

# IMAGES AND MORE IMAGES

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## ESSAY 15/01

IMAGE OVERLOAD

PHOTOGRAPHY

MEMORY

SOCIAL USE OF IMAGES

Today everything happens through images, and a lot happens through photographic images. These can be used in multiple and contradictory ways: some eminently aesthetic, which retain the purpose of electing the image as an artistic artifact, or mainly cultural, which retain the purpose of documenting a significant aspect of reality, are frequently overridden by purely functional uses, which exploit the image for utilitarian purposes, or simply self-representative uses, which record useless moments of human existence only to legitimize it. This is the natural con-

sequence of an epochal social change: the production of photographic images, once the prerogative of a few, is now within everyone's reach. Image overload is the first and most evident consequence of the democratization of the production of images which, once their lives have ended, tend to be relegated to the entropic oblivion of images stored forever, thus adding to the hypertrophic mass of digital data stored but not used. The recovery of control over this visual hyper-productivity can only pass through the reactivation of our critical capacity.

The image is living its own paradox. Its multiplication is so widespread and pervasive as to lead it to a real panvisibility, but its manifestation is so sterile and essential as to reduce it to the embarrassing absence of communication. In its moment of maximum diffusion, the image encounters an identity crisis, being deprived of its primordial role: visually fixing an elementary piece of memory. Through the image we remember moments of life, which have always acquired a visual form; historically only mental and therefore internal, but later (after the birth of the photograph) mainly external. The etymological *imitaginem* contains the imitative quality of the term image, on the basis of which it establishes a two-way relationship with its own meaning. Thus the image is a copy, which derives its constitutive essence from the real world, and this meaning remains unchanged when it embodies the outcome of a purely mental imaginative activity. In this aspect is inherent a claim to truth that, among all the images, characterizes for us photography, so we are led to believe that everything we see photographed matches an analog in the real world. However, this claim is denied when we are faced with “synthetic” photographic portraits generated by algorithms, which merely recombine real portraits by constructing images of real but non-existent human faces, completely unrelated to a real equivalent (thispersondoesnotexist.com).

Today everything happens through images, and a lot happens through photographic images. These can be used in multiple and contradictory ways: some eminently aesthetic, which retain the purpose of electing the image as an artistic artifact (such as the works made and produced in the professional field), or mainly cultural, which retain the purpose of documenting a significant aspect of reality (such as reportage photography). These uses are frequently overridden by purely functional uses, which exploit the image for utilitarian purposes (e.g. shopping list snapshot-promemory) or simply self-representative uses, which record useless moments of human existence only to legitimize it (e.g. the photo of the

meal). This is the natural consequence of an epochal social change: the production of photographic images, once the prerogative of a few, is now within everyone's reach. Anyone with a smartphone, even the average primary school pupil, is able to take pictures or capture videos and then share them and spontaneously enter the continuous flow of production and consumption that characterizes the society of images. But, filtered through the screen of the smartphone, any scene observed can appear worthy of being photographed, generating a sometimes compulsive phenomenon that leads to storing in the memory of their devices thousands of images, few of which are truly memorable.

Image overload is the first and most evident consequence of the democratization of image production: tens of millions of new images are daily published online, all of them potentially usable by any user. In a short essay of 1955 entitled *La follia del mirino* (later reworked in the novel *L'avventura di un fotografo*) Italo Calvino anticipates a very current critical reflection on this subject: "The step between reality that is photographed because it looks beautiful to us and reality that looks beautiful to us because it has been photographed, is very short". (Calvino 1955). That is, as Susan Sontag later points out, "in teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe" (Sontag 1978). The smartphone we hold in our hands is transformed for our eyes into a beauty generator, a tool capable of aestheticizing our lives by offering us the opportunity to redeem ourselves, through the photo taken and its sharing, from small and large daily frustrations. The photos we take and post succeed in staging another life, our dreamed life: this represents for us an irresistible impulse, which leads us to seize the opportunity to show ourselves publicly for what we are (not), to select the best of ourselves or, at least, what best represents the role we want to play in society (a sort of avatar of Second Life, built, however, for real images).

