

Young Nostalgics: Why, Where, and How to Analyze Postmodern Constructions of ‘Pastness’ in Contemporary Youth Blogs

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Derived from the premises of ongoing doctoral research, this article will address the epistemological and technical methodological challenges raised by a qualitative analysis of ‘nostalgic’ online photographic journals. Following a general justification of the research and a theoretical contextualization, the discussion focuses on the eclectic methodological framework that the author proposes to use, from discursive textual analysis and photographic semiology to interviews. Conceptual ambiguities, research lacunas, practical problems, a lack of reflexivity in the field and a shift in the nature of contemporary blogs are additional critical points that the author discusses. Concluding the article is a brief, caseinpoint presentation of the immensely popular ‘nostalgic / retro / vintage’ blog ‘.la douleur exquise.’ (misswallflower.tumblr.com), designed by a 20 year old Georgian girl and followed, as of February 2011, by over 50,000 distinct Internet users.

Keywords: tumblr.com, microblogs, online visual semiology, content analysis, nostalgia

The Young Nostalgics Contextualizing an Idiosyncratic Internet Find

In consulting almost any book on ‘youth culture’, be it from the old Chicago School tradition of urban delinquency studies (e.g., Park & Burgess 1925; Thrasher 1927), popular subcultural theory (e.g., Hebdige 1979), or the fashionably Bourdieusian ethnographies documenting the (sub)cultural capital of

today’s fragmented ‘club cultures’ (Thornton 1995) and the semiotic value of ‘lifestyle’ in consumer societies (Miles 2000), we find young people associated with the present. We also find them organically connected with the future’s dauntingly ‘global’, ‘changing’, and often ‘unprecedented’ challenges. This appears to be a matter of common sense, an unremarkable academic reflection of a social axiom — the

natural assumption that it must be the next generation, the forward-looking, moment-grabbing, techno-savvy stylistical consumers of today that personify our tomorrow.

After several months of browsing the Internet, I found sufficient evidence to challenge these assumptions. This study examines idiosyncratic exceptions to these otherwise apparently valid rules. When one finds a 20-year-old girl utterly fascinated with the aesthetics of sepia-toned photographs, fin-de-siècle philosophy and vintage clothing, another 18-year-old with very similar visual-affective interests (to which she adds a special predilection for all fashions retro-Parisian), or yet another young girl enamoured with 'dejavu' and childhood imagery, the relationship between youth, memory, present and past takes on a much more ambiguous dialectical aura.

All of these individuals, their interactive cultural statements and visual identities exist, to the eye of the researcher and of the world, exclusively online. The space in which they choose to visually articulate their thoughts is synesthetic, in constant flux, and, rather interestingly, is almost entirely 'borrowed' from somewhere else. All use the relatively recent microblogging platform tumblr.com and spend hours on end 'hunting' the Web for things that, quite simply, catch their eye. The often spectacular results of such compilations are 'microblogs', or tumblrs — collections of hyperme-

dia content open to the public as a novel type of visual journal. The combination of nostalgic, 'vintage' imagery (probably most evident in the warm colour palette and oneiric Romantic scenery created by the photographs, animations, evocative quotations and brief video clips), with the ultramodern, technoecclectic online medium of what is probably the fastest growing and best articulated microblogging platforms currently in existence, makes up for a very idiosyncratic environment.

To devise a coherent, credible methodology with which to approach these cases can be challenging. First of all, the methods of inquiry need to be adapted to the research questions. What exactly does one want to analyze, and why? Only after briefly clarifying these points will I be able to explain how and which hermeneutical path I followed.

Why and What is Analyzed?

In generic terms, I aim to theoretically contextualize and qualitatively investigate what I have previously identified as seemingly paradoxical cases of young people's online journals displaying an (often self-declared) nostalgic predilection (aesthetic, psychological, sartorial, cultural) towards one form or another of 'pastness'. What can explain these young persons' longing for an immaterial past that they have never personally experienced? How is this past 'vicariously' constructed and imagined, what psychological func-

tion does it serve and in what ways does it interact with the 'mainstream' present's incontestable materiality? Where in the nebulous web of late modern poststructuralist theory can we situate these cases and how can we interpret them?

