Maria's Bag

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Abstract. Shared photographs transmit a sense of place (Agnew, 2011) that allows for (dis)affection to be transmitted. Social co presence and intimacy are generated when photographs are shared within a particular group, which could be called the phatic community (Prieto-Blanco, 2010). It is at this stage, at this level of kinship that the how and what of sharing is determined. The empirical work carried out with Maria and ten more Irish-Spanish families living in Ireland corroborates this likeness and hints at a communicative function that is activated by photographic exchanges – namely, the phatic.

Keywords: Irish-Spanish families, photographic exchanges, phatic community

For the past four years, I was immersed in a doctoral journey that allowed me to work with eleven families in Ireland. The ethnographic work lasted eighteen months during which participants granted me access to their everyday photographic practices. In this context, and arguably in many others, photography was sensed to, first, being in transformation and second to be creating a mode of action whereby actors share tacit and intersubjective knowledge visually. As Rose has pointed out, "[p]articipation produces a set of specific sets of meanings, feelings and positions" (2010: 17). Thus, it may be argued that visually mediated interactions with one another have the potential to precipitate socio-cultural change.

The first striking finding occurred while in the field. After a few meetings with several families, I realized that both screen- and paper-based images coexisted in a seamless flow. Accordingly, diverse modes of distribution were used synchronically to share images with significant others living far away. Snail mail, messaging applications, photo calendars, and selfies all belonged to the media repertoires of Irish-Spanish families living in Ireland. In the midst of all these photographs, or better said photographic objects, and pictorial practices, there was one case that immediately struck my attention. Allow me to share it with you.

Maria has been living in Ireland for almost a decade now. She is in her thirties. She works full time. She is in a long-term relationship and shares an apartment with her partner. She photographs regularly both for personal and leisurely reasons, but she

does not work for the creative industry. In fact, none of the participants of the study did. She shares her photographs via e-mail, social media, messaging applications and her apartment is populated with frames and photo-albums. All these processes were commonplace to the other participants too. However, Maria always carries with her a bag that contains: her photo camera, memory cards, recently taken photographs printed and placed in a small 10x15 photo album, postcards and flyers of events related to photography she has attended or aims to attend.

Image 1. Maria's Bag. June 2014.

The first time we met, and following the research design, she selected five photographs that she had already shared. She first used her camera to show me the images, but, frustrated by the slow browsing process on the camera display, she turned to Facebook. In line with the narrative approach of the research, I listened to the stories behind the production and distribution of each of those photographs. Maria moved from concrete to more general narratives of her photographic practices, stating that "Facebook can be a little addictive" (Maria, October 2013) and that she shared more photos with her friends than with her family. Like other participants expressed, continuous – albeit ever-interrupted – digital exchange of images framed by a conversational mode challenge traditional notions of digital ephemerality. The immediate and intermittent nature of these exchanges generates ontological security for migrants like Maria and her transnational network of support. The affordances activated within these photographic practices highlight the social and cultural relevance of digital ephemeral encounters (Grainge, 2011). Three elements seem to define transnational digital photography: connectivity, reflexivity, and material emplacement.

When we finished talking about those five photographs, I asked her about the many memory cards she kept in her bag. It was an unusual amount, especially for someone who does not photograph professionally. Her answer was striking too while highlighting the continuity of analogue and digital in contemporary photographic practices. Maria treats memory cards the same way analogue films were treated: once the memory card is full, it is time to start photographing with a new one. Thus, for Maria, full memory cards become portable storage units and she carries many of them around in case she wants to browse her photographs or show them to friends and family. Afterwards, we discussed the 10x15 photo album she carried in her bag. For the most part, it was filled with photographs she had taken recently; however, she also said: "I change the photos quite regularly, but some of them stay" (Maria, October 2013). Like observed with other participants, paper-based photographs – some may call them analogue photographs – seemed to offer Maria anchor points. Other participants also consider photographs as proofs of experiences shared with others, and, as such, they are not just clickable: they are constitutive and the result of ongoing relationships.

With the popularization of mobile digital lifestyles, Facebook and other social networks complement purely analogue third spaces (Oldenburg, 1989: 28) by subsidizing social interactions and advancing informal socialization. Edwards (2009, 2012) highlights the affective dimension of photographs and their power to create places of (dis)affection. The parallels between her work with analogue photography and this research suggest a strong sense of kinship, particularly with regard to the emphasis on the affective dimension. Shared photographs transmit a sense of place (Agnew, 2011) that allows for (dis)affection to be transmitted. Social copresence and intimacy are generated when photographs are shared within

Image 2. Paper photographs. Maria's Bag. June 2014.

a particular group, which could be called the phatic community (Prieto-Blanco, 2010). It is at this stage, at this level of kinship that the how and what of sharing is determined. The empirical work carried out with Maria and ten more Irish-Spanish families living in Ireland corroborates this likeness and hints at a communicative function that is activated by photographic exchanges – namely, the phatic.

*If you are interested in this study, further insights can be found in Prieto-Blanco, P. 2016. (Digital) Photography, Experience and Space in Transnational Families. A Case Study of Spanish-Irish Families living in Ireland. In: Gomez-Cruz, E.–Lehmuskallio, A. (eds), *Digital Photography and Everyday Life. Empirical Studies in Visual Material Practices.* London: Routledge.

"Objects matter in the context of social practices" (Rose, 2010: 18).

*When talking about social practices, I should always reiterate that in the context of photography one needs to talk about socio-technological practice as the medium is an intrinsic element and it is by a collaboration between human and non-human agency that meaning arises.

Notes

Material objects – by reflecting on the materiality of objects, certain cultural expectations of their function are fractured, thus allowing the research to be focused on ambiguities and subjective responses to production and consumption. The medium itself is questioned (Edwards, 1999: 68–69). Subjective and objective

agendas come together through the medium's characteristics. The expressive communicates, explores, and articulates a response by taking the viewer outside of the frame, thereby revealing what has not been visualized on the image (ibid.: 59).

The objectual character of photographs is brought in relation with social practices:
- – Visual form, what photographs show;
- – Material form;
- – Presentational form.

The objectual character of photographs of other media is the result of perception, thus of the blend between the subjective and the objective. From a holistic point of view, the same that is required to approach and explore practices, environmental features are meaningful elements. These environmental features are perceived rather than sensed. I think that the objectual character of photographs can be explored through the concept of **affordances**: "material qualities of an object that allow some things to be done with it and not others" (Gibson, 1977).

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