Screening Screens: Cinematic Spectatorship in the Desktop Film *Noah*

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Abstract

This article explores the effects of spectatorship in the short film Noah, a nearly 18' desktop film created by Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman that premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival. My discussion progresses existing theories about the status of text in films and encourages us to rethink how *Noah*'s presentation of computer interfaces contributes to novel perspectives regarding the relationship between viewer and screen. Considering the computer screen's remediation and its cinematic effects, specifically focusing on the acts of reading and watching in *Noah*, I propose that the remediated computer screen in *Noah* transforms reading into a viewable activity, thus recharacterizing text as moving image. Altogether, this article posits that, as a desktop film, *Noah* dismantles set connotations of screens across early and contemporary forms of new media and paves the way for contemporary cinema's digital futures.

When *Noah* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2013, film critics lauded the film for its realistic portrayal of contemporary relationships maintained online and for its reinforcement of the idea that social media drives people apart as quickly as they connect them together.[1] A nearly 18' minute film that takes place entirely on a computer screen, *Noah* features an ambiguously-motivated teenage breakup that unfolds online, one that culminates in the protagonist's mystifying heartbreak. From the perspective of Noah, the film's protagonist, the audience views the action solely on his desktop — from which the sub-genre 'desktop film' ('computer screen film' or 'screen capture film' are also commonly used terms) derives its name.[2] We watch him navigate applications and websites like Facebook, Skype and Chatroulette on a Macintosh interface while his relationship

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[1] Tim Hornyak, 'Short Film *Noah* Will Make You Think Twice about Facebook', *CNET*, 18 September 2013, <https://www.cnet.com/news/short-film-noah-will-make-you-think-twice-about-facebook/> [accessed 8 July 2020].
[2] Mark De Valk and Sarah Arnold, 'Post-Film: Technology and the Digital Film', in *The Film Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 266.

with his girlfriend, Amy, unravels as a consequence of his own insecurity. In addition to this desktop interface, however, viewers also see the interface of Noah's iPhone juxtaposed with the view of his desktop in a few scenes, which shows the protagonist multitasking across various devices throughout the course of his breakup. Directed by Canadian film students Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman while enrolled at Ryerson University, *Noah* has yet to receive concerted academic attention, though it has garnered mainstream appreciation as the inspiration for a *Modern Family* episode that also takes place entirely on a computer desktop and was also in some sections filmed on the iPhone 6 and iPad Air.[3]

As encountering computer interfaces splayed on the silver screen may be an arguably jarring experience for select cinema traditionalists, considering *Noah*'s cinematic premiere would bring to the fore reconsiderations of spectatorship, especially in the context of desktop films, as well as forcefully put cinema studies in closer dialogue with contemporary new media studies, advancing film's conventional status as 'the original modern "multimedia"'.[4] This jarring experience, suggested by the projection of a desktop screen in a cinema, can be noted from the disorientation resulting from each screen's respective and contrasting connotations: the cinematic screen is often considered a shared, public screen in front of which large audiences gather to embark on collective viewing experiences, whereas computer and mobile screens are contestably considered more private and personal — as well as interactive and haptic —, fit for individual and portable viewing offered by its smaller screen size. On the topic of how cinematic spectatorship has evolved and continues to evolve in the age of new media, Francesco Casetti has enthusiastically observed how the contamination of digital culture in traditional cinema — as demonstrated by the newfound flexibility by which films are increasingly projected and viewed beyond their the traditional, 'dark room' cinematic spaces (that is, streamed on mobile devices or even projected as moving image installations within museums) — has transformed the role of the spectator and the general definition of what a cinematic experience may and ought to be.[5] In considering the myriad possibilities of cinematic spectatorship and its future role in cinema studies, this essay reverses the trajectory of Casetti's enquiry, in that it aims to consider how portable devices and the communicative codes associated with such devices fare when re-integrated into traditional cinematic viewing contexts — as exemplified by the projection of the desktop film in traditional cinematic venues — and how this integration may diversify existing ideas about cinematic spectatorship and its future evolution. The core of the argument thus prioritizes the cinematic première of *Noah* at the Toronto International Film Festival, where the short film was screened in a public cinema.[6]

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[3] Maya Kosoff, 'Modern Family Episode Shot Entirely on IPhones and IPads – Business Insider', *Business Insider*, 18 February 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/modern-family-episode-shot-entirely-on-iphones-and-ipads-2015-2?IR=T> [accessed 21 May 2020].

[4] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 50.

[5] Francesco Casetti, *La galassia Lumière: sette parole chiave per il cinema che viene* (Milano: Bompiani, 2015).

