

CHAPTER EIGHT

Improbable Curators: Analysing Nostalgia, Authorship and Audience on Tumblr Microblogs

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Introduction

Launched in 2007 and hosting around 280 million blogs as of February 2016, Tumblr¹ is one of the most popular yet under-researched microblogging platforms currently in existence. Having established itself as a premier venue of online popular and youth culture (Dewey, 2015), the service provides an idiosyncratic synesthetic space wherein countless visual and stylistic statements are shared daily, ranging from digital images to literary excerpts, journal entries to animations. The absence of subordinating vertical structures (there exists no real ‘mainstream’ vs. ‘underground’ dynamic here), the possibility of interpreting the blogs both as niche and micro youth media (see Thornton, 1995, pp. 137-151) and the socially interactive element of these unregulated exchanges all reflects a parallel world rich in psycho-social connotations that remains largely uncharted by social scientists.

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This chapter draws on a project that investigated these novel circulatory dynamics over a period of three years by employing digital ethnographic and semiotic analyses. By becoming highly selective content curators, these users develop independent, privately informed yet interpersonally mediated, digitally synesthetic narratives. The Tumblr infrastructure provided a system of content distribution and collaborative design that not only destabilises the three conventional 'sites' of an image ('production', 'image', 'audience') (cf. Rose, 2007, pp. 14–27), but also raises interesting questions with regard to individual agency and the 'naturalisation' of creative practices online.

What type of vicarious 'curatorial' visions are being articulated here, what psychological and cultural functions might they serve and in what ways do these phenomena interact with mainstream material realities? How does Tumblr's potential as a platform for anonymous, flexible and easily accessible aesthetic expression, stylistic experimentation and emotional catharsis compare with other social media offerings, and what might we learn from it in terms of encouraging reflexivity and meaningful social communication online? Finally, how do these loosely-woven user communities compare to cultural and creative practises employed in contemporary museography and collaborative or activist online productions more broadly?

I will begin with a brief description of the Tumblr platform itself, followed by a number of relevant semiotic and ethnographic examples extracted from the fieldwork for this project. These inform a more theoretical discussion in the latter part of the chapter, where I consider to what extent Tumblr might model the ideal 'curatorial' platform for emergent modes of collaborative production, as discussed by Jean-Paul Martinon in his book *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (2013). I also use Tumblr-related observations to address issues related to contemporary museography and artistic knowledge transmission more broadly, referring in this process to the work of authors such as Malraux (1978) and Rancière (2009). I conclude by suggesting that there exists considerable potential for Tumblr communities to function as independent sites of knowledge (re)production, acting as non-commercial user archives, or reflexive and dialogical repositories of individually-filtered cultural content. My analysis thereby also attempts to offer a more positive, conciliatory perspective on the debates within new and social media, which tend to oscillate between optimism and pessimism (e.g., Fuchs, 2015; Gauntlett, 2015; Turow, 2012; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2010; see also Hesmondhalgh, 2013, chapter 9).

Tumblr: History and corporate topography

Although considered a social networking or social media tool, the microblogging service Tumblr retains a number of unique characteristics, both in terms of interface design and functionality, as well as corporate philosophy. It is, for example, more complex and more eclectic than Pinterest, with which it shares only superficially similar 'curatorial' mechanics, in the sense that both services

provide the tools to create collections of digital material. The latter, however, has over time become associated with a relatively sectarian community fuelled by a largely female demographic focused on creating massive archives of recipes, wedding gift ideas, crafts and the like (see Friz & Gehl, 2015), while Tumblr continues to harbour a much more culturally heterogeneous user-base and content pool. In this sense, statistical data and industry commentaries (Tan, 2013; Dewey, 2015; Reeve, 2016) suggest that Tumblr has already surpassed Facebook as one of the most popular digital social network for teenagers (aged between 13 and 25). As Tech-Crunch's Adam Rifkin noted, the service can perhaps even be understood as a sort of 'Facebook 2.0': 'Facebook has become a real-life social network infested with parents, co-workers, ex-friends, and people you barely know, [while] Tumblr has become the place where young people express themselves and their **ACTUAL INTERESTS** with their **ACTUAL FRIENDS**' (Rifkin, 2013, p. 2, original emphasis).

Founded in February 2007, by November 2012 Tumblr had 'shouldered its way into the top ten online destinations, edging out Microsoft's Bing and drawing nearly 170 million visitors to its galaxy of user-created pages [...]. Tumblr's tens of millions of registered users create[d] 120,000 new blogs every day, for a total of 86 million and counting, which drive some 18 billion page views per month' (Bercovici, 2013, p. 1). Even before that, in September 2011, its funding rounds 'valued Tumblr at \$800 million, making [David] Karp's [the then 26-year-old Tumblr CEO's] 25%-plus stake worth more than \$200 million. Then its traffic doubled' (ibid, p.1). And then, of course, in June 2013, Tumblr was acquired for a little over one billion dollars by the legendary (ex) Googler Marissa Mayer, acting as Yahoo!'s new CEO. This move, meant to extend Yahoo!'s reach with a younger and more mobile demographic, immediately sparked concerns throughout the Tumblr 'vernacular', with corporate- and advertising-related anxieties soaring and industry commentators watching the developments closely (Walker, 2012). The deal struck between Mayer and an apparently uncompromising Karp hinged on the promise that the service would stay independent, and that no changes at CEO level would happen. In other words, Yahoo! accepted the challenge of acquiring Tumblr 'without ruining it' (Brustein, 2013). This is all extremely significant, all the more so because Karp's condescension towards conventional advertising is well known and has persisted even as his platform continues to face difficulties in turning a profit and sustaining its growth (see Walker, 2012; Edwards, 2013; Kim, 2016). As Elspeth Reeve (2016) notes, this tension is unlikely to be resolved in the near future:

In 2010, its founder, David Karp, said, "We're pretty opposed to advertising. It really turns our stomachs." Then in 2011: "Making money off of Tumblr would be incredibly easy" — he'd throw up an AdSense ad on every user's dashboard and make the site "wildly profitable". In April 2012 sponsored content began appearing in users' streams. Tumblr was, at that time, still a unicorn; the possibility of making money was just

as powerful an asset as the actual making of it. In 2013, Yahoo bought Tumblr for \$1 billion and began a new ad rollout, but after a year, Karp's wild profitability still hadn't materialized. A former Tumblr executive told *The New York Times* that Tumblr's anonymity was a hurdle: "Real-world identities are valuable to advertisers. Tumblr doesn't have that" (para. 43)

What renders Tumblr relatively unprofitable at a corporate level, however, is precisely what makes it extremely appealing to its users, who continue to benefit from an extremely streamlined sign-up process and intuitive privacy controls that allow for complete anonymity, while encouraging effective inter-blog communication. Its potential for virality is further enhanced through the minimalistic yet effective use of 'reblogs' and 'likes', while users continue to have complete aesthetic and functional control over the look of their microblog(s). All of these things create an overall non-commercial, even alternative feel to the entire platform, generating a radically emotive value to it that David Karp clearly understands and cultivates: 'to me, Tumblr is very much about creative expression [...] limitless creative expression, your page can look any way you want, you can tear out the Tumblr branding if you want and create something that just looks totally unique on the Web' (Karp, 2011, cited in Dixon, 2011, 4:10). This relatively utopian state of affairs — where profitability is placed second to user interface and design — is arguably due to its CEO's uncompromising principles (his disdain for standard advertising and popularity indexes is notorious — 'they're gross'), making Karp one of the most contrarian internet entrepreneurs of the century ("Tumblr is David" - see Walker, 2012, para. 3).²

