

Between Visibility and Media Performativity. The Role of Interface and Gesturality in Desktop Cinema

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This article aims to investigate desktop films as ‘meta-media’ audiovisual forms and to analyse their aesthetics and their meta-reflective potential in the broader framework of contemporary visual and media culture. Screens and interfaces, re-mediated into these films, constitute a second-level media space into the filmic space. They are the only space visually accessible to the spectator, whereby the characters’ gesturality emerges as a form of performing relationship with digital technology, as a posture or a more general engagement with the (media) environment, as an ‘operational trace’ on the screen. Resulting from this visual and narrative structure is the centrality of ‘media performativity’, a concept that will be widely problematized in this article on a theoretical level and analysed as a behavioural pattern that characterizes our daily interaction with the screens surrounding us, as a part of an eco-media system in which action (of the user) and reaction (of the interface) are interwoven and entangled. The concept of media performativity relies on the idea that the individual is no longer separate from the medium throughout the mediation process but is instead deeply and radically involved in the medium itself.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION: VISUAL AND FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE DESKTOP FILM

David Kim is a man in his forties living alone with his daughter Margot, following the premature death of his wife due to a lymphoma. One evening, Margot tells her father she would sleep over at a girlfriend’s house, but then she disappears in the middle of the night, after having tried repeatedly to call Kim as he was asleep. With the help of detective Rosemary Vick, Kim starts ceaselessly looking for Margot, in the attempt to find out what happened. After having thought of a voluntary escape, they realize that a kidnapping – if not even a murder – are much more likely hypothesis. Kim finds thus himself trapped in a mirror maze: he needs to solve the enigma to find a way out.

This simple and brief account of the plot of *Searching* (Aneesh Chaganty, 2018) may give the idea of a regular thriller movie, revolving around a



complex, intriguing detective story. We may say it is, indeed. Nevertheless, if we widen our perspective and shift from the narrative thread to the film's visual structure, it becomes certainly harder – and misleading – to define this movie merely a 'thriller'. *Searching* is, in fact, an example of desktop film, namely a movie that only takes place on the screens of the protagonist's digital devices. Laptop, smartphone, tablet, are here the only environments where the protagonist's actions and those of the characters he interacts with take place.

From start to finish, the film shows nothing else than the screens Kim interacts with. His investigation does not occur in real, 'physical' environments, but mostly follows the traces that his daughter has left across the social media accounts or chatrooms she habitually uses. Even Kim's interaction with other characters is always mediated by digital devices: it occurs through FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, and Gmail.

These are our starting questions: what does the formal system of a desktop film tell us about visibility? As a product fully embedded within contemporary visual culture, what does its meta-reflexive operation suggest us about this visual culture, or – more broadly – about contemporary media culture in general? In this paper, I will attempt to answer these questions by elaborating some reflection and, at the same time, by identifying some recurring features in this contemporary film category. I will make reference to a few films to analyse some transversal theoretical nodes, though fully acknowledging the interesting differences distinguishing each example – in terms of both aesthetics and narration.¹

Historically, cinema has brought multiple realities to the screen, adapting them to the nature of the screen itself by means of the 'specificity' of film language. In the case of desktop films, cinema brings to the screen a reality that is already 'screenic' in itself. Thus, the aim of desktop film directors is not to replicate events taking place in a 'real' setting, but to stage and narrativize the screens themselves (which already intrinsically mediate the reality of events within the film, on a diegetic level), starting with their tangible operation that is activated by a complex performance taking place before the viewer's eyes. This is done through a specific set of media-related actions that – as we shall see – are actorial and authorial at the same time.

FROM VISIBILITY TO PERFORMATIVITY: VISUAL CULTURE AND GESTURALITY

Let us therefore move on from the matter of visibility, and return – on the basis of a sheer conditioning that lies behind the questions we initially asked ourselves – to some of the considerations developed by Béla Balázs in the 1920s. His theories encompass a number of aspects which may prove functional to our discussion, namely a certain conception of visual culture



that is strictly related to the visibility of a body moving in space.

The visibility of the body and the gesture were two theoretical issues treated in Balázs' reflection, revolving around the idea of a newfound visibility of man (*Der sichtbare Mensch*, 'The Visible Man', is indeed the title of his most renowned publication) made possible by the reproductive-projective action of cinema. The passage from a textual to a visual culture – that, according to Balázs, the moving image seemed to make possible – rested upon this.

