

Memories through Multimedia Documenting our Lives

Atteqa Malik, May 2005

One dominant characteristic of the human condition today is the overwhelming desire to preserve the present. This global “save” culture has emerged at a time when life could be described as an experience of disconnected moments. Due to the flooding of image capturing devices in markets all over the world, the neurotic compulsion to collect memories through images and videos has taken on epidemic proportions amongst innumerable members of the world community. Photography will soon stop being a hobby and become a language as more and more people learn how to communicate using digital pictures and icons. With the intent of filtering relationships involving artificially recorded memories and those stored in our subconscious, this paper will be an observation of Karachi’s urban culture that shows metamorphic changes in the stories of our lives.

It is possible that the current human preoccupation with holding onto recorded visual moments is related to an ever-present hunger to understand the meaning of life. In today’s world, in addition to remembering experiences, it is possible to view actual events that were recorded. This heightened ability to reprocess memories can provide individuals with a way to touch base with an identity that is evolving too fast to otherwise comprehend.

Virtual individuality establishes itself the moment a person sees a photograph of him/herself, makes a phone call or establishes a web presence. This virtual existence according to Paul Virilio is a new reality.

“there will be two realities: the actual, and the virtual. Thus there is no simulation but substitution.”(1)

He talks about the human condition being unstable as it oscillates between the two symmetrical realities. Representation of the self in what French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (in the *Evil Demon of Images*) calls “the simulacrum, a socially constructed hall of mirrors with no external points of reference” has resulted in a three-faceted identity crises for the individual. Where before the focus of the self would either be towards the material world or the hereafter, the addition of a virtual existence has made things more complicated now. This change has been happening slowly over the past hundred years or so, but it was restricted to a few individuals who were exposed to the new technology that made this possible. Now with mobile phones and digital cameras flooding the market, the experience of being on air, on line, on hold, is something that probably all urban dwellers would label as a part of their daily life.

The characteristics of a healthy, virtual personality have not yet been clearly defined as new mediums for it are still arising as a result of technological innovation. But it can surely be said to be intangible and interchangeable yet having eternal attributes. A virtual conversation, for example, remains embedded forever in a person’s subconscious the same way an actual one would. An image uploaded or the text put forth on the Internet can be viewed, saved and remembered for as many people that view it. Depending on the storage capacity of the Internet in the future, the information could be around for an indefinite period of time, available to those who search for it. Because the

virtual self has not yet been limited by too many definite ethical boundaries and legal limitations, it can get away with naughty acts that may not necessarily be characteristic of the real self. This may be because now individuals are able to hide their real identities even when they are interacting socially with each other. They can remain anonymous by using nicks in the virtual world and hidden in the actual world when recording others without being observed themselves. Separate searches for solutions to new ethical dilemmas enveloping societies all over the world have been launched at a time when databases of scholastic thought have never been larger.

The religious and cultural heritage of Pakistan is embedded with influences from the various Sufi saints who had settled here to escape persecution in their own countries a few centuries ago. Using many different metaphors like the story of the reed, the master Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi wrote decades ago about the human yearning for a completeness that once was, but is lost now. In her paper titled "A Muslim Woman's Perspective" Anita Mir discussed conditions of the individual and the *polis* that appeared to be challenges to faith. While discussing public and private spaces in this context, Anita Mir referred to Annemarie Schimmel's interpretation of the Rumi quote "he who knows himself knows his Lord" as being "he who knows the finite knows the infinite". She questioned whether "it is from his very rootedness to time and space_to the temporal_that man begins to comprehend the eternal and also his rootedness to that?"(2) Realizing the challenges faced by the human spirit now could help in predicting future social values of a rapidly evolving metropolis, in this case being Karachi. New inventions may be fulfilling previously unsatisfied yearnings, but are creating new dilemmas for troubled souls caught in the hustle bustle of urban madness.

