

5 Narrating Personal Moments Through Social Images: Postcards as Souvenirs of Memorable Instances and Places

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Postcards are purchased both as souvenirs – objects that authenticate past experiences and speak through nostalgia – and as collection items – objects that add to the narration of our personal past. They are sent to relatives and friends as charismatic views of the sociality and culture of the visited other.

The postcard is purchased as a mass-produced view of a given society, produced within the given societal borders. The handwriting of the personal beneath the caption of the social transforms the public into private, the social image into an individual memento.

This paper examines the role of postcard images as vehicles narrating past instances. Pinned on one's notice board, the social image is transformed into a personal narration – one connected to one's past and therefore worthy to be remembered and talked about.

Capturing Gazes - The Snapshot

Photography has indeed created another way of looking at things, especially unfamiliar or distant things we now seem to gaze upon as quite normal or at least neutrally. Details, close-ups, distances and strange shapes, whatever the eye misses in the eternal movement of things around it, photography catches and offers for humanity to gaze at. 'It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious' (Benjamin, 1997).

It is true that photography has direct access to the real, but reality is not always easily or correctly perceived by the human eye. An optical illusion can be intentionally or by mistake captured by the photographic lens.

What is photographed seems to be acquired by the owner of the camera/picture. Through photographs, one sees reality, one has the chance to hold in his hands and ponder on persons, experience, information. Photographs cease to be an instrument of memory, helping, reinforcing it. They are starting to function as 'an invention of it or its replacement' (Sontag, 1977:165). Everything that a photograph does not confess it is hard for one to remember.

As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, photographic practice is determined by its family function and is ordinarily associated with the high points of family life. Different social classes own different types of cameras and take different photos, in accordance with the rules of a social etiquette that defines what is worth photographing and what is not. All take pictures of and within the contexts of their family. The family album expresses for Bourdieu *the essence of social memory*.

Creating a continuous personal narrative of the past: that is what the photograph is taken for. Evoking a memory of past experience, reconstructing the past using its remains: that is what the family album is treasured for. Compact cameras are nowadays thought of as an easy, quick way of note taking or keeping a diary. One takes snapshots to look back at one day. The pictures taken can therefore be seen as testimonies of the eye's experiences, personal documents of lived moments. A photograph can even count as evidence, because in principle, it cannot lie – unless it is technically falsified. The photograph can be seen as a certificate of presence (Barthes, 1982:87), guaranteeing the certainty of the event's existence, its authentication.

A holiday snapshot is connected to past experience. Many holidaymakers like to stand in front of a great historical monument and pose. The image was created in the subject's mind before being captured. Everyone has been photographed in the same way in front of the same monument. Landscapes and monuments appear in holiday snaps as decorations or signs. Holidays are made for photographers. There are specific places and antiquities, which one must be photographed with. These kinds of snapshots often relate to postcards, as the former take the aesthetics and subjects first introduced by the latter. In front of a most celebrated monument – shown in some of the area's postcards – the holidaymaker poses. One can see the queue of people who want to be photographed in the same scene, taking an identical posture to the one photographed before them.

Gazing at Tourist Images - The Postcard

Both photographs and postcards offer their viewer the power of possession. It is the memories of the object photographed/captured, which are maintained and reinforced every time one looks at a photograph. Places, faces and events are transformed into objects and are offered for the viewer to gaze upon. The power of this gaze is unrestricted. The historian standardizes an age's standards by looking at the images of its people. The traveller characterises a town's beauty by sending a postcard of its centre to a close friend.

The object photographed is subject to change, transformation and, most importantly, death. In our memory, the place we visited last year is beginning to fade, but the postcard we bought from it is always there to remind us of its

existence. One's face is altered with the passing of time, but the photographs that others took of him are there to remind him of his youth. Postcards and photographs function as little reminders of past times, beloved persons and lived experience. As we move away from the moment photographed, chronologically as well as geographically, the nostalgia of the experience lived starts to arise.

By shifting reality to the past, the photograph suggests that it is already dead. This is the melancholy of photography: the passing of time, the capturing of a loved moment on paper, but its final escape through one's fingers. With the advent of photography we learned that time is ruthless. A photograph of a passed moment is a source of our future melancholy. 'The photography is at the same time a pseudopresence and a token for absence' (Sontag, 1977:16).

The postcard is not connected to the self and the punctum the way the photograph is. A capture of time denotes the end of time. As the photograph remains to eternity, its referents already gone, it reminds you of the past time, of time's characteristic attribute of passing. The postcard remains interesting for generations and generations, while the snapshot is worth seeing only till the time you can recognise the faces involved in its composition. The unknown face requires no sympathy – with the exception of Boltanski's exhibitions, where the unknown applies to the general and the general includes us.

