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ALICE CATI - ANNA CHIARA SABATINO - MAX SCHLESER - SHUAI LI*

CAPTURING MOBILE LIVES An Introduction**

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1. MOBILE MEDIA ECOLOGIES

Since the advent of small-gauge film devices, alternative audiovisual forms have adopted original and creative approaches to documenting personal experiences. Among these, so-called amateur audiovisual films have often been characterised by self-referential and subjective expressions, whether shaped as “home movies” or individualistic autobiographical or self-portrayal declinations. The practice of independent filmmaking includes shaping new representations of personal identity and subjective experience, which represents a major shift toward self-focused narratives in audiovisual practice¹. From this perspective, the question is no longer how self-representational practices such as mobile and smartphone filmmaking are used to express unique personal perspectives and styles, but rather what forms of self-narrative representation emerge within the exploration of novel approaches and alternative renderings of the self in audiovisual and digital media, “they fit into new ways of being oneself”².

Within a mediascape where social media platforms have catalysed an unprecedented development of self-narrative forms through digital and mobile creative practices³, nearly anyone can produce and share self-representations, acting as agents to capture and share stories. Edgar Gómez Cruz and Helen Thornham claim that “the selfie mobi-

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¹ A. Motrescu-Mayes, S. Aasman, *Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video, and Digital Media*, London-New York: Routledge, 2019.

² G. Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, London-New York: Routledge, 2006, 15.

³ M. Schleser, *Smartphone Filmmaking: Theory and Practice*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2021.

lises technologies, cultural norms, and codes that are increasingly embedded in social networks, so that the practice of the selfie operates in a much wider continuum that we need to consider”⁴. As such, disciplinary perspectives on these practices will be among the topics discussed in this issue.

Since the first mobile films emerged roughly two decades ago, audiovisual storytelling has seen remarkable growth in multiple configurations, from video diaries and travelogues to first-person formats, ranging from cinema to social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, as well as news broadcasting and citizen digital journalism. Such media expansion has led to new formats and narrative structures, establishing smartphone filmmaking and digital storytelling as a distinct creative ecology that includes both professional and amateur domains⁵. As these platforms continue to evolve, they offer new opportunities for both creators and audiences to engage with content in innovative ways. One key aspect of mobile storytelling is now resonating in the mediascape more generally: a shift towards brevity and immediacy in storytelling. The immediacy of mobile storytelling with mobile devices allows creators to capture, edit, and share narratives instantly, fostering efficient creative expression⁶. Furthermore, “mobile audiences whose attentions are more fleeting and dispersed”⁷ lead to the rise of short-form video formats on social networking sites. This phenomenon has transformed personal storytelling by encouraging creators to condense their narratives into more concise and immediate forms. Additionally, the role of algorithms in addressing and promoting content has a relevant impact on the visibility of self-narrative productions, determining which stories reach broader audiences and go viral⁸. In this perspective, digital storytelling and mobile filmmaking as creative practices become both autonomous expressive tools for self-narratives and vehicles for collective engagement, as well as catalysts for activism, addressing issues like inequality and environmental and social crises. In the current digital landscape, creators can construct an authentic self-image that resonates closely with their intended audience.

From private memoirs to always-active social media profiles, from domestic memory capturing to the dialogic and participatory dispositive of smartphone filmmaking, how can audiovisual languages, tools and practices be declined today in their personal and collective performances? How traditional self-representative configurations such as autobiography and self-portrait evolve within their audiovisual upgrades? What are the varied facets that the self-narratives take on in the age of Big Data? What models of self-reflexive discourse and self-representation are defined as marginal or dominant in the contemporary mediascape? How do amateurism and professionalism interact with self-storytelling, which frequently occurs at the crossroads between private and public, between personal and corporate logic?

⁴ E. Gómez Cruz, H. Thornham, “Selfies beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical) F(r)ictions of a Practice”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 7, 1 (2015): 5.

⁵ M. Berry, “Mobile Filmmaking” in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, edited by L. Hjorth, H. Horst, A. Galloway, G. Bell, London-New York: Routledge, 2017, 308-317.

