*Killing Time: New Memory and Smartphone Photography*

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Abstract

In the smartphone era, personal snapshots move swiftly beneath the gaze of a vast audience of different countries and time zones. With photographic practice evolving at such a rapid pace, it's important to reflect on how our relationship with the medium textures personal history, and filters presence in the moment. This presentation will explore new photographic understandings of time by drawing on a philosophy of speed, theories of new memory, and critiques of photography's relationship to the past. Smartphone photography is a vehicle through which we experience both historical and radical modes of temporality. This presentation traces ruptures and trajectories within the ongoing story of our social photographic practice.

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Introduction:

The desire to send social photographs has informed an accelerating visual culture since the advent of photography and telegraphy in the 1880s. From the early daguerreotypes through to current smartphone practice, our relationship with the photographic medium has been fuelled by the urge to hold a frozen moment, to catch something of ourselves within the flux of time. In the new social landscape of photography, the habitual act of instant shooting and posting opens up dynamic forms of temporal perception. At the end of 2013, it's estimated that 1.4 billion smartphones will be in people's pockets across the globe (Leonard, 2013), each one capable of storing and sending thousands of digital images through cyberspace. Urban crowds are illuminated by hundreds of blinking screens, dispersing virtual snaps to a vast global audience, each shot a wink at contradictory relationships between memory and forgetting, embodiment and escape. What follows is a portrait of this current photographic practice, where snapshots and telegraphy interact in an unfolding social story of space-time. Reflections on individuals' visual narratives and embodied connections with photographic practice illuminate how we photographically mediate memories and a sense of the present moment.

Shooting Time:

Through its many technological transitions, the photographic medium has remained a lens through which social and subjective perceptions of temporality emerge. Photographs invite narrative associations, a train of emotive and visual connections that form a visual language of autobiography. Where is the source of the narrative compulsion that unfolds through the camera?

According to proponents of narrative identity such as Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur & Blamey, 1995), we experience temporality as chaotic, as a source of mortality we attempt to manipulate through the creation of personal histories. Without mediation, time is subjectively encountered as an overlapping of past, present and future, a discordant phenomenon that consists of forgetting, remembrance, presence and predictions. Ricoeur stated that in order to find a sense of agency in the chaos of time, we seek some form of emplotment: a "synthesis of the heterogeneous." (Carr, 1991, p.15)

Photographs offer this tantalizing possibility, being what Barthes has termed 'our clocks for seeing'(Barthes, 1981, p.15); they are a means of visually crystallizing experience, bringing the frozen past into the present, and providing a sense of power over lost time. We float outside the once living instant, even as we revisit the emotive core of the experience. Thus the camera places us outside of lived reality, where we are granted authorial power, where history and memory can be molded into a narrative of our creation.

The relationship between this narrative impulse and the photographic gesture is now undergoing a period of transition, where the 24 hour online stream of personal smartphone snaps produces a contradictory engagement with presence in the moment, and visual recording of the past. What we're witnessing isn't a direct break from previous

photographic modes, and it isn't a complete eradication of the urge to record time. It's a complex and multi-faceted form of techno-social engagement, where images are transitioning and resonating in ways both familiar and novel. This paper seeks to trace the shifts and trajectories emerging from pre-smartphone photography's connection with temporal mediation. It does so by addressing a gap in current research, engaging with the topic via the fields of new memory and a philosophy of speed. The study presented below is conducted as part of the author's doctoral research within the Transforming Cultures Research Centre at the Faculty of Arts in the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

Zero Space:

Telephony has had a pivotal role to play in the evolution of the communicated autobiographical image. The advent of the telegraph presented new ways of envisaging both the material nature of the image and the embodied presence of the portrait subject. Physical bonds to space and time were reconceptualized when in 1838 Samuel Morse introduced what became known in popular discourse as 'the lightening machine' (Batchen, 2006, p. 36). His invention for conveying textual messages across vast distances introduced a form of magical thinking on the future of photographic practice. Textual messages once confined to distinct paper surfaces were able to speedily cross vast distances without the aid of human travel, as though, in Walt Whitman's words, 'the world itself were rolling through the air.' (Batchen, 1999, p.36) However, the image itself couldn't be transmitted, and being excluded from this lightness of being, its material presence grew heavier as symbols were alleviated of their fixed physicality. As Jennifer Roberts puts it,

