

Photographs: Their Value to the Individual

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**Abstract**

Individuals encounter a phenomenon when observing photographs that enable them to relive and immerse themselves in the moment that the images depict, in a way no other media can achieve. A photograph thus holds a value to individuals unattainable by any other standard of illustration. Due to this attribute, photography has become integrated into daily life, as individuals invest in the memories it can capture so accurately and instantly. This paper explores the phenomenon by confronting the history, use in culture, and interpretations of photographs according to anthropologists and photography experts and amateurs alike.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Photographs are often found framed, hung on walls, or placed in living and workspaces. Whether it is a portrait of a loved one, a photo of a family grouped in front of the house, or even a sunset over the horizon with its brilliant colors and fading rays – all paused in the flat second dimension of space. Since its invention, photography has been a means of providing a copy of a moment in the documentary form of an image. It has served as a form of art, of communicating, of documenting, and other genres of expression throughout the world and in history. Black and white or color, digital or film, photographs and the ability to take them appear in homes and the hands of individuals more and more as advancements in the field develop.

The contemporary age has given just about everyone access to photography. The convenience of taking a picture to capture moments and relive the experience over and over is now in the individual's hand; smartphone cameras have adapted to produce the most refined experience ever. Companies like Apple and Samsung market the camera and display capabilities of their devices above all other components, knowing that customers are most interested in this particular feature. Countless apps and software are available on these devices that enable individuals to further edit, process, and polish off their photographs to their heart's content.

Today photography is widespread. It is essential. It is ingrained in the minds of today's generations that they use it. If there is no picture of a party or two friends together, it did not happen. Image-orientated apps like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and more have given way to making photography a part of everyday life in media-obsessed societies. Likewise, pictures keep us informed of what is happening in

each other's lives. Twenty-first century lives have a startling chunk of their time dedicated to taking pictures and communicating through them, as well as a huge amount of digital storage space dedicated to saving images to look back at. In a way, much like a digital scrapbook.

Smartphones, cameras, and editing software are the technical focus of photography. The emotional and psychological aspects are the true driving force of what keeps people investing their money and attention to photographs. The companies mentioned beforehand invest in giving individuals exactly



**Figure 1:** Among other uses, photographs have become a means of reliving a moment and experience, or preserving memories – such is the case with the two lovers pictured above. Photograph by Autumn Nicole Walker (2018).

what they want – the ability to re-experience something beautiful again and again.

Whether photographs appear in frames on walls, or in the photo albums on smartphone camera rolls, people are driven to keep taking them and having them there to revisit now and again. As they are more ingrained in personal lives on social media, photos serve as

visual storytelling for people today. With an increasing role in social lives, the need for photographs becomes almost insatiable. This study will observe the close relationship between an individual and a photograph, revealing the value it imposes on an individual and beauty of a moment. Photography, as we use it today, serves us to relive an experience.

The role of photography spans back to its original discovery in the 1800s, and has since grown in use for society. There is a clear contrast between its need and demand among individuals up until the current century. One cause for explanation is that the process is deemed long, involved, and very intricate to develop a photograph. Another is that cameras were not as widespread as they are today, and even fewer people knew how to operate them (or had the patience to for that matter).

While in use, cameras were often employed to document portraits for individuals. People regarded photographs with awe as much as they do today, and so were eager to have the likeness captured on film. The role of photographs in a way replaced traditional portraiture by painting, as they were seen as the closest representation to the truth and likeness of a person/scene as possible. Still a new concept to mankind, artists were the main pioneers of photography, who regarded as the newest medium for expression. They began experimenting by photographing things of interest they encountered.

Another point of interest among experimenting photographers became the documentary purposes of a photograph. It would be put to use as a means for people to start seeing the world in ways they could not. A photograph displayed moments and foreign concepts to many as photographers brought to light many things unseen or

overlooked by society. During large-scale events, it communicated what the photographer witnessed to the population.

