

An alternative conceptual framework for studying everyday offline and on-line photographic practices on Flickr

Eve Forrest

As digital cameras and smart phones are bought and used in increasing numbers, millions are now using online photography sites to upload and share their own images with others. One popular site to do this is Flickr which is fundamentally changing the way personal, everyday photography practices are being conducted on a global scale and increasingly allowing online and offline worlds to become intertwined. This article proposes that in order to better understand these new entanglements, an alternative approach to researching visual practices is required. Rather than simply analysing the content of sites like Flickr, a more interesting approach can be adopted by examining offline and online photographic practices from a non-visual perspective. This paper outlines an alternative conceptual framework, incorporating ideas from phenomenological philosophy and Non-Representational Theory (NRT), to consider the many ways that various sensory elements combine to make photography a thoroughly embodied and fundamentally corporeal practice. It proposes a methodological strategy to study participants' photographic habits, both when they visit and navigate around Flickr and explore offline environments with their camera.

Keywords: Flickr, photographic practices, places, phenomenology

Introduction

Everywhere you go, people are taking photographs and the everyday use of 'visual technology has been and continued to be noticeably transformed' in the 21st Century (Graham et al 2011, 87). Most of us now carry a camera in some form: either on a mobile phone or a portable 'point and shoot' camera. Thanks to numerous photo sharing platforms and the mobile internet we can also publish our images

within minutes of taking them on our phone, or later upload them to different places online via a computer. Photography centred spaces such as SmugMug, Photobucket and *Flickr*, are becoming increasingly popular destinations for our images; it is the latter that this research will discuss here.¹. Palmer recognises the importance of these sites stating that 'the emergence of online photo-sharing platforms in particular – demand a rethinking of dominant theo-

ries of personal photography' (2010, 158).

Although the practice of personal photography has never been more popular, academic research from a sociological, media and visual studies context has mostly neglected personal photography practices (Rose 2004; Shove et al 2007). Van House (2011, 125) recently observed that 'understanding the actual 'doing' of photography is critical... yet there remains a relative lack of ethnographically informed research on people's actual, daily practices of photography' with Larsen adding that 'photographing is absent from most theory and research jumps straight from photography to photographs' (2008, 143). The research that has been most recently conducted into online photography practices has instead been from the perspective of human computer interaction (HCI), which is more interested in learning the specific technological aspects of user engagement with online platforms and increasing the potential of that interface, rather than reflecting on the behaviour and experiences of using sites such as *Flickr*².

With these issues and changes in mind, this paper offers an alternative conceptual framework as a way of rethinking photographic practices both offline, in everyday environments, as well as online, specifically on *Flickr*. This approach has three key starting points. First, it believes that photography is a practice that

engages the entire body, not just the visual sense. Second, it believes that thus far, the academy has put too much emphasis on photographs and images, where instead the focus should equally be on the practices and 'doings' of photography. Finally, the sensory aspects of visual practices have often been ignored in favour of a more distant approach. To address these issues directly, this piece will outline alternative conceptual approaches to photography, both online and offline, with the hope of widening discussions on everyday practice. The first approach will use phenomenology, and more specifically incorporate parts of Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and embodiment to connect with discussions to the body and technology. Secondly, the paper will focus on the usefulness of Non-Representational Theory (NRT) relating to elements within everyday visual practices. Both parts will incorporate discussions on the important sensory issues relating to photography (Pink 2009, 2011). Finally, this piece will briefly suggest ways in which this conceptual framework could be applied in the field via specific ethnographic investigations. However in order to contextualise later discussions about online and offline places, this essay will begin with a brief discussion on place and how these theories connect with activity on *Flickr*.

Online and Offline places

Although place is a simple word it is notoriously difficult to define, however there has been no shortage of attempts to understand what place means across many diverse academic disciplines (Cresswell 2004, 2008). Place is also tied in with ideas of space and time, both equally complex areas that have divided opinion between geographers, sociologists and urban theorists alike. From a Marxist point of view, space is a 'site of struggle not a passive geometry' (Urry 2004:11) where the stretching and disconnection between of space and time have been crucial of for the advancement of the modernity juggernaut (Giddens 1991). However geographer Doreen Massey (1994) specified that the meaning of place is not always fixed, and 'the global' in the context of local places is vital to our understanding of how they are lived in. It is this lived quality of places that appeals to the other more humanistic strands of geography (Relph 1976) which, in the words of Seamon and Sowers, emphasised that 'regardless of the historical time or the geographical, technological, and social situation, people will always need place because having and identifying with place are integral to what and who we are as human beings' (2008, 49). This is also picked up in the work of Tim Ingold whose work analyses, more generally, 'how the use of lines and the making of routes are implicated in the making of place' (Pink 2008,179).

