Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes

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Memory, Selfhood and Sociality in the Age of Networked Photography

Sara Pargana Mota

1. Introduction

Just a brief look at the proliferation of personal images and photographic albums on social networking platforms reveals that photographic practices, and their circuits of production, circulation and consumption, have changed considerably as a result of new media and digital technologies. New technologies, applications and multiple digital visual platforms are increasingly mediating the ways individuals present themselves, and also shape their relations with the outer world. Personal networked photographs are produced, shared, consumed and archived through new digital imaging devices, platforms and networks. They have essentially flooded the world of Web 2.0, and play an increasingly important role in media practices, as a central aspect of Internet communication. If personal or domestic photography can stand as an example of the transformations that happen when photography begins to take part in a network environment, we can still reaffirm photography as *"both a leisure pursuit and an increasingly flexible medium for the construction of ordinary people's accounts of their lives and fantasies"* (Holland, 1997: 196).

Considering the centrality of the visual in everyday life experiences, the present chapter provides an overview of personal photography in our new media ecology, and it is driven by the question: how are the practices and social meanings of photography in everyday life changing in interaction with digital devices and networks? I will then explore networked snapshot photography as an everyday practice of remembrance, sociality and identity formation, and how it consequently blurs boundaries between private and public spheres. With a reflective understanding not just of the disjunctures, but also of the continuities and extensions between old and new technologies and associated practices, I will stress the importance of looking into networked photographic practices in order to reflect

upon the process of appropriation of technologies. Finally, I will conclude by pointing out emerging approaches and contributions to understanding media and photography, not as representations, but by addressing the practices through which they gain meaning.

2. PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By the late 1980s, large corporations started working on a "post-desktop" technological paradigm for human-computer interaction known as ubiquitous or pervasive computing. This vision was based on the possibility of combining a series of networked and mobile technologies, in order to incorporate computational capabilities in the objects and environments that surround us, making the ubiquitous computing resources integrated into the day-to-day, able to insinuate themselves into all the openings that everyday life offers (Galloway, 2004).

Currently, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, this vision of the rising ubiquity of networked technology is no longer just a fantasy. Computers are fragmenting into mobile phones, netbooks, tablets, smartphones or MP3 players - technological artefacts that connect the physical world and the Internet in new ways, often using the interaction made possible by Web 2.0. This post-desktop era is also synonymous with an exponential multiplication of screens, which has been strongly affirmed by Lipovetsky and Serroy (2010: 10):

> *The screen everywhere and at all times: […] the screen of all dimensions, the flat screen, the big screen and the small mobile screen; the screen on you, the screen with you; the screen where all can be done and all can be seen. The video screen, the thumbnail screen, the graphic screen, the portable screen, the touch screen: the coming century is the century of the omnipresent and multiform screen, of the planetary and multimedia screen.*

A multiplicity of screens that bursts and makes itself felt in daily life. As part of this kaleidoscope of screens on new technological devices, personal photography continues to be one of the most successful consumer technologies in the contemporary landscape. The transformations to which it has been subject, along with the developments in information and communication technologies, have changed the ways people create, distribute, share, consume and archive photographic images.

Never before have people taken as many photographs as they take now,

at a time when digital imaging devices - digital photography cameras or mobile phones with built-in cameras - are one of the fastest growing consumer markets worldwide. Digital cameras allow endless snapshots, with no additional costs besides free space on memory cards. The camera's convergence with the mobile phone has introduced new forms of photographic communication, like the capacity for permanent visual contact with distant others, which led Mizuko Ito (2005) to talk of an era of *"visual co-presence"*, of permanent connection between each other and with the outer world through images.

The ubiquity of the digital imagery apparatus enables a growing readiness to create visual relations with the surrounding reality and to record every action and every commonplace scene and detail, from cups of coffee and cupcakes, cute pets, flowers growing on the balcony to an outfit about to be worn or the new culinary experiment that is just being served. A changing scenery of practices and objects that: *"[…] invites a new kind of personal awareness, a persistent alertness to the visually newsworthy. As the mundane has been elevated to a photographic object, the everyday is now the site of potential news and visual archiving"* (Okabe and Ito, 2003).

