New visual technologies: shifting boundaries, shared moments

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New Visual Technologies: Shifting Boundaries, Shared Moments

Front cover

Either half of Durrant 'Figure_2.jpg'

Colour plates in order of priority

(1) Herrema – 3 images (2) Johnsrud – 4 images (3) Capstick – 4 images (4) Durrant – 3 images (5) Villi – 3 images

Order of articles

Digital Photography Practice

1. **Sarah Pink**: *Amateur Photographic Practice, Collective Representation and the Constitution of Place*
2. **Mikko Villi and Matteo Stocchetti**: *Visual Communication, Mediated Presence and the Politics of Space*
3. **Abigail Durrant, David Frohlich, Abigail Sellen and David Uzzell**: *The Secret Life of Teens: Online Verus Offline Photo Displays at Home*
4. **Nancy van House**: *Personal Photography, Digital Technologies, and the Uses of the Visual*

New Visual Mobilities

5. **Ron Herrema**: *The experience of photologging: global mechanisms and local interactions*
6. **Andrea Capstick**: *Travels with a Flipcam: bringing the community to people with dementia in a day care setting through visual technology*
7. **Stephen Groening**: *Automobile TV: Shelter, Risk, and the Post-nuclear Family*
8. **Brian C Johnsrud**: *Putting the Pieces Together Again: Digital Photography and the Compulsion to order Violence at Abu Ghraib*

Visual technology has been, and continues to be, noticeably transformed in a number of important areas. As carriers (e.g. cellular networks, the Internet), as production technologies (e.g. digital camcorders and cameras, mobile phones), as display technologies (e.g. public displays, mobile phone projectors) and as services (e.g. Flickr, MMS, blogs) some of these developments are grossly observable. Other aspects of these changes are, perhaps, more subtle and nuanced. This special issue sets out to explore these transformations through eight papers addressing specific aspects of new visual technologies. The papers largely consider visual technologies as socio-technical *things* embedded and emplaced in the world.\

This special issue was particularly motivated by two workshops, both in 2008. The first[1], held at Lancaster University in the UK, focused on (new) visual technologies and mobilities and solicited papers on visual technologies in family life and their role in creating and sustaining communities and tracing mobilities. The second[2], held at Microsoft Research, Cambridge,

[1] http://mundanetechnologies.com/goings-on/workshop/lancaster/photos/

[2] http://mundanetechnologies.com/goings-on/workshop/cambridge/

centred on the relationship between social interaction and what we termed "mundane technologies": "technologies and applications that are commonplace, which lots of people use" (Dourish et al., 2010) or "technologies whose novelty has worn off… which are now fully integrated into, and are an unremarkable part of, everyday life" (Michaels, 2003). Several of the papers at that workshop focused on new visual technologies such as mobile games (Coulton et al., 2008), digital photos (Graham and Rouncefield, 2008) and video (O'Brien et al., 2008), as well as mobile blogs (Jay, 2008) and situated digital photo displays (Taylor and Cheverst, 2008), emphasising what we have come to think of as 'shifting boundaries and shared moments'.

Although a variety of new visual technologies are presented in these papers, it would be disingenuous not to comment on the frequency of papers addressing developments in digital photography – five papers out of the eight in this collection. The emphasis on photography marks out both its "widespread popularity" (Van House, this issue) and that photographic practices themselves are evolving. However, beneath the apparent domination of digital photography lies a more complex picture involving different mobilities, services and socio-technical assemblies. We saw this kind of complexity at the workshop in Lancaster in: work involving the mashing up of vernacular digital photographs using positional data[3] to support events (Cheverst et al., 2008); the use of mobile blogs to analyze the effects of air pollution on children's journeys to and from school (Bamford et al., 2008) and; the work of assembling and displaying digital home videos of pets[4] (Laurier, 2008). We also saw that such new visual technologies suggest 'shifting boundaries' through playing a role in being 'in between' events, people and places (Hulme and Truch, 2005).

