

BART WEISS



# SMARTPHONE CINEMA

MAKING GREAT  
FILMS WITH YOUR  
MOBILE PHONE

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE



# Smartphone Cinema

This book guides you through the process of using your phone to create different kinds of video and audio for TV, theaters, YouTube, TikTok, and podcasts.

Drawing from the author's experience teaching classes on mobile filmmaking, this resource helps you tell stories better whilst going over the techniques necessary to control the phone professionally, also covering the accessories and software that can help you shape your narrative. Within the chapters you will first learn how to tell a compelling story, before delving into the proper methods for shooting video on your phone effectively and recording high quality audio. The book then explains the best techniques for editing and mixing these components together, always with the smartphone format in mind. Chapters also include the expert knowledge of a wide array of media makers that utilize this medium, from filmmakers to influencers, who give insight into the specific tools they use and how they approach the mobile phone as the hub of their creativity.

This book will be a guide to first time makers, students of many disciplines (including student filmmakers), and professional filmmakers who want to leverage what the phone can bring to a shoot.

**Bart Weiss** is an award-winning independent film and video producer, director, editor, and educator. He is mostly known as the director and founder of the Dallas VideoFest and produces the TV show *Frame of Mind*. Bart received an MFA in Film Directing from Columbia University and has taught film and video at Texas A&M's Visualization Lab, SMU, and the University of Texas at Austin. He has recently retired as an Associate Professor at UT Arlington.



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# Smartphone Cinema

Making Great Films with  
Your Mobile Phone

**Bart Weiss**

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**This book is dedicated to my students, who have inspired me with their enthusiasm for learning and making films; the University of Texas at Arlington, which allowed me to develop and teach classes in smartphone cinema; and my wife, Susan Teagarden, for her love, support, and understanding.**



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# Foreword

*By Alan Govenar*

By nature, I'm a wanderer, an explorer of day-to-life wherever I am, who sees something different each time I walk around the same block. I often think about how directors I admire, from Dziga Vertov and Alain Resnais to Frederick Wiseman and Martin Scorsese, might film what I am experiencing, imagining how the mundane can become profound.

Mobile phone cameras have transformed the way I look at and listen to the world. Having one in my pocket is at once reassuring and confounding. Knowing that it's possible to instantaneously document, stage, or re-envision what's going on around me is liberating, not only in the act of filming, but in being able to review the footage I shot and having the opportunity to redo the shot immediately. That said, second takes are often different from the first. Nuanced changes of light and shadow, composition, and sound are inevitable, which can be frustrating, but is often invigorating. Mobile phone video is in many ways ephemeral and subject to chance and circumstance, but the resulting footage can be transcendent.

My use of mobile phone cameras is as varied as the films I make, from experimental shorts to feature length documentaries. The footage I produce functions as both A- and B-roll, and at 4K, 24 fps, has been intercut with video made with professional cameras, as well as historical and archival materials. For my film *Myth of a Colorblind France* I made tracking shots, leaning on the dashboard of Ubers, driving through the streets and boulevards of Paris; in *Extraordinary Ordinary People*, I chronicled my journey around the United States with videos through airplane windows that I used to transition between different places and time zones; for *Looking for Home* and *Down in Dallas Town*, I shot cutaways and interviews, often with people I had never met before.

With a mobile phone camera in hand, my interactions on the street, or on the subway, or maybe a bus, are often spontaneous. I like filming situations as they unravel, planned and unplanned. The presence of my mobile phone camera is less threatening, less intrusive than a more traditional documentary film crew. I'm more relaxed, more confident, more free form. My conversations with

people I know and those I don't can be more personal, and to varying degrees, more revealing, though also more playful, and potentially, more provocative, and sometimes more confrontational.

Think about the crucial evidence that mobile phone videos can provide, from George Darnella Frazier's documentation of the murder of George Floyd to the narcissistic selfies of January 6 insurrectionists. In both instances, content overpowers form, launched into the cyber universe through social media and TV news.

Working with a professional film crew can create more problems than solutions. Professional gear can be intimidating, while a mobile phone camera is relatively easy to accept.

Mobile phone cameras are everywhere, and just about everybody who has one has used it to video friends and family, at the very least.

The inventors of our mobile phone cameras are my collaborators in the videos I produce, but ultimately my work depends on my ability to shape the moving image through framing, lighting, and sound. That said, the moment I think I understand the video technology imbedded in my mobile phone, it's different in days or months. The innovation in mobile phone production is constantly changing and the debate about what works best is never ending.

This book opens doors to mobile phone filmmaking that many of us might never know exist and presents a step-by-step approach to understanding and implementing techniques that can maximize the technological capacity of these ever-evolving cameras. In each chapter, Bart challenges readers to engage more deeply with the how and why of mobile phone cameras through hands-on workshops and assignments. He shares his views on factors to consider when purchasing a new mobile phone and offers suggestions on how to proceed once you have a phone and are ready to get started, from research, building an idea, and storytelling, to the practicalities of mobile phone production: camera settings, stabilization, accessories (selfie sticks, gimbals, cages, and grips), external lights, native and non-native apps, monitor settings, LUTs, microphone options, shooting video (frame rates, depth of field, lenses, zoom control), editing software (Adobe Rush, iMovie, Luma Fusion Davinci Resolve for iPad), ducking audio, and distribution (via festivals and broadcast). For Bart, the principles of mobile phone filmmaking are applicable to virtually any genre:

You can make any genre of film with a mobile device. You can make a horror film, a comedic film, an adventure film, a documentary, an experimental film, or some new kind of film that has yet to be made. You can do news and journalism, make cooking videos, create video diaries, generate work for YouTube, TikTok, and other social media.

