VISUAL FRICTIONS

Photographic social media, designed landscapes and urban, place-based visibilities: in search of friction

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Abstract
Beginning from the double premise that, particularly in the city, designed landscapes function as a socially and culturally powerful form of visual media, and that they do so in interaction with other visual media forms, this paper seeks to both investigate and challenge what is taken as a reciprocal shaping of urban visibilities. This investigation is occasioned primarily by the rise of digital and networked photographies, and the disruptive potential they seem to hold with respect to this reciprocal influence. Drawing on theories of materialist media ecology, it proceeds by way of an interpretative experiment in relation to a set of photographs of a park, as circulated on Instagram. I ask, can social media images be seen as unintentionally disruptive of the reciprocity between landscape and photography, and if so, what are the avenues through which they might then become politically productive? My principal aims in doing so are (1) to explore an approach to photographic interpretation and analysis that is appropriate to the contexts of production and circulation provided by photographic social media; and (2) to identify possible strategies or points of future intervention on behalf of alternative or frictional visibilities.

Keywords: urban landscapes; photographic social media; Instagram; public space; natural surveillance; materialist media ecologies

This paper begins from the assumption that public designed landscapes such as parks and gardens do much more than simply provide a space for recreation, social mixing or “contact with nature.” They constitute a socially and culturally powerful if subtle form of media. I mean this in two senses: first, they mediate perception of the surroundings in ways that differentially value particular views,
experiences, activities, aesthetic qualities and ways of being; second, they function as mediums of social and cultural exchange—in the form, for example, of photographs taken and circulated in social media. In this second sense, it becomes clear that their functioning in the first sense is itself mediated, or rather, that designed landscapes are only socially and culturally effective in interaction with other media forms.

In recent years, particularly in cities, the interactivity of landscape and other visual media appears to be intensifying, or at least, is increasingly explicit. On the one hand, the rise of camera phones and photographic social media (e.g. Flickr, Instagram) means that not only tourists but also residents are increasingly disposed to photograph and otherwise represent aspects of their engagement with landscape. Certain kinds of public landscape (especially parks and gardens) are also increasingly animated by programming promoted, and sometimes even delivered through social media. On the other hand, such landscapes are conceived as environments capable of mediating behaviour. Especially in North America, parks and other public spaces are increasingly designed to prevent behaviours such as vandalism, sleeping in public and drug trafficking, not to mention terrorist attacks. Further, those not designed and/or managed for such purposes are frequently seen to facilitate those activities.

As I discuss further below, such developments reflect an intensification or perhaps clarification of a longstanding reciprocity between landscape and other visual media—photography in particular. This reciprocity is worth investigating for three reasons. First, both landscape and photography exert a considerable influence over what is seen, and how, in urban public spaces. In this, they also shape what can be talked about, interacted with, reproduced, valued and so on. That is, to draw on the broad definition of visibility given by Brighenti (wherein the cultural-perceptual and socio-political dimensions substantially overlap): by *visibilising* public space in particular ways, they help to delineate the horizon of possible social and environmental relations.

Second, it is possible to observe in certain forms of both landscape and photography, a tendency toward an increasing homogenization of effects. For example, as the analysis presented below demonstrates, in landscapes designed for security, and networked or social photographies designed for commercially oriented data production, place-based visibilities are managed or structured in ways that tend to produce effects that are politically and perceptually similar. In relation to public parks, which have historically been sites for both the “symbolic projection of public culture” and a display of and/or contact with urban nature, the prospect of an increasing visual homogeneity, shaped by the imperatives of surveillance on the one hand, and those of commerce on the other, is troubling: what happens, for example, to those forms of life and ways of being in the city that impede surveillance or are not photogenic?

Third, landscape and photography exhibit a similar “duplicity” in their ability to disguise their influence by concealing the means and conditions of their making. While the perceptual effects of media are always hard to see (because transparent), the various techniques that disguise and naturalize horticultural interventions in the landscape, combined with the “black-boxing” of digital photographic technologies, makes their contribution to the shaping of place-based urban visibilities all the more obscure.

From this perspective, the rise of photographic social media such as Instagram—which enables a more broadly accessible means of visually engaging and communicating about urban landscapes—inspires a certain hope. Might the newness of such technologies, combined with the sheer volume of its uptake, register some unexpected means of disrupting processes of visual homogenization and producing alternative points of view? I am particularly interested in the possibility that photographic social media may contribute to the development of collective processes of landscape interpretation and criticism. As several authors have recently argued, the sheer volume of images produced and consumed through social or “networked” photographies means their content cannot be interpreted according to existing models of representation and communication. Here I explore the possibility that this destabilization of interpretation by experts may open new terrain for *collective* critical practice.

