How to Take a Photo: Cultural Memory and Photography's Expanded Field

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Abstract

How should one 'take a photo'? Google's image search algorithm suggests that it mainly involves looking through the viewfinder or screen of a dedicated camera (pre-eminently a DSLR), although using smartphones, and adopting selfie poses, are also acceptable (see Figure 1).
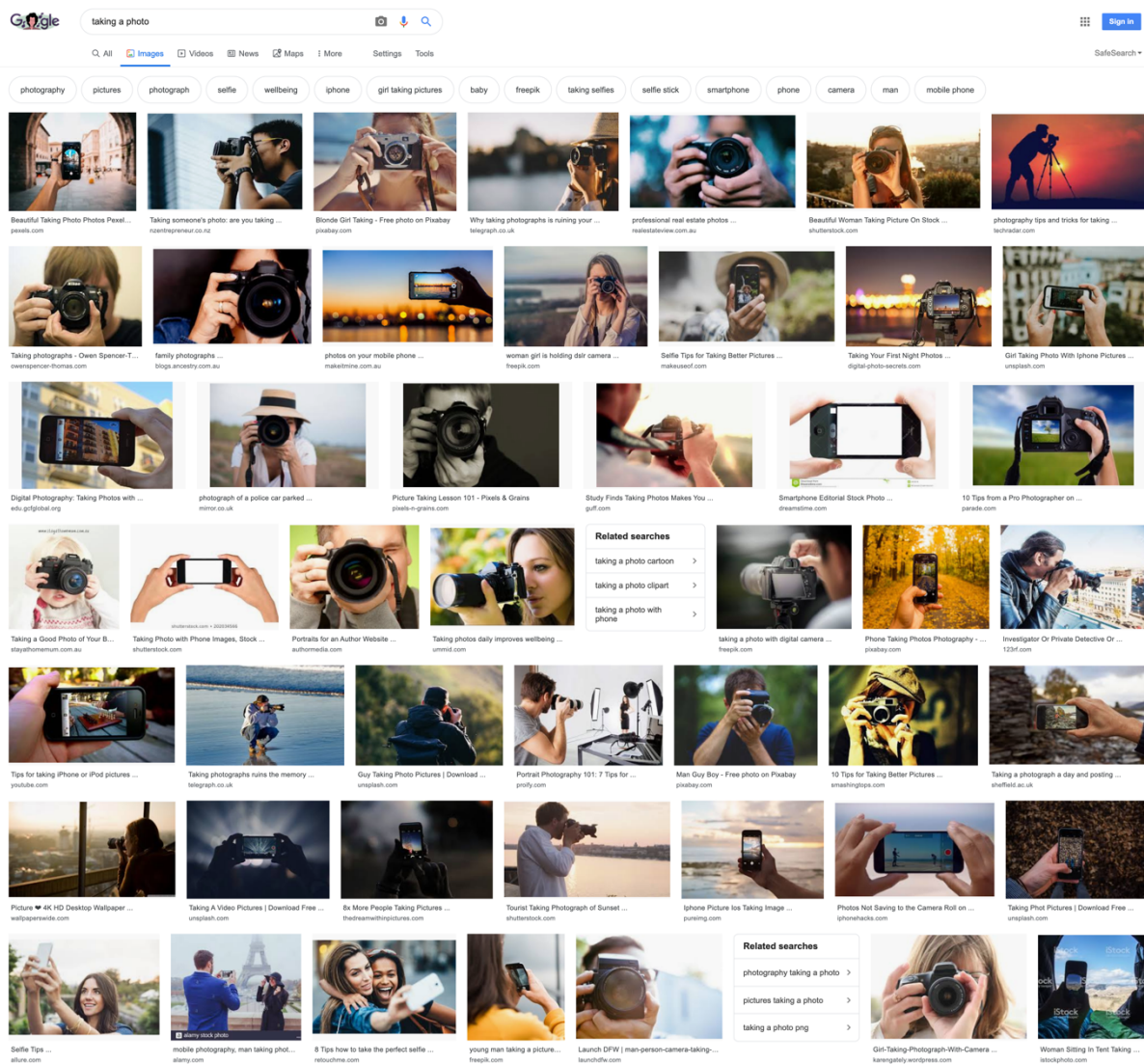
Figure 1