Whilst some are convinced that online places are somehow inauthentic (Gieryn 2000) because they do not occupy a *physical* space, there is another argument which instead advances the idea that 'particular media environments have become meaningful places' in their own right (Moore & Metykova 2010, 185). Miller and Slater (2000) sought to rethink notions of online and offline place within their ethnographic study of internet use in Trinidad. From this they 'questioned the assumptions of the virtual and the everyday or material as distinct realms' (Lister et al 2003, 221). Later studies of online interactions highlight the many ties that bind online and offline places (Kendall 1999, 2002). I believe that places are personal, but created and brought to life through habit. They are more than simply lived in; places are complex, unique yet ubiquitous and a vital part of our everyday routine, in essence 'place is when space feels thoroughly familiar' (Tuan 1977, 6).

If places are 'never finished but always the result of processes and practices' (Cresswell 2004, 37), then Flickr (and other sites online) can be conceived as such because they are visited in a regular, habitual way by users who know their way around them intimately. I acknowledge that online and offline places are experienced in different ways by users, indeed this piece is not saying that walking around an urban

backstreet is the same as accessing the same place on *Flickr*. However there are parts of the online and offline experience that cross over, such as the exploration of unknown places and the creation of familiar paths. With these ideas in mind, this piece will now turn to phenomenology, technology and experience in relation to the first part of my conceptual framework.

Phenomenology, technology and body

Seamon and Sowers summarise phenomenology as 'the interpretive study of human experience. The aim is to examine and to clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences as they are known in everyday life but typically unnoticed beneath the level of conscious awareness...seeking out what is obvious but unquestioned and thereby questioning it' (2008, 43). The work relating broadly to the canon of phenomenological philosophy is very wide (Glendinning 2007), so I will only be talking specifically here about Merleau-Ponty and focus on perception, embodiment and technology. Merleau-Ponty believed that 'perception may be materially extended through the "body" of an artefact and that perceptual extension is not limited by the outline of my body or the surface of my skin' (Ihde 1990, 40). As an example of this he used (the now frequently cited) blind man's cane which 'has ceased to be an object for him and no longer

perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity extending the scope and radius of touch and providing a parallel to sight' (Merleau-Ponty cited in *ibid*).

Later still he extended these discussions to the work of Cezanne and believed that in the act of painting, 'that body... is an intertwining of vision and movement' (Merleau-Ponty cited in Baldwin 2004, 294). By taking a picture, the photographer becomes a part of their everyday surroundings and their 'photographs intrude on, and become part of, [the photographers] everyday perception' (Wright 1992, 28). Using a camera is akin to 'working a lasso, like playing a musical instrument, is pure movement or flow...it involves an embodied skill, acquired through much practice... the agents attention is fully absorbed in the action' (Ingold 2000, 414). The practice of photography in terms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, switches from 'a way of seeing to a specific mode of *being (a seeing -with)*' (my emphasis, *ibid*) which develops a different kind 'of sensory engagement with the environment' (*ibid*, 262) and between the camera and body there comes a new 'coordination of perception and action' (*ibid*, 353).

The practice of photography is thoroughly corporeal and involves the body at all times: whether you are taking the pictures, or posing in front of the camera, carrying equipment, shouting directions to subjects or later uploading photo-

graphs online, fiddling with buttons, screen settings and scrolling via the computer mouse or touchpad. Photography is a practice based in, and produced through, movement (Pink 2011).³ It does, of course, incorporate the visual, but it is also *tactile*, and there are many physical elements that add to the mixture of the overall experience of doing photography. 'We learn, Merleau-Ponty argues, not by thinking about things but by doing them' (Crossley 2001, 128). The complex relationship between human and machine and the interactions that lie therein is also of interest to phenomenological philosophy. Crossley explains that our knowledge of the world extends beyond our own bodies, and empties into the various spaces we occupy so 'I can type [on a keyboard] without having to find the letters one by one... this type of knowledge is a practical, embodied, quite remote and distinct from discursive knowledge... my hands turn [the keyboard] into a space for typing, subordinating it to this human function' (ibid, 122). These ideas surrounding the knowing of technology through the body and hands can be applied more widely to both the tactile and routine practice of doing photography on *Flickr*, where an understanding and navigation of the site is routinely enacted and learned through habitual use.

