Photographic Ritual:

Visual Conditions of Behaviour and Definitions of Self

by

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Introduction

"Photography, moreover, began historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's formality." (Barthes, CL 79)

Looking through personal collections of pictures from trips, parties, family celebrations, one cannot fail to notice the stubborn repetitiveness of images all shot one after the other in the hope to catch the right moment when the jumper in the swimming pool is gracefully curved just before plunging into the water, or the young girl has finally achieved a professional-model-like posture and expression. Flattering pictures are not hard work only for the photographer. People are always ready to "strike a pose" to the best of their abilities. Some prefer to mask their embarrassment with "funny" faces; others pretend not to notice the camera, so they can appear candid. Regardless of their reaction, nobody can stay indifferent or completely avoid participation.

If thirty years ago Susan Sontag noted that "images consume reality" (179), what would she have had to say about the pandemic use of the digital camera today? Casual photographers, who document private gatherings and celebrations with indiscriminate consistency, form a new phenomenon. Theirs' is an entirely new practice furnished with its own distinct technology, which completely changes the

quality of the experience and challenges a great number of theoretic assumptions on the purpose of the photographic act. If analogue photo cameras did not quite reach every single household, the digital ones are in possession of almost every single member of western world urbanity. Every event or social gathering, of formal or informal nature, is hardly ever left unattended by at least one of the essential tools for documentation and moment preservation – the photo, video or cell phone camera. Too often personal experiences are spontaneously transformed into photo shoot sessions, photographic events, which intercede and displace the present to create its 'future-friendly' look. Thus, the dynamic of the precise moment of picture-taking (interaction between photographer and subject, the subject's response to the camera through posing and gestures, taking time to view and delete "unsuccessful" pictures) becomes the measure for the importance assigned to the "image world" in contrast to simultaneous real-life events.

As a society of viewers has turned into a society of photographers, the awe of realistic representation has disappeared. Reproducibility of perfect likenesses is no longer a challenge, neither is it the main goal. Rather than reflecting on the existence of the referent, amateur photographers prefer to fashion appearances according to taste or whim. People enjoy a newly acquired feeling of control over the photographic mode of self-representation, which gives them simultaneous access to an array of contrasting roles. As photographer, subject and viewer collapse into one, the photographic event transforms into a theatre – a dream outside of time, where the realistic reflections of truth and illusion cannot be told apart. And yet, more than ever consumers indulge in their compulsive desire for picture taking and

gladly trust their own carefully constructed, well directed and edited visual personas. Should, then, the disregard of realism in the creation of idealized versions of self be considered a form of willful self-deception? And is the public empowered by assuming the role of the photographer or made even more vulnerable to the effects of Debord's "spectacle"? This paradoxical ambivalence in the treatment of the photographic medium necessitates further consideration of the impact of technology on the experience and conception of self. Therefore, through the observation of photographic behaviour and ritual I will examine the possible implications of the critical intervention of the photographic act into live experiences, the effects of self-representation on the formation of identity, and the impact of vernacular photography on contemporary perception of reality.

Theoretical Background

Since the problem of identity formation through self-representation is the main reason for my interest in photographic ritual and practice, I need to outline briefly some of the main concerns of structuralist, post-structuralist and semiotic theorists which seem to ground a large part of cotemporary discussions on the subject of identity. Thus for instance, a predominant view of structuralist thinkers is that language precedes and determines subjectivity. Barthes speaks of the "death of the author" and the impossibility of authorial thought, which is independent of already existing texts. Hence, he concludes that 'it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is... to reach the point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me"' (Barthes 1977, 143-148). In the same line of thought, a text does not have

only one true meaning – the one intended by its author, but each reader creates his/her own interpretation influenced by his/her cultural and historic context. Barthes is only one of a number of theorists (Kristeva, Jameson, Levi-Strauss, Derrida), who elaborate on the notion of 'intertextuality', to eventually deny the existence of an original referent behind any signifier, or the subject before the text, cultural practice, role or stereotype which describes it.

Other more contemporary writers like Judith Butler and Sidonie Smith discuss identity formation in the context of gender and autobiographical narration. Thus, according to Butler every notion contains and is distinguished against its opposition: the 'I' appears in contrast with the 'Other'. In this line of thought, she claims that there is no original self or gender and repetitive performance is what constitutes identity. This repetitive performance is a kind of psychic mimesis, which does not copy "some prior phenomenon, but constitutes the phantasm of the original in and through the mime"(Butler, ft.12 to *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*). Expanding on Butler's conception of Performativity, Smith deals with autobiographical speaking as a mode of self-invocation and actualization. According to her, the act of narration provides an opportunity for bridging the gaps in our experiential history and assembling a unified conception of our own identity. Smith also insists, that as there is no self before the recitations, "autobiographical storytelling is a recitation of a recitation" and it functions performatively as we start living what we've narrated.

In her comparison of the photographic and autobiographical modes of self-representation, Linda Haverty Rugg notes that both the writing of identity as text

and the construction of the body through images require a kind of dissociation, a "double consciousness" resulting in a "decentered, multiple, fragmented, and divided against itself in the act of observing and being" autobiographical self (Rugg 2). While questioning the authenticity and credibility of any kind of self-referentiality relying on culturally formulated codes and systems of signs, Rugg also points out "the desire to accept the image or the text as a readable reference to a (once-) living person" (Rugg 13), which always remains part of the contract between writers and readers of autobiographical texts.

The overview of the above authors presents a variety of self-reflexive techniques and attempts at definitions of identity; but what is it that distinguishes photography as a medium of representation?

Traditionally, the authority of the photograph as a representational device is justified by its value as a document of what has been. While most early critiques of photography acknowledge its inherent relation to an external reality, they also recognize that behind its realistic appearance hides its capacity to breed "true" illusions. Sontag, for example, describes the photograph as a "trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (Sontag 54, OP), therefore easy to confuse with the things it represents. Thus, a picture is transformed into a "surrogate possession of cherished people", past experiences and knowledge about things we've never seen. Sontag outlines several distorting effects of photography on our perception of reality. According to her, photographs produce a "retroactive view of experience", desensitize the viewer, and "depersonalize" our relationship to the world. Consequently, instead of experiencing the world, we refer

to it through images, which are often intentional. They dramatize, aestheticize, create stereotypes and clichés, later naturalized and reproduced by reality. This is what Butler may call the "performative" effect of photography.

Similar to Sontag, Barthes points out that the photograph is such a literal indication of the real that it is untranslatable, unclassifiable and cannot be spoken back to since it is never distinguished from its referent. Precisely the mixture of the real with the illusionary is what makes the photograph a "bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time" (Barthes 115, CL), which naturalizes appearances without giving the viewer any right of objection.

Critical discourses from the end of the 20th century almost unanimously focus on photography's inexorable impact on society's perception of reality, time, historical fact, and fluctuating sense of identity. Identifying the dangerous effects of perfectly realistic images, Benjamin signals the "loss of the aura" of authenticity of any mechanically reproduced art or object, Baudrillard announces the replacement of history by "hyperreality" and the move from ideology to the era of simulacra and simulation, and Debord coins the notion of "spectacle", whose function, according to him, is "the concrete manufacture of alienation" (Debord 23, SS). While discourses on the ideologically conductive nature of the photograph are prolific, fewer are the authors like Bourdieu who focus on photography as a social practice and ritual indicative of the values and self-perception of the mass consumer. According to him, photography is seen as realistic because the social uses it has been assigned are "objective" and "realistic". As a middle-class practice it

distinguishes itself from high art with its purposefulness and realism as the clear counterpart of the aesthetics of "art for art's sake". Yet, the photographic medium is hardly Bourdieu's main interest; rather he uses it to reflect on society and human nature.

On the background of the immense theoretical heritage on the subjects of photography and identity, the purpose of my study will be to trace the changes in the photographic practices of the mass consumer responding to the introduction of digital technologies. The constant presence of the digital camera formulates the authority of an unfathomable external observer, who undermines the validity of nearly every living moment. Just as criticism disturbs the nature of the criticized, questions its authenticity, displaces its authority, so does the photographic gesture interrogate the object of its attention. Thus, rather than taking sides in existing ontological or critical discussions on the nature of photography, I wish to explore the dialectical play between its two diametrically opposed functions: one being to reflect and confirm existence, and the other – to displace and decontextualize the habitual regularity of common experiences. Similar to Bourdieu I will use vernacular photography to interrogate the meaning-making practices of daily life, yet in addition to examining the popular aesthetic as evidence of cultural stereotypes, I will observe closely the ritualistic play between photographers and subjects in the moment of picture-taking. Experienced performers, as we all are, we use the photographic occasion to rehearse "ideal" visions of self, in what Judith Butler may describe as another form of "performative" constitution of identity.

Methodology

My research is be based primarily on analysis of photographs as opposed to interviews with people, or ethnographical observations, because spontaneously taken vernacular photographs are the least prejudiced witness of the existing practice. I believe that my personal experience of a participant in the studied social phenomenon and larger cultural environment allows me to recognize the telling details in their content.

Rather than looking into every possible context of popular use of digital photography, I focus on representations of parties: first, because this seems to be a very common theme among users, and second, because the party occasion makes it easier to notice how photography has become a way of interacting in the present moment rather than a method of collecting memories. The party scene also illustrates the ironic contradiction between the intention and effect of the photographic action, which in seeking to preserve a happy moment, actually replaces it. Furthermore, private collections of party photographs provide a fertile ground for the observation and analysis of the human fascination with self, and more specifically, the construction of identity through photographic "performativity".

To ensure a well rounded and systematic treatment of the data, I employ a combination of methodological strategies. First, I trace the historic development of

photographic ritual back to the appearance of the family album. The conscious or unconscious intentions, desires and assumptions driving the participants in the contemporary photographic event are best illuminated in comparison to past self-referential usages of photography. My assumption is that the changes in the treatment and use of the photographic medium reflect the changes in perception of reality and self.

As a compliment to the historical analysis of photographs I do a small scale content analysis of party photographs to be found on websites like Flickr, Facebook. The purpose is to establish the parameters of use of digital technology: how are digital pictures different in composition, content, appearance and behaviour of people, numbers? By quantifying my observations of photographs I attempt to validate my expectations that: uniformity and patterns in representations of similar events signal the presence of a visual vocabulary of parties; the tendency to theatricality in pictures and the great numbers in which they are produced indicate that participants are more entertained by the process of picture taking than the event. While this research method by itself cannot serve my intentions to theorize on the possible motivations of people who take pictures, it facilitates an initial assessment of available research material and gives a more concrete view of the nature and scope of the studied phenomenon.

Finally, my main method of reading and interpreting photographs is semiotic analysis, which treats them as coded texts interpretable in the context of the cultural environment they are a product of. As such, they are best read through the prism of post-structuralist ideas of 'intertextuality' and 'deconstruction', where

the examination of the structural dependency of signifiers, codes and texts reveals the cultural stereotypes triggering this ritualistic practice.

In the context of photographic representation the photograph can be seen both as a sign which contributes and is part of a larger text (one picture in the family album); and a complete text created by the rules of a specific coding system (choice of subject, composition, light). As a singular sign, a photograph has a denotative and a connotative value, meaning that what is seen by the viewer often has a completely arbitrary relation to the viewer's interpretation of it. In other words, the photograph is an indexical sign with an acquired symbolic meaning, which constantly shifts depending on the context of use and cultural environment of the interpreter. This necessitates the examination of party pictures not only as singular signs, but in the context of the sequence they belong to, and in the larger context of the party as Western-world culture phenomenon.

Although the semiotic paradigm offers a template for the systematization of the observations of party photographs, the selection of codes and categories, as well as their interpretation are highly subjective and informed by my experience in a specific cultural environment. Therefore, my qualitative research does not intend to arrive at any definitive conclusions on the intentions of users, the meaning of their photographs, or make predictions of any sort, but to present a critical discussion on an existing social phenomenon.

1. Grandma's wedding picture: the photographic ritual in perspective

There is only one photograph from my grandparents' wedding day and it hangs above the bed in their family bedroom. It is a black-and-white portrait of the young couple, graciously posed, looking serious, almost solemn. One can spend hours staring at these two impenetrable faces trying to imagine their thoughts and feelings on that day. Were they happy to get married or was that an act of duty, requiring responsible attitude and determination? There is no bridal gown, no flowers, or tuxedo. Was there even a wedding or was their union only marked by two ritualistic acts: the signing of the marriage certificate and the taking of the wedding picture in a professional photo studio? This is the only photograph they have from that day – a true monument and symbol of the beginning of a family. My parents, next in line, have several photographs of their wedding. Some are taken with a portable camera and some in the photo studio as the custom requires. All of them fit on the first five pages of a small album, which my grandmother kept in the "treasure" chest. As a child, I spent hours staring at their young, smiling faces trying to picture life before me. My sister has one album of wedding photographs done by a professional photographer, a

videotape and a further several thousand digital photographs collected from guests at her wedding. Some of them she posted online on a personal web-site, so that friends and family from all parts of the world can see them. She also intended to go through all the digital ones and select a few to print, but never found the time.

In the span of three generations private photographic practices have changed so dramatically that my grandmother's refusal to keep up with the latest trends has ironically led her to the creation of an entire wall-paper composed of the printed digital pictures of her immigrant grandchildren. The evolution of photographic technology has influenced not only the amount of pictures we produce per occasion, but the whole ritual of picture-taking in one with the quality, aesthetic and even the uses of photographs. Browsing through the family memorabilia, I ask myself if my imagination is in need of a larger pool of photographic impressions to construct an even better fantasy of my grandparents' or parents' weddings. Conversely, do I recall any of my sister's wedding photographs, and if not, do I have the patience to see them one more time? Are memories better preserved by the few carefully framed and displayed photos or by the countless pictures kept in stacks or computer files? Facing the thousands of digital pictures a person can accumulate within a single year, one cannot help but ask what triggers this compulsion, this insatiable self-interest? Is remembrance the purpose of contemporary photographs at all, or is the way we use them indicative of a dramatic shift in self-perception and world-view?

Reflections on possible identity-forming effects of vernacular photography need to be foregrounded by a historic overview of its uses as an autobiographic medium. This will entail the examination of past rituals of making, displaying, and reading photographs, as well as the technological and cultural processes leading to the appearance of the family album as vernacular photography's main venue. Rather than conducting a full-fledged historic

investigation, I will rely on the work of theorists such as Geoffrey Batchen, who explores the implications of technology on photographic behavior and usages; Elizabeth Siegel and Patrizia Di Bello, who offer their perspectives on the origin of the family album, and Julia Hirsch, who unravels the signification codes of photographic styles and aesthetics. Seen in the context of early examples of self-descriptive attempts, the contemporary consumer's obsession with digital photography may become easier to evaluate and interpret.

Undoubtedly, the most immediate distinctions between contemporary and old-time photographs are derived from the ontology of the medium at its particular stage of development. In his book Each Wild Idea, Geoffrey Batchen argues that the posing arrangements, style and genre of the photograph, its presence and use as a material object, all depend on the limitations or excellence of the photographic machine. Although faster than any portrait painter, photographic technology before the invention of the box camera was cumbersome and very demanding to both photographer and photographed subjects. A good photograph required a high level of expertise and precision on the part of the photographer and a lot of patience and compliance from the sitters. Batchen's account on the production processes of daguerreotypes and tintypes in the period from 1860s through 1890s affords the fact that long exposure times necessitated the careful arrangement and posing of subjects, who, in addition, had to be "supported by a standing metal device to keep them steady for the necessary seconds" (62). In its early days, he explains, "photography insisted that if one wanted to look lifelike in the eventual photograph, one first had to pose as if dead" (62). The uniform results of this picture-taking process present a ready evidence of the fact that technological limitations and production rituals dictate the style and appearance of photographs. The carefully arranged figures with impenetrable faces and up-right, stiff positions have the countenance of marble statues. Composition and studio background vary

little from one image to the next. The effort and care invested in the photographic procedure give it an air of formality well fitting an occasion which, for most people, would take place only once in a life-time.

