Reading Between the Pixels:

Looking at the Change of Meaning Through Digitization

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*Introduction*

A pixel (picture element) is the smallest unit of a picture that can be represented, and each pixel has its own specific address. Where does this pixel exist in our universe? Can we visit it on a Sunday afternoon? Yes. In fact, we can visit a pixel at any moment in time, but only if we put our mind to it. The reasoning behind this is that the existence of each spec in this world only exists if we give it meaning. This meaning breathes life into the specs and creates a unique identity – a specific address we can locate and connect to.

In the literature, the transfer from the real world to the online world creates a void in meaning and causes an imbalance in identity (Getto, Cushman, & Ghosh, 2011; Hogan, 2010; Mills, 2011; Rigney, 2010; Van House, 2011). Whether it is textual or visual, an authentic meaning cannot be digitized identically because of one main feature: experience. Looking at the narrative, the photography, and social media, the discussion will show the differences in experience between online and real-world, but also ways to read between the pixels.

*The Narrative*

All societies began with an oral culture that relied on the transmission of stories throughout a community in order to survive. As a result, generations were able to construct meaning and keep what was important to them through memory and storytelling. Then, writing began to take the place of storytelling. There was never a complete departure from oral, but people did not need to depend on it to keep history and knowledge. The move to print also allowed more freedom for interpretation of meaning and people were able to connect to narratives the exact way they wanted to. When technology entered society, it was convenient to place the narratives online. There were positive aspects to this, like increasing access to stories and sharing culture. However, a digitized narrative became a transferred piece of work – a collection of pixels. It can be easily stored and forgotten. It can be opened and glossed over, and then recycled. The experience of a digital narrative encourages the idea of collecting and compiling narratives, rather than collective sharing. When sharing does exist it is often in the form of a forward or a link; sharing and storytelling is no longer an experience that is personal and unique. When this happens, a reader does not appreciate the experience as much and it becomes just another piece to read on the Internet. Authentic narratives are also difficult to find and the search seldom leads to an authentic source. This threatens the identity of a narrative, as its true voice may not be heard. Readers need to consider these points when using digital narratives. They need to ask themselves the purpose of putting such a narrative in digital form. They also need to question what has changed as a result, because “the concepts change their meaning as a result of being applied and even as a result of the very complexities they have helped bring to light” (Rigney, 2010, p.103). The reader must look at a digital narrative with caution because the identity is fragile. To find its identity, the reader must piece the meaning together – both its original form and the personal interpretation. Readers must understand that a digital narrative is a piece of history that binds all humans together. It stands alone as a source of knowledge. It also represents more meaning than what we can interpret. A digital narrative requires a will to find these meanings or they will be a lost address without any visitors.

*The Photograph*

The photograph has created an opportunity to capture any moment in human history. It also created an opportunity to remember when the mind could no longer. Hours could be spent over a spilled box of photographs and moments could be relived with each flip of a photo. Photographs also hold physical identities that become part of a family as “[p]hotographs are often treated as extensions of the people represented. Displays are sometimes arranged to reflect the relationships among the people represented” (Van House, 2011, p.131) – misplacing them meant lost years and an emptiness that new photos could not ever replace. It was time that could not be regained nor recaptured. Culturally, the photograph holds prominence as Bourdieu (1999) argued that “family photography ‘reinforc[es] the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense it has both of itself and its unity…a ritual of the domestic cult’” (Van House, 2011, p.126). Passed from generation to generation, a photograph often housed various fingerprints, fine crease lines, and a (sometimes scribbled) date of time of birth, as “people often write annotations on the back or even the front of the photograph, which are then inseparable from the image” (Van House, 2011, p.128). A ripped photograph in the trash often meant a break in relation or disowning of existence; “[p]hotographic prints and their presentational forms (e.g. albums and frames) have been studied as social and cultural objects from the perspectives of material culture, cultural anthropology and cultural geography. As tactile objects, they have an emotional and sensory impact beyond that of their content” (Van House, 2011, p.126). Therefore, we connect to photographs as part of our cultural being. When technology entered into society and printed work soon transferred over to a digital format, the visual soon followed and photographs were found spread through the Internet and internal hard drives. However, like the narrative, the photo does not transfer seamlessly either. The digitization of photographs has created a new and efficient way of storing photos but it changes the way we experience the photograph: “[e]ven when children reproduce content using a different sign-system [like a digitized photo], there is potential for generative and reflective thinking. This is because text users create new connections between multiple modes” (Mills, 2011, p.60). These new connections show the discrepancy between a photograph and a digitized photograph; “[t]his tension invites learners to invent a way to cross this gap by engaging in both evaluative and generative thinking” (Mills, 2011, p.61). This thinking reveals that a digitized photograph is an imitation and not a replication of the original; it is not the same authentic picture. It cannot hold the same identity, as the photographs are uploaded and sifted through. Instead, the photographs become a blur and it is difficult to differentiate between IMG\_0257 and IMG\_0258. The jpegs are also easily lost and forgotten in small camera disks or computer files, and the bytes do not hold a physical presence in one’s life. The digital photo does not age and become more memorable through time, as a finger-printed, edges-curled, sun-tinted photo does. It does not grow with the owner, just like their stories help to shape the owner, as they “carry physical traces of their social lives. Their meaning is constructed by their content but also by their archiving and display as well as the stories told around and with them” (Van House, 2011, p.126). The digital owner cannot grip on to the photo, idolize it in a single wooden frame, and press the faces of the people that give the photo identity. Some may argue that a digitized photo could technically do many of these features, but the experience is completely different; “it was recognised that each digital interface is more than a simple tool for sign-making, akin to a pencil or paintbrush. Theorists of semiotics have conceptualised digital technologies as mediating tools” (Mills, 2011, p.62). The mediated digital message is not authentic, and it can never be, unless the photos are printed, held, and cherished the same because “digital files lack the perception of solidity and the casual durability of paper that goes with paper. While few of our younger participants printed images, participants often described prints as more solid, more ‘real’” (Van House, 2011, p.129). Technology has given new ways to experience photography, and sharing has been easier with uploads and forwards. The photo can live digitally, but intimate connection with its owner is different: “Holding onto ownership of images has become a challenge” (Van House, 2011, p.128). As a result, the digital photo takes on a different identity that is often more shared than cherished.

