

Everydayness, Media, Infrastructures: the Spectacular and the Mundane

A mini-lecture to the Expressive Culture class at the University of Texas at Austin 2/27/2018

We already know with you that “everydayness” is a category, not just a continuity of usual, uninteresting things; it is considered to be a legitimate subject of interest, a subject of anthropological study. It is out of the mundane that the spectacular emerges. However, again, the spectacular does not always tell us as much as the mundane tell; the mundane is as deserving of an attentive looking as the spectacular.

If you give it a consideration, everydayness does not exist as such; it is always already caught in some other categories without which we cannot approach everydayness. Today in class, you are contemplating media, and the book you have read mentions the media theorist Marshall McLuhan, a founding father of a new way of looking at media, if you will. In 1960s, Marshall McLuhan came out with a broad reading of media. He’s the author of the books *The Medium is the Massage (sic!—V.O.): An Inventory of Effects* (1967), *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968), *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (1989) and many other works. “The global village” is another of his beguiling concepts; this one refers to the village-like proximity of all the humans, to the village-like circulation of rumors and news, while this imaginary village preserves the global scope, width, and breadth of its existence. The locality of the “village” superimposed here with the global interconnectedness of the world.

We should stick to “the medium is the message” metaphor for now. McLuhan offered a series of interpretations for this expression that only come ever so unsatisfactorily close to the encompassing of the meaning of the saying. As all the big statements, it is unruly and is hardly approachable at all with any sort of finality. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, where he introduced this adage, McLuhan says:

“In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. Thus, with automation, for example, the new patterns of human association tend to eliminate jobs it is true. That is the negative result. Positively, automation creates roles for people, which is to say depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed. Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine,

but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message.” (McLuhan, From *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964).

What can we discern from here? First of all, the working definition of media with which McLuhan operates here, seems to be “the extension of ourselves,” that is to say, a tool, an instrument that facilitates our capacities and reach.

It was the time when humanity desperately searched for a “meaning,” something decipherable in a complete form, something reliable. Around this time the literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, separately yet together with the philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault were searching for the meaning as well. As you know, Barthes proclaimed the death of the author in 1967, and Michel Foucault in 1969 called to look for who benefits from the discourses in order to place the discourses and understand where they come from rather than looking at the figure of the author, to return us to McLuhan, we could say, the messenger, someone who is behind the message.

Some of the key words that pop up as we begin speaking about media, is a flow, or a flux, circulation, transmission, passing. In *Practices of Looking* chapter 6, Media in Everyday Life, that you read for today, there is a definition of media:

“Media is the plural form of medium, which describes the means of technology used for storing and communicating information and other configurations of data....Medium is also used to describe a psychic, a person who channels a dead person’s spirit, making it audible and visible through expression and gesture. All of these meanings suggest intervening layers through which something flows.” (Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 216).

“Something” that “flows” immediately bring upon the considerations of infrastructure. Here is how. Let us think together through some of the approaches to infrastructure that Brian Larkin offers in the piece titled “The Poetics and Politics of Infrastructure” (*Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 2013. 42:327–43).

- ▶ “Infrastructures are material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space. They are the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked.” (Larkin, *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure*, 2013, 327)
- ▶ “Infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. As physical forms they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown. They comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life.” (Ibid, 328)
- ▶ “Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter.” (Ibid, 329)
- ▶ “Infrastructure has its conceptual roots in the Enlightenment idea of a world in movement and open to change where the free circulation of goods, ideas, and people created the possibility of progress (Mattelart 1996, 2000)....In this sense, it is very difficult to disentangle infrastructures from evolutionary ways of thinking not the least because this is such an intimate part of their appeal....[I]t is difficult to separate an analysis of infrastructures from this sedimented history and our belief that, by promoting circulation, infrastructures bring about change, and through change they enact progress, and through progress we gain freedom.” (Ibid, 332)

As you see in these definitions of infrastructure, all of which come from this single piece by Brian Larkin, there is an entanglement of flow, progress, modernity, freedom, everydayness, environment, and circulation around infrastructure.

Let us think for a moment if we can imagine an advanced civilization somewhere on the another planet that does not have a developed infrastructure. Let us engage with this mental paradox. Imagine that the civilization is so developed that it does not need any infrastructure. Is this even imaginable? Do they have homes and if so, how do they build them? The infrastructure is a built environment. Perhaps they have shelters in the trees that already contain everything that they need. But how do they circulate things, how do they organize flow? If they use telepathy for transmitting a thought from one individual to another, does not it mean then that they themselves become an infrastructure? Still, in this infrastructure that is combined out of living being, is it possible for us to recognize the advancements that they made, the progress that they made, and the modernity that they embrace? Would the earthlings consider this civilization developed or primitive? Suppose you are not going to use the word “primitive” as educated beings themselves, but which word would you use to describe the civilization that does not have any built infrastructure preserving the sense of it as a developed civilization? In what sense do we use the word “developed” then? Is a tool that the human being uses a sign of the being’s advancement or a sign of its incapacity? What is in a “human nature” that makes people constantly dissatisfied with whatever that is that they have and strive towards improvement of the “quality of life,” as it is now customary to put it?

But to return to the media and the everydayness. A perfect picture of the media as “an extension of man” is a selfie-taker shooting a selfie with a phone that becomes a prosthetic device. A selfie stick is a graceful limb of the robot, even though the body of the robot is absent from the picture. Think about how the same type of media and the same type of infrastructure function differently or in a similar manner around the globe.