Drawing on critical postmodern theorists such as Jameson (1985; 1991) and, to a lesser degree, Baudrillard (1981), my research investigates the ways in which these cultural expressions connect with what the above writers have described as a postmodern crisis of memory and historicity. In this sense, present-day popular culture has been described as a sterile pastiche "in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible [and] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson 1985, 115; see also Jameson 1991). Similarly, Jean Baudrillard described the Western popular culture machinery as producing 'simulations' and 'simulacra' that not only obfuscate, but virtually erase their own referential origin, thus creating 'copies without originals' and a society from which "history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references" (Baudrillard 1981, 46).

In this context, my intention is to investigate whether cases such as those briefly described above reflect young persons' idiosyncratic attempts to resolve these dilem-

mas, to recover Baudrillard's 'lost references' — to be(come), as it were, authentically 'authentic'. For it is the absence of 'authenticity', its commodified relativization and the dissolution of all cultural-social-aesthetic hierarchies that these critics of postmodernity contentiously deplore.

The Internet, Blogs and Social Research: What Is (Not) Known?

It is recognized that the Internet is a new, rich space for social research, with a number of volumes dedicated to understanding and addressing the many methodological and theoretical challenges that the medium puts forth (e.g., Jones 1999; Hewson et al 2003; Hine 2003; Hine 2005; Kozinets 2010). These, and other scholarly efforts focus largely (and opportunely) on discussing the applications, or adaptations of 'traditional' cultural-anthropological methodologies (e.g.: interviews Beck 2005; focus groups – Franklin & Lowry 2001; ethnographic observations – Hessler et al 2003) to 'untraditional' environments (e.g., chat-rooms, forums, e-mail exchanges, bulletin boards), while also discussing ethical and anonymity-related implications.

In attempting to essentialize the main research directions, or social research potential of the Internet, Silver (2000) proposes two main 'pillars of cybercultural studies': identities and virtual communities. The most popular form of online

self-expression, the 'blog' (or the 'weblog'), arguably brings these elements together in a tightly-knit spiral of identity reflection and generation. However, the 'blogosphere', the virtual spatial totality of all existent public blogs, remains an area rich in qualitative data that has yet to be fully recognised by social-cultural researchers (Hewson 2003; Hookway 2008). Indeed, much of the initial online research seems to have positively, yet 'quantitatively' exploited the Internet as a generic data-gathering and data-producing medium (Coomber 1997; Best et al 2001; Solomon 2001). Considered by some authors as the "next evolution of web-based experience" (Kahn & Kellner 2004, 91), the blog, and its psycho-socio-cultural analysis, poses nonetheless several (qualitative) challenges, some of which are arguably unique to the medium in question. One is its exponential increase in popularity and ease-of-use, the other, its rapidly shifting nature. These are two characteristics that are perhaps most salient in the case of my own research, and which I will therefore briefly explore below. First, however, a few words on why blogs (should) matter to cultural scientists.

In a highly informative article aiming to introduce the 'blogosphere' to the social researcher, Hookway (2008) lists many substantial benefits that the analysis of online journals generally provide to the academic community: public availability; low

research costs; instantaneous collecting of large amounts of data; access to fully anonymous, thus less self-conscious participants; access to otherwise geographically or socially removed subjects; the ability to empirically and/or comparatively discuss issues regarding the phenomenon of globalization; the ability, on account of their archived nature, to conduct trend and paneltype longitudinal research; and finally, the advantageous fact that blogs offer significant insight into the space and time of everyday life (Hookway 2008, 9293). Although Hookway's article is relatively recent (2008), some of his other observations are already out of date, or limited in scope — facts clearly connected with what I earlier identified as two essential changing attributes of contemporary blogs (i.e., a large increase in popularity and a change in their nature). For example, Hookway mentions NITLE's (National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education) extremely modest, if not completely unreliable estimate of 2.8 million existent blogs, while his more 'liberal' statistics range between 31.6 and 100 million blogs (Hookway 2008, 93). On October 2nd, 2011, the reputable, Nielsen Companyowned BlogPulse.com identified a total of 172,659,256 blogs (with more than 20,000 new blogs created each day, and approximately 1,000,000 blog posts published daily!). Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the very 'definition' of a blog may