Until July 2016, when Yahoo! itself was acquired by the US telecommunications giant Verizon, no structural changes had been made to how the platform functioned, and no advertising had been forced inside the actual space of users' tumblrs. The odd Samsung commercial popping up behind the scenes, so to say, in users' *dashboards* (see below), with its little dollar sign hanging almost ironically in a corner, was the most visible effort being made, something the community appeared to tolerate. Unfortunately, it is no coincidence that on 26 July 2016, the same day that Verizon confirmed the \$4.8 billion Yahoo! acquisition, Tumblr discreetly announced that it would start serving ads directly on users' microblogs, on slide-out sections on the web, and on its mobile apps and web (see Perez, 2016). This announcement, in essence a development that Karp had opposed for years, was 'softened', indeed almost pivoted on the promise that the income will be shared with bloggers ('getting you paid for your work' – Karp, 2016, para. 4). Also, users were given the ability to simply turn off the on-blog advertising feature, which itself was activated only on blogs using the service's default Optima theme (in effect 'protecting' the millions of users who had in one way or another customized their tumblr). As of December 2016, many questions still remain unanswered, including how the ad revenue sharing system will work; Verizon itself failed to even mention Tumblr in its press

release, though it did say Yahoo!’s services and brands will continue to operate separately. As one commentator suggested, the new investor may indeed lack a real idea what to do with Tumblr (see Walters, 2016). Despite all of this, Karp’s vision still appears deeply influential, with official Tumblr ad-related messages remaining simple and to the point, indeed at times touched by a provocatively apologetical tone: ‘a post-consumerist society built on an economy of surplus instead of scarcity would enable Yahoo! and Tumblr to procure both labor and materials at zero marginal cost. Just something to think about’ (‘Tumblr Ads and You’, Tumblr.com, para. 15).

The young nostalgics: Introducing a Tumblr capsule

Within the deeply eclectic Tumblr universe, the ‘young nostalgics’ are remarkably well encapsulated. ‘Young nostalgics’ is the term I use to describe a relatively elastic, and somewhat elusive, community. The microblogs

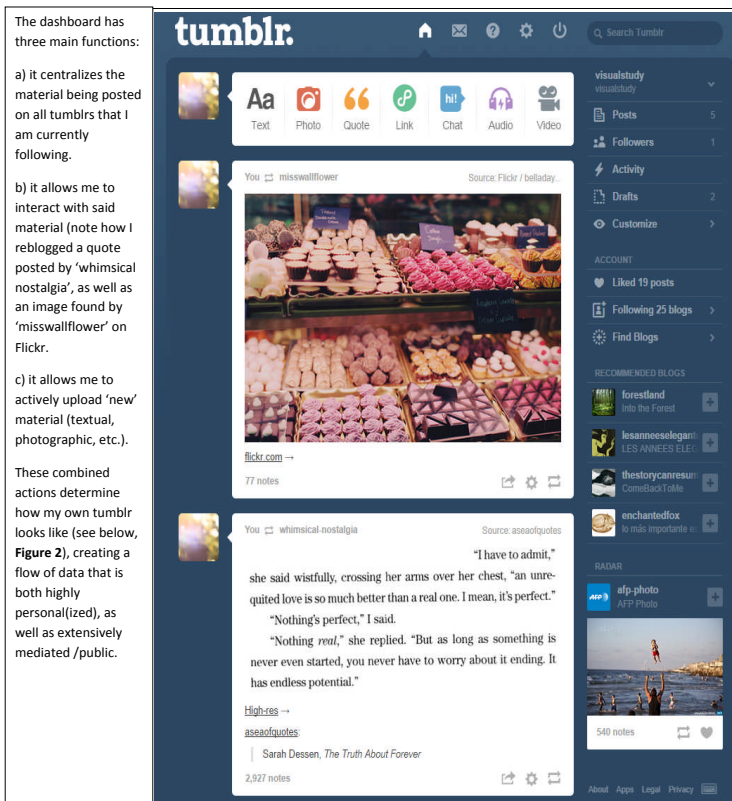


Figure 8.1: Screenshot of author’s tumblr dashboard. Embedded (reblogged) image source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/belladayys/9144559116/>

belonging to this community, essentially digital scrapbooks, are loosely integrated within a larger architecture of digital visuality and affect. They are often pervaded by an oneiric air of ambiguity, of interpenetrated psycho-symbolic accents — stressing the feminine here, the mystical there, the childish or the tragic a few images lower. However, despite the differences in general mood (some blogs are softer, with a light and innocent air — the cases of Luna and Lara — while others are a little darker, stressing the magical or the mysterious elements of nostalgia — Charlotte — with others falling somewhere in between — M. & W; see below), all of the analysed tumblrs share, in varying but distinct proportions, a combination of aesthetic and affective themes that make them recognizable as belonging to the same community.

The first ‘nostalgic’ microblog that I encountered, M.’s *La Douleur Exquise*, was discovered accidentally in the autumn of 2010. I did not realize, at that time, that tens of thousands of people followed it regularly, nor did I anticipate that it would become, together with a number of similar blogs, the focus of my research. As I imagine many of M.’s followers did, I browsed through its content simply because I found the website’s aesthetic consistency alluring and wistful mood fascinating. Following a ‘snow-ball’ sampling (i.e., a non-probability sampling technique where an original subject’s context, in this case 20-year-old M.’s tumblr, redirected me, either through a direct recommendation, or through various ‘chain links,’ to additional sources), I identified, successfully contacted and interviewed the following tumblr owners (beginning with M.):

- M., Tbilisi, Georgia (blog description – ‘Miss Wallflower’/*La Douleur Exquise*; ~ 86,000 followers, as of April 2012); native Georgian; born in 1991; started microblogging in May 2009; will be referred to as: **Wallflower** / **M.** (archived screenshot below, retrieved 7 March 2012).

“I’m a very nostalgic person in general. And I tend to daydream a lot, and daydream about the past, and older times, and yes, of course, [my tumblr] it’s very nostalgic. The mood is nostalgic” (Wallflower).

- C., the Netherlands (blog description - *Cygnés de la Nuit*; ~1,500 followers, as of June 2013); originally from Syria; born in 1995; started microblogging in November 2011; will be referred to as **Luna** (archived screenshot below, retrieved 9 June 2013).

“I certainly think my tumblr draws inspiration from the past, in almost every single way. Almost all the pictures from my blog are somehow related to the past. (building from the past, vintage clothing, screencaps from old movies and a lot of pictures from Lana Del Rey, who’s a huge inspiration to me and who always looks very vintage)” (Luna).

