
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Text(ing) on Screen: Cinema's smartphone as intertitle, endophasia, and "mystic writing-pad"

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| ABSTRACT

The incorporation of text on screen through cell phone imagery has been steadily increasing since its mainstream introduction in the TV show *Sherlock* (2010). Though text message as a form of narrative storytelling has become almost ubiquitous in film, the strategy is greatly understudied, especially with respect to its place in film history. Building narrative through text is nothing new; intertitles in the silent era took the place of dialogue, and they relied on the audience's willingness to read text as a supplementary, or even guiding, narrative device. Many filmmakers of the silent era were creative in their use of text, using techniques like expressive graphism and broken verbal flow to imbue text with emotion. In the current era, the texting narrative device has turned our films silent again, with emotional tenor similarly derived from punctuation, textual tempo, and reaction shots. This paper identifies several functions of the modern "text-intertitle": (1) Texting creates in the audience an endophasia, or an internalized reading voice, quite removed from the film's externally imposed dialogue; (2) Text pacing created through line breaks, punctuation, and ellipses is an effective driver of narrative suspense; (3) Lastly, some films use the cell phone as a Freudian "mystic writing pad", a writing apparatus that is not beholden to the spoken word but is rather presented to the audience as a communal psyche, ghostly realm, or abstract plane.

| KEYWORDS

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Introduction

The incorporation of text on screen through smart phone imagery has been steadily increasing since its mainstream introduction in the TV show *Sherlock* (2010).¹ Though text message as a form of narrative storytelling has become almost ubiquitous in film, the strategy is greatly understudied, especially with respect to its place in film history and its narrative effect. The few existing articles on cell phones or smartphones on film focus on exhibition and distribution considerations, and when narrative representation of cell phones is discussed, it is largely through the lens of a history of oral communication and telephones.

This article addresses the more figural and symbolic potential of cell phone and smartphone narratives. It treats texting as a coextension of silent film intertitles, in that it replicates the audience effect of reading the screen within a designated pace. In this process of "reading" the screen, the viewer lends their own inner voice (or *endophasia*) to the text, creating a more participatory model of narrative reception. Ultimately, films that are structured to question the basic assumptions of texting, like *Personal Shopper* (2016), use this narrative device to greatest symbolic effect. By treating the cell phone and smartphone as more

¹ The TV show *Sherlock* is often cited by cultural critics as the origin point for texting on screen. However, many examples of cell phone texting pre-dates *Sherlock*, including international soap operas and Chinese and Japanese cinema.

of a Freudian "mystic writing-pad", these films showcase the writing apparatus as a communal psyche, ghostly realm, or abstract plane.

I. Intertitles

Building narrative through text is nothing new to film; intertitles in the silent era took the place of dialogue, and they relied on the audience's willingness to read text as a supplementary, or even guiding, narrative device. Many filmmakers of the silent era were creative in their use of text, using techniques like expressive graphism and broken verbal flow to imbue text with emotion. And though sound film continued to use some text for narrative effect, the substantial use of text on screen had largely fallen to the wayside until the incorporation of computer screens and smart phones into film narrative. In the current era, the texting narrative device has turned our films silent again, with emotional tenor similarly derived from punctuation, textual tempo, and reaction shots.

Michel Chion's *Words on Screen* reinserts written text into the audio-visual medium of film. It focuses mostly on non-diegetic intertitles of silent films and diegetic text in the mise-en-scene of sound films. Chion does analyze computer screens in later sections of the book, but does not include phone texting as part of his analysis. Interestingly, his discussion of silent film intertitles is the most analogous discussion to the current use of cell phone text on screen. Chion emphasizes that though there was an early standard for intertitles, many films developed creative and playful ways to emote or invoke a unique voice in the viewer's mind.

Examples of "expressive graphism" in silent film range from letters "shouting" with their large scale to text moving from the intertitle to the diegetic mise-en-scene (Chion, 2013). In representations of the cell phone text, we see similar impulses to make text imitate oral uses of language. Texts can shout through punctuation and capitalization, as in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010), but they can also escape the confines of the cell phone screen and plaster themselves on the film screen itself, sometimes even interacting with the characters as though they are tangible objects in the diegesis.