From a technological point of view, the city of Karachi has developed very rapidly in a short span of time. In parts of Karachi where there were no phone connections or electricity ever, a market has opened up for mobile and wireless phones in the last year. International wireless communication company advertisements have all but drowned out the city these days. There are signs of poverty, crime, non-availability of civic amenities mixed with corruption, materialism and consumerism everywhere.

Karachi does not give off the vibes of an originally small fishing village turned port city that used to be an incubator of intellectual thought, arts and pleasantries in the nineteen sixties. Rather, it is showing bruises resulting from an exploding population and marketing strategies common to large cities everywhere. Metrosexuals and technosexuals are walking side by side to road side beggars here. As Karachi goes through a metamorphosis, it's residents are in state of transition, awaiting the consolidation of third world poverty meets mobile mania.

The trend of videotaping rituals in Pakistani culture has brought forth an interesting dilemma. What would once have been considered a private function, many times having men and women seated separately, now becomes a public commodity once the video or photos of the event begin to be circulated among family and friends. Until recently, Muslim civilizations have had rules for private life that are separate from the ones governing public life. It used to be the public realm in which most community interactions took place, mostly by men says Sami Zubeida in a paper titled "The public and the private in Islamic law and society" (3). Now, when a video taped private event is distributed freely, there is no way to restrict unwanted eyes ogling at images of daughters and sisters, even husbands. The medium of viewing the recordings is same in which

television and film actors are viewed so the rules applied seem to be the same. Some sections of society have reacted by disallowing such events to be videotaped. Others have risen to the occasion by making the event glamorous enough to be video-taped, while still others have reacted by calling the whole thing un-Islamic and giving it up altogether.

Sami also points out that “Modernity brings a common public space, to which various actors and enunciators address their discourses and contexts.” and lists secularization as a “crucial aspect of modernity”. Through secularization Sami says “even spheres previously intrinsic to religious authority, such as law and education, are withdrawn from it and taken into the modern state sphere and the public”(4). Individual ideas begin to clash with values that had defined a certain society until then. Sami in his paper, described a growing resentment in Iran’s young generation towards the strict laws that defined even the private sphere. Pakistan’s youth after being exposed to the liberties that come with modernization, is showing an affinity to make personal decisions similar to its Iranian counterpart. Chatting, gaming and text messaging play a significant role in most teenage social interactions nowadays. These are arenas that allow all sorts of exchanges to take place without any religious or cultural rules in effect.

The creation of an uncontrollable virtual world with an absence of codes of conduct for Muslims of all ages is resulting in a lot of complicated questions being left unanswered, bringing together and pulling apart the Muslim community along different lines. As this phenomenon becomes apparent in Pakistan it can be observed that reactions to it are also taking place. While, many religious bodies react by terming all things Western and modern as un-Islamic, the curious are excitedly following all possibilities to the extent that some have left behind their own culture in their search for new identities. Many aspects of previously clear personal and public space are overlapping giving rise to ambiguity in behavior codes. This is especially with regards to the actions and dress code of women. The songs and dances of young women at weddings used to be the life of the party and their visibility was essential to their finding suitors for themselves. Videotaping and distributing wedding videos widens the suitor horizon to include anyone and everyone and not just men from the community thus removing boundaries that communities had previously adhered to so strongly.

The married life expectations of a bride and groom are formulated by memories of film heroines acting out scenes with their movie mates. And then couples are left alone to deal with the tragedies behind their “picture perfect” lives. There exist no set rules yet to restrict cybercheating or virtual infidelity. Many a marriage has fallen apart when one partner did not notice that the other was involved in such acts until things had progressed too far out of the limits securing a healthy marriage. Nothing in the picture albums nor the choreographed dances, nor money showered on arrangements can heal the heartbreaks in such cases that are greatly on the rise in contemporary Karachi society.

This winter at a family wedding, as she was standing on the edge, curiously watching the bride and groom, my two and a half year old was pushed off the wedding stage by a teenager. I spent the next half an hour consoling my sobbing daughter and wondering what happened to those days when brides surrounded by doting young children was considered a norm in the Pakistani wedding tradition.. The teenage girl obviously did what she did instinctively, as she thought that my daughter would spoil the picture being taken. The photographer could easily have not included her in the shot as she was standing right at the edge of the stage and could easily have been excluded from

the frame of vision or be cropped from the developed pictures.