Balázs was not interested in the purely artistic-expressive gesture (that of the performer or the dancer, for instance), which is truly comprehensible only by a select few and ascribable to a 'high-culture' or 'elite' ideal of artistic value. Nor was he focused on strongly coded gestures, such as those related to sign language, whereby an expressive motion of the body corresponds to a single conceptual meaning (Balázs seems to implicitly state that in this case the gesture ends up being, though useful and unavoidable, a surrogate of the word). The gesture he was interested in – for the purposes of *a true cultural analysis* – is the everyday, commonplace gesture:

Not culture in the sense of the beautiful poses of statues in art galleries, but the gait and the everyday gestures of people in the street or at their work. Culture means the penetration of the ordinary material of life by the human spirit, and a visual culture must surely provide us with new and different expressive forms for our daily intercourse with one another. The art of dance cannot do this; it is a task that will be accomplished only by film.²

The specific idea of 'gesture' that vigorously emerges from Balázs' reflection transcends that which we may define a formal concept of gestuality, and rather defines a form of *engagement with the world*. Besides, film may distance itself from the high level of formalization and coding of gestures that is represented by other forms of artistic expression, and may narrate or *document* a certain way of existing in the world: a certain way of experiencing the ordinary space.³

It is clear that the analysis of forms of interaction with other people and the surrounding environment today cannot disregard the many forms of interaction with the media devices inhabiting our everyday spaces and structuring our everyday practices and gestuality. The settings we regularly move around are distinguished by a substantial presence of technological media with which (or should we say, more precisely, *within*, or *through* which) our daily gestuality interacts and by which is partially reshaped. This is an aspect that has reached its extreme consequences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic,⁴ as a growing number of everyday practices has been relocated to online environments and mediated by screens and interfaces, whereby an increasingly large number of interpersonal actions



and interactions have taken shape. Our gesturality has systematically materialized – in part as the gesturality of a body filmed by the recording systems embedded in our computers and mobile devices; in part as a *trace* of our interaction with screen interfaces, which gets visible not only on our screens, but also on those of our interlocutors.

If Balázs' reflection brings to the table the emergence of a visual culture in contrast with a written culture that had marked and nearly monopolized communication forms ever since the invention of the printing press, we should ask ourselves what the concept of 'visual culture' refers to today, and how it finds its own peculiar position within contemporary media culture, where the link between visuality and gesturality must be reinterpreted even starting from the interaction between the contemporary media user and the 'new' digital media that increasingly appear as *mixed media*, in the definition provided by William J. Thomas Mitchell⁵. It thus seems impossible to exclude from a reflection whose aim is to identify the 'cultural symptoms'⁶ that emerge in the media-based transformation of our everyday areas of activity the behavioural patterns that characterize our daily interaction with the screens surrounding us. We shall refer to such behavioural patterns as *media performativity*.

The centrality of these forms of operation clearly emerges even in the 'media ecology' concept discussed by Matthew Fuller, in which the attention towards objects appears to be replaced by the attention towards media 'practices' and 'processes', to the point objects themselves are perceived as processes:

Objects here should also be understood to mean processes embodied as objects, as elements in a composition. [...] Ecologists focus rather more on dynamic systems in which any one part is always multiply connected, acting by virtue of those connections, and always variable, such that it can be regarded as a pattern rather than simply as an object.⁷

The operation we are discussing seems thus to represent a key element, even for a reinterpretation of the idea of visual culture.⁸ At a closer look, the visual dimension is no longer exclusive or predominant in our daily relationship with the screens around us,⁹ although the latter still represent a fundamental component for the analysis of contemporary visual culture. Vision is increasingly analysed as part of a significantly broader sensory experience that – referring to U.S. psychologist James J. Gibson's definition of the term in the late 1970s – we may define an 'ecological relationship'.¹⁰ The body as a whole takes on – in our modern interaction with screens – a progressively more central role, and for this reason a cultural analysis of contemporary screens becomes more and more an investigation on our actions on and inside such screens.¹¹

Pietro Montani explained this concept extremely clearly: while defining the notion of *digital sensorium* as 'a way that sensitivity (*aisthesis*) is



intimately *embodied in a technology*, he reiterates the centrality of the use of screen, its capability to trigger production-communication practices based upon the interaction or the inseparability of text and images, starting with the 'atypical performances assigned to the fingertips' that allow the occurrence of 'a sensitive, specifically technical performance'.¹² Even more radically, we may state – again inspired by Montani's reflections – that the centrality taken on by media performativity in modern times redefines and qualifies the perception of (and relationship with) the surrounding world very specifically.