The Souvenir

With the existence of postcards, recollection is secured, and so is 'authentic' experience. 'The souvenir both offers a measurement for the normal and authenticates the experience of the viewer' (Stewart, 1984:134). The postcard is taking me from event to memory and then to desire. Desire to maintain the memory, desire to go back there again one day.

'The souvenir distinguishes experiences' (Stewart, 1984:135). We do not buy souvenirs of events that we know we will be experiencing again. We desire souvenirs of unique, unimaginable events or places, places we are only allowed to visit once in a lifetime, either for financial or for social reasons. A postcard of the Eiffel Tower denotes the lived experience of the photographer but its strongest function is that it guarantees the eternal repetition of this experience to its possessor. Its value is acquired by means of its relation to a particular location, without which it is meaningless. 'The souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia' (Stewart, 1984:135). Its function is within us, psychological, rather than practical.

The experience to which it is related is uniquely personal. It will bring back a now distanced past experience. That difference, that partiality is the

very essence of its power, the very reason that makes the postcard a trophy and the buyer its possessor.

The privilege of being the one viewer is enhanced in the postcard. Although huge numbers of people have access to the same postcard that you are watching and although many of its copies are still unsold and easily viewed in shopping windows of corner shops, the illusion that you are the only person viewing it is maintained. As you hold it in your hands, no other human figure is near so that your eye appears to be the only eye resting on it, viewing, gazing, and capturing the image in the shells of memory and the unconscious.

The Collection

When collected, postcards are taken out of their original function and use. They are not sent, but are kept as souvenirs or collectable items. They are searched to be bought and cherished when finally owned. They become private possessions, their owner's capital, his little treasure. In every one of them one part of the world is present, a past experience or wish, something personal and therefore sacred.

'A unique bastion against the deluge of time' (Elsner and Cardinal, 1997:1), the collection serves as a defense against the destructiveness of time. A collection can be interpreted as a desire for immortality, as the collector relives all his past moments through his collected items and this cyclical reliving seems to set death away. A local shelter from the fear of death or time's irreversible feature of passing, a collection serves as a comforting friend and a way to forget the unforgettable. What one collects is bits and pieces of his past, in an anxious attempt to save the past and prevent the coming of the future. 'As one becomes conscious of one's self, one becomes a conscious collector of identity, projecting one's being onto the objects one chooses to live with. Taste, the collector's taste, is a mirror of the self' (Elsner and Cardinal, 1997:3).

Through the postcard purchase the commodity is transformed into a collector's item, as Benjamin would say. Collecting dead past experiences and images is a common practice among individuals and a postcard both awakens memory of the places visited and is neutral enough – unlike the snapshot that contains the person – to be exhibited/shown. This way moments of past life are preserved and relived, while discarded, unconnected possessions are kept together – different postcards of different places are kept in the same box/album – trying to connect the passages of one's life, create its narrative. The collected items keep their place in the collector's home, like the rest of his furniture, becoming a montaged but unified everyday image of his surroundings.

Powerless before the passing time, one collects oneself.

Generating Memories: Producing Postcards

On postcards, images are brought together according to a new law, the law of attractive appearance and cultural promotion. 'Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, ... of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze' (Urry, 1990:3).

Composed images are common on postcards. A composed image of Crete, for example, would suggest the island's natural beauty (beaches), and its cultural significance (pictures from Knossos). What such postcards clearly state is that such places are worth visiting, while at the same time the producers are trying to indicate the guaranteed authentic experience of the potential visitors – elderly people dressed in a traditional way would, for example, suggest exactly that authentic experience. The flowing name of the island written in the middle of the postcard would unify the images and state the desired invitation. All these – beautiful landscape, cultural significance and authenticity – are to be found on one island: Crete.

Postcards are among the influential elements of the tourist gaze. They should include pictures of the most celebrated places, as well as the less known spots which are worth seeing. They give information about the place, guiding the tourist's gaze and programming his trip so that he does not miss a single attraction. This task is performed by the editor of the postcard, bearing always in mind the country's specialisation in providing particular kinds of objects to be gazed upon. By using specific images in postcards, they manage to insert them in the tourists' minds so that when the tourist returns to his home country he will take these images with him – he will take or send some postcards of them anyway. This fact allows for the images to be seen and copied by other potential tourists, the gaze being endlessly reproduced and recaptured.

The image on a postcard does not stand or travel alone. It is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure – namely the text. The text – usually typed on its reverse – accompanies and describes it. It comes to 'sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image' (Barthes, 1977). Replying to the question what is it that is shown the text helps the reader to choose the correct way of perception, guides both his gaze and his understanding of the image.

Postcards however are mostly seen and judged by their illustration. It is the picture one looks at and buys on a postcard, not the space provided for the message, even when the particular postcard is meant to be sent to someone.

The postcards and the images shown on them are related to the things signified; they refer to them and maintain them for their buyer.

