Blissfully Ephemeral: a Genealogy of a Photographic Paradox

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Abstract

This thesis is a genealogy of photography as a communicative object, one that goes against the grain of photography as a memento. The phenomenon that has triggered my interest is Snapchat, a smartphone app with which photographs can be exchanged that disappear almost immediately. My genealogical method, as inspired by Michel Foucault, is not one of looking for origins; I acknowledge the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of history. Rather, my aim is to establish how conditions were shaped in order for a phenomenon such as Snapchat to emerge. Throughout my research I assess how the paradox of the photograph as memento versus the photograph as communicative object has affected photography's relation to terms such as memory and communication over the course of a number of decades. In order to establish productive analyses, I use examples from vernacular photography as well as art photography and conceptual art. The family photo album, Instagram, and Fiona Tan's *Vox Populi* are the protagonists in the first chapter, in which I assess the altered relation between photography and memory. In the second chapter, On Kawara, the picture postcard, and Polaroid photograph serve to illustrate some characteristics of visual, photographic communication. The emphasis in such interactions is on the transfer of phatic messages, an exchange in which the photograph as an object plays a mere verificatory role; it helps the sender to tell the recipient that they are still alive. The third chapter centres on the disappearance of the photograph that is the consequence of Snapchat and other disappearing-photo-apps. At a time in which we amass daunting amounts of photographs, Snapchat has begun to relieve us somehow from the burden of remembrance and time-consuming structuring processes, but clearly, it does not operate without collateral damage. Certainly, the way in which photography functions as part of our daily life is rapidly altering. Snapchat's wealth of ambiguities complicates straightforward interpretation, certainly at this stage in time when it is still relatively new. Could it be considered an inherent critique of the way in which we build our online identities, or is it inextricably part of the social media machine? Does it enable a renewed sense of intimacy, or is it the epitome of contemporary alienation? Through the continuous publicness of our private lives, much of the distinction between what used to be the private and the public has collapsed. Snapchat provides an answer to this situation in the sense that it offers its users a right to be forgotten, yet also, the consistent exposure and interaction it motivates leaves little room for privacy. And contrary to what many believe, this increased exposure does not seem to make us more visually literate, and it never ceases to overwhelm us. More than ever, Snapchat has made visual communication to be about its "here I am" value, and less and less about the photograph itself. Clearly, it is not an isolated phenomenon as such, rather, it is symptomatic for many widespread societal changes, attitudes and developments. As you will read, Snapchat's inconsistencies cannot currently be solved, but arguably, that should not be seen as a weakness. On the contrary: they demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon that I have studied.

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Introduction

It perplexed me that in 2013, being a 23-year-old, I was suddenly unaware of the latest in my own field of study – photography. There is a generation some years younger than I am – often referred to as "Millennials"[1] – who grew up with the Internet as a self-evidence. They never accessed the Internet using a modem, and certainly never dealt with such a thing as a 15-minutes-of-internet-a-day limit. They do not know what it is like to live without the Internet, and they do not recognise a cassette tape when they see one. They are the ones who have started using an app called Snapchat. I had not heard about it until the beginning of 2013, nearly a year and a half after its launch, which many of my younger acquaintances considered scandalous. Being a photography student, I could not help but feel embarrassed. How could I have missed this? It did not prove to be very difficult, seeing that the essence of Snapchat communication is that it disappears very quickly. It began to fascinate me. Why are these youngsters exchanging photographs that they cannot keep? Why do they not *want* to keep them? Is this all about preventing embarrassment? And is it not slightly sacrilegious to treat photographs as if they are disposable? But it could not have come out of nowhere, I felt. So I decided to trace this attitude and need back into photography's history to see where it came from and how we have gotten to this point, hoping to interpret and explain why it is so logical that this tech-savvy generation is using Snapchat.

Photography came around at a time when the Industrial Revolution was in full force, and it was always both part of it, but also, somehow, moving against its essence. As Susan Sontag states: "Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is able to record what is disappearing."[2] Photography, hence, long functioned as a means to preserve the time that modernity killed so fast, but also, newer and newer inventions were a way to keep up with its pace – briefly put, their relation was and still is quite schizophrenic. Snapchat came around at a time in which (the transition to) the digital was rapidly affecting the way in which we live. In general, society has started moving at a faster pace, consequently leaving us with sickeningly short attention spans. That trend can be traced to the pace at which technology moves, the short-term perspective of flash trading, the way in which we are continually distracted by the feeling

[1] Millennials is a common abbreviation of "millennial learners," also referred to as "digital natives;" they are the generation who grew up with technologies such as computers, cell phones and video games. The term refers to the turn of millennium, and the fact that this generation spent the majority of their (conscious) lives in the 2000s – although there is no clear demarcation of when exactly the generation begins. For further elaborations: Eva Brumberger; Shawn Bergman et al.

[2] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 15-16.

we are missing something, and the apparent necessity of multitasking.[3] That we would be surrounded by screens and imagery, according to Jonathan Crary, was already partly prefigured in Nicola Tesla's 1901 plan for a World System, one in which everything and everyone would interconnect.[4] Tesla, in contrast to Edison, envisioned electricity as an immanent substance – as something that would surround us at all times. Now that we have arrived at or close to that point, it seems that we do not know how to deal with it. Photography, as it always has, exists both as part of this context and as a way to move against it. Snapchat, by enabling its users to exchange photographs that disappear, could both be considered an inseparable part of the society of immediacy which we are part of, as well as a move against the grain of wanting to hold on to more and more data.

While the digital is close to entirely replacing the analogue, we are confronted with a type of digital oblivion. The fact that more and more libraries are closing down, according to Bregtje van der Haak, is "a symptom of a time spirit that is merely concerned with looking forward and is discharging the means that enabled it to look back."[5] Does this mean we are losing an important part of our history? Technology, in a metaphorical sense, has become the amnesiac who still has a great brain function, but without a reliable ability to remember the past. Institutions such as the Long Now Foundation and the Internet Archive voice concerns that many others have with regards to the rapid loss of data that characterises the digital. We have outsourced many of our memories and histories to commercial companies, who will probably only keep our data for us as long as it is in *their* interest. It seems that we are continually fixing, but never perpetuating.[6] These dilemmas, voiced so poignantly in Bregtje van der Haak's VPRO Tegenlicht documentary *Digitale Vergetelheid*, are not unique to the Internet. They have been at the heart of the photographic debate for as long as it has existed.

But if the above seems to imply that technology and modernity have unidirectionally changed us, then there is certainly a counterargument to be made. As Vivian Sobchack explains in her "Scene of the Screen," materialities of human communication fundamentally alter our subjectivity and experiences and the way in which technology functions in our lives. Referring to Martin Heidegger, she states:

> Technology never comes to its particular material specificity and function in a neutral context for neutral effect. Rather, it is always historically informed not only by its materiality but also by its political, economic, and social context, and thus always both co-constitutes and expresses cultural values. Correlatively, technology is never merely

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[3] <http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/afleveringen/2014-2015/digitaal-geheugenverlies.html>. Accessed December 3, 2014.

[4] Jonathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum, 1984), 283.

[5] Tegenlicht Meet Up, Pakhuis de Zwijger, Amsterdam, September 9, 2014. Translated by the author.

[6] *Digitale Vergetelheid*, directed by Bregtje van der Haak (2014; Hilversum: VPRO Tegenlicht), TV.

> "used," never merely instrumental. It is always also "incorporated" and "lived" by the human beings who engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors.[7]

Even though my method is not phenomenological, I am interested, like Sobchack, in how technology is used by humans, and how it functions in their lives. Technological determinist arguments, in that context, are not only invalid, but also useless. In agreement with Vivian Sobchack, but also Raymond Williams, Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, I argue that such technologically determinist argumentation reduces much of the complexity of how technologies find their place in human lives.[8] Clearly, in order to build a solid argument, the formulation of an alternative approach is crucial, one that recognises the importance of social, economic, and historical developments involved with my look into photography. Looking at how technology is used is crucial, but explaining why is vital. My approach is rooted most solidly in the writings of Michel Foucault, whose approach helps determine how a specific set of circumstances and institutions are rooted in particular formations of power. His definition and use of genealogy as a historical technique is non-teleological, non-deterministic and admitting of the haphazard conflicts that form much of our histories.[9] It opposes itself to the search for "origins."[10] A genealogy is directed towards determining how one social system replaces another, which in my case means going back to trace some of Snapchat's precedents, and determining in what manner Snapchat is rooted in contemporary society. However, I am well aware that, as Foucault states:

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form to all its vicissitudes.[11]

Therefore, my juxtaposition of Snapchat with its precedents is not yielded towards finding historical beginnings, nor do I aim to identify any origin, I merely wish to demonstrate how phenomena from past times can offer interesting perspectives towards interpreting the present.

Along similar lines, I give credit to Brian Holmes, whose writings on the flexible personality provide the necessary insight into the societal and political processes which gave

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[7] Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence,'" in *Materialities of Communication*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrechts and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 84; Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 317.

[8] Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen"; Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, "Technologies of Memory: Practices of Remembering in Analogue and Digital Photography," *New Media Society* 16 (2014); Raymond Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form*, ed. Ederyn Williams (London: Routledge, 1990).

[9] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, Memory," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154

[10] Ibid., 140.

[11] Ibid., 146

rise to the status quo in which Snapchat is being used. His interpretation of power relations situates the personal computer within a mechanism employed by traditional companies who aim to keep their "workers" docile.[12] The companies will aim always to upturn societal critique and moments of crisis, silencing those voices that deem their operations malicious. Their challenge, as Holmes explains, lies in partially integrating critiques so that the system can become tolerable again.[13] Using the personal computer, in a way, corporatism has given back to the worker, or "prosumer," an illusory sense of freedom and flexibility. The new work processes that are the result of these developments, and the more volatile modes of consumption that the system promotes, seem to connect seamlessly to Snapchat's volatile nature; it imitates the quick obsolence of products in its treatment of the photograph.[14] I will thus trace what I consider to be Snapchat's ancestors in order to determine mutual parallels and differences, thereby analysing the status quo of photography-as-experience. Looking at photographic history, how did particular conditions shape the possibility for Snapchat to emerge?

My thesis is a genealogy of photography as a communicative object – and it is one that goes against the grain of photography as a memento. Using a number of case studies, I will assess particular 'moments' in the history of the paradox of the photograph-as-memento versus the photograph-as-experience, ultimately aiming to demonstrate how aspects of the photograph-as-experience have always existed. In my pursuit of a genealogical line of reasoning, I acknowledge that the present is produced through a reconfiguration of the past, and that history is always contingent; its turns are never rational, predictable or inevitable. I call it a paradox because although it may seem as if the photograph's mnemonic and communicative functions are mutually exclusive, they have in fact existed in parallel for all of photography's history without much difficulty, albeit in different configurations. Equally valid arguments could be made for calling it a coexistence, a juxtaposition, or a contradistinction, but for the aforementioned reason of a seeming mutual exclusivity and incompatibility, I will stick with paradox. My goal as such is not to claim that Snapchat encompasses a paradigm shift in photographic history in itself, but rather, I strive to demonstrate that it is emblematic of certain reconfigurations in terms of the changing relations between photography and terms such as memory and communication. By emphasising the many continuities and lessons that can be drawn from certain precedents, I aim to show how Snapchat is symptomatic of these changes in photography. My main question therefore is: *what is the status quo in the paradox of photograph-as-memento versus photograph-as-experience and how has it developed and*

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[12] Brian Holmes, *The Flexible Personality. For a New Cultural Critique*, January 2002, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en/print>, 7. The page numbers I refer to in relation to Holmes' article are those appearing on the printable version of the online article that is originally without page numbers.
[13] Ibid., 6.
[14] Ibid., 8. Holmes refers for some of these ideas to David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 141-148.

transformed throughout photography's history? Through the course of three chapters, I will analyse what photographic history reveals about the development of both functions, predominantly from a material culture angle.

In the first chapter, I will focus on how photography functioned as a manner in which to preserve, to keep certain memories. As José van Dijck emphasizes, in the analogue age "personal photography was first and foremost a means for autobiographical remembering."[15] The epitome of the photograph as keeper of memories – the family album – will serve as a starting point for the discussion of how the mnemonic function of photography flourished and changed. I will finally juxtapose the family album to Instagram, a smartphone photography app that shares some of its mnemonic features, but also encompasses some drastic changes. Both phenomena, despite their differences, are characterised by a degree of aesthetic motivation, and both reflect a need to keep photographs for the future.

Besides its preservative function, photography has always served as a tool for communication, which was, in Van Dijck's words, "duly acknowledged, but were always rated secondary to its prime purpose of memory."[16] My second chapter therefore revolves around analysing photography as an inherently communicative object, used to convey predominantly phatic messages. In this case, I juxtapose the picture postcard and Polaroid photograph in order to determine how and why photographic communication arose, developed and mutated.

The third chapter will function as a way of bringing together the conclusions from the first two chapters, in an analysis of the 'object' that motivated me to write this thesis: Snapchat. Its temporary nature raises questions about whether photography's mnemonic function still has a future, as there is no apparent need to keep these inherently communicative photographs. Now that the photograph itself has become disposable, there is much more at stake than the average techno-optimist would expectantly admit. I will analyse Snapchat in a context of ephemerality, obsolence, and the possible consequences of their recent involvements with photography.

Throughout this thesis, I will focus on vernacular photography[17] rather than professional or art photography. That is because I aim to study the role of photography as a part of daily life, not necessarily how it functions in a professional or artistic context. That does not mean that these developments are not relevant for professionals, but rather that this research does not address these developments from their point of view. I will, however, use examples from art and conceptual photography to introduce theoretical dilemmas and demonstrate that these problems are not unique to private photography. In fact, the resultant comparative analysis ensures for a

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[15] José van Dijck, "Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory," *Visual Communication* 7 (2008): 58.

[16] Ibid. Van Dijck refers to Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag, *On Photography*.

[17] I use the term vernacular photography in combination with terms such as amateur-, private-, personal-, snapshot- and domestic photography, depending on what term is used by the authors that I cite. To a large degree, despite some nuance differences, they are exchangeable terms referring to the same phenomenon.

productive dialogue between the professional and the vernacular – two domains that share much of their theoretical ground. The full integration of photography studies under the larger rubrics of visual- and material culture ensures for an interdisciplinary approach. Both the complexity as well as the importance of studying vernacular photography cannot easily be overestimated. Many have struggled to interpret what Catherine Zuromskis calls "the ubiquitous and banal but deeply affecting culture of snapshot photography."[18] Shortly said, the images that are part of this culture are difficult to pin down, exactly because they are produced for and circulate predominantly within the private domain. Additionally, as Zuromskis highlights, their meanings are also strongly embedded in individual motivations, which makes snapshot photography a challenging domain of study. Yet if even partly understood, it is a very rich addition to the understanding of visual culture as a whole, and to be able to contribute to such enrichment is my aspiration, even if my approach must remain in limited scope.

[18] Catherine Zuromskis, "Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography," *American Quarterly* 60:2 (2008): 428.

We have no idea who they are, yet their pictures look so familiar. The photographs on the wall are strikingly similar to the ones in our own albums. They form the basis for Fiona Tan's *Vox Populi*, a series for which Tan reordered sets of family photographs, collected by assistants in Norway, Switzerland, Tokyo, Sydney and London. Tan never met with participants directly, using assistants to ask them to lend out their family albums for the project, always aiming for a cross section of the city or country to be represented. As Coline Milliard emphasizes: "the distance Tan maintains counteracts the intimacy of looking at someone's cherished pictures – and it ensured that the families wouldn't interfere with her choices."[19] Tan received the albums without any of the owner's background information, enabling her to make purely visual choices in constructing the five big installations, each consisting of nearly 300 photographs (Figure 1.1). All photographs originate in an era in which the album was still prevalent; none were ever really intended for strangers' eyes.[20] Tan's transfer of private pictures to an artistic, public sphere, strips them of the original album's narrative as well as of most of their emotional content.

Using *Vox Populi*, Tan confronts us with the way in which we attempt to depict our lives and ourselves.[21]And as Brian Dillon points out in the book version of *Vox Populi London*: "The oscillation between cities and whole countries is not systematic, but it is important: Variation blurs the notion of what exactly constitutes a 'people.' As the artist herself emphasizes, stereotypes and clichés are 'what ubiquitous amateur photography is dealing with a lot of the time.'"[22] Paradoxically, while each piece attempts to capture the spirit of a people in all their diversity, it also perpetuates the myth of human unity and reiterates the homogeneity of family photography in what Sacha Bronwasser calls "a seductive cocktail of recognition and voyeurism."[23] Even more than about homogeneity, representation, or anything else, however, Tan's *Vox Populi* has come to be about an interaction between the private and the public.

Already at the start of the series in 2004, the concept of having a photo album was facing extinction at a rapid rate, while simultaneously a new photographic phenomenon was emerging. Dillon describes the *Vox Populi* series as an "eloquent monument of privacy" in an "era of social media," a statement that would not have made sense before social media came along. Only when this development did occur, did the effect of Tan's series became clear.[24] As Bronwasser states: "Around 2010 the Western world (in which *Vox Populi* is set) faced an

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[19] Coline Milliard, "Images of a People: Fiona Tan Puts a Face on London," *Modern Painters* (2012): 60.
[20] Sacha Bronwasser, "Een Monument voor Privacy," *Fiona Tan, Options & Futures* (2014): 2. Passages translated from Dutch by the author.
[21] <http://www.depont.nl/collection/artists/artist/werk_id/1443/kunstenaar/tan/>
[22] Brian Dillon, "Introduction," in *Vox Populi, London* (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 2012).
[23] Coline Milliard, "Images of a People," 63; Mark Godfrey, "Photography Found and Lost," 99; Sacha Bronwasser, "Een Monument," 3.
[24] Sacha Bronwasser, "Een Monument," 3-4.

interlocking of two affairs that irreversibly changed our idea of what was private imagery and what was not."[25] As social media was thriving and the smartphone started outnumbering all other photographic cameras, people soon started sharing their most intimate imagery online with people they barely even knew. Carefully constructed photo albums, the selections made by an artist and the anonymity with which they are displayed in *Vox Populi* stand in stark contrast with this online sharing culture. Crucially, Tan's endeavour makes a point about what happens when private photographs are made public, and paradoxically, by recontextualising private photographs in a museum context, Tan makes a statement for the keeping private of private photography, in favour of looking beyond the first and fleeting impressions so characteristic of social media.

