

## Documentary Vision

Every day the urge grows stronger to get a hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.

—Walter Benjamin, 1936<sup>1</sup>

It's the little things: your friend who texts instead of ringing a doorbell. A bus filled with people looking at phones instead of newspapers. And it's the bigger things: waves of protesters using these same phones to crowd the streets and overthrow long-established regimes. Even those who do not remember a time before smartphones are born into a world still reeling from the collective vertigo of the dizzying change—not just in the technologies and devices but in interpersonal behavior and political realities. Social norms and understandings try to keep up with the modifications in how we see ourselves, others, and the world as a result of new digital, social technologies. Collectively and individually, in different ways and to varying degrees, we struggle with the personal and social changes that come with redefining visibility, privacy, memory, death, time, space, and everything else social media is currently challenging.

We have conceptual tools to help understand these changes. Operating systems use metaphors like “files” and “folders” to make the workings of a computer more comprehensible. We've developed a spatial understanding of the digital when we say we are going “online” to a “cyberspace”; the metaphor makes for good fiction because it frames newness within something familiar. Perhaps less intuitively, the emergence of

photography in the mid 1800s can help us understand the contemporary rise of social media.

Photography arrived as a new technology like a kind of magic, allowing you to document the world in new ways and to share these frozen bits of lived experience with people who weren't present for them. It changed the possibilities of time and space, privacy and visibility, truth and falsity. The fact of the camera changed how we saw the world and thus changed vision itself. And the advent of photography occasioned many of the same debates and confusions we currently have with social media, amid another sweeping change in the field of vision. How we see, what we can see, what both social visibility and invisibility mean are changing today as rapidly as they did in the early years of photography. Once again, the entire set of ways people make themselves visible to the world, and make the world visible to them, has undergone a substantial reorientation with respect to new devices that capture and share.

The history of photography has much to teach us about understanding social media and thus much of our contemporary social reality. The current claims that the deluge of web content, comments, and social streams is all banal noise without much signal, that the Internet is making us stupid, echoes what poet Charles Baudelaire said in 1859 of photography: "If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally."<sup>2</sup> And a century before "pics or it didn't happen" became a mantra, writer Emile Zola said in 1901, "In my view, you cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it."<sup>3</sup>

To understand social media, we need to understand that vision changes, how we see is historically located and socially situated. We cannot understand photography or social media without stepping back and looking at the deeper impulse that fuels both: the desire for life in its documented form.

Technology and nostalgia have become co-dependent: new technology and advanced marketing stimulate ersatz nostalgia—for the things you never thought you had lost—and anticipatory nostalgia—for the present that flees with the speed of a click.

—Svetlana Boym, 2007<sup>4</sup>

Snowstorms produce a blizzard of images. The Snow Day is exceptional and thus picture worthy. Each extra inch looks like progress and is thus photographable. Everyday surroundings that usually seem to have exhausted their photographic potential are breathed new productive life. *Look how different things are right now.* And snow photos look good. The white wash makes the image simpler and more striking by removing extra elements from the frame. The bright snow provides instant contrast, making any subject pop. The flurries in the wind provide movement and texture and depth. The snow itself falls and is blown into beautiful and unpredictable arrangements, wrapping around the contours of objects smooth and lifelike. Even when shot in color, snow photos can appear almost black-and-white. Snow is its own photo filter.

Over New Year's 2010, the northeastern United States was blanketed by large snowstorms, and social media streams were covered by photos that captured these white-out urban snowscapes. But beyond the shared impulse to document a dramatic weather event, these images had something else in common: many were similarly faded and grainy, appearing to have been taken on a cheap film camera decades earlier. The sudden influx of retro, faux-vintage images belonged to a new photographic trend, inaugurated by two competing mobile-phone apps: Hipstamatic, named "App of the Year" in 2010 by Apple, and Instagram, which would eventually emerge as a dominant social photography network. Hipstamatic triggered the popularity of old-fashioned-seeming photos, producing square, fake-aged images modeled after earlier film cameras

such as the Polaroid. Instagram came next with a larger set of filters (more flavors of vintage) and a popular network to post them to.

While making an image black-and-white had long been a quick route to making a photograph seem older than the moment it captures, faux-vintage filters offered a wider array of tools for a more flexible approach to nostalgia fabrication.<sup>5</sup> Among other things, filters would fade the image (especially at the edges), adjust the contrast and tint, over- or undersaturate the colors, simulate lens effects and color distortions such as chromatic aberration, blur areas to exaggerate a shallow depth of field, add imitation film grain, and so on. Often, the photos are made to mimic the look of having been printed on physical photo paper.

Both apps yielded a similar aesthetic, one that would come to dominate social photography for a short time, filling social media streams with photos of a similar simulated patina, mimicking the ravages of time and evoking nostalgia as well as a sense of authenticity that digital photos in their infancy appeared to lack. In 2010, *New York Times* photographer Damon Winter won a prestigious photography award for his faux-vintage war photos from Afghanistan, confirming the rise of the aesthetic beyond the masses to the level of professionals and the aesthetic elite.

Nostalgic filters' cultural moment coincided with the emergence of *social photography*, where millions of people were suddenly taking, sharing, and viewing each other's photos as part of everyday communication. Social photography jumped from point-and-shoot digital cameras to the smartphone—a small networked computer that is far more likely to always be on or near its owner. As part of a computer ecosystem, the social camera is connected to a series of sophisticated software applications and is digitally networked. The same technology that allows photos to be far more social also makes it easier to apply filters and other augmentations than it was on previous

point-and-shoot cameras or with photo editing software. Filtering could be baked right into the process of shooting and sharing, offered as a menu of immediate alternatives for the same image rather than something requiring any technical knowledge.

Why was this moment, the early rise of everyday social photography, so defined by an aesthetic saturated with nostalgia? The low quality of some early smartphone cameras might explain why some sort of filter that masked or exploited this deficiency could become popular, but why specifically *vintage*? Understanding the appeal of this particular aesthetic at that critical moment in social photography's emergence is essential to understanding the logic of social photography, even today, and the type of documentary vision it encourages.

We can begin answering this question by looking at why the first flood of social photos so frequently made visual reference to the physical photos they came to replace. The proliferation of digital media can raise the profile of their analog counterparts, sharpening the older media's significance through new contrasts. Just as the rise of the digital music through MP3s and streaming was coupled with the resurgence of vinyl records, there has been a similar effort to reclaim and repurpose physical photos. Analog images are seen as slow, pricey, and rare to the degree that social photos appear quick, cheap, and abundant. That an old photo could survive as long as it did grants it an authority that the equivalent digital photo taken today may never achieve. Their sheer physicality—their weight, their smell, their tactility—take on new significance in the halation of glowing screens.

Digital photos could appropriate that significance as nostalgia, mimicking physical photos by simulating the ravages of time through fading, added film grain and scratches, and faux paper or Polaroid borders. Making digital photos appear physical buys into the cachet and importance that physicality now imparts. Like other digital skeuomorphisms made to

emulate physical objects (the diskette "Save" button or envelope symbol for e-mail), the simulated physical and vintage photo is a bridge to both an imagined past and a digital future, slowly becoming unnecessary as the digital version grows more commonplace.

The popularity of the faux-vintage aesthetic reflected a collective grasping at the authenticity, the "reality," that sheer vintage suddenly seemed to grant otherwise unremarkable printed photographs. The proliferation of faux-vintage photos underscored the fact that vintage photos *were actually vintage*. They stood the test of time, they described a world past, and, as such, appeared to earn a sense of significance.

Sociologist Sharon Zukin's 2010 book *Naked City* describes the modern gentrification of inner cities as a quest for authenticity, often in the form of urban grit and decay.<sup>6</sup> For those born into a postwar sociocultural context, often characterized by theorists as plastic, suburban, inauthentic, Disneyfied, and McDonaldized, there has been a resulting cultural obsession with decay and a search for an authentic reality in our simulated world.<sup>7</sup> From fashion to furniture to cities, the worn down or vintage can successfully convey a sense of authenticity. Sharing faux-vintage photos, when they first populated social media streams, was like situating oneself in a Brooklyn neighborhood rich with venerable brownstones. The filtered images conjured a sense of special realism amid the mass of digital photos. Faux-vintage photos placed one's self and one's digitally mediated present into the context of the past and its overtones of the authentic, the important, and the real.

The "vintage" in these social photos doesn't fool anyone: people know quite well that these photos are not really aged by time but with an app. These are self-aware simulations—the self-awareness evoked by the *hipster* in Hipstamatic. The faux-vintage photo is more like a fake 1950s diner built in the twenty-first century, or like Main Street in Disney World, or the checker cab in Las Vegas's New York, New York casino

complex. These are both simulations of the past as well as nostalgia for time past.

The authenticity that a faux-vintage filter ostensibly provides should be negated by the fact that it is a simulation. But it does not preclude the photos from conjuring feelings of nostalgia. What the images reference is not the vintage as such but the idea of vintage. Simply being aware of the faux in faux-vintage does not disqualify these photos from entering successfully into the economy of the real and authentic; it might even assist in their success. As in the fake-retro diner, the simulations in faux-vintage images are obvious, yet this obviousness does not preclude them from causing and exploring feelings of nostalgia. Consistent with Jean Baudrillard's description of simulations, photos in their faux-vintage form are more vintage than vintage, exaggerating the qualities of old photographs while also evoking nostalgia without an actual referent in the past. Here as elsewhere, nostalgia evokes beauty, not the other way around.

As trends go, the faux-vintage aesthetic didn't last for long. But the centrality of nostalgia to the rise of social photography is telling: it suggests continuity with the nostalgia that all documentation implies. This link is key to understanding social photography and social media more generally: the faux-vintage photo is an example of the documentarian's futile demand to embalm that which is escaping. Our contemporary documentary vision positions the present as a potential future past, creating a nostalgia for the here and now.

