SNAPSHOT AESTHETICS: FROM EVERYDAY LIFE TO ART AND VICEVERSA

Abstract
This article focuses on how techniques and aesthetics influenced the genesis of the ‘snapshot style’ in the late 19th century. Snapshot photography was to be seen as not just ‘technological painting’ but rather a means of establishing an aesthetic relationship with the world, a performative (yet autobiographical and individual) experience, a technological tool fostering a conceptual immersion in the perception of reality. This idea became useful in the transition to later developments in digital photography. It allows us to overcome the dualism of instant/truth vs. pose/fiction, which does not accurately represent the complexity of photographic practice, and to understand that it would be superficial to ascribe to the snapshot the responsibility of being a transmitter of truth. Rather, this contribution tackles the question in a non-stereotyped way by confirming photography’s specificity in the relational and performative nature of its practice. This specificity is a royal road to telling stories about the world, through instant shots or pose aesthetics according to individual authors’ poetics. The article concludes by focusing on the relationship between ‘selfie storytelling’ and artists’ attitude in the 1990s, when the private and participatory aspect became a hallmark, and the family album became a common symbolic reference. A comparison of two authors, Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson, serves to describe the transition from the desire to memorise a life through sharing a collection of images of family albums to experiencing a life by constructing an identity through images that can constantly be altered.

Keywords
Snapshot; mass culture; visual studies; selfie storytelling.

1. SNAPSHOTS: A QUESTION OF TECHNIQUE VERSUS AESTHETICS

The first use of the term snapshot is attributed to Sir John Herschel, a cultured Englishman of the Victorian period as well as a photography enthusiast, who commented on “the possibility of taking a photograph, as it were, by a snap-shot”.1 This term, first used in this pioneering manner, lends itself well to the idea of a fast, immediate shot, ready to capture subjects at the click of a shutter.2 One of the most annoying limitations of

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1 The word ‘snapshot’ was primarily a hunting term referring to a quick shot, taken with no particular preparation. The first precise use of the term in a photographic context refers to the pioneer sir John Herschel in an brief essay published for The Photographic News (11 May 1860). It is also possible that Herschel echoed a report in which Thomas Skaife used the word ‘to snap’ in order to describe the features of his Pistolgraph Camera in The British Journal of Photography (1 July 1859). See J. Hannavy, ed., Encyclopaedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography, London: Routledge, 2005, 1277.

earlier photography techniques was precisely the length of time needed for the pose; this was due mainly to the lack of photosensitivity in the materials used and to lenses which afforded little light, significantly conditioning the subjects and thus limiting the range of objects in the world that were ‘photographable’. The experimenters in the early days of photography used new patented techniques, but lacked the technology that was needed in order to capture an ‘instance of reality’.

Many years, a great deal of experimenting and attempts and failures were to go by before this took place and before the snapshot could actually contribute to immobilizing the passage of time, freezing time in an eternal instant, as it were. It has been observed that technology in the form of the physical device and the materials are a determining factor in shaping forms of culture indeed. The snapshot provides precisely such an opportunity to demonstrate how these dimensions mutually affected and influenced each other in a dialectically fluid and non-deterministic manner. The origins of a snapshot aesthetics did not simply coincide with the result of new technologies but with the socio-cultural transformations and the capability of the technologies to satisfy the ‘desire of the masses’. So that what has been defined as the ‘snapshot’ did not simple coincide with the introduction of silver bromide gelatine around 1880, thanks to which the ‘instant photograph’ was finally possible, but with a radical evolution in costumes, behaviours and ways of life. Despite having overcome the restrictions caused by having to pose immobile and the time needed to complete a photograph, society was not yet ready to fully exploit these opportunities. Although ‘technically’ the potential for using snapshot photography was already in place, for many years it remained solely a passing passion for aspiring artists or for curious aristocrats, and was in no way ready to be exploited by the general public. This step was to take place in the years that followed. A critical passage in the technical evolution of photography was to prepare the ground for a revolution in customs and behaviour and for the spread of the snapshot style photograph.

Despite the unpredictable success of the carte-de-visite patent by Eugène Disdéri in 1854 (a patent that subsequently reduced the price of printing, spreading the fashion of portrait photography), a professional studio was nevertheless still required to take photographs. The revolution brought about by George Eastman’s 1888 Kodak patent led to the concrete possibility of a user-friendly form of photography that was within everybody’s reach. It was no longer just the professional, or those who were familiar with the complicated optical and chemical techniques, who were able to take photographs: thanks to Kodak, now even the amateur could take up a camera and ‘be a photographer’ with an easy-to-use, manageable device that could be carried around everywhere during the course of people’s everyday lives. Interestingly, this clearly demonstrates that technical innovation, although important, is not a fully determining factor in constructing a ‘snapshot aesthetics’.

