

# ELATHAN CINEMA

ASPECTS AND ANALYSIS OF SHORT FILMS

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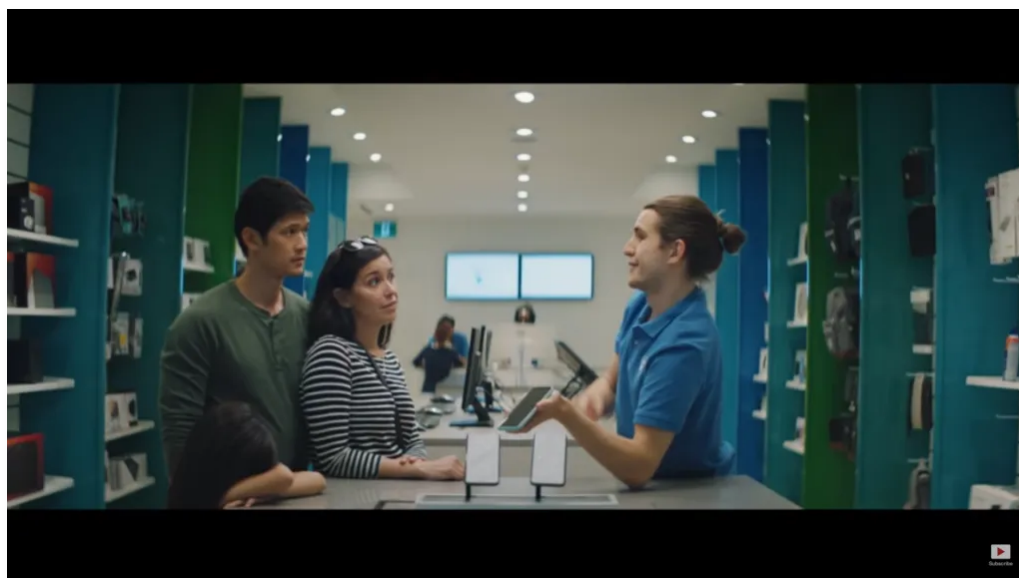
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## Acting and Relationship Mechanics with Screen Time (2017)

Posted on *February 13, 2018* by *Alby Darling, L. Dalrymple*

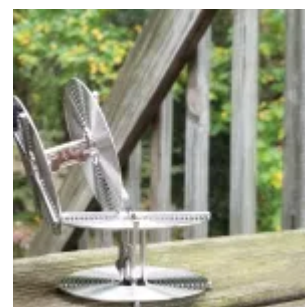
Written by Alby Darling, L. Dalrymple



Jess's (Smith) smart phone becomes sentient

*Screen Time* (2017) is a five-minute short, credited as an American film, even though it was filmed in Toronto, due to its production. *Screen Time* is one of three sets of short films produced by Qualcomm in collaboration with TNY Studio of The New Yorker for the New Yorker Festival screening, using different magazine covers as inspiration. *Screen Time* is based on the black and white September 4, 2017 cover of the same name, as drawn by cartoonist and

### Short Focus, Short Theory



Elathan Cinema aims to be a project focusing on film theory as it applies to short films, as well as news and developments (where applicable).

Over time, the hope is to both share the joy of film, as well as deconstruct some of what makes short films magic in a way a feature may not be able to accurately capture, or even be accurately discussed due to the longer nature of their content.

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Directed by Peter Huang, who has a solid previous background in directing short films, *Screen Time* features Harry Shum Jr. (*Shadowhunters*, *Glee*) as Cameron and Alex Castillo Smith (*The Girlfriend Experience*) as Jessica, a set of parents to a curious young girl and a self-aware smart phone. Which is not the first time that Huang has worked on the themes of technology's place in everyday, modern life.

