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Cell Phone Photography and  
the (Shifting) Photographic Eye

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## Abstract

This paper addresses the relatively new phenomenon of camera phone technology, focusing on the (re)construction of the shifting photographic vision, practice and gaze that this technology has created. I will examine the rearticulation of photography in terms of its temporality as the primary (photographic) concern by placing camera phones in parallel to their analog counterpoints. Finally, the paper considers how camera phone practices involve fervent social sharing and contemplates whether these images create a new form of memory.

**Keywords:** camera phone, camera phone photography, new media practices, photography technology, visual culture, photographic memory, temporal, social practice, vernacular photography

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## Creating Cellular Vision: Cell Phone Photography and the (Shifting) Photographic Eye

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### Introduction

Camera phone technology is challenging the way photographic vision is practiced, experienced, and consumed. Moving away from the traditional solipsistic top-down power dynamic that analog photography demanded from the photographer and their subjects, camera phone practices are fervently invested in social sharing. This is largely in part due to the camera phone's wide spread accessibility, as it has become a standard feature on many cellular phone models. Camera phone technologies have become more sophisticated as users become savvier. Brands like *LG* and *Apple* both boast about the ease and prowess of their camera phones, marketing them as they might a digital camera. In addition, sites like *Flickr.com*, *Instagram* and the now defunct *Scoopt.com*, are testaments to the device's popularity and prove the importance of the socio-cultural impact of camera phone photography.

Shifting from being recorders of time, memory, and history, camera phones demand a sense of the immediacy

from the photographer. The action of lifting the phone up high to aim at an interesting event becomes an intricate dance as the user shifts their arm to aim the camera, culminating with the satisfying faux-shutter sound effect. These captured images represent moments of (fleeting) immediacy, transforming the photographic image into an *experience* to be consumed rather than a tangible object to be fetishized (Goggin, 2006). More importantly, the desire of realism over the abstract is inscribed in these photos as the emphasis of the imagery is placed on the mundane as the user aims to relive the moment and experience as closely as possible.

This paper will address the relatively new phenomenon of camera phone technology, focusing on the (re)construction of the shifting photographic vision, practice and gaze that this technology has created. By placing camera phones in parallel to their analog counterpoints (mainly that of 35mm amateur photography, though I will briefly outline the fine arts practice of camera phone artist, Patrice Elmi), I will examine the rearticulation of photography in terms of its temporality as the primary (photographic) concern. As photography has transformed into a sense of immediacy to be consumed and shared, I question how this has changed contemporary photographic aesthetics and practices. Finally, as the trend indicates a shift towards the immediate, how is photography's (perceived) role of preserving memory and news affected?

#### Transforming the Eye: Practices and Aesthetics in the Era of the Camera Phone

Camera phone technology represents a serious shift in the role of photographic practices. Moving into the realm of being producers of identity through the exploration of the immediate, camera phones are subverting how owners are using and perceiving photography. Lutz Koepnick (2003) explains that the exciting quality of camera phones is its ability to alleviate doubts about our spatial and temporal identities. Because of their portability and dual-function nature, camera

phones, unlike analog or even digital cameras, are usually within easy reach. As they are small enough to fit into a purse or pocket, they are able to transcend spatial boundaries that bulkier cameras cannot. With their small size, and the almost mundane nature of the cellular phone, camera phones are able to access and photograph areas and events that other forms of cameras cannot (Kato et al., 2005).

Transcending physical boundaries, camera phones actively enter the public sphere as the mechanical eye easily subverts the private realm through its capabilities of stealth and recording (Hjorth, 2008). Though armed with a fake shutter release sound to mimic the traditional camera in attempt to (re)create the analog photographic experience, camera phone technology further blurs the already fine line between the private and public through its mobile privatization. After all, to capture an image is to record the moment for the self's private pleasures in order to release the images to your own chosen public.

With the portability of the camera phone, it is no wonder that the mundane world has become the focus for the new photographic eye. Gone is photography's referent to pictorialism. Today, we are no longer interested in the special/rarefied moment but instead have moved to a sense of a fleeting immediacy that the camera phone simply records (Murray, 2008). The idea of a fleeting moment is in line with society's flâneur mobility and mentality. Appropriate for the shallow flâneur, Murray (2008) points out that "[i]n everyday digital photography, there is also an implicit acknowledgement of the inability of photos to hold onto certain moments" (p. 156). Strolling through the streets, camera phone in hand, anything and everything is photographable for the flânerie sensibilities.

