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Camera Phone and Photography Among French Young Users

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Abstract

The cell phone now being firmly established among French young people (voice/SMS), what are the uses of the camera phone? Is a radical transformation of the social function of photography taking place that would entail a specificity of the uses of the cell phone device? Unquestionably, those everyday life photos, more spontaneous, more intimate and emotional too, are user-generated content that take part in the construction of personal and social identity in real time – it can indeed be noted that temporality in the act of taking pictures has changed. However, most of what used to be at stake in traditional photography is still important, for instance the issue of the trace, of the authentication and evidence of the past reality. But a new question arises: could it be that those pictures are less worthy of becoming images? Are they more precarious? For two constraints remain: one is economic, the other one is technical. What young people do, therefore, is set up a real rationality of the uses in order to arbitrate between the various devices available. The manufacturers/carriers' wish to have the cell phone become the one and ultimate device does not seem to have been fulfilled in France as yet. The methodology applied is combined: one quantitative part contains a survey including short descriptions of almost 500 photos, and one qualitative part, which is based on semi-directive interviews among 20 persons between 18 and 24 years about their uses of camera phones compared with those of digital cameras.

Keywords

Camera phone – Mobile phone – Photography – Pictures – Mobile images – Sociability – French young users – semi-directive interviews.

1 Introduction

The cell phone has a special place within ICT's (Information and Communication Technologies), with an equipment rate that has soared, in hardly ten years, from 10 to 80% of the French population. Various explanations can be put forward to explain such a success. Within the context of the sociology of uses and the sociology of the family, we have brought out several categories of voice/SMS uses, among teenagers as well as among their parents (Martin, 2007a). Teenagers use the cell phone, first of all, as a mediation tool with friends. It is also a means of expressing identity and developing autonomy, its logic of uses being part of the general process of individualization at work in contemporary families. It is, finally, a personal and personalized object that can somehow become a part of its owner, an embedded object. And young people, especially girls, enjoy using it. In June 2008, 99% of the 18 to 24-year-olds, and 76% of the 12-to-17-year-olds

are equipped². Towards the end of year 2000, the first camera phones appeared. It is the ensuing merging of the cell phone, a communication and broadcasting tool, with the camera, a recording tool, that we are going to examine to try and understand the new social uses of camera phone photography among young people. It is therefore necessary for us, at first, to go back over what is at stake when people do and use photography. It should be stressed, to begin with, that photography as a hobby has developed along with the general increase of other amateur-practising types of activities (Donnat, 2003). According to the CREDOC³ in 2002, 81% of French people do photography as a hobby, and this has spread throughout all age groups, especially among the young (in 2002, 93% of those under 25 do photography, compared with 71% in 1989). Then, within hardly ten years (1997-2007), the very same years when the cell phone settled in France, digital photography replaced traditional photography: their respective sales curves are symmetrically opposed and, in 2007, two thirds of the French households owned a DC⁴ (digital camera). So much for statistics. As for practices, Pierre Bourdieu *et al.* (1965) showed, more than 40 years ago already, that the social function of photography consists “mainly in recording and hoarding up ‘memories’ of things, people or events socially marked out as important” (*op. cit.*, p. 39). And so it seems that “most of the time the practice of photography exists and goes on mainly because of its function within the family context or, more precisely, through the function bestowed upon it by the family group, which consists in solemnizing and immortalizing the great hours of family life – or, in short, in strengthening the cohesion of the family group by reasserting its perception of itself as a whole” (*op. cit.*, p. 39). Now a number of questions arise: how have those practices evolved, chronologically, first – that is, within the general sociological evolution of modern families (individualization at work) – secondly, with the young now practising massively, and, finally, with the coming into use of that new device, the camera phone? In what ways can that embedded and therefore constantly available artefact change those practices? What will those young people choose as their favourite themes, when do they take pictures, on what occasions? Will the general increase of amateur photography and the rising number of the opportunities to take a picture – with the sense of spontaneity that the camera phone undoubtedly encourages – be enough to radically transform the social function of photography? Is this very function losing its highly ritualized, almost sacred character? In the same way, the constant availability of those digital pictures (always at hand in the memory of the artefact), as well as their circulation within sociability networks, are essential aspects to be examined when dealing with youngsters. What new status do those digital pictures acquire in such a context? Could it be that they become even more

² Credoc, 2008, *The diffusion of ICT in French society*, CGTI (General Council of ICT's)/Arcep (electronic communication regulation authority), available at www.arcep.fr. Credoc is the Research Center for the Study of Living Conditions).

³ A survey ordered by the API, an association for the promotion of images, summary available at www.sippec.fr, the SIPEC being the union for companies dealing with pictures, photography and communication.

