

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A MEANS OF CONSTRUCTING  
MEMORIES OF THE PAST AND NARRATIVES OF THE  
FUTURE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

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**Abstract.** The study is aimed at explicating the photo archive as a means of memories forming in the digital age, which involves solving the following tasks: a) studying the correlations between photography, archive, and memory; b) analyzing the functional purpose of digital photography in the context of constructing memory; c) considering digital archives as a means of preserving knowledge and social expression. The digital culture of the modern era is becoming a form-limiting factor for people's interaction with each other. Constant changes in the development of digital technologies and the absorbing impact of social networks on people lead to the reconstruction of each user's own internet space. Therefore, such well-established concepts as photography and archive are undergoing significant changes. In this regard, the features of the functioning of human memory are constantly updated and rethought. Modern philosophical research, as well as scientific developments in the field of information technologies and media communications, emphasizes that there is now a transition from a fixed archive to a dynamic, mediating memory created by users using existing internet platforms and digital algorithms. Now the photo archive is becoming not only a technical means of preserving visual information, but also an interface for social interaction, emotional expression, and socio-political influence. The Digital Archive tracks social hierarchies, cultural priorities, and available algorithmic memory selection. At the same time, a digital photo becomes a variable unit, which is constantly modified depending on the need and contextual content. Photo archives mostly play the role of a means of forming narratives and collective identities. Photography, archive, and memory are interrelated categories that determine how individual and collective memory is constructed. The functionality of Digital Archives transforms the mechanisms of memory, opening up new horizons for socio-cultural analysis. Social media users participate in curating their own memory, creating dynamic and emotionally rich digital archives.

*Keywords:* photography, digital photography, archive, photo archive, memory, memories, reminiscence, social narratives, identity, cultural symbols

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## Introduction

Photography is one of the most important tools for fixating the reality, and its role in preserving memory and forming identity is constantly growing. At the same time with the development of digital technologies and social networks, it becomes more necessary to rethink the concepts of the Archive and Photo Archive. Because they have undergone significant changes, that caused transforming traditional ideas about documenting and transmitting information. The relevance of the study lies in the need to critically reflect on the changes in the role of photography and the archive both for preserving memories and for forming worldviews in the light of the digital age.

Being a socio-cultural multifaceted phenomenon, human memory is constantly opening up in its new facets for philosophical and scientific understanding. If we talk about the development of Western European philosophical thought, the study of the phenomenon of human memory has its roots in antiquity. It was then that memory began to be considered, in particular, as the keeper of human feelings and sensations. The similar role was assigned to photo archives as well. Human memory considered being personal spiritual (non-physical) archive, which can only be accessed through human consciousness. Unlike memory, a photograph is an object you can hold, see, and store. It is a physical or digital repository.

However, the modern era, characterized by the rapid development of digital technologies, puts forward new approaches in understanding both photography in particular and the archive in general, as a means not only of recording the past, but also of constructing narratives of the future.

That is why the purpose of the article is to study Photography and Photo Archives as a means of transforming human memories and constructing new narratives.

**The relevance of the study.** The role of photography and photo archives in the conditions of the rapid development of digital culture is a relevant issue in philosophical thought and in other areas of scientific knowledge. This requires an analysis of the functional purpose of Digital Photography and Photo Archives as a means of changing of human's perception of both the past and the future.

**Analysis of the basic results of previous studies and the literature.** Recently, a significant number of studies have been devoted to this issue. Walter Benjamin in his work "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproduction" [1], analyzing the loss of "aura" by works of art in the conditions of their constant technical reproduction, in particular by means of photography, creates the basis for further interpretation of photography as a socio-cultural artifact.

