

Technology

Cells signal the future of film

The DIY moviemaking sensibility is coming to a cellphone near you

By Joseph Wilson

In this year's little booklet containing the schedule for the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), there's an ad on the inside cover for Motorola's new ROKR Z6m cellphone. The ROKR, a slick, features-laden gadget retailing for around \$400, encourages you to shoot, edit and share films made with the phone.

Equating cellphone shorts with the slick films featured at TIFF might seem like serious posturing, yet for the fourth year in a row, the festival actually features a film shot entirely on a cellphone. Pat's First Kiss, a short film by Pat Mills, screens as part of the Short Cuts Canada program.

Mills's film was shot in 2007 as part of TIFF's TalentLab, an intensive four-day training program on how to direct, shoot and edit decent films with only a mobile phone. TIFF, partnering up with Motorola, has also just announced the winner of this year's For The Reel contest, an opportunity for aspiring filmmakers to submit mobile films no longer than three minutes.

This new genre of "mobile movies" is still fairly undeveloped, but signs are popping up that the scene is slowly gaining credibility with the mainstream film community. The Toronto Student Film Festival (TSFF), held in April, had a mobile-filmmaking category for the first time, and Mobifest, being held after TIFF in November, screens exclusively "made-for-mobile movies" that are under 90 seconds long.

A whole slew of movies about Iraq have featured the cellphone as a filming tool. Brian De Palma's Redacted excoriates the violence of the American occupying troops by stitching together faux-documentary footage supposedly shot with video cameras and cellphones. A major plot point in Paul Haggis's In The Valley Of Elah hinges on footage of the Iraq war found on the cellphone of a dead GI.

Feature-length mobile films are still pretty rare, however. Why Didn't Anybody Tell Me It Would Become This Bad In Afghanistan, a film by Dutch filmmaker Cyrus Frisch, was shot entirely on his Sharp 902 and 903 camera phones and debuted at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival.

Perhaps the most important moment for cellphone movie-making occurred earlier this year when film polymath Spike Lee announced he would be making a feature-length cellphone film.

Lee, under the auspices of Nokia, will edit user-submitted footage into a three-act film on the topic of humanity, which will premiere in the fall.

When the blogosphere exploded with accusations that Lee was selling out, he was quick to defend Nokia's support.

"You are seeing first-hand the democratization of film. Aspiring filmmakers no longer have to go to film school to make great work. With a simple mobile phone, almost anyone can now become a filmmaker."

The big question is whether this will lead to great films. Often calling cellphones "the fourth screen" (after TV, film and PCs), media executives and artists go back and forth on how to use the devices' screens to their fullest potential. Cellphone video is notoriously low-resolution and runs at fewer frames per second than does traditional video, resulting in blurry, jerky footage on the big screen.

It's too soon to say how fundamentally cellphones will change the movie industry. For the moment, though, companies are willing to take the risk to avoid being left behind in the rapidly changing mediascape.

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