⁴ Among which 1 out of 5 owns more than one DC. From now on we will be using DC for “digital camera”, as opposed to “camera phone”.

precarious? Whereas Pierre Bourdieu regards photography as a way of transforming reality – since it is highly coded and codified⁵ (Dubois, 1990) – Roland Barthes (1980), in *La chambre Claire: note sur la photographie*, offers another perspective, in which photography becomes a trace of reality. What is most important indeed, in such a perspective, is the overwhelming feeling of evidence provided by photography, with its famous “That-has-been” acting as proof of a past reality whose existence it testifies to, and which makes photography, by essence (because it is mechanically generated, *i.e.* the imprint resulting from a physico-chemical process), “a message without a code”. Yet, of course, it will be coded and codified later, when received. From its production to its reception: Philippe Dubois (1990) lays as a basic fact the impossibility to think out a photograph without considering whatever action calls it into existence. Any photo is “consubstantially an action-picture, it being understood that the word ‘action’ here doesn’t merely stand for the very gesture that actually *produces* the picture (when the photo is taken), but can also include the action of *receiving* and that of *contemplating* it [italics his]” (*op. cit.*, p. 10). We thought it extremely important, therefore, to think out those pictures all along the whole process of photography – from posing and shooting to storing, contemplating, showing, and, finally, circulating and sharing them within sociability networks. Of course, Philippe Dubois’s analysis of this process originally applied to traditional photography, but we chose to believe that, for this very reason, his analysis would help us make out the changes brought about by camera phone photography (and more generally by digital photography), in relation to temporality especially.

We have used combined methodology: at first, 252 questionnaires were dealt to bachelor year 1 and bachelor year 2 marketing students and to bachelor year 3 information and communication students (80% of them are 18 to 21, 60% of them are female). This sample does not claim to be of any statistical value; it aimed, first of all, at collecting names and phone numbers for the next stage of our investigation. Some of the questions nevertheless could be used from a qualitative point of view. The qualitative stage then was based on 20 semi directive 60 minute-interviews about the uses of digital camera (DC)/camera phone photography and video. And, finally, we were able to make use of some elements from an August 2007 TNS Sofrès survey⁶. We will at first examine the changes in the social function of camera phone photography – that is to say the specificity or non specificity of its social uses – by analyzing each stage of the process of photography, using digital camera photography as another point of comparison. We will thus explore and question the commonly held hypothesis that those pictures are ‘precarious’ pictures. Our second part will deal with the rationality of the uses. Then

⁵ After the first doctrine, the mimesis, which, from the very start of the XIXth century, saw photography as a true reflection of reality

⁶ Survey ordered by the AFOM (association of French mobile carriers). We would like to express our special thanks to Eric de Branche, communication manager, for allowing us to use data. Thanks to Laurence Bedeau, too, group manager at TNS Sofrès. This survey comes after another one entitled “The mobile phone today. Uses and social behaviours, 2nd edition, June 2007” carried out for the AFOM by Joëlle Menrath and Anne Jarrigeon, available at www.afom.fr

in the third part we will evoke some of the most outstanding characteristics of those circulating pictures, studying self-staging videos more particularly.

2 A RADICAL CHANGE IN THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY?

We must start from this unquestionable fact: camera phone photography is a mass practice among the young. According to TNS Sofrès, 74% of those between 18 and 24 are concerned, and in our sample the figure goes up to 95%, among which 70% do it from 1 to 5 times a week (i.e. less than once a day). It is well under the number of SMS sent, which is between 30 and 48 a week⁷. We are now going to examine the successive stages in the process of photography, that is to say what is at stake in the issue of the memory, at first, and then in the shooting, posing, contemplating and showing, keeping and storing of those pictures, and their circulation and sharing. But let us start with the themes: what do they shoot?

2.1 Friends come first

The respondents in the TNS Sofrès survey were asked to evoke the various themes in their photos through a multiple-choice questionnaire. The “portraits or a group portraits (including family photos)” category comes easily first, ticked by 81% of the respondents – but no distinction is made here between family and friends. As for us, we asked the students to describe in detail the two photos they like best on their camera phone. We were thus able to collect a sample of 484 photos that we classified according to their subjects, and it turns out that “my friends”, “me and my friends”, “my boyfriend/girlfriend” and “my boyfriend/girlfriend and me” put together represent 50% of the favourite pictures. “Family” comes second, with nearly 20%. It is also to be noticed that the respondents themselves appear on one third of their favourite photos. A striking change has obviously taken place since Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of the practice of photography. First, there has been a general increase of photography as a practice (*cf.* above): it is more intensive, and has expanded beyond special occasion photography⁸ as described by Bourdieu (1965). Secondly, the individualization process at work in contemporary families (brought to light by the sociology of the family), together with the secularization of private/family events, have transformed the way people see and take pictures. Irène Jonas (2008) shows how family portraits have evolved toward more and more “naturalness”: what we may call “affective” photos (those seeking to create and share intimate and authentic moments⁹) have become just as important as more “traditional” pictures. This evolution is also deeply connected with technological evolution, that is to say with the appearance of digital

⁷ Credoc, 2008: 30 SMS a week for the young of 18-24 years old and 48 SMS a week for the 12-17 years old.