Although the effects of technology on photographic ritual and aesthetics may be less conspicuous, its impact on the physicality of the photographic product is immediately recognizable. Whether it would be the metal plates of daguerreotypes and tintypes, the paper prints of analogue cameras, or the virtual images of digital ones, the material presence of photographs is not only technologically preconditioned, but essential to the way they function. Therefore, instead of tracing the chronology of technological innovation, Batchen formulates the history of vernacular photography through the examination of photographic objects in the context of their use. Starting with the daguerreotype, he explains that due to the light sensitivity of the silvered sheet of copper, the produced image was very unstable and vulnerable to the touch. It required special glass covering and was often kept in a "silk or velvet-lined leather case like a precious jewel" (60). Batchen describes the experience of viewing a daguerreotype as a complex interaction with a three dimensional object designed to demand the viewer's cooperation. As he phrases it: "the look of the image comes only with the feel of its materiality" (61). Some of his further examples of vernacular practices exploiting the tactility of photographic objects are: keeping locks of hair inside the case of a daguerreotype, placing photographs in pendants or other jewelry, embroidering the frames of photographs or decorating them with the personal possessions of the sitter. Even the photographic album would lose its "capacity to tell a story" were it not experienced as a "mobile object" relying on the viewer's hand to "put the photograph(s) back into motion"(66-8). Thus, unlike other theorists who tend to cherish the "invisibility of the photograph, its transparency to its referent" (59), he reminds us that vernacular photographies

tend to construct photographic objects with tangible physical presence and complex morphologies which force the viewer "to look right at, rather than through, the photograph" (60). But then, is it the adorned image or its referent that we value more? In Batchen's view, the appeal of the photographic object does not consist in either the image or its referent, but "the brute objectiveness of photography in general, the comforting solidity of its memorial function" (60). Such a claim sounds far less disconcerting if one takes into consideration the custom of exchanging gifts as tokens of respect or affection. Understandably, the symbolic investment in photographic objects is further facilitated by the presence of the loved one's "true" likeness. Such objects are treated as declarations of love, guarantors of a given word and lasting feelings, or as surrogate possessions of loved ones.

By studying the morphology of images and our interaction with them, Batchen points to the desire of objectification inherent in photography or signification processes at large. In vernacular uses of photography however, symbolic synthesis and simplification exploit the concreteness of manageable objects to literally objectify human experiences. From this point of departure, Batchen begins to distill the nature of photography as an emanation of human aspirations and necessities, rather than technological processes. Based on this, one can account for the inherent contradictions in certain applications of vernacular photography which casually divert from its presumed insistence on objective realism. In fact, image manipulation techniques are as old as photography itself. Batchen again notes that painting over daguerreotypes and tintypes has been very common in the 19th century. Modifications could vary from fine accentuating touches to complete submersion of the "indexical guarantor" under layers of paint (62). Thus, according to Batchen, if daguerreotypes were painted over to make the image more opaque and readily available to the gaze, tintypes

imitated aristocratic portrait painting. As for the fine re-touching of photographs, it served as an enhancing technique, which aids the imagination in bringing together realities and desires.

Very much in tone is Julia Hirsch's view of the use of painted backgrounds and costume in studio photography:

> The availability of such disguises to anyone who could afford to have his picture taken by a professional made the photographer's studio a chamber of fictions, offering clients special illusions where they could escape from the evidence of their material successes or failures: the kind of evidence that would inevitably be found in their own living rooms, parlors and housefronts. (Hirsch 70)

Although she places the emphasis on the democratic and equalizing character of photography, Hirsch does not fail to point out that the appeal of studio pictures stems from their ability to grant "temporary immunity from reality" (Hirsch 70) or at least the simple entertainment of role-playing. Indeed, early image production and modification techniques demonstrate that photographic motivation is not driven by the possibility of reliable representation of what exists, but the urge to construct idealized versions of it. Photography, then, would be the tool of choice, not because it does not allow manipulations of reality, but precisely because it produces the most convincing ones.

Tendencies to aestheticization are also apparent in personal or family albums, where photos and other memorabilia are organized in creative collages emanating one's happy memories and desires. The origin of the photo album as a common autobiographic medium has been the subject of exploration of a number of contemporary theorists, who attempt an evaluation of its communicative power and social significance. Thus, for instance, Elizabeth Siegel[1] traces the transition from "text-based" family genealogies to the first visual records in the carte-de-visite albums. According to her, if the photo-album is the repository of private histories, its American predecessor must be the 19th century family Bible with handwritten notes of

[1] Siegel, Elizabeth, "Talking Through the 'Fotygraft Album'" in Noble and Huges Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative, University of New Mexico Press 2003, (pp:239-253)

birthdates, deaths, and weddings in its margins. Later on, Siegel explains, this popular practice is formalized by Bible manufacturers who create the "Family Registrar" – a version of the Bible with cardboard pages for note-taking and slots for photographs (Siegel 242). The addition of the carte-de-visite to written records adds a whole new dimension to private histories. For the first time physical appearance is expected to speak of the character and become the emblem of a person. As the author points out, "And it is here that this particularly modern shift from an oral or textual tradition to a visible one is most apparent: the family record that now became a history of appearances and physiognomies, feeding a positive desire to see and verify – and thus to know- the person pictured there" (Siegel 243). And if looks are telling, photographs are taken with special care. Standard props, backgrounds and formal poses prevent possible blunders and even out personalities and status. Although the photographs themselves allow little room for creative interventions, Siegel insists that these first albums "enable a new kind of self-presentation to others, and a new excuse for that display" (Siegel 248). They formulate the respectable public face of the family – the one shown with pride to friends and visitors of the household. With the disappearance of the genealogical text from the typical 1860s carte-de-visite album, the viewing of the unyielding series of individual portraits had to be accompanied by the knowing voice of the presenter who owns the responsibility to withhold embarrassing secrets, embellish the good deeds and qualities of honorable relatives and thus rehearse, once again, the most presentable version of the family history. As Siegel concludes, not only do cabinet card albums mark the transition from an oral/textual memory to a visually dominated one, but add a public dimension to private histories by becoming the occasion and the means for telling and retelling them (Siegel 252). In this sense, these early photographic collections

testify to the fact that identity narratives (oral, written, or visual) are formulated as part of interpersonal exchanges and communal rituals.

Looking for social processes, which may have led to the conceptualization of contemporary photo-albums, Patritzia Di Bello[2] examines the album-making practices of women in Victorian England. According to her, these shed light on the "social conventions through which photographic portraits have become our society's privileged sign of emotional attachment" (Di Bello 8). Di Bello describes the uses of ladies' personal albums pre-dating photography. She starts by examining the numerous uses of the word 'album', which toward mid-seventeenth century implied a "blank book where visitors to a country house were invited to contribute signatures or short pieces of writing, often of a learned or poetic nature" (Di Bello 31). The connotation of 'album' referring to personal collections of texts, images or music was added during the Romantic period, when album-making was seen as a predominantly female practice. Besides demonstrating their elite taste and water-coloring skills, ladies of upper class origin used these books to collect mementos from family friends and acquaintances of high status or talent. To be invited to make an entry in such a book was considered an honor since it indicated the friendly disposition of the owner. Conversely, contributions to the album had the status of precious gifts which would last for years to come.

Considering the sentimental character of such an exchange, the photographic image seems a natural addition to the colorful compilation. According to Di Bello, photography was gradually appropriated as one of the "image-making accomplishments declared suitable for ladies" (Di Bello 72). Of course, even if not photographers themselves, Victorian women devised numerous ways of incorporating the photographic image in their mixed media

[2] Di Bello, Patrizia, Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts, Ashgate 2007

collages. As Di Bello reports, instructions on how to color photographs were regularly published in the "Ladies' Own Paper" along with other suggestions on how to use them as the basis in the making of "pleasing images". The author also points out that since "commerce followed fashionable elite women, (…) by the late 1870s printers were selling empty photographic albums already decorated with mechanically reproduced landscapes or flowery frames, into which the owner's photographs could be slotted" (Di Bello 75). It was around the same time when the idea of albums specifically designated for the display and organization of family portraits first appeared.

Di Bello's further exploration on the private uses and social function of albums, leads her to the conclusion that although the indexical nature of photographs is highly valued, their uses are never cautioned by fear of transgressing realism. In fact, as her readings of the albums of Lady Waterlow and Lady Filmer demonstrate, photography is more closely affiliated to fantasy than fact. Thus, if Anna Waterlow uses family portraits to construct and dwell on the vision of her happiness in the role of the mother (Di Bello 98), Lady Filmer uses photographs in her mixed media collages to create whimsical fantasies, which parody photography's presumed realism (Di Bello 118). Based on her observations Di Bello finally states:

> There is something particularly interesting in using photography to represent feminine experiences. The truth about photography and femininity was supposed to reside in their closeness to nature, in their potential as natural means or reproduction. But in these albums, the use of collage and mixed media techniques undermines the realism of photography, its power to reproduce nature faithfully by using technologies based on natural optical and chemical phenomena. In the albums both photography and femininity are reconfigured in ways that suggest that they are also performative cultural constructions. (Di Bello, 153)

Di Bello's final remarks resonate with John Tagg's statement, quoted earlier by herself, that "the indexical nature of the photograph…can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning" (Di

Bello 18). In fact she goes a step further by suggesting that "indexicality itself can be seen as one of the fantasies incited by photography" (Di Bello 159) – a fantasy, of course, essential to photography's role of a trustworthy interpreter of reality.

If Siegel and Di Bello explore the cultural practices which lead to the appearance of the photographic album, Julia Hirsch[3] focuses on the historically preconditioned codes of signification it uses. According to her, family photography is "an aesthetic, social, and moral product", which reflects "age-old patterns both of life and of aspiration" (Hirsch 12). By this she means that family photographs, candid or formal, are all based on the same fundamental images solidified by the pictorial history of the family (Hirsch 15). More specifically, these portray the family as "a state whose ties are rooted in property; the family as a spiritual assembly which is based on moral values; and the family as a bond of feeling which stems from instinct and passion" (Hirsch 15). To illustrate her point, Hirsch examines how the above themes have been rendered in the decorations of religious scriptures, Roman and Egyptian reliefs, and paintings from different historic periods. Not only does she observe the consistency in decorum among them, but shows that the same motifs reappear in photographic images as well. Thus, for instance, the family as a "state whose purpose is material survival" is usually represented with their material belongings in the home, or working together in their family business. As Hirsch demonstrates, in the Cleves Book of Hours (15th century) the family are shown at work in their bakery. Then, in the 19th century photograph from Nebraska the Rawding family is lined up in front of their homestead with all their belongings and life stock (two horses and a cow) facing the camera. As for present day photographs, people pose in front of their homes, cars or swimming pools to demonstrate

[3] Hirsch, Julia, Family Photographs, Content, Meaning and Effect, Oxford University Press 1981

their "conquest of the material world" (Hirsch 21). Technology, Hirsch insists, does not remove "cultural bias", but works within it:

> The success of portrait photography did not grow out of its way of seeing, but out of its inexpensive way of making pictures. The first family photographers were not aiming at stylistic originality but at commercial success, which came to them quickly because they were able to produce cut-rate versions of painted portraits. (Hirsch 82)

The author also explains that the formal and candid styles do not exhibit an essential difference in their perception of the family, but are merely the "two habits" of representation photography has assumed (Hirsch 81). Both of these styles, of course, have their roots in the well-established traditions of portrait painting. Thus, according to Hirsch, studio photography borrows its aesthetics from Renaissance family portraiture which is "aristocratic, and committed to grace, to elegance, and to decorum" (Hirsch 85). The purpose of the studio photographer and the painter beforehand, is to capture the character, personal worth and dignity of the sitters, their spiritual and material interdependence, and the propriety of their attitudes. Hirsch reminds us that "love, contempt, and envy are all withheld from our view", as the family is measured by the "standards of politics, not of passion" (Hirsch 97). Thus, some 300 hundred years later[4], formal family photographs are still the visual reaffirmation of Renaissance ethical principles. They show the one face of the family an outsider should ever be allowed to see.

In comparison, candid photography, first brought about by the box camera, steals glimpses of all kinds of postures and facial expressions. Yet, even such unrehearsed family scenes find their analogue in the paintings of Bruegel and Jean Steen; Hogarth, Rowlandson, and Daumier; Renoir, Mary Cassatt and van Gogh, who present the "view of the family as

[4] According to Hirsch, the Renaissance tradition of personal conduct is best described in Baldassare Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier (1516; English trans. 1561). Therefore by 300 years later she means the beginning of the 20th century. Later in the book she also adds that in contemporary formal photographs we still "endeavor to look cohesive, strong and gracious but we have forgotten the ancient imperatives that shape our wishes" (101). Rather, we tend to imitate the people of power we see daily in press releases. Hirsch, Family Photographs, Oxford University Press 1981 (pp: 97-101).

appetite, impulse, passion and violence" (102). Hirsch describes candid shots as honest, spontaneous, and artless. They capture impressions of things and people, rather than their presumed essences. Therefore, she continues, if formal photography is about condition and being, the candid one is about process and circumstance (Hirsch 102). Its freedom of expression and thematic richness are only sanctioned when choosing which images to keep and place in albums. In contrast to rehearsed formal photographs, here "editorial authority is exercised" after the shot has been taken. As Hirsch notices:

> We do not normally keep photographs that show us disarmed by our children, angry with our spouses, and shamed by our parents. Such glimpses into reality are the stuff of photojournalism: they do not belong with the images we use among our own relatives to buttress family pride and sustain a sense of security. (Hirsch 12)

Hirsch's analysis of the origin of photographic conventions and codes of signification once again expose photography as a well-directed tool of self-representation. Whether it would be the controlled environment of the studio with its pre-designed scenarios and decorum, or the carefully selected candid shots which put on display only the happy moments, photography is never innocent of culturally programmed intentions. Its agenda, according to Hirsch, is driven by the visual aesthetic of historically established ethical values, as well as the compelling desire of people to measure up to existing cultural ideals.

After considering briefly the private uses of early photographs like the daguerreotype, the tintype, the cabinet card and even the first film photographs, the distinction between the use of photographs of the self and the use of self-made photographs becomes more pertinent. One may even argue that the true history of vernacular photography begins after the invention of the portable consumer cameras and the merging of the photographer with the photographed subject. In order to catch a glimpse of the consumers' perspective on

photography in the span of 1888 (the year of the box camera was released on the market) up to the 1980s (when the first digital cameras appeared), I will consider two samples of popular usage. One is a collection of photographs taken by two amateurs over the turn of the 20th century, and the other is a Kodak book on how to take good photographs from 1980. The first reveals some common themes in the photographs of pioneering amateurs who test the boundaries of the "brand-new hobby of photography" (Silber 11); the second discloses popular views of photography and photographs at the peak of an already established practice.

The Family Album I am looking at was assembled by Mark Silber in the fall of 1972 and contains the photographs of Gilbert Tilton and Fred W. Record, who were life-long friends and business partners. As Silber explains, the collection of photographs is accompanied by the dialogue of the closest living relatives of the two photographers whose discussion aids the viewer, but also demonstrates the arbitrariness of the attached meanings. The camera Tilton and Record used was a Cyclone SR, which took 4x5 inch glass plates and was one of the first transportable cameras in use. This is how Silber describes the technological conditions of the time:

> The potentialities of photography were widened. The freedom from the immediate need for a darkroom created possibility for a new imagery. The ripened emulsion of the dry plate increased flexibility. This atmosphere allowed for the growth of photographers like Tilton and Record: the family album, for the first time, was being filled with the documents of everyday life. The medium prospered by creating the home photographer, the documentor of his own life and times. (Silber 16)

The value of these pictures, he insists, is not in the fact that they present "a cerebral treatment of an era", but that they are the spontaneous, self-interested creations of ordinary people.

In contrast with the aesthetic of the carte-de-visite, the album opens with a photograph of a jumping man caught in mid air. Apparently, as soon as the singularity of the photograph is overcome, the purpose is no longer capturing the "soul", the "personal worth

and dignity" (Hirsch 90) of the subject, but staying the moment – the moment of transient emotion, or the brief second of the jump right before the grounding pull of gravity. This is only one of a number of images which illustrate the shift of interest of the "home photographer", who is no longer tied to the décor of the home or the genre of family portraiture. Certainly, the photographs of the family posing inside or outside their home in well-arranged groups are still present, but along with them are shots from their celebrations, leisure times, scenes from daily activities and working places or even playful demonstrations of "special" tricks. Thus, out of 45 photographs, 5 are of people posing in front of barns with their livestock; 16 are of leisure activities like picnics, hunting, fishing, dancing, sitting around tables, swimming, throwing pillow fights; 4 are of people at work or working places, 12 are posed individual portraits with various domestic or nature backgrounds; 2 are posed family portraits – one inside and one on the front porch; 5 are of people performing funny tricks – the jumping man, two women dressed as men, two women dancing, one woman rowing and the pillow fight. There are, of course, several pictures of children and even 2 pictures of pets. Altogether, Silber's collection justifies Hirsch's claim that "in candid photography anything can happen". It can be posed, in disarray or completely accidental, since the "term itself makes no exclusions or particular promises" (Hirsch 102). And while we observe themes inherited from the visual history of the family, the desire to experiment and the boundless curiosity of the photographers also find expression in a number of shots as surprising and unique as life itself.

