Display, Identity and the Everyday: Self-presentation through online image sharing

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Drawing on a study of a photo-sharing website (Flickr.com), this paper explores ways in which everyday life is reconfigured through an online photo-sharing space, where traditional boundaries between the public and private spheres are being extended, challenged or eroded. The paper reflects on the presentation and subjects of the images; the narratives within and around them, and the affordances and practices which impact on the ways in which many people review and represent their “everyday selves and lives” online. The interactions on Flickr are presented as instantiating both learning and literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) within a context that can be conceptualised as simultaneously global and local. The paper further considers the relationship between digital and traditional domestic photography, drawing on analyses of photographic representation (Hirsh, 2002; Kuhn, 1995) and contrasts how digital practices affect meanings differently.

Introduction

A 13-year-old boy is in the kitchen while his mother peels potatoes; holding his prized cameraphone in his palm, he photographs her hands skilfully paring vegetables, capturing the curled trails of muddied skin on the work surface. He is one of millions of new photographers incessantly taking digital shots with cameras they keep with them all the time; he hones in on detail here, but also captured the panoramic moving-images of the waving sea of football fans at last Saturday’s match. These addicted photographers are not indiscriminately taking photos; I see them daily, checking images on small screens; deleting; shooting again. Many upload shots to larger screens, displaying them on social-networking sites or distributing them by email. As they live their lives people seem to be simultaneously gaining first-hand experience, and then reviewing digitized representations framed within screens. Narrative and meta-narrative seem to run on parallel lines; like auto-ethnographers, people are documenting and re-considering their lives. Perhaps it is the slick, sleek seduction of the shiny digital gadgets which are so alluring, making digital text

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production so compelling; perhaps it is the desire to “story” and archive aspects of our lives. I see images on websites, where people have honed in on the minutiae of the mundane, the “ordinary”, the background of our existence. They move from a space of involvement, to a space of review; they gather data, building pictorial narratives. Evissa, a member of Flickr, a photo-sharing website writes:

I’m learning how to see. I mean really see. Textures, shapes, things up in the air, things dropped on the ground. The ravages of time, spaces in the city that appear when something’s demolished and then disappear when the area’s rebuilt ... I guess I like Flickr because it makes me think. (Evissa, 2006)

Evissa’s photostream has images of standpipes, of lost shoes, of quirky notices and of street-art—which she explained to me she had never really noticed before, seeing it as “stuff in the background” that she now foregrounds in photographs. Maisie talked to me in New York about how image-making can change one’s perspective:

I think it’s amazing how you see stuff in new ways; rows of clothes pegs on a washing-line are just something I used to ignore. But if you frame the shot right, choosing the right perspective, the pegs can dominate the Manhattan skyline; then they seem like witty objects or like works of art ... You see the design in things ... funny how many pictures of pegs there are on Flickr ... (fieldnotes: “flickr-walk” in New York, 2006)

It is true that there are many pictures of pegs on Flickr and through Maisie and Evissa’s words, we see how the process of image-making has sharpened their observations of the “everyday”. Discussions on Flickr itself focus on qualities of images displayed there; the narratives within and arising from them; how photographers got the shots; what they plan next; what photographic techniques they may have tried; what the shots might “mean” or suggest, and what the best title for an image might be. Not only is Flickr dynamic online, but it exists offline; photo-sharing practices are influencing what people do, how they interact with their surroundings and the way they view the “everyday”. Looking at other people’s photographs, interacting or witnessing interaction about the images produces a space for learning. The interaction is compelling, where the local is represented on a global stage, and where a new textual space is produced. The Flickr space could be seen as a new kind of “local” with its own conventions and practices collaboratively developed. It is within this new locality that people can further review their sense of their own “everyday”; foregrounding the background in a manner which seems to elevate its status, managing to somehow “invert” the usual way of seeing.

In this paper, through a focus on representations of “the everyday” from Flickr, I illustrate how interacting over images in the public sphere can, through a process of online social learning, impact on people’s notions of “everyday life”. Further, I reflect on ways in which online spaces provide an arena where collaboration over meanings can be transformative, impacting on how individuals locate themselves within local and global contexts.

Below I outline my research methods and some of the underpinning concepts upon which the work has drawn. Prior to discussing data taken from Flickr, I then
reflect on how the changing landscape of photographic practices is impacting upon
the meanings of image-making.