Photography has gained momentum since its invention. While at one time it served as a documentary process for those learning with the camera, it has become rooted



**Figure 2:** 'Brick Factory' - documentary photograph of a man stacking red bricks in Nepal for National Geographic. Photograph by Narayan Maharjan (2018).

in routine life as a very familiar concept to individuals. What purposes it serves today can be traced back to its original usage, as people have expanded on the power photographs have over individuals. What influence it imposes on individuals lies in its very nature as a paused moment in time, and of course, the

appearance of truth.

Photographs serve a semblance of the truth to people in a way that words and other forms of illustrations cannot. For that reason, people connect with them on such a level that is unaware even to them. This is the primary observation that will be explored in this paper. Because of this unexplained tie to something as simple as a photograph, people have become accustomed to taking and sharing more and more pictures as the ability to take them is available.

The twenty-first century age utilizes photographs in a much more involved way than the past; over the centuries since their introduction, photographs have become a

means of communication between individuals. The popular websites dominating social media today like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and others all encourage individuals to post photos as often as they can to share the good times with others. This drive to share photos has become a habit to keep friends and others updated with ongoing aspects of an individual's respective life. People have taken a liking to use this to connect with their family and friends – a service that was not available just ten years ago. This is the case which writer, filmmaker, and political activist Susan Sontag recognized as early as 1970s. In her book published in the same year, Sontag (1977) remarks, “Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted” (p. 24). Companies like Apple and Samsung, as well as the websites mentioned above contribute to what Sontag describes, effectively fulfilling her prediction of society by driving individuals to immerse themselves further into the experience.

Just as nice as it is to share moments and keep friends updated, individuals have made it an indulgence to constantly take more photos, polish them with vibrant and livening filters, and then post onto an app. As mentioned above, pictures are seen as embodying the truth. And in this case, the use of a photograph by individuals becomes more of proving something to others that they want them to think or know. Which, at this point, one may argue they are not posting a photograph to assert *the* truth, but *a* truth. But, as entranced as ever by photographs and the moments they illustrate, people engage regardless.

Photographs have always been valued as the verification of truth by photographers and those who engage with them alike. It reigns as one of the most

engaging reasons why people are so fascinated by the nature of photographs. Likewise, they enable individuals to revisit the paused moment framed within a photograph. In the current and contemporary era, the role of photographs has stretched to sharing and communicating between individuals. Society itself has seen an almost obsessive inclination to posting them around for others to assert themselves.

### **Definitions**

In this paper, some terms relative to the subject of photography are used. Below they are listed for convenience, with their definitions offered to enable readers to follow along with ease.

- Composition – the structure of visual elements in a photograph, including color, shape, form, subjects, and the like.
- Daguerreotype – an early form of photograph developed over a long exposure period.
- DSLR – Digital Single-Lens Reflex, or a digital camera that uses digital imaging and memory storage as opposed to film.
- Portrait – a photograph, usually of a face, illustrating a person and embodying his or her likeness.
- Punctum – Latin term and as used in the context of photography and in this paper by Roland Barthes, refers to the detail of a photograph that leaves viewers with a lasting impression.
- Studium – Latin term and as used in the context of photography and in this paper by Roland Barthes, refers to any element of a photograph that initially engages viewer (i.e. color, background, pose etc.).



- Fibonacci Sequence – a spiraling pattern in the image that begins with a prominent detail and carries attention throughout the rest of the image.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The literature review serves to address background information on photography, enabling readers to follow each section with ease and also construct a bigger picture of the topic. These sources observed below are those that introduce critical overviews for the body of the research. It is divided up by first presenting a history of the subject of photography. The second section will include research on examining what a photograph conveys to the individual. The following sections directly examine the relationship between this higher meaning and the individual to determine the value held by photographs.