These new imaging devices provide opportunities to capture and store all the visual information about the places we pass by, or the people, things and experiences that are significant to us. Moreover, personal computers, although becoming smaller and thinner, carry and hold even more data about our lives, as more and more people throw themselves into the task of self-archiving, ordering, filing and sorting personal photographs.

3. Photography and Web 2.0

In fact, not only do contemporary digital media enable the relatively cheap creation, management and storage of records of events and experiences, easily accessible and retrievable; these records are also quickly reproduced worldwide. We are experiencing new mobilities and *"not only people and things are on the move in ways that they have never been before, but also data and records of events"* (Reading, 2009: 32). Personal and domestic photography in circulation through the telematic networks has become an important characteristic of the present media and visually saturated landscape.

The development of new technologies and the emergence of Web 2.0 have given rise to interactive platforms and what was designated as *"participa-*

tory culture", defined by Jenkins (2006: 290) as *"a culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content"*. Strongly anchored in collaboration and user content, the Web 2.0 has also contributed to a mass popularisation of digital photography.

Millions of people create and share visual content online on a regular basis. New technologies, applications and multiple digital visual platforms – social networks like Facebook, Flickr, or the more recent Pinterest and Instagram, YouTube, blogs or photoblogs – show a new ubiquity of digital photography, where it is possible not just to register and visually materialise the most mundane moments of daily life, but also to share them almost instantaneously. This sharing of photos is now part of daily life *"for a generation schooled in virtual self-actualization"* (Palmer, 2010: 155). Every day, around 300 million photos are uploaded to Facebook.

The expeditious process between the act of capturing a digital image and the act of exposing it immediately afterwards on the Internet, the growing accessibility not only of computers and multiple mobile digital devices, but also of digital storage and access to broadband connection, as well as the growing computer literacy among people of all ages, have begun to provide new opportunities for capturing and transmitting images. It has also allowed for the emergence of the "citizen-reporter". Being in the right place, at the right time, and with a mobile phone, can be enough to make any person a photojournalist. In essence, Web 2.0 technologies have made it possible for the average user to access the means of production and distribution, previously restricted to professionals. Never before have so many individuals, with a growing digital and visual literacy, been able to distribute content to so many others, participate and interact visually with the surrounding reality, and share their views and understandings of the world in which they live. And, as Rubinstein and Sluis emphasise, while describing the current developments of what they called "*the networked image*", referring to *"a life more photographic"*, *"the mass-amateurization of photography, and its renewed visibility online signals a shift in the valorization of photographic culture"* (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008: 11).

4. FROM FAMILY ALBUMS TO SOCIAL NETWORKS: NETWORKED PHOTOGRAPHY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Digital technologies, ubiquitous computing and Web 2.0 have thus made it possible for users to create, share, consume and archive photos and

images in their everyday online activities, and through the lens of this contemporary reality we can see the potential changing nature of photographic practices, contexts, objects and dynamics.

When Kodak cameras were introduced, made public and integrated into everyday family life, domestic snapshots, the most familiar of photographic genres, tended to be represented as *"predictable, conservative and repetitive in both form and content"* (Batchen, 2008: 121), and intimately bounded up with memory, domestic settings and the private world.

In the "analogue age", photographs were predominately seen as keepers of cherished family memories, emotional objects of autobiographic remembrance. Sontag (1979: 15) writes:

> *[P]hotographs actively promote nostalgia. [...] Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. [...] All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.*

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) affirmed the role of photography as a silent witness of *"what has been"*, more close to loss and death than to presence. Bazin (1980: 242) related the photographic album with the ritual function of the Egyptian mummies of preserving life and embalming time, *"rescuing it simply from its proper corruption"*. In these phenomenological approaches, the function of photography as a tool for identity construction and as communication medium was acknowledged, but was always understood as something secondary in relation to its primordial function: memory (Van Dijck, 2008).

