Discuss how the conditions of the ‘post-photographic era’ relate to a particular area or institution of photography.

To what extent has vernacular photography changed in the 'post-photographic era'? 

In a digital age how do we share, use and disseminate once private photographs?

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Introduction.

By the late 1980's the growth, easier accessibility and lower cost of digital technology precipitated the emergence of what is termed the 'post-photographic era'. Digital cameras and smartphones revolutionised the taking of photographs, whilst the internet enabled the sharing and dissemination of personal imagery on an unprecedented scale.

The principle (but not exclusive) function of a snapshot prior to the digital revolution was as a tangible keepsake, an aide-mémoire. During the majority of the 20th century family albums in the main included a miscellany of printed photographs, my personal archive certainly confirms this. Whilst temporality and memory are traditionally linked with photography this connection appears to be coming increasingly tenuous.

My critical review will appraise the following points assessing the status and function of vernacular photography as a mnemonic device in the 'post-photographic era':

• How the 'post-photographic' era has transformed vernacular photography.
• The decline of the printed photograph, the transient image and sharing online.
• Staying connected in the 'post-photographic' era.
• The archival image in the 'post-photographic' era.
How the 'post-photographic' era transformed vernacular photography.

Whilst the veracity of a photograph as a factual token of memory has always been unreliable, distortion of memory is neither new nor unique but following the inception of digital technology, rather than a choice, image manipulation appears to be the standard. Analogue techniques are lengthy, easier to detect, and generally undertaken by experts, whilst digital technology enables amateurs, even the smartphone owner, to use a photo editing app both easily and convincingly, it is no longer a specialised and difficult process, hence manipulation must be considered a fundamental element of digital photography. The everyday use of camera phones' in particular has created 'shifts in the practices of snapshot and personal photography' (Lister, 2013 p. 1). Images are easily viewed, manipulated and reviewed in the palm of your hand, to be shared or as easily deleted from record.

Although manipulation is not unique to digital photography what is unparalleled is the expanding potential to reassess and enhance our own images whilst old family photographs are easily restored and altered, thus enhancing identity and appearance. José van Dijck a media and culture studies professor at the University of Amsterdam proposes this process of altering identity could be a lasting task allowing personal histories to be constantly re-invented, forming new narratives 'where future and past can intertwine ....where parent and child are sown next to each other to testify this' (Ritchin, 2008. p.142). Nevertheless, whilst 'digital photo cameras have been touted as novel instruments of identity formation' (Dijck, 2008. p. 63) photography has always been used as a tool to shape identity.

For Roland Barthes what has been is at the core of photography's power, time is linear. However, for a new digital savvy generation it appears the photograph is no longer associated with the past but with immediacy, the here and now. Unlike a printed photograph in an album, book or frame, the
networked digital image is no longer singular but can be seen on screen in innumerably contexts 'what was once amateur or snapshot photography has become potentially global in scope' (Dewdrey, 2013, p.101). Indexicality has traditionally been presumed important in photography but digital technology challenges its continuation as a medium of truth. Family snapshots are no longer static, hidden and kept in the home, but publicly shared via email and social media; they travel around the globe suggesting that their status as a mnemonic is no longer considered as important as their use as a means of communication.

The decline of the printed photograph, the transient image, and sharing online.

Rather than existing as a physical print and kept in a box or album for private viewing to be used as a device for remembering, many personal images are now globally shared via digital platforms such as Flickr, Facebook and Instagram. The digital image (unless printed) differs to an analogue photograph in that it generally has a transitory existence on screen and/or hard-drive highlighting the polarity between the two. The ubiquitous cameraphone is always on hand to snap daily life, we continue to document the same social events, weddings, birthdays as we have always done, but how we do this and the sheer number of images taken has changed.

Vernacular photography is no longer applied to the capture of special or momentous occasions but 'permits entirely new performative rituals' (Dijck, 2008, p.62) as images are instantaneously shared via social media sites and emailed to relatives and friends, the traditional physical album is in decline. Photo blogs and emails are used to keep in touch, physical albums rarely kept. The intangible and ephemeral images taken and shared with cameraphones are seldom intended as mementos: they are rarely printed but discarded once received and seen, their importance is momentary and
primarily used as a device for communicating daily experiences not just special occasions. Hence their perceived function as an aide-mémoire is questionable in the 'post-photographic' age.

