Negotiating Romance in Front of the Lens
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Abstract: The paper examines the new roles assumed by digital photography in romantic relationships. Research conducted in Israel demonstrates that the ubiquitous digital and phone cameras have been incorporated into multiple scripts of courtship, reconciliation, eroticism, and relationship formation. Photography often functions as a non-verbal method of expressing an interest in the other party during courtship, of framing the relationship, and of negotiating its status. Being semiotically laden, photography between partners is more structured and done much more cautiously than photography among friends. Photography also helps lovers in "doing romance", serving as a tool for the production of romantic moments, eroticism and playfulness, thus reshaping emotions and moods in present time rather than in future consumption of photos qua artefact.

Keywords: photography, romance, framing, camera-phones, gender roles

1. Introduction

The constitution of romantic ties, seen from a praxis-oriented perspective (Reckwitz 2002a; Swidler, 2001), is a product of performance and negotiation: If relationship-types are embodied in and differentiated by what the parties do together and in relation to one another, then at least some of these activities function performatively as statements in negotiating the relationship's status, as well as constitutively in bringing it into being. While actors rely on cultural codes in forming, negotiating and cementing social relationships, they are constrained by knowledge of how their actions may be interpreted by others (Swidler:105-106, 162-169). Since one of the things that contemporary couples do together is photographing one another, and since this activity is often symbolically and emotionally laden, patterns of documentation deserve research attention no less than patterns of talk, as analyzed by Goldsmith & Baxter (1996). In this article I demonstrate how photography as a non-verbal communication pattern is part of the symbolic effort to turn the flux of interaction into a meaningful relationship, just like conversational-patterns are.

This paper aims to uncover photography's emergent communicational and constitutive role in romance. One focus will be photography's double role, as both an indicator of the relationship's (emo-
tional and social) status (*indexical* role) and a vehicle for negotiation (*instrumental* role. cf. Duck & Pond, 1989). It can assume these roles, since different patterns of photography become commonly associated with different sorts (or stages) of relationships. A second focus will be the increasing usage of camera as technology for emotional manipulation and the production of intimacy, romance and eroticism. For the camera has not only become ubiquitous in our lives (due to its miniaturization; digitalization, which nullified the per-photo-extra-costs; and integration in mobile phones: see Okabe, 2004; Rivière, 2005; Davies, 2007)—it also assumes an ever-important role in cultural scripts of doing-romance.

This raises the more general question of technosociality. Knorr Cetina (1997) suggests we live in a postsocial era, in which human relationships are increasingly mediated by and dependent on (occasionally even replaced by) relationships with objects. She thus recognizes increased orientation towards objects as sources of relational intimacy, *inter alia* due to increasing usage of hi-tech devices in everyday-life. Contrarywise, Latour (1996) maintains that whenever human interactions and relationships are framed (not only in late-modernity), it's due to non-human actants. However, one need not adopt Knorr Cetina's historical meta-narrative to admit that cameras increasingly mediate interpersonal relationships. In some of the cases discussed below, the camera's role may be adequately conceptualized as instrumental, (e.g. as a stage-prop, following Goffman, 1959). However, cameras don't only technically “afford” pursuing pre-existing wishes: Following Orlikowski (2007), one may consider the social and the material to be “constitutively entangled” within emergent socio-material practices of romance. For some of the practices-of-romance described below, the camera provides an irreplaceable component, not only for being interpreted in certain ways, but also for being handled in certain ways (Reckwitz, 2002b).

Thus, photography is seen as a "technology of world making", which establishes reality rather than represents it (Crang, 1997; Larsen, 2005). Photography is traditionally understood as representational, an instrument for documentation of moments and persons to later be consumed as reified memories or an autobiographic narrative. Notwithstanding the importance of this explicit
role, photography has other functions, including framing of situations (on material culture and framing, see Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Thus, rites-of-passage (e.g. weddings, birthdays, graduations, and even informal coming-of-age rituals, like tattoos and piercings among Israeli youths) are understood as events that must be photographed (Chalfen, 1987, Bourdieu, 1990). The camera infuses them with solemnity, dubs them worthy of inclusion in the personal biography. The documentation of such events is socially sanctioned: Parents who fail to videotape their child's kindergarten graduation ceremony may well be seen by other parents as failing to love and care for their child. However, this paper will focus on situations that, unlike ceremonies, have a much more subtle, emerging definition, and the documentation of which is subject to much more implicit and negotiable rules (e.g., unlike ceremonies, falling-in-love requires authentic feelings, which necessitate a certain degree of improvisation on cultural scripts, especially in a culture most highly aware of these scripts, as are contemporary Western cultures, according to Eco, 1994, Dowd & Pallota, 2000). These practices must be analyzed while taking into account not only gender but also age differences, since teenagers often use cameras much more intensively than do adults, while developing different norms (which may later spread to other age-groups).

