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Seeing Photographically and the Memory of Photography

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Abstract

"Seeing photographically" is an act of cultural memory. In an era of AI-generated images, screenshots, "disappearing" or "view once" photographs, and myriad other practices that challenge the definitional boundaries of photography, the phrase invokes past understandings of the medium's sensory affordances, transferring them into a continually changing present. Focusing on a case study of the digital "rescue" of found film chemical photography, the article excavates cultural memory processes that relocate photographic seeing to digital arenas. The memory of "seeing photographically" does more, it claims, than preserve photography as a "zombie category" that disguises the reality of computational imagery. Rather, it helps construct and maintain a media ideology of what photography was and is, and of its continuing cultural, and especially existential, significance. Mobilizing worldviews, social values, and moral obligations associated with photography in the past, "seeing photographically" reanimates them in contemporary contexts of media ubiquity, intensified visibility, and existential anxiety, with profound ramifications.

Keywords

cultural memory, photography theory, chemical photography, found photography, digital images, media ideology, existential media

"Seeing photographically" is a fecund phrase: its meanings proliferate almost magically through the interplay of its two terms. What can it mean to *see* photographically? Perhaps it refers simply to the physical act of looking at the world through a camera,

framing a visible section of that world according to the proportions of a future picture. Or it could designate a seasoned photographer's semi-intuitive use of pictorial and photographic parameters – composition, light, colour, focus, and more – in the course of taking a picture. Zooming out from the discrete moment of looking through the device, "seeing photographically" – in an age of ubiquitous cameras – can also indicate a far broader condition: the socialized understanding, common to virtually everyone in a given society, of how and why photographs are created, and their habituation, over time, to routine schemas of embodied competence and judgement when making, posing for, and viewing photographs. More generally still, the phrase suggests a profound intertwining of biological, psychological, cultural, and technological dimensions, whereby perception and technics have become inextricable to the extent that seeing *in general* is shaped by the attributes and constraints of photography. Under this meaning, the "program" of photography, to use Flusser's (2000) terminology, extends far beyond any particular instance of camera use or of viewing images, so that we now visualize the world "photographically", *irrespective* of whether we are looking through a camera or at a photograph.

Who or what "sees photographically"? We should be wary of assuming that the term exclusively describes how human sight becomes modified, that it is only people who see. No less important is the sense that photographic devices become capable of vision. The analogy of the camera-eye is obviously a key means for expressing this mutuality, enabling the idea of "seeing photographically" to gain discursive purchase in modern culture, from claims regarding the similarities between human and camera optics, to representations of the camera-eye as a techno-biological hybrid in modernist photography and cinema. Perhaps the best-known visual depiction of this merging of camera and human optics is Andreas Feininger's 1951 portrait 'The Photojournalist'[1].

The phrase "seeing photographically" requires, however, one last act of unpacking. For photography, like other media, is a fluid construct that has changed over time. Its solidity as a particular thing is fixed at different moments according to institutional, technological, epistemological, and experiential parameters that intersect with broader social, cultural, and economic forces (see, as an example, Gómez Cruz and Meyer's (2012) "five moments" of photographic history). Which version of "photography" do we invoke, then, in the phrase "seeing photographically"? Kodak-era snapshot

photography? Professional studio portraiture? Photocopying? Photogrammetry? Camera-less photography and photograms? Photojournalism? Commercial stock photography? Paparazzi photography? Smartphone selfies and personal digital photography? Screenshots and in-game photography? Do we simply assume that there is a single thread that runs through all of these and other instantiations or "fixings" of photography (Kember and Zylinska, 2014), a techno-cultural identity or essence, akin to Barthes' (1993) "Photography" with a capital "P", that is common to them all, and that shapes in turn what it means to see?

Alternatively, we could conceptualize these fixings as a "memetic archive" (Mazzarella, 2017), a competitive cultural field of possible, plural "photograph*ies*" which can be mobilized and enacted at the very level of embodied action and perceptual experience. If we accept (as I do) the idea of a plural field of photographies, we need to ask why and how specific instantiations of photography are marshalled as modes of "seeing" while other instantiations are not. Answers to such questions can be found, I propose, by investigating how past versions of photography are rearticulated and reproduced in ways that construct an identity for the medium in accordance with current needs, desires, and anxieties. "Seeing photographically" is of necessity an act of *cultural memory*.

The mnemonic turn in photography theory

The dispute over a singular, essential "Photography" versus multiple, historically contingent "photographies" is, of course, not new. "Photography as such has no identity", John Tagg famously declared. "Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work" (1988: 63). Tagg's pronouncement, made more than thirty years ago, represents one pole of a recurrent bifurcation in photography theory that has long divided scholars (Batchen, 1997): the opposite pole is frequently exemplified by Barthes' "ontological desire" to discover Photography (capital "P") "in itself" in *Camera Lucida* (1993). This bifurcation pits materialist and historical conceptualizations – which treat photography as a fluctuating constellation of technologies, institutions, practices, and forms – against a medium-specific ontological commitment to the (technologically anchored) "essence" of photography, which tends to privilege the discrete photographic image as an object of semiotic and aesthetic analysis. The advent of digital technologies in the late 20th

century exacerbated and complicated this division, particularly around the importance of indexicality to definitions of the medium: the supposed loss of photographic indexicality in a putative "post-photographic" era of digital image simulation was loudly debated in the 1990s (Mitchell, 1992; Robins, 1996). Later revisions questioned the simple analogue-digital binary, with claims that the substitution of photoelectronic and computational processes for photochemical and darkroom ones need not have eroded – though it may subtly have altered – photography's indexical quality (Soderman, 2007).