From a sociological approach, the practice of amateur and domestic photography was analysed within the broader context of the social practices of collective identity construction. Bourdieu et al. (1990) described the production of family albums as a conventional and ritualised practice with a *"normalizing function"* of constructing middle-class narratives, consolidating bourgeois values, desires and ways of life. Family photography functioned as a *"ritual of integration"*, reinforcing and perpetuating family ideologies, like stability, closeness or happiness. Chalfen (1987) also analysed the conventionality of snapshot photography within what he called *"Kodak culture"*, stressing, however, the *"personal expression and interpersonal communication"* that inevitably underlie these kinds of personal

and vernacular images. In line with Bourdieu, Chalfen also shows how this practice is connected with rites of passage, such as weddings, birthdays or Christmas family gatherings, and how snapshots were produced, consumed, viewed and shared within the close social circle of family and friends.

As a networked practice in the lives of so many people, this private imagery is increasingly transcending the domestic circle when shared with larger audiences. Digital traces of zeros and ones, they seem rather different from the photos of sparse moments materialised in the architectural spaces of memory in analogue photographic albums. In the present, as stated by Appadurai (2003: 19), "*the archive of possible lives is now richer and more available to ordinary people than ever before*". New technological platforms and devices are increasingly mediating private memories, and the immersion into this digitised context means a new public visibility, and a widening of the public reach of mediated memories. This reality also raises questions about how technologies give birth to new practices of inscription and incorporation of memory and affect how we remember and how we forget (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009).

The traditional family albums and "shoe boxes" are becoming galleries of images and narratives open to broader social circles, contributing to the blurring of established boundaries between public and private space. This current reality updates Barthes' (1981: 98) insight that:

> *[T]he age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.*

Considering the changing nature of this dichotomy, Lásen and Gomez-Cruz (2009), departing from an ethnographic study on self-portraits, claimed that public and private realms are being reconfigured by digital and networked photographic practices, practices that entail changes in the relations between privacy and intimacy.

As a contemporary practice performed on social networking sites, photography has attracted the attention of many scholars from different academic backgrounds. In the context of Flickr, Murray (2008: 147) argues that "*photography is no longer just the embalmer of time [...] but rather a more alive, immediate and often transitory practice/form*". Harrison (2002) notices how self-presentation is now the primary function of photography, as opposed to the family representation, remembrance or commemoration

underlined in previous studies. In this shift of the social uses of photography, the individual has become the focus of pictorial life and experience, and photography is used as a tool for identity formation and the affirmation of individuality and personal ties. And seen as performative practices connected to presence and "common banality", rather than a nostalgic trace of memory, online digital photographic practices can lead to a reconfiguration and re-negotiation of concepts such as presence and present (Petersen, 2008).

Photography in online networking is increasingly addressed as a performative everyday social practice, and as a communicative tool, a currency for social interaction, where identity construction is produced in individual social networking profiles. Nevertheless, if personal and domestic analogue photography was traditionally conceptualised as a chronological narrative and technology of memory, it has always been a site for human interaction and communication, as well as for identity formation (Van Dijck, 2008). Sandbye argues that, despite the different definitions to which family photography has been subject and related, maybe it will be through its practices within Web 2.0. that *"we can fully realize the content, depth, and the potential of family photography"*. In this process "*we can actually highlight aspects of the medium that were already there: the conception of photography as a primarily social, participatory, performative and culture phenomenon"* (2012: 107).

5. Analytic approaches for future research

If the transformations within digital technologies (and consequently in visual culture) in the past were interpreted in terms of a revolution or novelty, it is important to stress here, in agreement with Van Dijck (2008) and Sandbye (2012), that digital media do not represent a complete rupture or a technological revolution, but are a continuity and an extension of traditional analogue media. In the case of snapshot photography they can reinforce and amplify already existing practices, as briefly illustrated in this chapter. The practice of domestic photography can therefore stand as an example of the ways in which practices associated with analogue photography have continued into the digital realm, an example of Bolter's and Grusin's (2000) concept of "remediation", meaning that the conceptualisation of a new medium is often based on its precursors, not necessarily producing a radically new and changed aesthetic or cultural frame, but remediating older forms.

