

Digital Photography: Memory Without Object

Abstract: This essay explores the relationship between photography and memory, comparing analogue and digital imaging technologies. Much of the discussion focuses around matters of materiality and immateriality and the ways in which material supports act as a grounding for processes of memory retrieval and recollection. The immaterial forms of consumption of digital photography, however, generate inedited possibilities to deal with photographic memories, both in terms of presentational forms and image rhetoric. These new properties will be outlined and thoroughly discussed in the essay, through the particular cases of digital frames, online photographic albums and technologies of digital manipulation.

The relation between photography and memory has been extensively recognized, challenged, surveyed, and discussed. Photographs have been and are still regarded as useful, even if not always truthful, bearers of information about past events, captured and seized in time. The necessary indexical relation between the photograph and its referent, as illustrated by Barthes, makes of photography an unmistakable evidence of what existed at a particular moment in time and space, of what “has been there” when the shutter was opened¹. For such a reason, photographs are treasured as utile *aide-mémoire*, able to preserve visual details which would otherwise pass unnoticed or fade away in the mists of time. In this sense, photography can be viewed as a prosthetic memory, an archive of images that remembers for us and allows the formation of trans-generational post-memories.

Besides remembering for us, sometimes photographs help us to remember. By catalysing individual and personal recollections, they may function as *madeleines* rather than *aide-mémoire*. The identification of the subject in the photograph allows the viewer to activate feelings of remembrance, which add an emotional and subjective tone to the objective information contained in the visual data. These mnemonic properties are commonly attributed to the pure image, that is to the content of photography. It is generally accepted that the mere iconic recognition of the person photographed, via visual associations, triggers processes of memory. The famous Winter Garden Photograph, for instance, gives to Barthes “a sentiment as certain as remembrance”, because he is able to identify his mother's essence, her “kindness”, and “gentleness”, in that *image*², regardless of whether it is also an *object*. Contrarily to this generally accepted position, in her essay *Photographs As Objects of Memory*, Elizabeth Edwards restores the status of photography as an *object* and emphasizes the importance of its material aspects in relation to processes of reminiscence. She points out that:

1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1982)

2 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 69-70

it is not the image *qua* image that is the focus of contemplation, evocation and memory, but that its material forms, enhanced by its presentational forms, are central to its function as a socially salient object. (...) These material forms exist in dialogue with the image itself to make meaning and to create the focus for memory and evocation³.

If the image triggers the process of recollection, its material and presentational forms create a focus for that memory. Edwards proves her point by discussing the importance that these material and presentational forms assume in the rituals of family mourning. She speaks of photographs used for gravestones, framed in “living room shrines” or stuck in family albums, while cycling through curious photographic objects: from embroidered frames up to the old custom of hair jewellery. Edwards persuasively demonstrates that *photography as object*, strengthens and enhances the memory of the deceased and assumes an important therapeutic value within the elaboration of mourning.

It is interesting that this emphasis on the materiality in the process of memory emerges at the moment of the de-materialisation of photography due to the advent of digital technology. Digital photography transforms photographs from *objects* into *data*, into immaterial numerical representations. From a practical point of view, digital photography do not differ much from analogue. The manner in which the camera apparatus is structured and how it generates photographs is the same as it was with analogue film. With the exception of digital images generated via computer graphics, digital photography continues to be produced by way of a material support, which includes the camera, the photographer and the subject photographed. Furthermore, digital pictures continue to be printed on paper and the resulting objects are virtually undistinguishable from prints of analogue photographs. Yet, there has been an undeniable and drastic reduction in the number of photographs printed in relation to the total amount of pictures taken. This figure suggests an incontrovertible trend towards the de-materialisation in the consumption of images which inevitably challenges those traditional “material and presentational forms” that, according to Edwards, “create the focus for memory and evocation”. Since it fosters a memory without object, digital photography seems to dispute Edwards's thesis, on both an exquisitely theoretical level and an empirical one.

