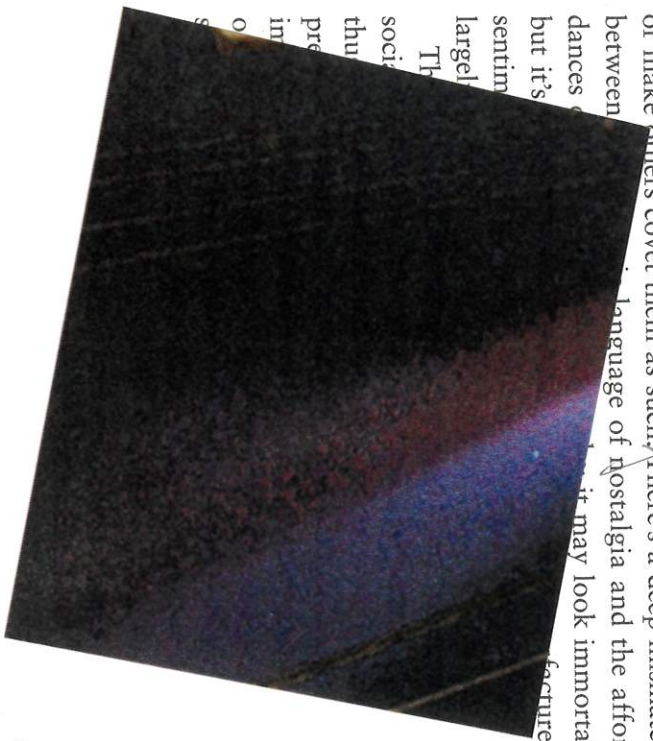


But a profile full of faux-vintage photographs is like a wallet full of dead currency. So much nostalgia had been shoveled at us that the aesthetic lost its impact. Merely making images evocative of photo scarcity doesn't make them actually scarce or make others covet them as such. There's a deep mismatch between the language of nostalgia and the affordances of the digital age. It may look immortal, but it's largely sentimental. The social media landscape is thus a place where the price of immortality is the loss of its original meaning. The abundance of intentional and assured photos can become immortal again.



2

Real Life

What photographic possibilities does the head contain?

—Siegfried Kracauer, 1933<sup>1</sup>

One of sociology's goals is to uncover seemingly counterintuitive social practices, or those that are enacted unconsciously. An Introduction to Sociology course attempts to instill in students what C. Wright Mills called a "sociological imagination," that is, the essential links between personal experience and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> It can serve as a kind of decoder ring for the social world, revealing what we are otherwise trained not to see. This process was famously literalized in John Carpenter's film *They Live* (1988), in which special sunglasses expose the authoritarian messages within consumer capitalism's ubiquitous advertisements. It is also what Karl Marx was doing when he said he was lifting the "veil" of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> It is what Jean Baudrillard did in his approach to the consumer society<sup>4</sup> and what Theodor Adorno did with "the culture industry,"<sup>5</sup> examining language and practices to expose the way material relations are influenced by and sometimes masked by hidden meanings and motives. Social theory can help us see the ways society hides itself.

Social media can be used to do similar work, when viewed through the right analytical lenses. For example, status hierarchies are not new—they are not born from social media metrics—but this explicit, surface-level social ranking through counting numbers of followers and hearts and views can help reveal such hierarchies that may otherwise be mystified. Social media also make obvious how identity is to some

degree performed rather than revealed in uncalculated bursts of authenticity. Anyone who has put together a profile page might recognize this.<sup>6</sup>

The social photo may best illustrate this kind of identity work. The self—that feeling that you are you and not someone else—is a story you tell yourself to connect the person you once were to who you are now to who you will become. Photography plays an integral role in linking the self over time. We see ourselves in old photos, but we also picture ourselves in the future, reminiscing on the images that capture us today. Photography stands for this process of remembering: it not only reveals the self but is also how one recognizes the self as a self. Photos don't just depict the self but are a procedure for self-knowledge, a mode of thinking about the self. This identity work is deciding to remember something as *quintessentially me*, a choice, a performance, memorialized within the frame.

The selfie—the Oxford Dictionaries' 2013 "word of the year"—is perhaps the most conspicuous, notorious, and debated type of social photography. The term *selfie* is widely used as shorthand for the exhibitionism, narcissism, and other enduring social worries aroused by technologies of visibility. But selfie taking is hardly aberrant; it is not rare or limited to some unusual subset of smartphone users. The selfie is instead quite familiar. Most simply it is the social photo one takes of oneself. It is a means by which the new image-taking and sharing technology has been attached to the traditional workings of identity, and it also makes those workings more explicit. Selfies make plain the ongoing process of identity construction. And perhaps this exposure is part of why selfies are so often deplored.

There is an interesting difference in how photo software can be designed to handle an image taken with a device's front-facing camera. Some give you the view that someone looking at you would see, but others flip the image so that it looks

like what you would see in a mirror. In the mirror-reversed applications, the words on your shirt are backwards and the part in your hair goes in the direction you are familiar with seeing in your own reflection, but it is unfamiliar to others who are used to seeing you and not your reflection. The apps either produce what others usually see when you are among people or what you usually see in the intimacy and privacy of the mirror.

The subtle distinction between these views can help illustrate how making a selfie mimics the making of a self. Researcher Anirban Basishya compares it to the difference between the selfie and the traditional self-portrait:

The self produced by a selfie and a traditional self-portrait are not the same. The connection of the hand to the cell phone at the moment of recording makes the selfie a sort of externalized inward look, and the point of view of the selfie is not necessarily the external gaze of the painter's eye as he steps out of his body to see and render his own form, but that of the hand that has been extended the power of sight. Thus, in a strange way, the so-called amateur look of the selfie also becomes an index of the real—the point of view of the selfie seems authentic, because it is as if the human body is looking at itself.<sup>7</sup>

The selfie is "authenticated" by the markings of the form (holding the phone and pointing it at oneself), which conveys an intimacy akin to looking in the mirror. In the tension between mirror view and external view is the self, and, like the self, the selfie traverses that space, puts it into social circulation. The selfie lets us share that mirror-view, what we see when contemplating our self, considering what we are. In this way, the mirrored view subtly conveys to others not the objective fact of who we are but instead what we see in our private back stage, which is a self in the active process of being made and also being passively shaped by the world.

how we think we might appear in a snapshot.<sup>11</sup> Even then, the self was understood as something manufactured, something exchangeable, something that is preserved and shareable as an image-object. As writer Rob Horning puts it, the selfie “manufactures a self to present to the world as an artisanal product.”<sup>12</sup> The corollary is that the self doesn’t quite exist until those moments of production.

Because social photography is about visibility, it’s no surprise that it’s also deeply gendered and stigmatized. As much as the selfie reflects how identity theorists have long described the construction and maintenance of the self, it has at the same time been conspicuously derided. While photos of tourist attractions and sunsets and possessions are liked or ignored, photos of bodies, and especially of faces, are obsessed over and tightly regulated. When the Oxford Dictionaries officially added the word *selfie*, it included the following example sentence:

Selfie (noun): A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.

*Occasional selfies are acceptable, but posting a new picture of yourself every day isn’t necessary.*<sup>13</sup>

As researcher Anne Burns points out, “When even the dictionary definition of ‘selfie’ is prescriptive, we can see how regulation has become naturalized as part of public discourse.”<sup>14</sup> Burns’s work forcefully describes the emergence of selfie-hate and its consequences. She argues that when selfies are criticized as “narcissistic,” when selfie “duck faces” are mocked, and the frequency with which selfies are taken and posted are counted and condemned, it’s often to express sexist attitudes and sort women, especially young women, into moral hierarchies:

Selfie discourse does not merely express prejudice toward others; it also justifies their denigration by establishing punishment as a socially accepted response to certain activities (taking selfies) and subjects (women who take selfies).<sup>15</sup>

Selfie-takers thus become scapegoats for identity’s irreducible social and performative dimensions.

The selfie is the paradigmatic example of how social photography more broadly has become a locus for imposing systems of rules and conduct for the self, a place where the self can be regulated with shame and stigma. Like sexting, which is so often represented as an inherently corrupting activity caused by technology that endangers vulnerable teens, social photography is seen as a danger posed by technology that needs careful management so that users don’t hurt themselves with it. Sexting and selfies are risky actions *done to people* rather than often pleasurable practices that they freely choose.

Society is more uncomfortable with certain categories of people—youth, women—availing themselves of such agency. Hence, the agency is displaced to apps or devices, and the “problem” can be solved: *just put the phone away and everything is fixed*. By treating digital connection as if it were a disinhibiting moral toxin, it becomes an easy target and expiating explanation for intractable social problems. This is a misunderstanding of how deeply enmeshed digital technologies are in our everyday lives.

Amy Adele Hasinoff proposes an alternative understanding that views sexting in the context of

the creativity and ingenuity of teens who consensually produce their own sexual images. If researchers saw sexting in this way, they might investigate whether consensual sexting could facilitate personal exploration or critical reflection on gender and sexual representations in mass media.<sup>16</sup>

Sexing, like sex, is both risk and pleasure. Pleasure often comes with, and from, risk. With sex and romance, whether mediated by a screen or not, avoiding risk is impossible and perhaps even undesirable. And the adult disapproval may make sexing seem even more sexy. But such discourse also has the hurtful result of intensifying the stigma, discomfort, and penalties for sexts that are shared beyond their intended audience. The expressions of misplaced concern make the real thing to be concerned about (violation of consent, shaming) even worse, exacerbating the harmful stigmatization linked to such harassment.

Think of the refrain one often hears from people who grew up before social photography: *I'm so thankful I didn't have Facebook when I was in high school*. Behind this sentiment is the worry that old social photos would come to light now and embarrass people in front of their professional networks and current friends and family—which is understandable as past digital dirt can often seem debasing. But the relief goes hand in hand with the implicit belief that how our identities have changed over time is something that should be hidden. This belief reinforces the stigma that generates the feeling of gratitude, while withholding it from younger people, whose identities are in far more obvious flux. Young people need space to experiment with the inescapable work of identity production, to make mistakes trying to get it right.

For young people today, photos of their past that are inconsistent with their eventual present will exist and circulate together. As we reach the point when having granular photographic self-documentation from one's early teens well into adulthood is the norm, it's increasingly difficult to support the fiction of an identity that is intrinsic and unchanging. This might ultimately relax the strict enforcement of apparent identity consistency. Perhaps the popularity of social photography will force more people to confront the reality that identity isn't and can't be flawlessly consistent. We could celebrate

the fact that people aren't just what they *are* but engage in a nonlinear process of continual *becoming*, rife with starts and stops and wrong turns.

Stigmas erode. Bill Clinton's pot smoking was relevant to his political fortunes; Barack Obama's much less so. As a personal history comprised of social photographs becomes more common, there is a case to be made that the inevitable missteps and mistakes, the digital dirt, won't be as discomfiting as it feels today.

Eroding the stigma around old photos is important because the stigma is so unequally distributed. A world in which past photos aren't treated as shameful could be of particular benefit to those most vulnerable, those less immune to societal double standards. When Krystal Ball ran for congress in 2006, barely scandalous photos of her at a college party became some of the most Googled images in the world—a fact that may have discouraged other women from running for office. Perhaps we can be more realistic and accepting of the fact that everyone has photos that do not reflect their current selves, and that's fine.