Photography's performative aspects have mostly been ignored in the literature. One exception is Jonas Larsen (2005; Haldrup and Larsen, 2003), who described family photography as acting out familyness and intimacy in front of the camera, in order to construct memory and evoke the same feelings later, improvising on prewritten social scripts. As I demonstrate below, romance is also acted out in front of the camera, not only in order to produce nostalgia and encapsulate feelings for future consumption, but also in order to feel romantic emotions in the present time. The notion of performativity I stress has no inherent undertones of strategic, conscious and rational agency. My respondents and interviewees shift between strategic action and unconscious doxa, yet their photography always remains performative following Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) definition: an "activity in which the person performing accentuates his or her behaviour under the scrutiny of others. That accentuation is deliberate, even if unconscious".
2. Methodology and structure

Self-completed questionnaires were used to collect data. Respondents were asked detailed questions (many of them open) concerning photography during their last three romantic relationships. The questionnaire-form was uploaded online as a Google-survey, and respondents were recruited using an e-mail-based snowball method (I sent e-mails to acquaintances and former-interviewees and asked them to forward them), hyperlinks published in different Israeli relationship-oriented web-forums, and invitations sent to young users of a Social Network Sites (SNS) used mainly by working-class youths. The last two methods were aimed at increasing the representation of teenagers and the less-educated among the respondents. Still, the middle-classes, highly-educated and women were overrepresented among the 68 Israeli respondents who fully completed the questionnaire. 94.1% were 16-40-year-old (Md=27.1). The survey's data was supplemented by interviews I conducted with Israeli teenagers and young-adults for a wider project on the sociology of photography (mostly face-to-face, occasionally instant-messaging interviews), as well as excerpts from a large corpus of Israeli blogs analyzed for the same project. Rejecting technological determinism, I don't contend that the following may be automatically generalized to other societies: Even within Israel patterns are uneven. However, there is good reason to believe that the general trend of appropriating cameras new roles in romance is indeed global, as part of a wider trend of expanding photography's social uses. This of course must be substantiated by further research.

The answers clearly indicate that photography of (and with) romantic partners is highly patterned. Photography may be used to initiate romantic interactions with unacquainted persons (section 3); but once the relationship is framed as quasi-romantic/dating, photography is subject to rules and restrictions (section 4): Photography is interpreted as an expression of deep emotion, a declaration of commitment (which potentially demands mutuality) which must be saved for the appropriate moment. Section 5 explores the use of photography to construct romantic/erotic moments and imbue interactions with meanings and emotions. Then I portray the changes in photography patterns
along the relationship's lifespan (section 6). Finally, I offer some reflections on the ways cultures utilize new technologies while retaining culturally-established methods of framing and distinction.

3. L's method of annoying girls

The most common pattern, to be discussed later, is starting to photograph only after a relationship has been clearly established, as a commentary on its nature. However, this is not the only pattern. Feminist literature has a long tradition of identifying the camera with the (male) gaze (e.g. Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1985). And so indeed, photography may function as a prosthetic extension of staring/gazing, a means of demonstrating and demanding attention, a way to "hit on" somebody. This is especially common among teenagers (mostly, but not exclusively, boys). This might be explained by the different attitude of youths to photography. Many teenagers take part in extremely intensive social photography: When Israeli youths detail the events of the day in their blogs, be it alone, with the peer group, or with a single friend or romantic-partner, they often enumerate "photographing ourselves" alongside other pastime activities like watching TV or having a supper.

In an interview with two 15-year-old boys, one of them told me about his friend L's "method": "when he wants to hit on girls", L' "just tries to annoy the girl, and then she comes and punches him, as a joke (...) the best nagging is when he photographs somebody. He either photographs, or pretends to be photographing, and then she comes, and she tries [to see what he photographed], and it goes wherever it goes". L' doesn't keep the pictures: Here, photography is a performance of showing-interest on one hand, and a humorous nagging or transgression (creating a representation of the girl without her consent) on the other hand. Photos do not have much worth and are frequently deleted (when they are truly taken at all): it is no act of immortalizing (as traditional photography is) but an immortalizing-like performance, which creatively plays with the cultural meanings of photography (i.e., photography as eternalizing an object dear to the documenter).

Respondents of both genders drew a similar picture: Teenage boys initiated interactions with unacquainted girls by photographing them. One respondent reported how a boy "hit on me in that he filmed me", while she "resisted, just for fun, hehe, just to develop a conversation". They became
a couple for over a year and a half. Thus, photography, with its culturally-specific meanings, is incorporated into the general pattern of courtship-teasing as a prelude to fostering intimacy, which in many cultures plays the role of breaking down normality and turning distance into empathy (Osella & Osella, 1998).