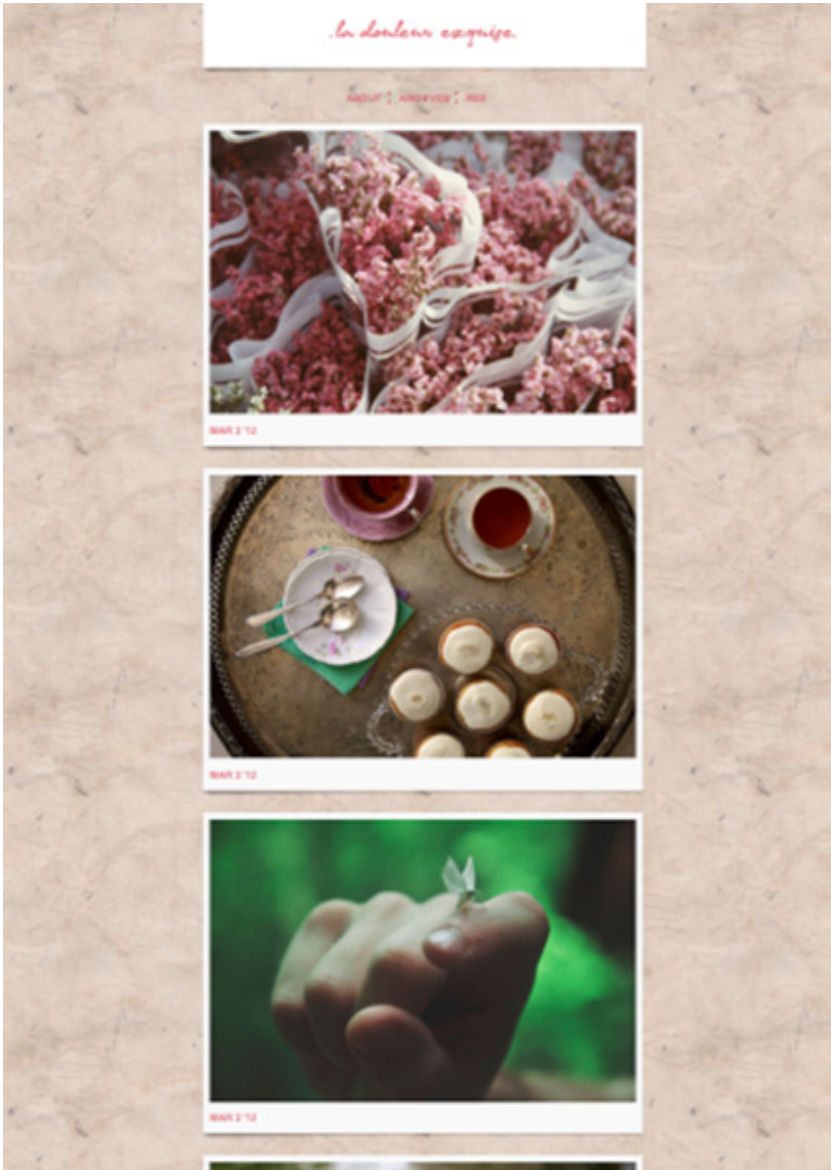


Figure 8.2: Screenshot of Wallflower's blog (with blogger's permission).

- M.T., USA (blog description, *Whimsical Nostalgia*; ~4,527 followers, as of November 2012); originally from the US; born in 1992; blogging 'on and off for a few years', but only 'recently got into it when my friend introduced me to tumblr in my freshmen year of college in 2011'; will be referred to as **Charlotte** (archived screenshot below, retrieved 9 June 2013).



Figure 8.3: Screenshot of Luna’s blog (with blogger’s permission), low contrast original.

“Eclectic. Pensive. Eternal. [...] I have always been in love with odd or whimsical things or things that evoke strong emotions. I was in love with period films at the time when creating the blog so I was very much



Figure 8.5: Screenshot of W’s blog (with blogger’s permission).

fairy-tales, but the whole aspect of ‘other worlds’ – a world full of fantasy. [...] They all play a part reflecting my world and thus, revealing my blog” (Lara).

These final five participants have been selected after filtering through considerably more invitations and (often lack of) replies. It still remains relatively difficult to approach a blogger on Tumblr; not only are contact details hard to identify, but some users simply disable or hide the already frugal ‘ask’ option from their blog. Interacting with the community as an academic (outsider) makes the task all the more challenging. Overall, I was quite fortunate to establish a positive rapport with these young participants, whose case studies have shed light unto what is a rich, though often ‘self-guarded’ nostalgic community.³ In terms of the selection procedure for the analysed visual material, this was informed by a combination of random number extraction, participatory observations and individual inter-blog examples and comparisons. Ethnographic data was gathered between 2010–13 through the use of synchronous and non-synchronous interviews (e-mail and real time chat services), as well as from an extended real life encounter with Wallflower in Tbilisi, which alone has yielded 53 pages of transcribed text (approx. 19,000 words). A Foucaultian (1979) – Barthesian (1991) interpretative discourse analysis, combined with photographic semiology and compositional interpretation (see Rose, 2007, chapter 4; West, 2000), have provided the necessary qualitative methodological framework with which to approach the material. Particular attention was given to the empirical sources themselves, especially because the bloggers’ idiosyncratic narratives are often of a deeply (inter)personal nature. Their complicated forays into history, art, emotion, biography, and self-reflection create intricate, ambiguous mythologies.

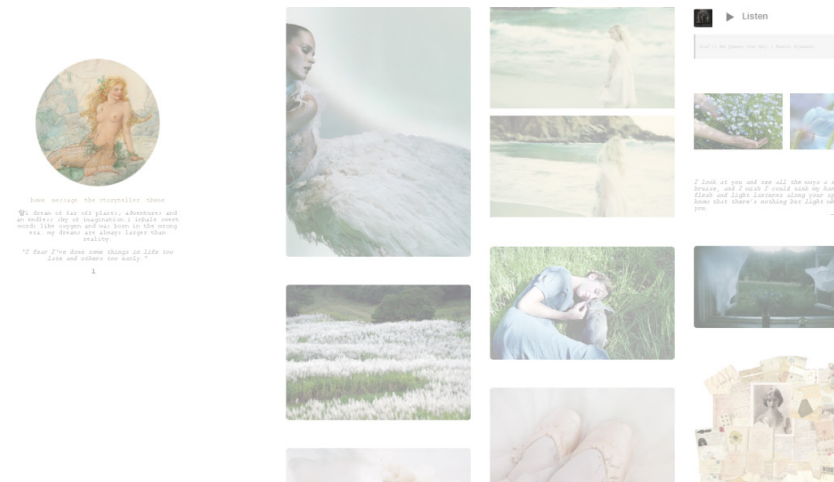


Figure 8.6: Screenshot of Lara’s microblog (with blogger’s permission), original low contrast.

As I will explain below, often Barthes' semiotic/theoretical work appeared limited, insufficient or excessively politicized, restricting the understanding of my participants' complex relationships in regard to authorship, individuality, community, aesthetics, memory and imagination. Nevertheless, I agree with his founding idea that 'myth' can, indeed, often be a 'type of speech' (Barthes, 1991, p. 109). More so, as the human potential for suggestion is infinite, everything can be(come) a myth (*idem*); pictures in particular 'are more imperative than writing [...], [as they] become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis' (*ibidem*, p. 111). That is to say, they become 'language', 'discourse', 'speech', thus entering the analytical province of semiology. Equally, of course, they enter the anthropological realm of culture, which itself, as Geertz suggested, 'is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5, emphasis added). I therefore approached the microblogs as open-ended, non-linear discursive entities, dialectically engaged within the social, aesthetic and stylistic realms of contemporary, as well as integrated in broader historical and cultural dynamics.

In terms of participant demographics, it is also worth noting that, although they come from different areas of the globe and share different cultural heritages (Wallflower and her friends are ethnic Georgians living in Tbilisi; Lara is North American; Luna is originally Syrian but lives in Holland; W. is from France, with US links; Charlotte has French, Spanish, Italian and Guamanian blood and lives in the US; many other tumblrs include individuals from Brazil, Russia, Italy or Greece), they all speak English and feel utterly at home on the Internet. In this sense, the act of organising and analysing these blogs revealed a cellular dispersion of the young nostalgic community throughout the larger Tumblr infrastructure. Indeed, the type of affective, mainly visual semiotics, relying on the symbols, themes and codes that I describe and contextualize in the following section, can be found in a growing number of tumblrs, either discovered by me, or explicitly mentioned by my participants. As of mid-2013, some of these bloggers include: autumnalreading, dearthimble, alice-eve-lithium, timetravelingscamp, paminamozartienne, debourbon, crownthewitchking, tangledboughs, beautifullyeternal, and many more (users such as Charlotte also have blogrolls where they promote hundreds of similar tumblrs). Often I found it impressive how much time, work and web design expertise (many tumblrs feature discreet soundtracks, video effects, various navigational 'blurs', etc.) these young people invest in their websites — all the more so because they seem to exist in a strange Tumblr bubble far outside the 'Tumblr meme' world, which is to say completely devoid of the usual deluge of cat humour, celebrity quotes or Internet-dividing debates on the exact colour of a dress (e.g., McCoy, 2015; Dewey, 2015; see also Goriunova, 2012).