My primary intervention is to undertake an interpretative “experiment” in relation to a set of photographs of a park, as circulated on Instagram. Drawing inspiration from theories of materialist media ecology, I ask, can social media images be seen as *unintentionally* critical of a given landscape
and public space, and if so, what are the avenues through which they might then become politically productive? My principal aims in doing so are 1) to explore an approach to photographic interpretation and analysis that is appropriate to the contexts of production and circulation provided by photographic social media; and 2) to identify points of future intervention on behalf of frictional as opposed to reciprocal visibilities of land, environment and social life in the city.

I proceed by tracing some of the social, material and technical relations implied in the production and circulation of a particular photographic content on Instagram, attempting both to reveal an unintended critical potential, as well as identify the conditions of its interpretation and exploitation as such. While this results in observations that are not exactly hopeful with respect to a political use of Instagram, I finish by discussing some concrete interventions that may provide a starting point for connecting potentially frictional content with existing or future politics of urban visibility. Before presenting this analysis however, I discuss the reciprocity of landscape and photography from a historical perspective, the functioning of Instagram in relation to landscape generally, and the conceptual framework that motivates my approach.

LANDSCAPES IN INTERACTION WITH OTHER VISUAL MEDIA

From the perspective of the term’s aesthetic use, “landscape” has, since its appearance in the 16th century, always been shaped by technologically enabled and culturally specific processes of visual mediation (e.g. painting, photography, landscape gardening). There is as such a historically specific conflation between the perception, representation and production of landscape: to look at landscape is already to look through land in a particular way. This conflation is in part what has enabled particular aesthetic values and sensibilities to appear self-evident in certain contexts, which in turn has facilitated a range of political projects dependent on the covert shaping of visibility—for example, through the design of landscapes that shape views and stage social relations in ways that are disguised and/or naturalized, or through representations and interpretations of land that elevate particular qualities and effects as a means to sustain or elevate a particular social order.

Arguably, photography has played a special role in elaborating and securing landscape’s secret powers, since it was invented just as the landscape “way of seeing” was becoming naturalized. As Nickel writes, “photography was born into a pre-existing, albeit incipient, notion of the photographic, one based on conceiving of the world as already containing an infinite number of latent pictorial compositions awaiting discovery.” Since then, Giblett asserts, it has become “one of the major ways in which modern, technologically savvy people relate to the land, and the land is mediated to them.” In the process, starting with the fact that the landscape format is the norm for photography (since you have to turn the camera on its side to take a portrait): “The technology of photography ... inscribes and reproduces landscape aesthetics.” Between the two “ways of seeing,” there is a common work of aestheticization (and de-politicization): just as the perception and re-presentation of land as landscape is a means of putting oneself at a distance from its productive use, so the photograph both beautifies and objectifies what it pictures.

Of course, as both Cosgrove and Sontag note, what the device of the camera adds in particular, is the illusion of objectivity. Especially in landscape photographs, practices of “looking through” and “looking at” become thoroughly intertwined, leaving us with what appears to be an objective rendering of a particular place: not only how it looks, but what of interest is there, and its importance in relation to other elements. It is easy to forget that what we see of a given place is selective, and to allow a particular point of view to stand in for the place itself. Such an effect is amplified in a modern touristic context, where people tend to visit landscape precisely to see in person what they have already seen of it through postcards, promotional materials, and the myriad of (often very similar) images supplied by a Google Images search.

From this point of view, the homogenization of place-based visibilities seems inescapable in a digital age. However, the convergence of new photographic and communication technologies has also introduced new potential sources of visual friction. As Cruz and Meyer observe, camera phones make it much easier to take photographs in a variety of
settings, while mobile and online photo-sharing applications make it cheaper and more convenient to share them. The massive and widespread uptake of digital and “networked photographies” has produced new, still emergent modes of photographic engagement. Not only are people taking and sharing more photos, more often, they are engaging in expressive and communicative as well as commemorative modes of photographic practice. This has given rise to new fields of aesthetic value as well as new forms of community that sustain them.

At the same time, photographic social media is increasingly deployed as a key component in promoting programming for urban public places, raising the possibility that the affordances of specific media forms may in turn shape the nature, or even the site of that programming. In this context, Instagram is particularly well suited to an investigation of the intermedial shaping of urban place-based visibilities. I turn now to a brief discussion of its specific functionality.