In some youth mass-events, most interactions between unacquainted parties start with the sentence "mind a picture?", as a ritualized way of initiating an interaction with a stranger. This applies to websites' user-meetings of SNSs, blog-platforms, forums etc., which usually take place in a large Tel-Aviv shopping-mall. In these public events, taking photos of each other is the main activity, alongside small-talk.

These tactics are not exclusive to teenagers. A male respondent in his late twenties wrote that he "usually prefer to shoot from the shadows, in order to capture a real moment", but in social events he breaks his habit, and uses photos in order to start conversations. Among the adult respondents, the gender roles are more equal: a few male respondents reported that women took their photos in order to initiate interaction.

One female respondent, a woman in her early twenties who finds her boyfriend not-romantic-enough, used photography not for giving attention to male strangers but rather for demanding attention from her boyfriend: "at the beginning of the relationship, I actually went with a camera and just took photos out of boredom, and in order to get his attention (...) I tried to take photos of him to divert his attention from the computer. It didn't work". She explaine that whereas photography couldn't make her boufriend more romantic, it was "a good way to extort attention or a smile".

Being photographed with strangers may also be a way of experiencing playful deviance (cf. Redmon, 2003), which is characteristic of music festivals. A 17-year-old girl described it as a playful transgression, a demonstration of guts and light-mindedness, rather than a strategy for initiating ties: She and her friend used to approach "hot guys" and asked for permission to get photographed with them. The boys mostly agreed with laughter, but after the photo was taken, the
girls bid farewell. Once back at home, she showed the photos to friends, and told them the amusing anecdote.

In spite of all of the above, most respondents never took a picture in order to start an interaction with a stranger, nor were they photographed under similar circumstances. For most of them, photography is a statement concerning the meaning and status of an existing relationship, which must be saved for the right moment.

4. The girl who doesn't want to pressure him

Once two parties are "dating", photography is subject to rules and restrictions. First, a strong consensus exists that during the first stages, romantic partners may not photograph each-other without explicit permission. Only one respondent reported doing so, and reported being harshly rebuked. This pattern sharply contrasts with the common practice among teenagers and young adults of photographing friends without asking for their permission in advance. Ca.20-year-old female software-developer reported on her intensive documentation-practice: The photos she took of her friends amount to 20 gigabit. Yet, in romantic relationships she's much more constrained: "I guess I've photographed people I dated, and they've photographed me. But not often. Usually I have much less photos of people I date than [photos] of friends". Actors are thus "constrained by the knowledge of what their actions would mean to others" (Swidler:162).

The norm, represented by a majority of the respondents, is to start taking photos when the relationship is established to a certain degree or even "on the same evening we decided we're together" (Male, early-twenties). However, as noted by Rosaldo (1993), cultural scripts are usually not strict rules-systems but rather a basis for improvisation: The meaning of the singular performance lies in the variations in the actual enactment that create and display qualities of social relations, rather than in the skeleton-code (cf. Swidler: 183-185). These variations in partners' photography are the focus of this paper. A male university student suggested that video-photography indicates it's "a relationship which is already defined as 'a couple', and no longer as 'dating". In some cases, photography didn't accompany the verbal declaration of the relationship's status, but
rather replaced it. A Tel-Avivian woman in her thirties reported on the beginning of her relationship with her boyfriend, four years ago: "We met when I started working in [firm name] in [west-European country], he had already worked there, and from that point we also have photos: from a work-related party, or with common friends I met while starting to work there, but not photos we took ourselves, only photos taken by others. We started photographing each other only after a certain period of time, when we realised that we're always hanging out together. And there was never the decision, that from now on we're a couple, in fact, thinking about it, maybe it was the photos that were this statement...".

For women, taking photos too early is especially problematic, since they might be framed as stereotypically uptight women in a rush to get married, so that the wish to eternalise the beginning of the relationship might bring about its end. Most respondents did not report restraining their wish to take photos in an early stage out of worry, but some, mostly women, did. A woman in her late twenties, described herself as an "obsessive documenter": "Whenever I begin to have feelings [for someone], the wish to document awakes". Yet, she "wouldn't photograph anyone until I was confident in the relationship, so I wouldn't stress him out": she doesn't "want to make him run away, to put pressure, to seem too in-love". Hence, she usually completely avoids photography for the first few months, consoled by the fact that "today, everybody has Facebook anyway", so that photos of her partners are accessible to her online. Many of her dates and boyfriends remained undocumented. One was photographed with her after three months, however, not on her own initiative, but rather by common friends ("they initiated it, and I was very approving and happy") in a social event where photography was expected (a picnic). For herself to take photos, she awaited even stronger a justification: "Usually, in most relationships, it happened when we took our first vacation together. If there was no vacation or special event, then there was no justification for taking photos, and I'd avoid it, again, in order not to stress him out". Besides being taken as "too serious", she was also worried of "The evil eye (...) first see everything's going well, only then start photographing". When the partner offers to take (or publish) photos, she interprets it as an act of showing
commitment. Similarly, a woman in her early twenties says: "It took me a long time before I took my first photo, I was afraid of doing it. The first time it happened was when we went on a trip". Likewise, a teenage girl who replied that "in the current relationship, we initiated the first photo together", later explained that she had wanted to take photos earlier, but didn't dare to. She waited for a common initiative, for a mutual recognition of the relationship's status. This might explain why the first photo, unlike those following it, is more often taken by male partner. The linkage between couple's photography and potential future marital commitment relies on solid historical background. "Photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of the solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life", Bourdieu wrote in 1965. This applies to most of the 20th century and left clear vestiges on contemporary social meanings of photography. Unlike photos of co-workers and friends, photos of romantic partners may be interpreted as the corner-stone of a family chronicle: If the relationship endures, they may later be ordered in the couple's family album.

