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Evocative moments with smartphone cameras

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Abstract

Photography and video making have become entangled with mobility and mobile social media as experienced in everyday life. This, in turn has affected how smartphones and applications influence contemporary everyday aesthetics. Romance, memory, nostalgia, playfulness and epiphany all play a part in the desire to create evocative still and moving images that capture creative moments. Non-representational theoretical concepts provide a way to grapple with the dynamic and intricate relations between creative practices with smartphones and the corporeal messiness of everyday life. This paper aims to capture some of the more-than-representational, the more-than-textual, multi-sensory aspects of visual creative practices with smartphone cameras. It provides a braided account of the dynamic relations between smartphone assemblages and embodied mobility that contribute to current discussions in creative practice research.

Opening remarks

Mobile media permeates many aspects of our everyday life, and as such, it is an important influence for art and creative practice. The affordances offered by smartphones have given rise to a huge array of remediated (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) and hybrid forms of aesthetic expression. Yet, as Larissa Hjorth (2016, 169) points out in her recent paper discussing the emergence of new forms of art through mobile media, “the notion of ‘mobile art’ or ‘mobile media art’ remains relatively undertheorised and discussed”. This is a timely and important discussion to have at this point in time because we are now privy to many aspects of everyday life that were previously difficult to access because we are living in an age where “social media render the back and forth of social life perceptible to analysis” (Crang 2015, 345). The back and forth of social life includes visual images and creative expressions which are being exchanged and discussed on social media timelines on an everyday basis, yet rarely is this problematised and analysed. This paper seeks to address the gap identified by Hjorth (2016) by presenting material from my digital ethnography, which I commenced in 2013. I use a cross-disciplinary approach by applying literature from anthropology and cultural geography, underpinned by non-representational theory, to a screen production context. I provide a discussion of non-representational theory in the next section.

In 2013, I commenced a small-scale longitudinal ethnography comprising observation and interviews to explore creative practices associated with smartphones. The group of participants I studied was drawn from my social media networks, including Twitter and Facebook. The participants vary in age and reside in different countries across different time zones. All participate in creative practice special interest groups that coalesce around hashtags and special pages on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and all identify themselves as creative practitioners. I adopt Phillip Vannini’s definition of ethnography as “people-focused emic research which makes use of data collection methods such as participation, observation, and interview, and which unfolds by way of thick description and interpretive contextualization” (Vannini 2015, 318). A central characteristic of ethnography, emic research into cultural phenomena adopts an internal perspective—from the viewpoint of one who is part of the cultural group being studied—rather than an objective point of view, relying on external conceptual frames and schemes.

The intersections between the evocative and the everyday as they are performed in mobile media lifeworlds are spotlighted in this paper. For my purposes here, lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*), a concept drawn from phenomenology, is defined as

the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective “worlds” of the sciences, which employ the methods of the mathematical sciences of nature; although these sciences originate in the life-world, they are not those of everyday life. (<http://www.britannica.com/topic/life-world>)

The other idea that is important to the focus of this paper is that of an evocative moment as being something that can occur in the midst of the flow of everyday life. The etymology of the word evocative indicates that it is from the Latin *evocare*, meaning to call forth, and *evocativus*, which pertains to summoning.

I have structured this paper as a braided nonfiction essay where I mesh material derived from my ethnography with a discussion of relevant theoretical concepts. It comprises three sections: in the first, I argue for the benefits of using non-representational theory in creative practice research; in the second, I explore how an artist uses her smartphone for her creative practice where notions of co-presence and ‘being there’ frame her practice; and in the third section, I present a final vignette that illustrates the emergence of new and hybrid forms of screen production in mobile media contexts.

