

Rethinking Aura in the Photos Printed from a Technostalgian Polaroid Printer

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Introduction

Media technologies from the past have been very present in our media landscape lately. According to Van der Heijden (2015), such increasing interests in past technologies are not completely new to our media culture, however the re-use of them has not earlier been present in so much fields of cultural expression at the same time. A term for this remediation of old technologies is 'technostalgia'. An example of such technostalgia, is the increased popularity of the polaroid camera in today's society. This camera develops a small print of the captured moment, directly after the photo was taken, without saving anything digitally. Even though people have access to their mobile phones or other cameras to take qualitatively better pictures, an increasing amount prefers to use of old-school polaroid camera for capturing moments.

As a reaction on the polaroid camera trend, the technological industry has created a modern variant of the polaroid camera: the polaroid printer. This printer allows the users to create polaroid photos without actually having to use a polaroid camera. The outcome looks exactly the same: a small photo within a white frame. However, a critic that arises is whether these printed polaroid photos have the same type of aura as polaroid photos that are taken with a polaroid camera. Therefore, in this paper I want to investigate how aura is experienced when using a polaroid printer for creating polaroid photos. This, I will do by looking at the processes behind the use of the polaroid printer, which are important for determining if there is aura present. I also attempt to make a comparison with the traditional polaroid camera. That is not only relevant in terms of finding out why the polaroid printer is so popular, but it also helps in rethinking the concept of 'aura' Walter Benjamin (1969) originally introduced in 1935 and in concretizing the concept of technostalgia as explained in Van der Heijden (2015).

To find an answer to this question, it is important to dive deeper into the literature first. I do this in a literature review on the concepts of 'aura' and 'technostalgia'. Next, I explain the technology of the polaroid printer and the polaroid camera. Then, I use phenomenology to come to an answer to the research question, which means I observed my own way of experiencing the polaroid printer. My observations are described in several anecdotes. In the discussion the anecdotes are linked to the theoretical framework that is described in the literature review.

Literature review

Van der Heijden (2015) describes the term technostalgia as "the reminiscence of past media technologies in contemporary memory practices" (n.p.). There are several theories around the reason why people remediate old technologies. Van der Heijden (2015) for instance describes one by the film scholar Sapio, who states that the 'return of the analogue aesthetic' is caused by

an attempt to compensate for a 'loss of materiality' (n.p.). This loss of materiality means that we digitalize everything nowadays. We store our photos on our computer and only seldom print them. We might not even look at most of them ever.

According to Van der Heijden (2015), a distinction between two different forms of technostalgia can be made. Firstly, he distinguishes restorative technostalgia. In this form, the old technology is completely re-used. An example of this can be the Instax Polaroid Camera that is popular nowadays. In this camera, the original equipment is used and users of the camera operate from the original practices and rituals. However, the appearance of the camera is modernized and therefore it is not original in itself. In Figure 1 and 2, both an 'original', vintage polaroid camera from 1965 as well as the modernized Instax polaroid camera from 2018 are visible.



Figure 1: Polaroid Land Camera 103 (© Etsy, n.d.)



Figure 2: Instax Mini 9 (© The Spruce, n.d.)

Then, Van der Heijden (2015) distinguishes reflective technostalgia, in which there is no complete remediation. Only some of the original features are used, but besides that, there might be new possibilities for the users. The polaroid printer is an example of this reflective form of technostalgia: it uses the technology from a polaroid camera in the printing part, but the user can also use an app to edit the photo and make sure the polaroid print looks exactly the way they want before printing it. The polaroid printer is visible in Figure 3.

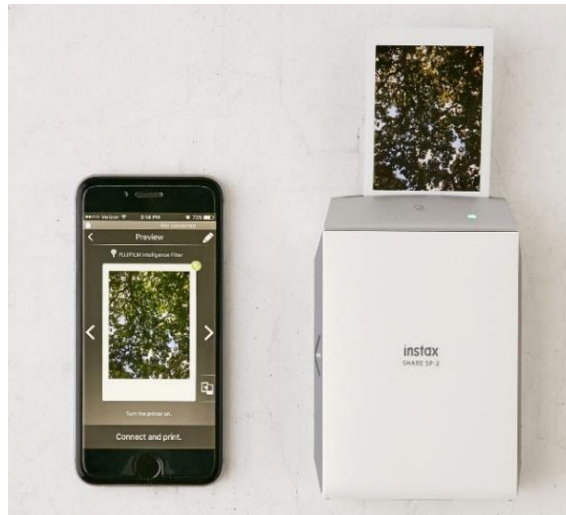


Figure 3: Fujifilm Instax Share SP-2 EX D polaroid printed (© Urban Outfitters, n.d.)