The concept of *media performativity* thus relies on the idea that the individual is no longer separate from the medium throughout the mediation process but is deeply and radically involved in the medium itself.¹³ We shall see shortly how the concept of 'interface' turns out to be a decisive element to understand and analyse the peculiar relationship which gets established between body, gesture, and technological device.

For now, we shall highlight how – in the scope indicated by Montani – the screen is no longer a 'filter' through which we observe reality, but a technical element contributing to its very assessment and an orientation of the individual within it. Gesturality accompanies such forms of performing relationships with digital technology, in terms of a posture or a more general engagement with the surrounding environment, which growingly attracts the interest of contemporary films and series. The 'narrativization' of such mechanisms quite openly reveals that which we might define the 'dual nature' of modern digital media: on one hand, they emerge as essential components of a hypermediated environment; on the other hand, they are environments in themselves, in which we move and interact with numerous media objects and other people.¹⁴ Desktop films appear to focus, in particular, on this second aspect.

WHAT DO DESKTOP FILMS (REALLY) TELL US?

In the perspective illustrated thus far, the desktop film represents a particularly interesting case study, due indeed to its ability to place media performativity at the centre of attention, assigning it the role as true driveshaft of the narration, whether fictional or documentary. This aspect does not only materialize in the aforementioned *Searching*, but even in other fiction desktop films such as *Noah* (Patrick Cederberg, Walter Woodman, 2013), *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014) or *Unfriended: Dark Web* (Stephen Susco, 2018), just to mention a few particularly significant titles in a growingly vast constellation of works, or desktop documentaries such as *Transformers: The Premake* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014) and *Watching the Pain of Others* (Chloé Galibert-Laîné, 2019).¹⁵

Evocatively, one might claim that this film category has picked up the legacy of Balázs' reflection, by identifying traces (disseminated within



screen-based interfaces) of a new media gesturality, finding in them a number of implications that significantly affect the twentyfirst century visual and media culture. Namely, they gather the passage from visibility to performativity that we have highlighted in the previous paragraph.

The central role and exposure (or the *documentation*) of media performativity clearly emerges in fictional desktop films as much as it does in desktop documentaries. Whilst in the fictional desktop film, as we have seen, this performativity rests upon – on the diegetic level – the characters, in the desktop documentary the gesture at the centre of attention is the creative one performed by the director him/herself who, time after time, acts upon the windows of the screen interface, and establishes relationships between the materials it presents to the spectator.

This is what occurs, for instance, in the desktop documentary *Transformers: The Premake* by Kevin B. Lee, where the act of directing corresponds with the research action the director performs on the interfaces and folders ‘coming to life’ on his desktop. On the one hand, Kevin B. Lee ‘delegates’ the image production to the hundreds of prosumers who shared an endless number of amateur videos created during the filming of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Michael Bay, 2014) online; on the other hand, he builds his narrative by offering to the spectator a footage of contents configured on the basis of the interaction between the director and his PC interfaces.

In this scope, we have a found footage film in which the archival images retrieved online by Lee intertwine with his gesturality: the content of such images is animated by the director’s actions, as he explores the web platforms on which the images circulate and are made available to users.

What the director thus stages in his film is a topological narration¹⁶

Fig. 1: *Transformers: The Premake* (Kevin B. Lee, 2014).





of viral marketing that he places in media environments, in which this complex phenomenon comes to life, first of all, through sharing of images and videos by fans of the great contemporary blockbusters.

In her introduction to a video dedicated to the desktop documentaries by Kevin B. Lee, the scholar Catherine Grant has made particularly interesting considerations that may help us define the use of screens and interfaces made by the director in his movie:

[Desktop documentary] uses screen capture technology to treat the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas. [It] seeks both to depict and question the ways we explore the world through the computer screen.¹⁷

Therefore, both in fictional desktop film and in desktop documentaries, the media environment is not only the film setting, but even its very production location. In fictional desktop films, character's mediation is an added element. The latter's media gesturality essentially corresponds to the gestures used by the director to create the movie, as explained thoroughly by Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman, directors of the teen-drama desktop film *Noah* (2014):

It was an interesting challenge for us to tell this story without breaking free from the box of this "image-space". A lot of conversations happened while we were developing the idea about leaving the computer screen, but as we crafted the visual components we realized that in our execution we managed to create and explore a character in a way we hadn't seen before; by observing his interfacing and manipulation of the image space. The most bizarre aspect of this idea, that didn't really hit us until after we'd finished the film, is that we performed as all the characters. Our actors were only involved for the video segments (Skype, Chatroulette). So in watching it, it didn't register clearly that there is a real disconnect between this presence and the imagery of the actors themselves.¹⁸

The re-mediation of the interface within the film occurs on an eminently operative basis, thus not purely a representative one. This operative dimension hatches thanks to a 'double level of mediation' that distinguishes desktop films. In fact, if it is true that the relationship between the cinema spectator and a film character is never a direct interaction, in that it is always mediated by the action of the filming device, in this case we may affirm that we witness a *second-level mediation*, given that the action of the protagonists and the relationships developing between the same within their real environment becomes accessible to the spectator only through the filter of the numerous devices relocated¹⁹ across the cinematic space.

