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## Mobile Interface Theory

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Mobile interface theory is an approach to studying the everyday practices of mobile devices and the roles these devices play in the production of embodied space. This approach draws predominantly from the theories found in phenomenology and poststructuralism, finding meaningful places where these theories intersect and inform a study of bodies, spaces, and mobile technologies. The result is termed the “sensory-inscribed” body in a mobile media age (Farman 2012).

The “mobile” of mobile interface theory is understood broadly, dating back to at least papyrus (when the primary means of inscription moved from durable, stationary media like stone to portable forms like papyrus). The significance of defining the term broadly is that it positions contemporary mobile media practices in relationship to historic forms and also emphasizes the continually shifting state of these contemporary media. Since contemporary mobile devices are updated (or become obsolete) more rapidly than almost any other medium, mobile interface theory privileges *practices* over specific *devices*. Thus, this form of analysis locates contemporary mobile media within a long genealogy of mobility and focuses on the practices that these various media encourage.

Alongside this focus on practices (historically situated), there is also a key concern with “medium-specificity” (i.e., the understanding that there are unique ways that a particular medium engages with users, the environment, and the content). For example, while Agar's (2003) argument may be correct that the contemporary cellphone might better resemble the pocket watch than it does previous versions of the landline telephone (in term of its key features like portability and in the way it transforms our relationship to space/time), there are unique qualities of the cellphone that resemble neither of these technologies. There are practices that are encouraged by the medium and the interface of the cellphone that cannot be effectively accomplished using other media. Here, a clear definition of “interface” becomes important. Within the mobile interface theory approach, interface is seen as “a set of relations that serve as the nexus of the embodied production of social space” (Farman 2012). This definition draws heavily

from [Drucker's \(2011\)](#) understanding of the interface as “the mediating environment that makes the experience, a ‘critical zone that constitutes a user experience’.” Mobile interface theory thus understands the “interface” (broadly conceived) as a nexus between embodied spaces; here, the practice of embodiment using the interface of a mobile phone is carried out in accordance with the mobile device's medium-specificity.

The theoretical engagement with these embodied spaces (which are connected through mobile interfaces) is analyzed through the lenses of phenomenology and poststructuralism. These two theoretical approaches are brought to bear on each other in order to find meaningful overlaps in the study of bodies, spaces, and media. In understanding how the mobile phone produces a spatial, social body for its user, mobile interface theory blends [Merleau-Ponty's \(1964\)](#) theories of sensory engagement with the relational world and [Derrida's \(1998\)](#) theories of textual inscription and deferral.

The result is what is termed the “sensory-inscribed” body. Analyzing mobile media engagement through sensory-inscription allows for a simultaneous understanding of how people experience social space through their embodied senses and an understanding of these bodies, spaces, and media as being culturally inscribed. The phenomenological aspect of the sensory-inscribed body is drawn from Merleau-Ponty's theories of relational space and proprioception: our perceptive understanding of our place in the world and how we specifically inhabit the spaces we move through is accomplished through proprioception. This situatedness is always relational, with both the people and the objects we interact with. The mobile phone is one such object. We connect with others through the device in an embodied way (i.e., we are able to proprioceptively engage simultaneously with our own lived space and the space of the person on the other end of the phone). The device also affords us a sense of situatedness through its *locative* abilities: it can locate where we are (typically through GPS, WiFi, or cellular triangulation) and inform us of the larger context of the place at which we stand.

The second aspect of the sensory-inscribed body in mobile interface theory is the practice of inscription, drawn predominantly from Derrida's theory that there is “nothing outside of the text,” or, in other words, the world as we know it and engage with is simply ever-changing sign systems that we interpret. This process of inscription and interpretation is ongoing, never settled or “grounded,” and thus always defers meaning. A sensory engagement with our locative media is incomplete without understanding how these devices are inscribed and how they simultaneously function as inscribing tools.

[Farman \(2012\)](#) offers an example of the sensory-inscribed body as the simple act of answering a phone in a setting that has prohibited the uses of a mobile phone. The example describes a student who answered his mobile phone in a classroom where the professor had set strict limitations on mobile phone usage. When the phone rang during the class lecture, the professor paused while the student fished for his phone in his bag, waiting for him to turn it off. Instead, the student looked at the screen to see who was calling and then answered the phone. Without getting up, he began speaking to the person on the other end of the line, who (it soon became obvious) was a relative facing a moment of crisis. In this scene, the sensory-inscribed body is at play on several levels. Firstly, the student's sensory mode of embodiment is located in two places at once. He was in the classroom and also in the place where his relative was in a moment of crisis. The process of inscription offers the rest of the picture for embodiment and mobile media: beyond the sensory mode of embodied engagement, this student was soon keenly aware of the ways the encounter was being read. Receiving disapproving looks from the professor and the other students in the classroom, the student soon realized the major cultural *faux pas* he was committing by using a mobile phone in this setting. When the call was lost and the line went silent, the technology also served to contribute to the act of sensory-inscription: did he offer poor advice? Had the reception vanished? The silence itself entered into the sign system of the moment.

Beyond the simple example of using a mobile phone in a classroom, this conception of embodiment is essential to the ways we interact with and interpret emerging cultural forms and technologies. From art to narrative to the games we play, the sensory-inscribed body offers a fruitful lens with which to view the emerging landscape of the mobile interface. “Mobile interface theory” thus provides a useful approach to the analysis of embodiment for the era of mobile media, situating the mobile interface historically and within a theoretical lineage that serves as a foundation for notions of the “sensory-inscribed” body.

SEE ALSO: [Body and Cultural Sociology](#); [Everyday Life](#); [Internet](#); [Poststructuralism](#)

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