[6] As the filmmakers have uploaded their short film on Vimeo, it is understood that the film will

It is therefore necessary to clarify the use of the term 'desktop film', for its usage has remained relatively sporadic in recent film scholarship. The closely adjacent term 'desktop cinema' has been coined by Miriam De Rosa to describe Kevin B. Lee's film, *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), film that, like *Noah*, was filmed on a computer screen with a Macintosh interface and which shows and maps out the various YouTube clips filmed by onlookers documenting the filming of *Transformers 4* in Chicago.[7] Desktop cinema, as De Rosa and Wanda Strauven write, refers to 'films that incorporate the desktop environment in the narrative by way of a combination of pre-recorded desktop footage and other sources, including original or found footage, as well as PC-delivered data'.[8] The presence of the desktop in Lee's film, which the director himself has labelled as a desktop documentary, precisely, as De Rosa and Strauven have noted, 'emphasizes the idea of documentation'; it is a film that essentially documents others' processes of documentation, piecing together various pre-recorded objects like a collage. While Lee's *Trasnformers: The Premake* is indicative of some of the functionalities of the desktop film, this essay is more interested in how character identities are formed and communicated in desktop films and how the spectatorial experience of such films may change as a result.

In recent years, feature-length desktop films such as Aneesh Chaganty's *Searching* (2018) and Timur Bekmambetov's *Unfriended* (2014) and *Profile* (2018) have reached mainstream recognition, making this enquiry all the more relevant beyond the singular case of *Noah*. In fact, Bekmamketov's ardent use of the desktop aesthetic has led him to coin the aesthetic into a genre that he has dubbed the 'screenmovie' (or 'a new format of cinema in which all the action takes place on the protagonist's computer screen') that reflects

> the evolution of communication. The average person spends more and more time in front of the computer screen and looking at their smartphones. Virtual reality is replacing reality proper. Virtual reality has long since become part of various art forms, exemplified, among others, in multimedia and hyperlanguage. Virtual reality has its own laws, which, logically, infiltrate film and other media.[9]

Bekmamketov's claims here suggest that his films reflect of the way social media and communications on digital devices have changed the way we act and behave

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be primarily seen by current and future viewers on mobile devices rather in traditional cinematic contexts. However, this essay is primarily motivated by the interesting juxtaposition of portable and virtual screens in the cinematic context, as offered by *Noah*'s world première at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival's student showcase.

[7] Miriam De Rosa and Wanda Strauven, 'Screenic (Re)orientations: Desktop, Tabletop, Tablet, Booklet, Touchscreen, Etc.', in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. by Susanne Ø. Sæther and Synne T. Bull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 231–62 (p. 249).

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Timur Bekmambetov, 'Rules of the Screenmovie: The Unfriended Manifesto for the Digital Age', *MovieMaker Magazine* (blog), 22 April 2015, <https://www.moviemaker.com/archives/moviemaking/directing/unfriended-rules-of-the-screenmovie-a-manifesto-for-the-digital-age/> [accessed 5 May 2020].

in corporeal reality. Despite the director's choice to solely focus on the desktop aesthetic in his filmmaking, and despite his affirmations that the screenmovie format can accommodate films of all genres (beyond its already popular usage in horror films), the 'screenmovies' that have found commercial and critical success so far all belong to the thriller and horror genres — as Chaganty's *Searching* and Bekmambetov's films demonstrate — which interestingly suggests that the popularity of the desktop aesthetic in contemporary cinema is still largely genre-based and also seemingly the preferred technique for portrayals of secrecy and investigation set in the contemporary period.

This article strives to provoke reformulations of spectatorship theories in application to the narrative desktop film — to distinguish desktop films like *Noah* that tell a fictional narrative from other forms of non-fictional desktop cinema, such as digital audio-visual essays, which are often filmed on a computer with an added voiceover to produce an audio-visual form of film criticism. The effort to be carried out is thus two-fold: first, it shall explore how portrayals and treatments of texts have developed from films of the pre-digital era to desktop films, and, second, it shall analyse the connotations associated with screens of varying devices that evoke theories of remediation introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) in their seminal work, *Remediation: Understanding New Media.* Conceptualizing the cinematic potential of *Noah* demands analytic attention to *Noah*'s placement and treatment of text with image, and in conjunction with analyses of *Noah*'s remediated properties, this conceptualization of cinema as new media will ultimately affect how we may differently approach cinematic spectatorship in the age of new media. Annette Kuhn, proposing that dominant cinema (her term for mainstream cinema such as Hollywood films) is an economic and social institution by nature, characterizes film viewing as 'a collective and semi-public undertaking: it is also an activity which is, as a rule, paid for by spectators'.[10] Thus, approaching *Noah* within Kuhn's parameters of mainstream film viewing poses salient questions concerning the relationship between spectator and screen that may find renewed prominence in this computer-mediated context of cinematic spectatorship.

