CAMERA EPHEMERA

FROM POINT-AND-SHOOT
TO POINT-OF-VIEW: ON SELFIE STICKS
AND SNAP SPECTACLES

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"Almost everyone today has a camera and takes snaps."

–Vilém Flusser, Towards a Philosophy of Photography, 1983

ABSTRACT.

In this era of planetary-scale computing, big data, and even bigger ambition, technological determinism continues to surprise us — users, whether we know it or not — in its unexpected guises, if not its eternal promise of a better future. The latest and greatest manifestation of this desire is Snap Spectacles, a camera embedded in a pair of sunglasses that anticipate augmented and augmentable realities, short of crossing the threshold into them.

Just as Spectacles represent more than a wearable camera, so too does its antithesis take an unlikely form, at once fetishistic and banal. The lowly selfie stick is the unassuming counterpoint to the chic shades, an equally uncanny product that embodies far more than a putatively narcissistic prosthesis. Whereas Spectacles are overdetermined by their design — from the styling and hardware to the interface and user experience — the selfie stick is underdetermined by its brutish, uncompromising instrumentality.

Insofar as these objects are novelties in every sense of the word, it is all the more urgent to decode them. Situated at opposite ends of the contemporary techno-photographic complex, these two consumer products reveal and conceal just how we consume and produce images today.

UPDATED INTRODUCTION.

The first version of this text was completed in February 2017 and submitted to the Design Academy Eindhoven as part of my thesis portfolio for my M.A. Design Curating & Writing. While eight months may seem like a brief timeframe to bring hindsight to bear on this document, it is paramount to note that the primary "designed entity" at hand, Snap Spectacles, was released less than four months prior to the submission of my text and that the device (pun intended) was always intended to be more of a hook (both to hang my arguments on and to grab the readers' attention).[1]

Thus, this revisionist *caveat emptor* is less a concession that Spectacles turned out to be a mere novelty — in fact, they were never anything but — and more a reaffirmation that digital camera technologies are evolving faster than the eye can see, and perhaps more radically than the mind can fathom. In this sense, much of the analysis in the text-as-submitted has proven to be as prescient as it is obsolete — more so, astoundingly, than I could ever have anticipated. The slogan "the camera is disappearing before our very eyes" seems altogether quaint now, a fact that only underscores the point that the camera is in fact a computer or a network that can see.

It is telling, then, that Spectacles have been superseded by several gadgets *du jour* in the interim: Three of the four biggest tech companies in the world have announced or released products that further expand the definition of what a camera is and does. Unveiled in April (and available "by invitation" shortly thereafter), the Amazon Echo Look imbues Alexa with sight, purpor-

tedly for sartorial tips linked to the e-commerce titan's robust recommendation engine.[2]

But it was Google's announcement, one month later, of its artificially intelligent augmented-reality app "Lens" that would offer an uncanny counterpoint to Spectacles. Capable of detecting and recognizing objects in images or via smartphone camera, Lens marks a leap from the extant AI-AR of the Google Translate app, which offers real-time on-screen translations of on-camera text, and extends that ability to flowers and restaurants. If Snap strategically subtracted the interface from Glass, Google has opted to take the opposite tack and revived the visual search function as an app instead of a wearable camera, putting (or keeping) the HUD at arm's length.

And then there's the forthcoming iPhone X, which will make its way to the hands of consumers roughly two weeks after this is published. Its revolutionary Face ID system, powered by the cutting-edge "TrueDepth" front-facing camera, marks both the apotheosis and the subversion of the selfie. Unveiled to a mix of measured adulation and justifiable consternation, it remains

to be seen as to whether facial recognition will catch on as the de facto authentication protocol; in any case, Apple's grand experiment will happen on a scale orders of magnitude greater than Snap's foray into hardware.

The fact of the matter is, technology grows more powerful by the day, and each new development demands more reflection than we can possibly give it. At the beginning of this month, Google announced a suite of new hardware products, including "Clips," a diminutive AI-enabled camera that pre-selects the "best" moments of a long-take home video.

Expressly intended for parents of young children, the "lightweight hands-free camera [...] helps you capture more genuine and spontaneous moments of the people — and pets! — who matter to you."[3] (It also doubles as a baby monitor.)

Willfully creepy or well-intentioned, Clips augments the simplicity of a dedicated hands-free recording device — like a GoPro, it does not have a screen or viewfinder — with a steroidal dose of processing power, algorithmically curating a highlight reel of seven-second memories that can be synced, viewed, and saved via app. In contrast to Lens, which "turns your camera into a search box" by conjuring an informational layer on top the visible world, Clips is the first consumer-facing AI that attempts to understand the emotional content of visual data,[4] though the jury's still out as to whether their machine-learning algorithms, "trained" as they are by software engineers in Mountain View, can outsmart the skeptics.