Before applying Benjamin's (1969) concept of aura on these technologies, it is necessary to first explain how Benjamin came to his ideas. Reproducibility is the starting point of Benjamin's ideas. According to Benjamin, from the moment the photography – and later on film – were introduced, everything became reproducible. Focusing on artworks, he stated that this meant that art became accessible for the mass and not just for one elite of society.

However, according to Benjamin (1969), a consequence of the reproducibility, is a decay of the aura of artworks. He states that the term aura refers to the uniqueness and the original of an artwork and to the history and tradition behind it. He believes this aura is something one can feel while looking at the artwork. By reproducing this artwork, the aura disappears. The authenticity is gone and there is no unique existence of the object anymore. Or, as Benjamin stated it himself: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. (...) The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (1969: p. 3)

Over the years, many scientists and philosophers have thought of reinterpretations of Benjamin's aura. Take Coleman (2015), for instance, who believes that nowadays aura has gotten a different definition. According to him, aura is about the emotions people attach to an artefact rather than the characteristics of the artefact itself. He states: “Aura does not adhere to particular types of objects created in specific ways. Rather, humans attribute aura to anything that has emotional resonance” (Coleman, 2015: n.p.). MacIntyre, Bolter and Gandy (2004) agree with Coleman, describing the aura of an object as “the combination of its cultural and personal significance for a user or group of users.” (p. 37). Thus, instead of focusing on the features of the object in deciding on the aura, the focus is on what the object does to the group or the

individuals experiencing it. What these authors agree on with Benjamin, is that reproduction, as long as you know about it, causes a decay of aura. The knowledge of having to do with a replica influences the experience of the object. An example of this is given in MacIntyre, Bolter and Gandy (2004): “if someone gave you a perfect copy of the Mona Lisa (and told you it was a copy), you would not react to it in the same way that you would to the real painting” (p. 38).

Benjamin’s (1969) ideas of aura were based on the way artworks were perceived in a time in which reproduction was an upcoming phenomenon. As seen, several modern thinkers have tried to move his ideas to our modern, technological society, in which reproduction has become a standard. They have broadened Benjamin’s concept from artworks to other objects and places and they have tried to individualize it. Within researching the polaroid printer and comparing it to the camera, a similar shift has to be made from Benjamin to modernity, since according to Benjamin, photos are already reproductions of reality. He does not see a photograph as an artwork in itself and therefore would perhaps state that a photo is the greatest example of the decay of aura.

However, looking at the taking of photos as a process and a tradition embedded in the photo, it is possible that Benjamin was too critical on photographs and their aura. This research paper will try to find out in what sense there is aura in photos printed with a polaroid printer, by experiencing the printer and exploring what it is like to use it. A combination of the older and newer definition of aura will be used, in which not only the tradition and history will be looked at as features that makes a photo unique, but also the personal significance the photo has for an individual.

Description of the object

For this research, I have chosen the Fujifilm Instax Share SP-2 EX D (see Figure 3) as the research object. This polaroid printer, which I have already used before this research, allows its users to easily print photos on a polaroid format from mobile devices, using a printing mechanism similar to the traditional polaroid camera. To print, the user needs to download the Instax Share app on their mobile device. Within this app, they choose photos from their gallery, after which the device has to be connected with the printer via WiFi. When the connection is made, photos can be sent from the phone directly to the printer, where they come out as small polaroid photos from 6,2 x 4,6 cm. Besides that, the Instax Share app can also be used to edit photos before printing and to share them online. The screenshots in Figure 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 explain visually how printing a photo from your mobile phone via the app and the printer works.

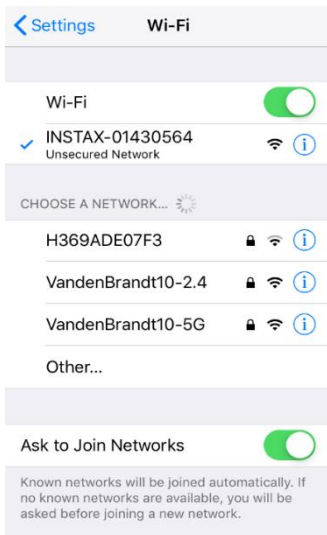


Figure 4: Firstly, the mobile device has to be connected to the printer via WiFi.

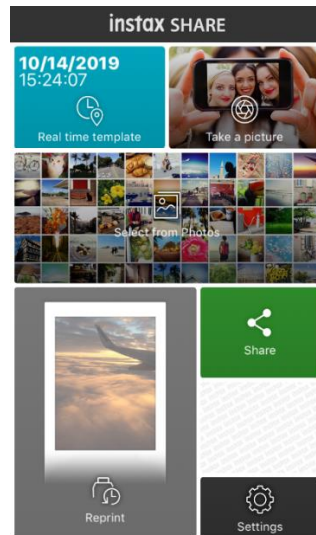


Figure 5: Then, you open the app. Via 'Select from photos', you go to your photo gallery.



