Mobile Video Platforms and the Presence of Aura

Patrick Kelly

Abstract

The development and rapid uptake of platforms and applications to capture and share video are generating emergent practices associated with social media. This presents new opportunities for filmmakers to explore different contexts.

This paper will examine the development of mobile video applications and their use as production tools for the creation of media works that trigger an auratic experience. In doing so, it will call on my own autoethnographic and practice-led research to affirm the mobile video format's ability to engage in thoughtful and reflective media creation through the use of applications such as Instagram and Vine.

Videography has become synonymous with a modern utilisation of the Internet and the most contemporary digital media equipment. Such developments have seen increased bandwidth and high-resolution consumer mobile cameras. Video sharing has thus become more common among social media users. Fierce competition is developing among the key players Instagram and Vine, and debate is mounting between social media commentators. Yet, these platforms serve different purposes. Instagram allows users to "choose and share more personal moments with one another," and Vine enables users to share videos with a wider audience. The nature of my use of the two platforms falls into alignment with these common tendencies. My recent interactive Instagram/Korsakow film entitled *North* (2013) demonstrates this in part through documenting my experience of Melbourne.

I will argue in this paper that these mobile applications can be used to generate aura, a trait discussed by theorists including Walter Benjamin, Jay Bolter, Stephan Schutt, and Marsha Berry. This characteristic is linked to the presence of "additional contexts generated through visual juxtapositioning" (Schutt & Berry 2011, pp. 39-40). It is through the presence of supplementary contexts (often manifested as a personal context against the backdrop of Social Networking Sites) that works produced using Instagram Video and Vine can be auratic. When addressing these issues, I will draw on autoethnographic research of social media use, including my utilisation of Instagram and Vine as both social and creative practice tools in the making of *North*.

Keywords: mobile video platforms, aura, juxtaposition, autoethnography, remixability

Mobile Video Platforms and the Presence of Aura

The development and rapid uptake of platforms and applications to capture and share video are generating emergent practices associated with social media, presenting new opportunities for filmmakers to explore different contexts. This paper will examine the growth of mobile video applications and their use in the production of works that embrace the concept of the auratic experience. Investigating the debate over the ability for mobile works to generate aura, I will draw upon the work of Walter Benjamin (1931, 1935), Jay Bolter and colleagues (2006), and Stefan Schutt and Marsha Berry (2011). My intention is to build upon their work in relation to the experience of media works. As part of this examination, I will also explore the presence of "additional contexts generated through visual juxtapositioning" (Schutt & Berry 2011, pp. 39-40). I will then call on my own autoethnographic and practice-led research making the 2013 interactive documentary *North*. This is to affirm the mobile video format's ability to engage in thoughtful and reflective media production using applications such as Instagram and the database film creation platform, Korsakow. *North* uses these platforms to examine my experience of Melbourne. In doing so, the documentary highlights the potential for mobile formats to explore various contexts, thus generating an auratic experience.

Benjamin famously defined aura, in all its slipperiness, as:

> *A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch. Today, people have as passionate an inclination to bring things close to themselves or even more to the masses, as to overcome uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it (Benjamin, 1931, p.20).*

Figure 1. The interactive film *North* (2013) utilises an autoethnographic approach. The original caption for this video on my Instagram account (@patcheskelly) was '#Selfie on Swanston St'. Location: -37.811629, 144.964694.

Benjamin was primarily concerned with the mechanical, corporate, and dehumanised reproduction of art. He contended that such reproduction using contemporary technologies affected the ability for one to produce an auratic experience for the beholder of an image. As this paper will demonstrate, many theorists discussing new platforms contribute to the constant updating of this argument.

With the development of the web and its ever-flourishing ability to customise online experiences, personal connection intensifies. In this sense, although Vine and Instagram are part of the culture of mechanical reproduction, the user interaction that takes place through Web 2.0 to 3.0 oriented platforms (and the exponential ability for the creation of different contexts) allows for the occurrence of auratic experiences.

Having progressed through the Web 1.0 and 2.0 stages of growth defined by information and communication respectively, we now find ourselves on the verge of Web 3.0, a web dominated by co-operation (Fuchs 2008, p.126). Larger bandwidths have meant an increase in the number of projects that embrace connectivity. This includes such phenomena as Transmedia and Collaborative Content Production (Scolari 2009; Joutsen et al., 2008), as well as the use of online video – an industry that is experiencing exponential change (Chapman, 2010).

After following the spread of digital technology from production and post-production into distribution, this development extended into the realm of mobile, with some traditional filmmakers adopting mobile devices in their endeavors. South Korean film director Park Chan-wook has begun to use the iPhone in his practice, citing flexibility as the main attraction for filmmakers to utilise the device (Myers, 2012).