While terms like "post-photography" and even "post-post-photography" (Tietjen, 2018) have continued to signal a move beyond photography as a self-evidently existing medium, much recent work has been devoted to the retrospective rethinking of potential continuities between chemical and digital photography, notwithstanding their many differences. One tendency is to replace indexicality as a core characteristic with a term from digital media, enabling claims that *chemical* photography was always already "algorithmic", "computational", or "programmable" (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2013; Lister, 2013; Troister, 2020). Flusser's (2000; 2011) pre-digital writings on photography and the technical image – and his idiosyncratic application, avant la lettre, of the word "program" to photography – have served as fertile resources for some of this work. Other scholars have utilized attributes of contemporary visual culture to provide compelling new philosophical and historical accounts of photography in general. Recent examples include Zylinska's non-human photography (2017) and Henning's identification of mobility (2018) – as opposed to stasis – as a key aspect of chemical as well as digital photography. Hence while in the earlier phases of digitization theoretical discourse grappled with future-oriented anxieties about photography's impending "death" (a fate also predicted for many other media at the time, and which has not entirely disappeared from photography theory: see Dewdney, 2021), much current writing is confident not only in photography's continued life, but in the idea that features of today's digital technologies (such as programmability) were also photographic *in the past*. In other words, photography theory *re-remembers* photography's earlier, "analogue" character in digital and computational terms, recollecting it in accordance with a *contemporary* horizon of experience.

In terms of photography's identity, this computationally inflected re-remembering has both restorative and transformational potentialities. On the one hand it identifies fundamental elements of continuity across the transition from chemical to digital technologies, reducing threats of disjunction and fragmentation to perceptions of the medium's continued coherence. On the other hand, these very elements of continuity enable a (potentially radical) conceptual decentering of indexicality in theorizing analogue and digital instantiations of photography: both are conceptualized as assemblages of programmable techniques for storing the "empirical probability distributions of light and shadows" (Kittler, 2010: 119) that act as information sources for producing images. This re-remembering thus makes possible key conceptual shifts in photography theory that do not dissolve "photography" as the object of that theory.

In labelling these conceptual innovations a "mnemonic turn", I'm obviously not referring to the long-standing concern with photography's function as an agent of individual or collective memory (more about which below), but to the treatment of photography itself as an *object of memory* by photography theory – accompanied by the theoretical equivalents of selectivity, forgetfulness, identification, and desire that usually attend memory as a human faculty (Bate, 2010). This idea underpins my broader thesis, and its relation to work by scholars such as Lehmuskallio (2016) and Gómez Cruz (2016) who conceptualize photography as a sociotechnical assemblage of discursive and material processes: "a processual approach to photography allows discussion of digital photographic practices in extension of a continuum from historical photographic uses, instead of claiming a strict break with the past" (Lehmuskalio, 2016: 250). Superficially, perhaps, this approach does not seem so very different to Tagg's. Whereas Tagg invokes macro-level forces in the social formation (the state, class, the market) to explain how the shifting assemblage of photography becomes fixed at different moments, Lemuskalio, Gómez Cruz, and others specify the construction of sociotechnical networks of diverse agents (devices, infrastructures, people, etc.) at meso- and micro-levels of action. My own attitude to the plural field of photographies is indebted to this processual approach, but finds it lacking a vital conceptual ingredient for accounting for the apparent stabilization of photography as a recognizable medium and a cultural practice over time, at various levels of action and experience, from the individual person taking, viewing, or appearing in photographs,

to institutions and organizations which deal with the medium in various ways. This ingredient, a mode of temporal association, agglomeration, and anchorage, is cultural memory.

The cultural memory of photography

To repeat: in this article I make a simple proposition: "seeing photographically" is a manifestation of cultural memory. In an era of AI-generated photographic images, ephemeral photographs that disappear from our devices, screenshots and in-game photography, and all manner of techniques and practices that radically challenge and blur the definitional boundaries of photography's "expanded field" (Baker, 2005), the phrase conjures past understandings of the sensory affordances of the medium, relocating them into a present of ongoing transformation. The concept of memory used here is social and material. It is not that individuals consciously and cognitively remember photography (though they certainly may do so), but rather that society remembers it, materially reproducing it through the design of technologies, professional and everyday discourses, and embodied routines, and through a range of institutional and vernacular practices. Significantly, some of these practices – like screenshots and in-game photography, or even the iPhone's "live photos" – might not, for some people, qualify as photography at all, at least in the technical sense of creating still images through the inscription of light (Gerling, 2018; Švelch, 2020).

