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New uses of digital photography

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- 1 Steven Spielberg's cinematographic adaptation of Philip K. Dick's short story, *Minority Report* (2002) is renowned for the credibility of its technological predictions. Depicting the world of 2054, based on expert propositions, it is famous for its anticipation of tactile interfaces. Besides the visualization of mental images, it predicts the widespread use of retinal scanning for surveillance and targeted advertising.
- 2 The seriousness of this forecasting exercise renders all the more remarkable its myopia of what became, soon after, ordinary visual practices in developed countries. In the movie, private uses of the image are limited to traditional print photography, holographic films and interactive video chat.
- 3 Few years later, these predictions seemed greatly outdated. It did not take half a century, but three to five years to have tools of audiovisual communication (Skype 2.0, 2005) or tactile interfaces (Apple iPhone, 2007). On the other hand no one could have imagined the rise of multimedia messaging services, parodies or visual conversations on social media. The present has overtaken the future, and *Minority Report* today seems trapped in a Foucauldian perception of the image as instrument of control and domination.
- 4 Unanticipated uses, more avant-garde than anything that could have been imagined at the dawn of the 21st century, have changed our visual practices and established themselves with self-evident force. But, unpredictability provides a valuable historical indication. Quite contrary to the automobile, aviation, or television — subsequent extensions of the horse carriage, navigation, or radio— the development of innovations such as photography, cinema, or disc depends on the appropriative mechanisms, determined by users' choices. The same is true for conversational image, an unexpected product resulting from the meeting of digitalized visual content and documented interaction.

## From fluid image to connected photography

- 5 In the early 1990s, the digitization of photography is described both as a revolution and as a disaster. Many specialists, following in a traditional technical approach, consider the transition to pixels the ruin of indicality and announce injudiciously the end of our belief in the truth of images<sup>1</sup>.
- 6 As writing transformed language into information, granting it invaluable qualities of preservation, reproduction and transmission, by reducing the materiality of images, digitization grants them both plasticity and new mobility. As digital files become easy to copy and manipulate, the iconic object becomes fluid image.
- 7 This first stage of the digital transition has serious implications for the image industry: the end of processing laboratories, simplification of procedures, proliferation of digital databases, falling prices. Yet, despite a considerable technological leap, there has been a remarkable continuity of forms and uses. For twenty years, the digital transition only marginally affected the visual practices. Contrary to the most somber predictions, newspapers continue publishing illustrated reports, and parents still photograph their children. As an automobile that would have swapped a combustion engine for an electric motor, photography has preserved its most essential functions. The visual has not been devastated, it has rather prosaically undergone a rapid rationalization<sup>2</sup>.
- 8 Like *Minority Report*, many experts expected the arrival of new visual tools to be accompanied by a shift towards animated image, more attractive, and a disaffection for photography. Amateur video practices have certainly made an important headway<sup>3</sup>. However, photographs remain by far, the most shared content.
- 9 It is difficult to compare in absolute terms the number of photos and videos shared on social media, because video is often accounted for as broadcasting hours. Facebook no longer provides regular statistics on video uploads, suggesting a weak growth. In 2010, with half a billion registered Facebook members, available statistics indicated a monthly upload of 2.5 billion photographs for only 20 million videos uploads, or 125 times less (from the point of view of amateur production, the difference is intensified by large proportions of rebroadcasted footage, whereas photographs are rich in auto-produced content).
- 10 It seems that the still image draws its advantage from its greater fluidity as compared to video, penalized for file weight, download time and restricted formats. Less universal than photographs, videos can only be viewed in an environment with appropriate technical reading device. In contrast, a JPEG file or an animated GIF<sup>4</sup> have the advantage of being displayed in any environment, on a web browser as well as a platform, a mobile phone or a tablet.
- 11 Between 2008 to 2011, the landscape changed unexpectedly. It was not a camera that was the cause of this crucial change, but a mobile phone manufactured by a computer brand – the Apple iPhone, designed by Steve Jobs<sup>5</sup> to provide wide access to web features (especially its 3G version, available from 2008) which heralds the advent of connected photography<sup>6</sup>. Smartphones rapidly outsold cameras in all developed countries. In France, in 2011, while 4.6 million cameras were marketed (more than twice

the amount sold towards the end of the 1990's) smartphone sales soared to 12 million units<sup>7</sup>.