⁸ A majority (55%) of the favourite photos are what could be called “everyday” pictures, while 20% were taken during parties, 15% on holidays and 10% for family events.

⁹ In the same way, the representation of children (who have now acquired the status of fully-fledged individuals) has become central.

photography (for instance, more and more pictures are taken: 4 or 5 times as many as with traditional cameras, (Jonas, 2008). With the portable phone used as a personal object and autonomy tool by teenagers (Martin, 2007a), the individualization of photography practices¹⁰ has reached its logical outcome: it is therefore not surprising that friends and acquaintances come first in those young students' favourite themes, although such an evolution is unquestionably a real one, considering the other uses they make of the mobile phone. Another and last change is the appearance of the comic, that is to say of humorous or even burlesque situations, spectacularly staged and often gag-like, in a great number of pictures (even more so in videos, *cf.* below): we are now far away from the posed situations described by Pierre Bourdieu (1965), in which the individuals were dressed in their social clothes. The evolution toward less formal and less ritualized photos is undeniable. Yet there are two things we must not disregard. First, the fact that, along with everyday commonplace pictures, some of those friends-related pictures still act as a sort of consecration of friendly sociability, not a solemn one of course, but a consecration nevertheless. Let us listen to Lauriane describing the photos in her portable phone: “*the party celebrating the end of academic year*”, or “*my first romantic week-end with my boyfriend in Disneyland*”. Then, the fact that the family has not completely disappeared, far from it. Clara, among others, evokes one of her two favourite photos: “*a family gathering with several generations sitting round a table*”. All those events, although secular, can be considered as socially important since they still provide benchmarks both for friend life and family life. And it is important to have them on pictures so that a trace of them can be preserved.

2.2 The memory, the trace

“In short, the referent adheres”, says Roland Barthes (1980, p. 18), and the *noema* of the photograph, its essence, is nothing but the famous “That-has-been” (*op. cit.*, p. 120), like an emanation from past reality – thus acting as an evidence of reality as much as an evidence of the past. It becomes obvious here that the power to authenticate, the assertion of existence, the trace, as it were, prevails over representation – which allows Barthes to state that a photograph is “a message without a code” (even if, subsequently, symbolization does take place, of course). As for Philippe Dubois (1990), he shows that a photo, as a sign, falls within the category of the index (such as defined in Ch. Peirce’s semiotics), since the index is physically connected with the referent (i.e., in traditional photography, the physico-chemical imprint)¹¹. The photo therefore becomes a proof of existence, and does so within the pragmatic register. We are told that the main evolution brought about by digital photography is that one can have immediate access to the pictures (they appear on the screen as soon as taken¹²): its power of representation directly serves reality and thereby is part of its construction; the three key-

¹⁰ The growing phenomenon of families owning several DC also contributes to individualization.

¹¹ Whereas it is through likeness that the icon is related to the referent, the way the symbol relates to the referent is defined through general convention.

¹² It must not be forgotten, though, that the Polaroid camera, the first instant-print photcamera, appeared as soon as the middle of the XXth century in the USA.

moments, event/capture/reception, become one (Jonas, 2008; Rivière, 2005). This is true indeed, and yet, even though those digital pictures are immediately available, the issue of the trace and the past seemed to definitely strike a deep chord in the respondents: whether in their answers to the questionnaire or in the interviews, they all evoked, like a leitmotiv, their desire to “keep a trace” of this or that event in their lives. And while talking about camera phone pictures they would often end up talking about those they take with their DC, no longer distinguishing between the two things. For instance, Aurélien says that “*what it’s really all about is helping memory to remember*”- quite a nice phrase... For Arnaud, nicknamed “the paparazzi” by his friends because he is a compulsive “shooter” (with his phone as well as his DC):

You could say that, if you only go through it once, the event is just OK, but at the same time you take pictures, so it’s kind of cool, you can recall it several times afterward, so you go through it again two or three or four times and then you really have the feeling of going through it, whereas if you only go through it once (he insists), and you don’t take any pictures, then, with years going by, well, it just sort of fades away...

