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Photography and the disruption of memory and meaning

Photography and the disruption of memory and meaning

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Abstract

By taking and sharing photographs, we are positioned within powerful communication networks that influence our personal and social identities. Over time, ownership and control is lost as our photographs gain performativity that allows them to divert from the purposes, spaces and times for which they are created. These issues are magnified by a number of technological, cultural and economic factors that accompany the evolution of ubiquitous digital media and their associated tools. Given the role that photographs play in the reconstruction of individual and collective memory and history, it is worth considering what is captured by the camera and what happens after the shutter closes.

Keywords

photography

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memory

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networks

control

If there is a case for the statement 'the camera never lies', it is in the sense that what is produced by the camera becomes part of the 'truth'. The photograph is analogous to

history, where what is written down becomes, over time, what we believe to have happened. This article is a reflection on the nature of personal photography and how it changes the people who engage with it.

Photography: Truth, representation or performance?

Although most photographs look very much like the scene that was photographed, there are a number of important differences. First, the photograph is limited in terms of the space it represents. It leaves out what is above, below, behind, to the right and to left of its edges and one cannot look behind the objects it shows (Szarkowski 1980). It flattens and crops the world (Christmann 2008). Second, although it is *of* a time, a photograph contains little or no time. Other than what can be inferred from visual clues, it does not show what happened before and after the shutter closed. Photographs leave out touch, taste, smell and sound, containing only visual information, which has been manipulated by the interplay between environmental and technological factors (e.g. the qualities of the camera, its handling of lighting and movement). The relationship between material reality and its photographic representation is further compromised through intentional and unintentional effects of camera settings and post-production processes.

Even before it takes a photograph, a camera is a powerful object. It changes the behaviour of those behind and in front of it (Sontag 1977), introducing a performative quality to both posing for and taking photographs. Thus, scenes are often altered and contrived in pre-production as people stop what they are doing and smile, assemble for a group shot or, perhaps, attempt to affect a 'natural' pose. Those not *in* the photograph

may feel compelled to watch or to walk around the 'photographic space' (a notion studied by Stanley Milgram (1977)), itself a clue to the spatial limitations of the photograph, though it is likely this compulsion is being eroded as it becomes impractical to avoid every photograph. In any case, an intrusive photographic event is inserted into lived experience, changing the very thing we wish to preserve.

Just as a diary often betrays 'an awareness of its potential to be read by others' (Van Dijck 2007: 54), photos are created for a potential audience. We communicate important ideas about ourselves to others through photographs and we change (and constrain) our behaviour when being photographed in an attempt to portray ourselves in a favourable light. Increasingly, it seems, we attempt to control both aspects of performance, to be simultaneously director and actor. 'Selfie' (a photographic self-portrait) is the Oxford Dictionary's word of 2013 due to a 17000 per cent increase in usage over the year (Guardian 2013). As the extent to which we are photographed (whether by ourselves or by others) increases, our awareness of our potential photographic image changes with it. Cameras, whether used for personal, reportage or surveillance purposes (and, indeed, these categories increasingly overlap), are becoming ubiquitous. As a result, we must take into account – whenever we are in public, at least – that we may be photographed.

Perhaps we are right to be concerned by the photographs that are produced of us. Whether they appear in pornography, on dating websites, in magazines, on social networking sites, or in any other place, people are commodified within photographs. Their images can be examined, manipulated and redistributed without their presence,

consent or awareness. Our ability to interact with photographs as a substitute for people led McLuhan (2005) to call photography a 'Brothel-without-walls'. As well as people, photography also commodifies experience. Within tourism, for example, we are sold flights and hotels through photographs of places we have never been. Once there, we take our own pictures as souvenirs and, perhaps, on a subconscious level, we take into account the sort of photographs that might be produced when choosing a destination (Slater 1995). Thus, commodification works in both directions – we take photographs of our more 'profitable' relationships, activities and environments, and potential photographic value influences our choices as, in part, we seek out behaviours and destinations that generate good photographs (Sontag 1977). As Slater writes, 'we construct ourselves *for* the image and *through* images' (1995: 134, original emphasis).

Within our collections, where are the photographs of people doing household chores, working, commuting, being ill, watching TV or most of the things that make up the majority of our time? Some of our biggest concerns – finances, health, etc. – are seldom represented or even closely associated with any of our images. Personal photographs generally emphasize action, happiness and popularity to the general exclusion of unhappy, salacious or mundane activity (Slater 1995). Though exponentially expanding digital storage capacity has redefined what is considered 'photo-worthy' (see Lindley 2012; Van House et al. 2005), and collections include photographs that are mundane, playful, bizarre or accidental, we are still unlikely to see images of ourselves doing the washing up. Cameras capture only a fraction of who we are and what we do; yet, the

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content of the resulting photographs is privileged within our socially constructed identities (Sarvas and Frohlich 2011) and, consequently, our memories.