Shifting the discussion to questions of social vulnerability helps clarify the real dangers of social photography. Problems with selfies or sexing have more to do with the sexism that pervades the whole of our augmented reality than anything essential about those technologies.

The idea that the selfie has corrupted our authenticity is part of a larger misunderstanding that takes anything digital to be distinct from real life. As the story goes, the predigital era was the age of reality. Before social media profiles, we were more true to ourselves, and the sense of who we truly are was held firmly together by the limits of geographic space and the visceral actuality of flesh. Without social media metrics quantifying our worth, identity did not have to be oriented toward status or scheming for attention. According to this popular

fairy tale, the Internet, online social networking, and constant picture taking arrived, and real conversation and identity were displaced by the allure of the virtual—the simulated second life that uproots and disembodies the authentic self in favor of digital posturing, empty interaction, and addictive connection.

From popular books to newspaper op-eds to everyday conversation, the fact of being digitally connected is given the highest of stakes: we are told that the screen is toxic, makes you less real, perhaps even precludes one from having human experience to begin with. Eventually, we may look back on our first years with pocket computers and find the collective obsession with regulating the correct amount of screen time or the correct number of photos slightly strange. But for now, our current moment is characterized by this constant preoccupation with when and how much we can look at our screens. Of course, one's orientation to digital connection cannot escape the moral order—nothing does. But what marks our current moment is the heavy-handedness of such concern, the high stakes of social ranking, the ways one is digitally connected becoming a constant anxiety to be confessed, detailed, documented, and dwelled upon. It is spoken about in the terms of medical pathology and addiction, and a whole set of elaborate rituals-governing connection and disconnection emerge to manage it, to help us “detox” from the digital-as-poison. In the future, will we still remember how self-satisfied we were about any time spent away from the screen?

This preoccupation with regulating one's digital connection is a reaction to how suddenly and fundamentally ubiquitous this connection has become. The deep infiltration of digital information into our lives has created a fervor around the supposed corresponding loss of logged-off real life. Each lived moment is now oversaturated with digital potential: texts, status updates, notifications, e-mails, and social photos are just a few taps away or pushed directly to your buzzing and

chirping pocket computer—anachronistically still called a “phone.” Count the folks using their devices on the train or bus or walking down the sidewalk or, worse, crossing the street, oblivious to drivers who themselves are bouncing back and forth between the road and their digital distractor. Hanging out with friends and family means also hanging out with their technology. While eating, defecating, or resting in our beds, we are rubbing on our glowing rectangles, seemingly lost in the infostream.

If the hardware has spread virally within physical space, the software is even more insidious. Thoughts, locations, photos, identities, friendships, memories, politics, and almost everything else find their way into social media. The power of “social” is not just a matter of the time we're spending checking apps, nor is it just the data that media companies are gathering; it's also that the logic of the platforms burrows deep into our consciousness. Smartphones and their symbiotic social media give us a surfeit of options to tell the truth about who we are and what we are doing, and an audience for it all, reshaping norms around mass exhibitionism and voyeurism. Twitter lips and Instagram eyes: social media are part of ourselves; their source code becomes our own code.

Predictably, this intrusion has created a backlash. Critics complain that people, especially young people, have logged on and checked out. Given the so-called addictive appeal of digital connection, the masses have traded human friends for Facebook friends. Instead of being present at the dinner table, they are lost in their phones. Writer after concerned writer laments the loss of a sense of connection, of boredom (now redeemed as a respite from anxious info-cravings), of sensory peace in this age of always-on information, omnipresent illuminated screens, and near-constant photo documentation. Among the most notable of these alarmists is psychologist Sherry Turkle, whose research decries the loss of real, offline connection. In an op-ed in the *New York Times* in 2012, she



wrote that, "in our rush to connect, we flee from solitude ... we seem almost willing to dispense with people altogether." She goes on:

I spend the summers at a cottage on Cape Cod, and for decades I walked the same dunes that Thoreau once walked. Not too long ago, people walked with their heads up, looking at the water, the sky, the sand and at one another, talking. Now they often walk with their heads down, typing. Even when they are with friends, partners, children, everyone is on their own devices. So I say, look up, look at one another.<sup>17</sup>

Without a device, we are heads up, eyes to the sky, left to ponder and appreciate.

Turkle leads a chorus of voices that insist that taking time out is becoming dangerously difficult and that we need to follow their lead and log off. Most often, their critique isn't centered on software companies' capitalistic imperative to monetize their users, but the asserted unreality and unhealthiness of digital connection. Any time spent without a device is cast as a kind of overwhelming and existential opportunity. Having to navigate without a maps app, eating a delicious lunch and not being able to post a photograph, having a witty thought without being able to tweet it forces reflection on how different our modern lives really are. To spend a moment of boredom without a glowing screen, perhaps while waiting in line at the grocery store, can propel people into a long reverie about the profundity of the experience.

Fueled by such insights into our lost "reality," we've been told to resist technological intrusions and aspire to consume less information: turn off your phones, put away the camera, log off social media, and learn to reconnect offline with other people and (maybe more important) with yourself. Books like *Turkle's Alone Together* and William Powers's *Hamber's BlackBerry* and the Digital Sabbath and Digital Detox® movements plead with us to close the tabs and focus on one

unmediated task off the screen undistracted.<sup>18</sup> We should go out into the "real" world, lift our chins, and breathe deep the wonders of the offline. A purifying digital detox lets us cast off the virtual and re-embrace the tangible, reconnect with the real, the meaningful—one's true self that rejects social media's seductive velvet cage.

One worry is that as documentary vision expands, more and more of the world comes to be seen through the logic of what can be digitally captured and shared. The question shifts from what to document to what *not* to document—and this proposition can be difficult to answer when each photo *not* taken is potentially experienced as a loss, a waste of possible records, memories, attention, and likes. At this point, where there seems no limit to documentation and where recording is seemingly done for its own sake, the documentary impulse might snowball toward pathology, a disease where the tail of documentation comes to wag the dog of lived experience.

Built into this worry about social media is that their logic moves only toward ever-expanding documentation. The so-called Zuckerberg law of information sharing—that each year we'll personally share twice as much information as the preceding year—captures the essence of this logic.<sup>19</sup> Overdocumentation is the self-defeating impulse to produce so much knowledge about yourself and your experience that you arrive at confusion, chaos, befuddlement. Photographers perhaps best know the danger of how documentation can spin out of control, the possibility of the camera eye seeing nothing unworthy of capture.

The street photographer Vivian Maier died with hundreds of rolls of film undeveloped, reels of video of everyday life sitting next to suffocating stacks of newspapers, themselves mixed with proliferating audio cassettes recording her every thought. This sort of hoarding seems to be an occupational hazard for professional photographers, whose lives are bound up with this logic of documentation. The "decisive moment"

can shift from when to press the shutter to when *not* to press it. No great reason to *not* take the photo presents itself when every moment without a finger on the shutter is a picture forever lost, a reality forfeited to time. Because of the apparent ease of documenting, which always seems to become easier, documentation can come to seem all or nothing. Some photographers consciously opted out of documentation, aborting before becoming overwhelmed with the imperative to shoot everything. Stieglitz and Arbus were among the most famous to be afflicted with this obsession with distinguishing between a photograph and the mere outcome of pressing the shutter. For Stieglitz, the difficulty in making this distinction meant ceasing to take more photographs. Arbus did the same before her suicide; Cartier-Bresson did the same, switching to painting. Geoff Dyer describes what happened to photographer W. Eugene Smith, sitting alone in his apartment shooting and shooting, many microphones and printed photographs overcrowding his space. Garry Winogrand had thousands upon thousands of photos that were unproofed or unexposed upon his death.<sup>20</sup> One of Winogrand's curators said, "he believed the world stopped when he stopped photographing it."<sup>21</sup>

But of course our lives don't stop when we stop documenting them. Our social photos never proliferate endlessly; they also contain limiting forces that slow such documentation down. Documentation was valuable in its rarity, and as it proliferates, it becomes valuable to *not* document. So-called "oversharing" becomes regulated, and a whole set of new stigmas, shame, and etiquette emerge. Digital connection and the ease of social media documentation don't overwhelm the possibility of disconnection and erase the value of life's unshared moments, but instead they provide new value and importance to disconnection and undocumented experience.

Rather than forgetting about the offline, we have collectively become obsessed with it. The existence of so much

disconnectionist punditry demonstrates that we have never appreciated a solitary stroll, a camping trip, a face-to-face chat with friends, or even simple boredom more than we do now.

Indeed, many of us have always been quite happy to occasionally log off and appreciate stretches of boredom, ponder printed books, walk sans camera—even though books themselves were also once regarded as a deleterious distraction from real presence as they became more prevalent. But our immense self-satisfaction in disconnection is new. One of our new hobbies is patting ourselves on the back by demonstrating how much we don't go online, don't have a certain social media account, don't take photos. Conversations routinely plunge into debates about when it is appropriate to pull out a phone or take a photo. People boast about their self-control over not checking their device, and many often reach a self-congratulatory consensus that we should all just keep it in our pants. The pinnacle of such abstinence-only smartphone education is a game that is popular to talk about (though I've never actually seen it played) wherein the first person at the dinner table to pull out their device has to pay the tab. Everyone usually agrees this is awesome.

What a ridiculous state of affairs this is. To obsess over the offline and deny all the ways we routinely remain disconnected is to fetishize this disconnection. Authors of popular books and op-eds pretend to be a lone voice, taking a courageous stand in support of the offline in precisely the moment it has proliferated and become overvalored. For many, maintaining the fiction of the collective loss of the offline for everyone else is merely an attempt to construct their own personal timeouts as more special, as allowing them to rise above those social forces of distraction that have ensnared the masses. I am real. I am the thoughtful human. You are the automaton. How have we come to make the error of collectively mourning the loss of that which is proliferating?

1/15  
C. K.

In great part, the reason is that we have been taught to mistakenly view *online as meaning not offline*. The notion of the offline as real and authentic is a recent invention, corresponding with the rise of the online. If we can fix this false separation and view the digital and physical as enmeshed, we will understand that what we do—~~while-connected~~—is inseparable from what we do when disconnected. That is, disconnection from the smartphone and its camera and social media isn't really disconnection at all: the logic of social media follows us long after we log out. There was and is no offline. Though it has become a lusted-after fetish object that some claim special ability to attain, the "offline" has always been a phantom.

Digital information has long been portrayed as an elsewhere, a new and different cyber space. I have coined the term "digital dualism" to describe this habit of viewing the online and offline as largely distinct. The common (mis)understanding is that experience is zero-sum: time spent online means less spent offline. We are either jacked into the Matrix or not; we are either looking at our devices or not. When camping, I have service or not, and when out to eat, my friend is either texting or not. The smartphone has come to be, as researcher Jason Farman put it, "the perfect symbol" of leaving the here and now for something digital, some other, *virtual* space.<sup>22</sup>

But this idea that we are trading the offline for the online, though it dominates how many think of the digital and the physical, is myopic. It fails to capture the plain fact that our lived reality is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline. The Web has everything to do with reality; it contains real people with real bodies, histories, and politics. We live in a mixed, augmented reality in which materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the offline and the online all intersect. It is incorrect to say "IRL" to mean offline: the Internet is real life. It is the fetish objects of the offline and the disconnected that are not real.