Photography is a technology of instability. It stages a play of the real and the simulated, the apparent and the contrived, the creative and the mechanical. And photography is itself always in flux, from plates to film, paper to pixels, to more people carrying more cameras more of the time. These changes affect who makes images, where, why, how often, and for whom. There has been a recent and massive shift in who sees any

photograph, and the audience for images that social media promises alters what a photograph is and what it means.

To say someone has “photographed” something sounds weightier than what most people do in their everyday practice of making and sharing images. Many people with a phone and camera app in their pocket do not consider themselves to be “photographers” at all; this designation evokes art and more formal documentation. Consequently, so much of the popular, everyday, journalistic, and academic discussion about “photography” focuses on professional image making, to which the question “Is the image good?” is relevant and debates about “oversharing” too many unimportant shots begin.

This is a perspective rooted in art history, one that deals with galleries, museums, and professional work and is tangential to all but a tiny fraction of images made today. The vast majority of photos perform functions distinct from those of documentation or art. The quick selfe reaction, the instantly posted snapshot of nice sunlight on your block, the photo of a burger sent to a friend: these kinds of images are of central importance to photography as it occurs today, but they are not as well conceptualized or understood. These everyday images taken to be shared are examples of what I am calling *social photography*. Other names include “snapshot photography,” “personal photography,” “domestic photography,” “vernacular photography,” “networked images,” “banal imaging,” or, as Fred Ritchin differentiates in *Bending the Frame*, an “image” as opposed to a photograph.<sup>8</sup> All these terms are meant to distinguish social images—the overwhelming bulk of photographs being made today—from those weightier images made with that traditional understanding of photography as something more informational, formally artistic, and professional.

The term “social photo” can be limiting because all photos are social in a sense (a critique equally applicable to the term “social media”). My interest here is with a type of photography made ubiquitous by networked, digital sharing, though

many of its characteristics can be found in different degrees in pre-social media photography, especially amateur snapshots (Polaroid sharing in particular). For my purposes here, what fundamentally makes a photo a social photo is the degree to which its existence as a stand-alone media object is subordinate to its existence as a unit of communication.

To unpack what that means, some of the basic presuppositions behind photographic thinking need to be unlearned. Far too much current writing on photography—even in pieces about social media and photography—fixate on professional photographers; how their photos are awash in the stream of amateurs, how the “best” photos can no longer stand out, how there is less money to be made, or how professionals are using social networks in creative ways. We hear so much about how professional photographers today are doomed to chase celebrities to make a living, how amateurs are now able to take images that have the look of professional photographers’ work, or how the best amateur photos can be elevated to the level of art. These are the concerns of professionals, and their focus is too narrow to capture what social photography is.

Photography theory’s long marginalization of amateur snapshots has left a shortfall of reference points for making sense of social photos today. The dichotomies of “amateur vs. professional” and “digital vs. analog” matter less for the social photo than the relations between power, identity, and reality. The fixation on professional and artistic photos comes with conceptual baggage rooted in other fields, much of which should slide to the margins when discussing social photography. The center of conceptual gravity for describing how people communicate with images today should be less art historical and more social theoretical.

Academic literature from the humanities and social sciences, which should be well positioned to articulate these aspects of social photography, has been slow to describe the importance of what has come to be a fixture of everyday

social life for many. Academic research on social photography is “underexposed,” as researchers Larsen and Sandbye note: “photography studies have been especially slow to tackle new changes, even relative to film, music, journalism, television, and museum studies,” adding further that “of all the disciplines that addressed and were once securely attached to a discrete medium, the study of photography stands out as resisting engagement with recent developments in its field.”<sup>9</sup>

I treat social photography here less as an evolution in photography or as the advance of amateur snapshot photos, and more as a broader development in self-expression, memory, and sociality. This runs against a tendency among commentators to look first to the gadgets, to think about things at their most literal. Discussions around the social photo rarely go beyond the devices and platforms, the technical details—which company is succeeding, failing, spending, or being bought. To think of social photography as simply photography done with mobile devices or just as photos on social media is too easy, literal, and technology-centric. Instead, I describe social photography as a cultural practice; specifically, as a way of seeing, speaking, and learning. To understand our social world today means understanding the ubiquity of digital communications and social media, and this media is deeply constituted by the images we make and share. Any contemporary social theory should be, in part, a theory of social media, which should be, in part, a theory of social photography.

It is ultimately nearsighted to view the social photo primarily in reference to any specific photo or even any specific social media platform. Much about what we choose to shoot, how we understand it, share it, present it, and see it is conditioned by the specific design decisions of the currently popular devices and services, but in the future, the designs and services will change—and the phenomenon of social photography is larger than the sum of these contingencies.

As such, the generalizing in this volume is intentional. Some conclusions will be rushed, and not every presupposition will be unpacked. It is written deliberately within my own Western context, and many of the developments I describe may or may not apply cross-culturally. And much of this work assumes access to these technologies, which is contingent on economic stratification, physical ability, and a host of other variables I often do not center. This is not a text that builds an indstructible fortress of an argument, but something a bit more grand and less permanent, where some points can be pulled away, others rejected. My goal here is to provide a way of thinking about things, to sensitize more than convince. The number of topics, examples, and alternative theoretical literatures we could appeal to are innumerable, and I'll only draw from a subset. To say there has been a deep change in how we communicate is by now boring. It is time to hold these changes to deeper examination, appreciation, and destruction, despite the likelihood that further changes will come swiftly.

With every passing decade, it is always said that photography now matters more than ever, and the statement is always true. Photography has long been more than just an art form or a scientific or journalistic practice. Before social media, the logic of the image came to touch nearly every aspect of social life, from politics to consumption to how we know our selves as selves. Newspaper pages gave more and more space to photographs, advertisements likewise gave less space to words, and television increasingly conquered American free time and culture. This world already so profoundly dominated by the image is the world that social photography was born into and the world that already trained its first users.<sup>10</sup> The rise of social photography is an even deeper and more intimate saturation of the image into how we see, speak, and think.

The photograph on social media is as underconceptualized as it is ubiquitous. Photography in its digital and social form

infiltrates our lives and our selves, with more of our everyday moments understood to be pregnant with photographic potential. For many, an image is always just a few taps from being produced and available for consumption on a glowing screen. People become constant tourists, looking for potential photographs, hungry for an additional image as they walk the streets, eat dinner, and go to bed. The normal rhythms of life are opportunities for making and browsing social photos and are as such experienced in relation to the photograph.

This much is obvious. The deeper evidence of photography's even tighter imbrication in everyday life is found not just in the metastasizing numbers of cameras and photos but also in the way this documentary habit burrows into consciousness. The logic of the social photo organizes our minds in new ways. Life is experienced as increasingly documentable, and perhaps also experienced *in the service* of its documentation, always with the newly accessible audience in mind.

The social photo, which typically comes as part of a stream, stands in contrast to the traditional photograph. As Susan Murray argued in 2008, everyday snapshot photography doesn't lend itself to the same kind of textual analyses that artistic work typically receives.<sup>11</sup> This holds even truer for the social photo, which is rarely created explicitly as an art object. To only apply traditional aesthetics to social photos is to disrespect the integrity of vision of those making and seeing the images, a vision not rooted in traditional photographic judgments and justifications. While those applying photo criticism to the social photo attempt to place those images within the established rules of the professional photographic community, the vast majority of people holding cameras have little interest in those professional norms or success metrics. The everyday social photograph fails at being "good" in the same way as an art photograph fails at conveying odor.

To ask whether social photos are "good" is to ask whether one's self-presentation is "good," if one's communication and

familial and professional social interactions are "good." This might be a relevant question to ask, but to answer it would have little to do with the rule of thirds and more to do with being caring, empathetic, and respecting others' privacy—that is, with various social, rather than formally aesthetic, considerations.

To treat social photography solely in the terms of its aesthetic quality is analogous to judging all written language on its poetic merits. Yes, there is room for poetry and its analysis just as there is room for art within photographic inquiry, but it should only be part of the analysis and certainly not its dominant aspect.

The considerations involved in creating social photos are often more social than technical. As Henri Cartier-Bresson put it, "technique is only important insofar as you must master it in order to communicate what you see."<sup>12</sup> And the technical ability to create an image is now comically easy, while the social communication in its everyday nuance and skill is as involved and impossibly complex as ever.

Walter Benjamin discussed photography as a technology that operates at the pace of the eye that perceives faster than the hand can draw, arguing that "the process of pictorial reproduction was accelerated so enormously that it could keep pace with speech."<sup>13</sup> An emerging perspective within media and photography studies posits the social photo as more *communication* than professional art.<sup>14</sup> José van Dijck makes the point that images today are more like a visual language, and Fred Ritchin says that the malleable digital photograph is more an expression of a point of view than an objective documentation, that it is more like writing.<sup>15</sup> In a study by David Nemer and Guo Freeman, *selfies* are defined as "nonverbal, visual communication that implies one's thoughts, intentions, emotions, desires, and aesthetics captured by facial expressions, body language, and visual art elements."<sup>16</sup> Edgar Gómez Cruz concisely states that "photography has gone from being

a medium for the collection of important memories to an interface for visual communication.<sup>17</sup> Today, a global flow of image-speak among those who do not write in the same language allows for new possibilities in visual communication. The *graphy* in photography means drawing, not with ink but with light.