“It just sort of fades away...” confirms the index-like quality of the photo: the physical connection between the event/referent and the picture appears clearly. Without the picture, indeed, the event will fade away, and therefore disappear, sinking into the past ineluctably. Therefore we can affirm that photos, even when digital and with no other material existence than the device itself, do work as “traces”. Merely by being contemplated, they allow the event to be gone through again and again, indefinitely (endlessly?), so that it won’t disappear, be wiped out by time. “The fact that photography can endlessly reproduce what ‘actually’ happened only once and will never happen again brings out what is particular and contingent” (Macmillan, 2008, p. 43). What we can see at work here is the pleasure principle, within and through repetition, completely cut off from reality – which allows one to dodge the unpleasant issues of death and the passing of time. “Enjoyment comes through pictures: this is the great change”, says Roland Barthes (1980, p. 182). Those pictures are taken to share the present moment, therefore, but also in anticipation of the pleasure they will provide later on by allowing the viewers to look back into the past. But let’s go back to the shooting and the posing.

2.3 The shooting, the posing

The cell phone often truly becomes part of its owner (Martin, 2007b), an embedded object that is always at hand and that its owner almost never parts with. This is why we all tend to think it will encourage spontaneity in the shooting. In the evolution of family portraits such as described by Irène Jonas (2008), “real life” pictures, showing unique moments of spontaneity and authenticity, already tend to replace posed pictures such as described by Bourdieu (1965). We could even add that this very issue of the singularity, or the uniqueness, of the moment, is not a new one, it has been recurring from the beginnings and throughout the history of photography. Doesn’t Walter Benjamin (1998) evoke the

desire shared by all photographers to take snapshots and capture the present moment? And this issue remains during the all history of the photography (Batchen, 2008). It is no surprise, therefore, that this way of talking about photography should still be very often found among a majority of our respondents, so much so that it even becomes a stereotype: they all mention the possibility afforded by the camera phone to photograph “real life”, “whenever the occasion is favourable”, thereby showing to what extent this “real life” shooting has become the new standard way of taking pictures. We could also imagine that the camera phone will contribute to an even greater increase of picture-taking opportunities. It probably will – yet traditional photography, as Philippe Dubois analyzed it, already encouraged what he called compulsive practice, whose power “stems from its initial connection with the referent situation” (1990, p. 80): a presence asserting absence, an absence asserting presence. And the moment of the shooting, makes that presence/absence issue especially palpable, with the ultimate paradox of the photographed object disappearing in that very moment¹³, when it is thus saved from disappearing (since the picture will become a memory, be a substitute for absence) through its very disappearance... Compulsive practices, therefore, turn out to be inherent to photography, and if they tend to increase nowadays the reason is to be found in digital technology rather than in the camera phone itself. Let us now analyze that other moment related to the shooting: the posing. Philippe Dubois (1990) refers to Medusa: all those whose eyes meet hers are instantly turned to stone. Thus things should be simplified: with real life pictures, in which the camera phone is supposed to make photography much more spontaneous, posing shouldn’t even be mentioned. Yet it is frequently mentioned by the respondents themselves, often when a comparison is made with videos: many of them find videos more lively, because of the very presence of sound, voice and movement. Nadia, for instance, says that “*a video conveys more emotions. A photo destroys emotions because it’s frozen*”. It seems that this idea of photos being frozen still affects digital photos. As for Lauriane, who describes herself as “*very keen on taking pictures*”, she explains how, during parties:

Everybody says I’m bothering them, because, yes, I often take pictures and I have to admit it does cut things off somehow -- you’re having fun and then “Stay still, I’m taking the picture!”

We have mentioned the evolution of family portraits towards more naturalness, as described by Irène Jonas (2008), who points out “the farewell to ‘Watch the birdie’” in all those new affective photos. It seems to us here that those real life pictures of spontaneous and authentic individuals are actually nothing else but a reflection of the new standards governing relationships within contemporary families: “Be yourself and be authentic” (however paradoxical, or even tiring, such an

¹³ Philippe Dubois (1990, p. 5) evokes the myth of Orpheus, who “can no longer stand it and, his resistance pressed by desire, finally breaks the taboo: taking all the risks, he turns to face his Eurydice, sees her, and in the very moment when his eyes recognize and catch her, she suddenly disappears. Thus any photo, as soon as taken, sends its object back into the dark kingdom of the dead, forever. *Dead for having been seen.*”

injunction to invent and develop oneself may be¹⁴). In short, what we can say is that if some real life party photos are indeed taken by those young people – stolen pictures of friend parties (often, as a matter of fact, under the influence of alcohol, *cf.* what we said above about the comic and spectacular dimension) – some also still resort to posing, whenever it is important to gather the whole group and immortalize the moment¹⁵. This shows how pregnant the issue of posing remains, in spite of the appearance of camera phone photography. But what happens next? What do young people do with those pictures?

