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## **D. AESTHETICS AND THE MEDIA/ 2. Media and the aesthetic of the city**

### A NEW WAY TO PERCEIVE OLD ROADS: POSTING CITY SNAPSHOTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

**Abstract** | Social media photography defined a new kind of image responsible for an expansion in the uses and attributes of the photographic image of snapshot culture. The immediacy and the practicality of this networked image made possible for countless trivialities to appear publicly on the internet but also gave rise to newfound opportunities for expressing oneself publicly. This text explores this conjunction of practices and technologies aiming to illustrate an aesthetic understanding of Athens, as promoted on visual posts that surface on social media platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram and made by Athenians. Based on an autoethnographical selection of material and discursive analysis the text delineates a frontier of everyday responses made by the urban resident concerning their daily interaction with the city, as they are inscribed in fleeting social media posts. The sampled material connects the urban posts of Athenian social media users with their need to comprehend and transcribe in public an emotional connection to the city of Athens. It is argued that while walking in the city as an everyday practice defined by deCerteau used to be mute and blind, there is now a possibility, facilitated by networked photography, for it to become tangible and even more, shareable information. The intention of this paper is to promote a further exploration of related material in order to demonstrate the personal ways in which the city residents project or manage their urban sensibilities through posted images of their city.

**Index terms** / *deCerteau, Walking in the City, Networked Image, Social media, Urbanscape*

## INTRODUCTION

The current proliferation of social media photography means that a variety of snapshots end up almost instantly on Facebook and Instagram as posts. This trend opened up a space where taking cityscape snapshots, a mundane task set aside for the tourist, expanded to accommodate the in-house viewpoint of the city resident. The following text

delineates a frontier of short-lived responses concerning the city residents and their urban experiences, based on small acts of makeshift demarcation enabled by the networked everydayness of social media posting. In order to look at such internalised and trivial phenomena, theoretical analysis and personal observations converge as the suitable methodological approach. Drawing information from an empirical sample of visual posts by Athenian residents as they have appeared on my Facebook and Instagram feeds this text claims that the circulation of personal city photos on social media networks offer an additional emotional usage of urban surroundings.

### **Methodology**

The methodological approach used in the text is autoethnographical selection of images from two social media platforms, the textual/visual Facebook and the highly visual Instagram, in conjunction with discursive analysis based on the notion of the city walker as featured in de Certeau's famous chapters "Walking in the City" and "Spatial Stories" and informed by recent views on networked photography. The sampled images appeared as third-party posts on my personal feeds from the end of 2018 and up to now - forming a total of 160 pictures from various users (40). This small data selection was based on three criteria<sup>1</sup>: the snapshots were taken by city residents for personal usage, they intentionally showed parts of Athens and were fated to become private posts on Facebook and Instagram. By all accounts these images were digital snapshots taken on impulse as opposed to professional takes, commercial promotions or artistic productions with the additional requirement that the photo registers the way an Athenian looks at their city.

Although the pictures do vary in the choice of corners, angles, set-ups and timings as much as their makers vary in sex, age and background one could certainly discern certain themes that poise on the negotiation of personal and urban myths of the lived city. This text claims that whereas localized urban fictions used to move stealthily from mouth to mouth in the pre-networked era, due to the current rise of smartphone technologies and the high visibility of certain social media platforms it is finally possible for urban stories to surface wordlessly in each posted city snapshot. The current discussion aspires to provoke a further exploration on the narrative connections involved in the visual material of that sort of private urban commentaries.

Therefore, it is the emergence of an urbanscape snapshot on Facebook and/or Instagram as a private post that manifests the potent plateau of this study. This includes the subsequent interaction with miscellaneous network users, the anterior decision of the maker to take the snapshot and post it and the concrete part of the city shown in the

photograph. This multifaceted space, not strictly real, personal, digital or fictional is the set up where the ephemeral emotional renderings of this survey take place<sup>2</sup>. Because of their unpretentious making, the tropes of their unplanned emergence and their informal, unofficial character these snapshots belong to the sphere of everyday aesthetics<sup>3</sup>. Contextualized in this manner these snapshots are seen as agents of the ubiquitous desire of contemporary Athenians to produce and project nonchalantly a more positive/less traumatic lived urban everydayness.

