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Visual Communion: The Photographic Image as Phatic Communication

Abstract

Phatic communication is a mode of communication where the significant content of the used utterance gives way to the social bonding function of the utterance itself. This mode of communication appears to be increasingly common in our current media culture and is exemplified by frequent photo sharing through applications such as Snapchat. However, most theoretical discussions of phatic communication have taken place in the context of linguistic expressions. In this theoretical article, we broaden the focus to visual interpersonal communication by way of photography theory. We suggest that photographic phatic communication is based on the indexicality of the medium itself and the sense of presence it produces. We argue further that, contrary to previous literature, photographic phatic communication is not without meaningful content. However, we propose that it is connected, primarily, to the material indexicality of the photograph and only secondarily to the signifying function of the iconic content.

Keywords: photography, photo sharing, phatic communication, visual communication, indexicality, materiality

Introduction

Many practices of vernacular photography have changed due to recent technological developments. For example, the camera phone and the ubiquitous Internet have enabled the massive and unforeseen production, and sharing of, photographic images. A wide array of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, encourage people in general, and quite vaguely, to share their lives with friends and relatives or with broader audiences, and to share their lives also more concretely in the form of digital content such as the camera phone images (John 2012: 167, 173). Clearly, social use of photographic images has diversified (Keightley & Pickering 2014) and the photographic medium has been embedded in other communication technologies and practices.

According to some scholars (Sandbye, 2012), this change that started in the early 21st century as the internet gained prevalence, is so dramatic that we can now talk about analogous ‘old photography’ and digital ‘new photography’. Today’s photography is ‘a ubiquitous, social activity’ (Sandbye, 2012) and sharing photographs has become ‘a pervasive routine communicative act’ (Lobinger, 2016: 475). As Peters and Allan (2018: 369) have expressed, ‘When any observed scene can be quickly turned into a sharable image, the way social life is seen and felt becomes constantly intertwined with this potentiality.’

While old photography stored dear memories, new photography is also a performative practice connected to presence (Murray 2008: 151; Sandbye, 2012; Villi, 2012: 49). Hence, Roland Barthes’ (1983: 77) famous notion that the photograph shows us ‘that-has-been’ is partially replaced by the notion that the photograph shows us ‘what-is-

going-on' (Sandbye 2012). This present tense of the photograph is accompanied by a fleetingness or ephemerality (Bayer et al., 2016) of the photographic act. In certain social media platforms, such as Snapchat, published photographs will automatically disappear after the receiver has seen them, if not specifically screenshotted. In such applications technological features are used to create a 'fading-away effect', inviting comparison with oral culture and spoken words that fade away after they are uttered (Soffer 2016). This fugitiveness works against the old conception of photographs as precious objects stored in family albums, traditional or digitalized. Evidently, current photography has in part turned into a pictorial throwaway culture where photographs have only a transient social function.

Its omnipresence, present tense and fugitiveness render the photographic medium as a kind of *gesture* suitable for opening and maintaining social exchange and bonds. The photographic image is a material trace of the light emitted or reflected from the photographed objects. This indexicality, which is discussed later in detail, equips the medium with a strong sense of presence of the photographed objects and the photographer as well. This presence is an elementary component of photographic communication in social media. Snapchat¹, which is popular especially among the under 25-year-olds (Perrin and Anderson, 2019), provides a pronounced example of this. The present and impermanent qualities of Snapchat messages (i.e., snaps) seem to reduce the self-presentational concerns of the users, resulting in frequent and perhaps more authentic communication (Bayer et al., 2016: 972). Thus, particularly on Snapchat, the content of a photograph may feel trivial compared to the photograph itself being a sign of connectivity and the presence of the sender. This photographic medium says, 'Hi! I'm here, right now!' This constant connecting is also encouraged by Snapchat with a

feature called Snapstreak, which rewards users for chains of consecutive multi-day communication. The ostensible triviality of content brings current photo sharing close to the notion of phatic communication (originally phatic communion), where the propositional informative content of an utterance is seen to give way to the pure social bonding function of the utterance itself (Laver, 1975; Lobinger, 2016; Malinowski, 1989; Senft, 2009).