Figure 6: There, you can scroll through the photos on the device and select one.

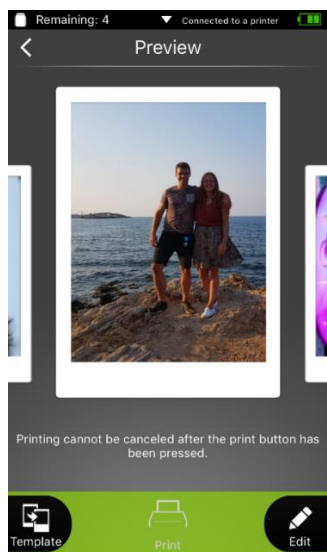


Figure 7: When you have chosen one, it shows a preview. You can choose to edit, template or print.

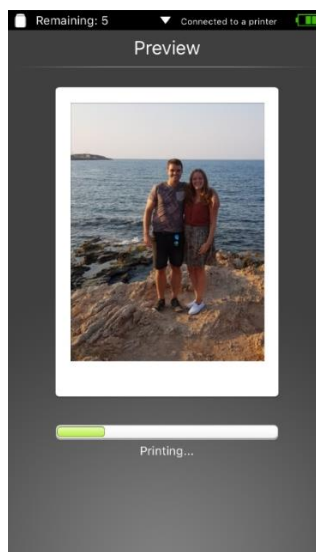


Figure 8: When you press the print button, the chosen photo will be printed.

Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, the methodology I use for this research paper is phenomenology. Phenomenology as a research methodology consists of observing and analyzing the way one receives the world in his or hers everyday experience of it, and in what ways this is meaningful to him or her. Within this, the focus is on how we experience the world before we

conceptualize what people observe. While observing and analyzing, the researcher steps back from his or her ordinary ways of looking at things. (Kamphof, n.d.)

In this research paper, the phenomenological data is derived from the notes taken during self-observation while using the polaroid printer. These notes are translated into three detailed, vivid anecdotes and present the essential data. In each of the anecdotes, the focus is on one specific element of the use of the technology. In this way, I point out the most important elements and structures of experiencing the polaroid printer.

Anecdotes

In this section, through three anecdotes I present the data of the phenomenological observations. All anecdotes focus on different aspects of experiencing the polaroid printer. They are placed in chronological order of the experience. The first one focuses on the process of selecting a photo, the second one focuses on the moment the photo is printed and in the third anecdote, the focus is on the final result.

Uncertainty

I'm scrolling through the photo album on my mobile phone, trying to find a memory of my vacation in Prague that fits the polaroid design. Choosing a photo is hard. Since I don't want to waste polaroid photos, I'm doubting my choices constantly. Many questions pop into my head. Isn't the photo too dark to print on a polaroid? Isn't it too zoomed out? I want this polaroid to actually be of good quality, so my choice has to be right. I select a photo of an old church and the app automatically frames it into a polaroid. The preview makes me doubt even more. On screen, the quality looks good enough, but I'm not sure it looks like that when I print it. I try another one, this one's from the John Lennon wall. Again, the preview the app shows me doesn't really help. The photo still looks exactly the way it looks on the phone screen, vivid and brightly colored, and I just know that it won't look like that when it's printed as a polaroid photo. My uncertainty about the printing only grows bigger. It frustrates me. I thought this would make everything easier, but it's almost like taking a photo with a polaroid camera. You never really know what you're going to get when it starts printing: it might come out really good, but it might also come out too dark, overexposed or totally out of focus. I sigh. I guess the only way to find out what works, is to just try and hope for a success.

Nervousness

When I press the printing button on my iPhone's screen, I feel a nervous, almost anxious feeling in my stomach. My phone confirms to me that it's connected to the printer by showing a green light. There's no way back now. The printer starts making a zooming noise, processing the photo I just selected. The little lights on the printer start to flicker and the zooming gets louder, simultaneously with the increasing of my heart rate. I see a polaroid photo slowly coming out of the printer. Suddenly, the noises stop and the lights stop flickering. The printer is done. For a moment, I wait. I'm not sure if that's it. When nothing happens, my hand slowly moves towards the polaroid photo and I carefully get it out of the printer. My hand is shaking a bit. I place the photo away from me, to a darker place. I heard that might be better for the development of the photo. That's it. Now I have to wait for the result to appear. A few more minutes pass by. I'm still nervous. Even though I know I can't change anything about the photo anymore, I don't want to touch the printed polaroid yet, afraid that I might ruin it. Or maybe I'm just postponing the viewing of the result. Ultimately, I know I have to check how it came out. I take the photo, still very cautious, and turn the printed side of it to my eyes. Then I smile, satisfied. It looks good. Not perfect, but good.