As linguists know well, speech isn't all eloquent profanity; it is filled with "umms" and "ha-has," and image-speak similarly comprises both the profound and the silly. To respect social photography as an image discourse is to acknowledge that it is varied and diverse and frequently inarticulate.<sup>18</sup>

Photography is more often thought to concern those unique, decisive moments, the exceptional instances pulled out from the continuous flow of reality. There are special *scenes*: the important moment recorded for posterity, the news event, the well-staged display, the perfectly lit room, the vacation sunset.

But with always-connected devices and the audience that social media provides, photography's scope reaches increasingly into the everyday, past the special scenes and into the spaces between. Social photos are better equipped to occupy what happens outside of these scenes, in the stream of everyday life.<sup>19</sup> Opposed to the scene is this *stream*, the commonplace flow of images, each perhaps trivial on its own but important in aggregate, providing us a type of intimate and ambient awareness of the other.

In *Ubiquitous Photography*, Martin Hand points out that the vision of the future projected at the end of the twentieth century was a matter of simulations and virtual reality but that today "we now have arguably the opposite: the visual publicization of ordinary life in a ubiquitous photoscape."<sup>20</sup> And the most significant technology with respect to social photography and the rise of photos of the stream of everyday life is perhaps not small, portable cameras but the social platforms that provide an audience, a social motive in addition to a technological means.

Without an audience for every snap, photography before social media had to work much harder for attention; it had to be important or special or worthy to justify being seen. While the barriers to taking photos have certainly been lowered due to user-friendly cameras that are always carried on the person, it may be even more significant that the barriers to an image *being seen* have also been lowered dramatically, bringing photography into the stream between the scenes.

Our collective understanding of what a photograph means has yet to catch up. Traditional analyses of photography fixate on the photo *object*. This is the thingness of the photograph, as a discrete something with borders. This was central to film photography and continues to animate contemporary discussions about digital photography. The thingness of the social media image is undoubtedly still interesting, but its status as an object is not as central; the what and how of a social photo is less important than the why. As van Dijk puts it, young people "take less interest in sharing photographs as *objects* than as sharing them as *experiences*."<sup>21</sup> There is a fast-evolving literacy in the circulation of images as communication.

Images within the social stream evoke more than they explain; they transmit a general alertness to experience rather than facts. This is what happens when photography is oriented more toward the normal than the exceptional and becomes woven through the contours of everyday life. Think of photos of food. Holding a camera over one's lunch has come to be a paradigmatic example of oversharing, mocked as an example of the banality of social photography. The food photo often fails to be novel in the information it conveys or its artistic quality. Unless the meal is very special, the photo of food fails at being a scene, the traditional domain of photography.

Removing a single social photo from the stream and seeing it as its own scene leads to the kind of contempt that these ordinary photos of food sometimes induce in critics. Alone, it



can't live up to any expectations of being the "one" shot. But as part of a stream, the photo of food often succeeds as part of an ongoing communication of who you are, what you are experiencing, the simple fact that you exist and are alive doing things.<sup>22</sup> Such images of the simple and ordinary are, in aggregate, a part of this significant aspect of social existence. It is the banalities of life that, together, weave the rich texture from which special moments emerge and on which they depend to stand out.

Those who gripe that we all take and post too many photos that are too banal and lack aesthetic distinctiveness are (knowingly or not) applying a critical logic from art history discourse that views images as formally artistic and documentary objects. But understood as *social* photos, as a kind of visual speaking, such a critique is largely irrelevant. Freed from it, we can instead talk about what these images can do well, which is extend the possibilities of communication, self-presentation, and other forms of sociality. Lunch photos are annoying to the degree the viewer is obtuse to visual sociality and mistakes them for a failed Ansel Adams image.

As easy as it is to appreciate special moments, it is equally easy to underestimate the seemingly banal moments in between. Those who study the social world appreciate the complexities of the trivial.<sup>23</sup> Minor gestures and social groomings make up the substance of our lives: saying hello, smiling, acknowledging each other, our expressions, our posture, our moods from good to bad. Social photography excels in the everydayness of ordinary communication, which is anything but trivial.

The photo object, which has so long been central to what "photography" was thought to be, is today far less important and more disposable. For social photography, the object itself is less its own end (a beautiful photo for its own sake) and more the means (a signifying contribution to a stream of images). Whether an image is self-destructing by design, as

in services like Snapchat, or ephemeral in so far as it simply flows down the expanding feed rarely to be encountered again, social photography downplays the *thingness* of the image. The image object becomes a by-product of communication rather than its focus. Photography is *social photography* to the degree that its central use is more expressive than informational, when the recording of reality is not its own end but a means for communicating an experience.<sup>24</sup>

In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin makes a distinction between *information* and *experience* that is useful for understanding the social photo.<sup>25</sup> There, he describes information as the fact of the matter at any given time versus the capacity to articulate experience, something storytelling can uniquely accomplish because it is not anchored to true-or-false but conveys timeless emotion and wisdom.

Benjamin felt that, relative to oral cultures, written text tended toward information rather than storytelling. He argued that with the rise of science and bureaucracy and mechanization, there was a triumph of information and an atrophy of storytelling. Modernity was gradually removing the narrative aspects of communication. Information is verifiable and is "understandable in itself," whereas storytelling must keep free from precise explanation, more show than tell. Information appeals to neutrality and disinterested objectivity because the goal is the report, the accurate and full description of a scene. Storytelling is instead an artisanal communication, that is, it contains traces of the specific storyteller, seen as feature, not flaw.

Visual communication is increasingly accommodating the sharing of experience in addition to and through the mechanism of recording information. This means that social photography, even or especially those photos that are filtered and framed and digitally augmented, can succeed at storytelling rather than fail at exactitude. In this way, visual communication is like oral storytelling.

I do not mean to suggest that social photos do not have informational qualities. Many of the services for sharing images leverage the information and associated metadata to build products and businesses.<sup>26</sup> But for those communicating through social images, their informational qualities are a means to the end of expression. Social photos take in the world in order to speak with it.

To speak with a social photo, to make something that is more expressive than the mere, cold, accurate fact of reality, is often considered a *manipulation* of reality. It makes sense: filters “filter” the unedited photo, augmented reality “augments” the reality the eye perceives. But this does not mean that photography, even social photography, is losing whatever authority it had in delineating what is real or true. The measure of “reality” and “truth” should not be counted solely by how the pixels in the image relate to the photons out in the world. More than the fact of the matter, the “truth” of capturing the essence of yourself and others, the mood, the *what it is* like quality of experience can depend on expressiveness more than accuracy. Rather than some rejection of truth, playing with the reality of our everyday world is part of expression and communication, and this ubiquitous playfulness with images has everything to do with the “truth” and “reality” of ourselves and our lives. The social photo, liberated from the fact of the matter, is able to tell new truths.

Every image has a border. It is a singular document, a record, and a piece of information. But as part of a stream, as an everyday lightweight practice, what emerges is a more nuanced visual literacy. As a visual discourse, social photos are a means to express feelings, ideas, and experiences in the moment, a means sometimes more important than the specific ends of a particular image. For example, a photo of a palm tree that appears quickly in a stream is often less about that specific palm tree than “palm tree-ness,” which can convey that the weather is warm, or that you are on vacation, or that you are

having a relaxing time, or whatever a palm tree conveys to you and the people you expect to see the image. The social photo can be like an emoji, like the cartoon palm tree, playing with the distinction between the world of actually existing objects and their symbolic meaning. This is why lower quality images sometimes tell better stories. The high-resolution photo invites a focus on the specific visual information in the image: what is being depicted and how. The low-resolution image can more easily stand for concepts, like an icon.

Artist and theorist Scott McCloud’s work on comics as a type of visual communication touches on this same point. He describes how comics can depict things by boiling away detail (details a photograph might include) down to the smallest possible amount of information that still captures the essence of the thing depicted. Part of why comics and cartooning are so popular is that there is an efficiency of meaning, what McCloud calls “amplification through simplification.”<sup>27</sup> Through the elimination of visual noise, the viewer can focus more on essence. Comics and cartooning are a way of seeing the world by visualizing things as their essence, stripped of particularity and amplified in general meaning.

Sometimes a selfie is different than a self-portrait, less an accurate picture of me at this time in this place and more, like the palm tree example, a visual depiction of the idea of me. Social photography, emojis, comics, and memes are part of an expanding visual discourse built on seeing, recording, and speaking with the world through its visual sign value to see the more universal meanings in specific objects.

Social photography heralds a transformation in the way that not only images, but also the camera, should be understood. As silly as it is to think of our pocket devices as mere phones, it’s equally silly to think of them as mere cameras. A camera can only serve the end of making photographs, while digital devices can take pictures as a means toward many other ends. The image-making capacity is situated among other apps and

functions, which can put an image within text, share it on other platforms, and so on. All these possibilities are wrapped into one fluid understanding of what the devices make possible.

This suggests a shift in what a "camera" is understood to be, primarily by transforming it from hardware to something more like software. The *digital in digital photography* clearly refers to this software, so it could correctly be called *software assisted photography* instead. It is the software that allows photos to be more than they once were.

The old hardware camera components, however—the lens and shutter and flash—are still the first things we think of when we hear the term *camera*. Many of the first digital camera sensors aspired to the qualities of film and Instagram's first filters emulated that material aesthetic. The logos of the first social photography applications like Hipstamatic, Instagram, or Facebook's initial camera app were depictions of a camera body or sometimes just the lens or shutter. The logos harken to a time when the processing of an image happened outside of the camera, in the darkroom or digital editing program. But for social photography applications, the software is part of the camera. And it's the most important part when software is used to do much more than simply emulate what hardware did before.