Overall, a new digital media culture is referred to as phatic, a culture dominated not by informational intent, but by social intent (Miller, 2008). Similarly, a mode of photo sharing where photographs are shared mainly to nurture and to confirm social relationships is becoming more common (Sandbye, 2012; Villi, 2012) and the concept of phatic is increasingly used when reporting research related to visual communication, current photo sharing practices and social media (Bayer et al., 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Kofoed and Larsen, 2016). In phatic photo sharing, neither the content of the photographs, their visual qualities nor the verbal stories about those photographs are seen as the key features of sharing; rather, the communicative significance, the pleasure of communication and the visual connectivity are focal (Lobinger, 2016: 481). This suggests that the dialogic dimension of communication has diminished and been replaced by the social bonding function of phatic online exchanges (Miller, 2008). In previous research (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016), the contents of such communication have been described by research participants as unimportant and trivial. Shared photographs are seen to confirm and strengthen relationships through ‘visual chitchat’ or ‘visual small-talk’ (Villi, 2012: 42). Previous literature (Manovich, 2009; Miller, 2008) has implied that, in most cases, these meaningful acts of communication ‘do not convey meaningful content’ (Lobinger, 2016: 481).

In this article, we provide a theoretical contemplation of the concept of phatic communication within visual communication and determine the communicative functions of photographic phatic communication, using the perspective of photography theory, to provide a better understanding of phatic communication. Although we discuss visual phatic communications specifically through photographic images and photography theory, we see that the discussion is most likely applicable to other types of camera images as well, such as videos, which have constantly gained popularity in social use. We suggest that the much-discussed indexicality gives a material base for photographic phatic communication. We will also argue that indexicality undermines the above-mentioned distinction between the 'old' and the 'new' photography. Digitalized and networked photographs still are indexical pictures, traces left by the light reflected or emitted from photographed objects.

Whereas previous research has underlined the irrelevance of content within phatic communication in current media culture in general (Miller, 2008) and within phatic photo sharing in particular (Lobinger, 2016), we propose that, based on the indexicality of photographic images, photographic phatic communication entails meaningful content. However, we also propose that said meaning is connected primarily to the materiality of photographic indexicality itself and only secondarily to the iconic content of the image.

We will begin by addressing the origin and meaning of the concept of phatic communication in linguistics, after which we will be able to discuss it in relation to indexicality and the material sense of presence by way of photography theory. With our

theoretical discussion, we intend to draw implications for future critical discussions and provide insights into exploratory inquiry and empirical analysis, especially on photo sharing practices.

Phatic communion and communication

In his contribution to Ogden and Richards' famous book 'The meaning of meaning' (first edition published in 1923), Bronislaw Malinowski introduced the concept of *phatic communion* to linguistics (Senft, 2009). In discussing free aimless social interaction, he pointed out a need for a new concept, a concept that would describe the use of certain types of expressions (e.g., 'Nice day today') that are needed to break the unpleasant tension between people caused by silence (Malinowski, 1989: 314).

There can be no doubt that we have a new type of linguistic use — phatic communion I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention — a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words. [...] Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. (Malinowski, 1989: 315)

Thus, Malinowski (1989: 315–316) defined phatic communion as the use of speech that serves to establish bonds of personal union between people, but does not serve the purpose of communicating 'ideas'. Widely-used prototypical examples of phatic communion are formulaic greetings, comments on the weather, passing enquiries of someone's health and other small talk topics (Malinowski 1989: 313; Senft, 2009: 228). Malinowski (1989: 314) described the flow of language that follows the first greeting formula as purposeless expressions of preference and disinclination, accounts of

irrelevant happenings and comments on things perfectly obvious. However, for Malinowski, phatic communion was by no means meaningless or trivial but ‘an intimate correlate’ of ‘the fundamental tendency’ of all human beings to ‘congregate, to be together, to enjoy each other’s company’ (Malinowski 1989: 314). In fact, he argued, in line with more recent views (e.g., Brandt 2013), that the primary function of language is not the ‘transmission of thought’ but the establishment and maintenance of social relations (Malinowski 1989: 316). Therefore, Malinowski’s view on phatic communion is twofold – it is talk that is aimless and obvious, but at the same time crucial in fulfilling our intrinsically human social needs (Coupland et al. 1992: 209).

Later Laver (1975: 233) has further emphasised the social importance of phatic communion and described it as ‘a most important social and psychological instrument’, as cumulative consensus about a relationship reached through repeated encounters constitutes the essence of a relationship.

Skill in managing the behavioral resources of phatic communion thus becomes not the triviality dismissively referred to as small talk, but a very basic skill essential to a major part of the psychosocial transactions that make up daily life (Laver, 1975: 233).