In contrast with even a decade ago, having a device in your pocket today means not just that you can document your life in new ways, but also that even when *not* documenting you don't experience life neutrally but as "not documented." Life sans phone is different now that the phone is such an omnipresent option. We have come to understand more and more of our lives through the logic of digital connection and social photography. For better and worse, social media is more than something we log into; it is something we are within and something we carry within us. We can't log off.

Those who mourn the "loss" of the offline don't see its dependence on the online. When Turkle was walking Cape Cod, she breathed in the air, felt the breeze, and watched the waves with Facebook in mind—if only to reject it, reject remedi-  
ation, though she was happy to remediate her experience in the *New York Times* op-ed column, an opportunity most of those posting on Facebook cannot access. The appreciation of this moment of so-called disconnection was, in part, a product of online connection, and the stroll ultimately came to be fodder for the op-ed, just as our own time spent not looking at our devices becomes the status updates and photos we will post later. The photos posted, the opinions expressed, the check-ins that fill our streams are often anchored in what happens when we feel disconnected and logged-off, not consciously thinking of ourselves as logged on.

Thus, it would be wrong to equate "online" with documentation and "offline" with experience. The reality of an experience and its documentation are not in conflict, and neither precedes the other. Writers like William Cronon long ago showed that the idea, or ideal, of an "untouched" natural nature is only a myth.<sup>23</sup> Our reality has always been already mediated, augmented, documented, and there's no access to some state of unmediated purity. The mediation is inseparable from the thing itself. The critique of social media should begin with how our reality is being augmented in more and



less desirable ways instead of chasing the fiction of a nonaugmented innocence.

The history of photography is a perfect case study, offering a lesson for understanding social media as not exclusively on or offline, real or copy, but always and essentially both and neither. Nearly all of the earliest descriptions and definitions of photography referenced "nature" when articulating the new medium.<sup>24</sup> In those accounts, it isn't entirely clear if it is the camera or nature that produces the image, if that image is genuine or a copy, which is the tension between the real and the fake. This is because a photograph is simultaneously made of reality and technological simulation. The clear distinction between nature and the copy, between on and offline, between human and technology, is blurred beyond tenability.

Solving this digital dualism also solves the bigger contradiction: we may never fully log off, the camera is never fully absent, but this in no way implies the loss of the face-to-face conversation, the slow, the analog, the deep introspection, the long walks, or the subtle appreciation of life we supposedly enjoy without the device. Real life can be enjoyed more than before by not making a fetish out of it.

At the base of the moralizing and shaming around when and how frequently to be digitally connected is the fear that we are losing touch with not only the physical, tangible, *real* world, but also the true, *authentic self*. This is the idea, described above, that social media uniquely demands an identity that is pure, performative fiction. However, the conflict between the self as social performance and the self as authentic expression of one's inner truth has roots much deeper than social media. It has been a concern of much theorizing about modernity and, if you agree with the thrust of these theories, a mostly unspoken preoccupation throughout modern culture.

For example, there's Max Weber's "rationalization," Walter Benjamin's "aura," Jacques Ellul's "technique," Jean Baudrillard's "simulations," or the Frankfurt School's and,

later, Zygmunt Bauman's descriptions of modernity and the Enlightenment—all part of a long tradition in social theory that links technological development to draining reality of its truth or essence. We are increasingly asked to make various "bargains with modernity" (to use sociologist Anthony Giddens's phrase) when encountering and depending on technologies we can't fully comprehend.<sup>25</sup> In short, the mass spread of countless cultural dispositions replaced a premodern experience, one that was thought to have more order, more stable understandings of what is right and true and who one should be. This social solidarity came to be threatened by new technologies, globalization, and urbanization, associated with an anomic, driftless lack of stability and truth, as described by such classical sociologists as Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel and, in more contemporary updates, by David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*), Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*), and Turkle herself.

In other words, social theoretical literature has long indexed the depth of modern concern over technology's replacement of the real with something unnatural, thus prompting the death of absolute truth, of God. This is especially the case with the kind of identity theory described above, much of which is founded on the tension between seeing the self as having some essential soul-like essence versus its being a product of social construction and scripted performance. From Martin Heidegger's "they-self," Charles Horton Cooley's "looking-glass self," and George Herbert Mead's discussion of the "I" and the "me," to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework of self-presentation, Michel Foucault's "arts of existence," and Judith Butler's discussion of identity "performativity," many of the most influential theories of the self and identity have long recognized the tension between the real and the pose.<sup>26</sup> Status-posturing performance—"success theater"—is fundamental to the existence of identity, and has been long before the advent of the perfectly staged social photo.

These theories share an assumption that people in Western society are generally uncomfortable admitting that who they are might be partly (perhaps mostly) structured and performed. To be a “poser” is an insult. Instead, the common wisdom is “be true to yourself,” which assumes there is a truth of your self.

Digital-austerity discourse has tapped into this deep, subconscious modern tension, and brings to it the false hope that unplugging can bring catharsis. These disconnectionists understand the Internet as having normalized, perhaps even enforced, an unprecedented repression of the authentic self in favor of calculated avatar performance. *If we could only pull ourselves away from screens and stop trading the real for the simulated, we would reconnect with our deeper truth.* This assumption animates, for example, a project by Verge columnist Paul Miller, who spent a much publicized year away from the Internet. He went into digital detox with the expectation that, “Real life, perhaps, was waiting for me on the other side of the web browser.”<sup>27</sup>

When the digital is misunderstood as exclusively “virtual,” as second-hand derivative documentation, then pushing back against the ubiquity of connection can feel like a courageous re-embarcking into the wilderness of reality. When identity performance can be regarded as solely a byproduct of social media, then we have a new solution to the old problem of authenticity: just quit. *Unplug—your humanity is at stake!*

The story is a productive one; it reinvents the real self through its supposed loss. To feel newly imprisoned in the digital archive in a way also implies that we were once free from such performance in a nostalgized past. Perhaps freedom and purity are sensed more strongly as a recent loss, their fiction less obvious.

Social media and social photography surely change the performance of identity. For one, they make the process more explicit. We are more aware than ever of the fate of having to

live “onstage,” an object in others’ eyes and not a wholly autonomous and spontaneous subject. But that shouldn’t blind us to the fact that identity theater is older than Mark Zuckerberg and doesn’t end when you log off. The most obvious problem with grasping at authenticity is that you’ll never catch it, which makes the social media confessional both inevitable as well as its own kind of predictable performance.

To his credit, Paul Miller came to recognize by the end of his year away from the Internet that digital abstinence made him no more real than he always had been. Despite his great ascetic effort, he could not reach escape velocity from the Internet. Instead, he found an “inextricable link” between life online and off, between flesh and data, imploding these digital dualisms into a new recognition that one is never entirely connected or disconnected but always deeply both.

The profound cultural preoccupation over when one has a mobile device in hand is rooted in concerns over who gets to say they are still human and who is having “true” experiences. As Diane Lewis notes in an essay, “The question of who adjudicates the distinction between fantasy and reality, and how, is perhaps at the crux of moral panics over immoderate media consumption.”<sup>28</sup> The popular books about digital detoxing, the disconnection stunts, the stream of viral videos depicting smartphone users as mindless zombies, and the countless editorial writers who feel compelled to moralize about the minutia of when one checks their phone or snaps a picture—all of these turn the “real” into a fetish while rendering everyone else a little less real and a little less human. What these critics are saying may matter less than why they feel required to say it.

It is worth asking why these self-appointed judges have emerged, why this moral preoccupation with immoderate digital connection is so popular, and how this mode of connection came to demand such assessment and confession, at such great length and detail. The disconnectionists have established a new set of taboos as a way to garner distinction at the

expense of others, setting their authentic resistance against the unhealthy and inauthentic being of those looking at the screen too much.<sup>29</sup>

Too often, discussions about technology use are conducted in bad faith, particularly when the detoxers and disconnectionists and digital-etiquette enforcers seem more interested in discussing the trivial differences of when and how one looks at the screen rather than the larger moral quandaries of what one is doing there. The disconnectionists' self-help has little to do with technology and more to do with enforcing a traditional vision of the natural, healthy, and normal. This concern-and-confess genre frames digital connection as something personally debasing, socially unnatural despite the rapidity with which it has been adopted. It's depicted as a dangerous desire, an unhealthy pleasure, an addictive toxin to be regulated and medicated. (The American Psychiatric Association has even looked into making "Internet-use disorder" an official condition with a listing in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.)

Sherry Turkle's 2015 book *Reclaiming Conversation* associates digital connection with a whole host of impairments and describes people, especially young people, as having a limited capacity for solitude, sadness, creativity, empathy, deep relationships, conversation, expression, sustained attention, and deep reading. Those holding phones are so broken that it is asked, "Have we forgot what conversation is? What friendship is?"<sup>30</sup> That we'd be concerned with how to best use (or not use) any new technology is of course to be expected, but the high stakes placed on smartphone and social media use—that it can delineate who is more human and alive—suggests something more significant is at play: why do so many of us feel as though digital connection puts our integrity as human beings at risk?

The degree to which inauthenticity seems a new, technological problem is the degree to which I can sell you an

easy solution. Reducing the complexity of authenticity to something as simple as one's degree of digital connection gives the self-help industry a solution it can sell. Researcher Laura Portwood-Stacer describes this as that old "neoliberal responsabilization we've seen in so many other areas of ethical consumption," turning social issues—in this case, being present, authentic, healthy, and human—into personal ones ("just quit") with market solutions and fancy packaging.<sup>31</sup>

For example, there has been a litany of "digital detox" wellness books and articles with titles like "The Amazing Discovery I Made When My Phone Died," "How a Weekly Digital Detox Changed My Life," "Why We're So Hooked on Technology (And How to Unplug)." The phrase *digital detox* has been added to the *Oxford Dictionary Online*. Camp Grounded, which bills itself as a "digital detox tech-free personal wellness retreat," has received lots of media attention since it was founded in 2013, with writer Alexis Madrigal calling it "a pure distillation of postmodern technoanxiety."<sup>32</sup> On its grounds the camp bans not just electronic devices but also real names, real ages, and any talk about one's work. Instead, the camp has laughing contests.

Different from critiques of how profit motives structure digital tools often to the end of violating user privacy and autonomy, the wellness framework instead pathologizes any digital connection as inherently contaminating, something one must confess, carefully manage, or purify away. When the "online" is framed as potentially toxic, users must assume a new responsibility for regulating their exposure.<sup>33</sup> Remembering Michel Foucault's point that diagnosing what is ill is always equally about enforcing what is healthy, we might ask what new flavor of normal is being constructed by designating digital connection as a sickness. Similar to madness, delinquency, sexuality, or any of the other areas whose pathologizing toward normalization Foucault traced, digitality—what is "online," and how one should appropriately

engage that distinction—has become a productive concept for organizing, controlling, and managing new desires and pleasures that have come with the development of communication technologies.

While Silicon Valley has made the term “disruption” a punch line, there is little disagreement that the eruption of digitality does create new possibilities, for better and worse. The smartphone is a machine, but it is still deeply embedded in a network of blood.<sup>34</sup> It is an embodied, intimate, fleshy portal that penetrates into one’s mind, into endless information, into other people. These stimulation machines produce a dense nexus of desires that is inherently threatening. Desire and pleasure always contain some possibility (a *possibility*—it’s by no means automatic or even likely) of unsettling the status quo. So there is always much at stake in their control, in attempts to funnel this desire away from more radical ends and toward reinforcing the values that support what already exists.

