



Article

The Ephemerality Of The Snapchat Image

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Abstract

In this paper, I thematize the nature of the ephemeral image. This new kind of picture, which became popular across social media through the application *Snapchat*, offers a peculiar phenomenological experience for the user, which I mainly engage through the recent work of the German philosopher Lambert Wiesing. The main thesis of this work is that ephemeral images appear to their users with a greater degree of presence, enhancing their actuality and orality, and developing our memory capabilities.

Ephemeral images

Snapchat is a free application for Smartphones, which was launched in 2011 on the Apple App Store. It now counts around two hundred and ten million users, for the most part situated between fourteen and thirty four years old. 2.1 million snaps are created on Snapchat every minute worldwide¹. The idea behind the success of Snapchat is quite simple: it's one of the first applications to enable the user to send ephemeral videos or pictures, which means: images, that can only be seen once by the receiver, and that definitively disappear after having been seen.

Scholars from different fields refer to such images in various ways. They call them: disappearing media², self destructing³ or self-deleting⁴ media, time-limited instant messages⁵, images that become permanently inaccessible to the receiver⁶, or as I shall refer to them here: ephemeral images. Snapchat may be considered as one of the first applications of its genre, because in the last seven years, a lot of social platforms introduced this ephemerality function. The “story” mode appeared on Facebook and Instagram, which enables users to share

content for a fixed amount of time before vanishing. And apps like Wickr, iDelete, Snow, Xpire and Slinghot emerged, basing their originality on this very same functionality.

The first very vast question one may ask in front of such an apparently new way of communicating (the success of which is still rapidly growing) may be put as follows: why do people use such ephemeral devices? Why do some people want to take and send pictures without leaving any traces, without creating any archives?

One initial basic answer to these questions could be: because they want to exchange intimate – not to say sexual – content, and they don't want it to spread out on the Internet. Snapchat has often been referred to as a “sexting” app. But I see this as the “mythos” behind the reality of the use of Snapchat, since it has been shown that sexual content only constitutes about ten percent of the messages sent through Snapchat – and none of the content sent through the “story” mode on Facebook and Instagram. Here you can see the main declared goals when using Snapchat:

- send funny things (98.7%)
- send pictures of themselves (85.7%)
- send pictures of what they are currently doing (85.7%)
- using the app for sexting (13%)⁷
- Therefore, there should be other reasons for using these ephemeral functions.

Thus a second simple explanation for the use of Snapchat may be put as follows: because we are totally “alienated” people, all the more so amongst teenagers, who cannot live an experience without sharing it through social media, in order to make their life seem spectacular. The ghost of a simplistic interpretation of Debord’s work isn’t far off here. But such a convenient interpretation of the “Snapchat phenomenon” doesn’t seem to reflect the specificity of ephemeral media. Furthermore, such a theoretical consensus ignores the fact that Snapchat is precisely used to avoid the spectacular ways in which we expose our lives to a larger audience on Facebook or Instagram. To send ephemeral images is to use a private, intimate and quite “fragile” way to communicate, a way which could be seen as the exact opposite of a spectacle and as a reaction to the danger that our privacy actually faces. As Christopher Kotfila puts it, to use Snapchat may be a way to recover some of the obscurity of our daily life at a time where Google and Facebook collect huge amounts of data on everyone:

While many benefits have come from the power of relevance-based search engines, one of the costs has been a loss of obscurity – at least until the recent emergence of self-destructing data.⁸ The quite naive and vast question thus remains: why do people use Snapchat?

Most of the literature trying to seriously engage this question seems to focus on youth culture, on the use of social media by teenagers, and on the particularly problematic phenomenon of cyber bullying, which seems central to the sociological-based approaches. Charteris, Gregory and Masters even talk about a:

“(. . .) moral panic in adults around how teens engage with disappearing media.”⁹

There may in fact be reasons to fear that teenagers may lose control on their private lives through such a way of communicating. However, I would like in this paper to address this question on a larger scale, in a more “general way” and, to be more precise, in a phenomenological way. A phenomenological approach, which should allow us not to focus on a particular category of users, but should instead lead us to reformulate our question as follows: how do people subjectively experience an image which doesn’t reside on a persistent archive, which support is an ephemeral “image carrier”? How to describe the phenomenological way in which people experience such a strange ephemeral object?

