media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

NECSUS
European Journal
of Media Studies

DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Philipps Universität
Marburg

NECSUS

Selfie-screen-sphere: Examining the selfie as a complex, embodying gesture

Darren Gary Berkland

Introduction

In Bo Burnham's film *Eighth Grade* (2018) screens become the lifeworld[1] of the film's protagonist, Kayla (portrayed by Elsie Fisher). Kayla is a thirteen-year-old on the cusp of adolescence who is navigating the tribulations of the final stages of middle school. Her life is going through several transitions, and the plethora of connected screens she encounters becomes a space where Kayla can both hide from the world and engage with it. As such, the film illustrates that – as cinema theorist Vivian Sobchack suggests – contemporary definitions of the screen need to be reformulated. Sobchack writes that the increased multiplication and convergence of the screen in society requires screen researchers to no longer consider screens as an '"array" of discrete artefacts' but instead 'a structural and functional collectivity'. [2] Sobchack calls this collectivity the *screen-sphere* and contends that the screen no longer exists as an occasional aspect of our lifeworld, but rather 'screens now *are* our lifeworld'. [3]

Although Kayla engages in a variety of screenic[4] behaviours, it is the selfie that emerges as a central and repeated one. The selfie – which will be discussed and explored in this article – has received considerable attention from researchers following its 2013 pronouncement as the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year.[5] The scope of the research surrounding the selfie has been interdisciplinary and multifaceted, looking at various aspects of the

selfie, with a variety of questions being raised regarding the selfie's particular ontology. Emerging voices have presented arguments which expand existing definitions of the selfie beyond simply that of an image or snapshot, and into more complex processes,[6] assemblages,[7] and activities.[8] Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym argue that the selfie is both 'a photographic *object* ... [and also] a practice – a *gesture*'.[9] This was expanded further by photography theorist Paul Frosh who defined the selfie as a 'gestural image': a 'new phatic agent in the energy flows between bodily movements, sociable interactions, and media technologies that have become fundamental to our everyday, routine experience of digital activities'.[10] What this literature reveals, ultimately, is that when examining selfies (such as Kayla's) it is not only the image which should be considered, but the various processes that occur leading up to the moment when the image is arrested. I am in full agreement with Senft and Baym, and Frosh, in their use of the term 'gesture', however, in both their respective cases, the concept of gesture is something of a 'given' and not explored beyond common-use definitions of the term. This arguably does a disservice to the potential richness of defining the selfie as *gestural*, as the critical potential of the term is never fully elaborated upon. In both cases, their selfie-gestures are simply shared gestures of photography (the taking and sharing of an image). However, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the selfie not as a 'photographic' gesture, but an embodying, *screenic* one. Therefore, if we are to expand existing definitions of the selfie through gesture's true critical potential, we need to step back from the 'photographic' moment of the selfie assemblage and instead look at various other processes implicit in it. Let us consider, briefly, two of the processes Kayla engages in.

First, consider the variety of screenic movements Kayla performs. Her screen is touched, grasped, held, and carried. With the smartphone's rise into a position of ubiquity, vivid debates have emerged surrounding how individuals engage with screens that require touching. Notably, Wanda Strauven writes there is a 'fundamental link between seeing and touching'[11] in contemporary screen use, and suggests that we should 'rethink the image in the era of the [touched] post-image'.[12] This combination of touching and seeing has, as Nanna Verhoef argues, impelled the screen into proximity of the body insofar as 'what distinguishes the touchscreen from other screen devices ... is the fact that spatial proximity of the screen not only *can* involve the user's body, [but] the screen *must* be touched'.[13] Such movements are made complex because of how mobile screens (such as those of the smartphone) *fit* into the hand (a term developed by Heidi Rae Cooley, examined further

down).[14] Touching, holding, and moving in this series of movements engages the complex prehensile postures; 'virtual fingers'[15] and these screenic touches are not simply a method of navigation, but rather a form of what can be understood as 'tactile vision': a method of *seeing* and *knowing* through the active, prehensile postures of the hand.[16]

Second, consider Kayla's relationship with (what I am calling) the digital mirror when taking selfies. This mirror is not a reflecting glass mirror, but an apparatus comprised of a screen and a front-facing camera. We see evidence of the 'double-axis' of posing before a mirror and posing before a camera that has emerged within selfie research.[17] However, what makes this mirror so unique is that it does not allow Kayla to make direct eye-contact with her mirror-self, and the adjacency of the camera to the screen results in an uncanny moment where the space becomes truly heterotopic (an-other-space). This heterotopia's ability to allow an individual to simultaneously occupy the virtual space behind its surface and the physical space before its surface results in a complex phenomenological moment with Kayla being here (as a perceiving body) and there (as a body being looked upon). However, the break in eye-contact here resists any reconciliation between the *Leib* (lived body) and the *Körper* (material body)[18] that some have argued an analogue glass mirror allows for (as will be further explored in this text). In this digital mirror Kayla is not looking at her reflection; instead she is *looking at herself looking at herself*, and the learned 'habitual familiarity'[19] of her own reflection becomes problematised.