The ritual practices associated with the remembrance of a deceased, as described by Edwards, have certainly not disappeared. Photographs of the loved dead continued to be printed and framed in living room shrines or used in gravestones. I do agree with Edwards that the material forms of the image “is likely to outlive conventional chemical photography”⁴. Nevertheless, I do believe that digital technology has introduced both new ways to assemble and exhibit photographs and new possibilities to deal with these memories. Digital images are experienced through new presentational forms that are likely to affect the process of memory itself, creating a different focus for evocation. Moreover, the easiness to manipulate the digital image challenges the fundamental

3 Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory” in Fiona Candlin; Raiford Guins (eds.), *The object reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 332

4 Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory”, 340

principle of indexicality and might compromise photography reputation as reliable testimony of the past and trustworthy source of memory. What is then the relationship between digital photography and memory? Can digital photography be still considered a source of memory? Can photography without object (image *qua* image) generate a focus for memory and evocation? What are the new presentational forms that digital technology has introduced? And how do they affect, if they do, the process of memory and evocation? What are the new practices of remembrance associated with digital technology? What kind of relationship do people engage with these images? What is lost and what is achieved in this passage from analogue to digital photography in the context of mourning? How is the need of physicality re-inscribed in the consumption of digital photographs?

In this paper I will discuss these issues comparing the traditional material and presentational forms of photography with the new possibilities offered by digital technology. In the first two paragraphs, I will approach these questions through a set of insight drawn from material culture studies. First I will identify those practices which are necessarily associated with the materiality of the photographic object, and, therefore, inaccessible to disembodied images. Then, I will point out the new modalities of storage, distribution, and exhibition afforded by digital technologies, while assessing their effects on the memorial function of photography, especially within the context of mourning. Finally, in the last paragraph, I will focus on the issue of manipulability of digital photography and evaluate how it affects the very idea of memory associated with photography.

What is lost: Relics, Surrogates and Nostalgia

In the transition from an analogue photograph printed on a material support, to a digital, disembodied image, what is lost is quite obviously an object. This means that the apparatus of practices and uses which revolves around that object is lost as well. In the context of mourning, photographic objects are often set into a complex system of worship. There is something mystical and religious in the relationship that people engage with material photographs of a loved one. Edwards compares the treatment of the photographic object with the worship of religious relics. This association is well grounded, so long as photography is an *index*, a physical trace of the individual photographed and, therefore, similar to relics. To say that in Barthes's words:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceeds radiations which will ultimately touch me, who am here (...) A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed⁵.

Undeniably, Barthes emphasizes the materiality of the photographic image in this passage. He speaks of “carnal medium”, “skin”, able to connect the dead with the living. The indexical nature of photography, the fact that it is an “emanation of the referent”, gives the viewer the impression of

5 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 80-81

establishing a material contact with the deceased and, thus, emotionally enhances his/her memory. Photographs become linking objects.

Conversely, a digital picture is usually neither treated nor regarded as a relic. This depends, first of all, on the fact that digital imaging technology makes indexicality less evident. According to Frosh, digital photography lacks of indexicality because of its different way of recording reality: while photographic negatives record and preserve the trace left by the light in a recognizable form, light sensitive sensors of digital cameras translate it into a code⁶. Gunnin has rightly demonstrated that the process of encoding data about light in a numerical representation, is still indexically determined by objects outside the camera like in chemical photography⁷. Yet, moving beyond these conceptual-technical controversies, what can be said with certainty is that the quality of index of the digital photograph is less perceptible and less incontestable. The evidence of a material connection, the “umbilical cord” which Barthes speaks of, has been weakened. As Mary Ann Doane properly points out, the index claims its connection to reality by virtue of its privileging of contact, of touch, of a physical connection⁸. The digital can no make such a claim and, in fact, is defined by its negation.

Touch plays a fundamental role in the distinction between embodied and disembodied image, *photograph as object* and *photograph as data*. Digital files cannot be touched, caressed, kissed, hold or, conversely, scratched, cut, torn, burnt. They do not enable a “bodily contact with the trace of the remembered”, as photographic objects do⁹. The possibility of such a physical contact is deceptively re-inscribed in the experience of digital images through the technology of touch-screens. Tactile grammar is re-configured in fascinating ways with the introduction of new gestures, such as the *pinch-zoom* which allows the viewer to enlarge the image, giving the illusory sensation of entering inside it. Yet, the physicality of digital pictures is still imperfect compared with that of photographs as object. It is not only the possibility of tactile interaction, but also its weight and smell that confer on the photograph as object the role of surrogate of the deceased, an authority that cannot be transferred to its digital twin. The physicality and materiality of the object replaces the absent body of the dead. For this reason, material photographs are often subjected to practices of fetishism, and invested with the attributes of the human being represented. This function of surrogate that the photograph plays within the framework of mourning, is particularly well illustrated by the custom of being photographed holding or showing the portrait of the loved one, popular in the late nineteenth century. Analysing these images in his book *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, Batchen explains that, “holding a photograph within a photograph answers to the need to include the virtual presence of those who are otherwise absent”; “to enable

6 Frosh quoted in Martin Lister (ed.), *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995)

7 Tom Gunning, “What’s the point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs”, *NORDICOM Review*, vol. 5, n. 1/2, September 2004, 39-46, 40.

