

Nathan Jurgenson. "The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media". p.51-2

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

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

By simulating the aesthetic of photographic scarcity, those faux-vintage filters responded to (or perhaps overcompensated for) this fear; the warm colors, faded glow, and false paper scratches and borders make the landscape seem enchanted, the portrait disarming. The bold statements and delicate textures adopt the visual cues of photography from before its digital devaluation. The faux-vintage aesthetic tried to reassure that present lives are just as authentic and worthy as the life captured in the scarce images from an analogue past. Photographs are becoming too easy, so, dammit, here's my life framed like it's 1962. But a profile full of faux-vintage photographs is like a wallet full of dead currency. So much nostalgia had been shovelled at us that the aesthetic lost its impact. Merely making images evocative of photo scarcity doesn't make them actually scarce or make others covet them as such. There's a deep mismatch between the aesthetic language of nostalgia and the affordances of permanent social networks: it may look immortal, but it's really quite ephemeral. Despite all the manufactured sentimentality, your photo still disappears down the stream, largely unnoticed.

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

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