Due to the proliferation of personal images taken and shared on a daily basis they cease to be thought of as unique and important when so easily replaced. In 2014 an approximate 1.4 million photographs were uploaded daily to Flickr; in order to view them would take over a fortnight allowing just a second per image. Dutch artist Erik Kessels's installation 24 Hrs in Photos offers a fascinating insight into the sheer number of internet images we are inundated with every day. Images shared on Flickr on a single day were downloaded and printed forming a huge mound of photographs that visitors to the exhibit were encouraged to walk over. Kessels display is a sombre reflection on how expendable and "public your private photos have become" (Kessels, 2011).

Figure 1.
Furthermore, there seems to be an evolving distinction between the printed photograph and digital imagery shared online via social media sites where often the motivation to share is frequently to gain followers, likes or retweets. Such images are no longer linked with the past nor considered symbols of memory, but 'become proxies for craving validation...less about the personal value residing in the image' (McLaren, 2016. p.136).

Whilst older generations continue to use 'the primacy of photography as a memory tool, particularly in the construction of family life............... teenagers and young adults use camera-like tools for conversation and peer-group building' (Dijck, 2007 p.113). Snapchat, a social media and messaging site popular with teenagers, allows users to share imagery that is short lived and deleted within 10 seconds of viewing, the antithesis of a printed snapshot that can be held and kept as a constant token of remembrance. Transitory digital images are occasionally accompanied by a brief note; their function first and foremost to maintain friendships, to communicate not commemorate.

Mimi Mollica’s * project **Nora There** was shot exclusively using a smartphone camera and shared via social media on Instagram. Mollica began photographing his daughter, Nora, as he pushed her pram around London. Initially the shots only featured Nora against dismal London backdrops but gradually other (human) subjects appeared in the frame along with his daughter. The resultant images are the antithesis of what is usually seen in a more traditional analogue family album; Mollica comments "funnily enough my project **Nora There** turned out to be less about Nora and more about the ‘strangers’ I photographed with her, that's why this series differs from the tradition of family photography, where I'd guess photographing the relatives is rather the focus" (in McLaren, 2016. p.140).

(* Mimi Mollica is a male photographer)
Figure 2.

Figure 3.
However, despite photography's traditional placement during the 19th and 20th century with remembrance it has additionally always been used as a device for communication and sharing events. Nevertheless, how we choose to share imagery in the public domain or via email private images has consequences for their future use; one over which the individual may have little control. 'The awareness that any picture unleashed on the internet can be endlessly recycled may lead to a new attitude in taking pictures: anticipating future reuse, photographs are no longer innocent personal keepsakes, but they are potential liabilities in someone's personal life or professional career' (Dijck, 2008. p.71).

Yet however digital imagery is disseminated José van Dijck contends 'that photography's function as a memory tool is still equally vibrant, even if its manifestation is changing in the digital era' (Dijck, 2008. p.59). Furthermore she suggests our changing relationship with photography does not originate from digitalisation but is 'part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualisation and intensification of experience--rather than family representation' (Dijck, 2008. p.61).

Whilst identity can be modified and altered with relative ease, photographs portray who we desire to be and how we are recalled, she proposes digital photography is not exclusively the reason why people do this and believes its reconstructed practice originates from contemporary cultural and social change. 'Flexibility and morphing do no apply exclusively to pictures as shaping tools for memory, but also more generally to bodies and things. Memory, like photographs and bodies, can now be made picture perfect; memory and photography change in conjunction, adapting to contemporary expectations and prevailing norms' (Dijck, 2008. p.63).

Moreover, vanity in portraiture is not new and family albums have always been constructed, they generally contain snaps taken on happy occasions.
The album compiler becomes the family historian, divorce ensures the exclusion of the errant groom or bride from the family history 'subtle elisions and brutal beheadings of disgraced relatives-these are the fingerprints of the complier' (Langford, 2008. p.92). Who is missing from a photograph can be as revealing if one is able to decipher the clues and Sophie Howarth suggests 'we organise our albums, whether physical or digital, to tell the story we want to believe about our lives' (Howarth, 2016. p.9).