**Insider Research**

This paper is informed by my own experiences with Flickr, my observations of others
in that space and a multimodal analysis of images of “the everyday”. I look at the
language used around the images; the arrangement of the textual space (the website),
as well as the views and experiences of other so-called “Flickrites”. Facer argues that
we could easily see new literacy practices as:

> a phenomenon existing “out there” in the world of research subjects rather than a
set of practices that might reciprocally alter the ways in which researchers interact
with research subjects, each other and the wider audience for . . . research. (Facer,
2002, p. 3)

However, I would see myself as an “insider” researcher, whose initial identity on
Flickr has not been “researcher”, but “member” and I have been active on the site
since it was launched in 2004. I am “embedded” in the culture of the site; I have
uploaded several thousand images to Flickr; I belong to more than 100 groups
and have around 150 “contacts” whom I only know from that space. I began my
research after I had been a member for over a year; I had become intrigued with
questions about how online interactions were impacting on my thinking and my
offline activities. Prior to my research beginning, I had already met face to face with
other Flickr members in my locality as well as in New York and London. In these
meetings I found that Flickrites, unprompted, would talk about their activities. I have
drawn on these and on subsequent conversations (with permission) for this current
project and have also (with permission) drawn from a shared blog set up by a Flickr
group (RogerB et al, 2006). It has also been easy to find comments and discussions
about Flickr elsewhere on the site as well as to observe online activities or ask
questions, since it seems that members are reflexive and reflective about their online
activities anyway. I have also moved beyond my own online social group and used
Flickr’s search facilities and “tags” (labelling mechanism) to find appropriate images
of the “everyday”. In this way I have been able to draw from a wide circle of
participants. A benefit of researching a social networking site has been that I have
been able to invite participants to review my analyses and to discuss my
interpretations; none made suggestions, although one did correct me in that I
attributed the wrong title to an image in my first draft.

Drawing on Markham’s work (1998, 2004), I have thought of my work as partly
“auto-ethnographic”, yet have been able to compare my experience in relation to
that of others. Face-to-face meetings have allowed me not just to discuss Flickr
with others, but also to experience and witness the ways in which online activities
impact on life “off-screen”. I have been able to analyse the intersections of my online
and offline activities and how my perspectives on my personal, social and cultural
worlds (cf. Ellis & Bochner, 2003) have developed in many ways.
I have found, like Mortenson and Walker (2002, pp. 250–251), that “an accepted online presence which proves that the researcher is real to the digital space and not just a visitor with no knowledge” can be a real asset. Furthermore, Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have drawn attention to the need for “insider research”—research focusing on those involved in new media by those who are also immersed in them. Digital texts are ubiquitous, increasingly embedded in the lives of those who have adopted them (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005), and insider knowledge is required in order to move beyond a fascination with the exotic, or the alienation sometimes experienced by “outsiders” to digital cultures. That is, the practices need to be researched by those who see beyond the charisma or alienating potential of technologies.

The “Everyday”

Whilst the images uploaded to Flickr are extremely wide-ranging in their subject matter, I focus here on those depicting “the everyday”, “the mundane” and “the domestic”. I look at representations of aspects of people’s lives, from the “quotidian” (washing-up bowls; lost gloves; children watching television), what might in fact be seen as routine and boring. The paper adopts a broad cultural studies definition of “non-places” (Auge, 1995), of “the everyday”, in the tradition of deCerteau (1984), Lefebvre (1971) and Moran (2005), but looking at people’s photographic representations of the everyday and the social learning that happens through that process. Auge talks of the way in which we increasingly inhabit spaces as if in parenthesis, in transit, moving through spaces as if they were invisible; these liminal spaces are ones which many people are now photographing, re-configuring and incorporating into their central gaze. This particular focus is pertinent in its illustration of Flickr’s impact on the lives of individuals, groups of individuals, and the ways in which they might reconfigure and review their perspective of their social and cultural worlds.