In 1960, Jakobson borrowed and modified Malinowski’s concept. Jakobson’s conception of communication was heavily influenced by the mathematical theory of communication as represented by Shannon and Weaver and he believed that the co-operation between linguistics and communication theory would enhance the efforts of both disciplines (Jakobson 1971). Hence, Jakobson understood communication rather technically as a transmission of messages between sender and receiver where social bonding and cultural aspects of communication (see e.g., Carey 2009) were set aside.

On the other hand, Malinowski's concept of *communio* carried much broader conception of communication where it was understood as a social and cultural process. When Jakobson took Malinowski's concept of phatic he, in fact, filtered it through his own technically orientated conception of communication. His conception of phatic was channel-oriented and referred to non-informative messages whose primary function was to enable communication by keeping the communication channel open (Jakobson 1980: 81–84).

Senft (2009: 227) suggests that, probably because of the rather influential paper by Jakobson (1960), nowadays most linguists and anthropologists refer to Malinowski's concept with the technical term of phatic *communication*. Although the treatment of phatic by Jakobson is limited when compared to Malinowski's, at present, both terms are commonly used interchangeably. Thus, based on Malinowski's original definition and influenced by Jakobson's modification, both phatic communion and phatic communication are commonly used to refer to utterances thought to have social bonding functions, like establishing and maintaining a friendly atmosphere in interpersonal relations, and are characterized by not conveying meaning or information, that is, they are described as procedures without propositional content (Senft, 2009: 228). In this paper, we as well use both terms of phatic communion and communication, but our understanding of communication as a social and cultural process follows Malinowski's conception.

Senft (2009: 228) has argued that phatic communion is a relatively neglected area in linguistics and has attributed this neglect, at least to some extent, to the widely accepted conception of the concept. He concurs with criticism presented by Laver (1975: 236)

and suggests that the concept, as originally defined by Malinowski, needs to be amplified, since there is more to phatic communion than the original definition entails. To be more precise, besides the social functions mentioned by Malinowski (1989: 315–316) (i.e., defusing the potential hostility of silence, getting the interaction comfortably on the way and establishing bonds of personal union), phatic communion provides the participants with a tool for staking indexical claims about their relationship and relative social status (Laver 1975: 236; Senft 2009: 231). Thus, he proposes that although in phatic communion words do not necessarily carry their denotative meaning, they may be signs, that is indices, indicative of participants' relative social status. In other words, 'language is used to convey more than the propositional content of what is said' (Levinson, 1983: 42). Thus, the absence of propositional (or symbolically meaningful) content does not infer meaningless content.

According to Laver (1975: 217), the 'fundamental social function of the multistranded communicative behavior that accompanies and includes phatic communion' is the management of interpersonal relationships, and, more precisely expressed, 'the communication of indexical facts about the speakers' identities, attributes, and attitudes', which constrains the nature of the particular interaction. In his paper, titled 'Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion', Laver (1975: 221–223) meticulously describes the functions of phatic utterances, specifically in the marginal phases of interaction (i.e., the opening and closing phases). He elaborates on the 'striking general principle' (Laver, 1975: 222) that emerges in linguistic tokens used for phatic communion with the exception of formulaic greetings; these tokens contain deictic references (i.e., the tokens refer to the time and place of the utterance or, more widely, to factors in the context of situation). Laver (1975) then suggests that in the

opening phase, the category choice of neutral (e.g., 'Beautiful morning.', 'Nice party.')

or self-oriented (e.g., 'Hot work, this.')

versus other-oriented (e.g., 'That looks like hard work.')

is restricted according to the relative social status of the interacting individuals.

For instance, when a non-solidary inferior speaks first to a superior, that person may choose the self-oriented category, but not the other-oriented category. Further, the category choice is relevant since it has an exploratory function in providing the means for communicating the indexical aspects of a relationship by reflecting the participants' views on the social structuring of the interaction.

In addition to the exploratory function, other important social functions of phatic communion in the opening phase are defusing the hostility of silence (propitiatory function) and demonstrating the acceptance of the possibility of an interaction (initiator function). In the closing phase of interaction, Laver (1975) sees that two principal functions are served: firstly, phatic communion assuages any feelings of rejection (e.g., 'I'm afraid I must be off. I've a million things to do.');

and secondly, it consolidates the relationship by emphasizing the enjoyable quality of the current encounter (e.g., 'It was nice seeing you.')

and promises continuation of the relationship (e.g., 'Let's meet again soon.').