Consequently, I addressed questions such as: How can urban snapshots posted on Facebook and Instagram communicate emotional information (memory, experience, vision) concerning the city? How can this activity be pertinent to the aesthetic understanding of the Athenian urbanscape?

### **What to make of it, really.**

For many, their participation in social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram serves as a harmless release of everyday grievances<sup>4</sup>. The expectation to get something more substantial out of it looks improbable and is treated as a superfluous claim<sup>5</sup>. This activity, open to teasing, humorous posting and flamboyance is accepted without ado as frivolous, a light-hearted occurrence in the stream of daily trivialities<sup>6</sup>. The self-publication of private material on a public domain, the immediacy, the assortment of themes and voices, the reception of the posted edits on a personalized time and place, the irrelevance of technical knowledge or erudition and a penchant for unpretentiousness are established aspects of this process pervading the ways we receive the related visual output<sup>7</sup>.

Another aspect of networked communication is its widespread visibility. Over 50 billion photographs have been posted on Internet via Instagram while 45% of the social network users are connected to Facebook<sup>8</sup>. In 2012 the option to post a picture simultaneously on Instagram and Facebook was actualized and this added an extra surge to the wave of unskilled photographers, most of them newcomers to the niceties of smartphone cameras. The readiness of an apparatus always at hand and the uninterrupted connectivity of social media established taking a snapshot at every possible time or place as a communicative opportunity and thus networked photography came into being<sup>9</sup>.

The conjunction of smartphone technology and social media platforms made possible the effortless and immediate posting of snapshots<sup>10</sup>. These two technological advances gave rise to a new, multi-layered, photographic image that ends up shared on social media

feeds among a diversity of users. This networked image is defined in form and content both by the technological developments that enable it and by the subsequent behaviours it effected, a blend made of digital affordances, the public expression of personal opinions and commonplace tactics<sup>11</sup>. This kind of imagery gladly succumbs to the homogeneity of the unexceptional and banal to much success<sup>12</sup>. Another attribute of these pictures is their temporal limitations: as old posts get buried under the bulk of more recent posts, users share a provisional “present”. Following these, networked photography is an ephemeral, trivial token of everyday happenings that goes public as part of mass self-communication<sup>13</sup>.

D’Aloia and Parisi place networked photography within snapshot culture that according to them has “made the photographic experience a more performative act”<sup>14</sup>. Emphasis is given to an internalization of acts and the expression of the “intrinsic, bodily, sensory, motor nature of cognition”<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the networked published snapshot works towards the construction of “a new aesthetic relationship with the world and the self”<sup>16</sup>. They also claim that

We are heavy producers of fleeting images that continue to snatch precise moments in space and time but have no significant spatial or temporal value *per se*, until they are publicly re-contextualized, as our existential *status*, on the Internet. (italics in the original)

In conjunction to these ideas, it comes as no surprise that the selected visual material consists of pictures impervious to any epistemological concern. Their makers do not care to produce an objective memento and connect a place with knowledge and history detailing what was there, neither care to explain a sequence to arrange what is where, or to instruct a diagram of how-to-go-there. Most snapshots dismiss the exact location of the spot they have captured<sup>17</sup>. What instead develops as a common thread is the intention to convey a personal mood - mostly a positive or amusing feeling or impression.

The “makers’ of the photos use these snippets of emotions in order to transcribe a current experience *happening to them* within the city. In this sense these are personal confessions of heightened temporal immediacy that go public. Emphasis is on what occurs to them or what has come to their reckoning at present so that the objective facts of the city are addressed under a layer of personal expectations and demands. The aim is to communicate a private conversation between the city dweller/pedestrian and the city that takes place as a part of the everyday goings-on. Consequently, the decision to take a

picture of an urbanscape and post it on social media becomes a bridge between the emotional response of the one and its communication to the many.

**Also: What is one to make of this city?**

In a parallel schema to de Certeau's categorization of urban storytelling to synecdoche or asyndeton these urban snapshots produce either a part for the whole of the city, i.e. an isolated shot of a street corner, a part of a pavement, a graffiti covered wall or present incoherent pieces and force the viewer to complete the lot: a soup of cropped buildings, a sky and the top of a tree or a glimpse of windows and a traffic light (see Figure1 and Figure2). Usually there is not much to see or to recognize unless you know it already because you too happened to go by. Still, there is a persisting determination to inform others about how this nebulous setting was privately lived at a specific timeline. In this context temporal closeness is crucial: the image should have the flavor of a freshly woven fancy that captures the occasion on an impulse and on the spot<sup>18</sup>. Such literal point of view reveals the feeling of the 'maker' and most probably shows nothing at all.