While the photographer's treatment of the medium is witnessed by the choice of moments he finds worthy of preservation, the viewer's appreciation of the photographic document is disclosed by the comments he/she makes while reading the photographs. The dialogue in The Family Album, taking place some 50 years later, identifies some of the faces,

hypothesizes about the nature of events and makes assumptions about the intentions of the picture takers. Although the speakers are the closest living relatives of the photographers, the information they can add to the visual message is quite limited. Not only do they find difficulties in identifying people or places, but often ignore them altogether for the sake of insignificant details, which spark heated discussions or prompt unexpected memories. Thus for instance, the photograph on page 79 shows two women fighting with pillows. Smiling widely, they are grabbing one another by the hair in what looks like an act played out for the eye of the camera. Rather than commenting on the identity of the women, or their actions, the two viewers see the mattress and start discussing how dusty it must have been:

> **It makes me wheeze up to see those mattresses. You know I used to go up there by the way**…
>
> *Yeah, corn husk mattresses.*
>
> …**and be dusty and had asthma. I couldn't lay down on it**.
>
> *Those are pretty dusty mattresses too. They probably never was taken out and beaten or anything like that to get the dust out of them.*
> (Silber 78)

The conversation continues with the description of the asthma and how it suddenly disappeared. Perhaps, due to lack of interest in the pillow fight or lack of familiarity with the people on the picture, the only indication the speakers give that they are looking at it is the mention of the mattresses and the remark: "You know I used to go up there by the way". Apparently, regardless of photographer's intentions, the viewers find their own points of interest and their dialogue starts meandering through unrequited (by the readers) memories. Occasionally, their remarks do not even compliment one another. As if each person is dwelling on a memory of their own. This seems to be the case in the following dialogue accompanying a photograph of two boys in the woods.

They look like Bridghams to me. They're…

Ha ha ha!

They're nice looking boys and they're well dressed…

Ha ha ha – pardon me for laughing.

I would imagine there was some connection with one of the families there, otherwise they wouldn't waste film on just strangers, would they?

I'm pretty sure they are Bridghams. They are such fine looking young boys. (Silber 82)

Despite the ostensible realism and immediacy of the photographic message the arbitrariness of photographic meaning surfaces in the comparison of viewers' reactions. Differences of interpretation appear at every level of familiarity with the visual narrative: first between informed commentators and uninitiated readers, then between the two commentators themselves.

Curiously enough, the brief exchange above also testifies to the fact that a century ago photographic materials were costly, so pictures were usually planned and executed with care. Even if the photographer's motivation is unknown, the boys' presence cannot be just a whim. Another attestation to this claim is a comment which appears next to a photograph of a woman drawing water from a well.

Rebecca at the well. Undoubtedly a spoof. But that's who it is: Rebecca L. Record, and the well and the receptacle. That almost has to be a posed idea. Somebody thought that up.
But I think they'd thought it up and gone out there to have their picture taken.
That was just a way of life just the same in spite of it. (Silber 30)

Surprisingly, although the viewers are well aware of the "spoof", they still insist on the documentary value of the photograph. Whatever they may know about Rebecca's identity to contradict the image, they appreciate the fact that she dramatizes a common, and for that time

daily, activity. Still, further references to Rebecca's love of posing follow pointing to the theatrical nature of the photographic event. As she appears sitting on a boat holding the paddles, the two interpreters suggest that she is just there to be photographed and cannot "row the boat across the North Pond in a week" (Silber 80). Looking at her poised posture, cunning smile and her wistful gaze sent into the distance so it doesn't meet the camera's eye, it is not hard to be convinced in the validity of their accusation. Rebecca's transformations don't end there. Yet another picture shows her and her friend Sadie both dressed as men. After identifying the two women the commentators point out:

> *They probably spent some time…*
> **Oh yeah, they probably put in hours at that.**
> *Didn't spare any details.*
> **Nope, everything was there, pipe and all. Women might do that today, possibly. (Silber 26)**

If the cartes-de-visite flattered their subjects by various manipulations of appearances, here the fun of masquerade is the only goal. These playful impersonations transform the photograph's claim to realism into parody. Both the photographs and the accompanying dialogue demonstrate the paradoxical attitude of pioneering users towards the photographic medium. On the one hand, every image demands belief and every dialogue starts by granting it with the phrase "That's…"; on the other, everyone shares in the joke of the "spoof". Photographers plan it, the subjects pose persuasively and the viewers laugh wholeheartedly if they recognize the scam. No one seems to be concerned about the credibility of the image. In fact, it must be their faith in the documentary value of photographs that instigates the attempted deception. Its earliest consumers must have felt that photography automatically confirms the reality of anything already pictured.

The careful consideration of images from both picture-takers and viewers of The Family Album reveals that, staged or not, photographs are still trusted as messengers from

the past. Photographic curiosity and dedication are not only indicative of the great confidence of users in the medium, but their fundamental need to conjure up the self through communicative acts. At a time when technology is advanced enough to allow space for creative improvisations, the photographic ritual is transformed significantly. The leading role of the photographer is no longer felt since those who "think up" the picture and those who pose for it may often coincide. Rather than sitting still in standard poses, photographic subjects can now choose how to respond to the camera's gaze. And while these new freedoms of expression result in greater variety of themes, the limited supply of film or dry plates make every shot a precious chance to capture something worthy of remembrance. In a word, The Family Album demonstrates that even as early as the end of the 19th century, the "home photographer" has already begun to demarcate the categories of interest prevalent in vernacular photography to this day.

The copyright of *Picturing the Times of Your Life* written by Don and Monika Nibbelink is from the year 1980. This is perhaps only one of countless publications of the Eastman Kodak Company intended to instruct amateur photographers on the art of picture taking. By now, what was once an exclusive hobby for people of means and time to spare, has transformed into a fully developed consumerist practice – a cheap, widely advertised and very accessible commodity. The instruction manual at hand not only testifies to the above fact, but its advertising slogans, technical advice, ideas and kind suggestions phrase out loud the stereotypical conceptions of photography at the time. This is observed as early as the table of contents, where the titles of chapters are already instructive slogans such as "Cameras are Memory Machines" and "You are the Photographer", or list the "times of your life" worth photographing. These are separated into the well familiar categories of "Growing

up", "Holidays", "Family Events", "Houses and Homes", "Vacations", which are then further divided into "Jennifer and How She Grew", "A First Grader's Day", "The Prom", "Halloween", Thanksgiving", "Christmas", "The Engagement", "Weddings", "Anniversaries", "Parties" and so on. The list of suggested topics for photographic exploration closely approximates those covered in Silber's collection from the turn of the 20th century. Portraits, home property, special occasions, favorite things and activities appear in both, yet the instruction manual from 1980 features superior techniques for aestheticization. Improved technology works in combination with habitual exclusion of the mundane or unsightly aspects of existence. Thus, if The Family Album may still include a photo of a blind musician playing for coins or shots from working places and routines, the present manual does not even feature a section on the working environment, not to mention on the expression of sadness, loneliness or loss. This undoubtedly justifies Jo Spence's comment in "Reworking the Family Album" that Kodak encourages exclusivity in snapshotting practices, which transforms the family records into a catalogue of celebrations (Spence 191). According to her, people derive more pleasure from limited representation as it facilitates the close visual approximation of existing cultural ideals.

Besides displaying examples of appropriate occasions for photographic exploration, the instruction manual lays the ideological framework which transforms photography from a mere hobby into a necessity. Thus, for instance, the chapter "How Much Are Memories Worth?" suggests that "what really makes a good life" are not only the happy experiences, but the "countless times of recalling" (Nibbelink 18) them. For that reason, although memories may "have no intrinsic value, [they] are essential to our general well-being and good health" (Nibbelink18). Further on, in "Cameras Are Memory Machines" the authors point out that since we think in images, not in words, pictures are the best accomplice of

memory. In fact, they continue. We may forget the events, but we never forget the photographs we have seen of them:

> Research has indicated that recollection of photographs you have seen before is often essentially perfect. Common experience suggests that the capacity for remembering pictures may be unlimited. This is especially intriguing when you consider that such memory is maintained without labels, words, names, or the need for rehearsal. (Nibbelink 31)

As soon as the readers have understood the value of memories, hence photographs, they are entrusted with the role and responsibility of the photographer. Their first obligation according to the chapter "You Are the Photographer" is never to forget the camera. The authors' heartfelt advice is to have it on you all the time lest you miss an opportunity to record something "important, interesting, unusual, beautiful, memorable, newsworthy, or otherwise worth documenting" (Nibbelink 32). Thus, by recording precious moments, you ensure your unfailing memory and overall well-being. Photography, then, is not a mere whim or plain curiosity, but a way of life, an obligation to yourself and your successors.

Naturally, if the above argument on the importance of photography seems a bit exaggerated, this should be credited to the commercial purposes of the edition. Published by the Kodak Company itself, the book is meant to function as an extended advertisement of a wide range of products. Even so, from the perspective of contemporary readers who are well accustomed to the use of the camera, any form of persuasion on the benefits of photographs sounds naïve and unnecessary. Likely, because ideas on photography formulated in books such as this one have long been internalized by the consumers and now parade as common sense.

In addition to telling the readers how to remember and what to remember about their lives, Picturing the Times of Your Life offers the criteria for a good photograph. Thus, according to the Nibbelinks commands such as "Hold it", "Cheese", "Line up" and "Smile"

are not recommendable. In fact, they are forbidden, because "surely you don't want to remember a graduation or a Thanksgiving as an abnormality with contrived poses and peculiar facial expressions" (Nibbelink 35). Here is the advice on how to achieve "normal" looking pictures:

> You should document an event as it really happened – natural and unposed, not contrived, hammed up, or artificial. It should almost be as though you were invisible. You can obtain more natural looking pictures by maintaining a low profile as you go about your shooting. (Nibbelink 34)

Perhaps it is to be expected that about 100 years after the invention of photography the aesthetic of the image should change. The well-contained, dignified stills of the carte-de-visite are irrevocably replaced by what our predecessors may consider flashes of insane gestures and facial expressions. Apparently, our conceptions of portraying normalcy are diametrically opposed, and so are our ideas of visual signification altogether. If early photographers had to compress the life-story of a person, their soul and identity in a single image, the postmodern one searches for newer and better picture opportunities. The signification is thus stretched into series of pictures in chronological sequence – a film-like visual narrative without an end. A good example of how this can be achieved is given with the photo sequence "Graduation", which opens up with the remark: "'Graduation,' one dictionary says, 'is the act of receiving a diploma from a school.' But it can be more than a moment for parents with a camera. It is a whole day of great sequential picture-taking possibilities" (Nibbelink 88). The pictures that follow show Aileen coming back from rehearsal with her gown, Aileen ironing the gown, Aileen peeking around the shower curtain, lunch, the mother with the graduation cake, invitation and tickets close-up, the class ring, the ceremony, and Aileen back home opening presents. Many of them would never be recognized as graduation pictures unless they are labeled and lined up in the same sequence.

Still, the greater number of shots adds more detail to the overall narrative and, of course, sells more film.

Needless to say, a good photograph is also recognized by the quality of its technical execution. For this reason, Picturing the Times of Your Life also provides detailed information on the use of various photographic tools. Besides promoting the benefits of a number of gadgets to the consumer, the manual also constitutes a catalogue of current technology and its possible applications. It is apparent that the sophistication of the equipment has increased significantly since the days of the box camera, when the shutter was preset in one position. Now, with the support of certain additional devices the camera can take pictures under any light conditions. The available wide angle lenses, zoom lenses, filters, tripods, flashes, floodlights certainly facilitate the production of good quality photographs but make the job of the photographer cumbersome and the execution comparatively slow. Apparently, even when s/he no longer needs to know how to develop images, the use of manual aperture, shutter and focus cameras requires significant expertise, especially when there is no screen on the back of it for simultaneous preview of the result. Still, for the less ambitious consumers there is also the automatic version, which may be more restrictive in terms of available perspectives, but produces well focused color images without much effort or special knowledge on the part of the photographer. Undoubtedly, it is the automatic camera and the life-like color image that should take most of the credit for the development of the candid aesthetic in photography.

Once more, technological innovation and the shifting aesthetic of photography trigger changes in the photographic ritual as well. As quoted earlier, rather than being the master of ceremony, the photographer is advised to “maintain a low profile” and always be prepared to snatch the moment out of its natural progression. Or else, s/he may consider “invent[ing] a

pose that looks unposed, or slow the action down, or even have the subjects repeat it if it all went by so fast the first time that you didn't have a chance to click the shutter" (Nibbelink 35). This recommendation by itself reveals the multiple levels of pretence and theatricality in the photographic process. The photographer pretends to be invisible; the subjects pretend not to notice him/her. If once a person had to be as still as dead in order to achieve life-like appearance, now one has to pose to seem unposed. The grotesque aspect of contemporary photographic behavior is best captured by a photograph on page 74 of the Nibbelinks' book which shows a family of five consumed in the process of picture-taking. The event unfolds in their living room. The father is kneeling on the floor, camera in hand, to take a close shot of the three children on the sofa, as the mother holds a huge floodlight above her head pointed to the ceiling. Meanwhile the three children are reading a book, completely "oblivious" of all the hassle and commotion around them. Of course, this is only the instructional photograph. The one, taken by the father looks convincingly unposed.

The Nibbelinks' Picturing the Times of Your Life witnesses the current condition of photography, its uses, its morphology, its aesthetic and ritual. The significant development of photographic technology since the beginning of the century has had a considerable impact on the way pictures are made, how they look, and what is considered a successful picture. Automatic still cameras make the photographic act a commonplace phenomenon, anticipated during the progress of every celebration, family event, or even daily routines. The intricate photographic performances have become second nature even to children, who assume the "natural" look without even noticing. And if the topics of interest have not changed much since The Family Album, the quantity of produced photographs certainly has. The authors repeatedly urge their readers not to give in to the box-in-drawer technique of preservation of photographs, which must have taken epidemic proportions if every moment in time is treated

as a unique photographic opportunity. More importantly, though, like all the previous samples of photographic usage, the Kodak instruction manual demonstrates that photography is a way of thinking – the kind which rationalizes the necessity of "make-believe" games and treats their products as unadulterated evidence of what has been.

Photography theorists may hold contrasting opinions on the ability of photography to channel reality. Yet, the everyday user does not waste time dwelling on such issues. Paradoxically, vernacular uses of the medium both rely on the indexicality of the photograph and constantly sabotage it through various manipulations of appearances. In fact, to assign specific meaning to a photograph is already a forgery. The golden pendant with the photograph of a loved one inside has nothing to do with the promise of love it stands for. No carte-de-visite or formal portrait can project the essential character of the person it portrays. The Family Album is too scattered and fragmented to even claim to tell the story of the people on its pages. And the most natural looking candid photographs are usually the ones best staged. Still, the early consumer of self-portraits, the "home-photographer" from the turn of the 20th century or the contemporary casual shutter-clicker do not seem adamant about realism, but use photography as a tool for self-expression, which molds reality into the cast of subjective points of view. As the authors of Picturing the Times of Your Life remind us, it has never been our goal to remember everything, the mind only "delights in recalling and savoring good times" (Nibbelink18). Our photographs of family and friends, of ourselves, do not aim to formulate comprehensive life-accounts, but project a vision of a life worth remembering. And do we go to great lengths to keep that vision perfect? In this sense, I would have to agree with Batchen that what we really treasure in photographs is not their fidelity to fact, but their physical presence, their monumental quality. The idealization and aestheticization observed in every example of vernacular usage answers the need of

commemoration. After all, it is the task of monuments to be greater than life. Ironically, with the advance of technology ornamental photographic objects are reduced to framed pictures, the framed picture descends from the wall or mantelpiece to enter the album, which in turn falls apart into loose paper prints, piled in boxes. Finally, by entering the virtual realm the photograph threatens to become more translucent and ephemeral than the transient moment it commemorates. Still, the fervor for picture-taking of digital consumers has not decreased. On the contrary, their devotion to the digital camera and image seems to be even more consuming than the one of their analog predecessors.

2. Defining the digital medium – content analysis of party photographs

The unappeasable desire to take a glimpse at your own self from the outside of your skin must be an inherent, self-confirming urge. But what makes the photograph such a trusted and authoritative mediator? According to Derrick Price and Liz Wells[5] its status of empirical evidence is not bestowed upon it merely on the basis of its indexicality, but is contextualized by the modern belief in the rational mind, which can distinguish subjective from objective, observable experience. The prevailing conviction of Western philosophers from the 18th century onwards, that there is a verifiable external reality, leads to the development of positivist approaches to research in which the photograph is conveniently implicated as a recording tool (Wells 24). Naturally, theoretical debates on the mechanical, therefore unprejudiced, realism of photography are also based on the underlining assumption of the existence of objective reality. As Price and Wells phrase it: "any [photographic] concern with truth-to-appearances or traces of reality presupposes 'reality' as a given, external entity" (Wells 26). Granted that chemical photography is an objective witness of what exists, its documents should confirm the concrete presence of the outside world and, by the same token, the authenticity of individual identity.