While these two processes may appear incidental to the capturing of the image, I posit that these processes extend and complicate existing definitions of the selfie and suggest that the selfie is a complex *gesture* that produces a novel form of embodiment within the screen-sphere. Positing such brings into question Sobchack's claims that individuals cannot physically dwell within the screen-sphere, and further raises some important questions about an individual's phenomenological relationship with the screen today. Kayla's selfies reveal some fascinating insights into how the body, the device, and space have become arranged within the complex topology of screens which have relentlessly occupied 'the interior and exterior spaces of our lifeworld',[20] and how gesture becomes a method of engaging with them. Ultimately, therefore, if contemporary definitions of the screen require reformulation then our embodied, gestural relationship with screens requires reformulation as well. This article presents the selfie as a starting point for such enquires.

Practically, this paper will begin by describing Sobchack's screen-sphere as a screenic topology. It will then describe how movements emerge in an effect of this topology, and, following this, explore the mirror and its relationship to the gestural, moving body with regard to the selfie, ultimately establishing the selfie as gestural. The definition of gesture I will be using here is primarily Flusserian, with gesture best described as a production of meaning that is contained in some practised performance. In Flusser's words, a 'symbolic movement'[21] of the body that at once both expresses and articulates meaning. Flusser's symbolic movement is a fruitful launching point for a wider interdisciplinary reading of the term that, as Ana Hedburg Olenina and Irina Schulzki note, attends to the twofold challenge of navigating the 'encumbrance of utterances leading to gesticulation on the one hand [, the symbolic,], and the methodological problem of accounting for- and adequately referencing all nuances of the bodily act [, the movement,] on the other'.[22] Last, it warrants mentioning that the reading of the body provided here is explicitly Merleau-Pontian in as much as the body is not to be understood as a 'mechanical organism' but rather a subjectively centred, perceiving incarnate consciousness.

The screen-sphere as a screenic topology

An opening sequence in Burnham's *Eighth Grade* effectively illustrates the screen-sphere and the complex way it creates space(s). First, let us count the screens present during the sequence: Kayla's alarm goes off on her phone (a screen) and it becomes the first thing she sees in the morning as it 'phatically call[s her] … into existence'.[23] From here she moves to the bathroom wherein she begins the process of applying make-up in a mirror (a screen). Alongside this mirror is her laptop (a screen) upon which a make-up tutorial video is playing. Following this, she returns to her bedroom grasping her phone and her laptop (both screens) in either hand. As she lies in bed, she extends her phone before her face and uses it as a mirror before proceeding to take a series of selfies.

Each of these screens describe space. The light of the screen when she wakes up illuminates her face and becomes one of a series of similar shots in the film where a cone of light connects a spectator to a screen (much in the same way a cone of light describes space in Anthony McCall's *Line Describing*

a Cone).[24] The bathroom mirror creates what Michel Foucault calls a *heterotopia* (literally an 'other-place') insofar as 'it makes this place that [an individual occupies] at the moment when [they] look at [themselves] in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there'.[25] Further, the laptop screen is divided into various windows as the interface allows for Kayla's computer desktop to be overlapped by her own YouTube profile which is overlapped by the make-up tutorial video. In this instance, the single laptop screen functions as a *mise en abyme* of screenic windows which 'overlap and obscure, and are resizable and movable'.[26] This ostensibly results in a 'single' *physical* screen functioning as multiple *virtual* screens, further edifying Sobchack's claim that screens today are no longer discrete artefacts but a single connectivity. Finally, when Kayla returns to the bedroom, the film shows her carrying and tossing her mobile devices and consequently rearranging existing nodes of space. As she lies on the bed and activates her digital mirror, the same heterotopic space of the bathroom mirror appears to emerge once again within her mobile phone.

Fig. 1: Four examples from the film demonstrating how a cone of light creates spaces between an individual and their device.