8 Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality and the Concept of Medium Specificity”, in Robin Kelsey; Blake Stimson (ed.), *The Meaning of Photography* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 9.

9 Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory”, 334.

life and death to stand side by side in front the camera”¹⁰. The photograph as object, by virtue of its materiality, ceases to be a simple representation and assumes the role of a substitute.

Besides functioning as a relic and fetish, the photograph as object is also capable to record the passage of time in a way that its digital twin cannot match. As their subjects, photographs “age, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects”¹¹. The ravages of time seem to authenticate and enhance the quality of pictures as fragments of the past. What is more, they tell not only the history of the person represented, but also their own stories as objects. Signs of tape on the back of the picture reveal that it was hung on the wall; bent corners inform that probably it was placed in a family album. The fact that it has been torn or cut are significant clues. Dates or sentences written on add up further strata of information [fig. 1]. Ultimately, old photographs may trigger a rather peculiar feeling in the viewer, which has little to do with the memory of the deceased. As Batchen reveals in his analysis of nineteenth century photographs, “for us, today” these old pictures “may even evoke another kind of memory – nostalgia” (p. 14). I would say that such a nostalgia is ineluctably related to the object, because, to a certain extent, it is nostalgia for the photographic object itself, made more and more rare by digital photography.



Fig. 1 – Tacita Dean, *Floh*, 2001

Quite unsurprisingly, remedies have been devised to compensate even this absence. As Batchen himself suggests, today, the production of nostalgia has become “a major industry”, which

10 Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 12

11 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), 4.

relies precisely on the possibilities afforded by digital technology. Computer programs such as Photoshop and especially phone applications such as Hipstamatic or Instagram (and many others with evocative names such as Retro Camera and Paper Camera), allow the user to easily modify an image, possibly ageing it. Hipstamatic was the first popular smartphone application designed to make instantly retro photos, without the need to retouch them with Photoshop. The even more powerful Instagram allows the user to choose between multiple filters and obtain different flavours of vintage. The faux-vintage photos are created by fading the image, adjusting the contrast and tint, over- or under-saturating the colours, replacing them with black and white or sepia effects, blurring areas, adding simulated film grain, scratches or other imperfections. And, most of all, these photographs seem to be printed on real, physical photo paper. Materiality and nostalgia, with their corollary of deterioration and decay, return to the digital file in simulated form. Bodily contact and illusions of materiality are thus astutely re-introduced in digital images through touch-screens and faux-vintage simulations. Nonetheless, the relationship that people engage with them is hardly comparable with the grade of affinity and participation that they usually share with photographs as objects. Digital images are unlikely to be either considered or used as linking objects, relics and fetishes.

New Presentational Forms: Digital Frames and Online Albums

Whereas the material and presentational forms of the photograph as object allow practices of fetishism and worship not applicable to the digital image, digital technologies offer new modalities with which to present and exhibit photographic memories. In this paragraph, I will analyse specifically the use of digital frames and online albums.

The images of the remembered are traditionally exhibited in what Edwards defines as “living room shrine”: “framed collections, on top of televisions, side-boards, pianos or mantelpieces”¹². These assemblages can be regarded as micro-monuments where personal and family memories are celebrated. They are rather sculptural and are created putting together photographs, memorabilia and other significant objects. In his book *Forget Me Not*, Batchen explores the centuries-old practice of strengthening the emotional appeal of photographs by embellishing them with text, paint, frames, embroidery, fabric, string, hair, flowers, bullets, cigar wrappers, butterfly wings, and more to create strange hybrid objects. In these monumental-like constructions, frames occupy an important position and they are often chosen and manipulated in very personal ways. Sometimes the creation of the frame itself becomes part of the process of mourning, as in the case of embroidered photographic shrines. Indeed, the act of stitchery has often been described both as an act of therapy and remembrance (Edwards, 2008; Llewellyn, 1999).