[5] Price, Derrick, Wells, Liz, "Thinking about Photography, Debates Historically and Now" in Photography: A Critical Introduction, edited by Liz Wells, Routledge 2004 (pp: 9-111)

Ironically, the affirmative power and solid authority of images seems to disintegrate quickly upon contact with digital technologies. Contemporary theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell and F. Ritchin stress the inherent mutability of the digital image and signal the "end of photography as we have known it" (Ritchin 1991)[6]. Should this be the case, why does digital photography enjoy such enormous popularity among mass consumers? If the previously examined vernacular uses of analog photography demonstrate an ardent interest in self-conception and articulation, is the purpose of digital photographs the same? Do they respond to the self-reflective needs of the consumer equally well, or perhaps even better? What happens to a sense of self erected on the unsteady foundation of an image in disrepute – an image whose claims to realism have been denied from its inception?

Martin Lister suggests that what used to be the debate on the documentary versus the artistic nature of photography has now been reformulated into a debate "between photography and the digital image" (Wells PR 219). How, indeed, is digital photography different from the analog one? Are the technological differences significant enough to generate not only quantitative, but qualitative changes in the nature and uses of the photographic medium? In a designated chapter to the third edition of Liz Wells' Photography: A Critical Introduction, Martin Lister offers an extensive overview on the similarities and differences of the digital and analog media. Here he lists the latest technological transformations of image-making equipment which precondition the appearance of the term 'post-photography'. According to him, for the last 20 years digital technology has gradually "become a taken for granted part of the media landscape" (298). Even if some professional photographers still insist on the

[6] Ritchin F, (1991) "The End of Photography as We Have Known It", quoted by Sarah Kember, "Photography and Realism" in Liz Wells (ed), The Photography Reader, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, originally published in P. Wombell (ed), Photo, Video, Photography in the Age of the Computer, Rivers Oram Press, London

analogue camera, digital processes are inevitably a part of their post-production practices. Yet, those less attached to old-fashioned methods have completely given in to digital technologies: "optical lenses are replaced by digital and virtual cameras, films by discs, 'wet' physical dark rooms and optical enlargers by computers and software" (298). This is especially true for the every-day consumers, who are so disinterested in the mechanical camera and film that such merchandize has already disappeared from the shelves of the retailers. In their place are "digital cameras, memory cards, scanners, writable CDs, and associated software". Further on, Lister formulates the most immediate implications of rapidly changing visual technologies. To begin with, he points out the mutability of the digitally produced image, which can be enhanced or completely transformed with undistinguishable precision. Digital images can also be exhibited "in an expanded range of ways, from 'hardcopy' through transparencies and varying forms of print, to the computer and TV screen, and websites" (301). Being easily transmissible via internet they become part of a global information and communications system without territorial or political boundaries. Consequently, existing visual libraries, museums, and historical archives are converted into "digital storage banks" accessible from any computer terminal. Next Lister also notes that the digitalization of images and the accumulation of data into centralized information networks greatly increase the potential for extension of "practices of military and civil surveillance" (301). Finally, not to be omitted is the fact that once digitalized, the image can no longer be clearly separated from the myriad of formerly distinct audio, video, photographic, animation media, which have presently converged into a new form of interactive multimedia.

Having synthesized the major technological developments and their immediate implications, Lister proceeds to articulate the range of critical issues which persistently appear in discussions on digital photography. His overview of recent theoretical debates traces the

evolving trajectory of the critical rhetoric. According to his account, initial response to the digital media was generally one of distrust or complete denial of its photographic essence. Thus for instance, in his book The Reconfiguring Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era W.J.T. Mitchell compares the appearance of the "point-and-shoot' digital camera on the consumer market to the appearance of the Kodak 'Brownie' box camera about a hundred years earlier (Lister in Wells 2004:302). For Mitchell, these two events are of similar significance because just like the box camera "the burgeoning technology of digital imaging suddenly spawn(s) a mass medium"[7]. Mitchell also declares that in comparison to the difficult for manipulation analog photographs which are "comfortably regarded as casually generated truthful reports about things in the real world", the digital image undermines "ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real"[8]. The same fear of the loss of the truth value of the photograph is expressed by the photographer Fred Ritchin, who also insists that "the new malleability of the image may eventually lead to a profound undermining of photography's status as an inherently truthful pictorial form"[9].

In contrast to early passionate rejections of the digital medium, theorists writing a few years later tend to treat the photograph as "the result of complex technological, cultural, ideological and psychological processes in which indexicality is but one element" (Lister in Wells 2004), therefore they are far more temperate in their views. Thus, for instance, in his essay "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography", Lev Manovich argues that most pre-conceived notions of the digital image are proved inadequate when seen in the context of its actual uses.

[7]Lister, "Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging" in Liz Wells (ed.) (2004) Photography: A Critical Introduction, Routledge, London and New York (302), quote originally from Mitchell, W.J.T (1992) The Reconfiguring Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press (17).
[8] Manovich, "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography" in Liz Wells (ed.) (2003) The Photography Reader, Routledge, London and New York (244) quote originally from Mitchell, W.J.T.(1992) The Reconfiguring Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press (pp: 17 and 225)
[9] Ritchin, F. (1991) "The End of Photography as We Have Known It", quoted by Lister, M. "Photography in the Age of Electronic Imaging" in Liz Wells (ed.) (2004) *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York (311)

To begin with, Manovich disputes Mitchell's claim that in contrast to the analog image, the digital one can be copied endlessly without any loss of quality. In actual practice, Manovich reminds us, due to "lossy compression"[10], "there is much more degradation and loss of information between copies of digital images than between copies of traditional photographs" (Manovich in Wells 2003:243). He also disagrees with Mitchell's view that the analog photograph contains an "indefinite amount of information" in comparison to the "precisely limited special and tonal resolution" of the digital one (Mitchell in Manovich 243). In fact, current technology is so advanced that a "digital image can easily contain much more information than anybody would ever want" (Manovich in Wells 2003:243). Finally, Manovich also denies that the 'infinite mutability' of the digital image contradicts its photographic nature. According to him, the unmodified picture is not and never has been the norm for a photographic image:

> Straight photography has always represented just one tradition of photography; it always coexisted with equally popular traditions where a photographic image was openly manipulated and was read as such. [..] Digital technology does not subvert 'normal' photography because 'normal' photography never existed. (Manovich in Wells 2003: 245)

Geoffrey Batchen is another theorist who discusses the renewed anxieties in relation to the ostensible loss of photographic realism. In his essay "Ectoplasm" he begins his discussion by formulating the two apparent crises with which photography is confronted – one technological and one epistemological. If the first one threatens to destroy the "faith in the photograph's ability to deliver objective truth" and displace photography as a "privileged conveyor of information"; the second one threatens to transform the very "question of

[10] Manovitch deploys the invented term "lossy" to refer to the common occurrence of data loss associated with digital technology.

distinguishing truth from falsehood" into a "quaint anachronism" (Batchen 129). From this point of departure Batchen begins to uncover the hidden assumptions which constitute the above commonly expressed concerns. The fear of the end of photography is confronted with the argument that photography has always been "playing with life and death" by making false promises. Indeed, most of our investments in it have turned out to be illusions. Thus for instance, the practice of taking posthumous photographs cannot bring back the dead, but "an image of the dead as dead somehow worked to sustain the living" (Batchen 130). Similarly, the photograph which is meant to fix time or "allow the return of what had come before", is inevitably a "visual inscription of the passing of time and therefore also an intimation of every viewer's own passing" (Batchen 133). In other words, although photography has never been what it claims, we have continued to believe in it. Furthermore, while acknowledging that "digital imaging is an overtly fictional process", the author also reminds us that "the production of any and every photograph involves practices of intervention and manipulation of some kind" (Batchen 134,139). In the same line of thought, he continues to argue that although digital images may be conjured up without the actual existence of an external referent, the virtual reality they create does not threaten photography per se. Photography, as Batchen defines it, "has never been any one technology", but it is "the desire, conscious or not, to orchestrate a particular set of relationships" between concepts like "nature, knowledge, time, space, observing subject, and observed object" (Batchen 140). Yet, just after declaring that human values and culture will survive no matter what is the favored representational device, Batchen turns around and questions even the integrity of the notion 'human' at a time of increasingly pervasive technologies. Batchen's retraction leaves the reader unsure of the author's stance on the relationship between reality and representation. While he suggests that technology alone is not enough to eliminate the culturally conditioned desire for photography, he also states that

digital media effectively demonstrate how the real is just another one of photography's inventions, i.e.: "we must logically include the real as but one more form of the photographic" (Batchen 142). Feeling the necessity to renegotiate established concepts like 'reality' and "humanness", does Batchen himself not embody this new "way of seeing – and of being", which he alone predicts will bring about "photography's passing"?

Batchen's treatment of the digital medium in "Photogenics" also leaves the impression that his expressed optimism on the perseverance of photography in the digital age is a bit ambiguous. Here the impact of digital technologies is made explicit through practical observations of the business strategies of Bill Gates' company Corbis, which owns the exclusive rights for electronic reproduction of the images from the Ansel Adams Trust, the Bettman Archive, NASA, the National Institute of Health, The Library of Congress, the National Gallery of Art in London and many others. According to Batchen, newly emerging media conglomerates and gigantic data banks such as this one create an unprecedented possibility for censorship, surveillance and centralized control over the world's visual and informational heritage:

> By dominating the market in electronic reproductions, Gates has also acquired a measure of control of what many may have naively thought to be a public resource: history. Remember that image of Truman holding up the premature issue of the Chicago Daily Tribune declaring his defeat by Dewy? It is in the Corbis catalogue. (Batchen 150)

More importantly, Corbis' use of images exposes the most valued aspects of the digital photograph. As Batchen points out, the company's objective to "capture the entire human experience throughout history", demonstrates that for Corbis "experience and image are

assumed to be one and the same thing" (Batchen 150). The same equation sign also appears between the image and its reproduction. As Batchen observes, the company does not care to own the original prints or negatives of photographs, but is only interested in their digitalized versions. The apparent assumption here is that "reproduction is already the only aspect of an image worth owning" (151). What is more, "with electronic reproduction, no one has to care about history as a linear sequence any more" (154). Easy access and arbitrary surfing of visual data banks transforms history into a "matter of individual invention" (155).

Batchen's own dramatic account of the influence and impact of contemporary digital technologies is hard to measure with his contention that "much of what [he has] identified with the digital phenomenon can already be found in the work of the medium's earliest practitioners" (Ibid:156). Even if one is convinced that Anna Atkins's (1799-1871) cyanotypes are based on the same essential principles as digital images[11], her photographic practice seems to be an isolated event with no particular effect on society at large. What distinguishes digital imaging from earlier modes of visual representation may not be its extraordinary new vision, but the fact that it is establishing itself as the only way of seeing and experiencing the world. Whether we would call it digital or photographic, realistic or virtual, no one can deny its presence and all encompassing effects. Or is it Batchen's intention to suggest that the photographic vision is, and always has been, the only kind of vision? If so, then linear progression of history, humanness, authenticity, original identity, reality are all human constructs, but it is digital photography that makes this immediately clear to all of its devoted practitioners.

[11]In Batchen's account, Atkins also values the reproducibility of her images above all: "Atkins presents her images as data, as precisely repeated, invariably differentiated information derived from a common master code" (158). The production of her images demonstrates an "effort toward a system of mass production" (159), and merging of "object and image, reality and representation" (160). Batchen, Geoffrey, "Photogenics", Each Wild Idea, The MIT Press, 2001 (pp: 147-162)

In "Photography and Realism" Sarah Kember also maintains that the essential constitution and communicative intention of visual signs remains the same regardless of changing technologies. Similar to Batchen, she recognizes that the authority of straight photography is based on a technologically deterministic point of view. Yet, in addition, she examines the psychological causes for the subject's conscious or unconscious insistence on "the separatedness and integrity of an object world" (Kember in Wells 2003:214). Thus, her discussion on the state of photographic realism in a digital environment sets out to prove that "the current panic over the status of the image, or object of photography (…) masks a more fundamental fear about the status of the self (…), and about the way in which the subject uses photography to understand the world and intervene in it" (Ibid: 203). Based on Barthes subjective reading of photographs in Camera Lucida, and Bollas' notion of the "unthought known", Kember describes the "affective capacity" of photographs, where the affect, "punctum" is pre-verbal and experienced through the body and emotions rather than rational thought. Hence, the affect of the photograph is induced by the recognition of something familiar, something resonating with our inner reality. Therefore, even if "we can recognize the impossibility of the real in representation, we can nevertheless feel its presence" (Ibid: 212). In this sense, positivist or technological guarantees of photographic realism are "ultimately illusory", because positivism is "a faulty way of thinking which maintains that the real is representable rather than experiential" (Ibid:215). Instead, the author claims, our investment in the real, photographic or not, is based on an irrational faith rather than verifiable external fact. Precisely this non-positivist way of thinking is what allows photographs to function as "transformational objects"[12]. More importantly, Kember maintains, that this irrational or pre-

[12] According to Kember, the photograph as a transformational object is "the means by which the shadow of the object understood as the real falls on the subject. The moment in which the shadow of the object falls on the subject may be understood as the aesthetic moment of photography, and the affect of this moment is of a transformation of the unthought known into thought." Kember's analysis is based on Barthes' discussion of his

verbal way of thinking which is "latent in our experience of photography (…) is, of necessity, coming nearer to being thought through our experience of digital images, and our awareness of their constructedness." (Ibid: 215). Her conclusion, like that of Batchen, aligns the digital photograph to its predecessors, but goes even further to suggest that perhaps our awareness of its 'constructedness' will narrow the distinction "between subject and object of the image, or between the self and other", thus facilitating our conscious self-recognition in images (Ibid: 215).

Interestingly enough, most of the concerns regarding digital technology have already been expressed by theorists writing in the dawn of the photographic medium. Despite their general agreement on the photograph's direct connection to external reality, early critics also suggest that photographs have the capacity to mix the imaginary with the real. Thus for instance, Barthes states that the power of the photograph consists in its "noeme" – the "That-has-been" aspect of it, which cannot be denied since without the "necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens" there would be no photograph (Barthes CL 76). However, in one with his assuredness in the indexicality of its referent, he also states that the photograph is a "bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a mad image chafed by reality" (Ibid: 115). Or, as he demonstrates in his essay "The Photographic Message"[13], it is precisely the indexical quality of press photographs, which "naturalizes" the constructed myths and symbols in their messages. Thus, it is clear that according to Barthes, the photographic image functions precisely on the borderline of real and imaginary. As much as it confirms it also destabilizes and displaces reality.

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mother's photograph in Camera Lucida.
Kember, Sarah "Photography and Realism" in Liz Wells (ed.) (2003) The Photography Reader, Routledge, London and New York (214-215)
[13]Barthes, Roland (1977) "The Photographic Message" in Barthes, Image Music Text, London: Fontana

Similarly, Susan Sontag claims that photographic "images are able to usurp reality because (…) a photograph is not only an image (…) it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (Sontag 1977:154). Yet, at the same time, she points out that they can be directed and manipulated: "photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out" (Ibid: 4). Not only that, but ,according to Sontag, the images we manipulate in turn manipulate reality. In a modern society where photographs have become the most valued commodity, "indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness" (153), it has become our natural inclination "to attribute to real things the qualities of an image" (158).

Sontag is hardly alone in concluding that images have become the template for life experiences. Just as Batchen observes that "human experience comes suspended in the sickly sweet amniotic fluid of commercial photography" (Batchen 151), Barthes contends that "we live according to a generalized image-repertoire" (Barthes 118), which tells us when and how to feel pain, pleasure, love and sadness, happiness. In the same tone of voice, Benjamin speaks of the loss of the "aura" of the work of art in the process of its mechanical reproduction. It is through this process that we substitute a "plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin 221) and detach the reproduced object from tradition. The depreciation of authentic origin not only intervenes with our conception of the real, but "leads to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" (Benjamin 221). The alienation of tradition is also conditioned by the fragmentation of time and the linear progress of history. Batchen's concern that "with electronic reproduction, no one has to care about history as a linear sequence any more" (Batchen 154), has been expressed much earlier by Sontag. While commenting on the time effacing effects of analog photographs she notes:

> Cameras establish an inferential relation to the present (reality is known by its traces), provide an instantly retroactive view of experience. Photographs give mock forms of possession: of the past, the present, even the future" (Sontag 167).

Similarly, in his essay "Photography, or The Writing of Light", Baudrillard comments that "the automatic overflow of images, their endless succession (…)obliterates (…) the very moment of the photo, immediately passed, irreversible, hence always nostalgic"[14]. Thus, images which slice up the continuous moment into still fragments alter the flow of time.