### **Historical Overview of Photography**

If one were to examine human history as a whole, photography is most certainly a recent invention. Naomi Rosenblum (2007), author of *A World History of Photography*, affirms the year 1839 is most notable, for it boasted the innovation of photography (p. 15). An early form of the camera produced basic photographs taken over hours and hours of exposure time. Regardless of the primitive quality, people were awestruck with the potential they posed. For the first time, a true picture could be produced without pencils and ink, or paints and canvases. Many of these were experiments with landscapes, architecture, and basically anything an individual found interesting enough to share with the world. Over the decades and centuries that followed, the process of taking better photographs developed rather quickly. In this time, photographers emerged and were employed to take portraits for documentary purposes and for those who wished to have

the simple pleasure of their pictures taken. Photographic portraits were viewed as close to the truth of an individual's likeness that a painting could never again capture, outside an artist's rendition of paint and interpretation of truth and color. It is also critical to mention



**Figure 3:** *Tents as Homes* by Dorothea Lange (1936) is a documentary-style photograph of a migrant family during the Great Depression.

that photography was not limited to landscapes and portraits, but also documented events – such as the American Civil War, which asserted the ugliness of battle, death, and decay to the public eye. Photographers also ventured to reveal the squalid conditions faced by child workers of

the Industrial Revolution, also those of immigrants in shantytowns during the immigration of the 1920s, and of migrant workers struggling in the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The next big leaps of photography occurred in two steps: the first in 1960 when photographs were rendered in color (p. 600). This discovery was met largely with praise, as now everyone could enjoy the moment again with livening and opulent hues; it enabled photographers and artists to become more expressive with their images. It gave them the opportunity to not just explore form and shapes, but also what was colorful and

eye-catching. However, traditional documentary photography, such as street photography, had always been depicted in black and white (p. 602) and is still in practice today. The second advancement in the field is known as the switch from film to digital development. Just as fast as people could pick up cameras and take a picture, the body of the camera itself shrank to lightweight devices and more importantly become what we know as the digital DSLR camera today since the year 1975 (p. 637). These developed alongside computers, utilizing pixels and memory cards rather than film. From then on, the two technologies worked in tandem as the world itself evolved electronically. With darkrooms no longer necessary for the digital era, software engineered to interface with digital photos were made available for photographers and amateurs alike. From this point, digital cameras and photo-editing programs rapidly advanced, jumping into the hands of ordinary individuals.

The last major stride in the history of photography is familiar to the contemporary world with the introduction of smartphones. The company Apple is particularly notable for its famed iPhone technology, which is ever-expanding beyond the original model patented in 2007. iPhones and other smartphones allows virtually anyone access to photography with a refined (aside from lower resolution and less complex) camera and editing software. As people had more access to taking and sharing photos, as well as widespread connection to the Internet, online galleries have become popular. Sites familiar to younger generations like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and others further encourage anyone and everyone to live in the moment again and again through photographs. The world has witnessed photography jump from the hands of artists to those of everyone that can own a smartphone. It can be noted that, now rooted more in

routine life, photographs have served a different purpose than in prior decades.