⁶ S. Li, *Ice City: Harbin – A TikTok City Film Exploring Mobile Storytelling across Platforms* [Doctoral dissertation, Swinburne University of Technology, 2023].

⁷ P. Grainge, *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 3.

⁸ X. Xu, “Mobile Storytelling: Elements, Evolution, and Experience” in *Mobile Storytelling in a Age of Smartphones*, edited by M. Schleser and X. Xu, Berlin: Springer, 2022, 25-36.

2. DIGITAL LIVES AND THE LIFE OF DIGITAL SELF-IMAGERY

Digital media have facilitated the proliferation of personal images, autobiographical narratives, first-person videos, and various fragments of information from which entire life traces can be reconstructed. Notably, to quote Max Schleser, thanks to mobile devices, self-representation has become a commonplace practice as we are immersed in a constant stream of moving images that are “encounters with the world”, portraying “notions of everyday life that encapsulate the self” and, at the same time, mirroring “the open-endedness of experience”⁹. For this reason, the concept of *capturing mobile lives* – expressed in the title of this special issue – should be understood in a dual sense: tracing lives in motion and giving visible form to an existence that is now hyperconnected and hybridised with mobile devices. Digital technologies, apps, and services have increasingly permeated everyday experiences, shaping not only ordinary gestures and actions but also our perceptions of ourselves and others. Never before have so many individuals produced, recorded, and instantly shared such vast amounts of data and information about themselves, their experiences, thoughts, preferences, and relationships.

While this phenomenon has prompted numerous scholars to interpret contemporary times within the context of a new wave that compels individuals and groups to expose themselves compulsively and narcissistically to carve out a space for themselves in the public spotlight, the progressive democratisation of expression tools has enabled marginalised and underrepresented individuals to take the floor and shape a self-image in accordance with their principles and values, liberating themselves from stereotypes and dominant models.

Central to this reflection is the hermeneutic paradigm of *life writing*, a perspective that situates all personal documents concerning the lives of individuals and communities within a broader continuum that bridges the gap between autobiography and biography. Such forms and practices of self-representation can be expressed in written form or created through various media tools, thus encompassing a wide range of sources including diaries, letters, visual and audiovisual narratives, medical records, interviews, social accounts, and so forth¹⁰. In enhancing its intermedial and interdisciplinary vocation, research on life writing has thus far primarily focused on problematising the concept of narrative, specifically emphasising the necessity of recognising in any document, trace or reference the nature of a valuable source for reconstructing a life story.

Equally important, however, is the emphasis on the concept of *life*, as research on life writing focuses on the lived reality of human existence. On the one hand, there is an initial process of sedimentation and documentation, forming the foundation for any gesture of externalising the self through media devices. On the other hand, the elaboration of personal experience is characterised more by the untenability and involuntariness of the mechanisms that drive us to engage with reality while immersed in the flux of the present time. In this sense, the very concept of “lived reality” rests on the oscillation

⁹ M. Schleser, “Connecting through Mobile Autobiographies: Self-Reflexive Mobile Filmmaking, Self-Representation, and Selfies”, in M. Berry, M. Schleser, eds., *Mobile Media Making in an Age of Smartphones*, New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2014, 148-158 (155).

¹⁰ Regarding life writing, see: M. Jolly, *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001; M. Saunders, “Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies”, in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, edited by A. Erll and A. Nünning, Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 2010, 321-331. For an initial reflection in Italy on the application of the concept of life writing in relation to audiovisual practices, see: A. Cati, M.G. Grassilli, eds., “The Migrant as an I-Eye. Transculturality, Migration, Audiovisual Practices”, special issue, *Cinergie*, 16 (2019).

between two different ways of understanding subjective experience. The first mode is connected to living and lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which offers the most vivid perception of and attention to any existential content. This form of experience is not only immediate and direct, but also reflective and conscious as it unfolds and is self-represented, enabling newly acquired content to be compared with other previously acquired experiences. Indeed, the second mode concerns accumulated experience (*Erfahrung*), where the sedimentation of content in memory presupposes a duration and a return of that content to the state of consciousness¹¹.