I have also utilised the iPhone in the making of a feature-length documentary film (*Detour Off the Superhighway*, 2013). I found that the device's portability and high-functionality (the device was always powered on and in my pocket immediately before use) offered a filmmaking experience that was unavailable when using traditional technologies. Mobile video sharing platforms Instagram Video and Vine make this process even simpler, allowing the user to edit and distribute within the application. There is an intense rivalry forming between the two platforms, operated by Facebook and Twitter respectively. A passionate debate is also brewing online among social media commentators (Talreja, 2012). Interestingly the discussion is not centered on the respective features or mechanical functions of each application, but rather on the cultures surrounding them. Some commentators are adamant that Vine works are more artistically engaging than those on Instagram. Xeni Jardin tweeted "the vernacular video format emerging on Vine, stuff in the 'most popular' list, is fascinating. That pop art form took no time to develop" (Xeni, 2013). Once Instagram announced the release of its platform's video sharing capabilities, Vine users used the hash tag #TeamVine to affirm their loyalty to the perceived Vine community on Twitter. In contrast to Vine's "pop art form," Instagram is constructing a culture around its video sharing that stresses its mission "to capture and share the world's moments" (Buchanan, 2013). As such, it is my contention that Instagram plays a significant role in the modern creation of personal contexts.

In addition to everyday social media users, we also see the Tribeca Film Festival adopting these contemporary mobile image-making methods. The internationally renowned festival recently opened a sub-competition, calling "for submissions from filmmakers who'd like to use the Vine platform to be featured on TribecaFilm.com, along

with a nice cash prize of $600" (Crook, 2013). The support of mobile video sharing by Tribeca is especially pertinent. It demonstrates the advancement towards modern approaches that are increasingly prevalent throughout the film industry. There is an argument, however, that these contemporary techniques of production and distribution are diminishing the ability for filmmakers to generate auratic experiences through their work.

In the article "Everyone I know is stayin' home: The new cinephilia" (2009), James Quandt reinforces Susan Sontag's "lament for the bygone days of cinephilia" (Betz 2010, p.130). Quandt's primary concern is with the rise of contemporary video platforms and their challenge to the traditional experience of watching a film projected from celluloid in a cinema. He points to film director Tsai Ming-liang's dissatisfaction with DVD format. Tsai believes that cinema is the only medium that offers viewers the full experience of his films (Quandt, 2009).

Quandt also gives prominence to how the colour grade in a 35 mm reel of Jacques Demy's *Model Shop* (1969) was much more dynamic than on a DVD (Quandt, 2009). He asserts that the DVD is a subservient imposter and lacks the aura of celluloid:

> *[o]ne enters the realm of the ineffable, of those venerable Benjaminian notions of aura and authenticity, when attempting to analyze the difference between analogue and digital copies – the weight, solidity, grain, clarity, the there-ness of images are all difficult qualities to describe (Quandt, 2009).*

What makes Quandt's claims significant is that he invokes Walter Benjamin's studies of the auratic experience while also asserting that motion picture, edited, manipulated and printed on celluloid is an auratic form of art. Such assertions could perhaps be updated to argue that celluloid film images are auratically superior to those on Instagram.

Although it is possible that Benjamin was referring to the three-dimensionality of those particular mountains, his definition arguably raises the question of its own feasibility. He described events and instances that he asserted could and could not generate an aura. These were assertions that directly contradicted each other in his various works. For instance, at one point he wrote in "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction":

> *One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process and its significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of the tradition (Benjamin 1935, p.3).*

Figure 2. Using Instagram filters, I manipulated the images contained in the interactive film *North* (2013). Location: -37.816446, 144.970093.

Nevertheless, writing in "A short history of photography,' he claimed that some earlier photographs produced with "primitive" cameras did have an aura to them. This aura dissipated upon the introduction of "instruments capable of overcoming darkness completely and of registering objects with the clarity of a mirror" (Benjamin 1931, p. 19). These were tools often used in art making during the 1930s. What he declares here is that the ability to modify the aesthetics of an image through such in-camera features as focus, aperture, and exposure, inherently renders the resulting image devoid of aura. We could posit that if Benjamin were writing today, such features might include jump-cut editing features in Vine, retro filters within Instagram, or simply the brightness settings on a user's phone.

