DEAR PHOTOGRAPH :
ONLINE PICTURES AND TRACES OF THE PAST

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Abstract

By analyzing the photographic archive of *Dear Photograph* (dearphotograph.com) – a website that intends to use pictures of the past as traces of personal memories – this article will focus on the relationship between memory and photography in the digital age, and on the value attributed to the sharing of private snapshots on the Web.

I will analyze the images chosen by the participants to portray their own past, underlining both old and new uses of photographs, and pictures will be read together with their captions, as a unique "imagetext". Even if images seem to play a crucial role in memory's representation, their relationship with their verbal explanations reveals some crucial aspects of the sharing of private photographs on the Web. Captions make family pictures "readable" also for an extraneous observer and distinguish similar photographs one from another: while enlarging the intimate context that characterizes the reading of family pictures, the Web amplifies the properties of analogue photography, which ratifies the belonging of an individual to a group, and transforms personal recollections into a shared (and sharable) memory.

Many scholars have studied the relationship between memory and analogue photography, as well as the role played by pictures in the sharing of personal recollections within the family.[1] However, this paper addresses an aspect of the relationship between memory and photography that has not yet received all the attention it deserves. By analyzing the photographic archive of *Dear Photograph* (dearphotograph.com) – a website that intends to use pictures of the past as traces of personal memories – it will focus on the forms and roles of pictures in mnemonic practices in the digital age, and on the value attributed to the sharing of private snapshots on the Web.

Dear Photograph was created in May 2011 by a twenty-one-year-old Canadian, Taylor Jones. As he declared in many interviews, he got the idea for the blog while he was looking at his family snapshots in his parents' kitchen. He noticed that his brother Landon was sitting at the table exactly in the same position in which he had been sitting many years before, as shown in the picture taken during his third birthday party. Taylor held the old snapshot in his hand, covering with it his eighteen-year-old brother, and took a picture of the picture. Then he repeated the experiment with other photographs and shared them with some friends on social networks, inviting other people to send images portraying their own past. His blog gained immediate success on the Web. In the homepage

he summarizes the instructions with this tagline: "Take a picture of a picture, from the past in the present." First you have to bring an old snapshot to the place where it had once been taken, then you have to take a picture of the picture. Finally, the photograph should be sent to an e-mail address with a caption opening with the words "dear photograph" (but today there is also a section for the submission within the website). Since the end of May, the blog has been updated almost every day.

Pictures of Pictures

Most pictures show a human being: only few of them portray a place, an object or an animal (anyway, animals are always conceived as family members). This choice influences also the stylistic elements of the snapshots. The profiles of the furniture or the borders of the walls around the human subject do not usually coincide perfectly. Indeed, if they overlapped exactly, the human subject would appear as a figure in the distance, much less important than the surrounding context. This slight difference does not prevent the identification of the place in the background: the photographic play is effective anyway.

Furthermore, being family snapshots, most pictures show people that are close relatives of the author of the post. More precisely, they portray them as children, alone or together with their brothers, sisters and little friends, exactly as Taylor Jones did in his first posts. The child is usually playing, or is photographed while doing something strange, such as wearing his father's shoes, or hooking a plastic fish from a little swimming pool in the garden. The caption describes the scene ironically. For instance, the comment on a picture that shows three children looking insistently towards a place out of the observer's sight asks what might be hidden down there, and plays with the idea that the picture of the picture, even zooming in on space, was not able to solve the mystery. In other cases, a strange piece of clothing is ironically commented (a hat with Mickey Mouse ears, bright-coloured trousers, three sons always forced by their mother to wear similar clothes). It is important to notice that, in all these examples, the creative aspects of taking a new picture are more significant than the affective and memorial value of the image. Captions speak of the desire to take part in a sort of *memory game*.