But what happens when life is captured through a smartphone, GoPro camera, or body cam? When, that is, do we record life experiences at the moment they are unfolding both within and around us? As Max Schleser points out, “mobile filmmaking not only emphasises the moment but also augments the experience”¹². Furthermore, we must understand how a specific medium, employed to shape the self, can condition both the manner and object of representation itself. Overall, digital filming technologies illustrate how a perfect continuity is established between lived experience and viewing experience: I film amid an event. However, the time required to share this visual content has also been significantly reduced, as web platforms and social media facilitate the immediate circulation of the newly documented fact.

It is true, however, that scholars hardly associate digital life narratives with forms conjugated to the past tense, recognising in them the characteristics of retrospective storytelling¹³. Rather, mobile autobiographies represent one of the main expressions of the trend towards so-called *recency* (the present tense), as evidenced by many content creators who frequently share what they are doing at the moment they are filming. While in the past, vloggers would sit in front of a video camera or PC webcam to tell their stories, in more recent times, taking advantage of the ready availability of handheld video cameras and editing resources, one increasingly sees social media stars talking, moving, and acting while filming. Not surprisingly, Mikka Lene Pers notes that the telling by doing mode emphasises showing as opposed to telling as a storytelling strategy that provides viewers with direct access to experiences¹⁴.

It cannot be denied that this contributes to emphasising an effect of authenticity that emanates from the ancient myth of capturing the contingency of life and reality, with which the photographic and cinematic device has established an automatic and immediate relationship since its advent. As Felipe Martins argues, “the authentic image is to be read not only as the visible prolongation in space and time of the referent from which it emanates, but also as a sign of a particular type that reveals something of the world, transfiguring it”¹⁵.

Yet, this intertwining of life, representation, and narrative extends far beyond the question of accessing the real anew or opening up to the chance and contingency of

¹¹ On the philosophical conceptualisation of experience, see: P. Jedlowski, *Memoria, esperienza e modernità*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2002, 16. For an application of these concepts to media experience: R. Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media*, Roma: Carocci, 2010, 25-26.

¹² Schleser, “Connecting through Mobile Autobiographies: Self-Reflexive Mobile Filmmaking, Self-Representation, and Selfies”, 148-158 (152).

¹³ I. Kreknin, “Digital Life Narrative/Digital Selves/Autobiography on the Internet”, in *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, edited by M. Wagner-Egelhaaf, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2019, 557-564.

¹⁴ M.L. Pers, “Telling-by-Doing Life as a Mother in YouTube vlogs”, in *Small Stories Research: Tales, Tellings and Tellers across Contexts*, edited by A. Georgakopoulou, K. Giaxoglou, S. Patron, London-New York: Routledge, 2023, 292-309 (294).

¹⁵ F. Martins, “The Construction of Chance in Cinema: Contingency Figures”, in *Aesthetic Authenticity in Cinema*, edited by F. Martins, Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2023, 102.

life. Regarding the surplus of life over any art form, David Bordwell stated, “Life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered”¹⁶. In the contemporary world, however, every connection between life, representation, and narrative is filtered through an ego: a subject who, quoting Foucault, whenever they enter into a relationship with themselves, already enacts a practice of self-recreation through a process of mediation¹⁷. Building on this aspect, Paul John Eakin proposes expanding the traditional conception of autobiography by reorienting the notion of human life not merely as a collection of content recorded through autobiographical writing, but as it is being lived in the present¹⁸. As articulated by the scholar, the concept of *living autobiographically* seeks to create a significant shift in understanding the collective attitude towards self-representation: autobiography does not primarily focus on recovering a life story retrospectively but rather shapes the very practice of living.

In this sense, we can understand the new figure of the *mobile autobiographer* as a genuine *form of life*. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is its use in language. However, the use itself cannot be understood in isolation; it is embedded in a form of life, which consists of a set of practices, behaviours, habits, and shared rules that lend meaning to language¹⁹. Wittgenstein aims to emphasise the concept of life over that of form, thereby highlighting the connection between existence and language, focusing on the latter’s fluidity rather than its systematic nature. If the form of life consists of the shared social practices that enable language, then meaning is not something internal to the mind; rather, it is public and embodied in lived experience. Based on this assumption, Dario Mangano posits that a form of life can be embodied by the photographer, as their images and the photographic act represent a textualisation of a particular way of viewing the world. Nevertheless, as the author states, it is not the tendency to capture images of reality that predominantly defines contemporary subjectivity:

It would be naïve to maintain that the camera we carry daily in our pockets, an integral part of our mobile phones, makes us photographers. And not because of the usual common sense that insists that having a camera does not make us photographers, but because for the remediation, it is vital that something else follows, an excess that offers that extra push that leads *wanting to do* to become *wanting to be*, or even *having to be*²⁰.

