Being Real in the Mobile Reel: A Case Study on Convergent Mobile Media as Domesticated New Media in Seoul, South Korea

Larissa Hjorth
Convergence 2008 14: 91
DOI: 10.1177/1354856507084421

The online version of this article can be found at: http://con.sagepub.com/content/14/1/91
Being Real in the Mobile Reel
A Case Study on Convergent Mobile Media as Domesticated New Media in Seoul, South Korea

Larissa Hjorth
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract / Convergence has become part of burgeoning mobile media. Whether we like it or not the mobile phone has become a vehicle for multimedia par excellence. Epitomising contemporary convergence by way of its smorgasbord of applications and multimedia possibilities, it seems almost impossible to get such a device just for voice calling without all the ‘extras’. But is mobile media a new emerging art form? Is it new media? Or is it a domestic technology? And in an age of convergent media can we distinguish the different media histories? As a symbol of convergent global media, mobile phone practices are also marked by divergence. This divergence is particularly the case in terms of the increasingly tenacious role of the local in informing and adapting the global. The history of the mobile phone as a communication device inflects the localized practices of mobile multimedia, fusing communication with new media discourses. This article will discuss the rise of mobile communication studies and the role of locality, then turn to one of the centres for mobile innovation, Seoul, to discuss the role of mobile media as a domestic new media.

Key Words / domestic technologies / locality / mobile media / new media / remediation / South Korea

Introduction: Mobile Reel
Over the last couple of years we have become accustomed to global media informing us of the revolutionary and democratic possibilities of mobile media. As John Boyd (2005: 28) notes, the mobile phone has become this century’s Swiss Army knife, much to the disdain of users who see it as an extension of the landline (Jenkins, 2005, 2006). Whether we like it or not the mobile phone has become a vehicle for multimedia par excellence, so much so that users who just want a mobile phone for voice calls find it impossible to get such a device without all the ‘extras’.

In one way, the rise of mobile media parallels the rise of the web cam by affording everyday users the ability to document and edit their stories, with mobile media promising more – a portal to new forms of distribution such as MySpace, Cyworld’s mini-hompy,
YouTube and so on. But is mobile media a communication medium or an art form? Simply put, is mobile media new media? According to Finnish researcher Ilpo Koskinen (2007), one of the key aesthetics of mobile media that makes it so compelling is its ‘banality’. In his study of camera phone practices in Finland, Koskinen observes that it is the banality that gives mobile media such realism and authenticity, thus making it of interest to the everyday user. Koskinen’s apt observations revise much of the earlier theorization of the everyday as a source for paired dualities such as the banal and sublime.

In order to tackle some of these questions arising from mobile media as new media debates, this article will firstly contextualize mobile media in terms of current debates around global technologies and a sense of place. In this section, I will outline the way in which mobile media must be conceptualized in terms of earlier domestic technologies such as the radio and TV. Having positioned mobile media as a domestic technology, and discussed how this influences associations and definitions of place, I will then discuss mobile media in terms of what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) characterize as the remediated nature of new media in the context of the various mobile media such as camera phone practices and location-aware mobile gaming. From there I will contextualize this phenomenon in a case study of one centre for mobile media innovation, South Korea. In this case study I will discuss the socio-cultural context and then turn to the main repository for South Korean new media, Art Center Nabi. Nabi – and its mobile media projects – will be contextualized in terms of current localized trends in global mobile media. By focusing on Seoul as a case study, this article hopes to meditate on the way in which convergent global mobile media is inflected by the (divergent) practice of the local.

**Locating the Mobile: Mobile Media and the Politics of Locality**

One of the compelling features of convergent mobile media, as distinct from other new media, is the role of place and locality. Emerging from a tradition of domestic technologies, mobile media re-enacts the performances around redefinitions of public and private space. In particular, the aesthetics, and thus politics, of mobile media are very much predicated on its formation as a domestic technology. Previous domestic technologies such as radio and TV have served to reconfigure public and private spaces in what Raymond Williams characterized as ‘mobile privatization’ (1974). As Williams observed, the rise of technologies and urbanity in the 19th and 20th century, from the train to the television, has been part of the way in which we have redefined space, and specifically the blurring between public and private spheres. For David Morley (2003), mobile media exemplifies Williams’s notion like no other media. As Morley observes, the mobile phone has further eschewed the blur between public and private as it no longer brings the public into the private as was the case for TV, but it inverts the flow so that the private goes out to the public.