In *Noah*, text and non-textual movements within virtual spaces come to substitute elements of character personality that, in the traditional and popular context of live action films, have been conveyed through the characters' physical bodies. Traditionally, spectators glean character traits from facial and corporeal gestures, quirks, speech, and bodily movements enacted within a physical space, and, more often than not, these traits serve as aural and visual indicators that are linked to and reveal the characters' personalities and attitudes, typically amplified to an excess in melodramatic films, for example.[11] Within *Noah*, however, ascertaining these cues

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[10] Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 21.
[11] While Peter Brooks does not explicitly discuss the role of melodrama in cinema, he does discuss the connotations of melodrama, which can be applied to an understanding of melodrama as a cinematic genre. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 9–10.

demands astute and concentrated close readings of how Noah browses his computer — or, more specifically, how the cursor moves across the desktop and how the close-ups of the profilmic event supposedly indicate Noah's eye movements. The corporeal reality from which we, as spectators, are able to understand Noah is substituted by a computer interface, the new context on which his character is presented without explicit verbal or visual cues that would normally register our understanding of the protagonist. The quick and fleeting manner in which Noah frantically highlights comments and other texts on his screen, jumps from tab to tab on his browser, or arranges windows on his desktop might suggest, for example, the protagonist's increasing paranoia caused by his girlfriend having abruptly hung up on him without a follow-up explanation, his lack of trust in her, as well as his own insecurities about their relationship. However, in our attempt to understand (and, perhaps, to even identify with Noah), we are confronted with this additional layer of complexity: the spectator's comprehension of Noah only amounts to an understanding of a virtually-mediated presence of his character because Noah's virtual presence stands in for his entire physical being. Spectatorship thus operates from the viewer's identification with Noah's virtual self via the spectator as a user, formulating a user-to-user — rather than person-to-character — mode of cinematic spectatorship. This observation shows some affinity with Cederberg and Woodman's decision to entitle their film *Noah*, as the correlation between desktop and character prompts viewers to equate Noah's desktop interface as Noah *the character*. Cinematic spectators are not only watching a film about Noah, that is, the way in which he navigates his desktop, but they are also watching *him* as well. The way in which Noah customizes the appearance of his desktop — having chosen to arrange his files in the shape of a heart around his and Amy's faces — is, for example, one such indicator of their relationship status and a portion of his character made visible.

Text as Moving Image

In other instances, viewing Noah's Facebook Messenger chat may also prompt viewers to determine and judge — via varied, personalized experiences with

Fig. 1: Noah writes to his Facebook friend, Kanye East, in speculation that his girlfriend Amy might be leaving him (4'50").

social networking — Noah as a character. This assumes that viewers comprehend Noah based on a subjective relation to the digital medium of the computer, its temporality and affect. Those versed in social media codes and communicative behaviours and lingo adopted in online chat forums, for example, may speculate from Amy's lack of response and her changed profile picture that she might have inexplicitly initiated the breakup with direct confrontation with Noah — an assumption cued without other cinematic elements such as dialogue or music to register that diegetic turning point (fig. 1). Coded signs and mannerisms often used in and pulled from interactive online and social media contexts, such as ellipses that disappear then reappear or the duration of pauses whilst typing, may indicate one person's relationship status with another. In this view, closer friends may tend to type hastily to each other while sending rapid-fire exchanges, more often than not in coded language, whereas two individuals at the start of any relationship (especially one in which one or both parties are eager to impress) may spend more time crafting their messages that will certainly serve as a reflection of one's personality and subsequently be judged by their recipient. Such signs, when presented in a filmic context, begin to carry as much linguistic significance as words, though their capacity as plot points in *Noah* ultimately relies on the spectators' cultural versatility and fluency in online messaging. As such, *Noah* presents a hybridization of social media language that comes into contact with cinematic language, and this hybridization, exemplified by the use of social media and online vernacular in establishing character personality, comes to substitute cinematic language in this extreme case of the desktop film, ultimately redefining how viewers perceive and understand the relationships between characters, as well as reformulating viewers' engagements with the cinematic screen in this particular case of expanded cinema. Key in this exploration are the text we read on the screen.