### **Photography in Culture**

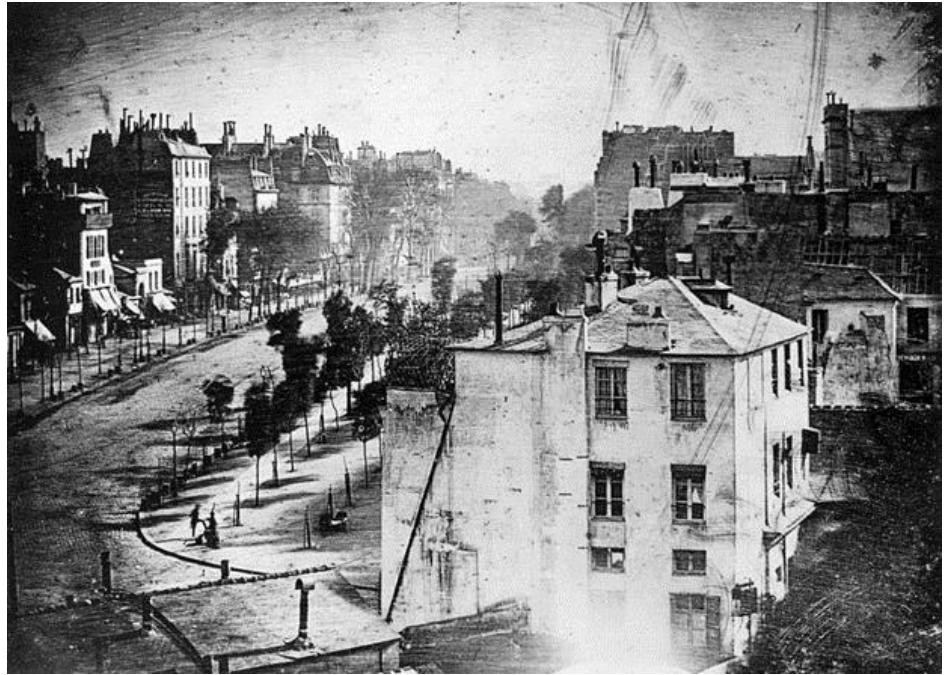
While the usage and delivery of photographs have changed and progressed through the course of history, the way individuals regard them certainly remains the same. Richard Chalfen (2008) in *Snapshot Versions of Life* mentions this detail, in addition asserting that there is a difference between a *photograph* and the average *snapshot*. He agrees that making and looking at photographs have touched every aspect of life these days by the means of ‘snapshots.’ What he refers to as ‘folk art’ versus ‘fine art,’ snapshots can be characterized as pictures that have very little direction or deliberate meaning when taken. This notion can be likened to the pictures taken on a smartphone or other simpler camera that are processed and delivered in seconds. Individuals pose for a picture and it is taken, then appearing on a Snapchat story or Instagram feed. These have a particular ‘look’ that is widely recognized and in widespread use today (p. 74).

Snapshots are what people encounter daily and still communicate a timeline of experiences to others; it is critical to understand that despite this difference between mediums of photography, the encounter remains the same. Although one may argue that fine art photographs, taken perhaps with a DSLR or more complex device than a smartphone, invoke a deeper sense of experience within an individual due to quality and the deliberate efforts plied to a fine art photograph.

Photographs are a means of communication between the past experience and the current; in a way, they are a means of visual storytelling. In her essays on the topic of photography, Susan Sontag (1977) explains in *On Photography* that people enjoy taking pictures but more so pictures have become a principal outlet for experiencing something

(p. 10). Wherever life places someone, whether at home or abroad, taking a photograph of the experience makes it

real and affirms that the event happened. Sontag further examines the notion that photographs preserve someone or something that will, in time, diminish from existence – yet by framing it within a photograph individuals are allowed to interface



**Figure 4:** Daguerreotype example of a Parisian street; these primitive photographs were revolutionary, yet offered limited details. Photograph by Louis Daguerre (1839).

with the experience well past its expiration (p. 15, 17). It does more than dictate a moment – it even serves to establish an individual’s understanding of the subject, and by extension, the world.

An individual can revisit or relive an experience in snapshots and photographs due to what *Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image* author Elizabeth Edwards (2012) notes as objects with ‘active biographies.’ A photograph on its own is nothing more than a flat, two-dimensional surface; to human beings, it effectively transcends this state by serving as a conduit for telling, seeing, being, and celebrating a higher meaning (p. 5). As a static moment in time, photographs always offer their story or experience to be fresh in the minds of spectators. Looking at a picture of someone or something makes

each time feel like the first time it has been seen.