2.4 Storing and preserving the photos

Only 22% of the youngsters (TNS Sofrès) store¹⁶ those pictures in their computers, and only 3% of them print them. During the interviews, it seemed that technical difficulties were massively the reason for this, since transferring the pictures from the phone into the computer remains a real problem. And in the case of those who have succeeded (through cables or Bluetooth), it is interesting to remark that they distinguish camera phone pictures from DC pictures in their classification, camera phone pictures being most often kept as such, in one “camera phone” file, without any specific order, while those taken with the DC are classified in files and sub-files, according to the event and the date. Can we say that, on the whole, technical constraint is the only factor at work here, or is there some sort of specificity behind those practices, with camera phone photos being taken with no filing intentions (Rivière, 2005), contrary to what Pierre Bourdieu (1965) had found out about traditional photography? Whatever the answer is, this paradox remains: some of the respondents suggested an impossibility to erase them, like Lauriane, who says:

It would feel like erasing a memory, maybe... I don't know, it's all in the mind.

It looks as if the referent adheres as much as ever. Within our little sample, we found out that the standard way consisted in transferring the photos into the computer as often as possible, but rarely in erasing them, except for less valued ones (*cf. infra*). Yet we can still wonder, with Irène Jonas (2008) what will become of those computer-stored pictures and what those people will do with them. Will they last just as long as the device (computer or phone)? And what will become of memory (which is the result of sorting out, classifying, selecting)? In any case, the disposed of/disposable pictures hypothesis seems quite an interesting one to be explored in the future. As for now, those photos remain in the camera phone and can therefore be contemplated and shown around.

¹⁴ *Cf.* Ehrenberg A.: *La fatigue d'être soi*, Paris: O. Jacob, 1998 [Tired of Being Onself, O. Jacob, 2008].

¹⁵ Observing people, in any tourist-attracting place, taking pictures of friend or family groups, is enough to realize that posing is still the norm - it being understood that such photos belong to the category of traditional pictures (such as analyzed by Bourdieu, 1965), along with more affective photos.

¹⁶ While hyper-storing (more than 60% of the photos taken, *cf.* API barometer 2007) is the norm with DC photos.

2.5 Contemplating and showing the photos

The cell phone being a very personal object and a self-reassuring tool (Martin, 2007a), the constant presence on oneself of one's photos in one's camera phone is obviously an important thing for the respondents: it provides reassurance and pleasure at the same time. Is it a sort of digital photo album¹⁷? Daisuke Okabe (2004) identifies a first kind of camera phone usage pattern that he calls "personal archiving", which constitutes a resource for personal identity construction. In our survey, young people indeed do look at their photos now and then (52% of our respondents), or often (25%), but, during the interviews, the pleasure they take in contemplating the pictures was always evoked as related to printed photos in an album, or sometimes to those that can be viewed on the computer, very seldom to those on the screen of the camera phone. For Roland Barthes "The photo in itself is not in the least moving [...], it moves me: which is what any adventure does" (1980, p. 39), and this happens because of the *punctum*, that stinging detail¹⁸. It is precisely that power of metonymical extension concentrated in the *punctum* that will restore the physical presence of the object/the person in the very picture. Now, it must be said that the poor quality of camera phone photos goes against them. This was a recurrent remark in all the interviews: although in technical terms they never go beyond the pixel explanation, the respondents complain about poor picture quality, using mere common sense arguments, like Arnaud: "*You just have to transfer them into the computer to see the difference !*". Amy Volda and Elizabeth D. Mynatt (2005) also evoke some usability complaints related to the bad quality of the camera phone photos. Therefore we shall lay the hypothesis that camera phone pictures have a sort of intrinsic flaw in them that makes them fail, as far as the *punctum* is concerned, to really affect the viewer's self. Let us listen to Cannelle:

Well, to me, it's not the same thing at all, I have no pleasure in looking at a camera phone photo, I can't say "Wow!", I really can't, because it's not good enough. I may look at it and say "OK, I understand what you're talking about, yeah, I can see what kind of place you live in", but I don't think I'd say "This is a splendid picture", no, never. [Question: Why? What is missing?] Well, it has to do with the size, the colours; it doesn't cause any click in me whatsoever, nothing that would make me think "Wow, this is a great picture!" Not with a camera phone picture, no way...

The "click": here Cannelle offers a splendid example of how the *punctum* works – that stinging detail generally absent from camera phone pictures. What is present, on the other hand, is the proof of existence – related to the authentication power of photography – that explains or shows that "*one was there*". Such a proof seems one of the basic motives for those 54% of the 18 to 24-year-olds (TNS

¹⁷ Digital photo albums sales have soared in the last few years.

¹⁸ As opposed to the *studium* – which evokes knowledge and culture – the *punctum* has to do with emotions "for *punctum* also means pinprick, little hole, little spot, little cut – and throw of the dice, too. The *punctum* of a photo is whatever in it chances to sting me (and wound me, and break my heart)" (Barthes, p. 49). "What the *punctum* of a photograph hits is the self of the viewer" (Macmillan, p. 41).