New digital frames, instead, do not allow the wide choice of models, flexible manipulation and personal re-elaboration that the old ones permit. They generally look alike and cannot be

¹² Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory”, 339.

modified. Consequently, the process of presentation and exhibition no longer focuses on the frame, but on its content, on the photographs themselves. Images can be selected, ordered in a meaningful sequence and then projected as a slide-show, usually with an adjustable time interval. It is true that multiple frames and photo albums allow their curators to obtain quite similar effects of montage. Yet, what is lacking in these traditional frames is the presence of movement (although external to the image) and the control of time. The sequence of images and the time to look at them are imposed in the digital frames in ways that cannot be compared with personal, free browsing across the pages of a family album. The quality of these *digital shrines* is therefore less sculptural and more cinematographic and entails inevitably new ways of seeing. Edwards clearly distinguishes the way of looking at photographs from the way of watching video or film, by the stillness of the former ones.

The evocative fascination of photographs as they operate in their stillness and materiality is very different from the evocative qualities of film or video. Stillness invites evocation, contemplation and a certain formation of affective memory in a way that film and video, with their temporal naturalism and realistic narrative sequence, cannot¹³.

The *right* way of looking at a photograph, according to Edwards, is, thus, that of “contemplation” and it is related to the stillness and materiality of the picture itself. Yet, stillness and materiality are eliminated in the moving and immaterial images of digital frames. Consequently, they require a new way of seeing, a more cinematic gaze: *watching* instead of *looking at*. As Azoulay points out, “the verb ‘to watch’ is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures”, since “it entails dimensions of time and movement”¹⁴. Digital frames imply a shift from a contemplative and elegiac gaze to a more active and participative one which is involved in the narrative sequence of images. The viewer becomes a spectator called to take part to and to be absorbed into the story. In such a way, this new form of presentation creates a different focus for memory and evocation. While in the traditional frames the evocation is triggered by the single image, in the digital frames it is aroused by the association of images. Lingering and contemplation of the single still are replaced with watching the flow of a pre-defined recollection.

Further, digital technology has introduced new methods to show and distribute photographs: on-line albums such as Picasa, Flickr, albums on Facebook etc. These new instruments are altering the traditional forms of self-presentation and construction of personal memory via photo-albums. Family albums are generally considered as selective constructions of memory, which mirror not the reality, but the image of the family that their curator wants to transmit. Unlike traditional ones, on-line albums are public: they can be viewed and are expressively designed for a greater number of people. If traditional family albums were intended for a small circle of relatives and close friends, on-line ones are conceived to be accessible to an indefinite number of friends and acquaintances. Evidently, such an openness is likely to affect the kind of memory conveyed by these collections.

¹³ Ibid., 334

¹⁴ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone; London: MIT Distributor, 2008), 14

The image that on-line albums articulate tends to be increasingly social and self-conscious. Pictures are taken and selected with the explicit aim of constructing a particular identity and showing it to others. Thus, if traditional family albums create a focus for private and domestic recollection of memories, on-line ones assume rather the form of public statements of self-presentation. The most intimate and affective pictures are likely to be absent from these public statements, because they would be anonymous and mute for a viewer who stands outside the familial network. For instance, Barthes's mother picture, the already mentioned Winter Garden Photograph, is the only of all photographs in *Camera Lucida* that, although discussed in detail, is not reproduced in the book. As Hirsch has convincingly explained:

Barthes cannot *show* us the photograph because we stand outside the familial network of looks and thus cannot *see* the picture in the way Barthes must. To us it would be just another generic family photograph from a long time ago¹⁵.

Another remarkable consequence introduced by on-line albums is that every member of the family is more likely to have his/her own albums. The unitary narrative of family albums is broken up into several minor narratives, which convey a more complex and fragmentary image. This image is even more convoluted because of the exponential increase in the number of pictures produced. The easiness and cheapness of the photographic act, epitomized by mobile phone cameras, has resulted in the production of an unprecedented amount of media material¹⁶. Finally, a last aspect to take into account is the structure of the platforms used to store and organize images. Social media compel users to arrange their photographs according to the conventions of predetermined and, more or less, rigid structures. As exemplified by the replacement of the personal profile with the timeline in Facebook, social networks increasingly aspire to become *the archive par excellence* of an individual and to envelope the whole life of the user within the system. The chronological character of this new environment forces the user to historicise his/her pictures: every photograph is regarded as a potentially documented past. We can conclude therefore that the processes of self-memorialisation through photography that on-line albums promote, tend to be organized on one hand according to the user's idiosyncratic desires and the social self-image he/she wishes to transmit, and on the other hand according to the predetermined structures offered by social networks.

