

*What is the value of an image in a world where it's no
longer an object?*

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Abstract

What does the photographic image mean in a world where photographs are mass produced? This independent enquiry explores the ways in which the photographic image has evolved from analogue photography to everyday digital photography. Exploring key topics such as Significance and Aura, Reminiscence and Memory, and the concept of the Haunted in relation to the photographic image.

Introduction

In a world where the photographic image is approximately produced '54,400 times per second...4.7 billion times daily...and 1.72 trillion times in a year' (Broz, 2022), it causes you to question are images still valued? Do they still retain the same significance and value as they once did or are they taken for granted? Does the mass production of images cause us to value and appreciate everyday moments or do they corrupt them, resulting in us no longer taking the time to appreciate an experience, but rather spend the whole time trying to 'capture the memory' so you never forget? Does the effort made to remember cause us to forget, as we may no longer remember the time experienced as it was from our eyes but rather that of another's, as the memory is no longer that of our own but an outsider looking in as we were not really there to experience it or capture it for ourselves?

When we have this amazing ability to not only capture moments in time but do it time and time again effortlessly through the means that we never considered possible even as soon as 50 years ago. However, does that instant capture still retain the same relationship between the one photographed and the photograph itself? How has this

change impacted the way we view photography, and is photography still appreciated and deemed important when it is not physical, no longer held onto as a valued object but rather a memory in itself as it is a form doesn't truly exist?

Within my writing I will be exploring what the significance of the photographic image has been and what it has become, attempting to answer questions that I have wondered and asked myself throughout my practice. Exploring significance and aura through the comparison of analogue photography to digital photography, interested to understand what it is about physically holding onto an image that is so important. Why perhaps it carries more value than that of a digital image. Going on to explore this in relation to memory and reminiscence, curious to discover what is valued about a photograph when it is thought of in association to memory. Bringing into question both Roland Barthes and Margaret Gibson's views on how the photographic image and its impacts on memory, considering whether a photograph has the potential to replace or corrupt memory in a world where photographs are mass produced. Using these ideas of memory and the significance of the photographic image to explore the ways in which they could be considered haunting. Discussing the work of Simon Ward in relation to Eduardo Cadava's perceptions on photography, questioning what is considered haunting and how the photographic image can convey conflicting feeling when associated with context.

Significance and Aura

Everyone has things that they consider to be meaningful or significant, it will depend on how something makes you feel. The interest I have for significance started from me asking myself how I view photography, what it was that got me interested in photographs and the concept of capturing images to begin with. Interested in gaining a better understanding of why photographs and photographic history were important to me, I came to realise that I do not have much of my own history documented. Growing up I did not have a 'normal' childhood, it was rather disrupted and influenced, so when I go back through family albums, I come across baby photos but there is not much of mine or my sibling's history documented after that. It was as though after a certain point we no longer existed on paper, which could potentially be a result of the photos being taken via digital means, stored, and lost but never printed. Which led me to hold on to the limited memories that I do have in a way that I may not have considered if the albums had been full of photos and memories. It makes sense as to why I have a connection and understanding of the feeling that photographs and photography it self-conveys, its 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) and significance rather than the process of capturing images.



Fig.1. *Photograph of my Nana on the Beach*

When delving into my mother's family history I found that she had limited objects from her past as well, both limited photographic documentation and other treasured items. All I really have from her past are the stories she has told to me through the years and the few cherished objects that remain. Figure 1 is one of three photographs that I have of my Great Grandmother, my mother refers to here as Nanna. She has been a vital and extremely important figure to me and more importantly to my mother, as we would not be who we are today without her. Ironically, I never had the pleasure of meeting her, the women who strongly contributed to who I am today is someone who has never even met me as she died before I was born, one of the only things I have to relate to her with is this photograph. It is the only one of her alone, it is favourite because from all the stories I have been told of her I feel that this image perfectly illustrates who she was, someone who was confident, authoritative, in charge, and yet caring and true to

herself. The way she is leant against the rocks seems relaxed, holding the pose of women at the time the photograph was taken would have, remaining to be proper. Despite the negative space surrounding her in the image she still manages to captivate you, holding your attention as she gives a gentle smile.

This image is important to me as I have no relation to the limited objects that I have of hers, it's not that I do not associate those objects and ornaments to her, but they mean more to my mother as she experienced the connection between Nanna and those objects in a way that I never did and never will. For me this image is what allows me to be close to her, I feel an instant unexplainable connection to her whenever I look at it. As most family photos do, it conveys nostalgia 'wistful affection for a period past' (Oxford Languages, 2022), compelling me to feel what it would have been like to know her.