Consider the place where I am doing my fieldwork. My overarching work is on “affective infrastructures.” I examine the tensions in the everyday life of people who engage with the morally outdated and sometimes malfunctioning infrastructures in remote Siberian villages on the shore of the Angara River. These villages came to life in their current form as a consequence of the Bratsk dam construction in 1954-61. Although the villages emerged as the result of infrastructural development, the infrastructures locally have been lacking from the start. Later, ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the existence of the villages has drastically changed. How do people make everyday decisions in a place where the infrastructure is failing? Infrastructures generate affects as well as affects partake in the construction or repurposing of infrastructure.

Anosovo never knew central telephony, having skipped this step of what seems to be a common infrastructural development. As of 2017, there is no mobile telephony, although sometimes people have and use phones; the nearby station of mobile telephony is too far for the signal to reach the place. There is television, thankfully—satellite, and before that, there was none for the same reason: the location is too far away from the caveats and blessings of modern “civilization.” But there is the Internet, even though the only provider of services reaching Anosovo is located in the city of Irkutsk. The local administration of Anosovo provides the free access to a Wi-Fi spot. In the evening on the bench near the administration building, you could see a picture familiar in every site of the world: people self-forgettingly staring at their phones. In spite of the fact that there is no other public place connecting Anosovo to the world wide web, and the home-provided Internet is too expensive for too many, villagers still have

smartphones and mobile phones. The physical mobility in the village is high since for almost every serious occasion, be it a flat tire or a health issue, one must arrange a travel to a nearby town of Ust Uda; the shortest route to which via the land is 113 miles.

In the administration of Anosovo, there are two phones: *Rostelekom* and *Iskra*. *Rostelekom* is paid by the administration, and *Iskra* is a payphone. Both ways of connection are technologically facilitated by the satellite. There are home telephones in the village, where the connection is done through the Internet. The cost of the Internet depends on the plan that ranges in speed and volume, from 850 rubles a month to 4.000 (\$14.14 to \$66,54 by the Moscow bourse's course as of the November 2017). Considering the rate of unemployment in the rural places in Siberia and very few socially secure positions in the village that provide any kinds of benefits, these sums are high, and few people can afford them, especially considering that the Internet is not a vital need but rather a luxury in these settings. "Truth be told, if you check it, the quality is equally bad [regardless of the selected plan]," I was told in Anosovo ("*Na proverku, pravda, kachestvo odinakovo plokhoye.*") The internet-signal is going from the city of Irkutsk through the rebroadcasting transmitter, and the signal weakens.

This is the place where our present two selfie-takers, Elena and Maria, spent their childhood and the largest parts of their young lives to date. The two heroes of this piece—Elena and Maria—are sisters. Maria is 18, and Elena is 22. They both now live in the city of Irkutsk; Elena is a married woman with a child; Maria is studying in college.¹

I am exploring what practices utilizing the media technologies are used by those who are staying and who are moving out of the village that is not constantly interconnected with the world. In particular, how selfies are taken and uploaded here, and what does it tell us about digital self-representation, the creation of identities online, and the way it impacts the sense belonging?

What struck me when I was looking at the galleries of selfies taken both in and out of this village, is that I could not tell the difference, I could not place them. Could anyone say "these were being taken there or there?" I searched for the traces of belonging there.

There is a conversation around selfies centered primarily on "luxury selfies," "microcelebrity," "attention economy," and those who solicit "instafame." However, the majority of selfies on the web is not luxurious, nor do people pretend or aspire to emulate celebrities. What do we do with these masses of material, how do we approach analyzing them?

As an anthropologist, I would treat any selfie as ethnographic material. Looking at my interlocutors Maria and Elena's selfies, I was interested in why their selfies seem to be the reproduction of what it is commonly accepted as a selfie; a creative exploit, a use of processing applications, seemed to be devoid of any flavor of something specific for the place. Indeed, one could not tell, looking at these selfies, where, geographically and geopolitically, so to speak, they were taken. These selfies are "placeless." In the absence of geolocational tags, they are floating in the endless ocean of paradoxically depersonalized selfies. These shots might have been snapped in Austin—might it be that someone in this class would take a selfie that might easily be mistaken for a selfie taken in Irkutsk?

One of Maria's selfie pictured a fragment of a ragged chair on the background, might have been coming from one of the hipsters' place with where lamps and chairs are variegated, and selected to

¹ Note that I have their written permission to display their selfies.

produce an impression of creative disarray. The wallpaper in one of Elena's selfie where she is impersonating a kitten points to the places where wallpaper is customary in decorating interiors; but although wallpaper seems to be something that is in decline in America, too many places in the world still look like that. Elena is depicted in the car on her Warhol-like selfie with hair differently colored—which is a hint that she belongs to this powerful minority in the world who has personal cars (although it is unclear from this picture if she is in the driver's seat), but again this "clue" is not telling much of a substance about her socio-economic class, not to mention any other type of belonging.

In short, here I suggest we started looking more attentively at what we are doing ourselves as people who engage with different media in different infrastructures, and in what sense we are trying to communicate what we are or construct our personae through our selfie-taking practices.

This in turn will allow us to reflect how media and media platforms influence our behavior, who is a consumer and what is consumed, is the selfie and other practices of being-in-the-world coercive, do they consume or use us rather than we consume or use them, and how the media becomes the message and the message becomes the media.