The Liquid Aesthetic of the Cameraphone: Re-imagining Photography in the Mobile Age

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Abstract

The cameraphone has emerged as a dominant device for the production and sharing of photographic images in the new millennium. No longer constrained by technological parameters of the past, the cameraphone continues to remediate and refashion the tropes of traditional photography, thus giving rise to new image making processes and, arguably, new ways of seeing.

From early model cameraphones manufactured in 2004 through to the enhanced capabilities of the ubiquitous Apple iPhone, the cameraphone has evolved from a crude digital imaging/communications tool into a sophisticated networked media device. It is now capable of capturing, editing, storing, and exporting high-resolution images.

As the cameraphone continues to evolve, constant technological shifts have facilitated a liquid aesthetic whereby cameraphone images, and photographic practices are shaped and/or influenced by the constantly fluctuating nature of this transformative technology. With this in mind, my research examines the shape-shifting parameters of the cameraphone and its impact on the field of photography. I explore ways in which cameraphones may reconfigure our relationship with imaging and facilitate new modes of photographic practice.

Keywords: liquid aesthetic, cameraphone, photography, iPhoneography, genre, remediation

Introduction

The birth of the cameraphone can be traced back to June 11 1997, when Philippe Kahn captured a photograph of his newborn daughter. He then shared the tiny pixelated image with friends and colleagues around the world via wireless communication networks. According to Kelly (2012), Kahn had created the portable digital imaging device by inserting the first point, shoot, and share camera into the

body of a Motorola Startac mobile phone. Kahn's cameraphone prototype exploited the potential of developments in digital technology and an emergent convergence culture. His experiment may now be understood as a small step towards the development of a media device that would significantly change our relationship with communication, media, and in particular, photography.

In her article "Picture this: The impact of mobile camera phones on personal photographic practices," Gye (2007, p. 279) argues that the cameraphone, due to its ubiquity and access to telecommunication grids, should not be viewed as just another kind of camera. Rather, she suggests that cameraphones extend existing individual imaging practices and are enablers for the evolution of new imaging methods. However, Gye also observes that in order to gain a better understanding of cameraphone imaging practices, it is important to build knowledge around the reasons why people take photographs.

The reasons for taking photographs may be many and varied, but the emergence of photography as a popular medium can be traced back to the l890s. The release of Kodak's Brownie, an inexpensive, portable, and easy-to-use film camera, took advantage of the technological breakthroughs in analogue photographic processes and a growing interest in personal photography during the late 1800s. Murray (2008), notes that the Kodak Company, through its advertising, defined amateur photography "as a practice that could be easily integrated into everyday leisure activities and could be used to express creative impulses" (p. 152). Whereas once photography had been the domain of studio photographers and professionals, the introduction of inexpensive film cameras and commercial film processing labs instigated a mass engagement with amateur photography. Non-professionals are now able to develop new approaches and rituals around the use of the camera to record visual traces of the everyday.

It is possible to argue that just like the introduction of the cheap film camera, the cameraphone has also ushered in a new wave of photography and remediated aspects of traditional photographic processes and practices. At one time, the cost of film processing and photographic prints may have discouraged experimentation and restricted the use of the camera to the recording of significant life events such as weddings, birthdays, graduation, etc. Now, the digital cameraphone has significantly reduced costs previously associated with photography. The ubiquitous cameraphone is also ever present, ready to capture digital images that range from the profound through to the banal. From a meal in a restaurant, or sale items in a shop window, through to family, friends, and complete strangers, both public and

private spaces may now be understood as the mise en scène from which to capture and document the minutiae of daily life.

As cameraphone technologies evolve and networked/convergence cultures continue to shape social practices, it may be said that our understanding of photography has also altered to fit the ever-changing parameters of our techno-social lifestyles. As Keep & Berry note:

> The advent of the mobile camera phone has transformed image capture from a consciously planned activity to one that can occur spontaneously. Capturing a moment in time is not just the creation of a visual artefact to aid the remembrance of past events, but also a means of enabling individuals to locate themselves in the present (Keep & Berry, 2009).

The cameraphone, due to its ease of use, connectivity, relative low-cost, and accessibility, makes it easier to engage in the capturing and sharing of photographs. Arguably, it promotes a new understanding of the ways that photographs can be used to communicate and express ourselves within our everyday lives. Lee (2007, p. 24) suggests that the cameraphone not only "reconstruct our experience of seeing" but they also challenge many of the established conventions associated with photography. These include social relations between the person/s being photographed and the photographer, as well as the worthiness and cultural meaning of popular photographs.

