

Photography steals your soul

from Celia Joy Homann

Essay

By freezing life around us through an image, are we depriving the world of a piece of its aura each time?

To finally understand this question, we need to take a step back and think about what it really means to take a picture.

Mechanical reproduction describes the way of democratization of art. From this point on for example, a person doesn't need a lot of money anymore to fly to Paris just to see the Mona Lisa, hanging in the Louvre. The mechanical reproduction of the Mona Lisa allows us today to see her everywhere we want. On a poster, a t-shirt or simply by searching for her on the internet.

The philosopher and art critic Walter Benjamin raised the question of whether the reproducibility of an art object causes it to lose its aura.

When we take this question "Does art lose its aura when it is reproduced?" and transfer it to photography, you could say that photography itself is a reproduction of everything. Does that mean that while we photograph everything that surrounds us, we drain each time a bit of its life force?

While I just raised this question and we started to think about it, a lot of cultures believed or maybe still do, that a photograph of a person can steal your soul.

Even Susan Sontag who was a famous American writer and essayist wrote that everyone knows that primitive people believe that when a photograph is taken it will rob them a part of their being.

I started to write this essay because I don't really know more about this than that some cultures do believe in it. But why and from what comes this fear?

When starting to search the internet for more facts I found a lot of opinions of strangers without a reliable source.

Such as nowka2 wrote on GuteFrage.net eleven years ago: "The sunlight reflected by humans is needed in the cosmos and should not be used to create a photo on earth, because it will then be banished into it. The Indians were the first to recognize this and therefore developed a photo shyness."

The quote sounds impressive and beautiful but if it is true or just made up we will probably never know.

If the Indians were really the first ones to believe that photography steals your soul, it describes the natives living in Canada, America and Mexico. When we know where the people who believe this live, we will get an idea of which culture these thoughts belong to and therefore where they come from.

Crease Mansbridge on the other hand writes in his short article that the basic idea of this belief arose much earlier. He says that it will be found in the ancient Egyptian and Greek cultures. They believed that “our reflections were an outward projection of our souls staring back at us. The superstition about breaking a mirror and suffering seven years of bad luck derives from this – if your reflection is broken, a piece of your soul is lost.” And when photography was invented in 1826, for some cultures of this faith, that invention could have meant something that could rob you of leading a happy life forever.

Furthermore Mansbridge mentions that many Central American churches forbid photography within their walls when the medium started to spread. He says that this fear comes from Mayans beliefs who thought that when you pray, your soul is traveling to saints or ancestors. When someone would now take a picture of you in this state it will prevent your soul from returning back.

Zoe Strother who is an art historian is one of the few reliable sources I found. She also wrote an essay about this question and therefore concluded as I just did, questions and answers from random internet websites. Probably because you will not find a lot of sources about this theme and so everyone just passes on their own half-knowledge on the Internet.

In her essay Strother points out that a lot of cultures believe in magic and especially in the practice of creating a voodoo doll and therefore having the control over another person. For creating a voodoo doll you need something that belongs to the person like hair, blood, nail clippings or a photograph. A Voodoo doll is like a photograph, an image of a person. But since such a doll is always used to hurt or cast someone, people expect that when their image is taken and it doesn't matter in which way (a painting or a photograph) either the image maker wants to harm them or the image can fall into the wrong hands and could be used to create some horrible damage to the person itself.

These beliefs created the fear against Photography and because there still are some cultures who farther believe in magic and therefore probably believe photography is magic as well, those fears survived to this day.

However, since the effect of a voodoo doll is not scientifically confirmed, we cannot say with certainty whether a photograph can really do as much damage as these people believe. Since a photograph creates an even more detailed image of a person than a painting or just one

person's memory of another, this could make it much easier for the enemy to create a doll and thus be even more effective than the voodoo dolls before the era of photography.

However, how do we know if this superstition really works?

Today, so many pictures of each of us are circulating on the Internet and I, for example, am still doing very well and can live my life happily and purposefully. Of course, this could just be because no one has yet built a voodoo doll of me or simply no one has yet wished me ill.

What we can say with certainty is that a photograph contains the intention to create an image of something. This is a fact that we cannot change. Now, if a person believes that when something exists more than once, their soul or aura will be robbed from the object or person, it is hard to deny that the photograph could be able to do this.

If we are completely honest with ourselves, it is actually also the task of a portrait to capture the soul of the other person, isn't it? What would a portrait be without us being able to discover a living person in it? It would be virtually just a shell of something that would no longer have any appeal and would therefore not even be worth looking at. If I as a photographer make a portrait of someone, I would like to show the person finally also a part of its self and without thereby the person and its soul for it in the picture to catch, this would not be possible now once. Thus, a good portrait really captures the soul of the person, even if it is only a small part of it and the person's soul technically hopefully keeps everything.

I have found an article from 2012, in which the author is unfortunately not named, but it is also about how a photograph can steal someone's soul. This unknown person claims that when we take a picture today it is available to very many people. Thanks to the Internet, so many people lose all control over their own image and are exposed to everything that other people have just put in their heads. Now billions of strangers who have never seen you in their lives could create a voodoo doll through a picture of a person and bewitch it, simply because the person has bad skin, for example, or a too curvy body or or or. This principle can be found in modern times already as mobbing and was raised to whole new levels. The Internet and its programs makes it possible to rework a picture via Photoshop and, for example, to put the head of the girlfriend on a foreign naked body. Now the question arises whether this kind of handling is not much worse and more effective than a voodoo doll, because this process can cause much more damage and thus really humiliates someone. Whereas, in contrast, no one will ever get to see a homemade voodoo doll in the closet. This thought makes the voodoo doll actually quite harmless and the Internet becomes one of the biggest nightmares ever.

Dr. Venkataramanan believes that the aura needs time to heal. If the person nevertheless continues to be photographed after he has completely lost his aura, the camera will next weigh down his soul.

According to this principle, it would work that you can completely restore your aura by taking a "photo break". So now if we could keep this balance of being photographed, nothing would happen to us. If we fail to do that, the camera will start robbing us of our soul until in the end there is nothing left in us.

Whether these thoughts can now be transferred to reality is of course not so easy to understand. Today, in 2022, is the era of influencers, who certainly photograph themselves or have themselves photographed every day, because they earn their money by being present on the Internet every day and being seen. Unfortunately, I don't know anyone to stretch this thought further, but it would be exciting to ask if influencers feel a difference in how their bodies feel. Assuming we would notice when we slowly lose our aura or soul.

Since the Internet has an answer for everything, a solution can also be found for our problem. Some people think that only analog cameras are able to steal your soul. The University of Arbib is currently working on a "Gaia Refill Filter" (GRF) for cameras, which should reduce the effects of soul-stealing cameras.

Actually, it doesn't matter where the fear towards photographs comes from and it remains open whether this belief corresponds to reality or not. Either way, it's an interesting question that each of us who takes photographs, even if it's only with a smartphone, should ask ourselves. Because at this point in time, people are taking pictures more than ever and the world has never been more digitally visualized than it is today. So it becomes more and more important to ask yourself if it's good for you to have to photograph everything around you or if it's good for you to photograph yourself every day. How many versions of yourself do you need to be happy or how many are needed to completely take away your soul in the end?

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