

**Comment on Francine Barone's Working Paper
"New Leisure Forum for Old Leisure Practices"**
15-29 March, EASA Media Anthropology Network,

By Valentina Gueorguieva

Dear all,

First, I wish to thank John Postill for inviting me to open the discussion on Francine Barone's text. I read the paper with great interest and found it very suggestive. The text starts from the assumption that online patterns of interaction, of identity building and self-presentation do not have to be considered as a completely new phenomenon originating from the development of new technologies, but as an extension of older cultural forms that re-appropriate means of online communication in their own way. The author affirms that "evolving leisure practices on the Internet are fundamentally shaped by existing offline (face-to-face) patterns of interaction". Since they are not profoundly distinct, or wholly set apart from the offline world, they should be examined in their real-life context.

The paper has two parts – a historical and an ethnographic study of leisure practices in the Catalan city of Figueres. The historical part reconstructs the practice of the *passeig*, or the social promenade through the main public spaces of the town, with the intention "to see and to be seen". The practice originated in the 19th century, and was common for Spain and other European cities (the *corso*). The author chooses to interpret it as a social drama (Goffman), the *passeig* is where the self is "on stage", developing an elaborate performance and where appearance is of utmost importance (clothes and accessories, mobile phones, expensive toys, etc.). Friendship is also on display in the social drama of the *passeig*. Walking, talking and standing in the main street, people in Figueres used to display status and sociality. With the increase of car traffic in 1970s, but also with the coming of television to the homes of Figuerenc, the practices of leisure changed. The decline of the *Rambla* in the 1980s is related to the growing proportion of leisure time spent in home. The *Rambla* is becoming a nostalgic place, now populated by tourists and over-60s.

The second part of the text examines the use of the web service Fotolog, a photo-sharing or photo-blogging platform and one of the most popular social networking sites in the Spanish speaking world, for young people between 13 and 25. A "flogger" can publish one photo per day and receive comments from her/his friends and followers on the website. Since over 95 percent of the daily photos and "ego shots", or self-portraits (wearing fancy clothes and haircuts), this practice is also interpreted as presentation of the self in public. Comments received by friends are the small gestures cementing the social bond. In Fotolog participants share links to other social-networking sites, to YouTube videos, a wider media context, so it is definitely not a closed world. Moreover, it is clear from the comments that users are a part of an offline community – they are classmates or friends and see each other at school or in the city center. The author argues that Fotolog is not a separate world, "a virtual or less real *passeig*, simply an additional social arena; another Figuerenc space, and another pace to walk around and chat with friends". In a way the practice of Fotolog revives the social drama of the *passeig*, where individuals construct elaborated presentations of self and put their social capital on display.

In conclusion, Francine Barone discusses the continuity between old and new forms of leisure, reminding that it was not the Internet who led to the *Rambla* exodus, but other cultural practices of the 1980s, and therefore "the Internet need not be demonized as a destroyer of traditional forms of interaction". She sees in new communication technologies and in Fotolog in particular a possibility

to enhance and resuscitate these old practices, but in a new (media) environment.

Though I completely agree with the theoretical stance that new forms of communication should be seen as a continuation of old forms or cultural practices, and with the conclusion that the Internet is not the only reason for the decline of traditional forms of sociality, I would like to address a couple of questions launching the discussion.

First of all, when we take Goffman's theory, there is what he calls the idealization of the self, or one's presentation in a better light. It was seldom underlined that online communication and social network profiles in particular offer an easy possibility of presenting "the idealized me" – through carefully selected profile pictures and double checked pieces of information in the status updates. No doubt, on the passeig and on Fotolog users display such idealized versions of themselves. In real-life contact we have a variety of mechanisms of "reducing the effect" of such presentations. Are there such things in Fotolog? Are there conduct-correcting episodes? Is this technology offering such means? For example on Facebook, a user can carefully select his profile picture, but s/he can also be tagged on some other user's picture. S/he can delete the tag, but not the picture. Her/his presentation of self is then compromised. Is there a similar technological possibility of Fotolog? And is it used by your respondents?

A second question is about the existing offline scenes of youth cultural practices. The passeig was probably a space for the young people and their leisure practices back in the 1960s. But what happened after the appearance of counter-cultural and subcultural movements? Could this be seen as another reason for the decline of the Rambla? And where are the scenes of youth cultures today? Where is the place of hippies, punks, metalheads, skaters and free-runners (if any)? Do they meet at concerts, gigs, sport contests and performances in public spaces?

One more time I wish to thank Francine for such a wonderful text, suggestive and provocative, and invite you all to join the discussion.

Kindest regards,

Valentina

Valentina Gueorguieva, PhD

Department of Cultural Studies, University of Sofia
125, Tzarigradsko Shosse Blvd., bl.1, b.405
Sofia 1113, Bulgaria