In order to address these questions with what I call a phenomenological approach, I now would like to begin by presenting the phenomenological view that the German philosopher Lambert Wiesing developed in his recent work.

Lambert Wiesing’s phenomenology

Lambert Wiesing doesn’t talk in his philosophical work about Snapchat. He doesn’t address the peculiar aspect of such ephemeral images. He is currently a professor at the Jena University where he is the chair of Bildtheorie und Phänomenologie, and he is well known in the German *Bildtheorie* field for having developed various views about images in general. One may say that Wiesing tries, in most of his theoretical and philosophical work, to answer the following question: What is an image? (*Was ist ein Bild?*) He tries to formulate the question of the definition of the image in its whole generality. And he addresses this vast question in a way he calls “phenomenological”.

To address this question in a phenomenological way implies, according to Wiesing, developing a specific approach to images: a “third way” besides the semiotic and the anthropological approaches. A semiotic approach, writes Wiesing in one of his most stimulating books called *Artifizielle Präsenz*¹⁰, is to consider an image as a sign: as an object referring to another object, as something signifying something else. Whereas from an anthropological point of view, an image is at first an artifact, a human creation whose role is to be engaged through the importance we give to the production and

the consumption of images in our societies. Whereas this third way of defining images in general, which Wiesing presents as the phenomenological approach, does not consist in considering images as signs or as artifacts, but primarily emerges from the following question: how do I subjectively experience images? How to describe this peculiar relation I consciously sustain to images? Does a phenomenal experience exist, which gives birth in our mind to what Sartre called a conscience imaginative? To put it in Wiesing's own words: What happens to me, when I look at a picture? (*Was geschieht mit mir, wenn ich ein Bild sehe?*¹¹)

With regards to Wiesing's work, the answer to this typically phenomenological type of question is: to see an image is to experience a visible object. Furthermore, in front of an image, I perceive an object that is only visible. I experience what Wiesing calls a pure visibility (*eine reine Sichtbarkeit*¹²). Taking the example of a photo of a piece of cheese, Wiesing writes in *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*¹³ that I cannot smell the cheese in the image, I cannot touch it, or taste it, or hear the sound such a piece of cheese may produce – I can only see it: it's a pure visibility. What Wiesing tries to emphasize here isn't the fact that "we cannot eat an image of cheese". He tries to undermine the ontological difference between a normal perception and the perception of an image. There is an "ontological gap" between these two kinds of perceptions, between the way I perceive a real thing I can logically touch, hear or smell, and something I can only see.

In other words, when I see an image, I experience it quite in the same way as through my normal perception: as a presence. When I perceive a "normal thing", this something is in fact always present to me, is here in front of me – and so is the image. But when I perceive an image, the object of my perception is only visible, it therefore appears in some ghostly way, says Wiesing¹⁴. And that is because what I see when I look at what Wiesing (following Husserl) calls a *Bildobjekt*, isn't physical and isn't temporal¹⁵. And here are two crucial arguments of Wiesing, which makes him define the image as a pure vision, but also as an artificial presence (*eine artifizielle Präsenz*). If there is a storm in the real world, the house in the image won't get wet: the wall of the house in

the image won't collapse. In the same way, the person depicted in a painting won't get old through the passage of time. The *Bildobjekt* – which is radically different from his *Bildträger*, from his support (say a piece of paper) – don't obey the laws of physics and the passage of time. And that's what Wiesing quite accurately expresses in this quote:

The magic in an image is that quite miraculously the person, which is visible on a piece of paper, cannot become older. The person keeps the age that she seems to have, even if the image gets to be hundreds of years old. And that is valid for every image-object [*Bildobjekt*]: it is in the full sense of the word metaphysical, light and elegant, freed from the constraints of nature. The image-carrier [*Bildträger*] obeys the passage of time and all the others laws of physics. But the image-object [*Bildobjekt*] is relieved of them.¹⁶

From a phenomenological point of view, the image in the sense of the image-object (*Bildobjekt*) that we can only see is a "pure vision without the presence of real things" (*eine Sichtbarkeit ohne Anwesenheit von realen Dingen*)¹⁷. But now, and that's actually the real question we were asking earlier: How do people subjectively experience such artificial presences? In other words, what does subjectively live someone when he perceives an artificial presence made of pure visibility?

