’ (see Chapter 4) and indeed other theories of film reception and audience participation.

‘hot’ and ‘cool’ identities of both technologies.³⁵ Smartphones are not only used for phone calls but are also used (perhaps primarily for some users) as interactive screens and cameras. Smartphones can be engaged with silently because of their touchscreen functionality. As Francesco Casetti has noted, smartphone screen use is like being in a solitary ‘bubble’.³⁶ Whereas telephone calls can be blocked (and vocalised) by film performers in a wide or medium shot, for example, sending texts or DMs requires more detailed visualisation in close-up on the screen.

If setting their film narratives in contemporary society, filmmakers must decide how to formalise these ubiquitous, personal devices (or marginalise them altogether). Variations of conveying text communication in films and TV can be seen in Tony Zhou’s video essay ‘A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet on Film’ (2014).³⁷ Sarah Atkinson’s more recent video essay ‘Smartphone Cinematics’ (2021) explores in-depth the different ways smartphones are integrated into narrative cinema (films made *on, for, about, and with* smartphones).³⁸ Filmmakers may choose to use close-ups on the screens of smartphones to show messages, photos, and social media interfaces. For example, the supernatural thriller *Personal Shopper* (Olivier Assayas, 2013) shows close-ups of iPhone messages being typed, sent, and received in tense real time and cuts back and forth to shots of the protagonist anxiously on her phone. As a way of making the visual language of smartphone communication more dynamic, techniques of digitally superimposing message bubbles in the corner or side of the frame of a live action *mise en scène* free up the camera to film characters or wider spaces simultaneously, as seen in *Emily in Paris* (Netflix, 2020-present) (Figure 2.6). As Hermida notes, ‘notifications, text frames, profile images, emoticons, etc., appear at any time and in any place, accompanying digital users while on the move.’ These graphics ‘invade’ real spaces, creating a ‘dialogue between both “visual surfaces”’.³⁹

³⁵ Lynch’s derogatory use of the word ‘telephone’ to refer to the iPhone in 2007 points to McLuhan’s distinction. By referring to the smartphone as a ‘telephone’, Lynch is degrading its *cinematic* status.

³⁶ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 10, 48.

³⁷ Tony Zhou, ‘A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet on Film,’ Vimeo, 15 August 2014, <https://vimeo.com/tonyzhou/internet?share=copy>.

³⁸ Sarah Atkinson, ‘Smartphone Cinematics,’ *Frames Cinema Journal*, issue 18 (2021), <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/FCJ/article/view/2261/1704>; Sarah Atkinson, ‘Smartphone Cinematics,’ Vimeo, 21 June 2021, <https://vimeo.com/565486598>.

³⁹ Hermida, ‘The Aesthetic of New Media,’ 4.

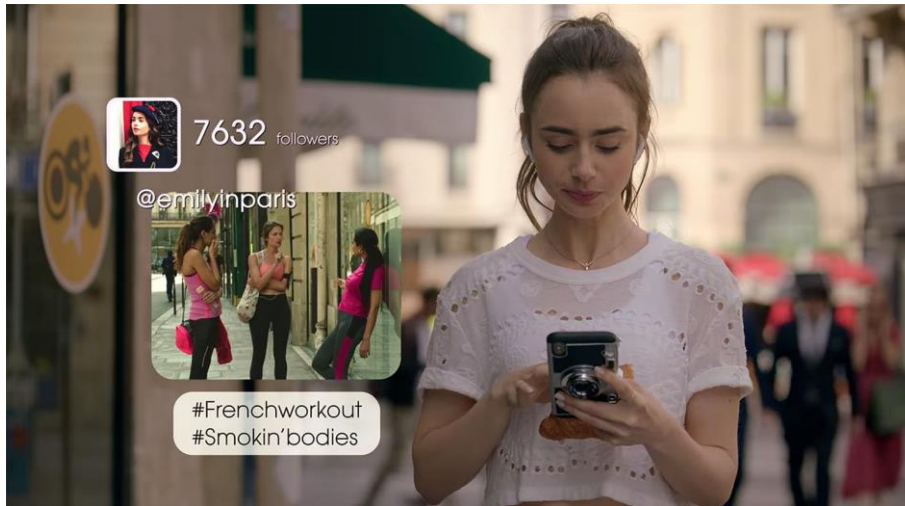


Figure 2.6: an example of superimposed social media graphics in *Emily in Paris* (Netflix, 2020-present).

These ‘invading’ superimposed graphics were well-received by critics as efficient innovations in the series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) and *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-2017) at the time. Michael Hogan, writing for *The Guardian* in 2023, criticises more recent TV shows where overlaid messages are too small to decipher if (ironically) watching them on a small screen.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the series *Succession* seems to encourage audiences at home to pause and zoom in on shots in order to read messages and images on characters’ phone screens.⁴¹ Phone calls between characters in films have also been adapted for contemporary technologies. For example, Pedro Almodóvar has incorporated Bluetooth-connected Apple Air pods into his films, where his characters can freely walk around their apartments or outside and speak hands-free. Almodóvar’s short film *The Human Voice* (2020), adapted from Jean Cocteau’s one-person play from 1930, was filmed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Significantly, Almodóvar replaced the central prop of the telephone from Cocteau’s play with Air pods worn by Tilda Swinton’s character, which re-situates the play’s theme of loneliness in a present-day culture of fractured communication and isolation (Figure 2.7).

⁴⁰ Michael Hogan, ‘From Starstruck to The Bear: Why Are Text Messages on TV so Impossible to Read?’ *The Guardian*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/sep/13/from-starstruck-to-the-bear-why-are-text-messages-on-tv-so-impossible-to-read>.

⁴¹ The Screen Bliss (@thescreenbliss), ‘Fans Zoomed in on Phone Screens in Succession (and it’s Hilarious),’ Instagram, 11 June 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DKxR1oYRGYx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.



Figure 2.7: Air pods in *The Human Voice* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2020).

Filmmakers may avoid representing new technologies altogether in their films. For example, Aki Kaurismäki has largely obfuscated digital technologies in his contemporary narratives, having his characters use landline telephones and listen to the radio rather than scroll on phones. Will Menaker and Matt Christman note that some well-known contemporary filmmakers like Robert Eggers happen to be setting their recent films in the pre-smartphone past, and point to smartphones as the cause.⁴² Recently, Eggers stated his intense dislike of filming any contemporary or mechanical technologies.⁴³ However, it is certainly not true that *all* contemporary filmmakers are hesitant to show or formalise digital devices in their films. And there are other personal and collaborative impulses that guide filmmakers to choose their films' settings.

One challenge posed by integrating social media into films are the practical limitations of tweaking interfaces to perform exactly as the director wishes. In this case, some film productions design close imitations of popular apps like Snapchat and Facebook, as in the case of *Tár* or *Happy End*, but crucially remove any recognisable logos, ads, copyrighted materials, or other undesirable media objects that are dictated by algorithms and in-built features. This allows filmmakers more control over their 'mise en scène', so to speak. The insertion of a smartphone video or interface in a film may be signalled by changes in aspect ratio, the 'look' of an interactive interface with its icons and symbols, an amateurish quality (in which lighting, colour, or sound may not be

⁴² Will Menaker quoted in: Chapo Trap House, 'Valhalla Whining,' episode 624, YouTube, 2 May 2022, 47:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkH49VNTp0E>. Christman even goes as far as saying: 'we have made ourselves unfilmable, even though all we do all day is film each other.'

⁴³ See: Matt Schimkowitz, 'Robert Eggers Sickened by the Idea of Photographing Cars, Cellphones,' AV Club, 26 January 2025, <https://www.avclub.com/robert-eggers-cellphones-cars-contemporary-film>.

optimal or professionally adjusted), or the shift from the film's dominant cinematographic style to a more personal and explicitly handheld mode of production.

So far, this chapter has outlined the broader historical overview of personal screen technologies in cinema. Regardless of the formal technique applied by filmmakers, the use of smartphones and other new screen technologies by characters in films – or indeed real, ordinary users in everyday life – is essentially intimate, mobile, and haptic. As Camille Baker, Max Schleser, and Kasia Molga argued in 2009, the portable, individualistic nature of these devices results in a 'haptic aesthetic, rooted in an embodied affectivity, manifested through gesture and movement of the device while documenting or "videoing" innate performativity or movement, which is afforded by the phones themselves.'⁴⁴ The focus of the next case studies will be on well-known auteurs and their creative responses to contemporary personal screen technologies, especially smartphones, in their filmmaking practice.

Case Study: Smartphone Surveillance and Disturbing Content

The social media era has turned more and more camera-owners into mobilographers, capable of filming life with the simple tap on a touchscreen. In the past, films like *Benny's Video* and *Lost Highway* showed the possibilities of inter-character surveillance via consumer technologies like videotapes, where ordinary people and not necessarily the state or government can enact their own personal forms of surveillance on unwitting subjects. Since the making of these films, personal surveillance or 'sousveillance' cameras are smaller and even more subtle, including smartphones, smart glasses (that can secretly capture video), flying drones, and tiny Ring door cameras (that can instantly send homeowners images of visitors at their front doors via a smartphone app).⁴⁵ Bryce Clayton Newell has remarked that as technologized policing and state surveillance have become increasingly visible – including bodycams and facial recognition technologies –

⁴⁴ Camille Baker, Max Schleser, and Kasia Molga, 'Aesthetics of Mobile Media,' *Journal of Media Practice* 10, no. 2-3 (2009): 119, DOI: 10.1386/jmpr.10.2-3.101_1.

⁴⁵ 'Sousveillance' can be used to refer to surveillance between people and not surveillance from the state. See: *The Guardian*, 'Olympic Spying Claim: New Zealand Report Canada for Flying Drone Over Football Training,' 24 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/article/2024/jul/24/paris-olympic-spying-claim-drone-new-zealand-canada-womens-football-training>.

ordinary civilians can enact their own forms of surveillance on both police and each other ('reciprocal surveillance').⁴⁶

Social media users may also willingly enact forms of surveillance on themselves. Notable 'lifeloggers' or 'lifecasters' have recorded their daily lives using mobile, body-attached cameras. Starting in 1996, Jennifer Ringley ('JenniCam'), considered the first 'camgirl', recorded her unfiltered life in her college dorm room for millions of online viewers. Ringley saw her project as a 'diaristic documentary' – thus not too far-removed from Astruc's vision of camerapersons filming alone in their apartments.⁴⁷ Today, high-profile Twitch streamers like Hasan Piker continuously exhibit their domestic lives for their dedicated audiences, many of whom are paying subscribers who watch streams for hours on end. Disturbingly, multiple alt-right extremists and mass shooters have live streamed their crimes using free and mobile digital technologies to enact their own 'liveness' online.⁴⁸ Present-day anxieties about pervasive surveillance have been reflected in several notable films in the past ten years. These are films where being filmed or filming oneself is framed in a negative context, as smartphones and digital platforms are used to disseminate threatening or disturbing video content.

Happy End has been cited as a key example of smartphone aesthetics in auteur cinema.⁴⁹ Although *Happy End* is nearly ten years old and technologies have evolved rapidly since, its thematic concern with surveillance and desensitisation to violence is still relevant. Like Haneke's Benny, Eve Laurent (Fantine Harduin) is a young member of a wealthy family and an obsessive mobilographer. The film's opening shot is a vertically oriented smartphone interface (like Snapchat) in which Eve secretly records her mother in the bathroom. In messages, Eve silently narrates her mother's night routine (brushing, washing, etc.). In the next shot, Eve films her hamster in its cage for her unseen audience in much the same way (Figure 2.8). Eve reveals that she spiked his food with her mother's depression pills (typing 'let's see what happens'). Eve then complains to her followers about her mother's illness and its impact on her father Thomas (Mathieu Kassovitz), who left them. The hamster is suddenly paralysed, Eve moves it with a stick,

⁴⁶ Bryce Clayton Newell, 'Crossing Lenses: Policing's New Visibility and the Role of "Smartphone Journalism" as a Form of Freedom-Preserving Reciprocal Surveillance,' *Journal of Law, Technology and Policy* 1 (2014): 59-104, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/jltp2014&div=6&id=&page=>.

⁴⁷ See: Brooke A. Knight, 'Watch Me! Webcams and the Public Exposure of Private Lives,' *Art Journal* 59, no. 4 (2000): 21–25, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2000.10792027; Senft, *Camgirls* (2008).

⁴⁸ See: Jillian Peterson et al, 'How Mass Public Shooters Use Social Media: Exploring Themes and Future Directions,' *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (2023), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231155101>.

⁴⁹ Hermida, 'The Aesthetic of New Media,'; Roy Grundmann and Fatima Naqvi, 'Every Unhappy Family is Unhappy in its Own Way: An Interview with Michael Haneke,' *Cineaste* 43, no. 1 (2017): 4-10, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26356819>.

and it is seemingly dead ('voilà') – blurring the line between fiction and reality as this is a real hamster. The next videos show Eve spying on her mother and admitting to having drugged her unconscious as a lesson. Eve 'types out' messages live for her online audience while filming, but she remains off screen 'behind' the camera's field of vision. These videos are clearly marked as handheld mobilography – commonly associated with the non-fiction context of home movies and amateur filmmaking. Eve's bodily movements are visible as the smartphone jitters in her hands (although it cannot be deemed for sure who is actually filming).

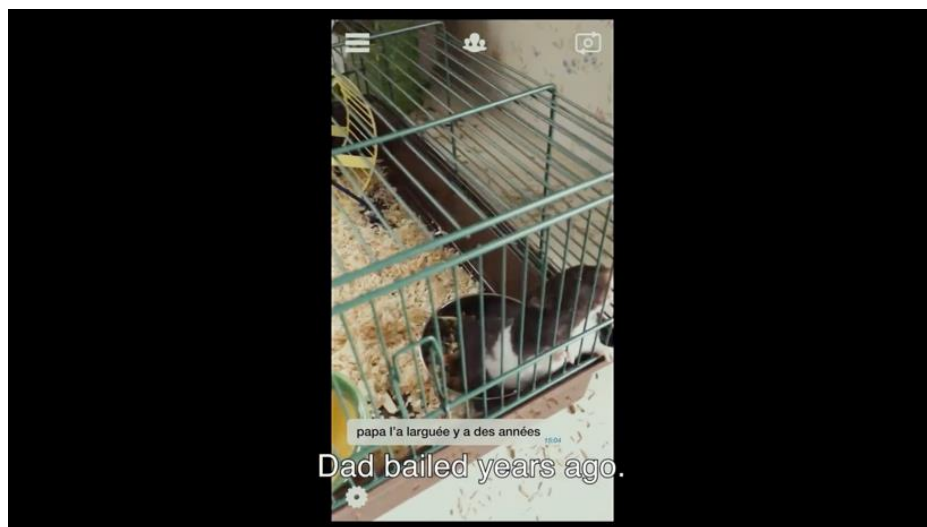


Figure 2.8: Eve's video in *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017).

Eve's video 'experiments' are recorded by a familiar handheld object for audiences with their own smartphones.⁵⁰ Benny's video camera and Eve's smartphone are similarly mobile, consumer-oriented 'amateur' formats for audiovisual production that can be easily handled by *anyone*. Eve's smartphone videos combine the disturbing connotations of Benny's CCTV-style static camera set-ups with Benny's handheld mobilography, with its jittery movements and proximity to the mobilographer's body.⁵¹ Wheatley notes how Benny's video of the pig places the spectator in 'a very immediate,

⁵⁰ The real death of the pig on screen also challenges notions of indexicality and what a *fiction film* is – previously noted by Vivian Sobchack in relation to the non-fictional deaths of animals on screen. The blurring of fiction and non-fiction may cause spectatorial uneasiness. See: Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 246-247.

⁵¹ Following Eve's videos, the next shot is a wide surveillance-style static long take of a building site accident connected to the Laurent family business (even showing a timestamp in the corner of the screen). We also see BBC television news broadcasts about striking oil rig workers.

visceral relationship with the film's content.⁵² I would argue that it is chiefly the personal and handheld mode of production and format that makes these images so immediate and visceral. As Janna Houwen has noted of *Benny's Video*, the video's flaws – its amateurism – ensure that the footage is physically linked to reality; the camera's movements 'refer indexically to the cameraman' and reveal that the images are man-made.⁵³ The video's handheld style doesn't disguise the embodiment and inquisitiveness of the person wielding the camera up close to the pig and in full frame, making the video the visibly *authored* work of someone who intended to capture this morbid event for their spectatorial pleasure (seemingly predicting the content of gore sites).⁵⁴

A sense of physical proximity to an indexical *body* is further pursued in the form of desktop screen recording in *Happy End*. It is revealed that Eve's father – Thomas – is having an affair with another woman, Claire. Using the desktop screen record method and shot in a static long take (akin to screenlife films), these 'sexts' are sent by Thomas and received in real time over an interface that resembles Facebook. The audience watches the explicit conversation absurdly play out from the POV of Claire's desktop with only the sound of her typing (Figure 2.9). Cinematographically, this technique resembles the static surveillance long takes in *Benny's Video* and *Caché* but innovatively does not implicate a camera in a traditional sense.⁵⁵

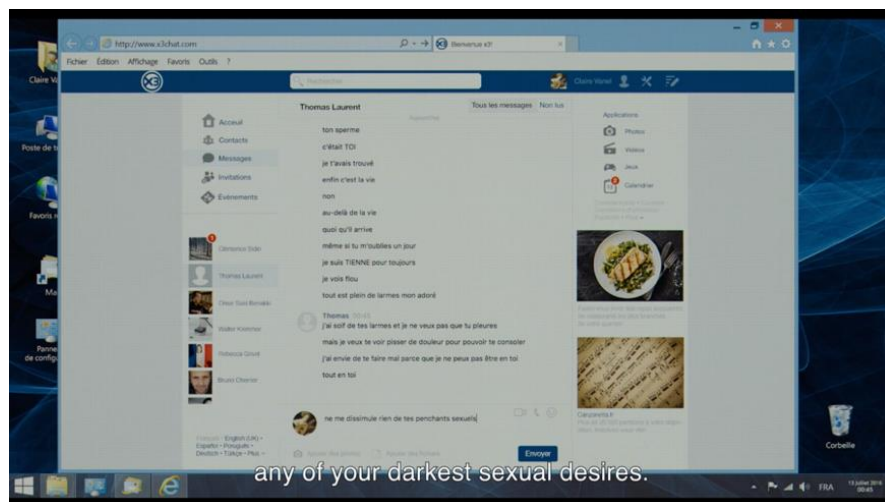


Figure 2.9: Desktop recording in *Happy End* (Micheal Haneke, 2017).

⁵² Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema*, 61.

⁵³ Janna Houwen, *Film and Video Intermediality: The Question of Media Specificity in Contemporary Moving Images* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 30.

⁵⁴ See, for example: Tait, 'Pornographies of Violence?' (2008).

⁵⁵ These desktop long takes may also be compared to Harun Farocki's and Michael Snow's experimentations with machine vision. See: Tomas, *Vertov*, Snow, *Farocki* (2013).

Ultimately, the technologies in *Happy End* are indicative of the social media era. Eve seemingly addresses an invisible diegetic audience watching her live videos – something not accessed by Benny in Haneke’s earlier iteration. Eve can be described as a live streamer, but her videos certainly deviate from the ‘norm’ of what is ethically acceptable or broadly popular on social media. YouTube creators, Twitch streamers, and influencers are subject to criticism and demonetisation if they transgress platform regulations. That being said, real-life instances of disturbing video content have been shared by influencers, such as the Logan Paul Aokigahara forest controversy in 2017, when Paul filmed the body of a deceased person for a YouTube video aimed at his young audience.⁵⁶ According to Haneke, Eve’s transgressive experiment was based on a true case that fascinated him of a fourteen-year-old Japanese girl who poisoned her mother for Internet spectators; ‘Why does she put it on the Internet?’ asks Haneke.⁵⁷ Significantly, Eve’s experiments are much more observational and physically distanced from death compared to Benny’s murder. In this context, Haneke’s film may contain the idea that smartphones have turned more consumers into complicit voyeurs who refuse to intervene in the events seen on their screens or revel in the anguish of others. The screen may act as a barrier, threshold, or protective window through which events can be coldly observed ‘as it is’ by online spectators for entertainment or morbid curiosity.⁵⁸ While this question of intervention or non-intervention (and desensitisation) existed long before the rise of smartphones – as *cinéma vérité* or reality TV demonstrate – it is the online culture of content production and spectatorship that has drastically expanded since. Although it is not technology that necessarily destroys the Laurent family (as other factors like bourgeois apathy are at play), their downfall is certainly mediated through screens.

Tár, about a fictional famous composer and conductor, Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett), incorporates smartphones and other technologies for the purposes of inter-character surveillance that evokes contemporary anxieties about illicit recording. The film opens with a narrow-focus close-up on an iPhone in the foreground recording a live video (Figure 2.10). The interface resembles Instagram Live. The iPhone is held out by an unseen character pointing the camera at Lydia, sleeping in the background out of focus.

⁵⁶ Justin McCurry, ‘YouTube Star Logan Paul Apologises for Film of Dead Man’s Body in Japan,’ *The Guardian*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/02/outcry-as-youtube-star-posts-video-of-dead-body-in-japan>.

⁵⁷ Grundmann and Naqvi, ‘An Interview with Michael Haneke,’ 7.

⁵⁸ See: Tait, ‘Pornographies of Violence?’ (2008).

As the video records live, private chat messages about Lydia are silently exchanged between the unseen mobilographer and another unidentified person. The messages suggest that the mobilographer has some negative feelings about Lydia. It is likely Lydia's assistant Francesca (Noémie Merlant). Later, in a Juilliard class, Lydia humiliates a student who prefers not to play the music of old white male composers. It is revealed later that this encounter was illicitly recorded by another student (or multiple students) in the lecture theatre, edited to recontextualise Lydia's behaviour, and published online. Lydia's emails are also scrutinised. Digital documentation of Lydia's behaviour damages her reputation, and she is removed from her position in a Berlin orchestra.

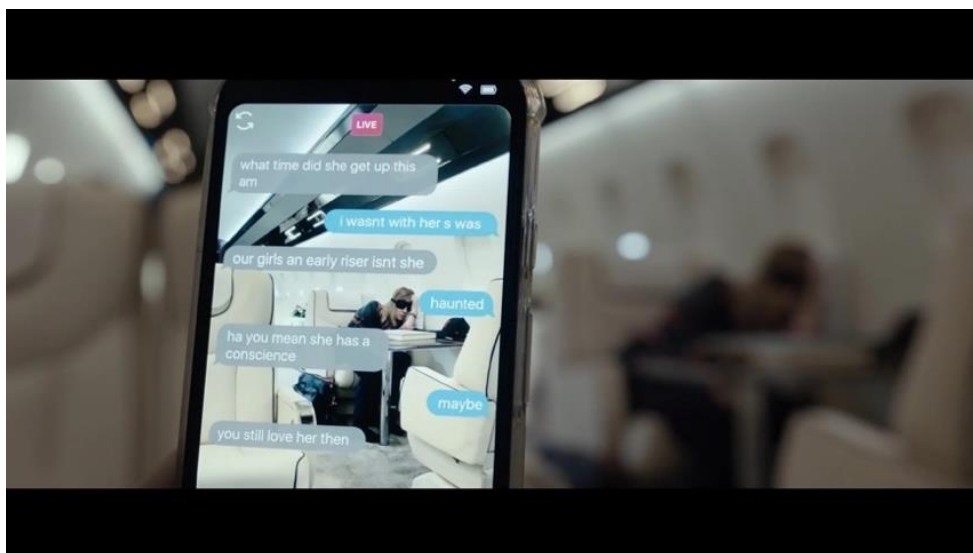


Figure 2.10: smartphone surveillance in *Tár* (Todd Field, 2022).

Lydia inhabits a similar position to auteurs because she is a celebrated conductor with authority.⁵⁹ We even see, in full frame, her Wikipedia page being edited to include new information about her life and work, and Lydia checking news about herself on Twitter/X. Significantly, the opening credits to *Tár* are arranged in reverse order to what is typical, with roles like music supervision and electrician preceding the famous names of star Blanchett and Field as writer and director. Field explained this choice: 'If you're going to credit people, then those credits should count as much as any other credits. Many

⁵⁹ Adrian Martin compares the film director to 'an orchestra conductor or the ringmaster at a circus.' Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 42.

are the hands that make a film.’⁶⁰ This egalitarian view somewhat challenges the traditional conception of the auteur, and indeed Lydia’s own view in the film that the role of the conductor towards their orchestra should be an undemocratic, authoritarian one. Significantly, the film opens with a shot from the approximate POV of Lydia’s subordinate. In one conversation that foreshadows later events in the film, Lydia negatively references the efforts of the MeToo movement. Like real figures within creative industries, including auteurs (see Chapter 1), Lydia’s behaviour is revealed to and discussed by the public via new technologies. The #MeToo movement after all was popularised over Twitter/X. Lydia’s authority is undermined by an Internet age she doesn’t necessarily feel adept in.⁶¹ The use of concealed smartphone surveillance by both Lydia’s trusted assistant and her students also reflects the anxiety of secretive recordings in intimate spaces (a fear not necessarily restricted to famous people) and the significant role that editing can play in the framing of such materials.

In *The Beast*, real-world contemporary online discourses on power and gender similarly provide inspiration for the film’s suspenseful and socio-politically charged drama.⁶² In Bonello’s film, set in 2044, artificial intelligence has taken over the division of labour and humans may choose to undergo ‘DNA purification’ to render themselves emotionless and perform better as workers. This process requires subjects to revisit their past lives, which protagonist Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux) undergoes while falling for Louis (George MacKay). In one past life in 2014, Gabrielle uses Facebook to look up Louis, uses video call to contact an online medium, and faces an onslaught of pop-up clickbait ads for plastic surgery and spam on her laptop.⁶³ Now, Louis is a ‘black-pilled’ incel, coded as such by his rhetoric about women, men’s rights, and use of slang popularised by alt-right communities on sites like Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan.⁶⁴ The obvious cultural

⁶⁰ Mark Olsen, ‘Why Are the End Credits at the Beginning of “Tár”? Todd Field Explains,’ *Los Angeles Times*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2022-11-30/why-are-the-end-credits-at-the-beginning-of-tar-todd-field-explains>.

⁶¹ Other media forms in the film include old VHS tapes of her mentor Leonard Bernstein and the fantasy videogame that Lydia live-scores in the final scene, thus showing Lydia’s evolving relationship with media.

⁶² Bonello’s interest in using smartphones can also be seen in *Coma* (2022), made during the COVID-19 pandemic and under practical restrictions.

⁶³ The film itself appears to be affected by ‘glitching’ as the same scene stops and plays again, just as a viewer with a remote control would pause and start a film. When Louis enters the house to kill Gabrielle, four-way split-screen CCTV footage is also inserted. Indeed, it is Gabrielle who is watching her own past lives on a screen in the AI-controlled purification chamber, revealing the previous sequence as intradiegetic.

⁶⁴ ‘Incels’ or ‘involuntary celibates’ are people who identify themselves by their inability to establish sexual partnerships. The ‘black pill’ is a metaphor derived from online political discourses in the 2010s. Its use in Internet spaces intersects with alt-right ideology, white supremacy, conspiracy theories, and misogyny. To be ‘black-pilled’ refers to ‘a dark but gleeful nihilism: the system is corrupt, and its collapse is inevitable. There is no hope. Times are bad and they’re going to get worse. You swallow the black pill and accept the end is coming.’ See: Elle Reeve, *Black Pill: How I Witnessed the Darkest Corners of the Internet Come to Life, Poison Society, and Capture American Politics* (Simon & Schuster, 2024), 3.

reference for Louis is the real-world case of mass shooter and incel – Elliot Rodger – who recorded a video testimony in his car and uploaded it to YouTube before killing six university students in Isla Vista, California in 2014. Like Rodger, Louis (and by extension, MacKay) films himself in his car and has prepared a monologue that echoes much of the rhetoric of the ‘manosphere’ – a men’s rights movement native to social media.⁶⁵ Louis eventually kills Gabrielle as an act of revenge against women. MacKay’s own personal handling of the smartphone blurs the lines of reality and fiction, placing the viewer in an uneasy position of consuming the personal ‘content’ of a disturbed misogynist with violent plans. It is as though Louis formally dictates the diegesis itself with his ‘caméra-stylo’ (Figure 2.11).



Figure 2.11: a promotional still of George MacKay using a smartphone in *The Beast* (Bertrand Bonello, 2023).

Interestingly, *The Beast* also extends its narrative to the audience’s personal smartphone screens, as Bonello decided to use a QR code to contain the film’s final credits via a permanent hyperlink.⁶⁶ So, when watching the film at home or in the cinema, the audience member is implicitly asked to take out their smartphone and scan the screen. The QR code links to an MP4 file, where Gabrielle’s medium, seen on her laptop screen, warns the viewer not to enter a small room (Figure 2.12). Like an ‘easter egg’ hidden

⁶⁵ The ‘manosphere’ can be defined as a collection of web-based groups that include Men’s Rights Activists (MRA), alt-right YouTubers, Pick-Up Artists (PUA), and incels. See: Jacob Johanssen, *Fantasy, Online Misogyny and the Manosphere: Male Bodies of Dis/inhibition* (Routledge, 2021).

⁶⁶ See: QR code link for *The Beast*, <https://bonus.noirlumiere.com/Ffd2990vVawDNUeahXEgau5P/video.mp4>.

from view in a videogame or DVD release, the QR code leads the viewer/user to expand their experience of the film. While QR codes appear on television programming, the use of QR codes in cinema has not been widely pursued by filmmakers. This may be because QR codes require cinemagoers to take out their smartphones in a dark theatre where any phones are generally prohibited (not to mention the barrier to accessing the hyperlink if one doesn't possess an Internet-connected smartphone). Like many contemporary art films, *The Beast* was also released on a home streaming platform – Mubi – and the QR code seems to have been in-built with this foresight. This metatextual, transmedial innovation asks the audience to be more tactile, removed from what Wanda Strauven terms the 'imprisoned' position of cinemagoing.⁶⁷ The action of using the QR code converges new media participation with cinema, while necessitating multiple screens and personal cameras. Thus, Bonello's film formally implicates the viewer as a voyeur of Louis's depraved plans *and* as a physical participant.

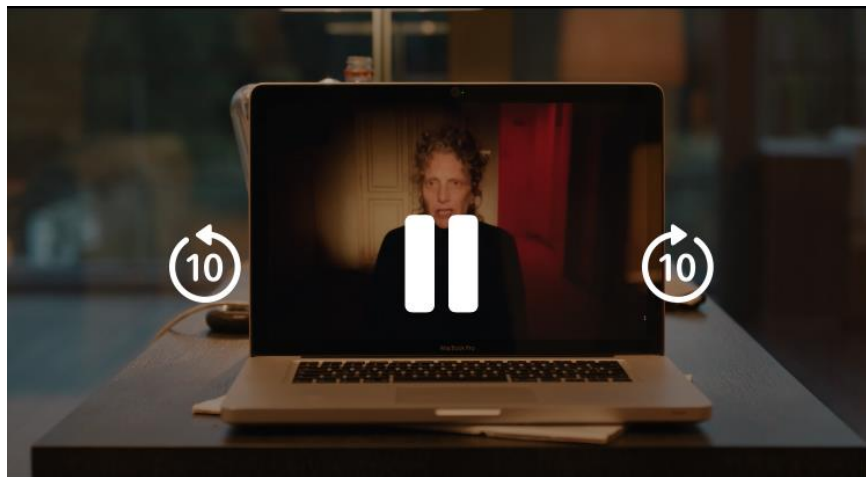


Figure 2.12: the MP4 video linked via QR code in *The Beast* (Bertrand Bonello, 2023).

Case Study: Amateur Mobilography in Auteur Films

With the pervasiveness of screens and cameras in everyday life, social and political events of upheaval or confrontation can be easily recorded by ordinary people. As Kari Andén-Papadopolous has noted, mainstream news channels rely more and more on amateur smartphone mobilography – or 'citizen journalism' – for their reportage, to

⁶⁷ Strauven, 'The Observer's Dilemma,' in *Media Archaeology*, ed. Huhtamo and Parikka, 150.

convey what it's like to *be there* in the moment of an explosion, politically charged event, assault, or major climate event (a type of mobilography I will discuss further in Chapter 5).⁶⁸ Major examples of mobilography, like the Zapruder film or the Holliday tape of the Rodney King beating, are 'raw' footage recorded by amateurs outside of an industrial framework.⁶⁹ This kind of footage has the potential to help launch a movement, as demonstrated by the widely shared eyewitness videos recorded of George Floyd's murder in 2020, which helped to mobilise mass protests as part of the Black Lives Matter movement.⁷⁰

A well-established filmmaker working for decades, Spike Lee has inserted amateur video footage into several of his films.⁷¹ Lee's historical biopic *Malcolm X* (1992) significantly features the formal insertion of amateur video tape without an intradiegetic purpose. Lee editorially intercuts excerpts of the Holliday tape in the film's credits sequence with the screen filled by an American flag and the sound of Malcolm X's denunciation of white American hegemony. Recorded in 1991 by amateur videographer George Holliday from his balcony, the video is 81 seconds-long and shows King being beaten fifty-two times with batons by four LA police officers. Visually, Holliday's video is blurry, jerky, imperfect, and filmed at night, showing video 'noise' in the sub-optimal filming environment – indicative of the spontaneous act of mobilography. As media scholar Paula Rabinowitz has analysed, the tape was later used as evidence in court and misappropriated by defence attorneys who voice-over 'narrated' the video frame-by-frame to position King as the wrongdoer, which ultimately served to acquit the officers (sparking the LA uprising in 1992).⁷² This foreshadows the extent to which 'raw' footage is consistently reframed for propaganda purposes and disinformation now in the social media era (as I will discuss in Chapter 5). Importantly, Lee's film also *re-contextualises* the tape by recycling it within the creative framework of a narrative film. Lee adds new sound (X's speech) and edits the footage to create a montage with an anti-racism, counter-hegemonic angle.

⁶⁸ Andén-Papadopolous, 'Media Witnessing and the "Crowd-Sourced Video Revolution",' 342.

⁶⁹ Rascaroli, Young, and Monahan, *Amateur Filmmaking*, 2-3.

⁷⁰ It is worth mentioning the American horror film *Body Cam* (Malik Vitthal, 2020), in which a murdered police officer's dashcam footage records a supernatural event. The film's title seems to capitalise on public discourses around police bodycams as a form of surveillance to document police misconduct.

⁷¹ Lee also innovatively inserted the young protagonist's iPad use into the coming-of-age film *Red Hook Summer* (2012).

⁷² Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, 211-213; Rabinowitz, 'Street/Crime: From Rodney King's Beating to Michael Brown's Shooting,' 143.

Similarly, in *BlacKkKlansman*, Lee chose to insert a collage of crowd-sourced smartphone footage of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally from August 2017, when multiple white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, assembled in the Virginia city. Several eyewitness videos selected by Lee show the incident where a white supremacist rammed his car into a crowd of people peacefully protesting the rally, killing one woman – Heather Heyer. Lee’s film ends with a dedication to Heyer and an image of an upside-down American flag – echoing the opening of *Malcolm X*. Many of the videos in this montage were clearly shot on smartphones and are off-kilter in their framing, owing to the frantic situation. In one video showing the car incident, the mobilographer runs back and forth, attempting to film the event as if to say ‘*this is happening right now. I am here*’. Screaming can be heard, while hands and arms block the smartphone lens. The mobilographer runs behind a wall to avoid the car hurtling towards the crowd (Figure 2.13). This video echoes the Zapruder film and its ‘somatic images’, as the mobilographer’s neuromuscular reactions are reflected in the unsteady movements of the camera that is held closely to the person’s body (which I will discuss in Chapter 5). Lee’s inclusion of confrontational mobilography from Charlottesville continues his creative interest in the possibilities of moulding images and video for the purposes of political mobilisation.



Figure 2.13: smartphone mobilography in *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018).

The romantic drama *Both Sides of the Blade* also inserts mobilography from an external source into its diegesis. Smartphones facilitate the film’s central affair, where Sara (Juliette Binoche) rekindles her past romance with François (Grégoire Colin) over illicit text communication and Facetiming. Characters also record and watch videos on their smartphones. This kind of communication has existed very little in Denis’s films set

in the twenty-first century up until this point.⁷³ On her radio show, Sara videocalls a journalist to discuss the economic crisis in Lebanon. Smartphone footage from an unnamed source of the devastating Port of Beirut chemical explosion in August 2020 is edited abruptly into the film, causing an aesthetic disruption. The source of the footage isn't the journalist being interviewed and is not clearly signalled as diegetic or intradiegetic but is inserted by Denis and the editors as an embodiment of the explosion from another (ordinary) filmmaker's point-of-view. The video demonstrates 'somatic images' in off-the-cuff mobilography, as the person filming the event could not have foreseen the physical impact of the explosion and suddenly moves the camera with their body. The smartphone jerks towards the ground and shows the shadow and feet of the mobilographer running from the explosion. This snippet marks itself out as informal and spontaneous in contrast with the 'quality' and required planning of feature filmmaking within the film industry. Denis's reference to Lebanon speaks to a recurrent concern in *Both Sides* (and her filmography) with France's postcolonial legacy and its alienating effects on present-day communities both in France and in the *Francophonie*. By abruptly bringing in the point-of-view of someone on the ground filming the port explosion, Denis appears to be disruptively connecting *here* and *elsewhere* (echoing Godard's television-watching family in 1970). Denis's own use of Instagram and smartphones to document her life and represent herself in the form of selfies has further revealed this new element of her broader body of work (as I will discuss in Chapter 3).

In *Bird*, the young working-class protagonist, Bailey (Nykiya Adams), finds solace in filming with her smartphone. Bailey films small personal objects and animals in her semi-rural environment and projects her short, 'imperfect' videos onto her bedroom wall with a home digital projector (Figure 2.14). The young non-professional actress, Adams, filmed these videos herself (her hands can be seen in frame). Bailey's videos are formatted in *Bird* as vertical (but with softened edges that evoke analogue film).⁷⁴ The aesthetic contrast of smartphone video instantly marks out these videos as personal and explicitly authored by Bailey, described by critic Wendy Ide as 'private moments of visual

⁷³ Filmed during the pandemic, the film shows off-centre shots of passengers in the Paris Métro. 'Phantom ride' effect shots from the front of a moving train also appear to have been filmed with a small camera like a smartphone or GoPro, which may have been for practical reasons (perhaps a way of navigating pandemic restrictions for filming in public) or an aesthetic choice.

⁷⁴ Significantly, Bailey's videos are originally *digital* while *Bird*'s cinematographer Robbie Ryan used a 16mm Arriflex 416 for the film's dominant form. This means Bailey's digitally projected iPhone videos that are intradiegetic are filmed by Ryan's analogue camera, which may subvert expectations of 'quality' and what's worth filming with a model of camera that is perceived to be more 'cinematic' than smartphones in contemporary culture.

poetry.’⁷⁵ Bailey’s smartphone mobilography essentially reifies Astruc’s initial vision from 1948 and demonstrates what Dean Keep calls the ‘evocative mode’ of documentary, where ephemera are captured with the camera that is *at hand*.⁷⁶ As Denis Renó has remarked, new forms of audiovisual media ‘of *myself*’ [my italics] serve ‘to record personal moments with an almost documentary character.’⁷⁷ In their poetic tone and by virtue of their projected format, Bailey’s videos are aesthetically more similar to the 8mm home movies in *Paris, Texas* than the surveillance-style smartphone mobilography in *Happy End* that emphasises ‘liveness’. Although Bailey uses her smartphone to record her mother’s abusive boyfriend as compromising evidence against him (in an otherwise powerless situation), her smartphone is primarily a creative outlet.⁷⁸

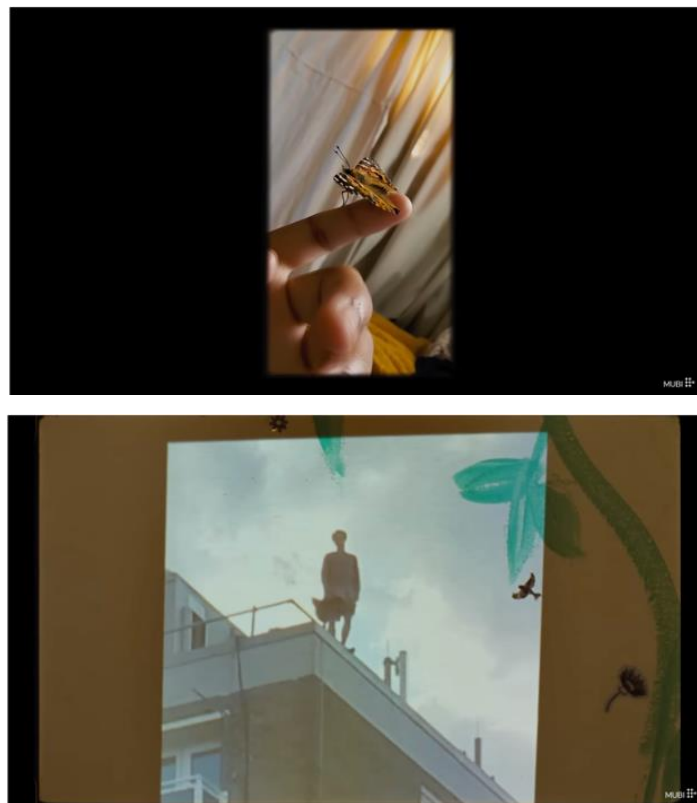


Figure 2.14: smartphone mobilography and home projection in *Bird* (Andrea Arnold, 2024).

⁷⁵ Wendy Ide, ‘Bird Review – Andrea Arnold’s Wild, Joyous Coming-of-Age Drama,’ *The Guardian*, 10 November, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/nov/10/bird-review-andrea-arnolds-wild-joyous-coming-of-age-drama>.

⁷⁶ Keep, ‘Smartphones and Evocative Documentary,’ in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry.

⁷⁷ Denis Renó, ‘Movilidad y Producción Audiovisual: Cambios en la Nueva Ecología de los Medios,’ in Carlos Alberto Scolari ed., *Ecología de los Medios. Entornos, Evoluciones e Interpretaciones* (Gedisa, 2015), 253 [cited in: Hermida, ‘The Aesthetic of New Media,’ 4].

⁷⁸ The film also explores the real-life phenomenon of unregulated smartphone vigilantism. See: Aric Toler and Neil Bedi, ‘Online “Pedophile Hunters” Are Growing More Violent – and Going Viral,’ *The New York Times*, 26 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/26/us/pedophile-hunting-violence.html>.

More smartphone videos featuring locals are inserted as a montage into the film's end credits as documentation of the housing estates in which *Bird* was made, presumably also filmed by Adams. Arnold's social realist narratives have often incorporated non-fiction elements, such as non-professional actors and real locations.⁷⁹ Thus, Arnold's adoption of smartphones in her filmmaking serves to further blur fiction and non-fiction as well as collaborate with the communities she films, but this time via the aesthetics of amateur smartphone mobilography. Adams's non-professional mobilography within Arnold's film also offers a glimpse into a model of auteurism that is co-creative via the integration of new technologies and creators.

Case Study: Auteurs and Content Creators

As I established in Chapter 1, authorship is a core element of the caméra-stylo and its theoretical interpretation in film criticism for the purposes of auteur film analysis or, indeed, the essay film, video essay, and other subjective forms of audiovisual production. Social media platforms and smartphones are inherently personal tools and encourage the expressive articulation of the self through their various affordances of posting videos, vlogs, selfies, and images for online audiences.⁸⁰ It is not surprising that some directors are responding to new technologies through the reflexive lens of authorship. Authorship is at the centre of contemporary discourses about authenticity in the age of synthetic media and expanded access to creative technologies. As more consumers access self-expression with personal cameras and digital platforms, the traditional pre-eminence of professionals within the film industry (especially auteurs) in screen culture is challenged by new 'creators' on TikTok, for example.

Partly a social satire and partly essayistic in its address, *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World* incorporates smartphones and social media to a greater extent into its aesthetic language and commentary than perhaps any of the films examined so far. The film's protagonist Angela (Ilinca Manolache) is an overworked and underpaid Uber driver and film production runner working for a multinational company in Bucharest.

⁷⁹ Her recent observational documentary *Cow* (2022) employs a highly mobile, intimate camera to follow its bovine subjects.

⁸⁰ Jafar Panahi's documentary *This is Not a Film* (2011), co-directed by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, plays with the restrictions and freedoms of film authorship in one's home. Panahi's film is a 'home movie' in a sense because it is restricted to Panahi's own private residence, where he was forced under house arrest by the Iranian government and banned from filmmaking. Without access to a crew, Panahi resorts to partly filming his day-to-day life at home on his iPhone. The film was smuggled on a Flash Drive from Iran to be screened at Cannes.

Angela must drive from location to location to record smartphone video testimonies from victims of workplace accidents and act as chauffeur for Austrian company boss Doris Goethe (Nina Hoss). While on the job, Angela also records videos of herself as her character Bobiță using a face-altering Snapchat AR filter (or ‘Lens’) and deep voice (Figure 2.15).⁸¹ Bobiță is a bald, misogynistic, and foul-mouthed influencer that parodies real far-right ‘manosphere’ influencers who promote traditional gender roles and advocate for men’s rights online (especially Andrew Tate, charged with human trafficking in Romania in 2023). The character was created by actress Manolache prior to Jude’s film as a parody of these men for her Instagram followers.⁸²



Figure 2.15: Ilinca Manolache as Bobiță in *Do Not Expect Too Much ...* (Radu Jude, 2023).

Jude extracts ideas about ‘quality’ explicitly in this film.⁸³ In the second part, an accident victim’s testimony is filmed outside the factory where the accident occurred. The scene is comprised of two long takes in the style of raw footage. The crew behind the camera can be heard off screen discussing film history and auteurs – a discourse typical of cinephilia.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the crew are absurdly making a film that does not fall

⁸¹ There are several ‘bald’ Snapchat Lenses, but the one used by Manolache most closely resembles this one: Snapchat, ‘bald character v1 Lens,’

<https://www.snapchat.com/lens/c1f70f8e14b94f5c864c82979a7683f4?type=SNAPCODE&metadata=01>.

⁸² See: Ilinca Manolache (@ilincamanolache), Instagram profile,

https://www.instagram.com/ilincamanolache?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

⁸³ Angela visits the set of an Uwe Boll production, where Boll plays himself. Boll’s schlock action and fantasy films have been the subject of intense criticism. Angela praises Boll for his continued fight against the critics, claiming that it’s ‘the history of cinema.’

⁸⁴ In an earlier scene during the boardroom meeting, the director and other crew members can be heard discussing *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) – another film in which the Lumière factory film is visually referenced and

traditionally within the remit of ‘cinema’, but rather other audiovisual screen forms like instructional videos, advertising, and infomercials. They are typically perceived as less artistic because they are ‘authored’ by companies, but nonetheless provide steady employment for artists. One crew member jokes that the shot looks like the Lumière brothers’ one-take actuality *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), pointing out that the Lumière film was an orchestrated advertisement for the factory.⁸⁵

Significantly, Angela/Manolache and her TikTok character seem to ‘take over’ the film by formally adjusting its aesthetic on multiple occasions. This aligns with the idea of ‘aesthetic transfers’. But rather than just show messages or social media posts briefly at the corner of the live-action *mise en scène* (like in *Emily in Paris*), the *mise en scène* alters completely to conform with the parameters of a smartphone video that is both ‘virtual’ and ‘real’. When these TikTok videos are formally inserted, the film shifts from its dominant grainy black-and-white aesthetic to full HD colour, ironically bringing us closer to the look of ‘reality’ while we observe an AR character. Angela films her Bobiță videos in landscape mode on her phone, suggesting a more ‘cinematic’ approach than the normal portrait mode of TikTok videos.

Likewise, the film inserts scenes from a Romanian film from the communist period – *Angela Moves On* (Lucian Bratu, 1981), about another female taxi driver in Bucharest. The lead actress, Dorina Lazăr, also appears in Jude’s film playing the same character. In these scenes, the film shifts formally from grainy black-and-white to the grainy colour of Bratu’s older film, including its technical flaws. The aspect ratio of the film also changes. Jude, in collaboration with editor Cătălin Cristuțiu, slows down these scenes to the point of achieving eerie visual and audible glitches, and even crops some shots to isolate members of the public on the streets who happen to be in the background. Jude’s insertion of this older, visibly analogue film, which serves as a narrative companion, can also be considered a form of remediation or remix. Jude’s film is an exercise in a co-creative *caméra-stylo*, by borrowing Manolache’s original video creations *and* scenes from a somewhat ‘forgotten’ film. Jude thus effectively answers Astruc’s call for thinking *audiovisually* in order to compare the economy and social life of present-day Bucharest with its past – like a palimpsest.

where ‘commercial’ versus ‘authentic’ art is a central theme. They also mention Godard’s recent assisted suicide in Switzerland in 2022, significantly pointing to two well-known auteurs.

⁸⁵ Writer-li-ness is also foregrounded in this film, including references to literature and end credits that are handwritten on cards. Significantly, the end credits also feature a PDF of logos (for the film’s funding bodies and distributors) presented as a desktop screen recording that scrolls down with a visible mouse.

After the film's release, Manolache continued to make Bobiță videos on Instagram, while the film's Instagram account @donotexpecttoomuchfrom posted ancillary materials.⁸⁶ Jude's media persona or 'brand-name' was not necessary to 'sell' this auteur film. Creative collaborator Manolache (and Bobiță) has become the face of the film on social media and at Q&A's. Manolache used Bobiță to collaborate with distributor Mubi for a short Instagram video to promote the film's US release in March 2024.⁸⁷ In collaboration with Mubi and Manolache, a cinema in Amsterdam produced cardboard Bobiță masks for attendants at a special screening, thus extending the character's cross-media presence and appeal as a kind of participatory 'meme' among fans of the film (Figure 2.16).⁸⁸ As an AR-assisted creation made via Manolache's Snapchat account and disseminated via her TikTok and Instagram accounts, Bobiță exists outside of Jude's film. The part-virtual and part-physical character of Bobiță has fluidly crossed over from social media to film to physical souvenirs. The AR filter itself exists as an online-based tool (essentially data) and isn't 'owned' by Manolache. Jude's film, as a less precarious media object, significantly archives Manolache's use of the filter even if that filter ceases to exist in the future. This is one contrast between theatrically released films made in the industry with financial support and digital tools that are accessed freely but ultimately controlled by corporations.⁸⁹

Beyond his film, Jude (@radujude) uses Instagram on a personal level and has adopted a largely anti-commercial approach (as I will analyse in relation to Denis in Chapter 3).⁹⁰ Jude does not share extensive ancillary promotional materials that other arthouse auteurs like Nicolas Winding Refn or Gaspar Noé do (as I will examine in Chapter 3). A theme that is present in his film work, Jude's Instagram profile humorously captures the absurdity of on-street advertising and contemporary capitalism in Romania.⁹¹ Jude also uses in-built editing features to create superimpositions or collages – what he

⁸⁶ See: Do Not Expect too Much from the End of the World (@donotexpecttoomuchfrom), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/donotexpecttoomuchfrom?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

⁸⁷ See: Mubi USA (@mubiusa), 'Bobiță has an important message to share,' Instagram, 20 March 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C4vonuiUOwt/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁸⁸ See: Ilinca Manolache (@ilincamanolache), 'Romanian Barbie is on @Mubi,' Instagram, 12 May 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C63UtnCzRE/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁸⁹ At least one example is Meta's recent removal of Spark AR, leading to many filters disappearing from Instagram overnight, pointing to the frailty of creating tools for platforms that are ultimately governed by corporate interests. See: Sarah Perez, 'Creators Are Angered by Meta's Spark AR Shutdown, Saying They'll be Out of Work with Little Notice,' Tech Crunch, 27 August 2024, <https://techcrunch.com/2024/08/27/creators-are-angered-by-metas-spark-ar-shutdown-saying-theyll-be-out-of-work-with-little-notice/>.

⁹⁰ Radu Jude (@radujude), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/radujude?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

⁹¹ Jude's *Eight Postcards from Utopia* (2024) is a collage film of surreal and absurd television advertisements from post-communist and capitalist Romania over the past three decades.

captions as ‘iPhone Méliès’, that resemble avant-garde copy-and-paste techniques (Figure 2.17).



Figure 2.16: Manolache and Bobiță masks at a special screening of *Do Not Expect Too Much ...* (Instagram, 2024).



Figure 2.17: Radu Jude’s Instagram posts captioned ‘iPhone Méliès’ (2024).

Jude has expressed his enthusiasm for those who make films with TikTok or generative AI. He sees their imperfect, degraded quality as a true sign of cinema's expansion to the wider public: 'it puts professional filmmakers in a crisis – which is good.'⁹² In an interview with *Dazed*, Jude does not differentiate between 'cinema', TikTok videos, and AI-generated videos – they are all *cinema*:

In a way, with new media, with Instagram or TikTok videos or filters, you feel a bit like it's the world of [Georges] Méliès again. Watching TikTok, you see people staging little acts and documentaries, they take me back to the beginning of cinema.⁹³

Jude's view resonates with proponents of 'expanded cinema', as well as media archaeologists like Tom Gunning who view technological fissures as not a 'cessation' but an inevitability in the development of filmic language.⁹⁴ With this emergence of new audiovisual technologies, the abundance of 'multiple cinemas' (to invoke Astruc) presents some parallels with early cinema, where feature narrative filmmaking had not yet become the institutionalised cinema to which all other audiovisual forms – such as documentary film and avant-garde film – are compared. Indeed, Jude has been quoted as saying about his film: 'I don't understand why some people, especially art filmmakers, complain and say they think it's the death of cinema. On the contrary, I feel like it's the beginning of cinema. I'm pretty optimistic.'⁹⁵ Jude's comment seems to echo Astruc's essays from 1948 – the masses will soon possess personal cameras and screens and true 'authors' will be able to make films outside of an industrial framework. Jude's film shows the possibilities of co-creation, as well as the intermedial relationship between social media and cinema.⁹⁶

Like Jude, Silva's personal engagement with social media has clearly informed his filmmaking. In *Rotting in the Sun*, Silva stars as a semi-fictionalised version of himself – a suicidally depressed and drug-addicted Chilean filmmaker and painter living in Mexico City, struggling to land a new project. Based on a real encounter that happened, Silva's character reluctantly befriends Internet celebrity Jordan Firstman at a gay nudist beach

⁹² Radu Jude quoted in: Peng, 'Radu Jude,' *Dazed*.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ See: Gunning, 'Let's Start Over,' (2012); Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 18.

⁹⁵ Jude quoted in: Peng, 'Radu Jude,' *Dazed*.

⁹⁶ Jude's experimental desktop film *Sleep #2* (2024) shows a year's worth of live webcam footage from EarthCam of Andy Warhol's grave – an homage to the long take experiments of Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1965).

(similarly playing a semi-fictionalised version of himself). Jordan pitches an idea for a TV show to Silva based on Jordan's relationship with his Instagram followers, which Silva then desperately pitches to HBO executives over Zoom. While distracted by messages and Facetime calls from Jordan, Silva accidentally plummets to his death from his apartment roof – hinting at real cases of smartphone-related deaths.⁹⁷ Silva's precariously employed housekeeper Vero (Catalina Saavedra) covers up his death, fearing she could be arrested, while Jordan investigates his disappearance and urges his Instagram followers to help find Silva. Ultimately, Silva's death in the film is presumed to be suicide.

The real Jordan Firstman rose to fame during the COVID-19 pandemic for his short 'impressions' and 'secrets' videos on Instagram and TikTok he made at home to pass the time and express himself in isolation. His recurring characters included a stereotypically straight American jock using a masculine AR face filter, which is seen in Silva's film (Figure 2.18). According to *The Cut*, Jordan's no-cost micro-short comedic pieces resonated with viewers who were similarly stuck at home.⁹⁸ Although Firstman worked in film and TV before the pandemic, Firstman can be considered an 'Internet celebrity' because of his sharp rise to fame via social media. As per Crystal Abidin's definition, unlike more 'traditional' celebrities like movie stars, Internet celebrities who are more 'native' to social media 'are continually required to indulge in greater disclosures of the self to maintain follower interest.'⁹⁹ Firstman's notoriety is largely fixated around his consistent creative activities that are posted on Instagram to over 800k followers, but has successfully found creative roles in more 'traditional' media.¹⁰⁰

In *Rotting in the Sun*, auteurism itself is reflexively explored by integrating social media aesthetics into the diegesis with seemingly detrimental effects for its semi-fictional auteur protagonist.¹⁰¹ In his depressed state, Silva's character mindlessly watches Internet videos, memes, and clickbait content. The visibly pixelated, 'poor' videos and images are seen up-close on Silva's smartphone screen from his approximate eye-level. In one

⁹⁷ See, for example: Sarah Hooper, 'Influencer Films Her Own Death While Singing to Friend on a Night Out,' *Metro*, 3 October 2024, <https://metro.co.uk/2024/10/02/moment-influencer-plunges-death-singing-night-21723443/>.

⁹⁸ Katie Heaney, 'The Cocky Prince of Quarantine Comedy: Jordan Firstman, Instagram's Premier Impressionist, Talks Sex, Drugs, and Getting Famous in Social Isolation,' *The Cut*, 2 December 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/12/jordan-firstman-cut-cover.html>.

⁹⁹ Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Jordan Firstman (@jfirstman), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/jfirstman?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

¹⁰¹ Initially, the film was to be shot entirely with smartphones (but looked bad according to Silva) and was eventually shot in a handheld style with a small Red Komodo camera, using claustrophobic spaces and intense close-ups. See: Nicolas Rapold, 'Sebastián Silva on the Politics of Nudity in *Rotting in the Sun*,' *W Magazine*, 2 February 2023, <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/sebastian-silva-rotting-in-the-sun-sundance-jordan-firstman-interview-2023>.

innovative editing technique, a shot of Silva in bed ‘doomscrolling’ on his phone cuts to a close-up montage of frantic videos on his screen, and then cuts back to a shot of Silva on the beach, seemingly still watching the same videos – traversing narrative time and space. With these temporal and aesthetic ‘glitches’ the film text itself seems to have absorbed Silva’s frantic mindset.



Figure 2.18: Jordan Firstman on TikTok (April 2020).

Rotting in the Sun may not be an essay film made with the first-person ‘I’, but its proximity to Silva’s subjectivity is noteworthy. As a filmmaker unable to create ‘content’, Silva’s character is confronted with the popularity of an annoying but lucrative content creator. When Silva’s iPhone and diary are left behind when he dies, the frantic montages seen on his screen cease to appear in the film. Instead, Jordan’s Instagram self-recordings formally ‘invade’ the film, as his iPhone videos are directly inserted into the film (but cropped to fit the film’s more standard aspect ratio). It is significant that the protagonist – an auteur playing himself – is shockingly killed off before the mid-way point. The narrative focus shifts to the experiences of Vero and Jordan in his absence. Thus, the film de-centralises the auteur’s subjectivity by killing him. The closing credits are comprised

of scrolling scanned pages of doodles from Silva's diary (reminiscent of scanned pages in Godard's later work) that posthumously enunciate Silva's semi-fictional 'voice' in its indecipherable, unhinged messaging. As an intertextual extension of Silva's semi-fictional subjectivity in *Rotting in the Sun*, the real Silva (@sebastiansilva79) regularly uses Instagram for creative and personal posts, including several references to the film, like reshared videos and memes seen in the film. Although Silva is ostensibly sickened by the accelerated aesthetics of social media, these very aesthetics ironically constitute his self-expression in this film, suggesting an embrace of post-cinematic convergence via the figure of the auteur and in a self-deprecating manner.

Conclusion: New Creators and Post-Cinema

This chapter has shown that several well-known auteurs, many of whom have been working in the film industry for decades and before the rise of smartphones, have responded to the contemporary expansion of audiovisual media production and consumption with a variety of formal choices. Despite the critical success of auteur experiments like *Tangerine*, making films entirely with smartphones or computer desktops has evidently not become the norm in the industry. What is seemingly more appealing to auteurs is the formal insertion of smartphone mobilography and social media aesthetics in their film narratives. Several key points can be observed. Crucially, these case studies demonstrate the inherent hapticity and intimacy of smartphones as mobile camera devices, as hands, self-filming, and 'somatic images' are made visible. With these 'aesthetic transfers' in films, smartphones are formally codified as *personal* rather than industrial camera devices. This mode of production often blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, owing to the cultural association between smartphone filmmaking and the aesthetics of home movies or what Keep refers to as the 'evocative' documentary mode.

On the one hand, one could conclude that the handling of digital technologies in these films is largely framed in a sinister context. This sense of unease might be a matter of family dysfunction, complacency, and passive violence, as in the case of Haneke's film. This unease might be explicitly sociopolitical, as in the case of *Tár* and *The Beast*, where threat emerges from the use of digital technologies rooted in real-life societal anxieties and discourses. Astruc's optimism for expanded screen media in 1948 – with its

promise of access – comes with a caveat, as consumers (and indeed fictional characters) wield these devices in ways that may be tied to violence and tragedy. Haneke's and Bonello's sadistic mobilographers represent the extremes of imitating an ordinary user's online 'content'.

On the other hand, smartphones are not universally framed in contemporary film narratives as detrimental additions to cinema itself. Several of the filmmakers discussed here were already preoccupied with certain themes and techniques in their work (Haneke and surveillance, for example) before the rise of social media and smartphones. These preoccupations are enhanced and extended via new technologies to represent contemporary frictions and unease – whether they be political, social, or creative tensions. Lee's and Denis's insertions of amateur mobilography in their films do not frame consumer camera technology as a strictly *negative* aspect of screen culture but rather demonstrate their long-standing interest in commenting on contemporary political tensions and shows their awareness of the significance of ordinary people's everyday filmmaking. In *Bird*, Bailey's ability to film small home movies of her environment with the technologies at her disposal offers a creative reprieve from the challenges of family turmoil. By inserting these home movies into the film as poetic, documentary-like instances of Bailey's embodied subjectivity in the world, Arnold is also implicitly embracing these technologies on a (co-)creative level. Jude's collaboration with Manolache to create an iconic character through AR filter technology also materialises (in practice) the director's vocal support for technologies like TikTok that challenge traditional notions of 'quality' and cinema's media boundaries. The films studied in this chapter reflect an important component in the 'post-cinematic' shift, where consumer technologies like smartphones assume the status of indisputably 'cinematic' apparatuses, even if those same apparatuses also function as tools for amateur smartphone mobilography and social media content production.¹⁰² As Astruc envisioned: 'Step by step, we will reach a state obliterating the clean demarcation line between amateur and professional cinema.'¹⁰³

As the final case study demonstrated, it is significant that authorship has been explored via smartphones and social media in at least two recent arthouse/auteur films. As more ordinary mobilographers, content creators, and social media personalities take to

¹⁰² Similar experiments in filmmaking that can be considered 'intermedial' or 'post-cinematic' include Harmony Korine's experimental action crime film *Aggro Drift* (2023), which utilises entirely infrared photography that resembles the Farockian 'operational images' of military camera technologies.