What is truly transformative today in reorganising and orienting the will and duty of individuals and the community is the propensity for self-reflexivity, for living by representing oneself. Inevitably, the new identity of these digital lives is measured not only on a quantitative level (we are all now mobile autobiographers, constantly reshaping forms, meanings, and practices of signification from ourselves) but also on a qualitative level.

Indeed, we cannot neglect, within a reflection that seeks to map the semantic and pragmatic shifts of the concept of life concerning digital media, the perspective of integration and hybridisation between online and offline life, as well as the analogue and

¹⁶ D. Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, London-New York: Routledge, 2008, 156.

¹⁷ M. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by H.M. Luther et al., Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998, 16-49.

¹⁸ P.J. Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.

¹⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation* [1953], Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

²⁰ D. Mangano, “This Is Not Vivian. The Photographer as a Form of Life”, *Versus*, 1 (2019): 90.

virtual existential dimensions. Drawing inspiration from Hannah Arendt's thought in *The Human Condition* (1958), particularly regarding the concept of *onlife*, Luciano Floridi proposes a deeper exploration of the interactions between ICTs and notions of public space, as well as our contemporary lifeworld in general²¹. In our society, all boundaries have now collapsed: not only those between our offline and online lives and the experiences that characterised earlier conceptualisations, but also those between media producers and consumers, authentic and fictitious, private and public. By positioning this reflection closer to Hannah Arendt's idea of "space of appearance", such a blended life also raises questions about visibility and invisibility in a non-territorial and contingently established space that emerges from people doing things together "in the manner of speech and action" (*vita activa*)²². Indeed, the risk is that the saturation of images and narratives of mobile lives dramatically leads to the indistinction of human existences, whereby they are now completely supplanted by the lives of self-images. In other words, Digital Self-Imagery now possesses a truly autonomous life, allowing images and data to outlive their authors and producers, thereby nullifying the subject's position within a genuinely politically viable world. Thus, Hannah Arendt's admonition regarding the necessity to take an ethical gaze and devote a deep listening ear to the other human lives around us, especially those ignored, invisibilised, and silenced by dominant systems (e.g., populations persecuted for ethnic-racial reasons, differently abled individuals, migrants, people who are gender non-conforming, etc.) seems particularly pertinent. The philosopher writes:

[...] men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times²³.

Therefore, the challenge we face today is no longer about recovering a materiality of existence and human lives drawn into the vortex of the digital and virtual, but rather about the risks of reducing everyday life to the individual's partial perspective, where we see and hear only scattered "public" selves, fleeting and ephemeral snapshots of an elusive, moving, and passing life.

3. LIVES IN MOTION: DIGITAL SUBJECTIVITIES, VERNACULAR AESTHETICS, AND EVERYDAY REPAIR

Nowadays, mobile self-representation is a set of practices grounded in the use of smartphones, portable recording devices, and digital platforms that enable individuals to produce, circulate, and archive multimodal narratives of the self in real time and on the move²⁴. The increasing portability of recording technologies and the ubiquity of smartphones have accelerated the accessibility of audiovisual storytelling, widening the range of actors who can engage in autobiographical, testimonial, or reflexive practices.

²¹ L. Floridi, ed., *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*, London-New York: SpringerLink, 2015.

²² H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 198-199.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁴ L. Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 273-308.

From brief Instagram stories to long-form YouTube vlogs, from ephemeral Snapchats to deeply intimate video-diaries filmed during moments of illness, care, migration, or crisis, the mobile apparatus has become both a mirror and a prosthesis of the self – at once recording surface, performative stage, and relational tool²⁵. This proliferation of mobile autobiographies contributes to what we might call an expanded field of vernacular self-representation: a space where ordinary users become authors of self through accessible, often improvised, and socially embedded practices of media production²⁶.