Of course, these comments are also very nostalgic. Particularly when a picture shows a child that is playing with his or her own brothers and sisters, with a ball, or on a swing, the captions insist on the regret for a lost carelessness. Also in the most playful posts, childhood pictures are an emblem of the past and of a lost time: they are photographic memories that mirror the body's changes and shield precious moments. In fact, the captions often reflect – although in a superficial way – on the changes provoked by the passing time and on the problems brought about by adult life. For instance, the caption of a picture in which a child is trying to do a jigsaw puzzle complains about the fact that adulthood's mysteries are not so easy to solve.

Even though they are sometimes ignored by the comments, changes are often clearly visible in the image: the picture of the picture shows the changes that time has produced on bodies, objects, and places. In the post of 26 July 2011, for example, the view behind the child is absolutely unrecognisable (the old skyline is completely hidden by a new high white wall). The caption, in this case, does remark the difference: "Oh, how the views change." The tangible signs of time passing appear thanks to the contrast between what can be seen today and what is visible in the

analogue photographic memory. The post of June 20th 2001 plays more creatively with Taylor Jones's model. The first picture shows a child smiling proudly on his bike; in the new picture a new motor-scooter stands out near the old snapshot. The whole caption plays with the meaning of the word "bike:" "*Dear Photograph*, me and my first bike. The bike I have now goes a little bit faster." The reframing of the picture underlines the passing of time, as if the growth of the human body went hand in hand with that of the means of transportation.

Even if some posts underline that a childhood habit (such as playing in the nature, or the passion for music or boxing) persists in adulthood (respectively, in the posts of 21 July 2011, 12 December 2012, 15 April 2013), the captions of pictures portraying a child insist mostly on an idea of loss: in other words, old childhood photographs show an irremediable distant time.

Also pictures portraying other familial members (sons, daughters, parents and grandparents, alone, in pair, or together with the child) are characterized by a dialectics between continuity and change. Many of these posts aim to underline that the love that tied the subjects together when the original photograph was taken still persists today. For example, in the captions of pictures showing the father and the son the author very often expresses his gratitude for the love and protection he received. Moreover, the mother is sometimes photographed again with her old picture. In the caption of the image posted on 21 August 2011, for instance, a woman says that nothing has changed: neither the blue-coloured house, nor the protective look of her mother. In both cases the mother *looks over* her daughter: in the old picture she towers over the child beside her; in the picture of the picture she looks at her adult daughter, who is photographing her down in the garden.

While reinventing the model proposed by Jones, posts like that seem to reveal the way through which *Dear Photograph* gives shape to memory: a single moment, which epitomizes a whole period or a beloved person, overlaps the present one, partially hiding it and forcing it to adhere to the remembered past and make it resemble it. Furthermore, the examples below show that pictures of pictures set up a relationship between the photographed subject and the observer (who, in this case, is also the photographer) *through the look*. According to Marianne Hirsch family photographs are always crossed by many mutual looks between family members (which she defines *familial looks*).[2] Face to face with the person in the image is not only the photographer, but also the relatives looking at the snapshot years later. This mutual look defines the identity of the observer and its position in the family relationships. *Dear Photograph* plays with this intricate net of looks in family snapshots: while taking a picture of a picture, the observers unveil their own presence; in many cases they even observe their childhood from the point of view of their parents at the time in which they photographed (and looked at) them.

Bourdieu, in his seminal essay on the social use of photography, insists on the affective value given by a family to pictures representing its members, and points out that images – which he considers as symbols of social integration – play a crucial role in strengthening the relationship not only between the descendants, but also between the family and the whole society.[3] Some posts insist – more or less seriously – on the lineage granted by the family photographs. By way of an example, the caption of the old snapshot posted on 27 June 2012 reads:

Dear Photograph, as the family archivist, I was drawn to this image of my great grandfather George and my Uncle Jack taken in my New England hometown circa 1930. When we moved away from our family and its history, my life was shattered. Many years later I found solace and reconnection through tracking

our family tree. On one of many visits, I found the alley in the photo by observing the unusual brackets on the house on the left. Piece by piece, I am putting myself back together.