Subjectivity shifts with this newfound mobility that camera phones afford and ends our relationship with the temporal. The temporal is proven to be a concept that cannot be

fixed, perfect for the endless photographable moments to be discovered and claimed by the camera phone user. It is not uncommon to hear the sound of a shutter or see a glowing sphere from the phone's frame in public venues. Camera phone photography, capturing innocent bystanders in its wake, makes claim to the moment, screaming, "I am here!" The viewer and subject no longer work in binary opposition, but are blurred together as Kato et al. (2005) describe that "...a large proportion of the population is equipped with image-capture devices ready at hand and ready to transmit [the images]" (p. 309). Our relationship with the camera phone, unlike that of photography's pictorialism, is relative to our geo-spatial location and relies heavily on the fleeting moment in order to create its form, and sharing technologies to reach new audiences.

Rearticulating photography in terms of its temporality has changed the subject matter that camera phone users search for. Images now are a shift away from history and memory and have moved toward a new aesthetics of the everyday (Goggin, 2006). Mundane banality rules in camera phone aesthetics, privileging the finding of what can be deemed interesting scenarios or objects. Patrice Elmi, professional photographer, claims that colour and composition become even more crucial to the camera phone aesthetic as users do not have control over formal tools such as aperture, depth, or lighting (Wong, 2007). This formula has proven successful as Elmi's abstract shots of multi-coloured walls and signs landed her a show at the *Drkerm gallery* in Los Angeles. More recently, the *SENT* exhibition featured an eclectic display of images submitted by celebrity camera phone users in order to promote the viability of the medium as an artistic tool.

The banality of camera phone photography functions as an introductory window to the world of photography (Goggin, 2006; Hjorth, 2008). Its usability grants even newcomers a sense of the art-making process. But as this ease progresses,

the photographic process becomes a performance in normalcy. The images themselves represent the “power of now” immediacy. Gone are the subjective multiple worlds of meaning that previous photographic philosophies believed to have existed. In their stead lies the mode of realism that authenticates the “real” and highlights the norm of the public sphere, exactly what is intended to happen inside the images (Cohen, 2005).

The act of recording an experience with photography is in itself a normative performance as photography’s lens has a legitimizing force (Sontag, 1977). An experience becomes an event through the power of the photographic gaze. But as camera phones are proving, the photographic gaze is evolving beyond its individualistic scope and is becoming a new means of practice as a form of peer-to-peer surveillance.

Finally, I question the policies of this new gaze. It is easy to support the claim that camera phones allow for a democratic vision of the world. The technology becomes quite common as the camera become more affordable. Added with the ease of its use, camera phones seem like an ideal way of allowing for a greater deal of picture taking. But this form of capturing reality is less about subverting techno-cultural elitism than it is about reinforcing normative convention of class and prestige. Flâneur sensibilities guide camera phone photography and further the market for prestige. As the photographic experience is increasingly becoming commodified, which groups are being left out of this new photographic process? How are these groups now subjected to the panopticon phenomenon of camera phones?

#### The Promise of the Camera Phone:

##### Transnational (normative) Sociality and Identity Formations

Camera phone practices promise users a sense of self through its transnational possibilities. Most significant to this is how camera phones usage links its users to a transnational

socio-cultural context. As Goggin (2006) believes, “camera phones are perceived to offer a sense of immediacy, lessening the time elapses between the time when the photo was taken and the time it is received” (p. 149). This vernacular theorization of the device becomes instrumental in thinking about the camera phone’s promise of sociality through new visual cultures. The images are immediate, eliminating Cartier-Bresson’s long awaited “decisive moment” as they occur in present time (p. 46).

A distinctive feature of camera phone technology is its ability to merge visual and oral modalities. Images are able to hold captions (both textual and through recorded voice) and are easily sent to peers via text message or e-mail. Pictures themselves are used as spoken language, turning the images into forms of social currency (Van Dijck, 2008; Hjorth, 2008). Camera phone visual culture stems from a broader cultural shift that is about individualization and the intensification of the event through experience. What better way of intensifying personal experience than by recording the process and sending and sharing it with friends?

Camera phone images, sharing similar qualities of Japanese *Puri Kura* (see Chalfen & Murui, 2004), are used as a means of identity formation and production. Friends trade images with their peers, increasing their own social capital. Funny occurrences or objects fallen upon by chance are recorded in hopes of being able to share with others. Camera phones themselves are used as photo albums, allowing a user at any given opportunity to show their individuality to others through chosen images of friends and experiences. Van Dijck (2008) furthers this idea of identity formation and explains that “connecting’ or ‘getting in touch’, rather than ‘reality capturing’ or ‘memory preservation’ are the social meanings transferred onto this type of photography” (p. 61-2). Camera phone photography represents a shift from sharing memory to a sharing of experiences. This becomes an affirmation of self and per-



sonhood as personal bonds are explored through a form of ritual bonding and community.