A few respondents coped with this problematic through an explicit 'disclaimer': an urban lesbian in her late twenties who wanted to take photos "was a bit worried that it might be misinterpreted as showing too much interest on my behalf / too advanced a stage / over-intimacy etc. etc. I ignored [it] and did photograph when I wanted to, but I made it very clear that there were no hidden intentions and no reason to worry". M', a woman in her late twenties working in the media branch, told me in an interview that she used to take photos even in first dates ("Sure! That's when it's funniest!"), but some of the partners came to know her via her Flickr online-album, hence knew she was an obsessive-documenter, and with the others, she mentioned it during the date. She showed some photos of dating-partners to friends (face-to-face or via mail), but unlike the rest of her photos, she didn't publish them on Flickr, both because of her partner's sensitivities and her own impression-management (not presenting herself as a serial-dater). As a rule, it seems that professional photographers (or even serious amateurs) feel more comfortable taking photos early in
a relationship: Their profession provides them with an alibi.

The tendency to take the first photos during the couple's first vacation or trip, as demonstrated above, is very common. This is no coincidence: The rules that regulate documentation are situation-sensitive. In some situations photography is considered obvious—vacations are the best example (Chalfen, 1987, ch.4), and to a lesser degree, also parties. There, people are expected to photograph each other. Photographing partners gains a more dramatic meaning during mundane activities. A Tel-Avivian female in her late twenties says: "In my opinion, you usually take more photos of someone you love, since you want to remember him also in daily life, not only in special events". Even more intimate than mundane situations are quarrels or sad moments. One respondent suggested that if such moments are documented (as happened with him and his girlfriend), "it means the relationship entered a new level". A high percentage of respondents over 30 years old had their first photograph of/with their partner taken on a vacation/trip. These photos were sometimes preceded by photos of the couple taken by others in social/family gatherings. However, respondents from this age group do not avoid casual photography altogether, restraining themselves to trips and events photography: Rather, they consider mundane photography as an intimate act to be taken seriously. One Tel-Avivian in her thirties, who did intensively document some of her romantic relationships, insists that "there's something intimate about photography. Getting photographed in front of some guy during a relationship is something that comes long after the first time you have sex". This is no surprise, provided that this generation grew up (and experienced their first romantic experiences) before digital cameras conquered the markets and helped reinvent patterns and notions of photography. Some younger respondents show greater flexibility, e.g. a woman in her early twenties described being captured by her boyfriend on his camera-phone in a one-week-old relationship, while waking up together for the first time.

This last case indicates another major factor, besides situation: the camera type, with its material and symbolic characteristics. Mobile photography is interpreted as more present-oriented than traditional cameras (Rivière, 2005), less selective and narrative-bound. As they are constantly
carried, using these cameras doesn't reveal premeditation and is thus more spontaneous, light-hearted and legitimate. A newly-wed self-employed woman says: "When the relationship was still in its infancy", they took photos with her camera-phone, but "as soon as it became stronger and we created common experiences, then of course with the [separated] camera". Since her partner did not have a camera-phone during the early stages of the relationship, she was the only one taking photos in this period. Similarly, one respondent reported taking a photo with her camera-phone during a first date. Bringing a separate camera to a first, or even a third date, would be a transgression. Other respondents described documenting sex on camera-phones. Though it might be difficult to prove, it's highly possible that camera-phones made spontaneous sex documentation more common. Camera-phones also enabled respondents to present their new dating-partner to friends, for show-off or to get their approval.

To conclude, the data reveals hierarchical distinctions within partners' photography: the camera-phone is the most mundane and casual, while the digital camera is restricted to more established relationships, and video even more so then stills. Similarly, mundane photos indicate a more meaningful relationship than documentation of trips/events, and the (uncommon) documentation of rows or unpleasant moments indicates even higher levels of intimacy and trust.