need, with the advent of microblogging platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Plurk, Formspring, several amendments. The typically linear, primarily textual, daily/monthly/yearly archived blog(entries) of the earlier decade, light on links and focusing on the drama of “everyday interactions, selves and situations” (Hookway 2008, 94) are becoming more hybrid, more interconnected, more visually/synesthetically oriented, and provide tools for realtime social interactions. For example, with more than a million Twitter accounts in existence, and three billion user-requests everyday, the 140 character limited Twitter ‘blog’ posts get instantly followed, republished, and commented upon by thousands of users every second, creating a veritable microcosmos of how, where, and what is happening in the world every minute. Furthermore, completely ‘hyper-mediatized’ platforms such as Tumblr.com often do completely without conventional textual inputs or even time stamps, offering weblogs that resemble individual ‘streams of virtual consciousness’, compiled of pictures, animations, quotes, videoclips and other multimedia artefacts. These inputs are either individually uploaded by the user, or are many times simply and seamlessly linked from somewhere else (be it another tumblr, an online photo gallery, YouTube etc.). Considering that what I have previously identified and described as nostalgic online diaries make almost

exclusive use of the Tumblr platform, further attention will be given to describing this medium in a later, dedicated section of this article. Finally, I would like to again draw attention to the paucity of qualitative (micro) blogging-oriented studies. The few general analyses that tackle the ‘blogosphere’ are usually aimed at investigating blogging aspects related to participatory journalism (Wall 2005; MacDougall 2005), civic commitment (Kerbel & Bloom 2005), the production of education-oriented knowledge (Brooks et al 2004; Sade 2005), and business/corporate-related activities (Festa 2003; Scammel 2006).

Youth and the Internet. Bridging Theory with Methodology

While studies that examine young people’s cultural behaviours in online environments exist, the majority of these projects have little or nothing in common with my own stated purposes (nostalgia, online constructions of pastness) and chosen loci of investigation (microblogs). Even when the modern cultural ethnographers move away from the popular street, festival or club arenas, they usually work within the ‘subcultural’ paradigm of ‘rebellious youth’.¹ Unsurprisingly, therefore, we read about the ‘subcultural’ resistance manifested in Internet forums, chat rooms and various online communities of (post)punk actors (e.g., Pileggi 1998; Helton & Staudenmaier 2002; Williams 2003;

Hodkinson 2002). Alternatively, the tensions between 'authentic' DIY (Do it Yourself) virtual activities and the increased commercialization of online music spaces are explored (Haenfler 2006).

While these studies do not seem to, and, in certain key respects, do not match my own research focus and context, they are important in that they reflect a methodological 'metamodel' that I think defines many contemporary cultural studies in general. Therefore, in order to coherently connect postmodern debates on memory and authenticity with my own particular view of tumblr youth-culture, user-centred new media and Internet studies, I will subscribe to the versatile research 'tradition' that, in the face of increasing lifestyle fragmentation and an alleged decreased importance of social class, focuses on bodies rather than characters; on discourse rather than ideology; on the minutiae of appearance rather than patterns of substantiality; on Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, rather than Marx, Gramsci or Adorno (Thornton 1990, 1995; Muggleton 2000; Andes 1998; Lull 1987; Sardiello 1998; McRobbie 1989). Again, all of these 'style'-centred studies deal mainly with music, fashion and the various interactions between youth 'resistance' and a dominant 'mainstream' culture (which, in fact, is a quintessential trope of the subcultural paradigm). As I will underline in later paragraphs, these are all dimen-

sions either virtually absent, or fundamentally transformed² in and by the online medium upon which my research focuses. Inevitably, therefore, I subscribe to Steven Miles' observation that not all young people are "submerged in the melodrama of subcultural life or the terrors of drug addiction and alcohol consumption" (Miles, 2000, p. 3). Hence to the same author's pertinent appeal for a refocusing of attention (from subculture and delinquency paradigms) to the degree of complexity found in the lives of 'normal' young persons. Furthermore (and this point is also echoed by youth-researchers such as Sabin (1999), Thornton (1995) or Muggleton (2000), too often researchers have allowed (have preferred?) a priori grand-theoretical structures to frame, shape and delineate narratives of youth that seem to exist mainly in the elegant pages of one research or another.

My study tries to evade these dangers by starting the analysis in an exploratory vein, working from preliminary empirical, observational online data towards speculative possibilities of framing these observations within a credible theoretical context (and not the other way around). In fact, I believe that the Internet itself, being a de-structured, ultra-versatile, fast-changing, anthropomorphic medium, renders highly problematic any traditionally 'deductive', or theoretically a priori attempt to categorize it. Finally, like any cultural study, my research too

is eclectic in the methods it will employ. Drawing freely from across the liberal arts, humanities and social sciences, I will deal with “methodologies rather than a single methodology”, and make the methods serve “the aims of the research and not the research serve the aims of the method” (McGuigan 1997, 2). Nonetheless, as will become evident from the methodological choices I discuss below, I agree fully with a suggestion made by Rice and Williams as early as 1984: “we need not jettison useful communication theories when we wish to understand new media ... [we need to] further specify and modify these theories, [and] look at those traditional theories untraditionally” (Rice & Williams 1984, 56, 80). In this sense, despite the fact that both textual discourse analysis and photographic semiology are firmly rooted in ‘pre-digital’ theorizing (e.g., Foucault 1979; Barthes 1975), I will argue below that these are methods which can be adapted and applied to the study of online environments without in any way becoming compromised or inadequate.