The concerns raised by Tan are relevant not only to her own artistic practice, they are also central to debates on family photography and its role as memory storage. In order to determine the mnemonic implications of the aforementioned photographic shift from private to increasingly public, I will first describe the histories and assets of the photographic phenomenon most solidly associated with the photograph as a memento – the family album. Next, I examine the long-intertwined histories of photography and memory. An analysis of Instagram, a digital phenomenon I consider to be, in some sense, a digital descendant of the family album, serves to identify some continuities as well as discontinuities relating to the photograph's mnemonic function. The transition from analogue to digital is not central to this juxtaposition, as my study takes a material culture angle more than a technological one. The central argument revolves around the transformations in the form and function of vernacular photography, essentially asking: *what was the nature of the mnemonic function of the photograph in the context of the family album and how has it changed upon the movement to newer photographic platforms?*

Later sections will expose the degree to which the family album served to remember and store, but also to communicate certain aspects of family life. That latter function has merely expanded since, repressing mnemonic functions. That we have outsourced our performances of self-awareness to smartphone apps, implies a shift in focus from looking to represent the past for the future, into not looking much further than the immediate present. Primarily, I aim to demonstrate how photography's mnemonic function shifted from the traditional family album to modern equivalents of the photographic album on the smartphone.

[25] Ibid., 4.

> Before there was Flickr, Photobucket, Picasa, MobileMe, Facebook, Instagram and Fotki, there was the photo album. A visual repository of private histories and personal narratives, the photo album was found on mantelpieces and bookshelves in every home. You couldn't log into a photo album. You couldn't search it for tags or mail it to your friends. You had to pick it up, open it, flip through it.[26]
>
> – *Christian Bunyan*

The photo album could hardly be described in a more nostalgic manner. Christian Bunyan, in a text accompanying Erik Kessels' *Album Beauty*, writes about the photo album in a retrospective tense, through the lens of the digital. It is as if he feels that younger generations would otherwise not understand or be able to imagine what the photo album is, or, as if he thinks that older generations would have forgotten about it already. The success of books and exhibitions curated by Kessels in recent years (Figure 1.2) – propagating the beauty and physical proximity of photography in the heyday of the album – is telling of our attitude towards the photo album that we for so long lovingly kept. But what exactly are these visual repositories?

Scholars predominantly demarcate the start (and the democratisation) of vernacular photography with the launch of the first Kodak box camera in 1888, a company whose slogan was: "You press the button – we do the rest."[27] Many of their advertisements advocated the simplicity and mobility of the devices (Figure 1.3), The availability of these cameras placed photography suddenly "in the hands of everyday Americans,"[28] the result of which was not only the democratisation of the medium. Most of all, it became a manner in which to celebrate family life, a process in which the keeping of a photographic album became indispensable. In Dong-Hoo Lee's words: "Popular practices of photo-taking and keeping a photo album were contextualized by the modern familial ideology that put great value on the stable and united family."[29] The integration of photographs into albums started, according to Silvan Niedermeier, with wealthy upper- and middle-class Americans, who begun to bring compact cameras on their travels, integrating the pictures in personal travel albums afterwards.[30] Clearly, the taking and keeping of photographs of one's own life was, at least in its early days, very much reserved for privileged Americans. As the phenomenon became more affordable, it entered the worlds of

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[26] Christian Bunyan, in *Album Beauty. The Glory Days of the Photo Album,* ed. Erik Kessels (Paris: RVB Books, 2012).

[27] <http://www.kodak.com/ek/US/en/Our_Company/History_of_Kodak/Milestones_-_chronology/1878-1929.htm>

[28] Catherine Zuromskis, *Exhibiting Snapshot Photography*, 437.

[29] Dong-Hoo Lee, "Digital Cameras, Personal Photography and the Reconfiguration of Spatial Experiences," *The Informational Society* 26 (2010): 267.

[30] Silvan Niedermeier, "Imperial Narratives: Reading US Soldiers' Photo Albums of the Philippine-American War," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 18:1 (2014): 34.

individuals from all different kinds of classes and countries. Especially the class dimension is illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu's famous typology of photography as an "art moyen."

In his interpretation, photography can so easily be integrated in anyone's life because it is one of the most ordinary things and requires no training or education, although this does not imply that the different social classes use photography in the same way.[31] Ways of using photography, according to Bourdieu, were united in their emphasis on documenting family life, quintessentially a strategy of belonging, namely "that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, in short, of reinforcing the integration of the family group by resserting [sic] the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity."[32] In a way, the documenting of family life had come to be considered as inevitable as the social ceremonies it solemnized, and most crucially, even though the images may often be stereotypical, including to the person taking them, the family album "expresses the essence of social memory."[33] It is this exact aspect that the album brings: a sense of reassurance about sharing a common past. Lastly, but not unimportantly, Bourdieu characterizes the first photographs as thoroughly private. Apart from wedding photographs and certain portraits, photographs were locked away, to be seen only by close relatives. Even more strongly so, it was "considered indecent or ostentatious to show pictures of members of the family to just anyone."[34] Private photography was clearly never intended to cross those family boundaries and be exposed to the eyes of strangers.

In order to demonstrate how the theories of Bourdieu apply to individual examples, I will now discuss one album from the collection of the Leiden University library, which hosts a large collection of photographs and photographica, amongst which is a large number of photographic albums. The majority of the albums in the Leiden collection are travel albums, focused on depicting faraway countries – but also places within the Netherlands – to the home front. Not coincidentally, the spreading of photography coincided with the high times of colonialism and an increase of tourism in many places all over the world.[35] Photography, in many of the albums, serves to demonstrate the magnificence of the sites visited and views encountered. Why the Leiden collection accommodates such a large quantity of travel albums while having collected so little albums depicting a more private type of sphere is largely unclear, although part of the explanation could be their regular focus on travel photography in research and exhibitions. More fundamentally, the albums depicting family life as it took place inside the boundaries of the home(town), are not as easily obtained as albums predominantly depicting travel sites, precisely due to their private nature. Also, to some, the travel albums may

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[31] Pierre Bourdieu et al., *Photography. A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 47.
[32] Ibid., 19
[33] Ibid., 30.
[34] Ibid., 24
[35] <www.library.leiden.edu/special-collections/photographs/subcollections-photographs.html>

seem more historically, visually and narratively relevant than 'just' some family album.

The album I will discuss is an anonymous album entitled *Familie Album 1922/1926*, as is written on the album's cover (Figure 1.4). According to the catalogue data, there is little known about the album, except that the photographs were most probably taken from 1922 up to 1926 in the Netherlands and Germany. The album contains 36 pages with pictures stuck onto them, some of which are captioned. Depending on the size and interdependence of the photographs, each page shows between three to five of them, whilst some photographs are clearly missing, judging by glue residue and torn paper (Figure 1.5). What sets this album apart from most other albums in the Leiden collection is its focus on family. Other albums focus on lavish views and scenery, with very little to no recognition for the social group visiting the sites depicted – an excellent example of which are the albums of amateur photographer H.J. Herbig (Figure 1.6). The family album, on the contrary, is focused on showing the doings of a family unit on the move, in their different (holiday) activities, with the occasional exception of a scenery shot (Figures 1.7 and 1.8). Another particularity, compared to many of the other albums, is the long time span of the photographs included. Rather than focusing on one holiday, like most of the albums, this album includes photographs from a four-year period. Why these people chose to compile an album using four years of photographs rather than one holiday is unclear – they might have chosen to be more selective about their photography, or perhaps they simply could not afford to fill a whole album with photographs taken during one holiday.

In its focus on people rather than scenery, this particular album comes closest to the type that most theorists seem to describe when they discuss the family album. The mix of activities includes travel, scenery, and portraiture – the variety of activities is great, one criterion of selection seeming to be the positivity of the experiences. Most of them are posed, smiles included, and all of them depict what most would consider to be 'fun' moments. This album really is about representing the family unit's participation in various activities, rather than anything else. In this sense, it really solemnizes and immortalizes what Bourdieu called the "high points in family life."[36] As I will make clear, it is quite likely that also this album contains gaps, caused by its efforts to represent the family unit at its best, looking happy and composed. The fact that most of the photographs look posed, can be explained by another of Bourdieu's essays, specifically the one in which he and his wife Marie-Claire focus on the principle of frontality.[37] In their view, this is a formal element inherent to photographed objects, because often portrait photography is predominated by the endeavour "to pose for the photograph as one would stand before a man whom one respects and from whom one expects respect, face on, one's forehead held high and one's head straight."[38] In a society that attaches great value to

[36] Bourdieu, *Middle-brow Art,* 19.
[37] Pierre and Marie-Claire Bourdieu, "The Peasant and Photography," *Ethnography* 5:4 (2004): 610.
[38] Bourdieu, *Middle-brow Art*, 82.

honour and dignity, it seems important under all circumstances to account for a controlled representation of the self in photographs in order to indicate a certain social status – which looks to be the case at least for this one family album.

Most straightforwardly, regardless of cultural context and momentarily bypassing individual examples, the album functions as a container for physical photographs, guaranteeing the longevity of this fragile mnemonic medium.[39] As Martha Langford claims, photographic technology in general, and the album in particular "allowed people to enjoy their growing collections of photographs by arranging them in clusters and sequences. It follows that these arrangements served different purposes: albums as collections, memoirs, and travelogues ask us to consider the pastimes and life-experiences of their individual compilers."[40] Strengthening this statement, Gregory Batchen explains why this principle of organisation sets the album apart from the individual photograph: "But beyond all this, the gridding of photographs provides them with the unmistakable structure of narrative, with the declared capacity to tell a story, always a weakness of individual photographs."[41] And exactly because albums are assembled, and carefully compiled, usually by one person, they will always be selective – a selectiveness that will, inevitably, result in gaps: "Albums show what can be shown, and they also keep secrets whose existence can be intuited from what is *not* shown, from the album's changes of direction and gaps."[42] This selectivity is interesting because it is telling of the family album's celebratory function, made evident by the fact that the lesser moments are rarely photographed, and in extension, how special occasions are rarely *not* photographed.

The accessibility of photography offered new mnemonic functions altogether, meaning in part that those who were photographed at an early stage now started actively photographing themselves. This natural transition is therefore in part responsible for the development of a more ordinary, more quotidian photography.[43] Yet aside from that, the normalcy of photography offered an opportunity to thoroughly cover and depict your own life and the lives of the ones closest to you, visually documenting your everyday life for future generations. Traditionally, domestic photography has had a strong bias towards constructing a positive image of the family, and trying to show the members at happy times, "often wishing to see them at their best."[44] As a consequence, the album in which the moments are assembled never offers an objective image of the family – and frankly, it was never intended to be like that. As Sarvas and Frohlich rightly

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[39] Sontag, *On Photography*, 4-5.
[40] Martha Langford, *Telling Pictures and Showing Stories: Photographic Albums in the Collection of the McCord Museum of Canadian History* (2005), 4.
[41] Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 66.
[42] Langford, *Telling Pictures*, 15.
[43] Risto Sarvas and David Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media – the Changing Picture of Domestic Photography* (London: Springer Verlag, 2011), 6.
[44] Ibid., 6.

say: "..the family album may not be false as such, but it is a subjective perspective of what has taken place in a family's history."[45] By constructing an album in such a manner, the compiler constructs their own version of family history.[46]

Mnemonically, such subjectivity has far-reaching implications, seeing that it heavily determines retrospective reflections on family life once the album is browsed. According to Annette Kuhn: "As with the souvenir as both token of remembrance and keepsake, value is placed on keeping – preserving – family photographs and albums, even (and perhaps especially) if they are rarely looked at."[47] In her vision, family albums can function as substitutes for remembering, as prosthetics, yet they can also be used by their compilers as incentives to "perform" memory practices in addition to them being simply physical containers of photographs because, as she says, they are not looked at as often. Along the same lines, Martha Langford states: "A photographic album is a repository of memory. A photographic album is an instrument of social performance."[48] Kuhn and Langford clearly regard the mnemonic practices associated with the family album as *active* ones; agents producing memories and meanings. Kuhn calls it *memory work*,[49] referring to how the album as an object may become a trigger for mnemonic practices not necessarily directly associated with the album itself. Her explanation of memory practices related to the album centres on the additional creation of memories; the meaning of the photographic album, in her view, is contingent and flexible.[50] It means that a photograph or an album can be seen as evidence for what has happened, but additionally, through the non-obvious meanings attached to the photographs, an album can produce "counter-memories."[51] Albums possess this feature even more than singular photographs, considering the narratives they construct and the additional value that it brings to a collection of photographs. As Langford argues, the album represents the compiler's "expression of autobiographical and collective memory through image selection, annotation and organisation."[52] In sum, for the owner of the photograph and/or album, they can be about much more than their own, their family's or their country's past or present. In a way, through the conscious act of memory work, "pasts and presents are folded together." The photographs and album are certainly souvenirs, keepsakes, but such words certainly lack the depth of meaning they are able to convey.

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[45] Ibid., 7.
[46] Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, eds., *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago, 1991), 7.
[47] Annette Kuhn, "Memory Texts and Memory Work: Performances of Memory In and With Visual Media," *Memory Studies* 3 (2010): 304.
[48] Martha Langford, "Speaking the Album: An Application of the Oral-Photographic Framework," in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, eds. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 223.
[49] Kuhn, "Memory Texts," 303.
[50] Ibid., 304.
[51] Ibid., 303.
[52] Langford, "Speaking the Album," 227.

> The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our 'natural magic', and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy. […] Such is the fact, that we may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there and in the space of a single minute fix it there so firmly as to be no more capable of change, even if thrown back into the sunbeam from which it derived its origin.[53]
> *– W.F. Talbot*

Upon the invention of photography, the camera obscura – retroactively – became a device with a deficiency. The images that could be seen flashing by, projected, were ephemeral and vulnerable. The camera obscura had no memory, and yet that was never really seen as a shortcoming. As Douwe Draaisma states: "Before 1839, the ephemerality of the image seemed as if an inevitable consequence of the laws of nature."[54] Jonathan Crary has extensively researched this epistemological shift that occurred in the early nineteenth century – the period when various optical devices came to change the way we looked at the camera obscura – and consequently, the science of vision itself. As Crary states: "What is of immediate concern here is how some of the optical devices that spawned a new mass visual culture in the nineteenth century are inseparable from the new normative sciences of the observer and of the seeing body."[55] The wide variety of optical devices mentioned by Crary all affected the epistemology of vision which started to shift towards an increased interest in the observer. This new kind of observer came into being through the discoveries made in the empirical knowledge of vision – a change accurately symbolised by the shift from camera obscura to photography. As Foucault calls it, it was "the threshold of our modernity"[56] that gave way to these epistemological changes. Whereas earlier, there was an assumed objectivity about what was seen by the observer and the image that was displayed, new discoveries meant that this assumption was rapidly replaced by the idea of the corporeal subjectivity of the observer. The camera obscura, both as optical system and as epistemological principle, no longer corresponded to scientific thought on vision.[57] The role of photography in this shift, according to Crary, was that it had "already abolished the inseparability of observer and camera obscura, bound together by a single point of view, and made the new camera an apparatus fundamentally independent of the spectator, yet

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[53] William Henry Fox Talbot, "Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing," in *Photography: Essays and Images,* ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 25.
[54] Douwe Draaisma, *De Metaforenmachine* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2003), 142. Passages translated from Dutch by the author.
[55] Jonathan Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," *October* 45 (1988): 15.
[56] Crary, "Techniques," 6.
[57] Ibid., 4 + 10.

which masqueraded as a transparent and incorporeal intermediary between observer and world."[58] The combination of a newly discovered embodied viewer and the preconceived realism of photography, therefore, is both a solution to the camera obscura's shortcomings, but also preconceives a denial of certain phantasmic elements inherent to the body as a basis for a new theory of vision.[59]

I use Draaisma's elaborations on the relation between photography and memory as a starting point for further analysis. Whereas before the epistemological shift of the nineteenth century the camera obscura was used as a metaphor for the variable nature of our soul,[60] now photography lent itself to an analogy in which visual impulses were administered in the brain, after their projection onto the retina.[61] Oliver Wendell Holmes' metaphor, in which photography fixes the transient and provides durability to the ephemeral, regards photography as an invention of a "mirror with a memory."[62] However, his metaphor was later upturned and instead of the mirror, the human memory came to be seen as a photographic plate, prepared for the recording, fixation and reproduction of a visual experience.[63] John William Draper uses photography as a metaphor for his principle of indelibility. His logic is the following: "But if on such inorganic surfaces impressions may in this way be preserved, how much more likely is it that the same thing occurs in the purposely-constituted ganglion!"[64] In stating so, Draper assigns to the human nervous system the capacity to retain "the relics or traces of impressions."[65] For a long time, the essence of the bulk of photographic metaphors referred to the alleged permanence of what was thought to be stored as a memory. Photographic technique was used to explain and suggest that a memory does not forget, and that it forms a perfect, permanent registration of our visual experiences. Authors from a variety of areas have independently used photographic metaphors in order to empower their theories of physiological retention,[66] rarely accounting for the inevitable ephemerality that every single photograph is subject to.

Taking into account the developments made in the understanding of photography and memory, the theories did not go without criticism – even from within the domain of mental

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[58] Ibid., 35.
[59] Ibid., 35.
[60] E.g. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (1974), 284. He discusses the subjectivity of perspective and the camera obscura functions as a metaphor because it gives the viewer a similar illusion of a funnel of space. "The draftsman staring through a peephole in order to guarantee an unchanging point of observation traces the outlines of his sitter on the vertical plate. In this primitive fashion the device has found little use, but it became popular as an application of the camera obscura."
[61] Draaisma, *Metaforenmachine*, 155.
[62] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 74.
[63] Draaisma, *Metaforenmachine*, 155.
[64] John William Draper, *Human Physiology* (London, 1868), 288.
[65] Ibid., 269.
[66] Draaisma, *Metaforenmachine*, 157.

physiology from which they usually came, for example by Théodule Ribot. In language use, he wrote, memory is considered to consist of three elements: retaining the experience, reproducing it, and its situatedness in the past.[67] In his view, photographic metaphors have the disadvantage that they explain conservation, but not reproduction. Therefore, Ribot argues, the photographic procédé is not nearly similar enough to serve as a metaphorical explaination of the processes taking place in our brains. Passages from Ribot's and other scholars' work demonstrate that as the preconceived likenesses between photography and memory become more precise, so too do their differences become clearer and clearer.[68] In the same vein, Johann Nepomuk Huber argues that the photographic analogy of traces may be explained in a memory context, yet, traces cannot see themselves and neither can photographs look at themselves, which means that any trace, in Huber's eyes, would require a consciousness to interpret them.[69]

So, if the myth of physiological retention seems debunked, then what *is* the relation between photography and memory? An interesting idea is described by Marcel Proust. In his renowned account, a madeleine, dipped into a cup of tea, although deceptively simple a cookie as such, sets in motion the recollection of a wealth of memories.[70] Photographs can do exactly that; they can "provoke psychological subjectivity as the sensation of déjà vu or *fausse reconaissance*."[71] I would like to focus first on how Proust proposes photography as a figure for the workings of voluntary memory in *Le Temps Retrouvé*. In Suzanne Guerlac's interpretation: "When nothing comes of his attempt to wilfully recall his days in Venice in order to write about them, Marcel compares the images that do come to mind to the snapshots of a boring photography exhibit. They are sterile images, he concludes; they open onto nothing."[72] The deliberateness linked to looking at photographs or trying to recover memories from the mind, thus, ensures that the images remain without special qualities; they are empty, dull. In a way, Proust uses *Le Temps Retrouvé* to identify snapshot photography with the limitations of voluntary memory.