That person lives, and that's another crucial thesis of Wiesing about images, a pause of participation. We normally perceive things which are in our physical and temporal world, which thus can have a direct influence on us and on the way we behave. The objects which we normally perceive are in this sense "really" present. Whereas the image-object is situated on an ontologically different level, which enables me to experience a pause from the real world, a pause in the sense of being in a kind of "un-worldly" state, which means: an a-physical and an a-temporal state. Wiesing interestingly describes this state as "a-political" too¹⁸. The image allows the spectator to live an instant in what he calls a metaphysical paradise: "We may condemn the pause of participation as an artificial escape from the world, but we can as well consider it as a first step towards a metaphysical paradise".¹⁹

At the beginning of this quote, we can feel to this day the weight of the platonian ban of images because they

seem to be artificial imitations of existing things, but in the second half of the sentence, we see that the image allows us to perceive something, to be present with it – without being forced by its reality to do anything, without its presence forcing us to take part in its existence. But to get back to our main topic, how does such an understanding of the way we experience images allow us to capture the specificity of ephemeral images?

Before directly engaging this question, I would like to reformulate three reasons why the phenomenological approach to ephemeral images may seem particularly relevant. Firstly, it may be worth noting that phenomenology could actually be the only way to capture the specificity of Snapchat. As we saw in the introduction, Snapchat contains intimate contents, personal contents. Its main goal is to incite subjective experiences which are very hard to objectify. Since phenomenology precisely tries to describe the nature of such subjective and personal experiences, the phenomenological may appear particularly pertinent in order to answer the theoretical challenge Snapchat poses. The somehow neglected phenomenological tradition should at least complete more semantical or sociological based analysis.

Secondly, I would like to underline that such a phenomenological approach gives us a way to analyze contemporary images in a positive or at least a fairly “neutral” way. What I mean by that is that the temptation still seems great, even two thousand five hundred years after Plato, to consider new types of images as imitations of real things and to condemn them because they would generate an illusion or a spectacle. On the contrary, phenomenology gives us a chance to seriously address this contemporary imagery without being the victims of a clandestine iconoclastic tradition, which theoretical impact still is to be felt today, as Marie-Josée Mondzain showed in her book: *Image, icône, économie: les sources byzantines de l’imaginaire contemporain*²⁰.

Thirdly, the phenomenology, following Husserl’s work on the *Phantasie* and Wiesing’s reinterpretation of it, seems to allow to clearly identify and distinguish the “image carrier” (*der Bildträger*) from the “image in itself”

(*das Bildobjekt*). This should allow us to clarify in our methodology that it’s in fact the peculiar status of the Snapchat’s image carrier that makes the perception of the *Bildobjekt* so special. The image carrier (on which the image in itself resides) doesn’t persist, it’s evanescent – and only because of it, is the content of the image experienced in a phenomenologically specific way.

Properties of the ephemeral images

How do people experience the peculiar presence of ephemeral images? To give some more theoretical inputs before linking them with Wiesing’s theory, I’d like to refer to a text from David Jeong and James Lee in their article called “Snap back to reality: Examining the cognitive mechanisms underlying Snapchat”. They write:

“One way to make CMC [computer-mediated communication] more effective in an age of unrelenting connectivity and disembodiment is to design and emphasize mechanisms that foster a greater degree of presence, a quality that reduces the perception of mediation²¹. (I underline)”

Lukasz Piwek and Adamin Joinson make quite the same point in their recent article “What do they Snapchat about?”, as they underline:

“(...) the high intensity of Snapchat use”²².