Sofrès) who show their photos to close relations – although to us it rather corresponds to the *studium* as described by Roland Barthes. And, though they do show their photos, close relations are but a small, not to say very small number of people. What is more, the respondents often say that if they do, it is because they are asked to, “*I show them if people ask me to*”: could this be prudish reserve on their part when being confronted with what we may call a form of extimity? Anyhow, this phenomenon seems to us, for the time being, much less important than the sudden emergence of portable phones (and private conversations) as a new social object into public space in the years 94-97 (Martin, 2008). Now, after evoking the showing around of the photos in face-to-face interactions¹⁹, it is time for us to study their remote circulation within social networks. A circulation which, at first, seems like a new dimension of those camera phone photos, and yet...

2.6 Sharing and circulating the photos

Barbara Scifo (2005) speaks about MMS as a gift. Like SMS, they are indeed affectionate winks that young people address to each other, meant to reassert the emotional bond by referring to a common past and providing the possibility to convey emotions in the very moment when they are felt, almost instantaneously. This endows those photos with the function of communicating and representing reality instantaneously (Rivière, 2005). This is exactly what Angélique talks about:

For example, my cousin and I were once crazy about ficus, because my aunt has one at home and we just love it, and it had that little “ficus forever” label on it that we found funny, so we scanned it and put it on our cars, it became a sort of slogan, our slogan. And a few months later I was a trainee for some time at the Regional Council and there was a ficus in my office, so I took a photo and sent it to her, just for fun, as a sort of reminder, you see...

We can clearly see complicity here, at work through an almost coded language. But an important economic constraint remains: Richard Ling (2008) asserts that the pricing of the service is a significant barrier to general use²⁰, and MMS are a “poor alternative”, which is only used by young people in situations where there is a need for immediacy. From his part, Daisuke Okabe (2004) describes a second kind of camera phone usage pattern that he calls “intimate sharing”, which creates a sense of “distributed co-presence” with close friends, family and loved ones who are not physically co-present. We can indeed agree but we also notice the photos are more shared in face-to-face interactions, by Bluetooth and we think that the photos taken with a DC circulate much more. With the computer – which remains at the centre – as a starting basis, various media intertwine, through e-

¹⁹ Julien Morel and Marc Relieu (2007) show how looking at those pictures can make conversation start (after one has picked up the other one’s camera phone on the table to take a look at his/her photos).

²⁰ In France, MMS are not a big success, since only 283 millions were sent in 2007, compared with 18.7 billion SMS, available at www.arcep.fr

mailing, blogs or internet Websites. What those young people want is precisely to share the pictures of shared moments, a party, for instance, or a holiday, as Charline explains:

From our holiday in Italy last year, we [2 couples of friends] brought back 1000 photos, so it is true we actually often have the same, with the four of us shooting the Leaning Tower of Pisa from the same angle, it's almost stupid somehow, but then you can store as many as you want and it costs nothing, so...

To us, this is where digital technology really changes things, since what people can do and try to do is to collect and possess everything (*cf.* above: hyper-storing “*costs nothing*”), that is to say all the photos, without exception, taken (with their DC) by those who were part of the event. So on the whole, now that we have examined all the moments in the action of photographing, drawing whatever final conclusion on the issue of the specificity or non specificity of the uses of camera phone pictures remains difficult. But let us go on and proceed with the comparison between camera phone photos and DC photos – a comparison made by young users themselves – and see how a real rationality of the uses is being set up.

3 A Real Rationality of the Uses

What first emerged as a major element from the interviews was the recurring remark made by the respondents about using their phones to take pictures only “*if I don't have my DC with me*”, “*temporarily*” – for which there can be many reasons (forgetting the DC, fearing that it might be stolen or broken or lost, etc.). Actually, it seems that the camera phone is used as a camera only by default²¹. The notion of a hierarchy can be made out in what the interviewers say. We may wonder, therefore, if it could be that those camera phone photos have less value. And if so, then why? Does it mean they are less worthy of becoming images? Or that they are acquiring a new status, as evoked in our disposed of/disposable pictures hypothesis? This issue probably holds quite a number of surprises in store for us, since we never heard such remarks made as far as voice/SMS uses of the cell phone were concerned: the respondents all mentioned the advantage of being reachable everywhere, all the time. What can actually be observed is the fact that every user sets up a real rationality of the uses with the various devices available, this rationality aiming at defining a general direction for practice and being the result of a personal analysis of all the criterions we have examined so far: picture quality, at first, depending on what one intends to do with them (store them in the computer or not), material constraints related to the object (size of the DC and therefore possibility/impossibility to carry it constantly²²), technical constraints (format compatibility), economic constraints (free e-mails *vs* expensive MMS; economic value of the phone *vs* that of the DC), etc. And such arbitration is not

²¹ More than two thirds of our 252 respondents own a personal DC.

