Cellphone photography;

The death of the camera and the arrival of visible speech

Daniel Rubinstein

Introduction

At first hailed as the latest in mobile technology, the cellphone with camera has all the attributes of a gadget; a distinctive sign of technological progress, a peculiar combination of features dreamt up in the marketing department of a mobile telecommunications company. Cellphones are known to sprout with inessential accessories such as an FM radio, a MP3 player, a QWERTY keyboard or a PDA. Most of them prove to be of limited use, as they tend to interfere with the main purpose of the phone, either by shortening the battery life, or by becoming ergonomically cumbersome. The phone that can take digital photographs did not seem to be principally different from these other crossbreed implements whose main attraction is the manifestation of technology at a stage when it is capable of producing hybrids and mutations. The images obtained from these cameras were only good to “muck about”, in the words of the first advertising campaign for these phones.

Soon enough the cameraphone started to attract the attention of politicians, law enforcement authorities, businesses and news corporations. It suddenly transpired that besides being a desirable new toy, a fashionable *gizmo,*

the fusion of the camera and the cellphone produced a new model of aural-textual-visual communication, one that combines images and language with instant delivery to the internet. The camera-equipped phone signalled not only the amalgamation of several separate technologies into one, but also the collapse of photography into the spoken and written language. The disappearance of the photographic camera inside the cellphone is simultaneously the end of camera- centred photography and the emergence of a new type of speech in which photographic images acquire a new life as a part of binary code along with the written language and spoken voice.

The growing popularity of cameraphones redefines not only mobile communications but also familiar models of acquisition and dissemination of visual information. This has caused so much concern that a whole range of restrictive measures are being hastily introduced in order to control, and in certain cases to completely ban, the use of cameraphones. For example, in Japan, where 90% of new phones are expected to have a camera (Japan Media Review 2004), bookshops display signs that ask the customers not to use their phones to photograph pages from books and magazines. In response to growing concerns, Japanese manufacturers started to produce cameraphones, which emit a sound when a picture is taken, akin to the sound of the shutter of a traditional camera. This is not due to nostalgia for the mechanical camera, but to alert to the presence of an image-making device that does not look like a camera.

The South Korean concern Mitsubishi, which is coincidently a cellphone manufacturer, banned the use of cameraphones in its compounds. In an attempt

to curb industrial espionage, Mitsubishi resorted to a low-tech solution: camera owners are asked to cover the lens of their phone with a piece of black tape. Other businesses ban the use of cameraphones on their premises altogether, denying the workers and the visitors the ability to make and receive phone calls as well as to take pictures.

In the US, cameraphones are banned from gyms, swimming pools and restaurants as well as from social events where celebrities are expected. In Scotland, a teachers union is calling for a ban on cameraphones in schools; the official reason for that is to do with child pornography, but some teachers mentioned that they do not want to be spied on by the children. Proposals have been made to ban the use of cameraphones in public places as a means of privacy protection and in order to prevent the spread of embarrassing and degrading images. All this at a time when surveillance video cameras already record each and every one of us up to 4000 times a day without causing much concern to anyone. It seems that it is not the surveillance itself that creates the sense of alarm, not the invasion of privacy as such, but the fact the images are privately owned as opposed to being controlled by the security apparatus of the state, and can be disseminated at will through the internet.

The hysterical response to cameraphones can be attributed in part to a suspicious attitude towards new technology in all its forms. Before cellphones became the norm of personal communication, they too caused concerns to teachers and industrialists. But while cellphones opened up new possibilities for peer-to-peer communication, the cameraphone allows for instant distribution of

digital photographs around the world. The integration of mobile internet technology with picture messaging and text messaging means that an image taken with the handset can have a caption attached to it and then be posted on a website within seconds after the image was taken. The immediacy of this operation, combined with the seamless integration of image and text into one message, creates a form of speech that restores the traditional relationship of photography with truth while at the same time making photography loses its separate identity and disappears into verbal communication.

The camera that is always with you

As noted by Gilles Deleuze, “technical advances play their part only by being taken up and incorporated in a new style.”(Deleuse 1990) The cameraphone added a new pose to the vocabulary of street styles. The cameraphone photographer is identified by a pose in which the phone is held at arm length, pointing the back of the phone at the object of the photograph, while staring at the screen.