Michel Foucault, in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* [2], emphasized the archive as a system of expressions that determines the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. Subsequent studies, in particular Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. Noting Photography [3], have deepened the understanding of the emotional and symbolic dimension of photography, which captures not only the image but also the trace of loss and presence. Modern scholarship is increasingly paying attention to the digital aspects of archiving. José van

Dijk's Mediated Memories in the Digital Age [4] and Joanna Garde-Hansen's Media and Memory [5] analyze how digital technologies are changing the ways in which memory is constructed, opening up new forms of individual and collective archives. Social networks, cloud services, and image-sharing platforms act not only as tools of preservation, but also as environments of interaction, where memory becomes a process that is constantly renewed and reinterpreted. These studies suggest a shift from a fixed archive to a dynamic, mediated memory, control over which is shared between users, platforms, and algorithms.

## **Presentation of the main research material**

Since its inception, photography has been an object of study in philosophy, sociology, and many other fields of knowledge. W. Benjamin was one of the first to draw attention to photography as a new technical means that has a significant impact on culture. He argued that unique works of art used to have an "aura" — authenticity based on their originality, locality, and historical context. In the era of mechanical reproduction (photography, cinema), this aura gradually disappeared, as images were able to be endlessly copied and distributed [1, p. 3–5]. W. Benjamin emphasizes that "mass production destroys the uniqueness of a work of art, but at the same time opens up new possibilities for accessibility" [1, p. 23–24].

Photography presented an example of a new technical art, each copy of which actually becomes an original, since the experience of viewing it does not change. Thanks to photography, art became accessible to a mass audience, which changed the social function of art [1, p. 12–14]. The accessibility of photography helped it to play a role in the construction of memories, thereby influencing individual and collective memory. In fact, from the very beginning, photography began to be used not only as a means of documenting historical events, but also as an element of identity creation. Along with their primary purpose of capturing memories, home photo albums simultaneously shaped narratives about the past, reflecting social relations and cultural norms of a certain time.

If we look at photographs through the prism of cultural symbols, their use in the home is precisely for the creation of identity, that is, they serve the purpose of preserving the memory of personal connections [6]. Through their function of continuous reflection, as if frozen "broadcasting" of certain moments, photographs become part of homes and contribute to autotopography. "Autotopography is a private, yet material, landscape of memory... consisting of the more intimate expressions of values and beliefs, emotions and desires that can be found in the home collection and arrangement of objects" [7].

To some extent, the functional purpose of human memory and the process of photography can be compared. After all, photography is the fixation of moments, in particular, in order to further facilitate the retrieval of memories and activate the processes of remembering. "Memory and photography both involve the process of recording images that can be used to recall the past. Memory itself is often characterized as an archive: a repository of things, meanings, and images" [8, p. 127]. However, it should be emphasized that photography is only a means, and memory is understood simultaneously as a functional and as a repository of information.

Thus, a photograph, as single a unit, and a photo archive, as a system or collection of units, are a material, objective embodiment of information. It is a projection of human memory in the material world. Unlike memory, a photograph is an object you can hold, see, and store. An archive is a physical or digital repository, quantifiable by the number of items, storage space, or megabytes.

At the same time, when photography was only physical, a photograph offered a relatively fixed and verifiable visual record of a specific moment. It presented a consistent image that can be shared and referenced by multiple individuals, providing a degree of “objectivity” that personal memory lacks. It didn’t “forget” details or reinterpret them in the same way the mind does.

Because human memory is non-objectified and immeasurable in material expression. You cannot point to a memory, weigh it, or quantify its precise dimensions. While it has a biological basis in the brain, the experience of remembering is not a tangible thing. Every memory is uniquely colored by an individual’s emotions, perspectives, and prior experiences. Two people witnessing the same event will carry different, personalized recollections. This makes memory inherently subjective and constantly subject to reinterpretation or even alteration over time. So the memory is not a static vault. It is a living, breathing process — constantly accessed, re-narrated, and sometimes forgotten or modified. It is inherently unstable in its pure form.

Besides, memory is a “spiritual” archive that is accessible only to its owner — the person himself and is non-objectified, immeasurable in material expression. Whereas an ordinary archive is an objective repository of any information, images, etc.