The postcard's production and purchase gives a good example for the correlation of the personal with the social. The image is captured by an individual photographer, mediated through a quasi-mass medium, seen as an identification or hint of a society and then bought as a souvenir of a personal past experience.

Tourists buy the social images of the visited place on postcards and then hang them on their walls or boards. The sociality of the other becomes a beloved, everyday image – a uniquely personal object. After its purchase, the postcard's autonomous character overpowers its social one. When bought, the postcard functions as a medium for the transmission of messages between friends, as a collection item or as souvenir of past experiences.

Usual Images on Postcards

The postcard of Acropolis characteristically proves the function of a postcard as a souvenir. The site is 'framed' by its location in the particular social setting and this setting is what provides it with meaning and cultural value. Its highly localised quality is straightforward: such a site cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Its authenticity makes it a classic view site. It characterises the whole city, and by extension the country, becoming one of its main collectors of tourist gazes. The site becomes the city's/country's symbol. Greece includes one of its images.

Architectural sites are often used on postcards. This fact is not inseparable from architecture's character as a public object, being a work commissioned for a site of open public access. Architecture is seen; it cannot be ignored or simply passed by. 'You must take endless precautions, in Paris, not to see the Eiffel Tower' (Barthes, 1979:3). You cannot miss a monument. It is there in front of you.

Monuments enhance the significance of particular locations and enter the consciousness of the people who live around them, they represent a highly visible past, they were created to make that past broadly known. The Acropolis is a universal symbol of Athens and therefore it is everywhere on the globe where Athens is to be stated as an image. Monuments are shown and seen as major signs of people and places: they belong to the universal language of travel (Barthes, 1979:4).

A familiar landmark or building can help the holder understand which city the photograph is taken from. Some postcards, however, manage to present a view from a vantage point outside the city or from a high point within it, transforming the city into a distinctive map-like image. Seeing the city as a map, distinguishing its streets, squares, monuments or public spaces, people

not being visible, offers the viewer a kind of power and possession. When looking at a snapshot taken on the street, everything seems around you, you become part of this interactivity. The postcard of a high point, however, provides you with the illusion that you are the only viewer; that this view is offered to you alone. Benjamin's *flaneur* would recognise some familiar places and buildings when looking at Paris from the Eiffel Tower.

The inhabitants of the visited place often appear on the postcards of that place in order to stress the difference of the habits and lifestyle and connect the place with a certain authentic atmosphere. The notion of the 'other' is highly valued on postcards and the images of the place's inhabitants effectively stress that desirable otherness.

Most of the images chosen to appear on postcards stress the sociality of the specific place the image was taken from. The postcard view conveys ideology as well as information. A postcard is an ideological statement, trying to agree with or provide evidence for Barthes' notion of '*An Empire of Signs*'. The image on a postcard is trying very hard to include all the characteristic, 'classic' features of the specific town. It is trying to make one thing clear: Barthes' *possibility of a difference*.

It is obvious that certain images are more popular than others – as they are meant to attract the 'tourist gaze' – and almost equate themselves with or act as symbolisation for the place shown. What the red columns are for Knossos, the university is for Oxford. What Plaza de Cibeles is for Madrid, the Eiffel Tower is for Paris.

One cannot visit one of these cities without visiting the corresponding monument and usually the visit ends by a look at the little shop situated near the exit. It is the tourist's little ritual: to travel somewhere, visit the well-known sites and the famous monuments and buy a souvenir to remind himself of a past experience and show to the friends and family. The more familiar the image on the postcard, the more proof that one has visited the place. The famous monument on the postcard also lends some of its pride and cultural status to the visitor – only cultural people visit cultural sites – and consequently to the receiver of the postcard. So everyone is happy: the producer sold many postcards, the tourist bought himself a souvenir that not only proves his actual visit to the place shown but also makes him appear with a certain status. Such charisma of the monument is transcended not only to the tourist, but to the receiver of the sent postcard as well.

Conclusions

Tourists visit their versions of Horne's 'dreamlands', relics of previous declarations of reality that we cannot altogether understand, monuments that can be turned into whatever dreams our age or society requires (Horne,

1984:1). Each individual interpretation begins with the help of the provided guidebooks. Tourists are told what they are seeing. Postcards provide all the information they need on their reverse. 'The fame of the object becomes its meaning; what finally matters may be a souvenir postcard, perhaps even the admission ticket, kept for years afterwards with other mementoes of passing visions of how life might have been' (Horne, 1984:10).

The objects and scenes a tourist has searched for and found in a foreign country are gathered and included in a postcard of that country and by buying that one postcard, the tourist tames the cultural other, the object of the postcard. The tourist takes the postcard with him as a trophy of the invaded country, something exotic and foreign, but at the same time, something gazed upon and admired – a part of one's experience.

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