

F. Sudweeks, H. Hrachovec and C. Ess (eds). Proceedings Cultural Attitudes Towards Communication and Technology 2010, Murdoch University, Australia, 198-206.

PHOTOBOMBING: MOBILITY, HUMOUR AND CULTURE

Putting in the visual

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Abstract. The photobomb, in name and practice, is a phenomenon of Web2.0 – in the sense of being a participatory and read/write Web. This paper contributes to the academic discourse concerning the anthropology of the Internet. Photobombing exploits the ready availability of channels for individual expression created with writability, the importance of user-generated humour for the Web and the ubiquity of digital photography devices. The issues of the visual and of humour are both problematic territory for academic research and, despite their significance within the context of digital culture, have received little focused attention in this context (Gillispie, 2003). By drawing upon an observational methodology we construct a typology of photobombs drawn from a variety of sources to understand the simplicity and subtlety of humour being employed as well as the way in which the photobomb – as a discrete artefact - is embedded and interlinked with other (digital) cultural practices. The approach employed here for photobombs offers insight into the potential for the wider application of typological methods in the search and retrieval of (digital) visual objects.

1. Pictured within a web

Digital photographs represent a significant commodity within the context of the digital culture and Web2.0 (Kalapoš, 2002). A photograph is a ‘whole’ artefact with embedded dense contextual meanings that are simultaneously aesthetically, politically, economically and culturally nuanced. This distinguishes a photograph from PDF and sound files, for example, which require separate readers or plugins, or text, which can be partially presented and experienced. The self-contained nature of the photograph also makes representation a relatively simple process with consequent opportunity for intentional and unintentional shifts in context and meaning. The participatory sentiment of Web2.0 actively encourages this reuse and repetition (O’Rielly 2007) through, for example em-

bedding, retweeting, reposting, digging and stumbling. These are practices that potentially, without instruction, add to popular confusion concerning concepts of intellectual property and plagiarism.

Examination of photographs, or specific classes of photographs, offer the ability to examine digitally oriented cultural practices that are not directly bound to a specific website or type of website. By detaching enquiry from a specific site of engagement and experience that a website represent examining the visual object provides an opportunity to understand the relationship between the digital mediated experiences of production and consumption, a task that has proved difficult in much of the literature associated with Web2.0 and the Internet.

As a specific category of images that is applied *post hoc* visual artefacts labelled as photobombs encourage forms of 'Web2.0 like' participation through the construction of collections such as thisisphotobomb.com and photobomb.net that take images from a range of image warehouses, humour sites and personal blogs and group them in one location. What is reinforced are the cultural practices of collecting and copying digital artefacts and the possession or, even more simply, the knowledge of things that reflects association with specific cultural identities. This, of course, raises the question of culture. We describe cultural practices here as activities and actions that are undertaken meaningfully and with shared recognition by a group. While cultural identity is used here in the sense of a series of beliefs and understandings broadly common to a group – although this is potentially a self-referential definition. Cultural identity and practice are consequently interdependent alongside with artefacts and it in this combination that culture is found (Levi-Strauss 1968, 295).

A key and problematic issue concerning any form of humour – including photographic images - is the ways in which it is culturally specific and constructed. Consequently, associating with an individual image categorised as a photobomb through reposts, retweeting, linking or as a reference point in conversation is to make a statement about one's association with a particular culture and its cultural traits – the characteristics of a culture - that is not defined by language or location but through a collection of recontextualised digital artefacts.

The importance of celebrity within contemporary mainstream culture (Holmes, 2005), as one example, intersects with the cultural milieu of which photobombs are a part (Figure 1). The likelihood of a celebrity to become associated with a publically available photobomb is high but nonetheless the act of retaining what would otherwise be a poor image and defining the photograph as a photobomb all enrolls the image in a specific way and with particular cultural meaning. Celebrity photobombs themselves problematise their meaning and intention in relation to mainstream culture. Many of this particular type of photobomb could be seen to represent the celebrities themselves in a poor light and act as a form of tacit criticism of the meaning and impact of their 'celebrity'. However, the counter observation is equally plausible in that the photobomb makes the celebrity appear more accessible and 'human' – and by implication implies that it is possible for anyone to become a celebrity. This latter observation reinforces the cultural significance of celebrity rather than critiquing it. The relationship of the desires to become celebrity and to associate with celebrities with the act and practice of photobombing is further reinforced by photobomb.net (as of March 2010) which carries ad-

vertising on the website for taltopia.com – a casting company – with the strapline, “Wanna be famous? Get discovered!”



