PHOTOGRAPHIC TRUTH IN MOTION

The case of Iranian photoblogs

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Introduction

In Persian, the phrase *'aks andākhtan*, 'to take photographs', literally translates as 'to throw one's reflection'. The etymology of the word *'aks,* meaning reflection (in water and mirrors), originates from the sixteenth century, in which it described the miniatures and illustrations by the artist Mawlana Kepek (Afshar 1992:267–8). In Qajar Iran (1785–1925), following the creation of the first daguerreotype in 1842, photography was considered both an art and a science by the Iranian royal court. Revered for its reflective capacities, photography played an important role in the documentation of the country, while in a visual culture that had long enjoyed a tradition of illustrative and figurative art, it also signalled the onset of a new visual realism in painting (Diba 2013). Since the nineteenth century, then, photography has been celebrated in Iran for its technological and artistic potentials, both of which playing prominent roles in Iran's wider realization of 'modernity'.

The relationship between science and art introduced above in the early context of Iranian photography (and which also applies to a host of other photographic traditions) is a well-established preoccupation of twentieth-century photography theory. Berger (1980:59) identifies this central tension as involving a 'twin capacity, to subjectivise reality and to objectify it', whilst Sontag (1977) puts photography and painting on a comparative, subjective plane in which image and reality are inextricably linked. This tension is also evident in the history of anthropology as a discipline. In the late nineteenth century, British anthropologist E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) claimed that 'The science of anthropology owes not a little to the art of photography.'[1] Debates concerning the ontology of photography (what it is) appear

to be largely connected to its status vis-à-vis the 'real' (what it claims to do/show), signifying, as outlined above, evidence, artistry or both. Despite the fact that human fabrication and manipulation are an accepted characteristic of analogue photography and other art forms, these aspects, along with the medium's dual (subjective-objective) capacity mentioned above, are often left out of the analytical frame concerning digital photography (Manovich 1995). Here, theoretical obsessions with 'authenticity' and reproduction (Benjamin 1972), digital manipulation and online distribution have overshadowed much thinking about the ontology of digital photography.

In this paper, I employ the issue of 'truth' as an analytical conduit, through which I suggest the theoretical discourse on digital photography can move, in order to speak to anthropologists' established concerns with images as social objects. Following Sturken and Cartwright (2001), who in debunking Mitchell's (1992) claim regarding the lack of truth in the digital have spoken of the 'myth of photographic truth', I suggest that truth as an ethnographic (and not a purely ontological) category can be brought to bear on the digital photography shown and seen on the Internet. As a starting point, we may consider the continued relevance of Pinney's (1997:20) statement (in relation to analogue photography): 'I am interested not in the ontological and indexical truth claims of images, but of contemporary mythologies and evaluations.' By emphasizing the social context in which photographic practices are situated and acquire meaning, Pinney invites us to look beyond the truth claims of images themselves, to where we can begin to situate truth ethnographically. Here, Barthes' (1981) distinction between the *corps* and the *corpus* in photography – the former being the photographic 'event' (the photograph) and the latter being the wider indexicality, which

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1   Tylor 1876, quoted in Pinney 2011:29.

the particularity of the photograph cannot itself provide – remains a useful schema for thinking about digital photography. Following from this logic, the idea is to re-configure truth in digital photography not as the objective of analysis (how 'true' the image is/is not) but as the analytical object itself, moving with digital photographs online through various virtual (digital and mental) landscapes and imaginaries. Rendering truth an ethnographic object of enquiry reveals how it is capable of producing multiple ontologies in given socio-cultural landscapes. Employing the phrase 'truth in motion' to conceptualize the general ethnographic fluidity of truth, Holbraad (2013:xix) claims that truth is 'motile': it follows a 'motile logic', which moves and transforms the world. The transformative and future-orientated dynamic described by Holbraad is reminiscent of what Strassler (2010), in the context of popular photography, calls the 'as if' of the medium: a 'prophetic' (Pinney 2008, 2012) quality, with a world-making capacity. The motility of digital photography has also been described by Pink (2011:8), who suggests that rather than being static or locative (or being of a place), digital images represent movement, and that the 'event' of photography takes place in places, which are continually evolving and moving forwards. In light of these perspectives, in this paper I suggest that understanding 'truth' and the digital photograph, ethnographically, is less about the inherent truth claims of the representations depicted by images (though clearly what they show is important to photographers, viewers and researchers), than investigating how and why producers and viewers attribute categories of value, virtue and 'truth' to certain digital-visual objects, places and spaces vicariously linked to a given society or culture.

In order to illustrate my argument, in the following discussion I consider three interrelated conceptions of 'truth' in relation to my wider digital-ethnographic research with Iranian popular photographers: (1) photographers' own claims to 'truth', deployed online through photoblogs; (2) viewers' practices of bearing witness to, (re-)producing and negotiating these 'truths'; and (3) my own anthropological handling of 'truth' as an analytical object. Though the emphasis is a theoretical discussion through the lens of my empirical findings, addressing these issues inevitably implicates its methodology: namely, how can digital images shown and seen online – as virtual, (and seemingly intangible) objects without physical status – be accepted and investigated as tangible ethnographic media? This is a question posed by Sassoon (2004), amongst others, in her critique of the digital image in/for anthropology. Sassoon called the authenticity of digital photographs into question because of their lack of physical material status.

Insights to many of these concerns can in one sense be partially located in the very theoretical stipulations upon which digital anthropology, rooted as it is in material culture studies, is predicated: namely, that digital material can be investigated anthropologically, like other 'intangible' entities, by attending to social manifestations (Horst and Miller 2012). This upholds a fundamental premise of material anthropology, that acknowledges a continued, historical relationship between the material and the immaterial in social life (Buchli 2015; Miller 2005). Theoretical insights concerning these issues may also be brought back from contemporary ethnographic fields. Having carried out physical and digital-ethnographic research in multi-sited fields (spatial and social) in Iran, the UK and online, in the following discussion I show how an ethnographic context such as 'the Iranian Internet' (Akhavan 2013) moves beyond preoccupations with 'the real', as a critique of the

digital. This brings us back to an ethnographic focus, akin to the 'contemporary mythologies and evaluations' described by Pinney (1997:20), which is concerned with how and why social meanings and realities are constructed through photography. We may also consider how digital images today give rise to participatory online cultures that anthropologists can study.