The meaning of the idea from Jeong and Lee that we live in “an age of unrelenting connectivity and disembodiment” is obvious. But what does it mean “to reduce the perception of meditation”, and more importantly, how to describe this “greater degree of presence” which ephemeral images seem to foster and which directly echoes Wiesing apprehension of the image as a presence?

Considering the first question, I find it relevant to sketch some doubts about the idea that ephemeral images “tend to reduce the perception of mediation”. I am not sure that Snapchat users “aren’t conscious” of the fact that ephemeral images are mediated through an App, through a digital device. But this very same idea may be understood in another way: to point to the fact that such

ephemeral images seem more “direct”, more “here”, more “in front of us” – which merely means more present.

The main idea behind Snapchat may be to reinvent presence in a world where people feel disconnected from one another, feel absent to others and to themselves. Since the ephemeral image is only visible once, we may look at it and perceive its presence with a greater attention than when we normally look at a “traditional” and infinitely reproducible image. This distinctive feature of a “snap perception” underlines the uniqueness of ephemeral images, whose nature deeply contradicts the traditional way in which we conceive of photography and cinema, at least since Walter Benjamin’s seminal book on the work of art and its reproducibility²³. An ephemeral image isn’t reproducible. And this intrinsic property of ephemeral images may generate their enigmatic presence – or one-time aura²⁴. When I see an ephemeral image, I don’t have a “second chance”. We may even say that as I prepare myself to look at a Snap I just received, I may choose the right instant to look at it, the right situation, I may sit comfortably on my seat or take a break of what I’m currently doing in order to entirely focus on the soon vanishing content. In Wiesing’s words: the ephemeral image appears as a *Bildobjekt* without a robust and durable *Bildträger*, therefore appears in its independence and purity: as a pure phenomenon. A volatile and purely phenomenological experience whose nature may be specified insisting on the fact that, and that’s the hypothesis I want to conclude on, enjoys a deep relation to conversation and to orality.

As Nathan Jurgenson puts it:

The way to understand photography as it happens on social platforms is not to compare it to traditional photography, which is about creating an art object, but instead as a communicating of experience itself²⁵.

In the same idea, he also writes that:

As photos have become almost comically easy to make, their existence alone as objects isn’t special or interesting, rather, they exist more fluidly as communication; a visual discourse more linguistic than formally artistic²⁶.

Furthermore:

“An immaculately framed and perfectly lit photo of the beach makes for a good art object can be a pretty boring speech act given how that same shot multiplies in social feeds looking kind of the same.”²⁷.

What I find particularly interesting in these three quotes is this emphasis on communication, on the linguistic, on the speech-act, on something he curiously calls an “image-speak” or “voice-as-image”, in other words, on what Oren Soffer calls orality. Soffer distinguishes:

“(. . .) the fixed nature of pictures (or typed text) – which catch the moment and objectify it – and the temporal, ephemeral culture of conversation”²⁸.

Doing this, both of these authors may be used to describe ephemeral images as parts of our ephemeral culture of conversation – more than as parts of the objects we call pictures. Even if it may seem quite trivial, it may be worth mentioning here that what we say “with our mouth”, like snaps, doesn’t leave any traces, doesn’t create archives, but creates relation, communication, conversation – and a strong feeling of presence. Soffer continues:

“In the digital sphere, data is obsessively collected by commercial companies and governments. Snapchat, however, promises to implement a quasi-oral island of non-recorded communication”²⁹.

In order to conclude, I once again would like to refer to the authority of Plato. As we all know, Plato wanted to ban images and poetry from his ideal city. However, and that may be a bit less known, Plato condemned writing too, and this because he thought writing would make us forget what we write. Creating traces, creating archives may make us think that the content of these archives don’t need to be in our minds anymore, since they are now on a carrier, since they are stocked in an archive. Plato wrote in *Phaedrus*:

“For this discovery of [letters] will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves”³⁰.

Therefore, one could quite provocatively hypothesize here that Plato would have liked Snapchat. Ephemeral images, and that is the paradox I want to end on, seem vain – but their flourishing might also appear as an ecological way to solve various actual problems considering the accumulation and the storage of digital images, while allowing us to recover some feeling of presence and some more memory.