- 12 The adaptation of photography to the mobile phone existed since the first camphones available in Japan in 2000. But, the power conferred by this conjunction to the 3G standard (UMTS), equivalent to the transition from modem to broadband, opens the way for full implementation of visual practices.
- 13 This development has transformed the smartphone into a universal camera. Taking a camera with oneself, once suggested the anticipation of a picture worthy occasion. Instead, the phone that one takes along for its communication or playing functions allows permanent access to photography<sup>8</sup>. Photographic occasions are limited to a set of codified events, outside of which shooting is barely tolerated<sup>9</sup>. Only tourism or exotic situations could justify intensive photographic activity. By granting the possibility of capturing every moment of our life, mobile phones transform each of us into a tourist of the everyday, ready to snap pictures at any moment. This new skill is manifested in particular through the press publishing amateur photographs or footage of catastrophes or outstanding accidents (London bombings in 2005, Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, the Hudson River crash landing in 2009, etc.).
- 14 But this metamorphosis is not limited to the production of images. Connected photography is a result of the association between the smartphone and communication networks: instant messaging or social media, on which images can be transferred immediately, through elementary operations. Although this combination represents only a fraction of amateur practices, it stands as an emblematic step, the symbol of the second revolution of digital images.
- 15 To be able to share a photograph in real time with an individual or a group of friends, once a capacity reserved to wired agencies, profoundly modifies its uses. During this initial period, picture quality offered by smartphones regresses compared to that proposed by compact cameras. Under these conditions, the choice of a mobile instead of the camera or the sharp rise in production on this support indicates that users find an advantage in connected photography. The qualitative deficit is largely offset by the usefulness of new image practices and particularly by the increasing ability to display them via social media.
- 16 Facebook, the largest of them, opened to public in 2006, considerably improves its interface for image display between 2009 and 2011, facilitating the integration of visual files and giving them better visibility. Now, taking a photograph is not enough, what matters is being able to show, comment and repost it. First choice for exhibiting auto-photography, Facebook becomes logically the most important collection of images in the world (more than 250 billion photos uploaded in September, 2013<sup>10</sup>). Despite the recent decline in media popularity, it will remain the main historic site in spreading the connected image.
- 17 Sharing ones' photographs or commenting them, all this was already possible on Flickr, since 2004. But, the specialized platform is today still a space for discussions focused on images. The breakthrough brought by Facebook has been to propose a general environment, equipped with maximum functionality, structured not by specific interests, but more fundamentally through interaction between real people. As noted by Pierre Bourdieu, the uses of amateur photography remain essentially social<sup>11</sup>. On Facebook, discussion focuses on all aspects of existence. Images are not mobilized primarily for

their aesthetic qualities, but because they document life, participate in the game of self-presentation and serve referential purposes.

- 18 This revolution of despecialization fundamentally changes the traditional photographic paradigm based on technics, primacy of the shoot, materiality, and objectivity of the image. While visual recording once formed an autonomous strongly identified universe, what characterizes it now is its integration into multipurpose systems. The delay of camera manufacturers, who are reluctant to convert their materials into connected tools and equip them with communication features only in dribs and drabs<sup>12</sup>, is indicative of the magnitude of change. For the first time in its history, photography has become a niche practice within the vast universe of electronic communication.
- 19 One can compare this integration to the miniaturization process that affected the clock industry between 15th and 19th century, bringing the church steeple's timepiece in lounges and then into the garment pocket. Gaining at every step in availability, the time function evolves and transforms: « The small sized clock that resulted from it, domestic or personal, had all together another quality and significance than public and monumental mechanisms. The possibility of use both private and universal laid the foundations of a *discipline of time*, as opposed to an obedience to time », as explains the historian David Landes<sup>13</sup>.
- 20 Having become a component among others of the communication world, does photography not risk disappearing ? Quite contrary. If the photo taking possibility is integrated in other devices, it would be unthinkable to conceive a communicating tool without a camera, or a digital environment lacking in visual display. Embedded in every connected object, the photographic function has become autonomous. It has gained in universality and in appropriability, accomplishing better than ever its promise of democratizing visual production. Like the clock, integration of photography, which is still in its primary stages, announces all the same a surpassing of this original function. Beyond the widespread production of images, what follows is a revolution of its uses.

## Utility of Conversation

- 21 We commonly see the overwhelming number of images deplored, associating this proliferation to progress in reproducibility. But is technical determinism the only parameter of this increase ? This could be explained more satisfactorily by the increase of the usefulness of photographs. It is what the observation of connected uses suggests.
- 22 While the first period of static web had been characterized as a "society of authors"<sup>14</sup>, the capability of symmetric interaction promoted by the web 2.0 leads instead to describe online publishing activity as a *conversation*<sup>15</sup>. Extensively studied in Pragmatics or Ethnomethodology, oral exchange structured by turn taking is considered as the foundation of sociability: « That is where a child learns to speak, when a foreigner socializes by integrating within a new group (...), where a social relationship is built, where language system is established and transformed. »<sup>16</sup>
- 23 Orderly interaction, symmetrical, open and cumulative, which characterizes instant messaging or online exchange is indeed similar to the egalitarian sociability of conversation. Integration of image in this economy represents a remarkable development of its functionalities, identified by Jean-Samuel Beuscart, Dominique Cardon, Nicolas

Pissard and Christophe Prieur in their study on Flickr<sup>17</sup>. Rather than conversations *about photos*, the study posits that, the web has encouraged conversation *with photos*.