Several important premises about the cultural memory of photography require elucidation. The first and main premise is that cultural memory is actively and continually performed by a variety of diverse actors across analytically distinguishable spheres of action. These include the design and production of photographic technologies and equipment, institutions (such as photography education and accreditation bodies, galleries and museums) which assert authority over photography as a field of cultural activity, and representational practices and conventions which formalize the aesthetic characteristics and substantive topics of photographic images – including among the billions of people worldwide who regularly use smartphones to create, circulate, and view photographs. Enacted continually across these sociocultural spheres, the cultural memory of photography reproduces and redefines an "old" (though modern) medium, helping to grant it recognizability and meaning over time,

and enabling it to survive and thrive in novel contexts of representation, interaction, and experience.

The second premise is that the cultural memory of photography is not narrowly technical. Rather, it acts as an anchor for structured constellations of epistemic and aesthetic schemas, worldviews, social values, and behavioural scripts that are historically associated with it. Hence the recollection of photography perpetuates and reanimates previously constituted protocols for representing and relating to the world. At least five such cultural constellations, consolidated mainly in Western modernity, may be elicited through the memory of photography: evidentiary – photography produces visible evidence of the world and instantiates epistemic ties between visibility and truth (Mnookin, 1998; Schwartz, 1999); spectacular – photography designates the world as picturable, pre-defining its objects as things to be seen and composed before an external gaze (Slater, 1995; Frosh, 2001; Seppänen and Herkman, 2016); temporal – photography reconfigures temporal sensibilities and memory frameworks by visually fragmenting and arresting the flux of time (de Duve, 1978; Metz, 1985); expressive – photography expands the repertoire and accessibility of aesthetic techniques and pictorial forms, potentially "democratizing" expressive activity among different and increasingly large populations (Heiferman, 2012); and ethical – photography enables and occasionally forces encounters with others who are made visible across space and time, including with the self-as-other (Azoulay, 2008). These memory constellations, historically sedimented in various ways, are activated and enabled to "travel" (Erll, 2011) within and across the various sociocultural domains in which photography is remembered and reproduced.

The third premise is that the cultural memory of photography is not the mere retrieval from "storage" of past instantiations, but – following from literatures on individual and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Ricoeur, 2004) – is "a reconstructive process" (Assmann, 2011: 19) that reconfigures prior attributes for *present* purposes and contexts. This means that the cultural memory of photography is likely to be *plural and contested*, as diverse cultural agents invested in the remembered medium turn it into "mnemonic capital" (Reading and Notley, 2016; Reading, 2019) for use in legitimation struggles. As a result, starkly divergent memory narratives of photography might be employed, for instance, by photography curators in art museums, advocates of

smartphone usage for social change, and young people using "Polaroid-style" instant cameras, drawing on different components of the cultural constellations associated with the medium. The cultural memory of photography is a contested, multi-dimensional, and elastic phenomenon: a mimetic archive, a repository of latent potentialities, a plural field of remembered and rearticulated photograph*ies*. The meanings of "seeing photographically" may vary significantly as a result.

The fourth and last premise is that particular historical configurations – usually but not necessarily involving radical and rapid technological change – create moments of intense cultural instability and dynamism where memory-work around the medium becomes more overt and urgent. I make a historical wager that the emergence of networked computational photography is such a moment of instability and potential**.** There are two reasons for this wager. The first is the advent of the computer as a "metamedium" that can simulate prior physical media as well as imbue them with new properties (Manovich, 2013), a capacity which has achieved new prominence in the form of AI image-generators such as DALL-E and Midjourney: through digital simulation, photography can be preserved and expanded as a pervasive and adaptive medium (Hand, 2012). Second, as a ubiquitous "digital companion" (Carolus et al., 2019) for billions of people, the smartphone positions photography as part of a broader, general historical process whereby, in the Global North and beyond, media have become so profoundly and intensely interwoven with the social world at all scales – from the intimate everyday lives of individuals to global communication infrastructures – that they constitute a techno-cultural "second nature" (Featherstone, 2009; Frosh, 2018). As media such as photography become pervasive in this process of "deep mediatization" (Couldry and Hepp, 2017) they become paramount means for recollecting and giving meaning to that experience, structuring how we remember in part through their salience as *what* we remember. Hence the memory of photography may be indissoluble from the memory of lives lived (ever more extensively) "in" media (Deuze, 2011).

In what follows I interrogate some of the processes involved in this cultural memory work and its configuration as a way of seeing photographically. Focusing on a case-study of the digital "salvation" of found film photography called "The Rescued Film Project", I excavate processes of cultural memory in relocating photographic seeing to

contemporary digital arenas. The memory of "seeing photographically" does more, I claim, than mobilize nostalgia in order to retain photography as a "zombie category" (Dewdney, 2022) that disguises the reality of computational imagery. Rather, it is key to the construction and maintenance of a "media ideology" (Gershon, 2010: the concept builds on Keane's (2005) "semiotic ideology"), a shared set of background assumptions about what photography was and is, and its utility and appropriateness among diverse agents across everyday and professional contexts.

These background assumptions do not, however, only underpin interpersonal and institutional protocols for photography as a sociocultural practice. They are more than merely "sociological" in the narrow sense of structuring and being shaped by patterns of media use (whether creating, circulating, storing, or viewing photographs). Immanent to them are suppositions about the character of the world and of the parameters of human existence and experience. Media are central to these suppositions, since they operate with and yet appear to overcome key boundaries of that existence, notably the constraints imposed by time, space, and physical embodiment. "Media are our infrastructures of being," John Durham Peters declares, "the habitats and materials through which we act and are" (2015: 15). Media are thus always "existential media" (Lagerkvist, 2022), a means for living with, reflecting upon, and making manifest underlying human conditions and limitations.