The issue of exactly how this community's semiotic content is being circulated, however, poses a number of distinct challenges. For the same things that

prevent advertisers and marketers from adequately penetrating the platform also make it hard to keep track of where everything goes and where everything comes from — as I will attempt to explain below.

Overlapping ‘production’, ‘image’ and ‘audience’

Although the exploration of the following ideas could inform several studies and is perhaps one of the Gordian knots of ‘digital culture’ debates, I wish to underline here the simple fact that visual microbloggers do to the analysis of photography what no other phenomenon seems to have done before. In certain ways, they converge the three main sites of the Image — production, image itself, and audience (see Rose, 2007, pp. 14–27). One can hardly ignore, or indeed understate the importance of the multiple roles that these subjects inevitably assume in the act of designing cultural products such as their microblogs.

First of all, the image’s actual source, its literal production site, is often so obfuscated by the intricate immensity of the Internet, that it becomes virtually impossible to retrieve. Some of my participants occasionally link back to an ‘original’, though typically that too is a re-presentation; in some cases, not even this weak act of ghost referencing happens. Its ‘author’ (see Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1979) becomes, in a way, the blogger her or his self. If we then consider the (micro)blogger as an agent, an architect who uses the data for her or his own aesthetic-affective purposes, it can be argued that the totality of these images becomes — or allows for — an altogether different, but nonetheless new, or ‘original’, site of (re)production. We are then left with the image itself and with what John Fiske considered the most important dimension, that of the audience, where senses become pliable, renegotiable — in a way, where senses are (re)created: ‘[the audience] is the final site at which the meanings and effects of an image are made, for you are an audience of that photograph and, like all audiences, you bring to it your own ways of seeing and other kinds of knowledges’ (quoted in Rose, 2007, p. 22). Similarly, the work of Jenkins (2013) takes the point further, documenting fans’ ‘transformative and expansive influence on culture ... [their] working through central concerns around creativity, collaboration, community, and copyright’ (p. xxxvi).

Then again, the senses have already been (re)created, for in that crucial moment when the blogger hijacks, or ‘poaches’ (Jenkins, 2013), or ‘construes’ (Firat & Dholakia, 2016) the photograph from somewhere else, she is herself, for a few seconds, the audience. Also important — particularly in the case of Wall-flower’s immensely popular blog, from which some of my other participants indicated they acquired many images — is the more conventional understanding of the ‘audience’, reflected by the thousands of people actively following a tumblr. Often these ‘receivers’ are ‘authors’ in their own right, having tumblrs of their own where they reblog much of the content they follow, thus creating a collaborative wave of continuous, and often somewhat similar content. Here

is, for example, one of my own photographs circulating throughout the young nostalgics' tumblr sphere. In this case, my spontaneous 'artwork' was a celebration of fairytales (themselves an important, Romantically-informed theme running throughout the community). The image was created by me as a sort of good will gesture and included in one of my first messages to Marie.

Seeing that Wallflower's blog is very popular, the image has over the course of several days been reblogged by over a hundred of her followers (thus marking the beginning and the end of my 15-minute Tumblr fame), as some of the examples below can attest (see figures 8.8–8.9).

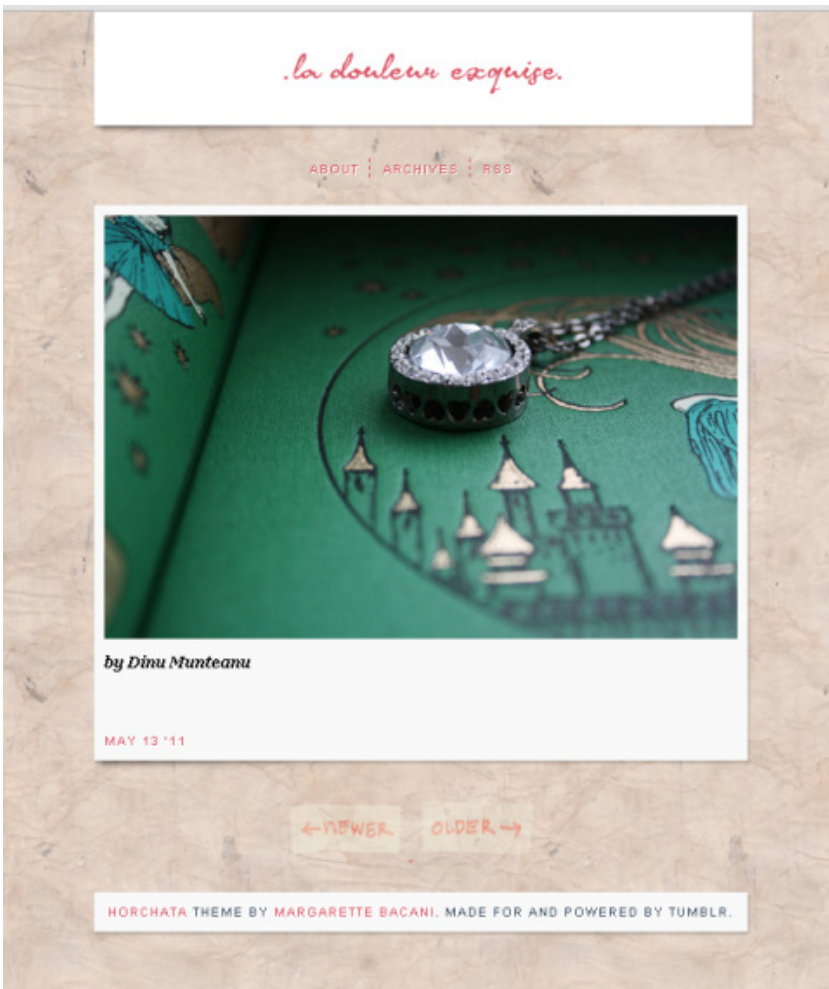


Figure 8.7: Reblogged photograph (copyright granted by author: D. G. Munteanu).



Figure 8.8: Reblogged photograph (copyright granted by author: D. G. Munteanu).

In this case, Wallflower mentioned my name, and some of her followers decided to keep the copyright reference, as the image was reproduced across many other microblogs. However, this is far from being the rule. Although some of my participants are increasingly aware of this 'attribution' dilemma,⁴ much of the material circulating on tumblr is 'free floating', devoid of direct references and therefore living parallel lives, with no direct authorial connections to

Chocolate in the Library

Photo May 17, 2011 [108 notes](#)



misswallflower:

by Dinu Munteanu

(via [thedragonflycafe](#))

Tags: necklaces, jewelry, books, book covers, castles, fairytales, green

ABOUT



Your library is your paradise.
~Desiderius Erasmus

PEOPLE I FOLLOW

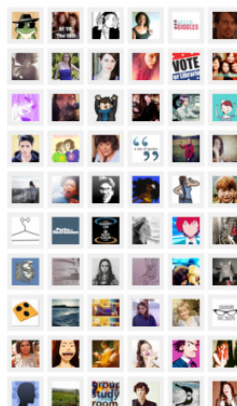


Figure 8.9: Reblogged photograph (image copyright: D. G. Munteanu).

safeguard their origin (for a philosophical exploration of the dilemmas associated with such ‘remixing’ environments, see, for example, Gunkle, 2016).

These last two sites of (re)production, imagery and audience, point us in two main directions before collapsing back on themselves: one is the semiological constituency of the image, the other is the bloggers’ agency, their projective intentionality. Put simply: their individual reworking of said image(s). These nuances do not escape Marie’s own assessment of authorship and meaning:

Yes, [the photograph] [it] takes a life of its own. It’s interesting, and it ... loses its meaning and it gains another meaning. Because everyone who posts and reblogs, they gave, for example I posted a photo of a sad girl, but I didn’t see it in a sad way, I saw it differently, but someone reblogged and wrote underneath “I miss you” or something like that [...] and it takes another, different [meaning].