The ethnographic approach to digital photographic truth, I suggest, facilitates a deeper understanding of the social lives of, and multiple realities generated and mediated by, digital photographs, rather than an evaluation of their meaning based on a lack of physical materiality. In order to situate my argument, I begin by briefly surveying the theoretical landscape concerning truth and the digital photograph, before drawing on ethnographic material in order to illustrate the social and political textures of photographic 'truth' in motion.

'Truth' and the digital image

Anthropologists conceive of photographs as 'documents of culture' (Edwards 1997). Their legitimacy is drawn from the fact that 'their creators are attempting to communicate values and negotiated realities which are integral to human experience and consciousness' (ibid.:54). In the contemporary digital era, however, the status of the digital photograph has been called into question. This reflects a certain early 'anxiety' (Cohen 2005) towards the digital photograph's lack of physical materiality. Failing, as Sassoon (2004) suggests, to provide evidence of its material, other lives, or the 'what-had-been' qualities of what Mitchell (1992) called, by contrast, 'normal' print photographs, the digital photographs have been considered as altogether less authentic for lacking the customary, self-authenticating 'certificate of presence' provided by the 'index' (Barthes 1981). Along these lines,

Sassoon (2004:186) has drawn a distinction between the 'unique value' of the original photographic object and its 'digital referent'. In being non-indexical, the latter was considered altogether less 'real' and more of a virtual annex than a social object in its own right (ibid.). In this notably anxious theoretical environment, Robins (1996) hastily pronounced the 'death of photography' in what Mitchell (1992) called a 'post-photographic era', while Nichols (2000:104) went so far as to claim that the digital image's 'material surface is its meaning, without history, without depth, without aura, affect or feeling'.

Recent scholarship on and with digital images in a range of ethnographic contexts has since opened up a range of alternative theoretical avenues for understanding practices of image-making and viewing (Favero 2013, 2014; McQuire 2013; Were 2013). These perspectives reveal the digital image's dynamic (and continued) place in negotiating and representing collective experience. Particular headway in this direction has been made by anthropological research in/on museums and digital archives (Geismar 2010). Brown (2007), for instance, has shown how sophisticated 3D digital facsimiles of Maori artefacts are understood by some Maori people to be as imbued with ancestral power as the actual physical object. She ascribes a cultural potency to the digital, which show how boundaries between 'virtual' and the 'real' become blurred in certain socio-cultural contexts of engagement. Furthermore, in his case study of the Melbourne-based State Library of Victoria's digital archives, McQuire (2013) found that individuals realized a powerful sense of cultural heritage and self-determination by coming into close contact with digital images of their ancestors, seen online as if they were 'real'. He suitably terms this the 'operational archive', denoting an active (and not passive) space of cultural engagement for, in this

case, descendent communities. As contemporary popular digital archives, the photoblogs that I will discuss below contribute to these ethnographic conversations regarding the social efficacies of digital images, including their 'paradoxical logic' (Manovich 1995) involving continuity and discontinuty with existing social/media processes.

Photoblogging 'truths' in/of Iran

Photoblogging is a contemporary media practice that has developed across the world since the early 2000s. Individuals post digital photographs taken (either alone or in groups) on camera phones and/or digital cameras, or scanned analogue material, on photography-orientated blogs known as 'photoblogs'. Although photoblogs are themselves stand-alone blog sites dedicated to photography, they have also become linked to online social networks in recent years.[2] Scholarship on photoblogs is sparse, and is often overshadowed by a focus on text-based blogs across the social and political sciences, and in journalism. One of the first research projects conducted on photoblogs was carried out by Cohen (2005), who asked 'what does the photoblog want?' Cohen's research in London with white, British, male and female photobloggers, made a notable contribution to understanding what the photoblogs (noun) is, what the act of photoblogging (verb) entails, and what his research participants wanted (if anything) from the practice; in other words, how their desires met the technologies and vice versa. Cohen's research observed a noticeable lack of intentionality amongst the particular group of photobloggers he studied. He recalls how, when interviewed, many of his research participants
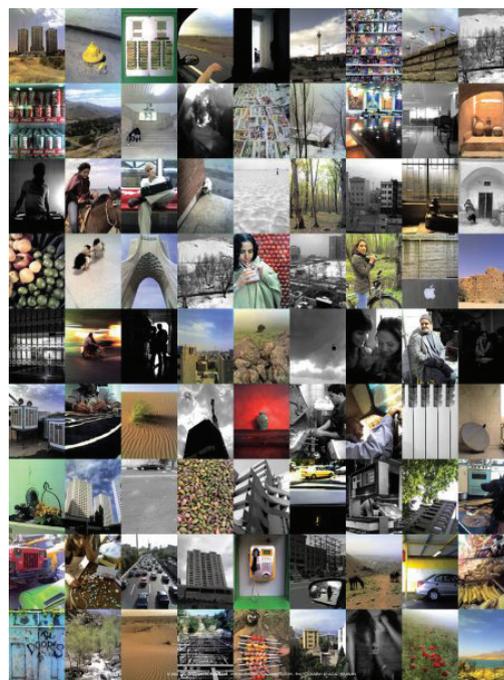

Figure 1   LGOIT Facebook photo collage of LGOIT photographs (2008).[3]

struggled to articulate why they photoblog. Cohen found their practices to be grounded in a combination of photographic spontaneity, 'in-the moment' instinct, and a general, aesthetic interest in the everyday. His findings foreshadow Murray's (2008) subsequent findings on Flickr, which similarly convey how everyday digital image-making reflects an everyday type of photographic practice that has aesthetic preoccupations rooted in the mundane. As I will discuss below, photobloggers in Iran express both similar and markedly different attitudes towards the everyday and the banal to those highlighted in previous studies of digital photography, photoblogs and Flickr in Western contexts.