Photography theory is certainly no stranger to this existential strain of thought. Most obvious perhaps is the "melancholic paradigm" (Buse, 2021) which stretches from Nadar to Bazin, Sontag, Barthes, Batchen, and many others, asserting "the primacy of death, mourning and loss in photography […] the paradigm always finds in a photograph absence, lack, anxiety" (Buse, 2021: 423). Against such melancholia, others insist on photography's ability to imbue and reveal presence, to affirm the ontological repleteness of the world and our phenomenological apprehension of it (Silverman, 2015); yet others cast photography as a key ethical technique for making mediation visible as a vital process of becoming (Kember and Zylinska, 2014). In particular, while photography is a technical medium of "time-axis manipulation" (Kramer, 2006), its relation to time is not reducible to technicity; not, at least, as long as photographs are created for human viewing and viewed by human beings – a point to which I will return later on. The experience of time as passing (temporality), and consciousness of

its finite character for individuals, groups, and species (mortality), mean that photography is thoroughly implicated in existential human questions, notably as an example of what Amanda Lagerkvist terms "transcendent media": "media that promise to transcend the ultimate boundaries, by allowing for relating across the threshold [of death]" (2022: 172). In the case study of the digital "rescue" of chemical images that follows, then, I examine how the cultural memory of seeing photographically not only produces a media ideology that organizes and authorizes cultural practices, but gestures towards a media theology that invokes metaphysical and transcendental responses to profound existential concerns.

The Rescued Film Project

The Rescued Film Project, founded around 2014 by Levi Bettwieser, is – as subtitled on its website – "an archive of images rescued from forgotten film". It is an evolving collection of over 30,000 images produced from undeveloped and "anonymous" films, at first collected locally by Bettwieser, but increasingly sent to the project from people around the world.

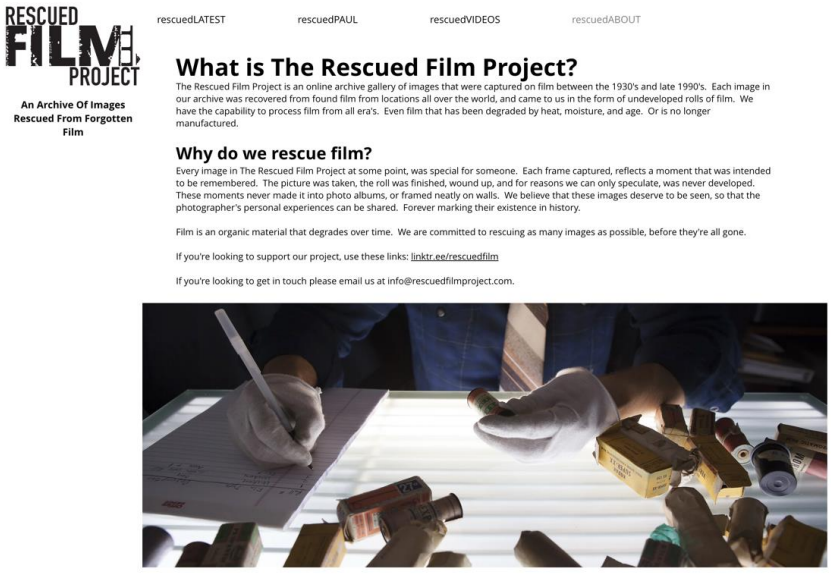

Figure 1: The Rescued Film Project Website

Here is the website's description of the project's rationale (see Figure 1: an almost identical text appears on its Facebook "About" page):

What is The Rescued Film Project?

> The Rescued Film Project is an online archive gallery of images that were captured on film between the 1930s and late 1990s. Each image in our archive was recovered from found film from locations all over the world, and came to us in the form of undeveloped rolls of film. We have the capability to process film from all era's [sic]. Even film that has been degraded by heat, moisture, and age. Or is no longer manufactured.

Why do we rescue film?

> Every image in The Rescued Film Project at some point, was special for someone. Each frame captured, reflects a moment that was intended to be remembered. The picture was taken, the roll was finished, wound up, and for reasons we can only speculate, was never developed. These moments never made it into photo albums, or framed neatly on walls. We believe that these images deserve to be seen, so that the photographer's personal experiences can be shared. Forever marking their existence in history.
>
> Film is an organic material that degrades over time. We are committed to rescuing as many images as possible, before they're all gone (Bettwieser, 2014b).

Obviously this project echoes, though it does not fully replicate, some of the cultural dynamics that have long animated Found Photography as a deliberate practice that seeks to recontextualize "vernacular" (i.e., conventional domestic) snapshot photographs in avowedly artistic contexts of display and evaluation. In fact, this recontextualization has become part of The Rescued Film Project's business model, although an earlier initiative promoting the sale of framed prints of "rescued" images has recently morphed into a focus on selling "apparel" (T-shirts) (The Rescued Film Project, 'Apparel'). It could certainly be seen as part of a larger proliferation of web and social media-based initiatives devoted to the location, curation, digitization, and online exhibition of "found" chemical photographic prints and slides – among them the "Museum of Lost Memories", "The Anonymous Project", "The Found Photo

Archive", and many others – which treat domestic snapshots as "archival objects of salvage" (Cross, 2015: 44). This, in turn, can be understood as symptomatic of a general phenomenon of "techno-nostalgia" (van der Heijden, 2015) or "retro-media in practice" (Magaudda and Minniti, 2019), whereby pre-digital media become conspicuous objects of memory and are reconfigured through, and in relation to, digital contexts.

