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Smartphone film, memory's connective turn and the aesthetics of embodiment in *Do You Remember That Year?* (2020)

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Do You Remember That Year? (*DYRTY?*) is a short, experimental film about the relationship between image, memory and narrative subjectivity, and about how this relationship can be impacted by the abundance of images generated and stored on Smartphones. *DYRTY?* won the Best International Premiere Video Award at the Avanca Film and Video Festival (Portugal) and the Best Smartphone Film Award at the South Coast Film Festival (U.K.).'

The film and the accompanying research statement examine the potential aesthetic and narrative responses to the 'connective turn' (Hoskins 2011), defined as an 'ontological shift in what memory is and what it does' as a result of the proliferation of digital technologies (Hoskins and Halstead 2021, 675). In particular, they address Hoskins' question about the use of mobile devices to capture images: 'What is our capacity to actually mobilise the archive of our experiences so that we come to comprehend our past […] in a meaningful and functional way (*ibid*, p. 678).

The research statement discusses the narrative and aesthetic methods employed in *DYRTY?* in an attempt tackle this question. In particular, it focuses on narrativization of episodic memory (Linde 2015) and engagement with 'the aesthetics of embodiment' (Rutherford 2003). An approach that allows for the exploration of the openly subjective 'metonymic slippage between vision, the image, the eye and the 'I' of subjectivity' (Doane 1985:61) and, consequently, the location of this subjectivity within the wider ecology where 'the perceiver constantly locates him or herself in the environment, that what we perceive is not data about the environment out there, but "the significance of surfaces in relation to our body"' (Cataldi 1993, 112).

Research statement

Do You Remember That Year? (DYRTY?) is an exploration of the relationship between image, memory and narrative subjectivity, in the context of the increasing abundance of images generated and stored on mobile devices. It consists of edited and manipulated footage captured on my phone over 18 months – in London, Italy, Spain and Cambodia – and a polyvocal narration provided by human and synthetic, computer-generated voices.

Recording on the phone is a compulsion of mine, like it is for many others. The disjointed, singular clips live in the phone's memory. But do they live in ours? And if so, how? Are they just pieces of record, seemingly neutral in their indexical purity? Or are they, or at least can they be, something else? In this short research statement, I outline the main concepts behind the development of this experimental film: the connective turn in digital image-making and remembering, memorial narrativization and embodiment.

Much has been written about what smartphones – and the media and data they allow their users to produce, share and consume – can mean for how humans remember, forget and experience, with a previously unimaginably rich archive, which so seamlessly mixes the public and the private, just a few taps away.[1] In making *DYRTY?*, I was particularly interested in what Andrew Hoskins describes as the 'connective turn' (2011); an 'ontological shift in what memory is and what it does' in response to the

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[1] See, for instance, Beer (2012), Lister (2013), Murray (2008) and van Dijck (2007, 2011 and 2013).

proliferation and dominance of digital technologies (Hoskins and Halstead 2021, 675). For Hoskins, this centres on 'connectivity between minds and bodies, between the personal and the public, which both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting' (*ibid,* 676).

Referring specifically to the use of mobile devices to capture images, Hoskins asks: 'If we are not recording to review and to remember, then what are we doing?' He proposes that '[m]aybe there is a security that comes with the moment of capturing,' but also that 'the act of recording has become more urgent than experiencing that which is recorded.' Finally, Hoskins asks the increasingly pertinent question: 'What is our capacity to actually mobilise the archive of our experiences so that we come to comprehend our past, or our lives [...] in a meaningful and functional way' (*ibid,* p. 678). In very simple terms, *DYRTY?* is an attempt at such mobilization, and an exploration of the fact that, as Martin Hand notes, 'it is not simply the case that as everyday life becomes a permanently accessible archive we have a superior capacity to remember' (2016, 271). If we accept this, what can we do with the images and videos in relation to memory and forgetting?

One response to this question, uttered with the acknowledgment that there are many possible others, is to narrativize this material somehow. Writing about the relationship between remembering and narrative Charlotte Linde (2015) states that 'both "memory" and "narrative" describe ways that an individual or a group represents a version of the past in the present' (2015). This was precisely what I wanted to do with the visual material on my phone. Linde goes on to point out that out of the three established memory models – episodic memory, related to 'a specific personal event or a sequence of events;' semantic memory, related to 'general facts or occurrences;' and procedural memory, 'the continuing knowledge of how to do something' – narrative most often deals with the first: episodic memory. It was through the subjective remembering of those images (and things I associated with them) that I wanted to mediate the phone archive. Lastly, the use of narrative seemed to be the most straightforward way of engaging with the inherent connectiveness of the material: 'Stories are typically told to someone: The act of narration assumes an audience' (Linde 2015).