However, photography patterns change with age: 14-21-year-old respondents constituted a majority of those who photographed on the first date or romantic interaction, although constituting only 24% of the respondents at large. The same trend was evidenced by the data gathered in interviews and blog-analyses. One possible explanation is that teenagers usually have shorter relationships than adults, hence they're considered serious at an earlier stage. But it is also possible that mobile photography technologies facilitated a new emergent cultural possibility, to use camera-phones in an early stage of the relationship, not only to document the partner, but also to facilitate intimacy and romantic feelings, to show interest in the partner, etc. The next few years will tell whether this pattern remains endemic to teenagers or will expand to older age groups. An anecdote will help demonstrate how teenagers use (camera-phones) photography on first dates. A 15-year-old
whom I interviewed after reading her blog told me how she photographed her 19-year-old boyfriend on their blind-date. She did it after a certain degree of intimacy was reached (they presented each other photos of important people and places in their lives using their camera-phones, and hugged. She captured his photo before they resumed their walk). The act of photography also fostered intimacy: “I photographed him, and we kept walking... suddenly I felt he's touching my hand and grasping it, and we just held hands without saying anything all the way back!” When I asked her whether she felt confident taking photos on the first date, she replied: “You see, when that date came to its end, I knew we'd be together, so I asked if I may take his photo. He agreed. He also asked [to take her photo]. I didn't agree”. She explained her refusal, which might have balanced the power asymmetry caused by their gender and age gap, by saying “hehe 'cause I don't like the way I look”, yet later, when they became a couple, she did let him photograph her. Even in this case, in which photography started quite early, it was interpreted as indicating the relationship status: She justified photographing by the belief they'd become a couple, as the permission to take her photo waited until it had been proven true. She also used a camera-phone rather than her separate camera.

While resisting photography-initiatives, partners often justify their objection by insisting that they are not beautiful enough to deserve a picture. This assertion must be challenged by the partner as if personally offended, yet light-heartedly, sometimes vehemently (“Don't make me beat you up” - a teenage girl to her boyfriend). This is a common cultural script, in which either gender may assume either role.

Respondents were asked not only to describe their own praxis, but also to state their general opinion: Does photographing somebody imply anything about the relationship's character or the emotions involved? Two thirds of the respondents believed it does. Apparently, their opinion does not vary with age, but it is influenced by gender: Males are much more likely to argue that photography does not indicate anything at all. According to the most common answers, photography indicates: 1. a wish to remember the partner and include him/her in the autobiographical narrative (“it's someone you want to remember forever” - male, early twenties).
This is the motive most often mentioned. Usually, when relationships ended, respondents did not erase the photos, though often transferred them to less accessible archives; 2. feelings of love and affinity, or a good period within a relationship (“when you love somebody you photograph him more often, no doubt” - male, late twenties); 3. the serious, committing and meaningful character of the relationship. Fewer respondents mentioned other elements like trust, aesthetic evaluation of the partner, playful passion, and a wish for the constant presence of the partner (“I want you by my side even when you're away”).

Some respondents interpret photography as indicating a change of formal status (“when you're already defined as a 'couple' and no longer as 'dating’”) or at least deep intentions: They perceived photography (in general as well as by their own partners) as a statement of commitment. When the photographer is revealed as uncommitted, his/her prior actions are condemned as misleading. “I remember one time, when I dated someone for a short while, it was not yet clear where it was going, and suddenly he took out his camera and photographed me—an unflattering photo by the way. I asked him why he did it, and I think he said he wanted to have a souvenir. I remember it gave me a pleasant feeling of security and belonging. Which eventually faded rather quickly...” (female, late twenties).

The linkage between romantic relationships and photography is so tight, that some respondents made the opposite linkage: A woman in her early-twenties, who had doubts about her relationship, suggested that “when you don't photograph [each other], it means something may be missing in the relationship”. For her, avoiding photography may be an indication for lack of sufficient romantics, love or commitment. A teenage boy replied first that photography doesn't indicate anything, then immediately corrected himself: “But if you don't photograph him, it means you don't love him. Like, not in the romantic sense. So actually it does [indicate something]”.

Some respondents assumed that photos would necessarily be accessible to others, hence making the relationship socially visible: “As soon as you're photographed with a partner, it makes the relationship ten times more serious, since there is evidence and you have to start explaining to
viewers who it is” (ca. 20-year-old female software-developer). A female university student in her early-twenties described photography as material “evidence for the relationship (...) and it does have a meaning—a will to share with the world your being in a relationship”. Many respondents of different ages and genders admitted that “show-off” is a major motive for documenting their partners, and supposed others do the same.

And indeed, photography is not only a performance intended for the partner's eyes, taking part in the framing of situations and relationships, but also a performance for a wider audience—those present during the photography, as well as those later exposed to the photos as artefacts. Thus, photography acquires the status of “tie-signs” in Goffman's sense—evidence (be it intentionally or unconsciously disclosed) that makes information about the relationship public, such as hand-holding (Goffman, 1971). This explains why a junior-high student would be furious at a classmate who photographed her boyfriend (a case discussed at length on her blog).