What distinguishes contemporary mobile self-representation is not merely the increased accessibility of technology, but also a paradigmatic shift in the logic of media production. Mobile self-representation is no longer necessarily tethered to professional or institutional frameworks – its grammar emerges from everyday life, affective immediacy, and contingent encounters with place, time, and emotion²⁷. The mobile device becomes a personal archive, a diary, a therapeutic companion, and a communicative interface – enabling what might be described as situated narration, the telling of the self from within the moving and lived context of its emergence²⁸. The smartphone does not merely record; it mediates, filters, prompts, and proposes narrative structures. Algorithms suggest what to remember (through “memories”), who to share with (through target suggestions), and how to present oneself (through templates, filters, and formats). In this sense, mobile self-representation operates within an ecology of affordances and constraints that shape its visibility, narrativity, and affective tone²⁹. Crucially, mobility is not only technological (the capacity to move with one’s device), but also social, spatial, and existential. The mobile subject is often in transition – moving through borders, navigating uncertain health, traversing affective or biographical ruptures. In such cases, mobile media serve not only as tools of expression but as existential supports, allowing users to frame, contain, or re-approach moments of instability or transformation.

One of the most significant cultural consequences of mobile self-representation is the expansion of what can be considered “legitimate” storytelling. In contrast to institutional or professionally curated narratives, vernacular storytelling emerges from the margins of expertise: it privileges personal voice, improvisational aesthetics, and the ethics of self-authorship. These forms are often raw, fragmentary, repetitive, or emotionally unpolished – and it is precisely in this imperfection that their power resides³⁰. Vernacular digital practices destabilize established hierarchies of representation and challenge dominant epistemologies, resisting the normative demands of legibility³¹.

Moreover, mobile vernaculars are deeply relational. They are often produced for someone – a community, a network, a friend, a future self. This intentionality transforms the act of media-making into a socially embedded practice – a gesture of connection,

²⁵ D. Miller, “The Fourth Screen: Mediatization and the Smartphone”, *Television & New Media*, 15, 4 (2014): 259-273.

²⁶ A. de Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

²⁷ J. Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media*, London-New York: Routledge, 2020.

²⁸ M. Sheller, J. Urry, “Mobilizing the New Mobilities Paradigm”, *Applied Mobilities*, 1, 1 (2016): 10-25.

²⁹ D. Lupton, *Data Selves: More-than-Human Perspectives*, Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020.

³⁰ A. Medrado, I. Rega, *Media Activism, Artivism and the Fight against Marginalisation in the Global South: South-to-South Communication*, London-New York: Routledge, 2023.

³¹ D. Buckingham, “Power to the People? Amateur Media and Everyday Creativity”. *Medienimpulse*, 55, 4 (2017): 1-13.

recognition, or survival³². In some cases, these narratives circulate widely, generating micro-publics or solidarity networks; in others, they remain intimate and private, functioning as tools of memory, healing, or testimony. It is in this space of vernacular storytelling that we observe the emergence of what might be termed mobile care practices: the use of everyday media not only for representation but for affective labour, self-regulation, and intersubjective support³³.

In this sense, mobile devices can be considered not only tools of expression but technologies of the self – enabling what Foucault described as the cultivation of self-knowledge, care, and transformation through digital affordances, particularly evident in contexts of trauma, illness, marginalisation, or personal crisis, where traditional narratives may falter or fail³⁴. Yet mobile self-representation also introduces a paradox: while it can be deeply reparative, it also risks exposing the subject to new forms of vulnerability, surveillance, or commodification. The promise of agency is always entangled with the demands of visibility. The transformative gesture may be interrupted or co-opted by algorithmic metrics, platform policies, or audience feedback. For this reason, any theorisation of mobile transformative practices must attend to the ethical, technological, and relational conditions under which these narratives are produced and received. This suggests that the reparative power of mobile media is not reducible to its psychological effects but must be understood in terms of its cultural, relational, and aesthetic dynamics. Mobile autobiographies do not only narrate the self; they reconfigure it, proposing new modes of temporality, embodiment, and subjectivity³⁵.