Provenance

The concept of “provenance”, which Rose (2001) describes as a “social mode of meaning” (p. 38), is a central one in this paper. The term is more often associated with artefacts, great works of art for example will have their provenance recorded; when I refer to “provenance”, I am referring to the ways in which the history of an image contributes to the layers of meanings it holds. It accrues meanings through its “biography”; Stewart (1993) talks of “objects surviving their original contexts ... as traces of the way of life that once surrounded them” (p. 144) and in describing souvenirs particularly, says “Once the object is severed from its origin it is possible to generate a new series, to start again within a new context” (1993, p. 152). Similarly, I am interested in the way in which images online, viewed in a new context, newly set alongside others from other situations and domestic settings, can generate new possibilities for meaning-making. For example, an image of a family at home signifies
different meanings for those family members viewing the shot at home, than when viewed by strangers online. Each image carries traces of meanings from its original context, but acquires additional nuances and associations from its online context.

**New Literacy Studies**

Researchers have become increasingly aware that literacy practices are social; when people engage in literacy practices and events, they are performing a social act, “Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity located in the space between thought and text”, argue Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 3). The work of the New London Group in conceptualising “multiliteracies” is now well established (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000); multiliteracies takes into account a full range of modalities as contributing to meaning-making—so that visual, aural, and spatial patterns are accepted as being as meaningful as the linguistic mode. In addition, multiliteracies regards cultural and social context as part of its conceptualisation of grammar; that is, the context of a message is semantically relevant. In this light, I see the activities on Flickr as instantiating literacy as a social practice where “literacy” includes the consumption and production of multimodal texts. Thus for example, the 5,000 people who have uploaded images depicting the contents of their bags, to the group “What’s in your bag?” (Flickr, 2006), have participated in a collaborative, social literacy act. In presenting such images, individuals not only enact an online identity, but also contribute to a text whose authorship is globally distributed. The text reflects aspects of the local Flickr group as well as aspects of the globally dispersed community.

Shifts, indeed a broadening of the meaning of the word “literacy”, have been partly due, since the proliferation of screen-based and other digital texts, to the escalation of the use of different modalities within single texts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2000; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). In this paper I draw on multi-modal analytical techniques, informed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2000), and Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) treating the whole Flickr site as a text in itself, discussing meanings inscribed within individual images, their relationship with each other and the site generally, as well as the way in which other functionalities of the Flickr software—such as comments, titles and notes—impact on meanings. Since Flickr is an international space, a key interest is the way in which images on Flickr derive from richly varied cultural contexts, yet which become transformed, suffused with new meanings as part of the interactive process online. That is, I see that once it is uploaded, the context of an image changes, acquiring new meanings from the new context. The example given above, of “What’s in your bag?” describes an activity, a trope specific to Flickr, which helps create the sense of a local space, whilst also drawing on global referents. The phrase “What’s in your bag?” gains a “situated meaning” in the Flickr context (Gee, 1999); further, as part of this trope, virtual “notes” are habitually used to label aspects of the images, identifying and describing items from people’s bags using both global brand-names, and geographically local
goods and so on (Maywenmiao, 2007). Further, the dynamics of the site are such that the context itself is ephemeral, the content and its arrangement changes perpetually and this dynamism impacts on the semantic substance of the space and all the items within it. Whilst the Flickr space has a certain “character” it is an amorphous, ephemeral and dynamic text.

**Affinity Spaces and Social Learning**

I draw on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Gee (2004) who have written about social learning as being the process through which individuals come together, motivated by a shared interest; Lave and Wenger refer to “communities of practice”, emphasising affiliations amongst individuals, while Gee refers to “affinity spaces” focusing more on affinities being developed through particular collaborations in specific spaces. Through working together, individuals build a sense of identity with others involved in that space, developing shared ways of talking about images, ultimately affecting the way in which they perceive themselves and others involved in the photo-sharing enterprise. I have seen how Flickrites, as in other online affinity spaces, develop particular shared linguistic and image styles, as ways of making social links with each other, which in turn, bring about a negotiated “way of seeing”, common to a group. I do not argue that Flickrites all develop a common homogenous viewpoint; but that through shared ways of describing and commenting on images, they develop a shared criticality and common endeavour to understand images, each other and their world. They create texts together and collaborate over their development.