¹⁰³ Astruc, 'The Future of Cinema,' 48.

producing screen media that can be watched by millions of viewers online, the filmmaker's singular authority over the filmic image is not so concrete. These new 'auteurs' are not part of the film industry, but may produce audiovisual content without the assistance of a crew or a studio and with whatever means are available to them. As a testament to this ongoing post-cinematic phase, Jude's *Do Not Expect* presents a critical re-evaluation of post-cinema via its protagonist Angela, while *Rotting in the Sun* sees a real auteur filmmaker reflecting meta-textually on the role of authorship and agency in the digital era.

As technologies and trends rapidly develop, like the introduction of new platforms, augmented reality filters, and Internet cultures (such as influencer culture), these shifts are reflected in cinema over time. If we are to view this range of films chronologically, it is possible to observe a more dedicated integration of Internet culture in more recent films like *Do Not Expect* and *Rotting in the Sun*. The characters of Angela/Bobiță and Firstman show that contemporary filmmakers – who also happen to be well-versed in social media vernaculars – are open to incorporating the social media personas that performers have independently created before production. It is not surprising that both auteurs are active on Instagram. Thus, these auteurs are also visibly *inside* the platforms they are portraying in their films, rather than distant observers (they are 'thinking materially').¹⁰⁴ These films do not paint Instagram or TikTok strictly as an *evil*, but certainly critique modern capitalism and neo-liberalism; from thankless gig work and hustle culture to bourgeois ennui.

Manolache's and Firstman's use of AR filters to create distinctive characters also shows the affordances for ordinary social media users, where the need for high-tech CGI or a crew (including makeup artists, costume designers, etc.) is eschewed by the user's individual, free access to body-altering synthetic technology. Both Manolache and Firstman play with traditional gender roles in their respective AR face filter characters, which demonstrates the performative flexibility of new and synthetic technologies.¹⁰⁵ As filmmakers and artists in their own right, Manolache and Firstman have demonstrated their ability to partly 'invade' the feature film production at a formal level, using technologies the directors understand but aren't necessarily using themselves. The *caméra-stylo* is thus further revealed as potentially co-creative and post-cinematic through

¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that directors like Bonello, Haneke, and Arnold who do not have public social media profiles are not well-versed in social media vernaculars (they very well could be).

¹⁰⁵ See, for more analysis of this kind of practice: Marghitu and O'Meara, 'Seamful Sutures: Gender Exploration and Identity Expression Using Augmented Reality Facial Filters,' (2024).

these intermedial cross-overs, where the lines between ‘cinema’ and ‘social media’ are blurred. ‘Low-grade’, ‘poor’ technologies and social media vernaculars are treated not as strictly ‘threats’ to film culture, but as an expansion of cinematic language to new formats and aesthetics.

Several notable directors are integrating the audiovisual practices of ordinary social media users and mobilographers in their feature film work. But, significantly, several filmmakers discussed in this chapter (and more) are also publicly active on Instagram. They are therefore well-versed in how social media and smartphone mobilography function on a personal and informal level and author their lives and thoughts as ordinary social media users do. The next chapter will investigate how auteurs especially approach Instagram – with two case studies on Denis and Refn – as a creative and/or promotional tool that extends their subjectivity, while offering an expressive outlet beyond their feature film productions.

3. From Set to Selfie: Auteurs' Creative Uses of Social Media

[T]he star-auteur can potentially carry and redeem any sort of textual material, often to the extent of making us forget that material through the marvel of its agency. In this sense, promotional technology and production feats become the new caméra-stylo.

– Timothy Corrigan (1990).¹

Working Working Working.

– Nicolas Winding Refn (Instagram, 2024).²

When Alexandre Astruc published his essays in 1948, the medium of cinema was still in the early processes of being theorised as an art form. As a response to the (mis)conception that cinema could not be an art because it is a mechanically reproduced mass entertainment form, the new theory of the auteur by the 1950s proposed that a film could be authored and express a filmmaker's vision. As Timothy Corrigan noted in 1990, one motivation behind *la politique des auteurs* was to 'cut through the complications of mass entertainment and to locate the expressive core of the film art.'³ Today, in the digital age, auteurs are not only involved with the film industry, but also with the broader tech and media industries that help shape discourses about auteurs as well as their articulation of a *personality*. As Adrian Martin commented in 2004 in response to auteurs' increasing visibility in media discourses, 'this is the era of the auteur as commodity, as brand name.'⁴ As Catherine Grant surmised in 2000 and again in 2008, auteurs may be consumed by audiences not only through the films they make, but indeed lovingly and pleurably consumed through ancillary discourses, press, and the 'work' of their promotional and paratextual selves – especially via digital technologies such as websites and DVD extra features like the director commentary track.⁵ This extension of the auteur

¹ Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteursism,' 49.

² Nicolas Winding Refn (@nwrefn), 'Working working working,' Instagram, 5 December 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0e2JdatLEF/?igsh=dTI3YXRkZDM5ZnJu>.

³ Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteursism,' 45.

⁴ Adrian Martin, 'Possessory Credit,' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 45, no. 1 (2004): 95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41552397>.

⁵ Grant, 'www.auteur.com,' 103; Grant, 'Auteur Machines,' 102.

through a paratextual or promotional ‘self’ is undeniably now facilitated by social media platforms that include Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, which a number of well-known auteurs are using regularly. However, this view of social media as *only* a tool for the ‘commerce of auteurism’ does not capture the entire scope of auteurs’ creative uses of these new technologies. Corrigan’s statement from 1990, that production feats and promotional technologies have become the ‘new caméra-stylo’, is a rather limited view in hindsight. Considering the methodological framework for the caméra-stylo in this thesis, my argument in this chapter is that a number of auteurs have accessed a new kind of caméra-stylo in their creative practice through the specific qualities of smartphones and social media platforms: being personal, informal, imperfect, and even low-definition in their practice and aesthetic.

The existing scholarship on auteurs and the Internet consists of Grant’s earlier observations and the books *Transmedia Directors* (2020), *David Lynch: Blurred Boundaries* (2021), and *Networked David Lynch* (2023), which discuss the media boundaries that auteurs increasingly cross in their creative work in the digital age.⁶ Thus far in the literature, there are only several scholars have conducted close textual analysis of auteurs’ personal social media profiles. In 2021, Matt St. John argued that Agnès Varda’s humorous use of Instagram helped her become a celebrity later in life through her cross-platform presence.⁷ There is also my own analysis of Claire Denis’s personal use of Instagram from 2022. I also co-ordinated a themed week of posts for *In Media Res* on the topic in 2025.⁸ However, given the extent to which auteurs are using social media (and approaching these platforms in different ways) to articulate their ‘self’, this offers new readings for a re-imagined caméra-stylo in the social media era. As outlined in Chapter 1, issues such as collaboration and quality surround auteurism. For Martin, the exercise of reading an auteur’s entire body of work for stylistic and thematic consistencies is only worthwhile if such reading goes against the grain rather than re-enforcing old methods of auteur criticism (i.e., focusing on male directors or solely feature narrative films); that is, ‘auteurism is only useful as a critical tool as long as it generates good, exciting results –

⁶ Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott ed., *Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry, and New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Bloomsbury, 2020); Anne Jerslev, *David Lynch: Blurred Boundaries* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Marcel Hartwig, Peter Niedermüller, and Andreas Rauscher ed., *Networked David Lynch: Critical Perspectives on Cinematic Transmediality* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

⁷ Matt St. John, ‘From Cannes to Cardboard: The Circulation and Promotion of Visages Villages and the Auteur on Instagram,’ *Camera Obscura* 36, no. 1 (2021): 155-185, [https://read.dukeupress.edu/camera-obscura/issue/36/1%20\(106\)](https://read.dukeupress.edu/camera-obscura/issue/36/1%20(106)). See, also: Tomas Elliott, ‘Selfie-Portraits: Agnès Varda, JR, and the Politics of Sharing,’ *Frames Cinema Journal* 18 (2021): 164-176.

⁸ Murphy, ‘The Filmmaker as Instagram Auteur,’ (2022); ‘Auteurs in the Age of Social Media,’ *In Media Res*, 3-7 February 2025, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/content/auteurs-age-social-media>.

helping us to make new discoveries.’⁹ Considering Martin’s position, it is significant that since his statement, the avenues of creativity for auteurs have been opened up by the Internet and most recently social media (as they have for general users), and so offering scholars corresponding materials through which to view auteurs and their creative work in novel ways. Scholarship on social media visual cultures already often emphasises the articulation of the ‘self’ online, taking social media posts as appropriate texts for analysis.

On the one hand, social media platforms can serve as tools for the ‘commerce of auteurism’ and can therefore be studied as paratextual media. Rather than make a living through the infrastructures of social media economies, auteurs can use their social media profiles as ancillary technologies to promote their feature film texts (as actors do), often in collaboration with distributors (i.e., the infrastructures of the industry). Social media technologies can effectively extend Corrigan’s concept, as platforms provide a new outlet for the auteur’s promotional ‘self’, which was once restricted to print media and interview formats. Like many artists and celebrities today, auteurs with their own social media profiles may choose to use the technology for explicitly promotional purposes.

Promotional posts include film trailers, official posters and other graphics, and interview clips that promote the film’s release. Even if the director in question does not post promotional materials, their Instagram profile (as a personalised public-facing creative technology) is still an extension of the director’s paratextual ‘self’ in film culture. To invoke Grant, we can now also ‘consume’ directors by following them on Instagram.

On the other hand, social media platforms like Instagram can be enjoyed by auteurs as creative audiovisual tools in their own right, beyond the promotion of their feature films. As I showed in Chapter 2, several notable auteurs like Denis, Michael Haneke, and Radu Jude have incorporated smartphone mobilography and social media aesthetics into their feature films. But auteurs also actively use these technologies in their own personal lives. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube offer alternative distribution sites outside of the film industry, where materials not necessarily classed as the auteur’s *professional* work may be disseminated casually, when and how they like.¹⁰ Auteurs also can and do use social media and smartphones in ways that express their stylistic preoccupations, autobiography, and personality. As examples in this chapter will demonstrate, auteurs post text-based reflections and commentary and still

⁹ Martin, ‘Possessory Credit,’ 97.

¹⁰ In the film industry, there is a way to relate this sense of freedom to associations with the ‘director’s cut’ of a film, where the director’s initial creative intentions are ‘recuperated’ from the editing and narrative choices made at the time of the theatrical cut’s release, which may have been studio-directed.

images; including selfies, photos of their environments and personal lives, reposted images or images of existing media related to their personal interests. They use editing tools, augmented reality filters, and engage in smartphone mobilography. As Chapter 1 has theorised, the promise of the caméra-stylo lies no less than in mobile, personal, and even humble camera and screen devices that are intimately engaged with by hands or held close to the body. This personal use of the camera-screen *dispositif* may offer a less formal and more solitary form of self-expression than their feature film productions – which is not to say that their feature film work *cannot* be personal, as many auteur films are. The production of a feature film typically involves a crew of skilled craftspeople collaborating on a single project with a considerable budget. For auteurs, a solitary mode of production is largely eschewed in feature filmmaking. With these small, personal devices, auteurs use social media like ordinary users of these platforms who are not considered ‘auteurs’.

In this chapter, I firstly provide an overview of a broad range of filmmakers and their uses of Internet technologies. From Hollywood directors to documentary and home moviemakers like Jonas Mekas and Varda (already established in their investment in mobilography and cinécriture), it is evident that social media applications, the Internet, and smartphones have been and are being used in ways that extend the auteur’s ‘self’ and creativity beyond their filmic texts. While some older auteurs are visibly assisted (sometimes by a family member) in using these technologies, many are clearly wielding these technologies themselves, as this chapter will show. My analysis is mainly focused on Instagram, as it appears to be the most popular platform regularly used by a wide range of auteurs. Instagram importantly facilitates audiovisual *and* visual content, which helps to maximise the variety of posts that can be analysed. Based on a sample of 50 director profiles, I examine the kinds of Instagram posts that auteurs are uploading – if they use Instagram as an ancillary promotional technology and/or for creative posts that are not necessarily tied to promoting their feature films.

Then, I take two case study examples of European arthouse auteurs – Nicolas Winding Refn (@nwrefn) and Claire Denis (@clairedenis6) – who use Instagram in different ways but similarly embrace its creative affordances to produce idiosyncratic and personal images and videos. Refn’s profile demonstrates his use of Instagram partly as a promotional technology (indicative of Corrigan’s model for the ‘star-auteur’), using the platform to promote his film and television works, while also sharing aspects of his personal life and using the app’s in-built AR selfie filters and drawing features.

Meanwhile, Denis eschews the typical features of utilising Instagram as a promotional technology. What emerges from her profile is a highly intimate and personal form of mobilography and aesthetic curation handled solely by Denis. In both cases, there is a haptic and intimate investment in making their embodied presence visible (and even digitally augmented in Refn's case). In both case studies, it is possible to recognise features of the filmmakers' respective stylistic idiosyncrasies in their film work. However, by embracing the language of Instagram aesthetics and smartphones, their profiles present *new* stylistic and autobiographical aspects of their work.

This chapter seeks to examine how Astruc's theory is re-imagined and expanded by auteurs' creative uses of social media. As I argue in this chapter, Astruc's initial vision finds new resonance today, as auteurs have embraced digital technologies that are used by the public. Thus, an embodiment of the 'post-cinematic' phase of transition in contemporary screen culture can be observed via auteurs; 'cinema' and 'social media' converge through their respective creative endeavours. Essentially, the *caméra-stylo* acquires new meaning, as auteurs who are traditionally associated with institutional cinema are now participating in the expanded screen culture that Astruc envisioned, alongside a large portion of society at large.

Auteurs and the Internet: An Overview

Before examining case studies on auteurs' Instagram profiles, it is important to trace the broader uses of the Internet and social media platforms by auteurs. While auteurs may not be professionals in Internet spaces like influencers and content creators, they have nonetheless adapted well to using digital platforms for various purposes. This is not surprising as film directors have historically worked and continue to work across different media and exhibition spaces.¹¹ Filmmakers like Varda (also a photographer) and Jean-Luc Godard notably moved between the feature film and the documentary and essay film. Varda and Chantal Akerman also explored the specific affordances of the gallery installation (video or otherwise). Andrei Tarkovsky's personal polaroid photos were published posthumously, and these images share aesthetic qualities with his film work.¹² Directors like Astruc, François Truffaut, and those at *Cahiers* were also film critics.

¹¹ See, for more on convergence aesthetics and auteurs: Vernallis, Perrott, Rogers ed., *Transmedia Directors* (2019).

¹² Andrei Tarkovsky, *Instant Light: Tarkovsky Polaroids* (Thames & Hudson, 2006).

Marguerite Duras was notably a novelist and screenwriter before directing films, and even posthumously published her cookbook, *La Cuisine de Marguerite* (1999).¹³ Directors like David Lynch and Refn have written and directed television and streaming series. Ingmar Bergman was long involved in theatre productions in Sweden. Television commercials for big-name brands have notably been directed by Lynch (Calvin Klein, YSL, Gucci, Dior), Martin Scorsese (Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel), Harmony Korine (Gucci, Supreme), Wes Anderson (Montblanc, American Express, etc.), and Sofia Coppola (Dior, Chanel, H&M). Filmmakers like Gus Van Sant and Coppola have also directed music videos. Auteurs' published autobiographies and DVD commentaries also form part of their broader body of work, and offer a paratextual voice to accompany, contextualise, and perhaps even alter perceptions of their film texts.¹⁴ Despite crossing between different media, an auteur's 'body of work' will generally comprise their different creative ventures, even if such works are considered 'minor' or not as important as their feature film texts, brought together by the 'author function'.¹⁵

Today, a contemporary director's 'work' is impacted by the technologies, commerce, and aesthetics of the Internet. For audiences, the Internet expands access to information about directors, once limited to print media and television appearances. This was the case when Corrigan first theorised the 'commerce of auteurism' in 1990. Now, directors typically have IMDb pages, Wikipedia pages, and sometimes personal websites with information about their work. Websites such as IndieWire (established in 1998) specialise in releasing news about directors and film festivals.¹⁶ Social media profiles managed by production, distribution, and online streaming companies (e.g., Mubi; A24) also promote films, often with a special emphasis on directors as enticing factors, perhaps only preceded by the appeal of the films' stars. This sense of 'access' is further articulated by directors themselves through new online-based formats. Online Masterclass courses are offered by Lynch, Werner Herzog, and Mira Nair among others, where subscribers pay to hear tips and on-set anecdotes from directors.¹⁷ This subscriber-based system creates a semblance of 'exclusive access' and this is supported by the director's direct address to the subscriber (and eye-contact with the camera). There are also new social media-based director interview formats like short Letterboxd interviews and longer

¹³ Marguerite Duras, *La Cuisine de Marguerite* (Éditions Benoît Jacob, 1999).

¹⁴ See: Grant, 'Auteur Machines,' (2008).

¹⁵ Foucault, 'What is an Author?' (1969).

¹⁶ Film critics like Richard Brody and David Erlich also frequently use Twitter/X to post short pieces of film criticism.

¹⁷ Masterclass, 'Techniques for Directing Your Movie,' <https://www.masterclass.com/subcategories/techniques-directing-movie>.

Criterion Closet or Konbini Vidéo Club DVD walkthrough videos. The latter remove interviewers altogether and allow directors to discuss their influences in a relatable and casual way, while promoting their own work through their promotional and paratextual ‘selves’. Internet memes co-created by fans also spread ideas about auteurs and their brand-names, such as memes dedicated to Lynch that isolate an idea of ‘David Lynch’ as a signifier of certain meanings, as Marcel Hartwig has examined.¹⁸ I will discuss this further in Chapter 4 in relation to Wes Anderson. As the Internet and social media platforms have opened up access to global communication networks and creative tools for general users, some notable filmmakers now clearly enjoy these technologies on a personal level.

For example, Mekas (who died in 2019), has an active personal website called jonasmekas.com that shares news and archives his digital and digitalised shorts, presumably still managed by friends or family (Figure 3.1). The cordial homepage welcomes visitors with a handwritten greeting from Mekas. In the welcoming video, Mekas addresses the viewer in extreme close-up, holding the small digital camera up to his face intimately, and then plays a trumpet in an off-centre shot: ‘Friends, my friends; it’s exciting. Here is my new, my own site. So please check occasionally. I will be putting a lot of stuff on it, all kinds of daily materials, films, documents, photographs, conversations, music. It’s exciting, my friends, so let’s be in touch.’¹⁹ The *writerly* and intimate quality of the website’s interface draws attention to hapticity and the embodiment of Mekas’s subjectivity as an artist. And in the aftermath of Mekas’s death, this website can function as a posthumous, digital ‘self’ that presents his body of work in one interface. While Mekas was assisted in running this website (and these people are presumably still maintaining it), it is nonetheless *his* website, even branded with his signature.²⁰

Since the post-millennium, Mekas embraced camcorders and Internet-based distribution. A notable example is Mekas’s video from 2007 (‘Wednesday/Febr.21, 2007’) in which he films himself up-close (handheld with a camcorder) defending pop singer Britney Spears during her much-publicised ‘breakdown’. Mekas shakes the camera in

¹⁸ See: Marcel Hartwig, ‘Room to Meme: “David Lynch” as Problematic and Self-Evident Aesthetic Object in Digital Memes,’ in *Networked David Lynch*, ed. Hartwig, Rauscher, and Niedermüller.

¹⁹ Mekas quoted in: ‘Welcome,’ video, www.jonasmekas.com.

²⁰ Mekas’s website might be compared to Bjørn Sørenssen’s analysis of elderly YouTuber Peter (described in Chapter 1). Although Mekas is an established and competent filmmaker, he was assisted by others in distributing such materials online. Sørenssen, ‘Digital Video and Alexandre Astruc’s *Caméra-Stylo*,’ 57.

frustration and the shot goes in and out of focus, blurring and creating pixelated ‘noise’.²¹ The proximity to Mekas’s face and unmistakable handheld quality of these short videos are hallmark aesthetic features of mobilography. Other digital videos include diary-like entries of Mekas’s life and travels, shot on camcorders or smartphones, filmed as recently as 2018.

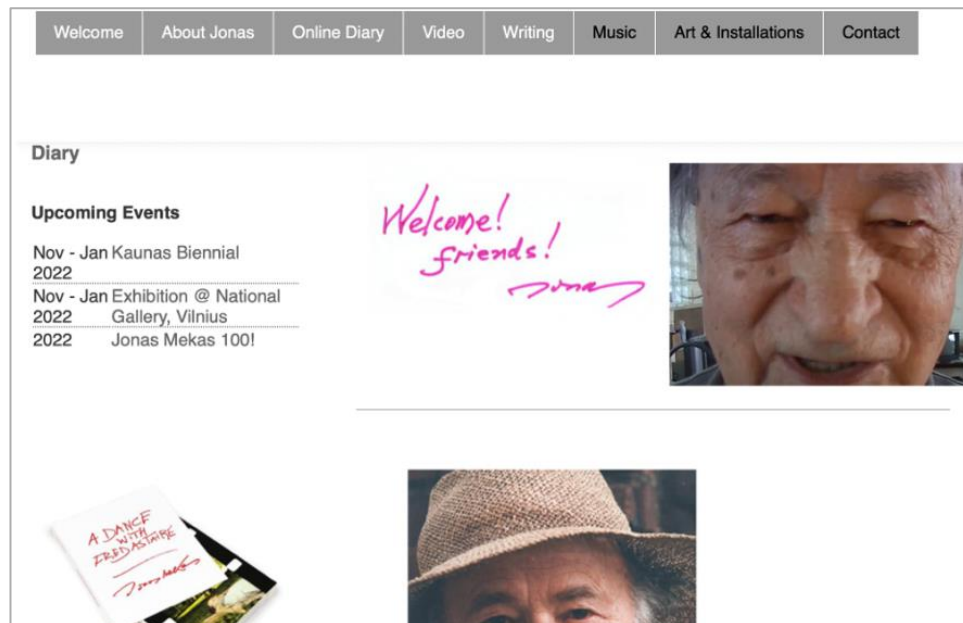


Figure 3.1: Jonas Mekas's website.

One example is a 3-minute video filmed in a pub in August 2018 with the title cards, ‘One Night from the Thousand Nights and a Night/at the Lamb pub’.²² Mekas’s handwritten title cards are physically ‘wiped’ by his hand as an editing technique that foregrounds his embodied presence as the filmmaker. Like many of Mekas’s mobile analogue films, the video is jittery owing to their handheld mode of production. This demonstrates Richard Bégin’s concept of ‘somatic images’ in handheld mobilography (detailed in Chapter 1).²³ The harsh lighting coming through the dark pub from the window creates visual ‘noise’ that is typical of ‘low-grade’ cameras like handycams or smartphones. Mekas has always embraced and encouraged the use of handheld cameras like 8mm, and he applied this experimental approach to small digital cameras. Mekas’s

²¹ See: jimiiliad, ‘Jonas Mekas on Britney Spears Shaving her Head,’ YouTube, 25 January 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qdx9VymtOo>.

²² Jonas Mekas, ‘The Lamb,’ video, 30 August 2018, <https://jonasmekas.com/diary/?p=2182>.

²³ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images’ (2016).

articulation of a caméra-stylo through mobilography has thus embraced convergence in the social media era and symbolically bridges the (analogue) avant-garde with digital screen culture.

Towards the end of his life, Jean-Luc Godard visibly embraced the smartphone as a tool. Godard's selfies and use of his smartphone can be seen in his micro-short *Official Spot*. Godard appeared at Cannes over Facetime in 2018. Godard's collaborations with Fabrice Aragno in his later work point to the co-creative possibilities of a digital caméra-stylo. Solitary creation – evoking Astruc's analogy of a lone René Descartes holed up in his room with a camera in 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' – may not necessarily be the answer to self-expression, especially if the filmmaker requires assistance in their old age.²⁴ In April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, he also participated in a masterclass with University of Art and Design Lausanne over Instagram Live.²⁵ This is an Instagram version of the extra-textual format of the director interview (on TV or on paper) that Corrigan analysed. Over a decade prior, Chris Marker had upturned the format by using a virtual avatar in *Second Life* to conduct an unorthodox live interview with an audience without showing himself, typing his answers out in short sentences.²⁶ Crucially, one difference is that viewers at home could comment on the video live as Godard was using the same technology, creating a semblance of proximity and perhaps even a sense of egalitarian use of the same dual camera-screen device (Figure 3.2).

Aside from being willingly involved in using these new technologies, Godard also became the subject of humour online when his image was accidentally captured by Google Street View's 360-degree mobile camera in 2013 (Figure 3.3).²⁷ Pictured walking on the street with Aragno in his home city of Rolle in Vaud, Switzerland, Godard's face is blurred as per Google Maps' anonymity policy, yet it is unmistakably him. On Street View, it is possible to 'move' the digitised Godard by sliding and clicking the camera angle forwards and backwards with one's hands. Taking a videographic approach, fan Robert Luxemburg's desktop film from 2018 is a moving montage of these images set to

²⁴ Godard's previous collaborations with Miéville, Gorin, and the Vertov Group starting in the 1970s precipitate this phase.

²⁵ ECAL (@ecal_ch), 'ECAL Instagram Live Jean-Luc Godard,' Instagram, 27 April 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-oqE-lgj5b/?igsh=MWpjM2ZocTl6eTFkdg==>; ECAL (@ecal_ch), 'As promised, the entirety of the #ECAL #Instagram #Live,' Instagram, 7 April 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_eu5fuAGgW/?igsh=a3VncGs5eDYybTdw.

²⁶ See: Guillaume-en-Egypt, 'The Second Life of Chris Marker (Harvard Film Archive 2009),' YouTube, 27 May 2017, <https://youtu.be/2oFYwKnNh8A?si=PSRbbhbPczPPamZn>; Criterion, 'Chris Marker's Second Life,' 13 May 2009, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1143-chris-marker-s-second-life?srltid=AfmBOoqHXJz-YcvkH9xmUApCCyvuYu06oGgv5cda8oTf962XiP_YXPvw.

²⁷ Films in Frame, 'Interview About a Film that Does(n't) Exist: Fabrice Aragno, on Jean-Luc Godard's Drôles de Guerres,' 12 February 2024, <https://www.filmsinframe.com/en/interviews/fabrice-aragno/>.

Georges Delerue's 'Thème de Camille' from Godard's *Contempt* (1963).²⁸ After his death, these images remain. Thus, the auteur can engage with these technologies directly or can be subject to co-creation of a 'self' by others online (as I will examine in Chapter 4).



Figure 3.2: Jean-Luc Godard on Instagram Live (2020).



Figure 3.3: Jean-Luc Godard (centre) on Google Street View (2013).

²⁸ Robert Luxemburg, 'Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville on Google StreetView,' YouTube, 21 February 2018, <https://youtu.be/X2ryBq31pHs?feature=shared>.

Similarly, Lynch used YouTube as a means of audiovisual expression in his later life. Lynch had embraced the Internet early-on as an extension of his voice with his member-based website davidlynch.com started in 2001 (now defunct) and later Twitter/X. It is unsurprising that he would embrace another digital mode of expression. Lynch notably lambasted smartphone spectatorship in 2007 and promoted the film theatre's special position as recently as 2023, but he was also vocal about his love for filming with digital cameras, especially after shooting short DV experiments such as *Rabbits* (2002) for his website and filming *Inland Empire* (2006) himself with a low-resolution Sony camcorder.²⁹ Interviewed by *Cahiers* in 2017, Lynch commented that he would not make feature films with a smartphone, but he did use his smartphone to spontaneously film minutia in his environment, such as spiders catching flies.³⁰ These filmed moments are indicative of the intimacy afforded by smartphones that are always *at hand* – what Dean Keep calls the 'evocative' mode of smartphone mobilography.³¹

Starting in May 2020 and until December 2022, Lynch recorded daily short to long-form vlogs ranging from lottery number announcements, weather reports, to DIY demonstrations in his workshop. Seemingly a continuation of his style of video from davidlynch.com (which included similar weather reports), these short videos were instead uploaded to his YouTube channel, David Lynch Theater, described as 'short films, works, and surprises'.³² In these videos, Lynch is typically sitting in his workshop, and he is either facing a static camera or holding his smartphone, while speaking directly to the viewer in one take or shot. Their production is clearly low-scale, filmed at home. These videos are somewhat repetitive in their framing and format, although some changes occur over time such as Lynch's position. His style of direct address to the viewer resembles a vlog, contrasting with the typical format of feature films. In some reports, Lynch holds the smartphone up close to his face and shakes the camera while excitedly making an announcement, creating motion blurring (Figure 3.4). His smartphone can be seen in the reflection of his sunglasses. Like Mekas's example, Lynch's handheld intimacy with the

²⁹ See: Andrew Pulver, "'It's All in the Damn History Books': David Lynch Rails Against the Death of Cinemas," *The Guardian*, 24 April 2023, <https://amp.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/24/its-all-in-the-damn-history-books-david-lynch-rails-against-the-death-of-cinemas>; Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 21; Sam Wigley, 'Attack of the Zeros and Ones: The Early Years of Digital Cinema, as Told by David Lynch, Miranda July, Michael Mann and More,' BFI, 25 November 2022, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/attack-zeros-ones-early-years-digital-cinema-told-david-lynch-miranda-july-michael-mann-more>.

³⁰ David Lynch interviewed in: Stéphane Delormé and Jean-Philippe Tessé, 'Mystery Man,' *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 739 (December 2017).

³¹ Keep, 'Smartphones and Evocative Documentary Practices,' in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry, 42.

³² David Lynch Theater, YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@DAVIDLYNCHTHEATER>.

camera is unmistakable.³³ During the first year of the pandemic, film productions were postponed, and filmmaking resources were limited. This mode of individualistic, socially distanced filmmaking with a smartphone became a useful vehicle for audiovisual production in isolation for many (not just auteurs). Significantly, Lynch announced in August 2024 that he would only be able to direct films remotely from his home as he suffered from emphysema.³⁴ Where feature film production necessitates more exertion and close contact with others, smartphone mobilography seemed to take on more practical significance for Lynch as a safer mode of audiovisual production during this period.³⁵



Figure 3.4: David Lynch's YouTube channel.

Some older filmmakers have notably been assisted by their family members or friends in establishing an online presence. In Varda's case, her creative partnership with the younger French artist JR for *Faces Places* helped establish her online presence via

³³ The close-up intimacy in these videos might be compared to Lynch's lo-fi commercial for his Signature Cup coffee brand in 2012. See: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xo8qlb>.

³⁴ Jacob Stolworthy, 'David Lynch Has Emphysema and Can No Longer "Leave the House" Due to Covid Fears,' Independent UK, 5 August 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/david-lynch-age-movies-emphysema-smoking-b2591296.html>.

³⁵ After Lynch's death, an estate sale of his personal items featured many tools from his workshop, props, musical instruments, and furniture. See: Andrew Pulver, 'More Than 400 Personal Effects Owned by David Lynch Put Up for Auction,' *The Guardian*, 29 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/may/29/more-than-400-personal-effects-owned-by-david-lynch-put-up-for-auction>.

Instagram.³⁶ Varda was also seemingly assisted by her daughter Rosalie (@rosalievarda) who uses the platform regularly. Varda's account is still posthumously visible. Francesca Scorsese (@francescascorsese), the youngest daughter of Martin Scorsese, often records TikTok and Instagram videos featuring her father. In one video, Francesca encourages her father to participate in a game that uses AR facial recognition technology. Scorsese must choose his favourite film by nodding his head in the direction of his preference. The AR technology fails to track his motion, and he becomes frustrated (Figure 3.5).³⁷ Humour arises from the perception that TikTok is a 'Gen Z app' and that an older '*film* director' such as Scorsese is a fish out of water; he is using a platform he doesn't necessarily understand or feel at home in. Scorsese has commented on the younger generation: 'They always have those iPhone cameras in their hands. You're not aware. I honestly did not know she was going to post it ... They use the words "post it," right?'³⁸ This comment highlights not just the versatility of smartphones as recording devices, but also the informality of using social media platforms as distribution sites. Scorsese has even referred to the image on the iPhone as the 'new cinéma vérité' in reference to the movement's embrace of mobile, lightweight cameras and filming life 'unawares'.³⁹ Francesca's popular videos with her father have perhaps introduced Scorsese's auteur persona to a new generation on TikTok, albeit via her (co-)authorial control.

In contrast, Paul Schrader's Facebook text posts are clearly marked as expressions of his thoughts and he is not assisted in posting them.⁴⁰ Schrader uses Facebook as a kind of public diary, sharing opinions about films, music, and culture that have drawn attention for their bluntness and controversial stances.⁴¹ According to *Variety*, the distributor A24 even asked Schrader to 'go dark' on social media to maintain good press around his film *First Reformed* (2017) during the awards season, suggesting a tension between the

³⁶ See, for more analysis: St John, 'From Cannes to Cardboard' (2021).

³⁷ Francesca Scorsese (@francescascorsese), 'In case you can't tell,' TikTok, 13 November 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@francescascorsese/video/7301045430882913582?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7421209786136167968.

³⁸ Ellise Shafer, 'Martin Scorsese Says He's "Tricked Into" Making TikToks with Daughter Francesca: "I Didn't Know Those Things Go Viral"', *Variety*, 16 November 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/martin-scorsese-tiktoks-daughter-francesca-tricked-1235792468/>.

³⁹ Ryan Lattanzio, 'Martin Scorsese: "The Image on an iPhone Is the New Cinema Vérité"', *IndieWire*, 12 April 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/martin-scorsese-david-johansen-documentary-personality-crisis-one-night-only-1234827846/>.

⁴⁰ Paul Schrader, Facebook profile, <https://www.facebook.com/paul.schrader.900/>.

⁴¹ Appropriately, Schrader began his career as a film critic and diaries feature frequently as narrative devices in his films.

author's expressive freedom on social media and the commercial priorities of film promotion within the industry.⁴²



Figure 3.5: Francesca Scorsese and Martin Scorsese playing a movie game (TikTok, 2023).

It is significant that older filmmakers have embraced these platforms, in whatever form they choose, because their careers span a post-cinematic *transition* from the pre-digital era to the digital era. In the years following major debates among critics on the crisis of cinema in the digital age, the uniqueness or, alternatively, *porosity* of cinema is magnified through major names within the industry.⁴³ Through the figure of the auteur, what Carol Vernallis calls the ‘cross-media swirl’ is made evident, where media

⁴² Christian Zilko, ‘Paul Schrader Defends His Facebook Posting: It’s a “Very Efficient” Way to Criticize Films,’ IndieWire, 9 December 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/paul-schrader-defends-facebook-film-criticism-efficient-1234933821/>; Margeaux Sippell, ‘Paul Schrader Speaks Out After Saying A24 Put Him in “Facebook Jail”,’ *Variety*, 27 February 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/news/paul-schrader-facebook-jail-kevin-spacey-24-1203151276/>.

⁴³ Despite being launched as a communication platform aimed at young adults, Facebook is now popularly associated with ‘out of touch’ older generations of users (‘Boomers’), replete with outdated memes and misinformation, as younger users (‘Gen Z’) have seemingly abandoned the site in favour of alternatives like TikTok. Therefore, Schrader’s posts may be perceived as the ‘unfiltered’ and ‘real’ expressions of a cranky older person using a site that has become stereotypically associated with his generation. See: Sara Fischer, “Not your mom’s Facebook”: Inside Meta’s Plan to Win Back the Youth,’ *Axios*, 4 June 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/06/04/facebook-meta-gen-z-users>.

boundaries are not so rigid in the digital age. Cinema and new media technologies borrow and interact with each other more and more.⁴⁴ Although the directors discussed here started their careers in a pre-digital film industry or pre-digital avant-garde cinema, they have turned to mobile devices and social media in their older years as a method of expressing themselves in new ways. As new media technologies borrow from older media such as writing and film, it is not surprising that filmmakers would embrace Internet technologies like social media applications that can combine text, images, video, and graphics. Out of all the platforms, it is ostensibly the Instagram platform that has appealed to filmmakers the most.

The Instagram Caméra-Style

Although filmmakers evidently use a variety of Internet-connected platforms and media, Instagram is the primary app used publicly by a broad range of directors. One reason for this could be the platform's age, being a well-established platform nearing 15 years since its launch in 2010. Its close competitor TikTok, by comparison, was launched globally in 2017. While the number of TikTok's monthly users worldwide has reached a height that rivals that of Instagram (around 1 billion monthly users) and the two platforms closely match and compete with each other's novel features, there are some key differences between them.⁴⁵ TikTok is popularly described as a 'Gen Z app' because a large portion of its users and high-profile 'creators' like Charli D'Amelio are in their teens and twenties. 25% of TikTok users in the US are aged 18-24 years, with over half being under 30.⁴⁶ Indeed, it is Gen Z who are the mainstream trend-setters on this platform, according to TikTok scholar Trevor Boffone.⁴⁷ This factor may deter older directors from using TikTok (as filmmakers considered 'auteurs' with established careers are generally not under 30).

And perhaps most importantly, while Instagram enables photo-sharing and video-sharing, TikTok only enables video-sharing. Therefore, another reason for Instagram's appeal to directors is its multimedia versatility. As St. John argues in relation to Varda's use of Instagram, 'as a platform that allows both photography and video in combination

⁴⁴ Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 3.

⁴⁵ For example, Instagram has changed its interface on several occasions, seemingly in efforts to mimic the style of TikTok feeds. Like TikTok's FYP (For You Page), the Instagram 'Reels' feature is one seemingly endless scroll of short videos, where the user must swipe downwards to watch the next video.

⁴⁶ Fabio Duarte, 'TikTok User Age, Gender, & Demographics (2024),' Exploding Topics, 11 October 2024, <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>.

⁴⁷ Boffone, *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, 1.

with text captions, Instagram [allows] the artists the greatest continuity with their other [film] work.’⁴⁸ Indeed, Instagram explicitly shares more artistic qualities with cinema than Facebook or Twitter/X, which are certainly used by directors but are primarily text-based platforms (i.e., statuses and tweets). Instagram is primarily a photographic and audiovisual platform. Lev Manovich notes: ‘If [...] Twitter is for news and links exchange, Facebook is for social communication [...] Instagram is for aesthetic visual communication.’⁴⁹ Although Twitter/X and Facebook do facilitate audiovisual content, Manovich is accurate in differentiating their respective platform vernaculars. This is not to say that directors do not use apps like TikTok and Twitter/X or that these platforms do not offer creative potential.

While Instagram has in-built parameters for the size and length of posts, users can express a creative vision on the platform. Importantly, as Crystal Abidin et al and Manovich have studied respectively, the grid-like interface of an Instagram profile may have a distinguishable ‘curation’ that reflects the user’s tastes and individuality. The desire to individualise the Instagram medium is expressed in filters, colours, themes, or compositions.⁵⁰ Appropriately, having an individual *signature* is also a significant part of Astruc’s theory, and subsequently *la politique des auteurs* (through mise en scène analysis, for example). And because auteurs may make films with autobiographical elements, Instagram is a highly suitable platform to extend subjectivity, self-representation, and self-reflection by sharing one’s appearance (selfies), personal life, and memories. Instagram offers a new creative platform for auteurs, while bringing audiences (followers) ‘closer’ to them and their work. Although Instagram is not a top priority of a director’s career (as it is for Instagram influencers) or indeed the reason they are well-known, analysing their Instagram profiles offers a larger scope of their creative activities.

There are undeniable differences between Instagram and cinema. Unlike standard film productions, Instagram facilitates a solitary creative experience. While a director may typically work on a feature production for months or years, posting an Instagram video or image can be instant. Posting on Instagram does not require studio influence, funding, crew labour, or a distributor. Instagram is free to download and use. Unlike traditional filmmaking, Instagram can facilitate every stage of production and postproduction on a smaller scale. Instagram combines the function necessary for

⁴⁸ St. John, ‘From Cannes to Cardboard,’ 163.

⁴⁹ Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 41.

⁵⁰ Abidin, Highfield, and Leaver, *Instagram* (2020); Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017).

recording, in-app editing and special effects features (filters, colouration, text, music, etc.), and distribution (posting publicly and receiving likes and views). And importantly, these actions are done by hand and engaged with on a haptic touchscreen that facilitates both recording and viewing. Unlike standard cinema formats, the video framing or aspect ratio for Instagram Reels (edited videos) and Instagram Stories (posts that last 24 hours) is typically in portrait mode. TikTok videos and Snapchat videos are similarly in portrait mode. This suitably fits the shape of the smartphone as a viewing *dispositif*. Instagram images can be posted as squares (1:1), evoking the polaroid, and in ‘carousel’ mode with sequential images or videos posted simultaneously that can be swiped through from side to side, evoking the Kodak Carousel slide projector from the 1960s. Instagram images and videos can also be posted in landscape formats that were introduced in 2015 to achieve a more ‘cinematic’ effect.⁵¹ The addition of ‘Reels’ by 2020 (to compete with TikTok) has allowed creators to record, edit, and display long-form videos on their profiles. This feature semantically converges ‘old’ media (cinema) with ‘new’ media. A cinematic term like ‘Reels’, suggesting the physical experience of loading film reels into a projector, foregrounds a sense of post-digital nostalgia for analogue technologies. This also points to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s view that what is *new* about ‘new media’ is how they remediate older media, even in their branded repackaging.⁵²

While experiencing Internet technologies does not automatically result in authorship (using a search engine, for example), posting on a platform like Instagram does serve a more explicitly authorial purpose. Manovich’s argument in *The Language of New Media* that all computer users can ‘speak’ the language of the interface is true of regular Instagram use, where potentially ‘end users feel that they are not just consumers but “authors” creating a new media object or experience.’ Even if combining or reproducing ‘preexisting texts, idioms, and schemes in new ways, the actual material process of art making, nevertheless, supports the Romantic ideal.’⁵³ Indeed, even the selection of predetermined elements – like choosing in-built filters, text, or music on the app’s interface – is a key operation for Instagram users as ‘authors’. Manovich’s later research into ‘Instagramism’ (the particular form and content of Instagram) partly extends the efforts of film critics, like Astruc, who were concerned with legitimising cinema as an art and language worthy of study. Manovich consistently describes the Instagram profile

⁵¹ Instagram, ‘Introducing Portrait and Landscape Formats on Instagram,’ 27 August 2015, <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-landscape-and-portrait-formats-on-instagram>.

⁵² Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 15.

⁵³ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 124-125.

owner as an ‘author’, regardless of the types of posts they upload and despite the platform’s status as a mass medium.⁵⁴ The expanded notion of authorship (or at least the feeling of authorship) in digital media suggests that posting images and videos on Instagram can be viewed as an artistic activity. It is a type of caméra-stylo, despite the pre-set features of its interface designed by the company (not to mention the variety of other editing apps available to Instagram users). Instagram, as an app that facilitates touch and autonomy, manifests a part material and part ‘virtual’ caméra-stylo, which has profound creative potential for all users, including auteurs, on Instagram.

While the traditional conception of ‘cinema’ as a commercial art form has generally been applied to a few (i.e., ‘filmmakers’), social media applications are just as accessible to filmmakers as they are for general users of these platforms. Auteurs share these creative spaces with ordinary social media users as well as content creators, vloggers, and influencers who are financially enmeshed in social media economies. Creators, as I will refer to them broadly, often independently create low-cost audiovisual content. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, the examples of real content creators featured in Jude’s *Do Not Expect Too Much* and Sebastián Silva’s *Rotting in the Sun* show how the new screen landscape includes those who access free and easy technologies. On Instagram, directors participate in an aesthetic culture that *all users* of the app can participate in. While the ways in which directors make use of the app for promoting their films may differ from ‘ordinary’ users, the platform’s affordances are nearly the same for every user.⁵⁵ Practically speaking, feature film production (and access to the film industry at large) is much more restrictive and requires certain skills and financing developed over time. However, amateur filmmaking and home moviemaking beyond the industry do exist, and online video platforms like YouTube and Vimeo have made distribution of these films much easier. While auteurs are competent in filmmaking techniques, Instagram and other social media sites may offer a tool that is more informal, less structured (in terms of production), and intimate.

It would be naïve to suggest that making a feature film is as easy as posting on Instagram or that filmmakers *prefer* Instagram over feature film production. Yet, as audiovisual media forms, they do share some key aspects. Both cinema and Instagram are multimedia forms, as Instagram users and filmmakers combine text, sound, live footage,

⁵⁴ See: Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017).

⁵⁵ This can depend on factors such as whether an account is a ‘business’ account, a verified account, or an influencer’s account, which have tailored in-built features to support certain requirements.

and even digital graphics. Digital images and videos posted on Instagram are translated in numeric code as pixels on a computer device screen, and since the 1990s, cinema has also become an increasingly digital medium in the production, post-production, and projection stages. Perhaps ironically, a filmmaker's digital feature film (shot on a professional-grade digital camera) shares more formal properties with an Instagram video (shot on a smartphone) than it does with material film stock (which can then, of course, be digitised).

Like cinema and most major online platforms, Instagram is undeniably commercial. Ad revenue has especially driven profit. For example, Instagram generated advertising revenue totalling 32.4 billion dollars for parent company Meta in 2021.⁵⁶ Instagram culture is also deeply intertwined with influencer culture and its commercialism. Initially launched by founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger as a photo-sharing app, Instagram has since become driven towards marketing and entertainment, especially through influencers and creators on the app. CEO Adam Mosseri is quoted in a tweet from 2021:

At Instagram we're always trying to build new features that help you get the most out of your experience. Right now we're focused on four key areas: Creators, Video, Shopping and Messaging.⁵⁷

Words like 'experience' and 'creators' in Mosseri's statement suggest that Instagram, like the cinema, is an artistic space (albeit an online one) and entertainment commodity where casual viewers enjoy themselves and more active creators, influencers, or 'prod-users' are also valued for their creativity. This mirrors to a certain degree the film industry, where art, mass entertainment, and business meet and where, for some critics, auteurism serves as a creative core. Instagram is simultaneously a market space that facilitates advertising, sponsorship, and shopping, and a platform for individual self-expression. Influencers and content creators may generate income through platform monetisation (e.g., via ad revenue on YouTube), audience subscription fees (e.g., via Patreon), and long-term paid brand

⁵⁶ BBC, 'Instagram and Facebook Ads Drive Profit Surge,' 31 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0dme129mk4o>; Sam Becker, 'Court Documents Reveal Just How Much Money Instagram Makes for Meta – and it's a Lot,' Fast Company, 8 April 2024, <https://www.fastcompany.com/91088837/court-documents-reveal-just-how-much-money-instagram-makes-for-meta-and-its-a-lot>.

⁵⁷ Adam Mosseri quoted in: Mitchell Clark, 'Head of Instagram Says Instagram is no Longer a Photo Sharing App,' The Verge, 30 June 2021, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/6/30/22557942/instagram-no-longer-photo-app-video-entertainment-focus>.

endorsement (e.g., on Instagram), and can exert more control over their careers than other entertainers. They may even cross over into Hollywood or the music industry (for example, Addison Rae).⁵⁸ It may be surprising that avant-garde or arthouse directors choose to use this mainstream corporate platform. For Astruc, the promise of the *caméra-stylo* cuts through the amalgamation of industry and mass entertainment. However, filmmakers do participate in commerce to varying degrees to sell, distribute, and promote their films and can successfully adapt to new, popular technologies such as streaming and social media. However, while influencers and content creators make a living on Instagram, auteurs are not typically enmeshed in the platform's economy and are therefore 'non-professional' users of the platform.

To a greater extent than consuming the auteur via interviews, Instagram followers can see what their favourite auteurs look like and how they act. Followers can 'consume' the auteur by simply viewing their posts. Compared to interviews (typically structured by questions and answers and limited to a short span of time), directors have potentially more control over their own publicity on Instagram, where they can represent their life and work how they choose over a long term and even daily. Furthermore, whereas general audiences could not previously engage directly with well-known filmmakers, apart from at film festivals or Q&A screenings, Instagram can create a semblance of proximity and intimacy between the audience (followers) and the auteur, as it does with other public figures and celebrities. The follower can comment on and like an auteur's post or even, hypothetically, message the auteur with a question in Direct Messages (although a response is certainly not guaranteed).

Directors may even encourage contact with their followers online. In both the lead-up to and following the release of his film *Megalopolis* (2024), Francis Ford Coppola participated in two rounds of AMA ('Ask Me Anything') on Instagram, where followers were invited to submit questions in the comments section, to which Coppola responded to a degree.⁵⁹ The AMA is a promotional strategy often practised by film and TV stars on platforms like Reddit that can consolidate the semblance of two-way

⁵⁸ See: Stuart Cunningham and David Craig ed., *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* (NYU Press, 2021); Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, 'Creator Governance in Social Media Entertainment,' *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883428>.

⁵⁹ For example, I submitted a question for Coppola, 'What led you to join Instagram? Are you enjoying Instagram as a way to express your ideas?' but did not receive his answer. Francis Ford Coppola (@francisfordcoppola), 'Ask Me Anything,' 23 February 2024, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/C3sZ9RErAHT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

communication for fans.⁶⁰ Followers and fans have even been shown to argue publicly with directors in online exchanges. In a thread of several Twitter/X posts in April 2024, fans criticised director Barry Jenkins for ‘selling out’ by departing from more personal auteur cinema towards high-budget Disney films: ‘Barry, You’re too good and talented for this [Bob] Iger’s soulless machine’ and ‘you don’t have to shill like this.’ In response, Jenkins defended his career choices.⁶¹ This anecdotal interaction points to the conditions of auteurism within the industry today, namely audience perceptions of its artistic value (a ‘soul’) and their vocal input in it, and the visibility and accessibility of ‘auteurs’ in online spaces.

Instagram profiles bearing the names of famous people are not always digital avatars of those individuals. This is demonstrated especially by fan-run accounts. As I will examine in Chapter 4, fan-run Instagram profiles like @accidentallywesanderson that celebrate and evoke a director’s style can serve as important paratextual agents that promote the author as brand-name. Paradoxically, @accidentallywesanderson is independent of Anderson, who does not publicly use Instagram, as a structuring force but is nonetheless centrally influenced by his personal vision. Thus, the auteur can be ‘consumed’ *second-hand* online, in a sense, by the interpretative lens of fan media. Typically, the verification symbol (blue tick) signifies the real-world individual’s connection to the account with their name.⁶² For brands and influencers, verification can provide accounts with credibility, while discrediting copycat accounts that could damage their image.⁶³ Verified accounts will typically appear in the top tier of search results. Less than 3% of Instagram accounts are verified, but verified accounts benefit from more engagement rates, seemingly because Instagram gives them algorithmic preference amongst over 1 billion users.⁶⁴ Therefore, for purely promotional purposes, it would be in the best interest of auteurs to have their account verified. However, other signs indicate that an account belongs to an individual director and when a director manages their

⁶⁰ See, for example: Stephen Barker, ‘Keanu Reeves’ 8 Biggest Reveals From His Reddit AMA,’ Screen Rant, 10 March 2023, <https://screenrant.com/keanu-reeves-reddit-ama-2023-biggest-reveals/>.

⁶¹ See: @midereres_k, ‘Barry, You’re too good and talented for this Iger’s soulless machine,’ Twitter/X, 29 April 2024, https://x.com/midereres_k/status/1784958188078449088.

⁶² Not every verified account with a famous director’s name necessarily belongs to the director. For example, the verified account @wong_kar_wai does not belong to the director with the same name.

⁶³ Justin Grome, ‘What Social Media Verification Can Mean For Your Brand – And How To Get It,’ *Forbes*, 16 March, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/03/16/what-social-media-verification-can-mean-for-your-brand---and-how-to-get-it/>.

⁶⁴ Nick Backlanov, ‘All You Need to Know About Instagram Verification in 2024,’ Business 2 Community, 4 March 2024, <https://www.business2community.com/instagram/all-you-need-to-know-about-instagram-verification-02371692>; Statista, ‘Number of Instagram Users Worldwide from 2021 to 2024,’ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183585/instagram-number-of-global-users/>.

profile personally.⁶⁵ Selfies and use of the first-person ‘I’ in post captions signal personal use of the app. Accounts that are managed with some assistance may refer to the director in the third person. For example, the account of 95-year-old avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky (@alejandrojodorowsky) is managed in collaboration with his wife Pascale.

To convey the scale of Instagram’s popularity as a tool among auteurs, the table (Table 3.1) below shows a sample of 50 directors with public Instagram profiles. These are directors who have achieved critical acclaim at festivals (some winning major awards) or are well-established as artists and auteur-directors within film discourses and scholarship.⁶⁶ The method for acquiring this sample involved searching at least 80 names of well-known living directors in the Instagram search bar and, if found, their name was added to the list. This method was repeated until a sizeable sample of 50 public accounts was acquired. Usefully, several directors follow each other, and Instagram shows this information publicly. While the list below does not include *all* the directors who use the platform, this list accounts for a variety of nationalities, modes of production, styles, ages, and genders. They represent backgrounds in arthouse, avant-garde/experimental, independent, global, and Hollywood cinemas. Three factors are recorded below: (1) Verified (yes/no); (2) Promotional (yes/no); and (3) Personal (yes/no).

<i>Director</i>	<i>Instagram username (public)</i>	<i>Verified</i>	<i>Promotional</i>	<i>Personal</i>
Agnès Varda ⁶⁷	@agnes.varda	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alejandro Jodorowsky	@alejandrojodorowsky	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alfonso Cuarón	@alfonsocuaron	Yes	Yes	No
Alice Winocour	@alicewinocour	Yes	Yes	Yes
Anna Biller	@msannabiller	No	Yes	Yes
Apichatpong Weerasethakul	@apichatpong_w	No	No	Yes
Asghar Farhadi	@asgharfarhadiofficial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barry Jenkins	@bandrybarry	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baz Luhrmann	@bazluhrmann	Yes	Yes	Yes
Benny Safdie	@bowedtie	Yes	Yes	Yes

⁶⁵ Actors have been shown to have strategic ‘promo only’ Instagram accounts. Actors and even directors may have private ‘finstas’ (fake insta) that feature more personal content.

⁶⁶ For the purposes of emphasising personal use of the platform, profiles run posthumously by organisations are excluded, such as @stanleykubrick run by the Official Stanley Kubrick Collection, or organisations such as the Wim Wenders Foundation (@wimwendersfoundation) and the David Lynch Foundation (@davidlynchfoundation).

⁶⁷ While Varda’s profile is now posthumous, the profile remains public.

Boots Riley	@bootsriley	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bruce LaBruce	@brucelabruce	Yes	Yes	Yes
Céline Sciamma	@celine_sciamma	No	Yes	Yes
Claire Denis	@clairedenis6	No	No	Yes
Claire Simon	@claire_simon_cinema	No	Yes	Yes
Claudia Weill	@claudiaweill	No	No	Yes
Coralie Fargeat	@coralie_fargeat	No	Yes	Yes
Cristian Mungiu	@cristian_mungiu	No	Yes	Yes
Fatih Akin	@fatih_bombero	Yes	Yes	Yes
Francis Ford Coppola	@francisfordcoppola	Yes	Yes	Yes
François Ozon	@ozonfrancois	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gaspar Noé	@gasparnoeofficial	No	Yes	Yes
Guillermo del Toro	@gdtreal	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gus Van Sant	@gus_van_sant	Yes	No	Yes
Guy Maddin	@guy.maddin	No	No	Yes
Jafar Panahi	@jafar.panahi	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jim Jarmusch	@jim.jarmusch	Yes	No	Yes
Justine Triet	@justine.triet	No	Yes	Yes
Ira Sachs	@irasachsfilm	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lukas Dhont	@lukasdhont	No	Yes	Yes
Martin Scorsese	@martinscorsese_	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mati Diop	@matidiop	No	Yes	Yes
Matías Piñeiro	@matiaspineiro	No	Yes	Yes
Mira Nair	@pagliji	Yes	Yes	Yes
Miranda July	@mirandajuly	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nanni Moretti	@nannimoretti_	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nicolas Winding Refn	@nwrefn	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nuri Bilge Ceylan	@nuri_bilge_ceylan	No	Yes	Yes
Paolo Sorrentino	@paolosorrentino_real	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quentin Dupieux	@mroizo	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radu Jude	@radujude	No	No	Yes
Roy Andersson	@royanderssonofficial	No	Yes	Yes
Ruben Östlund	@ruben_ostlund	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sally Potter	@sallypotter	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sarah Polley	@realsarahpolley	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sean Baker	@bakermovies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sebastián Silva	@sebastiansilva79	No	Yes	Yes
Sofia Coppola	@sofiacoppola	Yes	Yes	Yes

Spike Lee	@officialspikelee	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tsai Ming Liang	@tsai_ming_liang	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 3.1: list of 50 directors' profiles on Instagram, recorded as of October 2024.

'Personal' vs 'Promotional' Posts

The table above demonstrates that most directors from this sample use the app for *both* promotional and personal posting. Only 7 out of 50 directors listed (Denis, Jarmusch, Jude, Maddin, Van Sant, Weerasethakul, Weill) use the app solely for personal posts rather than sharing official promotional materials for their new films, as of autumn 2024. Out of this sample, only 18 out of 50 accounts are *not* verified (including Denis's account). Among this sample, it is evident that Instagram largely serves as a promotional *and* personal tool and that most directors receive verification. Considering these results, self-promotion on the platform is now a normalised practice among director accounts, in combination with the 'personal' style of posting that has become the 'norm' for all active users of the platform.⁶⁸ Thus, the promotional 'self' of the auteur has effectively been extended to Instagram, where they can potentially exert more control over how they present their lives and work.

What I call 'personal' Instagram posts share much in common with Instagram aesthetics in general: selfies, spontaneous and casual mobilography, AR filters, text captions, curated aesthetics, personal memories, and political messages. These are the kinds of posts that are typical for *all* users of the platform. 'Personal' posts may include images of family and friends, pets, personal interests like art and music and range from still images to videos like Reels and Stories. In aesthetic terms, 'personal' posts can be more spontaneous, informal, and even imperfect in comparison to more polished promotional materials. Personal posts also instil more of a sense of the account owner's haptic engagement with their smartphone *dispositif*, through the conditions of smartphone

⁶⁸ Results from this sample present two further interesting points: (1) while Instagram's current worldwide gender demographics are balanced at nearly 50/50, 35 (70%) of the directors from this 50-person sample are cisgender male. This may reflect the skewed gender gap among directors in the film industry, rather than Instagram. See: Statista, 'Distribution of Instagram Users Worldwide as of January 2024, by Gender,' 21 March 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/802776/distribution-of-users-on-instagram-worldwide-gender/>; and (2) the oldest living director in this sample is Jodorowsky (95), while the youngest is Dhont (33). Some directors from this sample also regularly use Twitter/X (such as Jenkins, Fargeat, Jodorowsky, and Safdie).

use such as taking selfies and even drawing on the screen. Like all Instagram users, directors must work within the platform's formal parameters (video length, etc.).⁶⁹

On the other hand, it is the method of production, aesthetics, context, and subject matter that differentiate 'personal' from 'promotional' posts. 'Promotional' Instagram posts are graphics, posters, trailer videos, and other 'official' paratextual materials that explicitly market a feature film and are generally treated as ancillary to the feature film text. Paparazzi images of awards ceremonies and film festivals, excerpts from film reviews, taglines, critics' quotes, and video clips of interviews may also contribute to this aspect of promotion, as they explicitly encourage followers to see the film in question. Official materials like posters and graphics are generally designed and produced collaboratively (typically by a studio, streaming platform, distributor, or agency). The primary purpose of the trailer or poster is to promote the film text. While some directors may certainly have a say in the design of such materials, the primary objective of promotional paratexts is to market the film on social media or in the 'real world' with eye-catching designs, text, and editing, and to present certain bite-size ideas about the film. Typical examples on Instagram include the graphics shared by Coralie Fargeat (@coralie_fargeat) for her film *The Substance* (2024) and by Ruben Östlund (@ruben_ostlund) for his film *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), that are clearly attributed to their respective distributors Mubi and NEON (Figure 3.6).⁷⁰ While it is known that some Hollywood stars are contractually obligated to share marketing materials on social media by studios and agencies, it is not certain whether directors are similarly obligated to do so by distributors.⁷¹

This is not to say that promotional materials cannot be considered artistic in their own right, as notable film poster artists, including Saul Bass and those from the Polish abstract graphic design cohort, have demonstrated otherwise.⁷² And, by differentiating 'personal' and 'promotional' posts, it is not to say that a post cannot facilitate both

⁶⁹ Instagram Stories can last for 7-second segments as images or as videos for up to 60 seconds; Reels for up to 90 seconds or 3 minutes; while Instagram Live videos can go on continuously for up to 4 hours.

⁷⁰ Coralie Fargeat (@coralie_fargeat), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/coralie_fargeat?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==; Ruben Östlund (@ruben_ostlund), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/ruben_ostlund?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

⁷¹ See: Debra Cassens Weiss, 'Celebrity Contracts Recognize Importance of Social Media,' ABA Journal, https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/celebrity_contracts_recognize_importance_of_social_media.

⁷² For example: Mervyn Marshall, '20 Fantastic Polish Film Posters That Are Better Than The Originals,' Taste of Cinema, 3 April 2016, <http://www.tasteofcinema.com/2016/20-fantastic-polish-film-posters-that-are-better-than-the-originals/>. This extends to audiences' enjoyment of ancillary materials in their own right. See, for discussion: Kathleen Williams, 'Extended Attractions: Recut Trailers, Film Promotion, and Audience Desire,' in *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes, and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, ed. Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (University of Texas Press, 2016), 260–276.

functions. Rather, ‘promotional’ posts are always explicitly the by-products of feature film production and tools of the film industry at large, whereas ‘personal’ posts may not explicitly tie a director to their film productions. At the same time, what connects ‘personal’ posts to the industry is the individual filmmaker, who can cross the border between personal and promotional.



Figure 3.6: promotional graphics shared by Ruben Östlund and Coralie Fargeat on Instagram.

It is worth noting that a ‘promotional’ post does not rule out the director’s creative flair or personal vision. In February 2025, months after the film’s release, Fargeat shared her personal PDF ‘lookbook’ for fans of *The Substance* on Twitter/X.⁷³ Auteurs may take photos and videos that capture promotional activities and materials for their films (posters on the street, for example), thus offering a personal point of view on official promotional material. For example, Varda used Instagram to personally document her global tour of festivals and awards ceremonies from 2017 to 2019 for *Faces Places* (Figure 3.7/left). Her smartphone photos and videos of her travels combine the informal, amateurish,

⁷³ See: Coralie Fargeat, ‘The Substance Look Book,’ Google Drive, https://drive.google.com/file/d/16jkY6a5IAkPUwb4oauawwW2SM_1vgvzf/view.

‘personal’ aesthetics of mobilography in the vein of *The Gleaners and I*, with the more promotional aim of spreading the word online about her new film projects, often referencing her work and using hashtags like #visagesvillages and #Cannes2017 in post captions. Thus, her Instagram serves as its own personal travelogue or audiovisual diary that still posthumously archives her subjective experiences from her final years.