Most marriage celebrations are not about bringing together families any more. They have become about showing and being admired with the bride expected to live up to her once in a lifetime makeover forever. Weddings have turned into five hour marathons of saying cheese on a sterile stage, with only guests of choice allowed to pose for that split second click and be off on their way. As long as the guests' presence at a wedding is recorded, their contribution to the event is considered fulfilled. Traditional or digital photography as a function to produce results is understood by all but an understanding of the editing processes involved in it is not mainstream knowledge. When a bride and groom are being recorded, any other person blocking the camera's line of vision is considered to be violating their space.

This impersonal behaviour is connected to the "camera awareness" that has become an inherent part of our public personas. It is not uncommon to see rituals being performed and re-performed until they are caught properly on camera. Camera-men, hired professionals, have all the power to include or exclude whoever they feel from the recorded memory of the event. More often than not, their eyes usually are directed at the ones who are looking attractive. People attending wedding functions, dress up and groom themselves, many times color co-coordinating with the rest of the family members, knowing that a family portrait is inevitable at these occasions.

The wedding scenario is just one celebration where misguided priorities play out in front of the camera. During most moments when we are experiencing joy or imagine that we should be feeling it, the eversnapping camera makes an appearance. The very act of capturing a significant moment has become an event in itself. The sin of not recording a "good time" is one that offers no redemption, as every person who has access to a camera is expected to be a photographer these days. It has become possible to snap, view and reshoot images during an event and then play with pixels once they have been loaded onto a computer. A culture of retouching has taken root in society that allows the nipping and tucking away of parts disliked in body representations, traditions or faiths to take place. The decisions to alter are made on purely personal and selfish grounds and are not inspired by any immaterial aspirations. This is a diversion from the path to salvation that requires all desires to be abandoned by humans for the purpose of achieving spiritual purification.

Many times, knowledge of whom the video will be sent to affects the way subjects act in front of a camera. Most individuals are aware that the camera can be used to expose, exploit or make famous. As actors with rehearsed lines and gestures, most people know their good camera sides and what not to say and do while being recorded. Various ideals of men and women projected to audiences via media outlets are acted out for personally recorded memories. Local parks are full of individuals trying to lose those few extra pounds. Healthy eating habits have always been discussed with respect to increasing quality of life but now the aim of body image achieving perfection has taken the lead in desired effects. Attention to physical details has become a high priority chore for the men and women who care. The invisible camera is everywhere.

While the Pakistani government is struggling to formulate the laws required to control crimes using electronic devices, ugly stories of hidden cameras are surfacing in the press. Many cyber café owners in Pakistan, who provided private spaces to users, went one step further by activating webcams to record what their customers were doing

in their rented private spaces. Many young couples for lack of a better place to get acquainted were caught on camera kissing or getting intimate in other ways. Then such films were either used for blackmail by the owners of the cafes or sold as porn movies.

Respect for a woman in Pakistan is often given in proportion to how her body appears in public. The private, denoting the female, has become synonymous with honor and been elevated to such a sacred position that it has become too easy to violate it for crimes that are politically or personally motivated. Even in the cities, for a woman and a man to have been caught on camera in a compromising position poses a big problem for the woman's future.

Due to the efforts of many NGO's and human rights activists, women are becoming more vocal about the crimes committed against them and are learning how to use media advocacy to champion their causes. However, this is only when the issues they address are clear cut acts of human rights abuse. When any issue of socially accepted moral values being stretched on their part is in play, the situation becomes quite complicated. People, like the cyber café owners, exploit this loophole resulting in many problematic situations. This issue needs to be resolved soon by lawmakers as electronic equipment is becoming an inherent part of office and domestic realms in Karachi and other big cities of Pakistan. A young female bank employee jilted the advances of her male colleague. The next morning all the bank employees switched on their computers to see nude pictures of the female (which had been created by using image modifying software) on their screens. The only choice left for the woman was to quit her job. Two of the girls who had been captured on webcams at cybercafes committed suicide as they saw no option to redeem themselves.