**The Changing Scapes of Photography**

Traditionally, domestic photography has been about the production of artefacts, objects that could be held. Viewing was generally confined to the home, reserved for family and friendship audiences. Barthes (1984, p. 67) notes meaningfully, in *Camera Lucida*, the blunted corners and the faded sepia print of a particular photograph, regarding its substance and materiality as semantically significant. The material and social history or “provenance” of individual photographs, with family members as curators of symbolic items is often ritualistically supervised. Well-rehearsed “classic” family narratives often accumulate around family albums, establishing or re-affirming aspects of familial identities (Hirsch, 2002; Kuhn, 1995) rendering images iconic within the household (Kuhn, 1995).

In a revelatory account, Kuhn (1995) describes in detail how her mother and father imposed narratives around family photographs that did not concur with her own. She writes that,

> memories evoked by a photograph do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an interest, of discourses that shift between past and
present, spectator and image, and between all of these and cultural contexts, historical moments. (p. 14)

Such practices as described here will undoubtedly endure throughout the “digital age” and I am cognisant that photographs are also shared and used in many other ways. Yet it is against this backdrop that I want to discuss digital online texts, where provenances accrue from new contexts and where social meanings accumulate, as traditionally, through the discourses that arise out of them. Flickr provides a range of contexts for each image, each one affecting the meanings and provenance of them in different ways. As shall be shown, how photographs are presented through written text and alongside other images constitutes the context for each one, and the way it may be read. Images shared online accrue provenances different to those material artefacts of the kind Barthes described. Nevertheless, Kuhn’s words, about “a network . . . of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all of these and cultural contexts, historical moments” (1995, p. 14) remain relevant as a description of the way provenance and narratives work together in developing meanings of online texts too. Images online accrue histories, meanings and provenances, drawn from local and global fields and often initiating a transformative process through which learning can take place.

Focusing on the Everyday

There are many images on Flickr which do not fit my conceptualisation of “the everyday”; many are concerned with extraordinary events, ceremonies, high-profile rituals, events, public displays and sensational moments, for example. However this paper’s focus on images capturing the mundane and the ordinary reflects on the ways in which digital photography has opened out new vistas for many photographers who, partly because of the ease of taking unobtrusive shots, partly because they are able to take more images than before, and partly because they are starting to notice more things around them, are taking huge numbers of images of their lives as they see it, around them.

Many so-called “Flickrites” say that they rarely go out without a camera and incessantly take photographs. They photograph shopping trolleys left in hedges; the debris of water bottles from the London marathon; shopping lists; kitchen cupboards, and even the palimpsest of roads and buildings. They foreground the background, bringing forward the liminal spaces and what Auge (1995) refers to as “non-places”, such as supermarkets, car parks, motorways, places of “blank homogeneity”. Such photographers capture aspects of life that others miss, or choose to ignore—the drab, the dirty and even the offensive. Flickrites also present the everyday carefully framed to show beauty in detail; they might arrange the shot or display unnoticed aesthetics of the mundane in sophisticated ways. They produce still-life shots evocative of magazine advertisements, showing for example, fruit and vegetables, their daily meals, corners of their home or even washing-up bowls, using their cameras to idealise or sanitise the ordinary. Such diversity may be embraced in
the work of a single photographer, reflecting how individuals can see and represent the world in multiple ways.

**Everyday Flickr**

As soon as images have been uploaded to Flickr, they are, by default, arranged chronologically, so that the stream can appear like a photo-journal, displaying sequentially, aspects of people’s lives. Images can be given titles, descriptions and keywords (or “tags”), all of which impact on meaning. For example, Ms. Moll (2006a) uploaded a series of photographed shopping lists she had found over a period of years. She gave each list a title which highlights an aspect of each one, such as “Organic”; “Pick up Salmon”, “not sure about the cream”. Viewed collectively, Ms. Moll’s shopping lists allow viewers to focus on what they might ordinarily disregard; from being discarded scraps, the lists acquire status, albeit somewhat absurd. Seen collectively, they give a view of the commonalities and differences in the way people live (Ms. Moll, 2006a); Ms. Moll (2006b) describes her activities on her photostream as “21st century archaeology”, revealing the level of her interest in terms of understanding the world around her.

As with Ms Moll’s collection of shopping lists, photos can be drawn from the date-ordered default, and be arranged into additional sets. For example, Ms. Moll has sets entitled “urban detritus”; “street art”; “abandoned chairs”; amongst other things she has been keen to display her interest in things usually ignored. She has images of yellow lines on the road, many abandoned gloves, a lost doll and a burnt-out car (Ms. Moll, 2006b).