Indeed, as is well-known, the term 'relocation' aims to identify the elements that allow a definition of the cinematographic experience beyond the technical specificity of the medium and the function of a *dispositif*



founded on the shot-projection binomial. In this sense, the term sets out to offer a theoretical-interpretation framework for the analysis of cinema dispersion and migration across fruition spaces other than the movie theatre and within several digital devices. The desktop film thus appears to stage a kind of *inverse relocation*, inasmuch as the film appears as an audio-visual space that welcomes the replacement of new digital media in order to reconfigure on the screen certain peculiar traits of the experience deriving from their use.

It may thus be claimed that the film itself becomes an interface capable of generating a complex interaction between cinema and digital media, accessing a definition of the very concept of interface: one that might broaden its sense. In his groundbreaking work dedicated to interface operation, Alexander Galloway consistently reiterates the need to not consider the interface as a thing, but an effect, and adds: 'it is always a process or a translation'.²⁰ In particular, it is interesting to consider that which Galloway defines an 'intraface', meaning 'an interface internal to the interface', described by the author as an imaginary dialogue between the workable and the unworkable or – explicitly referencing Gerard Genette's reflection on the concept of 'threshold' – as 'a zone of indecision between inside and outside' or – in the end – as the relationship between *the edge* and *the center*.

As stated above, desktop film in the capacity of a threshold works as an interface that generates a substantial redefinition of media devices that *remediate*²¹ within it, making them unworkable for the spectator, who is pushed to delegate the condition of media-users to the characters. On the basis of this process, it is easily understandable how much the screens of computers and mobile devices are more 'suitable' for desktop film vision: not only because the films find their 'natural habitat' in their interfaces, but also because the screens have a greater ability to place the viewer before the inoperativeness of such interfaces (this effect tends to greatly scale down when the films are watched 'at a distance' on a TV or cinema screen).

In such films, the transparency distinguishing the interfaces of contemporary screens and granting them maximum efficiency in terms of accessibility to digital content become the *opacity*²² of the intrafaces acted upon by the cinematographic medium. And it is this opacity that guarantees the fundamental shift from a 'direct' topological narrative – based on the interactivity of the contemporary media user – to an 'indirect' (non-interactive) topological narrative that turns into a meta-narrative of media performativity (the one performed by the characters or the directors mediating our relationship with the interfaces of devices in the movies).

In this sense, the desktop film becomes the medium²³ for contemporary media gesturality: not as an interactive technological device, but as an aesthetic and narrative apparatus allowing a dynamic documentation of media gesturality while maintaining its inscription within the borders of its (media) ecosystem of origin untarnished.



The metareflective operation that such films are based upon thus becomes the main narrative driveshaft of the films themselves, and exploits the opportunities (even in terms of *affordances*) granted by screen interfaces as well as the constitutive (but constructive) instability²⁴ of the digital mediascapes configured in the same. The magnitude of gesturality narrated in desktop films certainly requires a placement within the screens reproducing its effects.

This aspect may be identified clearly in the documentary *Flânerie 2.0* by Chloé Galibert-Laîné. The director combined the desktop film, found footage, and documentary formats to give the viewer an experience of the modern city as an intrinsically hybrid and blended experience occurring in the urban and explorable environments within our mobile device screens. As long as it is filmed from the outside only, the media gesturality represented in the film does not offer the sense of operations performed by people shot by the director: each of them holds a smartphone in their hands, tapping the screen with their thumbs.