A wall of memories

I'm looking at my wall. A bunch of memories is collected there, since I glued around 30 polaroid photos to the wall. I'm pretty proud of my collection. I look at the photos, one by one. An old photo from me with my mom. A newer one, from my cat, which I quickly took with my phone once. My eyes stop at a photo of me and one of my best friends. I remember when that photo was taken. It was on a Saturday night out a few months ago. I smile and think back of that evening. By watching the photo, I can almost feel the good time we had. My eyes move to the other photos. The streets of Porto, a photo I took on vacation. A photo of me and my sisters, taken during our annual family day. Then, my eyes get stuck again. I'm staring at the photo of an old lighthouse me and my family visited when we were on vacation in Iceland for a while. The light was difficult that day, I remember. I think I wasted around 3 polaroid photos before I captured the lighthouse in an acceptable way. When I take a closer look, I see the photo still isn't perfect: it's a bit overexposed. I remember the frustration very well, but looking back at it, the memory of that lighthouse against the beautiful landscape, makes me feel more warm than frustrated. I smile again. This wall of memories makes me feel rich. Life is good.

Discussion

Using a polaroid printer is a form of technostalgia. It can be seen as an attempt to get back the aura of an original polaroid photo that has come instantly out of the camera at the moment it was taken. It looks exactly the same and it even uses similar printing mechanisms. The question is, if with a polaroid printer, the aura of an original polaroid photo can really be restored.

In the anecdote named 'Uncertain' the process of choosing a photo is discussed. It is about doubts and uncertainty. In the second anecdote, named 'Shaking hands and a high heart rate', the main topic is the nervousness. Then, the third anecdote, 'A wall of memories', is about the memories behind every photo, in which it does not matter anymore if the photo is taken with an actual polaroid camera or if it is just printed on a polaroid photo from a mobile phone. Linking the perspectives discussed in the literature review to the anecdotes, there are several points in which there can be found some overlap between aura and the use of a polaroid printer.

Especially in 'A wall of memories', aura as it is re-invented by Coleman (2014) and MacIntyre, Bolter and Gandy (2004) is very present. This anecdote is about the personal significance each and every photo has to the individual looking at it. There is a memory behind every photo and that memory has an emotional value for the one the photo belongs to. The process or the history that gives a photo its uniqueness is of less importance in this anecdote. However, that does not mean that there is no history behind a photo that is printed through a polaroid printer. As seen in the first two anecdotes, there is a process of choosing and prior to the printing. Even though this process is different from the process of taking a photo with a polaroid camera, it is still unique to every photo and therefore, it can be seen as that which makes a photo authentic.

However, there is also something to say against this authenticity, because with a polaroid printer it is easy to reproduce a photo. You can just print the same photo twice and have a replica, which does not differ from the original one, the one you have put effort in at first and the one prior to which was a process of doubting and nervousness. The app even has a function in which you can with one press on a button reprint the last photo you printed. This reproducibility the polaroid printer enables its user with, can be seen as a cause of a decay of aura, following Benjamin's (1969) argument. That is where there is a difference with the actual polaroid camera, because reproducing a photo is almost impossible while using a polaroid camera. You cannot capture exactly the same moment twice. That makes the aura of a polaroid photo taken with a camera perhaps somewhat stronger than a printed polaroid.

Conclusion

The main question of this research paper was: 'How is aura experienced when using a polaroid printer for creating polaroid photos?' What turned out from the anecdotes and the discussion afterwards is that using a polaroid printer for creating polaroid photos, for me at least, was a process in itself. There were feelings and emotions present while I was creating the polaroid photo through the Instax Share app. In the selecting process, there was doubt and an anxiety of making the wrong choice. After the choice was made and the photo was being developed by the printer, there was nervousness that could be followed by satisfaction when the photo was successful, but also by disappointment when the photo turned out to be a failure. That is similar to the process of taking a photo with a polaroid camera. Then, there is the content of the photo, that in itself has an aura. A photo can bring the viewer back to a memory. There is emotion attached to it. Therefore, there is aura.

However, the aura of a photo taken by an original polaroid camera, can never be completely restored by a polaroid printer. That is because of the reproducibility. As a user of the polaroid printer, there is always the knowledge, that if a photo turns out to be good, one can print it again, to maybe share it with friends. That reproducibility causes, as Benjamin correctly stated in 1935, a decay of aura. It does not mean a photo printed with the polaroid printer has no aura at all, but it does mean that this aura will never be as strong as the aura from a photo that is taken with an actual polaroid camera and therefore consists of much more uniqueness.

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