On the one hand, pictures of pictures represent an opportunity to *reinvent the past*, and underline the *performative aspects* of remembrance acts.[4] On the other hand, the publication of private family picture online intensifies the use of family snapshots as coats-of-arms.[5]

Some posts dedicated to old family members underline the *distance between past and present*, and the photographs evoke a lost person: a son who went to study abroad, a father who divorced from her wife, or even a dead relative. In the caption of the picture posted on 30 July 2011 a woman explains how cancer killed her beloved sister and prays the photograph to give her back to her. The hand holding the analogue snapshot is particularly evident here (with red-coloured nails and in the middle of the picture), as if it was looking for a physical proximity with the portrayed subject. Also in the digital age, the use of photographs as *objects of memory*[6] needs to deal with the physical surface (the *skin*) of the picture that *embodies* a beloved person. "From its earliest days the relationship with photographs has demanded a physical engagement – photo-objects exist in relationship to the human body, making photographs as objects intrinsically active in that they are handled, touched, caressed."[7] The image posted on 26 June 2011 seems to seek an impossible contact with a dead person. The first picture shows a middle-aged man and woman seated in a bench: he is telling her something and she is caught in the act of laughing. In the picture of the picture, the same man – a little older – stands near the bench and looks at the empty space on it, where he can find now only his photographic memories.

Many scholars have insisted on the ghostly character of photography, and on its relationship with death and mourning:[8]

La photographie est très exactement le lieu et le moyen par lequel la science (médicine, psychiatrie) fait fiction, […] elle est le lieu de passage, d'ouverture à un espace d'invention totale où le corps photographié tout à la fois se donne à fond et en même temps se perd dans les âbimes: c'est la définition même de la "fantômisation" des corps photographiés. Corps de lumière, corps de ténèbre.[9]

As the material trace of a physical proximity with the portrayed subjects, the photographic image proves at the same time that they existed and that now they exist only in the photographed past: while immortalizing and eternizing, the picture mummifies life. Digital photographs, more enduring than analogue ones, seem to grant a more resistant resting place.

The Words of a Shared Memory: Comments and Captions

In her reflection about Roland Barthes and his decision to hide to *Camera Lucida*'s reader the picture of his mother as a child which constitutes the heart of his book, Marianne Hirsch points out that Barthes's words envelop and protect the intimate space of memory. Nevertheless, this sort of "verbal veil" opens also a breach in the curtain around personal memories and familiar stories, and reveals them to an unknown reader/observer too. As Hirsch suggests reflecting upon Barthes's book, which actually contains both the pictures and their verbal explanations, texts and pictures,

"intricately entangled in a narrative web, work in collaboration to tell a complicated story of loss and longing;" hence they should be analyzed together, and read as a unique "imagetext," a "prosa picture," or a "visual narrative."[10]

Indeed, the words posted together with the pictures in *Dear Photograph* can be considered as traditional *captions*, as *short letters*, or as the beginnings of a *diary page*. Even if pictures seem to play a crucial role in memory's representation, their relationship with the written text is complex and multifaceted.

First of all, the words are *captions* that guide the observer in the reading of the pictures: they help him to decipher the image when it is not completely clear, or when some elements are too small, far, and blurry. Then, they give a role to people and objects: a woman becomes "the mother," a child becomes "the son" or "*me* as a child," a door that can be barely distinguished behind some people becomes "the family house's entrance." It can be argued that the use of pictures in *Dear Photograph* is based on the confidence in the *indexical nature* of photography:[11] even if pictures are meant to embody the piece of reality they show, they have to be combined with words in order to achieve a meaning and to be able to tell a story. Schaeffer[12] distinguishes between two aspects: on the one hand, a photograph functions as an index only if the observer knows that it is a photograph, and what the technical production of a photograph implies (*savoir de l'arché*); on the other hand, it is important to consider also what the observer knows about the situation portrayed in the photograph (*savoir latéral*, constituted by information that is not given by the picture). In those types of reception of photographic images that Schaeffer calls *photo-souvenir* and *remémoration* (he distinguishes among eight different types), the picture is part of the personal world of the observer (the *savoir latéral* is more significant than the visual information given by the image) and helps him to remember a past moment. *Dear Photograph*'s captions give voice to the photographer's *savoir latéral* and to the affective meaning of the picture in his or her memory, thus making it "readable" also for an extraneous observer. Furthermore, it is only through words that many similar photographs can be distinguished from one another, becoming the trace of a personal story. However, by sharing the memories entangled with pictures, the captions enlarge the intimate context that, according to Schaeffer, characterizes the reading of pictures in *photo-souvenir* and *remémoration*: the "dear photographs" become a piece a *common story* (an *ordinary* and a *collective* one).