Another example is Gaspar Noé’s (@gasparnoeofficial) extensive promotion of his film *Climax* (2018) from May 2018, which included a series of colourful graphic posts (Figure 3.7/right).⁷⁴ Evidently, these posts are designed specifically for Instagram. They are shaped in the square format and feature text in the style of Instagram infographics (playing with the vernacular of the platform). The graphics include tongue-in-cheek text slogans such as ‘I WILL MAKE FRANCE GREAT AGAIN’ (borrowed from Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan), ‘CLIMAX’ in the colours of the French flag, and ‘TIME HAS COME FOR RETINAL CIRCUMCISION’. Other images include an atomic bomb, a close-up of a bloodshot human eye, Noé’s selfie in front of the French flag, and a bowl of red sangria (a reference to the film’s plot). The colour scheme mirrors the red tinted lighting effects and colour palette in *Climax*. These slogans and images (in the style of subliminal messages) consciously emphasise Noé’s public ‘brand name’ as an auteur invested in ‘extremity’ since the turn of the millennium. Thus, Noé’s profile grid functions as a kind of ‘mood board’ with images that are distinct from but aesthetically evoke the film. This echoes Éric Rohmer, who wrote his film scripts in notebooks with covers that matched the colour palette of his imagined films, like a kind of preliminary mood board.⁷⁵ The stylistic contrasts between Varda’s profile and Noé’s profile are evident, especially in their colour palettes (Figure 3.7), thus demonstrating that the same platform can be used in very different ways by auteurs to express their own aesthetic sensibilities. While it cannot be verified that Noé designed these graphics himself, they demonstrate that what is ‘promotional’ on Instagram can also be, in effect, ‘personal’ via the auteur persona.

⁷⁴ Gaspar Noé (@gasparnoeofficial), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/gasparnoeofficial?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

⁷⁵ See: Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 247.

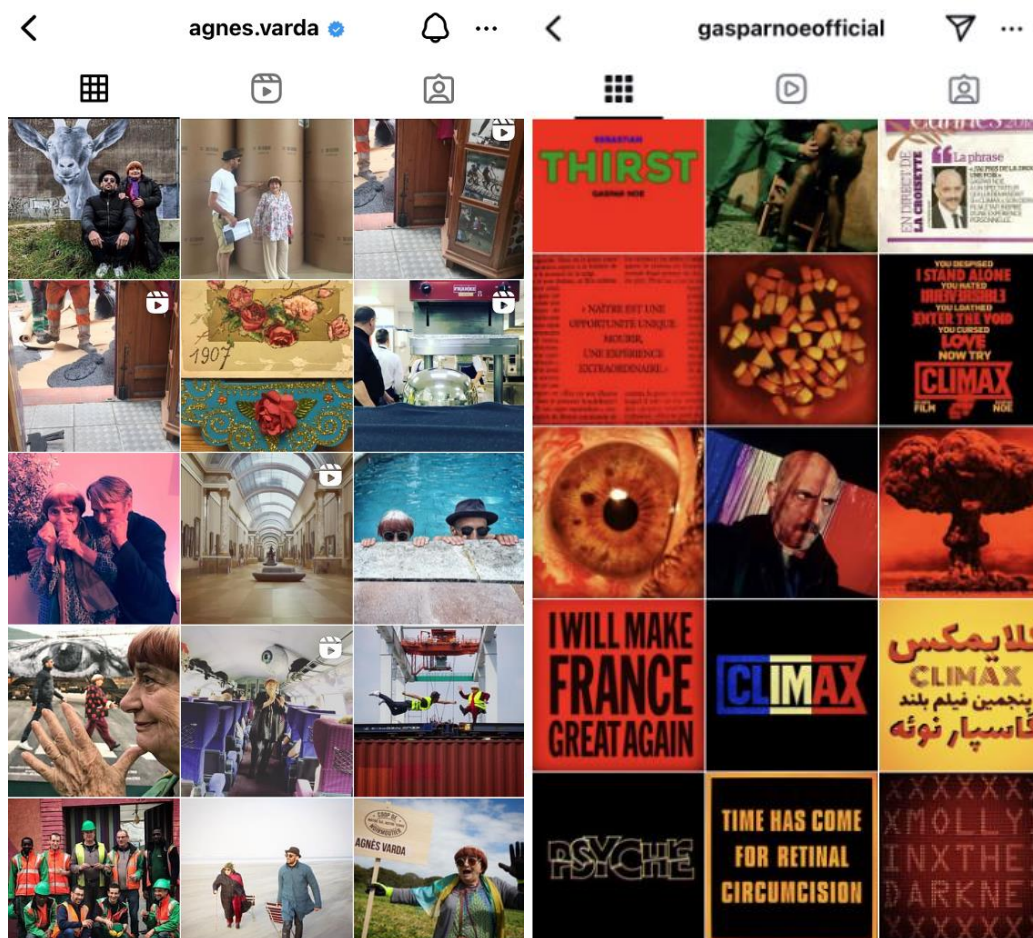


Figure 3.7: Agnès Varda's Instagram posts (left) and Gaspar Noé's Instagram posts.

Case studies on two directors' accounts – Refn's and Denis's – will reveal in further detail what directors post on an individual level. For the purposes of reflecting the intimate aspect of Astruc's original formulation, the following case studies are profiles that are explicitly managed personally by the directors themselves and feature an abundance of 'personal' posts, as both directors clearly use their own smartphones. While Denis is shown to eschew the commercialism of a promotional self on Instagram, Refn uses the platform to express his auteur persona through both ancillary materials and personal imagery.

Case Study: Nicolas Winding Refn and Instagram

Refn can be described as a contemporary auteur working in the film industry, insofar as his films share a consistent style and 'vision' over time that has in turn been analysed

extensively via auteur theory.⁷⁶ While starting his career in independent Danish cinema, Refn mingles the aesthetics and tone of art cinema with Hollywood genre filmmaking in films like *Drive* (2011) and *The Neon Demon* (2014). Within the past two decades, Refn has moved more towards the mainstream consciousness than Denis or even Varda and No  . Refn has worked in film, advertising, and streaming series. Refn is indicative of what Corrigan terms the ‘star-auteur’ in the vein of directors like Herzog or Coppola, because of his visibility in ancillary media such as interviews and the making-of documentary format. Refn makes frequent appearances in interviews, sometimes with other directors like William Friedkin and Kenneth Anger, and has collaborated with high-profile games designer Hideo Kojima – even appearing as a motion-capture character in his game *Death Stranding* (2019).⁷⁷ Like Herzog and Coppola, Refn’s production feats and difficulties as a director have been the subject of more than one making-of documentary. *My Life Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn* (Liv Corfixen, 2014), directed by his wife, examines Refn’s difficulties directing *Only God Forgives* (2013) in Thailand. Therefore, Refn is already invested in self-representation and autobiography. His articulation of paratextual auteur stardom is suitably supported by his presence on Instagram.

Refn’s Instagram profile bio reads ‘Film Maker [*sic*]’, thus signalling to the public what his profession is (and even emphasising his profession with non-standard spelling). His verified Instagram account has over 77k followers. Refn extends his social media presence across different platforms, where he can re-post the same content to an extent. Refn also has a website (www.byNWR.com), which acts as his own curated streaming platform where users can rent old and obscure restored films, a Twitter/X account (@NicolasWR), and a second Instagram account (@bynwr_official) dedicated to his restoration and personal work. Refn also personally uses TikTok (@nicolaswindingrefn) and has over 8k followers there. Refn has posted extensive promotional materials for his projects and shows enthusiasm in participating in self-promotion online, while also being creatively involved in their aesthetic. These include graphic posters, photoshoots, and

⁷⁶ See, for example: David Sweeney, *The Films of Nicolas Winding Refn: Genre, Gender, Glamour* (Liverpool University Press, 2024).

⁷⁷ For recent in-depth analysis of Refn’s self-branding across different platforms, see: Christopher J. Olson, ‘From Creator to Curator to Author as Content: Nicolas Winding Refn, Transdiscursive Authorship, and Self-Branding in Twenty-First Century Media,’ (PhD diss., The University of Wisconsin, 2023), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2911049495?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>.

trailers for his latest streaming series *Copenhagen Cowboy* (Netflix, 2022) and, previously, *Too Old to Die Young* (Amazon, 2019) shared on his Instagram (Figure 3.8).

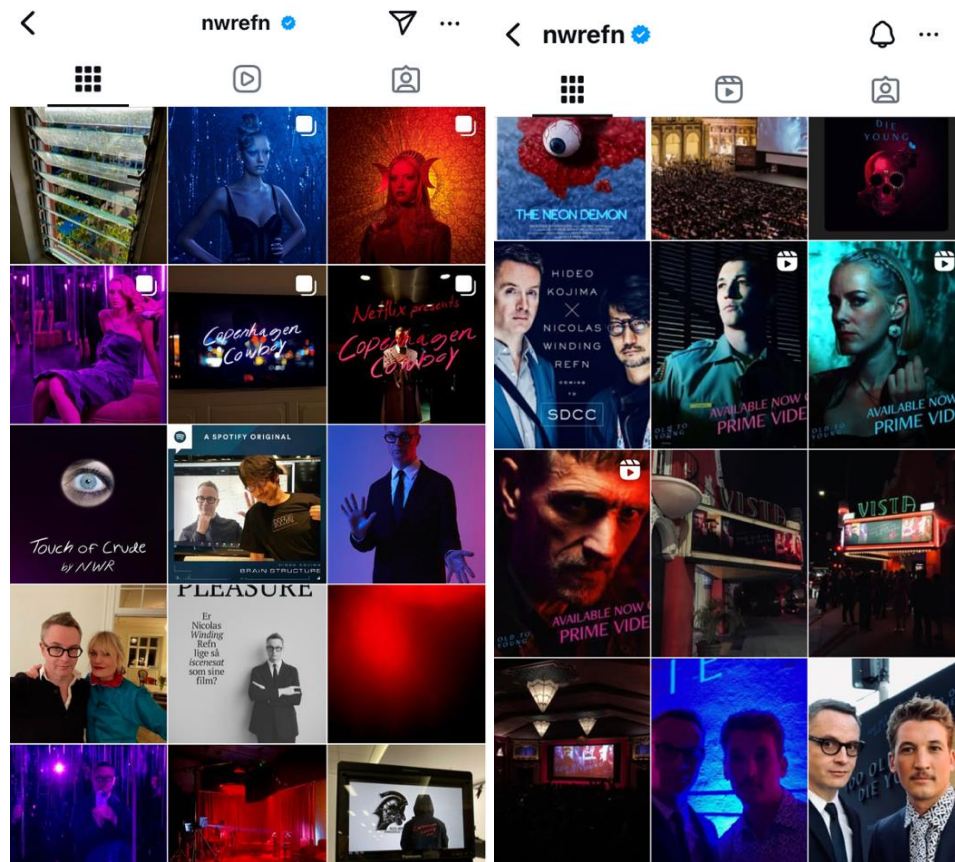


Figure 3.8: samples of posts from @nwrefn on Instagram.

Refn's gallery grid demonstrates a keen interest in maintaining a certain curatorial 'look' for Instagram. Refn's posts are visually evocative of the *mise en scène* that has become attributed to his signature. A key recurrent design feature across Refn's projects is red or high-contrast filtered lighting.⁷⁸ For example, a surreal sequence in the historical epic *Valhalla Rising* (2009) and fight sequences in *Only God Forgives* are drenched in red lighting effects. This conveys a dreamlike quality, while evoking cult cinema and Anger's avant-garde cinema that Refn admires. Similarly, Refn's profile features multiple posts with a neon, hued, or filtered lighting that evokes his consistently stylised *mise en scène* (Figure 3.8/left). Some of these images with coloured lighting are on the set of his

⁷⁸ See: Anna Backman Rogers and Miklós Kiss, 'A Real Human Being and a Real Hero: Stylistic Excess, Dead Time and Intensified Continuity in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*,' *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 12, no. 1-2 (2014): 43-57, http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/nc/2014/00000012/F0020001/art00003?crawler=true#aff_2.

productions (such as his campaign for PRADA or *Copenhagen Cowboy*), and are therefore images of his professional production *mise en scène* that implicates a crew, industry funding, and collaboration. One selfie shows him drenched in neon lighting on the set of his ad for PRADA (Figure 3.9/bottom right). But Refn also documents lighting effects in his immediate environment (off set) that may *happen* to evoke his films and uses Instagram's in-built filters to intentionally achieve this effect in selfies. This reveals his personal preoccupation with this aspect of his style across media, whether on a film set or taking a selfie.⁷⁹

Refn frequently uses his smartphone to take selfies, utilising Instagram's in-built augmenting effects and design features. In one selfie pictured below, Refn has used a Halloween-themed AR filter that transposes goth-style makeup on his face, including false eyelashes and lipstick (Figure 3.9/top left).⁸⁰ Refn is not only playing with the AR effect as a sort of toy but also using his own (famous) body to play with gender performance through the algorithmically generated face-masking technology. Refn's play with gender performance and camp artifice ties to his cinematic preoccupations.⁸¹ Other uses of AR filters include a selfie in which he is wearing digitally rendered devil horns, glitch effect selfies, and collaborative TikTok dance videos with his daughter.

On Instagram, Refn is substantially more explicit than Denis about his profession as a director. Refn's selfies are often accompanied by text captions describing his mood or current activities. One selfie with the caption 'Working Working Working [*sic*]' from December 2023 shows Refn slumped at his desk with a vacant expression (Figure 3.9/top right).⁸² On the wall is a poster for *Only God Forgives*, and in the foreground, a stack of papers. The image itself is of low-resolution, visually fuzzy, and colour-saturated in the lighting of his office. Refn has also seemingly used a filter or aesthetic adjustment, as well as a frame feature that evokes the polaroid. This aesthetic was once the primary

⁷⁹ Refn has even self-reflexively poked fun at his own authorial signature. In one TikTok video reposted by Refn, a short clip of him breaking down in tears seemingly on set in the documentary *My Life* is recontextualised with the text caption, 'When production says "no more neon".' This follows a common social media meme format (recontextualising images with new text captions). Refn is demonstrating that he is aware of his own 'brand' as a filmmaker and has a good sense of humour about it. See: Nicolas Winding Refn (@nicolaswindingrefn), 'When production says "no more neon"', TikTok, 31 January 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@nicolaswindingrefn/video/7194864120187964678>.

⁸⁰ Nicolas Winding Refn (@nwrefn), 'Happy Halloween,' Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHAvDfLlrU-/?igsh=cTFqeW1sdWdkd29t>.

⁸¹ Refn's filmic portrayal of gender archetypes, often oscillating between celebrating and destabilising these binary conventions, is an aspect of his work. See, for example: Barry Nevin and Aoife O'Connor, 'Nicholas Winding Refn's Abject Male: Inhibiting Spectator-Identification in *Bronson* (2008) and *Drive* (2011),' *SubStance* 51, no. 2 (2022): 38-60, DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sub.2022.0012>; Cáit Murphy, 'Gendered Music and Silence in Neo-Noir and Melodrama: Analysing *Drive* (2011),' *Sonic Scope* 4 (2022): 1-26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21428/66f840a4.6ed83144>.

⁸² Refn, 'Working working working,' Instagram.

visual vernacular of Instagram in its ‘primitive’ years, as users worked within the platform’s various formal constraints at the beginning (such as square-only posts). But, according to Abidin et al, this ‘low-grade’ aesthetic was largely abandoned by the late 2010s among users who saw these early filters as tired clichés.⁸³ This change coincided with the platform’s growth as an influencer economy and, indeed, the platform’s novel technological features. Refn, however, continues to approach Instagram in this ‘primitive’ way.



Figure 3.9: examples of Nicolas Winding Refn's selfies (Instagram, 2020/2023).

⁸³ Abidin, Highfield, and Leaver, *Instagram*, 50, 55.

One selfie taken in May 2023 (caption: ‘Working  on a new movie’) shows Refn slumped over his laptop. This is a spur-of-the-moment selfie to capture his tiredness. This kind of selfie or caption is not unusual for social media by any means. ‘Casual’ posts are emblematic of the confessional quality of Instagram and other platforms, where an individual’s own torment with their job is commonly the subject of posts. What is interesting about Refn’s selfies is that they point to the unglamorous labour of *being a director* and are therefore an intimate behind-the-scenes look at the industry – namely, how Refn personally *feels* within it.⁸⁴ His frequent selfies with and images of other directors who have inspired him – like Jodorowsky or Dario Argento – also foreground his authorial and intertextual persona (Figure 3.9/bottom left). Refn’s selfies emphasise his embodied position as a creative author, whether experiencing apparent exhaustion or exploring AR effects that digitally alter his own body.

One example of Refn’s smartphone mobilography was recorded while he was in Venice in September 2024 and posted to his Story. In the video, Refn is a passenger on a boat riding through the canal passages at night. The water and banks of the canal are lit by the red hued lighting of passing boats, creating an effect similar to his stylised *mise en scène* (Figure 3.10). In effect, Refn is self-projecting his own style onto an existing environment that happens to look *Refn-esque* – a practice that fans have also done in relation to the style of their favourite filmmakers (as I will discuss in Chapter 4). The video is a one-take shot and is diegetically silent, but is accompanied in Instagram’s in-built editing features by Refn’s choice of Kraftwerk’s song ‘Radioactivity’. As it happens, this video captures the mobility that Lumière cameraman Alexandre Promio envisioned in Venice (as I mentioned in Chapter 1) as he watched the canal banks recede, desiring a mobile, portable camera that could move as fluidly as the boat he was riding on.⁸⁵ And, it echoes the sentiments of Mekas and Astruc alike, who envisioned the spontaneity of intimately held cameras to capture environments as they are unfolding before us. By coincidence, Refn is demonstrating this vision of a mobile camera that can not only move with the mobilographer through space, but can also instantly disseminate media to

⁸⁴ Film producer Christine Vachon (@kvpi) repeatedly posts banal images of unappealing food and wine selections at airport lounges, where the broader impression seems to be that producers are always travelling (to festivals, awards ceremonies, and film sets, etc.) but not necessarily living glamorous lifestyles.

⁸⁵ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 108.

viewers online, who can ‘be with’ the mobilographer in the moment, despite being physically distanced.⁸⁶

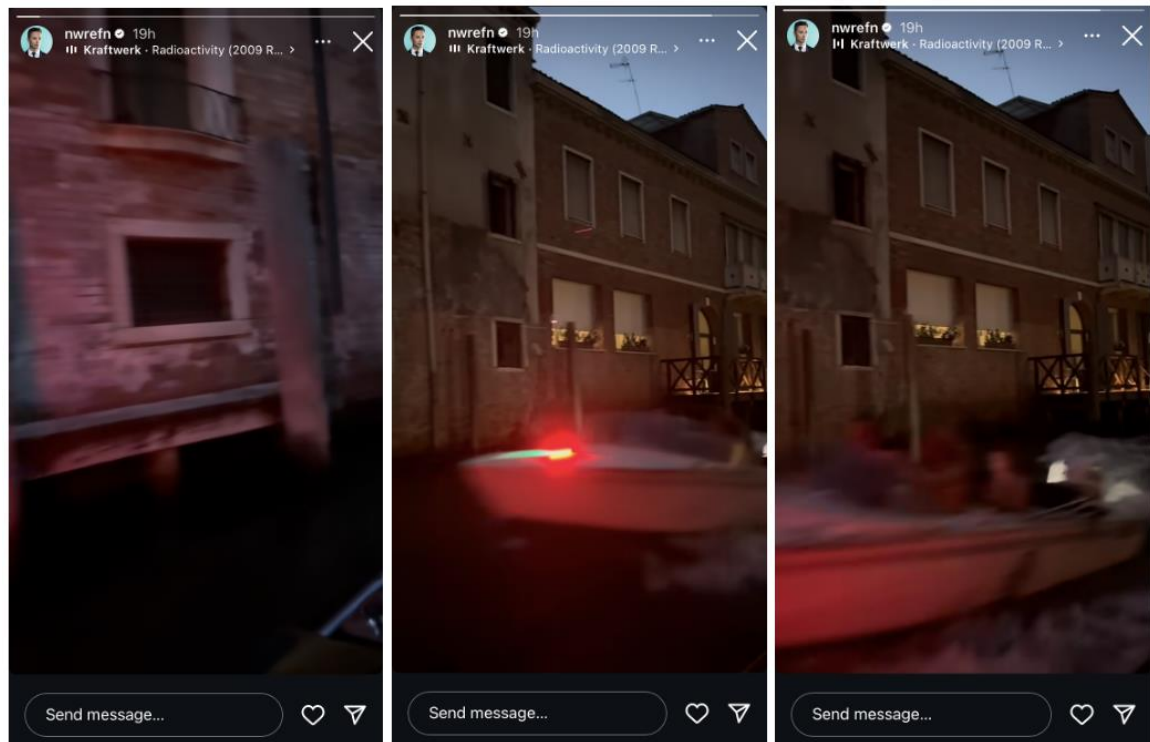


Figure 3.10: Nicolas Winding Refn's Venice video (Instagram, 2024).

As further testament to the haptic qualities of the smartphone, Refn frequently uses the ‘draw’ feature to hand-write on images.⁸⁷ On Instagram Stories (and indeed other applications), it is possible to draw over images on the touchscreen with one’s finger performing the function of a pen (a type of *stylo*). For example, when Anger died in 2024, Refn posted an image of Anger with the digitally handwritten inscription ‘Go with God Anger/RIP/NWR’ (Figure 3.11), and a similar post was made for director William Friedkin when he died. It is fair to assume that Refn handwrites these posts himself either with his index finger or with a stylus, as there is consistency in their style. By using his own hands to create posts, Refn is physically imprinting his signature on digital texts (files) that are personal to him. Thus, what is ‘virtual’ can also be ‘material’ through the function of hands. Like other smartphone users, Refn is making haptic contact with the

⁸⁶ Denis similarly photographed a canal boat journey in Venice. Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), [Venice image], Instagram, 30 August 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CwkFiEELAjW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

⁸⁷ Nicolas Winding Refn (@nwrefn), ‘Go with God Anger RIP,’ Instagram, 25 May 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsrPIlytkza/?igsh=MW00dHZ5d3J5ZDR4Yg==>.

touchscreen to personally inscribe his ‘voice’. The caméra-stylo is therefore re-imagined in the smartphone *dispositif*. Containing the multi-functional abilities to easily handle, record, write with, and distribute media, the smartphone apparatus is a post-cinematic rendering of Astruc’s initial hopes.



Figure 3.11: Nicolas Winding Refn's homage to Kenneth Anger (Instagram, 2023).

Case Study: Claire Denis and Instagram

Like Refn, Denis is a contemporary arthouse auteur with a significant body of work.⁸⁸ As Martine Beugnet argues, it is the combination of the superimposition of ‘personality’ (distinctive style, recurrent themes, and autobiographical elements) on Denis’s films and the mode of production and cultural framework she inhabits as a director, that her films may be described as *auteur* cinema. But this is not merely defined as the expression of a singular vision, as this label also designates a body of works that are ‘recognisable as the output of the same person and/or team’ and inscribed in a wider historical context of cultural references and cinematic traditions.⁸⁹ Denis’s films are collaborative productions

⁸⁸ For the purposes of this chapter, what connects both filmmakers is their shared use of Instagram, but Refn and Denis may also tangentially be connected through their associations with a broader post-millennial European ‘cinema of abjection’ or contemporary *cinéma du corps*. See, for example: Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁸⁹ Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester University Press, 2004), 14-15. See, also: Peter Sloane ed., *ReFocus: The Films of Claire Denis* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

that involve the expertise and craft of others. Denis has repeatedly worked with collaborators like co-screenwriter Jean-Pol Fargeau and cinematographer Agnès Godard, who have undoubtedly contributed to the look and feel of Denis's filmic body of work over the course of several decades.

Unlike her film productions, Denis runs her Instagram account without assistance or collaboration. She has consistently posted selfies and other images and videos that only *she* could capture on her personal smartphone. Since starting her account in March 2019, Denis has amassed 13k followers and has over 700 posts, as of autumn 2024.⁹⁰ This is a considerable quantity of posts (more than many other directors on the platform) and indicates her dedicated use of the app. As an example of a director who uses Instagram personally, Denis stands out for several reasons. Interestingly, Denis's Instagram profile does not reflect the typical approaches to maintaining a public figure's profile. This is best exemplified by the absence of a profile picture, which creates anonymity among other Instagram users called Claire Denis who appear in search results. Unlike most of the directors listed (Table 3.1), Denis's account is not verified account (as of autumn 2024). According to an online 'how to get verified' guide, a verified account generally requires a profile photo.⁹¹ This suggests that Denis does not wish to be found easily in Instagram's search engine, or this does not matter much for her aims on the app.⁹²

Compared to other directors, Denis has a low Instagram follower count at 13k. In comparison, Scorsese has 1.4m followers. Fellow arthouse directors Gaspar Noé and Varda both have over 150k and Refn has 77k (as of autumn 2024). This disparity is partly down to mainstream notoriety. It may also be because Denis has not verified her profile. Some directors also have Twitter/X or Facebook accounts with even more followers, while Denis seemingly only has a public Instagram profile, therefore limiting her social media exposure. Denis's apparent aversion to commercial auteurism on Instagram is also visible in her profile's lack of promotional materials, as seen on other director profiles. Unlike Refn or Noé, Denis does not explicitly promote her work on Instagram, preferring to document her life without explicit reference to her film releases. On Instagram, Denis has rarely referred to the production processes of her latest features *Both Sides of the Blade* and *Stars at Noon* (2022). The first was in competition at Berlinale in February

⁹⁰ Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/clairedenis6?igsh=MXV0cG90ZWZyYnEzdw==>.

⁹¹ Shopify, 'How To Get Verified on Instagram (Blue Check) in 2024,' <https://www.shopify.com/ie/blog/how-to-get-verified-on-instagram#:~:text=Instagram%20also%20doesn't%20verify,be%20active%20when%20you%20apply>.

⁹² Nevertheless, Denis's selfies indicate her ownership. Additionally, Denis's profile is followed by verified film industry figures who are also close friends, like Jarmusch and actress Béatrice Dalle.

2022 and the second production was delayed for a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic and competed at Cannes in May 2022. Denis did not share ancillary media (posters, graphics, interviews, press, etc.) for these films or any of her fourteen features made prior to her first Instagram post in 2019, although distribution company Wild Bunch (@wildbunchdistribution) shared extensive promotional materials for Denis's *High Life* (2018) on Instagram. Vague, visual references to ongoing productions on her Instagram profile include some images and videos of herself and actors on set, international filming locations, and camera set-ups, often without expository captions. By contrast, another director like Sally Potter (whose Instagram content is highly personal) is more explicit about her experiences on set and what she's filming.⁹³ Without information from ancillary discourses (i.e. film journalism) or personal interest, Instagram users may not be aware of Denis's projects or that Denis is even a well-known auteur. So far, self-promotion on Instagram or other platforms is not her priority, although this could certainly change in the future. She appears to simply enjoy the creative tools Instagram offers, or its capacity to document her life in an off-the-cuff manner.

Denis's unconventional approach to maintaining a public figure's Instagram profile mirrors her filmmaking. Although Denis has received attention from critics, scholars, and cinema institutions and has worked with internationally recognisable stars like Robert Pattinson or Juliette Binoche, she remains outside of Hollywood. Her mainly French-language, transnational co-production mode of practice takes her across borders and continents. Her designation as an arthouse director can be attributed to her films' often challenging subject matter, pensiveness, open-ended and elliptical structure, or complex characters with ambivalent motivations. As Beugnet writes, 'Denis's films generally fail to meet many of the expectations associated with more traditional work [...] they provide a wealth of connections and potential interpretations'; and her films often shun expository dialogue and cinematic conventions of articulating time and space.⁹⁴ Furthermore, the script serves as a 'detailed but loose framework in preparation for the actual filmmaking. [...] the written stage thus lays the foundations for the construction of a highly visual cinematic world.'⁹⁵ In other words, the film script is merely a kind of

⁹³ For example, Potter posted an image of a bare soundstage with the caption: 'The scary joy of a soundstage being cleared ready for action – everything is possible, nothing yet exists...' Sally Potter (@sallypotter), Instagram, 26 October 2023,

https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy3hgwXiZd/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁹⁴ Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 21-23. See, also: Kath Dooley, 'Oppositions and Lines of Desire: Exploring the Screenwriting Approach of Claire Denis in a Practice-Based Study,' *TEXT* 18, no. 2 (2014): 1-17.

⁹⁵ Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 15.

‘skeleton’ to work from, while the act of making a film really takes place on the day of the shoot for Denis. Denis has adopted an approach to filmmaking that shuns verbocentrism (a heavy emphasis on character dialogue) and is invested in the visual and haptic, as well as non-verbal sounds, to produce a filmic language (potentially her own form of cinécriture). Indeed, Denis is quoted as saying about her filmmaking: ‘To simply utter words is boring to me.’⁹⁶

Like her films, Denis’s Instagram posts are often ambiguous and fragmented, leaving certain aspects to her Instagram follower’s interpretation. As with most of her films, Denis prefers to write post captions in French (Instagram automatically translates captions with varying accuracy). Denis’s posts often leave out pieces of textual information that are part of the conventions of Instagram, like captions referring to what is visible in the image or video. Denis avoids using tagged geographical locations and hashtags in captions, the latter of which have become the norm (but certainly not the rule) of promotional and commercial Instagram posting, including directors’ promotional posts. But, according to Abidin et al, hashtags have become aesthetically unappealing to users who have adopted a more minimalist approach.⁹⁷ Denis’s first Instagram post from April 2019 consists of a blurry high angle nocturnal shot (presumably from a hotel or other tall building) with the caption titled simply ‘Boston’. Denis does not state why she is there or on which street the shot is taken, creating ambiguity. It recalls nocturnal cityscapes, streets, and hotels in films like *Vendredi Soir* (2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001). Her Instagram posts are also emblematic of the transient, transnational nature of her style, work, and travels as a filmmaker.

In other posts, Denis renders visual identification indistinctive. The pixelated and haptic *fuzziness* of the smartphone zoom function and blurry, low light ‘digital noise’ create a ‘messy’ glitching effect in some posts.⁹⁸ This achieves an abstract, almost painterly quality akin to the style of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century pointillist paintings. The video’s pixels are so visible they appear like tactile brushstrokes on a canvas and foreground the ‘imperfections’ of smartphone mobilography (observed similarly by Laura U. Marks in relation to experimental video works).⁹⁹ One example is

⁹⁶ Denis quoted in: Michael T. Martin and Eileen Julien, ‘Postcolony’s Colonial Registers in Claire Denis’s *Chocolat* and *White Material*,’ *Black Camera* 10, no. 1 (2018): 102, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.10.1.06>.

⁹⁷ Abidin, Highfield, and Leaver, *Instagram*, 74.

⁹⁸ Appropriately, ‘glitch’ derives from the German ‘glitschen’ (to slip) and related Yiddish ‘glitschen’ (to skid). See: Kane, *High-Tech Trash*, 15.

⁹⁹ See: ‘the tactile opacity of low-grade video’ in: Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 76.

Denis's zoomed-in video of a full moon from September 2024 (Figure 3.12).¹⁰⁰ The video is only a few seconds long and only diegetic music from a radio or speaker can be heard in the background. The video's low resolution and obscurity is generally shunned in more 'professional' filmmaking and indeed Instagram's dominant, professionalised aesthetic vernacular that privileges optimal lighting and clarity.¹⁰¹ Denis's approach to Instagram is imperfect, reproducing a historically avant-garde interest in what would be deemed an *error* in cinematic conventions. While generally not categorised as an 'avant-garde filmmaker' because of her arthouse mode of production that privileges feature narratives, Denis's approach to Instagram is experimental, and she eschews the normative elements of promotion and stardom on the platform that contribute to the social media 'commerce of auteurism'.



Figure 3.12: Claire Denis's moon video (Instagram, 2024).

On Instagram, Denis often de-frames bodies and objects by decentring them, slicing part of the body/object out of frame in 'empty' space, or in extreme close-up. This

¹⁰⁰ Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), [moon video], Instagram, 3 September 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CwuEQXTLLHJ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==.

¹⁰¹ 'Lo-fi' generally refers to 'low-fidelity' sound recording and to the 'lo-fi' music genre that embraces less-than-standard recording equipment (often DIY), imperfection, and error. In this sense, 'lo-fi' is related to glitch aesthetics.

effect has been observed by Beugnet in Denis's films as '*décadrage*' or de-framing (first noted by Pascal Bonitzer). These are 'empty frames, unusual angles, fragmented bodies at the borders of the frame or in close-up.'¹⁰² A notable example of de-framing in Denis's film work is the desert exercise sequence in *Beau Travail*, where the legionnaires' bodies are driven to the periphery of the image as they enter and leave the 'void' of the frame. This preoccupation is extended to her Instagram aesthetics. General examples of de-framing on Denis's profile include extreme close-ups on faces, tilted or upside-down portraits, and de-framed workmen on Paris roofs. Denis's repeated (even obsessive) images of workmen on Paris roofs are perhaps especially reminiscent of *Beau Travail*'s exercise sequence and indeed the rooftops and cityscapes that proliferate in her work (Figure 3.13). Her Instagram posts therefore share tendencies with her filmic corpus, but their mode of production is crucially more spontaneous and informal than that of her feature films.



Figure 3.13: examples of Claire Denis's Paris rooftops (Instagram 2022/2023).

¹⁰² Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 31 [citing: Pascal Bonitzer, 'Décadrages,' first published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 284 (1978). Reprinted in: *Théories du Cinéma* (Cahiers du Cinéma, 2001), 126].

Denis's 'personal' Instagram posts include everyday banal objects, selfies, travels, friends, public figures, and family. These kinds of posts are typical of Instagram aesthetics in general. Regardless of what kind of image or video Denis posts, whether spontaneous mobilography or an old photograph, her Instagram appears to be highly curated. Denis has developed a distinctive aesthetic that reflects Instagram design trends, but also shares qualities with her filmic oeuvre. On a basic level, the distinctive colour palette of her Instagram posts (sky blue, natural greens, cream, greys, pastels, and beige) suggests a curatorial eye (Figure 3.14). This colour palette somewhat reflects the colour palette of landscapes, cities, apartment interiors, and textures (including the sensuous textures of skin) in her films. Denis's Instagram compositions and distinctive colour palette are visible when viewed as a gallery grid, which also shows the repetition of some motifs, like multiple images of clouds and rooftops from different angles.

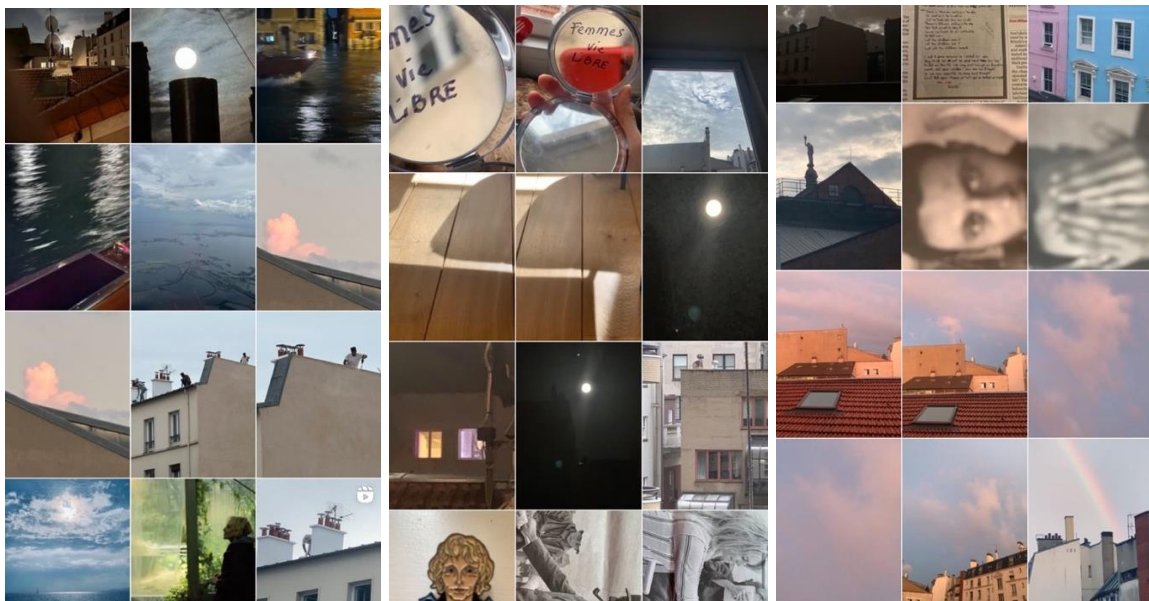


Figure 3.14: sample posts from @clairedenis6 on Instagram.

Because of her fragmented and spontaneous style, Denis's Instagram photography cannot be classed as 'professional', as per Manovich's description of Instagram trends. 'Professional' photography on Instagram takes into consideration high contrast/saturation, optimal clarity, balanced composition, and photo-realism, and are often photographed using high-grade camera settings rather than average smartphone settings. 'Designed' Instagram photography, meanwhile, privileges flat-lay compositions, minimalism, low

saturation, empty spaces, textures, and soft colours. ‘Casual’ photos are more concerned with content than aesthetics, and select everyday moments deemed worth documenting. These categories are fluid as users may decide to put more aesthetic or technical effort into certain posts.¹⁰³ Denis’s profile is evidently both ‘designed’ and ‘casual’. For instance, Denis’s flat-lay still life compositions of fruit or other small objects evoke ‘designed’ photography. Mundane objects like dishes or weedy plants growing on a path shot with an amateurish, naturalistic, unfiltered look and spontaneous moments such as selfies or street life are more ‘casual’.

One interesting example of a designed composition with casual content is a fourteen-second video posted by Denis during the early stage of the pandemic, consisting of a flat-lay shot of cleaning items in a kitchen sink, without words (Figure 3.15).¹⁰⁴ The focus on banality in this short video and similar posts evokes the camera in Denis’s films that selects seemingly humble and inanimate objects like detritus or domestic items in the mise en scène and renders them the frame’s focus (a further example of de-framing).¹⁰⁵ Examples include a sunken tyre in *Beau Travail* or the red rice cooker in *35 Shots of Rum* (2008). This aspect of her profile highlights Denis’s preoccupation with her immediate surroundings, by capturing items in her own home, her kitchen, and through her window looking out at the cityscape from her point-of-view. While not promotional, Denis’s Instagram is intimate and aesthetically rich.

¹⁰³ Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 72-73.

¹⁰⁴ Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), [sink video], Instagram, 24 April 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_XamtCALAx/?igsh=MWV5aXRqdGZvMA==.

¹⁰⁵ Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, 31.

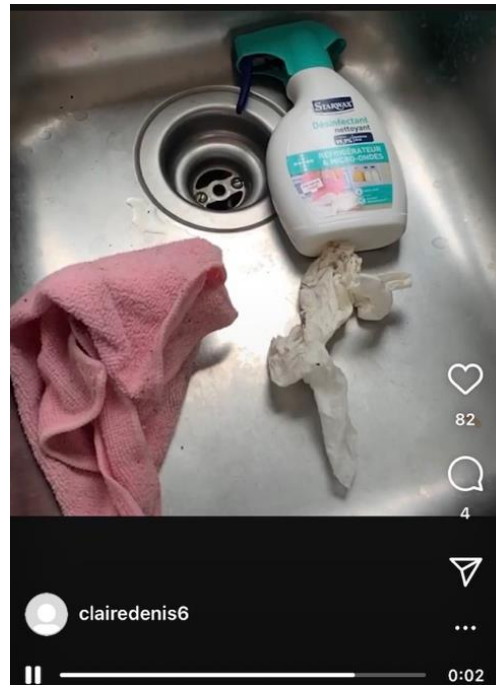


Figure 3.15: Claire Denis's sink video (Instagram, 2020).

Instagram crucially offers a novel creative tool for auteurs, who may engage in forms of expression that are not present in their major film works. One important feature of Denis's Instagram – autobiography and self-representation – is unique in the full spectrum of her oeuvre. Denis's Instagram profile is firmly autobiographical because it regularly documents her daily activities, memories, ideas, and interests. The theme of autobiography has been especially discussed in relation to her debut feature *Chocolat* (1988), which only partly evokes elements of her childhood as the daughter of a French colonial administrator in Cameroon in the 1950s.¹⁰⁶ Denis rarely inserts her own life and presence into her films as filmmakers like Varda, Mekas, or Godard have in different ways. As St. John notes: 'Autobiographical elements are a narrative and stylistic preoccupation in [Varda's] work, from her marriage and motherhood to her friendships and career, and her Instagram maintains this interest.'¹⁰⁷ Although Denis has shared thoughts and memories in interviews about her upbringing and career, this overt introspection and retrospection does not extend to her films. Compared to her films, Denis's Instagram posts are more overtly personal. Her profile features images of figures she admires, like philosopher Frantz Fanon, and those she has frequently worked with, foregrounding a sense of sentimentality and personalism. Denis posted photos of

¹⁰⁶ See, for example: Daniel Dufournaud, 'Claire Denis's *Beaux Familles*,' in *ReFocus*, ed. Sloane, 231-251.

¹⁰⁷ St. John, 'From Cannes to Cardboard,' 169.

philosopher and friend Jean-Luc Nancy when he died in August 2021 (one caption simply states ‘Merci’).¹⁰⁸ Denis also paid homage to friend and actor Michel Subor upon his death in January 2022. Denis has also used Instagram to convey political messages that are tied to her own filmic interests in postcolonial matters, such as expressions of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and solidarity with the people of Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in September 2024.¹⁰⁹ Her Instagram can therefore be described as a personal archive of intertextual connections and personal reflections.

Self-representation is not a priority for Denis’s *filmic* works. With the minor exceptions of her early-career documentaries *Man No Run* (1989) and *Jacques Rivette, le veilleur* (1990), Denis does not physically appear in her own films. Either by accident or intentionally, Denis briefly appears in a mirror with the camera in the background of a party scene in *Both Sides of the Blade*.¹¹⁰ Denis’s films have been extensively analysed for their haptic and bodily qualities, including her *cinéma du corps*.¹¹¹ However, the study of Denis’s own bodily presence in her films is understandably lacking, as this is not a consistent or prominent feature of her work. It is more so a feature of her smartphone and social media use.

Denis manifests a more visible subjectivity through Instagram. Selfies are an extremely common aspect of Instagram and one of its emblematic aesthetic features. Unlike her films, Denis’s body is the main subject of her selfies (Figure 3.16).¹¹² While Denis posts far fewer selfies than Refn, she clearly enjoys this ‘genre’ of photography. Julia Eckel notes the ‘displayed authorship’ of selfies – ‘a photograph that shows its photographer in the moment of making the photo, thereby being at the same time a visual

¹⁰⁸ Denis’s *L’Intrus* (2004) is based on Nancy’s writing and Nancy theorised Denis’s *Beau Travail*. See: Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘A-religion,’ *Journal of European Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2004): 14-18 [published originally in *Vacarme*, no. 14 (2001): 69-70].

¹⁰⁹ Denis’s political stances have long been expressed through petitions in print publications and statements in interviews. For example, Denis joined other filmmakers like Aki Kaurismäki, Béla Tarr, and Pedro Costa in signing a petition demanding immediate ceasefire in Gaza: *Libération*, ‘Gaza: Des Cinéastes du Monde Entier Demandent un Cessez-le-feu Immédiat,’ 28 December 2023, https://www.liberation.fr/idees-et-debats/tribunes/gaza-des-cineastes-du-monde-entier-demandent-un-cessez-le-feu-immediat-20231228_WMAUSVJVLFEBNK4ME4XU3ZRU3M/.

¹¹⁰ In her concert/road documentary *Man No Run*, Denis’s reflection can be seen in the mirror of a dressing room, but she quickly disappears from frame. In her two-part documentary about Rivette, Denis appears in conversation with Rivette and Serge Daney. She remains largely obscured by the camera angle or by her own hand. See, also: Judith Mayne, *Claire Denis* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 4-5.

¹¹¹ See, for example: Kath Dooley, ‘Haptic Visions of Unstable Bodies in the Work of Claire Denis,’ *Continuum* 29, no. 3 (2015): 434-444, DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2015.1025360; Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras, and Denis* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012).

¹¹² Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), [selfie], Instagram, 11 April 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNhMBI7AGsQ/?igsh=Y204M3YwaGgxMDZy>.

documentation of an act of authorship and its result.¹¹³ In selfies, Denis's authorship is foregrounded and singular. The selfie necessitates self-handling of the camera, made visible by an outstretched arm or in a mirror, as pictured. Denis expresses her own embodied presence when she posts selfies and her daily observations with her caméra-stylo. This flexibility and intimacy is afforded essentially by her smartphone's mobility. Denis is demonstrating what anthropologist Heather Horst described in 2016 as 'mobile intimacies' – the constant presence of the smartphone, the endless possibilities to create images at-hand or in-pocket, for communication and for material engagement with a screen device.¹¹⁴



Figure 3.16: one of Claire Denis's selfies (Instagram, 2021).

¹¹³ Julia Eckel, 'Selfies and Authorship: On the Displayed Authorship and the Author Function of the Selfie,' in *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, ed. Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 131.

¹¹⁴ Heather Horst, 'Mobile Intimacies: Everyday Design and the Aesthetics of Mobile Phones,' in *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology*, ed. Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardévol, and Débora Lanzeni (Bloomsbury, 2016), 162 [cited in Abidin, Highfield, and Leaver, *Instagram*, 79].

As Lydia Tuan notes of Varda in films like *The Gleaners and I*, Denis is here writing *with* and *through* the body.¹¹⁵ In some videos and still images, Denis's hands (and sometimes feet) are the focus, being potent signifiers of writer-li-ness, work, and intimacy. Denis also often takes images of her own handwriting to express political or social messages, such as the 'Femmes, Vie, Libre' in reference to the Kurdish 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement that was sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in Tehran in 2022. Rather than use Instagram's in-built hand-drawing feature (as used by Refn), Denis digitally photographs the inscription of her non-digital handwriting on surfaces, as though to emphasise *her* material signature (more like Mekas's example). When Denis posts smartphone videos, their handheld quality is unmistakable. They are enactments of her presence. The small, portable camera picks up on her bodily agitations in an environment – what Bégin calls 'somatic images' in mobilography. For example, a video recorded by Denis at a Tindersticks concert (who often score her films) is amateurish, low-quality, shaky, and not expertly lit in a way that her feature films might be (in collaboration with a skilled cinematographer like Agnès Godard).¹¹⁶ This spontaneity and informality with the use of a humble smartphone conveys her own feeling through mobilography, produced outside of any industrial framework. Denis is wielding her own 'small, digital caméra-stylo that intensifies the subjective fragments of this contemporary woman with digital recordings of a fleeting world', as Corrigan describes of Varda's essay films.¹¹⁷

The recent presence of smartphones in Denis's cinema offers new scope for analysis of the role of technology in her broader oeuvre, including *Both Sides of the Blade*, where smartphone communication enables the central affair and where smartphone mobilography is even inserted into the film's aesthetic language (as I discussed in Chapter 2). Interestingly, the iPhone pictured in Denis's selfie (Figure 3.16) is likely the same one used by protagonist Sara as a prop in *Both Sides*, because of its distinctive cover – a copy of David Hockney's painting 'A Bigger Splash' (1967). This provides another autobiographical linkage with her own object and personal taste. Via the seemingly insignificant object of the smartphone, Denis's filmic work and her personal use of Instagram intersect. While not otherwise invested in self-representation, Denis's Instagram alternatively offers that fascinating source to followers, audiences, and critics.

¹¹⁵ Tuan, 'The Texture of Time,' (2023).

¹¹⁶ Claire Denis (@clairedenis6), [Tindersticks concert video], Instagram, 1 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CdAZXiHqpLh/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.

¹¹⁷ Corrigan, 'Of the History of the Essay Film,' in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Alter and Corrigan, 219.

Significantly, although less than 3% of Instagram users in 2024 are above the age of 65, examples such as Denis and Varda point out that the factor of age does not rule out creativity or self-representation on the platform.¹¹⁸ Indeed, perhaps the liberty and personalism afforded by the humble smartphone and multifunctional Instagram has brought on a new phase in Denis's work. This phase may be labelled as 'intermedial' through the porousness of her filmic work and her social media use, or even a late 'post-cinematic' phase in her creative endeavours. Although Denis does not prioritise Instagram over her filmmaking career, Instagram is evidently a tool that she uses weekly and even daily, re-embodying Astruc's vision in 1948 of people freely wielding their Paillard cameras in private apartments and public streets.¹¹⁹ Her profile is a novel glimpse into her life and work and possibly her most personal, autobiographical, retrospective, and intertextual work to date. Her own personal *caméra-stylo* is thus articulated through this new *dispositif*.

Conclusion: A New Creative Tool

This chapter has revealed a broad desire among well-known filmmakers to engage casually and creatively with emergent creative technologies in the form of smartphones and social media applications, especially Instagram. As Martin argues, from its initial conception, Astruc's *caméra-stylo* theory would become perhaps too narrowly applied to the well-financed feature film production, when modestly budgeted and more personally *handled* filmmaking warrant further recognition as reflecting its true promise.¹²⁰ Smartphone mobilography and the use of social media platforms beyond the film industry may constitute a contemporary re-imagining of this promise.

If we consider Corrigan's view that promotional technologies are the 'new *caméra-stylo*', it is evident that the commerce of auteurism is now extended to social media platforms that facilitate the expression of the 'self' in casual and easy ways. As I found in this chapter, numerous filmmakers use Instagram as a tool to promote their feature films. But this view of the *caméra-stylo* is rather limited. The smartphone and social media *dispositif* offer another re-imagining of the *caméra-stylo* that is closer to the

¹¹⁸ Statista, 'Distribution of Instagram Users Worldwide as of April 2024, by Age and Gender,' <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248769/age-distribution-of-worldwide-instagram-users/>.

¹¹⁹ Astruc, 'The Future of Cinema,' 48.

¹²⁰ Martin, 'Introduction to "The Future of Cinema",' 44.

initial premise of Astruc's concept. This re-imagining comes in a form of personal content, including selfies, off-the-cuff observations, and smartphone mobilography that is haptic and personal, moving with the auteur through the world and capable of expressing a 'point of view' beyond the feature film production. It is perhaps especially significant when auteurs who normally don't engage in this mode (instead opting for the well-financed feature) are now using smartphones and social media as an informal creative tool, alongside other users of these platforms. While auteurs may remain within the film industry with access to funding, it appears that Instagram especially offers the most suitable online platform for extending the auteur's personality and aesthetic sensibility. This comes down to how versatile and filmic or photographic Instagram is in its aesthetic identity compared to other apps like Twitter/X, which seems to correspond with the interests of a broad range of filmmakers.

Smartphones and Instagram are not experienced or engaged with in the same way by all directors. How a female director like Denis, born in the 1940s, may use the platform differently from a male director like Refn, born in the 1970s, is uncertain. But age certainly does not determine a director's ability to understand the platform. Refn's *style* of posting may be differentiated from Denis's on two levels. Unlike Denis, Refn enjoys sharing promotional materials and confessional-style captions about his profession that align with his star-auteur persona. And, while Refn takes advantage of Instagram's in-built design features and augmenting effects, Denis does not appear to ever use filters or augmenting features. This may reflect their different approaches to filmmaking aesthetics. Refn is known to use highly stylised lighting while the lighting in Denis's films is often more naturalistic. Neither of these stylistic approaches necessarily connotes incompetency in using the platform, as augmented reality filters are very popular among users on Instagram as are more naturalistic aesthetics. In her articulation of a non-commercial, fragmented aesthetic on Instagram, Denis can be said to be taking an avant-garde approach to a platform that privileges clarity and commercialism. The well-polished, idyllic, clear, and 'perfect' images of (young) influencers on the same platform have become tired clichés and signifiers of commerciality. Thus, from a purely aesthetic point-of-view, Denis effectively navigates Instagram's 'language' despite being in her 70s. The recent adoption of Instagram by directors provides a new medium for analysis of their developing work. Through the seemingly insignificant, everyday object of the smartphone, their cinema and their Instagram profiles can become *porous* and convergent. For Denis, Refn, and other directors like Varda, the smartphone and Instagram have

become a new caméra-stylo, as subtle and flexible as a pen in one's hand, intimately and personally articulated.

While notable directors actively use Instagram, Wes Anderson does not use this platform or any other, at least on a public level. Despite this, social media platforms are replete with Anderson-based posts, co-created by ordinary social media users, that promote and perpetuate ideas about Anderson's 'brand' and reproduce his style. The next chapter will alternatively explore the co-creative, fan-made auteur-centric media and aesthetic mimicry as a contemporary re-imagining of and challenge to Astruc's caméra-stylo.

4. The New Co-Creative Caméra-Style: Re-Imaginations of Auteur Cinema in the Age of TikTok and AI

If cinephilia is dead, then movies are dead too [...] no matter how many movies, even very good ones, go on being made. If cinema can be resurrected, it will only be through the birth of a new kind of cine-love.
– Susan Sontag (1996).¹

There have never been more ways to watch, talk about, and even semiotically deconstruct and rearrange films thanks to the digital age. The ability to watch a particular director's body of work and read its idiosyncrasies requires personal investment (even obsessiveness), but also *access* to these films, which has greatly been advanced by Internet platforms and digital technologies such as DVDs and streaming services. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter/X, Substack, Reddit, and Letterboxd facilitate discourse between cinephile communities, even if comprised of 'micro' impressions and memes. As I established in Chapter 1, the foundations of auteur theory were enmeshed with the cinephilic French film culture that developed in the post-war period amidst a social and artistic scene with regular, dedicated screenings, publications, and conversations.² Cinephilia has guided varying opinions within the 'crisis of cinema' debates: from Susan Sontag's essay on the 'decay' of cinema in 1996, quoted above, to Jean-Philippe Tessé's description of the tactile *warmth* of film celluloid.³ Meanwhile, proponents of 'expanded cinema' and 'post-cinema' enthusiastically observe new audiovisual technologies and multi-sized screens – what Alexandre Astruc would call – our *multiple cinemas*.⁴ As Astruc envisioned of future screen media, there are libraries (online databases) where consumers can find films *on any subject* and *of any form*.⁵ Fittingly, what has been termed 'new cinephilia' in the digital age broadly comprises novel articulations of cinephilia via digital technologies: from DVD collecting, to blogging, to videographic criticism. Girish Shambu's monograph on this subject highlights that 'just as there have

¹ Sontag, 'The Decay of Cinema,' *The New York Times*.

² Shambu also notes that this 'old cinephilia' fixated primarily on a select few male directors in the west and the feature film narrative. Recently, this gatekeeping mechanism has been dismantled somewhat by new considerations for women and non-white filmmakers, as well as non-narrative forms of cinema. See: Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*, 80-81.

³ Tessé, 'La Révolution Numérique est Terminée,' 8; Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 70.

⁴ Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,' 33.

⁵ *Ibid*,

been many “cinemas” over the course of the history of the medium, there have also been many “cinephilias”.⁶ As similarly noted by Catherine Grant and Alison Smith, a passion for cinema is perhaps irrevocably tied to an interest in the individuals who *make* cinema.⁷ ‘New cinephilia’ has accentuated this interest in auteurs as *personalities*, with increased access to their work and their *style*.

As audiences gain more access to filmmakers’ entire bodies of work and engage in online discourses, auteurs themselves have also become increasingly commodified through their paratextual personas (i.e., the ‘commerce of auteurism’). As I examined in Chapter 3, a significant number of auteurs have adopted social media for promotional and creative purposes. But, ordinary social media users who are cinephiles or fans also exercise their ability to wield new and flexible digital technologies to express themselves through the lens of cinema, often creatively interpreting auteurs’ recognisable styles and signature ‘brand-names’. This dialectical relationship has been noted by Noël Carroll, who dismisses the idea that cinema audiences are passive or experience cinema at the complete behest of the author’s monolithic imagination.⁸ Carroll argues that although discourses on creativity often focus on the activities of ‘artists’ or ‘filmmakers’, the ‘creative audience’ also plays an important role. For the director to accomplish a desired effect in their work, the audience must cooperate creatively with the play of their imagination. Audiences fill in the blanks, so to speak, by mentally simulating characters’ experiences and points of view, or noting ‘how narrative content and style operate in concert via a presiding concept, theme, or purpose.’⁹ The organising of an overarching ‘style’ over the course of several films is a key operation of auteur criticism. But as Carroll surmises, while critics expertly exercise their thematising imagination, ‘most of us find ourselves mobilising it’ and ‘are no less creative than esteemed critics.’¹⁰ While this view seems to challenge Astruc’s vision, experiences of cinema are always arguably *co-creative* as audiences exercise their imaginations in tandem with the creative decisions made by filmmakers. The phenomenon of the ‘creative audience’ may account more generally for the urge amongst media practitioners, video essayists, and fans to co-create texts, trends, and memes with the digital tools at their disposal.

⁶ Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*, 5.

⁷ Grant, ‘Auteur Machines,’ (2008); Smith, ‘The Auteur as Star: Jean-Luc Godard’.

⁸ Noël Carroll, ‘The Creative Audience: Some Ways in which Readers, Viewers, and/or Listeners Use Their Imaginations to Engage Fictional Artworks,’ in *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, ed. Elliot Samuel Paul and Scott Barry Kaufman (Oxford Academic, 2014), 62-81.

⁹ Ibid, 79.

¹⁰ Ibid, 80.

Returning to the methodological framework for the caméra-stylo set out in this thesis, I aim to explore in this chapter how a *co-creative* version of the caméra-stylo might be articulated by fans and cinephiles using digital tools in response to a director's film texts and/or a director's overarching *style*.¹¹ In the digital age, the idea of *co-creation* can be seen as a fundamental aspect of online audiovisual culture, demonstrated by memes, remixes, and parodies that borrow and recycle the original work of other creators, while mimesis and memetic culture are also fundamental to the social and aesthetic fabric of platforms like TikTok. The rise of generative AI in mainstream culture has also brought on a new algorithmic component to 'co-creative' exercises online. This chapter will firstly outline significant examples of fan-made interpretations of pre-existing films, namely auteur and avant-garde works. While film fandoms and fannish culture may be associated with major franchises like *Star Wars* (1977-present), there is also a fannish current running through experimental screen history. Historically speaking, an urge to re-imagine an existing audiovisual work can be traced at least to the 1930s, with Joseph Cornell's avant-garde proto-fan-edit film *Rose Hobart* (1936). More contemporary experimental projects include: digital remediations of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); Jen Proctor's digital remake in 2010 of Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958); and Jessica McGoff's desktop documentary *My Mulholland* (2020). Recently, AI-generated experimental 'remakes' of beloved art films have been screened at festivals, which pose questions about authorship and the limits of homage.

An extensive case study on Wes Anderson's authorship and style and fans' creative responses to it will demonstrate in more detail fans' desire to co-create auteur-centric media by taking advantage of easily accessible digital tools. This case study represents a significant example of one filmmaker's *style* rather than one single film text being widely mimicked on social media by ordinary users. This alternative 'body of work', which Anderson has very little authority over, includes: the 'Accidentally Wes Anderson' Instagram profile and media, the viral Wes Anderson TikTok challenge in 2023, and AI-generated images and videos that try to construct non-existent film worlds created by the director. This case study is especially concerned with the TikTok challenge, in which users pretended to be 'Andersonian' caricatures in short, humorous videos, especially brought Anderson-based fan works to mainstream view. I am also interested in AI-generated mimicry of Anderson's style, which further draws on the tensions of artistic

¹¹ Referring to fan-made works as *co-creative* is perhaps an obsolete statement because, from Carroll's standpoint, audience experiences with cinema are *already* co-creative.

authority and authorship in the social media age. Both trends prompted film critics to scrutinise fans for reducing Anderson's style to a few obvious visual cues. This case study will reveal a tension between cinephilic appreciation for an auteur's style and the ability to mimic it. Fans have co-created an idea of what 'Anderson' is – his style, tone, themes, and tropes over several decades – and have used digital tools to express this. Essentially, this accumulation of fan works dedicated to Anderson both *challenges* Astruc's vision of lone, Romantic authorship (that has been taken up by auteur theory) and *re-interprets* Astruc's vision by offering a co-creative variation of self-expression through fans' personal screens and cameras articulated outside of an industrial framework.

My intention in this chapter is to examine how Astruc's theory has been re-imagined in co-creative digital fan media that either digitally remake/remediate a filmmaker's work *or* stylistically *mimic* an auteur's style – the latter being especially apparent in Anderson fan works. By examining a co-creative variation of the caméra-stylo in this chapter via Anderson in the social media age, Astruc's theory is revealed to be both reified through the accessibility and flexibility of screens and cameras and challenged via the auteur's own signature being mimicked by fans.

Cinephilia and Co-Creative Practice: From Avant-Garde to AI

Although the Internet now offers a new outlet for cinephiles that was not present for critics like Astruc in the 1940s and 50s, new cinephilia shares much in common with 'classical' cinephilia – they are both acts of *discourse*.¹² It is fitting that Louis Delluc, who envisioned early-on the figure of the auteur as a kind of painter (similar to Astruc's camera-pen), is also often credited with coining 'cinéaste' (*cinéma* + *enthousiaste*) in the 1920s. According to Donna Kornhaber, the term was later favoured by *Cahiers* critics to differentiate more run-of-the-mill 'réalisateurs' from 'auteurs'. Interestingly, the term 'cinéaste' may apply to both professional filmmakers and those deeply involved in cinema discourses, such as critics and the public who engage passionately with cinema (lending itself to the title of the American magazine *Cineaste*).¹³ Henry Jenkins argues that the contrast between 'cinephiles' and 'fans' is cultural. Fans may wish to 'take culture in their own hands' by reshaping and re-enacting their favourite texts (cosplaying

¹² Shambu, *The New Cinephilia*, 5.

¹³ See: Kornhaber, 'Charlot as Cinema,' 149. See, also: Truffaut's comments on 'metteurs-en-scène' or 'directors-for-hire' in 'A Certain Tendency' (1956).

and fan edits, for example), wanting to be ‘inside’ these texts; whereas cinephiles are perceived as more intellectually ‘distant’ from their passion. However, Jenkins surmises there is very little difference between them, taking the example of French New Wave directors like Jean-Luc Godard who were certainly *fans* of Hollywood cinema and restaged elements from those films in their own work.¹⁴ Indeed, as an early adopter of VHS and video monitors before the true digital age, Godard’s re-editing and collage techniques in combination with voice-over narration and intertitles in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998) effectively foreshadows the basic components of videographic criticism. And indeed, videographic criticism invites cinephiles and scholars to be ‘inside’ pre-existing texts.