### **Decoding the Photograph**

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1980) examines what exactly in a photograph that individuals look at that derives meaning and experience. Using Latin terms, he acknowledges the ‘studium’ as well as the ‘punctum’ of an image. The studium is the meaning behind the picture as intended by the photographer, as interpreted by spectators; in snapshots it is often clear the intent of the image, yet with photographs of fine art it is what people try to procure from the presented image. More importantly, the punctum is recognized as the element(s) in a picture that are the first to catch an eye (i.e. a flash of color, someone’s smile, a golden composition – anything interesting to the individual eye). The punctum is what makes someone say ‘wow’ and fall in love with a picture, which offers more insight into why photographs are held with such value (p. 25).

Photography, as we use it today, serves us to relive an experience. This paper will confront the role of photographs as they appear today, and then explore the relationship people maintain with them on the individual level. For a time in the past, photographs were a strange and photography an experimental subject to those with ambitions. Today there is a definite contrast in how people have integrated the subject into routine life to communicate the stories they create. This paper will largely examine how valuable photographs have become to individuals today by recognizing that photograph enables them to consistently relive the past and re-encounter the beautiful.

## **Chapter 3: Value to the Individual**

### **Preface on Photography**

As soon as humanity had the ability to instantly document their world, the interest

in photography exploded. The year 1839 rang in a new technology as the first generation of cameras produced this feat in France – and from there, early photographers sprang into nature, studios, cities – wherever they could find something worth photographing.

Interest soon brought photographers into individual's own homes to capture their likeness in a way no painting or drawing could ever interpret. The developing process was not as instantaneous as modern cameras; the first camera could take up to eight hours for a fully developed (often grainy and overexposed) image to be produced. For later cameras used in photographing people, the time between the initial flash and final development consumed thirty seconds of time. This is the explanation behind why many individuals of old photographs appear un-phased and unsmiling, for it the exposure time was too long to hold an expression other than a serious one. These primitive photographs are referred to as daguerreotypes.

Unlike traditional paintings of oils and acrylics that were exclusively interpreted by the artist, photographs enabled the world to see actual representations of other places on the planet unfamiliar to them. Likewise, portraits of this era (much like today's version of headshots) allowed individuals to connect with the true likeness of another human. To say the invention of photography was revolutionary is an understatement; the practice continued to evolve as more people learned to manipulate a camera. And as a result, more advances sharpened the quality of images and widened its use.

Photographs were a successful way to exhibit a pretty landscape or the prestige of an aristocrat and socialite, but some photographers sought to capitalize on the power to bring the truth of things unseen to the public eye. The period of the Industrial Revolution was renowned, but behind the scenes were squalid conditions for child workers.

Photographers managed to infiltrate factories and document the unreported cruelty. By the year of 1861, photographers crept on the battlefields of the Civil War of America – the first war to be photographed. Documentary photography served to communicate what others could not see in person. As photographs contend the truth, society could do nothing other than accept the images before it. This style of photography continued through the Great Depression, in which migrant workers and those stricken with famine were seen by all in thanks to the work of traveling photographers.

As more interest garnered in photography, the technology itself evolved with advancements in color and accessibility. Developing alongside computers in 1975, cameras reached a digital phase that equipped them with memory storage rather than film. As in the case with technological evolution, camera bodies became smaller and more widespread; more people could access a DSLR or a simpler camera to photograph as they pleased. This dawned the use of disposable cameras, with which anyone could take a limited number of photos with and then choose to print the results (Rosenblum, 2007, p. 15 - 637). Accessibility increased further when budding companies like Samsung and Apple chose to incorporate tiny cameras into mobile phones. These devices and the camera in them developed as fast as people could pick them up, giving an introduction to the peak of the digital era.

### **Photography of the Modern Age**

Photography of the contemporary era differs significantly with its use in the past. It can be characterized in social media, advertisements, scrolling on a monitor, and many other ways familiar to Millennials. Photographs and pictures have become a means of visual storytelling that depict individuals' lives. Just about every form of media, both



digital and physical, utilize photographs. Prominent sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat offer the service of sharing both photographs and snapshots alike and to connect through them. Magazines such as National Geographic maintain the documentary style of photography by publishing photographs and stories from across the globe.