**INSTAGRAM AND URBAN SPACE**

Instagram is an application designed exclusively for smartphones (and more recently, tablets) that enables mobile photo capture, editing and sharing. It was launched in 2010, bought by Facebook in 2012 (for $1 billion), and currently claims 400 million active users who upload, on average, 80 million photographs a day. Though it is promoted as photographic social media, in which the social and the aesthetic are effortlessly blended, its most important feature from the perspective of its commercial productivity, is the way the uploading of photographs permits the correlation of location data and social data. With some exceptions, most research on Instagram has, to date, focused on the associated data, and in particular, how to make use of it for a variety of (often commercially oriented) purposes. In this context, what the photographs themselves are or do is not theorized, and sometimes not even clearly stated. This vagueness in relation to content corresponds to an underappreciation of the diverse ways in which Instagram accounts are used: for example, not only as a way of communicating with friends, but also as tools of marketing, advertising and awareness-raising, or as galleries, portfolios or visual journals for creative professionals.

This combination of conceptual vagueness with a diversity of uses means that the larger cultural significance of Instagram has yet to be clearly articulated. However, I take seriously Instagram’s claim that it is “a new way to see the world.” For one, I find it striking that the majority of users regularly employ the built-in filters. Its restriction to mobile use, and its highly streamlined functionality (relative to Facebook or Flickr, for example), makes it possible to edit photographs on location and in place. This suggests that its effects in relation to urban spaces may be perceptual as well as social, simultaneously aestheticizing and elevating the social and cultural value of particular locations, qualities and events. In this context, it must be seen as a key vector through which the technical, habitual and discursive shaping of land and place-based visibilities takes place.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION**

As several authors argue, the technological and practical changes associated with networked photographies and the never-ending avalanche of images that carry them, demand a new interpretative frame. Perhaps most importantly, the quantity and circumstances of their production, and their presentation in a continuously updated stream, suggest a relational or contextual significance that exceeds the boundaries of the photograph itself. This significance is specified in part through the use of hashtags, which provide photographs with a codified, as opposed to narrative, contextual significance. For Rubenstein and Sluis, this makes the taking and sharing of photographs more akin to speech than the kind of artistic or commemorative acts on which interpretation was premised in the past. They suggest that networked photographies operate in ways similar to what Frosh observes about stock photography—that is, on the basis of culturally engrained associations that signify without needing to be consciously interpreted. They trade, in other words, on the communicative economy of the glance: yielding a semantic density that tends to be culturally normative.

While such developments challenge the existing premises for interpretation, they also make it possible to interrogate practices of “looking through” and “looking at” in new ways. When photographs of urban landscape are edited and distributed
in place, the amount of reflection or critical appraisal is minimized, giving us less a collection of photographs selected for their aesthetic or narrative qualities, and more a record—or rather, a display—of the photographer looking through the camera at the landscape. At the same time, the simultaneous insertion of photographs into collective archives (via hashtags) produces new traces of the socio-cultural processes attending practices of looking. What visual social media offers to interpretation is thus less a particular kind of photograph, and more a different perspective on a multifaceted and ongoing process of (re)mediation.

At the same time, recent technological and urban environmental developments suggest that the agency of non-human objects and processes are increasingly pervasive in shaping photographic possibilities and constraints, particularly in relation to photographs of urban public landscapes. On the one hand, there is an increasing convergence between photographic and computing technologies; on the other, an increase in the presumed capacity of designed landscape to shape perception, use of, and movement through public spaces. Especially while they are still in process, these developments call for a mode of conceptualizing and interpreting social media photographs of landscape that acknowledges the intermedial and less narrowly intentional nature of their production.

In the recent Digital snaps: The new face of photography, several authors propose that personal or social photography should be understood as an evolving media ecology. I propose that this is an especially appropriate framework for interrogating the role of such photographies in the intermedial production of urban visibilities. Inspired in large part by the work of Marshall McLuhan and his contemporaries, the term “media ecology” acknowledges, for a start, the relational and interactive character of media forms, prioritizing the socio-material effects of those forms over their specific content. It takes media to be environmental in their influence, since they alter our perception and experience of, as well as behaviour in, the world in a manner that is immersive and effectively transparent.

Building on these observations, as well as the insights of vitalist and new materialist philosophies, authors such as Matthew Fuller and Jussi Parikka take a more inclusively materialist approach to the description of media ecologies, proposing that “media” refers not only to technologies of communication, but to a more general capacity to register and transduce or translate circumstances and events into intensities and effects perceptible to others. To mediate is thus not only to affect, but to be affected and thereby, to invent new relational possibilities. From this perspective, media ecologies do not constitute stable communities, but, to paraphrase Parikka, ongoing “experiments in relatedness” between a variety of bodies, technologies and circumstances in a given place. From this perspective, the production of visibility can be seen as a process of continual re-mediation that is always place-based, even when its effects are mobile.