**Staying connected in the 'post-photographic' era.**

Professor Gillian Rose conducted research investigating why family snaps remain significant in the digital age. She suggests 'in many ways digital photography allows people to do what they want to do with family snaps more easily, more often, and more extensively' (Rose, 2013. p.70). Her initial research was conducted in 2000 and only one of her interviewees (all female with children) had access to a computer, all used analogue cameras. The second interviews were conducted between 2006-8 by which time the majority owned a digital camera and all had a computer at home.

She proposes rather than reconstructing family photography digital technology has augmented it. All her interviewees took numerous snaps, they felt it crucial 'to take photographs of their family members and in particular of their children' (Rose, 2013. p.79). The mothers Rose interviewed felt it vital to correctly date, store and organise their images 'and with digital photography, all these things are remarkably easy to do' (Rose, 2013. p.81). Social media sites and email enable the easy sharing of snaps with family members.

However, emailed images are rarely printed and, more importantly, deleted. Rose concedes 'participating in email exchanges strips family snaps of much of the destiny of memory ....they are not sent primarily as a truthful record of a
happy moment...their indexicality, in fact, is no longer key' (Rose, 2016. p. 68); their function more to maintain family relationships. Furthermore, Rose suspects 'that a really significant transition in family photography---one which will articulate changed subjectivities and a different relation to digital images is likely to take place in another decade, when today's teenagers who use social networking sites as a central part of their social relations and representations of self become parents in their turn' (Rose, 2016. p.129). If the indexical function of the networked photograph become expendable in favour of its communicative function will the digital family album of the future cease to be of mnemonic value?

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence for sharing imagery online rather than as physical prints 'many families still find pride of place on mantleplaces for framed pictures' (McLaren, 2016. p.141). Furthermore, because of its instant worldwide reach photography is an influential medium to provide 'human connection and kindred resilience' (McLaren, 2016. p.137). Perhaps we need to acknowledge how digital technology has enabled an undoubtably different, but easier, more cost effective method of creating and sharing family snaps.

Staying connected is a major benefit of digital technology and migrants are able to keep in touch with relatives, which in the past was difficult and expensive. Smartphones in particular are used by refugees to let their family know they are safe. Photographer Patrick Witty documented refugees when they first arrived via boat onto Lesbos, a Greek Island. He observed 'that the taking of a portrait by smartphone was often the first ritual to be performed when the boat hit sand. As soon as the migrants reach safety, photographs of exhausted but smiling families are being posted on Facebook so that those back home know that their loved ones have made it' (in McLaren, 2016. p 137).
In 2017 an approximate 1.2 trillion images were estimated to be taken on smartphones worldwide (1). Whilst for many the photographs taken are expendable, photographer Alex Beck's series of work *Big Shots* presents the smartphone as a commemorative storage place. Portraits of Syrian refugees are shown alongside a treasured image from their smartphone which are accompanied by hand written information about the image. These people have lost homes, family members and been forced to flee their country; their smartphone snaps function as a perpetual mnemonic device and are documents of both personal and communal history.

Figures 5 & 6.

(Signs her name twice) | Shatilla, Beirut. A picture sent by her elder son, who was killed by bombs in Yarmouk, a Palestinian refugee camp in the suburbs of Damascus.

“Syria was more beautiful in the past that now. I wish I could return to Aleppo. To walk in the streets.” | Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, looking toward Syria. A photo from Aleppo, where he’s from. Joram (16). A cousin passed by his home a month after he fled, and it was completely destroyed, along with the houses of his neighbors and friends.
Many families now live far apart, frequently in different countries, a group family snap of the sort found in analogue albums is effectively impossible. Born in Singapore now based in New York John Clang's project Being Together began as a way of creating a 'very basic family portrait......to show the technological aspect of the time we are living in' (Clang, 2013) continuing the Asian tradition of recording formal family gatherings. The images are not composites but made as the virtual get together occurs, just how a family would have gathered together for a traditional photograph.

Using digital technology Clang initially attempted this with using his own family members but extended the venture to include other families in Singapore and their far off relatives. Using a webcam and Skype to connect distant relatives the Skype images are projected onto a wall enabling Clang to take his photograph of the virtually reunited family.