The hardware lens and sensor are necessary, but not sufficient, components of a social camera, and perhaps not even the most significant. Simply put, a camera is a device for making images, a tool that unlocks a vast field of visual possibilities, from beautiful portraits and landscapes to selfies and everyday phatic expressions, and now includes image-processing tools such as filters and augmented reality. The full range of what happens when a software camera is connected to the Internet is not explained by the mere fact of light moving through a lens and onto a sensor. That hardware is merely a component to what the software does, much of which, like automatic focus and exposure, occurs without the

user's direction.<sup>28</sup> It is the code that allows you to augment, edit, and share an image. It makes possible a photography that is more conversational, ephemeral, and expressive. The social camera is not something just looked *through* but looked *with*, to use writer and curator Lyle Rexer's framework.<sup>29</sup> Cameras are never purely neutral windows to the world; rather, they are collaborators that encourage new ways of seeing, new performances of vision. The social camera makes more explicit that the machine is a creative partner in seeing and expressing.

While the hardware can produce media objects, the social camera is based in software that does something with those objects. Being able to augment and share images is more relevant to social photography than the f-stop on the new hardware lens. The software makes the images socially relevant and affords a certain kind of audience, interaction, and value that goes beyond quantified megapixels. Our definition of a camera today should include and perhaps even be centered in the software.

To situate these shifts in social photos and social cameras within a broader context, we might appeal to philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's influential social theory of modernity, built around the metaphor of an increasingly "liquid" world. He argues that nearly everything becomes less solid and heavy and instead lighter, more fluid, porous, agile, and difficult to grasp, a consequence of the radical changes and upending of traditions caused by modern ideologies and technologies.<sup>30</sup> In the past, he argues, the social world was "solid" and meant to last, and today it is increasingly more liquid and impermanent. For example, he cites among other things the rise in divorce rates, the replacement of lifetime employment by multiple careers and employers over time, the shift from education that concludes at an early age to something continuous and lifelong, and the transition from a producer society centered on building objects that last to a consumer society that

always needs the new thing to be quickly thrown away for the next. Liquid economies don't produce as many heavy things, like automobiles, but rather lighter things like software and information.

In this framework, a more solid photography of the past was built around the photo object, whereas social photography is something lighter and more immediate. Cameras and photos have become increasingly liquid, the image that once existed as a solid and comparably heavy paper object is now near-weightless digital information, which thus moves across space with increasingly little effort. The social camera and social photo are a more fluid photography precisely because their objecthood grows less relevant, existing primarily as information and flow as such. And, as described above, the objects depicted in the social photo, heavy in their particularity, are more likely to be melted down to their symbolic value.

Indeed, the whole history of photography could be written in terms of its increasing liquidity, especially how it becomes quicker and quicker.<sup>31</sup> The social photo as liquid photography describes not just the rapidity by which images are created but also the pace of their movement, their spread, their sharing and resharing with friends, families, potentially anyone, as well as their tendency to leak beyond their intended confines. More than just fast, the social photo is nearly instantaneous. Sociologist John Tomlinson has theorized a shift in recent decades from machine speed to information immediacy.<sup>32</sup> Machine speed describes the pace at which the heavy, mechanical, industrial technologies of cars, trains, jets, ocean liners, and the like move. Information speed, on the other hand, is lighter and relies on more easily adaptable communication technologies including the Internet and social media networks. While industrial movement is characterized by immense effort, immediacy transcends the journey; it is not rapid transit but rather an always imminent closeness. The

locomotive is the symbol of mechanical speed, the struggle to overcome distance. Digital connection, on the other hand, transcends space. The train wins a battle against space that digital connection does not have to fight.

Predigital photographic history is one of ever-quickening mechanical speed, from glass plates to paper, the portable Kodak Brownie to the faster Polaroid. Social photography, more than fast, enters into the logic of immediacy. This liquid photography better affords a kind of speaking and hearing with images. The accelerated pace at which an image is not just made but also received allows a novel type of photographic communication that is faster, more globally understood, and sometimes more directly expressive than words. Social photography often carries the lightest possible baggage in capturing oneself and one's world and communicating it with others. So much information and feeling can be articulated through a stream of images, especially as we become more visually literate in encoding and decoding such expressiveness. Most simply, a photograph is often faster than words.

None of this is to say that traditional photography wasn't social. For example, many Polaroid images were made to be seen, shared, and discarded. Like the social photo, their potential to speak was the end and the photo object just the means, often discarded soon after. Conversely, we can find images on social media whose communicative aspect is subordinate to the object itself, for example, images made to be formally artistic or photojournalistic. Nonetheless, the general function of the social photo is about social communication rather than an aspiration to stand alone as a self-referential object. The social photo finds its purpose not in the image object itself but in the transmission of the moment as it presents itself. Circulation is the content and experience is what is offered and shared. By diminishing the importance of the media object, by making it close to or literally disposable, social photos recenter communication itself.

By removing some of the heavy conceptual baggage from the term *photography*, we can better think of images as speech, as gesture, as breath. Better than thinking of social photography as something that involves photographers exchanging their work, we might instead describe it simply as talking or hanging out. The social photo's central cultural importance is the degree to which the image's frame, the media object itself, has dissolved away, leaving behind the substance of life and experience. My selfie, your photo of the park, the photo of my writing setup with books scattered about are quickly posted and seen and go down the stream. They don't always aspire to art or lasting record but rather to shared expression and meaning. In this way, photography on social media is often more social than media.

For so many, the social camera has become a fundamental part of experience, taking on some of the discursive functions associated with speech and text. They offer a way to understand ourselves, communicate with others, and find out about the world. We can now ask how to accomplish with a social camera anything that we can with words.

The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.

—Dorothea Lange, 1978<sup>33</sup>

To speak with images often entails seeing and feeling the world as potential communicative substance, as a collection of expressive potential waiting to be actualized by documentation. Much of our social media is designed to record, categorize, store, and rank lived experience, which, like all documentation, affords a type of ownership of the present by proxy. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag sometimes describes photography less as documentation than as a kind of invasive objectifying process:

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.<sup>34</sup>

What is real is only what is photographable, according to the logic of the camera. The documentary vision that social photography arguably provides pulls individuals out of the moment to frame it (and themselves) as an object for the future, as well as something already belonging to the past. This seizing and reversing of experience's ephemerality—to possess the present moment as an object, docile and durable—is what Andreas Kitzmann called a “musical gesture.”<sup>35</sup> Baudrillard called this accumulation of mediated experience “museumification,” by which life is treated as a collection of consumable objects.<sup>36</sup>

In *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen*, Shawn Michelle Smith notes how the invention of the photograph was quickly used for categorizing.<sup>37</sup> Eugenicist Francis Galton, for example, used photography to sort people into racialized types. Photography allows for and perhaps even demands—through the processes of objectification and possession—such a taxonomical gaze. The taxonomizing documentary consciousness associated with photography—now expanded with social photography—rests on how a medium atomizes the infinity of life into discrete, manageable elements to be collected, shared, and saved. As media historian John Durham Peters writes:

The stream of data flowing through the unaided senses already exceeds our explanatory schemata. The present moment supplies enough sensory information to outlast a lifetime of analysis. Audiovisual media, however, are able to catch contingent details of events that would previously have been either imperceptible or lost to memory.<sup>38</sup>

In a 1958 essay, André Bazin relates the documentation technology of photography to the embalming of the dead. Documentation takes on the form of what Bazin called the "mummy complex," where ephemeral reality must be frozen in time and not allowed to decompose, reflecting the "need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures."<sup>38</sup> To document our thoughts, travels, friends, and comments is to confirm their enduring reality while also collecting our being as so many museum-ready treasures. As Baudrillard famously put it, "the very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction.*"<sup>39</sup>

The atomizing of experience is intrinsic to the documentary consciousness that social-photographic practices impart. Social photography turns the ephemeral into something tangible and our life into something collectable, consumable. Moments exist only momentarily, but the document can be held indefinitely.

This view of life as frameable is an inherently nostalgic gaze. Like all nostalgia, this gaze is conservative: it views backward, and its inclination is to preserve. Nostalgia looks toward what once was, not toward what could be. It promotes calm over change and solid stillness over fluid movement. Sontag claims:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. An ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer. A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *momento mori*.<sup>41</sup>

Photos, like all documents, are nostalgic in that they embalm their subjects—a stilling sadness that kills what it attempts to save out of a fear of losing it, a fear of death.

The term *nostalgia* was coined more than 300 years ago to describe the medical condition of severe, sometimes lethal, homesickness, marked by pronounced depression and even physical ailments. By the nineteenth century, though, the word had morphed from describing a physical to a psychological condition: it was no longer merely about the longing for a place but also a longing for a lost time, inaccessible except through evocative reminders (what Proust's madeleine referred to). As the literature scholar and artist Svetlana Boyrn describes in her study of nostalgia, it is first a longing to return home but has since come to stand for the idea of home, "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed."<sup>42</sup>

As Peters puts it, nostalgia is simply "the jealousy the present has for the past."<sup>43</sup> The faux-vintage photos described earlier were an attempt to create a *nostalgia for the present*, to borrow a phrase from the philosopher of postmodernism Fredric Jameson: an attempt to make our photos seem more important, substantial, and real, to endow the powerful feelings associated with nostalgia to our lives in the present. As Jameson puts it, nostalgia for the present allows us to "draw back from our immersion in the here and now ... and grasp it as a kind of thing."<sup>44</sup> This is part of the appeal of social photography: documentation of personal experience is reified and made shareable—what you do and who you are is given an audience, made part of social participation in new ways.

Social photography, and the audience it promises, position us in the present with a constant awareness of how it will be perceived in the future. We come to see almost anything we do as a potential image, imploding the present into the past, and ultimately making us nostalgic for the here and now. Social photography, as well as social media more generally, encourages users to take the present as a potential document to be seen by others. Those faux-vintage images described earlier might have been an early response to seeing life as more consumable, something to be put in a catalog, and thus something

one could be spontaneously nostalgic for. For a documentary consciousness, photographs are not just representations of the movement of life; life itself becomes shaped by the logic of documentation.