Thus photographs and archives serve as a projection or extension of human memory’s fundamental abilities into the material world. They can act as external triggers, because a photograph doesn’t hold the memory, but it acts as a powerful mnemonic device, capable of intensely recalling associated internal memories, emotions, and sensations that might otherwise remain dormant. Photographs also capture and fix visual data that our internal memory might blur or lose over time, providing a more stable and enduring reference. It is generally accepted the archive provides a common ground for collective memory. It allows individuals to converge on a shared past, discuss their differing recollections, and build a collective understanding that transcends individual subjective experiences.

So, human memory is the unseen, personal landscape of the past, rich with feeling and ever-changing. The photograph and its archive are the visible, shared map of that landscape, offering fixed points and pathways that help us navigate, verify, and collectively experience the past, serving as a vital counterpart to the intangible nature of our inner world. They provide a material anchor for the otherwise boundless and elusive realm of remembrance.

As mentioned above, the concept of a cultural archive was noted in detail by Michel Foucault. He interpreted the archive not simply as a collection of documents, but as a system that regulates statements, determining what can be said and how. In Foucault’s theory, the archive is as “the principle that governs the production of knowledge in the modern episteme: the system that governs the emergence of statements as unique events” [2, p. 170–175]. Thus, the archive

represents the historical parameters of specific systems of knowledge, that is, the beginning of what has been and can be said, that dictates knowledge for whom and about whom. The archive, according to Foucault's concept, is a space of interaction between power and knowledge that sets the boundaries of historical memory. This is an important aspect that shows: the archive is not located within the walls of its own building, but is created through a network of discursive practices and disciplinary rules and norms within which the practice takes shape [2, p. 129]. This even applies to situations where we are talking about personal photo archives.

Thus, Richard Chalfen has shown that, at the same time, even in the domestic context, photographs reconstruct a partial view of reality, adhering to a number of social constraints and expectations. Therefore, photographs should be interpreted as "cultural artifacts surrounded by a social and cultural context" [9, p. 161].

Similar arguments for the semiotic value of photographs as placed artifacts are advanced by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart. "Photographs, especially those to which we give visibility through framing and display, have a physical presence; they are image-objects whose function goes beyond the recording of events and relationships or the intentional exchange of experiences in social settings" [10].

A feature of the modern digital age is that archiving goes beyond the boundaries of traditional private space or institutional structures and takes on new forms thanks to social networks and online platforms for content exchange. The public presentation of personal information through social media is shaping new types of archives of everyday life. For example, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok act as spaces for visual documentation of everyday experiences that are both part of personal memory and a public archive.

Social networks blur the line between individual and collective memory, between personal and public archive. Thus, personal digital photographs posted on social networks function as platforms that allow embedding personal memory in a shared sociocultural and historical context. Photographs begin to act as mediators between personal memories and collective histories. Therefore, digital archives are no longer simply repositories of images, but also active participants in the formation of memory. José Van Dijk emphasizes that "memory in the digital age is no longer a purely cognitive or cultural process — it is formed through digital technologies" [4, p. 42]. "The essence of this process is not that memory is mediated by the media, but that media and memory transform each other" [4, p. 21].

José Van Dijk introduces the concept of "mediated memory", which is related not only to digital technologies, but also to the principle of recording memories in general. "Mediated memory is the actions and objects that are used to create and reproduce the past, present and future of the individual in relation to culture. Mediated memory is not a static repository, but a dynamic relationship: memories move back and forth between the personal and the collective, and they travel up and down between the past and the future" [4, p. 21–22].

It can be stated that when mediated memory arises on the basis of digital technologies, the dynamism of relations is enhanced. Thus, according to Van

Dijck, “in the period of digital technologies, an additional aspect of relations that run between the body, mind, technologies, materiality, practices and forms is added to mediated memory” [4, p. 50].

Thus, modern digital technologies change the very way of remembering: previously memories were “recorded” in physical archives (books, photo albums), now they exist in the form of dynamic digital data. If traditional archives were controlled by experts with a certain form of access or admission to them, regulated in particular by state authorities, then digital archives are the result of individual or collective action of users. And now the degree of “publicity” is regulated by the users themselves, when of course it does not go beyond their control in the digital space.