At the heart of these transformations lies a simple but powerful technological fact: the self is no longer a unified authorial presence but a dispersed network of temporal fragments, constantly assembled and reassembled through practices of curation, memory, and sharing. Moreover, portability facilitates accessibility, functioning as an infrastructure of inclusion: it lowers barriers, opens possibilities, and enables new forms of storytelling agency³⁶. Yet, access to mobile self-representation is still conditioned by socio-technical, economic, and geopolitical factors. Data costs, platform restrictions, algorithmic biases, and surveillance infrastructures all play a role in shaping who can speak, who is heard, and what forms of selfhood are legible³⁷.

Theorizing mobile lives therefore demands an interdisciplinary lens attentive to aesthetics, media infrastructures, practices of care, and power – a critical endeavour this special issue seeks to advance.

Among the most compelling explorations of mobile self-representation as a tool for documenting and aestheticizing the everyday, the work of British director Victoria Mapplebeck offers a powerful example. As Laura Busetta argues in her contribution, Victoria Mapplebeck's long-term use of smartphones to narrate motherhood, illness,

³² B. Axford, *The World-Making Power of New Media: Mere Connection?*, London-New York: Routledge, 2017.

³³ A.C. Sabatino, V. Saladino, *Cinematic Psychotherapy: Audiovisual Languages, Therapeutic Strategies, and Autism Narratives*. London-New York: Routledge, 2023.

³⁴ J. Bruner, "Self-Making and World-Making", in *Narrative and Identity*, edited by J. Brockmeier and D. Carbaugh, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2001, 25-37.

³⁵ A.R. Schrock, "Communicative Affordances of Mobile Media: Portability, Availability, Locatability, and Multimediality", *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 18 (2015).

³⁶ D. Petousi *et al.*, "Interactive Digital Storytelling in Cultural Heritage: The Transformative Role of Agency", in *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by M. Vosmeer and L. Holloway-Attaway, Cham: Springer, 2022.

³⁷ T. Kant, *Making It Personal: Algorithmic Personalization, Identity, and Everyday Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

and memory underscores how mobile filmmaking can function as both an archival and political act. Through movies such as *160 Characters*, *Missed Call*, and *Motherboard*, Mapplebeck constructs a deeply personal audiovisual grammar that challenges dominant representations of gender and care, while asserting a feminist ethics of digital intimacy.

Likewise, Paola Lamberti's essay regarding TikTok's green videos expands the scope of mobile self-narration by focusing on ecological vlogging practices among Gen Z TikTok creators. These green vlogs, situated within affective and generational frameworks of eco-anxiety, articulate a form of situated and sensory storytelling in which mobile devices become not only tools of documentation but agents of ecological co-agency. As Lamberti shows, these practices – rooted in the aesthetics of the #Ecotok and #CinematicVlog genres – transform environmental discomfort into acts of aesthetic and affective resistance.

Contemporary mobile self-representation fosters the proliferation of what might be described as situated narration, the telling of the self from within the moving and lived context of its emergence. This dynamic is particularly evident in Kashish Singh and Pragati Paul's contribution, which explores how dancers engage with the smartphone screen not merely as a recording device but as a stage and co-author of embodied vernacular storytelling. Through an autoethnographic lens, Singh and Paul show how platform-native performances reconfigure intimacy and authorship, foregrounding the body as a mediated site of expression, connection, and algorithmic visibility.

This entanglement of affect, embodiment, and mediation also underpins the mobile aesthetics emerging from contexts of conflict. In his paper, Samuel Antichi analyses how TikTok has become a space where soldiers, civilians, and influencers alike perform and narrate the war in Ukraine through the platform's vernacular forms – dance, humour, parody, and POV storytelling. These practices, while sometimes criticised for aestheticising violence, reveal a deeper strategy of “playful trauma”, wherein creators mobilise platform trends to process, mediate, and politicise their lived experiences. Dance challenges, beauty routines filmed in bombed-out shelters, or ironic meme-based activism become powerful tools of visibility and affective engagement, destabilising the boundary between documentation and performance.