Discussing Methodologies. A Call for Online Case Studies.

I use the term ‘case studies’ to refer to ethnographic research that investigates several cases in considerable depth. Being an anthropic, socially interactive medium, the Internet is implicitly an ethnographic space, one that fully lends itself to

judicious, flexible ethnographical inquiries (as also suggested by Jones 1999; Hine 2003, 2005; Kozinets 2010). The cases I have chosen are constructed out of naturally occurring situations (unlike the variable manipulations of an experimental approach), and imply the collection of unstructured data, plus the qualitative analysis of this data (Gomm et al 2000). To use Robert Stake’s (1995) well-established taxonomy, I consider each proposed blog analysis an ‘intrinsic’ case study, one that is interesting in itself and that will be approached in considerable detail, the researcher having a genuine interest in understanding its *sui generis* significance.

The apparently paradoxical nature of a young person’s nostalgic predilection for vicariously constructed forms of ‘pastness’, the interesting possibilities of contextualizing this phenomenon through the lens of postmodern critiques of historicity and memory, and the novel modalities through which hypermedia and online environments enable individuals to interactively express themselves all add up to the ‘intrinsic’ value of such cases. It is also true that, in choosing more than one case and in suggesting that a certain type of ‘nostalgic’ valance is a shared feature among all my exemplifications, I am simultaneously working within a framework that Yin (2003, 47) would describe as ‘multiple case studies’. This adds to the methodological equation the use-

ful possibility of drawing intercase comparisons, while also assuring a relative, tentative degree of general findings replicability (an attribute intrinsic case studies are notorious for lacking). Considering, however, the very recent, volatile and virtually uncharted terrain that my study investigates, I would consider any additional claims concerning the potential generality, or higher social contextualization of the analyzed websites, premature. For example, the most popular blog included in my analysis (Marie M.'s misswallflower.tumblr.com, with over 50,000 individual followers) is not only the one that sparked my (initially personal, then professional) interest in understanding its aesthetics, discourse and general 'rhetorical' construction, but also the one that creates a number of 'emulations' within the blogging platform itself (i.e., users who were inspired by Marie's website and created their own tumblr). It is, however, difficult, at this stage, to establish a larger, fuller picture of what could possibly be (come) a 'neonostalgic' current within the 'tumblr sphere'.

Reflectivity and the Construction of a Methodological Apparatus

What I subsequently termed the essentially 'nostalgic' online photographic journal misswallflower.tumblr.com was discovered by me accidentally, in the autumn of 2010. I did not realize, at that time, that tens of thousands of people followed it

regularly, or that it would become (together with a number of similar blogs) the focus of my research. As I imagine many of Marie's followers did, I browsed through its content simply because I liked the website's alluringly aesthetic consistency and its ability to create an indefinable, wistful mood. These facts in themselves betray the initial 'reflective' nature of this project, a reflectivity which I believe is a dimension as unavoidable as it is benign (and, in fact, ubiquitous in most qualitative cultural studies). Finally, upon consultation with other research colleagues and academics (the reflectivity of whom seemed to fortunately overlap mine, thus instilling the project with credibility) I decided to try and understand how, and potentially why these 'cultural statements' (McRobbie 1993) were performed.

Following a 'snowball' sampling (i.e., a non-probability sampling technique where an original subject's context, in this case 20 year old Marie's misswallflower.tumblr.com, redirected me to additional sources), I have so far identified five microblogs (misswallflower.tumblr.com; feelslikedejavu.tumblr.com; lastmemory.tumblr.com; lilpokerface.tumblr.com; voixdouce.tumblr.com). They were chosen based on thematic and occasionally interpersonal (e.g., [feelslikedejavu](http://feelslikedejavu.tumblr.com)'s tumblr belongs to a close, real life friend of Marie's) similarities. Each intrinsic case study will rely upon two separate types of methodologies. One

is more hybrid, rooted in semiological epistemology and media studies, while the other takes on a more ethnographicalempirical route, proposing the conduction of (online/offline) interviews. In what follows, I will sketch out the details of both these methodological constructions. Needless to say, they are intended to be complementary and synergic.