To further complicate matters, several of these screens can be reoriented on vertical or horizontal axes resulting in a further 'reconfiguration of the patterns of space involved'.[27] The laptop is mobile, it can be rotated, and the hinged screen can be tilted near horizontally. Also, the orientation of the mobile phone (when grasped in the hand) is determined only by the length of the arm and any coalescence of sophisticated radial or lunar rotations of

the wrist, extensions or flexions of the elbow, and abductions or adductions of the shoulder joint. As Miriam de Rosa and Wanda Strauven note this reorientation of the screen 'implies a more profound change … in our ways of conceptualising the screenic device'.[28] I will turn to the implications of this reorientation through grasping devices further down, but in the meanwhile it is important to note the complicated spatial possibilities.

This creates complex arrangements of screens and spaces, and it is this complicated arrangement – so effectively demonstrated in *Eighth Grade* – that Sobchack calls the screen-sphere. Her greater intellectual project is centred around the 'bodily and material foundations'[29] of viewing a film or moving image and throughout her titles *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992) and *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), Sobchack thoroughly challenges basic assumptions between the spectator and the screen and concludes that the position of the spectator within the cinematic apparatus is a *sensuous* one. Sobchack's conceptualisation of the screen-sphere is an elaboration of her theory of embodied, phenomenological screen spectatorship in response to the dramatic change the screen has undergone in society today. The screen is no longer arrested by the apparatus of the cinema or the home, but rather it has become 'ubiquitous, interconnected, and mobile'[30] with 'increasingly dynamic connectivity'.[31] This increasingly dynamic connectivity has as much to do with wireless and cabled internet connections as it has to do with space. Screens today are not simply connected through the networked infrastructure of the internet, but connected in the manner by which they describe and define a complicated arrangement of space(s). Interestingly, in Sobchack's earlier attempt at describing the screen-sphere (in an article titled 'Comprehending Screens: A Meditation in *Medias Res*' [2014]) the question of how space operates in relation to the screen is scarcely touched upon. Only in a later version of the paper (expanded upon and published in *Screens from Materiality to Spectatorship – A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment* [2016], and retitled 'From Screen-Scape to Screen-Sphere: A Meditation in *Medias Res*') is the issue of space dealt with directly. As she writes:

> The screens that constitute the screen-sphere's boundary components locate us both 'inside' and 'outside' – although this distinction becomes no longer viable. Indeed, because they open and extrude an n-dimensional space, the screens at the boundary of the screen-sphere form the equivalent of a Möbius strip, in which their spatial 'looping' of 3-D and n-D creates a continuous and one-sided surface of display. The screens bounding the screen-sphere no longer face 'inward' toward us or 'outward'

away from us, but face us wherever we are, their chiasmatic function both connecting and separating the 3-D 'here' wherever we physically are and the n-D 'there' where we virtually are, but physically are not.[32]

This description of the spaces of the screen-sphere is both complicated and complex and certainly illustrates how screens and space become intervolved today (as demonstrated in the above sequence from *Eighth Grade*). However, I suggest that a more effective method for describing this virtual sphere is as a *screenic topology*.

I am using Brian Massumi's conceptualisation of topology here – that is, as a way of approaching the virtual. As he writes, a 'topological figure is defined as the continuous transformation of one geometrical figure into another'.[33] It is the way in which constituent parts are interrelated and arranged. So, in the case of Kayla's space, the arrangement of screens in the bathroom become rearranged in the bedroom and through the screens' connectivity all 'the geometrical figures [she] can create in this way are versions of the same topological figure: [insofar as] topological unity is, in and of itself, multiple'.[34]

There are a distinct set of advantages when considering the screen-sphere as a screenic topology. First, a topology's predilection for 'doublings and foldings, punctualities rejoining encompassments, prospection buckling into retrospection, [and] expanding contractions and contracting expanses' will allow us to account for what Sobchack describes as the 'non-Euclidian'[35] nature of the sphere. Again, following Massumi, the word 'non-Euclidian' is a 'coinvent short-hand that accounts for space of this kind: that cannot be separated from its duration due to a transitional excess of movement ... a good-enough nontechnical term for dynamic or durational "spaces" that do not fit into the classical Euclidean (actually Cartesian) intuition of space as a triple-axis'.[36] Thus, by considering the screen-sphere as a topology we can belie a definition that simply reduces the complexity of the screen-sphere to nothing more than an *arrangement* of connected screens. As a topology, the screen-sphere includes the space(s) created in conjunction with the collection of screens that describe it. In other words, the screen-sphere is not simply a collection of multiple, connected screens, but rather the result of how spaces have changed following the recent irruption of screens. More importantly, however, as a topology we can do away with Sobchack's 'boundary components' that supposedly limit and separate the screen-sphere. While Sobchack's metaphor of the Möbius Strip accounts for the relationship between 3-D and n-D spaces that are simultaneously interior and exterior, by moving

into the topological the screen-sphere is not a specific shape, but rather 'continuous and multiple' as it arranges and rearranges itself continually.[37]