As a form of domestic technology, the adaptation and adoption of mobile media is always ongoing and never complete, subject to symbolic negotiating within household moral economies (Hirsch and Silverstone, 1992; Haddon, 1997; Miller and Horst, 2006). The study of the mobile phone as a domestic technology necessitates what Daniel Miller and Heather Horst describe as a study not about ‘things or people but processes’ (Miller and Horst, 2006: 7). For Gerard Goggin (2006), through a revised version of Paul du Gay
et al.’s (1997) ‘circuit of culture’, mobile phone culture can be understood as a multidimensional and dynamic process. Without doubt, the mobile phone – as a poignant multivalent symbol and set of cultures and practices – is firmly embedded in what it means to experience place, co-present or not. Far from eroding a sense of place, ethnographic variation in mobile practices has demonstrated the significance of mobile technologies in asserting the importance of place as both a geo-imaginary and socio-cultural precept.

As Mizuko Ito’s ethnography in Tokyo (2003) observed, young people used the keitai to arrange to meet each other easily. Kyongwon Yoon’s ethnography in Seoul (2003) showed how hand-phone (haendupon) practices re-enacted traditional socializing rituals and familial relationships. These ethnographies are but two studies of many that demonstrate that mobile phones – as exemplifiers of ICTs – are bound to a sense of place and community. This leads Castells et al. to note that mobile networks are indeed augmenting the significance of locality and place (2007: 258). For Doreen Massey (1993) a sense of locality is defined through representational processes, a practice that is always mediated; what constitutes ‘home’ is often mediated by memories that colour and favour our sense of identity. This resonates with Genevieve Bell’s ethnographic research in the Asia-Pacific region in which she identified multiple, often competing ‘cultures of mobility’ that demonstrated that ‘what it means to be “mobile” . . . has distinct cultural meanings’ (2005: 70).

In a period marked by increasing forms of mobility – people, ideas, and capital – across nations, regions and globally, the symbol of the mobile phone acts as a poignant signifier. As John Urry (2000, 2002) observes, the particular milieu of contemporary global cultures has seen a ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences, in which the mobile phone has become a lens for debates around place and contemporary forms of society (Putnam, 2000). Through the lens of ‘transnationalism’ – epitomized by the global-and-yet-local mobile phone – social scientists such as anthropologists, urban geographers and sociologists have been able to rethink what impact various forms of mobility (social, cultural, economic, and geographic) of objects, people, ideas and capital have on a sense of place, boundaries and ‘imagined communities’ such as the nation-state (Anderson, 1983).

Much of the mobile communication research has sought to define mobile communication as an extension of already existing practices of co-presence (being here and there) and place. While the body of literature for mobile communication is quickly rising, the area of mobile media, especially as through the rubric of new media, is still relatively small. In this emerging field we see two dominant trajectories drawing from either camera phone ethnographies inspired by domestic technologies (Ito and Okabe, 2006) or new media projects such as the UK’s blast theory, Proboscis’s Urban Tapestries, and the SMS poetry and camera phone artworks of the.phone.book.Limited.

One of the striking features of mobile media, as a form of convergent new media, is how it reconfigures definitions of remediation. Mobile media’s remediation draws specifically from the lineage of domestic technologies and thus is mired in the politics of the household social economy. Thus this convergence implies a domesticking of new media. For theorists such as Koskinen, the remediation of mobile media results in the mobile showcasing the ‘mundane problem’ in which emphasis is focused upon the context rather than content of the multimedia. In turn, by disavowing the tyranny of
the visual that dominated much of 20th-century media cultures, mobile media is engaging with, and privileging, other sensorial dimensions as the haptic (Richardson, 2007). In this next section I will foreground some key precepts underlining mobile media’s relationship to debates in new media.