Moran, in his book *Reading the Everyday* (2005, p. 131), talks of “performative domesticity” and of “domestic theatre”. He considers the design of modern kitchens which combine a look of the traditional with the labour-saving devices of the present day in a manner which suggests “culinary authenticity”. Many of the images of domesticity I have seen on Fllickr consciously dramatise the domestic, such as Clydehouse’s image of a man dressed as a chef, cooking in a brand new kitchen (Clydehouse, 2005), the still life of a freshly baked lemon cake (10 cent designer, 2006) and many more. Such images abound on Flickr, and comments usually focus on the arrangement of artefacts, the use of the camera and lighting, as well as the skills of the cook/householder, etc. Potentially less savoury scenes are presented in a way that sanitises domestic tasks, for example, boristheblade’s “Soldiers”. Figure 1 displays a series of three very shiny bottles of brightly coloured liquid, with carefully arranged super-clean cloths folded over the tops.

The title focuses on the static upright arrangement, personifying the bottles; the image emphasises the pristine turn out of soldiers—who stand uniformly clean, orderly, and straight. The background is equally clean, evocative of sterile environments such as in a hospital. The many comments on this image draw attention to the cleanliness of the bottles and the work-surface, with one remarking,
“This has OCD written all over it”. The series of remarks jokingly develop the idea that boristheblade has “obsessive compulsive disorder” and “confessions” from others assert they are “cleaning fanatics”. The long exchange of comments ends with boristheblade announcing, “I am glad to help everyone with their obsessions”, so that finally the image accrues meanings related to OCD and the addition of text reading “leave no trace except intentionally when you wish for the everyday texture of life to be seen”. This final piece of text ironically acknowledges the “domestic theatre” of “the everyday” inherent within the image.

Flickrites can set up public groups which others can join and then contribute images; any image can be placed in multiple groups. Examples of relevant groups include “my everyday life”, “corners of my home”, “what’s on my desk”, “apartment life”, “my mess” and “mundane details”. Figure 2 shows the group homepage from “apartment life” with thumbnail images arranged chronologically. Selecting any image opens up the image page, giving a larger view, the title, description, comments and tags.

Group homepages change daily, reflecting Flickrites’ activities; new images are added, some even withdrawn; the context is highly dynamic and the provenance for individual images therefore changes temporally. The page on this day shows thumbnail shots reflecting life in modern homes, scenes of domesticity—a cat; food in preparation; meals ready to serve; people relaxing; knitting; someone in a study, someone in the kitchen, and so on. The group of images happens to reflect comfortable life styles, warmth and plenty; yet this is not always the case in looking at the group page. It changes daily. The name of each contributor is given under each image; clicking on the name takes you to a personal photostream, where the image may be reconfigured in the way it is read in that new context. Clicking on an individual image links to a larger version of the shot where the title and comments are shown. One of the shots, composed of two photographs in a single frame, comprises...
a close-up of Saffron’s relaxed face and a close view of a hand-knitted “throw”. The colours are warm golden tones, expressing softness through gentle lighting. Saffron entitles the shot “a gift from my grandmother” and describes it as follows:

she commissioned one of her friends to knit a wool wrap for my birthday. Perfect for the cool weather we are having at the moment (even though it’s meant to be spring) and winter next year. The picture below gives a better indication of the colour. (Saffron, 2006)

Comments from other Flickrites compliment Saffron on the photograph and the throw; they remark on the weather, comparing it to where they are situated exchanging views on grandmothers. For example jissa says, “thats such a special thing to own—something hand-made from grandma—treasure it!” (jissa, on Saffron 2006). Saffron responds to each commenter in turn:

reya: yep . . . its been keeping me warm this evening . . . we’re meant to be in the middle of spring, but its been cloudy, rainy and windy:

helen: i know . . . terrible weather. hope you didn’t get wet at the markets!

jules: yup . . . grandmothers know these things. Of course i turned up to her place wearing a short sleeve t shirt and skirt . . . she took one look at me and said i have something for you to wear right now;

jissy: totally . . . I’ll be keeping this with me all the time. (Saffron, 2006)
The comments affirm meanings attributed by others to the wrap; these derive from declarations about the cultural significance of grandmothers—the care they show—thrown into greater relief by the cruelty of the weather. The final comment to jissy “I’ll be keeping this with me all the time” synthesises the accumulated meanings of the artefact. A later question from Astrid (who is Norwegian), asks what a throw is, and Saffron explains,