For my purposes, one of the principal benefits of this broadened definition is its displacement of emphasis from (intentional) use to the effects of media. It enables us to avoid resorting to “received concepts such as ‘self-expression’ or ‘representation’” and encourages us to focus on how specific photographies work and what they do. This does not preclude an interpretative analysis, however: both Fuller and Parikka practice a materialist approach towards interpretation that is oriented toward effects produced by specific technologies, art works, media systems and practical communities, and the relations implied in and sustained or challenged by them. While they focus on examples drawn from artistic works that explicitly seek a creative disruption of existing media relations, I consider social media photographies of a particular urban landscape in terms of their potential for unintentional disruption. I do this by (somewhat artificially) isolating two moments in a larger process of ongoing (re)mediation, exploring within each, different avenues for making the relations implied in the production of specific urban visibilities appear.

More specifically, I experiment with the introduction of interpretative constraints consistent with the observations about networked photographies outlined above. That is, I ask: given a certain photographic content, what might we see differently—if we refuse access to the photographer’s intentions, or recourse to a single “use” or genre of photography? Drawing on a variety of sources to contextualize the production and circulation of content, I trace a (failed) trajectory of its critical potential, attempting to show what the photographs can
and can’t do by pushing them (imaginatively) to do more than they want to, and to make certain socio-technical relations of production and circulation appear.

The first moment I attempt to (partially) reconstruct, is that of the photograph’s production. On the basis of visits to the site, my own photographic documentation and consideration of the site plan, and drawing on Gibson’s theory of affordances as well as knowledge of the principles guiding the design of public landscapes for security and crime prevention purposes, I identify a set of photographs that picture an unexpectedly disruptive relation between camera and landscape, but one whose socio-semiotic effects are thoroughly ambiguous. The second moment is prospective in character, constructed as a means of imagining what such potentially critical but politically ambiguous photographs might do in circulation. On the basis of my own experiments with hashtags and consideration of prescriptions regarding their use, I identify some constraints on the possibilities in this regard.

The analysis is followed by a discussion of what, between these two moments, can now be said about the appearance and mobilization of unintended visual frictions within the intermedial production of urban visibilities. I conclude by making some modest suggestions regarding tactics for developing and extending their political potential.

**#GRANDPARKLA, THE INTERPRETATIVE EXPERIMENT: BACKGROUND AND SET-UP**

The newly renovated Grand Park opened in downtown Los Angeles in July of 2012. Designed by landscape architects Rios Clementi Hale Studios, the signs at its entry points proclaim that it is “the park for everyone”—in other words, an inclusive space for celebrating the city’s cultural diversity. Sloping downhill across four blocks to the base of City Hall, it is a park of wide-open spaces, spectacular architectural features (such as a large, multi-level fountain lit by coloured floodlights at night), and attractively framed views of important cultural and civic landmarks. Paid for in large part by the developer of a downtown condominium complex, the project has multiple stakeholders, including the Los Angeles Music Center, which is situated at the top of the park, and administers its programming. Envisioned in part as a means of addressing ongoing problems with homelessness, crime and drug use in the downtown core, the park is meant to be a safe, socially vibrant public space. It has been the focus of substantial cultural programming to entice people into the city centre, and its administrators have cultivated a comprehensive and strongly visual social media presence: in addition to a website, the park has a blog and Facebook account, as well as Twitter and Instagram feeds.

In this context, Instagram users would appear to be doing the park administrators’ work for them, since many of their photographs can be seen as promotional of park programming. As of January 11, 2015, Instagram returned 2407 photographs and videos associated with the hashtag #grandparkla. The majority of these photographs depict either the park’s fountain, a view of City Hall, or people enjoying social and cultural events held in the park. More convincingly perhaps than park administrators, such photographs show the park’s social relevance—often to thousands of people at a time—treating it as a backdrop to a range of social and cultural activities. In this context, I am particularly interested in those photographs that are of landscape—by which I mean, those that, more-or-less self-consciously, show us something about the landscape itself or its features. I see these as potential sites of a visible inter-action between landscape and photography.

The example I treat here works with a subset of the photographs tagged #grandparkla, created on the basis of an observation made while scrolling through the updating grid of thumbnail images on the screen of my mobile phone. I was struck by the regular, if not frequent, appearance of a particular content that, even on this small scale, was unusually noticeable: that is, the park’s bright pink furniture. Movable chairs, benches and tables are distributed in large quantities through most areas of the park, constituting both a content and a part of the landscape (see Figure 1). They are frequently featured in official photographs, commentary on the park and in its promotional materials (e.g. see www.grandparkla.org). The same colour of pink appears in all on and offline communications.