In both cases – the vertical screen performances of dancers and the wartime TikToks from Ukraine – the smartphone functions not only as a recording device but as a relational interface, shaping how stories are told, perceived, and circulated. Whether choreographing identity in aesthetically curated spaces or performing resilience in the midst of violence, mobile self-representations operate within a logic of situated affectivity – a mode of storytelling attuned to the embodied, the ephemeral, and the algorithmically contingent.

Another relevant dimension of mobile self-representation concerns its entanglement with time and space – not simply as coordinates or contexts, but as constitutive frameworks through which subjectivity is shaped, staged, and archived. Two contributions in this issue focus on these aspects, offering complementary perspectives on the temporal and spatial grammars of mobile identity.

In her article, Federica Cavaletti explores how mobile self-representation intersects with the existential dimension of time, particularly in the case of solo travel shared on Instagram. Through a philosophical and phenomenological lens, Cavaletti interrogates the aesthetic and ethical implications of narrating risk, solitude, and displacement. Here, mobile media do not simply document movement; they construct a figure of the self as adventurous, defined by autonomy, unpredictability, and temporal excess. The

“adventurous self” is not merely one who lives intensely but one who tells their life as intensity – curating fragments, delays, and silences to evoke a temporality charged with meaning and uncertainty. Instagram becomes a stage where time is both stretched and punctuated, where the moment of danger or transcendence is retroactively framed through image, caption, and algorithmic visibility.

If this contribution focuses on the lived and narrated experience of time, Deborah Toschi turns her attention to the spatial logics of mobile subjectivity. Through a media-archaeological and cartographic approach, Toschi revisits the concept of the “spatial self”, in relation to the evolution of location-based services, GPS-enabled devices, and image geotagging. The essay traces a genealogy of spatial media, from early camera phones and personal GPS trackers to today’s multi-sensor smartphones capable of capturing movement, acceleration, and posture. Describing a new mode of autobiographical inscription, where the body leaves traces across digital maps, archived trajectories, and image metadata, the essay argues that mobile media enable an embodied form of cartographic storytelling – what it calls a “mosaic of identity” composed of geolocated fragments, tagged moments, and algorithmically recalled memories. The spatial self is no longer constructed through coherent narratives but through accumulations of micro-data, curated itineraries, and performative place-affiliations.

Taken together, these two essays reveal how mobile self-representation operates across heterogeneous temporalities and spatialities: it stretches time into narrative possibility while anchoring identity in the data-rich textures of location and movement. Both contributions resist reductive notions of the self as a stable or unified figure. Instead, they propose models of subjectivity that are experimental, situated, and dynamically configured through everyday acts of documentation, sharing, and curation. Whether traversing remote landscapes or tracing steps across digital maps, the mobile subject is one in motion – assembling meaning through the entangled coordinates of lived time and mediated space.

Another crucial intervention in this special issue comes from Susanna Bandi, whose essay addresses the intersection of mobile self-representation, neurodivergence, and epistemic agency. Through the analysis of mobile media practices by autistic women – particularly YouTube vlogs and smartphone-recorded testimonies – Bandi explores how digital self-narration enables the articulation of lived experiences that are often rendered invisible or unintelligible within dominant neurotypical discourses.

The article foregrounds the specific narrative strategies adopted by autistic creators: circularity, repetition, sensory detailing, visual stimming, and the use of non-linear temporalities. These formal elements are not aesthetic deviations but integral parts of an alternative epistemology – one grounded in embodied truth, affective attunement, and resistance to normative narrative expectations. In Bandi’s analysis, mobile media become technologies of reappropriation: tools through which autistic women reclaim the right to define their own terms of selfhood, language, and visibility.

Rather than conforming to the curatorial logics of Instagram or the storytelling templates of mainstream YouTube, the mobile autobiographies examined by Bandi challenge dominant modes of legibility. They resist coherence and spectacle, opting instead for forms of expression that may appear “slow”, “awkward”, or “fragmented” to neurotypical viewers – but are in fact deeply coherent within the communicative ecology of the creators themselves. Mobile filming becomes an act of pacing, scripting, and protection – allowing the production of testimony without the demand for performative overexposure.