The arrival of digital editing and printing techniques have also spawned a series of monsters obstructing the skyline of Karachi. Female faces and bodies adorning larger than life billboards have cropped up all over the city. Sponsored mostly by multinational companies, these have arisen mainly to target advertisements to a rapidly growing consumer market in Karachi. Muslim men are taught to lower their gaze when a woman is present in front of them, while Muslim women are instructed to dress modestly so as not to attract undue attention. In contrast to these requirements, a person commuting on the main thoroughfare of the city has numerous intimate encounters with gorgeous, female models every second. As more and more billboards spring up unrestricted over rooftops, catching the consumer eye will become a challenging task. Since sex sells best, how will the advertising agencies balance their use of sexually implicit messages with the modesty that a majority Muslim country would appreciate? These boards can become easy physical targets for those activists who use the method of destroying property to get their views across. A mobile phone company's advertisement with a woman suggestively saying "Let's get connected" was burned a while ago, but many times the catch lines are so cleverly phrased in English that a large part of the population does not get the hidden message. This works well for many companies advertising new products like cellular phones and credit cards. Their target audience is more often than not the young, enterprising individuals who are the ones with the cash in their pockets these days. As marketing trends heighten, giving birth to previously unknown yearnings, bank loans and credit cards join in the fun promising the residents of Karachi with a future they could not have imagined.

Often called the city of lights, Karachi could also be named a city of migrants. Migrants from Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh and other provinces of Pakistan have at one time or another made their way to Karachi in search of a better life here or onwards to another country. Karachi, being the hub of the country's economic growth, lost many talented professionals, in an exodus known as the "brain drain" to many. This meant that a lot of people from other parts of Pakistan came over to fill the gaps that were left behind by the outgoing Karachi'ites. Karachi with a very basic civic infrastructure has been developing rapidly because of and inspite of such a great exchange of people. Most Pakistani workers abroad do not make permanent homes immediately in the places they work. Their families, for whose increase in quality of life they are working, live in far away places all over the country.

The longing to reunite with or join a relative living far away is an inherent part of many Pakistanis' sense of being, Karachi'ites included. This provides those who are obsessively recording family events an ulterior goal_ that of sharing it with the one who is not there. On the other hand, for many who are away, nostalgia for home and the prospects of meeting family soon serve as the strongest moral boosters when completing work schedules that are often inhumane and unreasonable.

For those who are too far away to visit regularly, avoiding confrontation with immigration authorities or worried about visa validities and job security, the only way to participate in family affairs back home is to witness recorded versions of events. In cases of long absences spanning years, these collective memories become the only tangible bond to the family that is left behind. At occasions marking the birth of a child, birthday, engagement or accomplishments of grandchildren the one missing is remembered through the eye of the lens. When my cousin's engagement video was being shot, the camera zoomed in on her fiancé talking to her mother on the phone. Her mother, who was in another country, was being told that pictures were being emailed to her at that very moment as she was very eager to see immediately what her daughter was wearing. The moments that were captured on camera in this case included all the desired family members, my cousin, her fiancé and family who were actually there at the engagement and her mother who was virtually there due to the phonecall, but whose presence was real in the time sequence of the recorded event.

It can already be felt that in every aspect of life, from education to entertainment, societies of the future will be supported by technology and media related activities. My nine year old fears a "robber" breaking into his room and taking embarrassing photographs of him which he would show to the whole world on television. This shows that privacy theft is as great an issue in the minds of children today as it is for their parents. During play, children have begun enacting the fight sequences they experience on television shows and videogames. This type of role-playing has become part of most children's form of release after being in front of various screens for hours. Given a hand held video camera, my children have begun recording and viewing their own fight sequences. Not only does this familiarize them with aspects of moviemaking such as scene to scene sequences, but it also is a good way for them to understand the artificiality of the screen world in their minds, including speaking to the invisible audience while acting in a recording. I have found though that at dinner table discussions, I have to keep reminding them that I am more interested in what they did that day than what Sponge Bob Square Pants did to Squid Word.