In this paper, I will identify some of the factors that arguably influence the shape-shifting nature of cameraphone technology and how these elements have promoted a re-imagining of photography and photographic practices in the mobile age.

The Liquid Aesthetic

The cameraphone has emerged as an important media device for capturing, editing, and sharing digital photographic images in the 21st Century. As the cameraphone continues to shape our relationship with personal computing and photographic practices, I believe that it is increasingly important to identify the ways in which cameraphones are reconfiguring our understanding of photography in the mobile age. Potentially, they are instigating new photographic practices and aesthetics. Murray (2008) notes, "While theorists grapple with the meaning of photography without film, consumers have had to learn new practices and protocols and many have found new ways to use cameras in their everyday lives" (p. 153).

Digital images produced on cameraphones may be understood as part of a database culture (Manovich, 2001) that acknowledges the shape-shifting and increasingly mutable qualities of digital media artefacts. Digital images have a liquid nature in that images taken on cameraphones exist as binary code and therefore may be easily deconstructed, re-constructed, and re-imagined. In addition, unlike photographs produced on film cameras, images taken on cameraphones are usually not printed. Rather, they are stored in the device, therefore making it easy to revisit an image or distribute images across a plethora of social media sites such as Instagram, Flickr and Facebook and Tumblr.

The cameraphone evolves in this ever-shifting technological landscape. In the process, it promotes a "liquid aesthetic" whereby changes in technology, as well as our relationship with personal computing, may be understood as key drivers that shape image-making techniques. A brief search of www.google.com will show that the term "liquid aesthetic" has been employed by some authors across a range of disciplines to describe an object/concept that is in a state of change/flux. It appears to have a liquid-like appearance. Here, I adopt the term as a "travelling concept" to describe the fluid nature of cameraphone technology and its associated social practices. I am interested in how these factors may shape the aesthetic and content of photographic images produced on the cameraphone.

Unlike conventional film cameras, the cameraphone invites new ways to engage with and extend photographic methods. Users exploit the portability and small size of the device to experiment and/or develop new approaches to framing visual content with unconventional camera angles and perspectives. The ubiquitous nature of the cameraphone arguably extends the potential of the device to penetrate public and private spaces more resistant to the gaze of larger format cameras (Keep & Berry, 2013, p. 168). Not only do cameraphones present opportunities to quickly capture and share digital images in a variety of situations, they also provide users with a plethora of production and post-production options. These choices come in the form of lens attachments and a wide range of digital filters that can easily be applied to alter the visual properties of images.

In the following section of this paper, I will identify some of the key factors that have influenced cameraphone aesthetics and associated image-making practices over the past decade.

Early Cameraphone: Emergent Aesthetics and Imaging Practices

As an artist working in the medium of photography, I observed that early model cameraphones shared similarities with earlier image making devices from the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Holga and Diana plastic film cameras. Unlike the more sophisticated digital cameras of the period which featured a plethora of functions and were capable of producing relatively high resolution images, the plastic camera lens and unsophisticated image sensor in early cameraphones resisted accurate renderings of subjects. Colours were often muted or over-saturated, and perspectives were stretched. Photographers used the small screen of the cameraphone as a viewfinder to frame subjects. This often made composing shots very difficult, especially in extreme light conditions. However, in the hands of an artist, these so-called "problems" may present opportunities to forge new creative frontiers. The limitations of cameraphone technology can be exploited for the development of innovative photographic practices.

I can still recall purchasing my first cameraphone in 2004. Many cameraphone models of this time possessed limited memory capability, poor lens quality, and low image resolution. Photographs captured on these devices demonstrated soft focus and de-saturated colour, resulting in poorly focused and heavily pixelated images. One of the technical improvements during this time included an option that enabled users to overlay text over images (see *Figure 1*). The meshing of text message and image created a type of micro-postcard that could be shared across the communication networks. It is fair to say that images produced on cameraphones during this period were generally viewed as a novelty rather than an emerging form of cultural expression and/or creative practice.

The practice of sharing photography captured on a cameraphone is an attribute often associated with the device. Initially, this was constrained by expensive mobile carrier charges that made sharing and downloading images prohibitively expensive. Therefore, most images often remained on the phone or were transferred to computers for sharing via email services. I can recall a friend at the time remarking that the only way of retrieving an image from her early model cameraphone was by sending the image as an MMS message to a later model cameraphone. The owner of that phone then downloaded and forwarded the picture to her email account. Working within these limited technical parameters may have been viewed as restrictive and/or inconvenient for many professional and amateur photographers. Here, I suggest that cameraphones actually provided an opportunity to exploit the perceived shortfalls of the technology for the production of visual experiments.