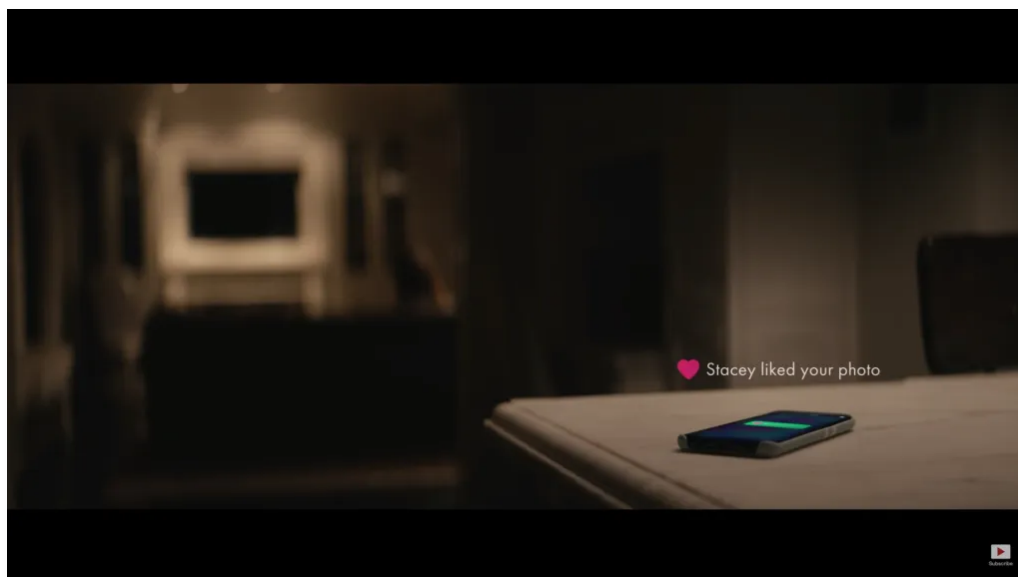
In Huang's previous short film, *5 Films About Technology* (2016), Huang takes on a bit more of a satirical view on smart phones, featuring girls who say they are "starving", but still take time to photograph their breakfast, a boy accidentally streaming porn to his mother's car, a man walking into a pole, and other similar antics.

In contrast with *Screen Time* specifically, this suggests that the original direction of the piece is somewhat different than what truly comes across in the finalized production.

If Huang had meant to have a similar theme or impact here as well, Shum and Smith cut him off at the legs with *delivery*. Regardless of the smart phone's existential rant in the repair shop.

But before getting there, let us reverse into Jessica's sub-plot as it supports Shum's key observation as Cameron.

## The Thing About Stacy (and Subplots)



A friend's notification comes at last

It is very easy, even in a feature length film to lose the thread of a subplot, here it is short. very tightly woven in and done in a way that is very easy not to

occur about once or twice a month as we have a tiny staff. Email is always open for suggestions on new short films to view, or questions on cinematic film theory.

Allowances may occur for major international or public holidays.

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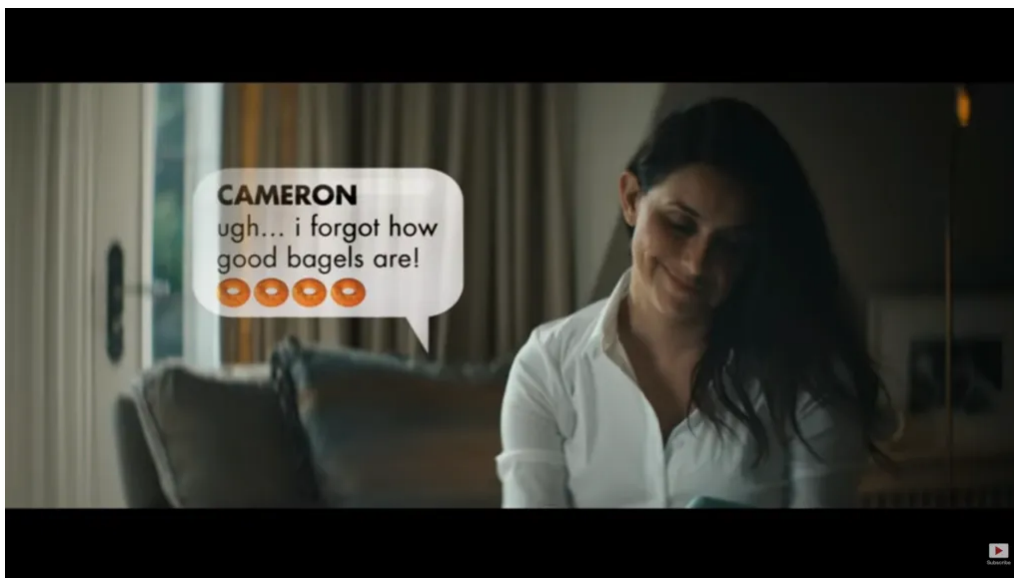
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- ++ a subplot is: a supporting side story, which can be related to character experiences, emotions, or overall themes