Nostalgia and Tumblr space: Some examples

In essence, the microblogs I analyse are scrapbooks. They are public, interactive and integrated within a larger framework of visibility and affect. Their content is eclectic, almost never of an explicitly biographical colouring, and draws inspiration from many centuries of history without however losing the aesthetic, stylistic and, perhaps even more importantly, emotional and symbolic coherence that makes them instantly recognizable as 'young (tumblr) nostalgics'.

My participants are well aware of these dynamics, and they explicitly acknowledge that they navigate through difficult historiographic waters; in fact, they reflect upon their strokes with particular clarity: 'The Classical Antiquity, La belle époque, the roaring twenties, the fifties and the late sixties (Woodstock festival)' (Luna); '60s, this moment the 60s, [the] 19th century ... also, yes, my favourite periods, 19th, 18th century and the 60s' (Wallflower); 'the Victorian era, but I have also been interested in the 1920-1960's because I have also loved the music and dance styles from this time period as well as the dress' (Charlotte); 'the 40's, 70's, Regency, Georgian, and Victorian era' (Lara).

It is important to note here that the young nostalgics' intoxication with 'pastness' is to a large extent governed by a sense of psycho-historiographical control: they do not want it back, their intention is not what Svetlana Boym would call 'restorative', but rather it might be best characterised as 'reflective' (Boym, 2001, p. xviii). Beyond the transhistorical/ahistorical nature of how this 'pastness' is envisioned (encapsulating many epochs and times, with no clear focus on one or another), this desire to re-present the past is rooted in the faculty of imagination and so reliant on metaphor and allusion, rather than on any type of temporally grounded, sequentially arranged 'genealogy' of memory. In this respect the bloggers' creative practices throw into question the old adages about nostalgia's social 'pathology' – its 'simulational' cultural sterility, reactionary bourgeois symptomatology, 'abdication of memory', etc. (see Jameson, 1991; Baudrillard, 1981; Stewart, 1993, p. ix; Lasch, 1991, p. 83).

On the contrary, as I will argue below, the nostalgics' semiotic play and stylistic improvisations put significant stress on what Andrew Wernick rather pessimistically insisted is the hegemonic institutional transformation of all 'promotionally' circulating objects ('commodity-signs', be they images or messages) (see Wernick, 1991, pp. 15-16). In this sense, despite the fact that some of the material on these tumblrs is most certainly embedded, at least at its point of origin, in deeply commercial spheres (artefacts pertaining to the movie, fashion and beauty industries are conjoined here with artistic, activist and fandom-related material), it will become apparent from my respondents' input that they are well aware of these tensions, and that they approach them with an almost subversive reflexivity, arguably investing their blogging efforts with 'a posture, a matter of perception, the result of a conversation that allows

the development of a mechanics of resistance to the present ... [a] permanent quest for an inner balance [...] always an in-between' (Valentin, cited in Boudas, 2006, p. 22).

For example, despite, or alongside a certain oneiric escapism permeating the community, the bloggers also exhibit an almost taken-for-granted awareness that the 'objective' past is not at all the focus of their psycho-aesthetic interests. These young bloggers seem 'not directed towards the past [...], but rather *side-ways*. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space' (Boym, 2001, xiv, emphasis added). When asked how they 'feel about *the past*', observations related to bigotry, sexism or hygiene are constantly and robustly invoked, and the ease with which these are delineated from the sense of self-cultivated, eclectically interiorized 'pastness' that defines these blogs further attests to their introspectively reflexive nature. In other words, we deal here not with a regressively temporal desire per se, but rather with intrinsic tendencies towards reverie, centered on the 'algia, the longing itself' (Boym, 2011, p. xviii). Similar points are invoked by Silke Arnold-de-Simine (2013) in her defence of a more equivocal, empathy- and reflexivity-centred approach to the topic of memory mediation in museums:

But what happens when nostalgia is no longer seen as a means to an end, a symptom pointing towards a problem that can be solved, but if the person who is nostalgic indulges in the melancholic awareness that the past cannot be regained? What is longed for is not only unattainable because it is lost but because it is absent in a much more emphatic manner. In this case the yearning becomes an end in itself: one cannot recover something one never had and will never have but is possible to long for it [...], a melancholia for an absence that often cannot be specified or clearly articulated but that is nevertheless acutely felt. (p. 59)

In fact, Tumblr in particular reflects this notion of non-temporal 'space' well. Note, for example, the environment's quintessentially visual nature. Even the textual material, from various literary quotes to other text-dependent journal entries, are often presented by my participants in the form of photographs, collages or screenshots, seamlessly integrated in the imagistic flux of one blog or another, and thus transcending their one-dimensional, conventional representation of simple, monochromatic rows of text (this is something that in my view no other platform, from Instagram to Pinterest, has managed to do so well) (see Figures 8.10–8.12., below).

In this sense, Tumblr's ability to create spatial collages replete with cinematic, visual and musical cues, takes full advantage of powerful affective characteristics often associated with:

Cinema — like the cemetery — [...] a space that is home to residual body images. Film and the cemetery share this special, corporeal

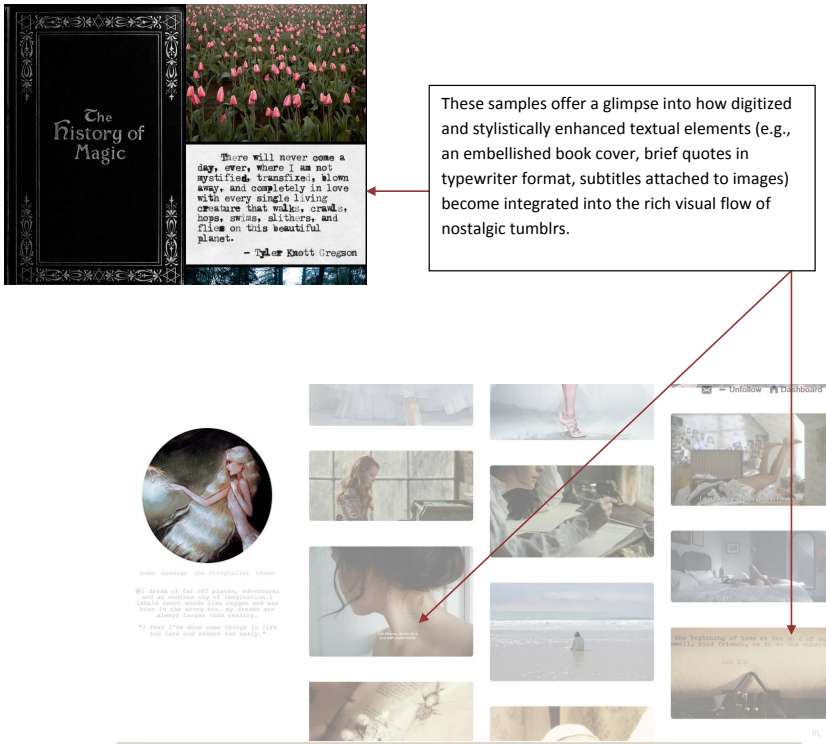


Figure 8.10: (Screenshot of Charlotte's tumblr) & **8.11** (Screenshot of Lara's tumblr) (annotated).

geography. [...] As a machine of death, film technology engages in a time play with spatial movements. Capable of not only multiplying time and space but of extending time with prolonged mechanical movement, as well as freezing frames [...], the language of film inhibits a boundless desire to capture life [...], to overcome the finiteness of death. Preserving the moment in time and space, film travels the geography of death and immortality. (Bruno, 2002, p. 147)