Indeed, like photography itself, the decision whether to publish photos online (on Flickr, Facebook etc.) is laden with meanings and emotions. Among all age-groups, some people criticize online publication, deeming the exposure of private matters in public as either morally or psychologically wrong. However, while respondents above 30 almost completely avoided online publication, among those in their twenties it's almost a norm. Publication is a public announcement of the relationship, “a kind of declaration of happiness, and also a statement that you're no longer single”, “a statement of love”, expression of the “need (...) to show everybody how strong your feelings are and how serious the relationship is”. It is also an indication one is proud of the partner (“look who I'm hanging out with” - female, early twenties): In the culture of promotionalism (Wernick, 1991; Hearn, 2008), publishing a partner's photos online is usually part of a conscious PR strategy. Among twentysomethings, publication is a stamp of recognition of the relationship as more than a date: “commitment, commitment and commitment”, an act that is “supposed to tell the world we're a couple, or at least something meaningful”. This function is so central that respondents reported being “suspected” of romantic ties or feelings towards friends appearing too often in their
online photos. One respondent who hasn't published photos of his girlfriend on Facebook explained that it gives the impression of marriage. However, the rules concerning the appropriate time for publication are not rigid and subject to personal interpretation.

5. Modelling romance

People utilise technologies to design situations, facilitate desired activities and emotions, and prevent undesired ones. DeNora's analysis of music as a “prosthetic technology” sets a good example. DeNora illustrates how university students are able to turn their living-space into romantic space while changing almost nothing, simply by using music; and more specifically, how young women in early stages of relationships need music during love-making in order to set a romantic atmosphere, slow down bodily tempo, and feel security and relaxation (DeNora, 2000). The interactionist tradition of Goffman, Gross and Stone emphasised how stage props can signal a change in the situation. Nowadays, the camera emerges as an increasingly important technology for production of romance and eroticism (not unlike candle-light, music or sex-toys), and to imbue seemingly-innocent interactions with meaning. Here, cameras are no mere stage-props aimed at communication with others: They also enable the manipulation of one's own emotions.

Respondents were asked whether they have experienced moments that were turned romantic by photography. During the design-stage of the questionnaire I was worried that many respondents might reply with indignation, assuming romance to be natural rather than constructed. This proved wrong: At least among the respondents, postmodern insights about constructionism are no sacrilege. While documentation of the very first steps in a relationship is prohibited, the next stage is the most intensively documented. This is done, among other reasons (such as introduction of the partner to one's milieu), for playful production of emotions and moods of romance and eroticism. Many respondents reported sessions of playful photography, in which both partners photographed each other intensively and simultaneously, in a way that flames the atmosphere.

An urban female in her late-twenties described such sessions of mutual photography in two different relationships. In both of them, it took place at an early stage: not quite in the beginning,
but still in the first 2-3 months. During this stage, photography took place mainly “in intimate moments, maybe those related to sexuality”, as an expression of “playful passion”. Later, “when the relationship became deeper and the early enthusiasm passed”, more standard patterns of photography took over. Another urban female in her late-twenties also described intensive photography (hundreds of photos, including nudity, interestingly taken on a film-camera) during the first 2-3 months: “The camera is like a third player, looking at the emerging or existing relationship, and we, like trained dogs, want to model for it beautiful romance, love, passion. What could have been a casual moment becomes magical because of the camera, especially after the photos are developed and the whole memory converges into one moment—the ideal photography, where we're reflected smiling and loving”.

And so indeed, posing often plays a key role in the romantic interaction: not only as a way to construct future memory, as suggested by Larsen, but also to design present situations and emotions, as a performance of doing-romance. A woman in her late-twenties from Jerusalem and her partner used to pose frequently during photography: “Of course. Trying to find a couple's pose, doing a funny pose, giving the camera a sexy glance”. A female high-school student reported how “photography always becomes romantic through posing”. The most common pattern among teenagers is the highly standardised “kissing-pics”, which sometimes have uncoincidental similarity to wedding photos. A high-school student from a small town and her boyfriend used to photograph themselves intensively as a couple in various poses “quite shortly after we became a couple”, while she often photographed her boyfriend either in funny poses or “posing like a model”. Another teenage-girl was photographed by a boy while kissing with him at night on a “romantic” beach—a clear case of “staging romance” while trying to “fall in love again”, which she desired. Another high-school girl, having a relationship for a year and a half, spoke about a moment turned romantic by photography: “He photographed me, and I photographed him. It made us come closer and get into moments of intimacy”. To the following question, whether photography had ever turned into an erotic game, she replied: “yes. We had sex afterwards”. A woman in her late twenties described how,
while lying on the bed, her boyfriend photographed her. Although she had “clothes on and everything”, she says the camera made the situation feel “sexy”. A male in his late twenties explicitly compared his experience of using a camera during intercourse and transferring it between both lovers, with using sex toys: a clear case of prosthetic usage. Similarly, a male in his thirties said: “There's nothing like feeling the caressing attention and admiration of the camera lens. A caress which is also a pleasure to give”. Clearly, he does not perceive photography as documentation of eroticism, but as constituting it. In his reply, as in those of others, photographer-model relations are clearly intricate in structures of gender power-relations: “It felt good to direct her and make her feel like a star, flatter her ego. And so I did, giving her attention, thus giving her silent clues about what was going on inside my body, without having to bother with words”. Another male in his late-twenties used to photograph “mostly in the bedroom”: “There are stages when I like to ask the object (sic!) to model, to get into poses”. He also praised one of his ex-girlfriends for being “a natural model”. A female respondent in her early-twenties reported how “threatening to take photos” became an erotically-arousing game.