Intertitles were also written with the flair of "broken verbal flow", which were attempts to "naturalize" the text with the diegesis (Chion, 2013). German Expressionist films especially would present fragments of text, frustratingly dissolving text, or reduce the number of words on screen to the bare minimum.² Certainly text messaging thrives on conciseness. But visually, we also see this imitation of oral word delivery when text leaves the cell phone. *Chef* (2014) frustrates the audience as non-diegetic text that overlays the diegesis is blocked by characters who walk or lean in front of it. *{Figure 1}* In this way, the text as a whole is not as important as its parts. Just as characters in *Chef* talk over each other, each one only getting a few words in, the text message must contend with the oral overlap and disjointedness of contending messages.

It's worth noting that there is no classic technique for filming a smart-phone text. The use of texting in film starts with what might be considered already to be more novel aesthetic choices. The oft-cited *Sherlock* (2010) example shows text popping up in the air beside each phone, like speech bubbles. *{Figure 2}* This helps to merge character reaction and text into the same shot. In the silent film era, few films placed text directly into the live-action frame, largely due to technical difficulties. The ones that were able to merge text with image were unique in their ability to show action and reaction simultaneously. But they tended to also have a creative flair about them, so that the text was only partially about dissemination of essential narrative information. The playful effect of animated words rising, melting, decomposing, or rearranging was a delightful touch that exceeded any pretense at realism. We see this same playful touch in *Sherlock's* "expressive graphism" whereby texts with exclamation points pop up with increased size and urgency within a crowd of reporters. The word "wrong" does certainly have meaning within the narrative, but its continued repetition on screen and in such multitude is more about visual effect, rhythm, and pacing than a direct line of communication, both between characters and between the film and audience.³

It is in later iterations of texting, like in *Non-Stop* (2014), that we see what might be considered a classic technique, as borrowed from silent film intertitles. In *Non-Stop*, the hero, played by Liam Neeson, receives text messages from an unknown attacker. The texts float in the air at various angles, supposedly matching the angle of the cell phone with respect to the camera. *{Figure 3}* Each text is followed by a close-up of Neeson's face, reacting to the new threat or information. The sequence plays out in near silence, very much emulating an early film in narrative pacing⁴. The texts mimic intertitles in that lines are doled out to us in portions, directing the way that we read them. But what makes these text-intertitles more advanced is how they travel with

² See more on this reduction of words in Section II.b. Character *Endophasia*.

³ A less dramatic form of "expressive graphism" in film texting is the typeface and form of the text. When liberated from the cell phone screen, text can take nearly any form. In *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014), for example, texting is presented in a handwritten typeface, so that texts between adolescents falling in love evoke shared diary entries.

⁴ Most contemporary films now use both techniques at different points in the film. For example, *Decision to Leave* uses the "classic" setup of text screen alternative with reaction shots early in the film, then it prints text on the film frame as we simultaneously watch character reaction later in the film.

each shot and new camera setup. They are beamed out from a hand-held technology, and Liam Neeson can anxiously spin as much as he wants; the text will follow him, stalk him, as he moves.

This pattern of alternation between text and reaction shot evoke both the “show” and “tell” qualities of film and literature. Film and film criticism tends to privilege the qualities of “showing”, distancing the medium from the “telling” quality of text and literature. In film studies, “reading” the screen involves analyzing the mise-en-scene, editing and cinematography, and acting choices. However, in cell phone texting on screen, the reading of direct text is placed on the same level as the reading of a character’s face. Plenty of film historians who consider early film to be a purer form of the medium would disagree that sound cinema made film more “cinematic” by bypassing the element of literal reading. Certainly we see the same visual interaction with text return in our smart phone films.