Secondly, it is relevant to notice that in his first posts Taylor Jones proposes to open the caption as if it was a *letter for the picture*. In the words chosen by the participants, the photographs – "material traces of an irrecoverable past"[13] – seem to be real *witnesses* of a lost time. If some captions play around the "more-than-human" qualities of the mechanical eye[14] (for example by asking the picture where the photographed childhood objects are now), some other posts beg the image for help, as if it were a talisman or a relic[15] able to resuscitate a beloved person, or at least to bring him or her a short message. Some captions take indeed this rhetorical solution literally: even if they begin with the words "dear photograph", during the text they change their addressee becoming a letter for the photographed beloved person, as if the picture was actually the incarnation of whom and what it shows.[16]

La photo de l'être disparu vient me toucher comme les rayons différés d'une étoile. Une sorte de lien ombilical relie le corps de la chose photographiée à mon regard: la lumière, quoique

impalpable, est bien ici un milieu charnel, une peau que je partage avec celui ou celle qui a été photographié.[17]

Finally, the opening of *Dear Photograph*'s captions can also be compared to the first words of a *diary page*. Taylor Jones proposes the participants to tell their own stories not to the human addressee of a letter, but to an abstract entity like a diary (as in many personal blogs).[18] Furthermore, the site is updated daily, like a calendar or an agenda. Of course, it is an open and shared diary, not only because anyone can read it, but also because it is written by many hands.

Beside this, as noticed before, the pictures chosen by the participants are very similar: even if the caption differentiates them, letting them tell a story from the past and transforming them into precious pieces of memory, the choice of the picture to post is decisively homogeneous. On the one hand, this homogeneity can be explained with the usual selections with characterize the traditional family album. Notably, before digital photography the amateur photographer used to take pictures only in very particular (and "official") moments of family life, such as weddings, festivities, ceremonies, and holidays.[19] Analyzing the "snapshot version of life," Chalfen says that in private collections the choice of allowed subjects is always redundant: through the recurring use of the same poses and backgrounds people reaffirm their main cultural values. In particular, the main use of family snapshots is tied to the birth of a baby and to the significant (and visible) changes occurred during the child's first year (all his "first times"); on the contrary ordinary and unhappy events are ignored.[20] On the other hand, the homogeneity of *Dear Photograph*'s snapshots can be explained with the mutual imitation that characterizes many amateur practices of the Web.[21] In other words, the large number of pictures portraying a child can be read as a creative variation of Taylor Jones's model.

However, there is also a third reason that could explain the homogeneity of the pictures: through similar photographs the participants try to uniform the story of their own life to a common pattern, and to transform their personal recollections into a shared (and sharable) memory, as if the Web could amplify the properties of analogue photography, which ratifies the belonging of an individual to a group[22] and his integration within a community.[23] As Edwards points out, "giving, receiving and utilizing the material object is integral to the social meaning of those images. Photographs operat[e] as exchange objects and circulate as 'memory texts.'"[24]

According to Marianne Hirsch, family photographs' precise and repetitive iconographic rules are crucial in their cultural use. Between the photographer and the photographed subject (but also between the image and its observer) there is always a sort of screen made up of ideologies, mythologies, preconceptions, and social beliefs about family, which shape the look. The scholar defines *familial gaze* that visual pattern that so often portrays the family through conventional and stereotyped images. By showing the familial cohesion as if they were a neutral transcription of reality, family photographs hide their ideological side, while imposing it. These pictures "locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life:"[25] through them, family members try to measure up to an ideal model and to play a role in a common story made up of shared memories.