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2   For a relevant theoretical discussion on photoblogs, including their relationship to 'the real', see Cohen 2005.

3   Created by LGOIT: www.facebook.com/lgoit/photos/pb.36738998882.-2207520000.1445946260./37648553882/?type=3&theater (accessed 15 March 2012). Used with permission.

Following the advent of mobile-phone cameras in the early 2000s (and particularly smart phones/iPhones from 2007), and the convergence of popular photography with blogs and online social networks, photoblogging in Iran has been gaining traction in recent years. As elsewhere in the world, the hobby has a certain appeal amongst urban, Internet-using middle-class youth. At the same time, the practice should also be understood in more local terms that appreciate the broader visual and political context of communications and image-making in Iran, as I have discussed elsewhere (Walton 2015). Photoblogging emerged at a wider socio-technological 'moment' of media communications in the country, where, despite official government censorship of the Internet, text-based blogging was experiencing exponential growth amongst Internet users in the early 2000s. By 2005, the Iranian 'blogosphere' had become the third largest in the world after the US and China,[4] facilitating what Sreberny and Khiabany (2010:59) in their seminal study of the Iranian blogosphere have called a contemporary form of 'politics by other means'.

A particularly striking social feature of photoblogging in Iran is the centrality of the notion of 'truth' (*haghighat*) in the practice, as a perceived virtue of the medium of (digital) photography. Quite unlike the British photobloggers featured in Cohen's (2005) study, many Iranian photobloggers share a curiously collective ethos of capturing and disseminating 'truths' about their country to the world:

Thanks to digital cameras and mobile phones … everyone can now see what life looks like in Iran.[5]

The media can change views about a whole nation. Sharing our photos online provides us with the opportunity to show who we really are.[6]

The Internet has changed our world. Sharing our photographs online is our way of showing the truth about Iran to the world. It also gives us the opportunity to keep our culture alive, in a similar way as with art or literature[7].

Iranian photobloggers' linking of digital technologies with country/culture-related truth-telling in one sense lends a certain 'locality' to the practice in its Iranian variant. Here, it can be considered in relation to contemporary forms of identity-linked digital storytelling seen in other societies and cultures, who are also seeking to bolster their collective local/global and political visibility (Underberg and Zorn 2013; Vivienne and Burgess 2013; Were 2013). Without over ascribing intentionality to Iranian photobloggers – who are themselves no singly classifiable group but individuals invariably connected/ disconnected to each other on- and offline, with varying subject positions, and degrees of intentionality – the widespread 'need to speak' about their country and its cultures in truthful visual terms is nevertheless intriguing. In some sense, this collective desire to mobilize popular photography to 'shoot the truth' can be located in the local and global visual economies in which many Iranians feel the image of their country has been submerged. The various ways that official national and international media producers have branded Iran, for instance, features prominently in how Iranian photobloggers spoke to me about their practice.

In the years following the 1979 revolution and onset of the Islamic Republic, Western

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4 Statistics taken from the National Institute of Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) 2005 blog census, www.nitle.org.

5 Online interview, 15 October 2012.

6 Online interview, 27 April 2012.

7 Online interview, 24 June 2013.

mainstream media narratives about Iran and Iranians have dominated popular ways of seeing Iran abroad. Through the propagation of these narratives, and their adoption in political campaigns, Iran has acquired the image of a pariah state, with a people often depicted as oppressed and/or in need of saving (Adelkhah 2009; Dabashi 2008; McAuliffe 2007; Varzi 2006). A symbolic focal point in Western media discourse has been the woman's *hejāb*, (Lester Roushanzamir 2004). A newsworthy image type, depicting veiled women, regardless of any appreciation of the local agency, independence or social mobility it affords, has, as Adelkhah (2009:215–16) puts it, become a 'meta-code' in the West that crudely evokes an image of oppression. At the same time, image-making inside the country has also staked its own ideological claims on the image of Iran and notions of Iranian identity. Islamic nation-building in Iran during and since the 'cultural revolution' of the 1980s has harnessed images of many kinds (from TV and documentary/fiction films to postage stamps and public murals) in the pursuit of constructing and consolidating native Iranian-Shiʿi identity (Akhavan 2013; Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000; Gruber 2008; Khatib 2013; Varzi 2006). Building this particular vision of national identity has been simultaneously contingent upon the purging of Western cultural influences, considered by conservative Islamic authorities in Iran to be a moral indulgence, associated with the former Pahlavi regime (1925–79). More recently, heightened periods of political tension between Iran and 'the West' over the past decade, particularly in a post-9/11 international climate, and under the conservative Ahmadinejad administration in Iran (2005–13), has seen a re-fetishization of Islamic-Iranian politico-aesthetic paradigms, presented in various ways as visual 'evidence' of what the country and its
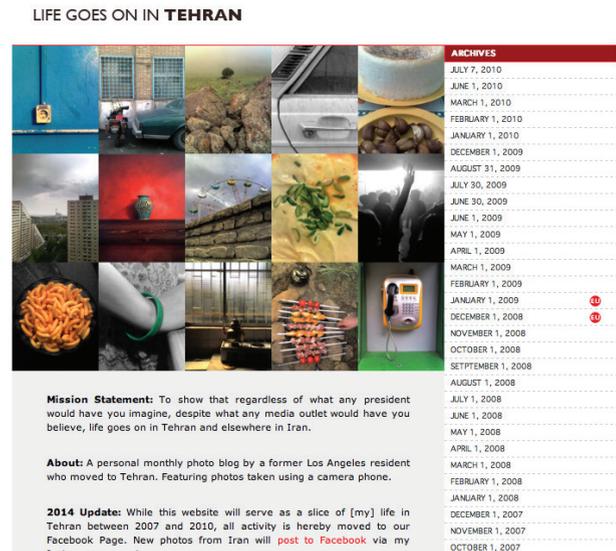

Figure 2   Life Goes on in Tehran (LGOIT) photoblog home page.[8]

people ostensibly are/are not (Dabashi 2008). In broader ideological/geopolitical contexts, therefore, 'ordinary' understandings about the country as lived in all its complexity and banality have — as Iranians all over the world, including photobloggers, are acutely aware — for the most part, been eclipsed.