In the conclusion of his paper, Laver states:

The information exchanged between the participants in this communicative process is not primarily referential information, but rather is indexical information about aspects of the participants' social identity relevant to structuring the interactional consensus of the present and future encounters. The function of phatic communion thus goes beyond the creation, in Malinowski's phrase, of "ties of union": it certainly does serve to establish such broad ties in that the tokens of phatic communion are tokens exchanged in the ritual transactions of psychosocial acceptance, but it also provides the participants with a subtle tool for use in staking indexical claims which shape and constrain their detailed relationship [...]. (Laver, 1975: 236)

Thus, phatic linguistic utterances are part of the discussant's social identity and cultural background, something that Laver (1975: 236) calls 'indexical information'. Deictic utterances, as well as vocabulary register and dialects, are all tokens of social position. Indexicality of language helps people to recognize themselves, and others as well, as a part of a social group, a communion. Evidently, it also helps to make social distinctions and maintain social differences and stratification.

Laver (1975: 217) has argued that the social function of the linguistic code used in phatic communion is no different from the function of paralinguistic, kinesic (body movements and gestures), proxemic (concerning the spatial relationships between individuals) and visual codes used. Thus, phatic communion could be comprehended as communicative actions, not only speech, that primarily serve to establish or maintain social relationships, rather than to impart information or communicate ideas. Phatic communication is not only connected to linguistic utterances; it is also part of the discussant's body and agency. Nonverbal communication, such as unintentional and intentional gestures and facial expressions, are part of the socially determined indexical expressions of the body. Further, the concept of phatic communication has been adapted beyond face-to-face interactions to discussions on the current media culture (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005; Miller, 2008), social media platforms (such as Facebook) (Langlois and Elmer, 2013; Saranoja et al., 2013), digital messaging (texts and instant messages) (Su, 2015) and visual communications in particular (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Lobinger, 2016; Villi, 2012). The concept of phatic communication is often referred to in the context of current visual mobile communication, specifically when discussing the

use of the social media platform Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016; Kofoed and Larsen, 2016; Lobinger, 2016).

Recent research results (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016) implicate that Snapchat users often feel that the contents of the snaps sent and received are trivial, unimportant, boring or unnecessary to them. The interesting inconsistency between the unimportance of the contents of snaps and the high importance of Snapchat use in young people's social lives has been explained with the concept of phatic communication (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016). These snaps have been interpreted as phatic photo sharing where the communicative significance is more relevant than the contents of that communication (Lobinger, 2016: 482). However, when applied to visual communications, a negative valuation, that is, the view that content in phatic communion is aimless, obvious or even irrelevant, is predominated (for similar view in sociolinguistics see Coupland 1992: 209–210) and its indexical properties are underplayed. Thus, in phatic photo sharing, the photograph is considered mainly relevant as a material object that is exchanged for the sake of visual connectivity and the contents of shared photographs are seen, in most cases, as meaningless (Lobinger, 2016; 482).

To summarize, Laver (1975) and Senft (2009) have convincingly argued that phatic communication usually conveys more than the mere social function of creating a bond between the communicative parties. They have argued, that phatic utterances are likely to entail indices of the participants' social identities. It seems reasonable to assume that the same applies to photographic content in phatic communication. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the meaning in photographic phatic communication is connected to the material indexicality of the photographic medium itself.

Indexicality, materiality and presence

As discussed above, indexicality plays a central role in phatic communications. In photography studies, indexicality has been one of the most controversial questions (see Elkins, 2007). The problem originates from Charles Sanders Peirce's conceptualization of the photograph as an indexical trace left behind by the light coming from a photographed scene. He writes, 'If the Sign be an Index, we may think of it as a fragment torn away from the Object, the two in their existence being one whole or a part of such whole' (Peirce, 1960: 137). Later, he continues: '[i]n so far as the Index is affected by the Object, it necessarily has some quality in common with the Object, and it is in respect to these that it refers to the Object' (Peirce, 1960: 143). He also thinks that photographs are 'produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature' (Peirce, 1960: 159).