Figure 1. Combining text and image option (2005).

By 2005, improved imaging and networking capabilities made the cameraphone a powerful enabler for engagement across newly developed social platforms (MySpace, Facebook, and Flickr). Self-portraits for online profiles and images of friends, family, and places became common subjects for users of cameraphone. The Kodak Company had promoted the Brownie camera in the late 1800s as the ideal medium for capturing and sharing personal photography. Now the cameraphone "remediates" (Bolter and Gruisin, 2000) analogue photographic practices to fit the parameters of an emergent database culture, driven by advancements in digital and networked communication technologies.

Ongoing improvements in camera resolution and the inclusion of a built-in-flash as a standard feature made it possible to capture images in low-light conditions. Continued improvements in colour saturation and image quality (megapixels) made the cameraphone better able to capture a wider variety of image content, therefore making the cameraphone more competitive with digital point-and-shoot cameras.

Just as Kodak had transformed photography into a leisure activity for the masses, the cameraphone also presented users with an opportunity to participate in an emergent and dynamic visual communication culture. Vernacular photography became an important tool for the pursuit of social inclusion, self-expression, and enjoyment. The small size of early cameraphone models, teamed with their inability to produce high quality printed images, arguably played a role in a reduced

resistance to the cameraphone's gaze. This made it possible to take the cameraphone into spaces that may have rejected larger format cameras. In the past, I was often surprised when complete strangers seemed relatively comfortable in front of the cameraphone. In some cases, people would even pose for a photograph (see *Figure 2*). After taking photographs for over thirty years, I was continually surprised by the lack of resistance towards people capturing images on cameraphones in both public and private spaces, thus promoting a new wave of social photography.

Figure 2. Visitors at Melbourne Showgrounds (2005), Dean Keep.

Emergent Cameraphone Genres and Social Practices

It has been said that traditional photography and its genres is underpinned by a desire to document or preserve our memories of people, places, and events (see Barthes, 1981; Benjamin, 1936). Our growing acceptance of the cameraphone in private and public spaces, along with the use of digital images on social media applications, has played a role in the development of cameraphone photographic genres. However, unlike traditional photography's preoccupations with the index, memory, and fine art cultures, people using cameraphones seem less concerned with "correct" framing, lighting, and composition. Many of the subjects captured

seem more focused on communicating aspects of their personal experiences with peers.

Figure 3. Kerrilee taking photographs at a birthday party (2006), Dean Keep.

As observed by Hjorth (2007, p. 235) "cameraphone practices are underscored by modes of realism. We feel like we are being allowed into someone's private world – the ultimate fetishisation of the personal." Photographs of meals enjoyed, holidays (see *Figure 3*), wine labels to be remembered for repeat purchase, haircuts to show off to friends, etc. indicate new ways of thinking about how we use photography in our daily lives. Photography is no longer a static medium to be framed and hung on a wall. Cameraphone photography appears less preoccupied with the production of a physical artefact (printed photographic image). Rather, it acknowledges the ways in which photographic images form a part of a complex visual language system that has evolved to fit the ever-changing parameters of our increasingly networked lives.

Considering the ways that the cameraphone has reconfigured our understanding of photography, Bareham (2013) observes that:

> The paradigm shift in photography is that everyday realism is more important than technical quality. It's the honesty with which people take pictures of

> each other using a phone that makes it so compelling; the way people photograph themselves ("selfies") their work, their food, their pets, their holidays, their lives (Bareham, 2013).

The cameraphone sits outside the field of traditional photography, therefore freeing users from the cultural baggage and conventions often associated with commercial and/or fine art photographic practices. Cameraphones transform users into media producers and enable individuals to capture and share traces of personal experience in the form of digital images that may be easily shared amongst friends or uploaded to social media sites. As suggested by Gye (2007, p.287), the "cameraphone [can] extend our way of looking at the world photographically" and therefore change the way we see ourselves in relation to the world we live in.

Van Dijck (2008) similarly notes:

> we are witnessing a shift, especially among the younger generation, towards using photography as an instrument for peer-bonding and interaction. Digitization is not the cause of this trend; instead, the tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 7).