Figure 7.
The archival image in the 'post-photographic' era.

Over three quarters of a million photographs were restored and digitised by Japanese artist Munemasa Takahasi and a team of volunteers in the aftermath of the 2011 Japanese tsunami and earthquake. The enterprise began with the intention of reuniting them with the original owners (400,000 have been returned) but those deemed too damaged were put into a 'hopeless' container. The Lost and Found project was initiated “to use these photos, which were destined to be thrown away, to reach out to the people living far-away places to show these photos, tell our stories, and ask for donations. These pictures offer visceral feel for the presence of the people and their lives in the photos, something that the press reports, videos and casualty figures cannot communicate. These photos also show compassion with which they were handled by so many people who retrieved and washed them” (Takahasi, 2012). The project can be viewed online, and has been presented as a book and exhibition.

Figure 8.
Taylor Jones is founder of the *Dear Photograph* website where past and current time are presented in a single frame. Archival images are re-photographed years later in the same location, whilst some of the contributions are humorous a central theme is of loss and remorse, common human emotions. Jones believes the printed photograph is incomparable and is worried there is a danger of losing the physical connection to the past that a print, unlike a digital image viewed on a screen, provides. The site initially only contained Jones's images but grew rapidly to include contributions from those eager to commemorate their own personal histories.

Figure 9.
Louis Quail is a documentary photographer. **Before They Were Fallen** is a series of images of UK families who lost family members in the Afghan war that are very emotionally charged. The project addresses the themes of loss, memory and commemoration whilst "the central concept of the work is the recreation of the family snap" (Quail, 2014). Viewing the former images, taken in more carefree times, alongside their contemporary version forces the viewer to contemplate the pronounced blank space. I find the sets of images extremely poignant, captions accompany each set put the photographs into context. Interviews with the bereaved families can be read by clicking on a link and a video also accompanies the project, it is truly touching work.

Figure 10.
Without digital technology diverse narratives such as those presented by Quail and Jones could not be shared ‘clearly the meme of juxtaposing and contrasting analogue photographs with those taken in contemporary times and then sharing them online is a device that photographers will return to again and again’ (McLaren, 2016. p138). Archived images can be digitally enhanced and publicly shared to be used in present day contexts and once ‘personal photographs are increasingly pulled out of the shoebox to be used as public signifiers’ (Dijck, 2007. p.119).

Charitable organisations use private family photographs to publicise their work. **Missing People** is an organisation whose website has a search directory that one can use to search for missing people. On the 24th May
2007, International Missing Children's Day, images of missing children were projected onto Marble Arch. Newspapers regularly publish family photographs of missing children and victims of atrocities whilst digital technology enables the use of family images that have the capacity to reach a global audience. 'We all recognise family snaps; and when they appear in the intimate public sphere as pictures of the dead or abused, we can all emphasise with the grief and pain for whom those photo's are just that, family snaps' (Rose, 2016. p.86).

In 2004 the digital edition of an Argentinian newspaper Clarín presented a coloured image of Daniel Taronopolsky holding a monochrome photograph of his parents and sister (who is just visible in the frame). Father and son are about the same age and look very similar, family photographs are regularly scrutinised for familial similarities, yet when the images are viewed in a present day context their function as an archival family snap takes on a new role. Taronopolsky was the sole survivor from his family of five, his parents and two siblings disappearance in 1976 was connected to the military government; he never saw them again. The black and white photographs of Taronopolsky's family are just ordinary snaps, characteristic of the vernacular genre, but have been brought out of the archive to be used as a form of political protest and expose injustice.

**Conclusion**

Technological, economical and social change have always enabled the growth of new creative opportunities that can be embraced or shunned; digital technology has revolutionised how we take, store and share family snaps. Whilst a physical print can be handled, passed around, is tangible; its non-physical digital counterpart exists in the ether. In the 'post-photographic' era, once digitised and shared, an image is no longer a private token of remembrance.
We need to be aware of the possible implications of the appropriation of our personal images. Questioning how they may be used and taken out of context, this will inevitably influence how we choose to store and share them.

Yet despite the revolution in how images are taken, manipulated, and shared, their communal and emotive purpose continues to endure; they remain a mechanism with which we continue to initiate affinity and maintain relationships.
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