Looking at the advantages of digital technologies for video essayists, Laura Mulvey commented in 2006 that ‘textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia.’¹⁵ Indeed, scholars and video essayists now benefit from being able to manipulate film texts to construct new meanings in *audiovisual* terms.¹⁶ The fact that films, many of which were digitised from film reels, can now be re-edited as *files* and then distributed on platforms like Vimeo and YouTube, within fair-use parameters, marks a key aspect of contemporary cinephilia and screen culture more broadly.¹⁷ The ability to pause, freeze-frame, speed up, slow down, cut out, isolate, accentuate, and zoom in on particular aspects of film texts has been drastically made easier with digital technologies. Christian Keathley stated in 2011 that videographic criticism is a new articulation of Astruc’s *caméra-stylo*: ‘due to the developments in digital technology, film scholars also find themselves in a position to respond to Astruc’s call – using new technologies to invent new audio-visual critical forms.’¹⁸ Although Keathley does not phrase it as so, this interpretation of Astruc’s metaphor is essentially of a *co-creative* *caméra-stylo*, as videographic criticism typically involves the formal alteration by one individual (a video essayist) of pre-existing film texts made originally by *other* individuals (often well-known auteurs). Since Mulvey and

¹⁴ Edgar Pera, ‘Fans & Cinephiles (Henry Jenkins Interview),’ 2 December 2015, <https://edgarpera.org/2015/12/02/fans-cinephiles-henry-jenkins-interview/>.

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (Reaktion, 2006), 144.

¹⁶ Significantly, Keathley points out the astonishing number of people who have commented in print on the colour of Cary Grant’s socks in the crop-duster sequence of *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1959). This cinephilic experience of hyper-fixation on an object in the *mise en scène* could have been visualised through a videographic essay, had critics had access to such technologies. See: Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 31; see, also: Tweedie, ‘Serge Daney, Zapper,’ 112.

¹⁷ Online open-access resources for film criticism and scholarship, like Google Scholar, Internet Archive, and Catherine Grant’s ‘Film Studies For Free’ website, also contribute to the richness of materials available to cinephiles.

¹⁸ Keathley, ‘La Caméra-Stylo,’ 179.

Keathley made these points, major figures in the development of videographic criticism, like Grant, Ariel Avissar, Lého Galibert-Lainé, and Kevin B. Lee, and dedicated videographic essay journals like *[in]Transition* have assumed a key role in film scholarship in the past two decades. Scholars and video essayists like Grant are also self-claimed ‘fans’ of the texts they critically engage with.¹⁹ Terms like ‘aca/fan’ bridge the semantic gap between ‘scholar’ and ‘fan’.²⁰ As a co-creative audiovisual practice in re-editing pre-existing texts, videographic criticism intersects with DIY fan-made media, Web 2.0 participatory culture, and the history of experimental screen media.

While Astruc hesitates to connect his idea of a ‘new avant-garde’ with the Surrealists and Dadaists at the time, aspects of experimental cinema do resonate with his vision of malleable and accessible screen media for consumers made outside of the framework of an industry or studio (as I examined in Chapter 1). Historically speaking, DIY audiovisual media by fans have been created for non-commercial purposes, from early home editing practices to ‘vidding’ and TikTok fan edits.²¹ A major landmark example in the development of DIY fan editing is *Rose Hobart*. An associate of Salvador Dalí and the Surrealists, Cornell was also an avowed fan of Hollywood productions and their stars. Cornell re-edited a discarded 16mm print of the Pre-Code adventure film *East of Borneo* (George Melford, 1931) to focus primarily on lead actress Rose Hobart. Cornell’s ‘new’ film was projected at silent film speed, featured jittery edits, and was aesthetically adjusted by a blue-tinted glass filter (Figure 4.1).²²

Cornell’s film is prescient in several ways. Firstly, his aesthetic adjustments of a pre-existing text are now facilitated by digital compositing and editing. New media users (including video essayists and TikTok users) apply in-built colour filters and AR filters to adjust pre-existing videos and images. *Rose Hobart* also predates, by decades, avant-garde films like Conner’s *A Movie* and Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), which recycle materials from other films and use music to recontextualise images (proto-‘vidding’), creating disruptive juxtapositions.²³ Fan-made music videos on YouTube recycle clips from films in addition to music.²⁴ Cornell’s hyper-fixation on the star is an

¹⁹ Grant, ‘Videographic Star Studies and the “Late Voice”,’ (2017).

²⁰ Henry Jenkins, ‘Introduction: Confessions of an Aca/Fan,’ in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York University Press, 2006), 1-6, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814743690.003.0003>.

²¹ See, for more on historical background: Coppa, *Vidding, A History* (2022).

²² Other iterations of the film’s projection feature pink- or purple-tinted filters, depending on the film’s screening or the version available to watch online. See, for more information: Grant and Random Love, *Fandom as Methodology*, 16,

²³ Coppa, *Vidding*, 79. See, also: Michael Pigott, *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁴ Well-known experimental films have been altered by the addition of a new soundtrack by fans, acting as both new audiovisual realisations of the experimental film *and* as alternative music videos for the given music track. See, for example: Erik Dussere, ‘maya deren x kate bush,’ YouTube, 12 January 2023, <https://youtu.be/V9FqW->

early vision of YouTube ‘fan edits’, where shots of a particular star(s) or fictional character(s) are re-edited by fans in video montages, often using new music, filters, and dramatic transitions. One notable example is the *Star Trek* fan edit, ‘Closer’ (2003) by T. Jonesy and Killa, as highlighted by Francesca Coppa.²⁵ Today, TikTok ‘fan edits’ approach media in much the same way, although in shorter montages that reflect the platform’s temporality.²⁶



Figure 4.1: *Rose Hobart* (Joseph Cornell, 1936).

Secondly, Cornell may have been the first independent filmmaker to make a camera-less film.²⁷ *Rose Hobart* precedes the techniques of Stan Brakhage (a friend of Cornell), who projected his films with thin, translucent objects and scratchings directly on film celluloid through light, such as *Mothlight* (1963).²⁸ The need for a *camera* to make films is also challenged in Godard’s recent films, where recycled found footage (as in *The Image Book*) and the technique of scanned pages, like in his short essay film *Trailer for*

[VGXoA?si=iZ2H464VUbYxQe_3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhOI6ni3GSA); The Kafkaesque Coffeeshop, “‘Meshes of the Afternoon’ My Bloody Valentine Music Video,” YouTube, 23 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhOI6ni3GSA>.

²⁵ The vidders re-edited and re-imagined a plot from the original NBC series, applied a sepia silent cinema-style filter and the song ‘Closer’ by Nine Inch Nails. See: University of Michigan Press eBook Collection, ‘Closer’ (2003), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10069132.cmp.54>; Coppa, *Vidding*, 160.

²⁶ See: CT Jones, ‘Creator of the Viral Pedro Pascal Fancam Explains Why the Actor is TikTok’s Favourite Daddy,’ *Rolling Stone*, 10 February 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/pedro-pascal-tiktok-daddy-fancam-1234662205/>.

²⁷ National Film Preservation Foundation, ‘Rose Hobart (1936),’ <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/rose-hobart-1936>. Man Ray’s camera-less filmmaking and photography in the 1920s is also worth noting.

²⁸ See, for example: Carole Cox, ‘Making Films without a Camera,’ *Language Arts* 57, issue 3 (1980): 274-279, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58680/la198028449>.

the Film that Will Never Exist: 'Phony Wars' (2023), decentre the traditional camera.²⁹ The ability to make a film without a camera is now re-imagined by digital technologies, from videographic criticism and desktop documentaries to techniques of photorealistic computer-generated animation and, more recently, AI generation. Thus, Astruc's vision is both upturned and reified, as consumers gain access to creative audiovisual technologies but may not necessarily have to use a camera.

Apart from re-editing a film text, other editorial techniques entirely remake or remediate films with recycled or found footage. While a film 'remediation' can be considered a type of remake, remediations specifically foreground and comment on the basis of the medium itself – in other words, exploring and contrasting 'old' and 'new' media in experimental or self-reflexive ways. Dean Keep and Marsha Berry define 'remediation' as 'a representation and integration of older media forms with new media.'³⁰ For example, Proctor's *A Movie by Jen Proctor* (2010) mimics Conner's *A Movie* by using *files* instead of film footage. Conner's original 12-minute collage film edits found footage, including shots of vehicle crashes, women undressing, and a charging elephant. Proctor's nearly shot-for-shot remake uses similar clips from file-sharing sites like YouTube and LiveLeak. Thus, ordinary consumers with cameras and access to online distribution sites have also co-created this remake. Many of the videos edited by Proctor are 'low-quality' and convey the 'tactile opacity' of low-resolution video pixelation (to quote Laura U. Marks).³¹ As Jaimie Baron has commented, Proctor's experiment reveals the 'very different experiential effects documents derived from the *material* filmic archive and the *immaterial* digital archive offer as they are appropriated into experimental films.'³² In her collage, Proctor uses stock digital video effects, news footage of 9/11, camcorder and mobile phone videos of demolitions, war atrocities, vehicle crashes, head-mounted POV footage from sports activities, and first-person shooter videogames (Figure 4.2). Much of the footage acquired by Proctor is from mobilographers whose portable cameras shake and move with their bodies. Crucially,

²⁹ In *Trailer for a Film*, Godard declares: 'The camera is but a quantum epidiascope' in reference to the proto-cinematic projection device from the 1870s. The epidiascope is a predecessor of technologies like overhead projectors and digital scanners today. One illustration from François Moigo's *L'Art des Projections* (1872) shows a demonstration of an epidiascope with the operator Henry Morton's outstretched hand as the opaque object being projected on a wall. This might be the image of the epidiascope that Godard has in mind. See:

https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Opaque_projector.

³⁰ Keep and Berry, 'Remediating Vertov,' 165.

³¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 76.

³² Baron, 'The Experimental Film Remake,' 469.

Proctor's version shows the increasingly pervasiveness of mobile cameras in everyday life since Conner made his film.



Figure 4.2: Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958) (top) and *A Movie* by Jen Proctor (2010).

Proctor also edits together surveillance-like footage of warplanes, airstrikes (some filmed in night vision), and weapons targeting systems – examples of what theorist Harun Farocki termed the ‘operational images’ of now pervasively produced machine vision (functional as data rather than art).³³ Thus, Proctor's collage makes connections between the now pervasively *filmic* experience of contemporary warfare and the vast entertainment-based media available on the Internet, including the thrills of POV camera angles and immersive media. The digital age has vastly expanded audiovisual production since 1958, from mobilographers with smartphones or GoPros to military weapons

³³ Trevor Paglen, ‘Operational Images,’ *e-flux Journal*, issue 59 (November 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/>.

systems and bodycams. Importantly, Proctor foregrounds that this is *her* film, especially in the flashing white opening titles, but she is also evidently a fan of Conner's work (she describes the video as a 'loving remake').³⁴

Proctor's co-creative use of the online database is reflective of contemporary access to production and dissemination. YouTube and other file-sharing sites realise Astruc's vision of 'libraries' of films *on any subject* and of *any form*. Perry Bard's 'global remake' project from 2007-2017 similarly makes connections between Vertov's theories and present-day technologies. As a crowd-sourced remake of *Man with a Movie Camera*, Bard's project allowed members of the public to contribute and upload their submissions of mimicked shots to the database. As Seth Feldman notes, some shots are straightforward replications of Vertov's original shots (using similar objects), but other shots feature modern equivalents that highlight technological remediation (i.e., a shot of an email inbox instead of a letter).³⁵ Many of the submissions by ordinary 'amateur' filmmakers are shot on mobile phones and camcorders, evoking Vertov's own efforts to make cinema more mobile and kinetic. And, the collective effort of the project highlights the co-creative nature of database filmmaking.

As a high-profile pre-digital auteur, Alfred Hitchcock has inspired numerous digital remediation projects. Stephen Mamber's 'Digital Hitchcock' database project from the 1990s took digitised versions of storyboards from *The Birds* (1963) and synchronised them with the film, allowing them to play simultaneously in a separate window on the computer screen.³⁶ The proto-video-essay *Phoenix Tapes* (Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, 1999) is an avant-garde reworking of Hitchcock's leitmotifs. The experimental collage film *The Green Fog* (2017), co-directed by Guy Maddin and editors Evan Johnson and Galen Johnson, repurposes clips from films and television programmes shot or set in San Francisco that loosely mirror *Vertigo* (1958).³⁷ Like Proctor's *A Movie*,

³⁴ Jen Proctor, 'A Movie by Jen Proctor,' Vimeo, 6 May 2010, <https://vimeo.com/11531028>.

³⁵ Seth Feldman, 'On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Constructivist: Perry Bard's *The Man with the Movie Camera: The Global Remake*,' *JumpCut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 52 (2010), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/FeldmanVertov/text.html>.

³⁶ Mamber also took tiny thumbnail images of the film's 1,100 shots and arranged them on one screen and linked the film's daily production notes. See: Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 40; Stephen Mamber, 'Hitchcock: The Conceptual and the Pre-Digital,' *Stanford Humanities Review* 7, no. 2 (1999): 128-136; Matthew Mirapaul, 'ARTS ONLINE: They'll Always Have Paris (And a Scholarly Web Site),' *The New York Times*, 18 March 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/03/18/movies/arts-online-they-ll-always-have-paris-and-a-scholarly-web-site.html>. Similarly, Kevin L. Ferguson's use of 'z-projection' sums the frames of entire Disney films into one composite image – what Ferguson calls 'digital surrealism' or the unconscious of a text. Ferguson, 'Digital Surrealism: Visualising Walt Disney Animation Studios,' *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (2017), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/11/1/000276/000276.html>.

³⁷ Similarly, Gus Van Sant's nearly shot-for-shot 1998 remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) takes some artistic liberties. Steven Soderbergh notably created a mashup of Van Sant's film and the original in 2014.

scenes are extracted from disparate sources including B movies and music videos. The film reveals the malleability of shots as units of meaning; concepts of ‘quality’ and patterns in cinematic language itself are highlighted.³⁸ The film is both formally and narratively fragmented, and familiarity with *Vertigo* on the audience’s part may be necessary to read any parallels.³⁹ Ironically, *The Green Fog* removes creative control from Hitchcock, who was notoriously meticulous in his planning (like using his own sketched storyboards as preliminary filmic representations). Hitchcock perhaps embodies the idea of an ‘auteur’, notably via the critical interventions of Robin Wood and François Truffaut in the 1960s.⁴⁰ Maddin’s digital ‘sampling’ exemplifies a co-creative caméra-stylo, based very much on the ability to edit pre-existing texts.

My Mulholland is another significant example of an essayist, scholar, fan, or media practitioner responding personally to an auteur film.⁴¹ McGoff’s video essay explores her experience watching *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) for the first time as a 13-year-old in 2007 and being too frightened to continue the film because of the infamous diner scene (in which a monstrous drifter suddenly appears from behind a wall). Typical of desktop documentaries, McGoff uses the apparatus itself (the MacBook screen-record function) to perform her embodied experiences as an Internet user, while commenting on Internet culture and spectatorship. And, McGoff does not use voice-over but rather types her thoughts in TextEdit windows as a kind of ‘live’ performance. These multiple windows- as-individual-screens are part of a greater *dispositif*, and demonstrate what Manovich terms the ‘spatialisation’ of cinematic montage in new media.⁴² *My Mulholland* opens on McGoff’s desktop, with the desktop background comprised of a still of a dark street from Lynch’s film. McGoff types: ‘The internet was a place for play and distraction, but it also presented me with what seemed like endless landscapes of knowledge.’ McGoff refers to her 13-year-old self as a ‘cinophile’, obsessed with reading through film trivia and Internet forums in order to make sense of Lynch’s film. A search engine window pops up showing images of memes, and we see McGoff using Wayback

³⁸ See: Eric Kohn, “‘Vertigo’ Revisited: Guy Maddin Explores Hitchcock’s Classic with Found Footage – SF International Film Festival,” IndieWire, 15 April 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/vertigo-remake-guy-madden-the-green-fog-interview-1201805968/>.

³⁹ Certain shots are cropped to hyper-fixate on aspects of the mise en scène, or re-tinted with colour filters and special effects (such as the eponymous green fog); the frame rate is sped up or slowed down and frames are skipped, creating a disconcerting feeling of glitching (like Cornell’s uncanny DIY editing). The materials are of varying degrees of quality. Dialogue has been mostly silenced, while certain sounds (like footsteps or a telephone ringing) are uncannily amplified.

⁴⁰ François Truffaut, *Le Cinéma Selon Alfred Hitchcock* (Éditions Robert Laffont, 1966); Robin Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films* (Castle Books, 1969).

⁴¹ Jessica McGoff, ‘My Mulholland,’ Vimeo, 6 June 2020, <https://vimeo.com/426494447>.

⁴² Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 156-159, 322.

Machine to revisit IMDb and other archived sites as they looked in 2007. In a window, we watch the diner scene play out ‘with’ McGoff, seen re-enacting the experience on her webcam, before she stops the player. McGoff then relates her shock over Lynch’s film to the jump scares, gore videos, and other disturbing materials on the Internet – what she calls ‘images waiting like snakes in the sandbox’ (Figure 4.3).⁴³

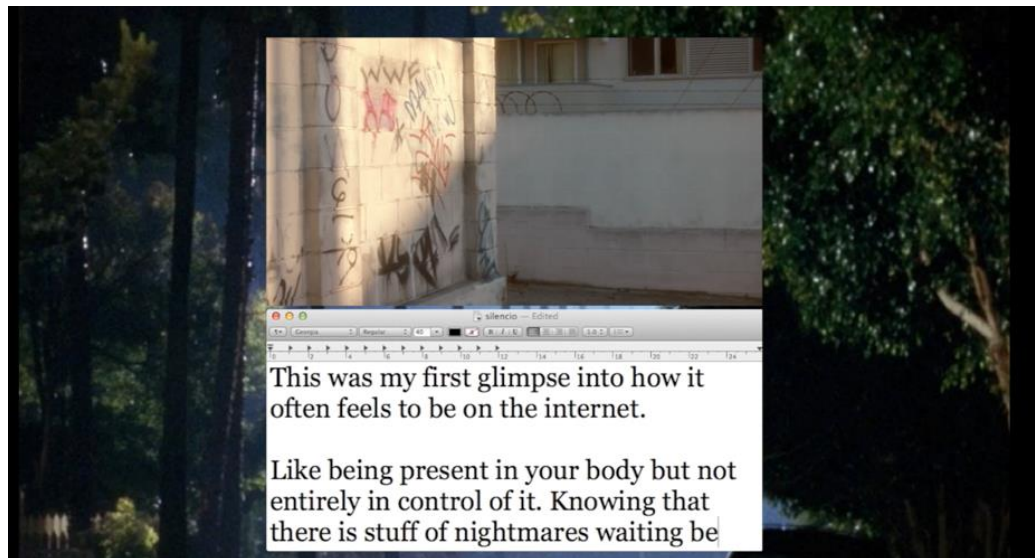


Figure 4.3: Jessica McGoff’s *My Mulholland* (2020).

McGoff’s desktop documentary re-imagines Astruc’s vision by using the screen apparatus as a kind of in-built ‘camera’.⁴⁴ As a good example of a ‘new cinephile’ coming of age in the digital era, McGoff could access online film discourses as a teenager. McGoff has since responded creatively to Internet culture by exploring the apparatus itself and her embodied experience in the form of a video essay/desktop documentary. Although McGoff evidently admires Lynch’s film and is inspired by its surreal neo-noir tone of mystery and anxiety, McGoff also decentres Lynch the auteur by foregrounding her own subjectivity as a cinephile and Internet user. This is *McGoff’s Mulholland* and not Lynch’s. Her haptic engagement with the MacBook is imprinted in the video essay’s form, through the movements and sounds of typing and clicking as a kind of ‘live’

⁴³ Kevin B. Lee’s *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) is a landmark in the development of desktop documentaries. Lee’s video essay comments on the contemporary swell of ‘remake culture’ in Hollywood and interestingly edits together amateur footage by ordinary people filmed on their smartphones. See: Kevin B. Lee, ‘Transformers: The Premake,’ Vimeo, 6 May 2014, <https://vimeo.com/94101046>.

⁴⁴ For more discussion on the desktop as a screen/camera, see: De Rosa and Strauven. ‘Screenic (Re)orientations,’ 149-150.

performance. As Minchol Cha and Sanghoon Lee note, the desktop documentary format has the potential to cross the ‘boundaries between creation and criticism’ via a partly mechanical stream of consciousness.⁴⁵ In text, McGoff often refers to how her body *feels* when combing through the Internet. McGoff therefore demonstrates the alternative to vococentrism (via voiceover) in essayistic filmmaking.⁴⁶

Like many cinephiles in the digital age, McGoff watched *Mulholland Drive* alone in her room and not in the collective viewing space of the cinema. She could physically engage with her screen apparatus, even abruptly shutting it off. This is the nature of ‘new cinephilia’ and the materialising of Astruc’s vision of home viewing technologies (i.e., ‘the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector’).⁴⁷ McGoff’s video essay can be considered a meditation on the simultaneously solitary and collective experience of Internet use and film spectatorship. Although alone in her viewing experience, McGoff consulted Internet forums to engage discursively with online communities of other viewers. And, by *writing her thoughts* with her screen apparatus, McGoff’s experience of *Mulholland Drive* and the Internet may resonate with other Lynch fans and audiences who watch her video essay, displaying what Lého Galibert-Laîné and Kevin B. Lee refer to as ‘desktop subjectivity’.⁴⁸

One of the first major films to be ‘remade’ using AI-generated imagery and sound was Chris Marker’s short science-fiction film *La Jetée* (1962), about a man sent to the past and future by scientists to seek help following nuclear devastation. Like Vertov’s film, Marker’s film has inspired several remediations. Projects include those by Joanna Zylinska and Adrian Goycoolea, who approached the concept of a ‘remake’ with different methods and styles.⁴⁹ Zylinska’s *The Gift of the World (Oedipus on the Jetty)* from 2021 takes an ‘automatic’ surrealistic approach to the original text (Figure 4.4).⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Goycoolea’s *AI Jetée* (2023) replicates Marker’s shots as closely as possible but produces surprising outputs.⁵¹ The contrasts between Marker’s and Goycoolea’s films become more

⁴⁵ Cha and Lee, ‘Desktop Documentary and Database Narrative,’ 75.

⁴⁶ Harvey, ‘The Limits of Vococentrism,’ 6-7.

⁴⁷ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

⁴⁸ Lého Galibert-Laîné and Kevin B. Lee, ‘Troubling the Desktop,’ *Filmmaker Magazine*, 14 March 2019, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107208-troubling-the-desktop/>.

⁴⁹ See: ‘AI Remakes of “La Jetée” (Chris Marker, 1962),’ King’s College London, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/events/ai-remakes-of-la-jetee-chris-marker-1962>; Y7, ‘La Jetai [2021] [Artificial Intelligence Rework] [StyleGAN2-ADA],’ YouTube, 8 May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6PGR9JjFyc&t=23s>.

⁵⁰ In Zylinska’s film, AI-generated voice-over script makes up an entire family plot with gender-fluid and Oedipal undertones. Zylinska used GanZ for images and ChatGPT 2 for the text of the voice-over narration, which had less data to work with at the time compared to later systems. She only inputted the first line of the voice-over narration and what followed was the generator’s interpretation.

⁵¹ Goycoolea credits Midjourney version 5 for the generated imagery, AIVA for the music, ElevenLabs for the voice-over, and Resemble AI for the whispers. According to Goycoolea, he uploaded stills from Marker’s film to Midjourney

explicit in the side-by-side version on YouTube (Figure 4.5).⁵² While techniques like lighting and fades are replicated well, other aspects like drastic facial mutations stand out in Goycoolea's remake. As Feldman comments on Bard's global Vertov remake, as viewers watch both films simultaneously, a third 'counterpoint' image is produced (a second layer of montage).⁵³ Baron refers to this experience as 'temporal disparity', as the differences between film ('old media') and digital ('new media') become clear to the viewer.⁵⁴ Indeed, the photorealistic AI faces in Goycoolea's film are uncannily smooth when seen side-by-side with the grainy, *real* faces in Marker's original.

As a film about memory, time, and technological tensions, the film is thematically apt for remediation and convergence projects. And as a '*photo-roman*' (with its writerly, Astruc-like connotation) comprised of mostly still photos (apart from one moving shot), the experimental style of Marker's original film is suited to AI generators' limited ability to produce *moving* images (certainly early-on in the 2020s).⁵⁵ Significantly, Marker often recycled newsreel footage and other media in his works, and this method is repeated in a sense by AI's algorithmic 'poaching' of data from different sources, including stock images. It is significant, too, that Marker was relatively reclusive, using various pseudonyms. The filmmaker even lived 'virtually' as a cat avatar called Guillaume-en-Égypte in the multiplayer game *Second Life*.⁵⁶ Therefore, these AI remakes play further with potentially multiple 'Chris Marker(s)' as (co-)authors.

5 and entered descriptive text prompts and stylistic descriptions such as 'film grain', '35mm', and 'Cartier Bresson' to achieve the look of images. See: Connecting Research | University of Reading, 'Dr Adrian Goycoolea: Screening of "AI La Jetée" (2023) and artist's statement,' YouTube, 20 October 2023,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeEPvgPhQG4>.

⁵² Adrian Goycoolea, 'AI Jetée & La Jetée: A Two-Screen Dialogue on Regeneration,' YouTube, 10 March, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFcPHUVOxsA>;

⁵³ Feldman, 'On the Internet,' (2010).

⁵⁴ Baron, 'The Experimental Film Remake,' 474.

⁵⁵ However, editing techniques like slow dissolves are also forms of movement (even when applied to 'still' images, as in Marker's original film). For more discussion, see: Zylinska, *The Perception Machine*, 120-128.

⁵⁶ Criterion, 'Chris Marker's Second Life'.



Figure 4.4: Joanna Zylińska's *The Gift of the World* (2021).

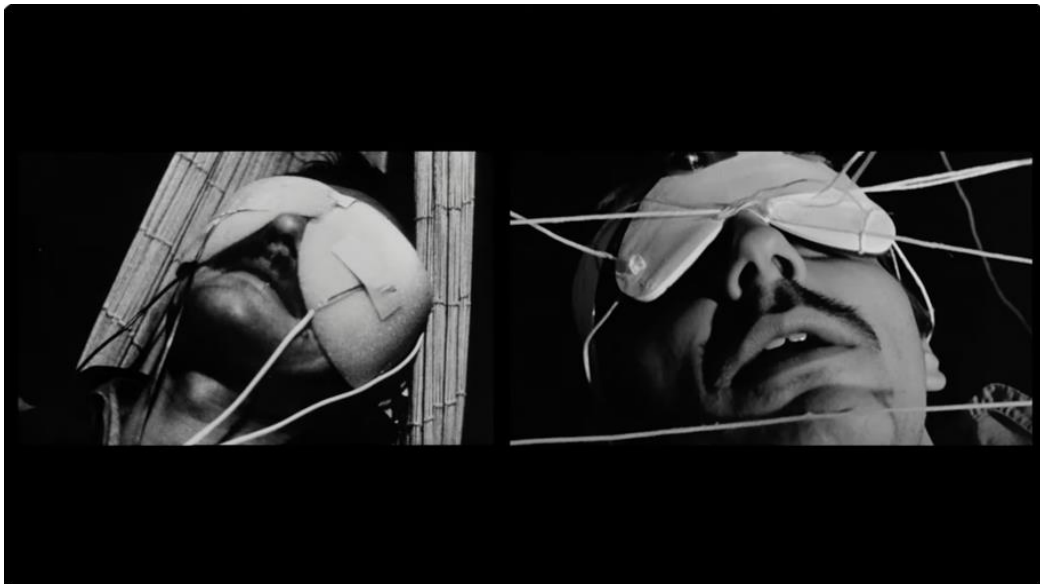


Figure 4.5: Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) (left) and Adrian Goycoolea's AI remake (YouTube, 2025).

Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) has also been 'remade' using AI as *Another Persona* by the Göteborg Film Festival in collaboration with SF Studios, Gothenburg Film Studios, and the Ingmar Bergman Foundation. As a 'cinematic experiment', *Another Persona* was screened only once for an audience at the festival in January 2024, followed by a discussion.⁵⁷ Unlike the remakes of Marker's film, the primary aim of the *Persona* remake was to only replace Liv Ullmann with a new female performer (Alma Pöysti). The effect sees Pöysti's face algorithmically *masked* over Ullmann's face in the film's

⁵⁷ Göteborg Film Festival, 'Another Persona,' <https://goteborgfilmfestival.se/en/another-persona/>.

original mise en scène (a sophisticated version of an AR selfie filter or deepfake). Bergman's original 1966 film can be watched while a new lead from 2024 is ostensibly performing 'within' the same diegesis. It can be said that a 'palimpsest' effect is created with two layers of time and performances. Aside from its meditation on screen performance, as a 'remake' of a widely regarded auteur film, the authorship of this new *Persona* comes into question. This remake is a collaborative co-creation made by a team of computer programmers and artists but – perhaps equally – Bergman's original 'auteur' film was also a creative collaboration between performers Ullmann and Bibi Andersson and cinematographer Sven Nykvist.

Contemporary mainstream cinema culture has been critiqued as an era of endless remakes, owing to the extent that Hollywood studios have remade or rebooted popular franchises from the 1970s to 1990s (and even the 2000s) in recent years to profit from familiar intellectual property.⁵⁸ Experimental filmmakers have also clearly demonstrated their interest in re-editing, recycling, and remaking films in the digital age. With remakes of well-known and critically appreciated films, there is the question of whether it is ethical to pursue a remake without the original author's consent. While Marker is not alive to comment on AI remakes of *La Jetée*, the Ingmar Bergman Foundation (as posthumous custodians of his work) was involved in making *Another Persona*. The very idea of gen-AI is controversial in a time of broader tensions in the film industry over AI's infringement on creative labour, especially marked by the 2023 Hollywood strikes. These experimental 'remakes' are intended to self-reflexively explore the contrasts and novel insights of new media tools. Filmmakers like Proctor, McGoff, and Goycoolea are also explicitly *fans* of the films they have 'remade'. Co-creation with found footage, auteur texts, and AI offer new methods of cinephilic screen analysis. Neither replacements for nor improvements on the 'real thing', their remakes and remediations serve as homages to the original texts and as textual 'dialogues' with their counterpart filmmakers.

⁵⁸ Examples include the *Indiana Jones*, *Star Wars*, and *Jurassic Park* franchises. This practice has been widely critiqued for its reliance on nostalgia and commercially viable iconographies. Auteurs associated with 'indie' or arthouse cinema have been hired by studios to remake popular films and may receive criticism from fans for 'selling out' (see Barry Jenkins's example in Chapter 3). As a symptom of late capitalism, it certainly speaks to Fredric Jameson's notable conception (from 1991) of the 'insensible colonisation of the present by the nostalgia mode.' See: Kathleen Looke, *Hollywood Remaking: How Film Remakes, Sequels, and Franchises Shape Industry and Culture* (University of California Press, 2024), 1-3; Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 19.

Social Media Re-Imaginations of Auteur Films

Scholars, media practitioners, and filmmakers are not the only cinephiles and fans who respond creatively to cinema, as demonstrated by the vast array of fan-made media online. Just as the auteurs discussed in Chapter 3 have taken to social media to promote their works and to express themselves creatively with the affordances of these platforms, ordinary social media users and audiences (from dedicated cinephiles to casual viewers) are engaging with editorial, synthetic, and digital technologies to interpret auteurism. Technologies of transformation for ordinary consumers, from splicing and re-editing films to TikTok editing, formally re-imagine pre-existing texts. While specific texts like *Man with a Movie Camera* and *La Jetée* have been remediated or re-interpreted in notable projects, an auteur's *style* is also subject to being copied and co-created by fans online.

Fan-made film posters are a significant part of auteur-centric media that is co-created online. As I explained in Chapter 3, ancillary materials can promote and 'package' auteur films, while conveying certain ideas about auteurs' 'brands' and their film texts. Freely available design software with digital image and text compositing has made poster design accessible for fans with the appropriate skills and knowledge of design conventions.⁵⁹ 'What if...' posters may imagine anachronistic and alternative film texts that substitute actors, time periods, and directors to create a new version of the original text. Examples include: 'What if Fritz Lang directed *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the 1920s?'.⁶⁰ Kathleen Williams claims that the success of 'What If...' posters 'relies on individual memories of specific films, as well as a collective and networked knowledge of broader film history.' And, by combining both historical and contemporary elements, these posters 'function as simultaneously anticipatory and nostalgic, looping between the denied future of a film, and our memories of the films they evoke.'⁶¹ Other fan-made ancillary materials include fake Criterion covers for 'low-brow' films and posters for failed productions like Alejandro Jodorowsky's unrealised *Dune* adaptation in the 1970s.⁶² Many of these works are participatory exercises in cinephilia and play with the idea of auteurism itself, whether poking fun at the concept of 'quality' or demonstrating a

⁵⁹ See: Jennifer O'Meara, 'Establishing a Saul Bass-line for Fan-Made Film Posters,' *In Media Res*, 11 April 2016, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2016/03/22/test>.

⁶⁰ See: Peter Stults, "'What if...' Movies Reimagined for Another Time & Place,' Behance, 2012, <https://www.behance.net/gallery/2783319/What-if-Movies-reimagined-for-another-time-place>.

⁶¹ Kathleen Williams, 'Directed by...: Anticipatory Nostalgia in "What If" Posters,' *In Media Res*, 13 April 2016, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2016/04/05/directed-anticipatory-nostalgia-what-if-posters>.

⁶² See: Jamie Sexton, 'Fake Criterion Covers,' *In Media Res*, 14 April 2016, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2016/03/23/fake-criterion-covers>.

depth of knowledge about film history. This kind of poster pre-dates the mainstream availability of gen-AI, where similar ‘what if...’ scenarios have been produced with AI image generation.⁶³

The ‘*Goncharov*’ meme is a recent example of a collective endeavour by social media users in collaboratively creating a non-existent auteur-based film. The meme collectively imagines a fake gangster film ‘presented by Martin Scorsese’. The meme originated on Tumblr in 2020 when a pair of men’s boots mistakenly labelled ‘Goncharov, presented by Martin Scorsese/Directed by Matteo JWHJ 0715’ were posted by a user.⁶⁴ Another Tumblr user responded parodically, ‘this idiot hasn’t seen goncharov’, as though the boots were real merchandise from a ‘lost’ film. The meme found revived interest on Twitter/X when the original Tumblr post was reshared as a screenshot.⁶⁵ Sustaining a relatively long lifespan for a meme, the idea of *Goncharov* further developed when in 2022, a fan poster was designed by artist Alex Korotchuk. The poster features a backdrop of the Kremlin and Naples, with a line-up of photoshopped images of stars like Robert De Niro, Cybil Shephard, and Gene Hackman, with the tagline: ‘The greatest mafia movie ever made’ (Figure 4.6). The *Goncharov* poster can be considered a ‘What If...’ poster, albeit in the absence of a real film text from which to draw inspiration. As a non-existent film, the plot and characters were then collaboratively imagined by social media users. The poster inspired further fan-fiction plots and even faux critical analyses, the creation of DVD sleeves, fan art, and erotic fiction.⁶⁶ The humorous and metatextual premise of the meme is implicated in cinephilia, and specifically auteur theory, as it parodies the idea that cinephiles must consume (and analyse) a director’s entire body of work, even if those works were never produced. As Olivia Stowell argues, this meme reveals the strong collaborative intentions of fans to playfully participate in co-creating auteur texts.⁶⁷

⁶³ See: O’Meara and Murphy, ‘Aberrant AI Creations,’ 1087-1088.

⁶⁴ This manufacturing mistake is likely referring to Italian director Matteo Garrone, who made *Gomorra* (2008), which was in fact endorsed by Scorsese on promotional materials.

⁶⁵ Madison Malone Kircher, ‘The Fake Scorsese Film You Haven’t Seen. Or Have You?’ *The New York Times*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/22/style/goncharov-scorsese-tumblr.html>.

⁶⁶ Petrana Radulovic, ‘Martin Scorsese’s Lost Film Goncharov (1973), Explained,’ Polygon, 21 November 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23471749/goncharov-1973-explained-tumblr-meme>.

⁶⁷ See, also: Olivia Stowell, ‘Goncharov’s Auteurish Aesthetics,’ *In Media Res*, 3 February 2025, <https://mediacommons.org/imr/content/goncharov’s-auteurish-aesthetics>.

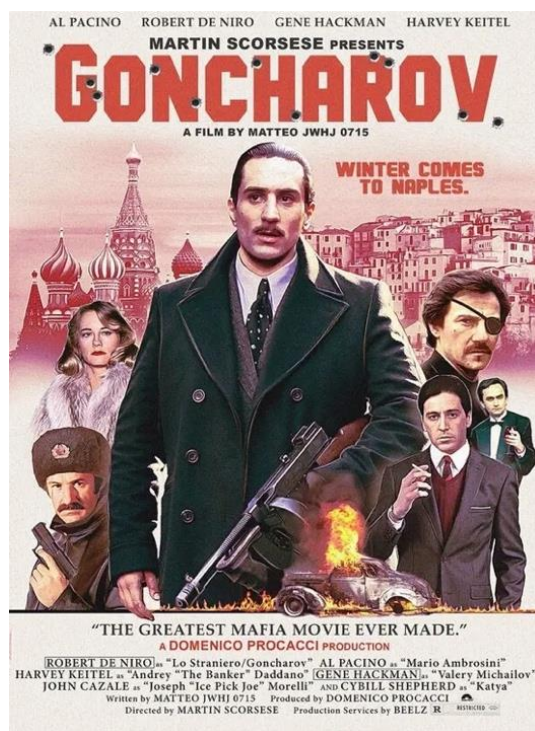


Figure 4.6: Alex Korotchuk's *Goncharov* poster.

Augmented reality filters on Instagram have contributed to digital re-imaginings of auteur cinema. Some freely available AR filters made by users on Instagram attempt to capture the 'look' of a filmmaker's style or feature a possessory or 'directed by' credit. With this kind of filter, the Instagram user can take a selfie, a photo, or a video of their environment. For example, as I tried below, the David Lynch filter by @paolohr renders an environment black-and-white and features a 'directed by' credit written in the title font for *Twin Peaks* (Figure 4.7). Following Lynch's death, fans posted photos and videos on Instagram of 'Directed by David Lynch' stickers on their apartment windows in homage, that look like physical AR filters (Figure 4.7).⁶⁸ In effect, the user is consciously inserting and authoring themselves into the 'world' of a director's films, while signalling their own taste in cinema for other users.⁶⁹ Accurately mimicking the look and feel of specific films in one's environment is a difficult task for casual social media use, but accurate mimicry is perhaps not the point as much as conveying a 'mood'. Using the augmenting and

⁶⁸ See: Antonio Serra (@the_less_of_two_evils), 'R.I.P David Lynch,' Instagram, 17 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DE7HNtGi1ye/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

⁶⁹ Popular Spotify playlists like 'Twin Peaks Vibes' may achieve a similar effect *audibly*.

mobile technologies available to them, Instagram users can author their environments and embodied subjectivity.⁷⁰

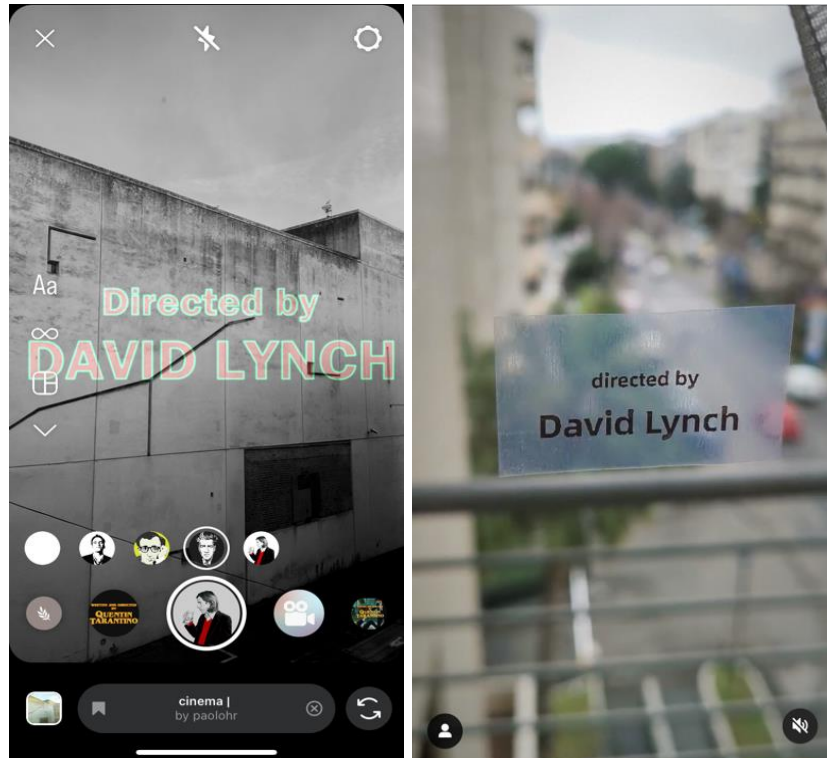


Figure 4.7: a David Lynch AR filter (left) and window sticker (Instagram, 2024/2025).

Case Study: Wes Anderson Fan Media

Although several individual directors mentioned so far (like Vertov, Hitchcock, Marker, and Bergman) have been the subject of digital ‘remakes’ or fan mimicry, Wes Anderson’s body of work has inspired a wide variety of digital fan media that re-imagines his oeuvre. More than most contemporary auteurs, Anderson’s particular signature has been repeatedly subject to different forms of aesthetic mimicry online, both from human creators and now co-creatively with gen-AI systems. Compared to avant-garde filmmakers like Conner or Vertov (whose work has been mimicked), Anderson has long been more situated within the Hollywood film industry (more specifically ‘Indiewood’) and its structures of funding and distribution.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Similarly, fan-made music videos have recycled scenes from Lynch’s works. See, for example: Marco Ragno, ‘Tame Impala - Yes I’m Changing,’ YouTube, 26 July 2016, <https://youtu.be/Outs-rsxPM?si=SrEjaPkTnlwsFkAZ>.

⁷¹ Peter C. Kunze, *The Films of Wes Anderson: Critical Essays on an Indiewood Icon* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

As I discussed in Chapter 1, one key issue with auteur theory is the collaborative and industrial nature of feature film production. Adrian Martin argues that Astruc's theory was partly misappropriated by *la politique des auteurs* as it became synonymous with the well-financed *mise en scène* of feature film narratives among the *Cahiers* group (the likes of François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, etc.) and beyond, rather than freewheeling, modestly-made films, such as those by Marker or Agnès Varda.⁷² Indeed, Astruc himself seems to apply his earlier vision of personal authorship and subjectivity to *mise en scène* some years later.⁷³ Anderson has certainly followed the auteur's path of the 'well-financed *mise en scène*' to which Martin refers. While Anderson has a distinctive style that has become synonymous with his 'brand', his mode of production does not align with the view of the *caméra-stylo* shared in this thesis – one that is mobile, personal, and broadly non-industrial. As a director, Anderson began with restricted, low budget productions but has worked on large-scale productions in recent years that require industrial-sized labour in order to produce elaborate scale models, sound stages, and practical and special effects. This sense of scale is apparent in behind-the-scenes DVD featurettes. Like many auteurs, Anderson's personal style must be qualified by acknowledging the input of frequent collaborators, such as Roman Coppola (screenwriter), Robert Yeoman (director of photography), Adam Stockhausen (production designer), Andrew Weisblum (editor), and Alexandre Desplat (composer). With this aspect of collaboration in mind, the label of 'auteur' or 'author' applied to Anderson can be viewed as a type of discourse insofar as his films are discursively categorised by audiences and critics as *his* works guided by *his* vision.⁷⁴

Anderson has developed a distinctive auteur persona that Devin Orgeron in 2007 referred to as Anderson's '*camera-Crayola*' (derived from the popular crayon brand), which suggests a more playful and childlike alternative to Astruc's more maturely enworlded pen.⁷⁵ To invoke Peter Wollen, there is such a thing as Anderson (the director) and 'Anderson' (the discourses named after him). Wollen differentiates the director as an individual from the director as a type of discourse (i.e., the difference between Hitchcock, the man/director, and 'Hitchcock', the structures named after him).⁷⁶ Michel Foucault similarly writes: 'The author's name serves to characterise a certain mode of being of

⁷² Martin, 'Introduction to "The Future of Cinema",' (2016).

⁷³ Astruc, 'Qu'est-ce que la Mise en Scène?' (1959).

⁷⁴ See, also, essays on collaboration in Anderson's work in Vernallis et al ed. *Transmedia Directors* (2021).

⁷⁵ Orgeron, 'La Camera-Crayola,' (2007).

⁷⁶ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Secker & Warburg, 1972), 168.

discourse.’⁷⁷ Today, there are directors, the discourses named after them, and the directors’ personal Internet-based personas that can function independently of each other semiotically, but are nonetheless unified by their recognisable name and work. However, there are also the ‘*Andersonian*’ fan works that bear Anderson’s name online. This alternative body of work includes the Accidentally Wes Anderson multimedia ‘world’, the TikTok trend in 2023, and AI-generated outputs. The reasons for *why* Anderson’s body of work is so susceptible or malleable to textual re-imaginings cannot be determined exactly. But, there are five possible contributing factors.

(1) The factor of Anderson’s consistent *visual* style and *mise en scène* is perhaps the most important, as it determines the basic aesthetic content of fan works. His construction of *mise en scène* has become the main marker of how Anderson’s ‘*caméra-stylo*’ is perceived in broader film culture. The ability to say that an image or video ‘*looks like a Wes Anderson film*’ is very much predicated on how Anderson, in collaboration with others like Yeoman, has developed a recognisable visual ‘brand’. Anderson’s aesthetic sensibility has accumulated over the past two decades through the construction of symmetrical compositions, shot choices, character blocking, striking décor and architecture, retro costumes and props, distinctive colour palettes, and so on.⁷⁸ These elements are often emphasised in fan mimicry. His films are so singularly *his* trademark, that Anderson scholar Mark Browning has commented: ‘the only movies Wes Anderson films look like are other Wes Anderson films.’⁷⁹ Anderson often uses static and wide shots (although tracking shots, close-ups, and whip-pans are also trademarks). Often, actors play out the scene together in the same shot, rather than in shot-reverse-shots. As James McDowall comments, Anderson’s style may be characterised by the ‘static, flat-looking, medium-long or long “planimetric” shot that appears nearly geometrically even, depicting carefully arranged characters, often facing directly forward, who are made to look faintly ridiculous by virtue of a composition’s rigidity.’⁸⁰ Long shots can be achieved relatively easily with smartphones compared to over-the-shoulder shots that often look distorted with the smartphone lens. His consistent style may be conducive to the well-composed, ‘flat-lay’ aesthetics of Instagram, for example. Furthermore, the

⁷⁷ Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ 211.

⁷⁸ Julie Assouly has examined intermediality within Anderson’s cinema. See: Assouly, ‘Wes Anderson’s Intermedial Cinema: Distancing Affect in an Affective Storyworld,’ Affective Intermediality conference, Cluj-Napoca, 20 October 2023.

⁷⁹ Mark Browning, *Wes Anderson: Why His Movies Matter* (Bloomsbury, 2011), ix.

⁸⁰ James MacDowell, ‘Wes Anderson, Tone and the Quirky Sensibility,’ *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 9, DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2012.628227.

distinctive ‘geometrical’ and ‘flat’ look of his films may also be easier for generative AI systems to mimic algorithmically.

(2) The second factor is *mainstream visibility*. Since 1996, all of Anderson’s feature films have been produced or distributed by major Hollywood studios, including Columbia Pictures, Fox Searchlight Pictures, and Universal Pictures. Anderson’s films have been nominated for awards at Cannes, Academy awards, and Golden Globe awards on several occasions. Furthermore, Hollywood stars like Tom Hanks, Bill Murray, Timothée Chalamet, Adrien Brody, Scarlett Johansson, and Gwyneth Paltrow have starred in his movies. Anderson is a well-established filmmaker with a considerable body of work, having directed eleven features, ten shorts and eight commercials, as of 2024. Thus, there is a substantial breadth of work for audiences to extract influence from. In 2023 alone (the same year as the TikTok trend), *Asteroid City* was released in cinemas and several of his shorts adapted from Roald Dahl stories were released on Netflix, thus sustaining prolonged visibility that year. Anderson is also popular on an international level. This is demonstrated by the global variety of photo submissions to AWA and globally located exhibitions dedicated to his work and impact such as at the Cinémathèque française in 2025, and ‘Accidentally Wes Anderson’ exhibitions in Tokyo, London, and Melbourne. His auteur name is certainly more widely known than other auteurs like Claire Denis or Nicolas Winding Refn that I have examined in this thesis, as well as more obscure avant-garde filmmakers like Conner whose work has also been mimicked.

(3) The third factor is *tone*. The dry or ironic tone of Anderson’s films may contribute to their malleability as texts among audiences who are also well-versed in Internet culture. Anderson’s films have been described as conveying a ‘quirky sensibility’ and balancing ‘ironic detachment with sincere engagement’.⁸¹ Serious or darker issues in Anderson’s films (like grief, war, mental illness, and mortality) are often treated with a sense of absurdity. This tone is easily reproducible on social media, where ironic humour is already distilled into GIFs, memes, and posts on a variety of subjects, from war and politics to subcultures and art. A sense of youthfulness, angst, and playfulness is also apparent in his films, especially coming-of-age films like *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) or *Rushmore* (1998), and may appeal to younger audiences who also happen to use social media platforms.

⁸¹ Ibid, 6.

(4) The fourth factor is Anderson's *auteur persona in ancillary media*. Related to the mainstream visibility of Anderson's cinema is his visible persona in ancillary or paratextual media. Anderson remains relatively private in comparison to other directors like Refn (discussed in Chapter 3) who share information about their personal lives on social media. However, Anderson has frequently appeared in recorded interviews, including Internet-based interview formats like Konbini Vidéo Club's DVD walk-through video and an explainer video with *Vanity Fair* on YouTube.⁸² Anderson's style has also been parodied in sketches on *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-present).⁸³ Anderson has taken advantage of digital technologies to extend his paratextual 'self', such as behind-the-scenes documentaries and DVD commentary tracks where his voice lends authority to the film.⁸⁴

Anderson's role as himself in a television commercial he directed for American Express in 2004 plays into popular notions about his fashion sense, eccentricity, bombastic production scale, and auteur persona. Here, Anderson is wearing a vintage suit and being very particular about props, for example.⁸⁵ Orgeron notes the ad's own mimicry of an 'Andersonian mise en scène' and its barely concealed aping of Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), which ironically points to Anderson's own pastiche of styles, directors, and eras.⁸⁶ At the end of the commercial, Anderson poses with a camera alongside his DOP Yeoman who significantly remains unnamed in the advert. Anderson's handwritten signature, as though on the back of a bankcard, is shown with the tagline 'My life. My card' (Figure 4.8).⁸⁷ This suggests Anderson's independent authority within the industry. In 2024, Anderson also directed and appeared in a commercial for luxury pen company Montblanc to promote 100 years of the Meisterstück pen and introduce his own custom pen called the Scribbler, which aptly echoes Orgeron's term for Anderson's cinema as 'camera-Crayola' (Figure 4.8).⁸⁸ Anderson's Montblanc product endorsement

⁸² Konbini, 'Wes Anderson est dans le Vidéo Club de légende pour parler cinéma,' YouTube, 1 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNyFwKXSxB8>; Vanity Fair, 'Every Wes Anderson Movie, Explained by Wes Anderson | Vanity Fair,' YouTube, 6 June 2025, <https://youtu.be/NEOvfStFSvM?si=rGmvyUljeoHMCTe1>.

⁸³ See: *Saturday Night Live*, 'Wes Anderson Horror Trailer – SNL,' YouTube, 18 April 2019, <https://youtu.be/gfDIAZCwHQE?si=oOOmw7pvd1tU0L>.

⁸⁴ See: Grant, 'Auteur Machines,' (2008).

⁸⁵ On a related note, a short parody voice recording shared on YouTube in 2022 (with nearly 700k views) uses a voice distortion to mimic a leaked recording of Anderson having an on-set 'meltdown', shouting at crew members: 'If it's not gonna be symmetrical, it's not going in the f*cking movie. [...] If everything isn't centre framed, how is the audience supposed to know it's my f*cking movie?'. See: Fineski, 'LEAKED Wes Anderson Meltdown On Set,' YouTube, 12 May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpLmMnsUeck>.

⁸⁶ Orgeron, 'La Camera-Crayola,' 61.

⁸⁷ hst74, 'Wes Anderson: American Express Commercial,' YouTube, 19 November 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbO3BS0Uzm0>.

⁸⁸ Montblanc, 'Montblanc | "100 Years of MEISTERSTÜCK"', YouTube, 1 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUSRyAha37w>.

suits the motif of authorship in his films and his auteur persona. The ad's emphasis on *writer-li-ness* and a celebration of physically handwriting a *signature* symbolically supports the basis of the caméra-stylo as the personal inscription of individual expression. His ancillary visibility effectively extends his 'self' beyond his film texts in broader screen culture and public consciousness.



Figure 4.8: Wes Anderson and Robert Yeoman for American Express (2004) (top) and Anderson pictured with actors Jason Schwartzman and Rupert Friend for Montblanc (2024).

(5) The fifth and final factor is *the digital age*. Coincidentally, Anderson's career as a filmmaker more or less aligns with the rise of the Internet and social media platforms, with Anderson's debut feature released in 1996 and his most recent being released in 2025. Orgeron comments that the development of his authorship 'coincides with the birth of and refinement of DVD technology' and Anderson has participated in creating the extra-filmic materials on his own DVDs.⁸⁹ Therefore, his career and his

⁸⁹ Orgeron, 'La Camera-Crayola,' 41.

accumulation of online fans also aligns with the development of ‘new cinephilia’. Contemporary younger audiences also happen to be the main trend-setters on apps like TikTok and appear to be at the centre of the Wes Anderson TikTok trend. Unlike contemporary society where smartphones and Internet technologies are difficult to avoid, digital devices are typically obfuscated in his film worlds. Although an Apple iPod features intermittently in *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), for example, his films are often set in the past. This contributes to his ‘retro’ brand. His style may even be described as ‘post-digital’. Younger audiences (Gen Z and Millennials) who grew up with and may fluently ‘speak’ the language of Internet platforms may also have come of age with the release of his films. His emphasis on objects of analogue nostalgia in his films, such as vinyl records and 16mm cameras, may be an appealing alternative to younger audiences who have grown up with pervasive digital technologies.

Other contemporary directors possess many of the same attributes. While Browning’s point is noteworthy, the distinctive colour palette, tone, or ‘look’ of films by directors like Elia Suleiman, Aki Kaurismäki, Roy Andersson, Jacques Demy, or Jacques Tati might be compared to Anderson’s own personal style or ‘tone’, but are not as broadly popular as Anderson. Auteurs like Gaspar Noé possess a distinctive visual style and a visible auteur persona (as I discussed in Chapter 3). Lynch has been extensively meme-ified in the digital age.⁹⁰ However, it is potentially the combination of *all* of these factors listed above that contribute to the volume of Anderson-centric fan media online. While it is not possible to account for all Anderson-centric fan media, there are some significant examples that demonstrate the broad and lasting appeal of Anderson’s style and, in turn, the ability to mimic it.

One significant aesthetic precursor to the more recent TikTok trend and AI-generated examples is the YouTube parody ‘What if Wes Anderson Directed X-Men?’ uploaded in March 2015 (Figure 4.9).⁹¹ Edited in the style of a trailer, the video is nearly four-minutes-long and presents itself as Anderson’s adaptation of the Stan Lee comic series. Although the trailer pokes fun at tropes in Anderson’s work (such as slow-motion shots), the creators are clearly fans making their own ‘imaginary paratext’, as Mathias Bonde Korsgaard has analysed, that shows consumers’ ‘audiovisual literacy’.⁹²

⁹⁰ See: Hartwig, ‘Room to Meme,’ in *Networked David Lynch* (2023).

⁹¹ Patrick (H) Willems, ‘What if Wes Anderson Directed X-Men?’ YouTube, 3 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UngE0qn3VRY>.

⁹² Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, ‘Fake Trailers as Imaginary Paratexts,’ *Mediekultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 36, no. 68 (2020): 107-125, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v36i68.118431>.

Considerable production value has gone into making this short video, as the creators used an apartment to film with small home green-screens and a miniature cross-section of a dollhouse for special effects scenes. The team also filmed outside of the real Tenenbaum house from Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001). This points to a desire to achieve authenticity and get 'closer' to Anderson's own production choices. Similar aesthetic mashups on YouTube include Steve Ramsden's 'Wes Anderson's The Shining' (2015) and Luís Azevedo's 'The Sopranos directed by Wes Anderson' (2022), which take advantage of digital editing to alter pre-existing texts to look 'Andersonian'.⁹³ Similarly to fan-made posters, the appeal of these mashups is seeing familiar intellectual property or popular texts combined with the stylistic 'lens' or 'filter' of an auteur like Anderson. Fans would later experiment with such mashups using generative AI.



Figure 4.9: 'What if Wes Anderson Directed X-Men?' (YouTube, 2015).

The collaborative potential of Anderson-based fan media was realised on a global scale with the Instagram account *Accidentally Wes Anderson* (@accidentallywesanderson), launched in 2017 by founder Wally Koval. The profile is a crowd-sourced gallery of colourful images and videos showing globally located public spaces, buildings, and objects that are 'Andersonian' (Figure 4.10). Originating with Koval's photographs of 'Andersonian' locations on his travels, the project developed

⁹³ Steve Ramsden, 'Wes Anderson's The Shining,' YouTube, 29 May 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nsi06PG7w_0; Little White Lies, 'The Sopranos Directed by Wes Anderson,' 9 May 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8gcInw508E&t=38s>.

through Koval's use of a hashtag on Instagram (#accidentallywesanderson), which was then used by others. The community grew as a kind of 'travel book club', according to Koval, and reached a global level with 1.9m followers.⁹⁴ The Instagram profile has spawned spin-off projects since 2020, including book publications and exhibitions. Rather than being the products of an individual author, AWA images are collectively produced by different photographers (both amateur and professional) and then editorialised by Koval. Its collective assemblage of different sources is similar to Bard's global remake of *Man with a Movie Camera*, but AWA has grown into its own commercialised multimedia world.

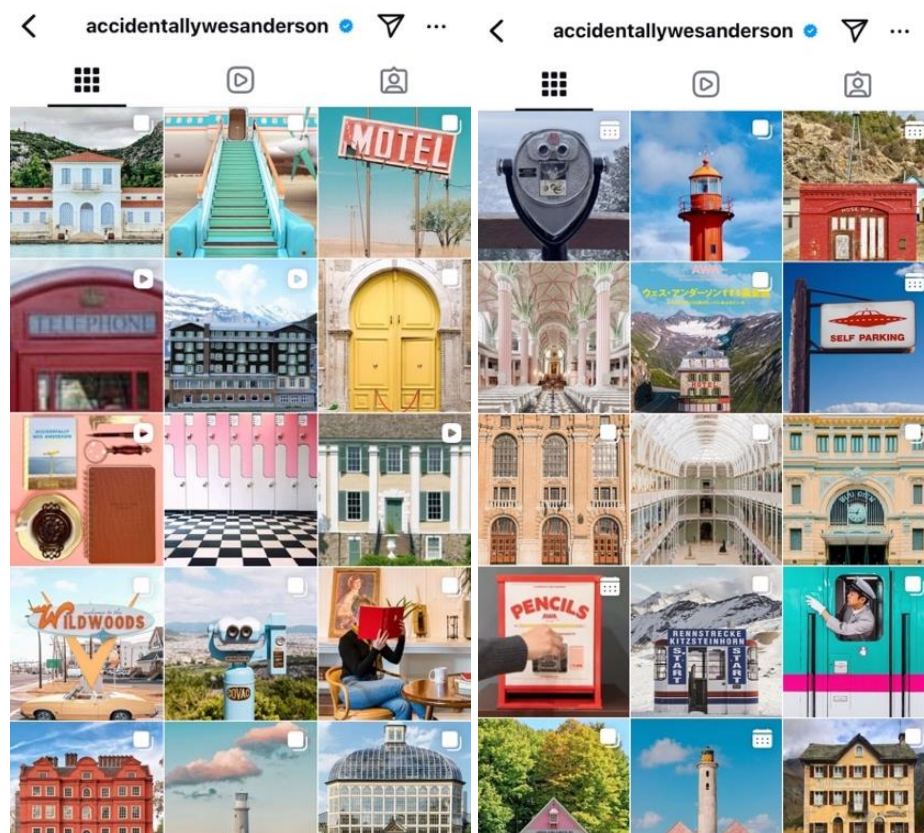


Figure 4.10: sample posts from @accidentallywesanderson on Instagram.

While Anderson's films are composed of elaborate custom-built sets that are meticulously decorated to portray a certain era, look, or colour scheme for the purposes of a film, the locations in this book are pre-existing structures that *happen* to be 'Andersonian'. This contrast brings to mind the meaning of *mise en scène* (literally to

⁹⁴ BBC, 'Accidentally Wes Anderson: When Real Life Meets Fantasy,' 25 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20201123-accidentally-wes-anderson-when-real-life-meets-film-fantasy>.

‘put in place’) as a system of artistic decisions. While Anderson’s films are a notable example of a director ‘putting things in place’ to convey a particular vision, the photographs in this book show objects and locations that have not been put in place by any film director. And yet, the overwhelming *authorial* voice being enunciated in AWA is Anderson’s. Interestingly, Anderson himself provides the foreword to the AWA book: ‘The photographs in this book were taken by people I have never met, of places and things I have, almost without exception, never seen – but I must say: I intend to.’ Anderson goes on: ‘I now understand what it means to be accidentally myself. Thank you. I am still confused what it means to be deliberately me, if that is even what I am.’⁹⁵ Here, Anderson points to the main paradox of this project (and others like it). Anderson’s introspection challenges long-held notions about Astruc’s theory of *caméra-stylo*, as Anderson shows hesitancy about the command of his own filmic signature, like a kind of identity crisis. While the AWA project exists independently of Anderson’s direction, his authorial authority is still important to Koval, the AWA team, and fans. Anderson’s foreword helps to legitimise this book’s efforts to capture accidental aesthetic mimicry. The AWA Instagram profile has even participated in promoting Anderson’s new releases like *Asteroid City* by sharing ancillary materials, thus showing the mutual benefit of such digital collaborations. It is paradoxically a project that celebrates his unique vision, while supposing that Anderson’s aesthetic does not entirely *belong* to him, presaging later developments in AI mimicry.

AWA effectively ‘speaks the language’ of social media aesthetics and marketing. Rather than having a background in the film industry, Koval is an entrepreneur and has spoken publicly about his social media networking strategies, while emphasising a sense of ‘community’ via the project.⁹⁶ This business-savvy approach is also clear in the book’s blurb:

Koval collects the world’s most Anderson-like sites in all their faded grandeur and pop-pastel colours, telling the story behind each stranger than-fiction-location. [...] Authorised by Wes Anderson himself, and appealing to the millions who love his films, this book is also for fans of

⁹⁵ Anderson quoted in: Wally Koval, *Accidentally Wes Anderson* (Trapeze, 2020), xi. It might be possible that Anderson receives a percentage of the book’s profits, although this is not public knowledge.