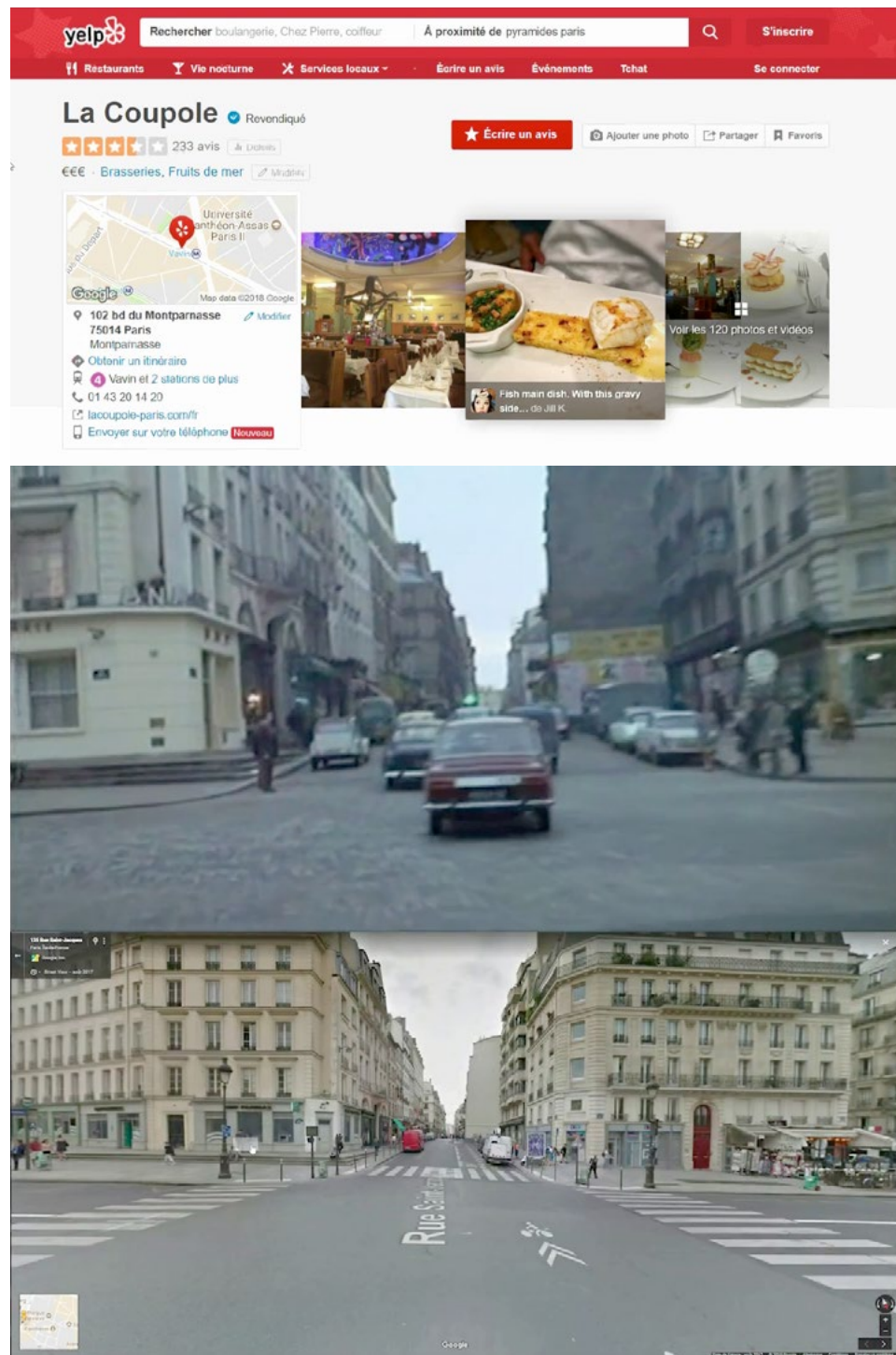
From the position we are in – an ‘external’ position that places us before these people, and makes the screens of their smartphones inaccessible – we may consider their gestures essentially identical. Their actions have a very limited (or nearly inexistent) impact on the ‘real’ surrounding space. They might offer us a sense of habit or of the actors’ *distracted experience* of the surrounding itself, but not the ultimate sense of hybridization that the film sets out to narrate. It is only when the director changes perspective – bringing us spectators inside the *screens* – that the underlying sense of the film’s aesthetic operation fully acquires an explanation and reveals the processes of anticipation of the real experience that materializes as a

Fig. 2: *Flânerie 2.0*
[Chloé Galibert-Laîné, 2018].





Fig. 3-4 *Flânerie* 2.0 (Chloé Galibert-Laîné, 2018).



result of the online research performed or the screenic virtualization of our motion – at times simultaneous – in the urban space.

Therefore, our perspective change corresponds to a different understanding of the characters' gesturality, which leads us to identify how deeply different the repercussions of that *pressing* or that *swiping* of the thumbs on the screen can be. Such consequences may be observable not only if we catch a glimpse of the individuals' gestures, but if we see the *effects* that the same have on the screens: the traces of the gestures we discussed shortly before.