The possibility of freely accessing images mediated by devices (from the television screen to the smartphone screen) also feeds a sort of voyeuristic drift: immersing oneself in the everyday life of other people, simulating the life of their lives offers the singular and ephemeral illusion of living one's own life more intensely, progressively taking away moments of reality and replacing them with as many moments of fiction. From the Big Brother to the "teleportation" offered by Periscope (which evokes the succession of identifications narrated in *Being John Malkovich*), the lives experienced virtually replace real life, determining the definitive absorption of the private sphere in the public sphere. We all feel called to exhibit our images in a performative spirit and doing so induces in us a false awareness of the success of our existence. Every user has not only the right, but also the technical possibilities (which seem to apply the legitimacy of the same right) to affirm something through images, but often has nothing to affirm and the shots posted every day on the social profile become only a certification of their presence, an attestation of their will to exist, rather than the expression of an authentic message. From the cartesian "cogito ergo sum" to the "post ergo sum" of the third millennium. Even the rampant tendency to self-representation embodied by the practice of selfie (Pinnotti, Somaini 2016, p. 265) goes up to dangerous paradoxes: some recent studies show how incidental selfie deaths have increased in the past few years (first of all in India and Russia), the result of the increasingly extreme dangerousness of the deeds considered necessary for self-affirmation and therefore worthy of being immortalized and spread.

The fruition of the image, its experience, happens today in many different situations, on which a distracted and superficial modality tends to prevail, caused by the enormous multiplicity of images available. Social networks such as Instagram, Pinterest and Flickr are crowded with photographs that contrast the surviving extraordinariness of authorial products with the rampant, absolute ordinariness of the snapshots taken from the daily lives of millions of users. In

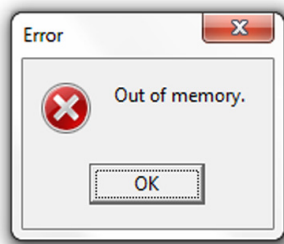
this case too, Calvino's words are enlightening when he stigmatizes the photographer's bulimic attitude, stating that "everything that is not photographed is lost, it is as if it did not exist" and that "to really live you have to photograph as much as you can and to photograph as much as you can you have to live in a way that is as photographable as possible" (Calvino 1955). The possible scenario of the integral replication of every moment of life continues to fascinate man, who in the attempt to store every experience (even the most insignificant) as a visual memory ends up losing the ability to process and select only those moments useful for the maturation and construction of its identity. Among the testimonies of this trend there are two examples that seem to oscillate between opposing positions: the experiment *My-LifeBits* (Microsoft), aimed at building an integral database of individual sensory experiences (a sort of immortal surrogate for human existence), and the warning evoked by the dystopian future narrated in the episode *The Entire History of You* of the British series *Black Mirror*, in which the possibility of endlessly re-projecting the memories of one's own life leads the protagonist to madness.

The life of an image is as pervasive as it is transient and fleeting. The very instant in which the image is taken, it acquires the aura of the past instant; we take it to celebrate the present instant, but immediately after it becomes comparable to other images more dating back in time. The widespread availability and use of digital filters that simulate the aging of the newly fixed shot (glitch effects such as vintage patina or surface wear) also testify to man's desire to regain possession of a reconstructed past: apparently distant, albeit close in time, and equally apparently analogical, albeit obtained by digital means. After sharing, the image actually continues to eternalize its own present, reproducing itself identically endlessly and multiplying the number of experiences that can be made of it.

In this way, the time in which an image remains "active" can be obtained by adding up many distinct moments: the

time necessary for the production of the image, the time necessary for its sharing and the time necessary for its use by all recipients. When an image stops being displayed, it tends to be relegated to the entropic oblivion of images stored forever, thus adding to the hypertrophic mass of digital data stored but not used. Among the possible answers to this accumulating tendency is Snapchat, whose use seems to induce a new awareness in the user, who is now called to produce images destined for definitive oblivion after 24 hours, making a distinction from those that deserve greater attention and that can be chosen as memories. A first step towards the recovery of control over visual hyper-productivity, which can only pass through the reactivation of our critical capacity: it is probably by renouncing to the unstoppable flow that generates images and more images, that we will be able to orient ourselves again towards the authenticity of our social communication.

**Fig. 1** Out of memory.



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