Sarah Pink believes that too often 'sensory experience was regarded as existing on two levels, tending to

separate body and mind... the notion of embodiment... resolved this dichotomy to some extent' (2009,24). The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is applicable to many areas of this study, from the movements that photographers make with their body and the camera, to their noticing of everyday details and exploring their immediate world. Photographers are immersing themselves not only in the practice of camera work but also their wider everyday environments, whenever they venture out with a camera. It is to these extended ideas of practice and NRT that this paper will now turn.

NRT and the practice(s) of photography

In the context of this paper, NRT relates more generally to 'a social ontology of practice that is an account of social life maintaining that human lives hang together through a mesh of interlocked practices' (Simonsen 2010, 222). NRT was developed as an alternative approach to understanding how individuals interact with the practices and places they inhabit. Nigel Thrift, a key figure in the development of NRT, argues that 'it is about putting the processes into social life in a real way... taking the static out of culture' (Thrift 2010,185). NRT is also interested in exploring the imaginative and unexpected in everyday life or the 'strangeness in the commonplace' (Thrift 2008, 87).

One key element of photographic

practice is about finding the 'strangeness' within the everyday, noticing the unnoticed and bringing it to the attention of others. This also extends to the online environment, bringing these unexpected moments and encounters to the surface for others to view. Thrift believes that images themselves are 'a key element of space' and should be seen as tools as part of the everyday 'practice of seeing' (2003, 100-102). This highlights another useful strand of NRT: its focus on 'practices... through the establishment of corporeal routines and specialized devices... practices are productive concatenations that have been constructed out of all manner of resources and which provide the basic intelligibility of the world' (Thrift 1996,8). Interestingly Schwartz and Ryan extend this argument to photographs, explaining that 'to explore photography and the geographical imagination is to understand how photographs were and continue to be, part of the practices and processes by which people come to know the world and situate themselves in space and time' (2003,18). The main focus in visual and photography disciplines has been on the image, or explicitly on photographers as image makers. Tim Ingold goes further stating that within the visual studies oeuvre 'vision has nothing to do with eyesight and everything to do with the perusal of images' (2010, 15). Thrift challenges the domination of the visual saying that 'of course vi-

sual is important but it is only one of the registers through which people sense things and in some cases it clearly is not the most important' (Thrift 2010, 186). There are all sorts of movements, positions and sensations attached to the practice of photography that too often are overlooked. Buse uses the example of the polaroid explaining that 'the [photographic materialists] do not take account of equally 'material' photographic practices where the photo object itself may not be what is most important as in the case of the process of Polaroid image-making' (Buse 2010, 203).

Hayden Lorimer eloquently expresses that 'with NRT the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements... unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions (Lorimer 2005, 84). Studying practices online and offline via NRT can offer a richer understanding of how 'representations are apprehended as performative in themselves; as doings' (Dewsbury et al cited in Wylie 2007, 164). The notion of everyday worlds colliding and mixing is of great interest to theorists of NRT where 'new thinking about place and space involves trying to understand the gaps in the rhythms of everyday life through which new performances are able to pass' (Thrift 2003, 1).

NRT can also be applied to *Flickr*, a world that is continually shifting

and being rebuilt through new images, groups and interactions between members. The worlds of online and offline are not sealed off from one another but are 'always moving and changing and mutating and communicating' (Thrift 2010, 187). Schwartz and Ryan believe that 'to explore photography and the geographical imagination is to understand how photographs were and continue to be, part of the practices and processes by which people come to know the world and situate themselves in space and time' (2003, 18). It is this recognition of movement, practices and every day routines that makes the NRT approach appealing to this research, particularly when joined with the earlier phenomenological discussions.

Taking phenomenological approaches into the field

Having defined a conceptual framework, this section will briefly detail how it might be taken further, moving from theoretical arguments and into the field, and used more widely to study photographic practices online and offline. From a phenomenological point of view, the role of the researcher undertaking work in the field would be to 'step back from any taken-for-granted attitudes and assumptions, whether in the realm of everyday experience or in the realm of conceptual perspectives and explanations' (Seamon and Sowers 2008, 43) in order to

understand them more fully.

