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In what ways does AI-generated imagery reframe the role of photography in constructing collective and personal memories of childhood?

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In this essay, I am going to explore how photography, memory and artificial intelligence connect, especially when it comes to how we remember childhood, both as individuals and as a society. Photography has always been a strong tool for documenting moments and memories, holding onto the past. However, a photograph isn't just a snapshot, it can become a meaningful piece of personal history, helping to shape how we see ourselves.

On the other hand, memory can differentiate here as it is messy, emotional and mostly influenced by culture around us. Although we think of photos to be proof of what happened, they shape and change our memories.

With the rise of AI, things have evolved more. AI can now create realistic images, even of childhood moments that never actually happened. This raises a wider set of questions about how we experience memory and nostalgia in a world where what is real, and fake is getting trickier to tell.

By examining these three concepts, this essay will explore how AI-generated imagery challenges traditional understands of photography as a truthful medium. Through this exploration, I will discuss how the rise of AI reshapes our relationship to the past and the memories we hold onto.

Photography is not only a medium for processing and taking photographs, but it serves as the traditional medium for constructing memories through documentation. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, describes the photograph as a “certificate of presence,” showing its power in the undeniable fact that what it shows has truly existed (*Barthes, 1981, p. 87*). Because photos are directly connected to real moments, people have

long seen them as reliable proof, especially when it comes to remembering personal or family events.

In the context of childhood, photography takes on a powerful reminder. From our baby albums to school portraits, photographs often serve as selected archive of life. However, scholars like Marianne Hirsch point out, photography doesn't just capture memories, but it helps to shape them. Hirsch's idea of "postmemory" is about how photos of things we didn't live through, like moments from our parents' or grandparents' lives, can start to feel like a part of our own story, especially when we see them and hear the stories, they lived themselves (*Hirsch, 1997*). In this sense, family photographs are not just sentimental keepsakes, but are a help in shaping ourselves, influencing how we see our identity and understand our roots.

Photographs also play a significant part in shaping collective memory. There are certain images we all relate to as our childhood images, for example blowing out birthday candles, playing in the park or school pictures. These images reinforce ideas of innocence, joy and growing up. Susan Sontag puts it, "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (*Sontag, 1977, p. 4*), meaning even causal childhood photos carry certain messages. Although it freezes a moment in time, it also tells a story, focusing on what is worth remembering.



Figure 1

Sally Manns *Immediate Family* is an example of how photography shapes memory and identity. Even though it shows a real moment, the dramatic pose and bold composition push against the idea that photos are just simple records. Instead, it invites what Annette Kuhn calls “acts of memory,” making viewers bring their own emotions and cultural take to the scene (*Kuhn, 1995*). The image feels familiar, even to people who didn’t experience those moments, tapping into what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory” (*Hirsch, 1997*), that feeling of emotional connection to someone else’s past.

As we move into a time where AI can create images from scratch, the role of photography and how it connects with memory, gets more complicated. If photos are tied to real moments, what happens when images are made with no actual reference

point? Can AI-generated pictures still make us feel nostalgic, even if it shows things that never actually happened? These questions make us think about how we see photography, shifting from something that captures memory to something that reproduces it, playing around with our ideas of what is real, present and emotionally true.

Photography is not an unchangeable thing as it is shaped by history and culture while carrying lots of meaning. It plays a big role in how we remember things, especially childhood, although that role is beginning to change. As visual tech keeps changing, photos might stop being records of what happened and start to become more visions of what we wish things had been.

Memory is not just a replay on the past but is something we are constantly reshaping and reinterpreting. Although we often view it as a reliable record of experiences, newer research shows it is quite flexible and personal. This comes into play when we think about how memory connects with images. They often feel like proof of what happened, but they can also change and mess with what we think we remember.

Maurice Halbwachs work, *On Collective Memory*, talks about how memory isn't just a person thing. It is shaped by the people and culture around us (*Halbwachs, 1992*). So, when we think about childhood memories, they are not just our own private thoughts. They're influenced by family stories and what we see in the media, especially photos. Images don't just remind us of things, they shape a memory deciding what sticks and what fades away.

Annette Kuhn explores this dynamic in her work on memory and family photography. In *Family Secrets*, she introduces the idea of “memory work”, which is all about thinking critically about how memories are made and not just dug up from the past (Kuhn, 1995). Through this perspective, photos aren’t just about freezing a moment in time, they help to build stories on who we are, where we fit and how we feel. A childhood photo might bring up warmth or distance, depending on where you’re at in life, background and the way you perceive yourself.



Figure 2

Christian Boltanski's *Les Archives* series really shows how memory isn't set in stone but is always changing. His blurry, anonymous portraits let viewers bring their own memories into the mix, making it hard to tell the difference between personal experiences and shared cultural memory. These photos, much like Annette Kuhn's idea of "memory work," (*Kuhn, 1995*) show how images don't just remind us of the past but shape how we remember and feel about it.

Visual memory is not fixed as it changes a little every time we think about it. Neuroscience backs this up, showing that our memories are quite flexible and can shift each time we remember something. That really matters when you think about how photos and visual culture shape how we see the past. Some stories about the past get repeated so often they stick, while other viewpoints quietly slip away. In a way, memory has as much to do with what we imagine as with what happened.

Alison Landsberg adds to this conversation with her idea of prosthetic memory, the idea that people can take memories of things they haven't experienced, often through movies, photos, or digital media (*Landsberg, 2004*). This feels relevant now in time when AI can create completely fake images with no real-life moment behind them. If someone connects emotionally with an AI-generated photo of a childhood that never happened, does that count as a type of prosthetic memory as well? This makes the cross between real and fake more difficult to figure out.