The ergonomics of the cameraphone make it difficult to tell if a person is writing a mobile email or taking a photograph. Quite often, you will not notice the taking of the picture at all, as the act of photography is concealed in the act of writing a text message, therefore creating a space in which the visual and the textual converge. Unlike a traditional camera, the cameraphone does not have an optical viewfinder; the image is formed on the screen of the phone, the same screen that is used for writing mobile email messages and searching for phone

numbers. The integration between the camera and the phone is done in a way as to conceal the camera as much as possible within the form factor of the cellphone.

This has given rise to a new urban legend whereby men are supposedly using their phones to take snapshots up women's skirts on the underground while pretending to read a text message. As a 21st century shoe mirror the cameraphone has the advantage of being totally inconspicuous, as well as having ample storage capacity to accumulate a considerable collection of illicit images. Just as the internet turned anyone with a home computer into a potential pornographer, the cameraphone makes anyone with a cellphone a potential photographer.

Until recently, the use of a camera in public life was subject to a very strict social code. In his research on the popular use of the camera, Pierre Bourdieu identifies the social occasions in which the presence of a camera is expected and required. These are family gatherings (especially when they involve children) and holidays (Bourdieu 1990). Outside these events a person with a camera has a clearly defined social role. It is either a professional photographer whose trade is signified by a large amount of photographic equipment, or a tourist who points their camera at the things we pass everyday without even noticing them. Between the tourist and the professional photographer there is the amateur for whom the camera is a way of turning the urban and the mundane into the lyrical. Professional photographers, by virtue of their tools, are easily identified, the tourists can also straightforwardly be identified and ignored, and the amateurs

are so few and far between, and their images so personal, that they pose few threats to privacy. And somewhere in that realm there are the perverts. Those with the long lenses taking pictures of children on the beach or in the back garden, those installing cameras in public toilets and changing rooms. Before the cameraphone, the overwhelming majority of the people who own a camera would only use it on vacations and during family functions. Therefore, while you could reasonably expect everyone on the street to own a camera, you could be equally assured that they were unlikely to use it, and therefore you had a certain guarantee of privacy even in the most public of places.

The integration of the camera and the cellphone ended more than a century of strict rules and regulations that governed the use of cameras in both the public and private domain. According to Mizuko Ito and Daisuke Okabe who researched patterns of mobile phone use, it is considered socially irresponsible to leave the house without the phone (Ito and Okabe 2004). In that climate the camera becomes a constant presence in the life of anyone who is using a phone. The waiter in the restaurant can take a picture of your lunchtime tête-à-tête and post it on the web before you get to the dessert. In the past you had a chance of spotting a camera in the wrong hands and take measures to protect yourself, now everyone who looks as if they write a text message are suspect of surveillance or espionage.

Personal / public

The function of the photograph as a private object shared with the friends and the family and invested with particular memories, acquires a whole new meaning when it is released into the public domain. By becoming public it loses its significance as a ritual of remembrance and becomes simply what Roland Barthes calls in Camera Lucida a “certificate of presence” (Barthes 1993). The cameraphone offers the choice between the public and the private that traditional photography never had. The image on the cellphone’s screen can be sent to a recipient in the address book, thereby keeping the image within the circle of the friends and family, or it can be posted to a website where it will be available for all to see. But even the idea of sharing an image with a friend takes on a whole new meaning. The recipient of an image has on their phone an exact clone of the original image. All instances of this digital image are identical to the original.

Over 100 years ago, when George Eastman invented the first Kodak snapshot camera, photography was revolutionised. Until then photography was an expensive hobby that required dedication, specialised training and considerable investment of time and money. Kodak made photography available to anyone who could afford the camera that came pre-loaded with a roll of film. The famous slogan “you press the button – we do the rest” summarised this philosophy. Over the years it emerged that despite the increasing affordability of photography and despite success rates so high that a person with no knowledge of photography could expect 80% of technically good pictures, the average user takes their camera out only once or twice per year. In his essay “Marketing Mass

Photography" Don Slater demonstrates that 50% of the film buyers are buying one or two each year, presumably shooting one roll during the summer vacation and one during Christmas. All the rest of the time considered not worthy of photography.

The revolution of the cameraphone is no less remarkable than the snapshot revolution in the way it transforms our attitude to personal image making; but instead of transforming participation (from the pursuit of a specialist to a snapshot camera in every home) it transforms the duration of the photographic moment, turning the whole of the social experience into a photographic event. Photography enters the everyday not because the everyday is now more photogenic but because the camera as a separate entity is no longer needed for the act of photography. The cellphone blurs the boundaries between the symbolic (language) and the iconic (image) and the result is a new form of shorthand. We are at the threshold of the post-camera era, and the demise of the camera is a moment of emancipation for the photographer.