This explains the abundance of confessions about social media compulsion that intimately detail when and how one connects. Desire can only be regulated if it is spoken about. To neutralize a desire, it must be made into an insistent moral problem: Is it okay to look at a screen here? For how long? How bright can it be? How often can I look? Is a photo appropriate? Taking a snap can be such a fluid motion, cool and effortless, a social choreography that looks less staged over time. Behind some of this fluidity of movement is the preoccupation, worry, and fear of having the phone out, screen glowing, to be seen as distracted, self-serving, frivolous, thirsty. One’s orientation to digital connection can become a minor personal obsession. Digital austerity is an authority figure downloaded into our heads, making us always aware of our personal relationship to digital desire. This is the true source of our social-media narcissism, not overweening self-love.

To be sure, the interest in preserving the status quo isn’t just the realm of the disconnectionists; for example, policies

that mandate using social media with your real name can be deeply conservative. The point is that digitality is not inherently unreal. The strongest critiques of our new technologies should be animated by the *reality* of exploitation, hate, and harassment as they occur through our screens. And let’s also be skeptical of those who are comfortable ranking whose (and what) documentation is worthy, healthy, and natural. Rooted deep in that digital dualist impulse is the compulsion to dismiss certain voices as undeserving of being heard. For example, Ian Mackaye, of Minor Threat and Fugazi fame, gave a talk at the Library of Congress in 2013 and touted this common argument:

I think that people are constantly thinking about capturing things that they’re not actually present for the moment they’re trying to capture. I’m quite sure of this. I think it’s insane how many pictures have to be taken these days. We have to realize there’s a level of documentation that’s just chatter, it’s noise.<sup>35</sup>

This sort of dismissal has a long history, and implies that the voices using a new medium should be excluded. *Writing my own thoughts in this paper book is important and healthy, but your posts aren’t “real” communication and your selfie is deranged narcissism.* We shouldn’t be in the business of ranking whose experience gets to count.

Think of a time when you held a camera and took photos during a trip and then, if you can, think of a time you went somewhere interesting without taking pictures: the experience is at least slightly different, some might claim radically different.

This is a central question provoked by social photos: not whether social photos are well composed or even accurate, but whether one’s conscious experience remains “true” despite documentary artifice. Are we still “in the moment”



when the moment is so constantly being put to work for other ends, in other moments? The idea that digital connection is unhealthy and less real runs parallel to the claim that the social photo pulls us out of reality. The worry is that the ubiquity of social photography threatens our ability to really live *in the moment*.

But what is "the moment" and what does it mean to be "in" it? Are those documenting the moment themselves in the moment? Photography has long been about moments, most famously Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment"—when the shutter opens to capture one out of an infinite number of possible shots.<sup>36</sup> Philosopher Erich Fromm's critique of the tourist gaze captures the sense of danger that documentation poses to "real experience":

The "tourist" with his camera is an outstaring symbol of an alienated relationship to the world. Being constantly occupied with taking pictures, actually he does not see anything at all, except through the intermediary of the camera. The camera sees for him, and the outcome of his "pleasure" trip is a collection of snapshots, which are a substitute for an experience which he could have had, but did not have.<sup>37</sup>

The stakes for being in or out of the moment are quite high. According to Fromm and others, to be in the moment is to be fundamentally more alive, to extract a greater quantity of experience out of life's limited potential. To be more in the moment isn't just to exist better but to exist more.

For those concerned with being or not being in the moment, the conceptualization of the moment as a moment is itself something different than being truly in the moment. A dog isn't concerned with its own being but rather exists to exist, its being is in and for itself. A human taking the dog's picture has a more complicated relationship with being because we are aware of our own being and can conceive of our moment

as a moment. The very fact of our own knowledge and language means that we cannot consume the moment without being aware of ourselves doing so, whether we have a camera in hand or not.<sup>38</sup> Being aware of "being in the moment" opens the possibility of failing at it. Being is no longer simply a given, as it is for the dog.

To think about the moment as a moment, like photographing it, is a way of putting the moment to work. Thus, to experience is always to do some work, as one can never escape productive thought. "Writing, thinking are never the opposite of work. To live without acting is unthinkable," Georges Bataille wrote, moving toward the conclusion that to live only *in the moment* without its own meta-awareness is the equivalent of death.<sup>39</sup>

Bataille is describing the irony that living in the moment is an ideal of perfect passivity. To fully experience something, to be fully in the moment for the moment's sake, would be to not speak, to not think, to not contemplate. One doesn't create, participate in, or manipulate the moment but instead becomes enveloped by it. To be truly and purely "in the moment" is to achieve the state of an insect. And to be fully in the moment could not be recognized as such, because that itself requires a conceptual frame, one that the moment is being carved from and put to work within. You can never know you are in the moment when you are in the moment. For one to conceive of the moment as something to be or not be within is to have already forfeited.<sup>40</sup> Thinking of experience is to think of experience as experience and is thus outside of experience. All writing, all documentation, is to approach life from the outside.

It's therefore useless to worry about being fully in or out of the moment in absolute terms. Photos are taken and shared in part to confirm the reality of our own lives to others and ourselves—to confirm that we have had moments, irrespective of the degree to which we were immersed in them. The



camera divorces the user to some degree from experiencing the present in the here and now, and the image retroactively confers significance to the lost moment it now stands in for as a substitute. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin famously proposed the idea of the "aura," the value created by the presence of an original artwork that isn't captured or transmitted through mass reproduction. Applying that idea to the social photo, one might see social media as a sort of mechanical reproduction of thoughts, experiences, sociality, and of life itself. This, then, casts a type of aura back onto the original in-the-moment life that has been reproduced. Original, genuine thoughts, interactions, and experiences that were once more likely to be in and of a local place and present time are interrupted by documentation.

All documentation imposes distance between the observer and the world, between life and its record. In her study of documentation, Suzanne Briet discusses the general tendency to accelerate the substitution of lived experience for its documentation.<sup>41</sup> Newspapers, photography, radio, films, television, and all social media chart this distance: you are not there, but here is a document of there. To borrow Benjamin's words, the photograph, like the souvenir, is like the corpse of an experience.

It may be that the social photo provides a "panorama" of the world, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch claimed the train did—reducing it to a landscape, to scenery sped past.<sup>42</sup> Much like the painting or the photograph, the train or automobile window is a mediating technology that both frames the world and moves one through it. With the speed and glass providing a remove, you don't feel like you were *there* in the space you moved through in the same way as you would if your feet were on the ground. The train flattens nature into something smooth and predictable, not something traveled within but something easily seen and consumed. As more of life is

experienced through camera screens, does it occur at a similar remove, where the messiness of lived experience is made into something *merely* observable?

One way to discuss this distance provided by the lens is through the act of posing. As theorist Kaja Silverman puts it, the photo pose is the imprinting of the camera on the body, parallel to the camera imprinting the image itself in its record.<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes writes that

once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing.' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.<sup>44</sup>

As Craig Owens describes it, posing is a sort of bodily freeze; the person is momentarily still for the camera and then forever stilled in the resulting image.<sup>45</sup>

The process of documentation—taking the device out, opening the camera, finding the shot—creates an alertness to this freezing. When taking a picture and posing it, there is that telling pause, that moment between experience and its record. Social media companies call this moment "friction" and are rapidly trying to shrink it. Awareness of that freezing heightens the awareness of the moment as posed. It is this freeze that many latch onto when claiming that the social photo is collectively taking us out of the moment.

"The moment" is not just a solitary experience. And, often, when people praise disconnecting from the digital in order to be "in the moment together," it really is a privileging of mere geography. The fetishization of contiguity has a long tradition and is echoed in our everyday language: each time we say "IRL," "face-to-face," or "in person" to mean connection without screens, we frame what is "real" or who is a person in terms of their geographic proximity rather than other aspects of closeness—variables like attention, empathy, affect, erotics,



all of which can be experienced at a distance. We should not conceptually preclude or discount all the ways intimacy, passion, love, joy, pleasure, closeness, pain, suffering, evil, and all the visceral actualities of existence pass through the screen. "Face to face" could mean much more than breathing the same air.

Geographic proximity remains important to whether we call something "close" or "in person" or "face to face." At times it is perhaps the most significant variable. But it certainly should not be the only one. To start from the prerequisite that co-presence is solely dependent on proximity in space devalues so many other moments where closeness occurs and happens to be mediated by a screen. Physicality can be digitally mediated: what happens through the screen happens through bodies and material infrastructures. The sext or the intimate video chat is physical—of and affecting bodies. Video chat brings faces to other faces. You are aware of, learning from, assessing, stimulated by, and speaking through bodies and the spaces around them, as details of those spaces filter in and are noticed or foregrounded. This screen-mediated communication is face-to-face, in person, physical, and close in so many important ways, and distant in only one.

Likewise, being geographically close does not necessarily assure the other qualities of proximity. You can be in the same room with someone, but that doesn't mean you are actively caring for or about them: maybe you are not listening; perhaps you are there out of obligation. You can be distant in all the ways you were close in the video conversation, not "in the same place" at all. To be sure, mediated communication comes with miscommunication, degradations in the fidelity of the message, the loss of meaning. But to downplay mediated communication is to downplay the cultural and social possibilities of communicating with those who are far away, to exchange across culture, to send messages to those in the future, to speak to yourself from the past, to interface with the dead.

In 1927, Siegfried Kracauer described how photography creates presence through absence and absence through presence:

When the grandmother stood before the lens, she was for a second present in a space continuum that offered itself to the lens. But what was made eternal was just this aspect, not the grandmother. The viewer of the old photograph feels a shiver. For they make present not the knowledge of the original sitter but the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the human being that emerges from the photograph but rather the sum of everything that can be subtracted from that being.<sup>46</sup>

This contradiction is the source of both its appeal and its threat. Presence through absence is the photographic magic that can bring you face to face with a relative who was long dead before you were born; it can time-machine you back to a trip you took as a child. The selfie you take today may amaze an elderly you with the vividness of your former youth. But this presence is brought into being because of distance—photography is a mediation of reality, and to mediate requires and foregrounds distance.<sup>47</sup>

The photograph, like the "stranger" in sociologist Georg Simmel's conception, relies on the tension of being at once a little too near and too far.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the concepts of distance and closeness depend on each other. When viewing a photo of someone online, the image brings you closer to that person and invites you into their life. But that closeness also inscribes the distance of the mediating lens and screen that allows you such intimate access. Distance is created by closeness; the intimacy of social media is possible by its status as a technology of distance.

Spending so much effort considering how we can document our life and seeing others doing the same makes us more aware of the moment as a moment. It maroons us in this irreducible



gap between distance and presence. So it's understandable that we might worry about being fully in our space and time, our here and now, and that we would consider just putting the phone down to experience life rather than concern ourselves with its documentation.

This sentiment assumes that documentation and experience are essentially at odds. However, as described earlier, social photos are not primarily about making media but more about sharing eyes. They are about developing and conveying your view, your experience, your imagination in the now—not as much the specifics of what you are seeing but the perspective from which you do so. Documenting a single moment from the ephemeral flow of lived experience was the end of the traditional photograph; for a social photo, it's merely the means to a different end, more about communication than information. As photos have become almost comically easy to make, their existence as objects is no longer special or interesting. Photos now exist much more fluidly as communication—a form of visibility more discursive than formally artistic. As such, social photography should be understood not as something removed from the moment but as something deeply immersed in social life. More than documenting moments to archive and preserve them behind glass, social photography often attempts to communicate being.