It is worth noting that the new development of video call representation in film has a quite different effect on the audience than texting narratives. Video calls tend to function as fantasy sequences that place two characters in the room together through a wish-fulfilling device. In *No Other Choice*, characters’ bodies are overlapped on screen, as though they are walking past one another on the street – we know that they see one other on their smart phones, but the film representation creates emotional distance. {Figure 4} Similarly, in *After Yang*, characters who video call while eating dinner break the fourth wall as they stare their respective screens. This gives the effect of the audience acting as mediator to the characters’ relationship, again creating emotional distance.

Texting in film tends to create the opposite effect. Instead of emotional distance, text creates a unique intimacy between characters and with the audience. It allows the audience to be let in on the characters’ private relationships, their mode of speaking with one another, and their texting mannerisms. And reading text evokes a specific inner voice in the viewer that is unique to each audience member. Such inner reading voice (or *endophasia*) stitches the viewer into the film narrative, creating additional intimacy with and realism of the characters on screen.

II. *Endophasia*

a) Audience *endophasia*

Michel Chion briefly mentions *endophasia* with respect to intertitles by invoking St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. He transfers St. Augustine’s surprise at reading without speaking aloud to the request that films make on their audiences when presenting diegetic writing: “All this diegetic writing is paradoxically given prominence in sound film, which is perhaps the first art in which written and ‘oral’ or spoken language, writing and speech, coexist” (Chion, 2013). Chion argues that unlike silent film, which uses text to translate an external voice to the viewer, sound film presents written text as a “mute call” to fill in their own voice to the voiceless space provided.

This is certainly true of the text message in film, an extended form of “diegetic writing”, which does not inherently have a voice of its own. The voice of the sender may be assumed for these written messages, but given that most text messaging sequences play out in near silence, the audience is quite removed from the characters’ voices and cannot be expected to recreate them in their mind’s ear. Additionally, text messages are often used to introduce a new character (as in the famous *Sherlock* example), to mask the identity of the sender (as in the *Non-Stop* example), or as a medium through which to access alternate realms (as we will see in the “mystic writing-pad” discussion).

If the text message is inherently voiceless, then whose voice is the audience inserting when they silently read the screen? The truth is that this is uncontrollable and risky terrain for a film narrative. By developing their own voice for the role of the text message, the audience is given quite a lot of leeway in how the film presents its story and how it will, consequently, have an effect on them.⁵ A single text can be read as threatening or facetious depending on the specific viewer’s inner voice and their specific interpretation of the film’s narrative. Though risky, this is also quite an interactive mode for film: the viewer is inserted into the narrative progression simply through their participation in the casting and acting of this voiceless part. The viewer is very classically “sutured” into the film through their participation in its production and delivery.

b) Character *endophasia*

In addition to this “suturing” power of the text message that stitches the audience into the film narrative production, much can be gleaned about the characters’ inner voices from their text messages. Though Chion references St. Augustine and

⁵ It is worth mentioning that select films will bypass this issue of the audience creating their own voice for the text message by having characters speak their text messages. The effect is often awkward as in *Other People’s Children* (2022), though some examples, like *Zola* (2020), lean into the awkwardness with playful humor.

psychoanalytic pathologies to establish his sense of *endophasia*, perhaps more helpful to this discussion is psychologist Lev Vygotsky's detailed studies of *endophasia* and egocentric speech. In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky argues that the internal relationship between thought and word is not inherent or primal. Rather, as the human consciousness develops, its internal speech evolves in response to social interactions with speech.

In attempting to analyze the processes of inner speech, Vygotsky turns to analysis of egocentric speech, a child's unrestrained babbling. The advantage of this infantile stream of consciousness, Vygotsky argues, is that it is "vocal and audible", both "internal in function and structure" and "external in manifestation" (Vygotsky, 2012). In advance of adjusting language to meet adult rules of social behavior (or "communicative speech"), children vocalize their *endophasia*. Once adult systems are imposed on the child, their egocentric speech and corresponding *endophasia* becomes more rigid: "Having received a new assignment, speech is naturally reconstructed and takes on a new structure that corresponds to its new functions" (Vygotsky, 2012). Vygotsky emphasizes that once these new characteristics are introduced, they take over egocentric speech, creating a permanent system of self-editing towards the "social whole" that is imposed on the inner voice itself.