The overall sense of community that camera phones foster is furthered when mixed with themes of online identity and community. Users are encouraged by the sheer popularity and accessibility of websites like *Flickr.com* (a free popular site where users can freely upload their images) and through the vast array of photoblogs such as *Imgur* or *Tumblr* (functions similarly to web blogs, albeit through visual imagery) that exist in the cyber realm. Users are encouraged to upload their images, share images over *Facebook* or *Twitter*, join groups based off of common interests, compete in contests and more. Camera phone mobility, along with its direct Internet access, has allowed for a greater number of people to join this group aesthetic. *Flickr.com* boasts over 2,000 groups dedicated to some form of camera phone usage. The more popular groups include *Photos Taken With an Apple iPhone* (29,867 members, 608,172 items submitted), *iPhone Camera Shots* (12,585 members, 316,844 items submitted), *Cell Phone Photography* (7,397 members, 169,496 items), and *Instagram* (7,208 members, 117,278 items) (accessed September 17, 2012). While members are free to join multiple groups and post the same image on several sites, it is still impressive that over 1 million camera phone images have been shared among users.

*Flickr.com* operates on a very interesting level and further promotes the promises of new forms of distribution for mobile users. Users upload images onto their profile and groups where they can receive feedback and anecdotes from other users. Murray (2008) likens *Flickr* to being part of a collaborative experience. Murray (2008) states that *Flickr* is "...a shared display of memory, taste, history, signifier of identity, collection, daily life and judgment through which amateur and professional photographers collectively articulate a novel, digitized (and decentralized) aesthetics of the everyday" (p. 149). *Flickr's* popularity is part of the social use of digital technolo-

gies. It too signals the shift of engagement with the everyday mundane image towards the transience and the development of a communal aesthetic and style (Cox, 2007).

Identity is further articulated when *Flickr's* slideshow features are utilized. Unlike traditional still photography, users can create slide show montages with their images causing photography to be consumed through motion. The single still image holds less power in these situations compared to the motion of experience and event that is evoked with the moving pictures.

Unlike traditional 35mm photographic prints, camera phones images and *Flickr* pages allow for a wider range of the population to actually see images. One truly exceptional note of *Flickr* is its close association with the *Creative Commons* licence. After uploading images to the website, *Flickr* users are invited to set up parameters to dictate how their images can be seen and consumed by others. Just as the camera phone has created a socio-cultural link with the individual, *Flickr's* support of the *Creative Commons* speaks of its desire to follow a Web 2.0 ethos (Cox 2007). The sophisticated user adds a legal licence to their work, determining whether or not their images can be used/shared with others (through attribution), whether images can be used for commercial purposes or even built upon, shaping the potential for a lived communal and social experience.

Transnational identity and sociality occur by virtue of the camera phone's subversive technologies. As it blurs private and public notions, the camera phone's power for identity formation and socio-cultural ties links users with one another. Websites like *Flickr* further this ritual of universal self as users are encouraged to participate in the image making process. At this point, though, who the primary users are and how others are receiving their performance of normalcy?

#### On Memory & News Production

The shift from pictorial memory-based practices to an everyday aesthetic has created new grey areas that are important to explore when it comes to analyzing camera phone photography's association with memory and news production. Sontag (1977) described how the Western society is an image driven one. Woe the individual who is not image literate. But as camera phones create a sense of urgency in its immediacy, how has memory been affected? Is it still relevant in photographic discourse? More importantly, with the widespread use and ownership of these photographic devices, how have camera phones affected news production and the citizen journalist movement?

The mesh between visual and oral modalities has created new forms of images that are deleted after consumption. E-mail and text message images can be seen as digital postcards in this way. "[N]ew technologies," according to Nancy Van House (2008), "are changing the temporality of images: While people do still make archival images, many are treated as ephemeral and transitory..." (p. 298). Once viewed, they are sent to the (desktop) trashcan in order to make room for new messages. But this is not the case for all forms of camera phone images, especially when it comes to documenting the everyday. Hjorth (2008) cites the three "s"s of image memory: sharing, saving, and storing. After sharing the images with peers, the creator will save their experience and store it onto a digital server (be it a website like *Flickr*, a USB drive, or directly on the camera itself).

Meta data and tags become complementary components to the images as they are attributed by the user as a description or placed upon the image by fellow users (as is done on *Flickr*). This ensures a difficulty in actually losing/forgetting the image in case of accidentally deletion but may prove embarrassing or even scandalous for notorious public figures.

