

Memory Materialized, Past Personified: A Cellular Story

I carry my phone with me every day, but unlike Hockenberry's (2020) insistence that phones are perfect, smooth, seamless, and "seeming no earthly thing" (para. 6), my phone is covered with marks, imperfections, and indications as to its history. It is one of the most human things I know.

Granted, these marks have not arisen from its production. A little over two years ago, I was having a great day with my ex-boyfriend – it was early February, the world was covered in snow, and we went to the theatre in Lansdowne. On the way home, I unknowingly dropped my phone in the middle of the street and didn't realize for half an hour.

When I found it, it was submerged in slush and thoroughly, completely, cracked – pieces of it here and there. Yet it still worked. It still functioned.

I had the screen repaired, although I have not repaired the back of the phone. It serves as a reminder of that day, of the happiness and carelessness I felt, yet it also makes me sad to think back on it (considering my current negative relationship with my ex). It is wholly marked with human graffiti, reminding me of things I've done and felt that I might not remember otherwise. Repeatedly, I have been told I should purchase a new phone, but I refuse to. Not only does it still function just fine, but unlike all the other phones I've had in my life, this one feels like me. It's memory materialized, the past personified, and I don't want to switch it for something devoid of life. Additionally, I acknowledge that keeping my smartphone for as long as I can is the best choice I can make; as Maxwell and Miller (2020) wrote, "the greenest smartphone is the one you already own" (last para. of introduction).

But is this connection healthy? Is it right to say my phone is me, even though my reasoning feels valid? At the end of the day, my phone is a technological device of origins not

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quite known; it has components mined from the earth, the electricity needed to power its data and servers is harvested god knows how – and I’m trying to assign human emotion and memory to it. The smartphone is “beautifully, unapologetically, plastic” (Hockenberry, 2020, section “iPhone 5C, A1532”), yet in my mind, it’s more than plastic. Is this a healthy association to have?

In discussing this, I’m reminded of a text that I’ve recently read for another class. Written by Ytre-Arne (2019), the text highlights how inextricably we are tied to media – “smartphone use is key to people’s reorientations in periods of change” (p. 488) and “it seems only logical that when everyday life changes, media use does too” (p. 488). Since so many people have smartphones nowadays, it’s likely – and as Ytre-Arne wrote, logical – that smartphones are connected to pivotal points in people’s lives. Whether it’s healthy or not is a different topic, I suppose. Nevertheless, it seems that smartphones have become an important compositional element of first-world, middle-class life.

Of course, I wouldn’t say I’m addicted to my phone. I’m not connected to the phone itself; I’m not connected to the electrical circuits within it or even its functions. Instead, I’m connected to how it makes me feel (which isn’t much better, now that I think of it). Could I form this type of connection with something that doesn’t harm the earth? Say, a notebook or a plant or an art piece? I think I could, but it would be a different kind of attachment. I think I’m so emotionally connected to my phone because it poses such a contradiction – and this contradiction thrills me. My phone and its sources are harmful, complex, and (at its fundamental) utilitarian. It’s not meant to make me remember or reflect, yet that’s what I’ve assigned to it. Notebooks or plants, on the other hand, are meant to evoke emotion and connection whereas phones were not designed for such a purpose. Originally, at least.

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So, yeah, I'm connected to my phone. I'm connected to a thing that thrives off child labor and fossil fuels, but I'm connected to it due to the meanings that I've etched upon it.

Although when it all comes down to it, is there room for distinction?

Sources

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