Whether or not one is literally recording a moment, the effect of the social photo conditions how one experiences the world, how one recognizes instances within it as significant or meaningful or funny or important or worthy. Social photography allows you to impose the screen, and the friends' approving comments, whether or not you are using a device. The social photo initiates a process of documenting life so that you know how to see life when away from the screen.

We should not take this desire to document as a mere inevitable byproduct of technological advancements. It is not that the invention of photography or, later, social media occurs and then, programmatically, we develop a taste for such documentation. We cannot understand the technical means to document and the social desire to do so without reference to each other; they cannot be arranged in a simple, chronological cause and effect.

Indeed, what made photography possible was not just technical ability but also a cultural readiness and purpose. Art historian Jonathan Crary makes this point most powerfully, arguing that many histories of photography suffer from a sort of technological determinism: the idea that specific sets of mechanical breakthroughs impose a new social order.<sup>45</sup> According to many accounts, once the technological breakthroughs of the camera obscura and light-sensitive chemicals were made, the invention of the photograph ensued in 1839, and then all the social changes and shifts in how we see the world followed from that. But as Crary points out, accepting that account is to accept that technology alone determines its own consequences, simply and irresistibly. He instead posits that the real breakthrough happened well before 1839 and was caused by changes not just in technology but also in culture, a

"radical abstraction and reconstruction of optical experience" whereby the new, modern world came to make vision itself something measurable and thus exchangeable.<sup>46</sup>

The chemicals needed to fix the image of a camera obscura had been around in some form for nearly a century before photography's invention. What was lacking was not so much the technology but the popular will to fix the image. The usefulness of making a copy had yet to become intuitive or desired. That determination began to coalesce during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where historians find greater evidence of the aspiration to use image-making devices to permanently hold an image of the world still, parallel to what Michel Foucault describes as the rise, around this time, of a broader movement to submit more and more of life to taxonomization.<sup>47</sup> Photography emerges within and partly because of this larger will to knowledge. Art historian Geoffrey Barchen's history of early photography describes this moment of a burgeoning desire to have still images. By example, he points to artist William Gilpin's 1782 writings, "Observations on the River Wye."<sup>48</sup> On the river and thus moving, Gilpin lacked adequate means to document his journey and notes:

Many of the objects, which had floated so rapidly past us, if we had the time to examine them, would have given us sublime, and beautiful hints in landscape: some of them seemed even well combined, and readily prepared for the pencil: but in so quick a succession, one blotted out another.<sup>49</sup>

Roughly around the 1820s, as Crary shows, there is an important shift in vision associated with a series of optical inventions—the stereoscope as well as the thaumatrope, phenakistiscope, and zoetrope, among others—that change the nature of observing. At this time, many people around the globe started to work on the project of freezing and recording the

image produced by a camera obscura—with better and worse results. The most celebrated of these projects was Daguerre's 1839 announcement of his daguerreotype, the most famous achievement in the inauguration of the photographic age.

In this reframing, photography is just one technology, though the best known, to emerge from the change in the politics of vision that predates any of these specific inventions. Social media and the host of digital technologies that are still to come should be thought of as continuous with this same process, as new means for our distinctively modern type of vision to take the world in as something to be grasped, pulled apart, and spoken with. Photography before and after social media emerges as part of a preexisting and expanding will to document.

How we see and what it means is deeply influenced by technology. Modern technological change is predictably unpredictable—always described as too hectic, too quick, moving at a pace that provides a sort of “shock,” as futurist Alvin Toffler put it.<sup>50</sup> Theorist Mitchell Stephens states that the invention of photography “was a shock, a shock from which we have not yet recovered.”<sup>51</sup> Shock, as a sensory experience of modernity, refers to a lack of readiness, to suddenness and the disruption of continuity through a sort of rearrangement. The emergence of photography provided its own dazzling shock, not just at the beauty of the nature being reproduced but also at the possibility of such reproduction. Hans Buddemeier asks about the pleasure of being shocked: “Why did the exact repetition of reality excite people more than the reality itself?”<sup>52</sup>

Another example of modernity's “shocking” technologies of perception was the emergence of the railroad, particularly its speed, which created for humans a new pace of travel and thus a new view of the passing world. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's history of the railway notes that from roughly 1850 to 1950, the railroad was the machine of progress and industry because it overcame nature both by replacing horse-based travel and

also, more literally, because the railway tracks were built over and through the natural terrain in its path.<sup>53</sup> The railroad's increased speed did two things to distance: it made space seem both bigger and smaller, in different ways. Space felt smaller because more of it was now apprehendable; you could more quickly access more of it, and thus any distance became relatively reduced. But velocity also made the world bigger because there was now more space one could potentially apprehend; more distance was allowed into the sphere of possibility.

The rise of the railroad brought so much landscape to the passenger that attempting to comprehend it all caused a cognitive fatigue. Used to walking and having more time to slowly take in the landscape, travelers found that the railroad bombarded such perceptual openness, producing a sort of exhaustion; in fact, an 1862 medical journal described the experience in these terms: “The rapidity and variety of the impressions necessarily fatigue both the eye and the brain.”<sup>54</sup> With speed, there is quantitatively more for the brain to deal with. This is not specific to the railroad but part of modernity more broadly, including the rise of the city. The classical social theorist Georg Simmel described this urban perception as an “intensification of nervous stimulation,” as opposed to slow, lasting impressions which “use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does the rapid crowding of changing images.”<sup>55</sup> The modern condition was thought of as a general onslaught of things to pay attention to, newly positioning the urban, railroad-riding individual as a kind of spectator to an existence slipping quickly by.

The railroad positioned the world for the traveler as something passing, distant, to be taken as scenery framed by a cabin window. Schivelbusch expands on philosopher Dolf Sternberger's description of this way of seeing as a “panoramic vision,” a view that foregrounds the back—the passenger barely noticing that which is most near, reduced to an inconsequential blur by rapidity—and detaches the passenger from



this space immediately surrounding the train car. Opposed to slower travel, where the passing landscape can be lingered upon and seen in great detail, railway speed produced a panoramic vision where the landscape is not seen for as long or intensely, its particularities are instead taken in as a part of an ongoing flow instead of discreetly. Always quickly vanishing, the landscape becomes more impressionistic, evanescent; panoramic vision is seeing the world as montage. This panoramic vision produced by the rapid succession of imagery is a useful way to frame the contemporary type of vision that social photography encourages, both in how we make and consume the images. The social photo is often viewed through the grid, stream, or story to be finger-scrolled, swiped, and tapped. The images in their proliferation and rapidity create an emergent stream in aggregate, and for the person doing the swiping, there is a more panoramic view of social life, akin to the montaged scenery from the train window.

The social photo is part of a distinctly modern and expanding type of vision, heir to the development from painting to protophotographic technologies like the stereoscope to photography itself. The logic of the frame—that the world can and should be actualized as frozen, sliced, and bordered—emerges alongside the development of these technologies. This is a documentary consciousness, and the ability and tendency to see the world as documentable makes social media possible.

Most abstractly, a “document” is the result of a transference of reality, both objective and subjective, to its reproduction. As John Durham Peters notes, documentation first requires not just a recording medium but also a “witnessing.”<sup>56</sup> This may be the witnessing of an objective reality or the witnessing of one’s own creative self-expression. Peters suggests that witnessing is simply knowing and consists of two phases, “the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying. In passive witnessing an accidental audience observes the events of the world; in

active witnessing one is a privileged possessor and producer of knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> A document is produced when what is witnessed is preserved, representing one’s thoughts or experiences in a medium. This much is self-evident, but what is crucial here is that documentation is not only recording but also a way of seeing, a way of apprehending reality as potential. Social media is thus more than an expanding stack of documents but a *process*, a consciousness, a way of seeing that emerges within historical changes in media and technology, including, but not limited to, the railway, the city, and the camera.

Writing in 1956, the proto-library scientist Suzanne Briet asked “What Is Documentation?”<sup>58</sup> Briet explains that the term *documentation* comes from Latin, meaning proof or instruction. A document is any sign that is perceived or recorded to represent, reconstitute, or prove a phenomenon. By this definition, a living animal in itself is not a document, but a photograph of it is. To catalog the animal is to document it, so to put the animal in a zoo is to make it into a document.

According to Briet, the librarian does a sort of “documentary prospecting” to find items to be standardized and made searchable. And while she is speaking here of documentation in the professional library-science sense, Ronald E. Day points out in his review essay of her book that the argument is not so limited in scope but instead applies within the broader categories of culture and modernity. Her understanding of “library” went well beyond buildings with books to encompass the mass organization of information itself.

The explosion of written material required a new profession of “documentarian” (that is, librarian) to organize and make available all these texts; likewise, the explosion of self-documentation made possible by new devices requires a similar organizing apparatus for digital documents: social media. Social media unites new documentation technologies to provide both an outlet and audience for what we post, delivering both the opportunity and motivation to self-document.

"Documentary prospecting" is an apt description for this type of everyday awareness that social media are predicated upon and encourage: to see the world as something to be recorded, measured, cataloged, and shared. And beyond the personal "rhythm" of documentation (to use Briet's term), cultural rhythms of documentation are accelerating as well. An entire sector of the economy is now based on the recording and categorization of our lives and the world, filling corporate databases, themselves building ungraspably complicated schemas for organizing information as it multiplies exponentially.