Grand Park is not the first to offer its visitors movable chairs. However, their bright colour and their distribution throughout the landscape,
as opposed to being contained within one portion of it, introduces a more explicitly aesthetic dimension to their use. That is, they are for certain purposes—i.e. those that require novel content and highly contrasting colours—very photogenic. By inviting a photographic response, they serve to aestheticize what is otherwise a more exclusively social or practical use of landscape. To me, the photographs featuring these chairs epitomize Instagram’s relation to landscape, since they capture a social use of it that wants to be pictured. Further, given the brightness and singularity of their colour, the chairs automatically situate the content of the photographs in which they appear within the park. Or at least, they do this more and more reliably as images of the chairs proliferate in various contexts over time. In this sense, the landscape facilitates its own mediation through (photographic) social media—promoting its cultural programming by permitting it to be definitively located whenever it is photographed in the vicinity of the chairs.

In order to gain a way of working with these photographs in context (as well as avoiding contravention of Instagram’s rules of use), I compiled a collection of photographs by reposting them to a dedicated Instagram account (with notice and credit given to the photographer; see Figure 2).[42] To begin with, I selected all those that featured the pink furniture in a prominent enough manner to catch my eye on a continuous scroll (reproducing the kind of viewing involved in hashtag-based searches of Instagram generally). Looking at this collection (of approximately 100 photographs) made new observations possible—most notably, the fact that over a third of them (33) featured chairs that were either predominantly or entirely empty (see Figures 3 and 4).

These photographs would seem to challenge what otherwise appears a supportive role for photographic social media in relation to the park’s programming, since they show the park failing in its mandate to populate a downtown public space. They present a view of the park that depicts not a design solution, but its founding problem: a social vacancy writ large. While recognizing that this
reading reflects a disruptive potential more than an actual effect, asking how such content is both socio-semiotically afforded and—it turns out—complicated, by the landscape’s design, is a way of seeing how such a potential might be unintentionally and collectively produced.

SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL COMPLICATIONS: THE SOCIO-SEMIOTIC AFFORDANCES OF GRAND PARK

Although it is not a common mode of landscape interpretation, a semiotic analysis of the way space is organized can reveal a great deal about the way the built environment is “read” and experienced by inhabitants and visitors. The broadly socio-semiotic interpretation I present here draws on J.J. Gibson’s theory of affordances as a means of emphasizing that, not only is the use and experience of designed landscapes inextricably tied to the socio-cultural and geographical context in which they appear, they are always addressed at least in part to the body and its specific socio-cultural competencies. Local users (or adequately knowledgeable visitors), need not explicitly “read” particular meanings in a given landscape in order for them to register on a perceptual and affective level. Designed landscapes make a particular orientation to land, environment and other users useful in a given setting—they afford the expression and therefore the reproduction of specific aesthetic values, perceptual habits, behavioural norms and so on. It is the production of such an orientation in Grand Park, as well as some of its socio-political implications that I attempt to uncover here.

In North America, principles for the design of “safe” public spaces, as promoted since the 1970s by the Defensible Space, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design and Secured by Design movements, are now enshrined in “best practices” for landscape architecture professionals. These principles, which emphasize the importance of maximizing the “legibility” of public spaces and the visibility of users within them, provide an increasingly taken-for-granted orientation to public land that nonetheless has profound social and political implications. Perhaps most importantly, it is based on a model of crime prevention that requires the exclusion of certain users (e.g. not only criminals and terrorists, but homeless people, “loitering” youth, skateboarders and so on) in order to make others feel more comfortable. It also puts constraints on the type and form of vegetation that may be used, and on the style of its cultivation, relying heavily on the social significance of “tidy” vegetative forms to signify oversight.

Reading Grand Park through the lens of the principle of “natural surveillance” in particular provides a means of bringing the park’s visual infrastructure, and some of its locally afforded significance, more clearly into view.

As noted above, Grand Park is composed of a series of open spaces that slope downhill. The vegetation is to a large extent clustered around the perimeter of these spaces, allowing the park to open on an attractively framed view of City Hall from multiple locations. Thus, in photographs of Grand Park that appear in various online contexts, and in the park’s own promotional materials, it is very common to see a view of City Hall. The park’s openness is however also conducive to other types of viewing, depicted only indirectly in photographs (i.e. in what is not pictured). Given that the vegetation surrounding or intersecting the open lawn areas, consists mainly of low growing perennial grasses and flowers, and relatively high canopy trees, the entire middle plane of the landscape is consistently empty, and there are virtually no opportunities for concealment. No matter where you are in the park, you can see across it. As such, it provides a perfect example of a space designed for “natural surveillance” (as well as that provided by an extensive cctv network and four security guards around the clock).