For those who claim that social photos interrupt one's being “in the moment,” the selfie is often Exhibit A, if not the punch line. But when seen not as a moment of self-regard snatched from experience but as an attempt to share experience itself—an effort to communicate “this is who I am, I was here, I was feeling like this”—the commonality of selfies isn't so surprising. Far from being antisocial, selfies are a lingua franca of sociality. An immaculately framed and perfectly lit picture of the beach might make for a good art photo, but it is a pretty boring speech act: it likely looks more or less the same as all the other shots of beaches multiplying in social feeds.

But no one else looks like your selfie. The selfie is the image-speak that is uniquely yours; it is your own voice as image and is thus especially intimate and expressive. In this way, social photos can be a sensual expression of and engagement with the moment rather than a sign of removal, which is exactly why we like to share and view them.

With devices always at hand, we can capture the moment in new ways and, most important, we have an audience for it. This can create both an exciting involvement with our moment and the insecurity about being removed from it. The social photo is both the disease and the cure: the opportunity to put the moment to work also requires involving yourself with it, immersing yourself in it—sometimes literally, with a selfie that inscribes your presence within the geography behind it, putting oneself in a place for others, a kind of networked witnessing.<sup>49</sup> The social photo is a mirror reflection of your conscious awareness of the moment as a moment, placing you both in the moment and outside the moment, manipulating it.

The task of photography criticism should therefore be to identify the way in which human beings are attempting to get a hold over the camera and, on the other hand, the ways in which cameras aim to absorb the intentions of human beings within themselves.

—Vilém Flusser, 1983<sup>50</sup>

Libraries come into existence when documents proliferate; you need somewhere to store information and someone to make it findable through organization. In our time of abundant self-documentation, the social media profile emerges as a kind of library to make our pasts accessible and (equally important) to give our selves an order. We've turned recorded selves into ordered selves, making self-documentation a means to that end of keeping ourselves in order.

But why organize our selves in this form? For libraries, organizing information serves the needs of science and scholarship, allowing it to build upon itself, so that the development of knowledge doesn't always have to start anew. Organizing information allows researchers to see the history of an idea with a search query, perhaps algorithmically sorted under some rubric of importance.

What does it mean to subject ourselves to such taxonomic treatment, making our lives add up to something searchable, ordered, and ranked?

In response to such developments, there has emerged a new appreciation for more ephemeral digital communication. Yet social media often fails to accommodate fluidity and change but instead fixates on permanence, identity categories, and social ranking. Much of the cultural understanding and development of social media centers on creating and maintaining ourselves as fixed selves, as real-name profiles, as selves-as-brands. Think about that common, and distinctly modern, Shakespearean truism also found in children's stories, self-help books, and everyday advice: "To thine own self be true." We are urged not only to discover that real, authentic version of who we are, but to remain faithful to it at all costs. It leaves little room for having more than one self, despite the many contexts we find ourselves in that draw on our different sides and different strengths. Advice to be true to some essentialized version of your self runs the risk of discouraging change and flexibility.

The ideal of the authentic self opposes Goffman's understanding of the self as a form of performance. This is also stressed in philosopher Judith Butler's framework of identity "performativity," where identity categories like sex and sexuality are not natural or essential but classifications that are culturally contingent.<sup>31</sup> This work exists within an entire school of thought that understands identity as never solidified but always in flux, more liquid than solid, more verb than noun.

The Internet has played a novel and important role in exacerbating this tension between identity consistency and change. As the story goes, the web arrived pregnant with possibilities to do away with ascribed identity. It would allow us to rethink who we are by allowing us to transcend geographic location, physical ability, race, gender, age, even species. The infamous *New Yorker* cartoon joked that "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." But then, as the story continues, social media became commercialized as it went mainstream; it got normal, and, along the way, spontaneous anonymity became replaced by a demand for consistent identity. Now that everyone knows you're a dog, it's difficult to be anything else.

The relationship to the self changes across history. As it is currently arranged, self-documentation on social media can put a tremendous emphasis on identity, constantly recorded, always accumulating, and presented back to us in always available profiles, exponentially increasing our own contact with ourselves. This self-history and self-mythologizing can be a source of personal meaning and pleasure, but it can also be oppressive. Susan Sontag, in a reflection on the characters in Robert Bresson's films, put it nicely: "consciousness of the self is the 'gravity' that burdens the spirit."<sup>32</sup>

The profile photo and the background photo, the lists of what you like and who your friends are, the evidence of what you do are all part of a never-ending and steadily deepening self-surveillance, complemented with a healthy dose of external surveillance, too. What can be in one breath "self-expression" can become "self-policing" in another. When who you are (and thus who you are not) becomes an increasingly significant part of everyday life, self-expression carries with it the danger of becoming more self-constraining. The more tightly it is bundled with persistent and visible category boxes (digital or otherwise), the more it limits the potential for reinvention.



Philosopher Michel Foucault's final project, the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, centered on the rise of identity and how social control is administered through self-control. Foucault dwells on the dual meaning of "subject," both what one is subjected to, which speaks of control and dependency, and also subjectivity, one's self or identity. In this theory, the two meanings are related: subjects are subjected to themselves at the most intimate, granular, everyday level. Being "honest"—being "true to yourself"—has at its base the assumption that there is a real self that's worth being honest and true to. Because of the social fiction that we have a "true" self, we are compelled to try to continually articulate it, to have confirmed socially that it exists and that we have been "true" to it. Foucault saw this as the linchpin of control in modern society, where endless preoccupation with the self serves as mass self-regulation. In this framework, the only real thing about the "true" self is the consequences of self-limitation and un-freedom that follow from it.

The plethora of social photos that we accumulate as tokens of our identity exemplify Foucault's worry. Social photos are a "technology of the self," in his terms, which constantly subject us to ourselves, prompting and sustaining our self-consciousness and self-preoccupation. Deposited into the history of our various profiles, the social photo makes us constantly confront ourselves as selves, challenging us to place each moment in a narrative with a point of view and a purpose, more like a memoir with a grand narrative arc than a meandering diary.

The demand to weave that story together is one way social control is imposed. The identity in the profile may change, but the overriding plot remains predictable, socially legible, smoothing the self into an accessible, linear narrative. This tends to funnel the self, restricting behavior to a more limited set of possibilities. In giving us too much self, the profile leaves us with less. To have more self, we need media that promotes the self's mercurial fluidity and celebrates its tendency to change and

multiply. Too much self is the self as a constraining spreadsheet; the minimal self becomes one with maximum potential.

As discussed previously in relation to documentary vision, the logic of the profile is that life should be captured, preserved, and put behind glass, like we are collectors of the museum of our self. Social photos are placed into social media profiles and streams as a collection of information that you and others create about your selves. Real name policies, lists of information about our preferences, detailed histories, and logged activities comprise a highly organized spreadsheet that one is asked to squeeze oneself into. The likes and hearts and follower counts give shape to the chaos, structure the torrent of experience into something with boundaries, something measurable and discrete.

As our documented histories grow, the profile looms larger, on the screen and in our minds, weighing on our behavior, our range of curiosity, and our sense of possibility. Much social media takes a stand—indeed, a radical one—for an identity that is singular and inescapable, one that idealizes stability over potential. This fixation fails to accommodate playfulness and revision. It is built around the logic of highly structured boxes and categories, most with quantifiers that numerically rank every facet of our content, and this grid-patterned data-capture machine simply does not accommodate the reality that humans are fluid, contradictory, and messy in ways both tragic and wonderful. Will social media continue to pivot away from status metrics and toward permanent identity-containers that box our selves in?

Every time a film is shot, privacy is violated.

—Jean Rouch, 1975<sup>53</sup>

There is a persistent idea that photography is an essentially democratic medium capable of shining light on injustice. Art historian and theorist John Tagg argues instead that it is a

consumer medium that solidifies power relations.<sup>54</sup> Writing after the emergence of digital photography, Tagg claims in "Mindless Photography" that this posthuman, automated vision looks a lot like state vision.<sup>55</sup> The camera is a recording device, holding the world captive, taking it in and categorizing it.

In every institution Foucault identified as designed to convert visibility into social control—the school, the hospital, the prison—we now see cameras. In these institutions, the gaze takes the form of the few (teachers, guards, doctors, and other authorities) who keep watch over the many (schoolchildren, patients, prisoners), all made visible, documentable, inspectable, and ranked according to a normative standard that reflects the ideal of those in power. Foucault argued that all of society was coming to take the form of this prisonlike arrangement of visibility, and the proliferation of cameras in institutions and in public space seems a testament to this expansion. That knowledge and power are interrelated is a given, and the camera is a knowledge machine. If a photograph is still a mirror with a memory, it can frequently be more like a one-way mirror, where the camera glass separates and conceals the observer from the observed. This is not applicable only to covert photography; it applies whenever one's image is taken without reciprocity or permission—be it by paparazzi, surveillance cameras, or disrespectful peers.

One way of thinking about the privileged, asymmetric view from behind the camera is through the practice of street photography.<sup>56</sup> The street photographer is the camera mechanism embodied, on the prowl, taking in the world always as something to be found, captured, sorted, put to work. With the mentality of a hunter, a master of territory, the street photographer stalks the blur of the now for moments to freeze and transform into shareable narratives, ones that ask us to see beauty in the mundane, the banality in the extraordinary, the importance of what usually goes unnoticed.

Street photographers do more than just see the world as a collection of objects to capture; they simultaneously intuit a visual moment's eventual impact, what is provocative and catchy about it—in other words, its virality—in real time, pouncing at the "decisive moment" to make the ephemeral still and, in turn, productive.

That is street photography in its mythological form anyway. The street photograph at best has some of the appeal of surrealism: as Clive Scott writes in *Street Photography*, it can "open up the passages between the conscious and the unconscious, reality and dream, the banal and the extraordinary."<sup>57</sup> The street photograph is not just an image of reality but something that changes how we see the world, how we interact with its basic, intimate, and everyday form. There are ambiguities about whether street photographers are photojournalists or paparazzi, if they are documentary photographers or something more creative. The documentary photograph attempts to tell the truth, but the street photograph demands questions without answer, forcing one to see what is hidden in plain sight. But street photography is also an obsessive way of seeing the world as always possessable. The decisive moment of taking an image in the street is driven by the impulse to grab something fleeting.<sup>58</sup>

The specific ethics of individual street photographers vary wildly in both theory and practice: some focus intensely on permission, respect, and consent; others significantly less so. These ethics matter because the street photographer's practice has now essentially been adopted by the masses of phone-carrying camera *flâneurs*, as well as by the corporate and governmental surveillance apparatuses surrounding us. The street photographer's ethics are congealing into a pervasive cultural perspective: people in public are objects to be claimed and exposed, and incipient virality takes precedent over permission. This dream, to capture and possess, is strikingly similar to the dream of "big data" and another way that

consumer medium that solidifies power relations.<sup>54</sup> Writing after the emergence of digital photography, Tagg claims in "Mindless Photography" that this posthuman, automated vision looks a lot like stare vision.<sup>55</sup> The camera is a recording device, holding the world captive, taking it in and categorizing it.