Social media can be understood as an episode in the long history of the increase in the amount and complexity of documentation and its organizational logic that Briet identified more than half a century ago. As social media fuels a massive increase in both the amount of documentation and the size of the audience for it, the effort to keep track of it becomes profoundly complex. Data scientists try to make sense of endless databases filled with intimate minutia of what we search for and post, all of which must be organized for potential usefulness. There are more types of data and metadata being invented to classify the increasing amount of information being recorded, making information retrievable in new ways. Machine learning creates its own epistemic schemas, which are unknowable to the rest of us.

This expansion of the logic of documentation and organization was, for Briet, a good thing, signaling modern progress's march toward a future that leaves no bit of our culture and those living in it to vanish. In outlining the field of documentation, Briet did not mention writers wary of surveillance like Aldous Huxley or George Orwell. Instead, she regarded it better to record the world than to let it disappear, with the benefit of remembering, learning from, and building upon what has come before. As Peters notes regarding the evolution of stone to paper to film to silicon, "among the greatest of all

human technical achievements is the ability to record the data of happenings in spatial form and then spin them back later into real time."<sup>59</sup>

There is a pleasant contradiction in a photograph: at once it traps life and sets it free. The ephemerality of lived experience is captured and made docile for later viewing, but that experience is also enlivened by this trapping—it's given the power to live on, even if it must be wrestled into the confines of a static frame. Jean Baudrillard said there is a certain "joy" in transferring the real into a document,<sup>60</sup> or as Cartier-Bresson put it, "putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis."<sup>61</sup>

The initial rise of photography was driven by and coupled with an expansion of a documentary consciousness, for example, through the figure of the "camera eye," which has been described for more than a century. If you take a lot of photos, you know the camera eye well: it's the habit of seeing the world in terms of the logic of the camera mechanism even when you are not looking through the viewfinder. With the camera put away you might still see the world as a potential photograph, to see the best framing, potential lighting, the movement, the depth of field. The camera's logic becomes your own. The working of the machine becomes the working of your own eye and, more intimately, the working of your own conscious awareness.

To be perpetually aware of the possibility of a photo yokes us to the act of taking the picture, the quick snap at the perfect time. Cartier-Bresson called this the "decisive moment" and Émile Dermenghem the "privileged instant"—that shutter-thin vanishing point of the future and the past.<sup>62</sup>

The traditional "camera eye" metaphor can be expanded to apply to the social photo. There was a time, not long ago, when most people didn't make images as part of their everyday life. One could go weeks without taking a photo, whereas

today, for those with social cameras almost always on their person, that is almost unheard of. Instead, the documentary possibilities, the quantity of photos, and the number of potential photo ops has expanded. With photographs (as with text, video, and other kinds of images), social media posit in each of us a sense of life as a composition to be shared; they invite us to regard the potential of our experience as an arrangement of discrete objects fixed within the stream of life. To see with a camera eye, especially today, is to reposition one's orientation to the world toward an expanding field of documentary possibilities. To see the moment as documentable is to take a certain kind of standpoint, specific to a place in time.

The social photo epitomizes our ideological "gesture."<sup>63</sup> Because social media promises an always-available audience, one sees the world as pregnant with documentary potential. The networked audience motivates us to apprehend experience as documentable and promotes in us the perspective of the documentarian. A large world is shrunk by the camera, and the photographer is made bigger by the lens.

John Durham Peters posited that to document is to witness and to *not* document is to potentially grant someone else the status of witness and relegate yourself to "listener" or "hearer." To document is to be involved with our own experience instead of passively letting it float by. And to not take a photo, to not document, means forfeiting a chance to share your experience with those not around you, to say nothing of potential lost likes and followers. Every moment not documented carries an opportunity cost, and the shutter button on your screen is the quickest way to mitigate this expense.

The camera eye has always been about more than just capturing the image in the moment, though. Kodak's early marketing of its cameras more than a century ago stressed not just making but sharing the photos. Beginning in the 1880s, Kodak simplified taking and developing photographs with easy controls and pre-loaded, removable film that could be mailed back to

the company and returned to the consumer fully developed. In addition to eliminating much of the technical knowledge previously needed to make and develop images, Kodak also sold photo albums for you to display your best images and advertised its cameras as something to take on vacations (to "prove it with a Kodak," as one advertisement said). Documentation is always deeply related to a potential audience.

Like early photography, social media couples documentary vision with the impulse to share. But social media provides contemporary documentary vision an expanded audience and thus an intensification of others' perception within one's own. The modern camera eye decenters the content of the image in favor of how it will circulate. Social media asks us to see the world through the lens of how other people might see it and to identify what they might like. An Instagram eye, for instance, does not just see one's life as a potential social photo but also sees the world through that particular network's logic, through the eyes of the friends and family and strangers who will not only see the photo but also how it fares with the app's approval metrics.

This documentary consciousness gives one something to do, to turn every moment into one that is potentially productive, like a tourist of one's own experience. When you have a thought, see something interesting, go somewhere notable, or are just bored, the camera provides an action, somewhere to direct attention, to get more out of the moment. Sometimes taking and posting a photo is just a way of killing time during "boring" moments seemingly less worthy of undivided attention—perhaps when you are somewhere against your will, when distraction is welcome, when waiting in line, or during much of high school. Social photography can make life a bit like a game, often with likes and hearts and followers to keep score.

The documentary consciousness can appear to turn the world into a massive department store in which everything is free. Social media's gluttonous phenomenology begs users

to see life, their world, and other people as an endless buffet to be selected from, picked through, and composed, chosen for display. Each post a fresh arrangement of the infinite into something especially *you*. Life essayed by device.

In this way, documentary vision means you are always shopping, looking to select and thereby "consume" experience, and once the camera is acquired, documentation comes at little cost other than the accusation of oversharing. "Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted," as Sontag put it.<sup>64</sup> The social photo encourages experience shopping in both of the major aspects of consumerism, through acquisition of experience and through the display of that which is acquired.

With the networked camera, more and more things enter into the sphere of consumption. A latte once relegated to being merely consumed by the body is now also consumable in a different way. Not only that, the social photo allows one to use the latte to demonstrate creativity through framing and filters or other augmentations. Most fundamentally, to notice something and open a camera application is often about wanting to share your eyes, your mind, your experience of the moment in the moment. What it's like, the texture, the music between the ears, the sweet on the tongue, the light and shadows splashing across your world are all made shareable by a camera. Without any cliché or irony, the pleasure of experience can be a total joy, so wild and easy that, surely, the logic goes, we must be able to share.

If the professional photographer develops an instinct for visual form, today, the social media user has learned to do the same. Through trial and error, users develop a literacy regarding the right moments to document, how they should be shared and when. We learn to intuit in real time the potential popularity of something that might be shared, to see the virality with our eyes and then inside the frame.

Perhaps this documentary consciousness is best illustrated when it's felt the strongest: on vacation. The tourist photo is partly about consuming a place, making one's ephemeral visit somewhat permanent, and assisting or even offloading one's memory of the experience to its documentation. Furthermore, the camera helps that experience become profound. It's not just the importance of the moment that drives us to the shutter button; the act of pulling out the camera itself imparts significance on the moment. You spent all this time and money to see this thing or that place; surely you'll need a memento. The memento is not just an artifact for the future but taken and shared in present tense, justifying one's efforts in the moment by letting others know you are there visiting this important thing and thus justifying your efforts. In this way, the vacation photo is both for yourself and others, emphasizing the documentary awareness that gives the trip meaning. Vacation photos allow travelers to see their trip as more extraordinary by making it more documentable.

Tourist photos are often criticized for their predictability, the banality of each imitating each other as millions fill cameras with the same image of the Eiffel Tower, the obligatory pose with the Leaning Tower, the identically framed view from the same Grand Canyon vista. This theme is explored in photographer Corinne Vionnet's 2011 project "Photo Opportunities," in which many tourist photos are layered upon each other, highlighting the homogeneity of the traveler's gaze.<sup>65</sup>

From another perspective, we might defend these photos from the accusation of unoriginality. They have an aim other than uniqueness or artistic merit; they are instead more directly documentary, declaring *I was there, I did that*. They are what Barthes called "certificates of presence" or what Sontag called "photograph-trophies."<sup>66</sup> Simply put, the vacation photo that is snapped and posted is the most informative and efficient way of expressing to others that you are traveling and where. My photo may be similar to almost every other shot of the

Eiffel Tower, but it is *my* shot of the Eiffel Tower. The trophy status is often more important than the composition of the image itself because it stands as evidence of our own lives and the feeling of ownership of that experience, of that place. It completes the purchase of "vacation" by turning it into its collectable form, one that can be displayed.

For many, the camera was once primarily a vacation tool. Important moments demand the camera; they prompt a state of photographic exception in which just waking up and the simple fact of moving about your day demands photographic attention. But the vacation is no longer needed as alibi for existence to be documentable. The circle has expanded.<sup>67</sup> Nearly every hour has the status once reserved for vacation and is encountered in more full awareness of its photographic potential.

As with the tourist photo, social photos work as evidence of *I was there, I did that*. And just as shots of landmarks are often homogenous, so are the flow of social photos in general, the characteristic milestones of an ordinary day like the sad selfie, the latte foam, the jet wings. But such images, while not visually original, nonetheless secure the feeling of an "authentic" flow to everyday life, as researchers Anne Jeslev and Mette Mortensen point out in their writing on the photo archive.<sup>68</sup> In this conception, the unoriginality of a social photo does not preclude it from seeming authentic. In short, if witnessing is "to know," then the social photo is not just a reflection of yourself and your world but, at the same time, equally the creation of your self and your world. It is a primary way we now learn to recognize ourselves as selves, our reality as reality.