My overarching premise is that the embodied and affective dimensions of screen production should be contextualised within a conceptualisation of place as something that is in constant motion, rather than static, so that the dynamics of evocative moments in mobile media lifeworlds may be better understood. In this I follow the feminist geographer, Doreen Massey (2011), who wrote the following in reference to a collaborative research project called the *Future of the Landscape and Moving Image* she was involved with in March, 2007:

What is at issue in representation is not in fact the spatialisation of time but the representation of time-space. This is as true of this film as of any representation. Moreover, its method is the assembly of pieces of film in a spatial sequence. But its form evokes space/place/landscape as alive with temporalities” (Massey 2011).

Non-representational approaches

Non-representational theoretical concepts provide me with a way to grapple with the dynamic and intricate relations between creative practices of my participants with smartphones and the corporeal messiness of everyday life, which I observed in my study. Nigel Thrift developed non-representational theory in human geography in the early 1990s (Vannini, 2015). It is an alternative to representational theories that privilege forms and objects. The goal of non-representational theory is to embrace practice, embodiment, materiality and process, or the more than representational aspects. Non-representational theory is also important to anthropology (see for example the work of Tim Ingold (2015) and Phillip Vannini). Vannini notes that

non-representational theory seeks to cultivate an affinity for the analysis of events, practices, assemblages, affective atmospheres, and the backgrounds of everyday life against which relations unfold in their myriad potentials (Vannini 2015, 318).

This provides me with a lens through which the dynamic nature of quotidian screen production practices may be analysed and translated into interpretations.

It is interesting to juxtapose non-representational approaches to research that seek to capture the movement of the viscous flow of everyday life (Thrift 2008) with creative practice research that is “supported by critical reflection and reflexive action [that] can be seen to invert the research process because it encourages working from the unknown to the known” (Sullivan 2009, 48-49). Through creative practice research, a questioning of existing knowledge occurs in order to reveal “critical insights that can change what we do know” (Sullivan 2009, 48). Non-representational ideas can provide research strategies to interpret and translate the empirical material or data of creative practice (for example, see Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

The relationship between theory and practice has been an important issue for discussion in creative practice research discourses. Smith and Dean (2009) propose a distinction between practice-led research and research-led practice so as explore the patterns of reciprocal and iterative connections between theory and practice in creative practice research. Practice-led research is understood as both “the work of art as a form of research and to the creation of the work as generating research insights which might then be documented, theorised and generalised” (Smith and Dean 2010, 7). On the other hand, research-led practice is creative practice that is initiated from basic research not necessarily concerned with creative practice and can take “different forms in different fields” (Smith and Dean 2009, 8).

The relationship between theory and practice is key to understanding how creative practice can become viewed as research. Brabazon and Dagli argue that creative practice research should

create a dialogue between theory and practice, to raise questions that cannot be raised within practice, to probe the applications within the theory and/or to follow the process of thought in order to identify the intellectual pathway in/to the creation of visual [or other] propositions' (Brabazon and Dagli 2010, 36-37).

A comprehensive examination of current debates in creative practice research is beyond the scope of this paper, rather my focus here is on how non-representational theory can be used as a tactic. Non-representational theory can help us speak about the parts that materiality, process, and practice play in creative practice research in general, and screen production research in particular.

Irrespective of how creative practice research is conceived,

the space of creative practice research encourages a critical engagement with doing, making, re-doing and remaking. It creates a place in which practice can be incubated alongside ideas, calling into question the past, present and future of that practice (Batty and Berry 2015, 185).

This has a tangential relation to ethnography that involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, cited in Pink 2001: 18). Furthermore, non-representational ethnographers, according to Vannini, “consider their work to be impressionistic and inevitably creative” (2015, 318).

Once mobile phones became ubiquitous, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the idea of presence—and its corollary copresence—became more complex because a virtual or networked dimension became a tangible addition. Being there, immersed in a specific place, remains a fundamental concept in ethnography since Geertz wrote the influential work *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* in 1973. Being there provides a touchstone for this discussion of creative mobile filmmaking and photographic practices because it presupposes some kind of experiential and conscious presence, whether it be physical or mediated through mobile technology.

