

Mobile production, mobile consumption

How the mobility of devices has changed
film production

By Laura Laabs

While our parents were still labouring away at editing strips of Super 8 film, smartphones today place the most sophisticated pocket-sized technology at our disposal. But what is the impact on film when anyone can produce a video and upload it? And to what extent are mobile devices already being used in film production?

On 17 October 2021, TikTok user Becca Murray (@thebeccamurray) uploaded a video of herself. It shows her in the kitchen, laughing and eating a carrot. Murray's caption puts the video into its jokey context: "filming myself so this can be played at my funeral because my partner doesn't film me." My wording, that she'd "uploaded a video of herself", is, in principle, superfluous. What's funny about Murray's clip is the fact that she, and countless other users of TikTok, YouTube and many other platforms and programmes, almost constantly produce and share films of themselves. Why, then, should there be any reason for another person to film you as well? How does this video on Becca Murray's account differ from her other videos?

To pose or not to pose

The clip has been edited with TikTok's retro camera filter. When used on videos recorded with modern smartphones, the filter simulates certain visual features that film formats now virtually obsolete used to have. These include film grain and signs of wear as well as an interface – in the sense of a user interface – comprising symbols that show details of exposure time or frame rate, for example. Murray's video is also interesting because it aims for an affective and nostalgic use of the "vintage look" that we encounter again and again, for example in Hollywood films or the true crime genre: the embedding of (apparently) amateur footage, which often shows happy and smiling housewives in trivial everyday situations or on holiday with the family, as a memento in funeral or deathbed scenarios.

Murray's video parodies this use. Or more precisely: she uses the filter to parody a certain authentication strategy. As part of such a strat-

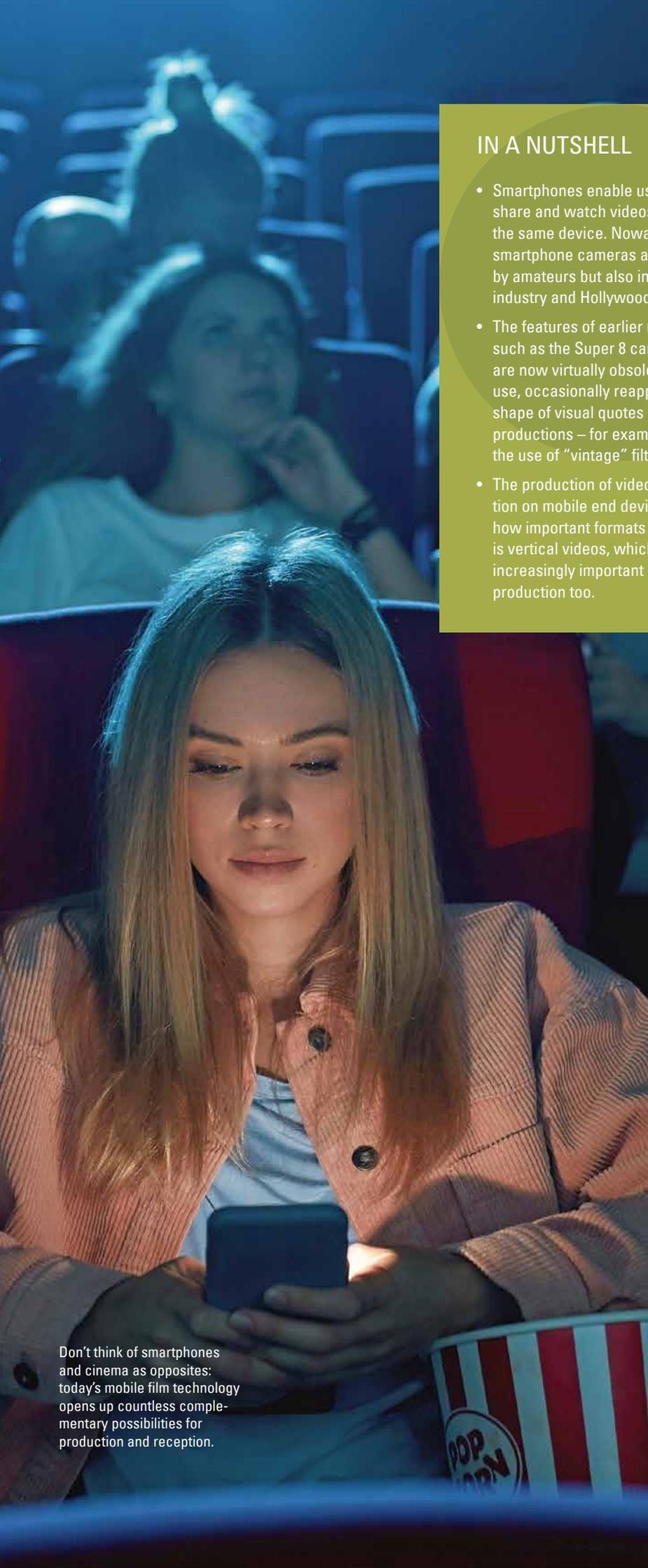
egy, seemingly uncontrived and accidental – "natural" – pictures create an effect of closeness to the person shown, or of their "authenticity". At a funeral, it would be nice to be able to say: "Just like her." It is a truism that content shared on social media is situated in precisely this field of tension between the orchestrated and the uncontrived. On closer inspection, then, Becca Murray's parody reveals to us a particular aesthetic value of footage recorded on mobile devices.