And if Lister and Batchen notice the increasing possibilities for surveillance and control with the introduction of digital images, so does Sontag in analog photography. Yet, instead of comparing digital to analog media, she compares image to text:

> Reality as such is redefined—as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing. (Sontag 156)

Next in line to photographic realism, historicity, and control, comes the question of subjectivity. Like Kember, Sontag observes that photographs are more mirror-like than we presume and are equally good approximations of the internal as well as the external world.

> But between the defense of photography as a superior means of self-expression and the praise of photography as a superior way of putting the self at reality's service there is not as much difference as might appear. (Sontag 119)

As she reports on the treatment of photographs as "acute manifestation of the individualized "I"", or as a form of "mastering of reality by a fast visual anthologizing of it", and "as a means of finding a place in the world", Sontag comes to the conclusion that "photographic realism can be (…) defined not as what is "really" there but as what I "really" perceive" (Sontag 119-20). In this sense, both digital and analog photography require the kind of non-positivist, irrational belief in the transparency of representation which Kember talks about. Not only that,

[14] Baudrillard, Jean. "Photography, or The Writing of Light", trans. Debriz, Francois, Ctheory, 2000, online source.

they require a fundamental faith in the concept of reality, which is traditionally seen in an intimate relationship to subjectivity or a subject's being in the world. In this context Kember's claim that the panic over the loss of the real is, in fact, a fear of the uncertain status of the self sounds all the more plausible.

In view of existing theoretical debates one can conclude that photography theorists recognize the emergence of a new digital culture which by far exceeds the frameworks of photography or any other single medium. Competing to report on the most significant technological innovations, some critics like Mitchell and Ritchin see the digital image as something radically new and hard to evaluate, while others like Manovich, Batchen, and Kember hurry on to prove that digital photography has not transgressed the essential character of visual representation. Looking back at earlier discussions of the photographic phenomenon, one cannot deny that voiced concerns on the existence of objective reality, authenticity, subjectivity and the linearity of time are hardly a precedent. Yet, to propose that digital photography does not produce unique changes in the social landscape feels unsettling. If Kember is right to suggest that "what happens in the transition from analog to digital photography is that […] the constructedness of the real becomes far more visible", don't we also need to ask how long does it take before quantitative changes turn into qualitative transformations? In fact, on the background of ever-expanding digital culture, the concern with the persistence or disappearance of photography seems irrelevant. The concrete existence of external reality once reserved for philosophical debates, is now a pressing issue for ordinary people with digital cameras who fashion themselves for the viewing, and simulate life itself.

If the presented theoretical debates on the nature and place of digital photography are controversial, perhaps the review of a popular photographic literature sample will provide

further information on the current condition of digital culture. Therefore, once more I will read through an instruction manual for amateur photographers, but this time one specifically geared to the digital consumer.

Scott Kelby's The Digital Photography Book: The Step-By-Step Secrets for How to Make Your Photos Look Like the Pros' is one of a countless instruction manuals on digital photography published each year. This particular publication is from August, 2006 and is a follow-up of Kelby's "groundbreaking", "#1 bestselling", award-winning book The Photoshop Book for Digital Photographers. The author himself is the editor of the Photoshop User magazine, the Nikon Software User magazine, and the president of the National Association of Photoshop Professionals (NAPP). His job titles alone are already indicative of the magnitude of the digital industry and point to several of the venues available for dependable contact with its audience, namely magazines, books, and professional associations. As for the book, it is full of telling details which seem to articulate the hopes, desires and ambitions of contemporary digital picture-takers. The search for clues can start from its very title. Designed to attract the mass consumer, "The Step-By-Step Secrets for How to Make your Photos Look Like the Pros'" is a heading which gives away the not so naïve hopes of present-day amateurs that by a few easy tricks they can produce professional quality photographs. And indeed, the digital camera is precisely that magical toy box equipped with electronic mechanisms which almost never fails to read the mind of its operator and bring forward the desired image. In a chapter entitled "Taking Advantage of Digital Like a Pro: It's More Than Just a Replacement for Film" Kelby explains the advantages of digital technology. Ironically, he begins by suggesting that the readers should be motivated to learn the tricks of the trade for two reasons: one is to have a better return on their investment in equipment, and the other, to hopefully make enough money "to pay both alimony and child support, because their spouses left them shortly after they went

digital, because now they spend all their free time playing around with their photos in Adobe Photoshop" (Kelby 145). Thus, while pretending to have forgotten the names of his own children, the author formulates the first important feature of the digital photographic process. Image production does not end with the click of the shutter any more. Even amateurs these days seem to spend innumerable hours in their "digital dark rooms", selecting, organizing, and retouching images. Not only that, but if the joke should have any truth to it, photographic obsessions can be strong enough to disrupt the regular flow of family life. Be that as it may, according to Kelby, digital technology does help in taking better pictures. First and foremost, because "once you've bought your memory card, film is free" (Ibid:146). So, instead of stopping each time to consider whether a shot is "worth 22 ¢", one is free to take as many shots as professionals would normally take before they achieve the desired effect. Therefore, Kelby advises: "When you shoot with 'wild abandon' (…) you are leveling the playing field. Your chances of getting "the shot" go way, way up, so fire away." (146). Another feature of the digital camera assists in "leveling the playing field" is undeniably the LCD monitor. According to Kelby, the monitor makes you a better photographer because it gives you "instant creative feedback". In other words, it allows you to experiment with angles and composition until you recognize the desired result. In addition, the LCD monitor offers the "'Edit As You Go' Advantage". By deleting the bad shots right after they've been taken, you leave more space for potential "keepers", and make yourself feel better as a photographer when you review the downloaded pictures later. Furthermore, unlike film cameras which are usually charged with a film of specific sensitivity, the digital one offers the advantage of "on-the-fly ISO switching" as well as various white balance settings. Hence, pictures which may otherwise require the use of flash or tripod can be taken "hand-held" without difficulty. Under the above conditions, the author concludes that there is no penalty for experimentation, so both amateurs and

professionals are free to test their wildest ideas and learn from trial and error while taking photographs.

After outlining the advantages, Kelby offers a few words of caution also pertaining to the specifics of the digital environment. His most important advice is "never to cram all the photos on one huge memory card, especially when shooting for a paying client" (Ibid: 152). This is not recommended, because "cards do go bad – not often, but it happens". Therefore, shooting on several smaller cards, will prevent the loss of all the pictures from that special event or vacation. Furthermore, Kelby also recommends that memory cards are kept in protective cases and organized in a special way that indicates which ones are full and which ones are available for use. This will prevent the accidental erasure of an already used card. Conversely, if trying to dispose of unwanted photographs, old CD's or DVD's, one should ensure that they will not "come back from the grave" and reappear where you least expect them, like on the web, or on a stock photo site, or…wherever" (Ibid:140). Here, Kelby points out, that once in a landfield, such data preservation devices become the pray of "trollers" looking for credit card numbers or other valuable information. Such advice gives a concrete face to thus far abstract theoretical warnings of the possibility of increased surveillance within a digital medium environment.

The closing gap between the professional and amateur photographer does not transpire only through the descriptions of advanced capacities of digital cameras, but in the themes and occasions pre-selected by the author for photographic instruction. Thus, instead of the birthday celebrations, graduations, and homecomings in Picturing the Times of Your Life (examined in the previous chapter), here we see chapters like: "Shooting Flowers Like a Pro: There's More to It Than You'd Think"; "Shooting Weddings Like a Pro: There Is No Retaking Wedding Photos"; "Shooting Landscapes Like a Pro: Pro Tips for Capturing the

Wonder of Nature"; "Shooting Sports Like a Pro: Better Bring Your Checkbook"; "Shooting People Like a Pro: Tips for Making People Look Their Very Best". Besides the repetition of "Like a Pro" in the title of each chapter, one can immediately notice that the presumed interest of the consumer is not only to collect private memories, but to produce beautiful or interesting to look at photographs. Whether real or simply a marketing strategy, the amateur photographer's striving towards professionalism necessitates a change of focus and tone of voice. Instead of trying to convince the reader of the value of visually recorded memories, Kelby describes different strategies for the production of what Batchen calls the "homogenous National Geographic way of seeing" (Batchen 118). So, even if his tips can be used for the photographing of private celebrations, vacations and school events, his titles are not specific to the occasion, but to the photographic terminology used in relation to it. Most indicative, perhaps, is the chapter on flowers, which testifies to the fact that the mass consumer does not seem to distinguish any more between the exhibition and the sentimental value of the photograph. His/her memories merge with the larger collection of beautiful appearances. But this does not yet exhaust the new digital attitude. It is also interesting to trace Kelby's recommendations on how to take original or authentic-looking photographs. Thus, for instance, in the section on flowers he suggests that shooting flowers from above will give us some very average looking photos. Instead, shots from the ground level or underneath will lend the unusual and interesting perspective we are looking for. Similarly, in the section on landscape the author points out that the photographer should know how to make good use of atmospheric conditions. He shares:

> In fact, some of my personal favorite shots have been taken when the fog rolls in between mountains. I've shot horses on the beach with the fog rolling in and it creates almost a Hollywood fantasy effect that looks great on film (digital film,

> anyway). Also beams of light in the forest, beaming through moisture in the air, or through thick fog, can be just amazing. (Kelby 77)

Later on, while advising on travel and city shots, Kelby literally spells out the National Geographic aesthetic. The heading of page 161 reads: "Shoot Children and Old People. It Can't Miss". The rational behind this suggestion is simple – this is what travel magazines do. "Really old people" and children make a place seem vibrant with life and stories. Other advice includes hiring a professional model, focusing on details, looking for vivid colors, and shooting at unusual times of the day, or simply searching for the best angle to view the scene from. To illustrate this last piece of advice, Kelby features a photo of a very narrow paved pathway passing between ancient looking stone walls with a small window on one side emitting red light. The author's explanation underneath states:

> The shot shown above is proof of this concept. It was taken in Morocco. Well, Disney's version of it anyway. If you were to walk three feet to the left, you'd see an outdoor courtyard full of park visitors eating dinner. But when I stepped 3 feet to the right, it hid the baskets of food and Coca-Cola cups and gave me this more authentic-looking view. (Kelby 167)

It is clear that while giving recipes for the making of 'original' shots, Kelby does nothing else but articulate and re-establish standard criteria of beauty, artistic quality and candid appearance of photographs. For him even 'authenticity' has a look made up of a particular and well distinguishable set of features. Whether it would be the old people and children in exotic locales, or the fake Moroccan walls in the Disney Land, it doesn't matter. Everything qualifies as a subject of an authentic-looking photograph as long as it is reminiscent of the pages of travel magazines, or Hollywood fantasies. Kelby's understanding of authenticity certainly confirms the claims of theorists such as Sontag in that "reality has come

to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras" (Sontag 161). In being the prototype of the real, an image cannot be inauthentic.

Kelby's practical advice inadvertently describes the new assumptions, interests and usages of digital photography. Judging by his text, contemporary consumers are not exclusively attracted to photographic objects of personal relevance. In fact, their practices have developed into semi-professional, quasi-artistic pursuits of beautiful generic reminders of human experience. Vernacular photography is not about personal memories or the creation of monuments any more. The way photography is employed today brings to mind Sontag's verdict on photographs from 30 years ago. At best, she sees pictures as means of appropriating the world or a form of self-expression (if unique perspective is possible in a world full of images), and at worst they are a way of refusing experience by limiting it to a search for the photogenic (Sontag 9). To Sontag, who still pondered whether photographs are a reliable source of knowledge, their flat surfaces seem as "inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (Sontag 23). A representative of the contemporary photographic society, Kelby is far more pragmatic and disillusioned. Not only does he take for granted the superficiality of photographic information, but devalues photographs even further by treating them mainly as commodities to be bought and sold on the digital market. Therefore, rather than proposing the creation of family albums like the Nibbelinks, he teaches his readers how to organize photos with Lightroom (software), how to edit them in Photoshop, print posters, or sell their photos as "stock" online.

Kelby's guide on how to shoot like the 'pros' certainly exemplifies many of the concerns raised by theorists. Yet, before I conclude that his book is truly reflective of the mass consumer's perception of digital photography I will look at some additional research

describing the behavior of the private photographer. More specifically, these include a report on the digital consumer's preferences and practices up to 2006 compiled by Ed Lee from InfoTrends (market research company); and two papers on Flickr – one of many increasingly popular websites for the sharing of photographs.

Since one of the objectives of the present study is to compare the digital and analogue photographic mediums in impact and scope, it would be beneficial to look at some of the numbers provided by marketing specialists. In his 2006 report entitled "What's Next in Consumer Digital Photography?" Ed Lee[15], the director of InfoTrends, examines the tendencies in consumer behavior in order to discover new profitable niches on the market. He observes that the sales of still cameras in the United States reached 25 million in the year 2000 and remained consistent in each consecutive year until 2006. Yet, if in 2000 only 4.5 million out of all cameras sold were digital, in 2006 the number of digital cameras was estimated as 20.7 million. Similarly, another table shows that if in year 2002 only about 20% percent of the households owned digital cameras, in year 2006 it is already close to 80%. In other words, in a matter of seven years digital technology has literally taken over the market for photographic equipment and has penetrated almost every household in America. Further on, Lee clarifies that although the digital market is comparatively saturated, the revenues are maintained by repeat customers, who upgrade their technology (sales of D-SLRs have risen with 44% from 2004-05), as well as the increasing interest of women and youth (women buyers up 34%, youth between 13-24 up 68%). The prediction is that by year 2008 most households will own more than one digital camera without considering the cameraphones. If those are to be added to the account, iGillott Research claims that even in 2005 there have already been 30 Million cameraphones in use. Meanwhile, according to the same report, the printing of images is

[15] Ed Lee's report has been compiled with data provided by the following market research companies: NPD Group, PMA Marketing Research, iGillott Research, eMarketer, DIMA, InfoTrends

significantly decreasing after being overtaken by the digital camera. More and more people (26% in 2005 compared to 18% in 2004) admit that they only print if they have to, namely if someone asks for printed pictures. About 10% (2005) declare that they never print digital pictures, but share them via email. Overall, the tables and numbers presented indicate that not only have digital cameras become the most trivial fact of life, but every segment of the population has been affected by the industry. Personal shooting practices are so common-place that we can no longer classify them strictly as a hobby or leisure-related activity. Instead they seem more like a part of the "natural" behavior of individuals going about their daily lives.

In comparison to the statistical approach of Ed Lee's report, Nancy Van House and Miller and Edwards base their research on personal interviews with a far smaller number of digital users. Although their findings cannot necessarily be treated as a general rule, they still provide some valuable information on the photographic habits and motivations of contemporary consumer photographers. Van House, for example, studies the user practices on Flickr.com as representative of what "ordinary" users do when given the ability to more readily incorporate images in their every day activity" (Van House 1). She observes that existing practices are usually driven by four different types of motivation. The first one is memory preservation and the creation of identity narratives. According to Van House, "personal photos not only help us to remember, but to construct narratives of our lives and our sense of self, individual and collective" (Van House 2). The second motivation is the reinforcement of social relationships through the sharing of photos. Self-portraits, images of one's friends or family, personal possessions and activities are generally motivated by desire for self-representation. These are usually pre-selected by users to "ensure that others see them as they wish to be seen" (Van House2). Finally, photographic images are seen as a form of self-expression, as they reflect the photographer's unique point of view. So described, the motivations of digital

photographers do not seem to differ greatly from those of their analog predecessors, but once on Flickr their interactions and activities take shape in accordance to the venue.

To begin with, Van House observes that although some people use the website as virtual storage, their primary interest is in image sharing and feedback exchange. Since images are uploaded by the minute, people usually tend to browse only through the newest ones. As Van House reports, "they described their Flickr collections as transitory, ephemeral, "throwaway", "a stream not an archive" (Van House 3). So, if these are identity narratives, they are not specifically concerned with continuity and memory, but seem to constitute a parallel dimension to ongoing life.

Social relationships on Flickr also take a peculiar shape. Photos of social events are common, although most of the people who post them do so with the intention to share them with family and friends they know off-line. Interestingly enough, one of the interviewed subject shares: "A lot of what I do is letting people know what's going on in my life. (…) I feel that I need to keep uploading pictures (…), because I am a terrible emailer, I never call, so I better give them something." (Van House 3). Such a statement testifies to the fact that visual narratives are increasingly used in substitution of more traditional verbal modes of communication. Not only that, but according to Van House "respondents are very aware of using Flickr to manage their image in the eyes of viewers" (Van House 4). Besides the self-portraits and pictures of family and friends, the self-image can be constructed through a demonstration of taste for pictures, comments, and collections of photos from different events. All of these fit together as the pieces of a puzzle to create an impression of an individual's character and living environment. One of the respondent's of the survey explains that he likes to post pictures of his friends "hamming up", because this shows that he has friends that are fun. He says, "I think people perform for the camera and my friends are fun people [they see it as] a chance to show

themselves as funny in front of an audience." (Van House 4). In other words, the self-image is controlled not only through selective posting, but intentional performances for the camera as well.