These aspects are relayed in photobloggers' online mission statements, photoblog descriptions and image captions. Figure 2 shows an example mission statement from the prominent photoblog 'Life Goes on in Tehran'. It conveys the photoblog's aim, which like many other photoblogs from Iran, emphasizes a need to look at Iran beyond its dominant, political tropes: 'to show that regardless of what any president would have you imagine, despite what any media outlet would have you believe, life goes on in Tehran and elsewhere in Iran'. As I will later illustrate, these attitudes can also determine the

8   lifegoesonintehran.com (accessed 1 April 2015). Used with permission.

types of images that photobloggers desire to show, in contradistinction to mass-media image types.

Many Iranian photobloggers articulate a widespread cross-generational and transnational Iranian need for communicating nuance concerning the image of Iran. Through their practices, they intend to expand the many narrative-epistemic parameters that have contributed to the country's international isolationism. Committed to exposing the 'reality' (vāghey'at) of everyday life, many Iranian photobloggers conceive of themselves as cultural interlocutors, considering it a duty to represent the 'real Iran' to the world with the digital technologies to hand. As one prominent Iranian photoblogger, Amir, writes on his photoblog 'Tehran Live': 'my photoblog is a sign for everybody that thinks we don't live peacefully'.[9] Other photographers notably title their albums of photographs to make a similar point about the importance of seeing truth in Iran in everyday frames. With album titles such as 'The Significance of the Trivial', individuals such as Tehran-based photographer Kiana search for 'an everyday and not an exotic life of Iran', which she wants to share with the rest of the world through her photography.[10] These aspects, I reiterate, add an ethnographic dimension to photoblogging in Iran, beyond the individual 'life chronicling' (Van House 2007:2721) typically associated with contemporary popular digital photography at large, placing this popular visual practice within broader social, cultural and political domains.

Technologies of 'truth'

A main way in which 'truth' is captured and disseminated by Iranian photobloggers derives from the digital technologies to hand. Mobile phones and digital cameras enable the variety of scenes from Iran that photobloggers seek to capture to be communicated, at times instantaneously, across the globe. Though their practices began in the early 2000s, using more basic camera phones, technological advances have increased the mobility and speed of low-cost communication (Berry and Schleser 2014; Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012; Larsen 2008; Okabe and Ito 2003; Pink and Hjorth 2012). For viewers across the world, smart phones have created novel, and in some cases real-time capacities to bear witness to a place, often in the here and now. By geotagging photographs and video clips taken on their smart phones to their reference points on Google Maps, photobloggers are able to indicate to their viewers precisely where the image was created in Iran (Figures 3 and 4).

Locative media ground the digital photograph in a palpable sense of geographical and physical 'reality'. In turn, this allow viewers to experience collectively 'virtual intimacy' (Biella 2008) with Iran, via the photobloggers' images: a live form of 'being there together' online (Schroeder 2010). Ito (2005) has called this capacity of digital photography to foster connection an 'intimate visual co-presence', whilst Van House (2007) has similarly termed this as 'distant closeness'. Here, the digital camera 'functions as a space-time machine capable of instantiating a potentially infinite chain of eye-witnesses' (McQuire 1998:133), which enables a collective experiencing of 'instantaneous time' (Lash and Urry 1994) in the act of making and viewing photographs. Such 'live photography' constructs its own regime of truth, by reflecting a unique ability to create live postcards of places visited: not the 'I was here' of Barthes (1981), but an 'I

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9   tehranlive.org/2013/05/21/happy-life (accessed 20 November 2013).
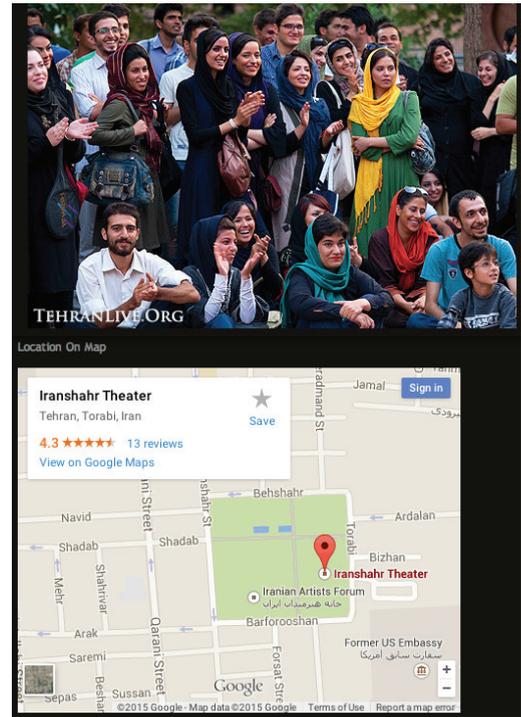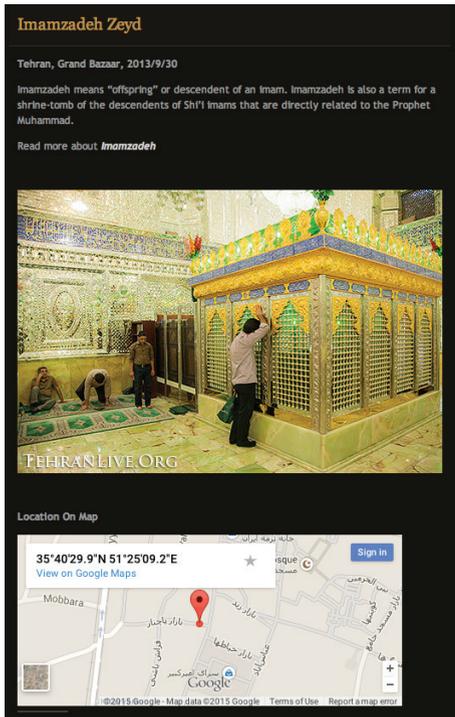
10   Online interview, 5 July 2013.