It is indeed such traces that allow a *qualification* of the gestures and their comprehension as parts of a broader relationship between the body and technology. The distinctive features of such gestures thus place them in a particular space-time dimension that is inferable and practicable only within the screen-environments – distinguished, as said, by specific affordances and, consequently, a specific range of actions made possible by the structure of each interface.

In theoretical terms, what originates from this example is the concept of *ecomedia*. The prefix (*eco-*) itself refers to the ‘environmental’ dimension of the issue in play. What environment are we talking about?²⁵ As highlighted by Francesco Parisi, when we talk about *ecomedia* the environment that we identify is ‘not merely the media space we inhabit, but may also mean the ability that media have to build up as independent environments that encapsulate us and *model our practices*’.²⁶

Besides, it is not arduous to play the game of finding ‘real-life equivalents’ of the situations that take shape in certain desktop films. In the short film *Noah*, for example, the protagonist enters his girlfriend’s Facebook page using her credentials and accesses the different *areas* of her private account (messages, diary, notification list) in search for clues to confirm his suspects that she is cheating on him. He indeed explores a series of rooms represented by certain areas with specific functions within a private space. The protagonist’s actions do not appear very distant from an equivalent situation in a thriller movie in which the character enters – in such case using a set of keys snatched by way of deceit – the house of another character, and opens drawers and closet doors, peeps in the most hidden corners and – why not? – flips through the pages of a secret diary. These are environment exploration actions taking place in a media space – in the former case – or in a physical-material space – in the latter case – notwithstanding that the distinction between the two categories of ‘spaces’ is not excessively simplistic.

Hence, there exists a media-related action that cinema may keep a watchful eye on to weave increasingly complex storylines: the plot of *Noah* (which is also a short) is essential and linear, as is – essentially – that of *Unfriended*, based upon the traditional mechanisms of a revenge movie, whilst the plots of more recent desktop films such as *Searching* and *Unfriended: Dark Web* turn out to be definitely more intricate. This is an interesting aspect, because it shows how an initial phase of pure fascination before this original desktop film setting – and the purely attractional function of the interfaces included in the same – is being followed by a phase in which the narrative articulation of the stories is taking on a greater and greater role.



A FEW FINAL REMARKS: FROM THE PERFORMATIVITY OF MEDIA-USERS TO THE INTERFACE PERFORMANCE

In conclusion of this article, it is perhaps appropriate to attempt to grasp what value the actions of these films' characters truly take on, and what is the role played by interfaces in structuring and defining rules for the environments wherein they materialize. This is clearly a complex issue which will have to be further developed at a later time.

The interfaces re-mediated within the movie cause the existence of a media environment that welcomes the characters' actions, it orients their intentions in a new (or at least different) way compared to what occurs in the 'real world', and finally affects the viewer's narrative experience deeply, despite the stories told in such films – including the formal structure by means of which they are conveyed – may turn out to be easily positioned within the limits of certain greatly canonical cinema and television genres: horror, in the case of *Unfriended*; teen drama for *Noah*; family sit-com for the *Connection Lost* (S06xE16, 2015) episode of the TV series *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020); thriller in the case of *Searching* and *Unfriended: Dark Web*; documentary in the case of *Transformers: The Premake*; just to mention a few. The subjectivity of the spectator watching these films meets the subjectivity of the various characters in a land we may define – according to Galloway – 'threshold', given that the action takes place in part on the basis of a pure succession of events (namely the film storyline as we have described for *Searching* at the beginning of this paper), and in part due to the characters' constant status of media-users. In doing so, it establishes a relationship with the surrounding world and the other characters that is driven by the exhibited structure of the interfaces with which the subjects interact, and which plays out an intradiegetic *media subjectivation* process.

If it is true that in the desktop film the visibility of the gesture is strongly depowered and marginalized (as in the case of *Searching* and – especially – *Noah*) in favour of *performativity of the trace*, or the effect of the gesture on the media environment, then we may state that the performance in play becomes – at intervals – a full *performance of the interface itself*.

In this sense, the desktop film hatches a feature of the mechanisms distinguishing contemporary interfaces that may be clearly inferred from Branden Hookway's reflections. The theorist – with the aim of elaborating a complex cultural theory of the interface – rediscovers the meaning that this concept had in nineteenth-century fluid dynamics, thus highlighting its ability to separate and – at the same time – establish a relationship and potential 'work' between two fluids comprising a system. This is how the



interface *acts* to create a form of interaction.