**Figure 5:** Pictured above is an example of a snapshot photograph. The individuals stand posed for a quick snapshot of the evening. Personal photograph (2018).

It is near impossible in the modern world to not encounter a photograph or snapshot at least once a day. Access to cameras and other photographic means has become so widespread today that the volume at which photos are taken has increased exponentially. Both the quality of cameras and rate of photo development have advanced greatly through the past century; digital cameras and those found in smartphones can produce a photo in mere seconds, sometimes faster – as opposed to the longer exposure time required with camera of the past. Cameras move just as

fast, if not faster, to keep up with the fast pace of the modern world.

A huge aspect of contemporary lives is concentrated on snapshot images – the same kind taken on a phone or the like. These tend to be uncontrived and quickly posted to serve the means of looking happy, for example. Richard Chalfen (2008), an

anthropologist and professor emeritus of Temple University, provides a background on this culture by referring to it as “snapshot versions of life.” In his book of the same name, he explains, “the majority of ‘ordinary’ snapshots exist within the social contexts of a human communication system” (p. 74). People are infatuated with using snapshots as a means of documenting their best experiences. Chalfen also makes the point that these are separate from more elaborate “folk art” shots. Folk art photographs are those that convey meanings beyond a smiling face in a professional headshot or a family photos, such as portraits of art or abstract intensions that stray from mundane, lifestyle photographs. The accessibility to photography in smartphones especially has created a wider volume of snapshots Chalfen describes in detail. Social media then encourages the posting and sharing of these images, usually for the gratification of the respective individual.

This trend in using photography serves as a record for their lives, especially in a way they want other people to see it. Part of the interest in photographs today, as they occupy many outlets in contemporary life, is that individuals can choose how the rest of society views them. The research into this subject by Professor Linda Haverty Rugg



**Figure 6:** The modern era is the dawn of ‘selfie’ photographs, especially those with face-changing applications. Depicted above is the selfie of a girl with a Snapchat filter. Photograph by Suzanne Pekar (2018).

(1997) in her renowned book, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, delves into how individuals perceive themselves through photographs. She explains that the concept and technology of photography allows individuals to express the multiple and different “fragments of themselves.” Take any typical Millennial today and the evidence is clear in what society reveres as “selfies” and a plethora of editing software to further reinvent their image (p. 231). Photographs essentially enable individuals to be whomever and whatever they want to be in the moment. The app Snapchat capitalizes on this and offers an alternating array of facial filters, with which users can actually alter their appearances on screen for a photograph.

Younger and recent generations have the biggest role in integral photography today; Snapchat actively encourages individuals with their motto, “Life’s more fun when you live in the moment... Happy Snapping!” alluding to their service of sharing snapshot photos and stories to communicate. These days, life is seen through pictures and cameras as a means of communicating and documenting. Society has developed an obsession with sharing photos and the moments they capture – so much that many are concerned only with using pictures to assert who they are or particular lifestyles. Closely examining the phenomenon of photographs, anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards (2012) affirms that photographs are “active biographies” which, just like a written biography or autobiography can inform readers of an individual’s life or story, so do photographs. They have exploded in what we refer to as material culture, which in her words are “an effective tool... because photographs are objects specifically made to have social biographies” (p. 222). This supports the understanding of photographs as a means of visual storytelling; they are conduits for communicating a story to others. In this case,

Edwards notes that photographs can depict much about an individual's life, which observers may glean these details as they analyze the image (p. 222).

Her research becomes applicable to the twenty-first century take on photography; Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other photo sharing sites arrange galleries of images that essentially depict an individual's life and character as they add to it. Even a photo that is not necessarily an image of them or a portrait is an active bibliography; a photograph taken, edited, or simply posted by an individual is a reflection and extension of their personality and character. In the modern age, people have capitalized on using photographs to narrate their own life. Now more than ever individuals rely on using a picture or a snapshot to depict and promote themselves – and in some instances present a version of themselves they want others to believe.