According to de Certeau "Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by<sup>19</sup>." This, he concludes happens because the everyday practice of crossing the city is mute and blind<sup>20</sup>. This text was written before the network exploded into our everydayness, when there was no way or pretext to record something-that-caught-my-attention-passing-by-because-it-looked-funny. Nevertheless, fast forward to present time that is exactly what the networked urban snapshots aim to show. Not a dot on a map, or an epic stop on a line of converse but an emotional breath in the course of trivial daily actions. To add to that, from the number of pictures that bear a geotagging almost none indicates a specific destination, a personalized route or a special spot. It is mostly Athens, or at the best a broad city district. It does not matter where I am, as long as you know I am in the city and live my moment there.

The snapshots are divided in two categories in regard to their point of view: one looks at things happening while crossing the city and the other shares the bird view from some place above. The differences in the perspective aside, there is a homogeneous decision to voice an exclamation point, if any point. Words are few and trivial - mostly a banal or plain commentary but usually nothing at all - and lack of any description veils the unspoken happening shared with us. The snapshot remains the only clue, a personal scribble entrusted to visualize a message of satisfactory or entertaining urban everydayness and inform us how someone practices on a quotidian basis a style of living in the city.

[insert figure1 and figure2]

Once these snapshots turn to posts the internalized commentaries each of us privately nurtures during our everyday activities within the urban environment becomes visible. The voiceless monologue of the pedestrian or the urban gazer might vary at times, places and occasions from containment to disappointment, from this-city-is-magical to this-city-is-hell. The events that trigger such feelings are as vague as walking in the city is: nulled by everydayness, many things happening at one time, things we almost do not see and for each of us their own, private routines in the city, favoured pavements, familiar paths, worn roads, known building “in different degrees and shades of familiarity and strangeness”<sup>21</sup>. This is a dubious area of responses but the posted image leaves no doubt in its stark visuality: the fragmented urban bits it presents make it clear that this is not a document of the city but a document about the resident and their specific spatiotemporal relationship with the city. The omnipresent uncertainty in meaning is overpowered by the resolution to communicate publicly the personal there-and-then momentum that prompted its making. Thus, the inconsequential, private and blind emotional occurrences that we experience daily in our ongoing encounter with the city can find shelter in these networked snapshots and somehow become concrete and *shareable*.

At the moment that this fleeting response to the city becomes *shared* it also becomes the object of a communicational exchange that touches the emotional membrane of urban living for many. The social media “friends” and “followers” might be real life acquaintances or real-life strangers, but the point is that anyone connected in the social media platform can see this post and make a comment: this is usually a banality, a single word, or an emoticon. Some might applaud with a “like” or a “heart”, others write down their opinion, many passively let it pass by. This ephemeral relation creates no commitment or stability. Any connection or interest stops as long as another post pops along. In its short life span this fleeting image manages to stir the omnipresent worries of any urban dweller “What does this place make me feel” but mostly “How do I deal with this place daily” and “What do I get by living in it” without caring to profess an answer or even voicing the question.

### **The city is burning/a-ma-zing.**

[insert figure3]

To support these claims, I will present two instances. The image in Figure3 emerged on my Facebook feed in January 2020 with the added commentary in English “The city is

burning”. The caption adds a touch of romantic exaltation and the use of English alludes to an international pop universe of expressions and feelings. The snapshot shows an uncomfortable corner of the city: a narrow pavement, densely parked cars, the landmark sign of a cinema and a hazy patch of sunny sky. All these pieces of an urban puzzle, easily recognizable by a resident of the area might not be so readily placed by another. The picture showcases in equal terms the obstacles of the urban environment and the exact spatiotemporal occasion that allowed the photo to happen. Suddenly this ugly, charmless corner of the city becomes “loveable” and indeed fifty users including myself agree to that. This affirmation goes far beyond the emotions I have experienced on this spot of the city. As a resident of the area I have a flash back of myself walking down this street blinded under the same bright winter sun not even remotely caring to make a photo of it. I feel extremely intrigued though by my encounter with this post and at the same time I wonder how it can be even possible for an ugly spot to inspire such sentimental take. All the more I realize that I am deeply satisfied someone else saw the potential and share it.