'This is why it is precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed and revealed to the very extent that it continues to evoke what can no longer be there.'
(Cadava, 1997, p.13)

Eduardo Cadava discusses many concepts that support both the meaning and feeling of the photographic image, one of which being the relationship that we have to photographs in relation to a person that has died. The statement '*it is precisely in death that the power of the photograph is revealed*' (Cadava, 1997, p.13) suggests that we do not fully grasp the feeling and significance that a photograph of a person creates until that person is no longer with us, we begin to see it and appreciate it in a way that is not considered whilst they are still alive.

The bond that remains between the one photographed and the one that cherishes it, he suggests is how a person's essences continues to live on within the photograph.

He refers to the remaining connection in relation to a photograph that was captured through non digital means, highlighting the relationship between the person photographed, the photographer and the image itself. In analogue photography there is a long careful process that goes into capturing and obtaining an image, resulting in the one photographed, the photographer and the image itself to create a connection that can be lost when an image would be taken digitally.

'We can say: what shrinks in an age where the work of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura.' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7)

Walter Benjamin discusses the concept of how when something is reproduced it can lose its value, its significance in place and time, devaluing its 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7). He suggests that something that is *'reproduced by technological means'* (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) ends up shrinking its 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) making it less than it was, resulting in reproducibility removing something's personality, the thing that makes it unique, its connection between the thing itself and the person who creates it.

Which does not mean to say that a photograph captured digitally does not hold meaning or significance, but in this case Cadava's concept could suggest that a photograph captured via reproducible means may lose its value and 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7). A single image captured through the means of analogue photography contains within it a personal exchange and experience between the one photographed and the image itself, in a way that a quick photo captured digitally does not necessarily have. Digital images create a barrier between the image itself and the spectator, in a similar way to if someone was to watch a concert or event through their phone screen as they film it rather than allowing themselves to be there to experience the event without creating a barrier between them and the experience itself.

In relation to my Nannas photograph it was captured between the 70s and 80s resulting in it being captured on film, as we no longer have the film this is the only version of the photograph left. The analogue photograph has allowed me to hold onto a piece of her, something that she herself not only participated in the making of but potentially held onto at some point also, allowing me to not only become closer to the journey between her and the printed image, but become closer to Nanna herself.

The idea of significance is subjective, it is and always will be based on personal feelings that you have. What it means within photography is the same, it is subjective to circumstance and belief. Despite agreeing with Benjamin's concept of 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) and the idea that when it comes to mechanical reproduction of imagery there is an element of historical value lost, however, we live in a world where reproducibility is continuously progressing. Both Benjamin's and Cadava's views are significantly valid, and for Benjamin's views on mechanical reproduction, they are even more relevant now than they were at the time of his writing as technology has progressed that much further. However, there is hope that through the use of digital photography there is a way of replicating the concept of 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7) to allow its significance in place and time to live on.

Reminiscence and Memory

Photography will forever be a reflection of the past, it can never be a representation of the present, or what is happening in the moment no matter how fast it is captured, it will never reflect the future, only ever time past. It may seem to freeze a moment in time, but only a representation of a moment, not the real thing, a form of reminiscence. Reminiscence being an exploration of memory, a recollection of the past that is portrayed by the narrator, the one who is thinking back. We have a habit of referring to photographs as memories, I have done so, but are they truly memories? Are they not just a reminiscence of what was, a representation to better explain or support a memory rather than being a memory itself?

It is more like an exploration of how you feel rather than how something makes you feel, a personal connection between you and a past experience. You could argue that remembering makes you feel a certain way, however it will tend to be how you felt at the time of the experience that's remembered, it is still personal to you as it was an instinctive emotion. However, a photograph has a habit of conveying and triggering feelings, even if the image is not that of your own memory. This causes people to question whether looking back on a photograph in a time that's past can truly be a representation of memory?

'Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory... but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory', (Barthes, 1981, pp.110-111)

Roland Barthes brings this question to light, suggesting that a photograph is not a true representation of memory but rather a 'counter-memory' (Barthes, 1981, p.111), as the photograph becomes the thing remembered rather than the memory itself. When there is a photograph taken especially of you in the past, it is capturing the visual from a spectator's point of view, the photographer on the outside looking in. The photograph is then in fact from another's perspective rather than your own, even with technology and digital photography being what it is today, such as cameras being readily available on phones. Taking a photograph of yourself using your phone, despite you being the one to take the photograph, is still from the view of the spectator, a reflection of yourself from a point in time, a reflection that would never be an accurate representation of your memory as it is through another's eyes, not your own. Barthes concept of 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1981, p.111) is his way of saying that the photograph replaces how we remember an experience with a false memory, something opposite to what it was, *'counter...act in opposition...a thing that opposes or prevents something else'* (Oxford Languages, 2022). The 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1981, p.111) becomes relevant when you then look back on photographs, as it is suggested that you will no longer remember the moment as it was when it was experienced but rather you will begin to remember the experience in association to the photograph rather than the memory itself, 'blocking memory' and creating a false idea of memory. Similar to the way I associate with the photograph of my Nanna, I did not experience the day out that the family had been on, as it was before my time, but I have an association to the story behind the photograph, resulting in me imagining what it was like. I feel a certain way from viewing the photograph, the image itself creates a nostalgia and connection to a time that has past rather than a memory. Photographs can convey a feeling; I do not have my own memory to link back to just what I imagine

it would have been like to have been there. Contributing to me believing that there is an element of truth behind Barthes argument, particularly the idea that photographs influence the way we view memory, the way we remember and associate with the past.

'Photographs remind us of the discontinuity of memory, the elisions and gaps, without filling these in. Indeed, photographs like all our recording technologies, capture fragments in a continuum of oblivion and forgetting.' (Gibson, 2008, p.86)

Margaret Gibson discussing her views on photographs in association to memory and Barthes's theory, suggesting that photographs act more like a bridge for memory, the thing that fills the gaps of time that may have been forgotten. Almost like written notes to remind us of what comes next, as we slowly forget the past, photographs can be used as a metaphorical crutch to help us to remember. However, this is not necessarily a good thing in Gibson's eyes as she uses this statement in support of Barthes's concept of 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1981, p.111). Claiming that even though photographs can be used as a source of some remembrance, they act more like an aid for us to forget through the way they corrupt our memories with false ones, therefore not truly helping us to remember, but rather being a cause of our forgetting. This idea is suggested through her statement *'Photographs remind us of the discontinuity of memory, the elisions and gaps, without filling these in'* (Gibson, 2008, p.86), they remind us of the lack of continuity, breaks in the consistent existence of memory. Elisions being 'the process of joining together' (oxford languages, 2022), joining together the gaps in memory, but never truly filling them in, as they are merely a reflection of memory, never a true representation.



Fig.2. *Ghost in the machine, Kindle screen*
Screen 1



Fig.3. *Ghost in the machine, Kindle*

These images (figures 2 and 3) are an interesting illustration of the discussed ideas as they are pieces of artwork that embody this idea of false memory. They are from Simon Wards photo series *Ghosts in the screen*, 2018, the images show collected kindles that have experienced being broken and damaged whilst they were still turned on, resulting in the broken and malfunctioning screen capturing and freezing a particular moment in time.

'Through the failure of the device, digital anomalies are revealed through the last screensavers of well-known historical writers.' (Ward, 2018)

These devices grabbed Wards interest through the way they have not depicted the last action on the device, but instead show something else, fragments of historical writers. Bringing to light these ghosts of the past rather than illustrating the true nature of what the kindle should have remembered resulting in a false memory, as it no longer depicts what truly should have been remembered but rather another perspective that was not that of its own, one that blocks out the original resulting in a form of 'counter memory' (Barthes, 1981, p111).

Despite finding supporting arguments to Barthes idea of false memory and the ideas that a photograph is not a true representation of memory, there are elements that are subjective, although there is a lot of understanding behind what he is saying, I do not agree entirely. The argument is of course not one sided and even though I have mainly supported his idea, there has also been mention of the spectator and alternative perspective when it comes to a photograph. To the one photographed the image is not a true representation of memory as it is not true to how they would remember the experience, however to the photographer it is how they remember it. Obviously, a photograph is not always an accurate depiction of what something was like, but when looked back upon by the person behind the camera the image is a capture of their perspective and allows insight into their memory of an experience. Even though we have access to cameras everyday through the use of phones, when used by yourself to capture what is around you and your experience rather than yourself, it is merely allowing a chance for others to experience through your eyes. To better support your retelling of memory, so the photographs relation to memory is not always as form of corruption.