Figure 1. Chris Rock 'bombing' Rhianna
 (www.bannedinhollywood.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/sexy_spoiled_photos_08.jpg)

The wide acceptance of the photobomb category of images as a form of expression reveals the extent to which practices made possible and defined by digital technologies simultaneously are almost *de facto* mainstream cultural practices. The *National Geographic* and *Daily Mail* coverage of the 'squirrel photobomb' taken in a National Park in Canada (Figure 2) provides the photographic category with a form of legitimacy and currency. The text in the *Daily Mail* article also allays what can be seen as a lasting mainstream concern regarding digital culture, “the image is so startling that, had it not ran on the prestigious National Geographic magazine's website, many might have assumed it had been digitally altered” (www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1206018/Crasher-Squirrel—How-cheeky-rodent-star-couples-photos.html). The assumption that digital is somehow inauthentic is generally, however, diminished by photobomb images rather than being reinforced. The majority of photobombs are primarily focused on the mundane and those 'special' events within an individual lifetime that are repeated *ad infinitum* in a multitude of locations; the graduation, the 21st birthday, the wedding or wedding anniversary or someone photographing a famous landmark. The mundane settings of many ‘famous’ photobombs coupled with the complex backgrounds and combination of subjects also serve to allay fear about the potential for ‘photoshopping’ – the post-production manipulation of the image on the computer with software such as Adobe’s photoshop. In this way, photobombs generally serve to reinforce authenticity and confirm a notion of reality albeit in its most surreal forms.



Figure 2. Squirrel photobomb
 (i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2009/08/12/article-1206018-0609210C000005DC-373_634x421.jpg)

2. The Photobomb

The urbandictionary provides two tentative definitions for a photobomb; “Any time the background of a picture hijacks the original focus” and “an otherwise normal photo that has been ruined or spoiled by someone who was not supposed to be in the photograph” (www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=photobomb). The photobomb is not a new phenomena and one black and white example (Figure 3) shows Paul McCartney 'bombing' a picture that focuses on George Harrison with two women. However, with the ubiquity of digital photography devices (Madrado, 2004), the importance of visual referents within social networking profiles and the utilisation of social media (Nakamura 2008) as the site for storing personal memory the photobomb category of images has shifted from being potentially being discarded as a 'ruined' photograph to a performative work of humour and a pseudo-permanent primarily digitally captured momentary event with 'lol' value.

The urbandictionary is not, however and unsurprisingly, entirely correct in its definition. There is a range of subtle differences to the most popular photobombs that indicate that each type is positioned in subtly different relationships with wider sets of cultural practices. Digital photography has meant that the act of taking a photograph is now closely combined with its initial consumption and not the first half of a pair of temporally distanced activities. This dramatic reduction in the period between production and consumption has not however constituted the act of photography and the artefacts that are produced as more temporary or disposable items. This is a doubly dramatic claim when the photographic artefact itself is also recognised as having changed from a relatively high cost and somewhat fragile tangible item to a primarily digital one. Digital photography also inherits a quality from more traditional forms of photography – it is inherently mobile in production and, now, also consumption. This form of mobility has not been generally considered within the context of the wider discussions of mobility that have become available with smartphones and similar devices that enable Web

browsing, texting and other forms of communication. The depth and range of expression that is possible with visual communications, and by implication digital photography, makes this omission problematic when a key hallmark of Web2.0 is also its ability to seamlessly share images and video recordings.