Off to Hollywood

However, video production for social media channels also gives rise to questions about the relationship between the private and the public domain, between amateur productions and professionalisation. In social media, it is often difficult to differentiate between advertising and entertainment. For example, make-up influencers, who have become successful above all thanks to YouTube, often collaborate with famous cosmetic brands or set up their own. TikTok user Julian Bass (@thejulianbass) made it to Hollywood thanks to a video that quickly went viral (Rahman, 2020). The video shows not only Bass himself but also above all his ability to produce special visual effects, or VFX in short. In the video, he personifies fictional heroes such as Spider-Man or a Jedi, making a conscious connection with already established brands. According to recent figures, the video has been viewed 17.2 million times on TikTok and another 27.1 million times on Twitter. Among others, Bass caught the eye

Non-stop film production: Becca Murray playing tongue-in-cheek games with her phone.





IN A NUTSHELL

- Smartphones enable us to produce, share and watch videos on one and the same device. Nowadays, modern smartphone cameras are used not only by amateurs but also in the advertising industry and Hollywood.
- The features of earlier mobile devices, such as the Super 8 camera, which are now virtually obsolete in private use, occasionally reappear in the shape of visual quotes in contemporary productions – for example through the use of “vintage” filters.
- The production of videos for consumption on mobile end devices makes clear how important formats are. An example is vertical videos, which are becoming increasingly important in professional production too.

Don't think of smartphones and cinema as opposites: today's mobile film technology opens up countless complementary possibilities for production and reception.

of Bob Iger, former CEO and still a member of Disney's executive board (Rahman, 2020). Bass is currently working, as he himself announced, on a larger project of which no details have been provided.

Semi-professionalisation typical for social media

In many areas, video production for social media is characterised not only by amateurs still wet behind the ears, on the one hand, and full-time professionals on the other, but especially by semi-professionalisation. For many users, this is the transition from private production to their main source of income – following in the footsteps of Julian Bass.

Meanwhile, smartphones are used in production in the professional film business too. Examples are Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* (2018) and *High Flying Bird* (2019), but also the Netflix series *Homemade* (2020), which was made during the COVID-19 pandemic and deals with it in short films.

Whether smartphone or camcorder, Super 8 or Polaroid: their aesthetic and discursive charge as the simultaneous producers and mediators of spontaneity, closeness and authenticity has a lot to do with format. Formats are means of giving structure that organise and present the information conveyed – the video, for example – in a specific way (Volmar/Jankovic/Schneider, 2020). The word “format” can mean material properties (for example, the 35mm of the respective film material) just as much as structural or organisational features (such as file formats). Thus, the granularity of film images in Super 8 format is reappearing as a filter on Instagram and TikTok. Conversely, it can be seen that mobile end devices and their formats are not only leaving aesthetic traces in film productions. They also have a direct influence on the production of the images. Without going so far as to speak of technological determinism, production for and with certain formats often also includes production for certain end devices or purposes. One example is the production of advertising content for social media, which is primarily consumed on mobile phones.

Different end devices require different formats

Peter Merziger, managing director of M7, a marketing agency in Saarlouis, explains this in the

context of video advertising for clients' social media channels. Talking to him makes it clear that film industries must always be referred to in the plural – looking solely at the entertainment segment is not enough. M7 produces films both for internal and external corporate purposes; for classic projection as well as optimised for smartphones. In the area of social media, the vertical 9:16 format is becoming increasingly important, alongside the already familiar square format, because vertical formats correspond to the conventional way of using and holding a smartphone and can fill the display better. Some platforms, such as Instagram, enforce this vertical use by not scaling the image when the device is rotated, even if they theoretically could. 9:16 is the vertical reverse of the 16:9 aspect ratio that we know from television. As a vertical format, it demands specific approaches and editing techniques from filmmakers. Merziger recounts the specific case of an advertising film containing a dialogue between two people. It was not possible to show them both at the same time in the long or medium long shot, as would be the case in a horizontal format, meaning that alternatives had to be found during recording and post-production, for example a camera perspective that “looked over the shoulders” of the two interlocutors.

However, M7 does not only produce videos intended for consumption on mobile devices. They also use smartphones for filming, and Peter Merziger draws attention in this context to their high-performance cameras and recording technology. He says that modern iPhones, for example, are capable of producing not only photos but also videos with bokeh effect, that is, where the main motif is sharp, but the background is out of focus. M7 tends to use the devices' own software to produce films (for instance Apple's camera app) rather than programmes offered by third-party suppliers. In addition, optical image stabilisation makes production easier, he says. Gimbals – put simply, brackets or mounts that serve as external stabilising systems for cameras – are nowadays superfluous in some situations.

Ready to roll

The logical price for the greater mobility of cameras was and continues to be the reduction of their technical capacity and, depending on the situation in which they are used, thus also limited functions. Production with or for mobile devices does not automatically involve less effort – something that Merziger also stresses. For him, however, one thing is clear, especially as far as private use is concerned: “The best camera is the one I've got with me when I need it.” Smartphones can, for instance, eliminate

the need to take other cameras on holiday with you. Lots of people carry their mobile cameras on them, in their trouser pocket or shoulder bag. The “closeness” described above then also means, in a pragmatic sense, ready to hand, which in turn allows for flexibility.

Smartphones allow us to produce, share and consume videos on the same device. Becca Murray's short video, however, obliges us to ask who produces footage for which audience and with which means and which technical effects are used specifically in the process. Conversely, it illustrates that the devices and apps we use are not neutral at all, as ubiquitous and seemingly self-evident as they may be. When we think about videos, we should not only consider their aesthetics but also keep in mind the respective devices and formats as well as the production and consumption circumstances alike. ●



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