In every institution Foucault identified as designed to convert visibility into social control—the school, the hospital, the prison—we now see cameras. In these institutions, the gaze takes the form of the few (teachers, guards, doctors, and other authorities) who keep watch over the many (schoolchildren, patients, prisoners), all made visible, documentable, inspectable, and ranked according to a normative standard that reflects the ideal of those in power. Foucault argued that all of society was coming to take the form of this prisonlike arrangement of visibility, and the proliferation of cameras in institutions and in public space seems a testament to this expansion. That knowledge and power are interrelated is a given, and the camera is a knowledge machine. If a photograph is still a mirror with a memory, it can frequently be more like a one-way mirror, where the camera glass separates and conceals the observer from the observed. This is not applicable only to covert photography; it applies whenever one's image is taken without reciprocity or permission—be it by paparazzi, surveillance cameras, or disrespectful peers.

One way of thinking about the privileged, asymmetric view from behind the camera is through the practice of street photography.<sup>56</sup> The street photographer is the camera mechanism embodied, on the prowl, taking in the world always as something to be found, captured, sorted, put to work. With the mentality of a hunter, a master of territory, the street photographer stalks the blur of the now for moments to freeze and transform into shareable narratives, ones that ask us to see beauty in the mundane, the banality in the extraordinary, the importance of what usually goes unnoticed.

Street photographers do more than just see the world as a collection of objects to capture; they simultaneously intuit a visual moment's eventual impact, what is provocative and catchy about it—in other words, its virality—in real time, pouncing at the "decisive moment" to make the ephemeral still and, in turn, productive.

That is street photography in its mythological form anyway. The street photograph at best has some of the appeal of surrealism: as Clive Scott writes in *Street Photography*, it can "open up the passages between the conscious and the unconscious, reality and dream, the banal and the extraordinary."<sup>57</sup> The street photograph is not just an image of reality but something that changes how we see the world, how we interact with its basic, intimate, and everyday form. There are ambiguities about whether street photographers are photojournalists or paparazzi, if they are documentary photographers or something more creative. The documentary photograph attempts to tell the truth, but the street photograph demands questions without answer, forcing one to see what is hidden in plain sight. But street photography is also an obsessive way of seeing the world as always possessable. The decisive moment of taking an image in the street is driven by the impulse to grab something fleeting.<sup>58</sup>

The specific ethics of individual street photographers vary wildly in both theory and practice: some focus intensely on permission, respect, and consent; others significantly less so. These ethics matter because the street photographer's practice has now essentially been adopted by the masses of phone-carrying camera *flâneurs*, as well as by the corporate and governmental surveillance apparatuses surrounding us. The street photographer's ethics are congealing into a pervasive cultural perspective: people in public are objects to be claimed and exposed, and incipient virality takes precedent over permission. This dream, to capture and possess, is strikingly similar to the dream of "big data" and another way that



photography is a good lens for understanding contemporary social media. For both, the whole world is made consumable by a technology, suddenly and magically within reach and brought into possession. For big data, like street photography, exposure is only something to celebrate, even when the subject distrusts the attention. When people call some of the least-liked technologies that plop out of Silicon Valley “creepy,” this is often what they mean: they are referring to the street-photographer ethos of looking at people and the world as images for the taking, to be reused for their own purposes. This is also big-data vision, to document humans in their natural condition—“pure recording,” as street photographer Walker Evans spoke of the process.<sup>59</sup> Anything that can technically be exposed should be, and the attention it garners retroactively trumps consent.

This street-photographer mentality understands other people, their lives, even their miseries, as objects to be leveraged, enjoyed. The early photographer Alfred Stieglitz said of the street, in 1896, “Nothing charms me so much as walking among the lower classes, studying them carefully and making mental notes. They are interesting from every point of view.”<sup>60</sup> In 1937, Walter Benjamin noted that photography “has succeeded in making even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment.”<sup>61</sup>

Most photographs are social photos, and many of these are shots taken in public. Today, it is much harder to sell street photography as daring and transgressive in places where people routinely carry mobile devices, where nearly everyone is a street photographer and nearly every place is already being routinely photographed. When so many of us are street photographers to some extent or another, counternarratives offering a different ethic, one critical of the big-data gaze, are becoming more mainstream. They move past the idea that privacy is about secrecy and hiding—as the opposite of publicity—but

instead is rooted in social vulnerability, what privacy theorist Helen Nissenbaum calls “context integrity”: socially situated expectations and permission. Nissenbaum writes:

We should not expect social norms, including informational norms, simply to melt away with the change of medium to digital electronic any more than from sound waves to light particles. Although the medium may affect what actions and practices are possible and likely, sensible policy-making focuses on the actions and practices themselves.<sup>62</sup>

There is today a collective “surveillant anxiety,” as scholar Kate Crawford puts it.<sup>63</sup> Anthony McCosker has proposed the notion of the “camera consciousness,” which is a general awareness that, from phones to drones, cameras are distributed everywhere.<sup>64</sup> As such, there is more suspicion and exhaustion around ubiquitous vision not just by the government and corporations but also by all the other people with cameras. We hear of facial recognition software, “creep shot” discussion boards, image-based bullying, harassment, and extortion. Street photography, at best, reminds of this anxiety, and, at worst, plays a direct part in it. For example, in 2015, street photographer Nathan Bett took street shots in New York City and noticed his subjects were captured grimacing into the camera.<sup>65</sup> “I found that the photographer on the street is more often viewed as a nuisance than a romantic recorder of the life observed,” he noticed, somehow surprised. Bett asked not of his subjects but of *himself* and other street photographers, “Who hasn’t ever felt singled out, looked upon, judged, or just plain anxious in public?” True to the street photographer ethic, his response to these grimaces at being photographed without consent was to Photoshop the faces together to make a new image, a street photograph reduced to pure surveillant anxiety. The violation of privacy is not just something necessary for his art but *is* the art itself. Resistance

to the street-photographer gaze becomes another element for it.

The idea of the street photographer works here as metaphor for the logic of digital data collection. As technologies of documentation, surveillance, witnessing, creativity, obfuscation, identity, and intimacy, photography and social media have much to teach each other. The social photo, at the busiest intersection of photographic and social theory, is a topic that foregrounds and makes literal these debates around privacy and surveillance, knowledge and power.

All photographs are accurate, none of them is truth.

—Richard Avedon, 1984,<sup>66</sup>

Since the earliest writing about the medium, to speak of photography has always been a game of metaphor. Because photography is in the business of imitation and representation and is rooted in both fact and fiction, any discussion of it must find ways to address its uncertain and destabilizing ontology and epistemology.

One early metaphor for photography was, as Oliver Wendell Holmes famously put it in 1859, a “mirror with a memory.”<sup>67</sup> In the early days of the medium, this reference to a “mirror” largely stood for something objective, a pure reflection of nature, and the image was therefore an impressive, in some ways perfect, copy. This was useful and figured a photographic practice often understood as more mechanical than artistic. Holmes’s nineteenth-century photos of people walking were an early scientific use of the medium, meant to aid in the design of better artificial legs. Charles Darwin also used photographs rather than drawings when he could, regarding the camera as more accurate.<sup>68</sup>

The camera as a truth-recording and truth-telling machine was, at its invention, part of a larger expansion of systems

of categorization and taxonomization, the “order of things” described by Michel Foucault.<sup>69</sup> For the scientist, the camera was a privileged empirical witness, and the photograph was powerful evidence.<sup>70</sup> Early on, some believed that photography had the potential to be a more objective and truthful painting; nature was captured or itself produced the image, minimizing the subjective distortions of artists. The first book of photographs, by Henry Fox Talbot and published in the 1840s, was tellingly called *The Pencil of Nature*. In 1859, poet Charles Baudelaire famously doubted whether photography had the potential to be anything more than a mechanical trade.<sup>71</sup> And in the mid-nineteenth century, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake wrote of how the Photographic Society was scandalized by the mere proposition that intentionally out-of-focus photographs could be considered artistically beautiful, which she likened to an accountant being asked to keep a false balance.<sup>72</sup>

But the photograph never enjoyed a universal status as self-evident truth. If the history of the medium were boiled down to a single debate, it would be the constant insecurity around the “truth” of a photograph. As with much current writing, the insecurities people felt with respect to the image were often epistemic, that is, concerning truth and doubt. From the start, photographic clubs that focused on artistic merits proliferated, and by the turn of the twentieth century, the inherent epistemic objectivity of a photograph became even less clear. Even as the Reverend H. J. Morton pronounced in 1864 that the camera “sees everything, and it represents just what it sees”—that it “has an eye that cannot be deceived, and a fidelity that cannot be corrupted”<sup>73</sup>—popular “spirit” photographs that revealed dead relatives in a customer’s portrait were being revealed as fakes. In 1927, theorist Siegfried Kracauer disparaged photography’s objectivity, writing about the rise of photojournalism: “There has never been a time that has known so much about itself, if knowing about oneself means having a picture of things that

is similar to them in a photographic way."<sup>74</sup> Kracauer's joke here is that the image *isn't* akin to "knowing"; the proliferation of images made his possibly the least-known time. He disputed the idea that photographs were neutral mirrors:

photographs tend to suggest infinity ... A photograph, whether portrait or action picture, is true to character only if it precludes the notion of completeness. Its frame marks a provisional limit; its content refers to other contents outside the frame, and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed—physical existence ...<sup>75</sup>

Actually there is no mirror at all. Any photograph is the outcome of selective activities which go far beyond those involved in the unconscious structuring of the visual raw material ... Lighting, camera angle, lens, filter, emulsion and frame—all these are determined by his estimates, his esthetic judgment.<sup>76</sup>

The existence of any particular image isn't simply a matter of its having been taken. Instead, an image is the product of certain interests, functions, qualities, and labors. Each photographer uses specific equipment in specific ways to record particular slices of reality for particular reasons for certain audiences and certain purposes, all of which are constrained by conventions, permissions, politics, and insecurities. To put it simply, a photograph is an infinity of contingencies.

As the technology developed, it became clearer to all observers that photography, like other art forms, combines the subjective and objective. In a highly influential 1945 text on "the ontology of the photographic image," critic and theorist André Bazin wrote that "painting was torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely the duplication of the world outside." Bazin claims that "great artists" can "combine

the two tendencies ... holding reality at their command and molding it at will into the fabric of their art." Of photography itself, Bazin writes that images produce a "hallucination that is also a fact," that is, it grounds a private vision within a recognizable reality.<sup>77</sup>

Susan Sontag, in another useful metaphor for describing the status of a photograph, says the photo is the work of both the poet and the scribe: it simultaneously captures some truth of the world as well as some of the subjective creativity of the photographer.<sup>78</sup> It depicts something of the world but is directed by the photographer's choices about how and what to shoot, how to print or edit, what to delete and what to save. To put it in the terms of photographer and writer Jerry L. Thompson: *journalist* photographers care most about a photo's information, emphasizing the scribe, while *pictorialist* photographers care most about how the image looks, emphasizing the poet.<sup>79</sup> All photographers play both roles, and all photos are shaped by both impulses.

Photography deals with reality but always through manipulation. This has always been so, even before Photoshop. In her history of predigital photographic manipulation, writer and curator Mia Fineman writes:

the desire and determination to modify camera images are as old as photography itself. Nearly every kind of manipulation we now associate with Photoshop was also part of photography's predigital repertoire, from slimming waists and smoothing away wrinkles to adding people to (or removing them from) pictures, changing backgrounds, and fabricating events that never actually took place.<sup>80</sup>

In a photograph, the dimensions of the world are made flat, flowing time is frozen still, the frame and shutter speed and all the various camera mechanisms manipulate reality to produce a contingent result.