The first level of the examination is a critical visualtextual deconstructive analysis of the blogs' hypermedia. This hybrid, qualitative methodology includes:

A) A Foucaultian (1979; 2002) Barthian (1975) discourse/literary analysis, approaching the textual material as an open-ended, non-linear discursive entity, dialectically engaged within the social, aesthetic and stylistical realms of contemporaneity. All the aphoristical quotes, literary excerpts or personal journal entries extracted from each analyzed tumblr can, and will be used to "understand the relation between the www text [and, implicitly, its 'owner/subject'] and society, just as the structural analysis of the text ... can be conducted to uncover the ways in which it takes on specific meanings" (Mitra & Cohen 1999, 199). Independent of this conventionally destructuring approach, however, are online-specific issues that the virtual material cannot be stripped of. These include its decentralized intertextuality (e.g., do we ana-

lyze the potential hyperlinked content the text may point at, or not?), 'multi-mediacy' (some texts are embedded in images or vice versa), international dimension, ambiguous authorship and uncertain 'physical' status, or what some authors call its "impermanence" (ibid.). Only by combining offline archival solutions with what I earlier quoted as necessary untraditional approaches towards traditional methods (and I believe that most forms of 'discursive analyses' add up to an eclectic collection of critical-rhetorical crafts 'traditionally' used by poststructuralist researchers to analyze a large variety of 'conventional' texts) can one surmount these critical points. My analysis thus takes up the challenge of "offering the opportunity to reexamine the methods that have worked well with traditional texts and consider how the methods themselves can be modified to address the emerging [online] textual form" (ibid.). In this sense, I concur with many discourse analysts who suggest that a successful study depends less on rigidly rigorous procedures, and more on 'common sense', craft skill (Potter 1996, 140), general scholarship (Gill 1996) and personal interpretative sensibilities (Phillips & Hardy 2002).

B) While the analysis of text remains important, it is the predominantly visual dimension of both the Internet as a whole, and the 'nostalgicity' of the analyzed tumblrs spe-

cifically, that pose the most interesting methodological questions.

Scholars such as Scheid & Wright (2004) also underline the importance of the visually-expressive dimension of blogs, albeit addressing in their research what could be considered 'background' blog variables (user icons, template selections, blog design, colour schemes, titles, sidebars, widgets and typeface). Badger (2004, 1) takes a tentative step further and compares weblogs with "homepages that we wear, ... [with] the visual elements tailor[ing] the garment to fit the individual". Badger also interestingly tries to place the Internet in a predominantly visual realm, as something we 'glance at', rather than simply read (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, such studies pivot around the relatively mainstream, conventionally tailored blogs, where images and 'background' visual elements are used to complement, enrich, or contextualize the otherwise prioritized textual dimensions. In this sense, photographs remain essentially secondary, and always contingent to the text.

In the case of tumblrs, however, it is clear that the visual/multimedia aspect of the weblogs becomes prioritized, often to the detriment of conventional 'journal entries' type of textual material. If, in the blogs analyzed by Badger (2004, 7), images establish a connection between places and the voice of the blogger, my tumblr subjects use hypermedia

to create a sense of place, space and voice at the same time. If we are to strip a conventional blog of its text, the images would appear lost, random and fragmentary. If we would, however, apply the same treatment to one of the tumblrs in question, the microblog's coherence, narrative (a visual narrative, ambiguous, vague and in constant flux, but a narrative nonetheless) and sense of intrinsicality would persist. In cases such as these, Andrew Darley's remark that the ability to easily reproduce images online can make the result seem less precious/less unique is almost turned on its head (Darley 2001, 125).

To try and penetrate this multi-layered context, I propose to use a critical visual hermeneutics based on compositional interpretation, photographic semiology and a personalized form of content analysis (see also Gillian Rose's excellent *Visual Methodologies*, 2007). Aside from Rose's (2007) efforts, theorists such as Darley (2001, 193) also try to critically describe and place into a contemporary cultural context the digital 'aesthetics of the sensual', and how the online 'poetics of surfaceplay' are to be understood and integrated into the textures and experiences of (post)modern digital imagery.