Some theorists examining the notions surrounding aura have recognised that modern works of their time do indeed provoke an auratic experience. Bolter and his colleagues emphasize their work on *The Oakland Project* (2004), an ongoing audio project based in Atlanta's oldest cemetery. The *Project* offers "an experience in which visitors walk among the graves and hear the stories of the ghosts" (Bolter et al., 2006, p. 23). They note, "we are seeking to exploit the unique character, the aura, of the cemetery" (Bolter et al., 2006, p. 23).

Using their practice-led project as an example of the presence of aura in new media works, Bolter and his colleagues write that:

> *Benjamin was wrong if he thought audiences and producers would accept a final and irrevocable loss of aura in their popular media forms. What Benjamin identified was not the end of aura, but rather an ongoing crisis, in which the experience of aura is alternatively called into question and reaffirmed (Bolter et al., 2006, p.22).*

This account would explain both Quandt's contention that celluloid film is auratic and Benjamin's own contrasting views across his various publications. Bolter and his

colleagues highlight the presence of aura in *The Oakland Project*, its reflective nature, and the importance of the experience a viewer has with the artefact in question. Perhaps there is a possibility for contemporary media to exude an aura, but what sort of characteristics need to be present for that auratic experience to take place?

Schutt and Berry (2011) consider the nature of aura within family photography. They quote Briggs, who wrote that "the aura is neither a stable attribute nor an object, but an index of the dynamic fraught relationship between the beholder and the artifact" (as cited in Schutt & Berry, 2011, p.48). This assertion is a critical point, reaffirming Benjamin's hazy definition of the term while also explaining that aura transpires with the connection between the viewer and the object. Schutt and Berry point to their own ancestral photographs within the article. They highlight that "the aura in these two images speaks of optimism and trust in a good future" (Schutt & Berry 2011, p.49) thereby advocating that photography can be auratic. What must occur for an aura to be present is a personal context familiar to the viewer. This setting "draws our attention to something purportedly embedded in the photo itself, something that we feel but can't put our finger on – the 'different intensity'" (Schutt & Berry, 2011, p.39).

Steven Soderbergh points to a similar idea to that of Schutt and Berry and present in the decline of Hollywood. He defines filmmaking as:

> *a specificity of vision. Everything matters in this approach. It is the polar opposite of generic or arbitrary and the result is as unique as a signature or a fingerprint. It isn't made by a committee, and it isn't made by a company, and it isn't made by the audience. It means that if this filmmaker didn't do it, it either wouldn't exist at all, or it wouldn't exist in anything like this form (Soderbergh, as cited in Brody, 2013).*

The element that he says makes cinema so unusual appears to be this idea of an aura of personal context, that one person's perspective can alter the look and feel of a piece of media. This quality is something I was also aiming for when presenting my experience of Melbourne in the interactive film *North*. The focus of the film remained on my context, exploring my perspective as a resident and, before, as a visitor to the city. Contained in the film are clips of myself (intermittently on and off screen) traveling through various parts the city, considering what these places mean to me and how those meanings have evolved over time. While engaging further with Schutt and Berry's notion of the aura of personal context, the film was also adhering to Soderbergh's idea that "if this filmmaker didn't do it, it either wouldn't exist at all, or it wouldn't exist in anything like this form" (as cited in Brody, 2013).
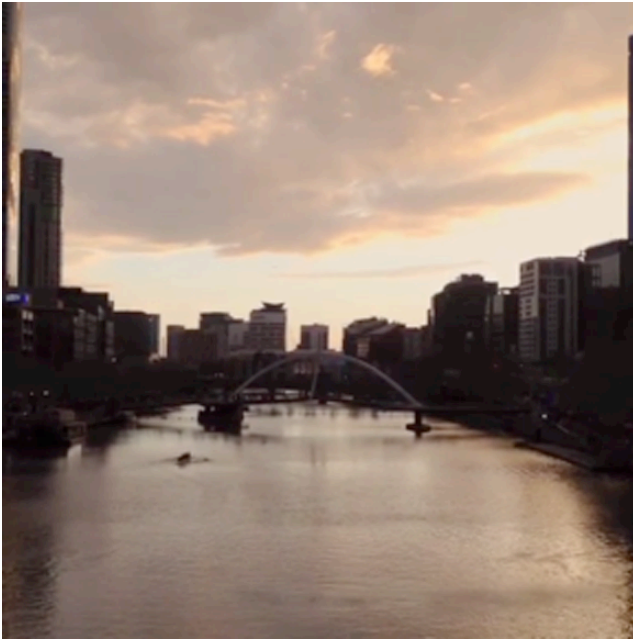
Figure 3. The interactive film *North* (2013) is compiled in Korsakow using images from my Instagram account (@patcheskelly). Location: -37.819243, 144.968204.