Some contemporary theorists believe that digital images hold little sway in terms of memory as they are easily manipu-

lated. As such, digital images cannot hold high truth-value. Forget the meta-data and tags that people have attached to their images; digital photos cannot hold the same notion of truth as traditional photography. Murray (2008) claims “the idea that digital images can be easily manipulated, altered, or constructed without a real world profilmic object has led many to conclude that digital images are *nonindexical* and lack the traces of the material past that were so much a part of traditional photography” (p. 157, my emphasis).

Murray’s claim that camera phone photographs are non-indexical because the manipulation possibilities ignores a strong history of fine arts practices where artists heavily manipulated exposure and aesthetical components for artistic sake. But as cultural and individual memory are both produced by technologies of memory (Van House, 2008), it may be easier to conclude that camera phones capture a new form memory, that of the everyday experience, as their primary usage has become to capture the experience of the immediate moment.

As digital memories rely on a somewhat expensive technology, normative ideology from the Western world can easily colonize developing countries’ uses of the camera phone. Van House (2008) states:

The digitization of knowledge may result in increased colonization of memory by the developed world and by the private sector. Information of no particular short-term use may prove to have long-term values to our cultural memory, but if it has no commercial value, no one may bother preserving it. Similarly, we may find vernacular knowledge, minority views, the records of small populations and information seen as not interesting or valuable just now left out of digitization...” (p. 306).

Cultural memory is dictated through the technologies of memory storage. But as these devices rely on a capitalistic

model, they too are subjected to Western biases. Ideology, then, plays an important role in capturing and retaining memory, despite the attempt to relocate this to an “impartial” machine. This becomes even more obvious with the camera phone’s close association with citizen journalism.

Photography’s present role in the terms of its temporality is a mixed- blessing when it comes to the democratization of news production. The doors of the once-closed news institution are now open to anyone equipped with a camera. But with it comes questions of their newsworthiness. The everyday nature of camera phone photography creates a new trend in how we view and consume news (Goggin, 2006). As we can scroll through multiple blogs created by citizens, view images that peers or RSS feeders (an automatic delivery service for blogs and websites) send, the audience/creator dichotomy blurs. News outlets even have jumped onto the citizen journalist bandwagon as was apparent after asking citizens to send in recorded clips of the UK Tube bombing in July 2005 (Goggin, 2006).

The participatory nature of the news became more evident with the now defunct website *Scoopt.com*. Hailed as the gateway for citizen journalists to get their photos across, the site boasted that it could sell user-submitted images and pay royalties of up to 40% (*Scoopt.com*). The monetary compensation acted as an incentive for users to try to discover “newsworthy” situations. News then became a construction (and are contaminated) by users, with camera phones in their hands, pointedly searching for an “everyday” moment that they could claim as their own. The images, once again, became a form of social currency as the owner can make the claim of the initial discovery.

Normative politics once again falls into play. Problems within memory preservation have shown normative ideology can bias our reception and remembrance of past events. News production, itself tied to memory, is shrouded with

norms and conventions. *Scoopt*, popular blogs, and the most visited images on *Flickr* retain their cultural importance because of the mundane banality of the images. By residing in the normative, memory and news are being subjected to dominant thoughts, and reproduced through our own actions. Alternative histories and news stories are forgotten, easily disposed of as an image sent from a friend via text message.

### Conclusions

Camera phones, while similar to their digital and analog counterparts, differ because of their portability and usability. Because of their small size and almost stealthy nature, camera phones are more able to enter the private realm. Because of its portability, camera phones eschew the already unstable boundaries separating the public and private realms.

Camera phones have also rearticulated photography in terms of its temporality. Photographs do not serve as indicators of time and space but are subjected to the urgency of the immediate. Used as markers of experience and of the event, camera phone images challenge the traditional notion of historical documentation.

Camera phone technology works well in the creation of a socio-cultural shared sense of self. As users are able to immediately share images, there are able to contribute their own personal thoughts and feelings to the collective. But this group mentality is also limited by its normative appeal. Though the creation of sites like *Flickr* allow for a pluralistic setting for a diverse array of images, the most popular ones are those that conform to a generic set of (acceptable) standards. Falling into line with camera phone aesthetics ensures a performance of normalcy. *Scoopt.com*, for example, offered actual compensation for a proper performance.

Camera phone photography is changing how we are using and consuming images, memories, and the news. Armed with our portable camera, we are all now potential news and image-makers. But along with this should come the responsibility to incite and question social practices. We potentially have a technology that can gather large groups based off common interests. Self and identity are created within this context and added into a communal aesthetic. But instead of allowing a normative ideology to permeate the camera phone's subversive eye, users should strive to mimic and then create a new photographic vision instead of running in parallel to the traditional idea of memory.

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