However, by defining this topology as *screenic*, the material, historical, and physical components of this sphere are not to be ignored. It is necessary to be aware that the screen as an information surface, or a surface that hides or reveals, is loaded with a complicated cultural, etymological, and technical history. As Erikki Huhtamo's pioneering work in the field of screenology reminds us, media studies 'should not be only on screens as designed artefacts, but also on their uses, their intermedial relations with other cultural forms and on the discourses that have enveloped them in different times and places'.[38] By maintaining such considerations in relation to the space(s) created allows for one to account for how different surfaces manage space in relation to one another. For example, a television screen delineates space differently from a mirror, which delineates space differently from a smartphone, which in turn delineates space differently from a television. Acknowledging these differences allows for a more effective navigation when surfaces inevitably collapse, overlap, and collide in the new arrangements (as is the case with the smartphone and the mirror in relation to the selfie, to be discussed).

In summary, the screen-sphere is a complex spatial topology that exhibits screenic qualities: a screenic topology. Kayla's morning routine, from waking up to taking the day's first selfie, all exist in effect of this topology. However, what is perhaps most important to note within Kayla's (screenic) behaviours are that all of them display some level of *gesturality* insofar as all her behaviours are a combination of both 'performative acts and the situatedness of the human body'.[39] For example, holding the phone, shutting off the alarm, applying make-up, posing before the mirror and – finally – taking selfies. The resultant question here, for my purposes then, is how does the gesture of the selfie specifically manifest in effect of a screenic topology? Considering that the screens of this topology are not discrete, separate artefacts, it is therefore possible to assume that there are no discrete, separate gestures. To expand and establish this, two aspects of the selfie are to be accounted for: its movement in relation to the corporeal, and the mirror's place within the selfie's assemblage.

The movements of the body and the screenic topology

Consider, for a moment, Kayla's gestures in the previously mentioned morning routine sequence. As Kayla's alarm goes off, she reaches for her phone, and grasping the device she orientates it to her face. A movement of the fingers on the phone's side-button switches the screen 'off' as she gets out of bed. In the bathroom there are a series of gestures we do not see: Kayla navigating to the correct browser window to play a YouTube video. Yet, what the audience sees is a brief montage of Kayla using a blending sponge, eyeliner, and drying her hair: all individual movements collected beneath the gesture of looking into the mirror. We see her carrying her devices back into the room (where she nonchalantly throws the laptop and phone onto her bed). As she lies in bed, she extends her phone before her face and proceeds to take selfies where two *poses* apparently occur simultaneously: the pose before the mirror and the pose before the camera.

A plethora of movements are exhibited here: reaching, touching, tapping, walking, looking, throwing, pressing, grasping, et al. To note, all these movements are executed between Kayla's body and various screens – the screenic topology – in a continuum. Therefore, they are, on the one hand, discrete or particular gestures that are isolated in relation to their individual screens; on the other hand they are gestures which are coincident and adjacent to one another as they emerge in an effect of this screenic topology. What results is a constellation of bodily movements: a unified gesturality comprised of unique gestural moments. What this means is that the gestures become an intermedial that directly affect the 'shape' of the screen-sphere (as she carries, throws, orientates, and moves screens) and thus her body becomes embodied (and not just present) within this shape.

Such an argument can be made with an understanding of the body that is informed by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Throughout his oeuvre, Merleau-Ponty establishes that the body is the thing with which an individual experiences the world[40] as he investigates how the body is never only an object, but a perceiving thing. He is ardently anti-dualistic, rejecting any separation of mind and body, and forwards that the body is an 'incarnate consciousness'.[41] Therefore, consciousness and the 'world' for Merleau-Ponty are mutually dependable parts of a whole; and at the centre – the zero point – of this whole is the sensuous, perceiving subject. This conceptualisation of the body runs throughout Merleau-Ponty's entire literature and even emerges in his unfinished final work *The Visible and the Invisible*

(1964), where he writes that the 'body interposed is not itself a thing ... but a *sensible for itself* ... [and it] unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis'.[42] As David Carr writes, this sensuous perception is found 'in the look, the reach, the walk, the mutual corroboration of the sense ... [and] through the *gesture*, the body becomes expression, the bearer of meaning in the world'.[43]

What is important to note in Merleau-Ponty's claims surrounding the body is that (as Elizabeth Grosz reminds us) the body 'is the very condition of our access to and conception of space'.[44] Writing in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty refuses to make a distinction between 'bodily space and external space'.[45] As he writes:

> By considering movement, we can see better how [the body] inhabits space (and, moreover, time) because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up as basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations.[46]

As Grosz elaborates, for Merleau-Ponty, if 'consciousness is not spatially located and if external objects are always located in space, how is it possible for consciousness to establish a space or distance between itself and its objects?'.[47] What this reveals about Kayla's movements of her body in relation to the screen is that this active assuming of space actively assumes itself within the screen-sphere's topology.