What makes The Rescued Film Project different from these other sites is its media-ideological extremity. The other found footage projects are overtly image-motivated and curatorial not only in their guiding intentions, but in the sequence of actions that defines them. Their rationales are frequently crystalized in origin stories of image-viewing which are also moments of epiphany. For The Anonymous Project, for instance, this moment is described thus: "In 2017 when filmmaker Lee Shulman bought a random box of vintage slides he fell completely in love with the people and stories he discovered in these unique windows in to [sic] our past lives" (Shulman, n.d.). The Museum of Lost Memories is similarly anchored in the discovery of a bucket of loose photographs in a thrift shop by the archive's founder, David Gutenmacher (Gutenmacher, 2023). These projects always begin with developed prints or slides, with manifest images, with something that was "seen photographically" in the past and is, serendipitously at first, put on display in the present. In contrast, The Rescued Film Project is radically indifferent to the pictorial features or qualities of the photographs it is engaged with, at least initially: it is devoted to the completion of an interrupted technical procedure and its sacred objects are undeveloped films and the *latent images* they contain. As Bettwieser explains in one of the project's videos:

> The reason we call it a rescued film is because I believe if we weren't actively searching and finding these rolls of film that they will be lost forever. There are other projects out there that document historical photos and negatives and slides, but negatives and slides and photos are images that have been processed. They've been hung on people's walls. They've been put in photo albums, and they've been enjoyed by the people who were meant to enjoy them. But with the rescued film, all the images are almost locked away and these rolls of film have never been seen before (Bettwieser, 2014a at 09:47).

Hence the project's operations are *not* dependent on the aesthetic, affective, or historical qualities of a photograph catching a potential curator's eye. Whereas in the other projects it is the visible display of old chemical photographs that catalyzes and justifies their subsequent actions, here it is the fact that these images are *unseen* that provides legitimation. As a result, while the memory narrative of photography that The Rescued Film Project invokes does share characteristics with similar found footage initiatives, its commitment is primarily driven by beliefs about chemical photographic technology which articulate "seeing photographically" in the starkest terms: as a quest to make the unseen visible. As Bettwieser notes:

> When I pull the film that I just developed out of my film developing tank and look at them, I'm the very first person who has ever seen that picture. They've never been enjoyed. They've never been remembered. And so it almost increases the weight of the importance of that photo because it has never had those moments before (Bettwieser, 2014a at 08:15).

The belief system of The Rescued Film Project connects chemical and digital photography through three inter-connected themes: fate (intentionality, contingency, and latency), figuration (the photograph as memory and experience), and salvation (deliverance from oblivion through digital and networked visibility). These themes are characterized by reciprocity: they not only show how digitization processes are framed as "rescuing" chemical photographs from their fragile latent state of invisibility, but how the rescued images provide digital processes with compensatory motifs about photography as an enduring experiential and existential phenomenon that digital images seem to have difficulty satisfying. Digital and chemical photography can thus be said to "rescue" one another.

Fate: Intentionality, contingency, and latency

For The Rescued Film Project, everyday chemical film photography is a potentially tragic combination of intentionality and contingency. As explained in the project's rationale on its website, the images are *worth* "rescuing" because each one "was special for someone" and because they reflect "moments that were intended to be remembered". Yet, "for reasons we can only speculate", those intentions were

frustrated by the contingencies of life (or death), and the process of developing them into photographic prints, of making them visible to others, was interrupted. Importantly, the presumed purposiveness of these photographers – what we might call the intentional energy or momentum generated by their initial actions in taking the photographs – is then magically transmuted to the film itself, since, according to Bettwieser, such films are "*waiting* to be rescued" in their thousands around the world. Their fate as undeveloped images, as photographs trapped in a latent state, casts them as entities with a natural organic telos and will, rather than as material stages in a merely technical process. Film thus becomes a capsule buried by lapsed time, waiting for us, its belated proxy addressees, to find and unlock its treasures. In a 2013 essay Rubinstein and Sluis asked a rhetorical question: "what is the state of the indexicality if the photographic film contains only the latent image, i.e. it remains undeveloped in its film canister or in the dark slide. Is it still possible to speak of indexicality of the "latent image"?" (28). The Rescued Film Project has no trouble still speaking of it, producing an animistic understanding of photography, whereby technological arrangements and objects are transformed into natural beings endowed with an ordained necessity and spiritual dimensions. That is why all such images can be described as "*deserving"* rescue; for it is their natural fate.

Figuration: The photograph as memory and experience

A key element of this animistic account is that the photographs are understood as identical to temporal experience and to memory itself. As Bettwieser says in another of the project's videos:

> Every one of these pictures that someone shot was important to them in that moment, and while it may not hold importance to myself, it held importance to the person who shot it, it *was* a moment or memory that they wanted to remember (Bettwieser, 2018 at 02:11).

