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September 2003
Engl. 105
Paper # 1

Camera Reading

Over the last few decades, most American children have grown up with access to a camera. At a young age children often get their first camera, and pictures of animals at the zoo or family outings are generally the results of the first few rolls. As young adults pictures are taken of friends and family. Vacations, road trips, concerts, and eventually their own children become the main subjects in picture albums. By the end of their life they have documentation of various moments captured through their eyes, but for what purpose? Surely photo albums are kept in the family, but without someone who can tell the story behind the photo, they become meaningless, regardless of whether the photo seems to tell a story or not. Pictures are taken in a very different manner now, than they use to be taken. The subjects in older photographs were families or important men posed in a very neutral position. Now-a-days pictures are taken of everything from a lamppost to clouds. Photos are taken in such mass quantities that the value of one memory, in one photo, is lost. In this over-populated world there seems to be an increasing need to document ones life, to simply prove its existence. And these days, with the developments in technology, people are increasingly equipped with pocket-sized cameras, which are being toted around much like a wallet or cell phone.

Cameras were first created as a way to draw a picture more accurately. As the science behind cameras became more researched, photography became a way to document how a person looks. Photography was very costly, so only few people could

afford to have their photos taken (Greenspun). But the use of cameras was often only for portraits and almost never as a form of documenting the lives of people. Unless directly profiting from the photos taken, photographers seldom took advantage of taking photos as a form of art.

It was not until the 1860s that documentation of human life and activities became photographed. Mathew Brady and his staff covered the American Civil War, exposing nearly 7000 negatives (Greenspun). However, sifting through the many pictures that were taken during the civil war, there is still no sign of art. The photos of people are generally taken from the same angle and the person in the photo has absolutely no expression on his face. The extent of the documentation of surroundings consisted of the living quarters of the cooks, the tents of the soldiers and the basins where the men washed their clothes. It was not until the turn of the century that photos began to document more than a face. Jacob Riis, a New York photographer, took pictures of various types of people in their native environment; such as: the Italian Ragpicker, Pedlar in Cellar, and the Blind Beggar (Masters Of Photography). He was able to capture not only the people but also the essence of their surroundings and conditions.

Cameras have only recently been inducted into mainstream usage. Various models began to sell to the public in mass quantities starting in the 1970s (Greenspun). Now, in the 2000s nearly everyone owns a camera. With the vast amounts of cameras available, the type of camera owned can be seen as a sign of social status. Owning a camera-phone, for instance, may make you the coolest kid in 7th grade. The cameras practical purpose, such as reporting a car accident to an insurance company with a picture included is usually not the reason for buying the device. The motive for purchasing such

an item becomes a need to fit in with the times and the hopes of popularity or acceptance. A sleek Elph camera with the ease of “drop-in loading” APS film and the ability to take it wherever you want without size or weight being an issue turns it into a piece of wardrobe rather than wasted handbag space. It’s not as if the owner of an Elph is looking to take award winning photos; instead he or she is trying to capture memories. But how many thousands of pictures are taken of just friends sitting around posing, smiling? After the film has been developed and the pictures shuffled through a few times, each picture will either get thrown into the shoebox or into the trash. In flipping through many of my dorm mate’s photo albums, a pattern formed. The occasional photo of scenery interrupted the stream of the same friends in front of different backdrops. It seems like the need to carry around a camera is to capture that “Kodak moment” if it ever happens; and even then, is it worth remembering? Being able to go back through your memories with the aid of visual stimulants can be helpful in passing along stories; but taking photos of the same friends in various settings can become redundant and can subtract meaning from the few pictures with an actual story behind them. Yet we still take the same pictures over and over again.

Perhaps the idea that there are over 6 billion people on this planet can be somewhat daunting and can lead to a fear that when one dies there is not much legacy left behind. Not everyone gets to be a celebrity in their life, so leaving a trail of photos can insure that one will be remembered when he or she is dead. However, the pictures left behind do not actually capture the life of a human; they show an idealized false identity. They show some of the times when someone was happy. After all, how often do you

photograph the sad moments? When looking through photos that are attempting to document a life, the depiction it forms must be taken with a grain of salt.

Cameras may just be a fad. But the want of keeping alive as many memories as possible is here to stay. Even though the way of taking pictures and the subjects of the pictures have changed, the idea behind photography has been the same throughout history. Only, today, as the price tag drops on many of today's top name brand products, the ability for anyone to own a camera is on the rise. This gives photographers the ability to document anything they want, no matter how important or irrelevant it is. Having the technology needed to take focused photos easily and at an affordable price, gives a head start to future generations of photographers who will fight to be remembered through their own lens.

Greenspun, Philip. "History of Photography Timeline." Photo.net. 2002
<<http://www.photo.net/history/timeline>>

"Masters Of Photography" Webgalleries.com. <<http://www.masters-of-photography.com/index.html>>