The film shows how corporeally embodied such an experience of the screen-sphere is. Kayla throws her phone across the room and it results in the screen shattering. The mosaic of cracks on the screen (itself an interesting metaphor for how a screen both hides and reveals) certainly obscures her ability to see what is being displayed on the information surface. Yet, use of the screen continues, as sight is merely one facet of a multi-faceted mode of perceiving the device. Later in the film when she is scrolling – one of the most ubiquitous gestures of phone use – she pricks her thumb, and the spot of blood becomes a very real indicator of how corporeal and multifaceted screenic perception is.

Cooley examines this multi-faceted mode of perceiving and concludes that the mobile device requires an (ostensibly embodied) 'tactile vision, to be understood as a material and dynamic seeing involving eyes as well as hands'.[48] In other words, Kayla sees with her hands as much as she does with her eyes when engaged with screenic surfaces. But it is not only seeing that occurs with the hands, but a complex and specific method of *knowing*.

This prehensile knowing is something linguist Jürgen Streeck explores in his book *Gesturecraft: The Manu-facture of Meaning* (2009), where knowledge of the world is developed through *grasping*. To grasp is not simply to hold, but rather it is a complex prehensile posture that is made manifest between the relationship of the palm, pads, and fingers of the hand. As Streeck describes it, grasping is a 'constellation of two or three *virtual fingers*: every [prehensile] posture is a configuration of two or three force vectors … acting as a single unit'.[49] As he writes:

> Grasping exemplifies what is meant by 'embodied knowledge': underlying our routine abilities to grasp, hold, reorient, and transport objects is a wealth of knowledge not only about objects and the prehensile postures that suit them but also of the mechanics of tasks in which objects are handled … Grasping is a sophisticated, knowledge-based activity.[50]

The virtual fingers in comprehension are not only force-vectors upon which an object rests, but rather they are agents of active touch as well. To have something grasped in the hand we commit to an intentional act of incarnate consciousness and the held object becomes an extension of our body's Merleau-Pontian perceptual horizon. Ultimately, simply by grasping her phone, Kayla's place in the topology becomes an embodied one insofar as she is not only holding her phone, but *comprehending*. In a very real way, any distinction between her body, her consciousness, and the screens can no longer be understood in terms of objects that are internal or external, inside or outside of one another. There is no distinction. Her experience of the screen-sphere becomes both spatially situated and perceptive – undoubtedly, an embodied one.
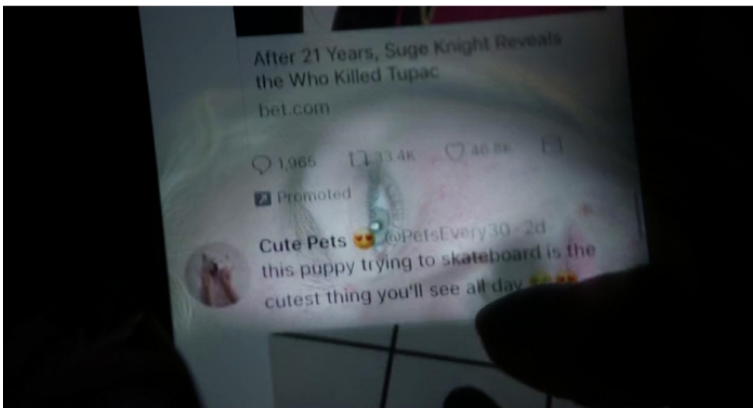

Fig. 2: The film presents an image of tactile vision that erases any distinction between Kayla's eyes, her screen, and her grasping hand.

While these movements begin embodying Kayla within her screens, the mirror and its ability to allow her to see herself within this proximity further reinforces this embodiment, completing the gestural movements of the selfie until that moment when the image is arrested. This can be evidenced by turning to the mirror, and how the mirror's spatial capabilities complicate an individual's relationship with their device.

The mirror and reconciling the body

There are two mirrors Kayla engages with in the opening sequence of the film. The first is the one in the bathroom in which she prepares herself by applying make-up. The second is the digital mirror created by the mobile device.[51]

Fig. 3: An example of the digital mirror capability of the contemporary mobile phone form factor.