In their paper "The social life of cameraphone images," Van House & Ames (2007, p. 5) identify four areas that influence the production of cameraphone images. They cite "creating and maintaining social relationships; constructing personal and group memory; self-presentation; and self expression" as key drivers for the capturing and sharing of cameraphone images.

Our relationship with photography has been significantly altered by the cameraphone. Photographic images are no longer relegated to a private family photo album; rather they form an important part of our visual communications. Photographic genres such as documentary, portraiture, and in particular self-portraiture ("selfies") are potent signifiers of personal experience. They are a "certificate of presence" (Barthes, 1981) that communicates to others stories and relationships that form part of our lived experience. Whilst the thought of taking a selfie with a larger SLR camera might be considered narcissistic or simply too much effort, the cameraphone is ideally placed to capture self-portraits in a wide range of situations. The increasing popularity of the selfie genre may be a case of its ability to situate both the photographer and viewer as a participant in digital culture whilst feeding a demand for user-generated content and personal storytelling. Events

such as the *Selfie Olympics* on the social media site Twitter showcase the performative nature of many "selfies" and illustrate the diversity of human experience.

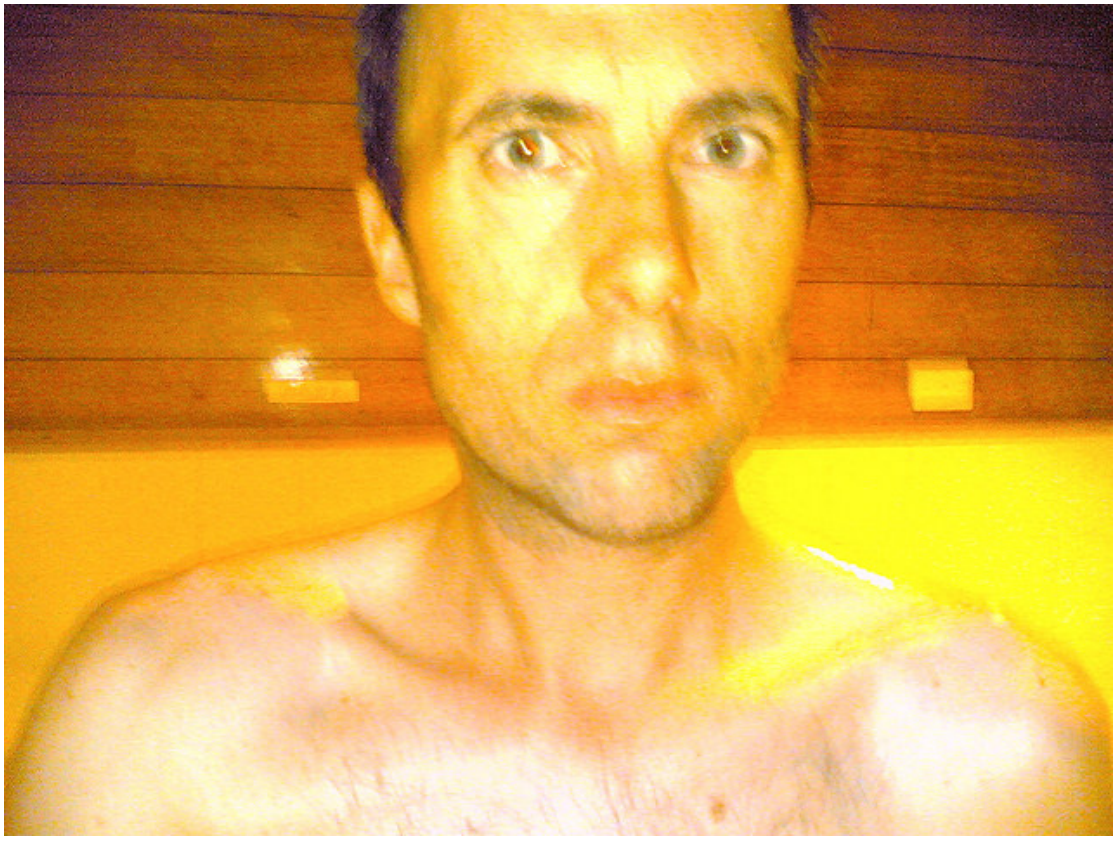

Figure 4. Untitled 1, Recovery Series (2006), Dean Keep.