⁹⁶ Joe Pulizzi, ‘Wally Koval “Accidentally” Gets into Content Business,’ TILT, 19 April 2021, <https://www.thetilt.com/content-entrepreneur/wally-koval-instagram-accidentally-wes-anderson>.

Cabin Porn and Van Life – and avid travellers and aspiring adventurers of all kinds.⁹⁷

This suggests that Anderson's films may appeal to a tourist sensibility and members of certain subcultures or lifestyles, beyond merely fans of Anderson's films (broadening the potential market for this book).⁹⁸ The blurb references the aesthetics of 'van life' and travel lifestyle accounts, which include vloggers and brand-sponsored influencers.⁹⁹ The book combines the colour palette and whimsy associated with Anderson's filmography and the imagery of tourist and travel books that emphasise well-composed images of pretty mountains, unusual landmarks, and 'hidden gems'. It is interesting that these locations are described in the blurb as 'stranger-than-fiction' when viewed with an Andersonian lens, when in fact many of these locations function for locals on a daily basis. These locations are ostensibly worth photographing because they evoke Anderson's films for fans. However, their appeal as picturesque locations is also wrapped up in the aesthetic vernacular that has developed on Instagram, where AWA was born.

As a demonstration of the strong links between Anderson's style and social media cultures, the aesthetics of AWA reflect Instagram's aesthetic vernacular. Anderson's films visually align with Instagram's aesthetic trends in photography that privilege symmetry, centrally-placed objects, and flat-looking compositions – what Lev Manovich calls 'designed' photography on the platform.¹⁰⁰ Instagram's iconic square-shaped blocks of photos on user profiles affirm the appearance of symmetry and geometrical compositions. Thus, a filmmaker like Anderson whose *mise en scène* can easily fit into these visual parameters is ideal for the platform. Anderson's style is recognisable even in the square grids of Instagram profiles. Similarly, the Tumblr blog #wesanderson-esque is dedicated to sharing crowd-sourced Anderson-based media like official posters, fan drawings, film stills with quotations, and imagery of objects and people that are 'Andersonian' in neatly composed grids (Figure 4.11).¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Koval, *Accidentally Wes Anderson*, [blurb].

⁹⁸ Andrea David's Instagram project @filmtourismus with a large following of 1 million similarly uses printed stills from films and TV photographed against the backdrop of real filming locations.

⁹⁹ 'Van life' refers to vloggers and lifestyle creators on Instagram and YouTube, for example, who document their lives living in vans, often emphasising 'simple living' and travelling to picturesque locations.

¹⁰⁰ Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017).

¹⁰¹ #wesanderson-esque, Tumblr, <https://wesanderson-esque.tumblr.com>.

spaces in his films.¹⁰⁴ This also brings up issues like over-tourism and Insta-tourism, where ecologically vulnerable, culturally significant, or secluded locations become hotspots for tourists trying to take the best photo.¹⁰⁵ While the AWA project is certainly not to blame for over-tourism, commodification, or gentrification of local areas, it is nonetheless part of a culture of travel consumerism. Thus, through a subjective ‘Andersonian’ lens, real spaces can be re-interpreted by fans as co-created spaces regardless of their artistic origins.

AWA and other Anderson-focused online media demonstrate Jørgen Bruhn’s concept of ‘medial projection’.¹⁰⁶ Medial projection may be understood as the phenomenon of seeing the world through the framework of media – *seeing the world as if it were a painting*, for example (similarly theorised as ‘iconic projection’ by Hans Lund).¹⁰⁷ Bruhn also uses the more specific term ‘cinematic projection’ to refer to the phenomenon of *seeing the world as if it were a film*.¹⁰⁸ While Bruhn is referring to literary narratives and characters who *see cinematically* or *see the world as a painting* (extra-literary material), this phenomenon can also be observed in other media, social media practices, and even in everyday conversations.¹⁰⁹ AWA’s marketing emphasises how the fans see the world through a ‘lens’, almost evoking Vertov’s kino-eye.

A desire among fans to ‘*be in*’ Anderson’s films or ‘*be like*’ his characters stretches at least as far back as the online campaign for the ‘Zissou’ trainers. Orgeron notes that following the release of *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), online petitions were launched by fans calling on Adidas to officially release the branded trainers worn by Team Zissou in the film.¹¹⁰ While fans made their own custom pairs in the absence of an official Adidas edition, Adidas eventually released a limited number of premium Zissou trainers in 2017 that were soon sold out.¹¹¹ Thus, fans seemingly desired

¹⁰⁴ See, for example: John A. Sweeney, ‘Postnormal Imaginings in Wes Anderson’s *The Darjeeling Limited*,’ *East-West Perspectives* (April-June, 2013): 75-98, <https://postnormaltim.es/sites/default/files/uploads/Sweeney%20content/Sweeney%20Darjeeling%20PNT.pdf>; Trey Taylor, ‘Wes Anderson, Please Cast More People of Colour,’ *Dazed*, 22 June 2015, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/25188/1/wes-anderson-please-cast-more-people-of-colour>; Steve Rose, ‘Wes Anderson’s Isle of Dogs: Loving Homage to Japan or Cultural Appropriation?’ *The Guardian*, 26 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/mar/26/steve-rose-on-film-isle-of-dogs>.

¹⁰⁵ See: Marco D’Eramo, *The World in a Selfie: An Inquiry into the Tourist Age* (Verso Books, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ I’d like to credit Jørgen Bruhn, who posed this question to me at the Affective Intermediality conference in 2023 and encouraged pursuing this line of enquiry.

¹⁰⁷ Bruhn and Gjelsvik, *Cinema Between Media*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Jørgen Bruhn, *The Intermediality of Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 51.

¹⁰⁹ This can also apply to music (i.e. the ‘soundtrack to your life’) or the feeling of ‘being in a movie’ when listening to music through headphones.

¹¹⁰ Orgeron, ‘La Camera Crayola,’ 64.

¹¹¹ Jake Woolf, ‘Adidas Made Steve Zissou Sneakers and Actually Sold Them to the Masses,’ *GQ*, 28 June 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/adidas-sneakers-steve-zissou-life-aquatic>.

to bridge Anderson's storyworld with reality and live out the style of his characters through fashion items. Indeed, articles have been published advising readers how to make their interior décor *look like* an Anderson film or *how to dress like* an Anderson character.¹¹² This type of discourse encourages 'cinematic projection' by framing an idea of 'Anderson' onto real-life spaces and bodies, while encouraging niche forms of lifestyle-based consumerism.

'Cinematic projection' can also occur more directly when social media users apply augmented reality filters to real spaces. Anderson-labelled AR filters are widely available in search results on Instagram, with over 80 examples as of autumn 2024. Some AR filters apply a warm colour or pastel tint to an environment and/or include overlaid text that alter the look of spaces and people in real time, as I tried out below (Figure 4.12).¹¹³ Social media users are ostensibly viewing the world (buildings, public spaces, etc.) as though it were an Anderson film. In this sense, the world becomes a 'mise en scène' that is paradoxically unconnected to Anderson. The user (the mobilographer) may project 'Anderson' onto a space, writing and co-creating space to be 'Andersonian', while viewing space through their own eyes.

One interesting example is a video by the Instagram fashion account @messynessychic, based in Paris. The account frequently posts candid smartphone mobilography of anonymous Parisians below (shot from a high angle) to comment on their fashion choices and personalities without their knowledge, often based on a chosen theme. In April 2023, the account posted a video addressing the Anderson TikTok trend, which shows passers-by on the streets below wearing pastel colours and vintage suits (Figure 4.13).¹¹⁴ This example of 'medial projection' (perhaps worryingly) applies an Andersonian lens to unwitting participants, claiming that 'real life' can be experienced like an Anderson film. The subtitles in the video read: 'For Parisians, Wes Anderson colour paletting [*sic*] is NOT a TikTok trend; it is a way of life.' Ironically, it is perhaps the elaborate construction of *un-real* cinematic spaces, elaborate costuming, and meticulously posed décor in Anderson's mise en scène that may be more noticeable in

¹¹² Kayleigh Dray, 'How to Transform Your Home into an "Accidentally Wes Anderson" Movie,' Ideal Home, 5 May 2023, <https://www.idealhome.co.uk/living-room/living-room-decor/wes-anderson-home-decor-ideas>; Callie Zucker, 'Dress Like a Wes Anderson Movie for the Ultimate Twee Girl Summer,' Byrdie, 8 July 2023, <https://www.byrdie.com/wes-anderson-style-trend-7555869>. See, also: Cosplaying is a widely established aspect of fandoms, from anime and videogame fandoms to sci-fi fandoms, where fans dress up as their favourite fictional characters and may participate in role play.

¹¹³ Many of these filters were deleted after Meta shut down Spark AR in January 2025, pointing to the precarity of digital objects and creators.

¹¹⁴ Messy Nessy Chic (@messynessychic), 'Public service announcement,' Instagram, 27 April 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cri1QK0ogrK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MTIyMzRjYmRlZg==.

real-world spaces such as city streets. To borrow a phrase from AWA, these passers-by on the street are *stranger than fiction*. This augmenting co-creative caméra-stylo, with an Andersonian ‘filter’, thus renders real life into a kind of participatory semi-fiction.

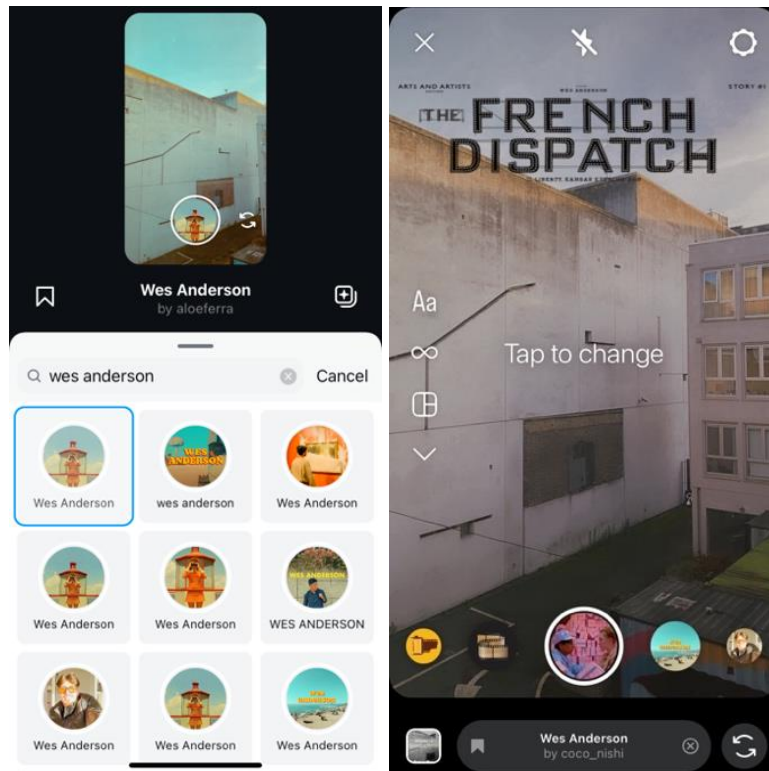


Figure 4.12: examples of Wes Anderson-themed filters (Instagram, 2024).

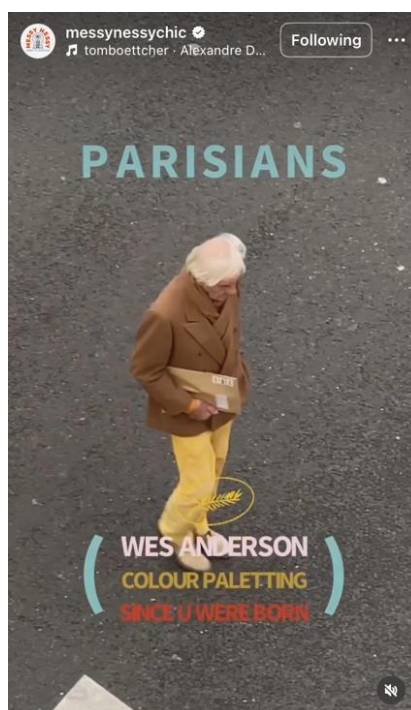


Figure 4.13: @messynessychic (Instagram, 2023).

The Wes Anderson TikTok Trend

While AWA media primarily consist of still photos, the TikTok trend that emerged in April 2023 significantly combined video, music, text, and – novelly – people’s visible participation. The trend arguably brought Anderson-focused fan media to mainstream visibility as it became a viral cross-platform ‘meme’ and ‘challenge’. As per Limor Shifman’s research on this subject, memes can broadly be defined as units of cultural distribution that are easily mimicked in content, form, and stance.¹¹⁵ And as Tom Divon and Laura Cervi add, TikTok challenges are essentially memes, as digital units that are ‘reproduced by imitation and spread rapidly, with creative variations.’¹¹⁶ Diana Zulli and David James Zulli argue that mimesis – *imitation and replication* – is digitally encouraged by TikTok and is the basis of sociality on the site; TikTok extends Shifman’s conception of the Internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure.¹¹⁷ The online proliferation of the Anderson TikTok trend – as a meme – relied on community participation in producing and expressing creative playfulness. While participants uploaded and shared their versions on different video platforms, the trend may usefully be described as a ‘TikTok challenge’ because this is where it ostensibly started.

According to the BBC, the trend started with 26-year-old TikTok fashion influencer Ava Williams (@avawillyums), who made a video of a train journey in New York with her smartphone (Figure 4.14).¹¹⁸ Since April 2023, Williams’s video has amassed over 2.3 million likes on TikTok. On the video’s origins, Williams explained that she felt sad because her family trip to New York was coming to an end: ‘I was inspired to make the video after watching *The French Dispatch* with my parents the night before.’¹¹⁹ The video is captioned: ‘With a good imagination, everything is symmetrical. Let a girl day dream [*sic*]! #wesanderson.’ The video is accompanied by Desplat’s track ‘Obituary’ from *The French Dispatch*. Williams’s video opens on a static shot of red seats on an empty train, accompanied by the title, “‘You better not be acting like you’re in a Wes

¹¹⁵ Limor Shifman, ‘Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,’ *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362-377, DOI: 10.1111/jcc4.12013.

¹¹⁶ Cervi and Divon, ‘Playful Activism,’ 4.

¹¹⁷ Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, ‘Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualising Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform,’ *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2020): 1873 [citing: Shifman, ‘Memes in a Digital World’ (2013)]; see, also: Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin, ‘Music Challenge Memes on TikTok,’ (2022).

¹¹⁸ Ava Williams (@avawillyums), ‘With a good imagination,’ TikTok, 8 April 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@avawillyums/video/7219665093867474218?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7421209786136167968.

¹¹⁹ Paul Glynn, ‘Wes Anderson: How TikTokers Are Giving Their Lives the US Director’s Film Treatment,’ BBC, 26 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-65396444>.

Anderson film when I get there”. The subsequent shots show Williams standing still on the train platform (facing the camera straight-on) and then sitting still on the train, positioned in the centre of the frame in alternating medium to long shots. Williams is seemingly alone and has filmed herself by positioning the smartphone against a supporting surface.

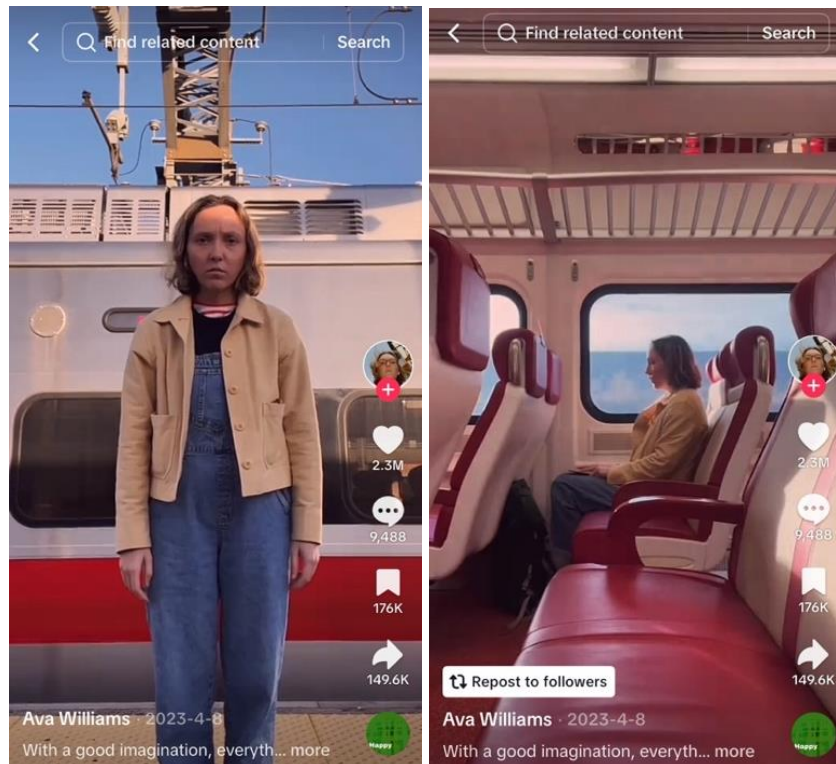


Figure 4.14: Ava Williams’s Anderson video (TikTok, 2023).

Williams’s original text caption, ‘You’d better not be acting like you’re in a Wes Anderson film’, and style of video were subsequently copied by other participants (although not all participants followed the exact same format).¹²⁰ The format of videos often goes as follows: in a wide shot, a human figure (sometimes dressed up as an ‘Andersonian’ character) is positioned standing still (often straight-on or in profile) or stiffly enters the frame from the side. Static, centred shots in montage may be shown of locations and objects. Text captions are inserted as intertitles or overlaid on the video

¹²⁰ On TikTok’s #wesanderson page, there are over 200k posts with this hashtag, although not all videos are intended to be part of the trend, and some predate the trend. TikTok even encouraged users to use the same hashtag to join in on the trend. The introduction to the #wesanderson page reads: ‘From the composition of each shot to the colour grading and the way the films are edited – join in the Wes Anderson trend and live your life as a character from your favourite movie!’. See: https://www.tiktok.com/tag/wesanderson?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc.

(with location, time, etc.), reflecting Anderson’s own use of chapter intertitles in his films. Unlike AWA’s still imagery, this trend encouraged participants to film and edit their own short videos, thus requiring more planning, blocking, and arrangement of different shots. Some participants used more elaborate zooms and whip-pans. Demonstration videos emerged on TikTok explaining how to choose authentic filters, text, and shot compositions or how to cut video to the beat of music in editing (Figure 4.15). This shows the extent to which the trend was collaborative among participants – some of whom were more serious about form and quality (as the TikTok comments demonstrate below).

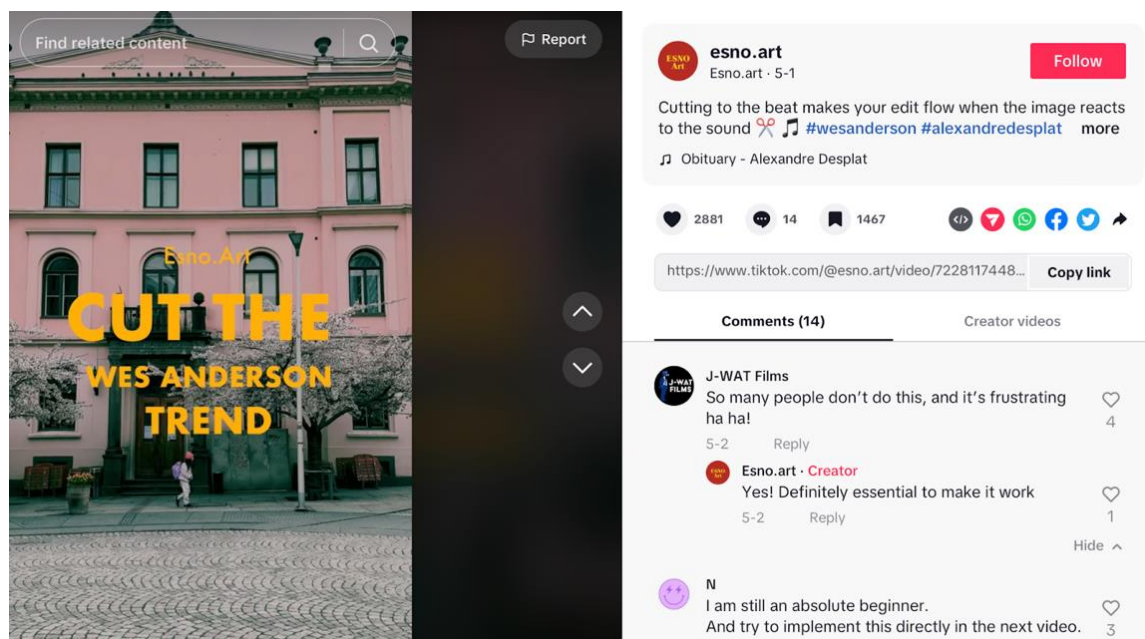


Figure 4.15: @esno.art instructs followers about editing (TikTok, 2023).

One important component of the TikTok trend was the visible insertion of creators’ bodies into their own videos, unlike AWA imagery. This adds a more personalised component to these media. TikTok videos, in general, regularly show creators’ bodies. Typical of TikTok’s aesthetic vernacular, the trend is very ‘frontal’. As Elizabeth Mears and Masha Shpolberg note, TikTok evokes the ‘frontal’ spectacles of early cinema. It is a style of filming that is highly aware of the spectator.¹²¹ Suitably, the typically symmetrical, front-facing blocking of characters in centre-frame in Anderson’s

¹²¹ Mears and Shpolberg ‘New Age, New Media,’ 3.

films happens to align with the very ‘frontal’ style that TikTok creators, including participants in this trend, have adopted in general.

For example, in his popular video from April 2023 (with over 300k likes), Kyle Rothwell (@kyle_rothwell) records himself on a beach with a lighthouse (nautical motifs proliferate in Anderson’s work). Rothwell is dressed as a filmmaker or an idea of what an ‘auteur’ looks like (Figure 4.16).¹²² As authorship (including writing and filmmaking) is a key motif in Anderson’s films, it is not surprising that Rothwell mimicked this aspect. Rothwell is wearing an army-style jacket, round sunglasses, and a red beret. In several shots, Rothwell holds a Minolta Super 8 camera and looks through the eyepiece. In another shot, he uses his hands as a viewfinder (finger framing). Rothwell’s ‘character’ might be a parody of Max Fisher (Jason Schwartzman) in Anderson’s *Rushmore* (Figure 4.17), or even a young Godard. Here, film authorship is tied to the signifiers of analogue film, a mobile camera, and a young (male) filmmaker using his hands to view the world through his eyes (echoing Astruc). Like many examples of the Anderson TikTok trend, it is not always clear if another unnamed contributor is filming from behind the camera or if the TikTok account owner (in this case, Rothwell) has filmed themselves alone with a tripod, as is often practised by TikTok users to allow themselves to record hands-free. In any case, the account owner takes priority as the creator of their video, much like a film director would.

¹²² Kyle Rothwell (@kyle_rothwell), ‘This is my favourite trend all year,’ TikTok, 21 April 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@kyle_rothwell/video/7224591474170613035?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7421209786136167968.

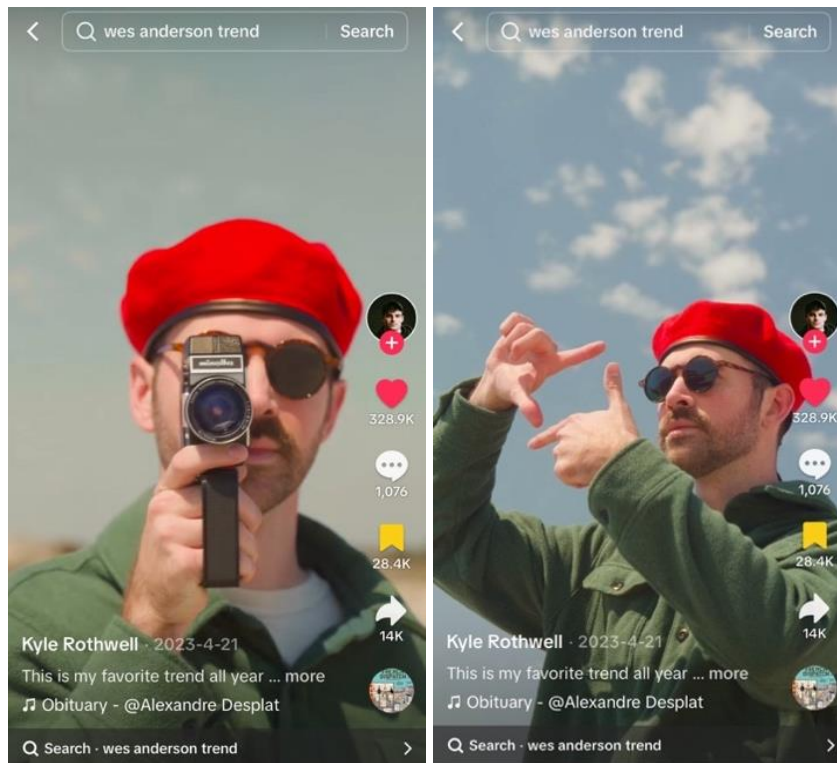


Figure 4.16: Kyle Rothwell’s Anderson video (TikTok, 2023).



Figure 4.17: Jason Schwartzman in *Rushmore* (Wes Anderson, 1998).

One example of a mobilographer and participant in the trend expressing a unique ‘voice’ through an Andersonian lens was Ukrainian TikTok user Valeria Shashenok (@valerisssh). Shashenok uploaded her video to the platform in April 2023, over a year after the Russian invasion in February 2022 (Figure 4.18). Since the invasion, Shashenok has become a so-called ‘refugee influencer’ on TikTok (which will be discussed further in Chapter 5). In her caption, Shashenok notes that she was inspired by Williams’s initial TikTok video (and Shashenok similarly uses Desplat’s ‘Obituary’ track) but decided to

make it about the war.¹²³ This video is like many other eyewitness or ‘citizen journalist’ videos recorded by mobilographers on their smartphones in circumstances of protest, war, displacement, or genocide (to be discussed in Chapter 5). Unlike most videos of war and destruction that permeate social media and are more ‘raw’ and ‘unfiltered’, this video is aesthetically augmented. Shashenok has added a pastel-pink filter and the caption, ‘If Wes Anderson made a movie in Ukraine’, in pink lettering. The obvious juxtaposition of warfare, a refugee crisis, trauma, death, and the ‘twee’ aesthetics of Anderson’s ‘brand’ come to an ironic twist in this ‘what if’ scenario. The destroyed apartment buildings in Shashenok’s video contrast with the picturesque landmarks featured in other videos and indeed the crowd-sourced idyllic images in AMA media. It underscores that the locations in the TikTok videos and AWA media are not film sets and cannot be ‘controlled’ in the way an auteur might control their set. Here, a participant is expressing *her* point of view as a Ukrainian civilian amidst a devastating war, while projecting an idea of ‘Anderson’ onto this very real landscape – like a palimpsest of ‘cinematic projection’.

The tone of Shashenok’s video is partly faithful to the style of Anderson’s films. A serious issue like war is treated by Shashenok with a degree of aesthetic detachment and a deadpan tone. While Anderson’s films present fictional and fantastical scenarios, Shashenok’s situation is very much rooted in her embodied reality. Her use of smartphone mobilography to document war partly upholds the aesthetics of ‘reality’, while the use of a filter and reference to Anderson seem to purposefully aestheticise war through an ‘Andersonian’ lens. Shashenok’s creative choice to use a pink filter partly evokes Damon Winter’s much-publicised use of the iPhone’s Hipstamatic app and its retro filters to photograph the War in Afghanistan in 2011, which prompted debates on the aesthetics of photojournalism and digital automation.¹²⁴ Shashenok is not a photojournalist, but her choice to digitally augment her environment contrasts, like Winter’s images of Afghanistan, with the dominant journalistic images of the war in Ukraine. By participating in the TikTok trend as a young person living through the first so-called ‘TikTok War’, Shashenok is perhaps inadvertently commenting on the nature of social

¹²³ Valeria Shashenok (@valerisssh), ‘Inspired by girl in TikTok,’ TikTok, 10 April 2023, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGdNtCoqa/>.

¹²⁴ In response to criticism, Winter argued that photojournalists make aesthetic choices all the time that enhance images – ‘we even decide how much or how little light will illuminate our subjects, and – yes – we choose what equipment to use. [...] We humans do not see in black and white. And we do not see the world at f/1.2 [lens aperture].’ Damon Winter, ‘Through My Eyes, Not Hipstamatic’s,’ *The New York Times*, 11 February 2011, <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/11/through-my-eye-not-hipstamatics/>.

media itself, where humorous memes and fun trends mingle with horrific images of war in the same scrolling newsfeeds.

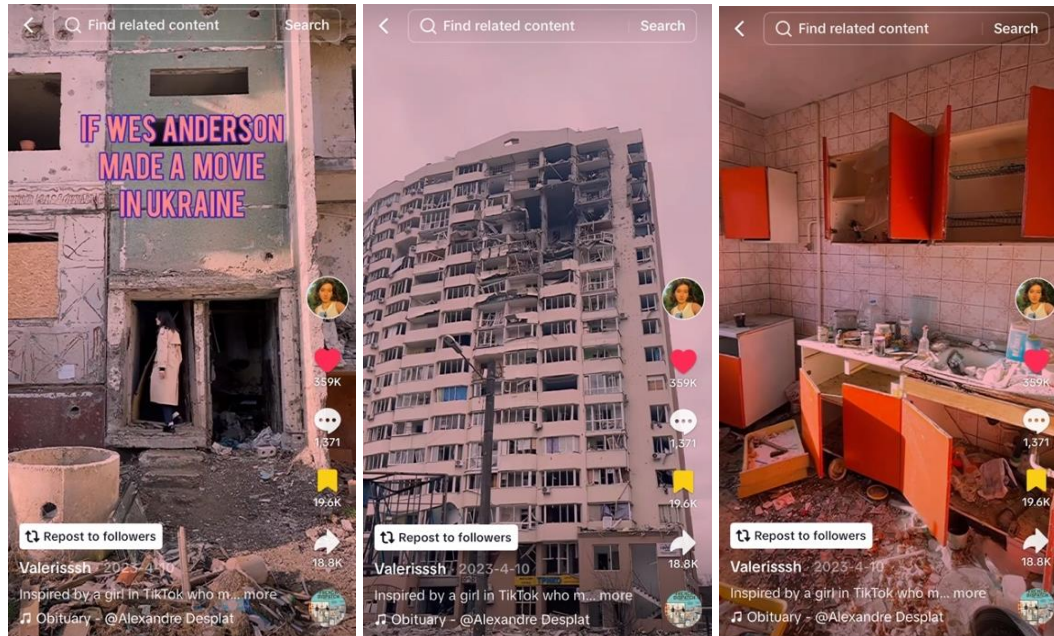


Figure 4.18: Valeria Shashenok's Anderson video (TikTok, 2023).

Anderson-centric fan media like the TikTok trend exemplify Web 2.0 participatory culture by using accessible and consumer-grade digital technologies, smartphones, and social media platforms as distribution sites beyond any *industry*. As an indication of participatory culture, these fans shared ideas with each other online for non-commercial purposes, merely wishing to share their work with others – mostly from younger generations – who appreciate the same things.¹²⁵ While ordinary participants did not take part for commercial reasons, the social media accounts of well-known brands and organisations copied the trend, including Penguin Books who easily coalesced Anderson's 'brand-name' (with its literary affiliations) with their own (Figure 4.19).¹²⁶ Even some celebrities and politicians attempted their own versions, demonstrating the trend's broad appeal.¹²⁷ This strategy is not unusual on social media, as corporations and political campaigns often use viral memes to appeal to younger markets and demographics on

¹²⁵ See: Connected Learning Alliance, 'Media Scholar Henry Jenkins on Participatory Culture and Civic Engagement,' YouTube, 4 August 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgZ4ph3dSmY>.

¹²⁶ Penguin Books (@penguinukbooks), 'A day at Penguin HQ,' Instagram, 26 April, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CrftI0Bu4mo/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MTIyMzRjYmRlZg==.

¹²⁷ Glynn, 'Wes Anderson,' BBC.

social media, such as the Kamala Harris presidential campaign's use of the 'Brat' meme in 2024.¹²⁸



Figure 4.19: @penguinukbooks' Anderson video (Instagram, 2023).

As the TikTok trend received media attention in 2023, some critics lambasted fans' failed attempts to mimic Anderson's work. Criticism of the trend often focused on the participants' lack of knowledge about cinematic techniques and production value. For critics, this was a question of TikTok users *jumping on the bandwagon* versus genuine cineliteracy and cinephilia. Fans were not thinking critically about Anderson's style or tropes, unlike the video essayists and media practitioners discussed earlier. For example, Christian Blauvelt argued that close reading of a filmmaker's style 'is essential for film literacy. But to be film literate, it's important to be "well read," so to speak.'¹²⁹ Stuart Heritage similarly commented for *The Guardian* on AI-generated Anderson parodies and the TikTok trend equally:

¹²⁸ Alaina Demopolous, "'Kamala IS Brat': Harris Campaign Goes Lime-Green to Embrace the Meme of the Summer," *The Guardian*, 23 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/23/kamala-harris-charli-cxc-brat>.
¹²⁹ Christian Blauvelt, 'Wes Anderson Is Right to "Immediately Erase" Videos He Receives Reimagining Movies in His Style,' *IndieWire*, 19 June 2023, <https://www.indiewire.com/news/breaking-news/wes-anderson-videos-reimagining-movies-in-his-style-1234876288/>.

It's enough to make you want to crawl inside your computer, grab AI by the lapels and shout 'STOP DOING WES ANDERSON WRONG.' To be fair, humans are just as bad when it comes to doing Wes Anderson wrong [...] none of these things actually spoof Wes Anderson. The only thing they do is spoof other Wes Anderson spoofs.¹³⁰

Indeed, as a form of aesthetic mimicry, these TikTok videos generally do not replicate Anderson's techniques or narrative elements. Some participants may not have even seen Anderson's films (which certainly does not prevent participation). What is markedly absent from these TikTok videos is a sense of any storyline or characterisation. The Anderson-like 'characters' being presented in these videos are not truly developed and are more like simple caricatures. Video creators are certainly *performing* on TikTok – by making certain physical gestures, blocking, or wearing appropriate costumes – but they are *also* explicitly expressing their own subjectivity as TikTok users (e.g., as Williams, Rothwell, and Shashenok).

Anderson's visual *style* (and somewhat his creative *tone*) is the element being mimicked in these videos and not plot-related aspects of his work.¹³¹ Even 'signature' aspects of Anderson's films, like recurring themes (dysfunctional families, etc.), compilation soundtracks of older songs, voice-over narration, framing devices, or allusions to other films are not widely mimicked by participants. This serves to diminish Anderson's role as an auteur to what is visible on screen rather than other aspects of expressing an artistic 'voice' in the cinema medium, such as screenwriting. This overwhelming focus on *mise en scène* is perhaps not surprising given the broader influence of ocularcentrism in film analysis and, more generally, Western artistic culture. Overall, the TikTok video trend does not represent a collective attempt to 'remake' Anderson's films and thus does not pose a threat to Anderson's authorship.

The formal qualities of this trend diverge from earlier fan works and are more indicative of TikTok's (and Instagram's) formal parameters. The fake trailer 'What if Wes Anderson directed X-Men?' from 2015 was shot in a more typically 'cinematic' format and with a small, mobile Panasonic GH4 (not a smartphone). YouTube videos are often

¹³⁰ Stuart Heritage, 'Please Stop Using AI to Wes Anderson Parodies,' *The Guardian*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/may/11/wes-anderson-parodies-ai>.

¹³¹ See, for analysis of fan re-enactments: Barbara Klinger, 'Re-Enactment: Fans Performing Movie Scenes from the Stage to YouTube,' in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

viewed on either desktop or smartphone screens. Meanwhile, TikTok and Instagram videos are generally experienced on vertically oriented smartphone screens. The 2023 videos are also significantly shorter than their YouTube predecessor, which corresponds with TikTok's endless scrolling temporality. The popular videos mentioned in this case study – from Williams, Rothwell, and Shashenok – only last between 22 and 24 seconds. By contrast, the longer 4-minute X-Men trailer even introduced named characters and a plot summary. The technical affordances of TikTok and Instagram (including video time limitations) and financial means (production value) may partly account for this. Planning, writing, filming, and editing a fake trailer that looks and sounds *good* requires considerable effort, production cost, and time. But, comparatively, these TikTok videos are shorter, simpler, and employ basic in-built editing tools through the app. They also largely avoid recording original sound and dialogue by using text captions, with music like Desplat's 'Obituary', for example, as the only non-diegetic sound. As a meme, viral trend, or challenge, these videos mimic an idea of what is stylistically 'Andersonian' that has developed online rather than directly mimicking his films, *per se*. Fans are observing and inspired by *each other*, which is typical of social media trends.

Significantly, the trend became viral to such an extent that the real actors who starred in Anderson's *Asteroid City* were asked to participate in their own version at the Cannes premiere press junket in May 2023 (Figure 4.20). Anderson has no visible role in this video. The video was created by the team of the film's distributor, Universal Pictures, and uploaded to their official TikTok and Instagram accounts.¹³² Evidently, the trend presented a useful marketing scenario for Universal Pictures. As *Asteroid City* was about to receive wide release, the distributor could take advantage of the trend's virality to promote the film on social media. In the video, the actors (including the lead actors Johansson and Schwartzman) are sitting or standing centre-frame in static shots and make small deliberate gestures in silence, like putting on headphones, reading a book, or taking a photo. Like Williams's video from the previous month, the video uses the track 'Obituary' from *The French Dispatch* and not a track from the unreleased *Asteroid City* (whose tracks were unavailable through the TikTok or Instagram apps at the time). The short video references *Asteroid City* only partly (for example, Schwartzman's use of a camera references his photojournalist character). Rather, the video perpetuates an 'Andersonian' idea that has developed among fans online. With stiffened facial

¹³² Universal Pictures UK (@universalpicturesuk), 'when you do the Wes Anderson trend,' Instagram, 30 May 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cs3NHbJvS2T/?igsh=MWpqaXdoZWR0d255dw==>.

expressions, vacant staring, and a lack of costuming, the actors are not so much playing their characters from *Asteroid City* as they are imitating the trend that was co-created by TikTok users. Potentially, they are also channelling how they act for Anderson; he could still be influencing their TikTok performances based on their previous ‘official’ performances. Here, the world of online Andersonian fan media collides with the famous faces in his film, while Anderson remains uninvolved.



Figure 4.20: Scarlett Johansson and Jason Schwartzman at Cannes (Instagram, 2023).

Gen-(AI)nderson

The mainstreaming of generative AI systems has introduced an algorithmic component to aesthetic mimicry of Anderson’s style. Although generative AI imagery repeats long-existing features of online fan mimicry of Anderson’s work – such as symmetrical compositions and vintage styles – the machine-based identity of AI-generated media brings a new dimension that challenges Anderson’s authorial authority more sharply. While the styles of other auteurs can be mimicked using generative AI, reproductions of Anderson’s style have been particularly noteworthy as a popular online practice. From

messy text-to-image mashups using DALL-E Mini/Craiyon in 2022, to more photorealistic images and videos using Midjourney and Stable Diffusion, users have experimented in generating media that resemble Anderson's mise en scène. For example, as I tried out in 2023 (with the prompt 'McDonald's Wes Anderson'), Craiyon mimics the symmetrical compositions and pastel, retro colours of Anderson's visual style in this image set, even including mutated versions of Anderson in centre-frame at the bottom (Figure 4.21).¹³³ Although crude and misshapen, this output shows the system's ability to tie Anderson's style with pastel colours and centred compositions as signifiers of 'Anderson' in its dataset and reproduce this algorithmically. This suggests that Anderson's visual style supports aesthetic conformity and is suited to algorithmic reproduction.¹³⁴



Figure 4.21: my Wes Anderson prompt generated by Craiyon (2023).

As AI systems trawl tagged images from Internet databases and algorithmically reproduce an aesthetic cocktail of these images in their outputs, it is likely that tagged still images of Anderson's films are widely available online (like Google Images and

¹³³ See: O'Meara and Murphy, 'Aberrant AI Creations,' 1078-1079.

¹³⁴ It has been shown that the symmetrical compositions of faces and natural objects, for example, are cognitively pleasing to humans. This may appear in the algorithmic 'subconsciousness' of AI generators. That being said, asymmetrical and distorted compositions do appear frequently in AI outputs. See: Anthony C. Little, 'Domain Specificity in Human Symmetry Preferences: Symmetry is Most Pleasant When Looking at Human Faces,' *Symmetry* 6, no. 2 (2014): 222-233; O'Meara and Murphy, 'Aberrant AI Creations,' (2023): 1082.

Pinterest) and in these systems' datasets. Aesthetic mimicry by fans, such as AWA imagery, may contribute to the well of data, thus potentially recycling fan media to create *more* fan media. As of autumn 2024, Googling 'Wes Anderson style' will prompt top search results that include real stills from Anderson's films, AWA imagery, as well as some AI-generated imagery from Anderson films that do not exist. AI generators may be trained on real still images from his films *and* fake still images, thus creating imagery that is far removed from Anderson's direct authorship (or even reality). In conjunction with algorithms, ordinary social media users and fans are therefore directly impacting what 'Anderson' means in search engines and databases.

Released during the height of the TikTok trend in April 2023, the AI-generated one-minute fake trailer for Anderson's version of *Star Wars* received 3 million views on YouTube.¹³⁵ The trailer was made by Curious Refuge – a startup company that specialises in training filmmakers in using generative AI. Like fan-made posters, the trailer's 'what if' scenario sees familiar objects from the *Star Wars* franchise, such as lightsabres and spacecraft, aesthetically altered to look more vintage and vibrant (Figure 4.22). The video features visual 'mashups' of characters from the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983) and stars from Anderson's films, such as Johansson as Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher). Their distorted faces appear uncanny. An unsettling effect is created by their silence and rigid movements. This could reflect the AI system's limitations in reproducing movement.¹³⁶ Several comments from Anderson fans underneath the YouTube video express how they *wish the trailer were real*. The trailer also essentially functioned as an advertisement for Curious Refuge. After the success of this trailer, Curious Refuge went onto make more parody trailers like '*Lord of the Rings* directed by Wes Anderson'. The trailer inspired ironic memes by cinephiles on Twitter/X poking fun at the notion of making more films 'Andersonian' with gen-AI, especially films that are darker than Anderson's style. This included a photoshopped cut-out image from the harrowing anti-war film *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985) pasted on a still from *Asteroid City*, getting at the absurdity of possible unrestrained uses of the technology (Figure 4.23).

¹³⁵ Curious Refuge, 'Star Wars by Wes Anderson Trailer | The Galactic Menagerie,' YouTube, 28 April 2023, <https://youtu.be/d-8DT5Q8kzI?si=kxQjvvyAiFChFK9h>.

¹³⁶ In a sense, the static look and silence shares much in common with the sedate movements of some participants in the TikTok trend who made only small and deliberate gestures.

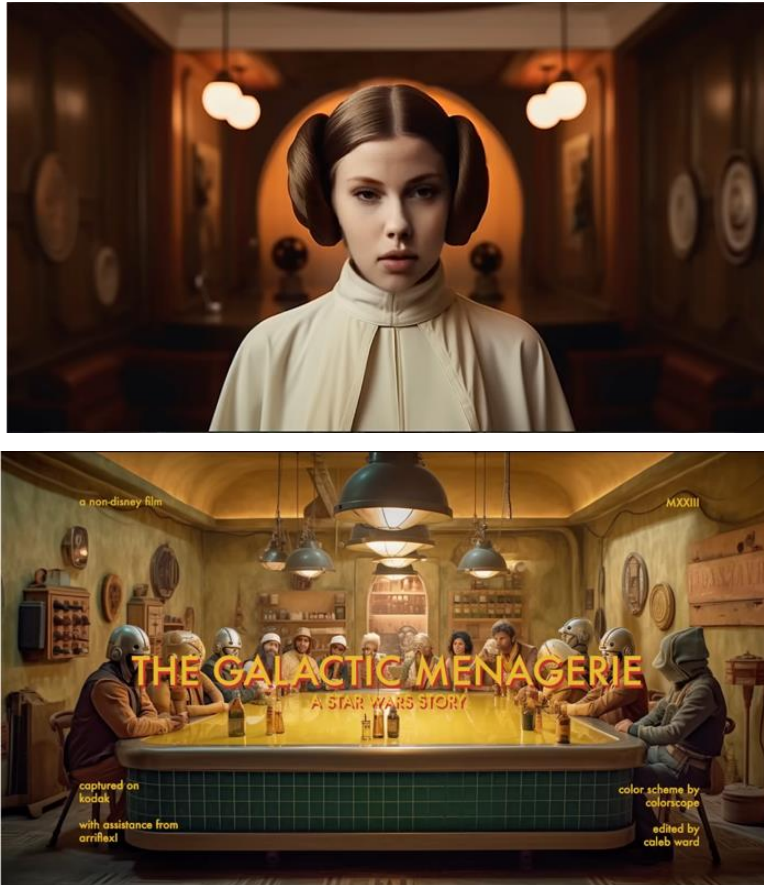


Figure 4.22: ‘The Galactic Menagerie’ (YouTube, 2023).



Figure 4.23: a meme poking fun at Anderson AI mashups (Twitter/X, 2023).

If we are to revisit Sarris's model criteria for auteurism – first 'technical competency', then a signature or 'personality', and finally 'interior meaning' – these qualities are not possessed by AI in and of itself. Crucially, perhaps, is the final quality – what Sarris describes vaguely as the '*élan* of the soul' that emanates from an auteur film.¹³⁷ Sarris's model is taken for granted by AI outputs that do not require the same effort, technical competency, 'personality', and investment (personal and financial) as an auteur production. Thus, on the one hand, the long-held idea of the auteur, including Astruc's theory and Sarris's later model, is being re-interpreted by lending AI the paintbrush. But this process also requires the human creator to make some creative decisions. As Blauvelt comments on AI and TikTok alike:

Aside from the offensiveness of fans thinking they know a director's style better than the director (or thinking it can be so easily boiled down to AI-ready bullet points of an essence), it's so indicative of the moment, in which poor copies of great work are thought to be entertaining of themselves.¹³⁸

Blauvelt's comment suggests that *real* cinephiles would not take part in mimicry because it is an insult to the effort that goes into film production (not a true expression of 'cine-love'). Blauvelt even goes so far as to question the morality of fans and their decision to *offend* the artistic figure they ostensibly admire.¹³⁹ This comment certainly speaks to broader current discourses on film remakes and recycled media, ephemeral trend culture, and anxiety over AI's threats to long-held notions of Romantic (human) creativity supported by theories such as Astruc's *caméra-stylo*. Unsurprisingly, the *Curious Refuge* trailer drew more public criticism than AI remakes of *La Jetée* or *Another Persona*. Key differences between them include the trailer's online virality versus the more closed reception of the other projects (being screened at festivals), as well as the academically-framed and self-reflexive approach to gen-AI taken by the latter practitioners, compared to *Curious Refuge*'s less critical, more entertainment-oriented stance. This commercialised and non-critical context contrasts with the personal creative 'voice' that is

¹³⁷ Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,' in *Film Theory & Criticism*, ed. Braudy and Cohen.

¹³⁸ Blauvelt, 'Wes Anderson is Right,' IndieWire.

¹³⁹ This kind of discourse is tied to a broader discussion in the media about the limits of parasocial connections between fans and stars, and the need for boundaries between them. See, for example: Scottie Andrew, 'Chappell Roan's Comments About Invasive Fans Show That We Never Really Know Our Favourite Celebrities,' CNN, 24 August 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/24/entertainment/chappell-roan-invasive-fans-parasocial-relationships-cec/index.html>.

clearer in video essays or digital remediations, for example. These AI-generated parodies are also less personalised and less overtly crafted by ordinary people than the TikTok challenge, which required more personal creative input. Thus, it is fair to say that simple AI-generated parodies of Anderson's style – for the sake of entertainment or technical novelty – are ultimately not demonstrations of the *caméra-stylo* (even a co-creative one).

Apart from his foreword to the AWA book in 2020, Anderson had seldom offered his personal thoughts on fan re-imaginings of his style. But in 2023, Anderson commented on TikTok and gen-AI fan works:

I'm very good at protecting myself from seeing all that stuff. If somebody sends me something like that I'll immediately erase it and say, 'Please, sorry, do not send me things of people doing me.' Because I do not want to look at it, thinking, 'Is that what I do? Is that what I mean?' I don't want to see too much of someone else thinking about what I try to be because, God knows, I could then start doing it.¹⁴⁰

Anderson's comment highlights the issue at the core of this new co-creative *caméra-stylo*. As ordinary people gain access to portable cameras, digital editing technologies, and instant distribution sites, they have more opportunities to potentially 'talk back' to their favourite filmmakers. But, the filmmakers in question may not want to be creatively *contaminated* by these works that bear their name. In his use of the term '*protect*', Anderson seems to suggest that these fan works, whether TikTok videos or AI outputs, are a kind of disease or threat. Similarly responding to AI mimicry of his work, director Tim Burton has said, 'It's like a robot taking your humanity, your soul.'¹⁴¹ This evokes the sentiments of critics who saw the digital as a threat to cinema. Anderson is expressing his anxiety over intermediality, as social media and cinema are displaying their mutual 'porosity', to invoke Pethő.¹⁴² The aesthetics of cinema (in this case, Anderson's) have seeped into social media; and, we are starting to see social media aesthetics seep into cinema, as I discussed in Chapter 2. The figure at the centre is attempting to preserve his own articulation of a '*caméra-stylo*' as he fears he may mimic the fan imitations of his

¹⁴⁰ Anderson quoted in: Blauvelt, 'Wes Anderson Is Right,' IndieWire.

¹⁴¹ Tim Burton quoted in: *Los Angeles Times*, 'Tim Burton Calls Out AI: 'It's Like A Robot Taking Your Humanity, Your Soul'', 11 September 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2023-09-11/tim-burton-ai-artificial-intelligence-robot-humanity>.

¹⁴² Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality*, 5, 96.

own work.¹⁴³ Ironically, as Astruc's vision from 1948 has materialised in the pervasiveness of cameras and screens, the result may come at a cost for the auteur (at least personally for Anderson). But as Anderson is releasing another feature film, *The Phoenician Scheme*, in 2025, these fan works certainly haven't hindered his creativity.

Conclusion: Cine-Love and Social Media

The caméra-stylo is re-imagined through the ability of audiences, scholars, media practitioners, fans, and cinephiles to participate in the articulation of the cinematic language outside of the structures of an industry. In dialogue with pre-existing texts (whether those of Conner, Vertov, or Anderson), these fan-made texts are the co-creative result of increased access to the versatile home screens, databases, distribution platforms, and portable cameras that Astruc initially envisioned. While not all participants in the TikTok trend or other fan media may consider themselves or *be* considered 'cinephiles' in the traditional sense, their access to and creativity with new technologies indicates cinema's convergence with social media – a vital facet of 'new cinephilia'. To invoke Grant, these fans are lovingly and playfully 'consuming' an idea of 'Anderson' that they then use digital tools to try to recreate. In line with Astruc's vision, fan-made media forms can be personal and largely non-commercial, made with the tools at ordinary people's disposal. One adjustment, however, to Astruc's vision is that digital culture encourages remixing and parody, resulting in a co-creative variation of personal production.

The realisation of the caméra-stylo in the social media era still implicates cinephilia, as it did for Astruc in 1948. The manipulation of cinematic works by fans, scholars, or media practitioners is often an expression of 'cine-love' for the original work. While auteurs are more visible to us as stars and media figures than ever before, thanks to Internet technologies and the discourses of 'new cinephilia', ordinary social media users also have access to creative technologies that can contribute to auteur-based works. The virality of the Anderson TikTok trend demonstrated that auteurs needn't use social media to popularise their 'brand-name' online. Timothy Corrigan's model for the 'commerce of auteurism' may be reshaped, to the point where the auteur's 'voice' does not need to be

¹⁴³ This can be compared to directors not wishing to read reviews or scholarship related to their work. See: Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 142.

present in their own promotional technologies, as a collectively accumulated ‘body of work’ co-created by fans can perhaps effectively ‘speak’ on their behalf.

Historically speaking, DIY fan works have been and are made outside of an industrial framework, but the Anderson-based fan works described in this chapter do not fall easily under the category of ‘avant-garde’. In the case of Accidentally Wes Anderson media, for example, the images are commercially oriented and explicitly touristic in their aesthetic appeal. The TikTok trend was a popular meme and was even copied by the social media accounts of corporations and Universal Pictures as a promotional tool. In their aesthetics, these fan works broadly do not attempt to counter dominant media language or reflexively comment on the medium itself (unlike many previously mentioned ‘remediation’ projects). The trend was quickly and easily commodified by Universal. As Mathias Bonde Korsgaard elucidates:

[A]ny kind of amateur production will circuit into professional production once it reaches a certain point of popularity – if not necessarily in terms of its quality or the training of the creators or in any other sense of the word, then ‘professional’ in the sense that *someone* makes money out of it.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the utopian promise of participatory culture as a non-commercial, liberating articulation of digital technologies must be qualified, as these fan texts may become commercialised as official promotional paratexts.

Inadvertently, by playfully suggesting that Anderson’s authorial signature can be found *anywhere*, Anderson’s authority over his own style might be diminished by fan media. As a co-creative exercise, these fan works may also ironically point to the theoretical ‘problem’ of collaboration in auteur feature film production, which is typically assigned to one person’s creative vision. Fans have collaboratively co-created Andersonian media over the course of several years, from AWA imagery to AI-generated works. However, the ethical question of aping an auteur’s style, especially with AI, is not yet resolved and auteurs themselves may fear ‘contamination’ from their audiences’ interpretations of their work. These videos indicate the creative imagination of audiences to re-interpret and ‘author’ their own environments. The caméra-stylo is therefore re-

¹⁴⁴ Bonde Korsgaard, ‘Fake Trailers As Imaginary Paratexts,’ 120-121 [citing: Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (Rutgers University, 2009), 155].

imagined in this articulation; aesthetic mimicry is combined with a mobilographer's personal view on the world.

Shashenok's TikTok video in Ukraine is perhaps the main example that stands out as one that challenges the dominant aesthetics of 'Andersonian' media. Civilians are documenting war and atrocity for social media followers using their smartphones and the technologies that are at hand, even ironicising their current predicament. In a very different social context to many of the fans and media practitioners described in this chapter, ordinary social media users in warzones and in tumultuous environments are using the same technologies, namely smartphones and platforms like Instagram, to represent their subjectivity. The next chapter will move away from the study of auteurs and auteur cinema to focus instead on mobilographers in confrontational situations, with an extensive case study on Palestinian mobilographers.

5. ‘The Battleground for Amateurs’: The *Caméra-Style* Amidst Global Struggles

At the extreme, if the cost of filmmaking continues to drop, we can imagine a situation when all the studios will close, while streets and private apartments become the battleground for amateurs writing their confessions with a 16mm Paillard camera in their parents’ dining rooms.

– Alexandre Astruc (1948).¹

Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle.

– Julio García Espinosa (1969).²

Alexandre Astruc’s vision for the *caméra-stylo* expanded beyond the industry and into ordinary people’s homes and streets with cinematic technologies that are even modest in quality. As a means of expressing one’s subjectivity and ‘vision’ through the screen apparatus, the *caméra-stylo* does not require a film crew or large-scale production. As the previous chapter pointed to, with access to easy and free digital technologies, ordinary social media users can produce their own personal audiovisual content and co-create trends that spread into mainstream media consciousness. The final chapter in this thesis looks at the possibilities of a liberated *caméra-stylo* handled by ordinary people in oppressive environments as a tool for peaceful resistance. Based on the methodological framework of this thesis, my aim is to re-imagine the *caméra-stylo* – as a practical apparatus and an aesthetic of mobilography – in the context of non-professional audiovisual culture. My interest is in uses of social media and smartphones that offer points-of-view *not* offered by hegemonic Western media and in confrontational aesthetics that subvert the conventions of social media’s commercially viable aesthetics. As a final analysis of the re-imagined *caméra-stylo*, this chapter will demonstrate the extent to which mobile and personal filmmaking is prioritised by civilians to express their point-of-view and embodied reality even in the most precarious circumstances.

¹ Astruc, ‘The Future of Cinema,’ 48.

² Espinosa, ‘For an Imperfect Cinema,’ para. 40.

Despite Astruc's cultural context and his references to European and Hollywood auteurs, his vision of the caméra-stylo and of newly armed camerapersons out on the streets and in their own homes is one that is not restricted to Western screen culture. Astruc's optimism for mobile cameras, flexible equipment, and filmmaking in the streets not only predicted home movies and movements like *cinéma vérité* in France or Direct Cinema in North America, but also anti-colonial movements beyond the West.³ In film, Third-Worldist ideology in the 1960s took the form of manifesto essays like Espinosa's 'For an Imperfect Cinema' (1969) in Cuba, quoted above.⁴ As I have outlined in Chapter 1, there is partial overlap between Astruc's vision in 1948 and Espinosa's manifesto. Although Astruc does not go as far as suggesting that *anyone* could make a quality film, his vision for the caméra-stylo is inherently tied to broader access to camera and screen devices. For Espinosa, the promise of cheaper filmmaking equipment would inevitably blur the line between 'artist' and 'consumer', and the definitions of 'art' and 'production value' would be dismantled by broader access to the filmmaking resources. Similarly, in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's manifesto 'Toward a Third Cinema' (1969), the filmmakers outline their vision for militant guerrilla documentaries with a practical, lo-fi production strategy that would, as film historian Ismail Xavier puts it, turn scarcity into a signifier.⁵

This chapter will primarily examine Palestinian civilians' non-fiction smartphone mobilography as a form of peaceful resistance and self-representation under the ongoing Israeli occupation to illustrate these ideas in the social media era. This case study on Palestinian mobilographers is especially significant because of the historical development of 16mm mobilography in Palestinian political filmmaking in the twentieth century – as documented in Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi's monograph *Palestinian Cinema* (2008)

³ Anti-colonial independence movements such as those in Indochina, Ireland, and India had already developed by 1948, but it is in the 1960s and 70s where we see major political uprisings and movements more visibly enmeshed with political filmmaking, marked especially by the Cuban Revolution and Algerian independence.

⁴ Debates on what constitutes 'Third Cinema' continue among scholars, especially with the rise of globalisation and transnational cinema. Directors may work within the structures of European Second cinema (auteur/arthouse) and make political, revolutionary, guerrilla cinema in global locations (Gillo Pontecorvo, Mikhail Kalatozov, or Costa Gavras, for example). See: Guneratne and Dissanayake ed., *Rethinking Third Cinema*, 15. See, also, the theorisation of an 'interstitial' production mode in: Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 46-62.

⁵ See: Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 'Toward a Third Cinema,' *Cinéaste* 4, no. 3 (winter 1970-1971): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41685716>; Robert Stam, 'Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity,' in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Guneratne and Dissanayake, 31 [citing: Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997)]. A similar desire can be found in the celebration of 'ugly-looking' films in Glauber Rocha's manifesto for 'An Aesthetic of Hunger' (1965) in Brazil, or the practical resourcefulness of Ousmane Sembène's '*mégotage*' or 'cigarette-butt cinema' in Senegal in the 1970s. See: Kelley Dong, 'Ousmane Sembène, Cinematic Revolutionary,' Harvard Film Archive, <https://harvardfilmarchive.org/programs/ousmane-sembene-cinematic-revolutionary-2>.

– and continuing as a mass movement into the contemporary era with camcorders and smartphones. The first section of this chapter will re-emphasise, based on Chapter 1, the key aspects of mobility and hapticity (or bodiliness) of the *caméra-stylo* in its realisation in personal camera and screen technologies. To ground my analysis further in film history, I will trace the prevalence of what Richard Bégin calls ‘somatic images’ of mobilography in political and activist filmmaking: from Latin American documentary filmmaking and political narratives to more recent confrontational mobilography and digital non-fiction filmmaking practices. Ultimately, the embodiment of mobilographers in confrontation reveals the vulnerability (and even mortality) of the mobilographer through the haptic sensations of movement, unrest, and spontaneity. Josepha Ivanka Wessels’s analysis of Syrian video activists as modern-day Vertovian ‘kinoks’ is especially useful for my analysis of mobilographers in Palestine. Wessels’s research highlights the value of approaching new audiovisual practices through the lens of ‘old’ film theories such as Dziga Vertov’s ‘kino-eye’ or indeed Astruc’s *caméra-stylo*.⁶

My case study on Palestinian mobilographers will focus especially on two Instagram accounts – one that is crowd-sourced and one that is more individualised – that upload daily videos and images of life in Palestine. Crowd-sourced video accounts on Instagram like Eye on Palestine/EOP (@eye.on.palestine), founded in 2014, reshare videos by smartphone mobilographers in Palestine that cover violence, evictions, and confrontations with Israeli occupation forces and settlers. Similar crowd-sourced accounts include Palestine Pixel (@palestine.pixel) and Translating Falasteen (@translating_falasteen), which have far fewer followers than EOP and are newer to Instagram. As a collective effort, EOP does not possess a single ‘author’, unlike the accounts of celebrities, influencers, or indeed the auteurs described in Chapter 3. And unlike the crowd-sourced Instagram profile Accidentally Wes Anderson described in Chapter 4, the guiding vision of a single auteur or creative ‘aesthetic’ is not prioritised by EOP. Instead, EOP functions as an archive for the documentation of daily life in Palestine, from multiple points of view and aims to be as ‘raw’ and ‘unfiltered’ as possible in order to achieve a sense of indexicality (i.e., ‘this really happened’) for the purposes of activism and producing counter-images to pro-Israel propaganda and dominant media representations of Palestinians, as I will explain.

⁶ Wessels, ‘Video Activists from Aleppo and Raqqa,’ (2017).

Since its foundation, EOP's content has focused on current events and daily life in Palestine under occupation. The account has shared extensive news stories, educational content about Palestinian history (like the Nakba of 1948), the experiences of Palestinians during the COVID-19 pandemic, the eviction of Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah in 2021, and the bombing of Gaza in May 2021. 'Somatic images' are pervasive on EOP, owing to the unpredictable and precarious situations in which the mobilographers film. After the Hamas-led attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israel began the invasion of Gaza and has been conducting a large-scale bombing campaign, destroying most of Gaza's infrastructure, including hospitals, universities, schools, and mosques. EOP has dedicated most of its coverage to the daily struggles of Gazans, of which an estimated 50k+ have been killed by Israel, including about 17k children, as of March 2025.⁷ Organisations like Amnesty International, Jewish Voice for Peace, and the International Criminal Court have declared this unequivocally a genocide and have identified repeated war crimes.⁸ The war has prompted a mass global movement of solidarity with Palestine, protests, boycotting of Israeli companies, boycotting of film festivals like Berlinale, and student encampments on university campuses – campaigning for which was widely proliferated on social media. During this period, mobilographers from Gaza became points of view through which Gaza could be 'accessed' by global audiences, despite the lack of access to established media production in Gaza and Israel's barring of foreign journalists from entering what is essentially an open-air prison. As I will explain, this is particularly important given the Israeli propaganda drive on social media.