The mirror – whether analogue or digital – has always been a site of 'separateness', alterity, and oddness, and this results in a pervasive and unavoidable 'troubling strangeness'[52] often experienced when looking into a mirror. This is not only due to the apparent distance between the individual and their reflection, but also because of its inevitable chirality. It is an odd moment, and in response to this moment, there have been a variety of accounts and theories as to what happens when we encounter our reflection. In both

psychoanalysis and phenomenology, however, there is seemingly an agreement that the person or subject before the mirror and the other reflected back go through a process of identification, reconciliation, or resolution.[53] As Nick Crossely writes the mirror as a technology requires that an individual develops a 'habitual familiarity' with their own image through being able to distinguish the specular image as '"mere reflection" of self rather than a real other'.[54] In psychoanalysis, it is Jacques Lacan's authoritative work on the 'mirror-stage' that explores how the ego is formed through an *identification* with its specular image. The ego manifests in the 'subject when [they] assume an image'[55] and with this 'the infant form[s] a false identification with its specular self as it re-organizes [*sic*] the latter merely as a *sign* of oneself'.[56] For phenomenologists, within the mirror a displacement emerges between the body as object and the body as perceiving subject: the *Leib* and the *Körper* respectively. Before the mirror stands the *Leib* (living body) that 'in the phenomenological context, is the experienced body or body-as-lived',[57] while beyond the mirror's tain exists the *Körper* (the body as physical object)[58] creating a *displacement* between the body and the subject. However, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that a reconciliation takes place, and the mirror re-establishes the body exclusively as subjectively centred as we 'try to fill this void by recourse to the image in the mirror'.[59]

However, such displacement, on the face of it, is amplified by the digital mirror insofar as the 'mirror' of Kayla's mobile phone does not *reflect* her at all. Rather, it records and displays an image that functions in a manner like a mirrored surface. Further, the camera and screen which allow for this functionality are adjacent to one another, and this results in a fundamental difference between the digital mirror and the analogue mirror: a break in eye-contact. Eye-contact becomes impossible in the phone's 'mirror' and what this results in is a 'reflection' that is looking slightly away. Kayla is looking at herself looking at herself, and arguably seeing herself as others see her.[60]

Therefore, resolving this displacement between the *Leib* and *Körper*, subject and object, sign and self, becomes problematised in the functionality of this mirror and the habitual familiarity of the mirror becomes strangely unfamiliar insofar as there appear to be two 'modes' of perception happening simultaneously here: Kayla is seeing herself reflected in the phone's mirror while simultaneously seeing herself as an irresolvable other, and the mirror-alterity reconciled by the analogue glass mirror is ostensibly left open in the camera-screen digital mirror apparatus. Therefore, Kayla – as with other selfie-takers – is being both *reflected* and *not reflected* and this results in a

'jolt'[61] or a break in the mirror's inevitable attempt at reconciliation be-
tween the subject and their reflection. Put another way, the break in eye-con-
tact that makes it impossible for the subject and their reflection to fully rec-
oncile causes two supposedly discontinuous orders of perception to occur
simultaneously. These two discontinuous orders of perception are referred
to by Massumi as mirror-vision and movement-vision. Mirror-vision and its
propensity for resolution is what happens when an individual sees them-
selves along the 'single-axis of vision [that] stretches you between two sur-
faces recapitulating the same'.[62] Movement-vision occurs when you see a
recorded image of yourself played back. The moment when Kayla looks into
her digital mirror both of these orders of perception occur simultaneously,
and while the mirror-vision desperately tries to resolve the image of herself
the recorded movement-vision resists such resolution.

How then is such a fissure resolved? The mirror's habitual identification
or resolution cannot be resolved optically as one would expect in the ana-
logue, specular mirror, and therefore the difficulty of the eyes in this mo-
ment to meet themselves is supplemented by the knowing, grasping hand.
Eye-contact becomes supplanted by 'hand-contact' (grasping) and therefore
the digital space of the digital mirror becomes embodied through the tactile,
knowing virtual fingers. In other words, while this looking into the mirror
does produce a displacement between Kayla and her (non)reflection, it is the
grasping of the hand that unifies this displacement between these two dis-
continuous orders of perception through *gesture*. Ultimately, this allows Kayla
to gesturally 'think' herself into the body's displacement: no longer outside
or inside the screen-sphere's arrangement of surfaces, but embodied within
its topology.

Conclusion

While *Eighth Grade* effectively demonstrates how screens have permeated
and enveloped the lifeworld of Kayla, it never collapses into a message of
moral panic or nomophobia. There is a moment later in the film where Kayla
reaches her point of apotheosis where she ritualistically burns a box of mem-
ories in an attempt to overcome her insecurities and move forward. There is
no screen between her and the fire, no mediator, and she has turned away
from the shadows of the cave-wall to look at what it is that projects them. Yet,

for the final shot of the film we see Kayla moving into the sphere again, opening software on her laptop and literally talking with her reflection in the digital mirror, using the space as a moment of affirmation. Burnham understands that, today, the screen is not something to be 'escaped', instead it is something we need to consider more readily. The selfie, for Kayla, is one of the many ways of doing so.