Texting on screen can serve a similar function to audiences as this process of ossifying child-like egocentric speech. We can watch text being written, a visual rather than "vocal" representation of inner thoughts. And we can then see that text being edited or erased according to post-egocentric systems. For example, in *Better Things* (2016), we see lovers writing hesitantly to each other in shorthand, with the texting ellipses creating dramatic pauses and indications of edited messages never to be received. The cell phone is not a magical time travelling device that thrusts adult characters backwards towards infancy. But this view onto their inner voice and how it is edited and curated for the outside world is quite unique. Silent film intertitles did not afford the audience such psychic intimacy with their heroes, as they largely documented the spoken, or already curated, word. The closest that film has gotten to achieving such direct access to *endophasia* is the voice-over track. Though here, just as the narrator's voice in literature, the "inner voice" is so often undercut by unreliable narrators or narrators who aim to please that audiences see voice-overs as often pre-meditated accounts rather than uncensored access to an inner voice⁶.

In *Decision to Leave*, this specific difference between *endophasia* and text edited for others, according to others' pacing, is emphasized with aesthetic techniques. Hae-joon writes abbreviated texts in response to the lengthy, emotive ones that he receives. But even in their brevity, we see that the sender writes at a break-neck pace, forcing Hae-joon to delete his responses over and over. As it becomes clear that Hae-joon must curate and adjust his inner voice to account for this social interaction, his face becomes superimposed with the animated ellipses of a text being written. {Figure 5} In the power dynamic of this silent conversation, it is clear that Hae-joon has been placed in the passenger seat, allowing the "social whole" to determine the cadence of his *endophasia*. The advantage of watching such an exchange on screen is the element of unrestricted narration – the spectator is let in on Hae-joon's slower pace and deleted responses, and thus understands the difference between his inner and outer character through the texting narrative device.

As speech for oneself rather than for others, *endophasia* has the rather unique advantage of not being grammatically oriented. Vygotsky identifies several ways in which *endophasia* rejects the rules of the "social whole": abbreviations, sense privileged over word meaning, and reduction of the sentence to the predicate (Vygotsky, 2012). Such adjustments to formal communicative speech has become the standard of texting in modern life. What perhaps began as a time-saving device, abbreviated and condensed language has become the mainstay of texting. It is speedier, yes, but it also creates an intimacy between sender and receiver in their mutual acknowledgment of what can often feel like a secret language.

As a child's egocentric speech develops towards a more socially-determined *endophasia*, it abbreviates in a very specific style: "the predicate and related words are preserved while the subject is omitted" (Vygotsky, 2012). Vygotsky argues that this style of language is based in "predicativity", as the receiver of the message must already have some context for the discussion at hand. Omitting the subject suggests an intimacy between the sender and receiver of the message, given that there is an assumed mutual understanding about what is being discussed. Such intimacy is often found in casual conversation and inside jokes between lovers and close friends. This specific shorthand is practically requisite for texting standards (imagine responding to a dinner invitation with the full sentence "Yes, I will meet you at the diner at 5pm tomorrow evening" rather than the quippy "See you there!" or "SYS").

We see such abbreviation consistently in texting on screen. While certainly realistic, this grammatical intimacy gives the audience an increased impression of closeness with the characters as well. We are let in on the individual *endophasia* of each character, outside of their catering to a "social whole", and we participate in the syntactic closeness between characters' inner

⁶ There are some notable exceptions to this claim, such as Linda's voice-over in *Days of Heaven*, which is often quite close to Linda Manz's unscripted, child-like egocentric speech, or the audible self-curating and editing of Travis's voice-over in *Taxi Driver*.

voices. Where film can be criticized for its impenetrable distance from characters' specific psyches (rather than psychological universals), the modern text device breaks through such social barriers of externality.