For such changes to come about, and for a new social identity to emerge as a result of these new technologies, a favourable social and cultural framework is needed, coinciding with the expectations, needs and desires of the general public for new technologies and new practices. What does not generally emerge clearly in studies on the origin of mass photography was already around 1850 the preparation of emulsions from gelatine began to be used in photography, especially towards the Seventies. This was possible after a number of technical developments (especially the ‘dry gelatine’ technique proposed by R.L. Maddox in 1871) had taken place and also as a result of it being sold, see I. Zannier, Storia e tecnica della fotografia, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1982, 55; C. Chéroux, Il gioco dei dilettanti, in Storia della fotografia [2007], edited by A. Gunthert, M. Poivert, Milano: Electa, 2008, 265-258.
of the snapshot, is that it was the changes in the collective habits – enormous changes in the habits, uses and consumption in the leisure time of a new bourgeois society that took place at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries – that led to photography no longer being considered a quick way to produce ‘paintings’, but as a tool to memorize and archive a person’s subjective life-story as a determining feature in the construction of collective identities. The snapshot soon became a fashion item among the bourgeoisie, an entertaining hobby for a new society that enjoyed experimenting with new forms of collective ‘ritual’ and leisure time (holidays and travel), as the very same Kodak advertising no doubt recognized: their advertisements targeted tourists, women, travellers and families. Indeed, soon after, the Polaroid camera began to significantly influence the 20th century collective imagination. We see thus that the expression ‘the snapshot’ is not as straightforward as it might seem, but needs further clarification as to what Richard Chalfen has called the ‘Kodak Culture’.

This reflection, which later becomes useful in the transition to subsequent developments in digital photography, further illustrates this aspect and highlights the point that photography was not to be seen simply as a ‘technological painting’, but rather as a means through which to establish an aesthetic relationship with the world, a performative experience, a technological tool favouring a conceptual immersion in the perception of reality that was the aim of photography right from the beginning of its 19th century origins. A machine, automatic, independent, easy to use: it is precisely these features that become its hallmark. It is only by distancing itself from the aura of the artistic process in the traditional sense of the word – difficult and elitist, complex and special – that photography acquires a new mode of identity and at the same time becomes a tool which is a symbol of the contemporary era and the “desire of the masses”. Thus, it is its pragmatic features, its being accessible and usable as an “art medium”, that renders photography a means through which to highlight its nature and thus the possibility of relating it to the experience of the world.

However, it should be noted that this is not an exclusive prerogative of instant photography, as we shall see later. The spread of the snapshot mode in photography at the end of the 19th century very clearly illustrates precisely how the experiential and performative aspect is central to its philosophy. And if in the first family and non-professional snapshot experiences an instinctive lack of style or a ‘non-style’ was followed, allowing people to take pictures freely with little regard for technicalities, then paradoxically its natural evolution led precisely to a more stylized result. One might say that art lent to photography a ‘linguistic awareness’, reformulating it within well-defined poetic parameters.

A practice that presents itself as being for the masses, for everybody, necessarily implies a lowering of the threshold of perfectionism and technical-linguistic skill: the “shot fired without considering too carefully the aim” is the dictionary definition of ‘snapshot’ and already alludes to a dimension of freedom, of being ‘grammarless’, that does not worry about visual codes or formal stereotypes, that does not trust to technology its raison d’être. At the peak of 19th century Pictorialism, photography was still im-

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A practice such as the snapshot is quintessentially private, amateurish, family-based and autobiographical with a natural interest in reality ‘as it is’ – a statement of banality and imperfection. A far cry from the ambitious art projects of early photography and from the rivalry with artistic expression, the snapshot style instinctively managed to satisfy the needs and the styles that were to find expression in 20th century art. It’s also important to underline the coincidence between the developments of the photographic era with the emergence of an ever individualistic society. The private and autobiographic aspect of pictures will become one of the main topics of photography mass appeal, and such fascination will increase thanks to the digitization of the photographic technique.