Peirce famously classified signs into icons, indices and symbols (Atkin, 2005: 162). If a sign stands for its object through some quality, like figural resemblance (e.g., colour or shape), the sign is an icon. If the sign stands for its object through a convention, like words or traffic lights, the sign is a symbol. When the sign is an index, it stands for its object through some existential or physical fact. This classification is not mutually exclusive (Boudana et al., 2017), and a sign may simultaneously operate as an icon, a symbol and an index. A photographic image, for example, may be an icon through its visual resemblance to its object, a symbol through its conventionalized meanings and an index through its existential, physical and material connection to the photographed objects.

Peircean semiotics are full of different conceptualizations of indexicality. On the one hand, Peirce (1960) stresses that an index is something which does not have a conventionally established relation to its object, as symbols do. This is the case with a weather vane, for example, which has automatic, material and causal relations to its object. Wind turns a weather vane directly without any symbolic intermediation, showing an existential connection whereby the movement of the weather vane is directly connected to the existence of the wind. On the other hand, Peirce elaborates upon the index and directs it to follow symbolic conventions. This is the case with so-called sub-indices, such as deictic expressions (e.g., 'I', 'here', 'now'), which obtain their meanings as a part of linguistic system (see Atkin, 2005: 184). Both types of indices are connected to their objects through continuity. Indices are part of the uses of language in certain temporally- and spatially-determined situations. The aforementioned indexical phatic expressions are very close to Peirce's (1960) sub-indices because they are part of the symbolic system, whether as spoken language or as conventions of nonverbal expressions. Although sub-indices have the generality of symbols, they have the ability to circumvent that generality and point to their object on a particular occasion of use (Atkin, 2005: 172). In a photograph, this particularity also works. A photograph of a horse, for example, is a sign not only representing a horse in general, but also just this particular horse in front of the camera.

Clearly, the iconic content of a photograph is subject to conventional interpretations. For example, we need to have some knowledge of the photographed objects in order to recognize the socially determined denotations and connotations connected to them. As utterances in spoken phatic communications, visual contents in photographic phatic communications may also entail 'indexical information about aspects of the

participants' social identity relevant to structuring the interactional consensus of the present and future encounters' (Laver, 1975: 236). On social media, in addition to depicted indexical objects (e.g., objects of shared interest), certain poses or gestures used in photos might also indicate to one's relative social status by revealing how familiar one is (or is not) with that particular social media platform. These indices are similar to the above-mentioned sub-indices. Although they do not correspond to Peirce's ideal example of an index, they still indicate or show their object, which is the main function of an index (Atkin 2005: 183-184).

However, indexicality of a photograph as a medium differs from the indexicality related to linguistic phatic expressions, as well as the indexicality of photographic iconic content and visual styles, for its technical and material quality. From a material point of view, the ground for the photographic image is a trace in the surface of the image sensor (or film), which is done by the light emitted or reflected from the photographed objects. Hence, it provides a physical, material and causal link between photographic representation and photographed objects. The photographic image is not only a representation of the photographed scene. In a sense, it is even part of it, 'a fragment torn away from the Object', as Peirce (1960: 137) puts it. This 'being part' of something differs from the 'being part' of linguistic or visual expressions which serve as an indexical sign of a speaker's or photographer's social position. In the latter case, indexicality arises from the social use of language or photographic content, a symbolic system. In the photographic medium, indexicality is causal, mechanical and physically material. Its meaningfulness builds upon an existential fact of the presence of the photographed objects.

However, an ample debate has revolved around the question of whether this physical causality still operates in digital photography (Elkins, 2007; Fetveit, 1999; Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz, 2016; Murray, 2008: 157). More recent discussions involve two main positions, which could be roughly characterised as ‘indexical’ and ‘anti-indexical’ (Author removed, 2017). The indexical position argues that indexicality still serves as a central element of the medium. By contrast, the anti-indexical position (e.g., Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013) emphasises that indexicality does not play a significant role in the formation of photographic representation. According to Rubinstein and Sluis (2013), the photographic image has lost its indexicality due to digitalization and the ‘algorithmic turn’. They see that, today, the digitalized photographic image is so embedded with different kinds of algorithms that the indexical link to the photographed objects has vanished. In this paper, it is not possible to fully address this problem and it has been discussed thoroughly previously (Author removed, 2017). Our starting point is that the indexical chain still operates after digitalization. Hence, for example Snapchat photographs are material traces, however digitally modified or weak, left by the light reflected from a photographed scene. Furthermore, even if the indexical connection has disappeared at the technical level, it still operates as a social discourse connected to the daily understanding of the photographic image. This is easy to test through an attempt to think about the conception of a photograph without the idea that a photograph is an image created in the presence of the photographed objects at the moment of exposure.