And, certainly, the emergence of digital photographic technology makes manipulation easier, more common, and explicit, heightening familiar insecurities about the image's relation to reality. The digital image, when not onscreen, may seem to not "exist" anywhere in the same way as an analog photo did. Photography professor Fred Ritchin, among the most prominent scholars of digital photography, fixates on the fundamental ontological change introduced by computational photography. Because digital images can be altered and edited with the aid of computers, they are not the same sort of "witness" as analog photos that are made more literally of light bouncing off the world, through a lens, and onto light-sensitive chemicals as a negative. No longer mechanical, no longer having such a strong and necessary correlation with the outside world, and no longer needing to exist in a pictorial form when not called upon by a computer, digital images are instead a more contingent set of binary code. In his 1996 essay "Sixty Billion Sunsets," art critic Julian Stallabrass is concerned that the rise of digital photography and the ability to edit a messy world into digital perfection threatens to proliferate an "ideological sameness":

If photography's days are numbered by digital technology, which may soon encompass the camera as well as the display, a new wave of blandness will break over the world, as happy and unhappy contingencies are discarded in favor of the conventionally beautiful.<sup>87</sup>

With the rise of digital or computational image making, many have feared that digital manipulation means photography has or will lose any ownership of the truth, so much so that people debate whether to even call digital images "photographs" at all. However, in all their filters and augmentations, the way social photos are used and shared still has much to do with a kind of fidelity to reality.

As we have seen, photographic images, even after digital manipulation, always draw inspiration from both "scribe" and "poet" at once, varying in proportion depending on their subject and audience. Rather than just working against each other, the poet and scribe also collude in the making of each image. It is not fully correct to say the *poet* and *scribe* are poles at either end of a continuum, with *scribe* designating fact and *poet* fiction. Poetry is not synonymous with falsity; it is more a matter of a different, more elliptical approach to conveying ideas. Sometimes poetry is needed to convey a reality facts alone fail to describe. For example, lists of accurate numbers of casualties can describe a war scene, but numbers alone fail to vividly convey the gravity of the situation. Remember that for Barthes, the "punctum" was that which affected you but which you cannot really know. As he put it, "what I can name cannot really prick me."<sup>88</sup> As I've described, the social photo privileges expression over information, but this does not mean it has shed its epistemic function.

Furthermore, certain types of digital photographs issue more directly from the scribe than the poet—and taken as a whole, the frenzied proliferation of photography only enhances its evidentiary function. Social photography is, in part, an exponential rise in the number of images being produced, and while each image object on its own might have a more tenuous claim to objectivity, taken together they can accomplish the opposite. While any one shot can be manipulated, a large number of images from many different and unrelated people don't all fake it the same way. A single image may be less trustworthy today, but a crowd taking images from many angles can provide more proof than ever before. Digitization and network connection, those same technologies that allow for and incentivize image augmentation, also create new opportunities for truth. All of this uncertainty places social photography in that same familiar epistemic tension that photography has always had.

The idea of a collaboration between poet and scribe in the making of a photograph offers a useful way to look at not only traditional photography but also social photography and social media in general. To start, understanding photography helps us debunk exaggerated concerns about the alleged end of privacy in the age of digital information.

"Privacy is dead," we hear, or at least critically wounded, thanks to digital technologies and the way they allow governments and corporations to watch and document us as well as how we watch and document ourselves and each other. Digital tools allegedly prompt mass exhibitionism, which in turn makes everything visible and trackable, ending all possibility of mystery or secrecy.

It is not difficult to find examples of this "privacy is dead" narrative. Claims that "the Web unmasks everyone" and that "the Web means the End of Forgetting" and "the end of anonymity" are common.<sup>83</sup> Nearly every major mainstream publication has hosted an article titled "The End of Privacy," and even academic essays, including one by Zygmunt Bauman, bear the same title.<sup>84</sup> The *New York Times* published an essay titled "How Privacy Vanishes Online,"<sup>85</sup> and a rash of popular books have announced a similar loss including at least two with the title *The End of Privacy* and another titled *I Know Who You Are and I Saw What You Did: Social Networks and the Death of Privacy*.<sup>86</sup>

This is understandable if you assume that publicity and privacy are necessarily inversely related, that they are zero sum. One of Michel Foucault's most famous declarations is that "visibility is a trap."<sup>87</sup> This is an attenuation of another of his dictums, that knowledge ("visibility") and power (the "trap") imply each other. This idea underlies some of the predominant concerns around social photography as a kind of "lateral surveillance." Social photography might be a dramatic proliferation of new *knowledge* about our lives, and thus *power* in the hands of those watching.

But the abundance of social photography is more than simple exhibitionism and inadvertently enabled surveillance. The idea that privacy is dead is as wrong as it is common. The poet/scribe tension reveals how photographs don't deal in objective truth or present facts in a simple, straightforward way. Likewise, the increased visibility offered by social media is not simply publicity at the expense of privacy. These concepts do not necessarily trade off; in fact, those concepts are more subtly intertwined, even mutually reinforcing.

The essential and productive tension between visibility and invisibility, what is known and what is not, has been explored by philosopher Georges Bataille, whose theory of knowledge and *non*knowledge influenced later thinkers like Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. Every instance of knowledge, Bataille insists, is also an instance of *non*knowledge, its opposite, what is *unknown*. Knowledge and *non*knowledge imply each other like matter does antimatter. "Nonknowledge is everywhere," as he put it.<sup>88</sup>

One way of interpreting this is that each time you learn something new, you also learn more about what you don't know. Discovery is never just a matter of gaining truth but also revealing new mysteries. Any scientific breakthrough prompts new questions that weren't conceivable before. Einstein's theories helped produce new knowledge; for example, understanding that space curves meant we could predict the position of Mercury in the sky with a bit more precision. But his theories simultaneously raised many new paradoxes that weren't previously conceivable, for example, that clocks that move in space run slow. Answering each of these new problems creates many new messes to be cleaned later.

For Bataille, the way knowledge always produced *non*-knowledge spurred a kind of epistemic despair—a sense of the impossibility of having absolute knowledge of anything. Almost a half-century before the briefcase from *Pulp Fiction*, Bataille wrote, "This is the position of someone who doesn't

know what is in the locked trunk, the trunk there is no possibility of opening.<sup>78</sup>

But the point here is not whether, say, the theory of relativity changes the net balance of what we know and don't know. It's to suggest that knowledge and nonknowledge are interdependent. Knowledge doesn't work like disinfecting light cleansing the darkness of ignorance once and for all, as Louis Brandeis famously suggested.<sup>79</sup> It also casts new shadows.

Drawing on this idea, Baudrillard reframes knowledge and nonknowledge in terms of what he calls "obscenity" and "seduction": "obscenity" is the drive to reveal all and expose things in full, whereas "seduction" is the process of strategically withholding knowledge to create magical and enchanted interest (what he calls the "scene," as opposed to the "obscene").<sup>81</sup> He writes that the scene is where the body

escapes into the ellipsis of forms and movements, into dance, where it escapes its inertia, into gesture, where it is unbound itself, into an aura of looking, where it makes itself into allusion and absence—in short, where it offers itself as seduction.<sup>82</sup>

Nonknowledge, then, is the seductive and magical aspect of knowledge.

Another way of looking at the relation of knowledge and nonknowledge is offered by the fan dance. In burlesque, a fan dance is a routine where the dancer uses feathered fan props to strategically and seductively reveal one part of the body while at the same time concealing other parts.<sup>83</sup> The dance is thus "scene" rather than "obscene" in Baudrillard's terms—the interplay of what is known and unknown. The revelation that concealment "accidentally" permits is far more seductive than total mystery or "obscene" full disclosure.

The fan dance points toward a different way to understand social photography, and social visibility and invisibility in general, one that, unlike nearly all the rest of discourse about

social photography, doesn't privilege the revealing part. When we share social photos, it seems apparent what they are revealing, but we need to think also about what they are concealing, the absences the images are framing or disguising.

After all, there is much that is left off the screen. We all have strategies we use to hide some of what we do, what we post, and who we are. Far from feeling that privacy is dead, intensive social media users tend to use the available privacy controls more and devise some informal ones of their own.<sup>84</sup> Ethnographer danah boyd documented "whitewalling," a practice in which users post what they want and manually delete it shortly thereafter, leaving a blank "wall," a habit that has been increasingly formalized into social media design ever since.<sup>85</sup> She has also traced practices in which users hide in plain sight, posting ambiguous messages that will be understood differently by different audiences—a process she calls "social steganography." Teens, for instance, might post song lyrics that convey different messages to peers than to parents and other authorities.<sup>86</sup>

These examples demonstrate how it's not just possible but typical to be highly public and private at the exact same time. Self-documentation is not pure exhibitionism but more like the fan dance, a game of reveal and conceal. No matter how much "oversharing" occurs, all is not revealed. More is always hinted at (at times enticingly). The massive popularity of taking and viewing social photographs has to do with both what is shown as well as the seduction of what is not, what isn't photographed, what lies outside the frame. In a stream of photos, it can be easy to forget the importance of the edge of the frame, the gaps between images. Each photo is at most only a limited truth, which raises as many questions as it answers. Knowledge comes standard with its opposite.

This is true of all photography. Each image takes something from the infinite abundance of life and presents it, cut away, as documentation. Shawn Michelle Smith's *At the Edge of*



*Sighi: Photography and the Unseen* describes the photograph as something that can only reveal by concealing what is out of the frame, making what is not shown relatively dimmer.<sup>27</sup>

The potential content of social photography is nothing less than anything photographable. And when tapping through a photo stream, we may wonder what happened between the shots. Each, no matter how intimate or descriptive, also hints at what occurs in between, like the so-called “gutter” in between cells in a comic book, which compel a kind of mental closure to imagine what happened in the gaps. How do these images all relate? Or, as Sergei Eisenstein would ask of this kind of montage, how might they collide to produce new meanings?<sup>28</sup> Anthropologist Marcus Banks argued that “photographs provide a basis for narrative work; there are stories about photographs, and there are stories that lie behind them and between them.”<sup>29</sup> Who else was there? What are the emotions and motivations concealed by the image? What are people hiding by showing this? So many stories can be constructed from the same evidence. Thus, the photo inherently invites speculation and fantasy; it is not reality but begs its existence to be created by the viewer. Whether conscious or not, this sort of nonknowledge saturates every pixel of social photography. The screen only ever tells a very partial story. The social photo is almost never created or consumed as the full truth. It asks, instead, *What is reality, given these images?* The social photo works as evidence of new truth, but we are equally alive to what is cropped, what is missing from the stream.

Mysteries and secrets aren't extinct. Indeed, they are more prevalent than ever because of how much we share. Not photographing a meal can now confer special importance to a moment precisely because of how often meals are otherwise photographed. Privacy is thriving in the sense that it is cherished and even fetishized today—not in spite but because of growing publicity.

Social photography is both the miniaturization and magnification of a person, a scene, and the world. As a blow-up, the image holds its subject perfectly still for examination. But photography equally makes its subjects smaller. Through recording, the infinity of their complexity is shrunk to the size of a document.

So much happens in those spaces beyond the border and between the photos. The nonknowledge outside the edges of our images is not empty but filled with the infinite movements of life. The reading of any photo, any profile or stream, takes into account what is missing; ghosts of our invention crowd the spaces in between. Reality is constructed, and this work of construction that we always perform is both vigorous and unnoticed. Our experience of social media always is shaped by what is just off screen, what is left out, and what may be soon to come.