2. Instant/Truth versus Posing/Fiction

Regarding the question of photography as a means to obtain a special and privileged relationship with the world, on the understanding that the mass, amateur late 19th century snapshot style is precisely such an experience, we need to explain better what we mean when we speak of ‘snapshot’. Do we focus on the photographer’s attitude towards the world? Or more on the characteristics and the nature of the subject? Or maybe both? Are we referring to everything that happens before the shot in the mind and in the manner of the photographer? Or in the entire shooting phase – which in turn can be either reflective and slow or immediate and instinctive – reproducing clichés and poses or reproducing the ungrammatical and casual? It is deliberately casual, as we have said before, because it is important to emphasize that the coordinates instant/truth and pose/fiction are only two of many possible positions in the poetics of a single author and cannot be evaluated in absolute terms. Just as one can claim that the impulsive element of a photo shot, made possible by lowering of threshold of technical complexity, usually a result of wanting to capture life in its immediacy, are ways to come closer to the real world, to distance oneself from artificial linguistic constructions (although the danger of resorting to visual stereotypes remains), on the other hand authors like August Sander or Diane Arbus show that this is possible also following an opposite way. They show it focusing precisely on the ‘mask’ and the time-consuming element as a necessary choice to be able to capture the most profound essence of the photographed subject, an essence that only a rapport and representation embodying ‘distance’ brings about through a kind of epiphany. Diane Arbus’s work in particular, sometimes erroneously classified as a snapshot style poetics, is a good example of how intimate relationships with the photographed subjects and ‘unique appearance’ (to quote Benjamin) provide an appearance

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of truthfulness of the same subjects\textsuperscript{10}. In the pioneering work of portrait photographers, it is precisely Walter Benjamin who identifies – in the forced slowness of early technology – that which grows “with and inside the image”, not catapulted outside it but rather “internally collapsed”\textsuperscript{11}.

Thus, despite being a novel element in American photography and privileging anonymous and banal subjects similar to the ‘snapshot style’, Arbus’ portraits have a pioneering element to them: the disorientated subjects are always immobile, suspended in a timeless atmosphere, their gaze is fixed on the camera and they wait patiently for the shot. Arbus’ photographs manifest people’s personal failures\textsuperscript{12}. She suggests that “A picture is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know”\textsuperscript{13}. In fact, after a brief fascination with Henri Cartier Bresson’s \textit{decisive moment}, she took distance from this because “there are no decisive moments to reveal the self”\textsuperscript{14}.

It is evident, thus, that this dualism (instant/truth and pose/fiction) does not accurately represent the complexity of the practice of photography, that committing to the snapshot the responsibility of being a transmitter of truth would be superficial, and that it would be extremely simplistic to propose this as a question in need of an absolute answer or one that is always true.

The only real way to address the question in a non-stereotyped manner is to confirm the specificity of photography in the relational and performative nature of its practice. This specificity is a privileged way to the storytelling of the world which is followed by instant shots or pose aesthetics according to the individual authors’ poetics, as it is natural. In her reading of Charles Sanders Peirce’s taxonomy of the indexical nature of the photographic sign, Rosalind Krauss doesn’t only analyse the relationship between referent and image from the point of view of production, but also in a conceptual sense when she highlights that special ‘in presence of’ condition that sustains in a triadic unity the rapport between photographer, camera and photographed. The special condition of the photographic sign, as a direct recall and presentation of reality, allows Krauss to establish a deep relationship between index, photograph and \textit{ready-made} (as introduced by Marcel Duchamp): something directly linked to the experience of the real and physically produced by the referent and its conceptual re-presentation\textsuperscript{15}.

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\textsuperscript{10} Antonino Paraggi, an amateur photographer and the protagonist of one of the stories \textit{Adventures (Avventure)} in the short story collection \textit{Difficult Loves (Gli amori difficili)} by Italo Calvino, after overcoming his scepticism and approaching photography, he eventually rejects photography’s hallmark of linguistic specificity and eventually re-evaluates the ‘truth value’ of the ‘mask’: “He had to follow the opposite path: aim at a portrait completely on the surface, evident, unequivocal, that did not elude conventional appareance, the stereotype, the mask. The mask, being first of all a social, historical product, contains more truth than any image claiming to be ‘true’” (I. Calvino, “The Adventure of a Photographer” [1958], in \textit{Difficult Loves} [1970], Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983, 46).

\textsuperscript{11} W. Benjamin, \textit{Breve storia della fotografia} [1931], Torino: Einaudi, 1966, 64-65.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 111. About the \textit{decisive moment} poetics and the dualism instant/truth and pose/fiction, how would we define the long wait that allowed Alfred Stieglitz to recover ‘moments of truth’ and ‘performative relations’ with the city of New York in his celebrated \textit{Snow on Fifth Avenue}? or Henri Cartier-Bresson’s hiding places where he waited, often for a long time and in perfect equilibrium, for the \textit{decisive moment}, the moment of epiphany?