Hi astrid, yep like a small blanket i guess . . . a pashmina is also used as a wrap and a chunky scarf. this is about a metre and a half long knitted wrap. i guess my grandmother would call this a shawl. I would think a poncho refers to material with a hole in the centre so you slide it on rather than wrap it. aaah such confusion. (Saffron, 2006)

Within the explanation is a further reference to the grandmother, reflecting something about the way she uses older forms of language, “a shawl”. The linguistic differences across time and place are overshadowed by the meanings cumulatively, collaboratively developed through the series of comments around the throw/shawl itself. This example shows how affinities develop through negotiated meanings; the image and the shawl itself accrue meanings others have offered. The provenances of the shawl as artefact, and of the image, have developed in the context.

Collections of images in public groups allow one to find images of similar types and view them as collections; commonalities are therefore emphasised but inevitably groups also highlight differences. For example, “people reading” reveals mothers reading to toddlers, students in libraries; tourists and maps; teenagers reading Manga and all ages of people reading Harry Potter in a range of global locations (Flickr Members, 2007). This multicultural collection at once depicts commonalities as well as similarities and as in the last example, pulls together a global artifact and international interest.

Another way of viewing images in new arrangements is to use the search box to type in keywords or “tags”; using the tags “home” and “mess”, nearly 3,000 images are generated, revealing that staged shots of sanitised environments are not the only type of domestic representation on Flickr. We see piles of clothes on sofas, clutter on the floor of lounges, toys scattered across bedrooms, filthy dishes in sinks, and garages and cupboards crammed to overflowing with miscellaneous items. Domestic life is seen differently here in this context, than for example in the above “apartment life” page. McReeleene’s image “Messy Sat” depicts a desk surrounded by half-eaten meals and mobile music paraphernalia. Based in Shanghai, McReeleene’s tags are given in English and Chinese script and comments appear also in English and Chinese. She has used “Flickr notes” superimposed on the image—for example citing “snacks, I love eating them while working”. Within her description she comments “geez, what a mess” (McReeleene, 2006). Dijnasser observes “you are an interesting photographer—documenting life from a different, more real perspective” (Dijnasser on McReeleene, 2006). The remark reflects the view that this is a more “truthful” shot; however the intention of McReeleene to present herself in this way through the image is balanced by her photo-stream which reveals a mix of
representations of the everyday, from this apparent “realism” through to the theatrical presentation type to which Moran (2005) refers.

Tags can also be used to signal the content of images in order to help others locate them. Using a tag search I found 5,000 images of padlocks; 42,500 images of doors; 3,000 images of shopping trolleys (in supermarkets; ditches; hedges etc.) and 300 car parks, to name just a few of the usually overlooked spaces and mundane artefacts. In looking at the images of shopping trolleys the volume of debris brings a powerful message that is less well told when viewing the images singly in people’s individual photo-streams. The collected set provides a narrative about waste and ecological problems and greed.

Flickrites have developed creative ways of using tags as in the examples of boristheblade’s above. One Flickrite, “Mouflé”, has labelled every image of herself with the words “that bag” (Mouflé, 2006). This refers to the fact that in every photograph she carries a particular black and white bag; the tag therefore locates all images of Mouflé and in that particular setting we see “Mouflé” and “that bag” as closely collocated, as “textually cohesive”. Moreover, Mouflé’s contacts now tag all their shots of Mouflé with “that bag” and so we see a development of the meaning of the words “that bag” which come to represent the meaning “Mouflé”, acting as an identity marker or synecdoche “standing for” Mouflé. (I am careful here to use her online name as indeed it is this identity which is tied to “that bag”.). The online presence of Mouflé becomes almost textualised, as does the bag itself. In this way, as with Saffron’s throw, we see how the multimodal affordance of Flickr can add to the meanings of everyday items, making them iconic or exoticised.