To recover this 'scientific' sense of the interface does not have – according to Hookway – a purely etymological meaning, but rather a conceptual significance. His underlying idea rests upon, in fact, the belief that the interface shall not be investigated as a technological element per se, but as the element capable of generating a relationship between the user and the technological device or – in his own words – 'as a site of contestation between human and machine'.²⁷ On the basis of this, Hookway expresses the need to read the interface structuring in unavoidably dynamic and process-based terms, 'more as a *forming* and less as a *form*',²⁸ and to give maximum value to the action, the procedure, and the performance by means of which the relationship fully materializes:

*While the interface operates in space and time, and on occasion may be described as a site or an event, it also governs the production of sites and events; it describes the site or moment in which the full operation and apparatus of systems, networks, hierarchies, and material flows are distilled into concrete action.*²⁹

An action on the interface – or through the interface – is thus a (re)action *by* the interface on the media-user. Therefore, the re-mediation occurring in desktop films cannot and shall not be considered a simple re-mediation of a peculiar 'visual structure' that characterizes media environments configured within contemporary digital screens, but the re-mediation of a *proceduralism* born out of the interaction with such structures. A re-mediation with the power to highlight and document the *practicability* of those very structures, and to narrativize the complex system of *actions* (by the subject) and *reactions* (by the interface) that only when considered as a system may account for the overall meaning of the media performativity in contemporary culture.

The metareflective dimension of the desktop films we have analysed in this paper – by building on the intraface theory by Alexander Galloway – becomes a tool in the hands of directors to narrate the fundamental indissolubility of visuality and gesturality as parts of the complex form of media performativity characterising the contemporary visual culture. Moreover, it may promote a view *from inside* that fully reveals the environmental influence potential of the contemporary media in which we act and move every day.



Notes

¹ For an analysis of the desktop film *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014) and the *Bottle Songs* series of desktop documentaries (Chloé Galibert-Laîné, Kevin B. Lee, 2018), see: Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020). For an analysis of the short desktop film *Noah*, see Lydia Tuan, 'Screening Screens: Cinematic Spectatorship in the Desktop Film Noah', *Cinéma & Cie. International Film Studies Journal*, 20.34 (Spring 2020), pp. 117 – 32. For a comparative analysis of the desktop films *Unfriended*, *Noah*, and *Searching*, I recommend my article 'Spazio filmico e spazio mediale nel computer screen film', in *Re-directing. La regia nello spettacolo del XXI secolo*, ed. by Luca Bandirali, Daniela Castaldo, Francesco Ceraolo (Lecce: Università del Salento, 2020), pp. 143–52.

² Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* [1924], English translation in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, edited by Erica Carter (New York: Berghahn Book, 2010), p. 13.

³ For a vast and multi-faceted reflection on the relationship between gesture and moving image (cinema, contemporary visual arts, and new digital media) that transcends the specific definition we are considering here, see the special issue *#Gesture*, ed. by Miriam De Rosa, *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, 2 (Autumn 2019).

⁴ See, for example: *Pandemic Media. Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, ed. by Philipp Dominik Keidl, Vinzenz Hediger, Laliv Melamed, Antonio Somaini (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020). See also *Virale. Il presente al tempo della pandemia*, ed. by Roberto De Gaetano, Angela Maiello (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2020).

⁵ William J. Thomas Mitchell, 'There Are No Visual Media', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4.2 (August 2005), 257–66.

⁶ We hereby borrow an evocative definition by Patricia Pisters, who uses it in her analysis of *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007), to introduce a more general account of contemporary screen culture. Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image. A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁷ Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (London, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 4. Peppino Ortoleva also seems to take the direction of a (con) fusion of objects and practices in an ecological perspective in his definition of 'online iconosphere'. See: Peppino Ortoleva, 'YouTube e l'iconosfera online', in *Estetica dei media e della comunicazione*, ed. by Antonio Somaini, Roberto Diodato (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), pp. 295–312.

⁸ This aspect may also be inferred from Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson and Øyvind Vågnes' reflection. The three authors – as the name of their text suggests – set out to combine the topic of gesturality and the act of seeing, and conclude by honouring contemporary media culture with a space where their interdependence, if not even their deep mutual penetration, firmly emerges. See: *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson, Øyvind Vågnes (New York, London: Routledge, 2016). See, in particular, 'Gestures of Seeing', the introductory essay by the editors, pp. 17–27.