This quality of the landscape is especially significant (if not immediately perceptible as such) in downtown LA, where public spaces have tended to host gatherings of homeless people as well as a range of illegal activities, and where, just around the corner, Occupy LA was encamped in 2011. Thus, while city officials promised upon its opening, that political activities would be permitted within the park, their hope was that “the nature of the space might sway park-goers to more modest pursuits.” As further press coverage of the park’s opening emphasized, concerns about drug use, sleeping in the park, and protest encampments led to a commitment by the city to a “firm and vigilant” approach to security. As one administrator put it: “We don’t want to throw protesters out...
but we want this to be a park for everyone to enjoy ...

Thus while the “park for everyone,” proclaims inclusivity, in practice, the comfort of certain people is prioritized over the rights and needs of others (to free speech, or a place to sleep, for example).

So far, the strategies employed at Grand Park seem to be perceived (at least in the mainstream media) as successful. A 2013 LA Times article compares Grand Park—where homeless people are reported to attend cultural events, and to use the restrooms to wash up each morning—to that of nearby Pershing Square, large portions of which are regularly roped off to prevent the use of lawns and benches by homeless people, and where police have been accused of harassing them. The enforcement of “extensive” regulations, and Grand Park’s “design elements” are seen as major factors in its success. From this point of view, the photographs of empty chairs respond, not to a vacant, but a socially hygienic environment. They are not chairs that fail to be sat upon, but chairs that succeed in not providing a place to sleep. As a subject for photography, we could say that they are doubly (and ambiguously) attractive: they draw attention, not just because of their bright colour, and its contribution to the landscape, but also, with Pershing Square just around the corner, because of the historically and geographically specific affect of their emptiness.

THE (LIMITED) MOBILIZATION OF AN AMBIGUOUSLY CRITICAL CONTENT VIA HASHTAGS

The majority of users posting photographs of empty chairs have also attached several hashtags to their photographs. Hashtags provide descriptions of photographs that are machine-readable, and therefore searchable. While some Instagram users do not employ them to a substantial degree, many use them to expand or specify the potential audience for their photographs. In general, they refer to events, places, personal interests, narrative themes, or more simply to the photograph’s subject, and thus specify the contexts with which the photographer wishes the photograph to be associated. Politically speaking, their simultaneously classificatory and communicative functioning has multiple, somewhat conflicted effects.

On the one hand, machine-readable photographs are amenable to data analysis, which enables its capture for commercial and surveillance purposes (i.e. correlating content with locations, which can in turn be correlated with all kinds of other data useful to market research, location-based advertising, predictive policing and so on). On the other hand, hashtags can be used to convincingly associate local places, circumstances or events with larger causes and campaigns (e.g. recently in the US, #blacklivesmatter). There is also a certain potential, though it is more rare, to make novel associations, or bring awareness to otherwise invisible problems. For example, in relation to Grand Park’s empty pink chairs, we can imagine a somewhat challenging context might be specified by associating them with hashtags such as #whereiseveryone? #emptyparks or #socialexclusion. Finally, as Rubenstein and Sluis point out, hashtags also enable photographic content to escape the contexts of its original production, since it can be viewed by audiences outside of one’s social network and potentially be shared or otherwise combined with other online content in unexpected ways.

The fact that the photos of empty chairs are accompanied by hashtags, thus suggests they have a certain potential for mobility. These hashtags are however, universally mundane and general in content. Aside from #grandparkla (which they all share), the most common among them are #dtla or #downtownLA (17 occurrences) and #pink (6 occurrences). Aside from these, there is little consensus among users, and most hashtags appear only once or twice, often pertaining to other aspects of the image (e.g. its inclusion of a pet dog or a new bike), or to such general themes as #work, #city or #furniture.

To me, these hashtags are not only apolitical; they actively mitigate against a political interpretation. The fact that the only consensus among these users pertains to the location and pinkness of the chairs, upholds their aesthetic and locative function within the park’s design—as if their social purpose and its relative success (to foster occupation and flexible use of a public space) was irrelevant. I find it modestly conspicuous that none of the photographers noted (in either hashtags or captions) that the chairs were empty, despite the fact that it is their emptiness that permits their portrayal as an aesthetic yet socially
charged object. Elsewhere on Instagram, the enigma of the empty chair has become something of a cross-cultural preoccupation (e.g. "#emptychairsproject" contains almost 19,000 images of empty chairs from all over the world), while in another American park featuring movable chairs (Bryant Park in New York City), the sight of empty chairs en masse was so jarring as to permit their deployment as part of an art work commemorating the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In fact, what a consideration of these hashtags suggests, is that in the absence of a political intention, rather than increasing mobility, or enabling an escape of photographic content from its original context, what hashtags do more significantly, is fix the context of viewing: these chairs are pink, not empty. They are meant to signify a place ("#grandparkla", "#dtlal"), and the photographer’s presence there, but little else.