The second account I will examine is that of Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), a 27-year-old activist and journalist from Gaza. Owda documents her daily life with her smartphone for 4 million followers on Instagram. Owda's example is significant because of the regularity and highly personal quality of her Instagram use and her status as a young female Gazan. Her confessional, intimate style of address to followers and filming of life 'as it is' in refugee camps made her especially popular as an independent media figure. EOP and Owda are selected based on their popularity on Instagram and the vast extent of their content, which has reached global audiences in the millions. The reasons

⁷ Al Jazeera, 'Israel's War On Gaza Has Killed 50,000 Palestinians Since October 2023,' 23 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/23/israeli-offensive-in-gaza-has-killed-50000-palestinians-since-october-2023>.

⁸ Amnesty International, 'End Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians In Gaza,' <https://www.amnesty.org/en/petition/end-israels-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>; Anna Betts, 'ICC Urged To Investigate Biden For "Aiding And Abetting" Gaza War Crimes,' *The Guardian*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/24/icc-biden-gaza-war>; Jewish Voice for Peace, 'Statement: A Year Of Horror, Grief And Outrage,' 7 October 2024, <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2024/10/07/statement-a-year-of-horror-grief-and-outrage/>.

for why Instagram is a popular tool for mobilographers is likely due to Instagram's global popularity and its versatile features (the ability to use Instagram Stories and Reels) that allow for the posting of images, video, and text (which TikTok does not afford).

Individual mobilographers like Owda represent Astruc's vision of people filming life in their homes and streets, while a vast database of videos like EOP demonstrates the extent to which smartphone mobilography is broadly prioritised by Palestinians even in the most horrific circumstances.

The end of this chapter will also address government uses of digital optical surveillance systems and weaponry (even AI-aided targeting systems), as well as the very platforms activists use for distribution, which are ultimately governed by corporate interests. Instagram remains an important site for the dissemination of independently produced activist video, despite Meta's forms of censorship and content moderation on Instagram that have been shown to target minority groups.⁹ At the same time, the proliferation of deepfakes, AI-generated imagery, and disinformation online threatens to distract the public from real experiences of atrocity. These factors challenge the full democratisation of the caméra-stylo in the social media era and the ability for mobilographers' audiovisual practices to be disseminated freely.

Astruc's vision has been explored thus far in this thesis in relation to auteur filmmakers (and fans channelling auteurs in Chapter 4), who are predominantly the individuals tied to the caméra-stylo within film discourses. This final chapter will discard the auteur as a figure of analysis – while still drawing on film history and aesthetics – to focus instead on ordinary mobilographers who produce personal audiovisual work on social media and outside of the film industry. Scholars like Bjørn Sørenssen, Liz Burke, Laura Rascaroli, and Laurence Allard have noted already the possibilities of a caméra-stylo in the social media era for those with personal digital devices.¹⁰ The social media posts described in this chapter represent an articulation of the caméra-stylo that is not part of the film industry or artistic institutions. This form of mobilography is handled by people who are not always considered 'filmmakers' in the same sense that auteurs and avant-garde filmmakers discussed in thesis would be. These mobilographers (as I will refer to them) are nonetheless another manifestation of Astruc's vision in the social media

⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook,' 21 December 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and-facebook>.

¹⁰ Sørenssen, 'Digital Video And Alexandre Astruc's Caméra-Stylo,' (2008); Burke, 'Cine-Writing the Everyday,' (2021); Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, 5; Allard, 'Partages Créatifs,' (2017).

era.¹¹ This analysis helps to re-frame Astruc's caméra-stylo beyond the auteur film, and explores instead the personal, embodied, and subjective (or alternatively collaborative) audiovisual work of those outside of artistic institutions and in situations of extreme precarity.

In Espinosa's time, it was the 8mm or 16mm camera that allowed for the most flexibility and movement in uncertain environments and terrain, especially in the context of war or guerrilla filmmaking. Today, it is the smartphone that has become the camera of the people as its pervasiveness has rendered it ordinary despite its highly sophisticated computer technology.¹² Compared to their analogue and digital prosumer predecessors, contemporary smartphones produce relatively glossy, high-quality and high-resolution images automatically. But the formal qualities of smartphone video are still distinct from the aesthetics of dominant cinema. This includes the smartphone's vertical aspect ratio, distortive lens, its sound quality, its interaction with light, low resolution and jerkiness when zooming, and its askew framing when handheld. The videos on Eye on Palestine can be described as 'poor images', as per Hito Steyerl's definition, in the sense that they are widely reshared, seen by many, and often suboptimal in their clarity (like 'imperfect cinema'). But 'quality' does not matter as much as a sense that what is happening in the amateur-style video is *real* and *raw*.¹³ The hapticity and shakiness of smartphone mobilography does not disguise the embodied presence of the mobilographer while dominant cinema generally avoids this visibility (as I examined in Chapters 1 and 2). What might be 'imperfect' about smartphone video production is its low-cost or no-cost value, in which the need for a crew or studio is eschewed by the mobilographer's ability to film and distribute materials independently. The 'imperfection' of smartphones, too, may manifest in their role as distribution apparatuses beyond any film industry. 'Imperfection' also manifests in the spontaneity of mobilography, where the environment cannot be controlled as it would be in the conditions of a studio or film set. The aesthetics of protest and war mobilography especially fit into this framework, as this chapter will examine.

¹¹ As I explained in the methodology for this thesis, the explicit ocularcentrism of terms like 'camera witness' fails to encompass other somatic and audible forms of embodiment in mobile filmmaking, making 'mobilographer' (drawn from Bégin's analysis of 'mobilography') more inclusive as a term in my analysis.

¹² The prices of smartphones vary greatly, with new iPhone models reaching €1000+ upon their initial launch, to second-hand android smartphones that are less than €100.

¹³ Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' (2009).

Confrontational Mobilography and Digital ‘Kinoks’

This thesis sees that Astruc’s theory is tied to the camera’s mobility or a handheld (or at least intimately handled) mode of audiovisual production. In his genealogical tracing of 8mm cameras to the smartphone, Richard Bégin defines mobilography as an audiovisual practice whereby ‘the fundamental notions of the body and corporeal perception are transformed by the advent of a technology which gives concrete form to the hybridization of the body and the camera.’¹⁴ Bégin’s concept of ‘somatic images’ are an inherent quality of off-the-cuff handheld (or body-attached) mobile filmmaking:

[Somatic images] refer to the state of a body-camera revealing its excitation, agitation, or state of rest. Rather than depicting a subjective vision of the world obsessed with discoursing on this vision, these images preserve the trace of a pre-discursive recording, that of the physical experience of what is occurring. What one may thus be hoping to record is the sensitive film of the world, the innervation at the origin of every experience.¹⁵

Mobile, lightweight cameras have made it much easier for mobilographers to move quickly and easily *while* filmmaking. Politically charged, protest, and confrontational mobilography has been a feature of cinema, both fiction and non-fiction cinema, since at least the 1960s, when 16mm and less cumbersome equipment allowed filmmakers to go out into the streets and into warzones. Like many forms of mobilography (from 8mm home movies to GoPro lifelogging), confrontational mobilography with small, mobile cameras often features the visibility (and sound) of people’s bodies on screen. This is especially apparent in war, clashes, and protests, where multiple bodies are often in frame simultaneously, including the smartphone mobilographer who may use a selfie angle or have their hands visibly outstretched in the camera’s field of vision.

The physicality embedded in the somatic images of mobilography and the prosthetic relationship between the camera and the human body also implicates the vulnerability of the mobilographer behind the camera’s lens.¹⁶ Vivian Sobchack has

¹⁴ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 107.

¹⁵ Ibid, 111.

¹⁶ See, also, Federico Selvini’s study of military helmet cameras: ‘These devices are characterised by two elements: the first-person view and the prosthetic relationship with the human body. The machine vision hence presupposes a form of witnessing inextricably related to the subject’s mobility. Helmet cameras produce an embodied experience of war in

identified this phenomenon as the ‘endangered gaze’ and related ‘interventional gaze’, which is more than ‘visually active’. She goes on: ‘Its vision is confrontational’ and is ‘often marked by the urgent physical activity of the camera, and often the filmmaker’s voice – usually repressed or suppressed – adds spatial and physical dimension to the inscription of bodily presence and involvement.’¹⁷ In other terms, Sobchack is describing the inherently somatic phenomenon of filmmaking with a mobile camera, and importantly points to sounds that further somatise audiovisual production. In extreme instances, this physical presence involves the mobilographer’s recorded death. As Sobchack highlights, film theorist Béla Balázs noted of a French war documentary where a cameraman’s automatic mechanism wobbles ‘like an eye glazing in death’ and continued rolling despite the cameraman’s death; ‘a new form of consciousness that was born out of the union of man and “camera” [...] he is conscious as long as he is shooting.’¹⁸ Balázs’s observation of human-machine hybridisation resonates with Vertov’s theories, but also Astruc’s as he connects human consciousness with the automated mechanism of the camera.

Sobchack notes the case of Argentine-Swedish photojournalist Leonardo Henrichsen, whose murder during the military coup led by right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973 is captured in the three-part Marxist documentary *The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of the Unarmed People* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975-1979). In terms of its aesthetics and its production mode, Guzmán’s film was made with modest, imperfect means, consisting of a small crew, minor camera and sound equipment, and incorporates handheld mobilography (including Henrichsen’s 16mm footage).¹⁹ Henrichsen’s footage captures troops aiming their guns outside the presidential palace in Santiago. A corporal shoots Henrichsen and the camera turns abruptly towards the ground (Figure 5.1). A soldier removed film from the camera but was unaware of a second chamber containing this recovered footage used in Guzmán’s documentary.²⁰ As an example of ‘somatic images’ being produced in mobilography, Henrichsen’s footage speaks not only to the brutality of the Pinochet-backed military (and similar military actions against journalists globally in the past and present), but also the intimacy of these mobile cameras that

which the visual perspective echoes the agency of a body at risk that is exposed to the stimuli and the dangers of the battlefield.’ Selvini, ‘First Person War: Helmet Cameras,’ (2023): 188.

¹⁷ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 170-171.

¹⁸ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (Dover, 1970), 171-172 [cited in: Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 252].

¹⁹ The film was also significantly produced by Chris Marker who provided much of the film stock. See: José Sarmiento, ‘The Battle of Chile: The Obstinate Memory of a Crushed Utopia,’ *Senses of Cinema*, issue 65 (December 2012), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2012/cteq/the-battle-of-chile-the-obstinate-memory-of-a-crushed-utopia/>.

²⁰ See: Monte Reel, ‘After 32 Years, Zooming in on a Killer,’ *The Washington Post Foreign Service*, 13 November 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/12/AR2005111201327.html>.

capture closely the embodiment of their camerapersons and their spatiotemporal position as witness to a historical event (perhaps especially in death). Indeed, journalists today are extremely vulnerable as targets of military fire.²¹ Recent cases of Palestinian journalists being targeted by the IDF, including Palestinian-American Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh, murdered in Jenin refugee camp in 2022, especially highlight this vulnerability today. In *The Washington Post*'s investigation of Abu Akleh's death, both smartphone footage from Palestinian witnesses and bodycam footage from Israeli soldiers were scrutinised to assess that she was killed by the IDF.²²



Figure 5.1: Leonardo Henrichsen's footage in *The Battle of Chile* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975-1979).

Aside from clashes with the police or active warzones, mobile cameras can record the physical vulnerability of mobilographers in other precarious situations.²³ James N. Gilmore cites Bégin's analysis of 'somatic images' to assess recent cases of GoPro-wearers dying while filming their sporting activities – what Gilmore describes as 'deathlogging' (as opposed to lifelogging), where the person's presence lingers after their death as the footage persists (from the 'eyes in their body').²⁴ Multiple concertgoers

²¹ There have been numerous cases of journalists and ordinary mobilographers with cameras being targeted by the IDF. See: Al Jazeera (@aljazeeraenglish), 'A Journalist Covering An Israeli Raid In Nablus,' Instagram, 26 February 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGhSMNvEgo/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.

²² Sarah Cahlan, Meg Kelly, and Steve Hendrix, 'How Shireen Abu Akleh was Killed,' *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/shireen-abu-akleh-death/>.

²³ The fatal shooting on the set of the western *Rust* in 2021, which killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins, also prompted discourse on the safety of crew members under the strains of feature film production.

²⁴ Gilmore, 'Deathlogging: Gopros As Forensic Media In Accidental Sporting Deaths,' 3; Bégin, 'GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,' 107.

posted smartphone footage from the Astroworld music festival in 2021, showing the crowd crush that killed ten people. One TikTok video posted by user @dieghtx30 titled ‘My Astroworld Experience’ shows a mass of people tightly pressed together. The mobilographer struggles to stay upright and keep filming as body parts become entangled, while the concert performance continues.²⁵ Faces and hands are pressed against the camera lens and frantic ‘somatic images’ and motion blurring are seen. The mobilographer’s embodied subjectivity in this unexpected scenario is captured in the camera’s mobility and the hapticity of these images (captured in the video’s title, too). While not filmed in the context of war or protest, this kind of video is indicative of mobilography in a confrontational scenario and indicates the extent to which smartphones are used as another ‘eye’ or ‘appendage’ for the mobilographer even in dangerous circumstances, and where it is understood that the footage may serve a valuable role as eyewitness testimony in pursuing legal action and public scrutiny. As Kari Andén-Papadopolous, Vincent Lavoie, and others have argued, such videos by ordinary social users (so-called ‘citizen journalists’) are being used increasingly by ‘official’ news outlets as reportage, while news outlets have adapted to social media in their own multi-platform news coverage.²⁶

Confrontational ‘somatic images’ are also a feature of some fiction narrative films. In *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969), cameraman John Casselis (Robert Forster) wields a handheld 16mm camera in the vein of a *cinéma vérité* filmmaker to document car crashes, political events, and violent clashes for a TV news channel (while not intervening in these situations).²⁷ Casselis’s soundman even describes himself as an ‘elongation’ of his sync-sound tape recorder, as part-man and part-machine – similar to Vertov’s ‘kino-glaz’ and descriptions of the camera (or pen) as an extended ‘prosthesis’ of subjectivity. Casselis is a fictionalised version of Astruc’s envisioned *man on the street filming with his Paillard camera* (and indeed Vertov’s ‘kinoks’) but contextualised by the political turbulence of 1968. In some scenes, especially at the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests, Wexler (who also served as DOP) films with a handheld camera that visibly moves and shakes with his body. This historical event is happening simultaneously as *Medium Cool* is being filmed, and the fictional characters are surrounded by real

²⁵ Rachel Sharp, ‘Horror Video Shows Astroworld Festival-Goers Piled On Each Other As They Scream For Help,’ *Independent*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/astroworld-concert-travis-scott-video-b1954669.html>.

²⁶ Andén-Papadopolous, ‘Media Witnessing,’ (2012); Lavoie, ‘War And The iPhone,’ 1-2.

²⁷ Significantly, the film’s title is a reference to Marshall McLuhan’s definition of ‘cool media’ and ‘hot media’. For more discussion about the film and McLuhan and protest imagery, see: Hito Steyerl, *Medium Hot* (Verso, 2025), 44-50.

protestors and police officers rather than hired extras. In the frantic crowd, the camera shakes and creates blurry, imperfect ‘somatic images’ that are typical of confrontational mobilography (Figure 5.2). The line between ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’ is crossed by Wexler’s physical participation as a director/mobilographer. As I analysed in Chapter 2, the insertion of non-fiction confrontational mobilography in narrative cinema can be seen in more recent examples like Spike Lee’s *BlacKkKlansman* and Claire Denis’s *Both Sides of the Blade*.



Figure 5.2: the 1968 Democratic National Convention in *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969).

While the police clashes in Wexler’s film are *real*, this kind of protest aesthetic was reproduced in the final scenes of the newsreel-style war film *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), where Algerian protestors clash with French police, filmed by a mobilographer physically embroiled in the turbulence (Figure 5.3).²⁸ In Peter Watkins’s political pseudo-documentary *Punishment Park* (1971), a fictional documentary crew are physically embroiled when police officers brutally beat prisoners and cover the camera lens. ‘Somatic images’ are produced in these frantic moments, with lens flares and jerky zooms that are generally eschewed in mainstream filmmaking (Figure 5.4).²⁹

²⁸ Significantly, Pontecorvo’s film was screened by demonstrators at university encampments for Palestinian solidarity in 2024, continuing the film’s history of being screened for radical counter-colonial groups. See: Mayssa Ferha and Fannie Arcand, ‘Campement Propalestinien à McGill: De Nouveaux Manifestants Offrent Leur Soutien,’ *La presse*, 4 May 2024, <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/2024-05-04/campement-propalestinien-a-mcgill/de-nouveaux-manifestants-offrent-leur-soutien.php>.

²⁹ Lens flares are generally considered an ‘error’ in cinematography and have appeared as often accidental features of avant-garde and low budget films, like films by Jonas Mekas. The physical phenomenon of a lens flare is not possible without the presence of a camera through which the images are perceived, as bright light hits the lens (thus reflexively

Aesthetically, there is not much visible difference between these confrontations and real confrontations filmed by the same camera, owing to the production of somatic images (and indeed the sounds of screaming, etc.). As these films point to, the ‘somatic images’ of mobilography during protests and other physically turbulent actions may be mimicked in a staged scenario, where the mobility, physicality, and unpredictability of the filming situation contribute to a sense of ‘reality’. As I examined in Chapter 2, handheld 8mm cameras and other small cameras do not disguise the physicality of the person wielding the camera. When incorporated into fiction film narratives, this effect can blur the distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’.



Figure 5.3: the end of *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966).

pointing to the production of the image itself). However, some Hollywood filmmakers have deliberately added lens flares to their films. See: Jacob T. Swinney, ‘CINEMA COMPILATIONS: Lens Flares,’ Vimeo, 26 October 2014, <https://vimeo.com/110092182/483228643d>.



Figure 5.4: the end of *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971).

Documentary scholar Bill Nichols asserted in 2001 that amateur-made raw footage like the Zapruder film lacks any pronounced documentary ‘voice’ or ‘perspective’ by itself.³⁰ However, Nichols later commented in 2016 that smartphone filmmaking intersects with documentary:

We no longer need to be trained filmmakers to share intimate photographs or to capture events as they happen around us, as participant or bystander, with nothing more than a handheld device. It is despite, or perhaps because of, this bewildering array of forms and functions that documentary finds itself in the midst of a golden age of creative expression.³¹

Nichols’s brief impression points to the proliferation of mobile filmmaking practices that are essentially documentary-based in nature. With the rise of digital consumer technologies and the Internet, mobilographers now access a broad range of mobile cameras and distribution sites that reach audiences instantly and in any global location. Vast databases of audiovisual materials, like YouTube and Instagram, offer audiences videos about any subject and of any form as Astruc envisioned, much of which includes non-fiction audiovisual production.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, there is some theoretical overlap between Astruc’s vision of cinema and Vertov’s earlier theories, including their similar ideas on cameras as bodily extensions of the self. By organising groups of ‘kinoks’ (‘cinema-eye men’) who

³⁰ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 146.

³¹ Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film*, 82.

filmed in streets, farms, factories, and homes, Vertov and his collaborators collected a sizeable documentation of a modern, rapidly developing society in the 1920s that encompassed all aspects of life, including technological innovation and a reflexive deconstruction of filmmaking itself. David Tomas writes:

[Vertov] argued it was necessary to recast the notion of process itself in a ‘non-acted’ or documentary mould. Film production would thus be displaced from the studio to the street. The camera would be propelled into an urban, industrialised environment and embryonic socialist culture where it would engage with new forms of manufacture, social organisation, and equivalent modes of communication.³²

Tomas’s description resonates with the caméra-stylo (and indeed even ‘imperfect cinema’), by displacing cinema from the confines of the studio and high-production scale, and propelled into an urban, unfolding environment. In this framework, life would be filmed ‘as it is’ (‘kino-pravda’) without the need for elaborately decorated sets and performing actors. Lev Manovich has argued that Vertov’s revolutionary filmmaking was essentially a form of ‘database cinema’ before the idea of modern computer databases even existed.³³ The availability of consumer-grade analogue and digital cameras has allowed civilians and amateurs to produce audiovisual media independently – as demonstrated by Perry Bard’s crowd-sourced ‘global remake’ of *Man with a Movie Camera* (detailed in Chapter 4) that connects Vertov’s ideas to the modern concept of the database.

‘Street tape’ culture and its related practices effectively reify the caméra-stylo and kinoks in non-fiction terms. Angela J. Aguayo’s analysis of street tapes of protests and other turbulent events in the US as participatory media historicises the practice against the framework of mainstream media organisations:

The evolution of street video reporting began with the development of affordable, lightweight and portable analogue recording equipment in the early 1970s. Building community and democratising access to production resources was the primary goal of early street tape culture. [...] By giving people access to tools that allowed them to document

³² Tomas, *Vertov, Snow, Farocki*, 33.

³³ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 239.

their lives and negotiate the world on their own terms, the movement created a vernacular space that had the potential to counter the prevailing dominant ideology of broadcast television.³⁴

Indeed, coverage of global wars and social struggles has increasingly become the domain of ordinary people. This has especially been facilitated by digital camera technologies and distribution sites that bypass dominant media networks and have the potential to mobilise global audiences towards action and solidarity. The Arab Uprisings that took place around 2011 especially mark the major expansion of smartphones and social media platforms – particularly Facebook and Twitter at the time – as tools for mass political mobilisation.³⁵ Peter Snowden's collage documentary *The Uprising* (2013) significantly uses footage uploaded to YouTube captured from the multiple POV's of civilians during the Arab Uprisings. The documentary demonstrates 'somatic images' and suboptimal smartphone or camcorder resolution – what might be described as 'imperfect' or 'poor' images (Figure 5.5).³⁶

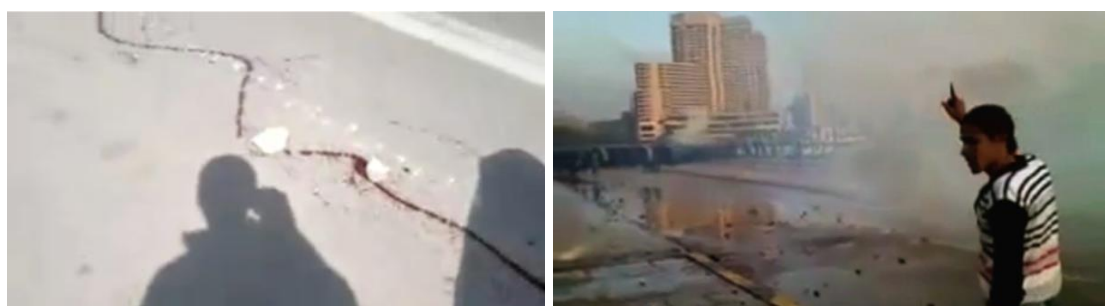


Figure 5.5: *The Uprising* (Peter Snowden, 2013).

Kari Andén-Papadopoulos describes camera-wielding activists ('citizen camera-witnesses') who 'put their lives at risk to produce incontrovertible public testimony to unjust and disastrous developments around the world, in a bid to mobilise global solidarity through the affective power of the visual.'³⁷ Alternatively, Wessels draws on Vertov's term 'kinoks' to refer to these activists who are similarly working in a

³⁴ Aguayo, 'Activist Street Tapes,' (2014): <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/AguayoProtestVideo/index.html>.

³⁵ See, for example: Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (MIT Press, 2014), 207-208.

³⁶ See: 'The Uprising,' <https://theuprising.be>. Adam Curtis's political documentaries might also be considered for their found footage aesthetic – typically using BBC archival footage but also civilian mobilography.

³⁷ Andén-Papadopoulos, 'Citizen Camera-Witnessing,' 754.

revolutionary context, where the ‘central, most essential thing is the sensory exploration of the world through film.’³⁸ As Wessels argues, the dominant Western media narrative about the Syrian uprising-turned-war beginning in 2011 has simplified the conflict as a symmetrical one, with the Assad dictatorship on one side and Islamist extremists on the other, while denying ordinary Syrians a voice. Prior to 2011, Syrian film and media were state-controlled and highly propagandistic, and access to YouTube and other digital sites was forbidden.³⁹ Filming life ‘as it is’ with their digital ‘kino-eyes’, the Syrian kinoks that Wessels interviewed used YouTube as a free distribution site (even smuggling USB sticks with footage to Turkey) to reach wide audiences.⁴⁰ Wessels notes how these activists’ videos use little to no editing and stay as close to raw footage as possible, while avoiding the exaggeration of reality, which Instagram accounts like EOP similarly uphold.⁴¹ However, I do not entirely agree with Wessels’s view that Syrian activists and Vertov’s kinoks were similarly interested in producing simply ‘raw’ footage. This ignores the important aspect of montage (including the ‘intervals’ between shots) and experimental in-shot effects (like slow motion and superimposition) that aesthetically altered many ‘raw’ takes in Vertov’s films to achieve the ‘kino-eye’ that could enhance human vision. The same aesthetic aims cannot be found in the activist videos described by Wessels or similar content on the EOP account, which is a key departure from Vertov’s work.

Importantly for the purposes of my analysis, Wessels argues that all audiovisual representation from these kinoks is subjective: ‘Subjectivity, emotions and performance allow the videographer to take a political space and construct his or her vision directed at an intended audience.’⁴² This view aligns with Astruc’s vision of the *caméra-stylo*, where a subjective vision of the world is achieved by the camera-wielder’s embodied interaction with their environment and a given mobile camera or personal screen technology like a smartphone. At the same time, the subjective quality of mobilography meets a more collective and collaborative effort to co-create a database of archived materials from not just one ‘kinok’ but a whole network of kinoks. One crucial development in this practice is the fact that modern Syrian activists could access digital networks and free distribution platforms that could bypass the infrastructures of the film industry. This is especially important where the ability to ‘narrate’ is suppressed or has been historically marginalised

³⁸ Wessels, ‘Video Activists from Aleppo and Raqqa,’ 161.

³⁹ Ibid, 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 164.

⁴¹ Ibid, 162.

⁴² Ibid, 163.

in more ‘official’ media representations. This collective effort shares much in common with crowd-sourcing social media projects like EOP, as I will discuss in the case study section.

Video activism that emphasises raw ‘eyewitness’ documentation is not the only form of activism that proliferates on social media. Against corporate monopolies of online spaces and hegemonic media narratives, creative methods of activism seen on social media such as ‘Queering the Map’ use digital technologies to produce counter-narratives (and counter-images) about war, identity, and non-Western spaces.⁴³ As different social media sites each have their own vernacular or aesthetics, activism has taken on different creative forms. Instagram can facilitate square infographic images in a ‘carousel’ format that visualise concise information about a given issue, like the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning data journalist and artist Mona Chalabi (@monachalabi).⁴⁴ The mimetic infrastructure of TikTok gives rise to expressions of solidarity with social causes in the form of ‘challenges’. Like the Wes Anderson TikTok challenge that I studied in Chapter 4, acts of solidarity on TikTok involve the body of the creator as a performative vessel through which gestures can be copied by others. Mimetic ‘challenge’-based activism centres embodiment despite being disseminated in digital, supposedly ‘immaterial’ spaces. For example, Tom Divon and Laura Cervi identify three TikTok challenge templates used by pro-Palestine activists: lip-syncing (to in-built music features), duets (where users juxtapose their videos side-by-side), and point-of-view (POV). In the POV challenge, especially, users implement cinematic conventions of point-of-view by having viewers ‘inhabit’ another ocular position to highlight what it’s like to *be* Palestinian.⁴⁵ By taking on a self-performative form and using metaphors instead of real images of bloodshed, the authors argue that ‘playful activism transforms users’ ritualised performances into powerful political instruments on TikTok and makes democratic participation more relatable, tangible, and accessible to various audiences.’⁴⁶

⁴³ The Instagram account Queering the Map (@queerinthemap) is a community-generated counter-mapping platform for digitally archiving the voices of LGBTQ+ people in relation to their physical location. One LGBTQ+ person located in Gaza wrote: ‘Pls [sic] know despite what the media says there are gay Palestinians. We are here, we are queer. Free Palestine.’ See: <https://www.instagram.com/queeringthemap/?hl=en>. See, for more discussion: Emma Graham Harrison, “‘No Pride in Occupation’: Queer Palestinians on ‘Pink-Washing’ in Gaza Conflict,” *The Guardian*, 16 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/16/queer-palestinians-lgbtq-israel-pride-flags-gaza-conflict-pink-washing>.

⁴⁴ Mona Chalabi (@monachalabi), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/monachalabi/?hl=en>.

⁴⁵ Cervi and Divon, ‘Playful Activism,’ 6. Similarly, in October 2022, French and Spanish female celebrities cut their hair in videos shared on social media in solidarity with the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement in Iran. See: France 24, ‘French Actresses Cut Hair in Solidarity with Protesting Iranian Women,’ 5 October 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20221005-leading-french-actresses-cut-hair-in-solidarity-with-protesting-iranian-women>.

⁴⁶ Cervi and Divon, ‘Playful Activism,’ 1.

Case Study: Palestinian Mobilographers

As a decades-long struggle against increased settlements and the infringement of human rights by the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian national struggle has seen through the development of new personal screen formats, including television, 16mm, video, and digital technologies. Coincidentally, the mass ethnic cleansing event of the Nakba ('catastrophe') occurred the same year as the publication of Astruc's two essays on the caméra-stylo in 1948. While the Nakba essentially destroyed the Palestinian film industry for nearly two decades, according to historians Gertz and Khleifi, by the 1960s the Palestine Liberation Organisation encouraged filmmaking (especially documentary) as a revolutionary tool in accordance with a partly Marxist-Leninist outlook.⁴⁷ Under Palestinian leadership, hours and hours of raw footage of refugee camps, cultural events, and war were accumulated in the archives by revolutionary film units (reflecting the basis of Vertov's interest in developing a proto-database).⁴⁸ Palestinian films were then screened in refugee camps, military bases, and villages (supporting Espinosa's vision of imperfect cinema, by happenstance). The main figures of Palestinian revolutionary cinema of the 1970s included Mustafa Abu-Ali, Ghaleb Sha'ath, and the first female Arab cinematographer, Sulafa Jadallah, amongst others from Palestine and neighbouring countries; militant filmmakers connected with Jean-Luc Godard, whose documentary *Ici et ailleurs*, made within the framework of the Vertov Group, filmed material in refugee camps and militant bases.

The ability to carry a 16mm camera while on the move is significant for resistance and guerrilla filmmaking, which can be observed in the Palestine Film Unit's extensive use of 16mm by the 1960s and 70s.⁴⁹ For practical purposes, heavy filmmaking equipment was not suitable in the rural regions of Palestine and Lebanon and, indeed, in the social context of displacement, war, or occupation. The Palestinian delegation's statement at the Round Table for the Afro-Asian Film Conference held at the Tashkent Film Festival in 1973 emphasised the importance of portable cameras:

⁴⁷ Gertz and Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema*, 22.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁹ See: Khadijeh Habashneh, *Knights of Cinema: The Story of the Palestine Film Unit* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 163-169. Significantly, the Palestinian Cinema Institution (1974) adopted a logo that combined the silhouette image of a gun with film reels. See: Habashneh, *Knights of Cinema*, 79.

[T]he light weapon is the primary weapon of the people's war, and similarly, the light 16-mm camera is the most appropriate weapon for the cinema of the people. [...] A militant film, therefore, must become an essential commodity for the masses, just like a loaf of bread.⁵⁰

It is the delegation's sentiment about camera equipment that still guides the collective Palestinian effort to document their daily struggles. Mobile cameras and free distribution sites in the form of social media platforms have brought the visibility of Palestinians to global audiences.⁵¹ The importance of smartphones for Palestinians on a day-to-day basis, more generally speaking, cannot be understated.⁵² The necessity of the Internet has been especially highlighted during the ongoing war in Gaza where communication with the outside world is severely restricted. As IDF bombardment strikes crucial infrastructure, access to Internet connection and phone networks has been lost on many occasions. Campaigns for the donation of e-SIMs to Gaza continue to be shared online. Electricity sources in camps are limited due to repeated outages, as seen in a video uploaded by EOP showing Gazans charging their smartphones with a car battery in October 2023 (Figure 5.6).⁵³

⁵⁰ Gertz and Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema*, 23 [citing: Samir Farid, *Palestinian Cinema in the Occupied Land*, translated from Arabic (Film Collection/Public Authority for Cultural Institutions, no date), 249].

⁵¹ Practically speaking, with the use of portable smartphones, Palestinian mobilographers are not reliant on the PLO, as they might in the past, or on funding from outside bodies (from Europe, Jordan, or Lebanon, for example) to produce and disseminate work.

⁵² Palestinian communities within Israel experience a severe 'digital divide' under apartheid restrictions, with a quarter relying on their smartphones to access the Internet (which incurs more costs) and Palestinian communities having more rudimentary Internet infrastructure than nearby Israeli communities. See: 7amleh Centre (@7amleh), 'Digital Divide: Discrimination in Digital Infrastructure Against Palestinian Citizens in Israel,' Instagram, 25 March 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DHnngzQv4KR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==.

⁵³ Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), 'Due to the electricity outage in Gaza,' Instagram, 15 October 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cya5Rq0NewS/?igsh=Z285YXJjNXJyc2F3>.



Figure 5.6: smartphones charging in Gaza (Instagram, 2024).

Consumer-grade digital cameras like camcorders and smartphones play a significant role in contemporary Palestinian documentary filmmaking. The documentary *5 Broken Cameras* (Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2011) is an important example. Co-directed by Burnat (a Palestinian activist and self-taught cameraman) and Davidi (an Israeli filmmaker), the documentary is comprised of a collage of raw home footage recorded on five of Burnat's personal camcorders, each destroyed in confrontations with the IDF and settlers over the course of five years in the West Bank village of Bil'in (having recorded 700 hours of footage in total). The documentary is structured like a diary, with Burnat's voice-over, around the destruction of these cameras as well as the life of Burnat's young son, Gibreel. As the cameras receive the trauma of confrontation (including a bullet), their fractured remains are symbolically wounded 'prostheses' of Burnat's embodied experiences, presented as a tableau in the documentary (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7: Emad Burnat in *5 Broken Cameras* (Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2011).

The more recent documentary *No Other Land* (Basel Adra, Yuval Abraham, Hamdan Ballal, and Rachel Szor, 2024) similarly focuses on the forced displacement of villagers by illegal Israeli settlements in Masafer Yatta in the West Bank. The film shows the collaboration between Adra (a Palestinian mobilographer and activist) and Abraham (an Israeli journalist and activist). The film switches between a range of camera formats. Adra's personal camcorders do not have optimal sound and images in a 'professional' sense and this imperfection is retained in the documentary, while the more professional camera equipment used by the documentary crew is less explicitly personal and intimate (Figure 5.8). The most confrontational scenes of evictions and settler violence are filmed on mobile smartphones or camcorders. As seen in the film, a key part of Adra's activism are his regular video posts on social media of evictions and violence in his community, which leads to the IDF's attempt to arrest him. In the documentary, Adra voices his despondency over the effectiveness of documenting the destruction of his community. Both Burnat and Adra have reached mainstream attention within the structures of the film industry (both films were nominated for Academy Awards). But, indeed, even after Adra's

documentary won an Academy Award in March 2025, settler violence against the community escalated and co-director Ballal was attacked and abducted by the IDF.⁵⁴



Figure 5.8: Basel Adra in *No Other Land* (Adra, Yuval Abraham et al, 2024).

Amidst Western media discourses that have framed the Palestinian struggle as a two-sided ‘conflict’ between Israel and militant groups like Hamas, the voices of ordinary Palestinians who suffer under Israeli apartheid and occupation are distorted. Like the Syrian video activists described by Wessels, Palestinian ‘kinoks’ are first and foremost concerned with documenting everyday life under occupation, even risking their lives to do so. Their embodied presence, as captured in mobilography and other subjective forms of representation (like selfies), serves as incontrovertible proof of their lived experiences as Palestinians, when that visibility has been denied in dominant media. Using the free and mobile digital technologies at their disposal, mobilographers are taking for themselves the ‘permission to narrate’, as Edward Said put it in 1984, with their own *caméra-stylo*.⁵⁵

Gary Bratchford identifies that having control over one’s own image on social media can help extend the visibility of Palestinians and deny the occupation the full

⁵⁴ Al Jazeera, “‘No Other Land’ Co-Director Attacked by Israeli Settlers and Arrested,” 24 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/24/no-other-land-co-director-attacked-by-israeli-settlers-and-arrested>. Local activist, Awdah Hathaleen, who helped make the film was later killed by a settler: Melanie Goodfellow, “‘No Other Land’ Collaborator Shot Dead By Israeli Settler in West Bank,” *Deadline*, 29 July 2025, <https://deadline.com/2025/07/no-other-land-collaborator-killed-israeli-settler-west-bank-1236473029/>. A smartphone video recorded by Hathaleen shows his last moments from his own embodied POV, still recording after he has been shot. See: Yuval Abraham (@yuval_abraham), ‘NEW VIDEO: Odeh Hathaleen documented his life under occupation,’ Instagram, 10 August 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNLnoFyMcVT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

⁵⁵ Edward Said, ‘Permission to Narrate,’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): 27–48, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536688>.

capacity to determine their visibility.⁵⁶ As Laura U. Marks has analysed, Palestinians have been ‘spoken for and misrepresented for so long’ that their struggle to achieve a voice is shrouded by Western discourses on terrorism that ‘render political struggle meaningless’ or deny the existence of Palestinians altogether.⁵⁷ Marks analyses Elia Suleiman’s use of home computer technologies to convey exile in his short film *Homage by Assassination* (1992), where familiar tactile objects and home screen devices become heightened signifiers of ‘home’ (Figure 5.9). Marks invokes postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who writes:

[T]he narration of *Palestine* depends heavily upon the expressions that occur *despite official representations* – the unofficial, vernacular, fragmentary performances of Palestinians. [...] the everyday, unofficial representations of the nation. The little performances of *Palestine* manage collectively to depict a new nation, one that is different from its external representations [original emphases].⁵⁸

Expanding on Bhabha’s comment, it is the ‘unofficial’ vernacular of ‘everyday representations’ on social media that may inscribe the voices of Palestinians in contemporary digital screen culture. Considering Marks’s and Bhabha’s commentary, it is also important to consider the videos that Palestinians produce that do not contain violence but depict other aspects of daily Palestinian life that become heightened declarations of belonging and resilience.⁵⁹ Selfies and videos or images of domestic life, marketplaces, cooking, playing, farming, and other activities in Palestine documented by mobilographers must be recognised as important self-representations, too.

⁵⁶ Gary Bratchford, ‘Performing Visibility: Representing the Palestinian Freedom Riders Through Non-Violent Protest and Visual Activism,’ in *Mediated Interfaces*, ed. Abidin, Warfield, and Cambre, 120-121.

⁵⁷ Laura U. Marks, ‘The Language of Terrorism,’ *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 38/39 (1992): 64.

⁵⁸ Homi K. Bhabha cited in: Marks, ‘The Language of Terrorism,’ 64-65 [correct citation missing from Marks’s article].

⁵⁹ Aguayo, ‘Activist Street Tapes’.



Figure 5.9: *Homage by Assassination* (Elia Suleiman, 1992).

For example, Muna El Kurd's (@muna.elkurd15) Instagram mobilography shows daily life in Jerusalem, such as sports activities and marketplaces that convey her embodied presence (Figure 5.10).⁶⁰ Videos shared by Maha Alkahlout (@mahashome) show the preparation of dishes and treats despite the extent of destruction and extremely limited resources around her in Gaza. One video from January 2025 shows Alkahlout sweeping and scrubbing her bombed apartment before preparing herself herbal tea – 'a luxury and costly indulgence.' She places the cup neatly on a tray on the table in the foreground overlooking the bombed landscape in the background. This kind of video is not unusual on Instagram, where content creators and influencers often post video montages of their daily lifestyle routines. However, the stark juxtaposition in Alkahlout's video defiantly shows her desire to begin life again after suffering over a year of

⁶⁰ Muna El Kurd (@muna.elkurd15), 'We celebrated and raised Palestine's [flag] high in Silwan,' Instagram, 4 June 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CPs8MXwouob/?igsh=MXE3N3ZpNno3NWczag==>.

bombardment and displacement (Figure 5.11).⁶¹ Here, the familiar, well-composed, ‘designed’ aesthetics of Instagram lifestyle accounts meet grim, messy reality, while inscribing a subjective embodiment of ‘presence’ through the gestures of cleaning and food preparation. Similarly, Mohammed Aljbour (@moe.leo0) documented the survival of his beloved cat Leo in Gaza, shared on Instagram where animal-related content is already massively popular.⁶²



Figure 5.10: Jerusalem marketplaces and a marathon documented by Muna El Kurd (Instagram, 2021).

⁶¹ Maha Alkahlout (@mahashome), ‘Household burdens remain exhausting,’ Instagram, 3 January 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEXENo-iUvC/?igsh=azJsNDRhbXhpZ3d3>.

⁶² Leo died of starvation in June 2025. Mohammed Aljbour (@moe.leo0), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/moe.leo0/>.

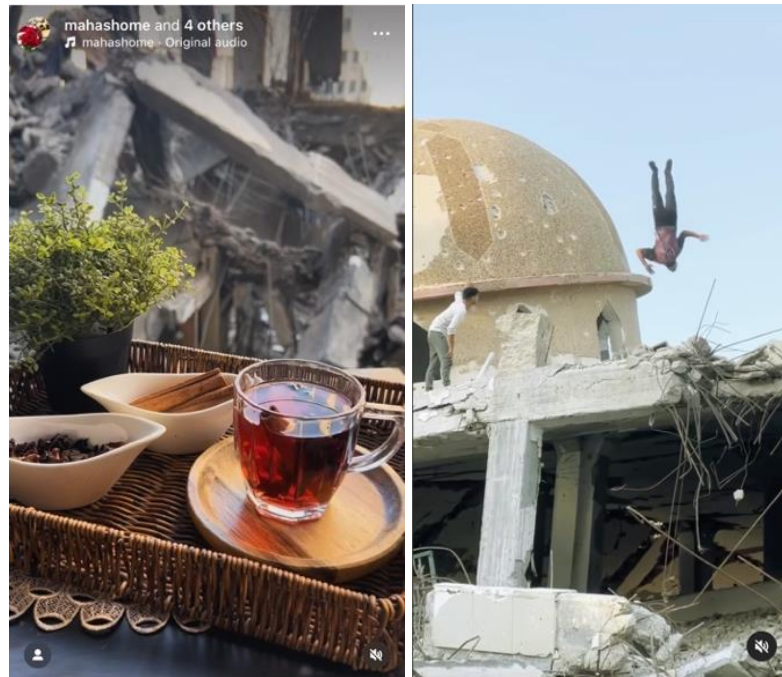


Figure 5.11: videos by @mahashome and @spider_gaza.mahmoud (Instagram, 2024/2025).

Acts of resilience in Palestine also come in the form of participatory culture on Instagram. Parkour athletes (like @spider_gaza.mahmoud) and skateboarders in Gaza have reclaimed the rubble of destroyed buildings as an urban obstacle course (Figure 5.11).⁶³ The Gaza Skate Team (@gaza_skate_team) continued to post videos during Israeli bombardment, even risking their lives.⁶⁴ These videos are made for non-commercial purposes and propagate a sense of ‘belonging’ amongst fellow enthusiasts online.⁶⁵ Performing these activities for social media viewers takes on further significance, as these videos contribute to the humanisation of Palestinians by Palestinians in media imagery in the face of their *dehumanisation* by Israel (that treats civilians as collateral damage). These personal audiovisual narratives help to individualise Gazan civilians amidst mounting death toll figures and ‘bring home’ the issue to Instagram viewers located elsewhere.

⁶³ See: Al Jazeera, ‘How a Parkour Group in Gaza Turns War Ruins Into Sporting Arenas,’ 8 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2024/1/8/israel-war-on-gaza-hamas-palestinian-parkour-group-destroyed-neighbourhoods-rafah-sporting-arena>.

⁶⁴ Gaza Skate Team (@gaza_skate_team), ‘We went to check out the skate park,’ Instagram, 24 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFNXA_6Ni2z/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA==; SkatePal (@skate_pal), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/skate_pal?igsh=bmg2cTdua3h5OWdv.

⁶⁵ See: Connected Learning Alliance, ‘Media Scholar Henry Jenkins on Participatory Culture and Civic Engagement,’ YouTube.

Eye on Palestine

Starting on Facebook in 2011, Eye on Palestine (EOP) (@eye.on.palestine) joined Instagram in 2014, was verified in 2023, and has accumulated 12.8 million Instagram followers. The account is unaffiliated with any news organisation and describes itself on its Patreon page as ‘freelance journalism and profit-free activism’. As of February 2025, EOP has uploaded over 52k posts, which exceeds the quantity of posts from the profiles of more ‘official’ media like *The Guardian* (9k posts) and Al Jazeera English (31k posts). With 12.8 million followers, EOP’s reach also exceeds the Instagram followers of @guardian (5.9m) and @aljazeera (11m). Thus, while these media organisations use Instagram effectively (even resharing the videos of independent mobilographers and borrowing the aesthetics of activist infographics), EOP appears to appeal to a broader Instagram audience. The account’s popularity might be explained by the sheer scale of EOP’s raw coverage of events in Palestine that promise to bring the truth directly to the viewer and without the narrating ‘voice’ (literal or figurative) of Western news coverage, elaborate special effects, or media editorialising. Having been blocked from PayPal, EOP’s Patreon has over 400 paid members, which provides subscriber-based income for the account administrators who prefer to remain anonymous. EOP has affiliated Facebook, Twitter/X, Threads, and Telegram accounts, which spread its reach further. EOP also has a backup Instagram account called @eye.on.palestine2 (with 1.1 million followers) if the main account is suspended or banned by Meta, which has occurred in the past. In 2022, the account was temporarily suspended for not following community guidelines and in October 2023, both accounts were locked by Meta for ‘security reasons’. Nadim Nashif, director of 7amleh (Arab Centre for Social Media Advancement), stated that such crackdowns by Meta unfairly ‘prevent the world from hearing the truth from the ground.’⁶⁶

The exact process of *how* videos are crowd-sourced from mobilographers by EOP is uncertain. However, it is likely that videos are sent to EOP directly in DMs by mobilographers or those with access to new raw footage; and/or EOP collects raw footage from other, smaller accounts on Instagram and other platforms and reshapes this content. Evidence of this is suggested in the appearance of watermarks by mobilographers on their

⁶⁶ Hibaq Farah, ‘Pro-Palestinian Instagram Account Locked by Meta for “Security reasons”’, *The Guardian*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/26/pro-palestinian-instagram-account-locked-by-meta-for-security-reasons>.

videos, or when EOP tags the original mobilographer in the post. The ownership or authorship of such videos does not appear to be prioritised by EOP. Rather, the collective accumulation of this database or unofficial ‘archive’ serves to document as much content as possible from as many POVs of Palestinians as possible.⁶⁷ In this, we might recognise the aims of Vertov’s kinoks and – by extension – the Syrian video activists described by Wessels, whose hours of footage present an all-encompassing view of life in the streets and homes of ordinary people.

Furthermore, the symbolism employed by EOP is significant. The account’s logo is a circular eye that also resembles a camera lens (Figure 5.12). The historical land of Palestine (pre-1948) is layered across the lens in the national flag’s colours. This logo bears a distinctive resemblance to a famous shot in Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, where the human eye appears to be fused inside a camera lens (Figure 5.12). Vertov’s view that the camera can enhance human vision – like a prosthetic – beyond its natural biological ability is perhaps reflected today in the smartphone’s ability to capture fleeting life anywhere at any time and disseminate videos online to global audiences, enhancing human vision beyond its physical limitations. Vertov’s prescient ideas about surveillance and candid cameras may also be reflected in EOP’s ‘cop watching’ activities. The motif of the eye re-appears across different media related to the Palestinian struggle. The poster for the Palestine Cinema Days festival from 2019 shows a close-up of a woman’s eye being widened, with the tagline ‘Keep your eyes wide open’ (Figure 5.13). The festival poster from the previous year shows a fragmented hand holding up a 16mm camera like a tool, evoking the earlier practices of resistance filmmakers.⁶⁸ A poster widely shared on Instagram in 2024 titled ‘All Eyes on Rafah’ by Josh Mayfield, in reference to Israel’s bombing of the Rafah ‘safe zone’, shows an illustrated eye (Figure 5.13). This imagery explicitly connects cinema to the optic regime of truth, while symbolically resisting the optical hierarchy of the occupation’s omniscient surveillance.

⁶⁷ The anthology film *From Ground Zero* (Aws Al-Banna, et al, 2024) was directed by 22 different Palestinians living in Gaza, many using their smartphones. The film was scheduled to have its world premiere at Cannes but was removed on ‘political grounds’ and was instead projected outside the festival grounds in protest. See: Ruwaida Amer, “Film Was the Best Way to Convey Our Art Amid the Suffering in Gaza,” *+972 Magazine*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/ground-zero-rashid-masharawi-cannes-gaza/>.

⁶⁸ See: ‘All Eyes on Rafah,’ Palestine Poster Project, <https://www.palestineposterproject.org/posters/all-eyes-rafaah>; Filmlab Palestine (@filmlabpalestine), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/filmlabpalestine/?hl=en>.

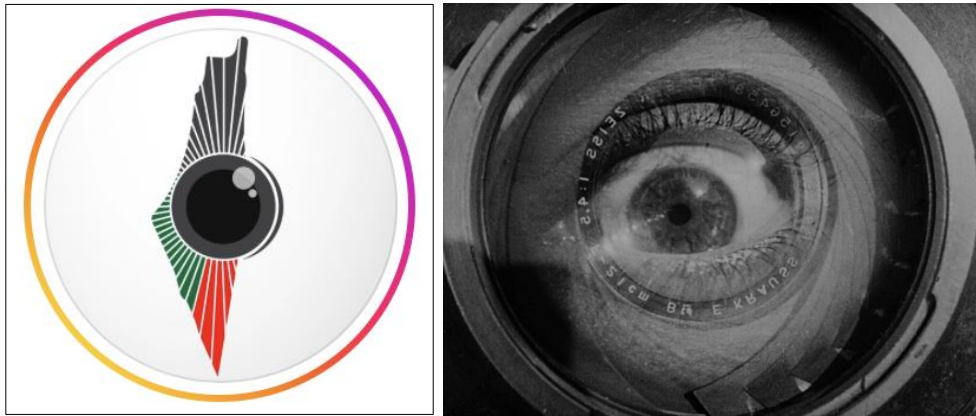


Figure 5.12: the Eye on Palestine logo (Instagram, 2025) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929).



Figure 5.13: Palestine Cinema Days poster (2019) and the 'All Eyes on Rafah' poster.

EOP is chiefly concerned with documenting the lives of Palestinians under occupation, including injuries, killings, arrests, evictions, and confrontations with Israeli police, military, and settlers. Other videos are also sourced from global events and demonstrations in support of Palestine, thus connecting the national struggle to an international solidarity campaign. The most important element of EOP is the documentation from Palestinian civilians of confrontational situations and violence. Somatic images are produced in videos where mobilographers are in unpredictable situations such as bombings. One video from May 2023 shows a home in Gaza being blown up by Israel. The camera shakes uncontrollably with the impact of the bomb; the

mobilographer shelters beneath a shop front (Figure 5.14).⁶⁹ Another video recorded from someone's home shows the bombing of residential blocks in Jenin refugee camp in the northern West Bank; the mobilographer films from behind their balcony, while in the background a man can be heard crying in anguish (Figure 5.14).⁷⁰

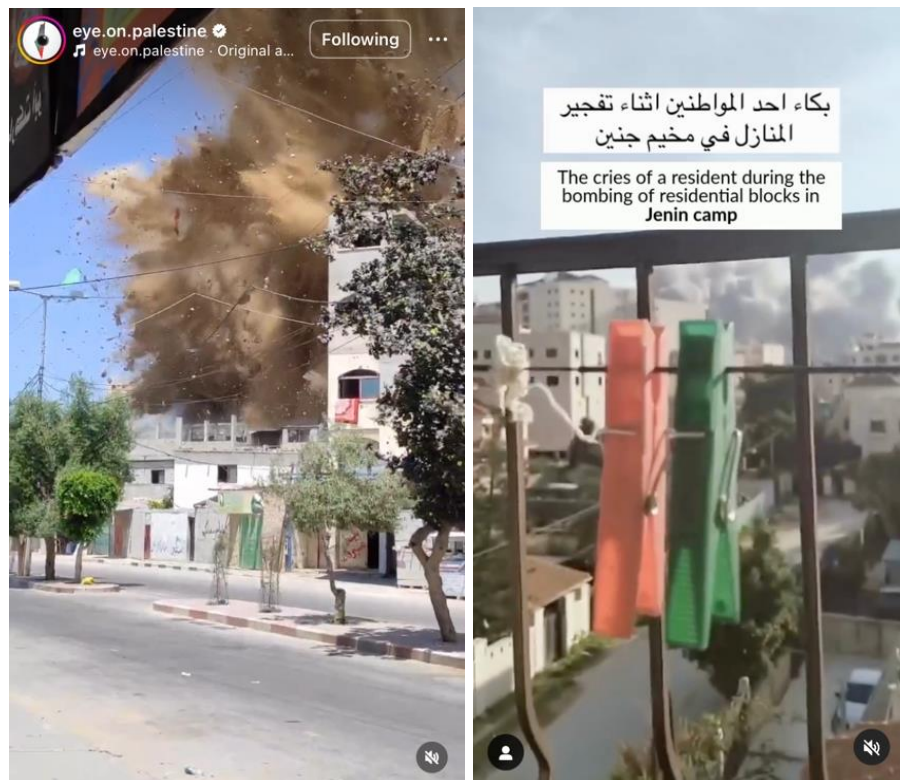


Figure 5.14: videos of explosions shared by @eye.on.palestine (Instagram, 2023/2024).

In some EOP videos, Palestinian mobilographers may be physically embroiled in confrontations with the IDF or police. For example, videos from February 2022 show the Israeli police and IDF violently removing Palestinians from the Damascus Gate with batons, sound grenades, and tear gas. Families had gathered at the popular site to celebrate the Prophet Mohammed's journey to the heavens (*'al Isra wal-Miraj'* celebrations). In the unpredictable scenario, one mobilographer's fingers partly cover the camera lens, causing a haptic blurring effect that demonstrates the 'imperfection' and

⁶⁹ Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), 'Israel continues bombing homes in Gaza,' Instagram, 13 May 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CsLWpsHg8_Y/?igsh=MXU0bHhjbGRiaGZ5bA==.

⁷⁰ Translating Falasteen (@translating_falasteen) and @eye.on.palestine2, 'The occupation blew up several residential blocks in Jenin,' Instagram, 2 February 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFkyKtpEZv/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA==.

intimacy of this mode of production (Figure 5.15).⁷¹ Another video from the same day shared by Baraah Abo Ramouz shows a teenage girl (identified as Iman Kiswani) being brutally seized by several armed male officers, who then threaten Abo Ramouz and other witnesses with batons.⁷² The mobilographer remains silent ‘behind’ the camera but shows their visible embodiment by physically ‘enveloping’ the camera, so to speak, or rapidly jerking the camera to avoid assault from batons. As noted by Lorenzo Dalvit and Alette Schoon, in this kind of video, police brutality is witnessed through both the vulnerable body of the mobilographer and the ‘body’ of the smartphone.⁷³ And as Aguayo argues, this askew framing ‘virtually places the audience in harm’s way’ and encourages them to enter the protestor’s space of disorientation.⁷⁴

It is worth noting Aguayo’s analysis of the aesthetics of ‘protest pornography’ or ‘riot pornography’ as a visual discourse on the struggle between the state and citizens: ‘Pepper spray in the face, rubber bullets at close range, protesters tightly bound and dragged off to arrest, baton wielding police [...] edited together in montage with dramatic music where the violence becomes the tension and climax of the narrative arc.’ This footage is very important as documentation of police violence, but Aguayo notes that the larger political struggle at hand (anti-war, anti-capitalism, anti-racism, etc.) can be obfuscated in such imagery, while the dull days of organising and labour are rendered invisible.⁷⁵ Certainly, the visual stimuli of ‘protest pornography’ are present in much of EOP’s more confrontational video content, but crucially there is little interference from the mobilographers in terms of dramatic montage. The videos on the account rarely feature additional music to accompany such confrontational images. Some aesthetic interferences may include the pixelation of faces for anonymity or zooming in on and slowing down interactions captured on camera. The ‘rawness’ of the footage (its imperfect images and sound) as incontrovertible proof of the occupation’s brutality is privileged over dramatization, bearing in mind that no single image or video can objectively represent the ‘whole story’ (such a feat would be impossible).

⁷¹ Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), ‘The aggression of the Israeli occupation forces continues,’ 28 February 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CahgXlJltiK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. This kind of haptic image evokes Sobchack’s discussion in ‘What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in Flesh,’ *Senses of Cinema*, issue 5 (April 2000), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/conference-special-effects-special-affects/fingers/>.

⁷² Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), ‘Israeli soldiers brutally beating,’ 28 February 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CahmCJtIA1j/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

⁷³ Dalvit and Schoon, ‘Siyashuta! Capturing Police Brutality on Mobile Phones in South Africa,’ in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry, 133.

⁷⁴ Aguayo, ‘Activist Street Tapes,’ (2014).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

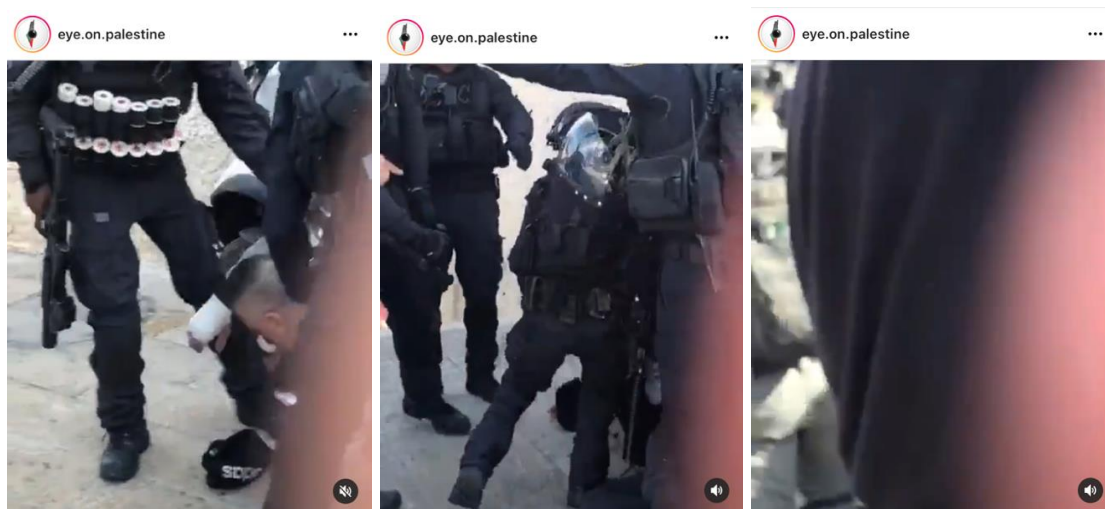


Figure 5.15: video of police confrontation at Damascus Gate shared by @eye.on.palestine (Instagram, 2022).

The somatic images created in these videos evoke Jane M. Gaines's analysis of political documentaries like *The Battle of Chile* and dramatic works like *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925): 'scenes of rioting, images of bodies clashing, of bodies moving as a mass. These are images of sensuous struggle, images exhilarating to politicised viewers, who would interpret them as action against a common enemy, an enemy that assumes a variety of guises – a racist state, capitalist management, a bigoted group.' Gaines notes the power of such documentaries 'to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling' that can be used to affect and mobilise future actions. Significantly, the first part ('Fragile Hands') of Chris Marker's political essay film *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977) seems to recognise this by cutting together footage of hand gestures and bodies in action from different documented social struggles and staged scenes from *Battleship*. Invoking Linda Williams's theorisation of 'body genres' in cinema that illicit strong bodily responses in audiences (crying, screaming, etc.), Gaines argues that in documentaries, 'political mimesis begins with the body.'⁷⁶

Gaines's concern is with documentary films rather than social media platforms. However, this desire can be found in accounts like EOP, where mobilographers' bodies and hands are not only intimately implicated in confrontational scenarios, but also *film* the struggling bodies of others with their mobile cameras. Furthermore, mimesis is engrained

⁷⁶ Jane M. Gaines, 'Political Mimesis,' in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Gaines and Michael Renov (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 90-91 [citing: Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,' *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2-13].

in social media visual culture in the form of trends, challenges, and memes. Instagram followers of EOP watching at home (who also intimately hold their smartphones watching these videos) may certainly be *affected* by these images.⁷⁷ Videos of protests and police clashes in other countries, too, represent the ‘sensuous struggle’ of political activism in an age of smartphones. EOP has shared videos of protestors being physically assaulted and arrested by police in Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin, New York, and other cities.⁷⁸ A video shared by Palestinian author and activist Mohammed El Kurd (@mohammedelkurd) shows him physically confronting NYPD officers, in which his fingers cover the lens in the ‘sensuous struggle’, conveying a sense of what it’s like to be in a protest crush (Figure 5.16).⁷⁹ These videos *unintentionally*, by virtue of their unpredictable mode of production, support an avant-garde aesthetic that denies the optimal sound, framing, lighting, and clarity of images that commercially dominate the Instagram platform.

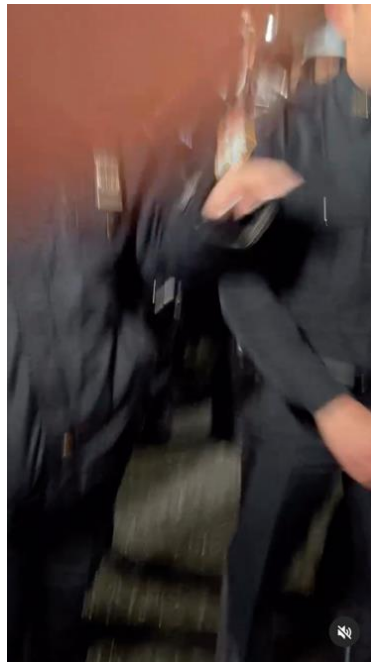


Figure 5.16: video of New York City protest shared by Mohammed El Kurd (Instagram, 2024).