However, few films aim to use the cell phone or texting as more than a simple reflection of our contemporary technological realities. The potential for psychological penetration and creative narrative restructuring is under-utilized with few exceptions. In the next section, we will examine the potential for a new use of texting on screen, which does not assume a known, single, or realistic sender of the message.

III. Mystic writing-pad

Perhaps the most original and creative uses of the texting film narrative will be to treat the smartphone in a non-literal way. With its quality of being plugged in to a social network and its ability to receive messages from unknown origin, the smartphone might be seen as a medium or a psychoanalytic screen. Whereas speech represents presence (in that the receiver of the message must be present or invoked in a literal way), writing works on absences: the author does not need to be present with the reader, and often is not. It is this realm of absences that becomes ripe for creative narrative thinking.

The psychological aspect of this device is paralleled by the way that deconstruction has analyzed Sigmund Freud's "mystic writing-pad", a children's toy that seemed to fix Freud's preference for writing over memory. The simple device – just a piece of plastic over waxed board – allowed for both writing and erasure on one, plastic plane, yet a reservoir of past "traces" on the waxen surface. The indentations made in the wax by a stylus writing over the plastic are ultimately unreadable as they become layered, but Freud saw this as a practical machine that was a close approximation of the psyche's processes. Its "mystic" quality is in the pairing of new material (an endless process of erasure, or wiping clean for new text) and a catalogue of old knowledge (impressions recorded deep into the wax surface).

The connection to smart phones here might be obvious – these devices also provide a surface upon which new text can be endlessly written and received, yet also leave traces behind (caches, tabs, cookies, etc.) of a history of previous text. Though mundane to us now, the connection of these devices to the Internet and its repository of historical text "traces" still has a "mystical" quality in the Freudian sense. Smart phone text lives in between absence and presence – both available and present for consumption and always already shifted down to the waxen background, towards a massive recording of impressions representative of a social unconscious memory. As Freud puts it, this process of appearance and disappearance is analogous to "the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception" (Freud, 1961).

In some rare cases, film treats the world of text, tweet, Internet as the writing on a "mystic writing-pad" that magically reinstates itself upon the screen. And like a "mystic writing-pad", we have temporary access to a fleeting thought, image, word that flickers before us as an impression, only to be filed away to into a deeper layer of the unconscious. *Men, Women, & Children* (2014) gives a representation of this process with individual smart phones projecting their screens over each character's head. We see text and images scrolled past, discarded, and queued at blazing speed. Even more mystical is the wide view of a crowd of high school students walking whilst consuming Internet content. {Figure 6} Each floating screen flashes as the crowd communally participates in this Freudian process of sense impressions giving instantaneous dopamine hits before being shuffled down into social network oblivion. But, of course, the waxen social network is not erased – the film's emphasis on the deteriorating effects of this technology on young minds is quite obvious – the content is collected into an unconscious container of impressions that define this generation's mental illnesses and social incapacities.

When Jacques Derrida discusses Freud's "mystic writing-pad", he argues that Freud takes the machine too literally. Yes, the device is similar to the psyche's function in one direction, but the machine can never reproduce what has already been written in the moment of the stylus impression. The plastic paper and wax slab are a prosthesis of the inner mind, but this is not enough to explain the mind. Derrida emphasizes the temporality of the trace, which interweaves presence with absence in the same way as language. The writing can disappear, but traces are still seen in certain lights. We can never access these traces directly, just as we can only apprehend the world after the fact. For Derrida, Freud's machine supports a process of deferment so that the dangerous elements of presence can be postponed through a "reserve" (Derrida, 1978).

In this way, the cell phone becomes a primal machine that is not about accessing the technological future, but about making tentative contact with the unconscious through writing. It makes sense that filmmakers have started to use the cell phone as a device that makes possible communication with other realms – most commonly, the abstract realm of the communal Internet. But also the ghostly realm, as in Olivier Assayas's work.