- 24 The ability to use an image as a message is however not born with digital tools. This property for example, is offered by the illustrated postcard, whose use experienced a marked rise since late nineteenth century. If we admit it as correspondence among conversational genre, the combination of images enables to observe a primitive state of this elaboration, evidently at a slow pace. Although industrial production requires to rely on standardized sceneries or situations, used postcards provide invaluable examples of an archeology of visual conversation.
- 25 In its digital version, it appears in email and online forums, then on multimedia messaging systems or MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) which accompanied the first generation of camphones. The J-SH04 Sharp model, commercialized at \$500 in Japan, in October 2000, used the J-Phone network, which allows the sharing of photographs among subscribers. An intermediate stage, during the mid 2000s, is offered by “moblogging”, or sharing photos taken with a camphone on a blog, a precursor of instant publishing on social network sites. If there are two uses of connected photography, one concerning private conversation, the other public or semi public conversation, then the porosity between the different spaces, encouraged by digital fluidity, must be noted.
- 26 Recently baptized, the selfie, form of contextualized auto-photography, is perhaps the oldest identifiable use of connected image. The onset of camphones in Japan follows in the footsteps of the purikura phenomenon<sup>18</sup>, miniature self-portraits shot by young Japanese in special photo booths, which allow multiple decorations to be added to it, and to be collected. The first Sharp camphone model includes a small mirror on the front, an original device to facilitate auto-photography. Advertisings of the time leave no doubt: the device had been designed by the manufacturer to allow auto-photography at arm’s length, thanks to a short focal lens.
- 27 If these functions were initially imagined only as gadgets, it is in a more dramatic manner that the transformation of uses initiated by the connected image appeared. On July 7 2005, between 8:50 am and 9:47 am, four bombs carried by terrorists blow up three underground stations and a bus in London, causing 56 deaths and 700 casualties. While the media could not enter inside the subway, Sky News broadcasts at 12:35 pm an image shot in the immediate vicinity of the attack : a photograph shot with a camphone by a user, Adam Stacey, taken at 9:25 am in the tunnel that leads to King’s Cross and sent as an electronic message to multiple recipients.
- 28 Although this picture shows a face, this is not a portrait in terms of pictorial tradition. And even if circumstances impose its public broadcast<sup>19</sup>, its initial sharing comes under private conversation. Thanks to the immediacy of its communication, Adam Stacey’s photograph, shot at the request of a friend accompanying him and wanting to inform his relatives, has first and foremost a utilitarian function of rapidly transmitting an observation.
- 29 If documentary vocation is an integral part of the history of visual recording, it generally concerns special uses— scientific, media or industrial. In terms of private photography, the usefulness of images remains essentially symbolic: preservation of memories or writing family history. Examples of practical uses, such as documenting an accident report for insurance, are attested since early twentieth century, but remain discrete

forms, which do not interest observers and are not described by any history nor sociology of amateur photography.

- 30 Yet some technical innovations, as instant development process proposed by Polaroid, by accelerating the availability of images, have participated in highlighting the practical usefulness of photography and have given rise to a wide range of constative uses. The same goes for instant transmission of connected image, which opens photography to the universe of communication. One can find a significant example of its actual application with the selfie of Flickr cofounders, Stewart Butterfield and Caterina Fake, in 2005. Entitled “Hi Mom”, the photograph published on Flickr is accompanied by an indication of its use : « This was sent to my parents as I was talking to them on the phone so they could see the view of where we were standing ».
- 31 Available studies on new communication practices suggest an unprecedented extension of their practical uses<sup>20</sup>. By combining the visual dimension to exchanged data, the image allows to provide indications about a situation (arrival or presence in a place, use of a means of transport...), appearance checks (testing an outfit, new haircut, physical appearance...) but also other countless practical information, such as purchase of a commodity, ingredients of a recipe, state of a building, etc... that photography allows to record or to transmit more quickly than a written message<sup>21</sup>. The connected image lends itself especially to regular exchange of signals intended to maintain friendly or amorous relationships. It can also serve political or activist objectives, such as photographs of gatherings during the Arab Spring movement, immediately shared as an appeal to join in the demonstrations<sup>22</sup>.
- 32 The extreme variety of these applications shows a rapid adaptation of connected tools, as well as the development of a new skill : the ability to translate a situation into visual form, in a way to propose it as a brief statement, often personal or playful— a form of reinterpretation of reality which recalls “the invention of the everyday” dear to Michel de Certeau<sup>23</sup>.