Compositional interpretation, a term coined by Rose (2007) and derived from High Art critique (e.g., Rogoff 1998), is useful in the case of tumblrs because it may crucially

identify, using a critical “good eye’s” ability to recognize the expressive dimension of a photograph, what more than 50,000 virtual gazes constantly return to (in the case of *misswallflower’s* tumblr). Without really being methodologically explicit, compositional analysis offers a subtle hermeneutical path into an image’s meaningful ensemble of signs. Particularly relevant in this case, where at stake is the review of thousands of incredibly diverse, yet nonetheless ‘nostalgicallyfused’ photographs, is the method’s attention to colour. On a number of occasions, it has been suggested by people to whom I’ve introduced the blogs that a constant visual variable within all the tumblrs I analyze is their ‘colour palette’. Indeed, if we were to chromatically describe ‘nostalgia’ (a term which I will discuss in more detail below), we would probably ascribe to it the various sepia tones of a Daguerreotype, or the blurry pastels of old photographs, or simply the diffuse, semioneiric shades that almost transcend their individual photographic sources and give these websites their elusive charm.

In order, however, to make methodologically consistent sense of this type of imagery, both modern semiology and content analysis provide us with invaluable tools. In this sense, I propose to combine Barthes’ (1982) system of photographic semiology with the sampling and coding procedures offered

by more traditional forms of content analysis (e.g. Krippendorf 1980; Lutz & Collins 1993). Barthes’ work is known for its insightful, creative and highly discerning capabilities to probe beyond images’ basic signifier/signified dynamics. The Barthesian concept of ‘punctum’, describing an expressive, metanarrative dimension of certain photographs, or the so-called ‘feel’ of an image, is particularly salient here (Rose 2007, 89). For example, a Parisian sunset captured, decades ago, with a Polaroid camera, its beautifully frozen rays of incandescent light still melting on the Champ de Mars, is not just an image of the sun, of a city, or of a famous landmark. It contains a ‘punctum’ of its own, which bruises our perception and has the ability to hijack our memory’s vicarious ability to emulate affect. As a Barthesian scholar beautifully remarks, it is “those details that reside outside photographer’s intention or the viewer’s expectation that hold the most potential to wound. Existing beyond an academic or conventional framework, beyond the ‘codes’ that determine the photograph’s general reading, these details point to the very heart of photography – the project of freezing in time what will ultimately be destroyed” (West 2000, 146). Indeed, by ‘scavenging’ the photographs from all possible online venues (other blogs, photography sites, printscreened movie stills, scanned artefacts, webcam or cameraphone shots, etc.) my ‘tum-

blers' forever divorce the author from the authored, the photographer from the photograph, thereby dissolving original intentionality and implicitly celebrating what can arguably be called an undiluted Barthian 'punctum', or the metaexpressive signified, of the original images.

Nonetheless, there is also consistency here, and not just a random effluvium of 'stolen' memories (however aesthetic, or touching, they might be). If some form of consistency, or visual coherence, did not exist, I doubt these tumblrs would have ever appealed to anyone, including their owners. To pin down this coherence, to submit it to a methodical process of psychocultural analysis, I use similar coding mechanisms to those put forth by content analysts (see Rose 2007, 5977; also, Schreier 2011). This will help me systematically establish possible 'expressive patterns' that, when one familiarizes herself or himself with these blogs, can also be picked up intuitively.

An important source of methodological inspiration, in this sense, can be found in Nancy West's exemplary study *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (2002), where she uses similar psychocultural visual deconstructive methods to identify in early Kodak Advertisements five nostalgic motifs (which are, in fact, condensed reflections of the codes she used to analyze the images' content): 'leisure', 'childhood', 'fashion', 'antiques' and 'narrative' (West

2002, 2). By coding and attributing keywords to a sample of randomly extracted images from each tumblr, I, too, attempt to disentrench the 'nostalgic' themes that I believe are entangled within all of these micro-blogs (e.g., "oneiricism", "retro cinema", "vintage fashion", "childhood sensorialism"). As for the sampling procedures themselves (inevitably necessary actions, when dealing with thousands of images), they may take many forms, from choosing one photograph in ten images for a number of x times (where x defines a qualitative 'significance threshold' agreed upon in advance), or extracting consecutive images from separate portions of the respective tumblr, for a similar number of x times.

Finally, 'nostalgia', understood as a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past, is arguably a universal dimension of human nature (Holbrook & Schindler 1991). It has been explored by historians (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Lowenthal 1985), anthropologists (McCracken 1988), psychologists (Taylor & Konrad 1980; Holbrook & Schindler 1991) and other eclectic authors (Campbell 1987; Davis 1979; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). This generous pool of knowledge provides ample content for my coding/decoding operationalizations.