The old futuristic wish to have a camera installed in ones eye and therefore to bypass the mediation of the photographic apparatus becomes a reality. This move of the photographic image away from the activity of photography is similar to the move of the mobile email away from the rules of grammar and spelling. The photo-text message does not conform to the norms of the spoken or written language nor does it follow the norms of photography. Instead it is situated within the expanding conglomerate of communication entertainment and computing that we refer to as visual culture.

From manipulation to evidence

The cameraphone photograph has an authenticity that is absent from most other types of photographic images. As it is an image that was unmediated by manipulation, the phone photograph makes a claim for truth that no other digital image can make. At present, the cameraphone technology does not allow for any manipulation of the image after it was taken. Cameraphone images can be downloaded to a computer and manipulated in the usual way, but as long as they are part of a text message, they carry a signature of authenticity. This is in stark contrast to other digital images that presuppose, by their very nature, the presence of computer manipulation.

Chemical photographic images are traditionally considered to have a unique authenticity that is absent from other forms of visual media. The creation of a photographic image involves the exposure of a light sensitive material to the light directly reflected from the photographed object. As Geoffrey Batchen points out:

> Photography's plausibility has always rested on the uniqueness of its indexical relation to the world it images, a relation that is regarded fundamental to its operation as a system of representation. (Batchen 2001)

He proceeds to observe that with the spread of computer visualisation, photographic images could be made without a direct referent in the outside world. Since digital images can be so easily altered by computer operators and new images created by scanning, combining bits from different images into one and

manufacturing new images, the claim photography had once on capturing the real became increasingly challenged.

The cameraphone image has a unique status among digital images insofar as it is perceived as a direct imprint from the real. Picturephoning.com reports that following recent cases in which cameraphones were used in identifying criminals, some police forces are setting up websites for mobile phone users to send pictures taken at the scenes of crimes (textually.org). At the hands of the people who happen to be at the right place at the right time, their phone becomes a part of an alternative network to the police surveillance cameras. This special status of the cameraphone image as non-manipulated and therefore evidential is due to the way the image is being stored in the memory of the phone and not on a computer equipped with image editing software. The immediacy with which the image can be sent and received (with a date and time stamp attached) adds to the notion that every person with a phone is a witness. This notion is being widely used by political activists who capture events as they unfold and immediately post them on the web. By working in that way they bypass censorship and the possibility of their equipment being confiscated and images destroyed. At the same time, this strategy can potentially eliminate claims that images were fabricated.

From looking to seeing

Just as you can become the subject of someone's urge to take a picture, you are equipped with the tools to carry your own surveillance operation. The

camera is instantly available whenever we are faced with the prospect of dead time on our hands; you look around to see if there is anything to take a picture of. As you switch from seeing to looking you become alienated from the environment, which was perceived as familiar and not worthy of special attention; in other words you become an observer, a voyeur. You participate in a looking game, which is usually reserved for exotic “photogenic” locations, such as holiday destinations. Through the process of looking you differentiate between sites, selecting some, rejecting others. Just like the walkman is used to cancel out the unwanted sounds and noises of the urban environment, replacing them with the familiar sounds from the player, so does the cameraphone provide a strategy for dealing with threat of the strange, the remote and the unusual located within familiar sites, by transforming them into sights on which ownership has been declared. The gesture of cameraphone photography sifts out the disturbing, destabilising elements of one’s immediate environment and places them in the depository of the digital memory of the camera. This act of appropriation is equally effective as a strategy for elevating the ordinary to the level of an event and trivialising the bizarre.

As an instrument for dealing with one’s desires the cameraphone offers a fleeting possibility of equilibrium albeit at the price of participating in an act of remembrance.

Bibliography:

Barthes R. (1993) *Camera Lucida*, Random House, London

Barthes R. (1997) *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press

Bourdieu P (1998) *Photography, a middle brow Art*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK

Deleuse G. (1990) *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, New York

Ito M. and Okabe D. (2004) *Emergent Structurings of Mobile Email Use* www.itofisher.com/mito/archives/000150.html (14/03/04)

Flusser V. (2000) *Towards a philosophy of Photography*, Reacton Books, London.

Sontag S. (1997) On Photography, Penguin Books, UK

textually.org/picturephoning/archives/cat_privacy_concerns.htm (14/03/04)

Japan Media Review, www.ojr.org/japan/wireless/1062208524.php (14/03/04)