If certain Flickr users exchange photos with only a limited circle of friends, others enjoy the publicity the site offers. Van House labels this type of use "photo exhibition", as people take the opportunity to display their artistic photographs, as well as to view those posted by others. Since such artistic images may vary from beautiful nature shots and posed portraits to nudes, the author concludes that the "public access to personal photographic images is a radical departure from past practice and from most other photo-sharing sites" (5). Flickr, then, becomes the site for creative self-expression of ordinary people nourished by the fertile soil of new digital technologies.

In essence, the observations of Miller and Edwards are very similar. Yet, instead of distilling and classifying types of uses, they distinguish between two different kinds of digital consumers. The group they refer to as the Kodak Culture[16] has transferred established analog uses online. Their treatment of photographs is very traditional: themes are usually family gatherings, birthday parties and outings. As Miller and Edwards paraphrase Chalfen's definition: "Kodak Culture photographers share oral stories around the images with others who can share and build on their narratives" (2). Next to the Kodak Culture group, the authors also describe the group of the Snaprs (all of whom are Flickr users), whose practices are "grounded in Flickr-specific possibilities" and give rise to new modes of visual communication. The examination of the photographic behavior of the above two groups reveals that while the Kodak Culture are mainly interested in sharing photos with an already established circle of family and friends, Snaprs treat their photo-sharing as photo-blogging, working under the

[16] Term is borrowed from Richard Chalfen (1987) Snapshot Versions of Life. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press

assumption that “people across the world would see their photos” (Van Housen 2). In addition, if the Kodak Culture group takes photos several times a year around holidays and trips, downloads photos only once in a while, and almost never edits them in Photoshop, the Snaprs take photos at least once a week, use external hard drives for storage, download their photos immediately and may often retouch them to enhance their artistic qualities. Essentially, although both groups report on taking both personal and “arty” photos, the Kodak Culture still seek predominantly the archival /narrative quality of photographs, and use them to keep in touch with friends, while the Snaprs are mainly interested in artistic self-expression, publicity and exchange of technical advice. For them the photograph itself, not the memory, is of primary importance and artistic endeavor eliminates shyness or a sense of privacy. So defined, the above two species of digital photographers construct two distinct types of identity narratives: one is based on visual transcriptions of personal experiences which still maintain somewhat linear chronology, while the other relies on self-identification with a unique perspective or creative vision abstractly exhibited through artistic photographs.

In retrospect of the examined theoretical opinions on digital photography, consumer-targeted literature, and studies on consumer practices, one can conclude that the studied medium breeds entirely new modes of social interaction. Even as critics continue to insist that digital photography does not betray the principles of signification of traditional photography, they also examine it in the context of evolving communication technologies and observe its evolution into an all-encompassing cultural phenomenon. Thus, Lister’s theoretical commentary takes notice of the diminishing faith in endlessly mutable and reproducible images, of their accessibility through global communication systems with greater potential for civil surveillance or censorship, and the inseparability of the once distinct photographic medium of the common pool of contemporary multimedia. As if to add to the sequence,

Batchen points out how “gigantic media conglomerates” not only make profit by controlling public access to information, but take possession of human experience and history. According to him, the chronological progression of history is continuously undermined by the random browsing of consumers who are accustomed to the consumption of information fragments outside of their original context. For contemporary digital consumers, originals are practically undistinguishable from their reproductions and experiences are assimilated through the homogenous vision of images. As a logical extension to the discussion also comes Kember’s comment that the “panic over the status of the image” (Kember #) is induced by a destabilized sense of self in a constantly fluctuating digital environment.

Such theoretical concerns are largely affirmed by already existing practices. Thus, for instance, Kelby’s guide to digital photography demonstrates that in comparison to the 1980’s, current personal uses of the photographic medium are so intensified that almost every member of the general public owns a digital camera and claims professional expertise and artistic sensibility. The author’s jokes about digital photographers forgetting the names of their own children may be exaggerated, but illustrate well the unexpected ease with which digital image-making transforms into an uncontrollable addiction that threatens to replace live experience. This devoted consumer audience reads technical literature of the variety Kelby writes, constantly upgrades the equipment as Ed Lee’s figures show, and organizes shooting trips at least once a week, if Miller and Edward’s study is to be trusted. Digital technology has transformed photography into a behavioral trend without need of justification or a tangible product. And indeed, the more immaterial images become, the more obsessed we are with producing them. It is also their immaterial nature that makes them hard to own and control. Just as the smallest technical failure can make them disappear without a trace, so too the nature of storing devices is such that special measures are needed to truly discard of unwanted

images. Yet, the new surveillance possibilities theorists caution against do not arise only from the carelessness of consumers, but are foregrounded into the shifting conception of privacy witnessed by the two Flickr studies. It is hardly all of the users of photo-sharing websites that value artistic expression and exhibition more than privacy; nevertheless surveillance is implicit in the very act of looking at personal information in the absence of the person. Whether they have granted access to everybody or just friends and family, subjects are never there to present their story, to correct possible misinterpretations or intentional misrepresentations of it. Hence, the self-representations Van House talks about are far more sophisticated and controlled. They can range from visual narratives of actual events used in place of written or verbal communication, to abstract forms of self-expression through aesthetic images without much relevance to a person's ongoing life. Out of interpretative necessity, images observe standardized criteria of beauty and emotional expressivity, which are well perpetuated by instruction manuals like Kelby's, or simply by personal viewing experience. The current generation already has the visual literacy required to read and write with images. Their texts, created with the speed of light, are not meant to refer to the past, or commemorate it, but to be simultaneous with the present. Solid, material monuments are an outdated and insufficient reassurance of the possibility of eternal life or human significance. Instead, we prefer to lose ourselves in virtual multidimensionality, where history and chronology seem irrelevant notions.

3. How to do things with images: photographic performativity and constitution of identity

> "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuse for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty." (Benjamin 1935, VI)

Having just announced the loss of the 'aura' of mechanically reproduced art objects, Benjamin takes a step back to make this small clarification. Mechanically produced and reproducible, the old photographic portrait still has a ritualistic function. It confirms and sustains the presence of a loved one. Despite the use of sophisticated visual symbolisms, these early pictures still insist on the incidence of a captured essence, on the sameness of the subject with its image, and the identicalness of the past with the present 'I'. In this sense, the personal uses of early photographs demonstrate that Benjamin's concept of authenticity is integral to traditional understanding of photography. Objective or highly idealized, the photograph as a memorial is entrusted with the responsibility to carry 'identity' and 'truth' from one historical moment to the next.

In comparison to analogue photographs, digital ones are far less ideological or ritualistic. Their infinite reproducibility has made the copy equivalent to its original, hence eliminated

every possible concern with objective representation. In Batchen's words, "if there is no "original work", then there could be no "faithful copy" either" (Batchen, 152). This acceptance of the image in place of the authentic object, according to Benjamin, is predicated by the kind of "perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (Benjamin III). In other words, rather than seeking unique identities, the digital photograph extracts the all-pervasive truth of the generic. The 'cult value' of early photo-portraits has been consumed in the process of digital production and reproduction of photographs now appreciated merely for their loud and superficial 'exhibition value'. Yet, the exhibition in question is nothing like the carefully composed exhibit of traditional photographic memorabilia. Instead, photography today produces a flickering stream of virtual images which constitutes a new form of real-time communication.

The observed differences in uses of analogue and digital photography also give a clear outline of our changing relationship to photographic media. Thus, while the photographic memorabilia discussed in the first chapter demonstrates how self-narratives both rely on and defy photography's purported realism, digital practitioners not only manipulate images according to taste, but are not interested in their historicity either. But how does a photographic image, which is neither 'realistic' nor commemorative, still retain its autobiographical or referential faculty? Is identity narrative possible outside the frame of Benjamin's authenticity?

Any concern with authenticity seems to anticipate the existence of an original referent before the signifier, a Self before the act of self-expression, a unified identity prior to language and representation. Therefore, to initiate an answer of the posed question I will

refer to theoretical discussions on the genre of autobiography as one of the most radical examples of a self-narrative which envisions a pre-existing self and promises its truthful representation. In this regard, Paul John Eakin who contemplates the source of autobiographical identity declares that:

> …autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure. (Eakin 3)

Further on he explains that "fictions" in autobiography are the product of both the "autobiographer's impulse to self-invention and the received models of selfhood in the surrounding culture" (Eakin 7) formulated through language and discourse. He revisits the old philosophical debate on "whether the self is a transcendental category preceding language in the order of being, or else a construct of language brought into being by it" (Eakin 9). The answer Eakin proposes is that identity is negotiated in the process of narration. Our conception of self, he insists, is constantly shaped in live dialogue with others; yet only occasionally such verbal self-formulations are formalized in writing. "Fiction", then, can be called any choice the narrator has to make in order to limit the representation to only one of many possible concrete forms. In this line of thought, Eakin justifies his proposition that while any autobiography is fictional, any fictional narrative is autobiographical in its own right.

Eakin's fictional self is readily comparable to Olney's conception of the "metaphorizing mind" as the starting point of autobiographic narratives. According to Olney, rather than the singular truth of a unique identity, autobiographies offer insight into "what man has been, or what forms have been possible to humanity" (Olney xi). Similar to myth which is often understood as the translation of internal impulses into symbols, the metaphor

is “the focus through which an intensity of self-awareness becomes a coherent vision of all reality” (Olney 30). By its ability to find similitude, the metaphor connects the new to the already known, the internal to the external. And if a constantly evolving self is impossible to capture by any other means, a metaphor should be able to translate the sense of another’s experience of self. Thus, Olney arrives at a definition of autobiography which is wide enough to apply to photography, even myth:

> It is my notion that though it treats often of specific places and times and individuals, and must do so to make its experience real, autobiography is more universal than it is local, more timeless than historic, and more poetic in its significance than merely personal. (Olney, viii)

Whether it is fictional, documentary, visual or poetic, the communicative value of a narrative is ensured through compliance with established requirements of form and structure. As a protagonist, historical time and a story-line are always present; their meaning is symbolic, rather than literal. Therefore, like Eakin, Olney argues that regardless of what it claims to describe, every narrative is a self-narrative - a faithful reflection of its author’s “characteristic way of perceiving, of organizing, and of understanding” (Olney 37). Respectively, what the readers find in texts is their own selves created in the “responsive act”.

Next to emphasizing the constructedness of the self in narratives, Olney points out the constructedness of history as well. His argument on the equivalence of fictional and documentary genres like poetry, history and autobiography is best summarized in the following quotation:

> History might well be described as the exercise of an imaginative cultural or racial memory that is quite analogous to, and has the same powers put to the same uses as, personal memory in the act of autobiography or poetry; the memory in either case is fused with the pattern-making creativity of the individual historian cum cultural autobiographer cum poet. (Olney 38)

If memory is always enmeshed with imaginative creativity, and memory is what ensures the continuity of facts/selves, there is hardly any difference between fact/self and its interpretation. Thus, the opaqueness of language as a medium is superceded by the unreliability of memory which appears as an additional filter hindering the access to external reality. In her essay "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance", Sidonie Smith goes even further by suggesting that "the very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss of consciousness of fragments of experiential history" (Smith 110). According to her, the self is constituted through habitual self-recitations necessitated precisely by the inability of memory to preserve the logical concession of enough lived experiences to produce a sense of integrity. Thus, if the autobiographical narrative is not the act of self-expression of a pre-discursive identity, the "history of an autobiographical subject is the history of recitations of the self" (Smith 111). Still, the constructedness of personal history and identity do not eliminate the need for essentialism or the belief in historicity. As Smith points out, self-narratives - be they divergent from one rehearsal to the next - present "a 'life' to which (people) assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities" (Smith 108). In other words, the coherence and contextualization of the narrative pre-condition the integrity of the self.

Similarly, Linda Haverty Rugg, who compares autobiography and photography as tools for self-representation, observes a "double consciousness" at work in both mediums: on the one hand is the awareness of the "autobiographical self as decentered, multiple, fragmented and divided against itself in the act of observing and being", and on the other hand is the insistence on "the presence of an integrated, authorial self, located in a body, a place, and a time" (Rugg 2). And if in autobiographic writing memory and identity take concrete shape in the process of narration, in photography, Rugg observes, memory is

equated with the captured photographic images. The equation of "real" images with ephemeral/mental ones typical of both processes causes the "confusion of outer and inner realms" (Rugg 23). Like Smith who credits identity on self-narratives necessitated by a failing memory, Rugg finds its place of origin in the confusion of imagined and physical presences, of being and representation. Admitting the absence (or inaccessibility) of authentic identity, Rugg, like the majority of identity theorists, feels obliged to maintain the discussion, because, she claims, there is a "conflict between knowledge and desire", which cannot be easily resolved. As she says:

> Although we understand the presence of fakery, the importance of historical situation and cultural construction, the indeterminability of text and the decenteredness of the self, some of us still retain the desire for the returned glance, however impossible. (Rugg 27)

In consideration of the above theory I return to the initial question: is identity narrative possible outside the framework of Benjamin's authenticity? The answer offered by autobiographic theorists is hardly unambiguous or definitive. Whether they describe it as emerging through fiction, metaphors, performative self-recitations or photographs, authors generally agree that there is no singular true self seeking the most faithful form of expression. Yet, while the existence of original identity prior to text is disputed, the presence of the narrated one is tangible and grounded in its particular context. By means of contextualization, this narrated identity is inserted in a temporal framework and made subservient to chronology. Its well marked historicity – the emphatic tracing of its evolution which impresses the identical-ness of identity from one moment to the next – functions as a certificate of authenticity. More importantly yet, the coherence of the narrative ensures the integrity of the self. Therefore, stories are usually comprised of a set of characteristic elements such as a main protagonist, a comprehensive plot and an intended message, which

reveals itself as an objective truth. In a word, the theoretical skepticism regarding the existence of an original self does not interfere with the continuous production of narratives which maintain its presence and materialize it through symbols. Ultimately, the paradox of narrative is that, like identity, its existence is constantly negotiated on the boundary of superficial essentialism and awareness of the opaqueness of memory and mediums of representation.

In addition to exploring the relationship between the processes of representation and formation of identity, the analytical discussion on the nature of the autobiographic genre justifies the analogy between visual and linguistic narratives. L. H. Rugg formulates the essential similarity between the photographic and autobiographic modes of representation by saying that:

> Autobiography, like photography, refers to something beyond itself; namely, the autobiographical or photographical subject. But both autobiography and photography participate in a system of signs that we have learned to read – at one level – as highly indeterminate and unreliable. (Rugg 13)

Similarly, if Eakin notes that autobiography can be likened to myth for its capacity to exceed particularities, so should be photography for its tendency to emphasize the generic in every concrete singularity. Like Oley's metaphors, visual images connect the already known to the unfamiliar and can evoke melancholic feelings even at the sight of strangers. Photographic memorabilia, then, presents itself as another example of a poetic self-narrative, which insists on fidelity to fact, but also relies on the "pattern-making creativity" of an individual's memory. Its truth is negotiated in the process of exhibition/narration and depends both on the subjective formulation of the author as well as on the interpretative response of the viewers who project themselves onto it. What is more, the family album, as well as most other examples of photo-memorials, seems to exhibit the structural features of

autobiographic narratives. It is usually easy to discern a story-line and recognize the central characters. Photographs are carefully selected, then organized in an order symbolic of the progress of time or the hierarchy of family relations. Together they compose a directed message, whose purpose is to formulate and exhibit the public face of the family – their 'essential' character. By their insistence on memory and truth, analogue photographs conform to the conventions of identity narratives. But does the same apply to the digital photo-stream? Do contemporary photographic practices still seek an essence or means of transcending time? If critiques and researchers of digital photographic practices provide a solid basis for hypothesizing on the question, perhaps the examination of personal collections of digital photographs will bring me closer to a possible answer.

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The assumption that the digital photographic medium should be suitable for the composition of identity narratives already suggests that photographs are treated as messages. As Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen point out, "the articulation and understanding of social meanings in images derives from the visual articulation of social meanings in face-to-face interaction" (Kress and Leeuwen, 121). Therefore, if the image is the basic sign of non-verbal communication, the principles of its encoding are understood by producers and prospective viewers alike. Accordingly, any member of a given culture is capable of recognizing and interpreting the address of photographic messages. On this premise, I read photographs as a record of possible modes of interaction between the producers, viewers and the represented subjects of the photographic message. This is mainly done through observations of different subject's reaction to the camera, the various choices of photo-

worthy objects, and the execution of the photograph in terms of framing, distance, and perspective.