**Really Reel: Connectivity and Contact**

In the rise of the ubiquitous rubric of mobile media, many forms of practice have emerged. These fuse various forms of visual, textual, aural and haptic languages. They are also bound to new resurgences in the politics of personal aesthetics in which the epitome of the ‘personal’, the mobile phone, further engages this phenomenon (Ito et al., 2005). This has led theorists such as Manuel Castells et al. to observe that ‘individualism, not mobility, is the defining trend’ of contemporary networked society (2007: 251); and what it means to be ‘individual’ is linked to socio-cultural context (Chua, 2000). In the personalized and localized convergence of mobile media we can find an assortment of different sensorial effects such as micro movies (that is, movies made for mobile devices), pocket films (movies made by the mobile device to be screened either on the mobile device or other screens including the cinema), casual games, location-based mobile games, and camera phone practices.

In a period signified by convergent media and so-called interactive media, Bolter and Grusin (1999) utilize the notion of ‘remediation’ to make sense of the often non-causal genealogies of new and old media. As Terry Flew (2000) observed, there is little ‘new’ about new media; rather, new technologies often revise and adapt older methods of communication and representation. Just as Lev Manovich dismantled binaries between old (analogue) and new (digital) technologies in the early 1990s, Bolter and Grusin re-purpose Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the content of one (often newer) medium will also be that of another (often older) medium thus transgressing the old versus new debate. As Manovich (2003) identified, contemporary new media and digital practice is all consumed by fetishizing the real through the lens of the reel – that is, texture and skin of the analogue.

One of the dominant features of mobile media is how it further fetishizes the analogue by way of its obsession with modes of realism. This is one of the striking features of camera phone images; they are, more often than not, seemingly banal in their subject matter and composition. In an age of highly edited and photo-shopped images, the camera phone image provides an antidote. This has led Koskinen to perspicuously define camera phone imagery as ‘the aesthetics of banality’ (2007). As Koskinen (2007) notes, the banality of images renders them reliable and thus worthy of sending to others. Koskinen also argues that mobile multimedia, unlike mobile telephony, ‘re-territorializes’ experiences and communication (2007: 48–60; Scifo, 2005). Building on discourses of analogue photographic practices and a so-called democratizing of photographic media, camera phones are affording users the ability to document, represent and perform the everyday. Camera phone practices enact what Anita Wilhelm et al. observe as the ‘power of now’ (2004) sense of place.

Camera phone practices, as an extension of photography and snapshots, are about performing normalcy. However, because of the distributive and networked logic of mobile phones one is now left to contextualize these ‘banal’ shots and render them
‘newsworthy’ and relevant to the receiver (Koskinen, 2007: 51). In analysing the ‘banality’ aesthetics and politics of MMS (multimedia messaging service) practices, Koskinen argues that it is this banality and triviality that separates the agenda of the camera phone from that of the stand-alone camera; Koskinen concludes that the mundane function in interaction needs to be overcome as the possibilities for more ‘relevant’ usages grow. Or, as Barbara Scifo (2005) observes, it is a ‘domestication’ of the glance regime.

In the case of seminal research on camera phone practices (in Japan), one can go no further than the work conducted by Ito and Daisuke Okabe (2005, 2006). Having already documented some of the possibilities of camera phone practices – and its implications for image-making processes and productions of identity – in Japan, Ito and Okabe take up this discussion of the need to consider context and content. For Ito and Okabe, the meaningful points of camera phone use are interwoven with the politics of networks/contexts, distribution and interactivity. This is best encapsulated as what they succinctly dub the three ‘Ss’ – saving, sharing and storing; the three ‘Ss’ are undoubtedly central in determining possible interpretations, audiences and ongoing exchange/currency.