What makes photographic indexicality so relevant in the context of phatic communication is the *sense of presence* it produces. Following Peirce, we can say that, because of its indexicality, the photograph is materially exceptionally close to the

objects it represents. This gives the viewer an extraordinarily strong feeling of presence, existence and proximity of the photographed objects. For the sake of its indexicality, the sense of presence produced by a photograph is much stronger than, for example, the sense of presence produced by a drawing made of the same objects or scene.

Roland Barthes has expressed this in his *Camera Lucida*:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (Barthes, 1983: 80–81)

However, the sense of presence does not always take place in photographs which are not relevant to the viewer. In social media, for example, one can find massive flow of photographs which are not emotionally, or in some other way, significant from the viewer's point of view. Hence, indexicality works as an affordance which has the potential to promote sensations of proximity.

It should be stated that when we write about the indexical materiality of the photographic image, we understand 'materiality' in the context of quantum electrodynamics. This means that the essential property of matter is its nature as a transient phenomenon where the electromagnetic radiation, energy and solid forms of matter transform each other (Barad, 2012; Feynman, 1988). From this point of view, the light emitted from a light bulb, for example, is a literal material part of the bulb itself. In

the case of electromagnetic reflection, the things are different and the reflected light is not material part of the photographed objects. However, the reflection is a complex interaction between solid matter and electromagnetic radiation, which is modified by the material surface structures of photographed objects creating 'projective homology that preserves the relative proportion of things' (Frizot, 2007: 277).

Hence, our conception of matter differs from the most common understanding of it as something which is clearly palpable with weight and dimensions. This is the typical conception of matter in the discussions of the photograph's materiality as well. For example, photographic historians Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004: 3) write that materiality 'is concerned with real physical objects in a world that is physically apprehendable not only through vision but through embodied relations of smell, taste, touch and hearing'. This palpable materiality is an important part of the photograph; the image on a cell phone screen provides a different haptic experience than a photograph printed in glossy paper. Edwards (2012: 224, emphasis added) stresses, '[...] in the pursuit of the analytical potential of the photograph's materiality it is important not to collapse into a dichotomous model that separates systems of abstract signs of semiotic approaches from material forms, because, of course, *material properties are themselves signifying properties.*' Although Edwards and Hart's argumentation operates within a more restricted conception of matter than ours, it is easy to accept that it holds true in our conception. Obviously, the traces left by the electromagnetic radiation in the photographic process are signifying for the sake of their materiality.

This is a very important point in the context of phatic communication. If we consider that even the material properties of representations (words or images) are meaningful, it

is not plausible to say that phatic communication does not ‘serve any purpose of communicating ideas’ (Malinowski, 1989: 316). Similarly, it would be problematic to say that, in phatic photo sharing, a photograph is relevant as a material object exchanged for the sake of connectivity, not for the sake of its contents (Lobinger, 2016).

What makes indexical materiality special compared to other materialities of the photographic image is its existential connection to the photographed scene and objects. The indexicality of the photographic medium and its sense of presence work as a material base for the communion between the photographer and the beholder of the photographic image. Even if the iconic quality of the photograph is disturbed, the photograph could radiate the sense of presence through its indexicality. This does not mean that the photographic image doesn’t convey ‘information’ or ‘meaning’. Nevertheless, meaning or information does not only (or in some cases, at all) lie in the iconic content of the image, since it is embedded in the existential presence of the photographed object.

Conclusions: Managing Interpersonal Relationships

Phatic communication is commonly understood as communication with mainly social bonding functions, like establishing and maintaining a friendly atmosphere in interpersonal relations (Senft, 2009: 228). This concept of phatic communication has been adapted to recent studies on photographic communications as phatic photo sharing has become an increasingly popular mode of communication, especially among the young on social media platforms such as Snapchat. In this article, we have provided a theoretical contemplation of the concept of phatic communication within visual communication while seeking identification of the communicative functions of

photographic phatic communication and a better understanding of phatic communication in the light of photography theory.