On the other hand, a different chapter from the *Temps Perdu* series, *Combray*, "implicitly privileges a certain photographic regime of the visual – one that proposes a total

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[67] Théodule Ribot, "La mémoire comme fait biologique," *Revue Philosophique*, IX (1880), 516-547.
[68] Draaisma, *Metaforenmachine*, 162.
[69] Johann Nepomuk Huber, *Das Gedächtniss*, (München, 1878), 28.
[70] The translated passage reads: "No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin." Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time, Vol I*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, ed. William C. Carter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
[71] Mary Bergstein, "Proust and Photography: The Invention of Balbec through Visual Resources," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 29:4 (2013): 308.
[72] Suzanne Guerlac, "Visual Dust. On Time, Memory, and Photography in Proust," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 13:4 (2009): 397-398.

visual imprinting with absolute accuracy – and associates it with *involuntary* memory."[73] Absolutely accurate imprinting is a premise of involuntary memory, and the automaticity of photography, for Proust, serves as a "figure for the activation of memory impressions that exceed consciousness or voluntary manipulation."[74] Those latter two words are essential, in the sense that there is no way the imprinted images could be recalled at any time, or at will of the possessor of them. Proust uses another metaphor to describe the spark of recall. Returning to the madeleine, the tea it is dipped in serves as a developing bath for the latent images, which are only developed when the memory is activated by a certain action, smell or sound. In Proust's eyes, it is this experience of involuntary memory that is more authentic than any other.[75]

Henri Bergson describes an in-between step not unlike Proust's, needed to retrieve the memory using a similar photographic metaphor, albeit a different one: "Reminiscence (or the attempt to retrieve a memory) involves feeling one's way into the past, a *tatônnement* that Bergson compares to "the focusing of a camera."[76] Clearly, photographs somehow 'stored' in our minds need additional action in order to be recalled. Especially in Bergson's metaphor it may sound as if the human could be an active agent in setting all this in motion, by operating the camera for example, but Proust would surely disagree. This camera cannot be wilfully operated. On a more meta level, Dora Zhang interprets the mechanic dimension of the experiences described by Proust, that is at the essence of involuntary memory:

> Just as something subjective, habit, is revealed to have a mechanical nature, so something mechanical and objective, the lens, is revealed to have an affinity with that most subjective of all Proustian experiences. The correlate of the optical unconscious is thus what we might call the "mechanical involuntary."[77]

Clearly, the mechanicalness of the brain's workings ensures that recall happens automatically, cannot be manipulated, and although it is subjective, can never be subjected to human will. It looks as though the human brain does not only arguably function in a photographic manner, but also, that it needs a developing agent of some sort to help it construct and retain memories.

The manner in which a photograph can be represented in our minds differs radically depending on the way in which we become aware of it – as has become clear from Proust's distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. To emphasise the need for physical imagery to assist memory, Nancy van House discusses actual, physical images when she says:

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[73] Ibid., 399.
[74] Ibid., 398.
[75] Dora Zhang, "A Lens for an Eye: Proust and Photography," *Representations* 118:1 (2012): 113.
[76] Guerlac, "Seeing What the Philosopher Saw," 200; Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres*, (Paris: P U F, 2001), 277.
[77] Zhang, "A Lens for an Eye," 113. The optical unconscious is explained by Zhang on page 111: "It is through photography, Benjamin adds, that we first discover the existence of this "optical unconscious." The "unconsciousness" of the lens is just its absence of intention, the dream of an eye discharged of thought embodied by an instrument that sees with no awareness of what it sees, blindly."

"Images are seen as memories made durable, correctives to fallible human memory."[78] This is exactly why the photograph is so important to us. We have delegated to it the function to remember things for us. In order to facilitate our own remembering of the events, and not only the photographs themselves, the photographic album offers a unique way of narratively ordering the photographs. It structures and orders the photographs not only on paper, but also in our minds, facilitating the recall of the memories we link to them. Even though the deliberate construction of such an album may seem as an example of pure voluntary memory, it is more complicated than that. Apart from the photographs facilitating remembrance of the events linked to them, there are always additional memories that may lead to images of a non-physical nature. That is where memory confusion arises, blurring the boundaries between the voluntary and involuntary, making each family album a beautifully complex mnemonic document.

[78] Nancy van House, "Personal Photography, Digital Technologies and the Uses of the Visual," *Visual Studies* 26:2 (2011): 130.

Clearly, the assembly of a family album functions to assist both wilful memory construction and the recall of involuntary memory elicitation; it is, if anything, a very rich memory container. Additionally, it is of a private nature, and thus rarely or never travels outside the walls of the home. Recent years, however, have seen a different kind of development. Suddenly, family photography has started to appear frequently in the context of the museum, sometimes as part of themed exhibitions, whilst other times as individual artists' projects. It is regularly labelled 'found photography'[79] because collectors, artists or curators obtain the photographs from flea markets, second-hand stores or in other mostly indirect manners.[80] Books and/or exhibitions consist of photos or pages pulled from albums or frames, quite radically recontextualising them in a multitude of ways. They are displayed even or especially if the photographs are complete failures.[81] What is most striking is that the exhibitors, curators or artists are not making their own private life public; they make public the photographs and lives of others, often of individuals they do not know, and especially of those whose stories they do not know. What then is so attractive about these mediocre photo documents?

I do not aim to answer the question I just posed, but rather use it as a way to discuss what I think is a striking development that occurs on different levels of the vernacular photography debate. That is to say, the entering of private photographs into the public domain is playing out on a much larger scale, simultaneously making the use of both terms nearly useless because what used to be private does not seem to be considered as such anymore. Photographs taken from private life are increasingly shared with larger and larger audiences. In order to determine the implications of this transformation, I will use the next section to analyse Instagram, a social media phenomenon saturated with the sort of photographs that match the above description.

In doing so, I will use the work of Fiona Tan as my lead, using her making public of private photography as an interesting analogy for what has happened to vernacular photography in general. In her *Vox Populi*, Tan decided to exhibit private photographs – with conscious consent from the photographs' owners – in a museum context, thus achieving in some sense a democratisation of museum content. All these people, through their private photographs have

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[79] Barry Mauer, "The Found Photograph and the Limits of Meaning", *Enculturation* 3:2 (2001): 4. "Found photographs are media artifacts of a peculiar kind because they were never meant to be viewed and interpreted by total strangers. Because the original contexts that anchored their meaning have been severed from them, found photographs foster a new and valuable "reading" disposition, one that sharpens our inferential skills and reflects upon our ordinary habits of perception."

[80] The phenomenon is so well-known that a Wikipedia entry exists: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Found_photography>

[81] Technically, that is. Badly taken, visually uninteresting. It is often even seen as a merit, as something charming. A striking example is Erik Kessels' *In almost every picture 13*, which features only pictures partly or entirely obliterated by the camera operator's finger.

suddenly become part of the public museum setting. Looking at Instagram through the lens of Tan's work will help clarify what was so special about the family album, and more importantly, what is so different about Instagram. *Vox Populi* is a requiem for times when privacy still existed. But precisely because of this lack of a public space for photography as such, it was therefore not considered in that manner. It is only through the emergence of this "era of social media"[82] that we begin to realise the significance of 'the private.' The family album was the epitome of the private, after which there came an increasing tendency to make private photographs public – consequently the essence of Instagram's success. What happens to the private photograph's mnemonic function in the move onto this new platform? The next section revolves around this question in the context of Instagram and its idiosyncrasies.

[82] Brian Dillon, *Vox Populi London*.

Instagram

> Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends' lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos.[83]
>
> *~ Instagram's developers*

Instagram is a smartphone app that has four basic functions: it enables the taking of photographs, editing them, sharing them with friends, and storing them onto an account. I choose to focus on Instagram because it represents and echoes some of the characteristics of the family album, and provides for partly similar needs. But in spite of that, it also comes with a wealth of differences, especially with regards to its mnemonic aspect. Simply put, the method of organisation offered by Instagram makes it radically different, as does the fact that it is installed on a smartphone – a device devoted to communicative acts. I would argue that the need to keep photographs, from a private photography point of view, has not necessarily changed over time, but perhaps the speed of modernity has forced us to accept that the mnemonic aspects of photography are becoming increasingly fragile. The digital archive is not nearly as permanent as many would want to believe – and along with that fragility, entire libraries are being closed all over the world. Are we destroying (our) histories and heritages without realising it?[84] My intention here is to demonstrate that we have moved to a different way of ordering our photographs in a way that entails significant consequences on our understanding of this medium. Thoroughly affecting the mnemonic function of the photograph, this new ordering changes not only our remembering of the events photographed, but also the function of the photographic in our processes of remembering.

Clearly, the family album in its physical dimension is as good as gone, as is the physical (analogue) photograph in general. In spite of initiatives such as the Impossible Project, through which Polaroid photographers are given a renewed chance to take instant photographs, and Lomography, a company determined to (re)popularise analogue photography, it is a very marginal part of contemporary photography. New ways to photograph and build personal archives have come at first to play a role alongside the analogue, but have slowly but surely begun to surpass it. The historical leap I make in this case from family album to Instagram is quite substantial, and it means that I skip over phenomena such as Flickr. My reason for doing so is because they are in-between steps in the same line of development that have ultimately led to smartphone apps like Instagram. Flickr, with its album structure, emulates more of the family

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[83] <http://instagram.com/about/faq>

[84] *Digitale Vergetelheid,* Bregtje van der Haak.

album's characteristics, especially in terms of arrangement. Instagram, which does not offer such structuring opportunities, takes the move away from the family album – in terms of organisation principles – one step further.

Upon making the move from book to smartphone app, many physical changes occur. Nevertheless, I do not consider these changes to be the most important factors in the mnemonic change that I signal. Although they are certainly part of the differences, they are not elemental to them, and I aim to abandon any strictly technologically determinist standpoints. I agree with with Keightley and Pickering when they state:

> When we turn aside from thinking exclusively in terms of the technology, and look instead at how digital cameras and digital imagery are being adapted to existing patterns of remembering in everyday life, we see that, alongside changes that are being made to these patterns, there are clear signs of continuity in the ways people are adapting them to older modes of storage and retrieval, and older idioms of drawing on and relating to photographs in thinking and talking about the pasts that they share.[85]

Likewise, I aim to demonstrate the continuities between the family album and Instagram, but also, to make evident that there are differences in ordering to which I assign most of the mnemonic changes. These changes are due to an interaction between developments in user demand and the growing possibilities brought along by the rapidly advancing digital age. In this standpoint I am indebted to Raymond Williams, who, in his 1975 discussion of television writes about the difficulty with statements about how new technologies change our world.[86] As he emphasises, teleological or technologically determinist points of view have many shortcomings; effectively, much of technology is accidental, and its effects can rarely be foreseen in their entirety. Most importantly, the significance of television, and in my view photography, lies in its uses "held to be symptomatic of some order of society or some qualities of human nature which are otherwise determined."[87] Similarly, in the case of photography, both its invention as well as its use, impact and effect rely heavily on a complex amount of factors, which cannot possibly be reduced to a 'photographic technology has caused' type of reasoning.

Nevertheless, what exactly is Instagram? In its most basic form, it is a way to share photographs with friends, and look at the photographs they post, all of which can be see in a general news feed that displays a list of photographs posted by all the accounts 'followed' by the user. The photographs' format is restricted: it can only be square, a format that can only be circumvented with the use of an additional app that adds white borders for the user so that a landscape image can be fitted into the square format nonetheless (Figure 1.9). Additionally, there is a whole range of celebrities who actively publish photographs of their lives on

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[85] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, "Technologies of Memory," 579.
[86] Raymond Williams, *Television*, 1.
[87] Ibid., 4-5.

Instagram, most popular of which is singer Justin Bieber, who is followed by over 22 million users, with reality star Kim Kardashian (21 million followers) and singer Beyoncé (20 million followers) in close second and third.[88] Besides private and celebrity accounts, there are a variety of other accounts. Most popular examples include accounts that feature daily pictures of cats (Figure 1.10), and accounts kept by women who use Instagram to market their fit and healthy lifestyles, physiques, but most of all, the products that they are given by sportswear manufacturers (Figures 1.12 and 1.13). Aside from these, there is also a small minority of aesthetes, often professional photographers, who use Instagram to gain attention for their photography (Figure 1.11). An example I will elaborate on is a double Instagram post by the aforementioned Kim Kardashian.

Kardashian, born in wealthy Los Angeles circles, became most famous during and after her participation in the reality television series *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, in which she co-starred alongside her family members. Amongst scholars, she is best known for her social media bonding and advertising strategies, through which she accumulates most of her wealth. Jennifer Anette Lueck would go as far as to say that Kardashian is "the most current and successful celebrity endorser."[89] Kardashian regularly posts pictures of her activities and the outfits she is wearing during those, but more interestingly, her photographs regularly feature her life with her closest family members. The double post I would like to discuss, published November 19, 2014, displays Kardashian together with her daughter, North (Figure 1.14). The first photograph shows them in a laughing, non-frontal pose, and is captioned "What we're like at home…" The second photograph displays them frontally, looking into the camera with a more serious look, and is captioned "What we're like in front of the paparazzi…" Both photographs harvested over a million 'likes' within six hours.

The juxtaposition of "at home" and "paparazzi" is particularly interesting in the case of Kardashian, a celebrity figure who, by regularly posting photographs of her closest family, exposes a considerable part of her private life to the public. In these two photographs, she comments on what at first seems to be a juxtaposition of her private and public life, yet to my eyes, something else is happening here. Because Kardashian's followers are already allowed such a regular look into her life "at home," there really does not seem to be such a strong contrast between her private and public life. Actually, the juxtaposition Kardashian demonstrates using the two photographs, rather than being one of private versus public, is really one of private versus paparazzi. At the hands of social media 'celebrities' like Kardashian, so she seems to suggest, the contrast between the private and the public really has collapsed into

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[88] Numbers as of November 15, 2014 from <www.socialblade.com>. They rapidly increase, because on December 15, one month later, they had risen to nearly 24 million (Bieber), 23 million (Kardashian) and nearly 22 million (Beyoncé).

[89] Jennifer Anette Lueck, "Friend-Zone with Benefits: The Parasocial Advertising of Kim Kardashian," *Journal of Marketing Communications* (2012): 1.

private versus paparazzi, both of which are, in fact, public. For an individual who chooses to live her life and earn her money by being in the public domain, there is no such thing as a distinction between private and public, or at least that is what her followers are led to believe.

Clearly, Instagram began and is still marketed as an amongst-friends phenomenon, but has increasingly turned into a platform where brands can market their products, for celebrities to increase their followings and revenues, and for nearly anyone to strengthen their self-image. Instagram being free and without any (overt) advertisement raises questions as to what their business model is; how do they earn money? Instagram is not open about this aspect, and it remains largely unclear whether they are profitable or even self-sustained.[90] One thing is clear, and that is that many brands are, directly or indirectly, capitalising on Instagram by marketing their goods to a wide audience, overtly or covertly.

Upon contrasting Instagram to the family album, there are three major changes that have mnemonic implications, the first of which is a matter of ordering. There is a straightforward logic to the ordering of any Instagram feed: it is chronological. The making of causal connections between photographs or album-yielded ordering is not an option. Photographs are arranged in a grid, vertically and in chronological order, which entails that gradually older photographs disappear to the bottom, as newer ones are added (Figure 1.15). In this sense, its ordering imposes an equalisation upon the photographic collection in contrast to the narratively ordered physical album. As a consequence, the family album's inherently narrative structure is removed from photographic memory-keeping; its mnemonically advantageous structure has been replaced in favour of the mechanically chronological. The result of that is that (photographic) moments happen and vanish sooner than we realise, and scrolling down in order to review them is barely stimulated.[91] Whereas the family album still encompassed a sense of spatialised time, a page-by-page horizontal rhythm, for Instagram users looking back at 'older' photographs has become secondary.

Bernie Hogan's account of the mnemonic consequences of the developments in personal photography is revealing. Hogan explains essentially where he believes this change in ordering, from narrative to chronological, stems from, and how it could be linked to our aforementioned increasingly public private lives. In his view, it is logical that we have moved from a manual way of ordering photographs to a more mechanical, computerised manner of doing so. He states: "Unique historical artefacts have typically been curated by experts. These people select which works to display, where to place them, and what narrative to tell about this selection. […] Yet it is simply impractical to have a human curator pore over one's social information and devise a unique and relevant exhibit for each person, on demand. Consequently,

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[90] They were bought by Facebook, a highly profitable social media company, in the beginning of 2012, for $1 bln (€770 mln).

[91] I will return to the idea of photographic temporality in chapter three.

computers have taken on this role, devising continually more sophisticated ways to curate artefacts."[92] Using this line of reasoning, it makes sense that we rely on computers to order photographs for us. We simply do not want nor need to spend time on curating our digital 'exhibits.' As Nancy van House confirms, manual organisation is simply too labour-intensive. It may be an opportunity to reduce ambiguity and discontinuity, but still: "organisation and annotation are labour-intensive and, among our interviewees, something they regularly said they intended to do but rarely actually did, with either paper or digital images."[93] Claiming labour intensity as a reason, perhaps we have begun to entirely delegate our memory-keeping to computers and hard disks, trusting them to retain the data for us. In part this is not surprising, considering the amount of photographs we currently produce and store. Organisation and annotation were always time-consuming processes, but they have become daunting in the face of the current number of images. Increasingly, we have come to rely on complex algorithms to do the curating for us. Social media such as Facebook, Instagram and also Snapchat, largely consist of mathematical constructions that determine their ordering.

The second change I would like to draw attention to is a difference in what I refer to as voluntarity. Unlike the family album, Instagram brings the viewer into contact with a wealth of images that do not depict events that were ever part of their lives or the lives of their close relatives. This likens the imagery to news photography, which is evenly disconnected from the observer's life. As a result, these sorts of images refer solidly to what Proust calls voluntary memory: the images are "sterile; they open onto nothing."[94] The only link to the event depicted is the image itself, which makes it ultimately mediated. In contrast, in the case of the family album, the photographs open up to a wealth of memories associated with it, as the images taken represent moments in the observer's life. This sparks instances of involuntary memories, predominantly because the photographs are not the only 'entries' into the memory of the event. In essence, this means that family album photography encompasses a richer memory world than Instagram does. The album elicits more complex mnemonic recall.

