

2016's Zootopia, or Zootropolis in some areas, takes the animal kingdom and puts them in a kinda parody of human society. They aren't the first modern day parable but they use the smartphone, the very icon of the 21st century, in a way many films don't. Why are movies afraid of the smartphone?

Ladies and Gentlemen, please turn off your phones, the video is about to begin. Unless you're watching this video on your phone, in which case carry on.

The problem with smartphones in movies is that they're *deus ex machina*s. Basically an unfair plot device that can solve pretty much any problem, which removes any sense of peril or suspense. Can a movie co-exist with a magical pocket-sized gadget that gives you worldwide connection and can answer any question? Home Alone would be a shit film if smartphones were involved.

Plenty of films include smartphones obviously, I'm not saying they don't exist in movies. But when they do, their capabilities seem hardly used other than phone calls or texting. I think an element of adventure is isolation, being forced to take the lessons you've learned and put them to the test on your own, and without a wikihow. And maybe smartphones kill any sense of adventure.

So to do this, movies may set the film in a time or place where smartphones aren't around. Like *Turning Red*, set before the dominance of smartphones, and how Mei's red panda secret is kept thanks in part to the limited capabilities of early mobile phones and lack of social networks.

Why, what other possible reason is there to set *Turning Red* in 2002, hmm?

Or they have the plot fixated on the phone, like a critical examination of it's effects on people or something that isn't that, like *The Emoji Movie*. But that just feels so try-hard. It's like any time someone becomes an overnight viral sensation. Just stop, shush, it doesn't work like that, stop doing this, it's lazy!

Then there's the other option, get rid of the phone.

Like the battery dies.

They have no signal.

Or they lose it.

You could draw a lot of parallel between *Zootopia* and *Onward*, both being reinterpretations of modern day society with either an anthropomorphic or fantasy creature twist. Except *Onward* mainly uses the modern day elements to illustrate the passing of time, to compare the good old days versus what we've become, targeting things like gentrification and a loss of old fashioned values. It's surprisingly resentful of modern technology, like how it underutilises technology in it's story. Barley's van Guinevere is ultimately just a vehicle to get them from A to B and so the film setting could instead just be a parallel for the 90s, 80s, 70s or even literally be a horse and cart. It turns the modern day element as this ambiguous generalisation of civilised Americana, with nothing really pinning it down to any one particular era, other than Ian's smartphone. And what happens to it? At the very moment they are called to adventure, the inconvenient smartphone is written out. So what was the point of putting it in in the first place?

Well it's of course a big trope to forcibly isolate characters by first removing the means of communication.

Phone's dead.

Radio's down.

Communication's down.

Mailman's dead.

Fire's out.

Basically if your phone line has been cut, you are about to be killed by a masked man with a knife. Except he can't get me, I don't have a home telephone, so SUCK IT STABBY MAN.

So do smartphones kill adventure? I suppose with improved cameras that are in our hands all the time, that's why we don't get so much mass hysteria over blurry UFO photos anymore. But, for better or worse, smartphones are a huge part of everyday life, like a wallet, handbag, keys etc. It's not as if they're totally absent but why are they not integrated into movies more?

One issue may be branding. Famously, Apple do not allow villains in movies to use iPhones. It's unclear how enforced this really is but maybe it's not worth risking the legal hassle.

When *The Matrix* used the Nokia fancy-slidey-phone, it was a pretty expensive model at the time. But thanks to the film's popularity, it showed the power of product placement as Nokia saw a massive £9.5 billion increase in sales. Because everyone wanted that phone, as well as the sunglasses, long black coat, and the ability to look cool.

So given the publicity a smartphone gets just by its mere inclusion, it has a lot of hoops to jump through with marketing, lawyers, contracts - maybe it's not even worth trying.

And when they are included, it's usually for phone calls or vague spy stuff, things that don't need to be a smart phone. Just a regular phone or a made-up gadget will do.

Perhaps this is designed to be some intentional escapism. We don't want to see Dr Strange spending four hours checking his Twitter indirects because that would be boring. Obviously characters having a conversation is more gripping than text message bubbles, although we are seeing this being done more creatively lately. We come to the cinema for adventure and the blockbusters have figured out that the best way to cater their films to a large enough audience is to just minimise smartphones. After all, not everyone is a fan.

But I wonder if because of the exponential growth of smartphones and their capabilities, writers are still figuring out how to best integrate them.

Which makes me appreciate *Zootopia's* usage of smartphones. Let's look at them all:

Phone Calls: While this is used by the villains hiding their identity, phone calls are generally kept as background elements with passers-by, but it's interesting that in the flashbacks we also see older styles of phones, helping to compare and illustrate the passing of time.

3:43 - old style

12:10 - bottom middle talking

12:34 - rhino talking

58:30 - rotary phone

1:23:18 - rhino talking

1:24:30 - phone call (villain)

1:25:54 - phone call (villain)

1:30:50 - phone call (villain)

Video Calls: Only used between Judy and her parents, even when she tries to hide her feelings, it's hard to hide something designed to be high-vis.

26:46 - video call

Texting: While characters are occasionally seen typing, there's only one clear instance of a text being sent, illustrating how instantaneous the spread of news can be.

12:06 - lion typing

14:40 - polar bear typing

33:10 - bellwether message mayor

1:13:25 - typing in background

Now for a movie about solving a mystery, they never turn the smartphone into some spy tracker, so here are the other uses seen.

Video Recording: Used to film vital evidence in a revelatory moment, which ends up endangering them.

1:05:35 - video camera

1:06:59 - video camera

1:07:33 - incoming phone call

1:36:35 - lots of general photos and videos in concert

1:37:08 - video camera

1:38:25 - video camera and photos

Photos: Used by reporters and this polar bear showing their past encounters, helping to make clear the threat in a light tone.

47:12 - polar bear looking at photos

1:10:30 - taking photo by reporters

Scrolling: Like the phone calls, the idle scrolling around is only seen by the background characters.

9:24 - beaver scrolling

1:00:50 - mouse scrolling

1:14:20 - using tablet

Faceswap App: A running joke is the Gazelle faceswap app, a frivolous distraction but comes packed with TTS, that's pretty impressive.

53:57 - face swap app with tts

1:08:24 - face swap app

Torch: Even while other characters use torches, Judy uses her phone.

45:47 - torch

1:04:50 - torch

Information: The characters never search the internet for any information, but Judy holds up a photo from a news website.

1:22:04 - holds up news article

There's still a few gaps here, early in the film Judy uses an iPod which were naturally very popular at the time of the film's release, though they've now been since discontinued because they've been entirely replaced by smartphones.

There's also her carrot-shaped voice-recording pen. This too could have just been done on a smartphone, but then it was probably better to have the blackmail as a physical object that could be ceremoniously handed over to Nick.

But those aside, Zootopia still demonstrates a unique approach to smartphones, not as an unfairly powerful get out of jail free card nor a basic stand in for the walkie-talkie, but as a part of everyday life. And it's treated so normally, it may even go by unnoticed, unless you're an obsessive who makes video essays. Don't at me. No, actually do.

Zootopia is far from the only movie to treat smartphones as normal everyday things but in this case, this goes a long way to improving the film as a whole. For all the advancements we've made in progressivism and basic rights, it's naive to believe the problems aren't still there. And for a film that challenges themes of prejudicism, which while not perfectly executed, it would be far less impactful if it wasn't designed to be a reflection of modern day society, which is best illustrated by the omnipresence of the smartphone.