In addition to a compilation of posts from my Instagram account, the film also presents these video posts using the database film creation platform, Korsakow. The platform then arranges the videos in an order that allows the user to view the clips in a different order with each viewing experience. In doing so, Korsakow allows *North* to benefit from juxtaposition. The latter is a characteristic that Schutt and Berry also highlights for its considerable influence on the beholder of an image. They connect this "different intensity" to perceptions of post memory and aura, asserting that "there are the additional contexts generated though visual juxtapositioning; placing two or more media items together in a visual manner" (Schutt & Berry, 2011, p.40).

They go on to say:

> *when someone reads or views a narrative sequence, the meanings they get   from, or give to, an item such as a photograph will depend on what came before it and/or after it in the sequence. In other words, new possibilities … are generated from the contexts and frames created by the narrative journey to that item (Schutt & Berry, 2011, p.39).*

Weil reminds us of the history of juxtaposition, "beginning with collage in the early 20th Century" and notes that "as the flow intensifies, artists of all backgrounds have engaged with the notion of reprocessing cultural fragments, thus creating a new context for the comprehension of information" (Weil, 2002, p.524).

Juxtaposition is an integral concept to examine within the field of mobile video sharing platforms. In the instances of both Instagram and Vine, a user's posts are most often interrupted within a user's news feed by others' posts. Each person's feed remains unique from all others, depending on the number and variety of users one follows. For example, if one were to follow hundreds of active users, each of them posting within a short timeframe of each other, the default chronological sorting of these posts and the juxtaposition that occurs through this sorting might generate many different meanings for

the viewer. With so many posts combined to create new contexts, the process engages with Manovich's (2005) idea of "remixability."

Furthermore, by additionally applying such content to a platform like Korsakow, one can create even more contexts. Conversely, when viewing an individual user's entire collection of Instagram or Vine posts on their profile, one often finds a curated collection of posts. The author can deliberately arrange a collage of information and retain control over the resulting context.

In both cases, it is the archiving of these captured moments, the juxtaposition of these moments, and the resulting personal interaction that might generate an aura. Instagram's co-founder and CEO Kevin Systrom says, "When I think about what Instagram is, I think about moment … our mission is to capture and share the world's moments" (Buchanan, 2013). It is from within the context of these captured moments that an auratic experience can emerge.

Vine phenomenon *Simply Sylvio* similarly demonstrates the ability for the creation of new contexts within that platform. Sylvio is the creation of artist and musician Albert Birney. It chronicles the life of a six-foot gorilla portrayed by Birney wearing a mask, gloves, and human clothes. We learn over the course of many posts that Sylvio enjoys Nintendo, dancing, playing the trumpet, vinyl records, and nature (Rankin 2013). At one point on Sylvio's feed, he meets then later marries another gorilla named Lucy. They document their courtship and present it on Vine. One viewer writes that "Birney's dry witted, beautifully cinematic Vines are so lovely, I await each one with the same excitement and lunacy that most people reserve for new Breaking Bad episodes" (Rankin, 2013). Birney's works generate an aura through revealing the personal contexts of Sylvio's life. The viewer experiences what Schutt and Berry term "a different intensity." I needed to spend time exploring Instagram and Vine to examine whether mobile platforms could also create contexts such as those produced through Sylvio's developing presence on Vine. I also needed to examine the nature of my work on these platforms using an ethnographic approach that:

> *involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersly & Atkinson as cited in Pink, 2001, p.18).*

It was mostly through this research method that I discovered Instagram and Vine posts such as Sylvio's and that I was able to recognize the contexts and the resulting aura within these platforms. Drawing from a similar autoethnographic approach, I was also able to create my project, the interactive Instagram/Korsakow film *North*.

Ellis states that autoethnography is "research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection" (Ellis, 2004, p.xix). I found this research method particularly useful. It complemented the inquiry in an effective way given that the generation of aura seemed dependent on the development of extra, often personal, contexts. This notion also spoke to Soderbergh's idea that "if this filmmaker didn't do it, it either wouldn't exist at all, or it wouldn't exist in