Thirdly and lastly, there is a quantitative difference that has qualitative results. Whereas a physical album is at some point full, nothing is less true for an Instagram feed. As its developers claim in the opening quote of this section, the images are a "memory to keep around forever."[95] Regardless of whether 'forever' is a realistic period of time of which to speak, new forms of hard disk storage and new digital spaces have ensured the near-endless, near-limitless opportunity of file storage. And if one believes Walter Benjamin, such an immense quantitative

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[92] Bernie Hogan, "The Presentation of the Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30:6 (2010): 381.
[93] Van House, "Personal Photography," 128.
[94] Guerlac, "Visual Dust," 397-398.
[95] <http://instagram.com/about/faq>

shift cannot but carry qualitative implications.[96] Unsurprisingly, because we take such an incredible amount of photographs every day, the photograph has ceased to be as special as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We certainly do not cherish them as such. While our 'clouds' are rapidly filling up, our shelves are being emptied out. Will our Instagram feed still be there for us, keeping our photographs, in twenty years? And if so, what will it look like? All of this is a matter of digital memory and requires a thorough assessment of the potential futures for digital online memory – an assessment I cannot currently make.

Most crucially, what I signal is a shift in interest, a shift in the manner in which photography functions in our private lives. Pink and Hjorth confirm that perhaps the private nature of photography always encompassed a lack of some sort: "This rise of photo-sharing sites has created a context vernacular photographers have always lacked: a broad audience."[97] Remembering starts to mean less and less, whilst being liked means more – exactly what, in a way, Fiona Tan both acknowledges as well as laments through her *Vox Populi* series. She gives vernacular photographers their broad audience, while at once realising that with this making public of private photography, some of its value is consequently lost.

Nancy van House succinctly explains how the digital plays a role in the threat to memory, but more importantly, how it is the public appearance of private photographs that transforms photographs from objects of memory into objects of communication:

> Memory is of course the most obviously threatened [by the digital], but many other meanings as well are at least uncertain. Transitory expressive images [..] are different from the durable art of the great photographers. Personal photographs may be becoming more public and transitory, less private and durable, more effective as objects of communication than of memory.[98]

Van House seems to be making a causal connection between the incrementally public nature of personal photographs and their becoming transitory. The boundary between public and private is being stretched by the increased sharing of 'private' moments, something which is stimulated through apps like Instagram. Because of its emphasis on sharing, there is a strong *look at me*-philosophy inherent to how the app is used. Photographs are shared primarily for the sake of demonstrating to others that you and your life are interesting, reflected in photographs of banal but beneficial and selective moments from your life, which are aimed to construct a favourable (digital) self-image. A high number of followers and/or 'likes' can result in a pulling up of yourself, a rise in status as part of the public spectacle, which is at the heart of most Instagram

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[96] As Walter Benjamin says in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," II, 221: "The situation into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated."

[97] Sarah Pink and Larissa Hjorth, "Emplaced Cartographies: Reconceptualising Camera Phone Practices in an Age of Locative Media," *Media International Australia* 145 (2012): 149.

[98] Van House, "Personal Photography," 133.

practice.[99] As a result, at the cost of wanting to look good, we seem to be forgetting how photographs can help us construct stories about or pasts and preserve the memories associated with them. Without wanting to claim that the fragility of digital data is the foremost danger to photographic memory keeping, I do wish to analyse why the "I was here" value of photography has so strongly increased in importance. I continue this argument in the next chapter, where I analyse the move from the picture postcard to the Polaroid photograph. Perhaps it is useful to keep in mind that Instagram, in some ways, is stuck between the chapters on memory and communication in the sense that it may be seen as "the picture postcard of private life."[100]

[99] Using the term spectacle, I loosely refer to Guy Debord's writings on what he has called the Society of Spectacle.

[100] Eric de Bruyn, August 27, 2014.

Between 1968 and 1979, conceptual artist On Kawara executed his *I Got Up* and *I Am Still Alive* series (Figures 2.1 and 2.2), which consisted of him sending numerous telegrams and postcards to acquaintances, through which he (re)acknowledged his day-to-day existence and activity to them. Both series of works are amongst those considered to be Kawara's most personal and intimate works, and he continually produced them for nearly a decade.[101] The repetitive intervals of the sending of the postcards – two each day – Kawara counterbalanced by the irregular hours and locations from which the messages were sent.[102] Telegrams and postcards from all around the world resulted in an all the more stunning juxtaposition of the "quotidian reality of the public world with the elliptical, self-reflexive messages on the back."[103] The self-reflexivity of the messages, perhaps, lies in their play with the theme of impermanence, reminding oneself constantly of ones own mortality, which has always been a clear underlying theme to many of Kawara's works. In Benjamin Buchloh's view, Kawara's relentless practice of cataloguing and his absurd enumeration of dates are safely embraced within the new paradigm of the aesthetic of administration.[104]

Altogether, using the postcards, Kawara reflects on existence, presence, death, and the need to assess his own place within the greater context. Sending telegrams and postcards to his friends and colleagues did not inform them of the contents of his life, but merely of its persistence. While Kawara's conceptual use[105] of the postcard is endlessly interesting in itself, it is also very telling of the function of the postcard for all other human beings who have ever sent one. Hjorth and Kim refer to a Japanese study from 1995 when they say that postcards were immensely popular especially before the era of visual mass media.[106] Even more so, according to Sato, it is an active agent of change within the visual culture it is part of: "The postcard played a key role in demonstrating and influencing new modes of visuality around modern everyday life."[107] On Kawara's postcard series, in Sato's eyes, emphasises the importance of the postcard in the construction of a sense of place and identity: "Inscribing the postcards with his location each morning, he showed how such media functioned on a fusion between the phatic

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[101] Jung-Ah Woo, "On Kawara's Date Paintings: Series of Horror and Boredom," *Art Journal* 69:3 (2010): 64.
[102] <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2001.228a-pp>
[103] <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2001.228a-pp>
[104] Woo, "On Kawara's Date Paintings," 70; Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (1990), 133 + 111.
[105] The conceptual nature of Kawara's work is confirmed by Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," 73: "On Kawara […] has been doing a highly conceptualized kind of art since 1964."
[106] Larissa Hjorth and Kyoung-Hwa Yonnie Kim, "Good Grief: the Role of Social Media in the 3.11 Earthquake Disaster in Japan," *Digital Creativity* 22:3 (2011): 190.
[107] Ibid., 191.

and informational."[108] Clearly, although some information was transferred through the postcards, it was largely overshadowed by the underlying sentiment Kawara wanted the cards to carry – and that is the phatic, social task the cards performed. Oxford Dictionaries defines phatic as "denoting or relating to language used for general purposes of social interaction, rather than to convey information or as questions."[109] And exactly in its communicative rather than informative nature, the phatic applies perfectly to postcard, Polaroid, and Snapchat interactions.

The increasing hybridization of physical and digital experiences[110] partly caused by the implementation of the smartphone have both reinvigorated as well as complicated discussions about presence and being in a certain moment. The smartphone's wide range of possibilities has changed the role of the photograph in daily life, especially in its increasingly communicative value; apps like (the aforementioned) Instagram and Snapchat are the epitome of communicative photography. However, there is an interesting predecessor to these types of photography, which I will focus on in this chapter: the Polaroid photograph. Observing it through the lens of the picture postcard, I will scrutinise photography's trajectory in order to determine whether the journey from picture postcard to instant camera has brought along any changes in the degree of photography's communicative function – a function which, arguably, it always had. *How do the communicative aspects of picture postcard and Polaroid photograph compare, and how has the photograph's function developed or altered along that time span?* The conclusions will extend into the third chapter, in which I focus solely on Snapchat. The postcard denoted a sense of presence equivalent to the presence inherent to smartphone photography, which may at a later stage turn out to be an interesting return of sorts.

Before I do so, I will use this chapter to thoroughly assess the communicative value of the photograph, as carrier of a certain message, and the exchange value of the photographic between one individual and the other. Both the picture postcard and Polaroid image are visually oriented objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. As a result, an interpretation beyond the iconographical one is necessary, one that will help appreciate both postcard and Polaroid as 'objects' with agency and an ability to perform – to "speak back."[111] I will begin by constructing an interpretation of the picture postcard as a communicative object, after which I will assess the implications of such an interpretation and lastly, research the parallels with Polaroid. I will extend my conclusions into the third chapter and demonstrate how practically all photographic phenomena share aspects of the postcard and Polaroid, and are thoroughly indebted to their heritage.

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[108] Ibid.

[109] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/phatic>. Accessed January 14, 2015.

[110] Lee, "Digital Cameras," 267.

[111] Ceri Price, "Tokens of Renewal: The Picture Postcard as a Secular Relic of Re-Creation and Recreation," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14:1 (2013): 115.

Picture Postcard

> The illustrated postcard craze, like the influenza, has spread to these islands [Great Britain] from the Continent, where it has been raging with considerable severity. ~ The Standard, London, 1899[112]

After its early days in the late nineteenth century, the beginning of the twentieth century welcomed the picture postcard as a true consumption phenomenon. Never up to that time, perhaps with the exception of the postage stamp, had there been "a more pervasive and ubiquitous fad for a material item."[113] Unsurprisingly, Bjarne Rogan thoroughly positions the origins and popularity of the postcard within (the rise of) modernity: "In short, the picture postcard went hand in hand with the rise of a new consumer culture, a more affluent society, and a new middle class."[114] As he goes on to emphasise, the popularity of this phenomenon, sold and mailed by the billions, can hardly be described unless the card is also considered as an exchange object, a message carrier. Still, many of the cards bought were never actually sent, and instead collected, but more fascinatingly, most of the written messages on the postcards that were sent seem to contain very little actual information. Several factors seem to underlie the popularity of the postcard, amongst which are: the aesthetics of the card, its value as a souvenir, its collectability, and lastly, its value as a means of communication.[115] Ultimately, according to Mark Wollaeger, the turn of the twentieth century was characterised by three new developments in English epistolary culture, one of which was the growing dominance of the image, and another the global circulation of information.[116] Because it was relatively cheap and quick, the postcard democratised the sending of messages from one person to another, and offered an alternative to writing letters, which was considered to be both very elite and feminine.[117]

In its ability to connect more and more people, the postcard was arguably one of the first proponents of an increasingly interconnected world. As Wollaeger states: "If an increasingly efficient system for mass distribution of mail in the eighteenth century had the effect of abstracting distance into pure exchange, the circulation of colonial postcards in the

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[112] Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 60; Bjarne Rogan, "An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication," *Cultural Analysis* 4 (2005): 3.
[113] Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 1.
[114] Ibid., 3.
[115] Many postcards were never sent and kept solely as collectibles. I will focus on communication for the sake of my own argument, without wanting to disregard of other functions. In some sense, the card was always a gift, "whether it was a gift to other collectors or a gift to oneself." Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 13 + 4-6.
[116] Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 80.
[117] Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 5.

twentieth century began to shrink not just England but the entire world."[118] Not only did the postcard establish a new kind of connection between people, but advertisers and political institutions soon too found their way to the postcard, which helped them to more efficiently and quickly spread their messages precisely due to its wide reach amongst the general public. In Wollaeger's view, by determining largely what messages people were receiving, postcards also thoroughly influenced and mediated the English outlook on the world.[119] Inevitably, this was not to everyone's joy, and Wollaeger's essay takes on a particularly opinionated flavour when he describes how he thinks the postcard was interpreted: "The picture postcard soon became as inescapable as the cell phone is today, though not quite so annoying. […] As in contemporary fears about the rise of consumer culture, women in particular were figured as both victims and carriers of a new cultural disease."[120] Ironically, it was ultimately the spread of photography that at least partly caused the postcard's demise. After 1910, newspapers and magazines began to publish more and more photography, which gave commercial photographers, who relied mostly on postcards, a new outlet for their work. Additionally, inexpensive Kodak cameras increasingly made picture postcards less necessary.[121]

As I emphasised earlier, postcards only have space for a limited amount of writing, which means that the majority of them carried only very short inscriptions. In Rogan's interpretation, "[t]he mailed cards are either short signs of life or metatexts on communication."[122] That is to say, Rogan considers the brevity of the inscriptions as nearly void of information, but still valuable in their expressive value as messages. In order to shed light on the function of postcards, Rogan turns to communication theory, for which he cites Anne Eriksen: "In order to draw a clearer line between mass culture and popular culture, folkloristic theory has pointed to the distinction between messages that carry information and messages that are primarily activities in themselves."[123] Following the distinction formulated by Eriksen, the type of communication enabled by postcards does not seem to be of the linear – informative – type, but rather, of the circular type: "the purpose of such communication acts being to *confirm* or mobilize an already existing social relationship."[124] And in order to function as such a confirmation of an existing relationship, the messages need not be much longer than just a few words. The information component, like with On Kawara's postcards, is often reduced to a mere

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[118] Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media*, 81.
[119] Ibid., 78.
[120] Ibid., 80.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 14-15.
[123] Ibid., 15; Anne Eriksen. "Massekulturens kommunikasjonsform," *Budkavlen* (1989): 68.
[124] Ibid., 16. This relates also to what Roman Jakobsen ascribes to the communication act, which is its phatic function: "The phatic function is to keep the channels of communication open; it is to maintain the relationship between addresser and addressee: it is to confirm that communication is taking place."

sign of life: "they can be translated into a 'Hello, I'm alive" and 'I haven't forgotten you.'"[125] To the recipient, the postcard communicates the aliveness of the familiar sender, temporarily connecting them, even though the other is located elsewhere, no matter how big the distance.

Ceri Price also explores the postcard as communicative artefact, one that is apparently ephemeral[126] and focuses on several of its paradoxicalities such as the ordinary and the extraordinary, the material and immaterial, the public and the private. In her essay, Price considers the postcard from an angle of tourism, an out of the ordinary experience, whereby she aims to study its context within social and cultural experience, in short, its role in expressing the phatic. She explores different ways in which postcards perform as tokens of holiday journeys. In such a context, the importance of the postcard is that it is distinct from the mundane routine. It can serve as a relic, an object that can be sent to those not with us, but that can also be picked up to keep for oneself as metonym of the place.[127] "More often than not, however, the postcard is a relic of a place, and as such is usually bought to be given away – herein lies its unusualness."[128] Interestingly, it is the postcard's direct association with location that matters. Susan Stewart agrees, by emphasising the out-of-the-ordinary quality of the site that the card must depict, because "it is only by means of its material relation to that location that [it] acquires its value."[129] Besides emphasising the postcard's original purpose, more essentially, Price goes on to discuss the meaning of the actual interaction that is the result of the postcard being sent.

Two of the most essential aspects of the postcard once it is mailed from one person to the other are first and foremost its value as an object, as a gift, and second, the connection it establishes between two individuals. Essentially, there is also a causal connection between these two aspects, considering the fact that the goal of the gift exchange of a postcard is "not the acquisition of commodities but the establishment of bonds between giver and receiver, bonds that had to be reaffirmed at some point by a countergift."[130] In that sense, the postcard serves both as a memento of the (travelling) experience, but also as a means of extending that experience to the recipients, who can indirectly take part in the sender's activities. Postcards, through this sharing of experience and the establishment of elements of reciprocity, build and

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[125] Ibid.
[126] Price, "Tokens of Renewal," 118.
[127] Ibid., 116-117.
[128] Ibid., 117.
[129] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.
[130] Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 173; An interesting digital example that uses a system of gift-giving obligations of some sort is Slingshot, owned and created by Facebook. It works like Snapchat, in the sense that photographs can only be viewed for a short amount of time after which they disappear, but what makes Slingshot unique is that the individual who receives a photograph, has to return a photograph *before* they can even see the photograph they have received – thus forming an instant obligation to return a countergift, even before the actual 'gift' was received.

preserve our social networks.[131] Perhaps an additional aspect of postcard-exchange that is partly enmeshed in the establishment of a relationship with someone else is the fact that the sender, as traveller, wishes to validate the trip to friends and family at home.[132] In that context, whether it is mailed or kept as a memento by the traveller, the postcard is a mnemotechnological reminder of what happened, not just through the printed image but also through its material link to the place,[133] thereby ensuring that the trip remains tangible and real.

As is characteristic for phatic expressions, messages written on a postcards are usually very generic in nature due quite simply to their design as photo cards to be sent as such, without envelopes and thus open to the public. As Price emphasises, "[w]ith its routine behaviours, predictable imagery and text, the postcard carries a message that goes beyond text and has agencies that go beyond the simply discursive."[134] Clearly, the image and text on the postcard are themselves rather unimportant, coming only second to the actual social implications of the communicative interaction in which it plays the main part. Because of this heavy emphasis on phatic rather than informative interaction, interesting parallels can be drawn between the postcard and the Polaroid photograph. In the next section I will elaborate on the Polaroid's history and most important aspects, after which I will juxtapose and compare it to the postcard.

[131] Price, "Tokens of Renewal," 120.
[132] Ibid., 123.
[133] Ibid., 124.
[134] Ibid., 118.

Polaroid

> No other camera would give me a second chance like this.
> *~ Polaroid Land camera advertisement, 1949*

Photography was already thoroughly rooted in Western societies when Polaroid gave its first demonstrations of instant camera technology. Inventor Edwin H. Land, who blew away the Optical Society of America during the presentation of his camera in 1947,[135] aimed to create what he named one-step photography, eliminating as many possible steps between exposure and final print.[136] On November 26, 1948, the first Land camera was sold in Boston, Massachusetts for $89.95, which functioned as the prototype for all Polaroid cameras produced during the years to follow.[137] The popularity of Polaroid cameras extended well into the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century, when cheaper cameras and film were finally made available.

What distinguished Polaroid's instant photography from other forms of analogue photography? Peter Buse aims to establish a Polaroid snapshot praxis in order to consider the resultant image in the context of the practice of its making, identifying three key features of the Polaroid image: "(1) Speed: the image appears in an 'instant'. (2) The image develops itself: there is no need to have recourse to a private darkroom or professional developing company. (3) Uniqueness of the print: the process provides no negative, and therefore is not easily subject to the normal photographic process of multiple reproduction."[138] A fourth aspect I might add, albeit a minor one, is the possibility to add written text onto the front of the Polaroid photograph, a possibility that, for other photographs, only existed either on the back of the picture, or next to it once it was embedded into an album.