The usage and presence of texts within films are neither unprecedented nor revolutionized by new media's emergence in recent cinema, though definitions of 'text' have grown and varied as a result of digital technologies that have extended creative flexibility in postproduction editing for contemporary digital films. From a pre-digital standpoint, for example, texts in films are usually defined as words that take on a stationary, inanimate role. In the context of French New Wave films, texts refer to words on objects such as letters, book covers, and newspaper clippings to name a few — objects which, as a matter of fact, play prominent roles both as diegetic and non-diegetic sources. These texts, however, can be but are not always stationary. In François Truffaut's *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975), for example, the act of writing letters, Adèle's narration of her letters (and even the letters themselves) may be interpreted as crucial turning points in the film — moments in which Adèle receives and opens a letter from her famous father, Victor Hugo, or moments in which Truffaut presents a close-up of a newspaper clipping that announces the death of Adèle's mother, for example, further the plot and, in retrospect, become major turning points. As such, texts, in the sense of words on paper, arguably already hold diegetic

significance in this pre-digital period. A different example comes in Michael Snow's literal interpretation of text as moving image in his experimental short film *So Is This* (1982) where the projection of white text against a solid black background animates the still nature of the projected words and encourages viewers to watch the film as though they were reading. Altogether, the notion of 'text as moving image' is offered by the idea that we, as viewers, see the act of writing in real time in these films, an act that make these texts both readable and watchable cinematic engagements.

With the continuous permeation of internet culture in everyday life,[12] treatments of texts in cinema have explored digital forms of representation as filmic texts begin to visually transpose computer and mobile screens wholly into cinematic realms. Consequently, texts have begun to take on new forms and meanings, freed from their once-limited possibilities in the pre-digital context as they begin to appear more frequently as text messages, status updates on social networking sites, website content and computer code, to list a few examples. Irwin Winkler's *The Net* (1995) portrays webpages as moving images by superimposing screenshots of web content over each other to create the effect of swiftly browsing page after page without showing a computer or its screen in the profilmic frame. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman's anti-utopian thriller, *Nerve* (2016), features a similar aesthetic via its projection of web pages over a character's face, layering virtual presence over corporeal reality to communicate that virtual space is as present as corporeality or that it serves as an extension of one's physical existence. Similar to Winkler's *The Net*, *Nerve* does not feature the physical screen within the profilmic event. Joost and Schulman's placement of a transparent browser window over a character's face effectively provides a comprehensive description of the character in the sense that a superimposition of the character's virtual presence on the physical form conveys the variously mediated identities of a single person. This aesthetic choice, however, is also a diegetic one, as *Nerve*'s plot is about how the obsession for maintaining a virtual identity may threateningly consume and even dominate the corporeal self. In Beau Willimon's television series *House of Cards*, text messages hover around characters' bodies to display their online activities alongside their offline presence. This feature, too, suggests that while the characters exist in physical spaces, their virtual activities are still omnipresent and not secondary to their corporeal actions in the physical dimension.

In light of these varying displays of text from French New Wave cinema to contemporary new media instances, the similarity linking both usages is the visible human figure displayed alongside the writing of these texts. While texts in pre-digital cinema and texts in the new media context differ in that they are respectively written in corporeal and virtual spaces, the source producing these

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[12] For a detailed description of how internet culture continues to permeate everyday life, see *The Internet in Everyday Life*, ed. by Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

texts is always present and visible; we typically see the character writing on paper or typing on a mobile device. But in the case of *Noah*, this corporeal source is not always present on screen; Noah himself, portrayed by Sam Kantor, is only visible in certain frames, such as in moments when viewers see his face when he dials his girlfriend Amy on Skype. Viewers see text appearing and being highlighted, as well as windows and applications opening and closing without seeing the corporeal owner of the actions on screen, which provokes further interrogate the functions of texts in *Noah* and their effects on cinematic spectatorship.

Writing on the presence of language within film in her analysis of Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), Ágnes Pethő notes that texts in pre-digital films, uninfluenced by the pervasiveness of new media, parallelize the once distinct acts of reading and viewing:

> We anticipate with curiosity what will come next, there is tension and there is release of tension along the experience of reading, there are unexpected turns of 'events,' changes of rhythm, very much in a similar way as in the experience of a traditional narrative film, only this time have a self-reflexive projection of the intellectual and emotional processes involved in the act of reading: the experience of reading shown in the same way as we experience a film.[13]

Here, Pethő compares the experience of reading texts in films with the experience of watching narrative films, and her point is valid in the sense that Snow's film indeed features text against a plain black background and portrays text as moving image. The viewer's engagement with *So Is This* is determined by not only the content of the projected text but also the manner in which it is projected. Pethő notes that viewers are encouraged to read the words as though they would analyse an image, as Snow has already set the pace at which viewers should approach and engage with the text.