For example, archival photographs, which were previously the preserve of museums or private collections, can now be made accessible to anyone through digital archives on websites and social networks. Social networks themselves are already modern archives, where photographs take on new meanings depending on the audience. Photographs uploaded to Facebook, Instagram or TikTok cease to be individual artifacts — they can be reused, commented on, modified or deleted, often without the owner’s consent. Photography is no longer a static record of the past, but part of a dynamic digital environment. Van Dijck says: “Ironically, the problems of preserving and accessing personal memories through digital technologies may become more complex than before [4, p. 48].

Traditional archives, according to Michel Foucault, were formed not only through documents, but also through discursive practices that defined what was true or significant. Therefore, certain images acquired symbolic power, while others remained marginalized [2, p. 38–41, p. 72–75]. In the digital age, a technological component is also added to this. Social networks as modern archives are not neutral: algorithms determine which photos users see and which become part of the historical narrative. For example, the “memory” functions in social networks impose a certain narrative about the past, but do not allow the user to accidentally stumble upon a photo, as was the case in physical albums. That is, digital archives shape not only memory, but also the way it is experienced.

Almost all digital archives are controlled by corporations (e.g. Google, Meta), which determine which memories will be available and represented. Archives have always been not neutral, but an instrument of power, determining who has the right to speak and which narratives will be preserved [2, p. 215–220].

At the same time, digital archives are crucially regulated by marketing interests. In addition to their dependence on algorithms that control our memories, this includes the censorship of photos on social media, the manipulation of visual history, and the exclusion of certain groups or events from the visual archive. In the digital age, archives can be subject to censorship, political influence, or manipulation that alters access to history. Corporations, governments, or algorithms of artificial intelligence can influence what we remember and what we forget.

Another important problem that arises in the era of digital memory is its paradoxical instability: on the one hand, data can be instantly deleted, on the other hand, it remains in cloud archives, backups, caches. It is important to

remember that dependence on cloud storage (Google Drive, iCloud) makes us less autonomous in preserving our own history. In the digital world, we do not control our own memory as we used to. In the digital environment, a photograph exists as a set of data that can be changed, moved and reused. This emphasizes the idea that the archive in the digital age is no longer stable — it is changed, rewritten and edited in real time. Van Dijck asks the question: “How authentic is digital memory if it can be modified?” [4, p. 136]. Thus, comparing digital photographs with analog ones, it can be noted that previously a photo captured a moment without the possibility of editing, now the pictures are easily changed by filters, “AI-generation”, “deepfake”. Modern photography is no longer a unique artifact, but exists in endless variations (copies, filters, editing). Instead of an objective reflection of reality, photography turns into a subjective reconstruction of the past. The digital age has not only changed the very materiality of photography, but also transformed the user from a passive consumer of images into an active curator of memory. Social media users form new digital archives every day - through the selection of images, their framing with filters, support with captions, hashtags and designations. These actions are not neutral: they are forms of subjective influence on how the past will be preserved and perceived. For example, Facebook memorial pages dedicated to deceased individuals are examples of a hybrid form of memory that combines individual mourning and collective commemoration. Such platforms actually form a new social infrastructure of memory, where algorithms and interfaces determine which memories will be “reactivated” and which will be forgotten. In this context, the archive becomes a space not only for preservation, but also for the rapid reinterpretation of history under the influence of current social, political, and commercial factors and interests. Another important aspect of digital photo archival culture is the transformation of the concept of “testimony.” In the classical sense, a photograph could be considered as an evidentiary form — as a material artifact capable of “testifying” a fact or event. However, in the context of digital modification and automatic photo editing, the line between registration and construction is lost. This gives rise to new ethical dilemmas: can a digital image be evidence if it is constantly subjected to manipulation and transformation? How does this affect collective trust in the visual archive as a form of historical memory? Increasingly, researchers are drawing attention to the fact that in the digital age, the authenticity of the image is replaced by the reliability of interpretation, and photography becomes a platform for emotional, not just factual, experience. In this context, the role of emotional archiving is growing, when images are stored not as documentary evidence, but as carriers of affective experiences. Such visual archives not only record events, but also form the emotional mood of the era, which is preserved and transmitted further. Thus, photography in the digital age performs a dual function: it is a carrier of information, as well as an affective tool for activating memory.