[insert figure4]

The image in Figure4 was posted on Instagram also in January 2020. It shows an unidentified corner of the city, possibly a pavement of the commercial center. Some of the users might exactly know which one it is but I cannot place it with precision. The lack of information for the whereabouts of the picture makes no difference for its meaning, “this” happened upon someone “there” today. The person that chanced upon it decided not to let this felicitous opportunity go by unnoticed as is made obvious by the subsequent post. The hypothesis that the photo was taken with the sole intention to become a post is made on the basis that there is no point of someone taking this picture but for the fun of posting it on the net. This photo is not about the whereabouts of a shoeshiner in the city, as relevant information is not revealed. This is a playful commentary about the capability of the city to surprise and amuse us with the daily happenings it accommodates. The point in case, made wordlessly but precisely by the subsequent post was decoded and appreciated by 43 users at the time it popped on my feed -whereas now it has reached the number of 50 hearts. Two users left positive commentaries, and manage to express with just four emoticons and one word in Greek [a-ma-zing] a comprehensive analysis that adds an undertone to the post. The picture documents as a wink of the eye, a me-and-the-city urban experience that when shared becomes part of the us-and-the-city reservoir of informal, wordless and ephemeral stories.

## **Conclusion**

The delineation of the networked communication of experiences and emotions about the city that are the object of this paper is based on a multi-faceted approach. The subsequent observations searched the nature of the posted images and discussed how and why these appear on Facebook and/or Instagram and what possible functions they can perform. The images posted by city residents are driven by different interests than those of the tourist or the professional. For one, the tourist cares to capture a characteristic sample of the city and therefore the city is present in their shots. As for the professional, the image maker aims to orchestrate a mood using skilled decisions and the architect wants to create an archive of urban knowledge. Still the city is eloquently present, but such treatment in the cases examined in this text is completely superfluous. The photos discussed here are taken under the lived-in presumption that the city is always present even when it appears so incoherently in the photos. Partly false and partly true the presumption that all the residents of the city live under the same sky, deal with the same traffic, walk in near-by streets makes irrelevant a further visual elaboration. This urban picture-making is not about the city as a map or as an itinerary or as an archive of urban plans but the city as the locus of *shared* personal experiences in the making that are considered part of the everyday, otherwise dull or uninspiring routine of dealing with the city. This picture making intends to reach out and share the internalised personal experiences that otherwise would slip unnoticed, unmarked and shapeless. As this paper claims, now it is possible for this kind of experiences to emerge and in doing so to reinforce, inaugurate or sculpt a collective emotional exchange concerning the resident and the city.



## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “This small dataset reflects a social environment and locations that I hopefully can recognize and where I expect to at least partly understand the meaning of the messages behind the posts.” Utekhin, Ilya. “Small data first: pictures from Instagram as an ethnographic source”. In *Russian Journal of Communication* 9. 2017. 7.

<sup>2</sup> “It has recently become more common to assert that digital media re-mediate existing spaces (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) that they are site-specific (McCarthy 2001) local as well as global and that virtuality is not opposed to material or physical practices.” Timmermans, Jeroen. “Playing with Others: The Identity Paradoxes of the Web as Social Network” 287.

<sup>3</sup> Photography in online networking is increasingly addressed as a performative everyday social practice, and as a communicative tool, a currency for social interaction. Sara Pargana Mota, “Memory, Selfhood and Sociality in the Age of Networked Photography” in *Past, Future and Change: Contemporary Analysis of Evolving Media Scapes*, 181.

<sup>4</sup> Facebook is an outstanding example of how WEB 2.0 applications hand users the tool to practice this mix that characterizes late modern identity of seriousness and frivolity. Timmermans, Jeroen. “Playing with Others: The Identity Paradoxes of the Web as Social Network.” 288.