anything like this form" (as cited in Brody, 2013). Given that *North* utilises video of my experience taken from my Instagram account, the inclusion of this work strengthens the likelihood that the final piece has an element of introspection to it alongside other personal contexts. By attaching subjective context to these images of locations throughout Melbourne, there exists the possibility for an auratic experience to occur.
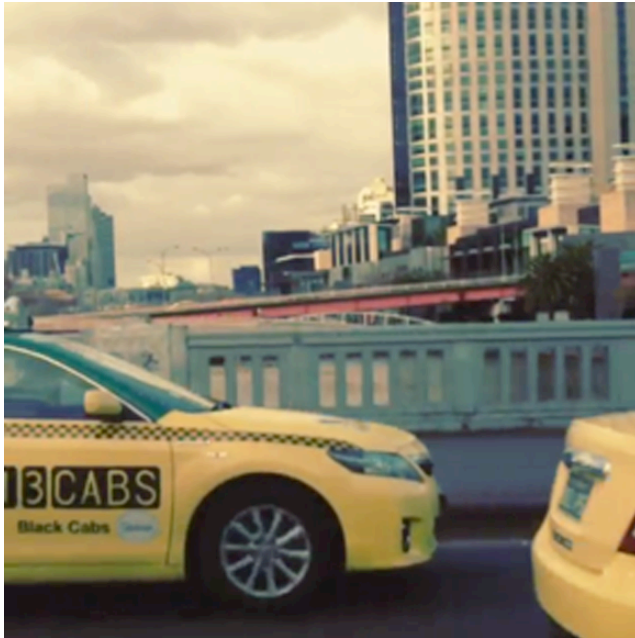

Figure 4. The interactive film *North* (2013) presents my experience of Melbourne. Location: -37.823141, 144.956017.

Through documenting a number of locations around Melbourne, I could present my experience of the city. The convenience of the mobile format was welcome. I found that its portability and high-functionality (the device was always powered on and in my pocket immediately before use) offered a filmmaking experience that is unattainable when using more traditional technologies.

I chose to record some of the clips on the suburban street where I live. This street would be unrecognizable, and perhaps at first inconsequential to many. In contrast, many of the landmarks captured are steeped in a long history and would generate their contexts. Examples of these include the areas outside Flinders Street Station and Parliament House. By capturing a wide variety of places, there is the possibility that many contexts will emerge within *North*. To invoke the earlier discussion of *The Oakland Project*, I sought to exploit "the unique character, the aura" (Bolter et al., 2006, p. 23) of these locations as well as my own personal contexts, to exude an aura from this work.

In addition to using Instagram Video for this project (the clips remain on my profile on that platform), I used the database film creation platform Korsakow as a distribution method. Korsakow allows the user to navigate between clips, often returning to the same ones at different time, and it includes a mobile platform in development. There is a belief that by using Korsakow "the treatment of discrete (linear) stories offers opportunities for compelling interactive narratives" (Boa-Ventura, Lopes, & Rodrigues, 2010, p.297). As such, it provides the creation of even more contexts through ever-changing juxtaposition. This is a function of the platform controlled in part by the user. It is possible to link Manovich's theories of remixability – a phenomenon mostly concerned

with new media – and the ability to form new contexts through the use of "remix," to the generation of auratic experiences. I hoped to achieve this by utilising the Korsakow application when making *North*.

The experience of shooting the footage was also one that complemented my inquiry. I have discussed the convenience and unobtrusiveness of mobile videography and found that this form complemented the experiential nature of my project. I was also mindful of the problematic nature of capturing a personal version of the events and locations in the film. Yet, as Pink writes:

> *More recently, MacDougall (1997) proposed that ethnographic documentary film should be used to challenge objectifying approaches in anthropology to emphasize the experiential and individual nature of social life and develop its potential to represent individuals and specific aspects of experience. This approach informs a style of filmmaking in which individuals rather than "whole cultures" dominate and the subjectivities of both filmmakers and subjects are appreciated (Pink 2001, p.139).*

As a result, I remain happy that some contexts remain vague within my film. I would echo Schutt and Berry's discussion of the impact of individual contexts on explicit situations (2011, p.41) and affirm the discovery of personal perspectives that might add to the auratic experience of the image. In the case of *North*, it might initially seem clear that the locations and moments presented in the film have some history to them. Yet, it is only upon attaining the knowledge of other personal contexts that an aura might arise. It is also worth noting that there is room for growth within this project. It is likely that I will add more footage to the project from my Instagram account, and I expect that many of these subjective contexts will grow stronger and more explicit in time.

This paper demonstrates the ability for contemporary mobile platforms such as Instagram and Vine to produce work that may invoke an auratic experience through the creation and exhibition of different contexts. *Simply Silvio* is one such account that in Schutt and Berry's words creates "new possibilities … generated from the contexts and frames created by the narrative journey to that item" (Schutt & Berry, 2011, p.39). Likewise, the interactive film *North* highlights possibilities for the creation of extra contexts through remixability – a discovery made through an autoethnographic approach involving the platforms Instagram and Korsakow. Through the presence of additional contexts, often manifested as a personal context within these mobile video-sharing platforms, an image produced using Instagram Video and Vine can provide an auratic experience for its beholder.

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