Since its introduction, people have enjoyed using photography to document their likeness and lives. Pictures are bound in scrapbooks and albums to keep the memories collected. What is most certain is that the modern use and access to cameras has enabled people, now more than ever, to document and share their lives in photographs and snapshots – and to cherish them for a lifetime and beyond.

### **Value to the Individual**

Photographs possess an inherent element able to permeate an individual's senses that transcends time. Timeless as they are in freezing moments of the past, photographs have the means to draw interest in people in ways illustrations cannot. What enables this phenomenon is no clear answer, but does lie in the very nature of pictures themselves. To determine the mystery behind the fascination with photographs on the individual level, one must dissect them down into two vital components.

Author Roland Barthes (1988) sought the same answer. In the case with most photographs, there is an immersive experience that begins with the first step. He identified this as the “studium,” which is the first of two experiences an individual encounters. Barthes defines the studium as “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” (p. 26). It is what initially engages the individual, much like stepping into a water current, which rushes and carries them to the next experience. The second is the “punctum” of an image; a Latin term for “wound,” it is defined simply as the object or image that jumps out at the viewer within a photograph. In his book, *Camera Lucida*, Barthes refers to it as “the accident which pricks me, bruises me” (p. 27). He also likens it to an arrow shooting out at the viewer that nicks them and generates further interest. As every photograph is unique, so it the punctum – but the effect is same for every picture. The



**Figure 7:** The photograph above is an example of a folk art photograph. In this case, the studium is characterized by the red flowers throughout the image. Likewise, the punctum is identified as the woman’s dreamy gaze and acknowledgement of the viewer. Photograph by Davis Hilton (2018).

punctum can exist as anything – exceptional lighting over a subject, a red dress or exceptional color scheme, eyes that pierce through the constraints of a photograph – anything at all. Some familiar concepts are responsible for achieving successful engagement, such as a golden composition (in which all elements align in the photograph to visually please observers). Another is what is referred to the Fibonacci Sequence (refer to Definitions section), which has a similar effect as a golden composition. The punctum is critical for it is what takes the first observation of the studium to a spiking sensation of interest and creates the immersive experience for the individual.

People love beautiful things and once-in-a-lifetime experiences – most can agree on that. It is all too familiar that something beautiful or an incredible is fleeting and never lasts as long it people want it. Take a sunset, spring flowers, or youth for example. Beautiful moments are few in number, but photographs enable individuals to re-experience the pleasure of a moment. Photographs exist as the closest thing to re-experiencing the reality of the past, if only as an echo or memory of the moment. Anyone who is quick enough can take a photograph and preserve the moment for a lifetime of reminiscing and beyond. This is the *first* aspect of which a photograph holds value to an individual.

To fully understand why the phenomenon between photographs and humans, further scrutiny is necessary. While each photograph is different and has a unique meaning to each spectator, what draws in an individual is the subjective experience. In his own research on the phenomenon between an individual and photograph, Mikael Pettersson (2011) coins a term in his journal publication the “proximity aspect.” There are three composite components that yield the proximity effect of photographs. The first

refers to the capacity that photographs have to put an individual in close proximity to the subject of the photograph by being an *actual depiction* of the thing represented.

Photographs exist as a documentation of the current state of the subject as it is at the time the photograph is taken. No other record of representation provides a clearer observation to the depicted subject than a photograph does.

This is further explained by the second component of the proximity aspect; unlike the content of a drawing or painting, the truth that a photograph carries is what appeals to the individual. Pettersson best explains this when he examines that in observing a painting or interpreted replica of something depicted, especially on the microscopic level, one will see that all resemblance to the truth is absent (i.e. brush strokes, dots of ink in illustration, interpreted colors and perspective, etc.). But closely scrutinizing a photograph will reveal the absolute truth of the subject and its exact appearance as it was in that moment. The inherent truth a photograph asserts is what generates the proximity aspect (p. 187). The second idea behind the proximity aspect is essentially attributed to the observer's belief that they "see, quite literally" the photographed thing itself, when they look at a photograph (p. 188).