At the social photo is primarily about declaring *I was here, I did that*, then it would be easy to mistake our documentary consciousness as centrally about truthful and transparent exhibitionism. But we do not typically just exhibit our naked actuality; we also depict something a bit more pristine. Scrolling through certain corners of social photography,

glowing, filtered, sweet, and beautiful, can prompt something of a sugar high. In thinking about the vision that social media encourages, we can add to the camera eye another legacy from the history of documentation: the Claude glass, a mirror used in the eighteenth century for sketching and painting.

Hung on the walls of wealthy eighteenth and nineteenth century European estates were so-called picturesque landscape paintings. Disarmingly charming, these works by such artists as Claude Lorrain and Thomas Gainsborough often depicted central Italy and were admired for their beauty; indeed, they were painted to be more beautiful than the landscapes themselves. In 1792, English artist and cleric William Gilpin wrote about the distinction between that which is beautiful when viewed in person and that which is best captured by its representation: "the most essential point of difference between the beautiful, and the picturesque [is] that particular quality, which makes objects chiefly pleasing in painting."<sup>69</sup>

What Gilpin's essay makes clear is the distinction between beauty as it naturally appears and beauty constructed as such. What is beautiful to the eye in the ephemeral stream of (mostly) unmediated experience may be different from what is beautiful in its mediated, documented form. While photography was invented after Gilpin's essay was written, many of us have had a similar experience of a photo imbuing additional beauty that one might not have appreciated if not for the image. This is the essence of the picturesque: something that is more pleasing in its mediated representation.

So popular was the picturesque ideal in the late eighteenth century that it set off a type of tourism in which wealthy vacationers took to the European countryside in search of landscapes reminiscent of picturesque paintings. But given how the picturesque was a constructed form of beauty, not scenery in its natural form, some tourists carried with them a device designed to provide a view of landscapes as if they were picturesque paintings. It was sometimes called the *black mirror*, or,

more commonly, the Claude glass, after Claude Lorrain. The device was typically pocket-size, with convex, gray-colored glass. When viewers looked into it, the convex shape pushed more scenery into a single, central, focal point, and the color of the glass changed the tones to be more pleasing to the eye by the standards of the contemporary picturesque paintings, which had a limited color palette. The constructed, mediated image was thought to be even more beautiful than reality.

What's most striking about the Claude glass was how it was used: rather than looking directly at the landscape they had traveled to see, tourists would stand with their back to the landscape and view its reflection for a moment in the device.

The Claude glass may be a long-forgotten piece of technology, but it's a useful metaphor for some of modern social photography. Like the tourist with the Claude glass, turning away from the world and to a gadget for an idealized image, we occasionally face ourselves away from the complexities of reality in favor of glowing, well-connected digital glass that renders a filtered and more beautiful representation. Sometimes the view from the screen is more than beautiful; it is picturesque.

The social photo—and social media in general—is, like photography before it, made of both fact and fiction. We see the world not as something to be neutrally and accurately documented but as something to be manipulated, the material for a story. As it is off the screen, our self-presentation through the social photo is always creative and playful.

The will to document makes clear that social media and technology and information in general are not a separate space or just made of wires and circuits, but are deeply a part of us, comprising flesh and blood, intimately entangled with the very ways we take in the world. Like a vast oil spill, social media and its varying logics, practices, demands, and creative uses spread across the world. All experience, in different shades and intensities, is bathed in the light of our own documentary consciousness.

In this understanding, documentation is not just a matter of expanding records of our selves and lives but also a process, a way of seeing that emerges, historically, in dialectical relation with the development of media technology. This way of seeing is more than a passive camera eye; it is also a constructive gaze.

Nineteenth century writing about photography did not always have this understanding, often depicting the photographer as merely the camera operator passively undertaking a soulless exercise. Baudelaire famously held this view, claiming that painting is human art and photography, carried out by way of a machine, cannot be. The reception of photography has largely moved past such dualism. Social photography, in particular, is a *cyborg practice*, to use theorist Donna Haraway's term.<sup>70</sup> That is, the social photo is an important contemporary collusion of the human and the mechanical to create something bigger than both.

Philosopher Umberto Eco argued that if photography is like perception, it isn't because photography is a natural process; rather, perception itself is also coded.<sup>71</sup> *Social media is real life* partly because real life is always mediated through the logics and technologies of human-habit, interest, power, and resistance. "Machines are social before being technical," as Gilles Deleuze famously put it, and the collusion of the human and the technical begins long before we direct our modern camera eye at reality.<sup>72</sup>

The conceptual gap between what we see and the image, the reproduction of sight, appears to be shrinking. As video becomes more like seeing, we begin to experience seeing more like an immersive, real-time, total video. Baudrillard wrote that there "is no longer any medium in the literal sense. It is now intangible, diffuse, and diffracted in the real."<sup>73</sup> Everything is informational, always seeing and being seen; seeing as if being seen, being seen as if seeing. The line between what is media and what isn't is harder to locate.

This understanding is made especially clear within contemporary photographic practice. One way to see social cameras is to imagine people holding their eyes, newly connected and telepathic, outstretched in their hands, seeing and speaking at once. Joanna Zylińska's recent work on "nonhuman photography" describes how all photography, all vision, is a cyborg practice, an augmented seeing that recodes how we look.<sup>74</sup> As such, it is an opportunity to unlearn the fiction of any "natural" sight and encourages us to imagine new ways of seeing.

Nothing seems more miserable and more dead than the stabilized thing, nothing is more desirable than what will soon disappear.

—Georges Bataille, 1939<sup>75</sup>

Does our documentary consciousness even require an enduring document? Because of the ease with which they can be snapped, circulated, and discarded, social photos are often seen today and largely ignored tomorrow, to the lament of no one. The documentary consciousness, as it is more fully enacted, generates an archive so dense and impenetrable that it can have the paradoxical effect of muddying rather than clarifying the life being documented.

In this way, social photography is largely ephemeral and has, in turn, increasingly embraced the ephemeral, not as an unfortunate effect but as a desirable outcome. Some photo apps embrace ephemerality by design—most literally Snapchat, which initially allowed users to exchange photos that would self-delete after viewing—but ephemerality is significant to all social photography. The fluidity and temporariness of the social photo meaningfully reorients the understanding of what a photograph is and suggests a different, anti-nostalgic documentary consciousness where the present is experienced

more for its own sake. Benjamin, Sontag, and other thinkers of photography understandably had in mind an essential link between the image and nostalgia because of the centrality of permanent recording to the physical photographic object. However, documentation is not inherently nostalgic; it is permanence that links documentation and nostalgia. What if documentation was to a significant degree delinked from such record keeping?

A photograph is made of time as much as it is of light—a frozen shutter-speed-size slice of the present captured within a border. Despite this, photographs have always been a way to cheat death, or at least to declare the illusion of immortality through lasting visual evidence. There's always the possibility that the next photo you take will one day be lovingly removed from a box by some unborn great-grandchild; the Polaroid developing in your hands might come to be pinned to someone's bedpost in posterity.

With digital photos this is no less true: your selfie posted on Instagram might be a signpost for the future you of what it was like to be this young. Digitally in some ways has made the image more permanent: images taken years ago can resurface and spread more easily now than they could in the past. When grieving the death of a friend, people often post old photos of the friend on Facebook, a gesture akin to pulling out photo albums or sifting through shoeboxes of photos, jarring memories of the person who is now gone. Those images serve as reminder of who they were; they can put you back in the moment when they were taken, when they were perhaps there with you. By transgressing time, such photos transgress death. The magic of an image is in how it arrests the rules of time, interrupting decay, refusing death's obliteration. In each of these images is a testament to what death cannot consume, a gesture against annihilation.

In the 1920s, the sociologist and philosopher Siegfried Kracauer wrote about photography's fixing of the ephemeral

moment as the paradigmatic example of modernity casting into crisis the transcendence that religion promised: "That the camera gobbles the world is a sign of the *fear of death*."<sup>76</sup> According to Kracauer, modern people are unconsoled by religious assertions about the eternal and metaphysical; they want to see the whole world, take it all in, which photography promotes. Social media, like photography before it, extends that ambition: it is partly about turning the world into knowledge, because to make something knowable is seemingly to make it everlasting. Documented, we feel eternal, relieving the modern anxiety over incomprehensible risk, omnipresent simulation, and personal inauthenticity—our world and self that are decentered and unmoored from Truth. The nostalgia of the traditional photographic gaze is an understandable reaction to that uncertainty and, of course, to death, to stave off impending loss by way of recording to remember.

A more ephemeral social media felt at first like a radical departure, a rejection of the idea that the gaze of photography and social media is inherently nostalgia inducing. As a generalization, social photography can be described as being more ephemeral than traditional photography. By *ephemerality* I don't always mean the most literal example, where images are preprogrammed to disappear, but something more of a continuum. I use ephemerality to refer to de facto cultural use and meaning, and social photography tends toward being more ephemeral through sharing images in the moment as a transient visual communication more than as documentary objects. While much is justifiably, if hyperbolically, made of the so-called death of privacy in the age of information immorality, the likely fate of the vast majority of social photos is to be briefly consumed and quickly forgotten.