⁷⁷ See, also: Kaarina Nikunen, ‘From Irony to Solidarity: Affective Practice and Social Media Activism,’ *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 10, no. 2 (2018): 10-21; Dhiraj Murthy, ‘Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations,’ *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117750716>.

⁷⁸ See, for example: Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), ‘The French police have just entered the courtyard of the Sorbonne,’ Instagram, 29 April 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6WuBNEquFP/?igsh=bTF3NwK3b3czMjRk>.

⁷⁹ Mohammed El Kurd (@mohammedelkurd), ‘NYPD violently assaults and arrests a protestor,’ Instagram, 1 May 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6aQv-hNI3I/?igsh=OGFhbmXwNXU4Y3Vl>.

The ‘eye’ in Eye on Palestine serves another symbolic function. The account might be described as a form of ‘cop watch’ activism that uses camera technologies to enact surveillance in the *opposite* direction of normative surveillance (i.e., government agencies doing surveillance on civilians).⁸⁰ This kind of activism goes at least as far back as the Black Panther Party’s cop watching practices in the US, when members of the Panther Police Patrol carried tape recorders and cameras to deter the police from abusing Black community members in the late 1960s.⁸¹ Increasingly in the digital age, ordinary mobilographers can record the abuses of police officers.⁸² For example, in 2020, teenager Darnella Frazier recorded George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis on her smartphone and posted the video on Facebook and Instagram, which later served as evidence in court to convict officer Derek Chauvin. Frazier explained: ‘I opened my phone and started recording because I knew if I didn’t, no one would believe me.’⁸³ Frazier’s video serves as indexical testimony to police brutality, and her video was shared widely on social media and inspired global Black Lives Matter protests.⁸⁴

Similarly, numerous videos shared by EOP of the IDF or police arresting and harming civilians were illicitly filmed by Palestinian mobilographers.⁸⁵ One example shows armed IDF soldiers body-searching Palestinian teenage girls on the street below during a raid in Shufat refugee camp in Jerusalem (Figure 5.17).⁸⁶ This flips the hierarchy of surveillance in occupied Palestine: from the IDF’s use of drones and facial recognition to snipers and armed watch towers along border walls. The mobilographer films the scenario from behind the bars of their balcony or window from above, much like the angle of a CCTV camera, alternatively framing the occupation forces as the ‘watched’, while the girls’ faces are blurred for anonymity. Significantly, multiple Palestinian mobilographers have captured videos of Israeli drones hovering above them, either conducting spying, intimidation, or preparing to drop explosives, as shared by EOP

⁸⁰ See, also: John W. Murphy, ‘Cinema Vérité and the Criminal Element: A Perspective,’ *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 50, no. 4 (1993): 501-507, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42577504>.

⁸¹ Charles E. Jones, ‘The Political Repression of the Black Panther Party 1966-1971: The Case of the Oakland Bay Area,’ *Journal of Black Studies* 18, no. 4 (1988): 417.

⁸² See, also: Dalvit and Schoon, ‘Siyashuta! Capturing Police Brutality,’ in *Mobile Story Making*, ed. Schleser and Berry.

⁸³ Joanna Stern, ‘They Used Smartphone Cameras to Record Police Brutality – and Change History,’ *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 June, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/they-used-smartphone-cameras-to-record-police-brutality-and-change-history-11592020827>.

⁸⁴ Frazier was widely praised for her quick act of ‘citizen journalism’ and was issued a special award by the Pulitzer Prize board, but she also faced some criticism for filming the event passively. It is certain that had Frazier intervened, she could have been harmed or arrested, which is true for many mobilographers in her predicament.

⁸⁵ See, for more on the transnational and institutional connections between the BLM movement and Palestine solidarity: Mislán and Shaban, ‘“To Ferguson, Love Palestine”,’ (2019).

⁸⁶ Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), ‘The Israeli occupation forces assault schoolgirls,’ 8 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzYAT2_qKl8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

(Figure 5.17).⁸⁷ Thus, the panoptical omniscience of the IDF's aerial POV is symbolically reciprocated by mobilographers drone-watching below, armed with their own cameras. But this practice ultimately does not mitigate the IDF's exceedingly more powerful technologies of facial recognition, surveillance, weaponry, and so on.

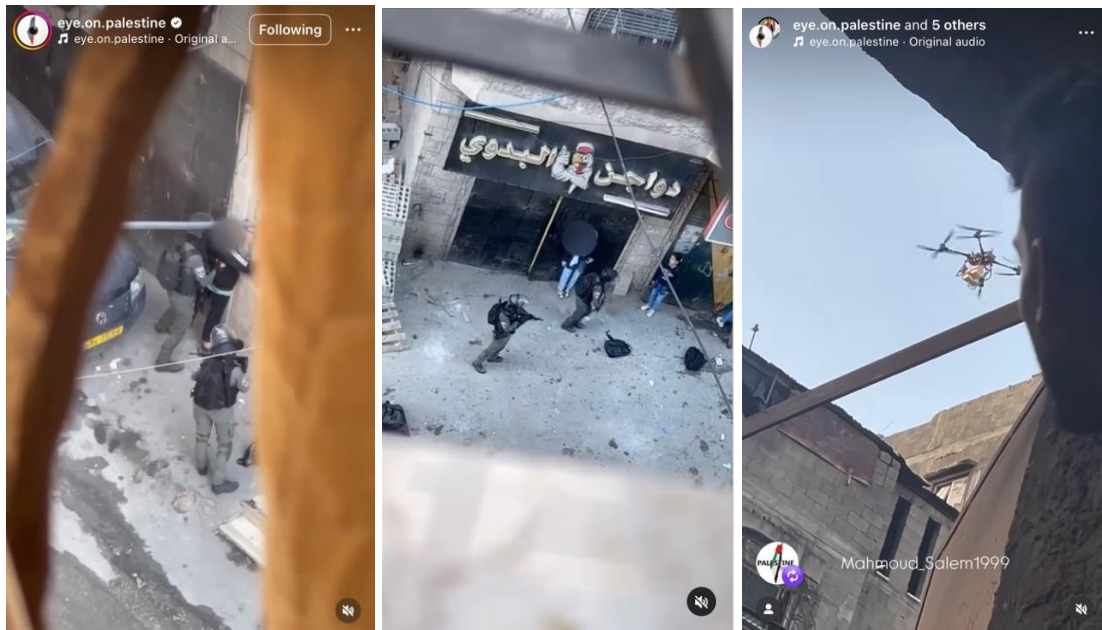


Figure 5.17: an example of ‘copwatching’ (Instagram, 2023) and a drone (right) (Instagram, 2025) shared by @eye.on.palestine.

More graphic videos shared by EOP may feature a content warning and are partly censored with blurred imagery, which viewers can decide to remove or not. Instagram uses the symbol of the eye superimposed over the post to connote this function. The blurred imagery creates a haptic second ‘screen’ on the smartphone *dispositif* (like a frosted window) to create a semblance of separateness (Figure 5.18). Since 2023, much of EOP’s content has focused on ongoing massacres by Israel, resulting in the increased visibility of dying, dead, starving, and severely injured Palestinians on its profile, many of whom are children. However, these videos have not been removed by Instagram and can be reshared repeatedly. These graphic and upsetting videos mingle freely with other posts on the algorithmically generated feeds of followers, creating absurd juxtapositions between Instagram’s in-built advertising, memes, and the abject imagery of brutalised

⁸⁷ For example: Eye on Palestine (@eye.on.palestine), ‘Israeli drones dropped explosives,’ Instagram, 22 August 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNphixlt0AV/?igsh=OXgzZmh2YXVhZXU5>.

corpses and distraught families in public view. Writer Mark O’Connell has described his surreal experience of scrolling through Instagram and seeing the ‘slick proliferation of consumerist spectacle’ being continually ruptured by images of trauma in Gaza, presenting a dystopian insight into contemporary capitalism where this stark visual contrast is supposedly *normalised* online.⁸⁸

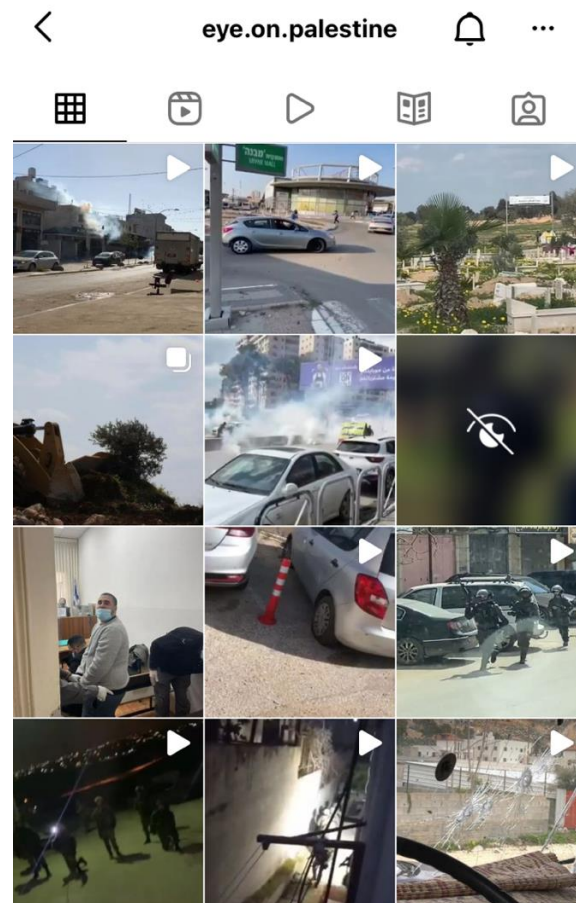


Figure 5.18: an example of a partly censored image on @eye.on.palestine.

The question of whether this imagery can be disseminated and/or viewed *ethically*, as public testimony to atrocity, requires a different research framework than what is pursued in this thesis overall.⁸⁹ However, it is clear that Palestinian

⁸⁸ Mark O’Connell, ‘On Instagram I See the Body of a Palestinian Toddler, an Ad for a Wetsuit, Oprah Talking,’ *The Irish Times*, 18 May 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2024/05/18/mark-oconnell-on-instagram-i-see-the-body-of-a-palestinian-toddler-an-ad-for-a-wetsuit-oprah-talking/>.

⁸⁹ See: Caitlin Doughty, ‘We Must Consider Gaza Images: It’s OK to Wonder About the Lives of the Dead – It Makes Us Human, and It Makes Us Understand,’ *Salon*, 3 August 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/08/03/we_must_consider_gaza_images_its_ok_to_wonder_about_the_lives_of_the_dead_it_makes_us_human_and_it_makes_us_understand/; Penelope Papailias, ‘(Un)seeing Dead Refugee Bodies: Mourning Memes, Spectropolitics, and the Haunting of Europe,’ *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 8 (2018): 1048-1068, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718756178>; Cherine Fahd, ‘Destigmatising Infant Loss with Photography and Hashtags on Instagram,’ *Photographies* 16, no. 1 (2023): 109-132, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2022.2150877>.

mobilographers intend for these images to be seen globally, hoping to prompt action. Because these videos coexist with typical Instagram content, they serve as powerful interjections in the normal ‘stream’ of life on the platform. It forces millions of social media users attached to their smartphones to not look away. The account especially resists the Israeli government’s disinformation tactics on social media that attempt to justify its actions in Gaza, such as digitally altered and edited footage. This also includes false accusations that Palestinians exaggerate and stage their own suffering online in filmed ‘Pallywood’ melodramas (a racist pejorative that deliberately evokes Hollywood and Bollywood), like using fake ‘dolls’ instead of filming real dead Palestinian children.⁹⁰ EOP’s aims can be seen as a starkly *real* rejoinder to this disinformation campaign.

EOP’s popularity on Instagram and its daily, dedicated uploading of video materials from thousands of viewpoints can be considered one of the most significant bodies of audiovisual work on Palestine in the digital era. As Palestinian film units in the pre-digital era strived to do, EOP’s vast collection of raw footage covers Palestinian life from all its angles and geographical regions, from the West Bank to Gaza. Its contributing mobilographers are not all professional ‘filmmakers’ strictly speaking, but as digital ‘kinoks’ they have co-created an alternative database of footage that foregrounds the embodied experiences of Palestinians and represents a peaceful collective resistance.

Bisan Owda

As one high-profile example of a Palestinian mobilographer, Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1) represents a case study through which Instagram’s visual culture and Astruc’s vision of ‘amateurs writing their confessions’ with a mobile camera converge. Unlike the crowd-sourced videos shared by EOP, Owda’s videos are more overtly *hers* and her physical presence as a creator in videos is much more visible. In her Instagram profile bio, she describes herself as a ‘Filmmaker, Traveler and a dreamer’. Although not strictly an ‘amateur’ filmmaker (as Owda worked as a video producer and vlogger before the war), her smartphone became a necessary and comparatively amateurish tool for her to express herself following the destruction of her film equipment, home, and video

⁹⁰ See: Al Jazeera, ‘When Will Israeli Army Explain Inconsistencies in Al-Shifa Hospital Videos?’ 19 November 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/19/when-will-israeli-army-explain-inconsistencies-in-al-shifa-hospital-videos>; Lara Bullens, “‘Pallywood propaganda’: Pro-Israeli Accounts Online Accuse Palestinians of Staging their Suffering,” France 24, 21 November 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231121-pallywood-propaganda-pro-israeli-accounts-online-accuse-palestinians-of-staging-their-suffering>.

production offices in October 2023. As of February 2025, Owda has 4.8 million followers on Instagram and has over 1,200 posts.⁹¹ Owda joined Instagram in 2018 and before the war, she used Instagram to document her hobbies, her work, her Palestinian identity, previous assaults on Gaza (such as in 2021), her travels to Europe, friends, and lifestyle-based content that emphasised wellbeing and creativity (Figure 5.19).

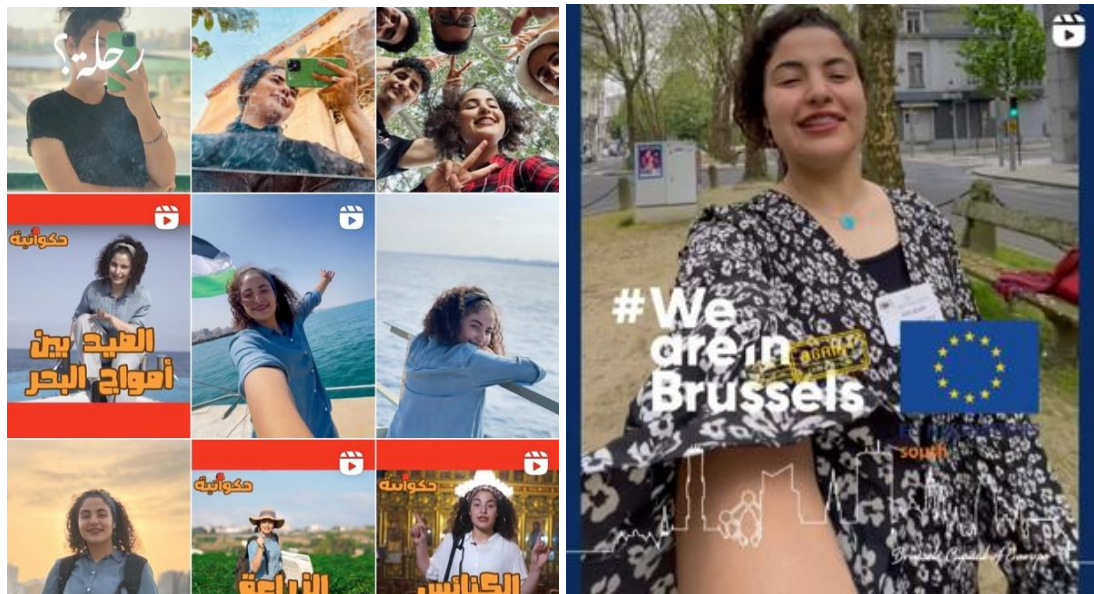


Figure 5.19: examples of Bisan Owda's Instagram activity before the war.

In terms of the formal style of her mobilography, Owda's camera is typically front-facing, meaning that Owda holds her smartphone while addressing the viewer. Her videos are typically in the vertical format, which is the predominant format on TikTok and on Instagram Reels, especially when content creators are speaking to camera (Figure 5.20). When she speaks or writes in text captions, Owda often begins by cordially saying 'Hi everyone, it's Bisan from Gaza'. To extend her control of her smartphone, Owda may use a selfie stick as a kind of prosthetic arm that allows her to film a wider field of vision while moving with one hand free. Owda speaks to camera and writes captions typically in English, as she wishes to access as large an audience as possible; although, some videos or phrases are in her native Arabic.

⁹¹ Owda's second Instagram profile (@wizard_bisan2) posts in Arabic and has over 390k followers and fewer posts, making her English-based profile her most popular one.

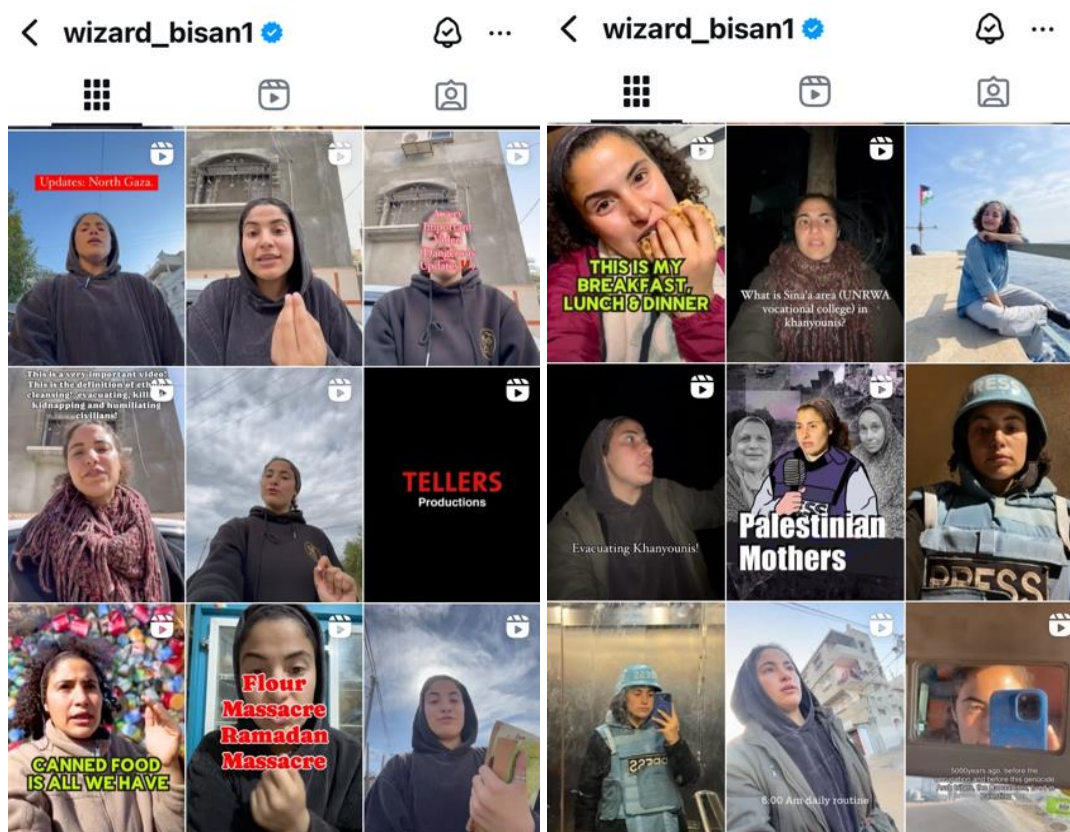


Figure 5.20: examples of Bisan Owda's Instagram content during the war.

In terms of their content or subject matter, Owda's videos typically take the form of reportage and educational content that is both collective and personal in its scope. Her topic of discussion is often the broader situation at hand, such as the latest attack or updates on refugees' struggles to access food and shelter or debunking disinformation about life in Gaza. Owda's videos also document her own personal struggles and experiences. The confessional and diaristic style of Owda's posts makes them highly subjective forms of audiovisual and visual production, with Owda crying and voicing her frustration and exhaustion in some videos. She has also filmed impressionistic 'good' moments, like finding a stray cat in the rubble (Figure 5.21). One video from January 2025 shows Owda trying a piece of fresh carrot for the first time in months. Owda describes the flavour and shares a memory about her mother's cooking, while emphasising the severe restrictions on fresh food in Gaza more broadly (Figure 5.21).⁹²

⁹² Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), 'We are still alive,' Instagram, 24 November 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0CVkGhMm_o/?igsh=dzN6d2Ezdzc2bmg5; Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), 'Have you enjoyed your holiday meals?' Instagram, 6 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEfTCSAspd8/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

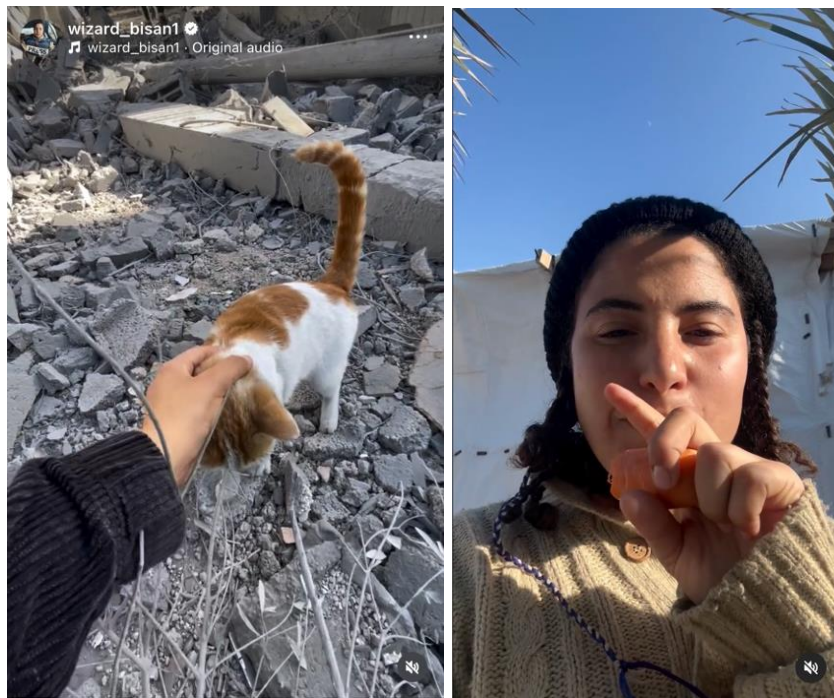


Figure 5.21: Bisan Owda meeting a cat and eating a carrot in Gaza (Instagram, 2023/2025).

Like many Instagram users, Owda takes selfies with her smartphone. Owda did so before and during the war, but her selfies taken during the war bear a new significance. One selfie taken in January 2024 shows Owda in an elevator and wearing a protective blue ‘press’ vest and ‘press’ helmet (Figure 5.22). Her outstretched hand in the mirror shows a smartphone. The mirror itself shows the smudges of people’s hands that have potentially been covered in the dust of rubble. Crucially, while Owda’s selfie shows certain visual signifiers – a young woman with a smartphone in a press vest and helmet – Owda’s text caption further reveals the production that occurred behind this selfie. Owda begins her caption: ‘Hi everyone, it’s Bisan from Gaza. I am still alive Alhamdulillah [praise be to God] ... it’s been 107 days of genocide.’ She goes on:

Now, we are without any connection, neither the internet nor the cellular, we can’t reach each other’s [*sic*] inside Gaza [...] We can’t reach you as well! The footage, information and news from Gaza are not reaching you as before because the Israeli army intentionally destroys [*sic*] the signal towers and the servers, even using the E-SIM requires

being in a high place which is very risky! I borrowed this vest to upload this post!⁹³

Owda's caption points to the practicalities of producing audiovisual content under siege, where her regular engagement with social media followers is interrupted by the destruction of Internet and cellular infrastructure. Significantly, a selfie taken by Owda in June 2023, before the war, shows her similarly in an elevator and seemingly holding the same smartphone, but smiling and wearing her own style (Figure 5.22).⁹⁴



Figure 5.22: two of Bisan Owda's selfies (Instagram, 2023/2024).

In their selfie format, Owda's videos are first and foremost self-representations. As Ace Lehner has argued, selfies have expanded the practice of self-portraiture in the digital age – a practice historically limited to male white subjects – to women and minority groups to represent themselves as they wish, denying the hierarchy of the male, imperial gaze over other bodies.⁹⁵ As a Palestinian, Muslim, female refugee, Owda fits into a marginalised group for whom access to self-representation and subjectivity was

⁹³ Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), 'Hi everyone, it's Bisan from Gaza,' Instagram, 21 January 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C2XKJ8aLmmu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁹⁴ Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), 'It's a date!!' Instagram, 3 June 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtCVi9asn7v/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==.

⁹⁵ Lehner, 'From Self-Portrait to Selfie,' 1-4.

long denied in Western visual culture, especially in Orientalist artworks. Smartphones have made visible and personal what was once limited to a privileged few. Thus, the original premise of the *caméra-stylo* – conceived within the context of male-dominated, European film culture – is expanded to underrepresented groups in the social media era.

Following a precarious ceasefire agreement in January 2025 (later broken by Israel in March), Owda and over 300k refugees made the journey back to the northern parts of Gaza, which she documented on her Story. Owda's video showing her return home sees her explore the bombed remains of her apartment while smiling (Figure 5.23).⁹⁶ Importantly, Owda's regular engagement with followers demonstrates the strong parasocial connection between social media users and the content creators they follow. For many possible reasons like lack of Internet access, Owda does not create and post her own audiovisual content every day, and sometimes only reshapes news stories on her Instagram Story. When Owda doesn't post videos for several days intermittently, followers are often concerned for her wellbeing, commenting questions under her last post such as 'is she okay?' or 'we hope you are okay'. Followers' concerns are certainly justified, owing to the IDF's indiscriminatory targeting of civilians and journalists and cases of other Gazan content creators being killed. For example, Medo Halimy, a popular TikTok creator known for tending to his small plants in a refugee camp as an act of resistance (calling it his 'tent life'), was killed by an Israeli airstrike in August 2024, followed by an outpouring of grief from his globally situated followers.⁹⁷

The term 'refugee influencer' has been used recently to describe refugees like Owda. However, this term must be qualified.⁹⁸ Owda was already interested in producing vlog-style video content before the war. But she is not a true 'influencer' in an economic sense as she has not engaged in monetised and sponsored social media posting.⁹⁹ The present priorities of refugees during war or displacement certainly may not include negotiating endorsement deals with brands.¹⁰⁰ Rather, Owda can be considered a *thought influencer* and arguably has more long-lasting influence over her Instagram followers by

⁹⁶ Bisan Owda (@wizard_bisan1), 'I am back, I am at home,' Instagram, 31 January 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFf90c6uEXC?igsh=enJnZWRvMGZ0bWNo>.

⁹⁷ Sophia Yan, 'Palestinian TikTok Gardener Killed in Suspected Israeli Air Strike,' *The Telegraph*, 1 September 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/09/01/medo-halimy-gaza-tiktok-gardener-killed-airstrike/>.

⁹⁸ See, for example: Digital World, 'From Refugee to Refugee Influencer,' 1 December 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/from-refugee-to-refugee-influencer/video-67965327>.

⁹⁹ Other young Gazan social media personalities include 23-year-old Plestia Alaqad (4.2 million followers on Instagram), who was able to escape to Egypt in November 2024. Alaqad has mirrored the aesthetics of lifestyle-based Instagram content to show what life in Gaza was like before the war (despite the harsh living conditions), such as being with friends and going to the beach.

¹⁰⁰ 'Content creation' by vulnerable groups may also be exploited by platforms. See: BBC, 'TikTok Profits from Livestreams of Families Begging,' 12 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-63213567>.

changing their political perspective. Undoubtedly, Owda's popularity is comparable to that of influencers' profiles on the platform. Owda's following of 4.8 million is significant, given that arguably more famous and established media figures (including the auteurs in Chapter 3 and Hollywood actors) have far fewer followers. The regularity of Owda's daily videos and updates mirrors the practices of influencers whose regular engagements with viewers ensure a sustained parasocial connection.¹⁰¹ But rather than endorsing the 'message' of sponsored products, services, or a particular consumerist lifestyle, Owda's lived experiences as a Palestinian are the 'message' that her videos aim to voice on social media.



Figure 5.23: Bisan Owda returning home (Instagram, 2025).

For comparison, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Valeria Shashenok is a young, female so-called 'refugee influencer' with 1.2 million TikTok followers.¹⁰² As I examined in Chapter 4, Shashenok's use of TikTok has creatively ironised the war by

¹⁰¹ See: Abidin, *Internet Celebrity*, 18.

¹⁰² Anne Kordunsky, 'A Ukrainian TikTok Influencer Shares Her Life as a Refugee in "Following Valeria"', *The New Yorker*, 21 February 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/a-ukrainian-tiktok-influencer-shares-her-life-as-a-refugee-in-following-valeria>.

contrasting her experiences with the ‘normal’ experiences of young people. Unlike the videos typically shared by EOP and similar accounts, these videos are more stylised with the use of rapid montage, captions, and music that reflect the vernacular of TikTok video trends at large. Her participation in the Wes Anderson TikTok trend is just one example of this playful commentary. Another video titled ‘MY TYPICAL DAY IN A BOMB SHELTER’ parodies the format of short ‘daily routine’ videos that are popular among content creators and influencers on TikTok and Instagram.¹⁰³ Normally, these videos are comprised of a montage of different activities with captions. One of Shashenok’s shots shows her standing outside a bombed apartment with the caption, ‘Check what Putin do [sic] with my city’ (Figure 5.24). Shashenok writes ‘Living my best life/Thanks Russia!’. Her use of smiley face emojis in her caption further ironises the tone of the video.

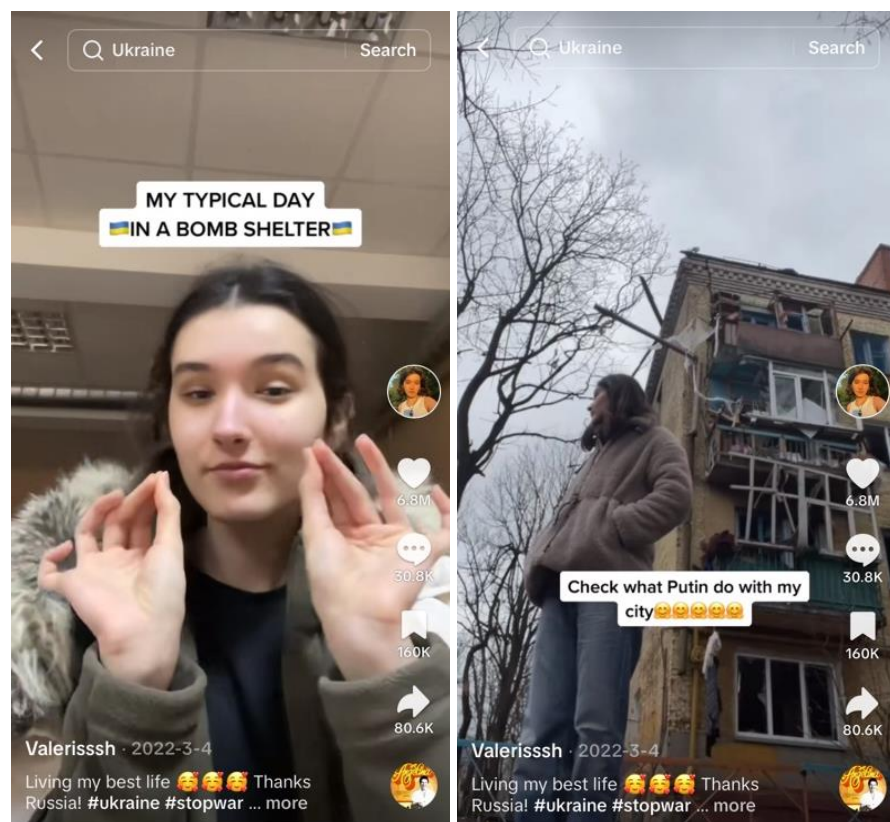


Figure 5.24: Valeria Shashenok in Ukraine (TikTok, 2022).

¹⁰³ Valeria Shashenok (@valerisssh), ‘Living my best life,’ TikTok, 4 March 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@valerisssh/video/7071270332891483397?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7421209786136167968.

Both Owda and Shashenok are well-versed in the vernacular of these platforms (with Shashenok using more ironic humour to frame her experiences). Their videos speak the shared social media ‘language’ of young audiences who largely populate these sites but may have never experienced war themselves. Important, too, is their fluent command of English, which despite the global diversity of TikTok and Instagram users, is the dominant language on these platforms and likely benefits them in gaining more viewer engagement.

Owing to her educational and dedicated video posting on Instagram, Owda has collaborated with Al Jazeera and received both a Peabody award and Emmy for her coverage in Gaza. Owda’s rise to notoriety in both the world of social media activism and content creation and in the world of ‘official’ journalism demonstrates the effectiveness of her personally oriented, impressionistic, and educational style of video production. The ‘imperfect’ quality of her videos is in their ‘make-do’ nature in the context of besiegement. Without funding or support from the film industry (Owda’s mobile and intimately held smartphone being her most important daily tool), Owda goes to great lengths to access the Internet and electricity to represent her struggle as a young Palestinian to global audiences. In this sense, Owda faithfully represents Astruc’s vision of a personal camera ‘writing’ the subjectivity of its wielder, as intimately and freely as a pen in one’s hand.

Navigating Platforms and Digital Warfare

Activists and mobilographers like Owda must navigate a society where war and digital technologies are intrinsically tied. Technologies for surveillance and military have long been the focus of computational innovations in the tech industry, before mass ownership of personal computers.¹⁰⁴ The game-ification of warfare can be seen in the connections between videogame development and military simulators.¹⁰⁵ Bodycams have become a marker of the image-making practices of government armies as well as militant groups who can bypass mainstream news channels to disseminate materials online.¹⁰⁶ The ostensive appeal of first-person ‘POV’ (like in a first-person shooter videogame) is

¹⁰⁴ Burgess, ‘The iPhone Moment, the Apple Brand, and the Creator Consumer,’ in *Studying Mobile Media*, 31.

¹⁰⁵ Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory*, 80.

¹⁰⁶ For example, members of Hamas produce their own video content using helmet cameras and share this anonymously through their media channels, including distribution on social media.

supported by the bodycam's mobility and proximity to the body.¹⁰⁷ This renders warfare and police-civilian interactions an increasingly 'cinematic' reality that Robert Campbell described in 2018 as the 'immanentisation of kinocentrism'.¹⁰⁸ Police bodycams (effectively the opposite of 'cop watch') and state biometric assessment of demographic populations using facial recognition technologies are the markers of a society where *visibility* is controlled top-down.¹⁰⁹ Recently, the IDF has relied heavily on AI machines to choose Palestinian targets without human oversight, resulting in the destruction of entire families and apartment blocks in Gaza.¹¹⁰ Matt Mahmoudi describes this practice as 'AI-washing', which absolves states and human soldiers of responsibilities by blaming the AI system.¹¹¹

Federico Selvini argues that the relationship between military apparatuses and cinematic technologies takes either the form of what philosopher Paul Virilio terms as the military's 'watching machine' (like drone vision), which provide an omniscient view from above and serve a functional rather than aesthetic purpose; or, alternatively, images produced by troops themselves on the frontlines, supported by lighter and easy-to-use mobile cameras.¹¹² The use of flying drones in the war in Ukraine has been a major recent development in the 'kinocentrism' of warfare.¹¹³ The 2000s saw the major expansion of the latter category, with troops being able to upload and disseminate their own images and videos instantly on the Internet, bypassing mainstream media organisations and the hierarchy of the military. In response to the publication of US soldiers' digital photos of their torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Susan Sontag noted in 2004 that war photography was no longer the province of photojournalists. Increasingly, soldiers are active participants in their own media production and distribution, even self-documenting

¹⁰⁷ In 2017, Ayalet Kohn identified one IDF soldier's use of an Instagram filter to aestheticize his scopic target (a Palestinian child) through the double lens of a camera and a rifle's crosshairs – 'aberrant in its inhumanity'. See: Ayalet Kohn, 'Instagram as a Naturalised Propaganda Tool: The Israel Defence Forces Website and the Phenomenon of Shared Values,' *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 23, no. 2 (2017): 203.

¹⁰⁸ Campbell, 'Drone Film Theory: The Immanentisation of Kinocentrism,' (2018).

¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International, 'Racial Bias in Facial Recognition Algorithms,' 21 March 2023, <https://amnesty.ca/features/racial-bias-in-facial-recognition-algorithms/>; Nick Robins-Early, 'How Israel Uses Facial-Recognition Systems in Gaza and Beyond,' *The Guardian*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/19/idf-facial-recognition-surveillance-palestinians>.

¹¹⁰ Yuval Abraham, "'Lavender': The AI Machine Directing Israel's Bombing Spree in Gaza," *+972 Magazine*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>.

¹¹¹ Matt Mahmoudi in: Robins-Early, 'How Israel Uses Facial-Recognition,' *The Guardian*; Jewish Voice for Peace (@jewishvoiceforpeace), 'Israel's Use of AI-Driven Warfare: Automating Genocide,' Instagram, 21 February 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3n4F23grI6/?igsh=eXh0eGluZTQ0aDk1>.

¹¹² Selvini, 'First Person War: Helmet Cameras,' 189 [citing: Paul P. Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Verso, 1989).

¹¹³ Rebecca Rommen, 'Kremlin Supporters Are Fuming After Footage Appears to Show Ukrainian Drones Blowing Up a Russian Armoured Column,' *Business Insider*, 7 February 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-drones-obliterated-a-russian-armored-column-putin-supporters-fume-2024-2>.

their war crimes on social media without repercussions.¹¹⁴ As Selvini writes: ‘[c]urrent wars are, among other things, a clash of images fought through the intangible social spaces of the web. All the subjects involved – regular soldiers, militiamen, guerrillas, NGOs, and civilians – actively participate in this circumstance, addressing distinct audiences on a global scale.’¹¹⁵

The vast use of camera technologies and digital distribution by different groups indeed suggests a ‘clash of images’ today. While warfare is an increasingly ‘cinematic’ phenomenon, it is also increasingly mediated through social media platforms where leaders, governments, and armies can exert their authority in digital spaces. Even weapons manufacturers like Lockheed Martin have their own social media profiles.¹¹⁶ Governments are also active in producing their own propaganda on social media.¹¹⁷ The Israeli government’s social media propaganda has been criticised by journalists on numerous occasions for justifying its actions in Gaza with falsified media evidence (of Hamas’s presence in Al-Shifa Hospital, for example).¹¹⁸ The IDF’s official TikTok account has adopted the aesthetics of influencer culture to create propaganda.¹¹⁹ This ‘image management’, as Bratchford describes, is an attempt to counteract the ‘new visibility’ of ordinary Palestinian civilians on social media, especially popular accounts like that of EOP and Owda.¹²⁰ As reported by numerous sources, war crimes conducted by the IDF in Gaza have been repeatedly documented by soldiers themselves as ‘trophies’ on their personal social media accounts, including pillaged belongings in the bombed homes of Palestinian families and the torture of Palestinian prisoners.¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘Regarding the Torture of Others,’ *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>. See, also: Uri Blau, ‘Israeli Troops Humiliate Palestinians – and Put it on YouTube,’ *Haaretz*, 19 June 2009, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5067525>.

¹¹⁵ Selvini, ‘First Person War: Helmet Cameras,’ 190.

¹¹⁶ Lockheed Martin (@lockheedmartin) has effectively used the language of action filmmaking to promote its fighter jets in short videos on Instagram, including promotional tie-ins with *Top Gun: Maverick* (Joseph Kosinski, 2022).

¹¹⁷ See, also: Al Jazeera, ‘White House Trolls with Mocking “ASMR” Video of Shackled Deportees,’ 19 February 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2025/2/19/white-house-trolls-with-mocking-asmr-video-of-shackled-deportees>.

¹¹⁸ Sayeedah Maryam, ‘What Exactly is Instagram’s Political Content Filter Filtering Out?’ *WIRED*, 3 April 2024, <https://wired.me/culture/instagrams-political-content-filter-what-is-it-filtering/>.

¹¹⁹ Fernanda Seavon, ‘Israeli Military’s TikTok Attempt to Make Propaganda Cool,’ Al Jazeera, 1 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/1/idfs-tiktok-and-its-attempt-to-make-propaganda-cool>. See, also: Antony Loewenstein, ‘Social Media is a Warzone: The IDF’s Strategy for War as Online Spectacle,’ *VERSO*, 1 November 2023, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/social-media-is-a-warzone-the-idf-s-strategy-for-war-as-online-spectacle?srsltid=AfmBOopeh_ncm3JrV5sLzd-XOwGQcX3EDXbku9FDe6Id9G6EB0UaOmU.

¹²⁰ Bratchford, ‘Performing Visibility,’ in *Mediated Interfaces*, ed. Abidin, Warfield, and Cambre, 127.

¹²¹ See, for example: Yara Hawari, ‘Why Are Israeli Soldiers Sharing Snuff Videos From Their Genocide in Gaza?’ Al Jazeera, 24 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/24/why-are-israeli-soldiers-sharing-snuff-videos-from-their-genocide-in-gaza>; Al Jazeera: The Listening Post (@ajlisteningpost), ‘For Months, Israeli Soldiers in Gaza Have Been Documenting Their Own War Crimes,’ Instagram, 3 March 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4EQJ-yL8uY/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Nadav Rapaport, ‘Israeli Historian Produces Vast Database of War Crimes in Gaza,’ Middle East Eye, 6 December 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-historian-produces-vast-database-war-crimes-gaza>; Alice Speri, ‘US-Israeli Soldier Posted Videos Showing Detonation of Gaza Homes and

Misinformation, disinformation (which is more purposefully false), and synthetic media also threaten to undermine the ability to bear witness to ‘reality’ in the digital age. Raw footage can be altered and reframed to produce different narratives. For example, famous footage of the Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi as a child slapping an IDF soldier in 2012 was reposted on TikTok and Twitter/X in February 2022 with the caption: ‘brave little girl confronts invading Putin’s Army #DefendUkraine.’ Those familiar with Tamimi’s prolific activism recognised her and fact-checkers quickly noted the problem. But the video had already been widely shared, receiving over 12 million views on TikTok and one million views on Twitter/X. The case prompted discourse on unequal media representations of whiteness and resistance.¹²² Gen-AI has been used for propaganda, as demonstrated by an AI-generated video reshared by the official White House social media accounts in February 2025 of an imagined colonised Gaza governed by President Trump, inspired by Trump’s ‘Gaza Riviera’ proposal for ethnic cleansing.¹²³

In May 2024, the massacre of refugees by IDF bombs in the ‘safe area’ of Rafah in southern Gaza inspired a shareable image called ‘All Eyes on Rafah’, shared over 46 million times on Instagram Stories. The image was intended to draw attention to the massacre. However, it was visibly AI-generated and did not represent Rafah, but an aerial shot of an imagined, vast encampment of orderly tents stretching towards snowy mountains on the horizon (Figure 5.25). According to Al Jazeera, the image is unmistakably AI-generated because of its unnatural symmetry, repetition, lack of detail, and absence of shadows that starkly contrasts with the smouldering, disorderly encampment – not to mention the structures unrealistically spelling out the words.¹²⁴ Its aesthetic orderliness might be compared to the symmetry of AI-generated Wes Anderson media in Chapter 4. Its mass proliferation on Instagram, using the mimetic ‘Add Yours’ Stories feature, proliferated a false idea of what Rafah was *actually* like after being bombed. While the image was intended to raise awareness, the mere existence of AI-generated images of Gaza may exacerbate false claims of ‘Pallywood’ or that Palestinians fake their suffering. AI researcher Ameera Kawash surmises that the image offered a

Mosque,’ *The Guardian*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/03/american-israeli-soldier-videos-detonation-homes-mosque-gaza>.

¹²² Kayleen Devlin and Shayan Sardarizadeh, ‘Ukraine Invasion: Misleading Claims Continue to Go Viral,’ BBC, 28 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60554910>; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-ukraine-war-girl-confronting-ahed-tamimi-palestine>.

¹²³ WIRED (@wired), ‘Riviera of the Middle East,’ Instagram, 26 February 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGijAISJXrO/?igsh=a2ozdWN6Z2tya3Bv>.

¹²⁴ Sarah Shamim, ‘What is “All Eyes on Rafah”? Decoding a Viral Social Trend on Israel’s War,’ Al Jazeera, 29 May 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/29/what-is-all-eyes-on-rafah-decoding-the-latest-viral-social-trend>.

more ‘palatable’ image of Gaza than real videos and images and could bypass algorithms on platforms like Facebook and Instagram designed to filter graphic violence. The production and aesthetics of the image were critiqued for undermining Palestinian testimonies of their lived experiences, of which there are countless examples to draw from, including journalists who risk their lives to document realities on the ground.¹²⁵ Indeed, the aerial ‘POV’ of the image seems to further distance the viewer from the lived experiences of those supposedly ‘below’.

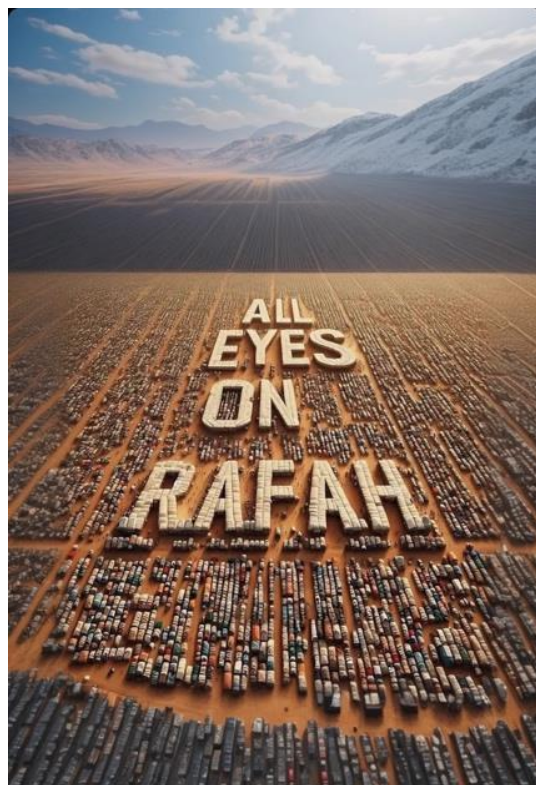


Figure 5.25: the AI-generated 'All Eyes on Rafah' viral image.

One obstacle for activists on social media is navigating a given platform’s policies on content moderation. Instagram’s censorship of political content and minority groups has impacted various activist causes.¹²⁶ With the increasing use of AI to monitor content (rather than human moderators) and determine algorithms, machine-based biases are further expressed in the censorship of content related to race.¹²⁷ Taylor Lorenz has

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ See: Christie, ‘Instagram Censored One of These Photos But Not the Other,’ *The Guardian*.

¹²⁷ See, also: Al Jazeera (@aljazeeraenglish), ‘Herzog Meets TikTok Officials as Israel Accuses Platform of “Pro-Palestine stance”,’ Instagram, 6 February 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C3A7cm7NCoi/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

detailed how pro-Palestine content creators are migrating to Twitch to circumvent moderation of political content on other platforms.¹²⁸ EOP has encountered difficulties with platform moderation. Model Bella Hadid, who is half-Palestinian, also reported in April 2022 that her Instagram was ‘shadow-banned’ after posting about Palestine on her Story (meaning that her Story was displayed less by the algorithm). In a selfie posted to her Story, Hadid explains her situation and shows her eye up close, evoking the imagery of similar eye motifs related to Palestine (Figure 5.26). The existence of shadow-banning was denied by Instagram’s CEO Adam Mosseri.¹²⁹ But Hadid’s case highlighted that even celebrities are not immune to potential censorship.



Figure 5.26: Bella Hadid’s Instagram Story post (2022).

¹²⁸ Taylor Lorenz, ‘Twitch Draws Pro-Palestinian Influencers as Rival Sites Back Off Politics,’ *The Washington Post*, 31 May 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/05/31/twitch-palestinians-fundraiser-politics/>.

¹²⁹ Rosa Sanchez, ‘Bella Hadid Claims Instagram Blocks Her Stories When She Talks About Palestine,’ *Harper’s Bazaar*, 15 April 2022, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/celebrity/latest/a39736076/bella-hadid-claims-instagram-shadow-bans-stories-palestine/>.

More recently, in January 2025, Mark Zuckerberg announced that Meta (including Instagram) would remove fact-checking against hate speech and disinformation.¹³⁰ Thus, existing problems of hate speech that include transphobia, Islamophobia, and antisemitism may be exacerbated by these new measures.¹³¹ According to 7amleh, the Arab Centre for the Advancement of Social Media, these new profit-driven policies undermine user safety and disproportionately impact vulnerable groups and have misclassified Palestinian humanitarian organisations as ‘dangerous’. Mona Shtaya at Digital Action has argued: ‘Reduced content moderation and the replacement of fact checkers with “community notes” could allow authoritarian governments to further exploit Meta’s platform for propaganda, harassment of political dissidents, journalists, and human rights defenders.’¹³²

It can be argued that digital technologies have fulfilled Astruc’s and Espinosa’s respective manifestoes by turning ordinary consumers into potential ‘creators’ with access to instant distribution sites and vast audiences. However, social media users must still navigate a fractured ‘digital public sphere’ marked by undemocratic inequalities, as Christian Fuchs has analysed.¹³³ Activists’ use of Instagram as a distribution site may prompt another question of why use corporate platforms run by billionaires that do not support the cause of Palestinians or indeed anti-capitalist and anti-colonial movements in general?¹³⁴ As Chris Robé argues, international corporations in the neoliberal market context have partly made possible the extent that activists have access to relatively inexpensive digital technologies to produce videos in the first place.¹³⁵ These same corporations certainly uphold values and labour practices that are antithetical to the causes of activists (in 2025, Google lifted its ban on using AI for weapons, ending its

¹³⁰ See, also: Dan Milmo, ‘Meta Apologises Over Flood of Gore Violence and Dead Bodies on Instagram,’ *The Guardian*, 28 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/feb/28/meta-apologises-over-flood-of-gore-violence-and-dead-bodies-on-instagram>; Sonia Kgomo, ‘I Was a Content Moderator for Facebook. I Saw the Real Cost of Outsourcing Digital Labour,’ *The Guardian*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/12/moderator-facebook-real-cost-outsourcing-digital-labour>.

¹³¹ See, also: Maryam, ‘What Exactly is Instagram’s Political Content Filter Filtering Out?’ *WIRED*.

¹³² Jewish Voice for Peace (@jewishvoiceforpeace), ‘Meta’s New Policies Put Palestinians at Risk,’ Instagram, 22 January 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DFIdFRHunva/?img_index=3&igsh=ZDQ4bmlhZXU0bWp1; District Magazine (@district.magazine), ‘Instagram Inserted “Terrorist” Into Some Palestinian Users’ Bios,’ Instagram, 25 October 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy0U64yMNNu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.

¹³³ Fuchs, *Digital Democracy*, 247-249.

¹³⁴ For example, Google Maps has never labelled ‘Palestine’, despite being recognised as a state by most UN members (but not major Western powers like the US and UK). See: Elena Cresci, ‘Google Maps Accused of Deleting Palestine – But the Truth is More Complicated,’ *The Guardian*, 10 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/10/google-maps-accused-remove-palestine>.

¹³⁵ Chris Robé, ‘Criminalising Dissent: Western State Repression, Video Activism, and Counter-Summit Protests,’ *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 57 no. 2 (fall 2016): 164.

promise to not pursue technologies that cause harm).¹³⁶ The use of corporate platforms to promote social causes to vast, global audiences is perhaps unavoidable, owing to the monopoly that these corporations have on online distribution networks. While there are more video-sharing platforms than ever to choose from, with distribution and subscriber-based platforms like Patreon offering alternative spaces for creators to address their audiences directly, Instagram has yet to see a mass deletion or migration of accounts that specialise in confrontational and political content.

Given this dynamic, an Instagram account like EOP benefits from accessing a free distribution site and the millions of potential followers on that platform to share its crowd-sourced footage with. Meanwhile, Instagram mines the data of accounts like EOP as well as likes and views that EOP receives to algorithmically generate similar content on newsfeeds and potentially target ads towards followers. This payoff – of using a corporate entity to espouse anti-corporate views – is certainly not unprecedented. For example, independent and militant filmmakers may rely on state funding or other funding bodies despite potentially disagreeing with the practices and ideology of that funding body. The importance of the struggle seemingly overrides this conflict of interests. As Marks has noted, Solanas and Getino advocated for ‘producing and distributing guerrilla films with funds obtained from expropriations of the bourgeoisie – that is, *the bourgeoisie would be financing guerrilla cinema with a bit of the surplus value that it gets from the people* [original italics].’¹³⁷ Campbell has highlighted that subjectivity has become increasingly cinematic in a society where visibility connotes personhood: ‘You are not real if you are not visible, and you are most visible when you are most cinematic; to be most cinematic, you must adopt the capitalist logic of having and producing symbols of wealth. If you are not capitalist/cinematic, then you are not real. And if you are not real, then you are as good as dead.’¹³⁸ If capitalist realism is our only accepted reality, as Campbell highlights in reference to Mark Fisher, marginalised and oppressed people are obliged to play by the ‘rules’ of that reality, thus using the mechanisms and products of colonial and imperial capitalism in order to render that suffering *visible*. As Hamid Naficy points out, the cacophony of voices in the globalised market situation requires a reframing of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s question, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, to consider instead,

¹³⁶ Julia Kollewe, ‘Google Owner Drops Promise Not to Use AI for Weapons,’ *The Guardian*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/feb/05/google-owner-drops-promise-not-to-use-ai-for-weapons>.

¹³⁷ Solanas and Getino, ‘Towards a Third Cinema,’ (1970/71): 9.

¹³⁸ Campbell, ‘Drone Film Theory,’ 59 [citing: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

‘Can the subaltern be *heard*?’.¹³⁹ The vast extent of videos documented by Gazans on the ground has undoubtedly helped to mobilise protests and boycott action globally, perhaps especially among young people who are turning increasingly towards social media for reporting on news events.¹⁴⁰

But mere consumption of this ‘content’ does not automatically result in revolutionary action towards change. As Antony Loewenstein points out, although footage recorded by Palestinians of their suffering has undoubtedly helped to make their experiences more visible to global audiences, this unfortunately doesn’t work with audiences who do not view Palestinians as human beings.¹⁴¹ Wessels noted of Syrian video activists who were ‘frustrated that their enormous body of raw, realistic video footage uploaded on YouTube had not led to concerted international solidarity with their revolution and genuine support for their demand for freedom, dignity and social justice and indeed a more democratic Syria.’¹⁴² Indeed, the Assad regime would not be toppled until 2024. Gazan photojournalist Motaz Azaiza commented in February 2024: ‘What is happening in Gaza is not content for you. We are not telling you what is happening waiting for your likes or views or shares [...] We don’t want your likes; we don’t want your shares [...] Go protest.’¹⁴³ Despite the consistent documentation by civilians in Gaza of their suffering, reaching millions of viewers worldwide, and despite worldwide protest and boycott campaigns made visible on social media, the onslaught has continued for nearly two years, supported by Western governments who are choosing to avert their eyes.

Conclusion: From Auteurs to Activists

This chapter has shown that smartphone mobilography and social media use in circumstances of war and struggle is one important re-imagining of Astruc’s vision in contemporary digital screen culture. As a final close analysis of the *caméra-stylo* in the

¹³⁹ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 11 [citing: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988)].

¹⁴⁰ Amanda Meade, “‘Can’t look away’: Israel-Gaza War Driving Rise in News Consumption Among Gen Z Australians, Report Suggests,” *The Guardian*, 17 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/jun/17/israel-gaza-war-increase-gen-z-media-consumption-digital-news-report-research>.

¹⁴¹ Loewenstein, ‘Social Media is a Warzone,’ *VERSO*.

¹⁴² Wessels, ‘Video Activists from Raqqa and Aleppo,’ 171.

¹⁴³ Motaz Azaiza quoted in: TRT World (@trtworld), ‘Like people asking me, “What should we do?”’ Instagram, 28 February 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C35cQK2oiuB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFlZA==.

social media era, this chapter demonstrates the value in rethinking Astruc's original formula and recognising its parallels with theories such as imperfect cinema and the theories of Vertov. As more and more videos proliferate on the vast databases of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, the screen landscape is no longer the domain of professional filmmakers and auteurs. Devised in the context of post-war French film culture, Astruc's ideas nonetheless find resonance in a global context, beyond European 'auteur' cinema and Hollywood cinema. Without the need for a film crew, cumbersome film equipment, or significant resources, lone smartphone mobilographers are afforded the production, distribution, and exhibition functions in the form of one small device (and its networked applications).¹⁴⁴ Platforms like Instagram offer the tools to document daily events for free and with relative ease, provided there is Internet access and an electricity source) Smartphones have undoubtedly become an important political and social tool for marginalised groups.

This final chapter has highlighted, more than other chapters in this thesis, the real political and social stakes of smartphone mobilography, and thus the caméra-stylo. As truth-telling devices to counteract Israeli government propaganda, disinformation, and synthetic media, Palestinian civilians' smartphones are as valuable, or even more valuable, than the pen, with the camera's ability to capture life 'as it is' and one's embodied subjectivity in struggle. With the prosthetic contact of the handheld smartphone camera, its live streaming and recording functions and its social networks, activists can reach audiences worldwide.¹⁴⁵

The aims of EOP challenge the dominant aesthetic language and commerciality of the Instagram platform by denying the production of the glossy, marketable, and idealistic imagery that the platform promotes. EOP's videos do not follow the trends and aesthetics of content creators on the app (or indeed other video trends on TikTok), who may use music, mimetic gestures, filters, and humour to make meaning. The account also denies the voice of one single creator, thus challenging the ostensibly unified 'self' that Instagram profiles are meant to represent, but rather shares the voices of *many* mobilographers through its crowd-sourcing practices. This also challenges the pre-

¹⁴⁴ This is not to suggest that smartphones are replacing or *should* replace the training and hard work of film schools and organisations like Filmlab Palestine that provide professional education. And indeed, auteur directors from Palestine, like Suleiman, may engage with the European arthouse film circuit and Western funding bodies, but their work simultaneously critiques this hierarchy, as in Suleiman's satire *It Must Be Heaven* (2019).

¹⁴⁵ On a similar note, the 38-minute VR documentary *Under the Same Sky* (Khalil Ashawi, 2024) aims to immerse participants in a 360-degree experience of Gaza, resulting in some participants crying and feeling overwhelmed by its immediacy. See: Frontline in Focus (@frontlinefocus), 'After the first screening,' Instagram, 14 January 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DE0FXUtsU-M/?igsh=MWl4emIzaHl4NHJrbQ==>.

eminent status of the ‘auteur’ in Western film culture more generally, and shares more in common with the aims of guerilla documentary filmmaking groups who denied singular authorship of their works.¹⁴⁶ The case of EOP has shown a more collective alternative to Astruc’s initial imaging of the caméra-stylo that nonetheless demonstrates the pervasiveness of cameras in everyday life and the ability for anyone on the streets to document their environment and embodied presence.

That being said, a lone creator like Owda who embraces the vernacular of Instagram (such as frontal direct address and selfies) is also a key example of contemporary mobilography in circumstances of war. Her regular video uploads that address viewers with personal and emotional testimony have made her a well-known social media personality. By filming herself (as both mobilographer and subject), Owda is redirecting the camera towards her own experiences of war and genocide. As Laurence Allard has argued in reference to Astruc, we must consider the mobile smartphone as medium of the inner voice and a ‘writing-screen’ (*écran-scripteur*), adopted especially well by those like Owda who have grown up in a world of personal screen devices.¹⁴⁷ Smartphone screens are essentially ‘writing-screens’ that have made self-representation a possibility for more sections of the global population. Arguably, Owda’s example is closer to Astruc’s vision than the crowd-sourced practices of EOP, owing to Owda’s more subjective and personal handling of her smartphone and account that enunciate the first-person ‘I’ more clearly. As Laura Rascaroli has argued:

From online video self-exhibition, to experimental art, to first-person nonfiction film, to interactive environments, to collaborative digital projects and beyond, new technologies are affording both artists and amateurs the means to express and represent themselves in ways that seem radically novel.¹⁴⁸

Content creators like Owda show that auteur filmmakers (or professional filmmakers and creative industries more generally) are not alone in being able to command large audiences. It is not my assertion that screen production and dissemination have been fully democratised. However, smartphones and platforms like Instagram have made it *more*

¹⁴⁶ See: Martin, *Filmmakers Thinking*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Allard, ‘Du Géofiltre à l’Égofiltre,’ 97.

¹⁴⁸ Rascaroli, ‘Working at Home,’ in *Amateur Filmmaking*, ed. Rascaroli, Young, and Monahan, 229-230.

possible for under-represented voices to represent their points of view, including subjectivities that have been historically suppressed in Western visual culture. In this, it is possible to recognise the re-imagining of the caméra-stylo in contemporary digital screen culture via personal, haptic, and mobile camera technologies.

Conclusion: The Re-Imagined Caméra-Style

When formulating the caméra-style in 1948, Alexandre Astruc could not have imagined the totality of the contemporary landscape in which cinema, now an ‘old’ medium, is but one audiovisual screen form amongst others. Nonetheless, this thesis has shown how Astruc’s vision of portable cameras and embodied self-expression in audiovisual terms finds resonance and has been realised in the digital era. Authorship and authority over the moving image are no longer confined to the film and television industries and social media has expanded spectatorship further beyond the movie theatre. Auteurs and professional filmmakers within the film industry share a screen landscape with millions of other ‘filmmakers’ who participate in their own personal audiovisual production. In Céline Sciamma’s words, the means of audiovisual production are now ‘in our pockets’ – including ordinary social media users *and* well-known auteurs who access these platforms.¹

Prior to this thesis, scholars such as Laura Rascaroli, Bjørn Sørenssen, Laurence Allard, and Liz Burke had already pointed to the realisation of Astruc’s vision in the digital era. However, my research has offered the first major study of the caméra-style via smartphones and social media platforms, providing a theoretical groundwork for the study of the caméra-style in contemporary digital screen culture. Looking back at the methodological framework of this thesis, it is clear the caméra-style – originally devised as a metaphor – is a concept rooted in Astruc’s observations of mobile, personal screen devices. Taking an interpretation of the caméra-style that is based on the role of the camera/screen apparatus itself, the body of the filmmaker and their close relationship to the apparatus, and the conditions of a mobile or flexible mode of production, helps to move the concept away from popular assumptions that the ‘caméra-style’ describes the well-financed *mise en scène* of the auteur’s feature film narrative. This re-evaluation, primarily proposed by Adrian Martin, is one that has been explored more in-depth by this thesis.²

There are undeniably still disadvantages to using the caméra-style as a core theoretical concept in the digital age. This is primarily because of its vague theorisation and the multiple interpretations of the concept in relation to a given technology or

¹ Sciamma quoted in: Cantó, ‘Céline Sciamma,’ *El Español*.