⁹ For a literature review on the concept of 'screen' that takes into account even the contemporary function of screens for the purpose of composing a broader epistemological framework in terms of aesthetics, history, and archaeology, see, most importantly: *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Devices to Environmental Medium*, ed. by Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, Francesco Casetti



(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); Erkki Huhtamo, 'Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen', *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image*, 7 (2006), 31–82; Mauro Carbone, *Philosophie-écrans: Du cinéma à la révolution numérique* (Paris: Vrin, 2016).

¹⁰ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

¹¹ We may find a setup of this kind even in the aforementioned neuro-philosophical proposal by Patricia Pisters who, in her analysis of the film *Michael Clayton*, and lingering on the screens and monitors that literally envelop the protagonist, states: '[these screens] are the markers of both a typical twenty-first-century media city and the *practices of everyday media use*'. Pisters, p. 2 [emphasis added].

¹² Pietro Montani, *Emozioni dell'intelligenza. Un percorso nel sensorio digitale* (Milan: Meltemi, 2020), p. 71.

¹³ Cf. Richard Grusin, 'Radical mediation', *Critical Inquiry*, 42.1 (Autumn 2015), pp. 124–48.

¹⁴ See, most importantly, Francesco Casetti, 'Mediascapes: A Decalogue', *Perspecta. The Yale Architectural Journal*, 51, (2017), pp. 21–43; Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016); *Ambienti mediali*, ed. by Pietro Montani, Dario Cecchi, Martino Feyles (Milan: Meltemi, 2018).

¹⁵ 'Desktop documentary' is a definition coined by Kevin B. Lee and other filmmakers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. See, on this topic, Luka Bešliagić, 'Computer Interface as Film: Postmedia Aesthetics of Desktop Documentary', *AM Journal*, 20 (2019), 51–60. See also Wanda Strauven, 'The Screenic Image: Between Verticality and Horizontality, Viewing and Touching, Displaying and Playing', in *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship: A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, ed. by Dominique Chateau and José Moure (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), pp. 143–56; Miriam De Rosa, Wanda Strauven, 'Screenic (Re)Orientations: Desktop, Tabletop, Tablet, Booklet', *Touchscreen, Etc.*, in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. by Susanne Ø. Sæther, Synne T. Bull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 231–62. De Rosa and Strauven chose to speak – more broadly – of 'desktop cinema', preferring this definition to that of 'desktop documentary'.

¹⁶ On the concept of 'topological narration', I shall take the liberty of recommending my paper 'Exploring Media Space in a Narrative Way. The Ongoing Desktop Narration Between New Digital Media and Contemporary Cinema', *Imago. Studi di cinema e media*, 22 (forthcoming 2021).

¹⁷ Catherine Grant, 'Reframe Conversation. Kevin B. Lee', <https://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com/2015/04/on-desktop-documentary-or-kevin-b-lee.html> [accessed 10 September 2021].

¹⁸ Unpublished interview to Walter Woodman and Patrick Cederberg performed by the author on 13 March 2015.

¹⁹ Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

²⁰ Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012).

²¹ In Galloway's reflection, the concept of remediation directly derives from another reflection by Marshall McLuhan. In this paper, I prefer to make reference to the reinterpretation made in the late-90s by David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

²² The correlation between opacity and metareflection dimension seems to be implicit even in Galloway's observations. It is no coincidence that in mentioning a series of cases in which the unworkable state of the intraface emerges he also references art cinema or Brecht's alienation-effect. All such practices leverage an awareness by the viewer of the processes lying behind the representation. See: A. Galloway, op. cit., pp. 40–42.



²³ On the relationship between the image and the documentation of the gesture, also see the reflections by Giorgio Agamben in 'Notes on Gesture', in Id., *Infancy and history: essays on the destruction of experience* (London: Verso, 1993), pp- 133–39.

²⁴ Upon discussing 'constructive instability', we explicitly refer to the definition presented by Thomas Elsaesser. On this topic, see Thomas Elsaesser, "'Constructive Instability", or: The Life of Things as the Cinema's Afterlife', in *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to YouTube*, ed. by Geert Lovink, Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), pp. 13–31. Also see Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Epiphany and Entropy: Around the Worlds in Eighty Clicks', in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. by Pelle Snickars, Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), pp. 166–86.

²⁵ See Ursula Heise, 'Unnatural Ecologies: The Metaphor of the Environment in Media Theory', *Configurations*, 10.1 (November 2002), 149–68.

²⁶ Francesco Parisi, *La tecnologia che siamo* (Turin: Codice, 2019), pp. 23–24.

²⁷ Branden Hookway, *Interface* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), p. 130.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 62 [emphasis added].

²⁹ Ivi, p. 5.