Webcam
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Webcam in the context of digital anthropology

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The book *Webcam* is the most recent publication of the Material Culture research nucleus of the Cultural Anthropology Department of University College London. It is located in the context of consolidation of the analytical field of digital anthropology. This approach has been gaining international recognition, especially from the *Tales from Facebook* publications (MILLER, 2011), *Migration and New Media*: *Transnational Families and Polymedia* (MANDIANOU; MILLER, 2012) and especially *Digital Anthropology* organized by Horst; Miller (2012).

According to Miller & Sinanan (2014) one of the conceptual keys in the debate regarding the connections between humans, culture, and technology is the subject of authenticity: discourses that evaluate how much the human being becomes more or less mediated with technological support. There is a line of thought that argues that there is a link between technology and sociocultural decline. Many of them understand the digital world as a superficial environment that is responsible for the loss of human essence. For the authors of *Webcam*, Plato in *Phaedrus* already produced the same criticism regarding writing: a support that was established outside of the mind could only destroy the qualitative essence of memory and creativity in favor of an artificial relationship with the sensibilities of the world. According to anthropologists, the idea

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is based on a lament of the authentic past, expressing itself as a*leitmotif* of the modern world.

Digital anthropology understands that history has taught us that one medium will retain the cultural traits of another, and that there is space for all in contemporary culture. The authors begin with the presupposition that face-to-face interaction and digital communication are equally cultural.   All of the technological material production of the internet is analyzed based on the concept of material culture, understood as the analysis field of the social relations between subjects and goods. UA presupposition that dialogues with the vision of Bourdieu (1984) regarding the *habitus:* the correlation between the formation of ideas and the production conditions, the connections between social subjects and symbolic fields where battles are waged in the context of conflict. They also dialogue with Goffman (1980), with the idea of theatrical representation and the idea that social actors are not chained to the structures and negotiate their roles in the interactions.

Therefore, regarding the symbolic field, Miller & Sinanan (Ibid) find in Van Dijcks (2007) an active voice that reflects on the marks of memory in the digital world. For the author, far from being an instrument of dematerialization, the digital world re-elaborates the sense of memory, adds more capacity to store memory outside the mind in a multi-modal and collective system. Miller & Sinanan (Ibid) argue that we do not become more mediatized due to digital culture. Thus we need to answer the question: is the impact of new technology insignificant? And they suggest that cultural sensibility is affected by the new technology. The authors developed the theory of attainment, an idea that can be translated as new meaning markers, as new values that are arranged by culture. And they affirm its relevance to deal with the dilemma: how much technology changes humanity and at the same time, it works with the rejection of the idea that its support makes us more or less human or mediated, and therefore doesn't domesticate our mind. But the nature of the mediation is altered. The challenge is to study the impact of the new technology and the modes of consciousness and other modes of

life, without seeing this process as an increase or decrease of our human essence. This perspective rejects, for example, the idea that we are being transformed into post-humans or cyborgs.

Therefore, what are the marks of attainment in the context of the webcam? The first idea that the book addresses is the concept of self-consciousness. Everyone who uses a webcam talks to one another, but at the same time they can see themselves in a small box on the screen, during the entire conversation. Thus, the book reveals the urgency of rethinking self-consciousness in high modernity. In the past we had the lake, mirrors, photographs, and videos with clipping of poses. On Skype, with hours of conversation, we see beyond the other person. We see ourselves as a routine of observing the self. The Greek myth of Narcissus inspired the creation of the concept of the self as object and investment: an idea somewhere between the auto-eroticism and the object love in Freudian psychoanalysis. The mirror phase was conceived by Lacan as the central point for the formation of the first outline for a child's ego, the Gestalt image of the body and its self-image.

For anthropology, in addition to psychoanalytic interpretation, it is also in the cultural experience and interaction that the construction of the subject is structured. This new experience of seeing oneself continuously through a webcam makes us rethink the concepts regarding imagination of the self. Miller argues that comparing the ontological principles of being between the English and people from Trinidad, we see profound differences in their reflections regarding subjectivity. The English who participated in the survey, have an absolute belief that the interior self is deep and subjective, while appearance is superficial. But ethnographies of the culture in Trinidad reveal that the inner self keeps secrets, but if the essence of the person begins on the inside, it is fundamentally revealed on the surface, and so is possible to judge another by their appearance. That is why they are invested in creating a style or look that reveals the soul. Therefore, in front of the webcam, the English participants experienced a type of strangeness with their self-image: they did not recognize themselves, their voice, or the shape of their eyes, or

the side glances. There is conflict between the idealized image of self and the representation in real time promoted by the camera. But in Trinidad, those who were interviewed believed that the online appearance reveals personality, and therefore exhibit themselves in a more visceral manner: with much gesticulation, emphasizing facial expressions. Thus they seek to reveal subjectivity by the objectivity of the screen.

The idea of intimacy is another mark of "attainment," reviewed in the context of the webcam, being translated by the concept of "always-on," or a new imagination regarding living and the rules of sociability. The authors reflect on the expansion of the sense of co-presence in mediated sexual relations or the emotional experience of kindred relationships. At first the webcam can convey the impression of a manufactured scene, a fake version of intimacy, but the construction of feelings of ambivalence allows individuals to experience a sense of belonging. The issue of immigration and transnational kindred relationships has established itself as a tradition in anthropological studies. Today, the relationships mediated by technology are studied as one of the central concepts to evaluate the potential of new media as a way to re-connect people from the same nuclear family who are living apart.

The sense of co-presence also makes us rethink the meaning of place and the idea of home. The arrival of the webcam problematizes the idea of a place that s tangible and physical but also a place of affection and familiar meaning. Miller and Sinanan (Ibid) argue that family relationships between parents and children will always involve degrees of tension and an ideal sense of how relationships should be. The authors identify how the webcam accentuates the contradictions, but to some extent, solve some problems such as the autonomy of children and parental supervision.

The fundamental anthropological contribution of the webcam study makes us reflect how technological development has grown exponentially and has influenced the interactive dynamics of everyday life. It also allows us to observe how cultures are highly creative, and especially diachronic in the use of social media. Therefore, it is a though provoking

work, that through the scientific rigor of Miller & Sinanan (Ibid) highlights the different cosmologies of social groups and the sociocultural motivations for digital interaction.

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