Moreover, the mobile phone camera has engendered significant changes in the dynamic of who can make films, opening the medium to people of all ages and

socio-cultural backgrounds. About the breaking down of the time-worn hierarchies of filmmaking, Bart writes, “If the people who have the cameras come from a place of privilege, how they portray others comes from their point of view. With mobile phones, people from impoverished communities can tell their stories from the inside out. All over the world, customs, stories, music, and culture can be portrayed by the people who deeply know the culture.”

Whether you are a professional or amateur filmmaker, or somewhere in between, this book provides a comprehensive overview of the history and indelible presence of new technologies and is a user-friendly guide on how to use mobile phone cameras to propel a paradigm shift in the ways we make and think about sound and the moving image.

# 1 What This Book Is About

This book is about how your mobile phone can be used to have fun and be joyous, as evidence for the world to see what you have experienced, as a means to create a documentary, and as a creative storytelling device. It is a high-definition cinema camera and a high-definition display device. It can be the center of your creativity, from photographs to videos, personal organization, and social media connections at the touch of the screen, and it makes phone calls! The phone is in our hands or pockets; why not let us create with it, play with it, and let it inspire you and the world?

**Welcome to the world of mobile filmmaking!**



*Figure 1.1* The author welcomes you. Mason LaHue.

There are many reasons to make films with your phone. Chase Jarvis wrote a book in 2009 called *The Best Camera Is the One That's with You*, which has

## 2 *What This Book Is About*

led to the commonly heard phrase, “The best camera is the one in your hand.” I found this to be true on a recent trip to Tahiti. I had a traditional camera and my mobile phone with me. I started shooting with the conventional camera, but I only used my phone as the trip went on. Indeed, it was just a bit closer than my other camera, and I could interact with people and the landscape much better with my iPhone. When I got home, I looked at the footage, thinking that the other footage would look better, but that was not the case.

You can make any genre of film with a mobile device. You can make a horror film, a comedic film, an adventure film, a documentary, an experimental film, or some new kind of film that has yet to be made. You might make a film that will be shown at the Sundance Film Festival. You can do news and journalism, make cooking videos, create video diaries, and generate work for YouTube, TikTok, and other social media. You already have the camera, so “just do it” – like the old Nike ads say.

**This book is for...** anyone and everyone who wants to use their phones creatively. Everyone will have much to learn and explore. As you are having fun shooting with your phone, share your joy with other filmmakers and the world!

This book is for experienced filmmakers who want to shoot quality videos on their phones. If you have been making cinema with film cameras, digital SLRs, or a Digital Cinema Camera, you can take the knowledge about filmmaking while rethinking and retooling your skills. You have your phone with you, so why not bring your skills to a smaller package with a large upside? This book will help you through the transition, give you many pointers, and help you build out your gear. If you have been making films for a while, creating with the phone will connect you to the person you were when you started out, but now you have more skills. This singular tool will bring joy back to your filmmaking and your life! If you are an experienced filmmaker, you can skip Chapter 4, Mobile Storytelling.

This book is also for beginning filmmakers. If you are just starting out, shooting with your phone will be a less expensive way to build your cinematic skills. When you learn how to use and control the Blackmagic Camera app, those skills will translate to controlling the Blackmagic cinema cameras because it is the same interface. Using your phone will build your filmmaking skills and allow you to shoot much more than with traditional media.

When I wanted desperately to become a director a few years back, I kept asking people what I should do. I got many answers and many smirks. I tried many things, mostly the cliched ones, and everything failed. Fed up, I started doing things unrelated to filmmaking – trying to survive, earn money, etc. – lying to myself and eventually fading out my dreams. I did everything but not the one thing that was most important to my heart. I realized that I was lying to myself, telling myself I would do this

job, save money and then make a film or I needed a big camera, money, I needed some bigshot producer's help.

Many of my friends who wanted to be filmmakers were quite similar liars. They would brag about how they wanted to be directors only. All they would do was pitch a story to someone, get rejected, curse them, and say how the world was so cruel to them. They would have an awesome camera, yet they wouldn't shoot a single film. They wouldn't write a single page or even any dialogue. I realized that we lie so much to ourselves. We make fake excuses. We get busy doing other stuff. We run away from our deepest dreams. I guess, deep down, we are so scared, and the world seems so cruel. We are scared of reaching our highest potential. We are scared of failure. All it takes is to get humble, stop thinking, take baby steps, and get started. For that, we need courage and, most importantly, a heart filled with love for cinema.

Also, it's important to remove the distractions that take us away from our true path. One day, one of my filmmaker friends, who had made several films, told me, "You will keep on lying, days will pass by, and you will never make a film. So just do anything, even if it's stupid, write your name on it as director, and that's how you will get started." All it took was for me to get up from my chair energetically at 10 pm when everyone was sleeping, pick up my mobile phone, shoot myself randomly with a horror story in mind that came rambling inside my head, then add voiceovers, edit it, and publish it on YouTube. Shockingly, many people around me liked it. It started the journey, and I have never looked back. Eventually, my mom sponsored me with a camera. I made many films, got published in local newspapers, received many awards and every day I am trying to learn a bit more and love a bit more – cinema, photography, comics, sketching, painting, poetry, editing. It's like I'm sketching with crayons like a kid. Once you make films, ideas keep coming, wanting to get made. I wanted to say this as we need to stop making excuses like expecting big rewards, a big cast and crew, Hollywood fame, money, status, worrying what people will say, I have a job, and all other blah, blah. You need to get up from your chair, couch, bed, office, sleep, phone talk, good or bad relationships, or whatever has entangled you, just hold the mobile phone like your best friend and start a love affair.

Swati Panda

This book is structured to have workshops after each chapter. When you do these workshops, you will build the experience to create a new body of work.

This book is also for film students at all levels. You will build your skills and make different kinds of films than your fellow students. When learning any skill,