This understanding of the interplay between what is shown and concealed, of knowledge and nonknowledge, undoes the myth that privacy could ever die. But the notion persists that all of the messiness of social life and all of the infinite complexities of human behavior and existence could be captured by and reduced to numbers.

Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together.

—John Berger, 1982.<sup>30</sup>

Like the photograph, social media show a partial reality, presenting one slice from the infinite number of possibilities that could be produced from a scene. The tiny fragment of truth being shown unveils an infinite mystery. Compounded, multiplied in a stream of images, all this publicity reveals an abundance of privacy.

Yet deep within the way digital platforms and devices are designed and built, and in the way we discuss their usage, lies a desire to believe we can create a complete copy of the

world in database form—a model that makes our world fully known and fully manipulable. That documentation is as much about nonknowledge and mystery as what is captured is a lesson overlooked or forgotten in this pursuit. To see life as measurable is to see it as knowable, which is a cathartic relief from the anxiety of our lived reality, which is characterized by always-incomplete knowledge. We can use a lesson learned by the history of photography—that documentation both reveals and conceals—and apply it critically to how modern social media is structured and understood.

Modernity has long been obsessed with, perhaps even defined by, its epistemic insecurity, its grasping toward big truths that ultimately disappoint as our world grows *less* knowable. Perhaps the scientific method, based in deduction and falsifiability, is better at proliferating questions than it is at answering them. From libraries to databases, each increase in the stock of knowledge and access to it is an increase from what feels like infinity to what feels like an even vaster infinity, stimulating our continuous anxiety with nonknowledge. Since every theory destabilizes as much as it solidifies our view of the world, the collective frenzy to generate knowledge creates at the same time a mounting sense of futility, a tension looking for catharsis—a moment in which we could feel, if only for an instant, that we *know* something for sure. Relief today is offered by what is called big data.

As the name suggests, big data is about size. Its proponents claim that massive databases can reveal a whole new set of truths because of the unprecedented quantity of information they contain. But the *big* in big data also denotes a qualitative difference, that aggregating a certain amount of information makes ordinary data pass over into Big Data—through a “revolution in knowledge,” to use a phrase thrown around by startups and pop science books.<sup>106</sup> Operating beyond the simple accumulation of new information for old science, big data is touted as a different sort of knowledge

altogether, an Enlightenment for social life reckoned at the scale of masses.

Like the similarly inferential sciences of evolutionary psychology and pop neuroscience, Big Data can give any chosen hypothesis a veneer of scientificity and the unearned authority of numbers. The data is big enough to entertain any story or retroactively prove any thesis. Big Data has thus spawned an entire industry (“predictive analytics”) as well as reams of academic, corporate, and governmental research; it has also sparked the rise of “data-driven” and “explainer” journalism. It has shifted the center of gravity in these fields not merely because of its grand epistemological claims but also because it is so well financed.

The rationalist fantasy that enough data can be collected with the right methodology to provide an objective and disinterested picture of reality is an old and familiar one, known as *positivism*. The term comes from *Positive Philosophy*, written in the mid-nineteenth century by Auguste Comte, who also coined the term *sociology* in this same value-neutral, transcendent view-from-nowhere image.<sup>107</sup> As Western sociology began to congeal as a discipline, Émile Durkheim, another of the field’s founders, believed it could function as a “social physics” capable of outlining “social facts” akin to the measurable truths recorded about the physical movements of objects.<sup>108</sup> It’s an arrogant view, in retrospect—one that aims for a grand, general theory that can explain social life. A century later, that unwieldy aspiration had largely been abandoned by the humanities, but the advent of big data has resurrected the fantasy of a social physics, promising a new data-driven technique for ratifying social facts with sheer algorithmic processing power.

As positivism has been with us a long time, so have the critiques of it. Donna Haraway described this impossibly objective perspective as the “god trick,” the dream of seeing everything from nowhere. She argues that “partiality and not universality

is the condition of being heard."<sup>104</sup> Sandra Harding's *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* argues for a new, "strong" objectivity that sees including a researcher's social standpoint as a feature instead of a flaw, permitting a diversity of perspectives instead of one false view from nowhere.<sup>105</sup>

While positivism's intensity has waxed and waned over time, it never entirely dies out, perhaps because its promises are too seductive. The fantasy of an uncontested truth that can transcend the divisions that otherwise fragment a society riven by power and competing agendas is too alluring and too profitable. To assert convincingly that you have accurately modeled the social world is to convince people you know how to sell anything from a political position to a product, to one's own authority. Big data sells itself as a knowledge that produces power. But in fact, it relies on pre-existing power to falsely equate data with knowledge.

For the neopositivists, big data always stands in the shadow of the *bigger* data to come. The assumption is that there is more data today and there will necessarily be even more tomorrow, an expansion that will bring us ever closer to the inevitable "pure" data totality: the entirety of our everyday actions captured in data form, lending themselves to the project of a total causal explanation for everything. Proponents tout the size, power, and limitless potential of big data to further impress how it could—how it must—become even bigger. This long-held positivist fantasy of the complete account of the universe that is always just around the corner establishes a moral mandate for ever more intrusive data collection.

Theorist Lev Manovich's "selfie city" project—a data-driven examination of selfies posted to Instagram across various cities—applies the ideology of big data to the social photo. Manovich claims that the solutions applied to difficult research problems in "physics, chemistry, astronomy and biology" can be applied to social photography to create, in his own allusion to positivism, a "social physics":

Today, the social has become the new object of science, with hundreds of thousands of computer scientists, researchers and companies mining and mapping the data about our behaviors ... The implications of this monumental shift are only beginning to unfold.<sup>106</sup>

Though big data fails to present an objective model of reality, it is used to intervene and redirect our experience of the real. Big data is used to sort much of our social photography streams, structuring what you see and how you are seen. Algorithmic social media treat the visual tropes of social photography like Google does any information: they are there to be indexed, ranked, and sorted, as if the complex ways images capture the world and interact with social life weren't opaque or infinitely variable and culturally contingent. Instead, social life is treated like a product or commodity, something to be manufactured and shipped for as opposed to the lived reality of social participation. This is the assumption that life can be translated into signs (measures, variables, data, algorithms) that approximate nature and will outline our selves and social lives—the view that, deep down, humans are numbers.<sup>107</sup>

In 2015, Stephen Hawking asked Mark Zuckerberg, "which big questions in science would you like to know the answer to and why?" After expressing a wish to know the human limits of life span and learning, Zuckerberg ended his response with this:

I'm also curious about whether there is a fundamental mathematical law underlying human social relationships that governs the balance of who and what we all care about. I bet there is.<sup>108</sup>

Such an ideal fits with the logic that structures much of our social media and embraces a number of dubious propositions, each their own "god trick": that social life can be articulated as unambiguous data; that there is a pure, objective, and disinterested way of capturing action, of reducing it to the correct

types of variables; that there is a universally applicable and static way of associating the variables; that human behavior is ultimately rational and its complex causality solvable; and that anyone with enough data is qualified to nominate themselves as arbiters of such Truth despite their own social position, demographics, politics, interests, and so on.

Such objectivity is never and can never be accomplished. In a society deeply stratified on the lines of race, class, sex, and many other vectors of domination, how can knowledge ever be so disinterested and objective? While former *Wired* editor-in-chief Chris Anderson was describing the supposed “end of theory” thanks to big data in a widely heralded article,<sup>109</sup> Kate Crawford, Kate Milner, and Mary Gray were correcting that view, pointing out simply that “Big Data is theory.”<sup>110</sup> It’s merely a theory that operates by failing to understand itself as one.

Humans are made of their politics, their insecurities and goals, their experiences and demographics. What photography had to learn first, big data and much of the tech industry has yet to comprehend: that data captured can never be objective, natural, or only made of truth. No matter how “big” data becomes, it is never a pure reflection of life but an imposition, with its own politics. Ordering the world is not merely contaminated by power; it is how power works.

Treating big data as inherently objective and truthful is both a fallacy and fantasy, just like treating photographs as truth. Big data utopians and “privacy is dead” dystopians each in their own way draw on the false notion that databases are accurate doubles of the world—and that it requires only data manipulation (rather than ever more complicating interpretation) to bend the world in whatever direction those with access to the data would like.<sup>111</sup> The idea of a perfectly observed society, as both dream and nightmare, is built on the fiction that data uncomplicatedly records and renders life.

Given the contingent, changing, and impure nature of vision, the social photo’s ability to represent particular viewpoints and perspectives might allow us to unlearn the impossible desire to see everywhere from nowhere.

Photography is a useful metaphor for understanding the politics of social media visibility, privacy, surveillance, and power. From “street photographer” politics to the positivist understanding of identity, much of social media, and thus social photography, is designed to be a second life, a simulated double world that fits into a database and is therefore knowable and controllable. This is the digital dualist dream behind so-called “cyber” space and “virtual” worlds, and it deeply influences how social photography is enacted and understood. In the first chapter, I argued that for the person holding the camera, social photography tends to privilege expression over information. However, for the platforms organizing social photography, information is still quite central. Rather than letting communication exist for its own sake, it is instead stored as data and put to work. Social media have been made to capture the essence, the “truth” of ourselves, to be a document, a record, and, as such, to simulate life within boxes, categories, cells in a database, to make an object of subjectivity.

Much of social photography is based on this anxious design. Each image is wrung through profiles that keep track of likes and followers and thus the success of every image and every person. This is not unique to social photography; on sites like Twitter, everything anyone says is gamified with scorekeeping through quantified retweets, faves, and followers. To make so much of our sociality permanent, categorized, and explicitly and quantifiably ranked into hierarchies produces not sociality for its own sake but one that is concerned with success and failure according to the metrics enforced by platforms. It’s hard not to conclude that part of the appeal of the entire

metric-based social media project is seeing one's own life standardized, uniform with others, and ranked.

The social photo is an especially prominent technological mediation of our lives, a powerful contemporary example of how reality is augmented—how connected digital cameras can articulate the self and sociality rather than inherently diminish or destroy them. To see through the logic of images, to consider how we speak with them and build the self through the audience they garner and the status they can afford, is also to describe digital connection as something potentially intimate and as real as writing instead of as a venture into some virtual plane. Social photos epitomize the technological nature of conscious experience, of sight, speech, and human sociality; they exemplify the embodied and social nature of the machines that make them.

“Artificiality is natural to human beings,” Walter Ong pointed out in an essay that describes how orality and literacy are enacted as technologies rather than natural phenomena.<sup>112</sup> Photography and cinema, too, are technologies that merge the artificial and the natural, blending the human body's lived experience with inorganic and mechanical means of transmitting experience. Social photography furthers this fusion of media and bodies, making clear how we see, think, speak, and feel through images. A crowd of raised phones at an event is like many outstretched eyes capable of sharing an experience in real time with almost anyone. Media have always been something living and embodied, and the camera made social is a particularly potent emmeshing of human and machine. The social photo makes more explicit than ever how we are made of and by images, just as much as they are made of and by us.

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that is more like speaking than recording. From there, I joined  
Snapchat in 2013 to develop this line of thinking as well as to  
apply it in design. This book is the culmination of my thinking  
about the rise of social photography, written from within and  
outside academia, within and outside industry.

I want this volume to document this transitional moment  
in the evolution of photography. I hope we can apply the  
conceptual tools developed here, through the example of