3. SELFIE STORYTELLING

What has changed in snapshot photography after the introduction of digital technology? And in what way has art benefitted from the current social and technological changes?

From the end of the 19th century, the authors who have exploited the idea of narrating the spontaneity of real life by using the snapshot style, making a tribute to a private memory storage and to the family album collections, represent three important eras of the history of photography and contemporary visual culture: the first, which occurred during the transition from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, corresponds to the explosion of the snapshot style with the Italian photographer Count Giuseppe Primoli and the French photographer Jacques Henri Lartigue. The second is represented by the watershed exhibition “New Documents” organized by John Szarkowski at Moma in New York in 1967 and its representative emblem of the new American frontier of photography with Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand.

Whilst the third and last phase coincides with the late 20th century generation (that sees the beginning of the digital era), beginning with a ‘veteran’ like Nan Goldin and ending with younger authors such as Wolfgang Tillmans and Terry Richardson. Between the periods represented by Giuseppe Primoli and that of Terry Richardson many things changed, but the basic idea of looking at the world, in its banal and anonymous guise, and then adopting a more liberal and anticlassical attitude through which to approach the subject is something these two authors have in common, as have other authors who address the snapshot concept. But if one had to choose which element – beyond that which has so far been described as typical of a definable style such as the freedom the snapshot form gives the user, the banality of the subjects, the sense of immediateness and of narration in real time – that is maintained, indeed is incremented, in the digital era, that element could be identified as a more autobiographical tendency towards personalization and self-narration that becomes predominant in the poetics of the authors of the 1990s till today. This feature was present as an ‘idea’ right from the beginning of the snapshot era: as mentioned, it is precisely due to the new forms of experiencing the private domain of life (hobbies, travelling, parties, and recreation) that the so-called snapshot photography suddenly became habitual, a collective ritual.

Although it is undoubtedly the “private aspect” that predominates the practice of photography, it is also true that the pervasiveness of photography in its multimedia expressions typical of the digital era (defined by Martin Hand as the state of “ubiquitous photography”) has rendered this idea a kind of extended and narcissistic selfie.

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16 We have already mentioned Diane Arbus’ borderline snapshot style in the “New Documents” exhibition next to Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. Indeed, it is the editor himself who draws attention to the differences in style and sensibility between these authors. For Szarkowski the three authors of “New Documents” were the representative emblem of the new American frontier of photography that took its cue from the historical 1958 work of Robert Frank, The Americans, thus proposing a new way of looking at reality with courage and determination but without resorting to sentimentalism.


storytelling. Every social relation and experience is increasingly tied to and mediated through visual processes; the digital culture has rendered visual technologies omnipresent, deeply influencing everyday rites and habits. In other words, since the practice of photography became a continuous experience it has increased the need to manifest its self-presentation, either in the form of a self-portrait (notably the selfie) or as a more sublimated presence insofar as that which becomes the object of attention is the life, the people, habits and experiences of those who physically take the photo. This emerges clearly in what the American Jean-Marie Twenge defined as the generation me – a generation raised with the drive for a continuous need for self-representation and narcissism encapsulated by the satisfaction of instantaneous sharing of that need with the digital community selected as their virtual spectators. In art, as mentioned, this attitude prevails with the generation of artists from the 1990s, but what is certain is that its hallmark participatory aspect, which led to the family album becoming a common symbolic reference, becomes stronger and is brought to an extreme in the digital era. In this way images of lives from the private sphere photographed and displayed from every point of view, even sordid or violent such as in the famous Self-Portrait. A Month After Being Beaten by Nan Goldin, rise to the status of public objects, claiming that the gaze towards the lives they re-presented becomes a global concept (in terms of addressees, geographical positions and temporal use). This lack of privacy becomes an immense, instant autobiographical ‘digitalscape’, of which we find an example in Terry Richardson’s Diary on his official website. Indeed, “advertising of the private” was for Roland Barthes already a key feature through which to define the advent of the photographic era and it was given further stimulus through digital technology, the scope of which could not have been predicted at the time.

The persistent presence of video-cameras inserted in mobile phones has undoubtedly altered our way of accessing photography which has gone from being a planned and deliberate practice – at least to some degree – to a condition in which it is always potentially possible to take photographs, as a kind of “present extensive”. The essential feature which has not been affected is that of being a direct ‘witness’ to the world, which continues to be a determining element in the photographic process and where the new “camera phones open up new, mundane areas of life for photography” in the sense that photography encompassed in the mobile or other digital instruments has significantly extended the concept of what is important or interesting to photograph and therefore to communicate to others.