Now considering Pethő 's point in application to *Noah*, we may argue that reading the messages that Noah writes to his friends, for example, is an engagement with moving images in the same sense, as films featuring writing 'impose their own rhythm and time structure over the reader who is no longer in control over the temporality of reception'.[14] While viewers may approach Noah's written messages in their own manner, this 'temporality of reception' — or the time allotted to viewers to engage with the texts after their appearance on screen — is already pre-determined by Cederberg and Woodman, meaning that the reader's inability to 'independently turn the page', so to speak, characterizes the text as moving image. Thus, Pethő would argue that the appearance and representation of any text, analogue or digital, would nonetheless constitute a moving image in the cinematic realm.

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[13] Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p. 83.
[14] Ibidem.

As mentioned previously, the use of texts in *Noah* illustrates a hybridization of social media language merging with cinematic language, and while I have demonstrated how the film's portrayal of text is communicated and expressed via social media language, it is important to also observe how the same text is, first and foremost, portrayed in cinematic language. *Noah* retains cinematic language through its abundant close-ups — specified here as moments in which the 'camera' zooms in rather dramatically then pulls back —, which demand viewer attention by telling viewers where to look on the screen, much like the close-up's conventional purpose in live action cinema. The profilmic image is rarely a static one; in fact, it presents a perspective that navigates across the desktop at a rather fast pace, following the movements of Noah's fleeting cursor as it opens and closes applications, switches between tabs and windows, and executes browser searches. Furthermore, this element of *dynamicity* in movement allows viewers to closely follow Noah's actions figuratively and quite literally, as the close-up of a search bar, for example, dramatically and exaggeratedly signals Noah's presence on the screen via an incredibly close, detailed, and nearly microscopic level of interaction that screen users do not have with their personal devices. Additionally, these text-based moments do not provide much opportunity for reading, as the dynamicity of the camera movement in these browsing sequences primarily serve as watchable engagements that may be read, thus further enforcing the view that *Noah*'s status as a desktop film has not completely dismantled the typical conventions of a film, and that, in some instances, may be even thought to be extending the tradition of cinematic portrayal of texts as seen in earlier films. However, this last point is valid only for the cinematic projections of *Noah* in cinemas; we must not forget that present and future viewers of this short film have access to the film online, and that the ability to pause and rewind moments in the film allows for a completely different spectatorial experience.

Noah's portrayal of text as moving image progresses similar instances that were already manifested in prior works such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Scenes featuring Pierrot, Godard's protagonist, writing in his journal from a first-person perspective may be analysed as an instance of how text operates as moving image. The audience's interaction with such text in Godard's film comes in not only reading what he is writing, but in also observing the act of writing with anticipation and attention to its formation in cinematic real-time. Writing on Godard's use of words and images, Pethő argues that text in film is treated as image because they are cut up and displaced like a collage:

> Text is always subjected to violent de-contextualization and re-contextualization as it enters the screen: it is torn out of context, and broken down to words and letters, these pieces in turn are often re-arranged and multiplied (we see extractions of words from words, inversions, anagrammatic plays with letters and onomatopoeia). Collage and texture are key notions of both image and text.[15]

[15] Ivi, pp. 271–72.

This loss of context, according to Pethő, is critical to understanding text as moving image in these pre-digital films; because the words do not appear on screen as they would in a print medium, for example, we do not associate the words, first and foremost, *as words*, and second, we do not immediately grasp the need to read them. Instead, Pethő suggests, these words appear to viewers as pieces of letters that are often 're-arranged and multiplied' and, thus, revealed to viewers as words to be read: an example of 'violent de-contextualization and re-contextualization'. In the opening title card sequence in *Pierrot le Fou*, letters appear non-linearly. Viewers must wait for the letters to arrange in a legible order before they may convey meaning. This disruption of reading can be argued as an instance in which the words, altogether, operate as a visual spectacle to be viewed rather than read. In another moment, Godard's portrayal of the transition cards 'vie' and 'rivière' are later revealed to come from the same sign; in this example, text functions primarily to establish setting.

Remediated Interfaces

However, we cannot apply Pethő's understanding of texts to *Noah* because this desktop film does not violently decontextualize then recontextualize words. Words in *Noah* still remain in their original contexts. Spectators are meant to recognize the words' role as instant messages or emails that do convey meaning and facilitate the communication between two parties, which means that text in *Noah* is not decontextualized then recontextualized like a collage, but is, in fact, remediated, from the computer and mobile screen to the cinematic one.[16]

Remediation, following and Bolter and Grusin's formulations, refers to the placement of one medium into another medium's context, meaning that all digital media remediate, as digital media fundamentally involve the refashioning and rehabilitating of earlier forms of media into digital spaces in order to make them more accessible and user-friendly.[17] Bolter and Grusin outline three forms of remediation: 'remediation as the mediation of mediation', 'remediation as the inseparability of mediation and reality', and 'remediation as reform'.[18] Remediation as reform is perhaps most applicable and visibly felt within *Noah*, as the desktop film *reforms* reality, remediating the interactive interface of the computer and mobile screen into the traditionally non-interactive realm that is the cinema, by presenting to viewers a fictional construction of authenticity and liveness. In other

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[16] The specificities as to what truly constitutes a cinematic screen, given the various devices — portable and stationary, on which films may be screened, is a salient point to consider, but as already mentioned earlier, this essay acknowledges though leaves aside such enquiry to focus more stringently on the instance of screening computer and mobile screens in a traditional cinematic context, that is, referring to the projection of desktop films in movie theatres.