To our understanding, similarly to spoken phatic communications, the management of interpersonal relationships is the main social function of photographic phatic communication. This social function is closely related to two types of indexicality: (1) the indexicality of the photographic medium and (2) the indexicality of the photographic (iconic) content. In other words, the photograph as a medium, through its material indexicality, supports the creation of a connected or mediated presence. This makes the photographic image particularly effective as a mediating object of phatic communication. In Barthes' (1983) words, it provides means to 'touch' another, even when physically absent. In addition, photographic content is likely to entail indices of the participants' social identities that shape the relationship in question.

Thus, in this article, we have taken a somewhat differing stance from previous research on new media that has suggested that the content of phatic communication is, in most cases, meaningless (Lobinger, 2016; Miller 2008). We argue that the sense of presence conveyed by photographs is not necessarily dependent on the detailed iconic content of those photographs. A photograph taken by a communicative partner (e.g., a photo of one's whereabouts) may entail sense of presence similar to a photograph taken of a communicative partner (e.g., a selfie). Thus, the receiver's analysis of the meaning of the contents of a photograph is not necessarily a prerequisite for feeling the presence of the sender through that photograph. However, as explained above, this does not mean that the content would be without meaning. Firstly, the content is meaningful since without content (a trace left by the light), there is no material indexicality and no sense

of presence. Secondly, as in spoken phatic communication, the photographic content is also most likely to entail indices (e.g., objects of shared interests, certain poses or gestures) pointing to the identities, attributes and attitudes of the communicative parties relevant to structuring that relationship.

Thus, adopting the concept of phatic to photographic communication without the conception of indexicality would greatly restrict the understanding of such communication as a phenomenon. Future analysis of empirical data on phatic photo sharing should benefit from addressing the two aspects of indexicality in photographic phatic communication, presented in this article. The fact that young interview participants in previous research (Kofoed and Larsen, 2016) have described the contents of their photographic messages as unimportant does not necessarily mean that they always are. It is more likely that people do not actively ponder ontological issues such as the material indexicality of the photographic medium (Keightley & Pickering 2014: 590) or the indexical content of the photographs that they share ritualistically and repeatedly. In addition, the unimportance of the content might simply mean that the content is unimportant outside of the context of a particular relationship and that the participants are either unwilling or unable to explain it to those outside of the relationship. The importance of a photograph and what it refers to may vary from context to context (Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz, 2016: 6). Thus, it seems that there is little point in examining the content of shared photographs outside of the social ties or relational context in which they are shared.

Laver (1975: 220) has suggested that in face-to-face phatic communication, different utterances are used in the opening and the closing phases of interaction and both phases

consist of multiple stages (see Laver, 1975: 220). Future research on photographic phatic communication could examine the patterns, stages or orders of such visual communication. In addition, future research should consider the interplay between visual and literal communication, as it seems that added text or captions may emphasise the phatic nature of photographs on social media (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016: 258).

In 1994, Boden and Molotch (258) argued against the ominous views of new technologies advancing impersonality of modern life, that despite available technological possibilities, people would continue to prefer copresent communication over all other forms of interaction and that when people were not able to secure a needed state of copresence, they would strive to approximate it as much as possible. They called this ‘upgrading’ toward more personal forms of communication the ‘compulsion of proximity’ and validated it with the thickness of information in copresent interaction (Boden and Molotch, 1994: 258). In 1994, not many of us had any real idea of the extent that technology would indisputably have on our current social lives. Indeed, technological advancements have led to the emergence and reinforcement of a new sociability pattern, where absence is no longer simply the opposite of presence and where new technologies of communication enable for a kind of ‘connected presence’ when one is physically absent (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005: 321). Overall, we have experienced a shift to social relationships that are increasingly mediated by objects (Knorr Cetina, 1997) and new modes of interaction that consist of frequent and continuous communication exchanges have emerged (Mascheroni and Vincent, 2016).

Although technologically mediated communications have presumably gained in popularity more than Boden and Molotch (1994) ever predicted, their statement

regarding the compulsion of proximity is extremely interesting, since it may be seen as an explanation for the growing popularity of photographic, and other visual, communication. As technological devices and mediated forms of interaction gain ground, people strive to approximate copresence through the use of photographic images. In situations where the communicative parties are not present in the same physical space, and where there may also be a time gap between sending and receiving messages, the photographic image, due to its inherent indexicality, is able to imitate copresence and provide participants with the sense of presence needed for maintaining and strengthening the communion.

Notes

1 Examples of Snapchat communications in different relational contexts may be found from Snapchat's promotional "Real Friends" videos (2019). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfaNTKSCGnEEBabBA5UySGJtf3BPP9Xpo>

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