

Buttonless Cameras and the Machine-made Snapshot Aesthetic

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Abstract

Snapshots have a firm place in the history of photography, as they are the most prolific form of photographic expression (Batchen 2000; Chalfen 1987; Chéroux 2013). However, due to its long history, abundance, and diversity, the snapshot has never comprised a unified and cohesive photographic genre. Instead, the conception of a snapshot encompasses various photographs, and it is rife with ambiguity and paradoxes (Batchen 2004; Zuromskis 2013). Snapshots can be candid or posed, conventional or subversive, banal or affective, intentional or accidental, innocent or ideological, spontaneous or controlled.

Despite these paradoxes and heterogeneity, the snapshot is defined by its specific aesthetic, which was recognised in the 1960s by artists appropriating the snapshot to authentically capture and represent the banalities of everyday life (Higgins 2013; Nanoru and Kosarova 2014; Kelsey 2015; Zuromskis 2013). The loss of control over photography defines the snapshot aesthetic. The snapshot is the domain of chance, accident, and various kinds of flaws and errors: image noise, blurriness, improper exposures, red eyes, fingers inadvertently placed in front of the lens, severed heads, lens flares, leaky shutters, chemical flukes, and mechanical scratches. The snapshot aesthetic is an aesthetic of imperfection; snapshot photographs have always been disordered, inadvertent (Geimer 2018), failed (van Alphen 2018; Chéroux 2003), and poor (Steyerl 2009) images.

However, several recent technological advancements have disrupted “traditional” snapshot practices (Campt et al. 2020; Gómez

Cruz and Lehmuskallio 2016; Larsen and Sandbye 2014) and transformed the defining features of snapshot aesthetics. In this regard, the present paper addresses the changing socio-technical conditions of snapshot photography brought about by emerging visual technologies designed to replace human camera operators with non-human operators and automated vision (Dvořák and Parikka 2021; Farocki 2004; Hoelzl and Marie 2015; McCosker and Wilken 2020; Paglen 2014; Toister 2019; Zylinska 2017). The paper traces the history of the snapshot aesthetic, concentrating on the development and transformations of the camera’s shutter button (Plotnick 2018) and the photographic gesture (Flusser 2012) in the context of recently introduced cameras not designed for the press-the-button gesture but rather for a variety of set-and-forget operations. Considering examples of autonomous and sensor-operated cameras, AI cameras operated by algorithms, and smart home camera systems, the paper demonstrates the transformative influence of emerging buttonless cameras on the snapshot aesthetic and on the conception of photography as a human-centred practice.

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Biography

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