Evidently, the possibility of having a photograph developed on the spot enabled new opportunities altogether, which Polaroid fiercely promoted to potential clients, often focusing on party photography: "[t]ake and show party pictures while the fun's going on."[139] Using such slogans, Polaroid aimed to solidly associate instant photography with instant fun. Additionally, it instantly rendered photography at once more public, through its enhancement of photographing as a communal activity, but also more intimate, both of which gave way to the flourishing of certain types of photographs. The intimacy enabled by Polaroid was due to the fact that amateur photographers did not have to pass their negatives under the scrutiny of the drugstore processor's eye, therefore "[i]nstant pictures of lovers and spouses became quite

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[135] <www.polaroid.com/history>
[136] Peter Buse, "Polaroid into Digital: Technology, Cultural Form, and the Social Practices of Snapshot Photography," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24:2 (2010): 217.
[137] <www.polaroid.com/history>
[138] Buse, "Polaroid into Digital," 220-221.
[139] Ibid., 221.

common."[140]

Don Slater, in an analysis of snapshot practice in general, identifies a fundamental discontinuity which could provide explanations towards why instant photography developed into such a popular type of photography. According to Slater: "*Taking* pictures is a taken for granted part of leisure activities; but *looking* at them is marginal."[141] Whereas from this particular statement, it seems that Slater assigns importance neither to taking nor looking, he goes on to suggest that taking photographs is a structured activity that is regarded as intrinsic to the leisure event, holiday, etc. Using photographs, with which he refers to the act of looking at them, is not part of that activity, and is usually unstructured and irregular.[142] The fact that taking photographs is considered as structured, supports the idea that perhaps the experience of taking a photograph is more important, and perhaps more often enjoyed, than the retrospective (re)viewing of photographs once they have been archived.

Peter Buse argues, in a similar vein, that digital cameras closed the gap between the taking and using of snapshot photographs, but that Polaroid had already identified this potential, which becomes evident once one looks at their advertisements (Figure 2.3). In Buse's words, such advertising "invariably depicts an admiring group huddled around the recently developed image," fully absorbed in the immediacy of the image-making experience.[143] With Polaroid, and later digital photography, the photograph's function gradually but surely shifted from its being taken in order to be archived and preserved, into its becoming an indispensable part of the social event during which it was taken. Nat Trotman reinforces this argument by observing that photographic theory "presupposes a certain distance between the act of observing a photograph and the act of taking it," but "over the course of a minute, a photograph does not concern remembering or forgetting. Rather, it plays between the lived moment and its reification as an object with its own physical presence. The party Polaroid is not so much an evocation of a past event as an instant fossilization of the present."[144] So in fact, she also signals a collapse of taking and using into one single instant. Trotman's statement, combined with Slater's suggestion that looking back at photographs has always been marginal, it may be suggested that even before the first Polaroid camera was invented, the road was paved for individuals to start using photography in such an instant manner. Looking back at photographs retrospectively was eventually ruled out by the photograph as part of an experience, especially once the Polaroid capitalised on its potential.

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[140] Peggy Sealfon, *The Magic of Instant Photography* (Boston: CBI, 1983), 6.
[141] Don Slater, "Domestic Photography and Digital Culture," in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. Martin Lister (London: Routledge, 1995), 138-9.
[142] Ibid., 141.
[143] Buse, "Polaroid into Digital," 222.
[144] Nat Trotman, "The Life of the Party," *Afterimage* 29:6 (2002).

In the most straightforward manner, the picture postcard and Polaroid photograph are united in their ability to combine photography with (written) text. Considering the limited amount of space, the message inscribed on either of them is usually short, and their meaning is acquired in discursive as well as non-discursive manners.[145] The invisible value of the message lies predominantly in its social value, which the object acquires once it is exchanged. In the case of the postcard, Marion Markwick confirms the essence of sharing the experience and providing a piece of evidence of that experience – something equally true for Polaroids. Both are 'taken' in a particularly relevant place, the major difference being that in case of the Polaroid, 'exchangers' are usually in the same space, whereas in the case of the postcard, the whole point is that they are far removed. Additionally, in their presence as objects, both function as collectibles, or as souvenirs[146] – one of them to remember a place visited, another to remember anything visited and chosen to be photographed. In that line of thought, both are tokens of the place in which they were taken – in case of the Polaroid this means the taking of a photograph, for the postcard it usually means the gesture of buying it. None of these characteristics necessarily have anything to do with the act of travelling, considering that both objects can be taken at any place or time, regardless of the type of activity during which their taking occurs.

The above conditions, as a consequence, create the precedent for the type of function that both postcard and Polaroid acquire: that of communicative objects. The reason for correspondence is more rooted in the maintenance of existing relationships and mutual understanding than in anything else – especially not in the transfer of bits of information. The way in which such maintenance occurs, then, is in the form of one individual somehow proving to the other that they are still there, experiencing, seeing, witnessing. This means that in both cases, the taking, sharing and sending of a postcard or Polaroid is a manner by which to talk to another person without using words; they encompass a predominantly visual way of letting the other know that "I am still there."

Why do images seem to convey social messages so much more effectively than words do? Sight is a profoundly important sense to human beings in a tremendously large number of ways, and in importance, it often surpasses other ways of interacting. As John Berger explains: "[t]his seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli."[147] As Berger continues to explain, the reciprocal nature of vision – the fact that we are aware of that we can see, but also be seen – is much more

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[145] Price, "Tokens of Renewal," 118. The discursive/non-discursive is an opposition mentioned by Price in relation only to the postcard; the argued parallel with the Polaroid is my own.
[146] Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 19; Marion Markwick, "Postcards From Malta: Consumption, Context," *Annals of Tourism Research* 28:2 (2001).
[147] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.

fundamental than that of spoken dialogue. "And often dialogue is an attempt to verbalize this – an attempt to explain how, either metaphorically or literally, 'you see things,' and an attempt to discover how 'he sees things.'"[148] In short, whatever it is we aim to demonstrate to somebody else, we would rather *show* than tell them. This idea is confirmed by Nancy van House, whose survey participants "often expressed an appreciation, even preference, for image-based communication. Many felt that images were more 'real' than text."[149] Additionally, as I demonstrated already in the first chapter, the invention of photography changed our idea and experience of the visual. Whereas dominant belief used to centre around the timelessness of the image and its independence of the individual, the camera harshly confronted man with the fact that what was seen was relative to one's position in time and space.[150]

Besides a generally strong bias towards the visual, Helen Wilkinson emphasises two additional factors of importance. She states that besides the universal appeal of images, particularly to people of limited education and literacy, there is also a societal development in late 1930s Britain that accelerates the affection for the visual: increased mass visual literacy.[151] Inventions such as photography and the picture postcard, according to Wilkinson, democratised the spread and use of visual messages, which inevitably had a positive effect on people's ability to 'read' them. Even though I will (partly) debunk similar statements made about the alleged visual literacy of contemporary millenials, in any case the popularity of picture postcards and Polaroid photography help demonstrate how important visual communication has become for humans. Regardless of historical relevance, we have come to want to show one another what we did and what it looked like where we were when we did it, something made infinitely more clear by a visual message than any words, because seeing is, after all, believing. The role of the photograph or picture postcard, in such an exchange, is not necessarily one of showing the objective 'truth,'[152] but more essentially, one of demonstrating that 'this happened to me.' The image denotes a sense of individual presence; its function is evidentiary, in that it proves to others that something was done and/or seen. In any case, the informative dimension of the image is often negligible.

The dynamic that underlies especially the picture postcard, but also other photographs, exchanged between individuals who are usually far apart, is due mainly to the increased mobility that characterises its heyday. As Raymond Williams emphasises, as it became more common for families to be separated through migration "[the photograph] became more

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[148] Ibid., 1-2.
[149] Van House, "Personal Photography," 131.
[150] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 11.
[151] Helen Wilkinson, "The New Heraldry: Stock Photography, Visual Literacy, and Advertising in 1930s Britain," *Journal of Design History* 10:1 (1997): 27.
[152] I do not wish to immerse myself in the debate of whether what a photograph depicts is true. It is not particularly relevant to my argument, and besides, it's an endless argument. I admit to the subjectivity of the interactions I describe.

centrally necessary as a form of maintaining, over distance and through time, certain personal connections."[153] Crucially the communicative functions of picture postcard, Polaroid, but also of other vernacular photography, are to not only collect or reminisce, but most essentially to communicate *the present for the present*.[154] Despite the many changes of platform, medium or ways of presentation, this does not seem to have changed very radically, as will I will also argue in the third chapter. Humans have always had the need to verify to others that they are alive, using visual 'proof,' the specific manifestation has just undergone some technological changes. Picture postcard, Polaroid, family album, Instagram, Snapchat; although only a selection of the available examples, all are intended primarily for that purpose. I would not argue that the drive to comply with this communicating of present/presence to others is necessarily inherent to 'human nature' in any way. As Pierre Bourdieu's writings on photography clarify, the sharing of photographs has long been linked to social premises and obligations; he calls photographs "privileged instruments of intra-familial sociability."[155] One of his interviewees emphasises the obligatory aspect and rudeness of omission in saying: "Family photographs? You have to take them, it's more polite, isn't it? We send them to everybody, it's really stupid, and it's expensive, but some of them would get angry otherwise."[156] In that sense, photography, but also the picture postcard, is a means for integration in a social group.

From this presumption, Bourdieu distinguishes five areas to which the photograph may bring satisfaction, or which may motivate their usage: "protection against time, communication with others and the expression of feelings, self-realization, social prestige, distraction or escape."[157] From these first two chapters I hope to have demonstrated that not only has the photograph served a variety of functions throughout its history, but more essentially, that its social and communicative aspects are essential. Without wanting to claim that picture postcard, Polaroid, or any type of photograph replaced the other, they are all representatives to a type of photography that has existed since the birth of the medium. In today's society, it is coming to an epitome of some kind in the smartphone age, the latter device being thoroughly communicative enabling phatic message exchange at least as much as picture postcards and Polaroids have done. The third chapter therefore focuses on the idea of a photography of disappearance, initiated by apps like Snapchat, and on the possible implications of such a use of photography. It is my view that this continued and perhaps accelerated ubiquity brings along significant changes, especially in the case of Snapchat, and that an analysis that takes the genealogy of chapters one and two into account in order to come to any substantial interpretation, and perhaps, explanation is sorely needed. Since the possibility of reproduction, images have

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[153] Raymond Williams, *Television*, 14.
[154] Sarvas and Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media*, 7. Emphasis mine.
[155] Bourdieu, *Middle-brow Art*, 26.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid., 14.

become "ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free."[158] As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to interpret and assess individual images, but at the same time, the numeric increase all the more reinforces the suspicion that the speed and frequency of the image as means of communication, are exploding.

Seeing is believing; therefore, I have selected a recent press photograph to illustrate this development. In the background, Barack and Michelle Obama can be seen dancing during the Inaugural Ball in Washington DC on Monday, January 20, 2014 (Figure 2.4). The foreground, which takes up about two thirds of the picture surface, is filled with a sea of hands holding tiny screens; they are people photographing the president and first lady using their digital cameras or smartphones. Seeing that they are in the same space, packed together very tightly, their photographs will not turn out to be all that different from their neighbours'. Why would all these people want to take essentially the same photograph? In my interpretation, the most important aspect of the act of taking a photograph, for them, is to prove to themselves and to others that "I was here." A photograph taken by anyone else, therefore, is infinitely less valuable, in the communicative sense. The increased access to cameras and the fact that we carry one with us at all times, combined with the way in which we use them, has caused a tremendous boom in the number of photographs we take on a daily basis. In the third chapter I will discuss the consequences and implications of the innumerable images that we accumulate.

[158] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 25; Benjamin, "The Work of Art,"

They are photographs, projected on a wall. The exhibition consists of 128 images, only one of which can be seen at a time. Nobody has ever seen them before, and after exactly sixty minutes of projection, nobody will ever see them again. They vanish.[159] *One Hour Photo* is a project conceived by Adam Good, executed twice, in 2010 and 2011. The project is reflexive, and comes with a number of statements. *One Hour Photo* "distills the photograph to the ultimate limited edition." Also, it "complicates the myth of photography as preservation, manifests the tension between the permanence of the medium and the impermanence of time, and subverts the profit model of the edition and the print."[160] Through its temporal nature, *One Hour Photo* aims to emphasise the experience of viewing itself. In the view of its creator, the works even cease to be photography because their medium is erased.[161] Whilst acknowledging and criticising the current, extreme accessibility of photography, it simultaneously reacts to photography's emergence as an expensive, exclusive art object. Using the installation it hopes to problematise the present conditions of photographic experience, which they describe as marked by a "dizzying increase (more, faster, and smaller bits of information swarming by in constant streams) and also by seemingly irreparable loss (of time and attention, of community, of the natural world)."[162] Their use of ephemerality as part of the installation seems to function in order to remind spectators of a similar ephemerality in their daily lives.

Around the same time the second installation of *One Hour Photo* was built and executed in the fall of 2011, a smartphone app called Snapchat was launched, which does practically the same thing. In the first section, I will explain Snapchat in detail. The conditions for its conception are heavily interconnected with the conditions I have described in the previous chapters – even though I have not yet elaborately spoken about the aspect of ephemerality inherent to it. The Oxford Dictionary Online defines ephemeral as "lasting for a very short time."[163] In the context of digital photography, according to Jessica Bushey, a photograph's ephemerality is "closely linked to its use as visual communication and not as an object to be permanently preserved."[164] The viewing interval set by Snapchat – one to ten seconds – surely fits in the definition of ephemeral, by nearly any standard. Also, its link to usage for visual communication is unchallenged, a photographic function I discussed elaborately in chapter two. Taking into account what has already been said, in this chapter I will focus more on what is new about Snapchat, namely, that after a photograph is sent and viewed,

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[159] <www.onehourphotoproject.com>
[160] Ibid.
[161] <www.onehourphotoproject.com/about.php>
[162] Ibid.
[163] Oxford Dictionary Online <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ephemeral>
[164] Jessica Bushey, "Convergence, Connectivity, Ephemeral and Performed: New Characteristics of Digital Photographs," *Archives and Manuscripts* (2014): 8.

it disappears. Further sections will focus on the notions of photographic remembering, forgetfulness, time, temporality and irreproducibility. My aim is to assess the implications of the photograph's disappearance and why it is that this type of visual communication is so popular, asking: *how have disappearing-photo-apps affected the way in which the photograph functions?*

There are clear parallels to be drawn between the phatic functions that characterise both picture postcard and Polaroid, and a similar verification of presence that defines Snapchat interactions. All three enable a visual sharing with others of what is happening or has just happened, using the image as a carrier of a mostly non-verbal message. There is an additional parallel between Snapchat and the postcard, which is that essentially, the logic of both of their logistics is basically an A to B one. In a sense, Snapchat has brought back the A to B logic that long characterised the postcard but not much other photographic interaction, placing the message exchangers back in their 'distant' locations, from where they send back and forth visual messages. In a time in which face to face contact is rare, the exchange of messages provides at least the illusion of a distant closeness to both sender and receiver. Nevertheless, Snapchat communications distinguish themselves on a crucial feature that is central to this third chapter, which is their ephemeral nature.

The ephemeral, as a term, has an interesting history in the way in which it was used by certain art movements in the 1960s. Groups such as Fluxus and artists creating performances as part of the Happenings movement aimed to produce time based, immaterial, irrepeatable art forms. The dematerialisation of the art object was their attempt at resisting commodification.[165] Their ideal, in a sense, was an ephemeral and authentic experience for both performer and audience that could not be repeated, purchased or recreated.[166] In doing so, they aimed to attach an unprecedented sense of immediacy to their works. It is interesting to see that by adding a sense of ephemerality and immediacy to photography, disappearing-photo-apps possibly emit a similar signal to the world of photography. Although their motivations may not be as politically coloured, their ephemeral nature will provide to be considerably impactful towards changing the way in which the photograph becomes part of daily life.

As a report from Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers (KPCB) demonstrates, the daily number of photographs taken and sent using Snapchat, in mid-2014 reached an exorbitant amount of approximately 400 million (Figure 3.1). Another KPCB graph shows how image and video sharing numbers have risen rapidly – the graph displays unique visitor trends for 'visual web' social networks such as Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat, all of which show an increase in popularity from March 2011 up until February 2014 (Figure 3.2). Looking

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[165] Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 141.
[166] Adrian L. Parr, ed.,"Becoming and Performance Art," in *The Deleuze Dictionary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 29-30.

at these graphs it is worth noting that although Snapchat photos are frequenlty sent, there are in actual fact relatively little unique visitors.

That there has been a shift of emphasis in photography from the mnemonic to the increasingly communicative is practically self-evident at this stage in time. The shift that Snapchat represents is, in a sense, a shift that takes photography from being a time-based activity to one of even more immediate gratification. Arguably, the value of a photograph has been transformed from being a keepsake, an object of remembrance, into an ephemeral expression, part of a communicative interaction, that is not intended for keeping – it is consumed and instantly destroyed.[167] This chapter serves to offer some explanations for how we have gotten to the point of Snapchat, and what type of photographic function has to offer that makes it stand out from Instagram, Facebook or any other photography-enabled smartphone app. The mnemonic value of photography is definitely at stake, and while it has long been a thoroughly communicative phenomenon, the disappearance of the photograph itself could have additional consequences, some of which I hope to contextualise. I will be speaking primarily about Snapchat because it was the first disappearing-photo-app to be launched, but when I discuss its characteristics, many of them will be equally applicable to Taptalk and Slingshot.

[167] Ibid., 8-9.

Snapchat, Taptalk, Slingshot

The paradox of studying smartphone apps such as Snapchat, Taptalk and Slingshot is that there is, in fact, nothing to study. Naturally, their workings and app interfaces can be studied, but the actual 'object' of interaction always disappears, making it virtually impossible to study exactly what the apps are used for. The occasional screenshot is made, yet no representative studies or statements can be inferred from them. Arguably, it is not only the way in which Snapchat is used which counts, seeing that its intended use is locked into the algorithm it consists of. Its structure, not the content that is finally shared on the platform, is what lies at the basis of the way in which it is used. Having acknowledged that, considering the complexity of studying such an algorithm and the impossibility of obtaining any information about it, I have chosen to direct my study efforts elsewhere. My study of the apps therefore does not centre on the material of interaction, nor on their algorithmic structure, but on the philosophy of their creation – their intended use. Their frameworks and underlying philosophies reveal interesting thoughts about photography's function. In this chapter, Snapchat will function as my main object of study, predominantly because it was the first disappearing-photo-app on the market and has a leading role in this new 'app-market.' I will briefly discuss alternatives such as Taptalk and Slingshot[168] to demonstrate that there are different varieties of disappearing-photo-apps, but otherwise they play no central role in further analyses.

In an article focused on cinema, Mary Ann Doane discusses the ambiguity and seeming transparency of the term 'object of research.' Her statements are useful because much of what cinema went through – in the face of digitalisation – is equally relevant for photography. Doane asks: "What happens to a discipline on the verge of the disappearance of its object, or to put it more conservatively, in the face of the perception of the death of its object?"[169] With the move from analogue to digital, both cinema and photography have lost their objects, in the sense that physical film is no longer in mainstream use. Doane discusses the loss of the object in the context of cinephilia – a very particular and individual type of love for cinema – arguing that as we witness the progressing 'death' of cinema, discussions about what it used to be, its ontology, have intensified. Once it threatens to disappear, we apparently start to love it more. The prototypical cinephile, in that sense, laments the loss of cinema's indexical relation to the real increasingly as the image gets electronified, a very Bazinian idea.[170]

By citing Doane, I am not saying that we have arrived at a postphotographic era, nor to involve in discussing the photophilic nostalgia that characterises widespread attempts at

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[168] There is quite a number more disappearing-photo-apps and also disappearing-message-apps that I will not be discussing.