The second level of the analysis is based on qualitative semistructured interviews with the blog owners.

These provide empirical narratives that are valuable in complementing the more reflective visual research described above. Depending both on funding and user availability, they take the form of online or/and offline exchanges (ideally, I prefer to also elicit offline, 'real life' interactions with my subjects, in an effort to create a Geertzian 'thick' description of their *modus vivendi*). This will be crucial for an in-depth understanding of the inspiration, psychodynamics, demographic and cultural peculiarities of the analyzed subjects (as detailed in Hine 2003, or Kozinets 2010). The online interactions can be synchronous (adopting 'chat-room' formats) or nonsynchronous (e.g., email exchanges), and will need to take into account issues of time displacement, anonymity, subjects' personal preference and professional ethics. In this sense, James & Busher's (2009, 13-17) discussion of 'online knowledge construction' includes valuable reflections on practical issues such as cost, accessibility, temporality, quality of data and identity confidentiality. Their book is a useful companion to the online researcher who might find it difficult to plough through these issues using only common sense and liberal amounts of scholarly intuition (as shown, for example, by Teli et al 2007).

Although the diffuse, complex and multifaceted nature of the Internet creates methodological tensions for the interviewing author,

I believe that these challenges are by no means ineluctable. Processes such as online interviews are not fundamentally different, and are in no essential way inferior to conventional exchanges. Indeed, when ideally (but not necessarily) doubled by 'real life' encounters (as argued for, and exemplified in Sade-Beck 2004), online interviews benefit from a total anonymity factor and from a lack of formal social tensions (it is hard to avoid, even in informal settings, the 'real life' power dynamics that ensue between the 'scholarly expert' and the rhetorically vulnerable interviewee). Furthermore, they do not suffer from researcher-induced nonverbal (or even verbal) biases and their content is qualitatively enriched by the interviewed subjects' ability to invest her/his replies with more reflectivity (as opposed to a spontaneous, often less complex verbal response) (see also James & Busher 2009).

Beyond these more or less traditionally understood interactions, the Internet also offers alternative forms of (gathering) empirical 'linguistic' data. For example, some of the bloggers I analyzed own personal 'formspring.com' profiles. These pages are hosted by a popular question & answer-based microblogging website (with approximately 22 million registered global users, as of February, 2011), where people interested in their tumblrs have the opportunity of asking a (large) variety of questions. As everything ex-

ists in the public domain, one can archive these pages, and later either use them to review the veridicality of the data elicited via the 'official' interviews, or directly quote and interpret some of this information when discussing the respective case studies at length. Also, there exists the interesting possibility of examining the questions themselves (e.g. possible repeated patterns), in an effort to understand what regular followers understand about, or associate with the tumblrs in question.

This interpenetration of primary sources and their peripherally dispersed availability are, I think, exclusive attributes of contemporary online environments and provide the cultural or media researcher with new opportunities to acquire a multifaceted understanding of their chosen subjects.

Further Exemplifications and Contextual Notes

Before concluding this article, which I hope sheds some light on how to choose, combine and refine methods for the qualitative analysis of online (micro)blogs, some further reflections on Tumblr as a communication platform and on Marie's incredibly popular misswallflower.tumblr.com will prove useful.

Launched in 2007 and already garnering over 3 million users, Tumblr.com is not only an exponentially expanding self-expression forum, but also probably the most innovative, hybrid, flexible and revo-

lutionary blogging platform currently in existence. The very medium in which these visual and stylistic gestures are born in, the incessant flux of images, videos, quotes and animations, the absence of any subordinating vertical structures (there exists no 'mainstream' vs. 'underground' dynamic here), the possibility of interpreting the blogs both as micro and niche-youth media (see Thornton 1995, 137151), and the socially interactive element of these fundamentally democratic exchanges, all reflect a parallel world rich in psycho-social meanings still left uncharted by cultural analysts.

As a case in point, it is extraordinary how unitary, in terms of evocative mood and style, Marie's collages of quotations (ranging from Mae West and Woody Allen to Rainer Maria Rilke, E. E. Cummings and Sylvia Plath), videoclips, literary excerpts and photographs are. The blog is the (first, arguably original) instance of what I believe to be an embryonic type of youthful, 'neonostalgic' identity — an idea easily placeable within the previously mentioned broader discourses regarding (re)constructions of social memory, the volatility of aesthetic heritages, and the use of new media/user-centred online spaces in creating these identities.