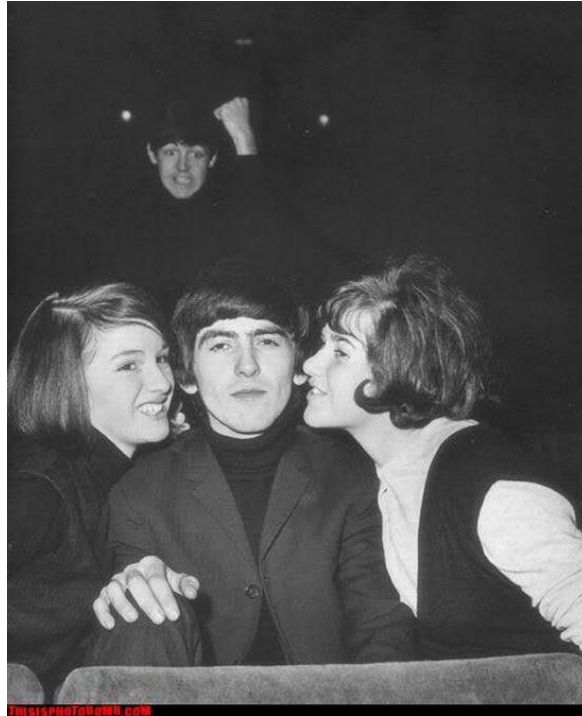


Figure 3. An early celebrity photobomb
(visboo.com/application/images/21012010/11142.jpg)

Photobombs, along with lolcats, demotivational posters and other genres of web humour, reveal the forms of simplistic and sometimes dubious humour that represents a major proportion of the content on sites such as flickr.com (32), rapidshare.com (33), photobucket.com (53) and imageshack.com (74) (alexa.com site rankings 4th March 2010). The basis for this humour is not solely confined to someone wrecking the photo of a group and include the mocking of a person's physical features, the unfortunate juxtaposition of an image or object with the subject of the photo and the unruliness of pets. These different forms of humour are reflected within the typology of photobombs presented by this paper with different types of humour generally being reflected by different types of photobombs and are closely related to types of photographs including '_Oh Shit!', OMFG and mirror-shot images.

Photobombs have even generated a degree of celebrity for those associated with the bombing. The perpetrator of one of the most frequently referenced photobombs has even offered her advice to other potential bombers (thisisphotobomb.com/hall-of-fame/guide-to-photobombing/). This includes the observation that the best locations are

found where there is ~~the~~ presence of unnecessary photography and group photos” and to ~~keep~~ an eye out for the narcissistic girl that is really taking pictures to improve her Facebook profile default.”

In this paper we present a typology of photobombs including animal and reverse photobombs in order to consider the importance of these particular types of photographs as contemporary cultural artefacts that lend insight into a range of cultural practices and the experience of the 'mundane' within everyday life. Photobombs themselves reveal the importance of humour within mass acceptance of the Web as a mainstream media, the continued importance of the visual (and of the artefact of the photograph) in constituting personal and group memory and the extent to which photobombing can represent resistance to the cultural mainstream.

3. A Typology of Photobombs

The range of publically available photobombs present a range of images that all aim to be humorous within the context of a ~~wrecked~~” photographic composition. This definition however belies the range of images and the varying intent and actions of the bombers. Similarly the basis by which an image is construed as humorous varies as a result of these different intentions and the location or event where they were taken. Table 1 sets out a tentative typology for photobombs that captures the range of photobombs currently discoverable. While the categories are themselves extensible and not necessarily mutually exclusive the purpose of the typology is capture the intention and context of the photograph rather than to judge the relative photographic merits of individual images. There is, for example, no judgement as to whether an image is focused or blurred (of which many are) although this may assist in making a judgement as to the intentions of the bomber and whether the image is a reverse photobomb. The typology itself assists in understanding how photobombing relates to other cultural practices and construction of cultural identity by association.

Utilising the typology reveals Figure 3 could be classified as A5B5C3D2E2 – a celebrity to celebrity photobomb containing a suggestion of intent with an insulting gesture taken in a bar or club. Figure 1 is classified as A5B5C3D5E10 and is another celebrity to celebrity photobomb with a suggestion of intent but undertaken in this example through a sexual/suggestive look. This reveals a similarity between these two photobombs and that both of the celebrity bombers are intending to produce a humorous result. Knowledge of the back stories for these celebrities is important here and would further suggest that the bomber is trying to break the tension associated between themselves and the bombee. Figure 2 is clearly visually a different image with no clear differentiating features of the bombees. Utilising the typology shows that Figure 2 can be classified as A6C2D7E4. This photobomb assists in highlighting the distinction between the bomber being simply present and what is described in the typology as 'peek-a-boo' (D8). This latter action is more generally found linked to images where the photobombing is intentional, bombed by an individual and to the camera (C1) at a 'mundane' event such as a graduation (E7) or sports event (E8). The football photobomb (Figure 4) is an example of the peek-a-boo and can be classified as B4C1D8E8. This classification also offers a clearer indication as to why the photobomb in Figure 2 is acceptable to the *Dai-*