[169] Mary Ann Doane, "The Object of Theory," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 80.

[170] Ibid., 85.

collecting vernacular photography and the usage of 'vintage' filters for smartphone photographs. I admit that this actual thesis is, in some sense, a photophile's attempt to assess what happened to photography during its history, in the face of its threatening disappearance. Yet, considering this, I cite Doane because she makes a distinction between two types of study, one of which centres around the object of photography, and the second one which is about historical stance – the way in which it is being used and viewed. Of these two aspects, the latter is my focus. According to Doane, the fact that the existence of analogue cinema and photography may, in some eyes, be threatened by the rise of the digital, also explains their revival. What I find so fascinating about apps like Snapchat is that they take the idea of disappearance to its most literal extreme.

Snapchat is a smartphone app that was launched in September of 2011. It enables users to take and share photographs with their connections. Its basic interface consists firstly of a start-up screen, which displays Snapchat's apt logo: a ghost. Then there is the newsfeed, where sent and received snaps are displayed, and a photo-taking screen (Figure 3.3). A received snap can be viewed from the newsfeed, only when the screen is touched, and once released, the photograph or video immediately disappears (Figure 3.4). The photograph also disappears when the set number of second has elapsed. Lastly, there is a friend list that displays all contacts and their Snapchat score (Figure 3.5). What distinguishes Snapchat from other photography apps is that all photographs sent and received are temporary – the receiver can only look at them for a limited amount of time as decided upon by the sender, who can set the limit between one and ten seconds.[171] The idea for Snapchat allegedly arose when a study friend of Snapchat CEO Evan Spiegel told him about a photograph he had sent to someone, which he ended up regretting. He told Spiegel that he wished there would be an app that enabled him to remove an image once it was sent.[172] Spiegel rapidly developed it into what Snapchat is today – a tremendously popular app amongst mainly 13 to 25-year-olds.

During its short lifetime, Snapchat has been subject to quite a number of privacy scandals – amongst which were user data hacks and claims that the photographs were not actually disappearing from phones and servers. Forensics experts claimed that Snapchat security was insufficient; the app allegedly saves the photographs into a folder that can be retrieved, which is visible in the app's design because rather than having the files deleted, it added the file extension ".NOMEDIA."[173] Snapchat reacted by posting an entry on their blog that explains how they store and delete photographs.[174] For the clarity of my argument I will not extensively discuss whether or not the photographs are actually deleted, also considering the impossibility

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[171] Exception: videos, they can be longer.
[172] Heleen van Lier, "Oorlog en arrogantie," *Volkskrant.nl*, January 7, 2014.
[173] "Deleted Snapchat photos saved in phone data, can be examined as evidence," *KSL.com*.
[174] Snapchat blog, "How Snaps are Stored and Deleted," <blog.snapchat.com/post/50060403002/how-snaps-are-stored-and-deleted/>

of determining whether this may or may not be the case. Instead, I will focus on Snapchat's underlying philosophy because it reveals much of what its intended use is – and Snapchat puts much effort into clarifying to the readers of their blog precisely what their intentions are. From the beginning, they seem to have been very idealistic about enabling a change in the way people used their smartphones to take and share photographs.

In a blog entry that celebrates their first birthday, Team Snapchat highlights the three ideas they say really matter to them: "We believe in sharing authentic moments with friends. […] Sharing those moments should be fun. […] There is value in the ephemeral."[175] The first two statements are not so different from what was advertised by Kodak and Polaroid (Figures 1.3 and 2.3), but the third statement is clearly new. What this seems to imply is that Snapchat advocates ephemerality for the sake of ephemerality, especially considering the fact that they barely explain what it actually is that they find valuable about the ephemeral. They explicitly refer to Kodak and what is different about their idea when they state: "Snapchat isn't about capturing the traditional Kodak moment. It's about communicating with the full range of human emotion – not just what appears to be pretty or perfect."[176] Apparently, Snapchat's aim is to motivate people to photograph more than their beneficial moments, and to encourage photographing themselves at any moment in time. Ephemerality – the fact that the photograph disappears after being sent – is the circumstance that enables this type of photography, considering the fact that, in principle, there should be no worry that any embarrassing or compromising photograph will circulate after its being sent.

In his speeches, Spiegel often refers to the type of society he thinks is being built, and how he, using Snapchat, aims to bring some type of solution or relief. In a metaphor, he compares contemporary society to Roman gladiator arenas when he says: "We have built a society where all too frequently the men in the arena are fighting not for their lives, not for their family, nor for their point of view – but for the spectators and for the applause. And we, the spectators, sitting in the arena, happily entertained, drunk and well-fed, we are full, but are we happy?"[177] Spiegel strongly implies that because our lives have become increasingly public through social media and global digital connectivity, our sense of the private is disappearing. This is especially so on 'permanent' social media, which entails that through this development, the individual's happiness is at stake. As he continues his speech, he explains how he envisions Snapchat going against the grain of this development. Because Snapchat photographs no longer exist once viewed, it encompasses a different type of identity-building.

According to Spiegel, this process brings relief in the sense that we do not have to

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[175] Snapchat blog, "Snapchat Turns 1 Today," <blog.snapchat.com/post/32347694051/snapchat-turns-1-today>

[176] Snapchat blog, "Let's Chat," <blog.snapchat.com/post/22756675666/lets-chat>

[177] Snapchat blog, "Evan Spiegel LA Hacks keynote," <blog.snapchat.com/post/82635264882/2014-la-hacks-keynote>

pretend to be the sum of everything we have said or done, on the contrary: "We no longer have to capture the real world and recreate it online – we simply live and communicate at the same time."[178] In that sense, Snapchat represents an extreme form of an eternal present, one typical for consumer culture. Arguably, these ideas extend indirectly to the perpetual present referred to by Guy Debord in the 1960s, for whom television represented an inability to connect with the past, resulting in what he reckoned an excessive focus on the present. Right on the opposite theoretical side stands Marshall McLuhan, who glorified exactly what Debord argued against, confirming also Spiegel's vision of simultaneity. As he states: "Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a global village…a simultaneous happening."[179] Contemporary Silicon Valley arguably still floats on McLuhan's myths of the global village, instant communication, and a desire to live in the present.

In line with McLuhan's vision, Spiegel actually proposes a collapse of living and documentation, suggesting that Snapchat is the force that joins the two together. In my view, his standpoint, which implies that Snapchat is somehow not mediated, is quite extreme. Where Kodak and Polaroid already advertised their products' suitability to document life as it happened, Spiegel goes one step further in saying that the documentation and consequent communication of events in our lives occur, in fact, simultaneously – they are one and the same thing. While the 'traveleability' of the camera is by now taken for granted, sharing life events is not yet as engrained and unmediated as Spiegel hopes to achieve using Snapchat. In fact, because we have started to live an increasing part of our lives *through* our smartphones, also an increasing share of our lives is mediated – Snapchat is only one of very many ways in which this is happening. In that manner, in fact, a reversal has taken place. Whereas the camera used to be an alienating device, now, we live our lives through the app. We are *being lived* by the camera. The app is not there to confirm our existence, rather, we are there to confirm it. Additionally, the app exists in order that there may be a life to live for its users.

Another frequent writer on the Snapchat blog is Nathan Jurgenson, a graduate student in Sociology, who on the Snapchat blog is merely described as "researcher," while he basically is their in-house philosopher, ready to 'sell' Snapchat's message and product. He has focused his studies on the Internet and social media, and is one of the first researchers to have written about Snapchat and what he calls "temporary social media." He makes statements about Snapchat and other social media phenomena that are interesting and usually bold, but he occasionally makes harsh generalisations. In an article on the Snapchat blog, he states:

> A common thing we hear about social media today is that near-constant picture taking means not 'living in the moment.' […] This sentiment wrongly assumes that

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[178] Snapchat blog, "Evan Spiegel AXS Partner Summit keynote," <blog.snapchat.com/post/74745418745/2014-axs-partner-summit-keynote>

[179] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 63.

> documentation and experience are essentially at odds, a conceptual remnant of how we used to think of photography, as an art object, as *content*, rather than what is often today, less an object and more a sharing of experience.[180]

In making this comment on what he believes to be a faulty assumption, Jurgenson has in the process, however, made a faulty assumption. While he claims that the photograph as part of a moment, as a sharing of experience, is often overlooked, in fact, as I have demonstrated in the first and second chapter, it has long been subject of study and is therefore self-evident rather than something that has been forgotten. Additionally, he cast aside all 'traditional' photographic thought into the corner of its being an art object, thereby grossly overlooking discussions that have focused on vernacular photography and documentary photography. By doing so, he misses much of what has already been said about the photograph as a communicative object – and if he did not miss it, then at least he does not discuss it. Yet despite all my objections to Jurgenson's manner of making his point, it is essentially similar to Spiegel's. Both of them suggest that experience does not have to be interrupted by or for its documentation. Additionally, as Jurgenson emphasises by referring to *content*, the message carried by Snapchat photographs are likened to the picture postcard in their communicative value.

It is this concept that lays the foundations for what Spiegel and Jurgenson believe to be a different type of social photography, conceived and enabled by Snapchat. In their view, social media like Facebook are often built around the logic of capturing life in order to be preserved and put behind glass. "It asks us to be collectors of our lives, to create a museum of our self."[181] In their opinion, what they call ephemeral social media excels in that they are built for everyday communication in a more familiar manner, emphasising everyday sociality. In that manner, an app like Snapchat would enable the construction of a more dynamic, flexible idea of the self that can be transformed by the day – because, after all, nobody knows who you were yesterday. In Jurgenson's interpretation, today's dominant social media are "too often premised on the idea (and ideal) of having one, true, unchanging, stable self and as such fails to accommodate playfulness and revision."[182] Ephemeral social media like Snapchat reject this type of organisation; a Snap cannot be commented on, or liked: "With ephemerality, communication is done *through* photos rather than around them."[183] In other words: Jurgenson and Spiegel expect that Snapchat will render photographic communication more genuine, helping its users to construct a more fluid identity through photography, communicating with their friends in a more authentic manner. What is strange about their vision is that fluid and authentic would by many be considered opposing terms, rather than unifiable ones, considering that the fluid connotes at

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[180] Snapchat blog, "The Frame Makes the Photograph," <blog.snapchat.com/post/72561406329/the-frame-makes-the-photograph>

[181] Snapchat blog, "The Liquid Self," <blog.snapchat.com/post/61770468323/the-liquid-self>

[182] Ibid.

[183] Snapchat blog, "The Frame Makes the Photograph."

least to some degree a sense of instability not easily reconciled with authenticity. Additionally, it is nothing short of nonsensical to describe the Facebook identity as stable.

Instead, Facebook could well be described emblematic for what Holmes has asserted to be a central feature of the flexible personality. It enables the wilful creation of an 'image of self,' an image which need not correspond to reality, and which can, in fact, be changed at will by the owner of the profile, at any time. It ensures that you can be liked by others based on a constructed persona that corresponds more or less to the person you yourself would like to be. Snapchat, in this context, creates an opportunity for its users to be even more radically in the *now*, where we can be continually different. In doing so, it simultaneously confirms as well as responds to the flexible personality; it corresponds with its characteristic fluidity, but also, it reacts against Facebook, which represents a certain shape the flexible personality has assumed. Therefore, it can be considered both an extreme version of what digital culture has done to our identities, as well as a form of inherent critique – a type of Trojan horse. What exactly it does, and how it will affect the way in which we consider and construct our (digital) identities is cannot currently be determined; some more time is needed to properly assess its impact.

Before I continue to describe more implications of these disappearing photographs, I will shortly describe two alternatives to Snapchat: Taptalk and Slingshot, both of which share the feature of the disappearing photograph, but that are also different in some distinct ways. Taptalk, launched at the beginning of 2014, claims to bring "[p]ersonal and private, every photograph or video is uniquely made for you."[184] In contrast to Snapchat, Taptalk photographs can only be sent to one friend at a time. Additionally, photographs cannot be retaken. Once a friend's face is tapped, a photograph or video is sent to them instantly (Figure 3.6). Especially because of this latter aspect, it achieves even more closely something that Snapchat likes to claim, namely a degree of imperfection. While Snapchat users can endlessly retake their photographs until they look their best, Taptalk photographs are immediately sent, which increases the intimacy of the visual message.[185] The sense of intimacy is reinforced by the fact that Taptalk stimulates interaction with a small group of close friends: there is space for only eleven friends on the first screen. Because it does not enable group messaging, you know that the visual message was intended always for you alone. The rapidity with which a Taptalk photograph is sent, reinforces its aspect of instantaneity, which Snapchat, with its extensive editing features, possesses to a lesser degree. Taptalk achieves what Edwin H. Land once dreamt of developing: it collapses the taking and sharing of a photograph into really only one step – a tap, in this case.

The most recent disappearing-photo-app is Facebook's Slingshot, launched in mid-2014, with a revised version launched on December 4, 2014. It aims to let users "share life as it

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[184] <https://www.taptalk.me/about>

[185] Eva de Valk, "Snap…en weer een foto doorgeslingerd." *NRC Handelsblad*, July 16, 2014.

happens."[186] In an interview, lead engineer Rocky claims "Slingshot has enabled me to live more in the moment since that's basically how the app works. [I'm] able to see a more genuine window into my friends' lives."[187] Why it is more genuine and what it compares to in genuineness, Rocky does not explain. His use of the word window, however, is striking, considering that face to face contact is becoming increasingly rare, and that the "friends" he describes are predominantly online contacts. Claiming to see their lives through a window is to assign an unquestionable truth value to Slingshot photography, so much that it is naive. At this point in time, it seems as though social connections cannot be considered separate from social media. For Slingshot to claim that they have reinstated an intimacy and directness that Facebook took away is absurd, because both contribute to a world in which our face to face contact is decreasing rapidly. Furthermore, statements made by Slingshot on their website are as vague as their employees'. One of them, "The Fastest Way to Share Rich, Raw Moments,"[188] implies that it is fast, which it may well be, but why the moments shared are rich and raw, is not clarified – it therefore remains dubious as to what the app's philosophy is. Slingshot's distinguishing feature is that it requires the 'slinging' of a message in return, which indicates sending back a photograph, before the one received can be viewed. Presumably, this is a strategy that Facebook uses to stimulate frequent use of the app.[189] More fundamentally, it establishes a gift-giving obligation, a sense of reciprocity not unlike the gift-giving assets attributed to the picture postcard by Ceri Price. It has been recently noted by visitor statistics that amongst teenagers, Facebook use is declining. Slingshot seems to be their way of trying to 'win them back' – it is no coincidence that Snapchat is popular mainly amongst the 13 to 25-year-olds,[190] the group that uses Facebook less and less.

As Eva de Valk explains in NRC Handelsblad of 16 June 2014, Slingshot and Taptalk, as well as Snapchat, are part of a larger trend that is described in the yearly Internet-report published by KPCB: less messages are posted on social media with a broad reach, such as Facebook and Instagram, and instead, more and more messages are shared between friends, one-on-one, or in closed groups.[191] Additionally, contemporary smartphone exchange is characterised by a steep incline in visual messaging; the exchange of photographs and videos. The disappearing-photo-apps make a significant gesture towards this accumulation in both stimulating more frequent exchange of photographs, while not wanting to add to the piles of images that people stack up on hard drives everywhere. A strange contradiction between their need to generate ever more traffic between their users and their apparent aversion against adding

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[186] <www.sling.me>
[187] Slingshot blog, "Slingshot Crewview: Rocky," <blog.sling.me>
[188] Slingshot blog, "Introducing the New Slingshot," <blog.sling.me>
[189] De Valk, "Snap…"
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.; Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers, *Internet Trends 2014 – Code Conference*, May 28, 2014.

more images to the world is striking. The dissentious rhetoric of waste that underpins it, stands in stark contrast with the possibility of interpreting apps like Snapchat as the gears that keep the machine that is a contemporary culture of disposability and obsolence running. Indirectly, their unwillingness to save users' photographs, echoes a statement made by conceptual artist Douglas Huebler in the 1960s: "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting: I do not wish to add any more."[192] The potential consequences of this strategy of simultaneous accumulation and obsolence will be discussed in the next section, along with the advantages of a solid structuring process.

[192] Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 840.

Snapchat was launched at a time when the number of photographs taken every day was exploding; the exact number is difficult to estimate, but floats at approximately 350 billion photographs a year in 2011 – the year Snapchat was launched (Figure 3.7). More and more photographs are being collected, in part because photography has become so accessible and easy so that we can record everything we do, anywhere we go. The sheer quantity of photographs taken is a symptom of how much a need there is for photography nowadays, but simultaneously alludes to a large problem we have begun to face. However, the acceleration I discussed in my introduction does not only occur on the accumulative end of photography, because due to the launch of disappearing-photo-apps like Snapchat, the number of photographs that disappear is growing too – perhaps even faster. As photographs accumulate more rapidly an increasing number of photographs are disappearing; the gap between what is collected and what vanishes is widening at a dazzling pace.[193]

What does that mean for the photograph's function? It seems that while we feel the need to accumulate more photographs, the huge archives we build as a result are also daunting to us. For about a decade now, photographs have been piling up onto digital hard disks, and many of us are at a loss with how to deal with them. We used to stick them into physical albums, sorted by year or holiday, organising them, not only physically, but in our minds as well. Now that they are piling up on hard disks, largely invisible to our eyes, we are losing track of how many we amass, where they are, and how we should structure.[194] The larger the number of photographs in the archive and the more time elapses between structuring activities, the more daunting of a task it becomes. Collecting photographs has become so easy, and hence, paying attention to the structure of the photographs has developed into a complex and time-consuming pursuit. There seems to be no time for us to do so, or at least we do not assign much priority to it. Our need to document our life using photography has radicalised, in a sense, because we always used photography to capture our lives, just not in such daunting quantities. As Nancy van House emphasises: "[W]hile people now have access to more and better images, they are also often overwhelmed by the volume and the problems of search and retrieval."[195] Certainly, for many people, this results in an increasing sense of anxiety and numbness, an incapacity to deal with it.