Similarly to what Barthes describes as the "prick" of the punctum, Pettersson acknowledges the "jolt" observers feel when experiencing a photograph in the third element of the proximity aspect. This is the result of recognizing something familiar in the image, in the sense that while the subject photographed may be remote to an individual observer (i.e. another part of the world, or a stranger), the observer feels the closeness to being in that moment because it is a "trace." Photographs can be treated as a kind of trace of the subject depicted. Sontag (1977) herself avows that, "A photograph

passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened” (p. 5). Based on this notion of a photograph existing as a trace, much like fingerprints or hairs left behind by an individual are viewed as evidence, the idea essentially provides the feeling of closeness to the subject. Effectively, observers are experiencing the proximity aspect (Pettersson, 2011, p. 190). This phenomenon – the proximity aspect – is the *second* aspect that brings value from the photograph to the individual. Simply put, it is the closeness to the subject that which people feel in observing photographic depictions that makes the experience so unique to photographs.

#### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

Photographs have the inherent power to create a reality that people can engage with to relive a moment of the past. By nature, they are a document of the past that record the scene or moment forever after. People treasure them for a number of reasons; the first is the fact that they exist as incontrovertible evidence that something happened – so much that there is a consistent need to document moments to guarantee they occurred. Although restricted to the four borders of a two-dimensional place, photos allow people to splinter the complexity of their individual personality. These are recognized in portraits and even the modern take of “selfies.” With the perspective of photography, one can appear anyway they choose to the world. Since its discovery, humanity has capitalized on this power to photograph everything and anything they can – so much and often to the point that the modern world is documented in visual storytelling. Sontag (1997) avows, “To collect photographs is to collect the world” (p. 1). Today, no statement is closer to the truth than her observation.

People are obsessed with the singular experiences found with photographs and



snapshots alike. Contemporary social media is founded on snapshot culture, provided by the widespread access to cameras. Snapshots make up the better part of individual's extensive camera rolls and photo albums. As observed by anthropologists, the timeless fascination with photographs has led to an obsessive, modern-day use of communication. Snapshots enable individuals to visually document their lives as they see fit, posting and sharing the wealth of photos and experiences on digital platforms of Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and countless others. Technology produced by industrial giants Apple and Samsung work in rapid developments to offer accessible means to the best and most immersive experiences behind photographs. The promises of re-creating the experience over and over with high-quality technology and photos in the hands of anyone grow with each year.

Immersive experiences can be attributed to two factors that speak to the phenomenon behind photographs. Two photographic elements break the average photo down to two understandable points, as identified by Barthes and known as the "studium" and "punctum." These are recognized as the first two encounters an individual has with a photograph or snapshot, which characterize the details that first engage the observer (studium) and the peaking of interest in the rest of the image (punctum). These characteristics in a photograph stimulate enthusiasm that is explained as the "proximity aspect" – a feeling of closeness or proximity to the subject of the photograph, as the clearest trace or evidence of it. Although a person or event has passed since the moment of the photograph, it persists to observers in the truest form of documentation. The proximity aspect is experienced best with photographs rather than drawings, paintings, and other forms of illustrations for this reason.

Ultimately, photographs convey a rendition of the truth that is unattainable in any other version of media. Since its initial founding in 1839 and further development from then on to the modern age, individuals have used their access to it to record and document the world around them. Nineteenth-century aesthete Mallarmé mused, “everything in the world exists in order to end a book” (as cited in Sontag, 1977, p. 24). Alternatively, Sontag herself observed, “Today everything exists to end in a photograph” (p. 24). And so it goes today – all happy endings and perfect moments are to end in photographs.

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