Figure 3   Geotagging on Tehran Live photoblog. 'Imamzadeh Zeyd'.[11]

Figure 4   Geotagging on Tehran Live photoblog. 'Street stage play'.[12]

am here' (Bell and Lyall 2005). The 'I am' of the subject in these cases also extends to the viewer (and potentially the digital ethnographer studying them), becoming a 'we are' here together. Unlike earlier preoccupations with stasis in the realms of photography and cinema, where the spatio-temporal organization of experience was deemed to be essentially artificially configured (Benjamin 1999), geolocative media hereby reconfigure this particular dialectic of photography by striking an instantaneous connection between photographer, subject and viewer as an affordance of digital photography's 'time-space compression' (Larsen 2008:152). If photoblogs are what Cohen (2005:897) calls 'both a technology and a desire', reflecting an 'invested part of its human user',

then in Iranian photoblogging, we see a manifest social example of how technology meets a collective desire (in this case, to relay 'truths').

While the digital photograph shares an affective ability with the analogue photograph to arrest the flow of perception, it is not necessarily characterized by the fleeting, and ephemeral nature of the 'copy' suggested by Benjamin. Digital photographs seen on photoblogs can be experienced almost in the moment of their creation and as an archived record after the 'event'. A particularly noticeable example of this dual capacity of digital photography can be seen in how viewers (re-)visit certain photographs at times of social political upheaval. During the Iranian presidential election crisis in June 2009,

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11   tehranlive.org/2013/10/01/imamzadeh-zeyd (accessed 5 April 2015). Used with permission.

12   tehranlive.org/2012/07/31/street-stage-play (accessed 5 April 2015). Used with permission.

hundreds of thousands of Iranians publicly protested against what they viewed as the rigged re-election of Ahmadinejad. At this time, photoblogs became the site of a virtual public message board for viewers to post comments in response to the unfolding situation in and after the live 'event' captured by the photograph. Indicative of hundreds of responses to photographs of the events in the June 2009 archives of photoblogs, the prominent 'Tehran Live' photoblog can be considered here for illustrative purposes. An American viewer remarked how, speaking on behalf of the 'American people' at large, he felt a 'a deep kinship' with Iranians'.[13] Another, German, viewer expressed how:

> *The whole of Europe is watching you, you are our hope for a free and peaceful future … me and a lot of friends in Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Austria, Australia and the USA are following right now on Twitter. We share your thoughts, anger and hope![14]*

These responses posted on photoblogs — which are digital spaces distinct from, but also connected to the more prominent arenas of Twitter and Facebook — demonstrate the capacity of both the digital photograph and the photoblog as an interactive archive/social venue to endure online. Comments appear instantaneously, as well as some weeks, months and years after the photograph's original posting. Here, the image continues to elicit discourse in relation to local settings and wider global events. This archival aspect of the photoblog is a notable feature of its capacity to communicate visual information as documentary 'evidence'. As Urry (2004:35) states, blogs are 'one of those machines' that allow people and networks to 'be connected to, or to be at home with "sites" across the world — while simultaneously such sites can monitor, observe and trace each inhabited machine'. As a popular digital archive, photoblogs creates documentary, time- and date-stamped traces of these 'truths' about Iran at a given historical juncture. These can be viewed and revisited at any time provided they remain online.[15]

Moreover, the fact that is a photoblog (a constantly evolving web 2.0 platform contingent upon the posting of new and 'live' material) and not a static web interface, further helps to maintain connections with viewers, based on their interactive engagement and the posting of comments.[16] This modifies earlier conceptions of photography as static signifiers of passing moments in time, and of the historic (Sontag 1977). The photoblog's capacity to modify temporality in this manner recalls Richardson and Hessey's (2009) concept of the 'dormant archive'. Seen in relation to Facebook, their concept suggests how, through a combination of human and or technological action, we are reminded of dormant or decaying connections (olds posts, past photographs, things we've 'liked'). These transform the 'life spans' or 'bandwidths' of social relations and digital objects such as photographs from the past in the present. It is this aspect,

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13   Viewer comment, Tehran Live. Posted 12 June 2009: tehranlive.org/2009/06/12/iranian-2009-presidental-elections/ (accessed: 15 December 2014).

14   Viewer comment, Tehran Live. Posted 12 June 2009: tehranlive.org/2009/06/12/iranian-2009-presidental-elections/ (accessed: 15 December 2014).

15   On the lifespan of photoblogs and the digital ethnographer's capacity to intervene and archive them, see my (2014) discussion on the 'Material World' blog: www.materialworldblog.com/2014/12/exploring-digital-visual-anthropological-research-methods-www-photoblogiran-com (accessed 27 May 2016).

16   In some cases, photobloggers do not allow comments to be posted on the photoblog itself, but on corresponding fan pages on Facebook, Flickr or Instagram.

Figure 5   Berlin, Vienna and Tehran. LGOIT photoblog.[17]

of being a 'live' and constantly updated mobile account of the 'truth' of Iran at a particular moment in time that constitutes a salient part of the photoblog's multifaceted appeal for viewers.

The aesthetics of 'truth'

Iranian photobloggers methods of reflecting their subjectively 'truthful' views of Iran also move beyond purely technological means of observational recording, archiving and collective witness-bearing in Iran. Individuals also demonstrate more artistic uses of their photoblogs, at times employing aesthetic strategies in order to play visually with the received types of images about Iran that they hope to dispel. Digital photographs are taken, and even 'galleried' (Miller 2001) on photoblogs to incite socio-cultural critique. Here, Iranian photobloggers demonstrate *mise-en-scène* in ways not dissimilar to the works of contemporary

Iranian visual artists.[18] Subjective 'truths' here are not revealed through photography's technological capacities, but are performed, and digitally 'painted' from a palette of intersecting social, biographical and visual imaginaries.

