

## The Camera and Relationships

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### Abstract:

Has our increasing usage of cameras negatively impacted our relationships with one another? Long before camera-phones, physical images called carte-visites in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century would be used as a form of communication with one another through the telling of ones presence at another's shop or home, or through the act of sending through letters. These small portraits acted as a token for one's presence; a physical interaction and communication through two people and a reminder of a moment and bodily being.

This tie to physicality through an image of one's self is similar to the physical communication through imagery we as a society hold dearly via a now digital lens. Social media platforms, such as Snapchat, or digital communication entities, like texting or video-chatting, provide a level of physicality of individuals through imagery shared between users. One can talk with and see movement of their loved ones in real time. Yet, at the same time, what comes with this type of conversation is an actual lack of physicality in it of itself, and an increasing amount of expectations, and possible stress, through the usage of these platforms. Thus, we beg the question, has the increasing immediacy of communication through the camera lens enhanced our relationships or hindered them?

Some say the camera is an extension of one's eye; an extra appendage of one's self made entirely of machine. This addition is connected to how we see and feel, what we think when we interpret the world, and how we capture and preserve those we cherish. With this extension of

ourselves through a machine, is a photograph then truly a separate entity, or perhaps are the grains of silver, long wound fibers, and repeated zeros and ones all part of us too? Similarly, to the camera, within our hyper-connected age, a cell phone has become an extension of who we are, both physically, mentally, and perceptually. With this deep-rooted connection of our eyes through a lens, how has this changed the way we interact in relationships?

Within the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, image sharing was popular through the physicality of an object. An example of this comes through the carte-visite. Acting as a business card, or calling card, in a sense, the owner would get small, portable, pocket-sized portraits of themselves to then leave behind when visiting people in their homes and businesses. These mementos served as a reminder and a mark of a passing by of a person. An instant frozen in time and marked by the card left behind. This act of providing a carte-visite is just as symbolic as the photo itself; both are markers of times, moments, and of people. For the receiver, this portrait serves as a reminder of a friend, an activity shared between them, or of conversations carried throughout that specific instance.

Paralleling our contemporary era, carte-visites offered qualities that pictures shared between two people within text messages do. An image shared intimately between two humans, photos via a text act as a symbolic indicator of a time, conversation, and thought between individuals. The content of the image provides situational additions, and the feelings raised, whether on the receiving or sending ends, change as well. What is a constant, however, is that the act of communication via image in it of itself draws individuals closer together. A relatability, a sense of security, and an offering that provides insight into the person's core makeup are all senses provided from images sent between two people.

Snapchat particularly serves as a platform that allows individuals to curate their feelings for the recipient of the video or image with filters, stickers, text, and additional imagery. This creative outlet provides a layer of personality, so to speak, to be shared with the image in it of itself, to then provide additional emotional ties. Snapchat primarily is used for image sharing of one's self in communication with another person. So what does this do for our relationships?

Carte-visites would be shared very specifically and although they could be frequent occurrences, they were not common enough for someone to receive hundreds, or even dozens, of them in one day. Snapchats, and even text messages, with our companions rack up the numbers daily to the point to where some platforms, like Snapchat, record "streaks" between two people, the ranking of a level of friendship between yourself and another user, and much more. These constant, blatant, reminders of connections with those in our lives almost push a subconscious expectation on ourselves to uphold the streak, keep the level of friendship high, etc. perpetuating a relationship we have, but ultimately leaving out the purity of the connection. Why as a society do we value this expectation? Do our contemporary relationships only seem credible if these credentials are met?

The camera provides a sense of closeness that words might lack. The feeling one gets when reading a heartfelt message is that of closeness, however seeing a loved one's face provides a sense of security and safety that words can fall short of. The feelings we place on the images themselves validate the image as what can be interpreted as a reality.

Video-chatting, such as through platforms like FaceTime or Skype, with a loved one provides images of those dear to us in movement in real time that correspond to what their camera picks up right then and there. Our face-to-face conversations are no different than if we were sitting with them across a table, yet the interaction couldn't be any different. Are we really

speaking to each other, or are we actually speaking to a machine, a camera? Were these momentos of carte-visites left behind as tokens of an interaction acting as a reminder of the past, of a person, or a layer of the person themselves?

The camera can foster relationships and allow them to flourish through their inherent connective abilities between individuals. People started using images of themselves as a language between each other to discuss memories, moments, feelings, and time. Carte-visites were quiet, infrequent occurrences of this. Fast forward to the contemporary era, with the abundance of lenses and cameras at our fingertips, connecting with others through this outlet has been easier than ever.

This vast difference between our contemporary era and the nineteenth century's usage of carte-visites is that our current instantaneous and readily available communication between people can easily facilitate negative feelings more than ever before. Feelings of insecurity, guilt, and unrealistic expectations have been normalized to occur when constant communication is occurring but then someone suddenly stops. The other gets worried that something terrible is happening to their loved one. If you have school, or meetings, or a day where you are simply busier than normal, and communication is at a lower frequency than it normally would be, a sense of guilt rides on the fact that you are hindering your relationship with the other and are ultimately failing. There's a constant need to obtain a continuous constant flow of shared communication and camera-based platforms, such as Snapchat, perpetuate this method of expectation. "Streaks," as they are known, are meant to be utilized, set after as a goal with another person, and eagerly expected to be kept up with by sending images taken with a smartphone camera to another person. Where a carte-visite was a quite subtle message, our contemporary usage of a camera as language is a loud scream.

Our relationship with our technology, though improving communication frequency between individuals, has come with some societal downfalls. The camera for centuries has allowed us to hold relationships beyond just words and physical items, but at what cost?