[17] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 53.

[18] Ivi, p. 55.

words, the remediated computer screen gives viewers the illusion that the cinematic screen on which the desktop is projected can be manipulated *live*, as viewers follow and engage with the plot — which progresses in a temporally linear fashion — by reading and watching texts and their movements in imaginary real time.

This claim presupposes an agreement with Lev Manovich's argument that traditional cinema conveys a narrative that is recorded from a past moment in time but that movements on a computer interface are always happening live.[19] Even though *Noah* is scripted — directors Woodman and Cederberg are also credited as the screenwriters — the nature of the computer screen as a 'screen of real time' connotatively misleads viewers to believe that all movements taking place on the desktop interface are unfolding as the viewers are watching, as if the content that Noah is browsing and interacting with have all been produced as a result of chance. *Noah* abruptly ends with the protagonist's missed connection on Chatroulette, and the very nature of Chatroulette as a social media platform that assigns conversation partners together at random seemingly poses as a conflict within the confines of the film's fictional universe. This open ending strongly confirms to viewers that, as a medium and an infrastructure, the internet does not have a pre-determined end date, and neither does it take pause for scheduled periods of time. Instead, it is, for the most part, a developing medium constantly evolving and progressing in a linearly forward motion. Therefore, the fictional elements and qualities of this film appear to have been trickier to grasp and control in the filming phases, as simply refreshing a webpage, such as a social media feed, produces modified results: the timestamp on a status update will change with the passing of time, for example, which may complicate the filming process via the necessity of constructing a pre-determined timeframe for the events to occur and of capturing main scenes in a single continuous shot to establish and maintain logical and believable continuity on the interfaces of Noah's computer and mobile.

Despite the film's remediating properties and the immediacy of its construction and presentation, *Noah*'s lack of diegetic finality does not go unnoticed; viewers become aware that the story does not *end* simply because Noah has logged off, and they may start to question whether some of Noah's Chatroulette partners were indeed scripted or if they appeared as a result of chance. In his definition of interface, Alexander Galloway argues that interfaces are not merely objects nor boundary points but instead 'autonomous zones of activity' and 'processes that effect a result of whatever kind'.[20] Considering, in this view, the interface not as an object but as a process, we may observe how the computer screen, as one of the principle narrative interfaces in this film, contains many narrative spaces layered onto one image: a representation of Noah looking into his webcam, the applications visible on the desktop screen and the ones browsed by Noah, and a representation of the person with whom he is communicating (both textually and

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[19] Lev Manovich, p. 103.
[20] Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), p. vii.

visually), hence labelling the profilmic event as presenting the events portrayed before, on, and beyond the screen. Due this multi-layering of narratives on the computer interface, viewer response and comprehension of Noah's plot may similarly take on multiple readings. The fact that we can read and misinterpret his texts will reveal different interpretations of Noah, such as whether his actions are considered paranoid, overly dramatic, or if they are perfectly reasonable according to the judgments of spectators. To consider messages as dialogue ultimately creates uncertainty for viewers with respect to comprehension of the narrative and Noah's character, such as if they have understood the narrative in a way intended by Woodman and Cederberg.

Noah's form also purposefully disorients viewers, in the sense that the familiarity of the computer screen as a personal screen immediately alerts us to the possibility that because we have access to such a view, we are perhaps trespassing or breaching private space. Michele White theorizes the computer user as seldom more of a spectator than an actual user: 'The person at the computer does not just 'use': he or she also looks (and is surveilled) and, like the film spectator, is structured as a subject of ideology through the ways his or her spectatorial position is defined by the discourses with which he or she engages'.[21] From White's perspective, it may appear that remediation has not changed the computer screen very much from its initial nature; there is already a cinematic quality attributed to the act of engaging with and using a mobile device, such as a computer, in that the user is also a spectator. The computer screen's remediation might only further underline its pre-existing cinematic elements, as *Noah*'s passive audience cannot interact with any element on screen. The remediation creates an illusion of interactivity, as the computer interface gives us the impression and the illusion that we can type texts onto Noah's screen, but the context in which *Noah* is screened ties us back to the passivity of cinematic spectatorship.