Although the choice of hashtags here is perhaps not as strategic as it could be (since photographs with popular hashtags—such as "#dtlal" and "#pink"—fall very quickly off the front end of the search results) the fixing of context is in fact what Instagram “wants”: this is what produces patterns of association useful to market research and location-based advertising. In an article in the Instagram Help Center, it is advised that the most effective hashtags are specific but “relevant”; they “stand out and connect with the people most like you.” Thus while the use of hashtags would seem a potentially powerful moment for creating novel associations and challenging hegemonic perspectives, in practice, such use is destined to be marginalized: as I discovered in the process of experimenting with more political hashtags for my re-posted photos of empty pink chairs, if you want a given photo to be viewed by users other than your followers, you need to choose a hashtag that corresponds to existing interests and communities—something that other people already know and care about. The more political hashtags proposed above, correspond either with very small numbers of photographs (suggesting there will be few users who search for and find yours), or meanings not relevant to my purposes.

It is also worth noting in this context, that Instagram does not permit other users to add hashtags to a given photograph, which severely limits the possibilities for the re-contextualization of content. In this context, I propose that it is less the quantitative mobility of photographs—their ability to “escape” the personal context of their production—and more the porosity of their contextualization that is disruptively promising. That is, it is not only a question of whether a given photo is viewed outside the social context provided by one’s followers, but also of the extent to which those other viewings can be politically oriented or at least open-ended. Given that most users select apolitical hashtags, what might enable their photographs to be viewed in a way that is more open to critical or creative interpretative activities? One of the main benefits of identifying the constraints on a disruptive potential of networked photographies in relation to otherwise well-established place-based visibilities, is to identify the points at which an artistic or activist engagement might help to make such constraints visible as such or otherwise exploit them. I turn now to some reflections on the analysis pursued here, its broader socio-political implications, and some concrete suggestions for future intervention.

DISCUSSION: TACTICS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COLLECTIVE AND UNDISCIPLINED LANDSCAPE CRITICISM

My aim in the preceding analysis has been to identify an unintended and politically generative excess within the communicative economy of the glance attributed to stock and networked photographies. There is however, a tension between this strategy and the critical ends towards which it aims, which is hinted at in the fact that landscapes designed for natural surveillance are similarly designed around the glance: the extent of surveillance must be immediately felt as opposed to consciously assessed in order to be effective in regulating behaviour and naturalizing exclusion. A strategic exploitation of the unthinking production of landscape photographs must therefore take into account their relation to regimes of surveillance.

It is worth emphasizing in this context that, just as the unimpeded sightlines of Grand Park facilitate both photographs of spectacular views and more effective policing by security guards and security cameras, the use of Instagram enables...
data-based surveillance of users’ interests, social networks and movement patterns.\textsuperscript{58} In both cases, it is precisely the unintended production of meaning—whether in the form of observable movements across the landscape, or the various types of data associated with Instagram use—that facilitates surveillance. Any attempt to excavate a critical potential from the same content must therefore take care to develop alternative venues or trajectories for its use. We need ways of seeing that are critical, rather than simply comprehensive (as is the aim of surveillance), or diverse (which in an age of “big data,” is infinitely exploitable for the purposes of marketing). Instagram’s frictional potential lies less in the volume and diversity of content produced through its use, and more in the new contexts and practices of communication that it has inaugurated, and which remain susceptible to extension and repurposing.

Thus, for example, even though it was not explicitly intended as such, the act of reposting photographs of pink chairs to a dedicated account, was a communicative act with (modest) critical potential: by notifying the owners of the photographs, the novel association the account itself established was communicated to those users—many of whom responded by following the account.\textsuperscript{59} This relatively straightforward and modest intervention is suggestive of the potential for developing a citizen (social) science of public spaces: for example, just as research in the field of urban informatics has developed applications that exploit the sensing capacities of smart phones for citizen-initiated environmental monitoring, the capacity to curate, recontextualize and communicate about place via social media platforms, suggests there is potential to develop a popular criticism or analysis of urban landscapes.