The camera has the power to imbue with romance not only situations with erotic undertones, but also extremely mundane situations. A woman in her late twenties, living with her boyfriend for two years, reported how the camera-gaze turned romantic many such moments, including one in which she cooked an egg: “even the egg... suddenly, it's something that belongs to us”. A female university student in her early twenties described how photography turns romantic mostly "the spontaneous moments captured by the camera-phone. Waking up together in bed for the first time”. A women in her late twenties argued that “almost every photo made that moment more special and intimate, and more romantic”. The lived experience of love and romance is thus colonised by mobile photography technology.

Occasionally, the construction of romance involves a clear gender role-differentiation. For instance, a teenage boy described an affair that lasted only two weeks. “After a few dates, when it became clear that we were dating”, the girl asked him to take their photos and he accepted. Timing
and location were carefully chosen: “The photos were taken on the beach during sunset” - the time and place iconically identified with romance, and indeed, the boy experienced this photography as a romantic moment. After he photographed them together, he took a photo of her alone, while she was “posing” and “moving in front of the camera”. In that case, the girl staged and realised a romantic fantasy with the boy cast for both masculine roles of lover and photographer. The standardised, iconic representation of their love was later shared with their friends, presenting them as an ideal romantic couple. After breaking up, the boy kept the photos, and although he didn't view them during the 6 months that have passed since, he considers “one photo of us hugging” especially dear, since “it's my first photo with a girlfriend”). For Illouz, such standardized romantic snapshots recapitulate and communicate romantic feelings in a way that helps establish the cultural-specific notion of love (Illouz, 1997:4).

Since photography normally functions as a practice of showing-love and evidence for thriving romance, it can be used during relationship-crises, in scripts of making-up (not unlike make-up-sex). A 15-year-old girl described in her blog a relationship-talk with her boyfriend that ended with making-up, kissing and photography. A 16-year-old girl wrote in her blog about her struggle whether to stay with her boyfriend, who is “the best boyfriend on earth”, although she felt he made her neglect her girlfriends. Despite her attempts to hide it, the boyfriend told her he noticed that she “lost something of my joy”. On the following day, they went to see a film, and immediately afterwards she photographed them kissing with her mobile phone, a photo she published in the same blog-post. A respondent in her forties also remember how ”once somebody used nocturnal photography as a romantic gesture to win my heart after a fight or a break-up”.

6. Chronicle of Documentation Foretold?

How does photography change over the a relationship's lifespan? Not all respondents reported any changes. Some described the evolution of photography patterns as a mere mirror for the relationship itself: Photography becomes less frequent and lacks feelings when the relationship decays, and shows chemistry when it flourishes. Yet, some other discernible patterns are less
obvious.

As mentioned above, some respondents reported intensive photography relatively shortly after the establishment of a committing relationship, followed by a drop in photography's pace. This early peak is function of both the playful photography discussed above, and photography's function in introducing the relationship to a partner's different social circles. Apparently, after fulfilling its function during relationship build-up, photography rates tend to drop when relationships are taken-for-granted, and diminished to special events (echoing findings on expressing physical intimacy in public: Afifi and Johnson, 1999). A new wave of photography may rise only after the birth of an offspring (who immediately turned into an almost-exclusive photography-object, either alone or with one of the parents), or (a surprising pattern mentioned by a few respondents) soon before a break-up, as for having a souvenir (not unlike the often reported practice of photographing workplaces, co-workers and apartments/places-of-residents shortly before leaving).