The intimate nature of the cameraphone also makes it well placed as a device to aid the production of autoethnographic artefacts in the form of digital images that reflect a myriad of personal narratives. At the time, the thought of using a cameraphone to document my recovery process seemed far less daunting than staring down the lens of a large digital SLR camera. When recovering from a major illness, it seemed only right that I use this most intimate of media devices to capture and record the images of my two-year recovery period (2006 – 2007). After all, the cameraphone had been there when I needed to communicate my thoughts and feelings with friends and family. Rather than isolating the photographs of my recovery period in a designated photo album, the images were easily stored on my cameraphone. This created an entanglement of text messages, images, and memories that could be easily retrieved to chart and/or reflect upon the progress of my recovery.

Figure 5. Untitled 2, Recovery Series (2006), Dean Keep.

Cameraphones also present new ways to see our world. During 2007, the digital photography industry (and many consumers) appeared to be fixated on discussions around megapixels and image sharpness. I realised then that many of the aesthetics previously associated with the cameraphone (soft focus, pixilation, colour shifts, etc.), would soon be outdated.

The Order of Magnitude exhibition held at the First Site gallery in Melbourne, and later at the Queensland Centre for Photography (2008), set out to celebrate the visual anomalies afforded by the cameraphone. At the same time, it challenged pre-conceived ideas around the fine art photographic print. Whereas traditional photography is bound by established theoretical and cultural conventions, the newness of cameraphone technology makes it possible to shun many of the pre-conceived ideas associated with photographic practice.

Figure 6. *The Wait* (2007) from *Order of Magnitude*, Dean Keep.

Although specific features unique to each cameraphone model influences the aesthetic of these photographs (see *Figure 4*), a lack of photographic conventions associated with the cameraphone has the potential to promote a culture of creative experimentation. Excessive pixilation creates a visual effect reminiscent of the impressionist movement in painting. Images of highways and suburban streets now take on an almost nostalgic quality. Pockets of soft focus and distortion, randomly generated by the cameraphone, create areas of mystery within the frame. They distort the original image, disrupt the narrative, and create a space for the viewer to project their narrative interpretation. Just as the pinhole camera has taken its place as a transformative technology within the history of analogue photography, the early model cameraphone marked the beginning of an emergent cameraphone aesthetic located within the genealogy of digital imaging technologies and contemporary photographic practice.

iPhonography and the Smartphone Aesthetic

The Kodak Brownie camera may be understood as a part of a long line of cheap "point and shoot" cameras that have played an important role in establishing many of the tropes and conventions associated with amateur photographic practice in the 20th Century. Similarly, the widespread introduction of Smartphone technology has been an important factor in precipitating a new wave of cameraphone aesthetics and practices. Whereas earlier model cameraphones had been constrained by the limited capabilities of the 2G network, the shift to a 3G network made it possible for cameraphone manufacturers and users to take advantage of location-based services and high-speed mobile communication systems. With greatly improved camera specifications (enhanced resolution), touch screens and the seamless integration of wireless communication networks, these late model cameraphone provide users with increased opportunities to re-invent and re-imagine photography.

The popularity of the iPhone, along with the photographic aesthetic it generates, has led to the development of a photographic genre called iPhonography. In her book *The Art of iPhonography: A guide to Mobile Creativity*, Roberts (2011) defines iPhonography as "the art of shooting and processing (editing and enhancing) digital images using an iPhone" (p. 7). According to the Apple website (www.apple.com.au) "everyday more photos are taken with the iPhone than any other camera." It would appear that the pocket-camera has now been replaced by the pocket cameraphone. Hjorth (2007) notes, "With almost all mobile phones now coming with cameras, many users—not necessarily interested in photography per se—are becoming avid practitioners in the making, circulating, and socializing of their own images" (p. 1).

The iPhone, along with a host of dedicated photographic applications (apps), is the embodiment of a post-Photoshop world whereby digital images may be remixed and re-contextualized to suit a host of moods and purposes. The integration of a high resolution camera, editing software and photo filters, combined with the ability to quickly upload images to social media sites, makes the iPhone, along with its Android counterparts, an ideal tool for participating in online social cultures where photographic images are frequently used as forms of both communication and "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986).

Photographic images have become an essential part of contemporary online communications and are frequently used by individuals to communicate a wide variety of information and emotions to others who share their social networks. iPhones provide users with a raft of imaging tools that are easy to use and promote

high degrees of visual experimentation. According to Cruz & Meyer (2013, p. 216), the iPhone has instigated a "fifth moment" in photography where photographic methods have become more fluid. Photographers can sculpt or design their images on the same device that they captured the image, thus establishing a more playful relationship with photography.