Armed with the ability to capture and tailor personal memories, all individuals can create representations of their lives in this era. In a paper titled *Concord and Discord In Multicultural Societies: The Clash of Cultural Values*(5), while emphasizing the need for humanity to continue making up stories Clinton Bennett quotes Salman Rushdie from *The Satanic Verses*(6) answering his own question on how “does newness enter the world?”. Salman Rushdie writes “mélange, hotpotch...is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that migration has given the world, and I have tried to embrace it.” (Pg.394)

Each recording made is a story in itself but the continuity offered when flipping through images on a screen or viewing video clips recorded on the same tape does give the overall experience a narrative feel. When recalling memories of real experiences humans unconsciously highlight certain parts with the intention of triggering off the desired emotional effect at that time. This can be compared to the way cropped, enlarged or print versions of our virtual experiences are saved so that they can be viewed again and again. Somewhere in the subconscious mind the two types of memories overlap to give yearnings some grounding. The aspect of reassessment offered through physically reviewing and editing memories could be used as a major stepping stone in providing incentives to change lives or misguide individuals by providing a false sense of self.

When real and virtual experiences are recalled on a mental clipboard, new identities that cross boundaries are created and thus portrayed in recorded films. There is often a tendency to romanticize everything. When recording memories, there is a tendency to capture only the good times, skipping out the bad. After the great wedding video for example, the frustrations of young husband and wife adjusting to living with each other are never captured for a juicy home video sequel, but an anniversary celebration is awaited, upon which the next recording session takes place.

There are exceptions to avoiding filming times of sorrow as in the case of a friend who recorded pictures of his mother who had passed away. He did this to let his siblings, who could not be there for the funeral, have some sort of closure when they arrived from the far off countries they were living in. This desire for closure came from his own experience of being far away when his father had passed away. His last meeting with him had been on the Internet. It is doubtful that the last memory of a pixelated image will be the one that he associates with his father, rather an intangible emotional bond would be the one that would stay with him forever. Seeing a loved one in death is a significant aspect of resolving the sense of loss felt by mourners.

Virtual communication offers a convenience that closes thousands of miles between people, yet at times creates insurmountable gaps between individuals who are physically within touching distances from each other. No one knows whether the future for human beings is to become uncaring, unfeeling cyborgs but it is hoped that the emotional strain in each person always remains alive. Even though it gives independence, this new life takes away quite a lot from individuals, leaving many silently screaming for a way out.

Rock versions of old Sufi verses, dealing with aspects of self discovery, have become a popular aspect of Pakistan’s contemporary music scene. They must be offering solace to the identity crises faced by individuals traversing the seamless boundaries of their various worlds a countless number of times each day. The amalgamation of each person’s experience is unknown to any other, as it lies hidden, deep in that subconscious

part of the human mind that gives life to our memories.

(1)Cyberwar, God And Television:Interview with Paul Virilio by Louise Wilson for CTHEORY, 21st October 1994, http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=62

(2) Pg.3,Anita Mir, A Muslim Woman's Perspective,
<http://www.sedos.org/ariccia03/mir.htm>

(3) Pg.1,The Public and the Private in Islamic Law and Society, Sami Zubeida
<http://www.aku.edu/ismc/samizubaida.pdf>

(4) Pg.2.,The Public and the Private in Islamic Law and Society, Sami Zubeida
<http://www.aku.edu/ismc/samizubaida.pdf>

(5)Pg.3,Concord and Discord in Multicultural Societies: The Clash of Cultural Values, Clinton Bennett,
<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/pakistan/literature/rushdie/bennet1.html>

(6)Rushdie, Salman. The Satanic Verses. London:Vintage 1988

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