A teenage female interviewee told me that among her friends, couples usually photograph intensively “especially at the beginning”. When I asked for an explanation, she said: “Yes, there's this thing with people, to take photos, errrr... 'Wow, that's my boyfriend, that's me and my boyfriend'”. Later on, couples in her surrounding keep taking photos with their partners, but “much less often, a photo here or there”. A survey of blogs written by Israeli teenagers indicates how frequent this practice is: Teenagers of both sexes often publish in their blogs photos of their fresh partners, often kissing, with the explicit aim of getting congratulations-greetings from acquainted and unacquainted readers alike. Some bloggers also use such photos to create a false impression of being in a relationship, e.g. to provoke the jealousy of an ex-girlfriend. During this early stage, partners usually take care to explicitly ask for permission before taking photos (due to the symbolic declarative meaning of these photos). The drop in photography rate is no less common among adults, as indicated by a quote by a female university student, who has been in a committing relationship for two years: “Since the relationship is already established, we hardly ever take photos anymore”.
A second common trend is the shift from staged photos, where the documented often feels uneasy, to candid photos, in which those photographed are more relaxed. The early photos are more often taken by the male-partner (49%) then the female-partner (30%; the remaining 21% represent mutual photography). Interestingly, two respondents reported a role-exchange over time: While the male-partner was the photographer during courting, the female-partner became the main documenter once a long-term relationship had been established (one of these respondents is in an 8-year-long relationship, the other divorced). This role-exchange is similar to findings on asymmetrical patterns of expressing physical affinity in different ages and possibly also during different stages of relationships (Hall & Veccia, 1990), though no general conclusions can be drawn from these few cases.

A third remarkable trend is the shift from photos in romantic/erotic poses (i.e. from photography’s function of playfully constructing romance) to documentation of daily life (i.e. photography's function of elevating the mundane). Both these functions were discussed above, however it should be noted that they tend to be chronologically ordered.

7. Conclusions

In emerging relationships, the status of which is still ambiguous, photography often functions as a non-verbal method of reducing ambiguity, declaring intentions, and negotiating romance. Its symbolic identification with the family and with long-term interest in the partner may be played with and used during flirting or later during reconciliation. Photography is also a tie-sign, presenting the relationship to the community (often using online distribution-platforms). Moreover, the camera's gaze is used for doing romance and for choreographing romantic and erotic moments as well as for the elevation of the mundane. Due to the technological affordances of digital cameras-phones, new patterns of relationship photography are emerging, most commonly among teenagers: Photography is much more intensive, begins in earlier stages of the relationship, and more often published online. iv Photography is thus integrated into new cultural scripts of romance. Are these new trends devaluating photography or transforming its meaning?
While most respondents interpret photography of partners as a symbolic statement, some older respondents suggested that such statements may be losing value due to the introduction of new photographic technologies. A doctoral student in her thirties, who lives in a village and only rarely uses camera-phones, claimed that photography “indicates a desire to remember what happened, which indicates a sense of affinity between the photographer and the photographed. I must admit that nowadays, when I see people taking so many pictures using their phones, it seems to me that for them photography does not have so deep a meaning”. An urban female respondent in her thirties also believes that photography is being devaluated, since “nowadays, when everybody has a camera on their phone, it becomes more routine. Like, not really committing. You don't have to go bring the camera. But in the past, it was more meaningful—'you are a person whom I want to remember, hence I find it important to eternalize this moment and you'...”. According to them, the constant accessibility of cameras and the inflation of photography are responsible for the loss in photography's symbolic value.

In their path-breaking book from 1979, Douglas and Isherwood demonstrated how cultures establish distinctions between times and situations by using distinct consumption-patterns: Significant situations are distinguished by using rare, expensive products, not used in routine. The hypothesis offered by these respondents follows the same logic as Douglas and Isherwood. However, the introduction of new technologies does not prevent people from finding new ways to draw hierarchical distinctions between situations and relationships. Even if camera-phone photography is not perceived as a committing expression of great importance, separate cameras keep existing, not only for technical reasons (e.g. their usually higher resolution), but also for their higher visibility in performative photography and for the very function of distinction. This also applies to the vernacularisation of photography, i.e. the widening range of photographable situations. The fact that photography becomes ever mundane (e.g. Okabe, 2004; Rivière, 2005) is not necessarily followed by devaluation of its historical symbolic meanings. Quite the contrary, it may even produce greater value, following subtle, context-sensitive dynamics: As demonstrated
above, while photography of a partner during a trip (where photography is historically established) is no big deal, photographing the partner cooking supper may be experienced as a highly romantic and touching gestures, as something that belongs to us.

**Bibliography**


Facebook is a popular Social Network Site. Users have personal profile-pages, where they usually publish personal photos.

Flickr is a highly popular internet site which enables users to upload photos to personal online-albums, organize them into sub-categories, and add captions. Users can block accessibility to certain or all photos, but usually photos are accessible to all and may be found through search-queries. Other users may publicly comment on photos or send private messages to the photographer.

31.2% of adult male respondents, compared with 18.4% of adult females

Teenagers are also more prone to perceiving mutual photography as a main activity rather than as a documentation of another activity.

not unlike the distinction between events documented by the participants and those documented by a hired photographer.