First-person autism narratives are not simply expressions of individual experience;

they are acts of epistemic resistance, mobilizing mobile media to contest cultural scripts that pathologize or erase autistic subjectivities. In doing so, these mobile autobiographies generate a “neuroqueer narrativity” – a way of speaking the self that is not about being understood by others, but about sustaining one’s own forms of presence, rhythm, and relationality.

A different but equally powerful articulation of mobile self-narration emerges in Vittorio Iervese’s essay, which analyses the transmedia project *Shadow Game* and its sequel *Mind Game*, which document the migratory journeys of unaccompanied minors across the Balkan route. What sets these narratives apart is not only the use of smartphones by the protagonists to film their own experiences, but the way these recordings construct a hybrid narrative mode – one that blends documentary realism, cinematic confession, participatory media, and game logic. As the article shows, the very concept of “the Game” functions as both a metaphor and a structuring device: each border crossing becomes a level to overcome, and each setback is a moment of reset. The result is a powerful narrative of agency under constraint – one that foregrounds the bodily risks, emotional labour, and ethical dilemmas of self-representation in contexts of surveillance, illegality, and trauma.

The smartphone, in this context, is a lifeline, a weapon, a diary, and a companion. The article identifies key modalities of migrant mobile storytelling – such as the “situational map”, the “cinematic confession”, and the “haptic message” – that allow these young individuals to narrate their journey from within, on the move, and often in real time. As the article compellingly argues, the “game” of migration is not only narrated through mobile media; it is performed through it, staged as a complex interplay of self-staging, relational positioning, and affective management.

Taken together, these two contributions point toward an understanding of mobile autobiographies as sites of tension – between exposure and withdrawal, voice and silence, agency and constraint. Whether in the adolescent bedroom or on the Balkan route, mobile self-representation emerges as a practice of resilience and negotiation, capable of holding together vulnerability and creativity, trauma and narration, presence and deferral. These stories matter not only for what they reveal, but for how they are told: from below, from within, and always in motion.

The contributions gathered in this issue collectively call for a renewed theorisation of mobile self-representation – not as a fixed category or genre, but as a set of evolving, situated practices that traverse media infrastructures, affective economies, and socio-political terrains. Across diverse contexts – illness, migration, adolescence, neurodivergence, activism, and algorithmic mediation – mobile autobiographies emerge as plural, fragmented, and deeply relational forms of storytelling. They do not simply *tell lives* but reconfigure the very conditions under which life becomes tellable, shareable, and intelligible.

Whether performed through vertical dance, confessional vlogging, geolocated image trails, the mobile self is always in flux: not a stable identity but a process of ongoing negotiation between body, device, and environment. Such rhetoric challenges conventional narrative expectations (coherence, resolution, communicative intent), and instead foregrounds modalities of presence, opacity, and affective realism.

Moreover, mobile self-narration operates at the intersection of visibility and vulnerability. It invites audiences into spaces of intimacy, distress, and resistance, while simultaneously exposing subjects to regimes of surveillance, judgment, and commodification. This paradox demands a critical ethics attentive to both the empowering and precarious dimensions of digital self-expression. The personal is never just personal – it

is technologically mediated, socially coded, and culturally situated. First-person narratives become, in this sense, nodes of intersection between individual trajectories and collective imaginaries, where even the most idiosyncratic testimony can gesture toward shared conditions of embodiment, mobility, and precarity.

The essays in this issue illuminate how the mobile subject is not merely a figure of technological modernity, but a deeply human one: searching, feeling, performing, resisting, and narrating their way through the entangled flows of mediated existence.

In theorising mobile self-representation today, we are thus not only mapping a field of practices – we are tracing a cartography of subjectivities in motion, of voices that speak from within the everyday, the ordinary, the intimate, and the unstable.

These *lives in motion* are not only captured but they also constitute a vital archive of everyday repair, one that demands scholarly attention not just for what it represents, but for how it performs agency, sustains care, and gestures toward new forms of living and being with others. Whether created to testify, to resist, to remember, or to repair, mobile self-representations are not only stories about life; they are ways of inhabiting it, framing it, surviving it.