> The full spectrum of visual arts, whether painting, engraving, drawing, or photography…were now "left behind" by the telegraph, unified in their shared resistance to the incursions of telegraphic code. Suddenly the materiality of visual configurations, crystallized by their recalcitrance to electronic translation and the continued indexicality required of their reproduction, became conspicuous in a new way. (Roberts, 2012, p.24)

The implication for photographic practice was a strong desire to unanchor the image from its fixed location, to allow it to move as freely as the light that created it. Novelists and cartoonists toyed with imaginings of a traveling picture, or a visual reflection of the self that could be sent to loved ones as a form of virtual presence. Inventors and consumers played with the longing to connect with others, to see the representative form of personally close yet spatially distant people. One of the most popular manifestations of the longing to transcend the weightiness of spatial ties was the science fiction creation of a device known as the 'telephonoscope.' Popularized in 1879 by George Du Maurier in his cartoon sketches for Punch magazine, this imaginary device consisted of a crystal disc or transformative mirror through which live moving images could be streamed simultaneously with sound. Popular science fiction writer Albert Robida later produced detailed accounts of this communicative portal in his monthly book series entitled *The*

*20th Century* (Robida, Willems & Evans, 2004), elaborating on the risks and benefits of a future society able to visually interact without having to rely on embodied presence.

The dream to coalesce different points in space-time via virtual communication has since become a reality. Easy access to one another's photographs grants visual entrance into moments and experiences dispersed across the globe. This is part of what new memory refers to as the connective turn in media relations, in which the experience of any given instant is fractured and enmeshed in others' networked displays. As Lisa Gye states,

> One of the most important effects of massively multi-way, instantaneous and ubiquitous communications is pervasive proximity. We experience everyone to whom we are connected—and conceivably everyone to whom we are potentially connected—as if they are exactly next to us. The effect is that of hundreds, or thousands, or millions of people coming together in zero space, so that there is no perceptible distance between them. (Gye, 2007, p.8)

The smartphone is a quick portal into multiple nodes in space-time, integrating the subject's sense of the lived moment with the mediated performances of a vast virtual network. This 'zero space' has a marked impact on how we experience and mediate temporality. According to philosopher of speed Paul Virilio, the visual presentation of a distant space or remote environment contracts the sensation of time passing. He writes that, "With…the immediate face-to-face of all refractory surfaces, the bringing into visual contact of all localities, a kind of no-space is created…The delineation between past, present and future, between here and there, is now meaningless except as a visual illusion." (Virilio, 1994, p. 31) In other words, time does not appear from the distinct view of one subject's point on the globe, but threads together various individual perceptions, numbing the sense of being physically anchored to one point in the space-time continuum. The 19th century imaginary of sending a visual self to others has become a part of our day-to-day reality, rendering the photographic act a more globally connected and socially integrated phenomenon.

Picture Yourself:

Within the networked fabric of personal smartphone snaps there exists a form of individual representation that has incited much public debate and discussion. The word 'selfie' was recently added to the Oxford Dictionary as a new term in popular language. This form of portrait shot shows the subject with outstretched arm, turning the smartphone lens upon themselves as they become both photographer and photographed. A large canon of academic research has begun to emerge on this particular photographic gesture. Screen theory has much to contribute on how these snaps can be psychoanalytically analyzed, while postmodern accounts of subjectivity view the performed identities as another formulation of decentered, and fluid identity. This paper proposes a less explored angle on photographed selves, shifting the focus to how individual photographs of experience and identity filter temporal understanding through distinct techno-social modes. What are the intentions and consequences of displaying multiple personal moments with a vast online network?