²² Compact DC can also become part of their owners.

absolute. It is, on the contrary, relative, since it is constantly updated according to whatever other devices are available, and the criterions constantly re-examined. As Lauriane puts it:

The use of the cell phone depends on what other device is available.

Here is her story: a few years ago, for Christmas, she was offered a DC by her parents, and she used it, even though she now describes it as “*not fantastic, really, when there’s not enough light the pictures are horrible*”, but nevertheless “*better than the phone I had back then, which was the first camera phone to be found, in fact*”. So when it was time for her to buy a new mobile phone, she took the photo criterion very attentively into account, and that is how she came to use her camera phone to take pictures, somewhat neglecting her DC. Then she went to university – an important time in her life since it meant new important friendships (cf. the “*photos of end of academic year parties*” or “*the strike*”, two intense moments of her student life) – and met her “*boyfriend*” on campus, something she will later immortalize, since one of her favourite camera phone pictures is “*my first romantic week-end with my boyfriend in Disneyland*”. At that time she thought of offering her boyfriend a DC which of course takes much better pictures than her camera phone, and it very quickly turned out that she would become the main user of her boyfriend’s DC, always reminding him to take it with him whenever they went to a party. She admits she used her camera phone less and less, mainly because of technical reasons and the quality of the photos:

The problem with the camera phone is that it takes about 5 seconds before picture stabilizes, so it’s quite hard to get a sharp picture.

Her parents, having finally got the message (she never uses her old DC any more), have just offered her a new one which of course is better than anything she has had so far. We can easily imagine that she has dropped all her other devices and now only uses that new DC (“*so now I have it with me all the time*”) – which has truly become part of her by now. This particular case is meant to show how rationality of the uses sets in and can only be understood through considering other available devices as well as the user’s singular story. We may add that such usage rules can also be set to work within the group of friends. Let us listen to Lucile, who doesn’t own a DC herself, explaining why, in some specific situation, she did not think of using her camera phone:

Using the camera phone to shoot them [friend parties] just doesn’t occur to me, and then the viewfinder is so small, and you have to stand so far away just to have everybody in the frame [...]. As a matter of fact, some time ago we had a party, and I simply didn’t think of using my phone to take a picture, I mean... [question: why?] some of us had their DC, they think of taking it with them and using it, so knowing they will send us the photos, we don’t take pictures.

It is clear here that those usage rules are most often born from technical problems that have to do with the poor quality of camera phone pictures, especially when the photos are meant to be

preserved in order to remember some evening spent together. The photos taken with the DC are therefore those that will be important and will circulate, be exchanged and shared within the group of friends. The rationality of the uses therefore goes as far as taking into account elements from current situations and contexts such as related to the availability of other devices (and their characteristics) within the sociability network. Before reaching a conclusion, we have to briefly examine videos – but then why do it separately? Because, contrary to a “photo [which] stops movement” (Dubois, 1990, p. 173), video, like the cinema, is made of motion pictures and therefore allows narrativity to set in. And this is precisely where most new things are to be found, it seems to us, as far as uses are concerned.

4 Videos: Staging Oneself?

According to TNS Sofrès, more than 43% of the 18 to 24-year-olds make videos with their camera phone. Among our 252 students, 73% do so. And in the interviews, some said they liked video because it is more lively than frozen photographs. Let us listen to Floriane:

You can see reality, what really took place before and after, whereas a photo is frozen. ‘Cause a video may last a few minutes, which means nothing will be lost of that very moment you’re going through [...]. Video is closer to life, it allows you to go through the memory again and get as close to it as possible.

The issue of how to immortalize the memory is just as important here as it is with photography, but it seems that movements, duration, and, some will add, sound and voice, are what create that more lively, “*more expressive*” dimension (Romain) that “*conveys more emotions*” (Nadia). You can “*see reality*” (Emeline), which is no mean feat, and thereby get “*as close as possible*” to the memory. The tone here gets almost pompous, which shows how keen young people are on video. And the humorous dimension, that we have already spotted in photography, is almost consubstantial here with the forming of such slices of life. That is, on the one hand, parties between friends, very often on the “school-kid pranks” mode:

Very funny, with everybody singing, we all were slightly drunk (Caroline). A completely drunk friend who falls off his chair while crying with laughter (Emilien)

Also in this category, are the videos of various feats, in which risk, of course, plays an important part²³. On the other hand, real staging and directing can be found, that nevertheless often pretends to be improvisations. Most of them are sketches, in which parody plays an important part.