Personal Shopper (2016) seems to hinge on the audience's belief that Maureen is texting with her dead brother's ghost. But in actuality, the film works whether or not we believe this narrative suggestion to be true. She may be using her cell phone as a medium to commune with her brother. Or she may be processing her medical diagnosis and fear of death through an all-seeing creep's unwelcome messages. In either case, the texts arrive suddenly, serve as a distraction from her daily life and

underpaid labor, and ultimately become her obsession. Maureen uses these fleeting texts to dig into the waxen depth of her memory and sense impressions. But everything that she dredges up is muddled and unreliable.

In the haunted house sequence where Maureen stays overnight in her brother's former residence, the supposed ghost leaves scratch marks – traces – across the writing table. Though the twins had made a pact to reach out to one another after death, this trace from the afterlife seems to terrify Maureen. If it is a reversal of the "mystic writing-pad", whereby the realm of past traces reaches up through the wax and plastic sheet to scratch itself back into existence, then it is indeed terrifying. Following Freudian logic, the unconscious emerges upon the surface of the psyche in moments of psychosis. Following Derrida's logic, the initial impression opens up the possibility of repetition, just as life "defends itself against death only through an economy of death, through deferment, repetition, reserve" (Derrida, 1978). For Maureen, the unnerving visit to her cardiologist at the beginning of the film starts a chain reaction of repeating thoughts of her brother, the deferment of her emotions surrounding his untimely death, and a reserve of repressed memory that threatens to emerge, likely in a more forced and sharp form than the original impression.

The texting in *Personal Shopper* plays out in a classic form: shots of the cell phone screen in Maureen's hand are intercut with her reaction shots. This pacing allows us room to both anticipate her reaction and continually be disappointed with her apathy as she discounts the texts or falls asleep after reading them. We see her thumbs hover tentatively over the keyboard, unsure of how much to give in to this "unknown caller". Her texting voice at first is curt and informal. Intimacy is formed between "Unknown" and receiver only when Maureen decides to use the cell phone device as a psychic release valve. Seemingly intimate questions like "Are you often scared?" do not cut deep, as though Maureen is being asked the wrong question on the Freudian couch. But as she decides to unload herself to "Unknown" as to a confessional booth, her texts become longer and her physical energy becomes jittery, excited.

Maureen recounts that her brother was visited by their mother's ghost, that her presence felt "like a dream, but not. That it was very real. He could smell her; he could see her so clearly." This is precisely the magical quality of Freud's writing device and the texts that Maureen receives. The texts are both present and absent – they have no known origin, but they arrive to their destination nonetheless. They carry a mere trace or scent of a sender, but they feel quite real to Maureen, advancing her real and uncensored, sometimes even unconscious, actions in the world. Assayas uses similar logic in *Irma Vep* (2022), where silent film intertitles are read on smart phone screens and ghosts (and actors invoking ghosts) take on tangible, visible form without fully playing by the rules of physical reality.

The smartphone becomes a magical device that reactivates traces of the past and makes them interactive in the present. Even more curious, the smartphone allows writing to become a physical force which, like that which enters the unconscious through perception, creates paths and webs which determine the structure of all subsequent experiences. Here words have presence only in so much as they are (literally) illumined from behind, just as we attain identity only retroactively, through a perceptual process of catching up to ourselves.

Conclusion

Texting merges Vygotsky's categories of external and psychological speech; we text into the void, with a hopeful certainty that our messages are received and responded to. Yet the messages themselves are not quite as important as their traces; we only expect the texts to be read in an inner voice, and we can live with the risk of the texts not being read at all. In defending his theory of *envois* late in his career, Derrida argued that "there is always an addressee, even if not socially determinable. There is even in the unconscious someone for whom one speaks" (Philippe, 2008). There is great potential in film's nonliteral use of smartphone representation, specifically along this logic of a non-socially determinable or unconscious addressees and senders. Texting will continue to be used to represent modern life in realistic ways. But if the unique qualities of invoking *endophasia*, intimate syntax, and magical reserves of the psyche are developed, film can reinscribe a more symbolic and figural understanding of our most common form of contemporary writing.

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