## Visibility of a “barbaric taste”

- 33 Connected photography cannot exist without recipient(s). Beyond their first-level utility, communication systems also give images the function of conversation shifters or dialogical units, so that they acquire a second-level meaning as expressive forms. In private interaction, restricted audience and familiarity of participants encourages implicitness, contextual games or transgression<sup>24</sup>. On social networks, public visibility brings resources of collective practices : participative interpretation through a series of comments generated in response to visual content, or a choral construction by reusing and repeating a pattern transformed into a meme<sup>25</sup>, which indicate social productivity of visual forms.
- 34 Sign of its success, visual conversation tends to become autonomous through tools of image collection and reposting, such as Tumblr (2007) or Pinterest (2010), where republishing and diffusion are the principal resources to provide content value. A platform committed to connected image, such as Instagram (2010), enables in the elaboration of collaborative responses to common events: a meteorological phenomenon or a cultural occasion, celebrated by generating and displaying photographic productions whose display takes the form of a collective game.

- 35 Conversely, the integration of images in conversation benefits from systems which reward participation on social networks. Exhibition and public appreciation build critical, social or aesthetic legitimacy of auto-photography. They also encourage autonomy of the interpretation, which is necessary to reduce the ambiguity of images<sup>26</sup>.
- 36 Widely sharing new visual practices, major social networks also give them unprecedented visibility and contribute to their viral spread. A satirical video posted in December 2012 on the website CollegeHumor parodies one of the songs of the band Nickelback, to make fun of different modes of connected photography<sup>27</sup>. Photos of meals, feet, cats, aircraft wings, filters, selfies, etc.. : the song draws up a long list of repeated motives on Facebook or Twitter timelines. This excellent parody shows that all these visual forms are indeed identified as just as many independent genres.
- 37 Upon reviewing characteristics of private photography of the early twentieth century, Marin Dacos noted that a great part of amateur photographs reproduced models of studio photography or advertisements<sup>28</sup>. By rewarding a bouquet of visual practices with a certificate of recognition, the CollegeHumor video suggests that from now on we are witnessing a reverse phenomenon. As memes or recommendations, private iconography benefits from the transition that has seen social network sites take the place of traditional media as cultural influencers. Through their mediation vernacular productions reach the rank of identifiable and reproducible models.
- 38 This new visibility appears in negative reactions. In 2013, the choice of “selfie” as word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary editors, was welcomed by critical media commentaries, condemning the saturation of the web by this narcissistic exercise of connected self-portraits<sup>29</sup>. Through the condemnation of an excessive presence, its reception testifies indeed the normative character that this genre is about to acquire.
- 39 When Michel de Certeau tried to approach « ordinary culture » he expressed his embarrassment at being confronted with the « virtual invisibility » of practices « that were hardly manifested through their products »<sup>30</sup>. Instead, the visibility conferred by large social networks to individual expression reverses the dynamics of the production of norm. Formerly, the popular classes copied the behavior of celebrities. Now, celebrities and world leaders reproduce models of the common people by conforming to the rules of the selfie.
- 40 One can regret this use of « barbaric taste », to quote Emmanuel Kant’s expression echoed by Bourdieu<sup>31</sup>, through social network sites, mediators of ordinary culture. But the opposition of good and bad taste is it not, in this case, a wrong way to ask the question ? While visual or musical practices encourage an approach inspired by Art History, which highlights author’s creativity and postulates the self-sufficient character of expressive motivation, linguistic analysis proposes a neutral description of processes. Conversation, unlike artistic creativity, is an independent practice where even expressivity holds communicational and social value<sup>32</sup>. In this context, new visual practices cannot be analyzed only through the grid of aesthetics.
- 41 Victory of use over content is particularly flagrant with Snapchat (2011), a visual messaging mobile application that proposes photos to be erased seconds after consultation. Semi-public visibility of conversation and the ephemeral nature of the iconic message have contributed to the success of this media among the youngsters, who use it as regularly as SMS. By programming the disappearance of photographs, Snapchat adds a ludic dimension, but also an additional freedom for users, encouraging them to



use it in an informal and relaxed manner. The application clearly demonstrates the desertion of the masterpiece and elaborate production, in favor of conversation in action. Already widely noticeable on most social networks, this shift suggests describing ordinary practices of images as a new language.