The idea of copresence was first conceptualised by Goffman (1963) whereby “copresence renders persons uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another” (Goffman 1963, 22). Copresence is achieved when people

sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” (Goffman, 1963, 17).

Goffman's concept presupposes physical proximity. The notion of copresence has changed since the arrival of mobile communications technology (see, for example, Hjorth 2016) to include networked proximity. Another important contributor to the discussion of the shifting nature of copresence is Turkle (2008), a prominent US psychologist who claims that our rapid cycling through mobile media creates “a sense of continual co-presence” (122). She stresses adverse effects of social media and mobile devices to argue that these diminish the quality of human interactions.

My concern in this section is not so much with the effects, adverse or otherwise, mobile communications technologies have had on communication and social relationships, rather my interest is in how these technologies are being harnessed for creative practice through the changes in how copresence with synchronous and asynchronous others may be experienced.

Hjorth (2016) argues that copresence can be thought of as a spectrum or range of interpersonal engagement that “goes beyond counterproductive dichotomous models of online and offline, here and there, virtual and actual” (Hjorth 2016, 175). This serves as a provocation to conceptualise copresence in the form of a rubric and add in other dimensions such as synchronicity, time zone and geographic distance. When we look at social media timelines and embodied mobility in operation, the unproductiveness of thinking about this space in binaries—such as online and offline, or physical and virtual—comes to the fore. The coupling of conceptualisations of “being there” with physical locations is no longer fruitful. In a blog post Postill (2015) unpacked the conundrum of how to conceive of being there in a digital era, proposing four ways of being there: physically, remotely, virtually and imaginatively. Copresence may be also thought of through Postill’s four modes. The inference to be drawn here is that acts of the imagination may be included as forms of copresence. This in turn, has implications for creative practices and evocative moments with smartphones.

So how do theories of copresence and “being there” play out in creative practices? How can non-representational ways of working illuminate these concepts in relation to screen production? In his Foreword to *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning Research*, the world-renowned anthropologist, Tim Ingold relates the following story, urging academic researchers to meet the world and to take risks (including with academic writing genres) through non-representational theory:

One night, a few years ago, I woke from a dream with the following lines in my head:

Often in the midst of my endeavors

Something ups and says

“Enough of words,

Let’s meet the world”

I do not know who put these lines there. Certainly, I did not invent them. But immediately upon waking, and before they had time to evaporate, I rose from my bed to write them down. They remain, pinned to a notice board in my office, and every so often I take a look at them, to remind myself of the message they contain. They could perhaps be taken as a manifesto for a non-representational way of working. (Ingold 2015, vii)

Copresence with smartphone cameras

So let’s now follow Ingold’s (2015) advice and step into a mobile media lifeworld to observe the constellation of relations between mobile and social media, and creative practice, through a fictionalised account. The story is based on an interview with one of my study participants and unpacks how copresence operates in practice to generate an evocative moment of screen production.

Jenny, a sixty-something grandmother is in her garden in Wales chatting on the public timeline in Twitter with a co-present friend who lives in the USA. This means her conversation is visible to everyone. She knows her friend from the USA is there but Jenny is also aware that others are most probably watching their interaction and may jump into the conversation at any moment. Jenny knows this seemingly intimate conversation is a performance and is rather enjoying it.

As she chats to her friend on her smartphone, she watches the way the light glints off the wasps near a rosebush. She takes a picture, smiling because she knows how people react to wasps, and takes a close-up picture of a wasp with Instagram. She uses a geo-tag to show her location because she wants people to know that the wasp is with her right now in her garden. She finds a filter that gives it just the right sinister edge and posts it to Twitter. Responses quickly come from her followers along the lines of “don’t get stung” and “ewww!”. She shares the joke with her co-present friend who has joined in the playful banter on the timeline. She retorts in kind, “haha, the wasps better watch out for me, I have a bigger sting”.