This collapsing of the distinction between the image and the experienced moment it represents, or the memory it might become, offers a compelling example of "disappearing media" that "'vanish' into the substance they mediate" (Meyer, 2011: 32). In their disappearance as mediating artifacts, the photographs "are authenticated

as being part and parcel of the very transcendental that is the target of – and from an outsider's perspective: invoked by – mediation" (Meyer, 2011: 32). The "transcendental", in this case, is human memory and temporal experience as a trans-subjective phenomenon amenable to capture and communication across historical distance. This becomes clearer if we compare the assertions of The Rescued Film Project with the claim, typically associated with Barthes and Bazin, that the photograph is inseparable from its depicted referent, and especially with Barthes' (1993) view that photography's significance derives from its registration of the real: the photograph is not a device for recording or conveying experience and memory, but for bringing memory and experience into an encounter – often traumatic (hence the punctum) – with the real as an external force of contingency, possibility, and inexorable transience. In contrast, The Rescued Film Project does not assert the indivisibility of the physical image from the real, but from the particular mental images ("memories") or temporal experiences ("moments") of the photographs' originators. It is thus closer to a more traditional understanding of the visual image (typically painting) as a vehicle for the *transmission of percepts* (Bryson, 1986).

This distinction indicates another important property of The Rescued Film Project's media ideology and redemptive theology. Notwithstanding the project's declared inclusiveness, whereby all undeveloped photographic films potentially attract its initial interest, in practice it does not fully "rescue" (develop negatives or digitize) films that appear to be largely illegible to viewers, for instance because of overexposure or material damage. It redeems only recognizable – that is, figural – images. In other words, the project privileges *human perceptual judgement* as the core value justifying the salvation of images. It is not interested in digitizing and displaying the "white noise" of the universe recorded by photosensitive film, for such signals have no human intentionality or telos. Its media theology, then, is distinctively and perhaps defensively humanist. It seeks transcendence in the redemption of figural images understood as direct human percepts (memories, experiences), rather than in the signals of a physical universe that, through radiation (including light) and other forces, inscribes itself as a cosmic archive indifferent to whether it is seen by human eyes (see Peters, 2015, especially Chapter 7).

The identification of photographs with human memory and experience underpins the distinctly moral obligation that motivates the project: "To us," Bettwieser concludes, "it's a tragedy that those moments go unseen" (2018 at 2:21). But why, we might ask, *is* this a tragedy, any more so than the thousands of digital images we snap on our smartphones and then delete? The original intentionality assumed of these latent images – that they were taken *in order to become* photographic prints or slides – is technically locked into and distributed across the two-stage chemical process of exposure and subsequent dark-room development. It cannot be applied to digital photographs in quite the same way, since the technical possibilities for interruption and latency in the images' "becoming" are very different, though one can imagine latent digital images "trapped" as files (for instance, on camera memory cards) in outmoded and unreadable formats in the future. Additionally, the statement evokes the ideal of a perfect archive in which, thanks to photography, the *human* past – past moments, intensions, experiences, and memories – can be entirely recovered, against all odds and despite the passage of time and the physical fragility of the medium. Their loss is thus a tragedy for the goal of saving, in both the redemptive and preservative senses of the word, as much of human experience and memory as possible. And it also seems to invoke a sense of transcendent justice in relation to visibility: in a just universe, what was intended to be seen *must not go unseen*. Developing and digitizing the photographs thus becomes a moral imperative: a form of reparation paid to photographs as visualizations of human life, interior as well as exterior.

Deliverance: Digitized visibility as salvation

Digitization provides a double redemption for the images. It enables the images, once developed, to be rescued from the fragility of their native medium and its tendency towards material decomposition.

> After processing the film and the negatives we scan them and we make digital images out of them, and then we safely store all the negatives we create as digital images instead of printing in the darkroom for a couple of reasons. The first is that because so many of the negatives are degraded, it would be almost impossible to print them in the dark room. Another reason we scan is because we don't want to be handling these negatives

too many times. You really just want to scan them once, store them safely so that they don't degrade anymore (Bettwieser, 2018 at 03:17).