Formally opting for the narrative model also implied a slight re-classification of the material on my phone. This allowed me to mark the ontological difference between the act of photographic record and remembering. Writing about analogue photography, Siegfried Kracauer states that it 'grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum.' The images of memory, on the other hand, 'retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with

photographic representation' (Kracauer 1995, 425). Conceived in this way, the archive is indeed connected to memory (in terms of storing and keeping) but, I argue, it needs to be mobilized in order to be connected to remembering – 'the act of using language to represent the past' (Linde 2015).

It could be argued that the smartphone already does part of this work. Unless organized into albums, the clips and images are presented chronologically, the time and place of their capture inscribed into the files. In searching for alternative modes of presentation, I began thinking about what gives them 'significance?' What could make them the objects of remembering or forgetting? Linde (2015), writing about the kind of information that tends to appear on private social media channels, observes that they 'tend to be "small stories"' and that they have 'the character of chronicles rather than specific narratives' themselves. In general, they 'do not have the shaping of moral meanings that usually characterizes narratives.' So where could such shape come from?

Again, there are many possible answers to this question and what was applied in *DYRTY?* is only one of them. While trapped on my phone, and in the cloud, the images and data I have generated and consumed do not exist in a vacuum. But what precisely constitutes their ecology? Given my physical and well as psychological connection with my smartphone, accessing this question through the concept of embodiment seemed like an interesting avenue to explore, both narratively and aesthetically (Rutherford 2003). I was particularly interested in investigating how it related to the 'metonymic slippage between vision, the image, the eye and the 'I' of subjectivity' (Doane 1985, 61 cit. in Rutherford 2003) and, consequently, the location of this subjectivity within the wider ecology where 'the perceiver constantly locates him or herself in the environment, that what we perceive is not data about the environment out there, but "the significance of surfaces in relation to our body"' (Cataldi 1993,112 cit. in in Rutherford 2003).

The focus on the body and embodiment was thus useful in departing from chronology as the organizing narrative principle. It so happened that the most memorable mind/body experience that coincided with the project was one of acute anxiety. It manifested itself through numerous physical and mental symptoms that then became projected on the clips I found on my phone in *DYRTY?*: from uncontrollable fight-or-flight reactions to ocular migraines. In this way, the voiceover, the soundtrack and the postproduction interventions tainted the images, even though the clips themselves largely bore no indexical relation to that experience, thus echoing Kracauer's skepticism about the ability of lens-based media to mimic remembering.

As well as being a recording device, a smartphone also functions as receiver. Like any other, my smartphone has a lot of apps, which monitor me but which also allow me to monitor the world. They, too, formed part of the ecology of the images I captured. There have been interesting studies of how the smartphone's many uses can fuel or stem anxiety and depression in different groups (e.g., Panova et al 2020). In the period under investigation in *DYRTY?*, my phone also carried a lot of apps, the data from which is still available. These data sets – from the numbers of steps I walked, to how many mindfulness exercises I completed on a particular day – also formed part of the informational and emotional ecology in which the captured videos operated and thus became part of the narrative (delivered by the synthetic, computer-generated voice).

But, of course, that was not everything. The connectivity and blurring of the private and the public, and the locating of oneself as a way of experiencing a given environment, are also tied up with all the other information that reaches us through the phone, including the news. At the time, for me, this resulted in thinking about the irreconcilable co-existence of my own, very privileged, first-world struggles and everything else that was happening in the world. I wanted *DYRTY?* to at least acknowledge the cognitive dissonance between the (im)morality of referring everything *to* oneself and the inevitability of experiencing the world around us *as* oneself.

In the film, I tried to engage with some of these concepts, experiences and feelings through audio-visual language. Sound, narration and editing are used in *DYRTY?* as one way of mobilizing the personal, smartphone archive in the memorial, or rather "remembering," sense. The framework of narrativization, connectivity and embodiment is, of course, one of many that could be employed to test the versatility of such a body of material – a practice that is likely to proliferate as our lives become more digitised and mediated. One of the aims of making *DYRTY?*, and writing this short accompanying piece, was to explore how practice-as-research can make connections between some of the theoretical strands in image, media and memory studies, and their empirical application.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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