While we may sporadically select photographs to be printed, either in books or separately, they form a marginal part of our photographic activity. Snapchat, amongst all this,

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[193] For numbers I would like to refer once again to Figure 3.1, which shows the rapid incline in photographs uploaded per day on Snapchat as opposed to other (visual) social media.
[194] The recent innovations in the area of facial recognition have provided somewhat of a solution, yet there is still much to be improved about it, and it certainly does not tend for all needs involved with keeping a well-structured archive.
[195] Van House, "Personal Photography," 132.

may simultaneously be considered a solution as well as a symptom of what I would like to hereby label photo hoarding. Compulsive hoarding has received increased attention in a number of recent television programs.[196] As a behavioural pattern, compulsive hoarding is characterised by the excessive acquisition of and inability or unwillingness to discard large quantities of objects that cover living areas and cause significant distress or impairment, or even potential hazard for the individual.[197] Photo hoarding is a metaphor, in the sense that increasingly, we have begun to collect more photographs that we can sanely keep or oversee. They are stacked up in little folders, bags and boxes in our houses – the real-life hard disks – right up until the point that they fill up entire rooms. The rooms are so full that we cannot physically enter them anymore, let alone be aware of what is on the bottom of the piles we have collected. We want to keep them all because we think they are in some ways significant – they have sentimental value to us, even though we cannot recall most of them. We fail to prioritise and make distinctions between what is important (to us) and what is not. We are not ready to admit that there is a lot of trash amongst what we have collected, because in our minds, we have become irrationally attached to every single photograph we own. While some of us may be at a stage where we are ready to acknowledge that we have a problem, we have no idea where to begin.

The increasing indiscrimination that characterises photo hoarding is emphasised by the Retort collective, who comment on our inability to reflect on or distinguish between the wide variety of photographs we take: "Here's me third from the left at Thanksgiving in Abu Dhabi; and here's me on top of a pig pile of Terrorists."[198] No matter what the activity is, whether Thanksgiving or a pigpile, it has to be recorded, since experience without instant doubling does not seem to be any experience at all. In Peter Buse's interpretation, what distinguishes the digital camera photographer from amateur snapshooter is that while the digital camera user, in their relentless drive to instantaneity, hardly distinguishes between Thanksgiving and a pig pile, the image of the pig pile would never have been sent to the photo-finisher by the analogue snapshooter.[199] The Retort collective would go as far as to say that we are facing a crisis in time. In some sense they are right. We have become much less selective about what we photograph, if only because it has become so terribly easy to take and store photographs, and it is precisely this effortless accessibility to the entire process of photography that affects our lives deeply.

The need for strategies to deal with this alleged crisis is illustrated by the recent publication of a book entitled *ED IT. The Substantial System for Photographic Archive Maintenance.* It is prepared towards the need for a method that teaches us how to keep our

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[196] E.g. TLC's *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, BBC One's *Britain's Biggest Hoarders* and FOX's *Hoarders*.
[197] Randy Frost and Rachel Gross, "The Hoarding of Possessions," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31:4 (1993): 367; Randy Frost and Tamara Hartl, "A Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Compulsive Hoarding," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 34:4 (1996): 341; Thomas Norma, "Hoarding," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 29:1 (2008): 46.
[198] Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), 182-183.
[199] Buse, "Polaroid into Digital," 225-226.

archives. In a statement not so dissimilar to that of the aforementioned Retort collective, Fred Ritchin describes what he thinks is at stake in the prelude to the book: "The rapidly expanding size of the photographic archive threatens to render everything as trivial."[200] In a description that fits my own definition of the contemporary state of mind as photo hoarding, he claims that a world with far too many images is one that, surely, does not know itself.[201] The argument at the base of *ED IT* is that overabundance results in an overall loss of relevance, which is very much a Benjaminian argument, in the sense that it attributes a qualitative loss to a quantitative increase.[202] ED's goal is to restore the value of photography through editing – the virtue of which they aim to demonstrate, while they promote conscious photography.[203] The strategy they propose consists of four stages – mining, clustering, mapping, selection – and a number of archives are used to illustrate how it could be executed (Figure 3.8).

The book closes off with a number of statements describing their philosophy, and even though some sound rather patronising, there are striking contrasts with the claims made by Snapchat's Spiegel and Jurgenson. Most interestingly, while the latter argue in favour of living and communicating simultaneously, ED suggests something else: "ED advises to experience a moment before capturing it,"[204] and additionally, "ED suggests thinking before taking a picture,"[205] two statements whereby they oppose themselves right on the opposite of Snapchat. The selectivity advocated by ED cannot logically be applied to Snapchat. Perhaps that is also to its convenience, because all images are automatically rendered equally (un)important – there is no difficult editing process to be gone through, and, most importantly, all of them are deleted.

In our photographing, we have, indeed, become less selective, if only because it is currently so easy and fast to take photographs. Whereas with analogue photography the photographer was faced with a huge pressure to 'capture the moment' with a limited amount of film, digital cameras have rendered that problem basically obsolete. A good 'shooting ratio' was a number for a photographer to take pride in, yet that dynamic has disappeared along with the speed of digital image making, and in any case, most of photographers' fear of missing out has ceased to be. Snapchat, if anything, has strengthened this indecision of action rather than weakened it, exactly because, as I just mentioned, there is never any retrospective worry of what to do with which photographs; there is no subsequent burden consisting of a pile of photographs, and nor is there, logically, any question of arrangement or selection. Thereby, Snapchat (potentially) becomes an excuse, or manner in which to take photographs

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[200] Fred Ritchin, "Prologue," in *ED IT. The Substantial System for Archive Maintenance*, eds. Nikki Brörman, Ola Lanko, Sterre Sprengers (Self published, 2014), 13.
[201] Ibid., 12.
[202] See also Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," II, 221.
[203] *ED IT. The Substantial System for Archive Maintenance*, 18. They refer to themselves as ED, I will too.
[204] Ibid., 438.
[205] Ibid.

thoughtlessly[206] and non-selectively, because the photographer never has to rethink their decision of what was photographed and what was not. In consonance with what Snapchat founders advocate, it comes to represent the epitome of living in the moment, and only in one moment, namely the present.[207] Snapchat does not enable the looking back onto our Snapchat pasts, neither is it built for that purpose in any way. As a result, there is what has long been the photograph-to-communicate, but now also the new photograph-to-forget.

Apparently, what we choose to photograph has changed. In 1990, Bourdieu claimed that the everyday environment never gave rise to photographs, whereas landscapes and monuments – which he qualifies as unique encounters – did.[208] That has clearly changed. We certainly do still photograph unique encounters, yet, what we consider worthy enough to be photographed has expanded to include the everyday, banal, trivial.[209] Inevitably, this emphasis shift in what we decide to photograph impacts the function of the photograph itself in our lives. Arguably, it has merely expanded, but I would like to argue that with this increasing lack of selectivity, also some of its former preciousness is lost. If our photographs do not depict unique encounters, but rather, increasingly trivial scenes, what would we want to preserve them for? And if that question is reversed: if we do not want to preserve them, why do we choose to take them? As my research has demonstrated, it is clearly not as much about the photograph itself as it is about the communicative and social value of the message that it carries, that it brings across. As Nancy van House confirms: "A common reason participants gave for the posting and viewing images online was keeping in touch with friends and family, keeping others informed and staying informed about friends' lives, especially about significant life events, but also just making connections without having to actually interact directly: distant closeness."[210] Like with the picture postcard, digital photography exchanges are often used towards the strengthening and preservation of existing social bonds.

I would like to continue, at this stage, to discuss some practical as well as theoretical stakes of the increasingly transitory nature of photographic images, resultant from the emphasis shift I have just described, and particularly the temporality of Snapchat. An important insight is that though it may seem that the temporality integral to Snapchat is somehow novel, the opposite is the case. It is true that with the extremity of temporality Snapchat introduces, memory is obviously threatened, but photography has always been subject to a substantial degree of ephemerality and fragility. Daguerrotypes, photographic prints of any sort; all are

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[206] In accordance, Snapchat advocates the simultaneous experience and documentation, which allows for and needs very little reflection – an aspect that is, however, clearly advocated by the writers of ED.

[207] The currently common acronym YOLO – "you only live once", thereby a motto similar to the much older carpe diem – is an expression of a similar sentiment, often used by teenagers to express the need to live life to the fullest without worrying about the future.

[208] Bourdieu, *Middle-brow Art*, 36.

[209] Van House, "Personal Photography," 127.

[210] Ibid., 131.

subject to light, and will subsequently fade, until finally, they disappear. The advent of the digital has accelerated this process and brought photography's fragility to a new high – at least in terms of speed. I referred to Bregtje van der Haak's documentary earlier, and in accordance, Van House emphasises the complexity and fragility of the digital archive: "[D]igital files lack the perception of solidity and the casual durability of paper that goes with paper."[211] Especially the rapidity with which digital technology develops, renders digital archives more vulnerable, due to the rate at which software and file formats become obsolete. Consequently, even the photographs we wish to keep and preserve – which I argue are a type of photograph that will always exist alongside the more communicative one that has become so dominant – have always been and always will be prone to vanish.

Evidently, the temporality of the image is a theoretical discourse that long precedes Snapchat and the smartphone age. As Jonathan Crary explains in his "Techniques of the Observer," it is in the early nineteenth century, when physical optics and physics merge, "that physiological optics – the study of the eye and its sensory capacities – comes to dominate the study of vision."[212] This new focus on human vision that focuses on studying optical phenomena such as the retinal afterimage, results in, amongst other things, the introduction of temporality "as an inescapable component of observation."[213] Within this new way of looking at subjective vision and its temporality, in any case, with theorists like Goethe and Hegel, observation came to be looked at as a complex and interactive process, rather than the discrete, stable status it enjoyed with Locke or Condillac.[214] Clearly, the temporality of vision and, consequently, also photography were acknowledged in this epistemological shift.

Currently, the photograph's temporality has been altered by new technologies and practices, which has resulted in photography becoming a form of visual communication without any expectation of permanence.[215] The fragility of the digital archive, as Nancy van House argues, has aggregated a change in attitude from being geared towards permanence into embracing immediacy; she explicitly uses Snapchat as an example of this change in attitude. Whereas I find that argument to be a form of technological determinism – due to her implications that technology has changed our way of conceiving of photography and consequently the way we make use of it – I do think that photographic impermanence is currently being embraced to some degree. While there will still always be a percentage of photographs that we wish to preserve, we acknowledge that at this rate, with all the photographs we collect, it can be quite appeasing to photograph without the consequent burden of arrangement – a possibility that Snapchat has created. All this invokes to ask if perhaps Huebler

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[211] Ibid., 129.
[212] Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," 9.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid., 10.
[215] Bushey, "Convergence, Connectivity," 9; Van House, "Personal Photography."

was right. Does this unwillingness to keep not indicate that there are enough images in the world? Why should we still photograph? Without wanting to provide a decisive answer, certainly the success of Snapchat relies heavily on the amount of interaction its users generate, its premise being that sharing needs to happen on line. Additionally, in light of recent privacy scandals, people seem to increasingly desire and demand their right to be forgotten. Digital oblivion may seem like a utopia, because big companies can practically do anything they want with the data they collect, yet that does mean it is desired less. Personal data, especially in large quantities, are of immeasurable value.

The link between photography and forgetting is as old as is its link to remembrance, as well as its fragility to the lapse of time. Already in 1859, Oliver Wendell Holmes warned his readers that photography had become so ordinary that it threatened the forgetting of how special this invention actually was: "A man looks at himself in the mirror, goes his own way, and immediately his mirror and mirrored forget what kind of man he was."[216] Photography, he wrote, was the invention of a mirror with a memory, and in that sense, Snapchat changed photography back into a mirror without a memory, seeing that by using it users now look in the mirror, or more accurately, into someone else's, in order to immediately forget what the image looked like. Peculiarly, with Snapchat we have somehow halted our search for immortality – a search that long motivated our desires to have ourselves and our loved ones photographically portrayed. The mirror image, like the Snapchat photograph, disappears after we 'walk away,' and it soon fades from our memories, too.[217] It is therefore not surprising that Snapchat researcher Jurgenson is the one to emphasise the insignificance of the photograph as object: "As photos have become almost comically easy to make, their existence alone as objects isn't special or interesting."[218] Clearly, Jurgenson is amongst those of whom Wendell Holmes would say that they have forgotten about the special nature of its invention.

Regardless of whether or not the photograph's disappearance is a regrettable development, it has significantly changed the function of the photograph as part of our lives. Another juxtaposition with the photograph as a mirror with a memory, however, will demonstrate that there is not only a reversal, but also a parallel to be identified. As Douwe Draaisma emphasizes in his *Vergeetboek*, the daguerrotypist preferred to consider the truth of the mirror image to be "as life itself."[219] A similar sense of verisimilitude is implied in the aforementioned statements made about Snapchat, which emphasise its authenticity, unmediatedness and ability to capture life as it happens – even though it may vanish almost immediately after its exposure.

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[216] Douwe Draaisma, *Vergeetboek* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2010), 203; Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereographe," 72 + 74. Passages translated from Dutch by the author.
[217] Draaisma, *Vergeetboek*, 206.
[218] Jurgenson, "The Frame Makes the Photograph."
[219] Draaisma, *Vergeetboek*, 203-204.

In a newspaper article describing a photographic exhibition, Rudy Kousbroek makes another revealing reference, one that could provide an interesting insight into the validation of Snapchat's reason for existence. According to him, that which should be supportive of the memory function is also a danger. "A photo preserves something, but it is not always clear that through the process of preservation, simultaneously, something is lost. A photographic portrait, especially of someone deceased, comes to replace the memory; the photograph pushes it aside, replaces it, makes part of the memory fade."[220] Whoever takes photographs, does not necessarily always have a memory *and* a photograph. The memories are intertwined with the photograph from the beginning onwards, and after a while, the photograph is also intertwined with the memories. Kousbroek refers to Roland Barthes' statements on photography and its ability to, by documenting a particular moment, destroy what has once been.[221] Keeping, in other words, can sometimes equal loss.

These statements allude to Proust's photographic theory, and particularly Dora Zhang's interpretation of his ideas is interesting. She elaborates on the link between photography and death, which is commonly considered in relation to the ideas of André Bazin, who locates photography in a tradition of arts aiming to protect the body from decay and to ensure its survival – a photographic portrait, in that context, is the logical extension of mummification.[222] Additionally, Zhang cites Roland Barthes' account of photography, which regards it as a reminder of mortality.[223] However, in Zhang's interpretation, the aforementioned visions on photography are not traumatic because they reveal to us the future nonexistence of things, but rather because they reveal the continued existence of things in our absence: "It is not their having been and being no longer that disturbs us, but precisely the contrary: their continuing to be *when we are not there* – the absolute indifference of the world to our perception of it, on which it does not depend in the slightest."[224] The photograph, in that sense, both signals as well as reminds us of the fact that the world and everything in it, continues to exist without us. By doing so, photography also signals death, not only by giving us a look into the future in which we do not exist anymore, but also by exposing that in fact, we really need not have existed at all.[225] Even though the photograph may function as a testimony to the fact that we have existed, leaving a slight trace of it as such, it also reminds us that the world as part of which we existed does not need our existence for it to continue to be.

Whereas we used to reach out to the photograph to help us preserve and protect some

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[220] Rudy Kousbroek, "Er moet iets bij," *NRC Handelsblad,* Cultureel Supplement, March 26, 2004. Translated from Dutch by the author.

[221] Kousbroek refers to Barthes who feels in photography: "la violence de la destruction de ce qui a été." I have not been able to find the original source in which Barthes makes this statement.

[222] Zhang, "A Lens for an Eye," 104.

[223] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

[224] Zhang, "A Lens for an Eye," 104. Emphasis mine.

[225] Ibid., 104-105.

things from time, with Snapchat, we have stopped doing so. Proust's ideas are useful in a different sense in that they also imply that besides the human being, the photograph itself might not always be necessary. As I highlighted earlier, Proust proposes photography as a figure for the workings of voluntary memory – wilfully scrolling through photographs does not stimulate the recovery of memories, even more so, such images are often sterile or even boring. In that sense, if photography were to be transformed into a figure for the workings of involuntary memory, which exceeds consciousness and which Proust considers a more interesting sort of memory perhaps, its disappearance would be a prerequisite. The photograph can be represented in our mind without a physical one in front of our eyes. So in some sense, we don't need the image; it becomes redundant in the outplay of authentic memory recall. Snapchat advocates a new type of photographic truth, one that focuses on verisimilitude but only in a very particular moment. Therefore, the image, just like us, need not have been at all. And if they ever were, perhaps they linger on best vaguely in our minds, rather than on paper, in an album, or on a hard drive. But whereas Proust's involuntary memory also strongly refers to moments that were physically lived through, in which we were bodily present. Snapchat's digital nature and lack of face to face contact presents a challenge to the applicability of Proust's theory. Perhaps a new form of digital involuntary memory would need to be formulated in the future to accurately describe the memories it generates, one that deliberates the consequences of the 'lack' of physicality in Snapchat exchanges. What we know for a fact at this stage is that Snapchat photographs do not continue to exist when we are not there, and perhaps that is their most comforting feature.

Irreproducibility, Tactility, Excitement

Although it may by now seem as if Snapchat merely represents the disappearance or riddance of something about the photograph – even though that in some cases could be considered an advantage – nothing is more deceptive. In this last section I will argue that the disappearing-photo-app represents a significant return to some aspects the photograph was experienced to have lost upon the transition from analogue to digital. The subchapter's title gives away some clues. I argue that Snapchat has brought back a degree of photographic uniqueness, and I will explain how it does so in the three ways I mention in the title.

The first way in which Snapchat brings back photographic uniqueness is obvious. Because the photograph disappears after being viewed, there is no way for it to be reproduced. There is no longer an original, hence, there will be no copies, with the exception of the 'copy' that is being made in order for the photograph to be sent from one user to the other.[226] This renewed impossibility of reproduction has the theoretical possibility of preventing the qualitative damage that is inevitable once quantities increase.[227] Even though an object's irreproducibility is only a minor element in Walter Benjamin's theories, and an object's history is essential in its acquiring of sentimental importance, the 'aura' of Snapchat photographs may reside exactly there; in their ephemerality, fleetingness, temporality, and resultant uniqueness.

In an attempt to establish a snapshot praxis, Peter Buse juxtaposes Polaroid photograph to the digital snapshot, identifying several similarities and differences. He lists three features that separate Polaroid image-making from other forms of pre-digital photography: instantaneity, the fact that the image develops itself, and the uniqueness of the print – only the first two of which the Polaroid shares with the digital snapshot. In the case of Snapchat, it seems that all three features apply here too. What Buse considers to be a defining feature of the Polaroid photograph is the uniqueness of the image; it provides no negative for further mechanical reproduction.[228] In a similar vein, Snapchat does not provide the digital correlative to a negative either, circumventing what Buse reckons the digital image's basis in binary code has led to, namely: "a whole array of new practices at the level of the dissemination and circulation of photographic images *after* their making."[229] Even though arguably, Snapchat images, like their non-temporary digital snapshot siblings, are not material objects but merely bits of code, theoretically, they are *singular* objects. Even though the singularity I refer to is a wholly

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[226] I will not linger on claims that Snapchat photos do not in fact disappear, or on the ways to circumvent their disappearance and keep copies. The philosophy is that the photograph disappears, and that is the 'fate' of 99% of Snapchat photographs.

[227] Benjamin, "Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

[228] Buse, "Polaroid into Digital," 226.