The overwhelming response to the call for papers for this special issue suggests that new visual technologies are a burgeoning area of research and that the mobilities they exhibit and sustain are of considerable interest to the Visual Studies community. The papers presented here can be regarded as but a slice of a much broader field that also includes new visual methodologies such as participatory methodologies for visual activism and autovideography for the evaluation of learning. This field also encompasses a host of new visual technologies that we could not include in this issue: digital newspapers, 3-d mobile photos, image databases, 'virtual' exhibitions, digital video productions, images from surveillance cameras, self-captured video, machinima, remixed media, YouTube videos, virtual artefacts, instant replay video technologies, Twitter, Facebook and mashups. The submissions we received also connected new visual technologies to changes in journalism, activism, art practice and curation, video production, simply living the life of a young person and even online confessions. This is not a random list of methodologies, technologies and changes, but rather it is a brief summary of the diversity found in the submissions that we gratefully received.

Nippert-Eng (1996) draws our attention to the 'boundary work' that we do in the course of sculpting and maintaining differences between home and work. While home and work is a prime division in most people's lives, it is but one of many divisions that we can suggest when critically considering the connective possibilities of new visual technologies. They potentially traverse and redefine a series of boundaries once generated through distance, temporal disjuncture, cultural conventions and economic barriers. We considered in our call that this 'shifting', this 'traversal' and 'redefinition' was achieved through the sharing of visual media across geographical regions, temporal zones and cultural conventions. This, we suggested had implications not only for how boundaries between individual (e.g. friends) and groups (e.g. different households) are defined but also for how these boundaries are managed through the use of different forms of media.

We also proposed that such technologies support mobilities that can transform our experience of all kinds of things. Instances of this personal experience include, firstly,

[3] Locomash (http://www.locomash.com)

[4] http://web.me.com/eric.laurier/assembling/

significant events and moments in our lives though, for example, visual narratives portrayed in digital photographs on Flickr and, secondly, our experience of our own selves through, for example, snippets of video on YouTube. We suggested other instances include, thirdly, the maintenance of family life, responsibilities and obligations through the remote, asynchronous sharing of digital photos or bringing home the experience and impact of a particular event. Finally we considered the importance of visual activism, driven by a number of provocative vignettes that integrally involve visual technologies. The paper call then was an attempt to make sense of the visual productions of new technologies not only for researchers but also a series of other publics – from the anonymous mass audience to groups of activists to the intimate social world of a family room – examining the role of particular visual media in and through time in particular settings with a particular focus on how they participate in and construct people's personal and collective material lives. Thus the concern in this theme issue is then both individual and intimate, as well as social and community-driven. For the former, this entails regarding these media in the trajectory of people's biographies (Strauss, 1993) and for the latter it involves regarding these media as part of the fabric of particular "social worlds" (Becker, 1982; Strauss, 1978) and (virtual) communities (Mynatt et al., 1998; Rheingold, 2000).

We see this attention to visual narratives and the development and portrayal in the papers presented here (e.g. Herrema, Durrant et al., this issue). We also see the role of new visual technologies in helping to constitute family life (e.g. Groening, this issue) and in representing and contesting traumatic events (e.g. Johnsrud, this issue). In addition, we see the different roles new visual technologies can play, from the intimate to the public (van House), in making certain views and viewpoints visible (Capstick, this issue) and in managing social interaction (Villi and Stocchetti, this issue). Broadly, in the papers presented here we are alerted to a new series of dichotomies that we think are pertinent to new visual technologies, dicothemies that need to be continually revised and revisited: personal and public (Pink, this issue); presence and absence (Villi, this issue); online and offline (Durrant et al., this issue); physical and digital (Van House, this issue); representation and expression (van House, this issue); amateur and professional (Herrema, this issue); the vernacular and the artistic (Herrema, this issue); isolation and engagement (Capstick, this issue); peace and conflict (Groening, this issue); authoring and re-authoring (Johnsrud, this issue); data and metadata (Johnsrud, this issue). These are but some of the shades of difference that the papers make visible for us. The submissions also illuminate a whole series of different boundaries: from those we have already considered, such as social and technical (Herrema, this issue), to those we just conceived, such as the remembered and the forgotten (Johnsrud, this issue), to the barely considered, such as having capacity and incapacity (Capstick, this issue). Then again, as Pink (drawing on Ingold (2007) in this issue) suggests, perhaps we over-emphasize or mis-construe the nature of boundaries when it is the lines between things[5] and the mesh of connections that are significant.

