

What does new age photography do for memory and history?

 By [Rebone Masemola](#)

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After sitting in on a session on Instagram and the art of photography I was left wondering about how the form has developed over the years, whether it's still an artistic form of social expression or just an activity we engage in to pass time.

It was estimated by Benedict Evans (July 2014) that in 2014 over 1.5-billion new photos would be shared every day on Facebook, WhatsApp and Snapchat alone, which equates to about 550-billion a year. Stating that total sharing across all social networks, including WeChat and other platforms would reach over 1-trillion that year - around 1.5 pictures per smartphone per day. These numbers are quite modest considering how quickly things in that sector have been growing in the last few years, so the stats could otherwise prove to be higher than estimated.

So what exactly is photography and what do picture takers understand themselves to be doing when engaging in this act?

A friend of mine who happens to be an enthusiastic photographer of note explained that she imagines herself to be capturing moments that might otherwise be forgotten or missed, freezing time, framing spaces and action, keeping record and making a physical representation of one's perspective. It's a mouthful I know, but very accurately explained because it encompasses many aspects of the form.

I am sure many can appreciate how far photography has come in this age, anyone with a camera phone (including my five-year-old brother) can fancy themselves a photographer, and this is also possible with the help of social media since it enable any willing folks to create and share content with the world. In hindsight consumers no longer need to wait for big media outlets and professionals to share images of events, smartphones put consumers in a position where they are citizen photojournalists. Whether the disseminated images are any good is a story for another day. Everyday citizens are now active consumers and creators of what circulates on their newsfeeds, gone are the days when people passively waited for the Reuters of the world to dictate whose images are worth looking at. Many images that go viral are shot by amateurs, but no one can ever say with certainty which ones would grab people's attention.



Image by Marguerite de Villiers

What do filters do for the art form?

Some people would say filters and the add-ons that came with the development in technology and social media killed the art, but how true is that really? Doesn't it serve to enhance the form for the better? Consumers are equipped with tools which allow them to capture, recreate and store moments the way they want to remember them.

Since perception is relative aren't we now better positioned to create our own reality? Altering moments of events doesn't change them right! Jennifer Cole (1998) argued that memory is not fixed; it changes to suit the time and social context. So in hindsight there is always bound to a subjective perception when one recalls details surrounding a captured image. Although photography involves freezing moments in time, how we will read and interpret them in the future could change based on one's positionality at that time. Memory is by nature never pure recollections of the past as it happened.



Image by Marguerite de Villiers

What does altered reality do for history?

"Taken to an extreme, memory becomes little more than a matter of 'power in the present', and not of detached reflection upon the past. It can serve to maintain power or can become a vehicle for empowerment" (Halbwachs 1950). Often time's people feel powerless when it comes to many aspects of their lives, so when the opportunity to be in control presents itself, people take the bull by the horn. Photography affords enthusiasts the opportunity to portray instances and moments how they prefer to remember them.

The beautiful thing about memory is that it depends on who is doing the remembering; hence two people can share the same experience but remember it differently because what stands out to people depends on their interests and state of being. We produce different interpretations of the same narratives depending on external influences. The same principle applies to pictures- what one person chooses to remember about an event captured in a photograph might be different to what the next person recalls, it's the same event from different perspectives. Is it then to be perceived as manipulation of a historical narrative when images are edited?

How something appears is always a matter of perspective and the versions we choose inform our reality!

I recently had a conversation with a 30-something-year-old woman who expressed her strong dislike of photography in general. In her view it takes away from present experiences because the moment one decides to capture an experience its authenticity is shattered. The notion that it steals the fun away from otherwise great moments, when someone registers or is aware of an action that is worthy of being captured it loses its captivity. She argued that in the moment of awareness she's forced to stop and fake a smile for a 'perfect' picture'. For her, photographs distort reality.



Source [Petapixel](#)

Since time is fleeting she prefers to spend it enjoying the present rather than worrying about how she'll remember things in the future. But in all fairness whether it's captured or not, years from now those experiences aren't going to be as clear in your mind as they were the day they happened. Memory is very selective and naturally unreliable, but since photography is self-expression I am guessing it's not meant to be credible.

Editing allows consumers to suppress memories surrounding an event they choose to forget, the delusion that if it's not in the image it didn't happen? Let's be honest the single frames don't capture the context and don't inform reality. But then is the suppression of instances from an occasion the suppression of the experience? This question can also be thought of within the current framework of South Africa, with the defacement of historical monuments/statues-would the removal of these instances from our history erase the experience or the memory of apartheid? Is it selective preservation of our history or a new era of rewriting the past? Will getting those images of oppression out of the public eye lead South Africans to forget or are people seeking to grieve in private?

What do the monument's presence in public force people to confront? Should these actions be thought of self-imposed amnesia? Does editing and filtering of images lead photographers and consumers of pictures to the same dynamic? Is the need to filter reality driven by the discomfort provided by real life? Has reality become scarier than fiction? Hence filters provide a new sense of comfort and control which we are otherwise deprived of when faced with the prospects of an unpredictable future.

Is there no obligation on our part to remember the past as it happened in order to share an accurate history with our descendants? Photography as a form of record keeping does not allow for editing because it is seen as an altering of 'fact' or 'truth', but once altered, the image becomes artistic expression.

If photographs are meant to serve as historical archives then it's more valuable to relate our past experiences as we understand them, henceforth what we call memory today becomes history in the future. In this case history of the future is going to prove to be quite filtered, inaccurate and reconstructed (like everything in our lives). Pierre Nora claimed "we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left".

ABOUT REBONE MASEMOLA

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