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Networking Imagery As a Means of Communication in Social Media

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Abstract

During the last decade, new media have become aggregators of visual content which translates socio-cultural meanings, practices of vision and techniques of watching and communication styles in real time. Nowadays it is possible to analyze a multitude of universes existing on the Internet, diverse in their content, with unique voices and their particular ways of visual self-presentation on a cyber space. With the development of social media, visual practices replace "networking talks", and these practices fix polyphony, polystylism, and the fragmented nature of modern times, while at the same time being the expression of collective and individual needs. Visual users' content has acquired a new status: it has turned from a means of representing and documenting events into a means of "pure communicating" with the help of which information is shortened and simplified, and interaction is constructed in line with social expectations and norms. In general, it indicates the ongoing cultural transformations associated with the transition from representational system of culture to presentational online culture.

Keywords: online communication, social networks, visuality, media studies

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1. Introduction

The paradigm of modern culture is linked not only with a quantitative growth of new images, but also with its fundamental changes, i.e. the global transformation of the cultural discourse from textual to visual. The development of social media has shaped a new field of visuality: it expanded the sphere of the visible and modified practices of seeing, and determined that visual images have become a basic non-verbal language of communication. Contemporary visual imagery which has become human entourage problematizes the situation related to reconsideration of methods and approaches that human sciences of the late XXs used to analyze and explain the phenomenon of the visual in online-culture. The changes that have occurred removed the issue about the uniqueness of imagery as an aesthetic object and fixed a new focus of studying the visual, which is seen in a conflict between regular static of perceiving the visual and an

endless flow of networking images placed in an interactive context, charged with vivid emotional reactions and having their agency.

2. Research Methods

A multidisciplinary approach with the use of media studies' instruments acts as a methodological basis for examining specifics of digital communication. This methodology makes it possible to reflect upon digital media in their interrelations with social, cultural and anthropological transformations, to analyze users' content, specific ways of communication and interests of the Internet communities.

3. Discussion

Several premises why visual content prevails in social networks over other types can be highlighted. First, the increased contacts are made, and information is circulated. This resulted in transition from writing (blogging) to curatorship, which is exercised through the help of short status, pictures, likes, smiles, color and bold lettering. Social networking users consume the content under the mode "get in and get out" "without reading everything that has been posted", since they view information from the mobile devices [1]. A high information fuss of digital environment reduces users' attention and this, as a consequence, leads to speedy screening of personal pages – so called "economy of attention". The mass of users is not always interested in the content of an event, but are always attracted by its visualization, and it is what makes a "voyeuristic" gaze that keeps one's eyes on various forms of life. So, the Facebook content necessarily involves visualized data – photos, videos, graphics – whose bright colors and a provoking character catches users' attention. While clicking Facebook teasers the user is often disappointed with the wrapping paper of some information without anything worthy inside, and such disappointment can give rise to digital detox.

Mass interest in unsophisticated, universally recognized Internet memes points not only to a collective demand for simplicity, but to overall fatigue from complexities of the world, overproduction of information and the multiplicity of communicative contacts. Even such an insignificant fact as holidays congratulations sent to "near and distant ones" imply just an exchange of digital cards, since a greeting card as a holder of textual information is being forced out by ready-made visual images. While pondering the meanings of modern culture, A. Genis stated that "our epoch is devoid of depth because everything that really matters occurs in the sphere of the evident, namely, "in

the world that has come to the surface, everything is outside [2]. In other words, habitual networking communication is characterized by "simple" forms of communication which do not require additional "semantic" participation. In addition, visual images appear to be much more sustainable forms of interpretation than textual ones.

Second, the popularity of visual content is associated with the development of the diversity of image processing software, which is easy to use, and which is not reliant on users having special skills. It is these programs thanks to which the transmission of video and photographic materials has become publicly available, and that allow every story or biography to be visualized. Moreover, availability of digital and web-cameras makes it possible to replicate not only the faces of the elite (which has been the rule since the Middle Ages and up to the current epoch of glossies), but also the images of ordinary users (for example, making selfies). Nowadays, everyone has become "the greatest fan of oneself, personal paparazzi" [3], which makes social media more democratic and emancipated. The famous YouTube slogan "Broadcast Yourself" is democratic in its essence and actualizes itself as a social project which is available to everyone, as every user, with the access to digital technologies, can place his/her photo without previous selection, censorship, or approval.

Third, network media use visuality to transfer information which replaces other channels of sense perception, such as touch, smell and taste. P. Rutledge, the American media psychologist, in her studies into immersive technologies and the influence of social media on individual and group behavior, drove to the conclusion that it is visual communication that brings information to public in a quicker way and draws users' attention more actively than textual materials, especially if it is animated and dynamic. She reckons that the specificity of our brain is such that visual information is processed at a higher speed and provides more active involvement of users into communication for assessing and discussing visual messages [4]. M. McLuhan argued that such perception goes far beyond networking reality, it can be considered as an inevitable process of social transformations, since "the proportion of sense changes when one of them – either bodily or mental function – takes a certain technological form" [5].