These three ‘Ss’ contextualize the visual and aural economies of mobile media; they take the ‘banality’ intrinsic to the everyday nature of mobile media and make it compelling. As these studies identify, the way to tackle global mobile media is via the local. In the next section I will briefly locate the role of the sociotechnological in South Korea’s capital, Seoul. Awarded the title of the most broadbanded country in the world by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2006) and pioneering online gaming genres that are played in 20,000 PC bangs (PC rooms), South Korea has gained much attention not only in the Asia-Pacific region (where the Korean wave, Hallyu, has dominated since 2001) but also globally (Borland and Kanellos, 2004). Through the lens of mobile media in the context of Seoul we can gain insight into the ‘domestic’ and localized nature of mobile media as new media and how this is imbued with a sense of place.

Waiting for Now: Locating Sociotechnologies in South Korea

Easily one of the dominant examples of 21st-century modernity, it is easy to forget that South Korea’s rise has been relatively recent. It is also important to acknowledge the diasporic communities of Koreans around the world that provide the need to conceptualize ‘Korea’ as an ‘imagined community’ – that is, a deterritorialized, transnational imaginary that extends beyond the geographic boundaries of nation-state. The role of technologies (and financial rescue by the IMF) has been significant in the recovery and rise of South Korea since 1997.

In South Korea, the intertwining of net and mobile telephonic spaces has helped facilitate Korean forms of democracy (Kim, 2003). For Korean sociologists Shin Dong Kim (2003) and Haejoang Cho (2004), the rise of a specific type of democracy in South Korea was afforded by, in part, new technologies such as mobile phones. The rise of online communities through internet cafes from 1999 to 2002 was perhaps epitomized by ‘pyeins’ (geeks) using the online community site Cyworld (dubbed ‘cypeins’ as in cy-geeks).
The importance of Cyworld (‘Cy’ meaning ‘between’ worlds or ‘relationship’ world) can be witnessed in the fact that over one-third (18 million) of South Korea’s 48 million population regularly use and visit their and their friends’ mini-hompys (personal home-pages). In Cyworld friends are called ilchons, a concept once used to denote one degree of distance (i.e. one’s mother is one chon) from family members in a traditional Korean kinship. This phenomenon of virtuality goes hand in hand with South Korea’s rise as one of the most broadbanded countries in the world. Beginning in 1999, Cyworld has expanded into a dominant social networking system (SNS) that, in 2006, was expected to generate over $140 million in sales (Jacobs, 2006). Cyworld’s success has been attributed, in part, to the dominant lifestyle trends in South Korea, the high-rise identical blocks of flats and an easy accessibility of broadband coverage. And also, ‘third spaces’ such as PC bangs (PC rooms) that have ensured the successful socialization of online content such as SNS, but, to a greater degree, online games (Chee, 2005; Huhh, forthcoming).

In Seoul one can find two types of youth sociality predicted around technologies – that of the mobile phone being used to contact friends and family (Yoon, 2003) and the internet through net communities such as mini-hompys (Hjorth and Kim, 2005) and online multiplayer games (Chee, 2005) mostly played in the very social space of PC bangs. In Florence Chee’s (2005) ethnography on PC bangs – spaces in which young people play online multiplayer games – these spaces are social spaces that are viewed as ‘third spaces’ between home and work. As Jun-Sok Huhh (forthcoming) observes in his analysis of the business and culture of PC bangs, it is impossible to separate the success of such a phenomenon from the role they played in disseminating and cultivating interest in the now dominant gaming genre, MMORGs (massively multiplayer online games). In a culture nurturing long working hours and living in high-rise apartments, the role of the various types of bangs (dvd, jimjil, PC) operates as satellite, parallel social spaces. For the youth of Korea – where most still live at home before getting married – these third spaces operate as spaces to connect with other like-minded people. In these examples, we see that the underlying reason for technological uptake is the desire to use it for social interaction, a process encapsulated by the concept of sociotechnology. As Rich Ling observes, mobile communication — symbolic of sociotechnologies — simultaneously engages with the politics of individualism and social capital (2004: 177).