Manipulated Memories

In so far, we have considered digital photography from the perspective of distribution, storage and presentation. Now, it is necessary to examine what digital photography is and allows the user to do, in short to outline the properties that distinguish it from analogue photography. According to a

15 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

16 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 34

simple and straightforward definition, a digital photograph is an image made up of a grid of discrete units known as pixels, with numbers that specify the colour and shade of each pixel. This means that, first, digital photographs or digitized analogue photographs are composed of digital code: they are numerical representations that can be subjected to algorithmic manipulation¹⁷. Secondly, they have a modular structure, that is they “consist of independent parts, each of which consists of smaller and independent parts and so on, down to the level of smallest ‘atoms’ – pixels”¹⁸. This numerical and modular structure facilitates the deletion, substitution and manipulation of parts, and makes it open-ended and never definitive. Digital modifications are reversible: the same image can be copied and altered indefinitely. The variability, namely the possibility of infinite manipulations of the same photograph, is, according to Manovich, the key conceptual difference between old and new media. As he claims, “a new media is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions”¹⁹. The industrial logic of standardization is replaced with a post-industrial philosophy of customisation and individualization. Moreover, practices of manipulation and post-production are potentially accessible to anyone as they are quite easy to learn and apply. As William J. Mitchell suggests “the essential characteristic of media manipulation is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer, it is simply a matter of substituting new digits for old”²⁰.

Manipulation *per se* is nothing new in the history of photography. Manipulative techniques were a common creative and anti-realistic device of Surrealist photography, and were massively employed in political pictures as a propagandistic strategy to offer a distorted view of reality. The novelty introduced by the advent of digital photography is not in the *possibility of*, but in the *accessibility to* manipulation. Alteration, that was an exception for traditional analogue photography, has become the norm for digital photography. This entails the possibility of a new relationship between viewers and photography. Viewers are not only consumers, but producers of manipulated images as well. Further, editing image programs allow the user to obtain much more sophisticated alterations than those permitted by traditional, chemical techniques of manipulation. The components of a digital image can be rearranged, extended, modified, deleted, even added, and created from scratch. It appears as though photographers, or consumers of photographs, have taken complete control over the final image, and have freed themselves from the constraints of reality. Digital photography has become much more akin to painting. Mitchell makes this comparison explicit when he says that “computational tools for transforming, combining, altering and analysing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments to a painter”²¹. Nonetheless, the realism and mimetic nature of digital images make them much more deceptive imitations of reality than paintings. Digital alterations are virtually undetectable and digital simulations are perfect copies of reality. Digital photography allows the viewer not only to intervene in the reality

17 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 27

18 Ibid., 31

19 Ibid., 35

20 William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press 1992), 304

21 Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, 304

represented, but also to make such an intervention invisible. This characteristic, namely the possibility to obtain undetectable manipulations, may undermine the reputation of photography as a reliable historical source and object of memory. In Levinson's words, the digitisation of photography threatens "the very reliability of the photograph as mute, unbiased witness of reality"²².

Even, the relationship between photography and death is reconfigured in new and fascinating ways by digital technologies. Sontag's memorable definition of photography as "an elegiac art, a twilight art", seems to be challenged by the advent of the digital. She said that "all photographs are *memento mori*", that "to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability"²³. Interestingly, Kevin Robins's description of the possibilities of digital photography is quite the opposite:

Electronic images are not frozen, do not fade; their quality is not elegiac, they are not just registrations of mortality. Digital techniques produce images in cryogenised form: they can be awoken, re-animated, brought 'up to date'. Digital manipulation can resurrect the dead²⁴.

Photography has often been described as a resurrectional device, because of its ability to inscribe a piece of the past in the present²⁵. Yet, the power of resurrection that Robins describes is of a completely different and unprecedented form. It does not consist in preserving a trace, in embalming for eternity an emanation of a past reality. On the contrary, it resides in the ability of re-animating, re-mobilizing, even simulating that past reality. Instead of recording an event, digital photography can reproduce it from scratch. It is no more a piece of the past projected into the present, but a re-creation of the past made in the present. In this way, digital photography is no more a document, but it becomes an artifice, a "false"²⁶. Its very relation with memory is consequently re-configured in fascinating ways which I will try to explain through the case of a specific artwork.