In this context, Instagram’s public API makes the development of third party applications a promising avenue for socio-political interventions that may help to create new venues and practices for interpretation and communication, and perhaps, eventually, new communities of users. There are many third party applications that currently enable searches of Instagram data. However these are designed to further the commercial use of the location and social data associated with photographs and present very limited possibilities for searches by individuals interested in the photographs themselves. The creation of a third party application to enable more complex searches (e.g. returning photographs from a given location with a particular hashtag, or particular keywords) could provide the content, and a venue for, collective consideration of political questions about the appearance, composition and use of public spaces, in a manner that is accessible in the course of everyday activities.\textsuperscript{60} A more explicitly critical design intervention that would afford interesting possibilities along similar lines, would be to create a search tool returning photographs of a given place that have been given hashtags corresponding to a very small number of photographs, or a small number of users (who post many photographs to that hashtag). This would be a way of identifying photographs of a place that have been contextu-lized by their users in idiosyncratic—perhaps personalized, perhaps politicized—ways.

The question that such tactics attempt to address, is of how to make a surplus of meaning long associated with photography,\textsuperscript{61} work towards ends other than those of a comprehensive survey or endless variation on the same themes; to inaugu-rate not only new uses of the content produced via photographic social media, but through its re-purposing, new ways of seeing together. In fact, this suggests we need to think in terms not of a surplus (of information or possible meanings), but rather a problematic remainder capable of inspiring questioning and critique. The fact that what we see is always conditioned in part by what we don’t see has both a perceptual and a socio-political significance here: what, or who, is absent in order to render particular qualities, experiences and beings present? Looking at landscape photographs, it is very hard to say what is not there without first-hand knowledge of that landscape (or better yet, what preceded it). However, this is one thing that Instagram and other photographic social media offer, provided we have the means of searching, collecting and comparing their content in a useful manner. With strategically enabled searches, it would be possible to identify what is not being pictured, and also possible to ask why, in a public setting. Then a more artistic experimentation can begin: with the amplification of such
absences, and strategies for turning them into political problems worthy of notice and discussion.

CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding analysis, I have explored a contextually and materially oriented mode of photographic interpretation. This is a mode of interpretation that attempts to correspond—in a more deliberate, open-ended way—with the kind of unthinking attention that Instagram solicits and rewards in its users. Although the structure of the analysis has been tailored to investigation of the social and material conditions relevant to the site under consideration, I believe that the materialist media-ecological framework providing its overarching strategies and objectives is one with more general applicability. The observations made above with respect to the inadequacy of conventional models of representation and communication in relation to networked photographs, and the recasting of their effects in terms of an ongoing process of re-mediation, are similar to those that have been made about other visual media forms and practices. A broader orientation to media effects and relations is conducive to studying processes of mediation, rather than discrete visual technologies or forms. It also enables the investigation of the place-based, and place-making effects of visual media, and consideration of otherwise covert mediating effects of environments.

Especially in cities, an awareness of the increasingly reciprocal shaping of communication and environment is crucial to the cultivation of democratic public life. My focus on unexpected disruptions of the reciprocity between social media photographs and designed landscape, and my attempt to outline some tactical possibilities for alternative engagements with them, highlights the critical pedagogical potential of the concretely experimental approach advocated by materialist media ecologists such as Fuller and Parikka. By experimentally working with Instagram to make it do more than it otherwise wants to, I have made some observations that not only contribute to a scholarly understanding of the intermedial shaping of urban visibilities, but which also, through the proposed interventions, may enable users to learn about the otherwise hidden cultural and perceptual effects of photographic social media and landscape alike. I hope that this can help us to more concretely envision a future in which the design of urban public spaces cannot be quite so cheerfully exclusive and discouraging of political activity.

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Notes

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M. Lister, “Overlooking, Rarely Looking and Not Looking,” in Digital Snaps: The New Face of Snapshot Photography, eds. J. Larsen and M. Sandbye (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 1–24.

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40. As one of the conditions of sale for the land on which the condos were built.

41. The Palais de Luxembourg in Paris and Bryant Park in New York City provide famously successful precedents.

42. See @pinkchairsofgrandpark. Instagram stipulates that photographs of other users may not be stored; re-posting however is an accepted practice. Following the rules of etiquette suggested by Instagram, I sent a message to each photographer letting them know of the re-posting and offering to remove it if they wished. I also gave credit to the photographer in the caption for each photo. In the vast majority of cases, I received a positive response from users; no one requested that I remove their photo.

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58. Instagram users agree to share their usage data and/or content not only with Instagram, but also its “affiliates,” “third-party advertisers,” “service providers,” and once it is anonymized, “other parties”. (“Instagram privacy policy,” Instagram website (January 19, 2013), https://instagram.com/about/legal/privacy/; (accessed Nov 18, 2015). The use of mobile devices in general is exploited for predictive policing and the mapping of movement patterns by security agencies. M. Crang and S. Graham,
“Sentient Cities: Ambient Intelligence and the Politics of Urban Space,” *Information, Communication and Society* 10, no. 6 (2007): 789–819.

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