Memory

Episodic memory involves the subjective re-experiencing of personal events and is not fixed or flat like the photograph but involves movement, non-visual sensory information and reconstruction (Tulving 1972). Although they are often thought of as synonymous with memories (Batchen 2006), photographs act as cues that help us to mentally reconstruct related episodes. Episodic memory, unlike photographs, fades over time (Schacter 2007) – a notion many of us struggle to accept. The photographer uses the camera to stave off the loss of memory, attempting to correct a perceived flaw – the tendency of our biological brains to rapidly forget the details and imagery of our experience. As such, we often trust photographs more than human memory (Haldrup and Larsen 2003). However, a number of factors can derail the photograph's value to us as a tool for remembering our past.

To begin with, the stability of photographs can limit the flexibility with which we reinterpret the past. While we are able to think of ourselves differently over time, our photographs continue to remind those who view them of aspects of ourselves or our experience that we may wish to be forgotten. Many of us have photographs that we avoid looking at so that we do not have to face some aspect of our past. When our photographs move into the public domain, our control over such information is compromised.

It is inevitable that, within our memories, some aspects of experience will be sharpened over time while other aspects fade (Conway 2005). Taking photographs is an attempt to take control of this, but rather than stopping the fading process it simply changes what is preserved and what is forgotten. Koutstaal et al. (1999) found that looking at photographs can reinforce memory for an event at the expense of other events for which photos are not reviewed. Thus, those things we have photographs of can become privileged within memory. Sometimes, our memory moves even closer to the photographic image as we come to privilege not just what is in the photograph but the photograph itself (Bate 2010). Our memory is susceptible to externalized representations (Sacchi et al. 2007) and sometimes we recall a static, rectangular and purely visual image as a result of exposure to photography. As a personal example, when I think of Christmas ten years ago, the first image that appears in my mind is a staged photograph of the people who were there, rather than any 'direct' memory of the event itself. It requires effort on my part to move beyond the photograph into the movement, sounds and associations of episodic memory.

This phenomenon was alluded to by Roland Barthes (1981: 91) when he wrote that 'Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory… it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory'. David Bate (2010) draws from Freud (1980) to conceive of certain photographs as 'screen memories' that encapsulate and, thereby, impede our access to important memories. Both Barthes' and Bate's ideas relate to the psychological phenomenon of retroactive interference where a newer 'memory' blocks a similar, older one (Baddeley 1999). Photographs may interfere with our reconstruction of visual imagery, making it easier for us to picture a scene but harder for us to relive it, to feel as

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if we were there. Fortunately, it does not appear to be a simple equation where more photographs equals more interference. Since many of us now have large photo collections yet are still able to remember reasonable amounts of past experience, this phenomenon is perhaps restricted to a few, select photographs that become the personal equivalent of iconic images that stand in for a host of related memories. It is likely that this is dependent on the extent to which we review our photographs and rehearse the stories they relate to (which, as we will see, is not all that much).

The possibility of remembering only the contents of our photographs seems preferable to the possibility of forgetting an event entirely, and so we use photography to create opportunities for nostalgia and future remembering. It turns out, however, that we are poor strategists in this regard. For one thing, we exaggerate how much most photographs and the experiences they document will matter to us later. We over-inflate the importance of the present due to what Schkade and Kahneman (1998: 340) call the focusing illusion: 'Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it'. According to Kahneman (2011), we have an 'experiencing self' who lives in the present moment and a 'remembering self' who keeps track of the story of our life to help us make decisions. This story is a highly selective and simplified account that leaves out the vast majority of our experience and perhaps the experiencing self takes photographs in an attempt to influence it. Yet the remembering self must be selective because we simply cannot use all of the information we perceive. Just as making all of the text in this article bold would not help you to remember it, taking photographs of everything we encounter would not help us to remain conscious of it: if everything is important then nothing is.

Despite our reluctance to let certain moments pass without recording them, or to delete photographs even when we do not value them (Whittaker et al. 2012), the first thing that normally happens to a photo after some brief, initial attention, is that it is forgotten. In 1995, Slater claimed that most families did not look at their (pre-digital) photographs more than once per year and that most photographs remained in the envelopes they were placed in by a developer. In the earlier days of digital photography, most photos stayed on the camera or were downloaded to a hard drive and then forgotten (Whittaker et al. 2010). These trends suggest that it is the taking and having of photos, rather than looking at them, organizing them or sharing them, that we find most engaging. Nevertheless, while most photograph collections are seldom constructed or used in the way their creators intend (Whittaker et al. 2010), the component photographs still function as memory artefacts in a variety of unpredictable ways. We stumble across forgotten photographs while doing other things, sparking new insights from old memories (Frohlich et al. 2012). The nature of stumbling is changing radically as, in contrast to lying unused in paper envelopes or digital folders, photographs are increasingly uploaded to the cloud via an automatic or semi-automatic process, ending up in public spaces.

Digital disruption: Losing control

Pre-digital processes of photographic production, distribution and consumption were relatively discrete and defined: photos were taken, then developed, then collected and then shown to other people, put into albums or simply put away. Digital developments are compressing these practices together. The ability to look at photos on the camera

means that consumption can happen immediately after production, disrupting established processes of anticipation and rehearsal of the photographs that are taken and enabling new processes of practice, experimentation and retaking. Distribution – even internationally – can happen immediately after production or, in the case of automatic uploading services such as Google Plus, simultaneously.

