THE CURRENCY OF VISIBILITY: VISUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND MEMORY ON INSTAGRAM

Abstract
Hashtagging allows Instagram users to articulate individual photographic identities and experiences to larger cultural movements and histories. Photographs are a key medium of digital-native communication. As such, the desire to hashtag a photographic experience on Instagram highlights the evolving nature not only of the visual subject but also of the digital photograph itself. This paper explores how hashtagging allows visual subjects to heterotopically organise their conflated lived and digital experience in both personal and public histories through the panoptic nature of the social network. The Instagram self is an identity constructed simultaneously through the images in the user’s profile and other hashtagged photographs. Each publicly viewable hashtagged photograph becomes part of an individual’s social visibility that also commodifies them, allowing users to barter for panoptic recognition in an exchange of goods – visibility for likes – in which hashtagged photographs affirm the user’s visual subjectivity. In contemporary remembrance culture, the formally ‘ephemeral gestures’ of public memory become integrated into the body of the event’s afterlife through a combination of the caption-like hashtag and the illogical nature of the photograph’s temporality. Furthermore, the additional illogical temporality of the always-here Internet draws attention to the constant re-colonisation of meaning. The nature of visual subjectivity requires the double sensation of seeing and being seen. Contemporary remembrance culture seeks to establish this ‘double-sighted’ construction of the subject as the means to construct the public space, an inherently heterotopic space. We can conceive of the personal Instagram profile as a modern heterotopic museum in a non-place and non-time. Through photographs’ heterotopic nature, with their amnesia of time and space, not only do we archive ourselves but we also enter the archive of culture via hashtags.

Keywords
Instagram; digital photography; hashtag; identity; visual subjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Instagram app allows users to share and edit photographs. In order to participate in the Instagram community, the platform requires users to report “souvenirs of daily life” to the imagined community through the uploaded photograph. In exchange for posting images of daily life, the visual subject is produced through likes, comments,

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and reposts. On Instagram, we use photographs to trade for social recognition, hoping these posts collectively constitute a digital self, and through the hashtag (＃), allow users visibility within certain social groups. The social network’s insistence on self-reported images becomes something like a panoptic impulse on identity, one that is bound in the visual subject’s desire for visibility within imagined communities.

As a networked space, Instagram encourages a relational identity in the form of photographs. As digital memory objects, photographs are a user’s souvenirs, waiting for narrative re-inscription. One of the processes of inscription manifests in the form of the ＃. Of the many ＃s, ＃throwbackthursday (＃tbt) offers an opportunity to examine the complex and contradictory ways Instagram enables the construction of an archive and an imagined community while disrupting the temporalities more familiar to personal narrative.

The uploader is tasked to carefully select an image congruent with the tastes and desires of the larger imagined community. Every Instagram photo requires its uploader to consider audience and identity, but also encourages the user to enter the past. Users must shop their own digital photographs for an image congruent with the particular social identity presented not only on the uploader’s profile, but also within the archive of the ＃.

Moreover, the gesture of reporting images to the social network relates to a desire for admittance into a heterotopic museum of identity – a museum of so-called private memories turned into a public good. The hyperlink of the ＃ leads the individual user to integrate experience in the form of photographic language onto a digital site of public memory. Using theoretical lenses, we can examine the linguistic demand of ＃tbt and how this creates a museum of the self.

2. who am “i”?

Previous forms of personal photographic narratives followed milestone structures: birthdays, holidays, and special events. The gesture of ＃tbt challenges this temporal organization by actively requesting the integration of past images into other chronologically reported images. ＃Tbt works almost exclusively with what Andrew Hoskins terms “emergence” which is the process of “disrupt[ing], contradict[ing] and challeng[ing]” memories. Though Hoskins discusses this in the context of the citizen journalist, I believe this process also occurs in a user’s personal form of Instagram reporting.

Instagram exists in the strange temporality of the Internet, what I call the here-always. Contemporary remembrance culture requires “compulsive consumers of the past, shopping for that which best suits their particular sense of self at the moment”4. This is significant because it speaks to the way memory works – it is a process of muddling the already experienced past into the unknown abyss of the present.

Once limited to “ephemeral gestures of remembrance”, public memory evolved after 9/11 when digital memorial sites emerged5. Instead of being exclusively control-led by official channels, other users are responsible for the content. The “ephemeral gestures” of public memory find a more permanent footing on Instagram. A user’s past

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3 Ibid.: 405.
remains constantly accessible in a non-place and non-time due to the archival effect of the #.

However, the temporality of the Internet means that a photograph has the ability for virtually limitless interaction, even long after the death of the uploader. The visual subject remains alive in some capacity because that photograph is an act of memorialization, one that “enclose[s] in one place all time, all epochs, all forms…a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages”\(^6\). Absence no longer means oblivion.

The continued potential of audience and visibility means the event’s afterlife is always “nesting”, waiting for the moment in time where it will be re-colonized by written language.