Evidence of this kind of visual play can be seen in the way photobloggers visually juxtapose photographs of Tehran with images (real or mental) of other cities. To take one example: Figure 5, from the 'Life Goes on in Tehran' (LGOIT) photoblog, shows three photographs of urban views, which are placed next to each other on the blog, where they form a visual triptych that creates an ambiguity as to their locations.

The cloudy cityscapes, similar looking modern buildings and symbolic urban markers such as lampposts and telephone pylons on first glance, and to the unacquainted viewer, suggest that

17 lifegoesonintehran.com/30_September_2009.html (accessed 15 March 2012). Used with permission.

18 Relevant examples of contemporary Iranian visual artists who explore the embodied, lived experience of Western perceptions and reductive stereotypes of Iran include Khosrow Hassanzadeh (b.1963 Tehran) www.artsy.net/artist/khosrow-hassanzadeh (accessed 3 March 2015) and Hoda Afshar (b.1983) www.hodaafsharart.com (accessed 2 May 2014). See also 'Never Been to Tehran' (2012) www.neverbeentotehran.com (accessed 8 April 2014) and the 'Shared Studio' project: 'A Portal between Tehran & NYC' (2014) www.sharedstudios.com/tehran-portal.html (accessed 20 December 2014).

they could be located in one and the same city. Only the captions reveal that these are actually photographs of Berlin, Vienna and Tehran, respectively, referencing LGOIT's travels in that year (2009) in Europe and Iran. LGOIT explained to me how in employing such visual strategies in his Tehran photoblog, he wished to dispense with the kinds of images which 'all too often characterize representations (and presumed perceptions) about Iran'. Questioning aesthetic assumptions in this manner, photographers such as LGOIT set about collapsing the ontological schism visually perpetuated in political and cultural narratives between Iran and 'the West' which 'metonymically freeze' (Appadurai 1988) Iran as 'other'. In one interview, LGOIT explained how the process by which images were selected and presented often reflected this intentionally provocative approach:

> *I wanted to maximize juxtaposition of images not only aesthetically but also thematically. A close up of a beer bottle next to a wide shot of a historic mosque. A party in northern Tehran followed immediately by a funeral in southern Tehran. Well, maybe not such extremes, but that would have been ideal in terms of what I wanted people to think about.[19]*

In light of the sentiments relayed above, seen across the Iranian 'photoblogosphere',[20] a relationship can be said to exist between the visual structuring of the photoblog and the artistic-social commentary of the photoblogger, who invites viewers to 'think' about what might/ might not 'true' about Iran. MacDougall (1992:169)

has suggested that since (analogue) 'photography is not caught up in the search for unitary truths; it need not be afraid of paint, or of being self-referential'. Here, a similar logic applies to digital photography. Iranian photobloggers such as LGOIT 'paint' with their photographs (and photo montage) as a means of getting closer to depicting a visual 'truth' about Iran, however subjective this endeavour inevitably is. Through image types and arrangements, they visually dismantle as much as they (re-)construct 'truths'. In this sense, Iranian photobloggers reflect the twin capacity of the medium introduced at the beginning of this article, which has characterized the medium of photography from the onset in Iran and across the world. Another of my research participants demonstrates this twin capacity by explaining to his viewers in his online mission statement how he employs his photoblog for social documentary and artistic purposes: 'my camera is my voice recorder, it's my camcorder and my painting brush'.[21]

Further examples of the way aesthetic framing in photoblogs links discourses of truth to broader social and political issues in Iran can be seen in photographers' exhibiting of 'ordinary' or mundane photographs of everyday life. These are framed and 'commoditized' on photoblogs as important photographs to be exported, visually and online, abroad. From photographs of snow fall, and shops devoted to Christmas decorations, to images of Coca Cola cans stockpiled in Iranian shop fridges (Figures 6, 7 and 8), the very presence of these kinds of photographs in photoblogs about Iran consciously feeds off dominant political narratives about the country, as well as foreign viewers' unfamiliarity and/or stereotype-based perceptions about how people in Iran live. Viewers from across the world are

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19   LGOIT interview, 15 March 2012.
20   I extended the term to 'photoblogosphere' in my Ph.D. dissertation. It conceptualizes the multiple spaces, on and offline, in and outside Iran, where photobloggers and viewers partake in the practice.

21   ehsanabbasi.com/about (accessed 5 September 2012).

Figure 6 *'A Passenger in Snowy Street' (2008) taken in Mashhad, Iran by Ehsan Abbasi.*[22]

Figure 7 *'Coke and Pepsi in Iran', LGOIT photoblog.*[23]

Figure 8 *'Christmas Night in Tehran', Tehran Live photoblog.*[24]

encouraged to search for more comprehensive understandings, aided by the evidence-based visual testaments presented on the photoblog. LGOIT explained to me how, since beginning his photoblog in 2007, viewers from around the world have emailed hundreds of questions, ranging from 'does it really snow in Iran? Isn't it all sands, camels and deserts?!' to 'are you allowed to be in the same room as girls you're not related to?', or, as LGOIT interpreted this to mean: 'isn't everyone a religious traditionalist bent on destroying the Great Satan?! ("the West")'.[25] Responding to these assumptions, Iranian photobloggers' visual interventions on the

image of Iran continue to affect ways of seeing Iran on a global scale.

A comparable example of this Iranian deployment of the 'ordinary' through digital photography can be seen in the online visual campaign developed by Iranians on social media in response to a comment made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2013.[26] Netanyahu had publically claimed that Iranians has such little freedom in Iran that they don't even wear jeans: 'I think if the Iranian people had freedom, they would wear jeans, listen to Western music, and have free elections.'[27] Very soon after the comment was made, people in Iran rapidly mobilized via social media, posting selfie photographs of themselves in a variety

22   ehsanabbasi.com/tag/snow. Used with permission.
23   lifegoesonintehran.com/03_June2007.html (accessed 27 September 2012). Used with permission.
24   tehranlive.org/2008/12/26/christmas-night-in-tehran (accessed 1 December 2014). Used with permission.
25   Online interview 12 September 2012.