² Martin, ‘Turn the Page: From *Mise en Scène* to *Dispositif*,’ (2011).

practice that have been published since. It is important to acknowledge in this research that while popular social media platforms may certainly offer a flexible and accessible medium to create audiovisual works, they are still ultimately corporate-owned and commercial. Ordinary users have little power over decisions made by social media companies, and this complicates the ability to truly ‘own’ these popular creative spaces. This diminishes the democratic promise of the *caméra-stylo*. How filmmakers and mobilographers navigate these affordances to express themselves in audiovisual terms has been my focus. While recognising that the concept of the *caméra-stylo* could be applied to multiple media examples, this thesis has used a case study approach to assess key instances where the *caméra-stylo* is re-imagined through smartphone mobilography and audiovisual social media platforms.

My use of the *caméra-stylo* as a core concept has found both reifications of and challenges to its premise in this thesis. Taking this approach has allowed for critical coverage of diverse examples of texts and individuals or groups, while remaining within the remit of screen analysis. I have made a significant intervention in the study of social media platforms and mobile technologies (especially the smartphone) by theorising them within the context of Astruc’s formula. I have reframed for scholars – both film and social media scholars – the significance of these technologies within the broader scope of screen history. This includes overlooked connections between Astruc’s theory and theories of intermediality and post-cinema, Julio García Espinosa’s ‘imperfect cinema’, Richard Bégin’s concept of ‘somatic images’ in mobilography, desktop documentaries, AR filters, activist filmmaking, generative AI, and fan media, as well as theories of hapticity and embodiment. This thesis has endeavoured to cover major issues in contemporary digital screen culture through the lens of Astruc’s ideas, from the rise of AI and TikTok trends to ongoing global struggles and political activism.

In this conclusion, I reflect on this thesis’s key findings in relation to my overriding research questions, as posed in the introduction: (1) How has the *caméra-stylo* been realised and re-imagined in contemporary digital screen culture, in a screenscape where ‘auteur’ filmmakers and the broader public use smartphones and social media for the creation and dissemination of personal screen media? And, (2) Considering Astruc’s and related screen theories, what are the aesthetic, avant-garde, authorial, and haptic qualities of smartphone mobilography and video-based social media? Below, I outline how key concepts and threads from this thesis have addressed these questions.

Key Findings and Further Applications

The Medium in Crisis

Considering the first research question and taking a broad view of this thesis, the concept of the caméra-stylo has certainly been realised and re-imagined today. This is due to the basic fact that its articulation is now intertwined – perhaps irrevocably – with pervasive digital technologies. Despite being devised in the pre-digital era, its manifestation is tied up with broader access to personal screen and camera apparatuses, especially in the form of smartphones and their interlaced social media platforms. I have shown that the same digital technologies may be used for vastly different purposes and contexts by members of the public – from the playful mimicry of auteur aesthetics to the personal documentation of war. This reifies Astruc’s vision that there would be libraries of audiovisual media on ‘any subject’ and of ‘any form’ in the future.³ Undoubtedly, the digital era has revolutionised Astruc’s ideal vision. Therefore, I have demonstrated the continued relevance of Astruc’s ideas beyond their initial context.

By applying a film theory to social media platforms and new screen technologies, my research contributes to a subfield of film and screen studies that broadly addresses the digital shift. New audiovisual technologies challenge typical notions about *what cinema is* – from cinematic virtual reality experiences to desktop cinema. But despite cinema’s multiple ‘deaths’ before and during the digital age, there is always something of ‘the’ cinema remaining in these post-cinematic screen technologies that flourish in the contemporary screenscape – to invoke André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion.⁴ Taking a film and screen studies approach to the analysis of social media and new screen technologies has revealed the rich connections between different forms of audiovisual media that may otherwise be overlooked in strictly *film* analysis, while still acknowledging the specific formal characteristics of these media.⁵

Referring back to the second research question, this thesis has shown the strong ties between the aesthetics of new screen technologies and cinema via Astruc’s and related theories (including cinema aesthetics of the past). Older filmmakers discussed in

³ Astruc, ‘The Birth of a New Avant-Garde,’ 33.

⁴ Gaudreault and Marion, *The End of Cinema?*, 60.

⁵ For example, the smartphone’s vertical aspect ratio and the design of social media interfaces that contrast with the norms of feature film production.

this thesis like Jonas Mekas, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, and Jean-Luc Godard – by virtue of their long-spanning careers – are especially important as symbolic representatives of the historical coalescing of Astruc’s vision of the *caméra-stylo* with home movies, avant-garde cinema, essay films, and digital technologies. The aesthetic connections between 8mm home movies and smartphones as inherently *haptic*, *intimate*, and *personal*, examined in Chapter 2, demonstrate the value of taking a genealogical and media archaeological approach to contemporary screen media. Similarly, in Chapter 5, I outlined the historical connections between 16mm mobile cameras and the present-day status of smartphones as invaluable tools of resistance for Palestinians. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, recent examples of auteur cinema have integrated new technologies as ‘aesthetic transfers’ that visibly contrast with the dominant form of cinema. However, the fact that social media objects – such as augmented reality filter videos in *Do Not Expect Too Much* or the screen-recorded interface in *Happy End* – can be inserted into feature films and remain unequivocally ‘cinema’ shows the porosity or borderless-ness of these media. As social media platforms have borrowed their aesthetics and audiovisual identities from cinema and television, so too has cinema now borrowed from the culturally pervasive aesthetics of social media. Rather than pessimistically view this post-cinematic shift as a discontinuation of cinema, I have shown how cinema and new screen technologies are not cordoned off from each other, via Astruc’s theory.

Auteurs in the Social Media Age

From the perspective of auteur theory and auteur criticism, this thesis has broadened conceptions of what comprises an auteur’s ‘oeuvre’. Important scholarship, especially from Catherine Grant in the early 2000s, pointed to the increasingly paratextual identity of auteurs, as their presence on websites, in marketing materials, and in paratextual commentary contributed to their status as *consumable* public figures in the digital age.⁶ However, since then, it is arguably social media that have made auteurs more visible and influential than ever as sources of meaning in screen culture through various apps (like Letterboxd), communities (like ‘Film Twitter’), and through their increased presence as social media personalities.

⁶ Grant, ‘www.auteur.com?’; Grant, ‘Auteur Machines?’ (2008).

Rather than repeat the more traditional enquiry into the stylistic idiosyncrasies of an auteur's feature films (that might erroneously dominate popular conceptions of what the 'caméra-stylo' is), this thesis has considered auteurs' engagement with social media, both in their work and in their professional and personal lives. The future of auteur studies, if it is to yield new and exciting results, must consider how auteurism is intertwined with new technologies. In Chapter 2, I showed how films by directors like Sebastián Silva and Radu Jude articulate the auteur's critical and creative 'voice' by formally integrating the aesthetics of social media. Several auteurs are creatively responding to the increasing pervasiveness of smartphones in ordinary people's hands and pockets by exploring the ethical, political, artistic, and authorial implications of expanded audiovisual media. This includes incorporating amateur footage with historical significance in films like *BlacKkKlansman* or the use of smartphones for inter-character surveillance in films like *Tár*. It seems likely that more auteurs will respond to the pervasiveness of social media and smartphones similarly, as a commentary on contemporary life or to convey realism or 'reality' in their films. I encourage further scholarly pursuit of this duality, especially as new auteurs emerge in post-cinematic film culture. A generation of 'TikTok natives' and Gen Z filmmakers will have grown up with and be well-versed in the vernaculars of these platforms.⁷

In Chapter 3, I have shown the extent to which Instagram, especially, with its engrained emphasis on the 'self' and curatorial 'personality', functions as a personal caméra-stylo for auteurs. It is true that most auteurs on Instagram use the platform as an explicitly promotional tool (see Table 3.1). Thus, contemporary auteurism has exceeded Timothy Corrigan's observations of the 'commerce of auteurism', as the 'personalities' of auteurs have extended to digital technologies that make their articulation of a 'self' increasingly flexible, visible, and accessible. However, it is not true that the commerce of auteurism has become the 'new caméra-stylo', as Corrigan has suggested.⁸ Rather, it is these very digital platforms and smartphones that have encouraged auteurs to embrace a new aesthetic that is mobile and personal. While auteurs are still enmeshed in the professionalised structures of financing, production, and distribution for their films, social media platforms offer them an alternative tool for self-expression outside of the industry.

⁷ However, this does not rule out older directors exploring social media and smartphones perhaps for the first time in their work. David Cronenberg's *The Shrouds* (2024) – released in cinemas as research was being finalised for this thesis – prevalently features smartphone surveillance and even an AI avatar technology.

⁸ Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteurism,' 49.

Auteurs can embrace both their promotional and personal selves on Instagram – as evidenced by Nicolas Winding Refn’s dual use of the app for the sharing of his private life, selfies, and embodied experiences as an auteur *and* promotional materials for his work. Meanwhile, Claire Denis uses the app solely for personal content, revealing an autobiographical, highly subjective side to her work that is unique in the grand scope of her oeuvre. Instagram and smartphones may serve as spontaneous, modest tools for creativity and the distribution of their personal ‘content’ outside of the film industry. Auteurs may use social media just as ordinary members of the public do. The specific features and aesthetics of social media and smartphones certainly *re-imagine* Astruc’s initial vision from 1948 but may also ironically *realise* the caméra-stylo for auteurs whose feature productions may not offer the same level of free-flowing expression on an individualistic level. Although scholarship on auteurs is catching up with these new forms of expression, I encourage further analysis of auteurs as social media ‘personalities’.⁹

As Chapter 4 demonstrated, auteurism and cinephilia are historically entangled – extended today by ‘new cinephilia’ in the social media age.¹⁰ The increased visibility of auteurs in the social media age may increasingly encourage Internet-based participatory and co-creative responses by fans to their favourite films and filmmakers. Social media users are participating in their own embodied experiences of enjoying cinema, from the use of AR filters to change their environments to look like an auteur film to the creation of fan posters and memes about auteurism. Auteurist culture – once the province of ‘old’ media’ – has ‘seeped’ into social media, especially via popular figures like Wes Anderson. Since Devin Orgeron described Anderson’s caméra-stylo as a playful, naïve ‘camera-Crayola’ in 2007, it is apt and ironic that Anderson’s style has been co-opted by ordinary Internet users to playfully articulate their *own* creativity on a mass scale.¹¹ ‘Anderson’ is so globally pervasive as a signifier (or set of signifiers) that his brand-name influence even permeates the documentation of war – as exemplified by Valeria Shashenok’s TikTok video. Accidentally Wes Anderson and the TikTok trend have shown how social media trends might narrowly interpret an auteur’s style to focus primarily on mise en scène, while being shaped by the aesthetic vernaculars of social media, such as the symmetrical compositions and lifestyle-based aesthetics of Instagram and the frontal, mimetic aesthetics of TikTok.

⁹ See, for discussion: Vincendeau, “‘Why Has Céline Sciamma Become so Iconic?’: The Auteure as Celebrity,” (2023).

¹⁰ Shambu, *The New Cinephilia* (2020).

¹¹ Orgeron, ‘La Camera-Crayola,’ (2007).

Although critics scrutinised TikTok participants for their lack of cineliteracy, the trend was not intended to be a serious auteur analysis or critical activity. Rather, this case study shows the extent to which ordinary social media users are experiencing the world and their own embodiment through the ‘lens’ of an auteur’s style, while ironically demonstrating Astruc’s vision by engaging in personal and collaborative audiovisual production with the tools at their disposal. Based on my research, I invite further study of auteurism as it intersects with aspects of fan culture, stardom, and social media participatory culture through the dialectical (and even parasocial) relationship between auteurs as public figures (or even ‘stars’) and their fans.

Co-Creation, Collaboration, and Crowd-Sourcing

The re-imagining of the caméra-stylo as co-creative has been a recurring theme in this thesis. The individualism of the caméra-stylo is a vital aspect of its realisation, but it is also important to consider how digital technologies encourage and facilitate co-creation. As co-creation is fundamental to Internet culture – including fan media, remix culture, and memetic texts – the concept of the caméra-stylo must be updated to accommodate analysis of texts that do not have a single author. Social media platforms allow for multiple authors to contribute to the same text in, for example, the ability to repost, use music samples, and edit different videos together. The ability to reshare and disseminate videos between accounts on Instagram contributes to the crowdsourced identity of Eye on Palestine, where single authorship is not prioritised. Rather than being ‘creative’ per se (in the common sense of the term), EOP certainly re-imagines the caméra-stylo as collaborative and co-created, aligning with practices of unauthored militant cinema and indeed evoking Dziga Vertov’s groups of revolutionary ‘kinoks’. Thus, the caméra-stylo can be re-imagined as a more collective effort in documenting the lives of a *group* of people rather than that of one individual mobilographer.

As I noted in Chapter 1, the caméra-stylo can be considered inherently co-creative because the camera partly relies on automated operations and as do many digital technologies today such as smartphones. More obvious cases of collaboration and co-creation, however, have been explored in this thesis. The case studies in Chapter 2 have shown how the caméra-stylo is realised today through the dialectical relationship between a range of contemporary auteurs and the ‘ordinary’ creators, practices, and aesthetics from social media culture. For example, Andrea Arnold’s integration of the smartphone home

movie aesthetic in *Bird* has shown her interest in collaborating further with non-professionals. The collaborative intentions between auteurs and content creators can be seen in *Do Not Expect Too Much* and *Rotting in the Sun*, resulting in the mingling of cinema with supposedly ‘lesser’ audiovisual forms. The real-life content creation of Ilinca Manolache and Jordan Firstman, respectively, existed prior to the films’ productions and was formally and narratively integrated into these films. The content creator ‘takes over’ the film as the sole mobilographer and user of a tool that neither Jude nor Silva are using themselves.

Chapter 4 has shown how the *caméra-stylo* – a theory formulated by a cinephile and shaped by cinéaste culture – has been re-imagined and reified by fans in the age of ‘new cinephilia’. The ability to edit films as *files* has made self-expression through audiovisual means a reality for cinephiles in the form of video essays, desktop documentaries, remediations, and crowd-sourced projects. This includes digital remakes of important works of auteur and avant-garde cinema like Perry Bard’s crowdsourced global remake of *Man with a Movie Camera* and AI remakes of *La Jetée* and *Persona*. In a less critically informed way, the Accidentally Wes Anderson Instagram profile challenges conceptions of the lone auteur by collectively developing a globally sourced alternative ‘body of work’ that supposedly bears Anderson’s signature. Fans have collaboratively co-created an idea of what Anderson’s signature is *like*, certainly informed by his films but also by *each other* through social media mimesis. It is worth repeating that a popular auteur like Anderson reflects a production method that contrasts sharply with the lo-fi, modest working style of filmmakers like Varda, Mekas, or Marker, who fit more appropriately within the framework of Astruc’s vision. Ironically, it is the Anderson fans who are using whatever-means-available to express themselves in visual or audiovisual formats – with the caveat that they are expressing themselves through the ‘filter’ or ‘lens’ of ‘Anderson’. Thus, the *caméra-stylo* is further re-imagined as co-creative. I have novelly connected Astruc’s theory to fan media and new cinephilia. By considering co-creation and participatory culture, my research contributes new analysis for the field of fan studies as it relates specifically to auteurs and auteurism.

Generative AI and the Caméra-Stylo

The subject of gen-AI has been a recurring issue in this thesis. Ironically, just as mobile cameras and digital platforms have realised Astruc’s vision in the past two decades, the

recent rise of gen-AI as an accessible co-creative tool has also introduced a problem for its original human-centred articulation. The rise of generative AI during the process of carrying out this research has been one major development for scholars of contemporary screen media to weigh against long-held conceptions of agency, quality, and the medium of cinema itself. Evolving from gen-AI systems' novelty-status as playful toys in the early 2020s and moving forward into its near-institutionalised status in the film industry, the idea of the *caméra-stylo* has perhaps never been as important or relevant. As the industry itself seems to obfuscate human labour, the work of the camera capturing indexical reality (arguably already an automatic mechanism) continues to be upturned by computer-generated cinema. At the same time, there have never been more cameras in screen culture, owing to the pervasiveness of smartphones *outside* of the industry.

Considering issues of copyright, labour, and the environmental demand of datacentres, there is the question of whether *any* use of gen-AI is ethical – even in experimental and self-reflexive projects.¹² As Chapter 4 showed, academically informed AI experiments like the *La Jetée* remakes may receive less scrutiny from film critics than more popular trends like the Anderson-style YouTube trailers. But as the film industry increasingly employs AI for efficiently solving creative challenges that may devalue human labour and online discourse arises about notable scandals of AI usage, any film experiments with AI are received in this contentious context (regardless of a given film's critical motives).¹³ This thesis has not offered to solve this problem but has usefully situated gen-AI mimicry of an auteur's work within a co-creative framework. Viewing gen-AI as a co-creative activity using an algorithm makes space to acknowledge the human element of gen-AI, including the original artist(s) whose work may be stolen and the person inputting a prompt.

For auteurs, AI may not pose a serious threat to their high status in film culture. The 'authenticity' and 'personality' of a *human* auteur's work are still highly regarded qualities in the digital age. As gen-AI systems fail to fully grasp the intricacies of an artist's style (even ironically failing to copy human handwriting or revealing the mangled residues of artists' signatures), the auteur's authentic 'signature' will surely remain

¹² Fiona Harvey, 'Energy Demands from AI Datacentres to Quadruple By 2030, Says Report,' *The Guardian*, 10 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/apr/10/energy-demands-from-ai-datacentres-to-quadruple-by-2030-says-report>. For more on the creative challenges of AI in the film industry, see: Catherine Flick and Kyle Worrall, 'The Ethics of Creative AI,' in *The Language of Creative AI: Practices, Aesthetics and Structures*, eds. Craig Vear and Fabrizio Poltronieri (Springer, 2022), 73-91.

¹³ See, for example: Andrew Pulver, 'The Brutalist and Emilia Perez's Voice-Cloning Controversies Make AI the New Awards Season Battleground,' *The Guardian*, 20 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/jan/20/the-brutalist-and-emilia-perezs-voice-cloning-controversies-make-ai-the-new-awards-season-battleground>.

important.¹⁴ Even if it is by virtue of cinephilia and our obsession with celebrities and artists as ‘geniuses’ in public life, the auteur will not be wholly *replaced* by AI.

That being said, auteurs no longer hold ownership over their discernible ‘style’ or ‘signature’. Their own auteur personas are even liable to AI mimicry, evidenced by the script for the reflexive docufilm *About a Hero* (Piotr Winiewicz, 2024) that was trained on the writings and distinctive voice of Werner Herzog (with his consent).¹⁵ Although fan artworks have been mimicking and parodying auteurs before the rise of AI, these new systems present an unprecedented existential challenge for issues of copyright and human labour. As AI generators become more sophisticated, certain filmmakers may be more susceptible than others to mimicry. Animation, for example, is easier to reproduce with AI than live action.¹⁶ The animation style of director Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli became the subject of mass AI mimicry on social media in 2025 using Chat GPT. Ghibli’s ‘cute’ style was even used nefariously for propaganda purposes by the official IDF and White House social media accounts. This is sadly ironic given Miyazaki’s leftist politics and belief that gen-AI is ‘an insult to life itself’.¹⁷ Thus, the auteur seems to increasingly have no control over the proliferation of their own brand-name online, while at the same time having more freedom than ever before in curating their online image in the form of personal social media accounts. Scholars who further examine AI mimicry of auteur works may consider the contradictions of authorship/collaboration within the film industry itself and may return to the theoretical basis of Astruc’s *caméra-stylo* to do so.

Marginalised Identities

I have shown the importance of considering examples of women and minority filmmakers and mobilographers in relation to the *caméra-stylo*. The role of gender is an implicit aspect of Astruc’s essays on the *caméra-stylo*, conceived and published within the context of a French cinéaste culture that almost solely prioritised films made by and film criticism

¹⁴ See: O’Meara and Murphy, ‘Aberrant AI Creations,’ 1074.

¹⁵ See, for example: Georg Szalai, ‘AI Trained in Werner Herzog’s Works Wrote Murder Mystery Doc “About a Hero,”’ starring Vicky Krieps,’ *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 November 2024, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/ai-film-about-a-hero-werner-herzog-vicky-krieps-idfa-1236058244/>.

¹⁶ This thesis has not examined animation via the *caméra-stylo*, as Astruc’s metaphor is grounded in the documentation of live action. However, this aspect could be explored more.

¹⁷ See: Vikram Murthi, ‘Hayao Miyazaki Calls Artificial Intelligence Animation “An Insult to Life Itself,”’ *IndieWire*, 13 December 2016, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/hayao-miyazaki-artificial-intelligence-animation-insult-to-life-studio-ghibli-1201757617/>; Matt O’Brien and Sarah Parvini, ‘ChatGPT’s Viral Studio Ghibli-Style Images Highlight AI Copyright Concerns,’ *AP News*, 28 March 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/studio-ghibli-chatgpt-images-hayao-miyazaki-openai-0f4cb487ec3042dd5b43ad47879b91f4>.

written by men. Astruc's Romantic view of a *caméra-stylo* – a metaphor that suggests agency, control, and mastery – is perhaps imbued with a masculinist vision of subjectivity (a tendency in auteur theory of the 1950s and 60s). However, the true promise of the *caméra-stylo* is in flexibility and self-expression beyond the confines of a studio system or industry and ideally extends to all genders and embodied experiences of identity. This aspect should guide its application in the future.

For even well-established female auteur arthouse filmmakers like Denis, Varda, or Arnold covered in this thesis, the novelty of social media and smartphones has not presented a *crisis*, but rather an expansion of their own self-expression *and* the self-expression of others, including ordinary mobilographers outside of the industry. Bailey's smartphone mobilography in *Bird*, examined in Chapter 2, shows how new technologies may offer socially marginalised girls access to filmmaking tools for self-expression (while the film industry or art world itself may still present barriers to access). Denis's creative affinity for Instagram, examined in Chapter 3, especially shows that older women may embrace this 'new' technology as a personal tool, despite being stereotypically marginalised as social media users more generally. In Chapter 4, several female practitioners like Jen Proctor, Jessica McGoff, and Joanna Zylinska responded creatively to *male* filmmakers. Thus, the subjective experience of being a cinephile and a female (or non-binary) practitioner comes to the fore in such projects, as the authority of the original *male* director is somewhat subverted. Many of the participants in the Anderson TikTok trend, including Ava Williams who started the trend and Shashenok in Ukraine, engaged in a co-creative vision of what a male auteur's signature is *like*, while articulating their own embodied subjectivity in the world as young women – including in warzones.

My research emphasises the necessity to not restrict the application of the *caméra-stylo* to auteur cinema. I especially highlighted in Chapter 5 how resonant the *caméra-stylo* is in modern society beyond the concerns of the Western film industry. For oppressed and marginalised sections of the global population (often excluded from much of scholarship on the *caméra-stylo*), access to audiovisual production and online distribution has revolutionised self-expression. This thesis has offered the first evaluation of the theory's relevance in Palestine in the past and present, showing the real social and political stakes of expanded camera ownership in the social media era. Palestinian mobilographers' aims to record life 'as it is' in a Vertovian sense – as seen on *Eye on Palestine* – is an effort to counteract Western media discourses and Israeli propaganda that attempts to dehumanise Palestinians. EOP's continued crowdsourcing of smartphone

mobilography presents one of the most significant archives of contemporary Palestinian amateur filmmaking. It is a form of digital resistance to attempts by governments, media, and corporations to make Palestinians *invisible*, including increasing crackdowns on pro-Palestine content by Meta, for example.

Sadly, an account like Eye on Palestine – an important case study in this thesis – may not exist in the future if it is permanently removed by Meta alongside other popular activist accounts. This action would first and foremost destroy a significant digital archive of smartphone mobilography, highlighting the importance of the Internet Archive and Wayback Machine as tools for scholarly analysis.¹⁸ This foregrounds the precarity of social media users who do not have the same legal or cultural authority as professionals within the film industry, where the value of ‘authorship’ is more enshrined for studios, producers, and directors (although not always equitably).¹⁹ In the context of war and genocide, the personal safety and human rights of mobilographers like Bisan Owda and the many contributors to EOP is not as ensured as it is for privileged auteurs in the film industry. This issue was starkly highlighted at Cannes in May 2025, after Gazan mobilographer and photojournalist Fatma Hassona was killed in April by an Israeli airstrike the day after the documentary *Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk* (Sepideh Farsi, 2025) in which she starred was selected.²⁰ Therefore, this thesis has demonstrated the scholarly and cultural value of analysing the social media accounts of ordinary, precarious mobilographers as they are *now*, by providing detailed record of their posts for future scholars. It is important to bear in mind that the ‘Instagram’ studied in this thesis will no longer be the same ‘Instagram’ in ten years.²¹

Owda’s daily posting on Instagram expands the original conception of the *caméra-stylo* and significantly points to its realisation. As a young woman from Gaza and as a

¹⁸ See, for example: Chris Stokel-Walker, ‘We’re Losing Our Digital History. Can the Internet Archive Save It?’ BBC, 16 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240912-the-archivists-battling-to-save-the-internet>.

¹⁹ For example, AR filters and other digital tools are not owned by social media users. Social media users can also be banned and unable to access their previous posts.

²⁰ Much of the documentary was significantly conducted over video calls between Hassona and Farsi, and features Hassona’s smartphone mobilography during the war. The documentary’s title might be interpreted as an apt reference to the embodied significance of the *camera* as an extension of the soul, which resonates with Astruc’s vision. See: Alex Ritman, ‘Mark Ruffalo, Guy Pearce, Melissa Berrera, and Ralph Fiennes Among 350+ Figures to Sign Letter About Killing of Palestinian Protagonist of Cannes-Bound Doc: “We Are Ashamed” of Industry “Passivity” (EXCLUSIVE),’ *Variety*, 12 May 2025, <https://variety.com/2025/film/global/letter-about-killing-of-fatma-hassona-1236391687/>; Al Jazeera, ‘Cannes Premiere of Film Profiling Slain Gaza Journalist Fatma Hassouna,’ 15 May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/newsfeed/2025/5/15/cannes-premiere-of-film-profiling-slain-gaza-journalist-fatma-hassouna>.

²¹ Since their public launch, platforms like Instagram have always seen updates and novel features added to their interfaces and functionality (the ‘Instagram’ of 2025 looks and feels very different to the ‘Instagram’ of 2010 or even 2020). For example, in January 2025, the iconic 1x1 square grid format of Instagram profiles changed for the first time since 2010, when the app introduced a new rectangular shaped format that reflects the format of Reels more so than the still Polaroid-like images the platform started out with.

refugee, Owda's personal Instagram videos represent an intersectional view of the caméra-stylo as a tool for *all*. Her articulate combination of the aesthetics of content creation and a raw, unfiltered view of her surroundings and experiences reflects Astruc's theory in the current era, where warfare and social media are intertwined. Astruc's theory is thus re-imagined as a vital tool for resistance for an oppressed group under inhumane restrictions that make living day-to-day – let alone filmmaking – an extreme challenge. The realisation of the caméra-stylo is promised by accessibility and thus, I encourage further recognition of audiovisual production in non-Western territories and in marginalised communities via Astruc's theory and similar theories.

Imperfect Cinema and New Creators

In an effort to re-imagine Astruc's theory of authorship beyond the auteur, I have demonstrated how Espinosa's view of an 'imperfect cinema' captures, perhaps in more detail, what Astruc had in mind for the expansion of screen media to ordinary people. The articulation of audiovisual media with ordinary means and without the backing of a film industry promises that films and videos will be made by many and watched by many. I have shown that the caméra-stylo is *re-imagined* for auteurs by emphasising that it no longer solely belongs to them (and it certainly may never have). The dual identity of the caméra-stylo – partly bound up in the figure of the auteur and partly in the masses – finds resonance now in a screenscape where the lines between 'social media' and 'cinema' have been crossed. Jude's perspective on social media speaks to the duality of the caméra-stylo and the 'crisis' of cinema:

[Y]ou wouldn't imagine a writer like Shakespeare or like Tolstoy saying, 'Oh, now everybody has access to education and can write so I don't want to write anymore.' I really think it's exciting that cinema can be made now by anyone, even in a form which is not perfect and considered degraded, like TikTok videos or AI-generated videos. It is not only exciting, but it puts professional filmmakers in a crisis – which is good.²²

²² Jude quoted in: Peng, 'Radu Jude,' *Dazed*, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/62126/1/radu-jude-do-not-expect-too-much-from-the-end-of-the-world-film-interview>.

Jude views the rise of social media as not the catastrophic ‘end’ of cinema as some critics lamented at the turn of the century, but rather an exciting development in the wider production of audiovisual media, placing professional filmmakers into a ‘crisis’. Even the degraded images of the Internet – reshared, mutable, low-resolution images and videos seen by many – are the markers of a screen culture that is now firmly post-cinematic. Indeed, Hito Steyerl’s conception of ‘poor images’ has been a recurring motif in this thesis. Many of the experimental films, video essays, and essay films analysed here are, or have become, ‘poor’ by way of their designation as digital or digitised and uploaded to sites like YouTube (sometimes without permission), arguably saving them from a fate of obscurity. Technically speaking, many of the examples of social media content I have analysed – from AR filter videos in *Do Not Expect* in Chapter 2, auteurs’ social media posts in Chapter 3, to Wes Anderson fan media in Chapter 4 and Eye on Palestine’s videos in Chapter 5 – fall into the category of ‘poor images’. But this does not discard these texts’ ability to *make meaning*, affect, or be unequivocally *filmic* (or indeed their scholarly value).

New, independent creators on social media use the means available to them outside of the film industry. I have shown that popular social media creators, trends, and projects may garner large audiences and go viral without the assistance of film industry capital (they may even cross over into the film industry). In Chapter 2, I noted how ordinary people’s audiovisual production on social media has filtered into a range of auteur films, from the insertion of amateur mobilography in confrontational scenarios to content creators and Internet celebrities as characters and co-creators. As a sign of social media users’ impact on the film industry, the Anderson TikTok trend was used by Universal as a marketing tactic to promote *Asteroid City* without Anderson’s creative input. Owda has become a popular Instagram ‘influencer’ who commands large audiences with her political message rather than her commercially viable idealised lifestyle. A dedicated study of content creators and vloggers (who often film for hours on end in their own homes) may also yield interesting results with the application of Astruc’s theory, while keeping in mind the economic cultures of these platforms.

The New Avant-Garde and Experimental Screen Culture

To return to my second research question, one key aspect of the caméra-stylo is Astruc’s envisioned bringing forth of a ‘new avant-garde’. What the ‘avant-garde’ means for the

caméra-stylo is broadly what is non-commercial in its aims and aesthetics and not bound by any institution. This thesis has novelly made extensive connections between the caméra-stylo and major figures of the avant-garde like Mekas and Vertov. Mekas's vision of simple films made by ordinary people elaborates on the core principle of the caméra-stylo; Mekas unsurprisingly took to video-sharing platforms and mobile digital cameras that could articulate his intimate subjectivity and impressions of the world much like his analogue films (as covered in Chapter 3). Vertov's revolutionary avant-garde theories resonate in the age of the database, where non-fiction mobilography is perhaps the most pervasive form of screen production for ordinary people.

In Chapter 1, I outlined how it is not sufficient to see all 'new' media as inherently avant-garde, as these technologies have become the fabric of everyday mainstream life. Rather, the possibility of an 'avant-garde' on social media is shaped by the aesthetic and commercial conventions of the platform or technology in question. In Instagram's case, it is the pristine and idyllic images of influencer and creator content that are the dominant aesthetics of the app, while the influencer economy, in-built advertising, and consumerist imagery are the app's commercial façade. Aesthetics that deny the production of idyllic and commercially viable imagery are intentionally (or unintentionally) avant-garde. Furthermore, what is aesthetically disruptive, askew, fragmented, or disturbing denies the optimal clarity and conventions of what is usually 'Instagram-able' or 'TikTok-worthy'. In Chapter 3, auteurs' creative uses of social media and Internet technologies demonstrated how experimentation and avant-garde aesthetics can be pursued even within the undeniably corporate framework of these platforms – such as David Lynch's YouTube channel and Denis's intentionally fragmented and obscure Instagram aesthetics.

As the thread of camera-less filmmaking in this thesis has shown, from Joseph Cornell's avant-garde film *Rose Hobart* to video essays and desktop documentaries and screenlife cinema, the 'caméra-stylo' is both reified and semantically contradicted by the absence of a 'camera' in these works. Examples of experimentation with scanned images (such as Godard's later works) and with recycled footage (in films like *The Image Book* or *Do Not Expect*) essentially reify Astruc's theory of essayistic, intimate, and subjective audiovisual production but ironically do away with the camera. Other methods of camera-less digital filmmaking might be further investigated via the caméra-stylo, like Marker's

Second Life project ‘Ouvroir’ (2009) and the videogame machinima style of screen-recorded films like *Grand Theft Hamlet* (Sam Crane and Pinny Grylls, 2024).²³

Somatic Images, Hapticity, and Mobilography

The intersections of hapticity, portability, mobility, and flexibility should guide the analysis of the caméra-stylo in the future, especially as new screen technologies seem to further fuse the body with the camera. Bégin’s concept of ‘somatic images’ has been a recurring motif in my research. Referring back to my second research question, ‘somatic images’ are a useful way to describe the aesthetics of smartphone mobilography that is often imperfect, shaky, blurry, ‘fuzzy’, spontaneous, and visibly handled. The visibility of the mobilographer’s shifting reactions to an environment, the aspect ratio, and indeed the haptic ‘body’ of the screen (such as the visibility of digital pixelation in low resolution) denies the conventions of feature filmmaking that aim to disguise the production of these images. Astruc’s original vision of a caméra-stylo is inherently bound up in his imagining of future screen technologies that are personal and closely attached to the body, extending audiovisual production beyond the studio and into streets and people’s homes. If we consider cinema itself, or indeed the many ‘post-cinemas’ that proliferate today, its development is inherently tied to the body. In Mekas’s view, it is the camera’s portability that promises true expression in cinema – regardless of the mobilographer’s professional credentials.²⁴ Thus, there is always something avant-garde promised in mobilography, where the cameraperson’s and camera’s flexibility may give rise to aesthetics that defy the norms of feature film production, articulated outside of the industry.

The hapticity of smartphones, social media use, and mobilography has been a major thread in this thesis. We engage with the Internet and digital apparatuses in ways that are indisputably tactile and *material*, regardless of how much our digital navigation, experiences, or ‘selves’ are contained within those online spaces. The smartphone touchscreen has returned the screen spectator to the proto-cinematic experience of tactile spectatorship. With every swipe, pinch, tap, and scroll on a touchscreen, we feel the smartphone screen and camera apparatus with our hands, thus re-imagining the intimacy of inscribing with a *pen* that Astruc’s metaphor inherently entails. The sense of

²³ The documentary shows the filmmakers attempting to stage *Hamlet* in the game *Grand Theft Auto Online* during the COVID-19 pandemic, using the in-game ‘camera’ feature.

²⁴ Mekas cited in: Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 109.

‘authorship’ afforded by touchscreen devices is tied to their physicality and individuality. This might reify the very identity of cinema itself. To quote auteur Philippe Grandieux:

Cinema is made (above all) with the hands, with the skin, with the entire body, by fatigue, by breath, by the pulsations of the blood, the rhythm of the heart, by muscles. Body and sensation, that is the machine.²⁵

The ‘somatic images’ produced by amateurs using whatever-means-available – from 8mm to smartphones – are the mark of a screen culture that has extended to everyday use, where the relationship between camera and body is highly intrinsic. With the advent of the smartphone, there is more mobilography (and more ‘somatic images’) today than ever before in screen culture. As Chapter 2 found, the somatic images produced in amateur mobilography have been aesthetically ‘transferred’ to dominant cinema and contrast with the polished formal verisimilitude of much of feature film production. Examples like *BlacKkKlansman* or *Both Sides of the Blade* show the ‘somatic images’ of dangerous situations – filmed using smartphones – inserted into fiction film narratives as non-fictional testimony to real historical events. In Chapter 5 I discussed this type of mobilography, focusing especially on the aesthetics of protest and confrontation in non-fictional scenarios. The indexical traces of embodiment in mobilography (i.e. the feeling that a living and breathing *person* filmed this) might foreground the subjectivity of the filmmaker non-verbally.

Again referring to the second research question, my framing of the caméra-style as a *mobile* mode of production (although certainly not a *rule*, as examples like desktop documentaries point to) has helped to re-imagine its resonance in contemporary screen culture, where mobile cameras are pervasive. Returning to the original basis of Astruc’s essays that viewed the rise of small, portable cameras with great optimism, the smartphone faithfully continues a desire to capture life intimately and freely without the need for cumbersome equipment and a large crew. This thesis has emphasised the genealogical importance of smartphones within the history of mobilography, including cinéma vérité and home movies. As I examined in Chapter 2 in relation to the home movie aesthetic, the mobility and informality of small-scale mobile filmmaking with a

²⁵ Philippe Grandieux, ‘About the “Insane Horizon” of Cinema,’ trans. María Palacios Cruz, <https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1423> [originally published in *Cahiers du Cinéma Hors Série: Le Siècle du Cinéma* (November 2000)].

consumer camera device is unmistakably personal and intimate by virtue of the camera's proximity to the body. The smartphone's mobility, too, has allowed for the auteurs I analysed in Chapter 3 to capture their environments as they are unfolding spontaneously and informally, and without the need for a crew or 'production'. For the TikTok users under focus in Chapter 4, the smartphone's portability and small size allowed for fans to film their Wes Anderson trend videos inconspicuously alone and in public locations (that may otherwise warrant a filming permit with more visible equipment), even if their shots were characteristically static.

The smartphone's mobility is engendered with serious social and political stakes. In Chapter 5, I especially considered the importance of mobile filmmaking for the Palestinian resistance in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the social conditions of mass displacement, war, and the increased fragmentation and colonisation of Palestinian land made it necessary for filming equipment to be flexible. For the Palestinian resistance, the mobile, modest camera became the tool of the people, and this sentiment is extended today with smartphones. Since my research on this subject began in 2021, the smartphone adopted heightened importance especially after October 2023, as the technology has made it possible for Gazans to film their experiences of bombardment for global audiences. In the horror and wreckage of war that makes any contact with the outside world extremely difficult, the prosthesis-like smartphone has been a consistent tool for Palestinians capturing what Amnesty International calls a 'live-streamed' genocide.²⁶ This thesis has shown that the realisation of the *caméra-stylo* today intersects with broader global issues and social movements, thus further de-centring film professionals as subjects for its application.

My theoretical framing of the *caméra-stylo* in this thesis ultimately helps to shift Astruc's concept away from analysis that emphasises the well-financed *mise en scène* of feature films. As Martin points out, an emphasis on *mise en scène* in film criticism came to stand in for the hopes of the *caméra-stylo*.²⁷ This thesis has shown that it is worthwhile theorising Astruc's concept via more off-the-cuff, low-grade, mobile, and spontaneous smartphone videos that cannot be classed as having a 'mise en scène'. This is especially true for mobilographers in warzones such as Gaza, where control over one's environment is extremely difficult. Rather, this demonstrates the value of considering the *caméra-stylo*

²⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Israel Carrying Out "Live-Streamed Genocide" in Gaza, Amnesty Says,' 29 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/29/israel-carrying-out-live-streamed-genocide-in-gaza-amnesty-says>.

²⁷ Martin, 'Turn the Page: From *Mise en Scène* to *Dispositif*,' (2011).

in terms of the technological and platform-based apparatuses being used (including politics and platform measures), the mobilographers themselves, and the production context (i.e., the *dispositif*).

‘Somatic images’ and mobilography are now, perhaps more so than ever, the mark of screen culture, in which a large portion of the population has access to personal cameras. As per Mekas’s view, a camera’s flexibility and what it captures of the mobilographer’s embodied subjectivity is the promise of a cinema of the people (and indeed the *caméra-stylo*).²⁸ This sentiment must guide its study in the future. As gen-AI becomes more powerful as a tool for capitalist interests on social media platforms (especially endless ‘AI slop’ that privileges idealistic imagery), the idea of the *caméra-stylo* and the imperfect ‘somatic images’ of smartphone mobilography may assume new importance.²⁹ AI-generated media serves to undermine the very real and raw materials that activists and survivors of atrocities go to great personal lengths to record on the ground. The importance of smartphone mobilography as a truth-telling device may come into sharpened effect. Mobilography may increasingly connote human consciousness.

Future Directions for Research

This thesis has not addressed all aspects of the *caméra-stylo* and there is still more to gain in understanding its place in contemporary screen culture. Its findings will still benefit further studies of the *caméra-stylo* and screen media – especially via the intersecting framework theorised in Chapter 1. Based on my research, it is possible to draw on several new avenues of analysis that may yield significant results in the future.

Films and filmmakers that I have not discussed may resonate with the findings of this thesis and Astruc’s theory.³⁰ Thinking especially of Chapter 3, with such an abundance of auteurs’ social media profiles and diverse Internet activities, I could have indeed dedicated this dissertation to this topic alone. I hope to continue studies in this area and that my research may give rise to more case studies, including the 50+ auteurs’

²⁸ Bégin, ‘GoPro: Augmented Bodies, Somatic Images,’ 109.

²⁹ See: Roland Meyer (@bildoperationen.bsky.social), ‘AI-Slop is a Product of Platform Capitalism,’ BlueSky, 2 July 2025, <https://bsky.app/profile/bildoperationen.bsky.social/post/3lsxp77n4xs22>.

³⁰ One consideration is the spare narrative filmmaking style of Korean auteur Hong Sang-soo. Particular movements and periods of filmmaking like Dogme-95 or ‘mumblecore’ films may also give rise to new considerations for the realisation of the *caméra-stylo* in the digital era.

Instagram accounts listed in Chapter 3.³¹ While I have mentioned essay films in this thesis, I have not endeavoured to contribute to new understandings of the essay film in and of itself. The essay film has already been comprehensively theorised by scholars like Rascaroli and Timothy Corrigan who have drawn on Astruc. However, I encourage analysis of recent essay films that integrate social media aesthetics and might shed more light on Astruc's theory in the digital age. I am especially interested in Sara Cwynar's essay film *Glass Life* (2021). Cwynar uses poetic voice-over commentary on consumerism and imagery – from the Kardashian family to Walter Benjamin – in the digital era, visualised by digital scanning (as a kind of camera) of collage cut-outs of images from social media.

As a future direction in research on the caméra-stylo, the filmmaker's embodied role in their own audiovisual production – specifically in the realm of social media and the Internet – may be further explored. Factors of embodiment such as age, race, gender, disability, queerness, or class might be theorised in relation to the caméra-stylo and new screen technologies to further expand its initial context. In terms of education, it would be possible to engage students – many of whom are also 'TikTok natives' and highly versed in audiovisual production at an informal level – in thinking about the value of screen history and Astruc's theory in their own personal screen production. Through visual and audiovisual communication, it would be possible to engage the general public in thinking about their smartphones as audiovisual tools that can express their embodied subjectivity. I endeavoured to achieve this with a research poster calling on the public to 'grab hold' of their camera-pen (using the image of an outstretched hand and smartphone).³²

Although sound was not a major factor of Astruc's metaphor or my analysis, the role of sound and particularly the filmmaker's or mobilographer's voice is undeniably a major part of how personal audiovisual media is fleshed out and intimately articulated. The hapticity and embodiment of desktop documentaries might be further theorised in relation to the caméra-stylo (and how this interacts with the 'virtual'). Both Kevin B. Lee's and Lého Galibert-Lainé's respective digital works may be suitably framed within Astruc's theory. For example, Galibert-Lainé's video essay *Flânerie 2.0* (2018) features

³¹ For example, I co-ordinated a themed week for *In Media Res* on 'Auteurs in the Age of Social Media'. As this thesis was being finalised in August 2025, even Herzog decided to join Instagram to share his daily experiences with fans. See: Werner Herzog (@wernerherzogofficial), Instagram profile, <https://www.instagram.com/wernerherzogofficial?igsh=YjlzeTB0bG5qN2Zl>.

³² See, already: Juhasz, 'YouTube Stylo: Writing and Teaching with Digital Video,' (2013). See: Trinity Long Room, 'Early Career Researcher Poster Showcase,' <https://www.tcd.ie/trinitylongroomhub/people/fellows/early-career-researchers/early-career-researcher-poster-showcase/>.

smartphone mobilography in Paris streets, and invokes Benjamin while remediating an older film, *Paris Does Not Exist* (Robert Benayoun, 1969).³³ Informed by my research for this thesis, I experimented with the desktop documentary form with *Google Mapping Blow-Up: A Desktop Remediation* (2025), which explores the London filming locations of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film through Google Maps technology, reflecting on film tourism, cinephilia, haptic Internet navigation, and the authenticity of digital images.³⁴ This revealed to me how scholarly subjectivity intersects with Lee and Galibert-Laîné's concept of 'desktop subjectivity'.³⁵ The articulation of a caméra-stylo via the desktop documentary will continue to be a point of interest in my research.

This thesis has largely examined the caméra-stylo in non-fiction and documentary-adjacent terms. From the social media profiles of directors in Chapter 3 to activist mobilography in Chapter 5, many examples I have drawn on can be described as *non-fiction*. My approach supports the view that the articulation of a caméra-stylo in audiovisual terms foregrounds the author's embodied subjectivity and often doesn't disguise its own production (thus giving rise to applications to the essay film, home movie, desktop documentary, and so on). The characteristics of feature narrative cinema (including characterisation, screenplays, techniques, tropes, structure, editing) have therefore not factored into much of my analysis. Although Chapter 2 analysed several narrative films with fictional characters and plots, my focus was on the integration of personal screen technologies in these films that consistently blurs the line between fiction and non-fiction. Thus, I encourage further examination of this aspect of the caméra-stylo — its non-fiction or documentary-adjacent identity, and how it interacts with storytelling especially in the social media era. The forthcoming volume *Essay Film and Narrative Techniques: Screen-Writing Non-Fiction* (2025) may address this in relation to the caméra-stylo.³⁶

Other screen technologies that I have not examined may also be considered within the framework of the caméra-stylo. My research has prioritised Instagram and TikTok, but the study of other audiovisual apps may reveal results that further emphasise the resonance of Astruc's theory in the social media age. Mentioned briefly in this thesis,

³³ See: Lého Galibert-Laîné, 'Flânerie 2.0,' 2018, <https://lehogalibertlaine.com/flanerie-20-francais>; Kevin B. Lee (@alsolikelife), Instagram profile, https://www.instagram.com/alsolikelife?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==.

³⁴ Cáit Murphy, 'Google Mapping *Blow-Up*: A Desktop Remediation,' *Frames Cinema Journal* 22 (2025), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v22.i0.2997>.

³⁵ Galibert-Laîné and Lee, 'Troubling the Desktop,' *Filmmaker Magazine*.

³⁶ Romana Turina and Kiki Tianqi Yu ed., *Essay Film and Narrative Techniques: Screen-Writing Non-Fiction* (Intellect, 2025).

body-attached cameras like the GoPro or smart glasses may be further studied as a first-person, mobile audiovisual mode of production that even removes the necessity for manual handling. Thus, the automatic, post-human, or machine-based side of the caméra-stylo might be further investigated. With VR and MR technologies, the possibility of ‘painting’ virtually could give rise to new considerations for a caméra-stylo that is both ‘virtual’ and physically embodied. It is not unrealistic to imagine that the refinement of MR headsets could facilitate personal, mobile filmmaking in streets and homes, and even inspire new forms of essay and documentary filmmaking. The Apple Vision Pro headset has even been marketed as the ‘ultimate home theatre’, thus exceeding Astruc’s initial vision.³⁷ Scholars have already coalesced cinematic virtual reality with documentary storytelling and the traditional roles of the film director and screenwriter, but may draw further on Astruc.³⁸

As Astruc’s vision implicates the production *and* distribution of screen media, future studies of the caméra-stylo in the digital age must consider the corporate apparatuses of social media platforms, generative AI systems, and other new technologies that claim to help ‘democratise’ these processes. My research has not specifically analysed social media platforms as distribution sites (and their economic, structural, and cultural characteristics), as my focus has been on aesthetics and production. Any analysis of the caméra-stylo must acknowledge that the democratisation of screen technologies is impacted by the parameters set by corporations and sociopolitical contexts. Recent changes to platforms’ infrastructure show that online spaces are ultimately shaped by the monetary and ideological interests of CEOs.³⁹ While it is possible to express one’s self on social media in very personal and individualistic ways, the extent to which social media users really ‘own’ the spaces in which they create, post, and communicate is complicated by corporate decision-making.

This thesis has consolidated and re-ignited new conceptions of Astruc’s theory in an expanded screen landscape. My research points to the value of interdisciplinary and

³⁷ Apple, ‘Press Release: Apple Previews New Entertainment.’

³⁸ See: Kate Nash and Deane Williams ed., *The Intellect Handbook of Documentary* (Intellect, 2025); Kath Dooley, *Virtual Reality Narratives: Embodied Encounters in Space* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024); Miriam Ross and Alex Munt, ‘Cinematic Virtual Reality: Towards the Spatialized Screenplay,’ *Journal of Screenwriting* 9, no. 2 (2018): 191-209, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/josc.9.2.191_1; John Mateer, ‘Directing for Cinematic Virtual Reality: How the Traditional Film Director’s Craft Applies to Immersive Environments and Notions of Presence,’ *Journal of Media Practice* 18, no. 1 (2017): 14-25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1305838>.

³⁹ For example, Elon Musk’s drastic changes to Twitter/X, such as the influx of bot accounts, disinformation, and hate speech have prompted users – including journalists and academics – to opt for other online spaces like Bluesky. See: Raphael Boyd, ‘From X to Bluesky: Why Are People Fleeing Elon Musk’s “Digital Town Square”?’ *The Guardian*, 11 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/dec/11/from-x-to-bluesky-why-are-people-abandoning-twitter-digital-town-square>.

multidisciplinary enquiry and specifically the analysis of audiovisual social media platforms in screen studies. This is especially important as aesthetics, movements, and trends on these platforms increasingly intersect with major components of film culture like auteurism, cinephilia, and non-fiction filmmaking. The old dream of the caméra-stylo has been essentially revived in this thesis by considering its long-lasting resonance and even its mutation into new forms of audiovisual production – both ‘real’ and ‘virtual’.

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Appendices

Filmography

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- Aftersun*. Directed by Charlotte Wells. UK/USA: A24, 2022.
- Aggro Dr1ft*. Directed by Harmony Korine. USA: EDGLRD, 2023.
- AI Jetée*. Directed by Adrian Goycoolea. USA, 2023.
- All That Heaven Allows*. Directed by Douglas Sirk. USA: Universal Pictures, 1956.
- Angela Moves On/Angela merge mai departe*. Directed by Lucian Bratu. Romania: România Film, 1981.
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- Berlin: Symphony of a Great City/Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. Directed by Walter Ruttmann. Weimar Republic: Fox Film Corporation, 1927.
- Bird*. Directed by Andrea Arnold. UK/France/Germany: Mubi, 2024.
- The Birds*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Universal Pictures, 1963.
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- Blow-Up*. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. UK/Italy: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1966.
- Body Cam*. Directed by Malik Vitthal. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2020.
- Both Sides of the Blade/Avec amour et acharnement*. Directed by Claire Denis. France: Wild Bunch, 2022.
- Breakaway*. Directed by Bruce Conner. USA, 1966.
- Breathless/À bout de souffle*. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France: Société nouvelle de cinématographie, 1960.
- The Brutalist*. Directed by Brady Corbet. USA/Hungary: A24, 2024.
- Caché/Hidden*. Directed by Michael Haneke. France/Austria: Les Films du Losange, 2005.
- Camera Buff/Amator*. Directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski. Poland: Zjednoczenie Rozpowszechniania Filmów, 1979.
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- Un chien Andalou*. Directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. France: Centraal Bureau voor Ligafilms, 1929.
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- Civil War*. Directed by Alex Garland. USA/UK: A24, 2024.

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Come and See. Directed by Elem Klimov. USSR: Sovexportfilm, 1985.

Contempt/Le mépris. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Italy: Marceau-Cocinor, 1963.

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Day for Night/La nuit américaine. Directed by François Truffaut. France: Warner-Columbia Film, 1973.

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Eight Postcards from Utopia. Directed by Radu Jude and Christian Ferencz-Flatz. Romania: Heretic, 2024.

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Empire. Directed by Andy Warhol. USA: Warhol Films, 1965.

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Faces Places/Visages Villages. Directed by Agnès Varda and JR. France: Le Pacte, 2017.

Le filmeur. Directed by Alain Cavalier. France: Pyramide Distribution, 2005.

First Reformed. Directed by Paul Schrader. USA: A24, 2017.

Four Eyed Monsters. Directed by Susan Buice and Arin Crumley. USA: YouTube, 2005.

From Ground Zero. Directed by Aws Al-Banna, Ahmed Al-Danf, et al. Palestine/Jordan: Masharawi Fund for Films & Filmmakers in Gaza, 2024.

The Game. Directed by David Fincher. USA: Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1997.

The Gift of the World (Oedipus on the Jetty). Directed by Joanna Zylińska. UK, 2021.

Glass Life. Directed by Sara Cwynar. USA: Mubi, 2021.

The Gleaners and I/Les glaneurs et la glaneuse. Directed by Agnès Varda. France: Ciné-Tamaris, 2000.

Gomorra. Directed by Matteo Garrone. Italy: 01 Distribution, 2008.

Goodbye to Language/Adieu au langage. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Wild Bunch Distribution, 2014.

Gossip Girl. Developed by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage. USA: The CW, 2007-2012.

Grand Theft Hamlet. Directed by Sam Crane and Pinny Grylls. UK: Tull Stories, 2024.

The Green Fog. Directed by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, and Galen Johnson. Canada/USA: Balcony Booking, 2017.

A Grin Without a Cat/Le fond de l'air est rouge. Directed by Chris Marker. France: Pari Films, 1977.

Grizzly Man. Directed by Werner Herzog. USA: Lions Gate Films, 2005.

Hands. USA: Pathé/American Work Projects Administration, 1934.

Happy End. Directed by Michael Haneke. France/Austria: Les Films du Losange, 2017.

High Life. Directed by Claire Denis. France/Germany/UK: Wild Bunch, 2018.

Hi, Mom! Directed by Brian De Palma. USA: Sigma III, 1970.

Histoire(s) du cinéma. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Gaumont, 1988-1998.

The Holy Mountain/La montaña sagrada. Directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky. Mexico: ABKCO Films, 1973.

Homage by Assassination. Directed by Elia Suleiman. Palestine, 1992.

House of Cards. Created by Beau Willimon. USA: Netflix, 2013-2018.

The Human Voice. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Spain: Pathé UK, 2020.

Ici et ailleurs/Here and Elsewhere. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville. France/Palestine: Gaumont, 1976.

The Image Book/Le livre d'image. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Wild Bunch, 2018.

In a Violent Nature. Directed by Chris Nash. Canada: IFC Films, 2024.

Ingrid Goes West. Directed by Matt Spicer. USA: Neon, 2017.

Inland Empire. Directed by David Lynch. USA/France: 518 Media, 2006.

The Intruder/L'Intrus. Directed by Claire Denis. France: Pyramide Distribution, 2004.

It Must Be Heaven. Directed by Elia Suleiman. France/Palestine: Le Pacte, 2019.

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Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville on Google StreetView. Directed by Robert Luxemburg. USA: Mubi, 2018.

La Jetée. Directed by Chris Marker. France: Argos Films, 1962.

Kino-Eye. Directed by Dziga Vertov. Goskino, 1924.

Kissing on the Mouth. Directed by Joe Swanberg. USA: Film1, 2005.

The Last Screenwriter. Directed by Peter Luisi. Switzerland: Spotlight Media Productions, 2024.

Level Five. Directed by Chris Marker. France: Connaissance du Cinéma, 1997.

Leviathan. Directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. USA: Independencia Distribution, 2012.

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou. Directed by Wes Anderson. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2004.

Life in a Day. Kevin Macdonald. UK/USA: National Geographic Entertainment, 2011.

Malcolm X. Directed by Spike Lee. USA: Warner Bros., 1992.

Man No Run. Directed by Claire Denis. France: MC4 Distribution, 1989.

Man with a Movie Camera. Directed by Dziga Vertov. USSR: Amkino Corporation, 1929.

Man with a Movie Camera: the Global Remake. Directed by Perry Bard. USA/Canada, 2007-2017.

Medium Cool. Directed by Haskell Wexler. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1969.

Megalopolis. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. USA: Lionsgate, 2024.

Meshes of the Afternoon. Directed by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. USA, 1943.

Moonrise Kingdom. Directed by Wes Anderson. USA: Focus Features, 2012.

Mothlight. Directed by Stan Brakhage. USA, 1963.

A Movie. Directed by Bruce Conner. USA, 1958.

A Movie by Jen Proctor. Directed by Jen Proctor. USA, 2010.

Mulholland Drive. Directed by David Lynch. USA/France: Universal Pictures, 2001.

My Life Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Directed by Liv Corfixen. Denmark: RADiUS-TWC, 2014.

My Own Private Idaho. Directed by Gus Van Sant. USA: Fine Line Features, 1991.

Nightcrawler. Directed by Dan Gilroy. USA: Open Road Films, 2014.

No Other Land. Directed by Basel Adra, Yuval Abraham, Hamdan Ballal, and Rachel Szor. Palestine/Norway: Dogwoof, 2024.

North by Northwest. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959.

Only God Forgives. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Denmark/France: Lionsgate, 2013.

Orlando. Directed by Sally Potter. UK/France: Sony Pictures International, 1992.

Paris Does Not Exist/Paris n'existe pas. Directed by Robert Benayoun. France: OPERA, 1969.

Paris, Texas. Directed by Wim Wenders. France/West Germany: Argos Films, 1984.

Peeping Tom. Directed by Michael Powell. UK: Anglo-Amalgamated Film Distributors, 1960.

Persona. Directed by Ingmar Bergman. Sweden: Svensk Filmindustri, 1966.

Personal Shopper. Directed by Olivier Assayas. France/Germany: Les Films du Losange, 2016.

The Phoenician Scheme. Directed by Wes Anderson. USA: Universal Pictures, 2025.

Phoenix Tapes. Directed by Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller. UK: Mubi, 1999.

Pillow Talk. Directed by Michael Gordon. USA: Universal Pictures, 1959.

Poltergeist. Directed by Tobe Hooper. USA: MGM/UA Entertainment Co., 1982.

Prénom Carmen/First Name Carmen. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France: Artificial Eye, 1983.

Profile. Directed by Timur Bekmambetov. UK: Bazelevs Company, 2018.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1960.

Psycho. Directed by Gus Van Sant. USA: Universal Pictures, 1998.

Punishment Park. Directed by Peter Watkins. USA: Sherpix, 1971.

Put Your Soul on Your Hand and Walk. Directed by Sepideh Farsi. Palestine/France: Rêves d'Eau

Productions, 2025.

Rabbits. Directed by David Lynch. USA: Davidlynch.com [defunct], 2002.

Rage. Directed by Sally Potter. USA: Cinetic Media, 2009.

Red Hook Summer. Directed by Spike Lee. USA: Variance Films, 2012.

La Région Centrale. Directed by Michael Snow. Canada: Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 1967.

Le Repas de Bébé. Directed by Louis Lumière. France: Lumière, 1895.

Ring. Directed by Hideo Nakata. Japan: Toho, 1998.

Rose Hobart. Directed by Joseph Cornell. USA: National Film Preservation Foundation, 1936.

Rotting in the Sun. Directed by Sebastián Silva. USA/Mexico: Mubi, 2023.

The Royal Tenenbaums. Directed by Wes Anderson. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 2001.

Rushmore. Directed by Wes Anderson. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1998.

Sans Soleil. Directed by Chris Marker. France: Argos Films, 1983.

Saturday Night Live. Created by Lorne Michaels. USA: NBC, 1975-present.

Scorpio Rising. Directed by Kenneth Anger. USA: Puck Film Productions, 1963.

Searching. Directed by Aneesh Chaganty. USA: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2018.

Sherlock. Created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. UK: BBC, 2010-2017.

The Shrouds. Directed by David Cronenberg. France/Canada: Pyramide Distribution, 2024.

Sleep #2. Directed by Radu Jude. Romania: Locarno Film Festival, 2024.

Sleep. Directed by Andy Warhol. USA: Warhol Films, 1963.

Stars at Noon. Directed by Claire Denis. France: Ad Vitam Distribution, 2022.

Star Wars trilogy. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1977-1983.

The Substance. Directed by Coralie Fargeat. France/USA: Mubi, 2024.

Succession. Created by Jesse Armstrong. HBO, 2018-2023.

Sweat. Directed by Magnus Von Horn. Sweden/Poland: Gutek Film, 2020.

Tangerine. Directed by Sean Baker. USA: Magnolia Pictures, 2015.

Tár. Directed by Todd Field. USA/Germany: Focus Features, 2022.

There Will Be No More Night/Il n'y aura plus de nuit. Directed by Éléonore Weber. France: Mubi, 2020.

This is Not a Film. Directed by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and Jafar Panahi. Iran: Kanibal Films Distribution, 2011.

Too Old to Die Young. Created by Nicolas Winding Refn and Ed Brubaker. USA: Amazon Prime Video, 2019.

Top Gun: Maverick. Directed by Joseph Kosinski. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2022.

Tout va bien. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. France: Gaumont, 1972.

Trailer for the Film that Will Never Exist: 'Phony Wars'. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. France/Switzerland: Blue Bird Distribution, 2023.

Triangle of Sadness. Directed by Ruben Östlund. Sweden/UK: Curzon, 2022.

Trouble Every Day. Directed by Claire Denis. France/Germany: Rézo Films, 2001.

Twin Peaks. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch. USA: ABC, 1990-1991.

Twin Peaks: The Return. Created by Mark Frost and David Lynch. USA: Showtime, 2017.

Under the Same Sky. Directed by Khalil Ashawi. Palestine: Frontline in Focus XR, 2024.

Unfriended. Directed by Levan Gabriadze. USA: Bazelevs Company, 2014.

Unsane. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. USA: 20th Century Fox, 2018.

The Uprising. Directed by Peter Snowdon. UK/Belgium: Third Films, 2013.

Valhalla Rising. Directed by Nicolas Winding Refn. Denmark: Scanbox Entertainment, 2009.

Vendredi soir. Directed by Claire Denis. France: Bac Films, 2002.

Vertigo. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1958.

Videodrome. Directed by David Cronenberg. Canada/USA: Universal Pictures, 1983.

Ways of Seeing. Written by John Berger. UK: BBC, 1972.

Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon/La sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon. Directed by Louis Lumière. France: Lumière, 1895.

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