Some art projects have taken on image deletion as part of their practice. For example, the 2010 *One Hour Photo* project had as its premise to "project a photograph for one hour,

then ensure that it will never be seen again."<sup>77</sup> And a popular Instagram photographer, Richard Koci Hernandez, writes about the process of deleting his photos:

my "photo stream" has recently seemed less like a stream and more like a damned-up river ... the Internet doesn't respect time in the way that I think it should. Especially in relation to photographs.<sup>78</sup>

Even before self-deleting applications, digital cameras raised issues of deletion that film cameras couldn't. Images made on most film cameras could not be seen immediately, let alone immediately rejected and destroyed. With digital cameras, being able to quickly see the photo you just took encourages taking more than one shot, comparing, and keeping only the best. Media theorist Susan Murray wrote presciently in 2008 of the photo-sharing site Flickr that "the ability to store and erase on memory cards, as well as to see images immediately after taking them, provides a sense of disposability and immediacy to the photographic image that was never there before."<sup>79</sup>

As researcher of digital photography Nancy Van House noted, the flow of digital photographs functioned more as a stream than as an archive, a claim José van Dijck corroborated in 2008: "When pictures become a visual language converted through the channel of a communication medium ... the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of visual communication increases." Van Dijck writes:

phone photography gives rise to a cultural form reminiscent of the old-fashioned postcard: snapshots with a few words attached that are mostly valued as ritual signs of (re)connection. Like postcards, camera phone pictures are meant to be discarded after they are received.<sup>80</sup>



The postcard comparison is useful. As images become easier, quicker, more abundant, their status as objects becomes more secondary to their role as immediate discourse, as a form of in-the-moment communication. The permanence of the social photo, in many cases, is redundant, unneeded, even unwanted. Instead, social photos proliferate as conversation, a communicative flow more than a documentary picture book.

Photography wrestled with ephemerality even before images became digital. Art historian John Tagg argues that the "era of throwaway images" began in the 1880s when the half-tone plate was introduced and image reproductions could be made more cheaply and easily.<sup>81</sup> But before the social photo, photography's relationship to ephemerality was centrally antagonistic.

Photography has many origin stories, how it came to be invented, by whom, and why, and they all depend on achieving more durable depictions, which is what separates photography from mere projection, like the images produced by the camera obscura. Photo paper has largely been developed to fade more slowly, though theorist Fred Ritchin notes how the physical paper photograph and a landscape it might capture "share a comparable materiality and process; they decompose similarly, for example, evoking a similar temporality."<sup>82</sup>

In any case, making images that are meant to be ephemeral rather than archival changes one's documentary consciousness and troubles the nostalgic gaze. Temporary photography's abbreviated life span changes how it is made and seen and what it comes to mean.

The demand for a more temporary photography can be seen as a response to the collection of our selves and our lives building up and threatening to suffocate us. The nostalgic gaze of permanent social media creates a tension between experience-for-itself and experience-for-documentation. The tension may reach a breaking point when documentary vision becomes a distraction: where the present cannot be just the present but always instead a future past. Temporary photography rejects

the burden of creating durable proof that you are here and you did that, the opposite of the "pics or it didn't happen" ideal. Because ephemeral images are not made to be collected or archived, they are elusive, resisting those museal gestures of systemization and taxonomization, the modern impulse to classify life according to rubrics. By leaving the present where it's found, a more temporary social photography feels more like life and less like its collection.

The photograph, for all its promises of immortality, is always redolent of death. This was central to Roland Barthes's analysis in *Camera Lucida*, in which he claimed that the enduring image "produces Death while trying to preserve life." Barthes states: "if photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death," understanding the permanence of the photograph as its "funereal immobility."<sup>83</sup> Documenting the present as a future past, as conventional photographs do, acknowledges and foregrounds the facts of change, impermanence, and mortality in the effort to defy them. In every permanent image is the looming context of loss and decay; each view of one's past is to see death itself, each permanent photo of ourselves is an image from when we used to be alive.

These archival images always confront the unavoidable overgrowth of what is new. To the degree it is ephemeral, the social photograph does the opposite: it interrupts the traditional photographic mode of fixing the present as impending history, positing instead a captured moment that is indifferent to such recording. While the photograph has long been associated with death, as an object in which experience is entombed and calcified, the social photo instead emphasizes an ongoing exchange, a springboard to future action and dialogue. It is necessarily less sentimental and nostalgic. Less at war with vanishing, this more ephemeral photography embraces disappearance and deliberately stages it for new ends, ones that aren't merely about being able to use the present at some later

date. Some may wrongly label the temporary photo as frivolous or trivial—after all, only unimportant images could be so easily parted with. But there is importance and meaning in witnessing ephemerality itself. As a medium, social photography becomes an important means to experience something not representable as an image but instead as a social process: an appreciation of impermanence for its own sake. Social photography, in its temporary form, offers an alternative to recording and collecting life into database museums, encouraging appreciation for the experience of the present for its own sake. By being quick, the temporary photograph is a tiny protest against time.

Photography, both permanent and ephemeral and everywhere in between, plays on the tension between the momentary and the forever, the transient and fixed. To fully understand the emerging, more ephemeral social photography, one must situate it in relation to the inflating archive of persistent images and their significance on how we perceive and remember the world. Beyond merely easing the pressures of documentary consciousness, the ephemerality of social photography responds to photographic abundance. As making more photos becomes easier, each individual shot means less and less. By printing too much visual currency, we devalue each image.

In their scarcity, photographs can age like wine, with grace and importance. In their abundance, photos can sometimes curdle, spoil, and rot. Social photographs of the present for the present are often more fun to take and view than they are to keep around, to be organized, filed, stored, and kept track of. The ephemeral social photo is not an addition to this problem of overabundance but an attempt at re-inflation.

From the beginning, technological innovation in photography was driven toward creating not just permanence but also visual abundance. Daguerre is widely credited as inventing photography in part because earlier mechanical image-capturing techniques—most famously Joseph Niépce's

heliography—did not create as many images as quickly and reliably. In subsequent decades, major advances shortened exposure times and made images more easily reproducible, replacing photographic plates with paper. Photography democratized dramatically with the introduction of Kodak's small, cheap, and easy-to-use personal cameras at the turn of the twentieth century. The ads proclaimed, "You press the button, we do the rest." Digital photography and smartphone cameras are a culmination of that drive to make taking, duplicating, and viewing photos something people can do almost anytime and anywhere.

As photographic technology expanded photography's user base, the photograph went from a rare prized possession to a common keepsake to a nuisance that clutters our visual memories. Articulating this visual oversaturation, writer Michael Sacacas worries that

digital photography and sites like Facebook have brought us to an age of memory abundance. The paradoxical consequence of this development will be the progressive devaluing of such memories and severing of the past's hold on the present. Gigabytes and terabytes of digital memories will not make us care more about those memories, they will make us care less.<sup>84</sup>

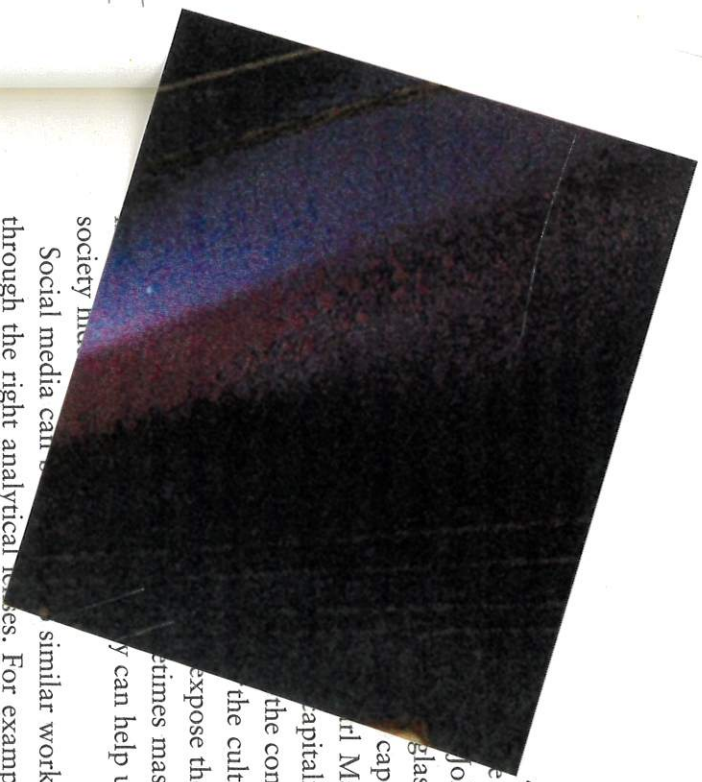
By simulating the aesthetic of photographic scarcity, those faux-vintage filters responded to (or perhaps overcompensated for) this fear: the warm colors, faded glow, and false paper scratches and borders make the landscape seem enchanted, the portrait disarming. The bold statements and delicate textures adopt the visual cues of photography from before its digital devaluation. The faux-vintage aesthetic tried to reassure that present lives are just as authentic and worthy as the life captured in the scarce images from an analog past. *Photographs are becoming too easy, so, damnit, here's my life framed like it's 1962.*

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 aesthetic language of nostalgia and the affordances of permanent social networks: it may look immortal, but it's really quite ephemeral. Despite all the manufactured sentimentality, your photo still disappears down the stream, largely unnoticed.

The faux-vintage filter helped evoke the look of scarcity, but social photography came to embrace more ephemerality and thus a real kind of rarity, one of attrition, pruning the archive preemptively. Furthermore, when it may not be seen again, an image's temporariness can imbue it with a heightened aura of meaningfulness, inspiring memory by welcoming the possibility of forgetting. Kracauer was right to say "the flood of photos sweeps away memory's dams."<sup>85</sup> A self-destructing image especially demands a sharpened focus and an urgency of vision, a challenge to exhaust the meaning from the image in the moment. Given only a peek, you look hard.

The ephemerality of social photography is a rare counter-trend to photography's historic tendency to increase abundance—and, as such, might be seen as a sort of photographic population control. In this way, the rise of a more ephemeral photography might be as much about reinstating the importance of those special, permanent images as it is the enactment of photographic disposability. Those photos chosen to remain more permanent can become correspondingly more scarce and perhaps seem more important. In the age of digital abundance, photography desperately needs this introduction of intentional and assured mortality, so that some photos can become immortal again.

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