26   twitter.com/NegarMortazavi/status/386939783 479443456/photo/1 (accessed 8 October 2013).
27   www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24435408 (accessed 8 October 2012).

of staged scenes wearing jeans, which were then captured on their camera phones and uploaded to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. This recent social-media example references a wider employment of the mundane as an aesthetic strategy of normalization deployed in Iranian photoblogging since its inception. The online Iranian cultural politics of the banal here recalls Miller and Woodward's (2012) argument about the aesthetics, politics and 'art' of the ordinary. In the immigrant context of north London, their study found that wearing blue jeans was an important means of embodying an image of 'ordinariness' that certain groups are often deprived of. In a fraught political and economic climate of heavy sanctions imposed upon Iran by members of the international community, particularly under the Ahmadinejad administration, mundane photographs from Iran propagated online by Iranians on photoblogs and social networks play upon Western — and particularly American — assumptions about the country, calling into question its pariah status. For these reasons, photoblogs have and continue to hold soft political power.

Contrary to established Western theoretical treatments of photography as an indexical record of that 'that-has-been' and an 'emanation of a past reality' (Barthes 1981:77), the Iranian photoblog appears here to be a site of re-construction. In this space, and deployed through a visual politics of 'banal aesthetics', perceptions of Iran and 'Iranianness' in 'modern social imaginaries' (Taylor 2004) are negotiated and playfully reformulated. For these reasons, Iranian photoblogs are what I call 'world re-creating' environments. They serve as a kind of contemporary digital 'studio' space for developing and exhibiting individual and collective explorations of Iranian identity. Anthropologists of vernacular (analogue) photography in a range of non-Western settings

have shown how the photographic studio space forms as an extension of a kind of 'cinematic experience' (MacDougall 1992:121) of witnessing oneself (or aspects of culture) in a certain, aspirational frame or new light, and sharing this with others (Buckley 2001; Pinney 1997; Sprague 2003; Strassler 2010). Iranian photobloggers' uses of photographs, archives and captions form digital equivalents to the physical props and backdrops of studios, by drawing on the 'as if' capacity of photography (Strassler 2010). Rather than questioning digital manipulation as indicative of digital photography's ambivalent capacity to represent, therefore, as earlier discussed, here (human) manipulation of the digital reinstates the ontological status of digital photography, placing it within ethnographic and 'artistic' frames. It does not define or reveal social reality, but rather, assists in the creation of alternative models of witnessing reality as fluid.

Witnessing 'truths'

Viewership of digital photographs forms a significant part of the overall 'constellation of [media] processes' (Massey 2005:141) in which the 'truth' and place (spatial, social and imagined) of Iran is negotiated and re-constructed through digital photography. Many viewers of Iranian photoblogs, inside and outside of Iran, Iranian and non-Iranians, appear to appreciate photobloggers' documentation of everyday life in Iran, beyond Western filmic or mainstream-media representations. One Iranian viewer of the LGOIT photoblog inside Iran expressed their gratitude for LGOIT's ability to narrate these other kinds of truths about Iran, which the viewer deems to be more 'real' than other newsworthy images: 'Thank u for show people what's real

and what's not!!!'[28] Another Iranian viewer from Tehran expressed the following: 'This site is so profound and surely from this good work, people can understand how Tehran is not simply all about war and bad people.'[29] Non-Iranian viewers generally express a sense of gratitude for the existence of photoblogs and the 'truths' that they deliver, but for different reasons. They use them as alternative news accounts, as well as accessible venues for garnering cultural information about the country and its diversity. As one comment reads: 'Your blog is such a great piece of information! I discovered it due to the election conflicts, but I am enjoying looking at all your pictures throughout the years … it really opens my eyes to your culture. Thank you.'[30]

For many members of the Iranian diaspora, photoblogs represent a dynamic interplay of inter-subjective 'truths' of captured past and present realities. For viewers who have actual memories of living in the country, the visual 'truth', of what Iran really looks like becomes a vicarious experience in the present, mediated through the culturally 'live' space and personal biographical time of viewing the photoblog and the many material aspects of life in Iran it represents. One comment from an Iranian viewer living abroad posting on Tehran Live typifies this kind of viewer response: 'Through the years, the memories have faded. Looking at your photoblog is like being reacquainted with your birth city again through photography.'[31] Testaments such as these from across the Iranian photoblogosphere demonstrate how photoblogs

facilitate connections to home by activating individuals' embodied memories of place. In this sense, photoblogs facilitate a heightened visual form of what Alinejad (2011) has termed in relation to Iranian (non-photography) blogs and the Iranian diaspora, a kind of 'transnational embodiment' fostered by the ability to connect to Iran, virtually. For others with no actual memories or experiences of Iran, including the Iranian 'postmemory' (Hirsch 1997; 2012) generation growing up in the West with 'virtual memories' of the country inherited through mediated forms such as family storytelling, photographs, and online sources, photoblogs and digital photographs perform other types of cultural work. They offer tangible impressions of 'truths' about life in contemporary Iran, which feed into the kaleidoscope of narrative truths already embodied by individuals living outside of Iran. Here, photoblogs either confirm, modify or challenge already held assumptions. In many cases, most notably during the June 2009 protests mentioned earlier, photoblogs (and the 'truthful' images seen on them) provide visual focal points of political engagement between Iranians inside and outside of Iran, echoing Sreberny and Khiabany's (2010) findings in the wider (non-photography) Iranian blogosphere about the socio-political importance of blogs in transnational Iranian communication.

A closer look at one digital photograph illustrates how notions of 'truth' (*haghighat*) and 'reality' (*vāghey'at*) discussed throughout this article move fluidly between digital photographer, photograph, photoblog and viewer.

Figure 9 shows a photograph taken by LGOIT of graffiti painted on a wall in Tehran in November 2008 depicting the logo of Apple, the American IT company. The accompanying caption reads:

28   Viewer comment, LGOIT Facebook page, posted 11 November 2011.

29   Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 31 May 2008 translated from the Persian by the author. The original comment is posted in Persian written in the English alphabet, colloquially known as 'PEnglish'.