*Social Media*

The way we connect to people has always been an important part of human life. From dinner tables to park benches, communication has what strung us together and woven us into a society. The experience of sitting next to someone and seeing an instant reaction during a conversation is an experience all together. It creates authenticity to the things we say and the way we feel when we are with someone. It creates meaning for our own existences and opportunities for us to share them. For example, learning how to cook with grandma and sharing stories and advice while elbow deep in flour is an experience that ends up tasting even better than the food itself. It is a unique moment that cannot be relived the same even when repeated step-by-step, ingredient-by-ingredient. When technology entered society, like the narrative and the photograph, it became efficient to begin connecting online using both visuals and text. Social media has allowed people to see each other grow and change with a few clicks of the keyboard: “[b]y making visible both one’s own and other people’s public representations of online activity, including photographs, social networking potentially increases the citationality of people’s online activity, re-iterating social norms and formations” (Van House, 2011, p.131). However, how much of the experience the same? How much of it is authentic? Despite the experience being automatic and updated within nanoseconds, it differs to a greater extent than some may see. Social media does not allow for the natural occurrences that happen during face-to-face. It allows people to edit themselves and their lives as they wish, which takes away the authenticity of the experience: “many treated their online images as expressions of their viewpoint and aesthetics” (Van House, 2011, p.131). Instead of communicating with people, we are only interacting with a part of them – the part they want to project to the world. Instead, we impart feelings through emoticons and LOLs that lack the glint of smiling eyes or the deep chuckle of a hearty laugh. We also lose our privacy when we digitize our interactions, as the “Post” and “Send” button publicizes ourselves and, if not, permanently records what we say. Our thoughts become unsafe with third party audiences: “[w]hereas printed images and negatives are under the control of the owner, digital photographs have slipped the bounds of materiality and may have a life of their own outside the control of their makers. Sites such as Flickr are explicitly designed to make accessible images by one’s intimates and acquaintances and even strangers” (Van House, 2011, p.128). At the same time, we may ourselves regret the things we type and meanings become misconstrued. A sentence may be interpreted as an insult or showing resentment. This miscommunication can lead to an “unfriend” and suddenly social media has destroyed communication and possibly unraveled the thread that once connected people. Meaning can take on different meanings with social media, and it can inspire new relationships and connections. However, meaning is different when it is communicated side-by-side or face-to-face, and media cannot socialize the authenticity of this in Web 2.0.

*Conclusion*

The narrative, the photograph, and social media have shown how meaning changes when it is digitized through these mediums. Sometimes it is a meaning that is completely different, or it can be meaning that has altered into a slightly different form with alternative meanings attached to it. In either case, new identities form and this reminds us to re-evaluate the meaning we get from digital representations in order attempt to re-conceptualize the experience. Despite not being able to experience meaning in its original form, we can still enjoy the new experiences for what they can offer us whether through text, visuals, or online interaction. The technology today has not yet brought us to a state where we can rely on pixels completely for our interactions and meaning-making, as it is still essential to preserve the human experience that is most authentic, most gritty, and most at the root of our experience – the most real and meaningful address that we can always visit.

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