

A BRIEF LOOK AT TEXTING AND THE INTERNET IN FILM

Transcribed by: Adrienne Smith & David Widman - Humber College

(keyboard keys clacking)

TONY: Hi, my name is Tony, and this is Every Frame a Painting. Today, I'm going to switch things up a bit and talk about problem solving. One of the reasons I like filmmaking is that sometimes you have to design a solution to a particular stumbling block. For example, how do you show a text message in a film?

(beeping)

It's an interesting conundrum. Texting is kind of visual, so in theory, this shouldn't be hard. And yet, every time a filmmaker cuts to an insert of a phone... you can hear the audience yawning. A lot of films just make it so that the characters don't text or they read the messages out loud like idiots, or worse, they invent some reason for the phones not to work.

MAN: 97% nationwide coverage and we find ourselves in that 3%.

TONY: But in the last four or five years, something's happened. Filmmakers have started adopting a new formal convention: the on-screen text message. It has exploded in just a few years. I first noticed it on the BBC version of Sherlock.

(varied dinging)

But after consulting Twitter, we found earlier examples in soap operas, teen movies, and in films from South Korea and Japan. Regardless of where you first saw it, this is a great example of how film form is always evolving. So, why are filmmakers adopting this? I think there's three simple reasons. First off, it saves money. If you have a story where texting is important, the director can save a ton of money by not shooting sixty close-ups of phones. All you need is After Effects and this guy.

ANDREW: Andrew Kramer here for videocopilot.net.

TONY: Second, it's artistically efficient. Shot/reverse shot is slow because the phone has to be on screen long enough to read it, sometimes in huge, ridiculous grandma font. On-screen texting solves a lot of this. It allows us to combine action and reaction in the same frame. Best of all, it gives us an uninterrupted view of the actor's performance, which is always nice.

But there is a third reason this has been noticed. Elegant design. And this is where Sherlock is definitive. This is beautiful in and of itself. You'll notice there's no bubble around the text because the bubble is the first thing that becomes outdated. The font has remained consistent for each season of the show. The colour is white instead of different colours for different characters. We aren't told who's sending and receiving, which is great, because now the audience has to infer based on the message, which increases our involvement. The words appear next to the phone but they float independently. Compare that to this film where the messages move as if they're attached to the device. Wait, no, to the person. No, to the device. Make up your mind.

So, who knows, maybe this will be a new convention, maybe it's just a stepping stone. While Sherlock seems to have solved how to do text messages, we have another issue. Many, many people have tried but we still don't have that one really good way of depicting the internet. Some methods are not exactly cheap; others are kind of inefficient. And others, well, you know. I am actually a big fan of one new development, the desktop film, where all the action takes places directly on the screen.

COMPUTER VOICE: Let me show you.

TONY: I can't speak for anyone else but these films are actually pretty similar to how I receive information on a daily basis. Some have emotional resonance, some are mysterious, and some are wonderfully experimental.

But if you really want to explore the cutting edge, there's only one place to go.

UMA: One ticket to Tokyo, please.



TONY: Where, for the last two decades, animation has been coming up with wild and crazy ways to show the world online, whether they be super flat and floating, or message board posts as inner titles, or plugging into a separate green online world. And there's a bunch of other fascinating possibilities that may or may not work in other

films but are really interesting just to consider. Even live action films from Asian directors have tried this, physical rooms where people chat, or an animated world within the cell phone.

All of these are experiments and some are honestly failures but that's good because people are trying. And for once, this is a level playing field. You and I have as much of a chance of figuring out the solution as the next Hollywood film. For something like this, lack of money is an advantage. Remember, cheap, efficient, elegant. For all I know, the solution is already out there.

MAN: A hacker.

TONY: Hell, Sherlock may have figured it out. But in the meantime, I think it's nice to appreciate a small formal step in the right direction. This is proof that film form is not set in stone. People don't stop inventing this stuff. And right now, at least, I see a big problem we haven't solved yet, and a very little playing field for anyone who wants to go for it.

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Every Frame a Painting. (August 15, 2014). A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film
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