The role of photography in mediating social relations, communicating experiences and producing social life has always been present. We are, nonetheless, faced with a variety of practices and objects in relation to photography, and with a new protagonism of the visual experience in an increasingly mediatised society, that urge scholars to look into domestic snapshots in the intersection of various social and cultural processes and technologies. Accounting for changes and continuities in domestic photographic practices, as well as for how individuals perceive and interpret their social doings, the processes through which they assign meaning to the new dynamics of snapshot photography direct us to the model "circuit of culture", proposed by du Gay et al. (1997), and to the concept of domestication (Silverstone, 1992, 2006). These lines of research are useful analytical lenses, as they look both into the practices and processes of meaning-making related to technologies in everyday life.

Through the study of the Sony Walkman, DuGay et al. analysed cultural artifacts within a dynamic model they called the "circuit of culture". This states that the processes of meaning-making assigned to certain cultural artifacts encompass at least five major overlapping and intertwined cultural processes: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. These processes entail and embody distinctive meanings and social practices. Lister and Wells (2001), Rantavou (2008) and Gómez-Cruz (2012) are examples of scholars who have been inspired by this model in their approach to photographic images and practices, within their cycle of social production, circulation and consumption, since photographs:

> *can be thought of as passing through a number of "moments" and its passage through each moment contributes to the meanings – plural, not singular – which it has and may have.[…] Within this cycle there are processes of transformation taking place and also of struggle and contest over what they mean and how they are used* (Lister and Wells, 2001: 64).

The wider scope of the circuit of culture approach is therefore useful, since it highlights the complex and multi-sited processes of meaning-making, in a broad perspective, that positions technological products and social practices within wider cultural phenomena.

When taking a micro-level perspective of media uses and contexts of use in everyday life, domestication approach can also be a beneficial tool. Emphasising the creative relationship between individuals and technological instruments, and the active nature of their consumption, Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) approached the social processes of adoption, use and ap-

propriation of media and communication technologies in domestic space. The concept of domestication stands as a metaphor for the dialectical processes of incorporation of information and communication technologies in daily life. Silverstone reformulated later (2006) that these processes take place within both private and public spaces, two juxtaposed and hybrid realms in times of mobility. Adopting and consuming technological goods has the potential to redefine the invested meanings and initial purposes for which they were designed. It is a process that involves negotiation and change within a context of pre-existing social relations, where meanings are produced and operate. By integrating and domesticating technologies into their lives, individuals and households endow them with their own particular meanings.

Both of these approaches are positioned within the common ground of the social shaping of technology, addressing the social construction of the material technological objects as well their role of mediation in the constitution of the social. Both capture these dialectic processes. New media and digital technologies are woven into and intimately connected to familiar spaces and activities of the quotidian, to our mundane physical experiences. As Miller and Slater stated, "*continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, […] that happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape*" (Miller and Slater, 2000: 5).

To a certain extent, addressing the continuities and changes between old and new technologies, photographic practices and how new media and technologies are domesticated in everyday life can be crystallised within the approach of looking into "*media as practice rather than representation, as taking part of the world rather than reflecting it*" (Crang, 1997 in Pink, 2011: 93). In accordance with Goméz-Cruz (2012), I would like to emphasise that the social meanings assigned to photography in everyday life are the result of its practices.

In my view, instead of describing domestic photography as a window or a mirror to culture, it should be explored outside the screens, in the context of ordinary practices and the variety of ways people are adopting, incorporating and perceiving photographic uses and technologies. In order to understand personal and domestic photography in its contemporaneity and in the everydayness of culture, the "newness" of pictorial practices in social media platforms should not only be addressed in an isolated and discontinuous form. Another approach can be to research how identity, memory and communication are – in various ways – inscribed and per-

formed, both in traditional family albums and in public or semi-public social media spaces. As I have argued in this chapter, a descriptive understanding of the uses of personal and domestic photography in analogue albums and of its practices and potentialities within Web 2.0 can shed light on the complex intertwining between "old" and "new" technologies and social practices, and on the complex imbrications of the technological, social and cultural processes within contemporary society.

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