The appeal of Instagram is more than the affirmation of visual subjectivity. By trading nostalgic photographs of a fictionalized past, a user’s cohesive and preserved identity emerges in a heterotopic space, shielded from death, decay, and disease. It is an immortality project, a structure or apparatus of identity that withstands the absence of the uploader. The potential for visibility within the touring of the # archive allows the user to become limitless, to feel eternal, even if this attempt is yet another cultural myth. Of course, the very idea of emergence troubles the landscape of the archive. Reinscribed meaning of the past seems to be at odds with the permanence suggested by the archive. However, if we view the entrance into the archive as a means of narratively asserting identity, then we can, perhaps, also acknowledge the ultimately failure of all immortality projects.

Digital natives are increasingly comfortable with acknowledging the multiple identities housed in one body. One profile may feature a spread of hashtagged photographs that reflect the tendencies and aesthetic values of multiple imagined communities, reaffirming the way Instagram users shop photographs to present the desired public self. A private self is impossible, a construct invented to give order to a fragmented existence. Moreover, it is this fragmentary truth that may spur our desire to install apparatuses that seem to yield visibility and stability.

Much like the 20\(^{th}\) century family photo albums, Instagram’s digital archive validates visual subjectivity while simultaneously presenting an identity not concerned with the linearity of time. Moreover, the #’s cultural archiving effect elucidates how these posted photographs are social identities. Gestures like #tbt account for the social co-authoring of identity and how the simple act of uploading and hashtagging these photographs satisfies the desire of the visual subject to be here-always.

### 3. detached past

#Tbt highlights the ways we “reassure ourselves the trunk of our present life tree has historical roots and future branches” by reinserting already navigated stories\(^8\). These memory objects best reflect a user’s current reality relationship allowing users to beco-


me visible in their personal profile as well as within the wider archive. The temporally shielded self exists in both narrative instances. 

#Tbt demonstrates how people browse the “desired past” for the “vivid and exciting” pleasures and pitfalls “already dealt with”. It represents the ‘nesting’ future of all photographs. All memory work is a reproduction, and is subject to revisionary tactics. The imagined community can continually shape the event’s afterlife. On Instagram, the event’s afterlife can be made more (or less) important in the process of reporting the photograph to the Instagram community. The past is revised – the photograph takes on a new meaning and the user may even create a new identity by refashioning the past. To remain validated and visible, users must shop past images in order to be born into the present and preserved in the future. The meaning of any photographed event becomes lost in a sea of ever-changing signifiers.

Like formally commissioned museums, #tbt spatially (in this case, digitally) confines images from various times and geographies into one location. Here, objects in a formal museum and the publicly constructed # archive exist in the very temporality of the photograph “the here-now and the there-then”. Similar to the traditional museum, the # archive seeks to shelter the user from time’s decay by inserting the image into a non-place divorced from the linear march of time.

The idea of memory as an “amalgamation of preservation and creation” seems particularly useful when discussing the role of #tbt. Already a nostalgic gesture, the imagined community of #tbt dictates its terms of admittance: recolonization of the past to make sense of the present. While more traditional forms of photographic reporting, such as the photo album of the 20th century, placed pressure on an individual to construct narratives, the hyperlink # invites the imagined community in an individual user’s self-performance. Due to the networked nature of Instagram, the social co-creation of the self is heightened.

By examining #tbt, we begin to understand how Instagram requires users to rummage through their past, re-colonize the photographic signifier’s meaning within a user’s own history, and re-present that photograph for insertion into public memory. The casual demand of ‘throwback’ insinuates a retrieval of the past, calling attention to the relationship of #s and photographs on the Instagram network. Though #tbt is just one example of the nostalgic narrative creation on Instagram, it highlights the user’s invested interest in continuous reinvention through the act of archival presentation.

An Instagram profile is a text that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by culture – meaning an individual does not solely author identity. Instead, the narrative of a person unfolds and functions on Instagram like “a tissue of citations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” However, this “tissue” is a carefully constructed social entity because of the panoptic demand the social network places on identity. The Instagram self is curated – meant to represent an identity congruent with the societal parameters of the imagined community associated with that particular #.

By placing a # beneath a photograph, I, as an Instagram user, ask other members of the immediate imagined community (my followers) and the larger imagined commu-

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nity (people ‘shopping’ the # archive) to validate my position in the community, asking them to ‘see’ me through a convergence of written and visual signifiers. I enter culture through the #, ask to place my personal (but never private) experience in the archive of public memory.

The instant a like or comment comes from the imagined community, my visual subjectivity is satisfied. I am absorbed, turned into a consumable good because my selfhood is a co-creation. I report images congruent with the identity I assume. On Instagram, my present first person experience is narrated from a third person perspective, an act committed from the moment the photograph is snapped since all photographs provide a maddening “dissociation of identity”\(^\text{13}\).

Furthermore, the act of liking and commenting affirms the worth of an individual’s narrative – there is something present in the photograph that deserves memorialization. This not only reinforces the visual subject, but also due to the social validation, encourages the user to continue the process of emergence through the palimpsest significance of older photographs. The social exchange – likes for visibility – reinforces the legitimacy of the user’s memories and personal narrative. The western user has made daily life a celebration/event/memorial. So the movement of photographs, #, and Instagram is akin to the desire to preserve daily experiences in a heterotopia, one liberated from the linearity of time and divorced from the official memory of events. It is in this way that daily life becomes the main source of identity sustenance for Instagram users. Daily life is the event and subject of public memory.