Rather than looking into every possible context of use of digital photography, I will focus on representations of leisure events such as parties, outings or vacations. Such choice of theme is justifiable by its popularity among users, as well as the fact that the leisure occasion makes it easier to notice how digital photography has become a way of interacting in the present moment rather than a method of collecting memories. Photographing the experience of 'fun' instead of experiencing it embodies the essential contradiction between the intention and effect of the photographic action, which in seeking to preserve a happy event displaces it. Private collections of celebration photographs also provide an opportunity for closer observation on photographic "performativity" and its effect on identity constitution.

To make the distinctions in the structure of analogue and digital photo-narratives more visible I will begin by comparing the informational value/claims of an early analogue print to that of a digital image as well as the digital sequence it belongs to.

The samples at hand have been selected from the web-site of Lawrence-Franklin Regional Library, John Holly Williams Collection[17] and the personal Flickr account of Pete the great[18]. The first one is a 1947 photograph of Amanda Jane Day's Birthday party (Fig 1). Most likely it was taken by the collector himself - John H. Williams – who was a professional photographer and a cousin of the family. Considering the fact that even as late as the 1940-50s photo-cameras were not yet easily accessible to the wide public, this picture should be sufficient as an example of a representation of an informal family celebration. The second sample picture is a 2007 digital image posted under the tag

[17] http://www.llf.lib.ms.us/LLF/JHWilliams%20Archives/llf-jhwilliams.html#a9
[18] http://www.flickr.com/photos/gustavthree/

Fig. 1: Amanda Jane Day Birthday, about 1947 (10 x 8) (b & w, photograph), http://www.llf.lib.ms.us/LLF/JHWilliams%20Archives/ifg027.jpg

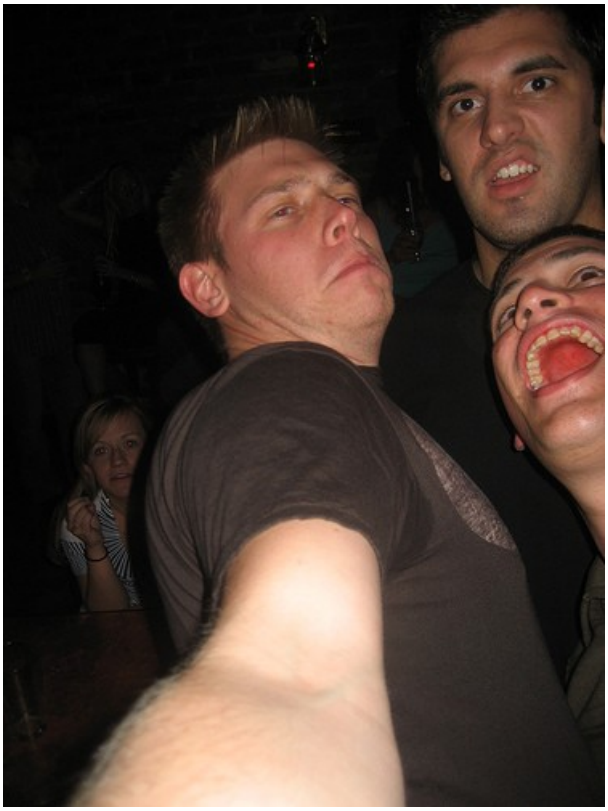

Fig. 2: Photo from the profile of Pete the Great, “Trip Home”, 1 out 114, posted on Flickr, 2007

'party' on Pete's personal, but publicly accessible, Flickr profile. The picture is taken by Pete himself and is one of a sequence of 114 images entitled "Trip Home" (Fig 2).

When seen next to one another, outside of additional visual or textual context, these two images appear strikingly dissimilar. The visual codes are so dramatically different that a person accustomed to looking at photographs from the 1940s may not even be able to recognize that the 2007 image has been taken at a social gathering or celebration of some sort. While the first picture shows a group of about 30 people, neatly lined-up around a long table, most looking at the camera with composed expressions; the second one shows an asymmetrical formation of three young men, whose gestures and facial expressions are too emphatic and demonstrate an array of emotions. The first one can be immediately recognized as a photograph taken at a special family or community occasion, most likely a celebration in honor of the person at the head of the table; while the second one is hard to apprehend or classify in any particular way. If these two pictures are visual messages, what are the differences in their structure or codes of signification, which make one easily accessible and the other almost opaque to an unacquainted viewer?

According to Julia Hirsch, whose work I describe in greater detail in the first chapter, family photography exhibits the familiar "patterns of life and aspiration" already described by the pictorial tradition of the Western world. The Amanda Jane Day's Birthday photograph is another confirmation of Hirsch's claim that photography employs the visual symbolism and style of expression of paintings. Here too the family is represented as "a state whose ties are rooted in property" and "a spiritual assembly which is based on moral values" (Hirsch 15). The table, which is the most salient object on the photograph, laden with all kinds of food and decoration, is undeniably a sign of prosperity and welfare, as well as the solidarity of the family as a self-sustaining economic unit. Whether as a sacrificial offering to the Gods

or a symbol of life, strength and fertility, food is also inseparable part of ancient to present-day celebratory rituals. It is shared with family and friends in honor of existing moral, spiritual and emotional bonds.

Similar to Hirsch who observes the similarities between the visual symbols in paintings and photographs, Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that the image maker's common sense or instinct for visual representation is, in fact, systematic enough to be likened to the grammar of language. According to them, any given image contains a number of representational and interactive relations (Kress and Leeuwen 181). The representational ones (the ideational metafunction) determine the capacity of the picture to refer to "objects and their relations in a world outside of the representational system"; while the interactive ones (the interpersonal metafunction) project the relations between the producers and receivers of the picture (Kress and Leeuwen 40). From the point of view of representation, Jane Day's Birthday photograph is constructed through conceptual patterns of signification, which as defined by Kress and Leeuwen, "represent participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence" (Kress and Leeuwen 79). Thus for instance, the depiction of Amanda Jane Day on her special occasion is achieved through what Kress and van Leeuwen call a symbolic attributive process (a type of conceptual representation). Her identity as the mother of the family is constructed with the help of symbolic attributes such as the presence of her children around her, standing up in a gesture of respect, while she is seated and the dinner table as a traditional symbol of unity, prosperity and celebration. Typically for symbolic attributive processes, human participants are not involved in any particular action, but "just sit or stand there, for no reason other than to display themselves to the viewer" (Kress and Leeuwen 109). Their intention is confirmed by their gaze meeting that of the camera/ potential viewer, thus formulating the interactive

dimension of the image. Here, as Kress and Leeuwen point out, the authors of the image "address their readers in the guise of represented participants" (Kress and Leeuwen 120), whose coded appearance determines the nature of the communicative exchange. On Jane Day's Birthday photograph, for instance, some people, like Jane Day herself and those standing closest to her look directly at the camera in a self-assertive manner; whereas others, who are further away from the birthday lady, look back at her instead. In this way, the more immediate members of the family distinguish themselves by returning the gaze of the viewer, while others take a supporting role as more or less anonymous guests at the party. As Kress and van Leeuwen describe them, the first kind are represented participants who "demand" the recognition of their identity by the viewer, and the second kind are simply "offered" to our attention.

The relationship between the interactive participants (authors and readers of the image) is constructed with the help of other techniques as well. Thus, for example, the ceremonial mood of the photograph is established through a number of paradigmatic choices which determine the distance, perspective and the angle of representation. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the use of central perspective signals an attempt for objectivity and realism, the front angle shows involvement with the object, while the oblique one – detachment. Similarly, the smaller the distance between the object and the camera, the more intimate is the depiction. The camera height is also significant: the view from below (low angle) makes the represented subject look "imposing and awesome", conversely, the high angle makes him/her appear small and insignificant (Kress and Leeuwen 146). Thus, when looking at the Jane Day's Birthday photograph, the central perspective gives the impression that this is a faithful representation of the occasion and the people involved. The Birthday lady, her sons and the table are assigned greater importance by the front angle of the camera, while the

guests lined on the two sides of the table are in oblique angle and many of them cannot even be seen. The distance of the camera, on the other hand, indicates that the photographer does not seek to capture the intimate emotions of Jane Day, but to portray her role and contribution as a mother of the family. Finally, the neutral, eye level view at the group indicates the lack of power difference between the interactive and represented participants.

The analysis of the semiotic structure of the image demonstrates how meaning is constructed on multiple levels. In other words, the immediate accessibility of the visual message is not the result of its capacity to affect the senses. What seems to be its most natural and singular interpretation is, in fact, impressed upon the viewer through the intuitive or conscious use of conventionally established techniques of visual representation. The easy reading of Jane Day's Birthday picture is another confirmation of the fact that traditional analogue photographs conform to standard codes of signification, which give them uniform appearance and structure. Furthermore, the customary presence of a main protagonist and/or significant occasion/plot developed though various processes of conceptual representation still support essentialist claims characteristic for any form of identity narrative.

In comparison, the digital photograph in Fig. 2 does not fit any familiar scheme. Although this is a close shot commonly used in studio portraiture, the three represented participants are not posing for a portrait. The traditional studio portrait, as Hirsch has pointed out, seeks to capture the character, personal worth and dignity of the sitters (Hirsch 85). The grotesque expressions of the subjects in Fig 2 seem to defy such a reading. Clearly, this photograph rather belongs to the honest, spontaneous, and artless candid category, but it contradicts Hirsch's expectations that it should be about process and circumstance (Hirsch 120). The close shot does not lend much information about the event or occasion at which the photograph was taken. The subjects are not caught unassuming while engaged in any

particular activity. The expressions on their faces are too disparate to suggest any unison of feeling or occupation. The fact that they are not surprised by the camera is also apparent in the returned gaze of one of the represented participants, as well as the protruded hand of the man on the left, who seem to be holding the camera himself. Finally, this shot opposes Hirsch's observation that candid photographs are usually edited through selection since " we do not normally keep photographs that show us disarmed by our children, angry with our spouses, and shamed by our parents" (Hirsch 12). This display of what some may see as foolish or absurd grimaces has not been withheld from the sight of strangers probably because it is neither accidental nor considered embarrassing. Yet, what is its representational value? Once it is established that the image at hand is neither a portrait nor a candid photograph, how do we classify it?

Apparently, the representational value of this image is hard to determine, not only because it does not meet the expectations of the traditional viewer, but also because it does not seem to point out the defining characteristics of its referent, neither presents any recognizable external processes. The conceptual patterns of representation present in the traditional family photograph are completely absent here. Rather than attempted description of the participants' "generalized and, more or less, timeless essences", we observe what Kress and van Leeuwen call narrative processes of representation, namely an effort to demonstrate "unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory arrangements" (Kress 59). According to the authors, "the hallmark of a narrative visual 'proposition' is the presence of a vector" created by depicted elements that form diagonal lines of action (Kress and Leeuwen 59). These could be the lines described by stretched limbs or bodies in motion, objects shown in unusual angles, or symbolic indicators of directionality (pointed arrows, linear perspective). In Fig. 2, for instance, such a vector is formed by the hand of the man on

the left, which comes at the viewer in a kind of handshake gesture. His torso, leaning backwards forms another diagonal line parallel to the one formed by the body and up-ward look of his laughing friend. The presence of multiple vectors creates the impression of great dynamism, yet the represented actions are still hard to define since the close shot does not allow enough information about their setting or motivation.

In contrast to its perceived representational weakness, the interactive intention of this digital image is clearly exhibited. Thus, for instance, the tall man in the center is looking directly at the camera. His distorted grimace and somewhat hostile stare are a clear indication that his purpose is to engage the viewer in a hypothetical exchange – to interact, rather than describe. Similarly, the two subjects who look away from the camera as if unaware of it, may appear as what Kress and Leeuwen label the "offer" type of represented participant, yet the close angled view of the stretched arm suggests that the left one is also the photographer. The disorderly, uncontrolled composition of the image adds evidence to this assumption. While the three subjects are barely fitting into the right top corner, parts of their faces cut out, the arm is unnecessarily prominent. If the represented participants coincide with the producers, the image acquires a new meaning and function. The gestures of the subjects can now be interpreted as intentionally theatrical. They pose, as someone who is in control of their self-image and the impression they create (the low angle matching their self-aggrandizing and condescending to the viewer expressions), but also as someone who diminishes their own self-importance and the seriousness of the photographic act through the use of parody. Their emphatic gestures both imitate and denigrate conventional photo-posing. Instead of the well contained smile seen in portraits, one sees an exalted laughter or a disdainful frown, while the dignified composure is replaced by deliberate pompousness.

Fig. 3: Pete the Great, “Trip Home” - party sequence, 5 out of 114, posted on Flickr 2007 http://www.flickr.com/photos/gustavthree/

If the analysis of the isolated digital image demonstrates the predominant presence of interactive processes of signification, the consideration of the same photograph in the context of its digital sequence substantiates it in terms of representation. Impenetrable on its own, the singular image contributes its segment of visual information to the puzzle of the digital stream to formulate a continuous narrative. Meaning surfaces in result of occurring trends and patterns of signification. Thus, for instance, the greater number of photographs allows a glimpse into the setting (See Fig. 3). In the dark background of some of the pictures one can notice that the event is taking place in a public place – most likely a pub. Often images follow one after the other with only a slight difference in content, like the shots in a film, they trace the progression of the ongoing action. People

are drinking and laughing, posing for the camera in groups of 2 to 4 people, often hugging to demonstrate their friendly feelings and the enjoyment of spending time together. In other words, the present visual sequence constitutes the narrative of a party or a celebration of some sort. Similarly, if a particular person appears in most of the photographs, he most likely is Pete the Great – the owner of the profile. The fact that he poses with many different people in succession reveals his intention to collect mementos from all of his friends. In other words, he is the initiator of the photographic act, as well as the intended viewer. Furthermore, as seen in Fig 2, he often takes the roles of both – photographer and subject as he holds the camera himself. Hence, one reaches the conclusion that in the context of party photography the photographer, subject and viewer often coincide, i.e. producer and receiver of the message collapse into one. What then is the purpose of the message? The common view of photography as a means of memory preservation does not seem to provide sufficient explanation of the enormous number of party pictures produced. Party pictures vary insignificantly from one occasion to the next. Looking back at Pete's collection, one discovers that the majority of pictures are close shots of people with intense emotional expressions. Apparently this is a preferred format for both photographer and subject as it allows for closer interaction with the camera/ the potential viewer/ themselves in a future moment. As Kress and van Leeuwen also note - the choice of the close shot suggest an intimate engagement with the represented subjects. The composition confirms once again, that the focus is on the people and their actions – they are usually well centered and the only objects in the image since the flash darkens everything else. Most of them face the camera directly, and those who don't are obviously aware of it since they pose in a similar manner as the rest. The abundance of exaggerated gestures, which appear consistently throughout the party text do not have a fixed meaning. The 'sticking out of the tongue' or the 'screaming

with laughter face' have no stable referents, neither are they a way a person would like to be remembered. Rather, they are an expression of the conventional understanding of 'fun' as a carnival of craziness. And since Pete the Great is sending a message to himself, its purpose should be to present him in a flattering light, namely as a 'fun dude' popular among girls and his many friends. Alternatively, if treated as "demands", the purpose of these images is perhaps to trigger laughter on the part of the viewer, make him/her recognize the implicit joke in representation.

The comparison of a 1947 family celebration photograph with the 2007 party sequence demonstrates the significant distinctions in the codes of representation used by analogue and digital photography. While the first one is primarily conceptual, concerned with general truths and timeless essences; the second one is for the most part narrative – interested in movement, change and transformation. If one is commemorative in purpose and application, the other is more interactive and communicative. In fact, digital streams confirm that the greater the number of pictures, the less conceptual they become. Enjoyment is now derived not from the successful translation of an external truth, but from the apparent discrepancy between spontaneously captured, silly appearances and complex real-life situations. The signification codes employed in consumer analogue photography construct its claim to authenticity. It produces self-narratives, which may transgress objective realism, but still insist on identity and history. Conversely, the digital stream, although narrative in nature, is a complex mosaic of fragments, which characterizes with the real-time continuity of speech or film, but not with the coherent, time-transcending symbolism of the monument. This new mode of self-representation is too frivolous to be concerned with truth and continuity, and too hectic to allow time for the careful composition of a comprehensive identity narrative.

To admit that digital photography constitutes a radically different medium which facilitates the production of alternatively structured self-narratives means to anticipate a substantial transformation in the constitution of contemporary identity as well. The nature of this transformation should be at least partially revealed through a closer observation of the structure of the digital narrative and the process of its production. Furthermore, since digital photography is more interactive than representational and more communicative than commemorative, its intention surfaces in the very act of picture-taking. Thus, the structure of the digital photo-stream has to be examined in relation to the photographic rituals which determine it.