Looking at the everyday business of photography and the experiences of photographers would naturally lead to an embodied, multi-sensory based ethnography where a variety of approaches would be used to fully capture what it means to be a photographer in the world. The principal method would be a form of participant observation that would shadow photographers in situ, following them around whilst also incorporating dialogue with them. This technique known as the 'walk and talk' (also known as the 'go along' or 'the guided tour') can be utilised as a way of understanding the different physical aspects of photography as well as 'accessing experiences and interpretations at the same time' (Kusenbach 2003, 463). Walking is a useful ethnographic method because it is 'not simply something we do to get from one place to another, but it is itself a form of engagement integral to our perception of an environment' (Pink et al 2010, 3) and it is an 'activity that creates space to both imagine and experience, at the same time' (Vaughn 2009, 317). Walking and movement are essential to the practice of photography.⁴ Through watching participants and taking part in the exploration of urban space it not only reveals previously hidden or taken for granted movements it also helps to give context when extending these ideas further into online places, where photographers move, explore and

wander around.

The move into online territory however poses a unique and complex challenge to the researcher, and navigating the landscape of *Flickr* requires knowledge and understanding about the different interactions present on the site. The answer cannot be found by looking to existing research, as there has not yet been any ethnographic based research relating to *Flickr* and online movement by its users (Van House 2011). In general, there is a need for much more research into online photographic practices, relating to the images themselves but particularly the other online features that allow users to interact with each other and the site in different ways. For example 'previous research has explored how people collaborate around physical photos, however much less is understood about the possibilities provided by the recent emergence of photo-sharing websites' (Miller and Edwards 2007, 1).

To understand more about how members use, relate to and move around *Flickr*, one technique would be to mirror the 'walk and talk' method. The 'browse and talk' allows the researcher and participant to reflectively discuss their actions and movements around *Flickr*, as they interact with the site on a computer. The verbalising of thoughts and feelings as *Flickr*ites navigate around their familiar places on the site allows a fresh perspective on attitudes and patterns of use, finding the ar-

reas of *Flickr* they most often revisit and how they navigate around the site to get to them. Alongside discussions on routine and movement, the different tactile interactions with the computer could also be studied. The researcher should directly observe and question the different interactions as they happen, paying attention to where and how often the participant moves around the site, how they find the images they like and end up on specific pages. Recording discussions via note book and voice recorder would allow for later interrogations of possible routine movements. Maria Bakardjieva highlights this method is not perfect but as 'there is no technical tool for capturing successive [computer] screens...' (2005, 85) a certain amount of improvisation is required by the researcher depending on the surroundings and the participants chosen.

Summary

It seems that 'the internet's institutional-technological framework clearly supports ways of coming together and being together that are unprecedented and that presumably will lay the groundwork for new ways of relating and constituting the human self' (Adams 2005, 178). I believe that the more transient aspects of current computing and digital culture mean that researchers must be more receptive to the ways that the technology is being appropriated and used in everyday life,

through habitual use⁵.

This paper has argued for an alternative, sensory based methodological approach when studying the practice of photography that encompasses many diverse paradigms, from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, to the movement of the body during the taking of photographs, to NRT and the everyday interactions within familiar environments. Furthermore these theories can also be extended into the online domain of *Flickr*, as the habitual movements and interactions on this site always have an offline context. By extending discussions about the practice of photography and following where photographers go we can then understand more about the different ways we respond to, inhabit and move around virtual and everyday environments.

Endnotes

¹ There is now an estimated 100 billion photographs uploaded onto Facebook. Source <http://www.pixable.com> (accessed 13th September, 2011)

² Yahoo (who own Flickr) Berkley research centre gives an idea of the scope and range of different HCI projects. See <http://research.yahoo.com/project/>

³ Pink (2011) in a fascinating and innovative article goes onto say how images are also connected to and produced through movement.

⁴ Flickr members sometimes meet up socially within their local area in order to take pictures together. These

meet ups are specifically structured to include a walk in a predetermined area of interest in the city.

⁵ These suggested methods and framework here are currently being put into practice out in the field via a current ethnographic study of Flickrites based in the North East of England, which examines the practice of photography and the connections between online and offline places. The study examines both their habits and everyday movements and routines with the camera, as well as their explorations of Flickr and their everyday urban environments.

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