From Kayla's action, through a Merleau-Pontian reading of the body, Sobchack's comments that an individual cannot 'physically dwell in this new spatiality without special technologies (such as sophisticated "virtual reality" equipment)'[63] becomes a dubious one. The embodied process of grasping the device and recognising the displacement offered by the digital mirror results in a collection of movements – or rather gestures – that embody her in a very real way. As Grosz contends, the digital space's ability to disembody is a 'pervasive fantasy ... linked to the fantasy of mastery at a distance, of "telepresence," the illusion of being able to leave the body at will and appear elsewhere'.[64] In a cutting rejoinder, Grosz simply queries 'how it is possible to escape the body and the real is unclear ... even or especially as one dons one's virtual reality gloves and goggles or lights up the *necessary* cigarette and prepares coffee to begin a heavy session on the computer'.[65] To take this a step further, how can one physically distance themselves from the screenic topology of the screen-sphere, if one of the principle methods of engaging with it is to grasp it and look into its digital mirror?

To reiterate, specifically regarding the gesture of the selfie, it is this holding and looking which are combined into the knowing, active touch of tactile vision that embody the user in the screenic topology of the screen-sphere. I agree entirely with Sobchack in that our contemporary definition of the screen needs to be reformulated. However, by examining the behaviours of Kayla, and the embodied way screens are used, it is perhaps important to reformulate our definition of screenic gestures as well. The selfie is a fascinating example of a gesture unique to today's screenic topology, but it is not the only one that should be read as embodied within this constellation. It is not reactive to the screen, but a gesture that exists in an effect of it.

However, I do concede that I have only examined one 'dimension' of these gestures: the movement component of the totality of the *symbolic* movement. This is partly a result of looking exclusively at movement and space. Future research into this topic will need to perhaps concern itself more with the symbolic and time. Further, the selfie as a 'complete' gesture needs

to account for the arrest of the image, the editing of the photograph, and the inevitable online dissemination colloquially referred to as 'sharing'.

Yet, such concessions aside, this article has evidenced that the selfie cannot simply be reduced to a 2D image and rather it should be conceptualised as a complex, embodying screenic gesture. This gesture complicates and extends existing definitions of how we engage with our screens in the effect of an expanding, multiplying ubiquitous screenic topology.

Author

Darren Gary Berkland is a South African-born PhD candidate in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University. He obtained his Bachelor's degree at Nelson Mandela University in Port Elizabeth, completing an Honours in post-colonial literature and a Master's in media studies and visual design. His current research interests explore the complex relationship between the selfie, the mirror, and the way we embody our mobile devices. He has presented papers on gesture at various symposia and conferences across a variety of disciplines including photography, journalism, and health and wellbeing. Berkland was a team member on the Google Digital News Initiative project Coventry Blitz VR, which aimed to explore the pedogeological possibilities of virtual reality and gamification. He was also an organising member of Coventry University's research event On Gesture: Approaches and Questions that examined the topic across mediums and disciplines, investigating gestures intermedial role between theory and practice.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

[1] Lifeworld is a central concept of phenomenology defined as 'a novel subject domain with its own structure and governing principles: the realm of consciousness or subjectivity and its world of experience' (Luft & Øvergaard 2013, p. 2)

[2] Sobchack 2016, p. 157.

[3] Ibid., p. 158.

[4] A brief note on the distinction between 'screen' and 'screenic'. The term 'screen' refers to the formal, ontic screen-objects. The word screenic accounts not only for the formal screen-object,

but also the more general phenomena that occur in relation to or as an effect of screens (i.e. screenic touching, screenic space, et al.). See Chateau & Moure 2016, pp. 15-16.

[5] Oxford Dictionaries 2013.

[6] Tifentale 2018, pp. 26-45.

[7] Hess 2015, p. 1632.

[8] See Eckel et al. 2018.

[9] Senft & Baym 2015, p. 158.

[10] Frosh 2015, p. 1624.

[11] Strauven 2012, p. 71.

[12] Strauven 2016, p 144.

[13] Verhoef 2012, p. 24.

[14] Cooley 2004, p. 137.

[15] Streeck 2009, p. 49. 'Virtual fingers' refer to a complex relationship between the facets of the hand (palm, pads, fingers, and thumb) and the forces they create on an object. A virtual finger creates an oppositional space that allows for grasping. The details of the specific motor mechanics of the hand are beyond the scope of this study.