Nostalgia comes into play here as memory isn't always about getting the facts right but is about how we feel about the past. Childhood memories, whether it is real or imagined, carry a lot of emotional weight. Photos help to lock in those feelings but as

images become more artificial, it creates wonder on how real the memories we're holding onto.

In the end, memory isn't a perfect reflection of the past as it is more lens shaped by context, stories and what we see. Photography has always been tied to memory, but now AI is beginning to create memories visually, we need to wonder whether the whole idea of memory is changing too.

AI has completely changed how we interact with visual culture, including photography and memory. Photos aren't just moments caught by a camera anymore, as with AI, we can create images that don't have any real-world reference, opening new ways to shape memories. AI's ability to create things like childhood memories makes us question what is real in photos and challenges the idea of what a photo is meant to show.

AI tools like DALL-E and Midjourney can now generate realistic images just from text descriptions. These images often look like real photos, but they aren't tied to any real event or experience. This shifts how we think about memory, especially visual memories from childhood. Photos used to be seen as little, small pieces of reality and snots of real moments. However, with AI, they become something else, that being a made-up memory, created now instead of remembered from the past.

A lot of people remember childhood as a sense of warmth, focusing on the good things and avoiding anything messy or painful. With AI, we can create those picture-perfect versions of the past whenever we want. AI-generated childhood images become a

new kind of nostalgia, not for what happened, but for something imagined. They can still hit us emotionally, even if the images aren't based on real memories.

Joanna Zylińska, in her *Nonhuman Photography*, looks at how AI is changing not just photography, but the way we think about images in general (Zylińska, 2017). With AI, anyone can make an image, which makes the whole process more open. The idea of using photos to keep memories starts to feel odd knowing we can make childhood pictures of things that never even happened. These made-up images can still trigger real emotions, which brings wonder on what happens to emotional truth of memories when the photo tied to it is completely fake?



Figure 3

An example of this new reality is the work of media artist Refik Anadol, especially his *Machine Hallucinations* series. Anadol uses AI and machine learning to create immersive visuals from lots of data. These abstract images look appealing to the eye and hit us emotionally, yet they are completely made-up, binding to mind a sense of memory even though there is no relation with real past events. His work shows how AI is not only changing photography but also getting us to think about memory, nostalgia, and emotional truth in visuals. Just like AI-created childhood photos can mix feelings even if they never actually happened, Anadol's work mixes the real and the imagined, making us question what actual truth there is in the photos and memories we hold onto.

In the end, AI's intervention within photography and memory transforms how we perceive visual representations. With the ability to create entirely new images that seem as authentic as real photographs, AI challenges the nature of memory and nostalgia, forcing us to reconsider not just how we remember, but what we remember and why.

When you put together photography, memory and artificial intelligence, the way we think about the past, especially childhood, is clearly beginning to change. Photography used to be seen as something trustworthy, a way to capture real moments and hold onto memories. A childhood photo used to feel like proof of what happened, something that helped us remember and even shaped how we saw ourselves.

However, memory isn't set in stone. It is a mix of emotions, stories and visuals. Scholars like Annette Kuhn and Marianne Hirsch point out that family photos don't just

show memories, they help to create and bring them to life. In this way, photographs shape how we remember childhood as well as obtain those memories.

AI-generated images are throwing off the connection between photos and memories, as tools like Midjourney and DALL-E can now make super realistic images of childhood moments that never even happened. These hit us with strong emotions, even nostalgia, even though they are not based on anything real. This makes you wonder whether if a memory that comes from a made-up image still counts? Are we heading into a time where fake, but emotionally charged, images start shaping how we see the past?

These mix-ups show both possibilities and tensions. AI could help bring to life memories we've lost or imagined, perhaps offering a kind of closure. But it also plays with the idea of photography as a truth-teller. It brings to question about things like manipulation, who owns the images and whether we can trust what we see emotionally. The line between remembering and imagining can become a blur, and photos go from being a record of what happened to something more about what we want to see.

This overlap opens a new area to explore which is the rise of AI-created childhood images as both a visual and emotional experience. These images aren't just creations but change how we see our pasts, identities and our connections with others. AI isn't just a tool for making images but is starting to play a part in shaping our memories.

Based on all the research gathered, the following and final question supports everything: In what ways does AI-generated imagery reframe the role of photography in constructing collective and personal memories of childhood?

This question is very relevant right now. As AI tools for creating images get more accessible and people are making visual stories of the past that never actually happened yet still feel extremely emotional. This has not been deeply explored in photographic and memory studies, making it an original area of investigation.

Finally, this research is all about looking into the emotional and cultural impact of this technical shift. AI-generated memories are either bringing us closer to the past or pulling us further away. And if memory is already something we shape and pick and choose, perhaps the difference between a real moment and a made-up one isn't as clear, or as important as it used to be.

In conclusion, the connection of photography, memory and artificial intelligence is reshaping how we think about the past. AI-generated images can recreate childhood memories, but also raise important questions about what is real, what's true and how technology influences our sense of memory. As AI continues to evolve, the boundary between real and imagined memories becomes harder to differentiate, and the emotional impact of an image can sometimes matter more than its factual accuracy. The rise of AI-generated sentimental images urges us to take a closer look at how new technologies are changing the way we create and remember the past. As these tools play a wider role in shaping our memories, it is important to not only reflect on how we remember, but on how those memories are actively being built, especially in a world where emotionally powerful visions of the past can be digitally made and feel entirely real.

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