The phenomenal rise of Cyworld could be read as a testament to its success in replicating Korean forms of sociality, kinship and social capital. Unlike in the USA in which communities such as MySpace, Friendster, Flickr, Facebook and media content sites such as YouTube have thrived, the Korean customization of the internet has taken socializing to a new level. With many more years’ experience than its western counterparts (Jacobs, 2006), Cyworld has managed to create a form of co-presence that speaks to particular localized forms of individualism, mobility and social capital. The significance of sharing, from buying virtual gifts for a friend’s mini-room, to the reproductive labour of cultivating a sense of care cultures, is apparent. The particular role of cute aesthetics in Cyworld (Hjorth and Kim, 2005) helps to socialize the technological space and is deployed by both male and female, young and old, distinctively different from western equivalents such as Gaia whose cute graphics have attracted children.

Even the US Gaia or Icelandic Habbo Hotel, whilst replicating the same cute aesthetics, tend to attract younger crowds who seem to conduct fleeting discussions that give
little information about the user's offline identity. Cyworld, however, is about a mirror world of the offline with the possibility of users exceeding their offline identity online and vice versa. This coherence between online and offline relates to Korea's localization and 'domestication' of the internet that has ensured its success in everyday urban life. South Korea appears to exemplify an innovative locus for emerging convergence technologies as undoubtedly massaged by the social and local. This leads us to ask: How can we conceptualize a localized notion of mobile media as new media?

Getting Connected: A Case Study Mobile Media

If the wireless experience is basically a street culture thing, lived by youth expressing themselves and communicating by any means available, including changing language by merging visual and text messages, for example, should we – those who are in the art field – feel threatened or enlightened? Maybe what we are seeing is the beginning of a new epoch in which the conventional meanings of the terms 'artist' and 'audience' are losing significance, not in a theoretical sense, but based on real situations in an everyday context. The potential for wireless creativity and 'art' being a critical and creative engagement with the intimate and the everyday context is here today. (Chung, 2004)

As Eunhye Grace Chung (coordinator of the Art Center Nabi’s Resfest’s Wireless Art Competition) notes in her article on Korean wireless experience, the potentialities of mobile media to challenge conventional relationships between artist and audience, user and producer are endless. The possibilities of convergent multimedia through mobile media have not been lost on new media artists – with collectives such as the UK’s the.phone.book.Limited, the UK’s blast theory, the UK’s Proboscis’s Urban Tapestries project, Korea’s Art Center Nabi, Marc Davis and his garage cinema group (short movies made on the mobile) and Finland’s AWARE – all utilizing mobile media as a form for experimentation, innovation and social commentary. The importance (by way of its ubiquity and accessibility) of mobile media has certainly taken off overseas, as identified by the 2004 International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) that focused on wireless experiences and the South Korea Art Center, Nabi, conducting the Resfest’s Wireless Art Competition (2004), Urban Vibe (2005) and Mobile Asia (2006).

Nabi’s exploration of mobile media began with the first (such as ISEA), clearly sign-posting the organization’s heavy commitment to nurturing the convergent mobile media. This agenda was, in part, influenced by the fact that the company’s funds and social capital are linked with the South Korean telecommunications company giant, SK. But it is also about a new media organization being an index benchmarking the nation’s shift from technological and economic prowess into a currency for cultural and ideological power both within the Asia-Pacific region (as the Hallyu phenomenon demonstrates) and globally. Given this, when I first began researching Nabi in 2004 I was expecting to be confronted by awe-inspiring technological sophistication that would revolutionalize the way I conceptualized emerging convergent mobile media. This didn’t happen. And then it struck me that the innovating features of mobile media are indeed how it both disrupts and reinforces localized normality around the banal and the everyday. This is where the power of mobile media lies, beyond the over-zealous hype about people power (Rafael, 2003; Kim, 2003).

In the Resfest’s Wireless Art Competition, Nabi sought to recruit various international new media artists to make work for mobiles; however, the result was little more than
screen savers due to the current generation of phones at that time (2nd generation). In 2005, Nabi housed a residency programme for the collaborative group INP (Interactive and Practice). Consisting of artists, engineers and media theorists, INP worked on various mobile media projects such as *Urban Vibe* in October 2005. The content of these projects was far from original in concept but the originality lay in the way in which locality operated to contextualize the content; very much highlighting Ito and Okabe’s argument of the importance of saving, sharing and storing in the informing of the content. The interesting outcomes of the projects were more about how they interacted and intersected with the general public, operating to test limits about the boundaries between art and the everyday. But did these locative projects do any more than just merely revive Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) notion of ‘relational aesthetics’ already widespread in contemporary art discourses?