Regarding the factors that led to the emergence of the snapshot style at the end of the 19th century, in this same way the postmodern condition has found the most appropriate technological means, through digital technology, to provide a cultural and social

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process in evolution with a visual demonstration and testimony of its new nature. A society that is increasingly exhibitionist and tied to a personality cult (that began to emerge precisely in the Victorian era), felt the urgent need to connect art and life and, in so doing, to render us all synchronized spectators of a performance in real time. As spectators, we are able to question the concept of visibility and – especially – redefine the relationship between private and collective memory. The construction of this relational process between life, art and spectators maintained the basic idea of immediacy, ‘operative freedom’ and ‘ungrammaticality’ as its founding tenets (as we see in Richardson’s famous portraits with red eyes).

Although many predicted the ‘death of photography’ with the coming of the digital age, it is interesting to note what José Van Dick, building on one of Susan Sontag’s intuitive ideas, has described as the transition from the analogic to the digital function of memory that photography has always embodied. What we see today is precisely that, alongside memory, photography has acquired an enormous significance and a steadily growing function peculiar to itself, to photography, namely to communicate a process of identity construction: “Indeed, a younger generation seems to increasingly use digital cameras for ‘live’ communication, instead of storing pictures of ‘life’”. It is a form of identity construction that is continuously subject to the effects of morphing, that favours immediate availability and facilitates tools aimed at modifying and reshaping one’s own image within a culture that has by now encapsulated the manipulation of the self as a common social practice. But this is precisely one of the transitions that demonstrates the generational change referred to above, namely the use of photography that passes from being a family practice based on the individual and sharing objects of memory, to sharing experiences and urging interaction rather than stimulating reflection and a passive gaze. Memorization does not therefore disappear but assumes different forms, constantly more similar to the functioning of a database, as discusses above. The more emotional the content, the less important the formal aspects and the shared visual constructs become. Compared to the static storage of memory, in which each picture is once defined, fixed and forced to a passive fruition, the database is typical of a behaviour of permanent interrelation and manipulation. The database is a living organism in which the visual information is always changing and where, despite to the traditional photographic combine printings, the digital construction of identity (morphing) is simple and quick. In this way the database allows one to create a parallel life giving rise to one of the main reasons for the big success of the private photography in social media. So digitization is not the cause of a changing memory’s process, but “the digital camera derives its revamped application as a memory tool from a culture in which manipulability and morphing are commonly accepted conditions for shaping personhood”, and most of all:

“Flexibility and morphing do not apply exclusively to picture as shaping tools for personal memory, but more generally to bodies and things.”

Coming back to the aesthetic dimension, and in particular to the last decades of the 20th century in which the dimension of art is linked to an autobiographical participation and individual presence, it is possible to focus the attention on artists who show their generation gap through the analogic/digital passage (both socio-cultural and technological). This is the case of Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson, who have in common the idea to arrange a family album one has to virtually leaf through, even if their poetics are very different in addressing the subject (shooting, shot, looking at the pictures), in their different personal and professional trajectory, but also in their different positions toward photographic representation and fruition. In *The ballad of sexual Dependency* (1986) or in *I’ll be your Mirror* (1992), Nan Goldin substantially wants us to empathize with her delicate and dramatic memory storage, the emotional narration of her own life by means of isolated episodes in which each image, independently, describes her world, while in the Terry Richardson’s *Terryworld* we see a live communication, a constant and compelling flow of photographs of the same object that tend to be semantically uniform. Thus, if we were to eliminate one link in the flow of communication, nothing substantial is lost, it remains an enormous visual autobiographical mosaic communicated moment by moment.

As in Cesare Zavattini’s dream of constant shadowing, everyone can follow Richardson’s life at any given moment, even that most banal and apparently insignificant moment that is incessantly photographed or immediately posted on the Net. Thus, when comparing the work of Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson, we see a transition from the desire to *memorize a life* through sharing a collection of images of family albums to *experiencing a life* by constructing an identity through images that can constantly be altered. What is lost, however, is the single image in favour of an overall visual communication based on the experience of “micro-cultures of everyday life” in real time: a photographic evolution that, sustained by technology, satisfies new modes of social communication. The intensification of that dimension – relationship and experience – is one of the central elements of snapshot poetics: “Digital memory […] collapses the assumed distinction between modern ‘archival’ memory and traditional ‘lived’ memory by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand and of presence and interactivity on the other.”

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31 van Dijck, “Digital Photography”: 70.
32 van Dijck illustrates an example of the juxtaposition of practices of the modern digital image with the ‘old’ illustrated postcards. The postcards were a way to maintain contacts, but once the function of keeping contact no longer existed, they were usually thrown away.