<sup>5</sup> Social network sites allow a playful handling of photos, pictures and the moderation of them: they leave exuberant room for jokes, for the posting of funny messages or clips and the challenging and teasing of friends. Ibid. 289

<sup>6</sup> Valentina Rao has called applications such as Facebook “third place”. She claims that “The general mood in third places is playful and marked by frivolity, verbal wordplay and wit”. “Facebook Applications and playful mood: the construction of Facebook as a “third place””. Valentina Rao, 2008. 2.

<sup>7</sup> “The growing interest of corporate media for Internet-based forms of communication is in fact the reflection of the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication. It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.” Castells Manuel, *Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society*, International Journal of Communication 1, 248.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/instagram-statistics/> <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/facebook-statistics/> Accessed 18/5/2021.

<sup>9</sup> “Never before have so many individuals, with a growing digital and visual literacy, been able to distribute content to so many others, participate and interact visually with the surrounding reality, and share their views and understandings of the world in which they live.” Sara Pargana Mota, “Memory, Selfhood and Sociality in the Age of Networked Photography” in *Past, Future and Change: Contemporary Analysis of Evolving Media Scapes*, 178.

<sup>10</sup> Keep, Dean. (2014). “The Liquid Aesthetic of the Cameraphone: Re-imagining photography in the mobile age”. *The Journal of Creative Technologies*. 130.

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<sup>11</sup> Nacher talks about “Networked media photography rather than just digital photography” Nacher Anna, Online Photography-media states of matter, 298. See also Alice Tifentale, Making Sense of the selfie: Digital image making and image sharing in Social Media, 47 and Larissa Hjorth and Jean Burgess, in Intimate Banalities “Intimate banalities: The emotional currency of shared camera phone images during the Queensland flood disaster”. 511.

<sup>12</sup> Manovich, Lev. “Subjects and Styles in Instagram Photography (Part 1)”. In *Instagram Book*, 2016. 17. Accessed 05/05/2020 on [manovich.net](http://manovich.net)

<sup>13</sup> The term “mass self-communication” is used by Manuel Castells to denote “the rise of a new form of socialized communication “ that is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many”. Castells Manuel, Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society, International Journal of Communication 1, 248.

<sup>14</sup> D’Aloia Adriano Parisi Francesco, Snapshot Culture: The Photographic Experience in the Post-Medium Age, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>17</sup> There are Facebook groups that focus on city buildings that residents, with various degrees of connoisseurship decide to take photos of, and post on Facebook. In such groups the location is important. Such cases are left outside from this study as they are motivated by determined aesthetic interests and urban planning worries.

<sup>18</sup> Snabo, Connie, Shanks, Michael. “Mobile Media Photography: New modes of engagement”. In *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography*. Mette, Sandbye, Jonas, Larsen (eds). Routledge, 2013. 235-240.

<sup>19</sup> De Certeau, p97 in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1988.

<sup>20</sup> De Certeau, σ98 in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1988

<sup>21</sup> Puolakka, Kalle, “On Habits and Functions in Everyday Aesthetics”. In *Contemporary aesthetics*, (Journal Archive). Vol. 16 , Article 7, 12.

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## Captions

**Figure1:** Instagram posts and their comments (Clockwise): our view is better than yours/#acropolis #sahara#dogsoninstagram#view#walkingwithmydog#Lycabettus#Athens#City#myCity |Behind the bushes simplicity is hidden (aplo=simple)/ #I\_Modestbars /I like it/ well tended, if anything | #athens#downtown#sweet#Sundays#citycorners | Pangrati(geotagging)/ my street | #sepia #exarheia #athens #downtown # athens #graffiti #skitsofrenis/ wow wow | Le citta invisibli.- I.C /abandoned places | athens Greece (geotagging) | athens Greece (geotagging) | Palaio Faliro (geotagging).

**Figure2:** Photos from Facebook accounts with the comments section included, clockwise: Athensville | ----- | Night Porter | In Athens, Greece | Meeting point/+++!/Cool | I looove to see empty roads (translated) | it was a nice walk tonight (translated) | timecapsule/ at Psiri, Athens | Haris, have you been to Halandri/I will come back to make it bold (translated) | ----- /beloved Pangrati/What are you doing here?/ Neighbourhood.

**Figure3:** Geotagging: Aavora [this is a city cinema] The city is burning #goldenhour #sunset (maker's commentary)

**Figure4:** Geotagging Athens, Greece. Third party comments: a-ma-zing.

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