One of the frustrating elements of mobile media, when contextualized as ‘new media’, is the way in which it is separate from the everyday socializing context that makes mobile media so exciting. This, to me, seems to defeat the point. Why aren’t artists thinking of creative ways in which to disseminate and interact beyond the context of the arts institution? Why do locative projects seem to reinforce divisions between the artists/actors and the general public (who usually respond in differing ways dependent on locality)? And when the art is taken outside the context, as was the case in the *Urban Vibe* project, why does it then need to be documented and exhibited in the gallery space? Doesn’t the need to qualify it as ‘art’ in the screen-like (or what Introna and Ilharco characterize as ‘screen-ness’) space of the white cube (despite relational aesthetics, I would argue that galleries still privilege the visual) contradict the very haptic nature of mobile media? Why hasn’t the ‘big games’ phenomenon (Lantz, 2006) been so successful in such a technologically endowed context?

The two projects I observed (and participated in) of the *Urban Vibe* project were *Myungdong Janggi* (Korean chess game) and *Shoot me if you can*. The chess game through the streets of Myeong Dong started slowly with a somewhat minimal number of participants (this may not have been the case for other sessions of the game). When it did begin, participants (also operating as avatars) wore coloured balloons on their heads to signify types of chess pieces and which ‘team’ they were on. The finish of the game consisted of two players standing right next to each other whilst the game-play was communicated to them via mobile devices. Finally, one player popped the other player’s balloon. Game over. In this project we are reminded that the enjoyment of playing games may not be in actually ‘winning’ but rather in the pleasure of the process of game-play.

These types of games serve to remind us that game spaces are social spaces, particularly prevalent in a location saturated with *PC bangs* and various forms of online gaming enveloping everyday life. While *PC bangs* function as a third ‘community’ space in between fusing the public and private, location-aware mobile gaming takes gaming out to the public, putting the performance of intimacy involved in game-play in the eye of the public. In a period marked by the ‘publicness’ of intimacy (Berlant, 1998) whereby such vehicles as camera phones can function as tools for narcissism, location-aware activities disrupt the normality of the everyday – for a moment.

In *Shoot me if you can* (by artist Choi Taeyoon) participants operated in teams replicating a first-person shooting online game. However, in this game the gun was replaced by the metaphoric gun of the camera phone (i.e. the snapshot as a hunting term) and
participants had to take a photo of opponent team members, forwarding it, via MMS, to Choi. The winner was the first to get all the photos of the opponents (hopefully not being ‘shot’ by the opponents during the process) in the limited game-play time. As a player (and a very hopeless one), I found the game was fun – giving excuses to run around the trendy streets of Myeong Dong and behave like an awry avatar. Often there were frustrating moments as one grappled with the technology and its lack of instantaneity.

Far from coherence between online and offline co-presence, this project highlighted the delay and deferral with which location-aware projects are imbued. Here we see that the politics of immediacy is always mired in the poetics of delay; a problem ever present in the simultaneous engagement of online and offline spaces. As Michael Arnold (2003) observes, contemporary mobile telephonic practices are ‘Janus-faced’, perpetually involving pushing and pulling across temporal and spatial everyday practices such as setting people free whilst operating as a leash.

One of the important aspects of Urban Vibe being conducted outside the safe walls of a gallery is the way in which the everyday person can be coerced or implicated. Such games as Shoot me if you can provide a platform for different types of public performativity whereby participants could ‘practise’ the everyday/familiar urban space in a new way. It is this pushing of the role of art and the everyday that is one of the most interesting aspects of Shoot me if you can. However, the lack of general public participants – in the case of the two sessions I witnessed – seemed to undermine the project’s brief. If these projects are about pushing the indivisibility between art and the everyday, or ‘relational aesthetics’, they need to get more of the general public involved as was the case in, for example, Proboscis’s Urban Tapestries projects in the UK.