If Spectacles remain but a distant relative to the latest generation of lens-based technologies, Snap foresaw these developments, as noted in the final sections of the original text of *Camera Ephemera*. The relevant passage from the company's S-1 statement bears repeating here:

> In the way that the flashing cursor became the starting point for most products on desktop computers, we believe that the camera screen will be the starting point for most products on smartphones. This is because images created by smartphone cameras contain more context and richer information than other forms of input like text entered on a keyboard.[5]

Depth sensors and deep-learning algorithms notwithstanding, it is not the camera but the *computer* that is disappearing, distributed among millions of networked lenses and dematerialized into the cloud. To that point, *Camera Ephemera* was always intended to look beyond Spectacles, selfie sticks, and cameras in general, beyond the optics of design — and vice versa — toward the design of vision itself. Computers are increasingly processing, parsing, and extracting meaning from images, but what do they actually see?

As Vilém Flusser put it, "the task of photography criticism should therefore be to identify the way in which human beings are attempting to get a hold over the camera and, on the other hand, the way in which cameras aim to absorb the intentions of human beings within themselves."[6]

–Raymond Hu, October 2017

INTRODUCTION.

The storefront is a ruse, floor-to-ceiling windows revealing a nearly naked interior, more like a white-cube gallery than a retail concept. On the wall at left, a series of flatscreen TVs rotate like propellers in slow-motion, depicting stock-footage-y video loops. At the center of the long, rectangular space is a grid of waist-high posts, tautly strung with wires to delineate a zigzagging path, insinuating a dense albeit orderly queue of shoppers wending their way through a dozen switchbacks to claim their prize from the monolithic box at the end.

Roughly the size and shape of a photo booth, the daffodil-yellow vending machine resembles a cyclopic cartoon with its circular screen. Programmed to display a halo of white sclera around a black disc of a pupil, the porthole abides until a customer catches its actual eye — a tiny camera above the screen — at which point it becomes a digital mirror. The LCD looking-glass instantly photogenicizes the face of the beholden, algorithmically smoothing out blemishes; its *coup de grace* is not merely meretricious real-time retouching but a further augmentation. At the push of one of three softball-sized buttons below the screen, to select a color, the user sees him or herself sporting the hottest fashion accessory of the season in a tantalizing simulation of projected endowment.

The coveted product? Snap Inc.'s Spectacles.

This is not a scene out of the dystopian television series *Black Mirror* or the latest cinematic near-future rumination, but a first-hand account of a brick-and-mortar store at 5 East 59th Street in Manhattan. In September 2016, the startup formerly known as Snapchat — whose eponymous messaging app is exceptionally popular with 18–24 year-olds — announced a new name and its first foray into hardware: a pair of sunglasses with an integrated video camera.[1] Available only via vending machines known as Snapbots, Spectacles would launch in November, when the peripatetic point-of-purchase materialized in Venice Beach,

California, where Snap is based. The guerrilla campaign would quickly go viral as the Snapbot traveled across the United States throughout the winter, visiting tourist attractions for a few hours at a time, inciting fervor out of sheer scarcity.

The pop-up shop in New York City would open two weeks after the Snapbot's debut, just before Thanksgiving, attracting diehard fans and dedicated parents during the holiday season. Not only did the street-level space house the store, but the façade of the modest building had been transformed into an eight-story-high portrait-orientation billboard. The wordless yellow color-field was emblazoned with the same cartoon oculus; some six meters in diameter, it appeared to lord over Apple's flagship glass cube. Orwellian despite its willful innocuousness, the monocular logo for Snap Inc.'s Spectacles felicitously evokes its debut product: The eye is punctuated by a glimmer at 10 o'clock, represented as a tiny bite in the dilated pupil — a subtle echo of Apple's own marque.[2]

If technological determinism continues to surprise us in its unexpected guises, the very notion of youthful sunglasses going "viral" crystallizes the sprawling scope of what product design means today. But insofar as computing merely accelerates the engine of capitalism, this inquiry will focus on the prevalence and place of the camera — a means of documenting, recording, and surveilling the real world — in the face of augmented and augmentable realities, specifically through two examples of material culture.

Even as AI and VR hover on the horizon, promising to parse and permutate reality at will, one can trace the radical reinvention of subjectivity — a modern-day echo of the shift to what Jonathan Crary calls the "observer" in the 19th century — back to the advent of the digital camera.[3] Having reached its apotheosis in the formidable all-purpose smartphone, electronic imaging technology has proliferated astronomically since the turn of the millennium as the cost of microprocessors has plummeted. From the earliest consumer-level point-and-shoot to the latest generation of Apple's iSight camera, we may well be entering the penultimate stage of veridical representations of the world — one that is increasingly captured and rendered as data, visual or otherwise.