Haunted

The photographic image is an embodiment of the past, the past is a thing of complexity and history, it makes you question what comes with it? A historical artifact that can convey a variety of feeling and emotion by reflecting the past, a conduit of experiences that despite not necessarily having any relation to you, can trigger something within you that you may not have even known was there, which in itself can be considered haunting. An image can be powerful, it can be both a heartfelt and endearing reflection whilst also having the potential of being something haunting. This is not necessarily always a bad or negative thing but can at times cause an unsettling or daunting atmosphere, especially when it relates to people who have died. Photographs will convey and respond to people in different ways, the way it is viewed can be influenced by your life experiences, general outlook and even your age. This causes me to question, whether or not the evolution of technology impacts the effect that the photographic image has, or does it support the photographic image and allow it to remain a potential conduit of haunting?

Haunting is something that provokes feeling, it's something externally triggering a feeling or emotion. Emotion's manifest from the mind, either consciously or subconsciously, feelings are experienced consciously but they are more of a physical sensation rather than a rooted internal emotion. Something haunting opposes reminiscence and memory in the sense that haunting is a created feeling rather than a nostalgic one, something that is haunting has a feeling of a memory but for the most part not a real one. Something will often be deemed haunting when accompanied by

the surrounding environment and context, it immediately gives a whole new meaning and feeling to something, especially a photograph. When it is looked at it can no longer be seen the same way as it was before as you cannot take back what you know, the information has scarred you and left an impression that you are unable to forget or ignore, figures 4 and 5 are a perfect example of this.



Fig. 4 Guardians: Ted 1 2018

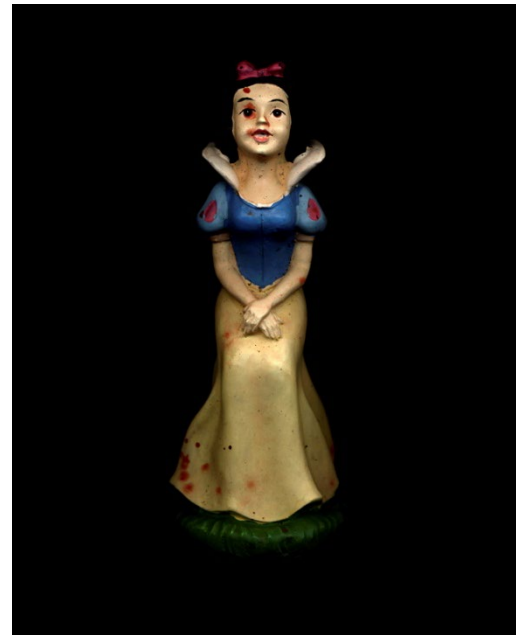


Fig.5 Guardians: Snow white 2018

They are a part of a photo series called *The Guardians*, 2018 by Simon Ward, the images were captured through the means of scanning toys left at the memorial sites of children, each item scanned and put back to rest as they were. Ward wanted to capture the objects in the moment, allowing the spectator to become closer to the feeling they emanate as well as bringing you closer to objects themselves. Relating back to Cadava's concepts surrounding the significance of an image and the power they possess, the scanning process creates that connection between the object photographed, the photographer and the image itself, each part of the process solidifying a connection of significance and feeling. Knowing as well that Ward himself

was in contact with the vessels, to the point where even he could feel all that haunted them describing them as 'emotionally charged objects' (Ward, 2018).

This way of working has managed to capture the essence and 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935 p.7) of the objects in a way that merely taking a photograph with a camera would not quite achieve. Knowing that the object was imprinted on to the screen in a way that causes them to appear as though they are trapped within the image itself, just adds to the haunting nature of the photographs, the careful process of examining and capturing each detail of the objects allows unseen features to rise to the surface. The images are only of children's toys, toys are innocent and not haunting or unsettling themselves, neither are these images at first glance, however, pairing the images and objects to the context that surround them suddenly gives them a whole new meaning, provoking you to feel differently. When looking at the images its slightly disturbing how they mirror the journey off the deceased, slowly decaying and fading away becoming less then they were, isolated in darkness. The toys and objects left behind creating the same sadness as decaying flowers do on graves but just in another form, replicating the slow perishing process of the deceased as they become less full of life and more unrecognisable.

The long scanning process emanating the opposite journey of death in the way it restores and captures what's seen rather than taking it away. Even the darkness of the backgrounds in these images mimic people's concepts of what lies beyond death, as some believe everything becomes dark. If the backgrounds were to have been white it would not have through mimicked another perspective and belief of what lies beyond death, the idea of 'going into the light', however, the dark swallowing abyss is more daunting as it projects uncertainty of the unknown.

'In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him-it begins, even during his life, to circulate without him figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at', (Cadava, 1997, p.13).