TroisTetes (TT)’s [sic] image of an abandoned chair (Trois Tetes (TT), 2006; Figure 3) attracted a great number of comments and attention; focusing on debris dumped in an urban section of a canal, the chair floats, partly submerged and upright. Such an item would normally be seen as “rubbish” but Trois Tetes (TT) uses language which turns the piece into a kind of poetic artefact, ambiguously entitling it “Room at the top”. He adds in his description, “Possibly my favourite shot of the afternoon, warmed up with Velvia Vision”. The text ironically draws attention to photographic endeavour and beauty rather than to the more obvious issue of pollution; his focus on the detritus of everyday life foregrounds the background and somehow inverts the usual way of seeing. Responding to the lead given by Trois Tetes (TT) in undermining environmental concerns about the proper disposal of waste, commenters jokingly discuss that “sinking feeling”, the quality of their own office chairs and where one could buy one like this, for example. NizNoz’s comment (NizNoz on TroisTetes (TT), 2006) takes the topic to a new plane, “I wish people would clean up the ducking pond after an afternoon of testing for witches. V. inconsiderate.” With this irony he makes the first (although joking) negative remark and introduces a new narrative—the idea that a medieval-style witch-ducking has taken place. Moreover, SimonPride points out further beauty in that the reflection of the chair-arm creates a heart-shape (SimonPride on TroisTetes (TT), 2006). The comments attribute a full range of meanings to the chair, implying histories and making suggestions that are creative and witty. In this way, the image has served to
transform a literal interpretation of the abandoned chair, yet somehow at the root is the notion that this is all ironic and the lack of beauty is emphasised through irony. In this way language has been used to offer a counter-intuitive reading of the text.

Within this piece of text on Flickr as well as, for example, across the texts of Moufle and “that bag”, we see how experiences and objects can be defined and re-defined through social literacy practices. The criss-crossing discussions amongst participants in the various contexts provided by Flickr allow many narrative threads and meanings to be drawn. There are many versions of the stories about real lives and many presentations of similar activities. People come to see that there are multiple ways of narrating their lives and this is demonstrated multimodally across Flickr.

**Final Words**

Stewart (1993) describes photographs as cultural artefacts which derive from “reality”; she argues that they are objects inscribed with meanings. As we see in preceding examples, online images can accrue cumulative meanings from their digital contexts. The process of uploading images to specific Web spaces and thus re-contextualising them invests original artefacts with new meanings, transforming the
original narrative or experience from whence they came, into new shared experiences, ones which develop meanings as a result of participation and collaboration. Kuhn’s words, cited earlier, about networks of discourses “that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all of these and cultural contexts” (1995, p. 14) remain relevant to the processes operating between words and images on Flickr. Narratives can evolve and emerge from everyday happenings, objects and multimodal interactions.

In writing about narrative, Hymes (1996) refers to an “iterative” process, of telling and re-telling; I have seen this occur online, where individuals and groups explore meanings of images together and where over time, in a process of accretion, a narrative emerges. Hymes (1996) explains it in this way,

It is the grounding of performance and text in a narrative view of life—that is to say, a view of life as a source of narrative. Incidents, even apparently slight incidents, have pervasively the potentiality of an interest that is worth retelling... There is a certain focusing, a certain weighting. A certain potentiality, of shared narrative form, on the one hand, of consequentiality on the other. (p. 118)

Whilst Hymes talks here of spoken narrative, I have shown how narratives can emerge through images, so that narrative meanings are inscribed within them. I have described and shown a process where the mundane and the seemingly insignificant are often shown in images; where specific meanings may then be attributed or undermined by text; where meanings may be emphasised, subverted or otherwise altered according to context; where images acquire a history. I have seen jokes and collaborative narratives develop, so that meanings are attributed, sometimes obscuring previous “readings”, sometimes developing them. It is as if the image itself holds a narrative, acquired through provenance.

In this article I have reviewed ways in which the everyday is presented on Flickr and reflected on how the process of sharing and discussing images leads to a learning process which provides multiple ways of reflecting on the world and our space within it. The structure of the website both allows and constrains particular kinds of arrangement, so that the semiotic potential of the images is affected by the affordances of the site. Thus because images can be placed in many different configurations within the site, along with all the comments they have accrued, each image can accumulate meanings but which develop semiotically and can be read in many ways. I regard these semiotic changes as textual transformations and have shown how these impact on people’s perceptions and experience of everyday matters. The images originally arose from individuals’ experiences so I have argued that the learning on Flickr is not just about words and pictures, but about the development of social and cultural knowledge and issues concerning the self.

References