Jenny loves socialising on Twitter and, as she is retired, spends a large part of her days on social media. For her, there is no question about the co-presence of her interlocutors and audience. She knows that people engage with her images and words. She is a poet as well as a visual artist and enjoys writing haiga, a Japanese form of poetry where words and images are juxtaposed. She finds Twitter and Instagram ideal for this pursuit. Objects such as poems and photographs have become interwoven in Jenny’s routine social interactions online. She shares creative expressions alongside playful banter with friends and followers who are emotionally and imaginatively co-present through networked technology, yet are in another location physically.

Copresence and being there have philosophical implications as well because these ideas are predicated upon the concept of a lifeworld where subjectivities are shared. The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, in his volume *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, first introduced the idea of a shared lifeworld where we all live together in a world external to ourselves that we all live in and make sense of together:

In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each “I-the-man” and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together.’ We, as living in wakeful world-consciousness, are constantly active on the basis of our passive having of the world... Obviously this is true not only for me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together, belong, the world as world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning... The we-subjectivity... [is] constantly functioning. (1936: 108-109).

Our ‘living together’ in the world has arguably been transformed through the affordances of smartphones even though smartphones themselves can be seen as an interim technology that are “an amalgamation of familiar media along with a few new ones that are constantly being improved” (Miller 2014, 211). Smartphones are also a source of distraction that can have adverse effects on interpersonal relations (Turkle 2008). They are a part of our lifeworlds, as I have illustrated through the vignette about Jenny and the wasp.

Mobility, new formats and aesthetics

For better or worse, smartphones have become a part of the world as a universal horizon, as objects in a coherent universe within which we are together. People in many countries around the world communicate multi-sensory and heightened aspects of everyday banalities through smartphone apps that sit in the background of everyday activities and practices. Smartphones, social media and apps have an influence on contemporary everyday aesthetics. For example, mobile media is awash with pictures of the sky and there is even a hashtag - #skyporn to bring together people who still gaze at the sky and wonder. In June 2015, Huffington Post’s Suzy Strutner wrote an article dedicated to this hashtag saying that “#Skyporn is an innocent, entirely wondrous trend”. Our fragile blue planet continues to inspire the poetic impulse, even in a world where attention is sucked into screens. On May 3, 2016 there were 11,470,281 posts on Instagram at 1:47pm AEST using the #skyporn hashtag:

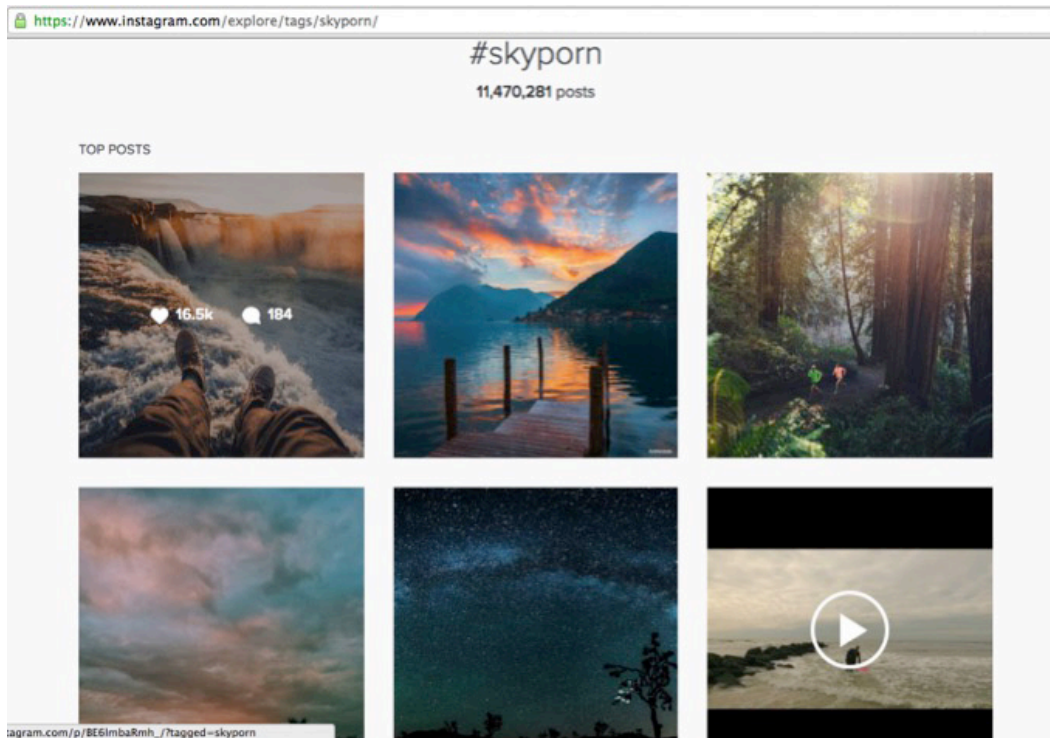


Figure 1: Screenshot of Instagram #skyporn page, May 3, 2016

Each of the images in the screenshot (Figure 1) has had a filter applied to accentuate the atmosphere of the shot. Arguably this technique has become a signature aesthetic of Instagram. Kevin Systrom, a founder of Instagram, describes how he came upon the idea of ready-made filters in an interview with Hannah Kuchler of FT Magazine:

Studying in Florence during college, he took a photography class in which a teacher pushed him to try a plastic camera and add chemicals to the developing solutions to achieve interesting effects. “That changed my life. I mean, you know, the discovery of square-format, filtered photos. I mean, that’s it, right?” he says, gesturing at the plus-sized Instagram photos on the wall. (Kuchler 2015).

Another participant in my ethnography, who I shall call Alice, regularly posts images of the sky to Facebook and Instagram and occasionally uses the #skyporn hashtag. I have been observing her posts since 2013 and have noticed that she uses the filters liberally to evoke analogue aesthetics for which Instagram is renowned. Alice is in her mid-twenties. She told me she enjoys being able to evoke analogue aesthetics even though she has never used an analogue instant or toy camera. She likes the way the filters allow her to play with her images to add layers of meaning and to give them a more material feel. Caoduro (2015) suggests that “Instagram emerges from a culture where the old, the authentic, the analogue is still a repository of value and appreciation” (73). Perhaps Alice’s aesthetic choices are a manifestation of the enduring influence of analogue values.

Alice has started posting videos made using the Instagram square format. This format moves filmmaking beyond traditional formats and aspect ratios into new and hybrid forms that remediate the analogue aesthetics of medium format cameras.

Alice is not alone in this. Experimental filmmakers have adopted smartphone cameras as a tool for screen production, pushing filmmaking into new forms and genres. For example, the square format of Instagram inspired Patrick Kelly's interactive film *North*, screened at the MINA 3rd International Mobile Innovation Screening. Kelly's work is significant because he combines ethnography with the filmmaking process itself as his research methodology. To produce *North*, Kelly used the mobile video-sharing platform Instagram to engage reflexively with his experiences (while moving through Melbourne) as a juxtaposition of moments. He later used the database film creation platform Korsakow as a distribution method. Kelly suggests that mobile filmmakers "might discover the emergence of even more contexts and auratic experiences" (2014, 136) because of the inherent "juxtapositioning nature" (2014, 136) of contemporary mobile media platforms. The faux-vintage aesthetics of Instagram filters have taken on a non-representational affect in Kelly's work. He presents an auto-ethnographic work which challenges traditional filmmaking genres and forms. Kelly uses short Instagram clips as playful, ironic counterpoints to evoke a unique and auratic experience of inner Melbourne.