The order of the papers in this special issue is not accidental and, to some extent, demonstrates the implications of contemporary and emerging visual technologies for families, social groups, professions and institutions. The first four articles centre on the seemingly ubiquitous practice of amateur (digital) photography. These clutch of articles explicitly consider issues with firstly circulating digital photos and urban identities and secondly photo messaging and presence/absence. They, thirdly, examine photo displays and self-representation and, finally, personal photography and distributed networks of interaction. The next two articles after these describe personal journeys and mark a shift towards specialist uses in particular communities – artistic and care respectively. The last two articles relate new visual technologies – automobile television and digital photographs – to issues of conflict. Rather than summarise these articles any further at this point we will move

[5] Ingold (2000:5) describes how a thing was originally "meant a gathering people, and a place where they would meet to resolve their affairs".

on to a series of observations regarding new visual technologies that these articles have supported.

Visual technologies are associated with a breed of new information and communication technologies variously described as 'ubiquitous' and 'pervasive' in computing and as 'reaching in' and 'exploding' in human-centred design (e.g. Weiser, 1991; Grudin, 1990; Bowers and Rodden, 1993). In classic works they have been variously framed as interacting with publics where their sensual form and susceptibility to circulation is central to their mass comprehensibility (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). As tempting as it is to embrace this apparent global nature of the visual new visual technologies are profoundly social (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) we suggest that the articles in this collection show that such technologies can only be fully understood through careful consideration of the site of production of the image, the site of the image itself and the site of audiencing (Rose, 2007). In several of the papers here this issue of audiencing is brought to their fore through the consideration of very particular groups: from teens (Durrant et al.) to the 'anonymous' members of photo sharing communities (Herrema). The reach of distributive technologies also raises questions about being between audiences and how visual materials are used to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct cultural identities. Many of the papers also affirm the importance of the malleable form of digital media (Johnsrud). Perhaps unsurprisingly the importance of Urry's (2004) mobilities for understanding these new technologies emerges – physical and communicative in particular – and the importance of these media's different materialities as well as their content (Edwards and Hart, 2004). Indeed, we see how this circulation of visual material occurs via new commercial services – digital photos via Googletalk, Facebook, MySpace (Durrant et al.), Flickr (Herrema) and MMS (Villo and Stocchetti) – as well as by more 'traditional' means – such as carnivals and exhibitions (Pink). We also observe how, with these circulations, personal transformations can occur e.g. from a casual photographer to photographic artist (Herrema).

What we wanted to depict in this special issue, through a variety of papers deploying a variety of new technologies, was how these technologies might contribute, more generally, to the changing field of Visual Sociology and Visual Studies. The selection of articles in this special issue encompass a range of different theoretical perspectives and traditions – from psychoanalytic theory (Johnsrud drawing on Freud (1920)) to theories of ritual communication (Villo and Stochetti drawing on Carey (1989)) to actor-network theory (Van House drawing on Latour (2005)) – with this spirit of inclusiveness leading to, we hope, a rich diverse collection of papers for the reader of Visual Studies. Similarly the papers in this collection present a range of methodological approaches: of autoethnography, ethnography tied to notions of evolving place, phenomenological enquiry through semi-structured interviews. The articles also broadly describe the use of the products of new visual technologies as digital life documents (Plummer, 2001), and we suggest that this methodological thread seems to holds promise for further development.

There are also a number of themes that, we hope, promise to generate new questions for the Visual Studies community about new visual technologies. They:

- inhabit space and act for us through 'inhabiting machines' (Urry, 2004) such as mobile phones – the suggestion is that lingering 'selves', positioned elsewhere in time and space, are being propagated.
- can be conceived as being central to 'meshing together' and constituting place as well as the management of personal social space.
- are now critical to supporting and even comprising the achieved, sometimes messy connections that create collections of people and things.
- constitute audiences that are variously known and unknown, individual and collective, online and offline, calculated and ad hoc, regional and global.

- not only bring with them new freedoms concerning what they allow us to do and who and what they connect us to but they also discipline and regulate us.
- enliven, support, and even generate and reassemble histories and biographies, eroded memories and cultural memory.
- allow 'softer', 'phatic' (Malinowski, 1923) interactions supporting intimacy and closeness as well as contestation and conflict.
- are worked with and 'practiced' as part of our everyday lives – the experience of them can only be understood in these terms.

Through all these themes we see that new visual technologies are increasingly involved in constituting us, our interactions, our identities and our relationships.

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