Figure 7. Portrait of Marsha taken on the Apple iPhone (2012), Dean Keep.

However, it is not only smartphones with cameras that are shaping new photographic practices and aesthetics. Cameraphone apps (Hipstamatic, Camera+, Pixlr O-MATIC) that can be easily downloaded to the phone as well as dedicated digital photography social media sites (http://pixlr.com), make it possible to readily change the appearance of photographic image.

Figure 8. Examples of mobile app "Pixlr O-MATIC" filters applied to cameraphone image (2008), Dean Keep.

With digital filters, a single photograph can be altered in ways that invite new interpretations of photographic images, thus producing multiple interpretations of the original image. A black and white or sepia filter may be applied to imbue the image with a nostalgic quality. Scratches, dust, and colour casts suggestive of heritage media processes may be layered over images to create temporal shifts. Berry (2013) observes that:

> The popularity of faux-vintage apps indicates that people are endeavoring to capture more than an accurate depiction of what their eyes can see. They are using heritage aesthetics to go beyond visual sense to interpret aspects of what the whole sensorium experiences as well as nostalgia for a strong sense of place. This desire to recreate the poetic dimensions of the auratic experiences we associate with analogue media is evident in popular smartphone app filters (Berry, 2013).

The popularity of so-called "retro apps" that mimic heritage media aesthetics indicates a growing interest in film-based photographic practices. This is evidenced by the increased popularity of Holga film cameras and the recent return of the Polaroid film camera. The meshing of digital and analogue photography promotes hybrid image-making practices that help us to make connections between traditional and contemporary photographic processes and aesthetics. Not only does the cameraphone promote a new understanding of the uses of photography as a communication tool, the cameraphone has arguably instigated new ways to evaluate and appreciate heritage media.

Perhaps one of the most defining aspects of the new generation cameraphones (smartphones) has been the introduction of GPS (Global Positioning Software) and location-based services. Hjorth & Pink (2014, p. 40) suggest "second-generation

locative media and emerging contemporary camera phone practices are becoming entangled to create new visualities and socialities of place and place making." Mobile applications such as Instagram, mesh locative media technologies, photo editing and image sharing capabilities enable users to seamlessly pin and share the location of images captured on cameraphones. The act of photography is thus transformed into both creative and spatial practices.

Changes in our relationship with photographic images and image sharing protocols present new ways to experience and understand photography and its precarious indexical nature. Moreover, as cameraphone technology improves, there has been a distinct shift in the ways mobile photography have been marketed and promoted within commercial and artistic arenas.

Over the past few years, advertising campaigns for cameraphone manufacturers Apple and Nokia have featured notable photographers such as Annie Leibovitz, Bruce Weber, and David Bailey. At one time, images captured on cameraphone were seen as existing outside of the sphere of art photography. Now, a growing number of dedicated cameraphone photography exhibitions hosted throughout the world suggest that our attitudes towards photography have already shifted to include the cameraphone.

Conclusion

Cameraphone images are arguably unique, in that they are not just digital traces or renderings of the people, places, and objects in our everyday spaces; such images are often potent signifiers of our ever-changing relationship with photography and technology in a highly mediated landscape.

Unlike traditional photography, cameraphone images are perhaps less indexical in their nature and seem less bound by their referent, as they are often separated from their original context. In a post-Photoshop era where smartphones routinely offer a suite of image editing tools or visual filter applications, cameraphones allows users to easily remix, repurpose and re-imagine images, therefore making it possible to transform and use the same digital image for a wide range of purposes. Emergent genres, such as the selfie arguably extend the self-portrait medium by placing the emphasis on a shared personal experience rather than framing and composition.

Over the past 10 years, there have been many developments in cameraphone technology that have influenced cameraphone practices and contributed to the

"liquid aesthetic" of images captured on cameraphones. The blurry green hues and soft focus so often associated with images now seems a thing of the distant past as smartphones capable of producing high definition digital images now have more in common with digital SLR cameras. Although some people may consider cameraphone images as poor cousins of traditional photography, it may be said that cameraphone practices enable users to reinterpret and re-imagine many of the tropes of conventional photography and therefore instigate new modes of photographic practice. However, the cameraphone is constantly changing to reflect technological innovation, which in turn instigates new modes of engagement and new ways to experience and capture the visual traces of the world. The cameraphone should be understood as a transformative and mutable technology that is constantly evolving, and in doing so, challenging our notions of traditional photography and inviting new ways to create, share, and interpret photographs in the new millennium.

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