Such projects as these need to gain more publicity (which Nabi’s sponsor Telecom giant SK could easily provide) to recruit members of the general public. In addition, the website could be more user friendly and informative; this would also help the recruitment processes and add to the general dialogue projects such as Urban Vibe require. Otherwise the projects are continuing to preach to the converted. Which is fine for the arts community that seems to thrive on reiteration (often in the form of aesthetic trends), but it seems to do little for the potentiality of mobile media as an exciting creative and personal media. And this problem seems to be endemic of current mobile media as new media projects. Whether it is a pervasive location-aware game, or a mobile movie, the exciting contextual possibilities of mobile media – its related networked avenues and challenges to notions of co-presence and intimacy – are often forgotten. One could argue that the problem of mobile media is symbolic of the current dilemma of new media in which the banality of the domestic, messy haptics and all, needs to be re-engaged.

In 2006, Nabi conducted the Mobile Asia competition to commission select mobile media (content made by or for the mobile) and pervasive projects. Once again, Nabi commissioned some artists to conduct some mobile media projects that explored location-aware gaming as well as experimenting with virtual spaces and gaming environments. While these projects were engaging they were disengaged by being housed in the far from general public space of the Nabi gallery. And here we see one of the biggest problems facing the potentiality of mobile media creativity – the issue of context. With so many vehicles and avenues for expression in the world of Web 2.0 (undoubtedly touched by the banality of mobile media) and with mobile media inhabiting everyday urban Seoul life, where does one ‘place’ domestic mobile media? Has the media become
so fetishized as convergence par excellence that the domestic, divergent dimension of
the new media has been neglected? And if the mobile phone is one of the most intimate
devices (Fortunati, 2002) why are mobile media projects pioneering inroads into new
forms of its emotional grammars (Beatty, 2005) and geographies of intimacy?

Conclusion: The Big Bang – Frozen Screens and Reel Haptics

If, as characterized by Robert Hughes (1990), 20th-century modernism is the ‘shock of
the new’, then might not mobile media, as indicative of 21st-century new media, be
defined as the ‘banality of the new’? Is this the byproduct of the relational aesthetics that
dominated late 20th-century art? As Meaghan Morris (1988) notes, through the lens of
the banal we can explore the politics of normalization and naturalization. Univocally, by
investigating the banality of mobile media we can engage in current debates about
normalization of the everyday. Mobile media is a banal and everyday media, at the same
time as it is significantly encoded into remediated and sublime practices of intimacy.
Moreover, the ‘mundane problem’ (Koskinen, 2007) of mobile media is undoubtedly
bound to the fact that it disavows the tyranny of screen cultures in favour of the haptic.
In the case of Seoul, one could learn a lot about the domestication of media through the
haptic and social space of the bang (Choi, 2007).

The banality of mobile media is unquestionably infused with its ability to be a repos-
itory for the sublime. In the context of camera phone practices, the banality of the image
is displaced by its context – the metaphoric bang – as a ‘shared’ medium. This shapes
the ways in which intimacy and co-presence are forged. In the haptic space of mobile
media we can find the spectres of the previous media haunting, as is always the case
with new media. But the ghosts of the mobile media ‘reel’ are not about a visual, screen
culture. Rather, they highlight the increasing prevalence of the haptic – the feel and touch
of the spaces that we inhabit both online and offline (such as the bang) that operate just
outside the frame of the miniature screen. It is the texture of this space that is mobile
media. It is the reel beyond the screen.

Indeed, one of the compelling factors to arise from mobile media, and this links back
to its fusion of remediation and domestic genealogies, is the persistence of the ontology
of the reel. However, unlike the 20th-century ‘reel’ – in the form of the aural modes of
address embroiled in ‘screen-ness’ – the mobile reel, and thus possible creative worlds
and realities, is undoubtedly governed by the haptic (Richardson, 2007). This is due to
the intimate (Fortunati, 2002) and personal (Ito et al., 2005) nature of the mobile whereby
it is kept close to the user in a pocket or held in the hand. For Chris Chesher, mobile
media is not an engagement of gaze, nor the glance, but rather akin to what he char-
acterizes as the ‘glaze’ (2004). Drawing on console games cultures, Chesher identifies
three types of glaze spaces – the glazed over, sticky and identity-reflective. For Chesher,
these three ‘dimensions’ of the glaze move beyond a visual economy, deploying the filters
of the other senses such as aural and haptic.