ly *Mail* and *National Geographic* when Figures 1, 3 or 4 would not share this mainstream favour.

Table 1. A Photobomb Typology

A) Bomber	1) Opposite Sex	2) Same Sex	3) Building/Sign/Object	4) Child
	5) Celebrity	6) Animal		
B) Bombee	1) Individual woman	2) Individual man	3) Single sex group	4) Mixed sex group
	5) Celebrity	6) Child/children		
C) Intent (of bomber)	1) Intended, to camera	2) Casual, to camera	3) Suggestion of intent, not camera	4) Unintended, not to camera
D) Action (of bomber)	1) Smile	2) Finger/Insult	3) Face/Gurn	4) Flash
	5) Suggestive/Sexual	6) Drunk/ Eyes roll	7) Statue/Presence/Nothing	8) Peek-a-boo
E) Location/Event	1) Closeup	2) Bar/Club	3) Home	4) Landmark/Outdoors
	5) Zoo/Fair	6) Anniversary/Building	7) The 'mundane', e.g. graduation or wedding.	8) Sports event
	9) Awards ceremony			
R) Reverse	The subject becomes the bomber			

The final element of the typology, the reverse photobomb, is a potentially problematic category and one that requires additional narrative to be understood as a photobomb. This is difficult within our argument that photobombs and digital photography more generally are self-contained artefacts that can be exchanged and distributed in isolation while retaining shared cultural meaning without accompaniment from other digital artefacts. In the reverse photobomb the apparent subject of the image, conventionally the bombee, conspires with the photographer to capture a person or object within the frame of the image. Figure 5, classified as A2B3C4D5E4R, provides an example of a reverse photobomb that is also provided with a backstory that reconfirms its classification. –There are a handful of beach boner reverse bombs. But can you imagine how funny this must have been – to have some old weirdo come chat you up, offer to buy you drinks, then order them with a raging "problem" in his speedos? Then you get it on camera!?! Instant laughs and friendship for life. With that boner, that is. Kidding!?”

(www.comedycentral.com/tosh.0/2009/10/20/top-23-reverse-photo-bombs-on-the-net/). Without this statement or its provenance on the Comedy Central website it is possible that this image could be treated as a conventional photobomb achieved with an unintentional bomber.



Figure 4. Football photobomb
(thisisphotobomb.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/129110325563918782.jpg)



Figure 5. Reverse photobomb
(www.comedycentral.com/tosh.0/files/2009/10/speedo-boner.jpg)

4. Photobomb as a practice of mainstream culture

There is an important relationship between the photography of everyday mundane events and the photobomb. In all of the examples utilised by this paper relatively plain and uninteresting images have received attention in a way that very similar photos would have not. Defining the photographic image as a photobomb provides it with additional mean-

ing and currency that positions them, albeit marginally, within the context of celebrity focused mainstream culture. Constructing a photobomb makes everyday activities become notable and this offers further explanation as to why these “wrecked” images are not discarded and not even simply retained but are made public, distributed and shared.

Photobombs also offers an opportunity to examine an aspect of digital culture in an artefactual manner rather than a locational – site specific – way. This offers opportunities for consideration of the cultural practices for exchange and participation that figure so significantly in the technologies of Web2.0.

The typology of photobombs proposed here also offers some consideration to the more general problem of classifying and retrieving photographic images within what is still primarily a textually based Web environment. The majority of image retrieval relies upon folksonomic tagging, machine based analysis or the context of the image within a web page. A typological approach at the very least can serve to complement these approaches by providing analysis of the content of the image itself in a systematic and structure way.

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