- 42 As the advent of cinema or television, that of conversational image profoundly transforms our visual practices. Photography was an art and a media. We are contemporaries of the time when it is reaching the universality of a language. Integrated via versatile tools into connected systems, visual forms have become powerful shifters of private and public conversations. The part individuals can play in their production and interpretation contributes to rapid development of formats and uses. The visibility conferred by social network sites accelerates their diffusion and gives rise to self-made norms. The appropriation of visual language shows a reinvention of the everyday. Furthermore, the extension of the usefulness of images poses specific problems for their analysis. If semiotics of visual forms had hitherto relied on a narrow range of presupposed contexts, deemed identifiable only upon formal analysis, the diversity of these new applications requires us to turn to an ethnography of uses.

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## NOTES

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2. Sylvain Maresca, Dominique Sagot-Duvauroux, "Photographie(s) et numérique(s). Du singulier au pluriel" (paper delivered at the conference "Travail et création artistique en régime numérique", Avignon, May 27, 2011), *La vie sociale des images*, May 5, 2011: <http://culturevisuelle.org/viesociale/2791>.
3. In 1997, 14% of people aged 15 or over said they had made films or videos. In 2008, the figure was 27%, i.e. almost twice as many. See Olivier Donnat, *Les Pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère numérique. Enquête 2008*, Paris: La Découverte, 2009. This confirms the importance of fluidity: shorter videos experienced the strongest growth.
4. Introduced in 1991, the JPEG (Joint Photographic Expert Group) is a type of compressed file that is used for most still images on line. An animated GIF (Graphic Interchange Format), which has been in the public domain since 2004, can be displayed in a given environment as a looped sequence of images in the same file.
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6. Edgar Gómez Cruz, Eric T. Meyer, "Creation and control in the photographic process. iPhones and the emerging fifth moment of photography", *Photographies*, v. 5/2, 2012.
7. "Le cycle de vie d'une photo à l'ère numérique", a survey carried out by Ipsos in 2011, in: SIPEC, September 2011.
8. « In the eyes of the country dweller, the urbanite is someone who succumbs to a sort of perceptual 'any-old-thing-ism'. And this attitude is incomprehensible to him because he works on an implicit philosophy of photography according to which only certain objects, on certain

occasions, merit being photographed. » Pierre Bourdieu, "The social definition of photography", *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (trans. Shaun Whiteside), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990 [1965].

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10. « Every day, there are more than 4.75 billion content items shared on Facebook (including status updates, wall posts, photos, videos and comments), more than 4.5 billion "Likes", and more than 10 billion messages sent. More than 250 billion photos have been uploaded to Facebook, and more than 350 million photos are uploaded every day on average » *A Focus on Efficiency*, Facebook/Ericsson/Qualcomm whitepaper, September 16, 2013, pdf [https://fbcdn-dragon-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-prn1/851575\\_520797877991079\\_393255490\\_n.pdf](https://fbcdn-dragon-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-prn1/851575_520797877991079_393255490_n.pdf).

11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, *op. cit.*

12. It was in 2012 that Samsung, Apple's main smartphone competitor, produced the first "smart cameras" equipped with Wi-Fi: the hybrid NX range and the compact EX2F. The same year, Nikon adopted Android for its Coolpix S800c.

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15. Valérie Beaudouin, *op. cit.*

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17. Jean-Samuel Beuscart, Dominique Cardon, Nicolas Pissard and Christophe Prieur, "Pourquoi partager mes photos de vacances avec des inconnus ? Les usages de Flickr", *Réseaux*, No. 154/2, 2009.

18. Jon Wurtzel, "Taking pictures with your phone", BBC News, September 18, 2001: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1550622.stm>. Developed by Atlus and Sega, the first purikura booths appeared in Tokyo in 1995.

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30. Michel de Certeau, *op. cit.*
31. Emmanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 1790; Pierre Bourdieu, *op. cit.*
32. Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *L'Énonciation. De la subjectivité dans le langage*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1980.
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## ABSTRACTS

Favored by connected tools and social media, the second revolution of digital photography is that of the conversational uses of image. Since the advent of cinema or television, this mutation profoundly transforms our visual practices. Photography was an art and media. We are contemporaries of the time when it reaches the universality of a language. Integrated via versatile tools into connected systems, visual forms have become powerful shifters of private and public conversations. The part individuals can play in their production and interpretation contributes to a rapid development of formats and uses. The visibility conferred by social network sites accelerates their diffusion and gives rise to self-made norms. Appropriation of visual language makes us witness a reinvention of the everyday.