There are a number of consequences to this compression. The barriers that are broken down have historically acted as filters. For example, the expense of film and development reduced the number of photographs and helped us to avoid collections that were too large for us to keep organized or to meaningfully engage with the majority of their contents. The intervention of a professional developer probably lessened the likelihood of our taking compromising images. The physical dimension of pre-digital photographs restricted the spaces where they would appear. The removal of these barriers has led to complications of control, privacy and context.

Before online photo sharing, collections were mostly controlled by the person who had taken the photographs. Now, if a photograph is networked by being uploaded to a photo-sharing website or a blog, or sent via e-mail, it is freed, to a large extent, from its original owner's control. Out of sight, it proliferates as copies are downloaded or amalgamated by friends, strangers and non-human entities such as search engines. The photographer cannot guarantee who can see it or where it will turn up.

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Figure 1: Cats on Flickr.

It comes to be viewed not alongside its former neighbours (photographs taken on the same camera at a similar time and place) but in thematic categories orchestrated through its metadata (e.g. all photos tagged as 'cat'). From here, it can be found and used by anyone for almost any purpose (Jackson 2009). Questions of audience (who can see / has seen this photo?), place (where *is* the photo?), ownership (whose is this version of this photo?) and purpose (what is the photo used *for*?) are all much more difficult to answer now than they were just 10 years ago.

As the context in which they are viewed changes, photos come to express things that their authors did not intend (Rose 2006). Consider the picture of the first Zeiss planetarium on [p. x] that was taken in 1923. This photograph presumably came into being through a chemical process, was printed on paper and has been scanned into digital form. Here it is in print again – or perhaps you are reading an on-screen PDF or some mashed-up, decontextualized form of this text that I have not anticipated. In any case, the photographer is probably no longer alive and will almost certainly never know that his photograph appeared in a journal about pervasive, digital media he could probably not imagine. In this issue of *Ubiquity*, it is used to contrast a historical dome with related, contemporary architecture. When it was taken, it was presumably for the purpose of documenting a modern event. This example shows the capacity for the photograph to say

things that are very different from the intentions of the photographer at the time it was taken.

Context is, perhaps, more significant for photographs of people. The photograph displayed here as Figure 2 has been unbound from the context in which it was created, where the behaviour portrayed may have seemed more reasonable (or, indeed, less reasonable). It is difficult to resist judging those people we see in images, despite not knowing their side of the story. We take the photograph as evidence even if we do not know what it is evidence *of*. An important step towards digital literacy involves learning to forgive these perceived transgressions as quotations taken out of context. At the same time, some level of restraint is advisable in producing and distributing images since we cannot be there to explain a potentially compromising photograph in each of its destinations.

Figure 2: People out of context.

Images of ourselves bear a hint of the doppelgänger, where one can simultaneously *be looking at* and *be in* the photograph. Two selves diverge as the camera's shutter closes: one living, ageing and evolving, the other photographic, fixed in age and appearance, yet interpreted differently with each new context in which it is perceived. Each photographic self produced in this way is of a different time, yet they all exist at the same time – now.

By positing images in online environments, Bayne (2008: 9) writes that 'we scatter our "bodies" across the web where they gain a kind of independence as nodes for commentary, connection and appropriation by others'. As avatars, for example, photographs are treated as a proxy for our embodied selves. Where the person in a photograph is well known, the representation can be mistaken for the thing it represents: 'People, quite literally, see through them; they do not see a photograph of a "loved one", only the person' (Haldrup and Larsen 2003: 41).

As time passes, the photographic image does not evolve to reflect our current appearance, although our interpretation of it does evolve to reflect our current attitude and context. On Facebook, for example, an old profile picture can create an impression of currency by appearing beside current posts. In Facebook's case, changing the profile image updates the old picture that stood beside every post across the user's timeline, again disrupting the relationship between current identity and past perspectives through the suggestion that the present self currently endorses each old post.

Conclusion

Photographs are strange and complex things. They take the place of our memories, wearing away at our own reconstructions of imagery and association and privileging their content and metadata over what we may otherwise have found important. They do not record history, but determine it.

The compression, through evolving digital affordances, of production, distribution and consumption increases the complexity of the networks in which we position ourselves – and are positioned – through photographs. Through online distribution, photographs proliferate and escape the bonds of their original context, disrupting control, privacy and meaning. This disruption affects the way that we are represented by our images, which, wherever they turn up, express ideas without our knowledge or consent and without reference to our current perspective.

We are learning the consequences of these developments as we go. Until we find a common balance of control, restraint and forgiveness, we are likely to face challenges of constrained identities, threats to our self-image and an over-privileging within memory of the contents of our photographs. Despite all of this, we continue to take increasing numbers of photos. It seems inevitable that we perform photography and photography performs us.

Acknowledgements

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