In *Dead Troops Talk, an ambush of a Red Army Patro, Near Moquor in Afghanistan, 1986* (1992), Jeff Wall digitally "resurrects the dead" and animates them. The picture [fig. 2] shows a surreal scene, in which soldiers killed during an ambush, animatedly talk and joke with one another, completely indifferent to their fatal and still bleeding wounds. Obviously, the picture is not a record of the reality, but a simulation with actors realized in the photographer's studio in Canada, six years after the historic event. Despite the realistic quality of the image, made possible by the use of digital technology, the scene represented is a deliberate fiction. The *simulacrum* is not deceptive, but it voluntarily unmask itself and its nature as artifice, as "false". Deleuze and Guattari celebrated the power of the false for its ability to produce real on the basis of the real²⁷. That is exactly what Jeff

22 Paul Levison, *The Soft Edge, a Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (London: Routledge 1997), 41

23 Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.

24 Kevin Robin in Lister (ed.), *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, 41

25 In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes affirms that "photography has something to do with resurrection"(82).

26 This idea of the 'false' is shaped around Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the simulacra.

27 According to Deleuze and Guattari, simulation is a process that produces the real, or, more precisely, more real (a more-than-real) on the basis of the real. "It carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced". Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2000), 87. For an analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the simulacra, see Brian

Wall does. Its picture, indeed, refers to a precise historic event, the last colonial folly of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, before of its dissolution. Yet, it is not intended to be a document; on the contrary Sontag defines it as the “antithesis of a document”²⁸. Its power resides exactly in its artificial nature, which allows that image to draw the viewer's attention in a way that a normal, documentary war photograph cannot match. The “antithesis of a document” offers a possibility to face our desensitisation to the common war photography and to use again an image to denounce the senselessness and brutality of war. Even if it is not a witness of the past, this image allows the viewer to reflect on and critically engage with that past. It becomes a focus to re-elaborate memory, instead of simply evoking it.



Fig. 2 – Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk, an ambush of a Red Army Patro, Near Moquor in Afghanistan, 1986 (1992)*.

The power of artifice, that digital photography can perform, is not to bring back the past as it was, but to construct it from the perspective of the present. The “false” does not create a focus for memory and evocation, but for reflection and re-elaboration of memory. Digital photography signs the passage from “what has been” to what “may have been”; it opens to the potentiality of multiple pasts recorded from subjective and dispersed points of view. This passage from the *index* to the *artifice* makes possible a new form of memory: an affirmative and creative act of recollection²⁹. While the kind of remembrance associated with analogue photography is passive and contemplative, memory which comes out of things, the memory fostered by digital photography

Massumi, *Realer than the Real. The Simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari*, 1987

28 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, Penguin Books, 2003), 111

29 Jay Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, n. 1, December 2009, 1-9, 5

might be of a more active and operative type. Pictures digitally altered might offer a possibility to critically re-engage with the traumatic memory of a past event.

Conclusions

The transition from analogue to digital and the way in which it affects the relationship between photography and memory, is a very complicated and tangled issue which can be approached from two different points of view: material culture and rhetoric of the image.

From the perspective of material culture, this transition involves the potential loss of an object and, therefore, the loss of those practices of fetishism, worship and material destruction, which are intrinsically linked with the object itself. Further, the lack of the object may trigger a feeling of nostalgia, which is a longing for the lost object itself. Nonetheless, digital technology introduces new modalities for presenting, exhibiting and organizing memories, of which digital frames and on-line albums are two of the most striking examples. These new presentational forms inevitably affect the way in which photographic memories are experienced and catalogued. Digital frames entail a more cinematographic gaze (*watching* instead of *looking at*) and a shift from contemplation and lingering on the single still to participation and involvement in the narrative flow of images. On-line albums imply a public destination of memories and their arrangement according to the predetermined structure of the electronic platform used.

From the perspective of the rhetoric of image, instead, the easiness of manipulation and the possibility to obtain undetectable alterations and simulations, both change the nature of photography, transforming it from incontrovertible witness of a past reality into *artifice*. Digital photographs do not necessarily attest what “has been there”; they do not necessarily preserve the trace, the emanation of a past reality. A digital image may not be a recorded memory, but an artificial and constructed one. If the remembrance usually associated with analogue photography is passive and contemplative, memory which comes out of things, the digital manipulation of images allows a more affirmative and active act of recollection. Pictures digitally altered do not create a focus for memory and evocation of what “has been”, but a possibility to critically re-elaborate the memory of an event.

Yet, the new possibilities roughly sketched above and the speculative ideas that sprang from them should not make us forget that in practical terms many digitally constructed or distributed images are still used in similar applications to their analogue predecessors and still function within the tradition of how a viewer understands analogue photography. The photographic object is re-obtained by simply printing the digital image, and many of those images are not manipulated and continued to be regarded according to the principles of indexicality and referentiality of analogue photography.

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