We have already established that the role of texts in desktop films such as *Noah* goes beyond the simple transformation of reading into watching; text in *Noah* is not solely an image that has lost the 'transcendence of writing', as phrased by Jean Baudrillard, simply because it is screened in a virtual context.[22] While we must not forget that *Noah* demands the viewer to read Noah's messages for narrative comprehension, we may counterargue that the image-value of texts within *Noah*, noted within Noah's typing, for example, reveals diegetic details, builds suspense, and fleshes out the characters' personalities more so than the actual messages of the texts themselves. This is partially an effect of the impression that

[21] Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 8.

[22] Baudrillard argues that texts become images in the virtual context: 'This [virtual text] is worked on like a computer-generated image — something which no longer bears any relation to the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. At any rate as soon as you are in front of the screen, you no longer see the text as text, but as image. Now, it is in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right — never an interaction'. See Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2014), p. 177.
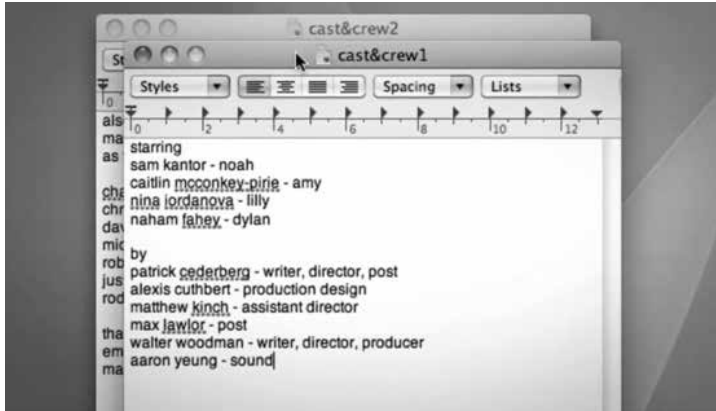
Fig. 2: Credits sequence features the credits typed out on Apple's TextEdit application (17'39").

Noah's messages are written in real time and that the narrative events, due to their portrayal on the computer interface, seem unedited and raw.

Noah ends by remediating the computer interface back to a cinematic one, as the credits appear on the desktop by Noah closing text files with the filmmakers' names already typed in the word documents (fig. 2). *Noah*'s active and constant, back-and-forth remediation — of remediating the computer screen into the cinematic screen and vice-versa — reminds us of the properties of cinema as it reminds us of the properties of social media and the digital. Although we might believe *Noah*'s narrative and character to be unfolding in real time, the active remediation corrects our utopian thinking by confirming that the narrative is, in fact, scripted. Because we are not taken out of the computer interface at the end, the credits deceptively convey diegetic qualities, even though, viewers are aware of the story's ending: the view of his desktop is still present even though the film has ended.

Conclusion: The Screen as a Body

As a film that heavily relies on screens for its content, or rather more precisely, relies on computer and mobile interfaces to deliver the narrative, Noah has demonstrated a novel mode of spectatorship wherein spectators engage not with physical human characters but rather with texts, applications, websites, and a cursor that browses through these pages and applications. In other words, as much as *Noah* provides a screen narrative — in the sense that without the screen, the narrative cannot unfold — the film also additionally unveils a narrative of the screen itself.

The concept of a screen and its definition have undergone several developments by several authors who have approached the subject in varying ways, both as an object and not as one. In his 2006 essay entitled 'Screen Narratives', Jan Baetens writes on the presence of function of screens in earlier films, namely Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), to observe how the presence of a television screen in a particular scene of that film carries with it a double function: not only is

the television a prop in the film (albeit turned off), but its screen is a reflective surface that functions as a mirror that provides a reflection of fleeting actions that would otherwise remain off camera. Through this observation, Baetens argues, in this portion of his essay, how screens may be present in everyday objects, from the reflective properties of windows during night-time scenes that, when juxtaposed, resemble multi-window computer interfaces, to polished floors that add furtive details and perspectives to the main narrative and enhance the spectator's engagement with film as a whole by promoting new sources of looking and seeing.[23] However, Baetens account of screens here merely notes their reflective properties as mirrors and their abilities to renegotiate spatial boundaries in the profilmic; the screen is still primarily treated as an optical device. Mapping a genealogy of the screen that diverts from this understanding of the screen as a mirror or a window comes Giuliana Bruno's theorization of the screen as 'spatial formations that are relational', as an architecture itself that constructs an environment rather than simply being an object or a surface on which image, moving or still, can be projected.[24] This proposed identity of a screen as a site of transition and a space of relations detracts from their characterization as objects and emphasizes more so their identities as fluid spaces. Writing on the screen's ability to project immersive environments, Ariel Rogers summarizes succinctly the boundaries of screen presence, reminding us that the screen, as an object, 'supplies means of sheltering, concealing, filtering, dividing, displaying'.[25] The material qualities of the screen, she further notes, allow the screen's borders to