Yet Tumblr seems to go a step further, eschewing any potential for directorial 'auteurism', as the material circulated here takes on a completely different life, or rather *comes alive* through subtle innuendoes and *mise en scènes* that only the bloggers themselves understand, control, and share. Indeed, their engagements with these mosaical signifiers are built on a collaborative ethos possessive of depth and sincerity, not unlike the 'labour of love' invested by fans in certain celebrity-dedicated websites (see Cook, 2012). Sometimes, these interiorized hedonic impulses combine biography with cognitive-imagistic

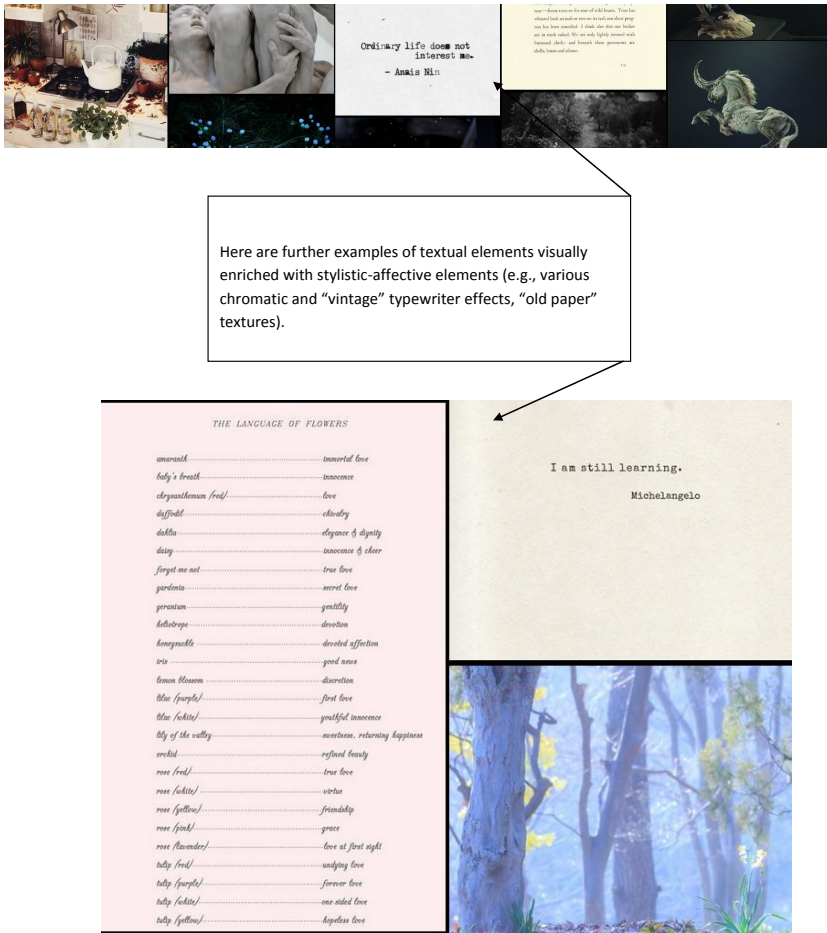


Figure 8.12: (Screenshots of Charlotte's tumblr) (annotated).

projections, and an unattributed blurred image of a girl running through rain in a suburban garden becomes an explicit ‘enjoyment of summer, laughing, dancing’ (Luna), just as an image of an old, unidentified musical score reminds Luna that ‘I’ve never played an instrument, but one day I will’. Likewise, similar images apparently extracted from vintage movie stills ‘remind me of the bliss of summer. The warmth of the sun against skin and the gentle breeze rustling the grass and tree’s leaves’ (Lara). This imaginative synaesthesia and anticipatory attention to ‘lived’ or reminiscent detail continues with ‘a sweet aroma of flowers and the buzzing of bees’ (Lara, on an image of a rose garden at dusk), a ‘Castle in the Clouds’ (Lara, on what appears to be a cropped version of an anonymous cloud) or with a ‘cool touch of the window, fingers pressed against

it while another's figure walks away' (Lara, on yet another graceful visual slide of a woman's hand pressed against a window). For W., an unknown balcony becomes simply a 'Wednesday morning in Lyon', just as a Victorian mansion overcome by ivy signifies 'another place where you want to be and to paint all the life it would have given you'; the same W., who possesses a poetic kind of brevity, described another unattributable architectural snapshot as 'Heathcliff's thrown away toys', capturing the inaccessible sort of sadness radiating from a washed out image of a gigantic building of apparently Tsarist descent.

Along similar lines, the recurrence of 'Parisian' details or miniatures (vintage fragrance vials, postcards, the Tower on the Champ de Mars, etc.) blends here not only with the eclectic connotations discussed above, but also with the sort of escapist/affective whimsicality that even the unforgiving Roland Barthes seems to feel ambivalent about when he empathetically acknowledges, perhaps in a secret reverie of his own, its blending of mythology with personal contemplation (note the allusion to childhood): 'the Tower can live on itself: one can dream there, eat there, observe there, understand there, marvel there, shop there; as on an ocean liner (another mythic object that sets children dreaming), one can feel oneself cut off from the world and yet the owner of the world' (Barthes, 1997, p. 17). Indeed, the young nostalgics, and Luna in particular, use the Tower as an instrument of imaginative projection, just as they all do with representations of French patisseries and macarons (themselves notable tumblr leitmotifs), i.e. to 'participate in a dream of which it is (and this is its originality) much more the crystallizer than the true object' (Barthes, 1997, p. 7).

The way in which these dream-like reveries intersect biography and introspection, as well as how they can blend with social commentary is a key finding from this project. In a way picking up from where Barthes (1991) left off, these examples show how, far from being 'victims' of an extraneous mythology, individuals can to a large extent control their own 'mythologies', building layer upon layer of individualized connotations, and finding pleasure in this very process.⁵ As Lara put it: 'I wish I could tell the younger generations [note that Lara was born in 1993] that the things that make them expressive and unique is [sic] not a flaw at all, but makes them *beautiful*. That they don't have to look like an air-brushed model on a magazine or those in Hollywood to feel like they're worth it.' Charlotte made a similar point but also demonstrated a level of reflexivity typical of my respondents: 'I feel like men and women alike have lost the values that previous generations had, almost like a more modern day chivalrous code. [...] We need to find alternatives, and we definitely need to start caring less about materialistic things.'

Ultimately, in such cases, these reveries can safely be referred to as a form of 'nostalgia'. However understood in psycho-historical terms, following the emotion's Romantic acculturation from psychiatry into literature and the cultural vernacular (Dodman, 2011, pp. 280-325; see also Fritzsche, 2004, *passim*), these nostalgic expressions articulate cultural-affective potentialities, manifestations and codes, rather than ideology or political position-taking. Indeed,

‘where the negative sense of nostalgia prevails, there is a tendency to neglect the reciprocal relationship between audience and media [in this case, between the blogger and an already ambiguous flow of visual data] in generating the conditions for making sense and meaning’ (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 930). In fact, the most prevalent keywords in my case studies — ‘dreamlike’, ‘soft’, ‘tender’, ‘expressive’, ‘imaginative’, ‘eclectic’, ‘pensive’, ‘ethereal’, ‘lightweight’, ‘deep emotions’, ‘sadness’, ‘happiness’, ‘love’ — seem to confirm psychologists’ recent findings that nostalgia retains positive, curative and adaptive characteristics for individuals living in contemporary societies (Wildschut et al., 2010; Hepper et al., 2012; Routledge et al., 2013; Cheung et al., 2013; see also Wilson, 2005; Davis, 1979, pp. 106–7).