At the same time, one should remember the impact that photography can have on a person. Roland Barthes’s idea of photography has become key to understanding how photographs can act in unpredictable and potentially uncontrolled ways. R. Barthes identifies two key means of influence of photography: *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* is the general cultural, historical or political meaning of a photograph, which the viewer can rationally analyze.

Punctum is an unexpected, emotionally significant element of the image that “pierces” the observer and causes personal resonance. “In social networks, virtually all photos have studium (standard portraits, reports), but only some have punctum — the moment that evokes personal or collective memory” [3, p. 25–27]. Barthes points to the traumatic power of certain photographs, which is caused by punctum [3, p. 26].

Thanks to this power, we become responsible for the past. The demands that the punctum makes on us are different from those that are made on us through the image, through the structures of history: the punctum instead points to the structures of memory, as well as to psychoanalytic interpretation. Personal subjectivities, memories and feelings become more relevant than the “accurate” or “objective” retelling of facts. “Since the structure of memory leads to the personal, the past will always be presented in a subjective, not an objective, image. The past always comes through a narrative form, and the narratives of the past themselves depend on the present. Moreover, the past is always in dialogue with the present, perhaps even with the future, trying to ensure its reproduction” [8, p. 133]. The photographic archive is not the past, but part of the future, the implementation of promises and responsibilities to the future [8, p. 135].

This is an important point, as the reproduction of images can be used as a form of political manipulation. Photographs not only document reality, but can also be altered, retouched or contextualized to achieve ideological goals. This is important for digital memory: the issue of storing photographs in the cloud, deleting or modifying them changes the way people remember and construct history. Like any archive, a photo archive sets the boundaries of what is said and how it is said, which affects collective memory. A photo archive determines how we think about the past, which in turn also shapes the present and the future.

Digital photo archives also have positive aspects. “As more and more media are connected in digital format, there is an increase in opportunities for museums, journalists, government agencies, private companies, media corporations and ordinary citizens to participate in the archiving process [5, p. 71]. Thus, in particular, the project of digital photo archiving makes it possible to make transparent structurally fixed hierarchies that function as archival in Michel Foucault’s interpretation of this concept, as “a set of rules that, in a given period and for a given society, determine: the limits and forms of what is expressed ... preservation ... memory ... reactivation ... forms of appropriation” [11, p. 59–60]. At the same time “the inheritance of traditions is the basis of the modern complex of formation of a specialist in the cultural and artistic field” [12, p. 79].

When photographs become accessible or permitted for distribution, they can support the telling of alternative stories. This requires a constant consideration of what remains unspoken, what can be formulated through the processes of memory functioning. After all, working with memory involves an active search, interpretation and reconstruction of an approach to the past that allows us to trace the relationships between personal and social events.

## Conclusions

Thus, photography and the archive are important factors influencing the construction of memories and the processes of human memory functioning. In the digital age, traditional archival practices undergo significant changes, and new technologies create spaces for active interaction of users of digital technologies and social networks with individual and collective memory. The expansion of the functions of digital archives changes not only the mechanisms of preserving memories, but also the processes of their reproduction by humans, opening up new prospects for sociocultural analysis. In the digital age, the photo archive becomes not only a technical means of preserving visual information, but also an interface for social interaction, emotional expression, and political influence. It is important to realize that digital archives are not always neutral — they reflect social hierarchies, cultural priorities, and algorithmic selection of memory. Photography in the digital environment loses the stability of an object-artifact, instead turning into a variable unit that is constantly transformed and modified depending on the context. Therefore, digital photo archives now perform not only the function of preserving the past, but also become a means of forming narratives and collective identities.

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