> enclose, obscure, reveal, or demarcate the spaces within and surrounding its edges, enabling the screen to function as a frame, mask, aperture or connector. [...] The screen's surface enables it to function as a threshold, barrier, reflector, membrane, interface, or vehicle for light and sound, thus joining, separating, or reconfiguring in front and behind it.[26]

The context in which Rogers situates her definition of screen, namely the context of virtual reality films, also contributes to the diversity of screen presence in contemporary cinema, in which virtual texts and hover over characters' faces on an imaginary z-axis. In virtual reality films, the screen of the film is attached directly to the spectator's face, which allows the screen to move according to the spectator's bodily movements and gestures, resulting in a kind of interactive

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[23] Jan Baetens, 'Screen Narratives', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34, 34.1 (2006), 2-8 (p. 3).
[24] Giuliana Bruno, 'Surface Tension, Screen Space', in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. by Susanne Ø. Sæther and Synne T. Bull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 35–54 (pp. 38–39)
[25] Ariel Rogers, '"Taking the Plunge": The New Immersive Screens', in *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium*, ed. by Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, and Francesco Casetti (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), p. 139.
[26] Ivi, pp. 139–40.

cinematic experience in which perspectives are largely spectator-controlled, or rather, user-controlled.

But how and why are these definitions of screens relevant to understanding *Noah*? The purpose of discussing the cited definitions and possibilities of screens is to highlight how screens, within those contexts, have been understood primarily by their ability to extend or limit the boundaries of diegetic space. Screen in the context of the desktop film, however, does not ascribe perfectly to those definitions, as the boundaries of the protagonist's computer screen are not visible inside the film (excluding the part at the end of the film where viewers see the home screen of Noah's iPhone; the framing of the mobile screen clearly indicates the boundaries of the screen relative to the computer screen). The very concept of 'screening screens', as this article's title has strived to suggest, therefore urges reflection on how the presence of the computer screen, remediated as the cinematic screen in the context of the desktop film, plays a diegetic role not only in the narrative but also in the spectators' understanding of the protagonist's body. In other words, *Noah* contributes to the genealogy of the screen by defining the screen as a body on which identity of the protagonist, Noah, is ascribed and performed through navigating websites and applications on a computer interface. While it is true that Noah does show his face in the film, as evidenced by the scene of his Skype call with Amy, the majority of his character's identity is conveyed and, subsequently, read and watched by spectators through the presence and writing of texts and the navigation of websites and applications.

In tracing the ways in which Noah's identity is conveyed not through bodily, corporeal gestures but through modes of virtual browsing on a computer interface, this article has prioritized the analysis of virtually mediated texts in Noah as they pertain to expressions and understandings of his character's identity, and it has also shown how this mode of character storytelling is not without precedent. Recent examples of texts on screen appear as the result of editing, but, as demonstrated in *House of Cards*, they crucially affect the viewer's understanding of the narrative, as texts not only introduce different perspectives from which to understand the plot but also unfasten new storylines that offer introspective views into the characters' private selves. The creation of these storylines is supported by the idea that one's interaction with a mobile device may reveal an aspect of one's life that is not disclosed in face-to-face interaction with other characters. More urgently, it suggests that behaviour online mediates our behaviour in day-to-day corporeal reality, as Sherry Turkle suggests in her notion of living on the screen, and vice versa.[27]

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[27] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), p. 26. For additional literature regarding the identity performance in online spaces, see Erika Pearson, 'All the World Wide Web's a Stage: The Performance of Identity in Online Social Networks', *First Monday*, 25 February 2009, <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i3.2162>[accessed 24 June 2020].

Words on screen in *Noah* mediate intimacy, as subtle details like typing speed become transcriptions of intimacy by revealing hidden character traits. These transcribed mediations of intimacy are made legible to us via the computer screen's remediation, which plays a major role in viewer reception and, ultimately, the viewer's piecing together of the narrative. Remediation explains why we read text differently in *Noah* than in *Pierrot le Fou*; it is remediation, coupled with the properties of social media and human-computer interaction, that allow texts to be viewable and readable moving images and replacements for dialogue. It is thus important to study the role and effects of text in this regard, as the rising presence of digitally based text in contemporary cinema and television will only make *Noah*'s textual experimentation in interactive possibilities for cinematic narratives all the more relevant for viewers of today's films and television.