Endnotes

- 1 - <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/snapchat-statistics> (12.03.2020)
- 2 - Jennifer Charteris, Sure Gregory, Yvonne Masters, “‘Snapchat’, youth subjectivities and sexuality: disappearing media and the discourse of youth innocence”, *Gender and Education*, 30:2, 2018, p. 205-221.
- 3 - Christopher Kotfila, “This Message Will Self-Destruct: The Growing Role of Obscurity and Self-Destructing Data in Digital Communication”, *Bulletin of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 40, n°2, 2014.
- 4 - Lane T. Wakefield, Robin L. Wakefield, “Anxiety and Ephemeral Social Media Use in Negative eWOM Creation”, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 41, 2018, p. 44-59.
- 5 - Lukasz Piwek, Adam Joinson, “‘What do they snapchat about?’ Patterns of use in time-limited instant messaging service”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, n°54, 2016.
- 6 - J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, Kathryn Barnett, Cesia Roche, Jimmy A. Young, “‘Snapchat is more personal’: An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviors and young adult interpersonal relationships”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, n°62, 2016.
- 7 - J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, Kathryn Barnett, Cesia Roche, Jimmy A. Young, “‘Snapchat is more personal’: An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviors and young adult interpersonal relationships”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, n°62, 2016, p. 595.
- 8 - Christopher Kotfila, “This Message Will Self-Destruct: The Growing Role of Obscurity and Self-Destructing Data in Digital Communication”, *Bulletin of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 40, n°2, 2014, p. 14.
- 9 - Jennifer Charteris, Sue Gregory, Yvonne Masters, “‘Snapchat’, youth subjectivities and sexuality: disappearing media and the discourse of youth innocence”, *Gender and Education*, vol. 30, n°2, p. 206.
- 10 - Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005.
- 11 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2009, p. 210.
- 12 - Lambert Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz*, op. cit., p. 32.

- 13 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 202.
- 14 - Lambert Wiesing, *Sehen lassen*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2013, p. 69.
- 15 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 204-205.
- 16 - I translate from: "Das Magische des Bildes besteht darin, dass zum Beispiel wunder- samerweise die Person, welche auf einem Stück Papier als *Bildobjekt* sichtbar ist, nicht altert. Die Person bleibt, auch wenn das Bild Hunderte von Jahren alt wird, so alt, wie sie zu sein aussieht. Dies gilt für jedes *Bildobjekt*: Es ist im wahrsten Sinnes des Wortes metaphysisch, antigrav und elegant, von den Zwängen der Natur befreit. Der *Bildträger* unterliegt dem Zahn der Zeit und allen anderen Gesetzen der Physik. Doch das *Bildobjekt* ist dem enthoben." Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 204-205.
- 17 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 205.
- 18 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 214.
- 20 - Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 214.
- 19 - I translate from: "Die Partizipationspause lässt sich als artifizielle Weltflucht ver- dammen aber auch als einen ersten Schritt in Richtung auf ein metaphysisches Paradies begrüßen." Lambert Wiesing, *Das Mich der Wahrnehmung*, op. cit., p. 214.
- 21 - David C. Jeong, James Lee, "Snap back to reality: Examining the cognitive mechanisms underlying Snapchat", *Computers in Human Behavior*, n°77, 2017, p. 274.
- 22 - Lukasz Piwek, Adam Joinson, "What do they snapchat about?" Patterns of use in time-limited instant messaging service", *Computers in Human Behavior*, n°54, 2016, p. 358.
- 23 - Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* [1935], Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1963.
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- 25 - Nathan Jurgenson, "The Frame Makes the Photograph", 2014, online on the blog of Snap Inc. at: <https://www.snap.com/en-US/news/post/the-frame-makes-the-photograph/> (12.03.2020)
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- 28 - Oren Soffer, "The Oral Paradigm and Snapchat", *Social Media + Society*, 2016, p. 2.
- 29 - Oren Soffer, "The Oral Paradigm and Snapchat", op. cit., p. 3.
- 30 - Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a.