Tumblr, curation and optimism

With regard to the ‘curatorial’ mechanics that enable all of these dynamics, I want to outline here the fact that on the face of it these allow for an almost complete circumvention of the conventional trappings of capitalist production and consumption, although this scenario is, of course, only made possible by the fact that Yahoo! (and now Verizon) continue to subsidize Tumblr’s servers. Which is to say that, although many of these images are extracted from commercial venues (fragrance advertising, fashion marketing, and so on), the commercial element per se emerges from the exchange deeply deteriorated. In this sense, I agree with Henry Jenkins’ position, articulated in his commentary on Michel de Certeau’s suggestion that readers’ activities are harder to document than theorise, that a modern audience’s productivity and transformative influence on culture ‘can be glimpsed only through local details rather than measured in its entirety’ (Jenkins, 2013, p. 3).

Take, for example, the case (out of many more) of the image below, silently ‘borrowed’ by the bloggers from what I discovered, with difficulty and only by using Google Image’s tracing algorithms, to be a quintessentially neoliberal icon of mass-production within the convenience-food industry, a Betty Crocker (General Mills) official website.

In the context of how this image is reproduced through these tumblrs, those ‘little pink cupcakes with edible pearls on top’ are hardly attributable to any Betty Crocker brand machination. Rather, they facilitate the simple making of a psycho-aesthetic point, acting as soft punctuation marks in the overall nostalgic mythology bonding the blogs together (in this case, the point is centered around the bloggers’ culinary/Proustian/hedonic invocations of childhood memories or scents, e.g. Wallflower’s stories of her grandmother’s baking). It is equally true that General Mills participates in, or rather reflects, unwittingly and unprofitably, this process. The company tries, as it were, to make the same point, or rather to monetize the same fantasy or aesthetic impulse (by producing the image in the first place). That its attempt to use the image to sell (on the



Figure 8.13: ‘Pink Champagne Cupcakes’, Betty Crocker Recipes (Official Website); original source (via Google Images): <http://goo.gl/FqT8V6>

dull remoteness of the company’s website) their ‘Betty Crocker® SuperMoist® white cake mix’ fails to even register on my participants’ tumblrs only underlines these microblogs’ independent semiotic existence. It can even be said that the nostalgic community’s, and Wallflower’s in particular, repurposing of signs and signifiers provides a valuable empirical continuation to Andy Warhol’s creation of a ‘space for the return of what modernism represses: image, representation, popular/low culture, kitsch and every other imaginable ‘impurity’. For Warhol, the very notion of originality was suspect. Having started his career as a commercial artist, he borrows or steals images from the consumer culture that surrounds him’ (Taylor, 1992, p. 17; Wallflower is incidentally an Andy Warhol admirer and ‘The world fascinates me’ was M.’s tumblr motto for a while).

The case is similar with the majority of the media files that the bloggers use to populate their tumblrs, which is to say that these digital artefacts rarely bare an immediate commercial identifier (those that do are sometimes cropped, blurred, made unidentifiable, etc.). The purpose they are used for is, again, to calibrate and continuously to stylize the broader ‘nostalgic’ communal discourse, with each hypermediated element functioning like just another colour on a painter’s easel (a fragrance bottle, a detail from a dress, a close-up of a human’s face, all occupying the same level of signification as an impressionistic

painting, a piano sonata, or a quote by Rilke or Fitzgerald): digital content that might be re-combined, felt, expressed and arranged as part of something deeper, something beyond the sum of its parts. Such postmodern collage is not necessarily intended to be in some way resistant to the commercial or ideological origins of the source material. Nor do the bloggers pay particularly conscious attention to these somewhat intrinsic aspects of their craft, characterised as it is by a nonchalantly proficient digital literacy; and yet this craft enables them to claim agency and to a degree autonomy by exercising the complete freedom to do, quite simply, as they like.

How far this all seems from the usual 'curatorial' histories, debates and cultural studies of recent years (e.g., O'Neill, 2012; Rugg & Sedgwick, 2007). It still seems to me that, no matter how reflexive, collaborative or dialogical, or even critical of the 'self-regarding' tendencies of their own (artistic) field to 'overstate the significance of the individual curatorial position' (O'Neill, 2012, p. 2), these critical discussions continue to revolve largely around the seemingly ineluctable issue of how and with what effects art is mediated. And while credible voices (e.g., Charlesworth, 2007; Hylton, 2007) do question the neo-managerial 'bureaucratization' of art, the continued privilege of academic, state or institutional interests in art, or the professionalisation of the artistic field as such, together with its increased regularisation and exposure to market forces, few voices from within the discipline actually step outside the canonical literature to allow for viable connections to be made to phenomena such as those encountered on Tumblr (e.g., Krysa, 2006, p. 14; Gere, 2010, p. 5).

Yet it is evident from the case study examples above that the young nostalgics do filter, understand, share and ultimately 'curate' a wide variety of material, including (but not always of) an artistic nature or origin. Thus Tumblr can also be understood as a collaborative, (trans)personal/(trans)media archival space. While investigating the processes of maintaining and visiting these tumblrs, my study focused on outlining the sensory, emotive, affective, experiential and performative avenues that crisscross my participants' archives. These, when understood as 'interchange and free play between virtual images and material artefacts', or as a process conducive 'to more democratic, collective and active experience[s]', could arguably be used to create what Michelle Henning, in discussing the emerging literature in the field, suggests would be a more "elastic", "delirious" or "exploded" museum: a more anarchic and playful museum without walls' (Henning, 2013a, p. 1; see also Henning, 2013b).

Even with the boundaries between audience, authorship and the curated 'objects' themselves overlapping (be they ideas, songs, images, anonymous dialogues, symphonies or daguerreotypes), we can perhaps still dream of artistic institutions collaborating some day with services such as Tumblr. Imagine, for example, plasma screens connected to specific tumblr flows and placed in various rooms (or public gardens; or city streets), perhaps according to some collaborative curatorial algorithms (e.g., based on #hashtags or independently curated aesthetic user bases). This would arguably bring a

nuclear transformation to Malraux's vision, for it would be a truly democratic (trans-critical/trans-artistic) version of his 'museum without walls [...] miniatures, frescoes, stained glass, tapestries [...], "details" and even 'statuaries', all becoming, through photography (and Tumblr) not only dynamic 'colour plates', to be arranged, rearranged, played with, not only 'moments of art' (see Malraux, 1978, pp. 44–6), but moments of 'life' itself. Such installations might even provide concrete examples of Rancière's (2009) otherwise quite opaque proposition: 'not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third that is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect' (p. 15); or, again: 'the third level: the assemblage of data and the intertwining of contradictory relations [which] are intended to produce a new sense of community' (p. 58).

As Jean-Paul Martinon (2013) alludes to in his playful, subtle, yet deeply philosophical argument (pp. 1–13), one possible way forward could be to differentiate between curating professionals and 'The Curatorial', the latter understood in a similar vein to that of Tumblr's aforementioned expressive potential:

a jailbreak from pre-existing frames, a gift enabling one to see the world differently, a strategy for inventing new points of departure, a practice of creating allegiances against social ills, a way of caring for humanity, a process of renewing one's own subjectivity, a tactical move for reinventing life, a sensual practice of creating signification, a political tool outside politics, a procedure to maintain a community together [...] the measures to create affects, the work of revealing ghosts, a plan to remain out of joint with time [...] a sharing of understanding, an invitation for reflexivity, a choreographic mode of operation, a way of fighting against corporate culture, etc. (Martinon, 2013, p. 4)