[16] Cooley 2004, p. 137.

[17] Best exemplified in the writings of Jill Walker-Retteberg (2014), Kate Warfield (2017), and Katrin Tiidenberg & Edgar Gómez Cruz (2015).

[18] In Edmund Husserl's book *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* (commonly referred to as *Ideas II*) he draws a distinction between the *Leib* and the *Körper*. While this distinction does not have a direct English translation, it is often written as the 'Body' (*Leib*) and the 'body' (*Körper*), with the capital B illustrating the *Leib* as the lived, perceiving thing. I will not be using a capital 'B' to distinguish between the two, as ultimately through Merleau-Ponty's work such a definition is impossible.

[19] Crossley 2004, p. 96.

[20] Sobchack 2016, p. 157.

[21] Flusser 2016, p. 4.

[22] Olenina & Schulzki 2017, p. 2.

[23] Sobchack 2016, p. 158.

[24] The role of light in the cinema apparatus is a complicated one and perhaps best exemplified in Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*, where a point of light draws a cone between a projector and a screen. In McCall's own words the installation 'is dealing with the projected light beam itself, rather than treating the light beam as a mere carrier of coded information, which is decoded when it strikes a flat surface (the screen)' (Walley 2004, pp. 65-75). The light itself plays an important role in describing the apparatus. Su Ballard (2007, pp. 34-42) reminds us that what McCall's work illustrates is the material space of cinema. *Eighth Grade* director Bo Burnham acknowledges in an interview that 'screens are a beautiful light source' (Buder 2019) and uses this light to connect a user to their screen, as the film features several shots of a figure in a dark room connected to the device by the light emitting off it. All the screens used in the film were practical, and connected to the internet, as the director was concerned with how the light of the screen – and the material space created by it – changes through the gesture of scrolling.

[25] Foucault 1967, p. 24.

[26] Friedburg 2006, p 229. Anna Friedberg tracks the metaphor of the window and its relationship to the screen. The multiscreen functionality of the current screen has a considerable impact on an individual's experience of the screen-sphere. As Friedburg writes, like the MacOS, the 'interface' of Windows extends screen space by overlapping screens of various sizes; each 'window' can run a different application; the user can scroll through a text within a window, arrange windows on the screen in stacked or overlapping formations, decorate windows (with wallpapers, textured patterns), and conduct new forms of 'window shopping' (p 229).

[27] De Rosa & Strauven forthcoming in 2020, p. 4.

[28] Ibid. p. 4.

[29] Hanich 2017.

[30] Sobchack 2016, p. 157.

[31] Ibid., p. 163.

[32] Ibid., pp. 171-172.

[33] Massumi 1999, p. 306.

[34] Ibid., p. 306.

[35] Sobchack 2016, p. 172.

[36] Massumi 2002, p. 185.

[37] Ibid., p. 184.

[38] Huhtamo 2004, p. 33.

[39] De Rosa & Strauven forthcoming in 2020, p. 4.

[40] Merleau-Ponty 1958.

[41] Carr 1967, p. 369.

[42] Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp. 135-136.

[43] Ibid., pp. 395-396.

[44] Grosz 1994, p. 91.

[45] Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 117.

[46] Ibid., p. 117.

[47] Grosz 1994, p. 91.

[48] Cooley 2004, p. 137.

[49] Streeck 2009, p. 49.

[50] Ibid., p. 51.

[51] It is worth mentioning that mobile phones can create specular reflections as well (see Fig. 2). However, such reflections are less implicit within the selfie process.

[52] It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the complex and storied history of the mirror. For a primer on this Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet's *The Mirror: A History* is essential, in particular the extended section on the mirror's 'troubling strangeness'.

[53] It is worth acknowledging the existence of the ongoing debate around the mirror's reconciliation and identification in relation to feminist theory. Luce Irigaray's work and criticism of Lacan is possibly the progenitor of this debate (see both 1985a and 1985b, or Huffer 2002).

[54] Crossley 2004, pp. 96-97.

[55]   Lacan 1977, p. 503.

[56]   Sobchack 1992, p. 106.

[57]   Cerbone 2006, p. 101.

[58]   Carmen 1999, p. 209.

[59]   Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 105.

[60]   Such othering is emphasised further when the image is captured during the selfie gesture, as the front-facing camera of the mobile phone flips the image once it is captured, as if the image was taken by another behind the camera.

[61]   Massumi 2002, p. 47.

[62]   Ibid., p. 48.

[63]   Sobchack 2016, p. 158.

[64]   Grosz 2001, p. 83.

[65]   Ibid., p. 85.