Here it has to do with Jess's desire for Stacy (who we as the audience never see but are told is Jess's friend) to like some of her photos on social media. Which plays into suggestions about Jess's character having some sense of anxiety over her life as the viewer comes in more direct contact with at the end she sits drinking wine on the sofa reflecting on the phone's rant about existence.

As a viewer we are never told directly from narration or anything Jess says that she has anxiety, but it comes through from her dialogue and Smith's acting. She is happy and relaxed when texting Cameron about bagels, or scrolling her feed of cats, she has very large panicked eyes as is understandable when the smart phone starts speaking of its own accord both in her home and in the shop. However, when checking her photos to see if Stacy has liked them, her face is drawn in much tighter, and even though she's in bed, her body posture feels more closed off instead of relaxed. Partly in that scene this "feeling" is also a trick of the camera being cropped *much closer* to her body compared to the other shots of the flashback set-up. Neither editing or acting exist in a vacuum from each other, after all, so this also shows how an editor can help give an actor more impact without them having to necessarily over-exaggerate their expressions.

What is also important about the Stacy mentions and her existence even off screen is, it means Jess is connected to her friends and her outside world. Sure, she might mindlessly look at cat videos sometimes, but by sharing her photos to her friends she is also doing what Cameron does while texting about bagels; being involved in her version of reality.



Locations in Time, Space, and History interlaced during *Others Will Follow* (2017)  
Manipulating Perceptions and the Flow of Time in *The Golden Fish / Histoire d'un poisson rouge* (1959)

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From the director's point of view, they may have meant for it to come off as "seeking validation", as Jess says "I swear she doesn't like them on purpose" at about 2:04 about Stacy, and she seems fixated on it. She quickly defends her friend to Cameron shortly after he in a dropped, sleepily tone calls her an "idiot" in contrast to Jessica's more awakened and focused state. If you expect someone to be somewhere, in physical reality or on online reality, and they are *not*, it is a reasonable thing to be concerned.

Or perhaps, even anxious.

It is also notable that the *phone* that develops self-awareness and anxiety over it's existence is **Jess's** phone. Not Cameron's. It is a kind of outward projection of an inner concern, which is brought around as well at about 1:54 as she seems more concerned than Cameron at winning their conversation about chronology, and again at the end scene where Jess is drinking wine on the sofa with her phone forgotten wondering out-loud for *herself* now directly if life has meaning.

## How an Actor Changes the Impact of Dialogue



A heart-to-heart, smart phone free

As previously mentioned, this short is five minutes and it could take you longer to finish your coffee in the morning than to watch this until the credit roll. That gives the actors much less room than compared to a feature or even a thirty-minute television episode to cover themselves if there is any kind of error, as there is limited continuity framework to work with, and limited space to *build* the character and make them feel real and believable to the audience.