30   Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 16 June 2009.

31   Viewer comment, Tehran Live, posted 2 April 2008

Figure 9   Graffiti in Tehran, LGOIT photoblog.³²

Unfortunately, there are no Apple stores in   Iran. But there is however, this random graffiti on a random wall in a random residential neighborhood. If my computer breaks down, I might as well bring it here and pray to the Apple gods.³³

The original image exists as a graffiti painting on a wall, which was subsequently photographed by LGOIT on his camera phone as street art, before taking on a new context as a digital photograph on the photoblog. This image blends the material (the wall, the graffiti) and the virtual (the digital photograph) in a way that is typical of photoblogs at large. The photograph has been 'liked' ninety-three times and 'shared' seventeen

times. But the comments are far from uniform. Some viewers appear to equate the image's materiality (the wall) with its online incarnation as art: 'Remove that Apple from my favourite city at once.' reacts one Iranian user, suggesting protest or disbelief. Here, the viewer responds to the material truth of the graffiti existing on the wall in Tehran, thus circumventing the mediating digital frame and ignoring the artistic/aesthetic intention of the photoblogger, however politically engaging, ambiguous, or even provocative this photograph was mean to be. The viewers' nigh on disbelief at seeing the Apple logo on a Tehran wall expresses an anxiety towards the recorded depiction and almost accuses the photobloggers' camera of lying. Moreover, in directing his reaction towards the graffiti on a wall in his city, this viewer demonstrates a certain Iranian defensiveness concerning what should or should not be seen in the physical, everyday cityscape of Tehran. Other viewers of this photograph go the opposite direction, emphasising the digital medium of the photoblog as a cultural mediator in representing Iran; they react to the very presence of the photograph in this digital space, rather than what it depicts. Comments such as 'What is this?' and 'In "Life Goes on in Tehran"??' show how for some, the Apple logo is perceived to be as (if not more) out of place in a photoblog 'about' Iran as it is in Iran itself. For these viewers, the photoblog becomes a visual idiom for the country itself, becoming linked to various interpretations of its culture. Another comment from a foreign viewer reads 'All the best wishes for your country and your people. Don't give up.', demonstrating a wider point about how meaning is assigned to digital images online by viewers through indexical processes that have no necessary bearing on the intentions of the photographer (and are by no means uniform). Overall, the above example suggests relevant points about the soft politics

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32   lifegoesonintehran.com/06_September2007.html (accessed 30 March 2012). Used with permission.
33   LGOIT September 2007 archive: lifegoesonintehran.com/06_September2007.html (accessed 10 December 2012).

of Iranian photoblogging introduced earlier, and how layers of 'truth' are implicated in both the medium of (digital) photography itself as well as the broader 'corpus' of the generally 'Iranian' subject matter. Here, the digital image becomes possessively linked to identity politics, which is anchored in the geographical and social place of Iran. This recalls McKay's (2010) findings concerning the uses of digital photographs amongst Filipino users of Facebook. McKay revealed how exchanges of digital images on Facebook allow observers and participants to generate and criticize norms for personhood and social relationships, on and offline.

Overall, comments from across the Iranian photoblogosphere generally attest to the polysemic nature of the digital photograph as a way of accessing a wider social nexus of 'truth' beyond the surface content of the image. In these experiential contexts, personal narratives are invoked, and also become 'materialized' (in the digital form of the comment) and collectivized as part of wider viewing publics, wherein images taken and deployed as 'truths' connect to people's real/virtual experiences and memories.

Conclusion: Anthropology, 'truth' and the digital photograph

In this paper I have discussed the issue of 'truth' in relation to one part of the online Iranian digital photographic landscape — the Iranian photoblogosphere — in order to extrapolate wider anthropological understandings about digital photography's contemporary social uses. I have shown how these can be understood in light of continuities and discontinuities in the socio-technological and theoretical status of photography. Moving beyond purely ontological questions, I suggest that anthropologists can explore relevant ethnographic interests in digital photography that reveal broader understandings

about truth and the medium of photography in dynamic social frameworks such as the Iranian photoblogosphere and beyond. In this sense, 'truth' is merely one motile component that moves online, as it might through any social network. As a motile object, truth moves and mutates with the digital photograph as it travels across time and space. As part of this process, it connects (and contributes), as I have shown, to a larger 'meshwork' (Ingold 2007) — 'trails along which life is lived' (ibid.:74) — of Iranian images, ideologies, histories and dominant discourses. These aspects intersect, coincide and move forwards together in the digital, imaginative and aspirational environments of photoblogs. As with the historical movement of analogue photographs, digital photographs are similarly able to reflect and 'refract' (Strassler 2010) existing images (and claims to 'truth' of the representation shown by the image) in order to mobilize alternative 'regimes of 'truth' (ibid.).[34] Shared online, and with the added stamps of 'reality' afforded by locative media, these popular visual systems form a 'counterhistory' of visuality (Mirzoeff 2011) to prevailing narrations posing as 'evidence' in national and international visual-media landscapes. These enable acts of witnessing a place within a given temporality to be extended and collectivized, marking subtle shifts in photography's social efficacy. These affective capacities should, I reiterate, supplant the anthropologist's primary preoccupation with 'reliability' (the claim of the representation), to the social efficacies of image systems; the latter being a characteristic concern of visual anthropology.

Overall, this paper's critical reflection on 'truth' contributes to nascent anthropological

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34   Strassler's (2012) study of amateur photographers in postcolonial Java, Indonesia, provides a relevant (analogue) photographic comparison to my work with Iranian photobloggers, particularly concerning the propagation of alternative 'visions' through popular photography.

understandings of digital photography in online environments by bringing together established and emerging wisdoms. In light of my empirical research on Iranian photoblogging, I conclude that theoretical insights continue to inform and be shaped by evolving digital technologies and mediating landscapes. This affords anthropology a firm contemporary grasp on the ongoing, shifting social and cultural nuances of (and theoretical and methodological approaches to) the medium, as it continues to develop between print and digital culture, off- and online.

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