The public nature of self-images is propelled by new ways of socially responding to others' snaps. In the age of Facebook and Instagram, the thumbs-up icon of the 'like' button is fueling a greater voracity for uploading shots for social display. The adrenaline rush of the 'like' economy is producing a more photographically based online stream. German professors Hannah Krasnova and Peter Buxmann recently examined this need for socially affirmed photographs by researching the ways in which Facebook encourages a need for visual presence. They found that uploaded images encourage the virtual crowd to post snapshots more frequently, in response to a negative comparison of self to other. To elaborate, many social networkers described their experiences with others' shots as giving them a poor sense of self-esteem, provoking the impression that 'others have a better life.' This negative self-reflection is fed in part by the displays of idyllic experience so common to Facebook and Instagram; glowing photographs of holidays, weddings, birthdays and parties, making for a picture perfect depiction of experience. Times of happiness and success are uploaded from an extensive audience of 'friends,' illustrating an ideal Facebook timeline of unimpinged contentment, joy and fulfillment. A photographic selection process at work, in which individuals' narrative images filter out the unpresentable and highlight the attractive and appealing.

Krasnova and Buxmann found that episodic feelings of envy provoked by such visual displays established a productive photographic output. They state,

> As part of their envy coping plan, some users may engage in even greater self-promotion and impression management. After all, overstatement of personal accomplishment is a common reaction to envy feelings. This behavior can trigger the phenomenon we denoted as the *self-promotion – envy spiral*, with users reacting with even more self-promotional content to the self-promotion of others. (2013, p. 12)

The result of this negatively charged production of public shots is that more and more images are created for the approving gaze of others. In other words, the photographed moment revolves around audience affirmation, rather than the subject's personal experience of the recorded moment. The present is perceived in terms of its aestheticization and photogenic nature, the snapshot catered to the viewers' expectations. To achieve the visually idealized, the photographer frequently stages the instant to reflect the visual norms anticipated; the ideal sunset, the perfectly arranged dinner table, and of course, the well-posed selfie. In part, this staging of events is another means of maintaining visual authorship and control over the representation of a photographed life. As with narrative identity, this establishes a sense of power over time's fluidity by displaying a photographically pleasing life story. But what does this do to the felt presence of life in the moment?

Susan Sontag's seminal work *On Photography* (1971) offers reflections on the tourist's photographic act that are pertinent to the daily ritual of smartphone snaps. Her writing explores how travelers establish a "dependence on the camera, as the device that makes real what one is experiencing," (Sontag, 2001, p. 10), as though the journey taken to different lands were only made authentic via evidentiary photographic proof. Could it be that smartphone photographers are becoming tourists in lived reality, experiencing daily life as something needing photographic substantiation? If so, then current photographic

practice both seeks and unravels a sense of felt presence in the moment. As Sontag writes, "A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir." (Sontag, 2001, p. 10)

Prosthesis:

The physical act of taking, viewing and displaying analogue shots was a slow and distended process in comparison to the immediacy of smartphone images. Without a digital window through which to view recorded snaps, photographers had to wait until developed prints revealed the results of their labours. After a one-hour wait at the photo shop, the series of shots taken in the hopes of catching one good image were finally revealed. Unwanted pictures were discarded, the remaining ones carefully allotted a space within a frame or a photo album. Now, the act of point, shoot and post are almost simultaneous, and the physical relationship with the medium is tied to an intimate yet fleeting prosthetic connection with the mobile phone.

In their recent "Word Technology Report", CISCO revealed that the majority of Generation Y smartphone users will touch and view the glass screen of their mobile multiple times within the hour. The device is whipped out while brushing teeth, sitting on the toilet, waiting for sleep to come, or while driving. Personal daily tasks are becoming fractured in a multi-tasking juggling act as this mobile object becomes more integrated into day-to-day existence. One third of the subjects interviewed for the report admitted to feeling like "part of them was missing" if they were unable to access their mobile. ('Gen Y locked into Smartphone habit,' 2013, para. 3) (Anon, n.d.)

This has implications for the photographic gesture, which is now a frequent and less considered act. Photos take minimal effort to create, requiring only a gentle tap of the smartphone screen. The act of shooting is so casual it merges with the moment it's taken, subsumed as part of experience. This mediation of reality doesn't pause for physical attunement to the moment, and so temporal awareness is unable to rest in the body. Barbara Adam writes that

> Since we have no sense organ for time, we need...the entire complement of our senses working in unison with our imagination before we can experience its working in our bodies and the environment. Such an effort at the level of imagination is needed if we are able to take account in our dealings with the environment of latency and immanence, pace and intensity, contingency and context dependence, time-distantiation and intergenerational impacts, rhythmicity and time-scales of change, timing and tempo, transience and transcendence, irreversibility and indeterminacy..." (in Purser, 2000, p.55)