This formation of the glaze – a combination of aural and haptic into a ‘hapral’ – is
apparent in the fact that spectators often stand with their ear towards the mobile phone
when viewing visual mobile media, as if to listen to the pictures. While much work by
social scientists has explored camera phone ethnographies in locations such as Tokyo
(Ito and Okabe, 2003, 2005) and Seoul (Lee, 2005; Hjorth, 2006, 2007), one of the
features that is becoming increasingly apparent is the rise of other senses such as aural and haptic in the contextualization of these images and making them real (through the role of the ‘reel’).

In Ingrid Richardson’s compelling argument about mobile media she calls on the need to harness the importance of the haptic (2007). Conducting a small ethnophenomenological study on the use of phone-game hybrids, Richardson disavows the ocular-centricism prevalent in ‘new media screen technologies’ to focus on ‘the spatial, perceptual and ontic effects of mobile devices as nascent new media forms’ (2007: 205). As she persuasively observes, ‘In order to grasp the epistemic, ontic and phenomenological status of screen media it is important to trace their ocularcentric legacy; by understanding this history we can then interpret how mobile screens in particular work to bewilder classical notions of visual perception, agency and knowing’ (2007: 208).

Departing from what Lucas Introna and Fernando Ilharco (2004) characterize as the multiple ‘screen-ness’ inhabiting contemporary life, Richardson argues ‘yet this “frontal” relationship which is typical of our engagement with most screens – where the mediums of cinema, television and computer can be said to discipline the body more or less into a face-to-face interaction – is thoroughly challenged by the mobile screen’ (2007: 210). In conclusion, Richardson avows that mobile media disrupts ‘any notion of a disembodied telepresence’ deployed by much screen-based media; in turn, we can ‘see emergent spatial ontologies of a kind never before experienced in such a collective and interactive fashion’ (2007: 214).

However, while Richardson argues for a future in mobile media, particularly location-aware mobile gaming, where the virtual and the actual become seamless, there is much debate arising around the correlation between online and offline identity and how this is tailored by the local. As new technologies preach increasing immediacy, one could argue that the future of the ‘remediated’ mobile media is like its past, and thus dominated by the persistence of the reel and the delay in emerging glaze practices. It is undoubtedly these features that give the mobile its sense of place in the world in a period marked by various forces of mobility and locality. In the case of Seoul, the city of bangs and screens and ‘all things big and small’ as Jaz Choi eloquently observes (Choi, 2007), it is indeed through the haptic space around mobile media, rather than the foci of the screen, that we gain a sense of the ‘big bang’ that is mobile media. Convergent and divergent, banal and sublime, these are the new geographies of mobile intimacy.

Notes
1 It should be noted that currently, the dominant demography of mini-hompy users is late teenagers to early 20s. This shift to a younger demographic has occurred across the last couple of years, while Koreans in the mid 20s to mid 30s increasingly prefer media such as blogs.

References:


Larissa Hjorth is a lecturer in the Games and Digital Art programs at RMIT University, Australia. In 2007 she was BK research fellow at Yonsei University’s CICC Research Team, South Korea. Hjorth’s main research interests include gendered customizing of mobile communication, gaming and virtual communities in the Asia-Pacific. Hjorth has published widely on the topic in journals such as Journal of Intercultural Studies, Continuum, ACCESS, Convergence, Fibreculture and Southern Review and has a forthcoming book on gendered mobile media in the Asia-Pacific region entitled The Art of Being Mobile (London, Routledge).

Address Games Programs, RMIT University, Melbourne, 3000, Australia. [email: larissa.hjorth@rmit.edu.au]