This statement made by Cadava gives example to the ways in which the photographic image can be deemed as haunting, expressing relevance to Wards photo series *The Guardians*. The statement takes into consideration the possibilities of what the photographic image can cause us to experience throughout not only a person's life but their death as well. Cadava is expressing a concept that highlights how even after a someone is no longer with us, the photographs of them will continue to live on after death. Leaving pieces of themselves behind, continuing to live on through those that remember them, through the haunting memories that those pieces possess. The part of the statement that says, *'In photographing someone, we know that the photograph will survive him-it begins, even during his life'* (Cadava, 1997, p.13), brings to light that the journey of the photograph and how it begins as soon as it is taken. We know that the photograph will continue to live on as long as it is stored and held onto in whatever form matter that may be in. Following on from that with *'to circulate without him figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at'* (Cadava, 1997, p.13), expresses a way we end up perceiving a photograph that has links to someone that has died. Highlighting the way the photograph 'circulates' (Cadava, 1997, p.13) without the person it relates to being around anymore, causing us to always have to think about the way they are no longer with us every time it is looked at, causing the photograph to be haunted by the memory of them both in life and in death. There is a strong connection between Cadava's statement and Wards series *The Guardians*, despite the photographs not being related to the journey of the individuals in life through to

death, it still causes you to anticipate their death every time it is looked at, as the images embody the journey of their death when the true nature of the images are revealed.

There is connection and links between Cadava's concepts and Wards work, as both Cadava and Ward express the ways in which we are haunted by what can no longer be there. Expressing not only how we are haunted by the death of those that are no longer with us but also by the future that we will no longer have with them, as they were taken sooner than we would have wanted or expected, especially when it comes to the children related to Wards work. No matter whether it is a photograph, an object alone, or an object within the photograph, there's a strong evocation to the past that no matter what form it takes can evoke what is deemed to be haunting, as it is the context that surrounds the thing itself that conveys the power of how it is perceived.

Conclusion

The evolution of photography has grown so far from its origin in terms of what it is capable of, from what it started out as to what it has become, people could have never predicted that the scientific exploration could have got us to the variety of possibilities that we are capable of today. Its forever changing, what's considered new now will be branded old in a years' time, causing us to question if the way we view photography is seen as outdated or have we been willing to change, has our perspectives adapted to keep up with this ongoing upgrade in the way we work? The trouble is everyone is different, we work differently, live differently, enjoy different things, we all have our own perspectives and opinions. What I deem as important and significant might resonate with other people, but will never quite be the same to how it makes me feel. It's interesting to have explored the ways in which other people have viewed the changes in photography not only in relation to the new reproductive ways of working, but also the impacts photography has had on people in relation to significance and memory. People like Roland Barthes's, Walter Benjamin's and Eduardo Cadava's perspectives on photography are a little outdated, they are more relevant now when they were at the time. Their views on photography were based more on analogue photography, having some of them only starting to scratch the surface with what was possible. However, they are examples of one side of how the photographic image is important, some were only beginning to grasp the impact that mechanical reproduction would have on photography.

Even though we have access to cameras everyday through the use of phones, does not make that version of photography convey something less valuable than if something was captured using any other means. Yes, it can create a barrier between you and the moment itself, but generations are evolving, for me I was brought up in a

way that made me appreciate what was real, what I could hold on to, the valued objects and photographs that put me in touch with those around me. However, the way that Simon Ward used the evolution of technology and ways of photographing digitally to cast an impression of the objects in the series *The Guardians* is inspiring. Managing to use the scanning process to create a similar impact as any other image taken via analogue means, capturing the feeling that those objects convey, their 'aura' (Benjamin, 1935, p.7). It is an interesting example of how photography is capable of capturing more than just a 'good' picture.

I resonate more with the connection and feeling that photographs give people, the context that surrounds the thing that gives it meaning. This is neither the right or wrong way to feel, but to me photography is more than just an image, its not limited to one form or another. There is value in having photographs that you can hold onto without having that barrier between you and the image itself, as it has experienced a journey that you then get to be a part of, you keep it with you. It is off putting to think that we live in a world where it could eventually be possible that the new 'normal' will be passing down a phone or form of hard drive rather than an album full of photos. However, this could be unsettling to me as I have only lived in a time where having access to the family albums was the 'normal' thing to do? For along time this was all I knew which will be the same for lots of people, but similarly to the photographers that came over a hundred years before, we can not predict what will come next. We can only consider what has come before and what is happening now, the everyday moments whether they are experienced or documented

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