Photographic mediation of experience affects temporal awareness through the physical nature of our engagement with the camera device. The pose of a photographed subject has become a perfunctory motion as technology has progressed. Where the early daguerreotypes took thirty minutes to materialize, it's now possible to snap multiple viewpoints in a couple of seconds, creating, deleting and displaying shots before the recorded event has reached conclusion. As to viewing images, this is achieved with a flick or swipe of the finger, a fleeting motion for skimming through a myriad of online shots. Album pages don't need to be turned, or glossy prints shuffled in the hand. The smartphone photographic gesture is minimal, closer to the sensation of a repeated physical habit, like lighting up a cigarette or fidgeting with loose hair. Thus, reading social photographs becomes a means of passing the time when solitude or inoccupation reveal the heaviness of temporal duration. Smartphone snaps cater to the act of the glimpse, the cursory glance, where little thought needs to be devoted to one unique shot.

Roland Barthes's work on different visual perceptions of time sheds light on this photographic modus operandi. He wrote of the distinction between what he termed 'mad' versus 'tame' photography. When offered the chance to linger on an image, photographic gestures can open the mind to the elusivity of time, where each image of the past conjures the moment's mortal and fragile existence. In *Camera Lucida* (1981) he views the portrait of a boy in full knowledge that the child died tragically a few years after his image was taken. What strikes Barthes is the simultaneous presence and absence of the photographed figure, a boy who lives on visually and yet is lost to the finality of death. To follow this call of lost time within a photograph is an embrace of the madness of photography, an enchantment with the contradictory nature of the image; the moment is absent and present, dead and yet living.

Such exposure to our vulnerability within temporal existence can lead to a social longing to numb photographic potency. Barthes writes of a cultural need to 'tame' the photograph, to silence its reminder of mortality and loss. To counter the image's reminder of birth and death, photography can be used as a form of inoculation against the awareness of transience.

> Photography can be...tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing and which I shall call, in conclusions, the photographic ecstasy. Such are the two ways of the Photograph. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality. (Barthes, 1981, p.119)

Prosthetic connections with the smartphone have rendered photographic engagement one of fleeting surface encounters. The touch of the finger on glass, a

passing glance, and each photo slides by, unencumbered by the heaviness of its mortal origins.

The Future Through a New Lens:

The virtual sphere of smartphone snaps lives on the border of permanence and transience. The capacity for photographically sensing mortality is weakening while the need to stay socially visible grows. Photography criticism and cultural theory have long studied the connections between memory and photographs, but in the current social landscape of photography, it's time to add these philosophical ruminations to studies of techno-social integration with lived presence. This paper has offered a brief portrait of an ongoing journey of temporal mediation, one in which the present moment is being heightened via a live stream of instant shots, yet numbed via habitual 'tamed' glances.

In the daily stream of 300 million Facebook photographs (Armbrust, 2012), the accumulating photo repository is too vast and fluid to store in mental images; it shifts restlessly, moving out of perceptual grasp. The overpopulated sphere of images floats into an online ether, but we don't stop trying to anchor ourselves in memory. Andrew Hoskins describes this socially scattered and fragmented photographic practice as part of a connective turn, forging new modes of remembrance and presence. He writes:

> New memory is 'new' in that its continually emergent state, shaped and understood through the metaphors, media and technologies of the day, but simultaneously these same media and discourses reflexively shape a reassessment of the nature and the very value of remembering (and forgetting) under these conditions. Even despite, or because of, the connective turn, the photograph retains a particular resonance in new memory. (Hoskins, Andrew, 2010, p.74)

Photographic acts interweave this constantly renewed sense of memory with an altered embodied awareness of the self in the space-time continuum. A philosophy of speed reveals how the global network of visually captured lives weave themselves into personal impressions of the moment. Multiple visual displays join to forge ongoing reinterpretations of subjective and social temporality.

The longing for telephotographic connection hasn't ceased, even though devices and inventions surrounding its inception are now only in museums. The telephonoscope is quaint, the telegraph lyrically mechanical. But the race with technological speed still invites us to step outside of embodied engagement with time, to send bodies as representational visual codes.

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