Taking photos and shooting video clips are activities that have become enmeshed with our mobility and use of smartphones in our ordinary lifeworlds. Mobility implies times of stillness (Bissell and Fuller 2011), being in transit (Berry and Hamilton 2010) and the infrastructure moorings that underpin the use of mobile machines (Hannan, Sheller and Urry 2006). Our everyday movements along paths between our destinations, both digital and physical, can provide unsolicited stimuli to create and share evocative moments.

I present another short vignette to reveal how the creation of an evocative moment using smartphone photography and video unfolded in my ethnography and how the new formats and aesthetics of mobile media come into play as we encounter moments of stillness while in transit.

John, another of my participants, walked along a towpath beside a canal in the south of England each day on his way to the bus stop. This was a precious part of his day. On these walks, he photographed a pair of swans raising cygnets and posted these to his Twitter feed each day. People would retweet the photos and comment on the weather conditions and growth of the cygnets. He would reply, often in the form of haiku poems. The Twitter conversations would often turn to the subject of love and raising families. One day, he posted a photo of the canal without the swans. The photo was monochrome. He followed this up with a short video pan of the canal and its banks. Still, no sign of the swans. This triggered an outpouring of concern: was he okay? Was his family okay? Were the swans all right? Had something bad happened to the swans?

John replied that he couldn't see the swans and was worried that foxes had taken them or that vandals had killed them. The responses were swift. People were ready to hunt down the vandals and wanted stocks and pillories brought back so that the vandals would be publicly punished and humiliated. The next day he posted a photograph with the little swan family intact. The sighs of relief among John's Twitter followers around the world were palpable. Many smiley faces prefaced the retweets of the photo that day. John's smartphone creative practice and social media practices show how "life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines ... unexceptional interactions and affective dispositions" (Lorimer, 2005). Evocative moments constitute an important part of John's lifeworld, but how can we better understand the complexities of such moments where online worlds become meshed with physical conditions; and where digital co-presence is tangible?

I return to an important concept drawn from digital ethnography to address this question. Hjorth and Pink (2014) coined the term "digital wayfarer" to problematise the entanglements of online and offline worlds:

... the digital wayfarer as we conceptualize her or him does not simply weave her or his way around the material physical world. Rather, their trajectory entangles online and offline as they move through the weather and the air, with the ground underfoot and surrounded by people and things, while also traversing digital maps, social networking sites, and other online elements. (2014, 45-46).

Opportunities for image making (Schleser, Wilson and Keep 2013; Berry 2013) are embedded in the background of our lifeworlds because of smartphones and camera applications. Most of us are digital wayfarers now. And this has changed the game for filmmakers and photographers. Digital wayfaring has paved the way for new forms and processes of filmmaking and photography that reflect our lifeworlds, where we move through digital and physical spaces that are almost seamlessly woven together most of the time. Concepts like co-presence and digital wayfaring have become integral to lived experience.

Closing remarks

I submit that if we place lived experience and feelings at the centre, as suggested by Tim Ingold (2011), we could begin to account for the multi-sensory and affective dimensions of filmmaking and photography. I return to the words of Doreen Massey who, in a blog post about a project that explored the landscape and the moving image, advocated a non-representational or more-than-representational approach to film because the “stories we stumble across in this landscape are often entangled with each other, but they are autonomous too and lead off in other, unrelated, directions. There are always loose ends in space...” (Massey 2011).

From a creative practice perspective that emphasises the making and doing, evocative moments created with smartphone cameras are dynamic “loose ends” that are constantly evolving into new and hybrid forms. In this paper I have presented, in the form of fictionalised vignettes, some of the stories I have uncovered in the lifeworlds of the participants in my digital ethnography. This is done to illustrate the more-than-representational dimensions and dynamics of evocative images made with smartphones. I used fictional narrative devices to compose the vignettes: however, the characters in my vignettes are based on my participants; and the events are drawn from my interviews and observations.

I conclude with the hope that my paper has presented a persuasive case for the use of non-representational theory and ethnography as strategies that may be employed to serve a creative practice research methodology located in screen production disciplines despite the loose ends they may leave.

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