Fourth, a visual (or figurative, in J. Lyotard terminology) way of denotation is immediate, sensual, able to affect, grab the attention, enchant, and impress. These effects of visual images instantly satisfy the person's desires associated with a sense of pride, possession, social prestige, search for approval, and status. They make it possible to enjoy imaginary relationships with what is lacking or principally unavailable. Visual communication, therefore, is more capable than verbal of impacting free and changeable

wants of the user transforming him into a viewer who fills the gap between the real and the virtual as a means of self-identification.

The widespread use of recording devices as well as a networking nature of servers, their virulence have given rise to mass dissemination of photography and video blogging in the social media. The users' content has acquired a new status: from a means of representation (production) it has turned into a means of communication, or, according to E. Petrovskaya, into "pure communication" [6]. Today, "regular" users with the resources of the Net have got the opportunity to migrate from the local to the global level of communication, to become "opinion leaders" able to influence views and techniques for monitoring virtual community. And the indicator of the content success is the number of viewcounts, favorable comments, likes and rating in search engines, which do not only reproduce but accentuate the functional structure of traditional media erasing the line between true and false, original and fake. Video and photo hosting determines the top of the best users' projects, "non-obvious" people become YouTube and Instagram stars and their everyday life is registered in a train of messages: "I'm in a restaurant", "I'm at the sea", "I'm in the car or "I'm got stuck in a traffic jam", etc. As L. Manovich rightly pointed out, social networks have become "our visual window into reality", and currently millions of users make photos, pose, and select filters demonstrating their version of everydayness [7]. Consequently, intimate and previously hidden aspects of everyday human life are now displayed and available to others. Such content does not require any text; it is enough to post a picture or video for other network users to receive the necessary information. Today it is not by chance that a selfie posted on Instagram is called "a visual diary" similar to a conventional family album. But there is one great difference: in social networks every event becomes media-like.

The result is the fragmented agenda when the private takes precedence over the public, thus crowding out urgent social problems from the sphere of network cooperation. In other words, as Z. Baumann wrote, modern life of the world, both online and off-line, has turned into individualized and privatized versions of events consisting of "an unending saga of activities, and we and our thoughts about ourselves are in the center of it" [8].

A mass character of content spread always implies simplified substance and technology. The Net parameters not only influenced the nature of the image, but also defined the very format of a photo or video on the Net. Notwithstanding the diversity of ways to fix everyday experience and visual representations in social media are normative, which are largely determined by technical capacities of broadcasting, for instance, the small size of a mobile phone screen. That is why in order to attract other users' attention a

picture should be rich in color, without superfluous details. At the same time the format of visual messages is set on the basis of socially desirable images and socially approved behavior. Users are offered the constructed, i.e. idealized image of reality which sets "the norm of how we see things" [9]. In other words, users place online an idealized image of everydayness/reality, the one that transforms it according to expectations and socially accepted behavior formats.

As we can see, normativity of the visual is set by both technical means of broadcasting and the users "structure of desires" aimed at making their pictures popular. And their popularity depends on how many friends, involved in communication, will like the picture. It is worth remembering W. Benjamin ideas, who thought that technological means tie us up so much that we are unable to identify ourselves as individual contemplators, thus forming some perceiving generality combined by collective perception [10]. That is why assessments largely determine what and how the user will publish. Thanks to taking into account opinions of the Other, the user identifies himself and represents his everyday experience in which there is no distance between private interests and a job, or different episodes of the personal story.

In J. Regev' words, it results in "deterritorialization of the private" [11], erosion of conventional boundaries of the personal: everyday human practices of consumption, meal, purchases which were used to be under suspicion, are now legitimized, become objects of interest in their own right demonstrating our social essence. Thus, for example, numerous pictures of dishes displayed on the Instagram are given though transitory but still universal value by the majority of friends. Everydayness targeted at "the gaze of the Other" becomes designed, constructed, and mediated by the interests of the Other. It is, therefore, important not to just place a personal photo or a portrait (selfie), but to create the image of a "normal man or woman", "a traveler", or a "good friend". All this speaks to the fact that displayed visual materials "become instruments of self-objectification, self-commodification" of modern man [12]. In other words, users build visual objects from their life and themselves, which can be successfully promoted and sold on the media market.

In their development of social networks, video chats have become a new consumer platform, or according to L. Boltansky, "a networking world of the new spirit of capitalism" which penetrates private, everyday practices of human existence [13]. For instance, since its establishment, YouTube video hosting has turned from the elitist channel which used to publish a unique content into a targeted advertising venue where users prefer watching a mass- and entertainment-oriented visual content. Such researchers as G. Chatzopoulou, Ch. Sheng, M. Faloutsos are of the opinion that YouTube has become a

fundamental way of promoting one's self, services or products. Furthermore, the popular authors with personal channels in YouTube receive cash reward for placing ads, paid subscriptions or reviews [14].

4. Conclusions

Therefore, life mobility and the very social media existing in real time mode, the situation of "economy of attention" have affected users' content which has become predominantly visual and acquired a new status: it has turned from a means of representation into a means of communication. While exchanging imagery, users co-construct a life world where every element of our experience, everydayness deserves to be published. When seen by others, the user's experience becomes socially personal and, furthermore, normatively set and constructed. Thus, visual practices shape a new combination of public-private in everyday life, currently existing in real-time.

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