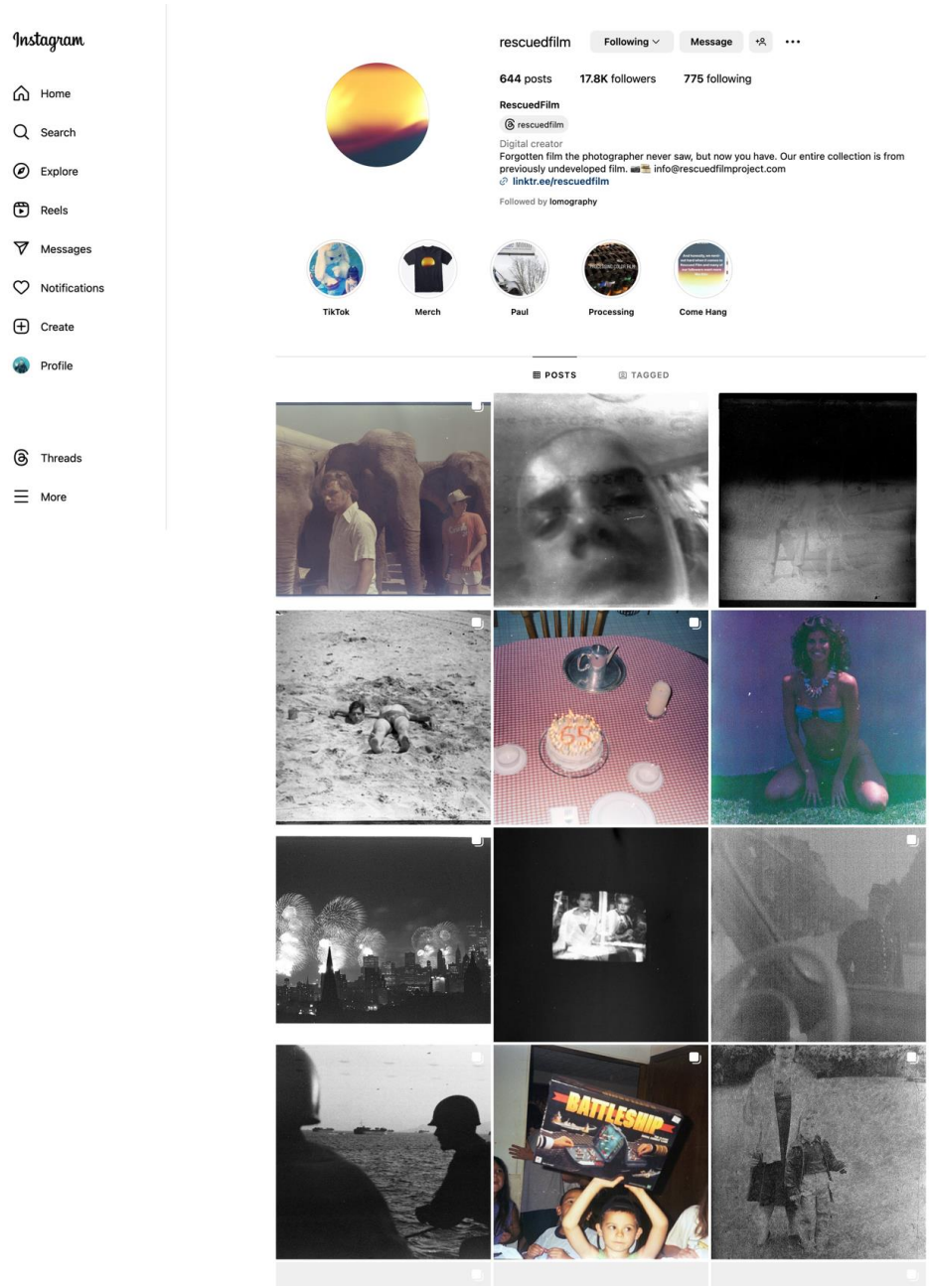

Figure 2: The Rescued Film Project Instagram Page

Through the agency of digital scanning, the soul can escape the decaying body that has entombed it. Furthermore, through digitization the images can be distributed widely to new viewers via the project's website and social media pages, thereby fulfilling their destiny as memories that must be seen (see Figure 2). Recall this description of the project's rationale on its website quoted earlier: "We believe that these images deserve

to be seen, so that the photographer's personal experiences can be shared. Forever marking their existence in history." Sharing, though it is no longer quite the keyword of digital culture that it was a decade ago (John, 2012; 2022), is the paramount mode of redemption: what the images are rescued from by networked digital media is the horror of *oblivion*, of utter non-existence "in history", simply by virtue of being seen.

W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) famously asked: 'What do pictures want?' These pictures, responds The Rescued Film Project, want to realize their own becoming and telos: they want, and deserve, to be seen. The question, however, remains, *who* should see these unseen images? The project has a telling answer, since it defines itself in the "Intro" section on its Facebook page as "An archive of images that the photographer never saw. But now you have" (The Rescued Film Project (Facebook)). Since the undeveloped films were almost all of amateur snapshots, we can be fairly sure that they were not originally intended to be seen by absolute strangers. Making unknown social media users into proxy viewers for the photographer and those family members and friends who never got to see the images is, indeed, an act of organized voyeurism (and forensic voyeurism too, since viewers are invited to become detectives in decoding the images' origins), as Bettwieser acknowledges (Bettwieser, 2018 at 02:53). But it is also a startling elevation of the role of *stranger sociality* in the moral discourse created around film photography – or, more to the point, around renewed visibility of chemical images through digitization and networked distribution. As Bettwieser remarks, "The majority of the images and archive are shot by amateur photographers just documenting their daily lives and so by curating them into one collection, we're really showcasing our collective histories as human beings" (Bettwieser, 2018 at 02:23). It is through the gazes of utter strangers, their affect, curiosity, and attention, that the lives of others can be redeemed, both individually, and as a part of the ongoing aggregation of experience and memory that constitutes human being. Sharing and viewing film images, delivered from oblivion by digital scanning and delivered to our sight by digital distribution, thus become historical and moral obligations.