Cameron feels as if he has fewer lines than Jessica or even the smart phone

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What really brings this home from Shum is a combination of facial expressions, subtle movements, the use of pauses, and variation of intonation or pitch are what give his character more depth. What he does with his voice, much like Smith does with her face, is Shum gives the audience of better sense of his character *without* the need for an overwhelming amount of dialogue in such a small space. It is very easy, as well as with Smith and her exaggerated expressions in the phone store, to see even if it is not said, that Jess's concern is understandably her suddenly self-aware phone, Cameron's concern is *Jess and their child*.

This thread is maintained at every point of the short, even in the flashback bits before the phone becomes able to speak.

For examples, both characters might be on their phones in the bed scene, but they're still sitting very close to each other, and Cameron is quick to defend Jess even if he may or may not be informed on Jess's point of view on the Stacy situation. While the group of them is walking down the street talking about Denmark, Cameron is on the side closest to the road (it is a traditional protective thing, at least for males in Western societies influenced by England, to stand on the side closest to the road with the ladies on the side *away* from the road due to horses kicking up all kinds of things behind them).

When he is sitting on the sofa as well, his posture is very open, yet relaxed while the pair is talking before he pulls out a video and they move closer and more snuggled into each other.

And most importantly, the bagels. Cameron sends a text about bagels that Jess asks about, and that we see as viewers pop up on the screen earlier. At about 3:30, Jess asks, "Why do we text about bagels?", and with how Shum replies, he says "when random thoughts pop into my head," **PAUSE**, "you're the one I want to share them with."

The pause is the click here, it is what makes the whole dang film work just about nearly.

Now, he also does this while suppressing an eye roll (see below sub-header), as if he's about to explain something so incredibly basic to his existence to Jess, but only manages to look at the ceiling before looking at her, because saying it is the important thing. Sometimes people just need to hear or feel an emotion or statement.

Now, after this they go on casually to talking about cheese, before Cameron brings up a video of their child which Jess asks him to send to her.

prevented a crying disaster in the personal world of someone they care very deeply about.



Happy, while still watching their video feed via the television

That is the point of humans.

That is the point of connection.

- Think about the great classics and cult of science fiction – *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*, *The Fifth Element*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and innumerable others.

These stories are not hinging on the architecture of the worlds, or the design of spaceships, or even the VFX of outer space and makeup design of aliens. The whole of these stories hinges on **people**. Or in place of people, sentient beings-or-others. People tell you the plot of *Star Trek* is a crew working together in discovering the universe, people tell you the plot of *Star Wars* is about family both biological and found, some may tell you *Blade Runner* is about how memories work and how self-connection functions in navigating society, or maybe they will tell you *The Fifth Element* is about how, ultimately, love creates “the fifth element” and can save the universe, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* gets into how perceptions of others can dictate interactions and the ability to form connections to them.

Even *Nier: Automata*, is ultimately, about forming connections, and every major character in that video game is a variation of an android because (spoiler alert) humanity is dead. But the drive to have purpose, to form connections to others remains. Because they were made by humans, and they have human programming and purpose.

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There is even a reasonably popular Tumblr post about the Curiosity rover up on Mars, and the fact it sings itself happy birthday, that says:

This isn't a sad story, this a happy story about the ridiculousness of humans and the way we love things. We built a little robot and called it Curiosity and flung it into the star to go and explore places we can't get to because it's name is in our nature and then just because we could, we taught it how to sing. — [thebaconsandwichofregret](#)

It is not a flaw, it is a feature.

Someone give Shum an award for this one. We'd do it, but we don't have a budget for that.

—

Music to *Screen Time* is crafted by Brian Gair, and inspired by Bruce Eric Kaplan's New Yorker Cover, also titled "Screen Time." This short can be found via [The New Yorker Youtube](#) to page linked here and below.

*\*Note: "Paid Post" means TYN was paid to publish the short, this review post was made without sponsorship.*

## Screen Time | A Short Film | TNY Studio [Paid Post]



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