Seen in this light, the Tumblr infrastructure, and the young nostalgics in particular, show striking similarities with Martinon's bravest invocation, that of Stéphane Mallarmé's unfinished, somewhat Babylonian project *C'est* (Engl. *This is*), a two-hour synesthetic spectacle combining 'magic, a small parade, some ballet, a recital, the execution of an alchemical ritual, the calculation of a mathematical formula, the reading of sacred texts, some mime, the contemplation of a crystal chandelier and a carefully planned fireworks display', all of it orchestrated from behind the scenes by 'an "Operator" (half priest, half comedian) [...] with the help of 24 "Assistants"' (p. 1). Being familiarized with my participants' archives, where virtually all of the elements above can be found in one form or another, Mallarmé's vision feels deeply liberating. For, as Martinon notes, the great symbolist's scenes (not unlike my own participants' Curatorial impulses and collections) are: expository (displaying the work of others); multi-temporal (conjoining the past with the present); multi-artistic in their 'constellation of meaning'; possessing no hero, they are also 'seemingly

egalitarian', 'viewer-centered', 'experiential and participatory'; they do not feel like an 'exhibition', but more like a 'manifestation'; furthermore, they are 'multi-sited', with 'no centre of significance', and they allow no 'pre-determined rules, grammar or syntax', opening themselves to 'the unpredictable'; finally, lacking a prescribed plot or a pattern, no single perspective or point of view prevails, and thus they retain a political potential that can be both formative and educational (see Martinon, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Conclusions

At their very core, tumblrs remain spaces in which individuals add, or redirect, content. However, invariably throughout my interviews, the purpose and the literal act of 'expression' comes up as an essential component, if not the core motivation behind the blogs. All participants feel that their tumblrs 'reflect parts of their personality', with many of them identifying very strongly with the content, layout, style and mood of their websites.⁶ Unlike more conventional, text-based social networking sites (e.g., online profiles), where young people 'write themselves into being' (see boyd, 2008, pp. 28–31), these largely anonymous tumblrs benefit from a special kind of co-creative expressive potential, enabling their users to interactively and imaginatively preserve a sense of agency, identity and community.

In this sense, and as far as the original, still expanding Tumblr infrastructure is concerned, these microblogging mechanics, with their perpetual states of user-centred, user-dependent representational fluxes and interactions, continue to exist in a highly idiosyncratic digital ecology that significantly augments 'the autonomy of communicating subjects vis-à-vis communication corporations, as the users become senders and receivers of messages' (Castells, 2008, p. 4). With no formal hierarchy other than the one created by every user in their individual dashboard preferences, and with relatively little commercial information being displayed, circulated or sold, the way this flow of data functions — both structurally and philosophically — points to individuals who are, to use Jenkins' terminology, increasingly more active and selective rather than passive or inert, becoming unpredictable and 'migratory' sources of cultural connectedness, and displaying little to no loyalty to the monolithic corporate networks of one type or another that enable their specific mode of collaborative production (see Jenkins, 2006, pp. 18–19).

Nevertheless, despite Tumblr's radical potential, caution continues to be advisable. Digital 'pessimists' have, of course, long disputed that many social networking services, by transforming individual/private qualitative information (e.g., shopping preferences, travel destinations, biographical input) into quantitative public data that can be sold to and processed by third parties, give rise to pertinent concerns over unregulated commerce, surveillance and a centralization of power that is far less democratic or unpredictable than users or

early optimistic theorizers tended to believe (see Turow, 2012; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2010; Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Fuchs, 2015, p. 378). Tumblr remains, for better or worse, a private enterprise, and while David Karp's commitment to the integrity of his brainchild seems extraordinary, many other dangers, from bankruptcy to corporate incompetence or greed, can lead to the medium's degradation.

Overall, however, while optimists may indeed overestimate individuals' creative powers and their potential for anti-corporate dissent and constant cultural migration in networked media, it should also be noted that the pessimist argument tends not to transcend the fact that issues of power centralization, cultural displacement and corporate domination are inherent within capitalist modernity and intrinsic to most organised forms of mass communication ('technology is always, in a full sense, social', necessarily dependant on 'complex and variable connection[s] with other social relations and institutions' – Williams, 1981, p. 231). The question should therefore not be whether these problems exist in digital manifestations — they certainly do — but rather inquire as to whether the new tools, platforms and possibilities for personal expression can add sufficient cultural value, psychological satisfaction, and, to use Williams' (1980) vocabulary, allow for enough individual 'direct autonomous composition' (p. 62) so as to effectively consolidate the network-based social-economic evolutions sketched out by optimistic models such as that proposed by Benkler (2006). In the young nostalgics' case, I have argued, Tumblr did indeed seem to provide all of these things, perhaps even enabling the creation of that elusive, liberating and communal-centered activity 'that combines the intelligence and the action of the multitude, making them work together' (see Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 302–3).⁷

Notes

- ¹ Please note that, when capitalised, I will use the noun 'Tumblr' to refer more generally to the platform/enterprise, while 'tumblr(s)' will be used to signify the actual blogs.
- ² Even the fact that Yahoo! took a \$230 million write-down on the business (essentially admitting they had overpaid for it), while also abandoning its sales integration effort — the move, pushed by Mayer in early 2015 and cancelled a year later, is reported to have created confusion and power struggles between Tumblr's and Yahoo's teams (Kim, 2016) — seemed to reinforce the same point. With Karp's authority seemingly intact, it remains to be seen whether Yahoo!'s plan to make Tumblr one of the 'three pillars' behind its comeback plan (see Oreskovic, 2016) will be kept by Verizon.
- ³ For example, despite attempting to include male participants in my study, it was largely females who replied and who were willing to participate in the research. As the feminine aspects of these tumblrs play a key role in

their semiotic and cultural construction — these young women often use Tumblr to ‘recuperate’ or ‘curate’ the emotion outside its male-centered psycho-historical and artistic contexts, thus raising interesting gender issues that I was unable to fully explore in this article — this has not negatively impacted on the relevancy of my findings. Nonetheless, future efforts can and should focus on recruiting male members of the nostalgic community, as inter-gender comparisons would prove valuable.

⁴ Wallflower herself acknowledged this issue during our interview, explaining her recent attempts to mitigate it: ‘It’s a very big problem with Tumblr. First when I started [with] Tumblr, I didn’t know that. I didn’t think that I had to write the author, to make a source link, but then over the time I understood that I had to include the author of the photo, and I always, always link the source material, always. When you click on the blog, when you click on the picture, you go at the source of the photo, *maybe not always the author*, but maybe [an]other blog that I found.’

⁵ In the specific case of Luna, although she did not expressly mention any traumatic or problematic nuances related to her ethnic background, her status as a Syrian emigrée in the Netherlands might even underline the affective permutations, indeed emotionally recuperative valences of nostalgia — in this sense, the emotion’s role in developing alternative narratives of history for victims of (post)colonial/postcommunist abuse or displacement has been tentatively described in a recent study (see Ladino, 2005).

⁶ On 17 June 2012, I extracted from one of my participant’s blogs (Charlotte) a ‘viral’ textual image (it had been noted by no less than 185,153 tumblr users); although I was unable to locate the original source, it merits citing: ‘A person’s tumblr tells a lot about them. It shows what kind of images they see in their head, who they love, who they hate, even what they think about other people. But most of all – has all the words they never said to people, all the words they couldn’t have said but should have said.’

⁷ Note that this is precisely why I have opted for a qualitative, relatively small-scale analysis of one particular Tumblr community/phenomenon. My adherence to the ‘digital optimism’ paradigm should only be considered in this particular context. While my case studies may indeed outline the positive communicational/expressive potential that Tumblr technology has, while the platform may even be a necessary ingredient in this alchemy, it is evidently not a sufficient one — the users’ conscious input and the judicious expressive/aesthetic calibration of their tumblrs make the journals what they are. On its own, Tumblr is little more than computer language (though a very well written one) and hardware; it could never, in itself, become primordial cause, means and message behind the nostalgic community (or any other community) per se. Like Williams, I too dislike such technically deterministic claims, while nonetheless maintaining a certain optimism in regard to the future of this type of technology, or rather to its

human potential and its applications in wider — civic, artistic, therapeutic, educational — spheres. [NB: Particularly unwieldy links have been shortened using Google's URL shortener (<http://goo.gl>)].

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