Conclusion

The Rescued Film Project, of course, is only one example of "seeing photographically". While it certainly cannot stand in for all contemporary

instantiations, it shows how the cultural memory of photography intersects powerfully with recent (and not so recent) thinking about the hybridity of human-technological relations, and about images as forms of lived experience. Operating as a mnemonic, discursive, and technical assemblage for "seeing photographically" across chemical and networked digital contexts, the project splices together two distinctive premises, one about media of the past, another about the present moment. In its orientation to the past, it employs an animistic narrative of the "old" technology of the chemical photograph as identical to temporal experience itself. Hence "seeing photographically" means seeing memory and past experience directly, *through* and *as* images. In its orientation toward contemporary conditions and needs, it endorses, in both its discourse and its practice, the exhibitionary imperative of the social media era, whereby visibility is treated almost by default as a social good. Here "seeing photographically" requires and necessitates the display of images before strangers on digital platforms.

In terms of the broader memory constellations associated with photography outlined earlier, this assemblage of photographic seeing intertwines temporal, spectacular, and ethical formations. Chemical photographs are perceived to contain – indeed constitute – fragments of experienced time, preserved in a time-capsule in a latent unrealized state, and requiring salvation by being brought into being as images. This salvation can only be truly achieved when the images' deliverance (via digitization) from material decomposition is consummated by incorporating them into platforms of public spectacle. Finally, making them visible to any and all on social media not only places viewers in situations of encounter with distant others (both photographed and photographers), but is itself discursively framed as an ethical imperative, as an act which bestows – across time and space – historical and existential significance.

What might be the possible cultural functions of this version of "seeing photographically"? I venture to speculate that it utilizes the memory of photography to negotiate four key dynamics of contemporary digital culture: first, the "glut of memory" that is associated with the "glut of media" (Hoskins, 2014: 662) and especially the archival capacities of digital media, which we can also connect to the fantasy and fear of total recall – "rescued" film feeds this fantasy of archiving more and more of "the lost past" (images, moments, experiences, intentions) in digital form; second, the emergence of visibility as a key domain of social life, including the

increasing visibility to large numbers of strangers of scenarios and interactions that would once have been called intimate; third, the reconfiguration of sociality, and especially stranger sociality, by digital networks and social media; and fourth, and by no means least, the challenges to human self-understanding posed by contemporary computational technologies. The Rescued Film Project potentially exploits and also soothes deep anxieties around these dynamics, integrating understandings of analogue and digital technologies, and injunctions to recall, share, and see, in a positive narrative of melancholic hopefulness and human salvation through media.

This media ideology, as noted earlier, is underpinned by profound concerns about the character of human existence, manifested in its "theological" strivings and metaphysical rhetoric. Specifically, the project overtly expresses existential anxieties and vulnerabilities connected to human finitude, particularly for secularized societies: the inevitable failure of human memory, the seeming cosmic meaninglessness of much routine existence and experience, the historical shapelessness of the present – and, perhaps most of all, the horror of individual and even collective oblivion. Perhaps this is the kind of affective and existential structure that Joanna Zylinska (2023) has recently identified as underpinning the recurrence of the "death of photography" trope in photography theory and popular discourse: that it manifests a growing consciousness of environmental devastation and potential extinction.

Yet the project's distinctively humanist conception of photography (as wholly identified with intentionality, memory, and temporal experience) also tells us something more. All cultural memory, like individual memory, involves *forgetting*. What is forgotten in this instantiation of "seeing photographically" – what is repressed by it – is the non-human. One can understand the dynamics of this repression through the lens of "operational images". Like Farocki's concept (2004), The Rescued Film Project's approach to images is non-hermeneutic: although the videos and posts on its websites do note the openness of displayed photographs to analysis and interpretation, this is epiphenomenal to the project's main aim, the salvation of films whose contents remain invisible because of an *incomplete operation*. Yet the project does not consummate this operation through a wholly mechanical procedure that develops and digitizes *all* latent images on *all* rolls of found film: as discussed earlier, it limits digitization and display to those images judged recognizable to human viewers. The result is a

metaphysics of photography as the transmission of human percepts across time and transformations in media technologies, an affirmation of transcendent *meaningfulness* that, through "saving" specific photographs and showing them to strangers, promises to rescue human experience itself from oblivion.

Moreover, the display of the photographs before strangers on social media mitigates a significant risk of purely operational completion: that it would culminate not in the presentation of images to a human public but in their being "viewed" by computational systems, that they would only ever be "seen" by machines. This mitigation is perhaps the most crucial function of the moral imperative to put these photographs on display. The redemptive visibility provided by social media platforms – digital technologies that privilege human sight – forms a humanistic defence against computational technologies of recognition and analysis which stretch what it means to "see" to new, non-human, extremes. It is possible to interpret this defence positively, as a "strategy of counter-operationality" (Pantenburg, 2016: 1959) which assuages the anxiety that human viewers are becoming irrelevant to photography in an age of computational image operations, object and facial recognition, and generative AI. However, it also makes machinic "vision" a crucial structuring absence shaping contemporary articulations of "seeing photographically". For all its historical and technical variation, photography always involves seeing. Who or what performs that seeing is now a paramount question, no less than what we mean by "photography".

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Notes

[1] Andreas Feininger, 'The Photojournalist' (Dennis Stock), 1951: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109N61#full-artwork-details

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