[229] Ibid., 226; Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, "A Life More Photographic: Mapping the Networked Image," *Photographies* 1:1 (2008): 9-28.

artificial variety that additionally, is not rooted in technological necessity but in a very particular cultural practice, what I mean to say is that dematerialisation does not necessarily mean desingularisation.

The link between Polaroid photograph and Snapchat leads me to the second way in which Snapchat reintroduces photographic uniqueness: tactility. It is grounded in the fact that Snapchat is an app with features based specifically on a touch-screen device: the smartphone. It is in no way the only photographic app that enables the touching of a photograph, yet, there is a feature that distinguishes Snapchat tactility from the tactility that characterises other photographic apps: the received photograph can be viewed only as long as it is touched. If the screen is not touched, there is nothing to be seen. Whereas the case studies in the second chapter – the picture postcard and Polaroid photograph – are thoroughly communicative but also material objects, Snapchat enables a similar type of photographic communication on a digital platform; in using it, visual message exchangers keep in touch. Some nuance is necessary in this regard, because clearly, this tactility by no means involves a relation to a unique object. Whereas a Polaroid is an object that can be passed around, and only one of it exists, the touch screen on which snaps are viewed has no texture. In fact, receivers merely touch the glass, meaning that there is a sense of tactility, yet a clearly limited one. Above all, Snapchat is a visual phenomenon, considering that a snap-touch can never productively occur without looking. Nevertheless, by introducing this aspect of touch, Snapchat distinguishes itself from other digital imagery in its ability to let users experience a relation to the image. As John Berger state: "To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it."[230] Conveniently, through its tactile nature, Snapchat reintroduces the ability for their users to relate to a photograph physically to a certain degree, even while the photograph itself is not a material object.

All of the above – Snapchat's temporality, tactility, the direct contact it enables, the distant closeness – creates the foundations for a type of excitement perhaps unprecedented in other photographic forms. Due to its temporary nature, a Snapchat photograph can easily be missed, which stimulates a more attentive type of viewing. In preparation of the viewing of a photograph, you prepare yourself to be ready to watch it with a focused eye. Then, even inthe case that the photograph appears for only one or two seconds, in any case, you have tried your utmost to see what it depicted. Photographs you know will disappear after you have seen them have an added value of some sort or another. This is exactly because you know in advance that they will only 'exist' for a very short period of time. It stimulates a more active attitude in you, as a viewer, an ensures for a piercing photographic experience. Yet, this difference in experience does contain another contradiction in the sense that it may not be in balance with the excessive quantities of snaps received by the average user. The fact that they receive as many snaps as they do, is likely to somehow diminish the piercing effect that looking at one has on

[230] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1.

them. Nevertheless, it is clear that Snapchat offers a different balance between ideas of retention and disappearance than other photographic platforms. And in another sense, Snapchat has rendered photographic viewing more like cinematic viewing. The fact that the sender controls the time span over which the receiver is allowed to see the photograph ensures that the rhythm of looking is determined by someone other than the user themselves.[231] As a result, some passivity enters the consumption of the photograph – and that certainly likens the Snapchat user to the spectators in cinemas or in front of the television, who are just as equally passive. This passivity, however, does not imply inactivity or inattentiveness.

By now it should be clear that Snapchat is accurately characterised by a wealth of contradictions, most of which are rooted in its attitude towards other (visual) social media. Its antagonistic attitude towards an algorithmic culture of overexposure, of which they appoint Facebook as its epitome, is expressed in the presentation of an artificial sense of authenticity. Its claims towards offering its users an experience of authenticity is a theoretical near-impossibility considering that algorithms, on which its functions are based, cannot easily be equated with what we used to define as authentic. Hereby positing itself both positively as well as negatively in relation to other social media, Snapchat can be reckoned thoroughly ambiguous. Equally ambiguous is its relation to our contemporary society of control, against which it makes a gesture but of which it is also inherently part. Could it be considered a Trojan horse of sorts, or does it represent better than anything else the alienation that characterises the flexible personality that Holmes envisions?[232] Arguably, Snapchat is inextricably bound into the form of governmentality Holmes discusses in relation to this flexible personality, one in which the freedoms offered by the personalized computer are used as a form of control: "The flexible personality represents a contemporary form of governmentality, a internalized and culturalized pattern of "soft" coercion, which nonetheless can be directly correlated to the hard data of labor conditions, bureaucratic and police practices, border regimes and military interventions."[233] By being part of a system through which users can express their emotions, thereby giving them an illusory sense of freedom, while simultaneously making antigonising gestures towards that very system, it is unclear where exactly the role of Snapchat can be pinpointed. In line with my genealogical approach, I do not wish to determine its purpose, boundaries, origin nor future in any sense. It has become clear how its inherent ambiguities and inconsistencies can form the best possible open ended answer to my research questions. In agreement with Foucault, this "search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the

[231] Snapchat also enables the sending of videos, but I will not go too deeply into that. It is more interesting in this context to argue why even photographs are viewed in a more cinematic way; they do not have to be videos.
[232] Holmes, 11.
[233] Holmes, 13.

heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[234]

With his *One Hour Photo* project, Adam Good intended to create a radical work of art that interrogated photography and transformed it into what he considered an ultimate limited edition – one hour. In the mean time, apps like Snapchat have in some way echoed but also outgrown his project. The photograph's 'ultimate limited edition' has been reduced to seconds, not minutes or hours. Claims towards the permanence of the photographic medium, on which *One Hour Photo* was at least partly based, are at this stage in time clearly a myth, and in fact, always were. We are at a point in time when we are ready to admit and face that photography is ephemeral and its obsolence is multifaceted; prints fade, hard disks crash, files turn incompatible, so we may be better off embracing its temporality. This is exactly what Snapchat's most frequent users have done. Like the party Polaroid, they treat their snaps like instant fossilizations of the present,[235] the only difference being that these fossils are only preserved for a very short amount of time. These snappers are the generation who have replaced "carpe diem" with "YOLO,"[236] and their philosophy of life is that it is best enjoyed in the moment, because it will be over soon enough.

[234] Foucault, 147.
[235] Trotman, "The Life of the Party," 2002.
[236] Acronym for You Only Live Once.

Conclusion

> All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is able to record what is disappearing.[237]
>
> ~ Susan Sontag

Arguably, there were always visual stimuli, and we have always communicated visually. Yet it seems that the pace at which we are currently exposed to them, is difficult to keep up with. The collections of photographs we amass are daunting, to the point that sometimes, we wonder if we could at least partly be excused from the burden of remembrance. Whereas the photograph long functioned as a mnemonic aid, to keep and cherish our memories for us, it is increasingly becoming the direct object of communicative interaction. The photograph itself, as an object, does not seem to matter to us in the manner in which it once used to. In this thesis, I have aimed to answer the following research question: *what is the status quo in the paradox of photograph-as-memento versus photograph-as-experience and how has it developed and transformed throughout photography's history?* As expected, there is no clear-cut answer to be given, nevertheless, many striking aspects of the paradox were revealed along the way.

Using the insights encountered in the process of writing, how would I characterise this point in time and the potential reasons for not wanting to keep (some of) our photographs? It seems that the move towards the photograph as a dispensable 'object' is the symptom of a development that can be seen in contemporary society at large. Whereas we used to experience the photograph, and especially the camera, as a commodity,[238] now that the photograph has lost much of its objecthood, so too has its commodity value changed. Additionally, despite the continued commodity value of the smartphone that hosts much of the apps I discussed, these devices have encompassed quite a fundamental shift in how we have come to think about ownership. This thought is avidly expressed by Rachel Botsman, who argues that the smartphone has taken us into an age characterised by access over ownership. The role of the smartphone in this development is that it has become a remote control to the physical world. Botsman describes a study in which 18 to 24-year-olds are asked whether they would want to own either a car or a smartphone. Their preference is clear: 75% chose the smartphone. As Botsman goes on to emphasise, this seems particularly striking to older generations, because to

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[237] Sontag, *On Photography*, 15-16.
[238] Bourdieu, *Middle-brow Art*, 13.

them, the smartphone is still predominantly a tool for communication. For the youngsters it is much more than that: using the smartphone, they can access goods and services almost instantly without having to individually own them – a very efficient way to consume.[239]

If this notion could be extended to photography, which I would say it could be effortlessly so, it means that in apps like Snapchat, a similar emphasis shift can be determined. Smartphone photographers have moved from physical ownership of a photograph to digital ownership, now onto a mere *accessing* of that same photograph. It can be used and accessed instantly, it is temporary, and there is no felt need to own it after it was used. As with a car, the mere access of a photograph means the user does not have to take care of its 'parking.' The photograph is simply not needed at all times. As I have already emphasised, the photograph itself is not the protagonist in its own exchange. In Jessica Bushey's interpretation, the photograph essentially plays the supporting role in a play in which identity is formed, and everyday experiences are chronicled.[240] Its function as a means to building identity is expressed mainly in the recent proliferation of the selfie – a style of personal portraiture typically created using a smartphone and very often the type of photograph exchanged using Snapchat.

In the light of the quantitative increase in visual communication that I have highlighted along the way, it makes sense to talk about visual literacy. Many have argued that the increased exposure to (visual) technologies such as the personal computer and smartphone has enhanced the skills of those who face this exposure. Just like in the nineteenth century, albeit in a different manner, our human sensorium is again tested by the exposure to novel technologies: "The Phenakistiscope substantiates Walter Benjamin's contention that in the nineteenth century technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training."[241] When I say visual literacy, in accordance with Ron Bleed, I describe it as the ability to both interpret and create visual media. Arguably, this form of literacy is now as essential as more traditional forms of literacy.[242] Whereas visual literacy was always important, the amount of imagery to which we are currently exposed, calls for more insight into its implications.

Many scholars in the field of visual literacy have argued that Millenials, or digital natives, the group of young people I have described earlier, have enhanced thinking skills in visually-oriented areas, because they are more repeatedly exposed to technologies such as the smartphone.[243] Their perspective is not revolutionary, seeing that McLuhan claimed the same

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[239] Rachel Botsman. "The Collaborative Economy: A Transformative Lens, not a Startup Trend. Presentation at Constellation Connected Enterprise, California, October 29, 2014.

[240] Bushey, "Convergence, Connectivity," 3-4.

[241] Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," 20.

[242] Ron Bleed, "Visual Literacy in Higher Education," *EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Explorations* 1 (2005): 3; Eva Brumberger, "Visual Literacy and the Digital Native: An Examination of the Millennial Learner," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30:1 (2011): 21.

[243] Mark Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9:5 (2001); Julie Coates, *Generational Learning Styles* (River Falls: LERN Books, 2007), 126; Diana Oblinger and James

already in the late 1960s: "Youth instinctively understands the present environment – the electric drama."[244] And although that may sound like a commonsensical effect of increased use of visual technology and communication, Eva Brumberger emphasizes that the aforementioned claims are rarely supported with experimental evidence, making it a contested set claims to rely on. In order to assess their veracity, Brumberger puts them to the test. Her conclusions are deceptive, in the sense that they demonstrate that especially the visual communication production skills of the 485 approximately 19-year-olds tested are very limited. Additionally, her data provide no indication towards the students' ability to effortlessly translate images and the information they convey. Brumberger's survey clearly challenges the claims embedded in the 'digital natives argument,' and it highlights two of its most problematic assumptions. First, she proves wrong the assumption that increased access to technology creates a difference as opposed to youngsters growing up without such access, and second, those with access do not perform better. Repeated interaction with visual material, therefore, does not necessarily result in visual literacy. In agreement, Peter Felten states: "Living in an image-rich world […] does not mean students […] naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills, just as continually listening to an iPod does not teach a person to critically analyze or create music."[245] Clearly, access and exposure are no determinate factors for visual literacy in the twenty-first century.

What does this imply for those Millennials who are exposed to a higher quantity of visual material than any other human in any other decade or century ever was? It is definitely no certainty that they are better equipped to deal with or interpret the material they face. Perhaps, in extension to Walter Benjamin's argument, the sheer quantity of visual material has ruined their ability to make quantitatively sane judgements. The photograph's function, amidst this quantitative increase, cannot possibly have remained unchanged, especially in the consideration that apparently we are by no means better capable to process all visual information we face. Has it made the use of the photograph more superficial? It is certain at least that the photograph as carrier of a message need not be informative – the exchange in itself, the mere fact that a photograph was sent, now suffices. As I emphasised earlier with regards to the picture postcard, the purpose of such communication is to "*confirm* or mobilize an already existing social relationship."[246] Arguably, in the context of the distant closeness[247] enabled by the smartphone, it makes sense to talk about presence, because through our increased interaction with this

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Oblinger, "Is it Age or IT: First Steps Toward Understanding the Net Generation," in *Educating the Net Generation*, ed. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005), 2.14; Brumberger, "Visual Literacy," 20.

[244] McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, 9.

[245] Peter Felten, "Visual Literacy," *Change* 40:6 (2008): 60.

[246] Rogan, "An Entangled Object," 16. This relates also to what Roman Jakobsen ascribes to the communication act, which is its phatic function: "The phatic function is to keep the channels of communication open; it is to maintain the relationship between addresser and addressee: it is to confirm that communication is taking place."

[247] Van House, "Personal Photography," 131.

communicative device, talking to one another from distant locations, the way in which we use photography to express our altered experiences of time and space has certainly changed.

Yet essentially, Snapchat is still very much a novel phenomenon that we are in the midst of discovering, and it would be wrong to make deterministic statements about its impact; I have signalled and interpreted merely some of its idiosyncracies and potential. Perhaps in a decade or two, there will be possibilities for studying it with some hindsight, to determine how its current ambiguities and complexities can be accurately contextualised. In its simultaneously being an extreme version of Internet ideology as well as a critique of it to some degree, it is as of yet difficult to determine its exact position in contemporary networks of power and corporatism. Does Snapchat, in the vein of what Holmes describes and as I mentioned before,[248] encompass a manner in which to partly incorporate critique in order to keep social media users docile? In any case it seamlessly connects to the increased obsolence of our commodity goods that Holmes mentions. Has it at least somewhat successfully upturned the situation in their favour and made the system tolerable again for a specific generation? In any case, as Holmes emphasizes, the contemporary compromise that arose out of earlier crises is a rather fragile one, and it remains to be seen what impact novel developments and crises will have:

> To recognize this profound ambivalence of the networked computer – that is, the way its communicative and creative potentials have been turned into the basis of an ideology masking its remote control functions – is to recognize the substance and the fragility of the hegemonic compromise on which the flexible accumulation regime of globalizing capital has been built.[249]

Either way, Snapchat has made the ephemeral appear to be something fun, whereas for some it is seen as regrettable – this is expressed in countermovements such as the exhibition and collection of analogue photography and the popularity of Instagram's 'vintage' filters.

The questions I just raised are, clearly, starting points for further research, which should elaborate on issues I have been able to merely touch upon. A crucial element in the success of further research is to perform a wider analysis of the sociohistorical scope of the phenomenon than I have done, because to be truly effective, a cultural critique – which I have not necessarily aimed to write – needs to establish more solidly the links between power and the everyday life.[250] A more thorough study of people's photographic habits and attitudes could provide insight into whether these are truly shifting in relation to earlier periods in time. Another area where I see a possibility for more in-depth study includes Snapchat's algorithm, which I have not been able to study at this stage, yet which can offer profound insight into its structural setup.

The sense of living in the immediate present that Snapchat so strongly advocates and introduces is certainly one of its most striking features, but also comes along with the last of its

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[248] Holmes, *The Flexible Personality*, 6.
[249] Ibid., 8.
[250] Ibid., 1.

many contradictions I will mention. Alison Butler has commented on what she calls the contemporary condition, in which she reckons that: "Complex and contradictory deictics have become the necessary tools of a form that is addressed precisely to the contemporary condition of being both here and there, yet neither here nor there."[251] It certainly is interesting to note that although Snapchat advocates a sense of nowness, the other side of the coin is that we are in fact, while using our smartphones, notably absent. Could Snapchat be argued to represent a state of perpetual present and oblivion not unlike the state described by Guy Debord in the seventies of the last century, when he discussed the way in which people related to their television screen? Most crucially, it seems as though we have reached a new high in our inability and/or unwillingness to remember in the midst of an increasingly mediated society.

Apart from the mnemonic versus the communicative, there is another type of distinction to be made between two types of photographs. The first is the photograph with an evidentiary function, the second is the intimate, private photograph – the distinction demonstrates how photography can encompass entirely different functions. Yet as the example of Kim Kardashian exposes, that what used to be a distinction between the spectacular, evidentiary and the private, has now largely collapsed. Snapchat, in that, culminates dilemmas highlighted in previous chapters in its embodiment of public/private dilemmas, its "here I am" value and its communicative essence. However, despite its apparent potential to reinforce mutual connections between its users, it seems as though the smartphone, and Snapchat along with it, have actually placed individuals further apart than they ever were. In the times of the picture postcard, we were able to communicate while being further apart than ever. The Polaroid brought us back together, by the shared experience of photography, while now Snapchat and smartphone have reestablished the distances between us, falsely implying that we are closer than we were.

Fundamentally, Snapchat has brought photography back into alignment with the camera obscura, whose fleeting images were never considered as such until photography was invented. Douwe Draaisma's articulation on the camera obscura's fleetingness can in fact be repeated in a contemporary context. Draaisma states: "Before 1839, the emphemerality of the image seemed as if an inevitable consequence of the laws of nature,"[252] and in extension, I would argue, after 2011, once again, the ephemerality of the image will seem as an inevitable consequence of laws of nature. In yielding photography forgetful, Snapchat encompasses a purposeful eradication of much of photography's mnemonic function, rendering the contemporary smartphone photographer a blissfully ignorant, apparently happy amnesiac. Snapchat has equipped the vernacular photographer with a strategy of forgetfulness; surely, its users will not have to confront their ghosts from the past.

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[251] Alison Butler, "A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation," *Screen* 51:4 (2010): 312.
[252] Draaisma, *De Metaforenmachine*, 142.

Terminology

All definitions within quotation marks are taken from Oxford Dictionaries online.

- APP

  "An application, especially as downloaded by a user to a mobile device."

- DISAPPEARING-PHOTO-APP

  An application that is characterised first by the fact that it enables its users to send and receive photographs, and second by the fact that the photograph itself disappears after being exchanged.

- PHOTO HOARDING

  As explained on pages 62-63.

- SMARTPHONE

  "A mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touch screen interface, Internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded apps."

- SNAP

  Derivative of snapshot ("An informal photograph taken quickly, typically with a small handheld camera."). In relation to Snapchat, it also refers to the photograph that is being taken using the app; a Snapchat-photograph.

- TAP (VERB)

  "Strike with a quick light blow or blows." In relation to Taptalk, tapping a friend's face using the smartphone's touchscreen results in the immediate taking and sending of a photograph.

- VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY

  As explained in footnote no. 17 on page 15.

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