Marie simultaneously constructs (all photos are actively 'hunted' by her on the Web) and expresses (she obviously filters the content according to sophisticated personal

preferences) her identity by 'transformatively' combining mainstream symbols (e.g., a mini-fixation on Chanel, the use of images and references from popular magazines such as *Elle*, *Vogue* etc.) with a subtly articulated elitism, presenting, for example, Ladurée luxury cakes and pastries, and literary and musical connections extracted from 'high culture'. Furthermore, her finely tuned, wistful sense for mood, emotion and affective imagery (in other words, her Barthian sensibility for visual 'punctums'), is well worth analysing. Equally, her indefinable, yet subtly patterned, silky taste for what can only be described as 'love', 'sadness' and 'ethereality', or her highly distilled, existentialist longing for beauty, are all absorbing dimensions. So is her articulation of femininity, and the apparent longing for a space of eternal, retro 'youth'. These are all possible semiotic patterns, similarly articulated by voix-douce.tumblr.com, feelslikedejavu.tumblr.com, and others, that should be further explored. How, for example, do they relate to more popular forms of mediatized youth culture? Without explicitly rejecting or criticising it, these spaces (may) nonetheless propose a complementary, highly personalized space in which youth identities can be reflected or shaped.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that these described realities are not contextually

located in an immediately familiar physical environment, they are interactively constructed, are open to the public, and make use (albeit in new or innovative ways) of universally expressive tools such as texts, sounds and images. From a methodological viewpoint, therefore, it is important to consider both this 'universal' dimension of the analyzed material (implicitly, its potential to be interpreted via traditionally acknowledged academic methods such as the ones I previously discussed), and also the need to match its in-situ hybridism with an equally hybrid methodology. As the tumblrs include images, texts, clips, but also an author (or, rather, a bricoleur) who uses these semiological tools expressively, it is necessary to examine both the projected meanings (in this case, 'nostalgia', and the visual construction of 'pastness') and the meaning-makers themselves. Discourse analysis and semiologically grounded hermeneutics may cater for the former, while interviews address the latter. The purpose, however, remains straightforward and unified: to understand what motivates young people such as Marie to do what they do, to analyze the result of their efforts, and to place these in a cultural-theoretical context. The fact that one can do this with a personal computer with online access not only confirms the fact that the Internet is a powerful platform that has significantly changed the way people communicate and

connect with each other (James & Busher 2009, 5); it also strengthens the claim that the World Wide Web is a multidimensional space where individuals pursue a multitude of forms of cultural and personal actualization. Indeed, only by using a similarly multidimensional methodological approach in the study of such a medium, can we begin to pertinently describe, understand or reflectively engage with it.

Finally, it is worth underlining that there is still much need for further sociological research that documents and explores the blogosphere's ongoing transformation or shift from the textual to the visual, from linear archives to fragmentary real-time communications, from insular, daily-life journals to the creation of 'ambient awareness' and a dispersion of cultural-visual 'exhibitionism/voyeurism' (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011, 105). We also need to understand and acknowledge that: 1. blogs have become extremely popular (if not ubiquitous), as well as increasingly polysemic, hybridized (textual/visual/synesthetic), interconnected and interactive; and 2, that old established paradigms such as that associated with 'youth subcultures' are, at best, insufficient when dealing with Internet (youth) culture. Studies of such environments will need to combine an attention to the technical aspects of blogging (e.g., use of templates, plug-ins, social media extensions etc) with clear, individualised and comprehensive analyses

of both personal and (digitally) cultural variables (who the blogger is, what blogging platform she or he is using, how isolated or popular the respective blog is, what discourse is articulated, and by what means, and can this discourse be extrapolated or placed in a larger blogging trend, etc). My study is therefore only one example, in one particular context, of a much larger, virtually boundless phenomenon.

¹ The 'subcultural' paradigm was disseminated by the influential, Birmingham-based Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), during the 1970s-1980s. Using a Marxist approach, it was generally argued that youth subcultures were class-dependent cultural modalities through which young people expressed their opposition to the dominant social order, and towards each other.

² Unsurprisingly, even a 'postsubcultural' researcher such as Bennett (2004) suggested that the Internet renders the idea of (sub)cultures with clear styles and rigid boundaries 'highly problematic' (p. 163), and that new research should focus on the 'shared ideas' between various individuals, rather than on the conventional physical spaces typical of conventional encounters (e.g., concerts, demonstrations etc).

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