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, Minuit, Paris 1965; Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Gallimard, Paris 1980; Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique*, Editions Labor, Bruxelles 1983; Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Image précaire. Du dispositif photographique*, Seuil, Paris 1987; Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets. Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Verso, London-New York 2002; Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)-London 1997; Pierre Sorlin, *Les Fils de Nadar. Le «siècle» de l'image analogique*, Nathan, Paris 1997; Jens Ruchatz, *The Photograph as Externalization and Trace*, in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2008, pp. 367-378; Barbara Grespi, "Lo specchio e l'impronta. I ricordi dell'immagine analogica," in *Locus Solus*, *Memoria e immagini*, no. 7, 2009, pp. 1-21.

2 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, cit., pp. 1-15.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, cit.

4 Birgit Neumann, *La performatività del ricordo*, in Elena Agazzi, Vita Fortunati (eds.), *Memoria e saperi. Percorsi transdisciplinari*, Meltemi, Roma 2007, pp. 305-322. According to Marianne Hirsch "postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through *an imaginative investment and creation*." Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, cit., p. 22 (my italics).

5 Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs. Content, Meaning and Effect*, Oxford University Press, New York 1981, pp. 35-36: "The family portrait becomes a *new coat-of-arms*: it is the visual boast by which the family can assert its inherent organization and purpose, and display, if it wishes, its conquest of the material world, and its grace in the spiritual."

6 Elizabeth Edwards, Janice Hart, *Introduction: Photographs as Objects*, in Id. (eds.), *Photographs Objects Histories. On the Materiality of Images*, Routledge, London 2004, pp. 1-15.

7 Elizabeth Edwards, *Photographs as Objects of Memory*, in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, Jeremy Aynsley (eds.), *Material Memories. Design and Evocation*, Berg, Oxford-New York 1999, p. 227.

8 André Bazin, *Ontologie de l'image photographique* [1945], in Id., *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Cerf, Paris 1958; Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 1977; Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, cit.; Sorlin, *Les Fils de Nadar. Le «siècle» de l'image analogique*, cit. According to Julia Hirsch, "all our family photographs are stalked by death: but they usually show it symbolically. The custom of photographing the dead was briefly followed in the United States during the 1850s in a decade of unusually virulent epidemics. But such a custom, rather than remind us of a life we would like to commemorate, impresses upon us the end we would like to forget." Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs. Content, Meaning and Effect*, cit., p. 124.

9 Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique et autres essais*, cit., p. 219.

10 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, cit., p. 4.

11 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, cit.; Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique et autres essais*, cit.; Henri Van Lier, *Philosophie de la photographie*, ACCP, Laplume 1983; Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," in *October*, no. 3 ("Part I") and no. 4 ("Part II"), 1977; Id., *Le Photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts*, Macula, Paris 1990.

12 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Image précaire. Du dispositif photographique*, cit.

13 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, cit., p. 5.

14 Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Die literarische Welt*, no. 38-39-40, 1931.

15 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, cit.

16 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, cit.

17 *Idem*, p. 126.

18 Guido Di Fraia, *Blog-grafie. Identità narrative in rete*, Guerini, Milano 2007.

19 Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, cit.; Pierre Sorlin, *Les Fils de Nadar. Le «siècle» de l'image analogique*, cit.

20 Richard M. Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green 1987.

21 Vito Campanelli, *Remix It Yourself. Analisi socio-estetica delle forme comunicative del Web*, Clueb, Bologna 2011.

22 Debra Livingston, Pam Dyer, "A View From the Window: Photography, Recording Family Memories," in *Social Alternatives*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2010, pp. 20-28.

23 Pierre Bourdieu, *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, cit.

24 Elizabeth Edwards, *Photographs as Objects of Memory*, cit., p. 232.

25 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, cit., p. 8.