This paper sets out to establish opposite ends of the territory rather than to comprehensively survey the contemporary techno-photographic complex. If Snap's Spectacles represent much more than a wearable camera — old tech dressed in new clothes — so too does its antithesis take an unlikely form, at once fetishistic and banal. The lowly selfie stick is the unassuming counter-

point to the chic shades, an equally ultra-contemporary product that embodies far more than a putatively narcissistic prosthesis. Vilified in countless social-media rants and half-baked think-pieces, the selfie stick has also been recognized as a cultural phenomenon with its inclusion in a 2015 exhibition *All of this Belongs to You* at the V&A (alongside the remains of Edward Snowden's laptop, no less).[4]

Its uncompromising bluntness as both instrument and metaphor a testament to its simplicity and symbolism, the selfie stick denotes a measuring tool for an inflated ego, not to mention a lightning rod for humble haters.[5] The seasoned veteran might even take a call without shedding the appendage, simply gripping the smartphone — the proverbial "wrong end" — with the shaft retracted into an errant, comically swollen antenna. Marshall McLuhan himself could not have conceived of such a superlatively literal "extension of man" (though he would have had a field day with Snapchat).[6]

Whereas Spectacles epitomize how product design is a manifold of interdependent aspects — styling, hardware, interface, branding, etc. — the selfie stick was merely engineered, sans ideology, for optimal performance. The former is overdetermined by the comprehensiveness of its design, down to the smallest detail; the latter is underdetermined by its apprehensible utility. If its "dumbness" is precisely why it is the perfect tool for beating a Trojan horse, its designation points to the deeper implications of collapsing the technical term "extendable handheld monopod" into the gnomic neologism "selfie stick."
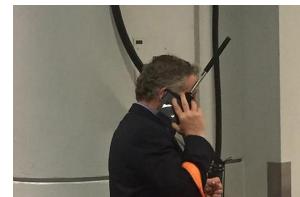
Moreover, neither device fully inherits the features of its predecessors. The selfie stick may resemble one-third of a tripod, but the reduction crosses a threshold of abstraction: the single strut becomes a handle as opposed to an anchor — a corollary to the consolidation and miniaturization of phone, computer, and camera. Conversely, Spectacles mark the transubstantiation of the camera into a pair of sunglasses, relocating the optical apparatus of the smartphone in an autonomous accessory. Each, then, entails new rules of social conduct, whether it is merely a matter of etiquette or a more profound question of ethics.

Taken together, the two case studies offer both an outline of the state of the camera today and a schematic of a dialectic that is dissolving into an ever-expanding field of media production and consumption. By one line of reasoning, what might be called the "evidentiary complex" — the instinct to furnish photographic evidence — emerges only at the intersection of the dark implications of the former and the polarizing semiotics of the latter. But just as the selfie stick is readily dismissed as an emblem of smartphone-enabled vanity, so too is it all too easy to imagine the dystopian overtones of pervasive point-of-view cameras. As products of ineffable sociocultural forces in the late-capitalist era, they are also contradictory objects of desire: The selfie stick *reveals* the omnipresence of cameras in everyday life; Spectacles *conceal* this pandemic.

All told, they are tokens of the unspeakable computing power that is poised to infiltrate and overwrite the real world, beyond mediation to bodily perception itself. As an investigation into both the designed and the undesigned, this paper examines these objects through various lenses. The pun is intended: a metaphorical methodology develops over the course of four chapters — bookended by discursive remarks on the past and future of the digital camera — effectively "zooming out" while maintaining a steady focus on the task at hand. The journalistic firsthand account of Snap Spectacles shifts to the "arm's-length" perspective afforded by the selfie stick. They are subsequently contextualized in contemporary society — beheld at middle distance — before they are analyzed at an aerial or panoramic long view. As Crary writes of the 19th-century optical device that serves as the keystone to his argument:

> [The stereoscope] is understandable not simply as the material object in question, or as part a history of technology, but for the way in which it is embedded in a much larger assemblage of events and powers. Clearly, this is to counter many influential accounts of the history of photography and cinema that are characterized by a latent or explicit technological determinism, in which an independent dynamic of mechanical invention, modification, and perfection imposes itself onto a social field, transforming it from the outside. On the contrary, technology is always a concomitant or subordinate part of other forces.[7]

Insofar as Snap Spectacles are a novelty in every sense of the word, it is all the more urgent to decode them, though ultimately they may raise more questions than can be answered in this brief analysis. What, then, does it mean when the image is no longer a representation *of* the world but a piece of data *about* it?