²³ Cf. the works of David Le Breton, particularly: “Between Jackass and happy slapping, an erasing of shame”, *Adolescences*, 2007, n°61, 3. But our respondents are way off happy slapping.

The wildlife report I made on the Island of the Saulcy [campus] about the copulation of ducks. An incongruous scene caught in the act that deserved a little video with National Geographic-style commentaries.

Young people themselves are very often part of it, subject/object of such staging. Can we say that this is self-staging continuing reality TV shows? (Rivière, 2005). The comparison might be extreme – we shall have to keep an eye on the evolution of such a trend. However, after evoking those new dimensions of videos, we would like to make a few remarks on the limits that remain (thereby showing we are here in the middle of an unfinished process). On the one hand, those videos are still few. This is confirmed by the TNS Sofrès survey, since half of those who carry videos in their camera phones actually own less than five. On the other hand, camera phone videos are not that much circulated. Here again, the technical aspect prevails, as it is the case with photos: which accounts for the fact that concert videos – the most likely type of videos to be broadcast on Youtube or Dailymotion – will rarely be shot with a camera phone, the respondents say, because of poor quality... sound²⁴.

From all this, it follows that even though camera phone photography is indeed a massive practice among the young, we must avoid drawing hasty conclusions about the specificity of the uses, keeping in mind the fact that we face with a long use-forming process. Koskinen and Kurvinen (2002), in one of the first surveys of mobile phone photos, published in 2002, speak of practices “repeating traditional practices”. Amy Vaida and Elizabeth D. Mynatt (2005) also notice the existence of inertial forces: in general, their participants just wanted to take the same kind of photos they had always taken²⁵. Daisuke Okabe (2004) whereas concludes that the function of the camera has shifted, by embodying the characteristics of the mobile phone as a “personal, portable, pedestrian” device. From our own survey, we can conclude that those photos are not all as spontaneous or ‘real life’ as one might have thought at first, and often do raise the issue of the memory and the trace. Of course, young people’s themes unquestionably focus more on friendly sociability, including when they aim at sharing the present moment, but the family sphere is not absent for all that. It seems important to them to have those photos constantly at hand, but the pleasure they have in contemplating them on the phone itself is weakened by the flaw that characterizes those pictures as far as the *punctum* is concerned; and, finally, those photos circulate much less than DC photos and, above all, tend to acquire a precarious, not to say ephemeral, status – since they seem destined to last just as long as the artefact. That is why it seems obvious to us that a transformation of the social function of photography toward less ritualized and formal picture taking is indeed taking place – but to us such an evolution is much more the result of digital technology than of the camera phone itself. It would be easier, in any case, to say

²⁴ And whenever they are, they will be shown around to close relations to say “I was there”, *cf. supra*.

²⁵ Nearly two-thirds of the participants’ photos were of classic ‘Kodak Culture’ subjects.

that there is a sort of continuum from camera phone to DC, in which a complex series of likenesses and differences interplay throughout the whole process of picture taking. Real dialectic tensions are at work between a global similarity of camera phone/DC uses, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, specialization depending on which of the artefacts is being used: we were indeed able to make out the tendency to use the DC in a thought-out, anticipated way, in parties or other events seen as socially important (this including affective photos), while the camera phone, on the other hand, tends to be reserved for everyday use – which could account for its lesser value. This is why it seems clear to us that the disposed of/disposable pictures hypothesis must be further looked into through some new research work. It seems that the newest and most specific characteristics of those pictures are to be found on the video side, but here we must insist on the fact that whatever the respondents say on the subject is still full of contradictions, as a result of the unfinished process of the forming of uses. It would be interesting, therefore, to make up exhaustive corpuses of all the pictures taken with and stored in the camera phone. And, at last, another research work could examine amateur photo reporting (a number of mainstream press and television media internet Websites are currently appealing for amateur pictures, agencies are being set up, go-between people are starting to collect those snapshots/instantaneous pictures taken by witnesses and sell them to the media, etc.). But it turned out that our respondents, focusing on everyday uses, never spontaneously evoked such uses.

Finally, the technical dimension of the artefact (such as expressed in terms of picture quality, that is) is obviously a very important one, having a direct influence upon the practice and uses of photography whereas it remained somewhat secondary as far as voice/SMS uses of the cell phone were concerned. Pictures are indeed more difficult to deal with – which, for the time being, allows us to have reservations about manufacturers' and carriers' great hope: the camera phone as the one and ultimate device. In any case, the camera phone is still a device used to phone or send SMS. Maurizio Ferraris (2006) tries to tell the future and sees the cell phone, the only artefact that is both hand and tabula, as the absolute symbol of the return of the written word that will therefore fulfil the recording function that no human society could do without. But let him alone be responsible for such a prophecy...

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