Surprisingly, even the artless, 'stream-of-consciousness' approach of the digital photo-stream produces relatively consistent representational forms. Pete's party sequence, for instance, constitutes a popular among consumers genre with recognizable defining features. These systematically reappear in the profiles of six individual Flickr users randomly selected from a class of pictures tagged with the word PARTY. The content analysis of these profiles showed that the party topic is represented by an average of 22% of all other pictures in users' photo-streams. With few exceptions, users have been excessive in their portrayal of party events, often making pictures which are repetitive and uninteresting to an external observer. About 15% out of the 307 are series of photos of same person/object in very short intervals of time. Their subjects are usually aware of the presence of the camera – 54% of photographs are close shots of people, about 63% of all are posed. This confirms that the great majority of people are actively engaged in the photographic process. (See the table in Fig. 4)

Fig. 4: Table of results from the Content Analysis of 'party' pictures posted on Flickr, 2007

User Name	Number of party pictures	Perspective			Who is taking the picture:		On how many photos do people:		Emotional intensity of the objects:			Number of repetitive photo series
		up to 3 people	panoramic	group photos	self portrait	external observer	pose for the camera	are caught by surprise	calm	emotional	extremely emotional	
l r	154/3531	34/60	16/60	10/60	9/60	51/60	32/60	2/60	13/60	8/60	2/60	9/60
raffmoxtro	7/154	2/7	2/7	3/7	0/7	7/7	3/7	4/7	7/7	0/7	0/7	0
funkymama	508/1200	27/60	21/60	12/60	3/60	57/60	51/60	5/60	13/60	22/60	16/60	12/60
Pete the Great	154/2878	33/60	8/60	19/60	1/60	59/60	28/60	5/60	3/60	8/60	17/60	2/60
Emil S	2312/ 6910	34/60	8/60	18/60	2/60	58/60	40/60	20/60	25/60	30/60	5/60	12/60
rankmaximus	134/383	36/60	10/60	14/60	0/60	60/60	41/60	19/60	19/60	15/60	9/60	12/60
total:	3269	166	65	76	15	292	195	55	80	83	49	47
out of:	15056	307	307	307	307	307	307	307	307	307	307	307
	21.71%	**54.07%**	**21.17%**	**24.76%**	**4.89%**	**95.11%**	**63.52%**	**17.92%**	**26.**	**27.04%**	**15.96%**	**15.31%**

Based on these observations and the preceding detailed examination of Pete's own photo-series one can conclude that in the party genre (but also in general) digital photographs are not taken or posted/ viewed in isolation and will rarely appear outside the context of their original sequence. Every object or occasion requires a run of several shots to ensure that at least one or two are successful. Hence, a party or a day at the beach can be spread over hundreds of photographs. Apparently, the careful planning or staging of shots has been replaced by spontaneity and speed of action, transforming the photographic act into a hunting game. While the resulting sequences are often repetitive and uninteresting they certainly testify to the devoted persistence of their photographers who are deeply absorbed in the photographic process. Ironically, the excess of photographs posted per occasion also shows that little or no editing is involved. Pre-selection is hard not only in the moment of

photographing but also when organizing pictures for future viewing. The general appearance of Flickr and Facebook party and vacation albums confirms that it is easier for users to show all the pictures, rather than choose which ones are worth the attention of others. The great number of produced photos makes them hard to process in a meaningful way. Whether they will be lost and forgotten in computer files or will be posted by the bulk on public web-sites, the casual, almost careless, treatment of digital photos contradicts the great importance assigned to the photographic activity. As it seems, the average digital consumer is more interested in the process that the product of photography.

The structure and meaning of the digital stream, particularly in the context of leisure photography, is also influenced by the fact that producers, represented subjects and receivers of the message generally coincide. The equal involvement of all participants becomes apparent in a number of ways. As the semiotic analysis of Pete's party sequence shows, the choice of frame and composition of photographs is indicative of their interactive intention, but also testifies to the close cooperation between the photographer and those photographed. Represented subjects also take control of the photographic situation by choosing their response to the camera. They can pretend not to notice it or gaze into it intently, strike exaggerated poses or perform complex scenarios. In any case, the choice of reaction defines their self-presentation and the nature of their message to the viewer. In this context, the "joking around" seen in Pete's photographs is a kind of refusal of self-

Fig. 5, Facebook profile picture, 2008

representation through emphasis on the transience of gestures. Conversely, the composed expressions of the girls in Fig 5 demonstrate their desire to identify with the projected image which is structured in the familiar style of celebrity shots. Finally, our interest in controlled self-representation is also captured in photographs, which show the stretched arms of people pointing the camera at themselves as well as photographs of people looking at photographs in their camera viewers. Whether taken by ourselves or others, digital pictures are auto-portraits, which can be instantly deleted if in conflict with idealized visions of self. As photographer, photographed subject, and viewer collapse into one, we can no longer see the difference between the initiator and the bearer of the photographic action or the difference between the sender and the receiver of the message. The digital camera has become a tool for sending messages to oneself – messages which expire almost simultaneously with the 'captured' moment. With this I return to the familiar question: if the digital sequence is not contingent on claims to authenticity and memory preservation is no longer its purpose, what is its impact on identity formation?

In her essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", Judith Butler theorizes on the subject of identity constitution. She begins her discussion with the claim that being a 'lesbian' is always a kind of miming. On the one hand, she notes, this miming aims "a certain performance and production of a "self"" (Butler, CR109). The result of this imitation is the appearance of a complex gendered identity. On the other hand, she reminds us that homosexuals have often been considered imitators, "false copies" of the "authentic heterosexual norm". The product of this second imitation is gender itself. Further on, in her treatment of homosexuality as a copy of a heterosexual model Butler employs Derrida's concept of "mimetic inversion" in order to illustrate the appearance of gender as the "phantasm" of an inexistent original. As she states:

> …gender is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation of its effect. (Butler, CR 110)

But, if gender is performatively constituted through imitation (of a "phantasmatic idealization"), so are the subject and the psyche. Thus, while denying the existence of a subject prior to language or the performance of social stereotypes, Butler also contests the possibility of self-identical and self-expressive psychic interiority:

> The psyche is not "in" the body, but in the very signifying process through which that body comes to appear; it is the lapse in repetition as well as its compulsion, precisely what the performance seeks to deny, and that which compels it from the start. (Butler, CR114)

Admittedly influenced by Derrida, Butler describes identity as an 'iterable' sign – always transferable from one context to the next, reconstituted and sustained in the repetition of itself. Like Derrida's sign, gender, the subject and identity have no original referent, they are imitations of imitations, signs of signs, which only appear and are meaningful within a system of differences, a larger text[19]. Hence, the Self is never fully "self-identical", or autonomous, its existence made possible in the process of différance[20] from various external texts, like gender categories or the 'Other'.

Since gender and identity can be considered the performative effects of repetitive self-mimicry, our act in front of the digital camera, or the photographic ritual altogether,

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[19] According to Derrida, the subject constituted in language and through language emerges through the play of differences in différance. Being is only understood after différance and after language:
"Since Being has never had a "meaning", has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then différance in a certain and very strange way, (is) "older" than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being. When it has this age it can be called the play of the trace. The play of a trace which no longer belongs to the horizon of Being, but whose play transports and encloses the meaning of Being: the play of the trace, or the différance, which has no meaning and is not."(J. Derrida, *Speech on Différance,* Margins of Philosophy , 1982, www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/diff.html)

[20] Derrida describes Différance as "the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general is constituted "historically" as a weave of differences." (from J. Derrida, *Speech on Différance,* Margins of Philosophy , 1982, electronic source: www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/diff.html)

should also be treated as identity constitutive performance. Similar to the lesbian who performs her self via the re-enactment of "lesbian behaviour", every visual persona of the represented participant imitates a core self via the imitation of culturally constructed roles or expressive gestures. And since these are imitations of imitations or signs without original referents, the excessive production of photographic images can be interpreted as an attempt to ensure the successful transference of an "iterable" self from one context to the next, from a present into a future moment. Identity is then realized through its insertion in the specific visual, but also the larger cultural text. Photographs, albeit easy to stage and manipulate, present us with the returned glance of an "external" observer and the instant reassurance in our integrity and social compatibility.

In this process the eye of the camera functions as the critical eye of the internalized other[21] who measures the success of visual impersonations against existing cultural stereotypes. Its embodied presence now competes with that of the actual external other and mediates every interactive gesture which occurs as part of the photographic event. Hence, the photographs I take and view in the process return not the gaze of a live other but the gaze of his/her temporally deferred counterpart. Similarly, the other in presence, instead of reacting to me in the real-time communicative exchange, looks at my photographs and responds to them anticipating the reaction of a future viewer removed from and unacquainted with the current context. Consequently, the live event is not only interrupted, but replaced by the photographic event, which no longer simply witnesses, but constitutes it. Thus, by the interference of photography, the party (or the celebration) itself becomes an imitation of an

[21] Here I refer to Butler's notion of the internal "Other" whom she sees central to the production of the self: "In my view, the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation, a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some "Other". That "Other" installed in the self thus establishes the permanent incapacity of that "self" to achieve self-identity; it is as it were always already disrupted by that Other; the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self's possibility." (Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Decking Out: Performing Identities, ------p. 27)

imitation, or as Benjamin may have phrased it: the “aura”, the unique “presence in time and space” of the live moment is dispelled at first contact with the fact of its own reproducibility as a “work of art”. Once again, if experience itself is an imitation of a photographed experience, identity constituted through the photographic ritual is clearly an ‘iterable’ sign or pure “exhibition value”

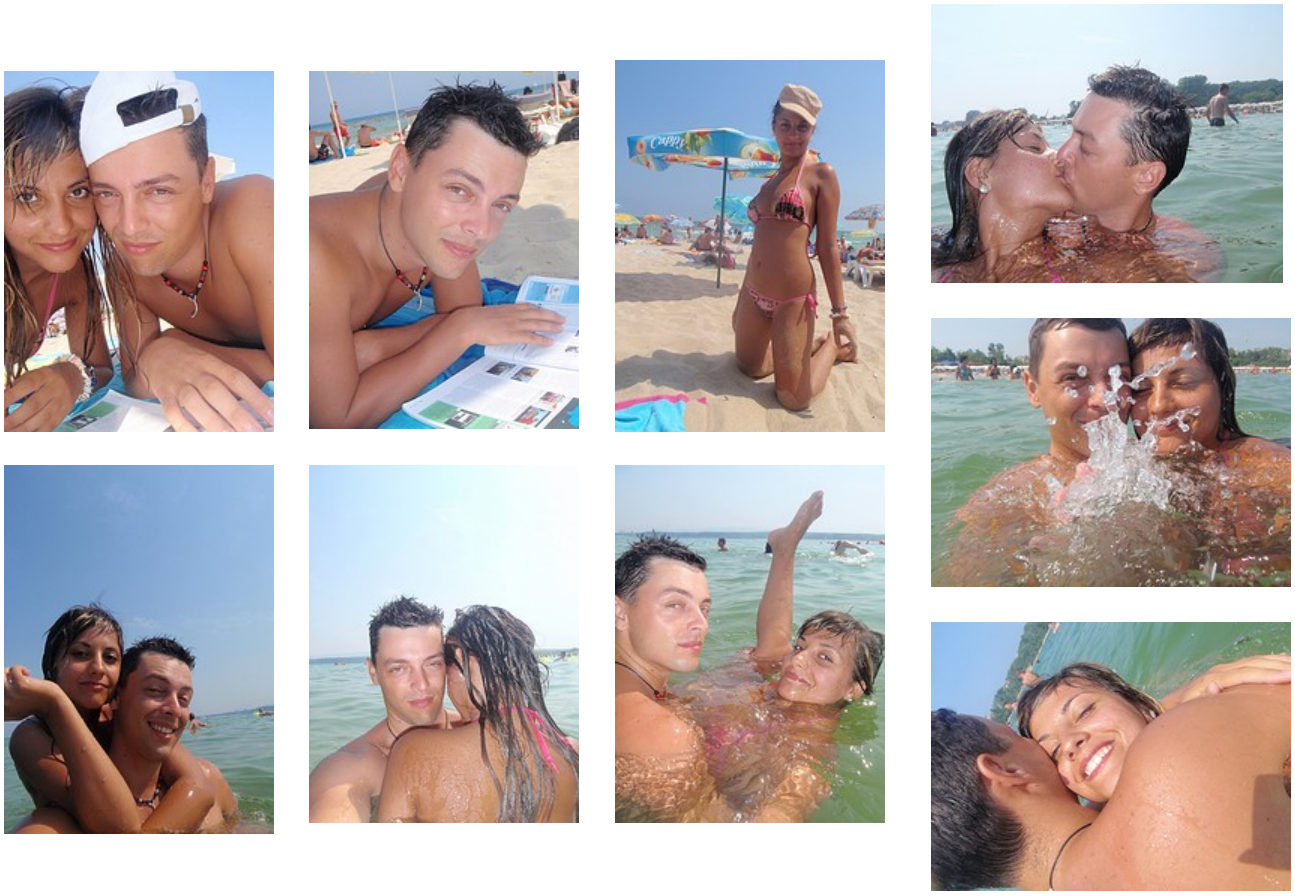

Fig. 6: Emil S, Summer 2008, posted on Flickr, http://www.flickr.com/photos/estoev/

The subject's absorption in the photographic event is very well illustrated by the sequence of photographs posted on Flickr by a couple of lovers on their summer holiday. The countless photographs they have taken of themselves are a very good indication that instead of communicating with each other, they direct their message to an anticipated "external" observer, or better yet, they communicate with each other through the camera. The photographs seem to reassure them in the presence of their love, youth and beauty.

Fig. 7, personal collection, Fall 2008

In addition, the photograph in Fig. 7 demonstrates that the source of the humor is in our anticipation of a future viewer's reaction. Unfamiliar with the dramaturgy of the picture-taking context one may actually imagine that the demonstrated desire to swallow the caterpillar was genuine and promptly satisfied.

Conclusion:

When looking at photographs, one looks for a reason, a meaning, for the hidden force that aligns every past event in a logical progression culminating in that very moment of looking. Photography makes everything seem pre-ordained. Or at least my grandmother's album does. Its well-ordered segments compose a story, a visual monument of past times and people erected on the symbolic coherence of old photographs. The photographs' tangible presence and artful design needs to be regarded with careful attention, because they were meant to be looked at, and meant to be read.

But I haven't, in a long while, looked at photographs in order to reflect or remember. We don't look at pictures any more, instead we make them. My grandmother finally stopped printing every digital picture we send her by email. Yet, not before she has completed a full-size wall-paper in her living room entirely composed of the smiling faces of her immigrant children and grandchildren. It took her time to realize that pictures cannot be treated in the "customary" way any more. In contrast to the memorable, carefully staged photograph of former times, the digital ones come in endless series of mostly uninteresting or accidental glimpses of trivial daily occurrences and things. Their purpose is not remembering, not the preserving of a sentiment, or a cherished person's face. More fleeting than the passing moment, these are not photographs burdened with the task to re-present the essence of a thing in its absence. Rather, they need to be discarded and forgotten as fast as they were made. Photography has become a new tool for real-time communication or better yet a nervous

compulsion triggered by the inability to absorb the innumerable possibilities of a post-modern consumerist world. In the same vein, Sontag maintains that the photographic urge to appropriate reality is a hysterical impulse, which recognizes its own futility:

> Our oppressive sense of the transience of everything is more acute since cameras gave us the means to "fix" the fleeting moment. We consume images at an ever faster rate and, as Balzac suspected cameras used up layers of the body, images consume reality. Cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete. (Sontag, OP, 179)

In fact, the obsession with digital photography has completely dissolved the distinction between the live occasion and the photographic event. Our fixation on the reproduction of experience empties it out of its assumed content, and renders it an imitation of an imitation – an illustrative shell which can be reactivated in every new context.

Photography, once equated with memory, has completely lost its melancholic air and now parades as a form of improvisational theatre, where performers coincide with directors and audience. Everybody is a skilled participant: equally engaged in the creative process, equally literate in the writing and reading of visual signs. Placed in the hands of the mass-consumer, the digital camera has transformed post-modern ideas of the performative nature of identity into common sense. However, if experience cannot be repossessed through photographs, how about the self? Submerged in the high-speed stream of digital stimuli, the contemporary subject has no time for the composition of a coherent self-narrative. The unlimited control we have over the single digital photograph is power exercised over the fragment rather than the whole. So, do the new awareness and gained control over self-representation bring us freedom or throw us back into primordial chaos?

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Links to studied Flickr photographs:

http://www.flickr.com/photos/gustavthree/	Pete the great
http://www.flickr.com/photos/lr/	l r
http://www.flickr.com/photos/rankus/	rankamaximus
http://www.flickr.com/photos/estoev/	Emil S
http://www.flickr.com/photos/funkymama/	funkymama
http://www.flickr.com/photos/raffmoxtro/	raffmoxtro