A somewhat different answer is given by 'Toca Nature', a virtual-world smartphone app for young children. To take a photo one clicks an icon picturing a dedicated camera which then overlays the screen image of a virtual scene with the cross-hairs and frame-lines of a viewfinder; an additional click creates the image of a photographic *print* on the screen (see Figure 2).
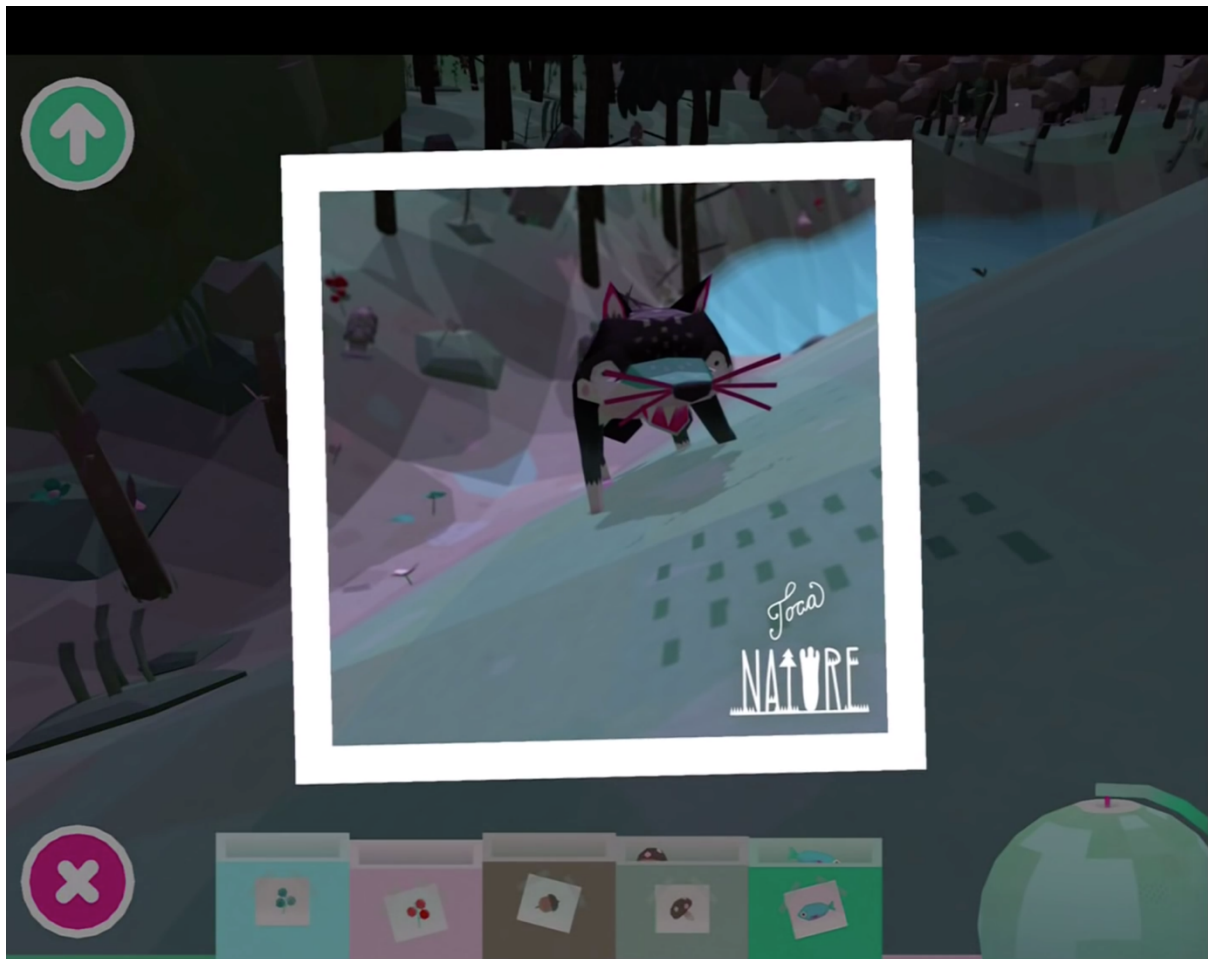
Figure 2

So, to repeat: how (and perhaps where) does one 'take a photo'? In the physical world of light, using a camera or smartphone to depict physical objects, or in a virtual world, using a computer-generated camera to create a simulated photographic print of digital objects? Moreover, are these different answers equally acceptable, and what can their coexistence and coherence in the same cultural space tell us about the current condition of photography and its 'expanded field' (Baker 2005)?

I argue that understanding this expanded field requires conceptualizing media technologies as *objects* of cultural memory: the persistence and expansion of photography necessitates that it be continually remembered, and actively reproduced, as it travels (Erli 2011) across diverse domains of technical, institutional, cultural and social action. To develop this argument, I unpack several potential meanings of 'how to take a photo'. The first is the phrase's conventional reference to the moment of 'capturing' an image: taking a photograph as a habitual practice performed by our bodies in combination with technical devices. This embodied dimension of photographic production is as significant an indicator of photography's social and cultural functions as the character of photographic images themselves. Taking a photo, moreover, becomes a recognizable social act not simply through physical performance, but through its representation in images and discourse – including in photographs themselves, such as those collated by Google Images. 'Taking a

photograph' thus connotes not only the practice of image-capture, but the social epistemology of the medium per se, leading to the second meaning of the phrase: how we 'take' (create) a photograph is intimately entangled with how we are meant to 'take' (understand) photography itself. Finally, contemporary photography has been taken into new contexts such as everyday screenshots and in-game/virtual world photography. 'Taking a photograph' in a non-physical realm involves taking photography itself *into* that realm. This is more than a formal process of citation or remediation: it is a 'relocation' (Casetti 2015) of photography as an anchor for constellations of cultural memory that are historically associated with it - epistemic and aesthetic schemas, behavioural scripts, and social and ethical values - and their rearticulation in contexts that are radically new.

References

Baker, G (2005) Photography's Expanded Field. *October*, 114: 120-140.

Casetti, F (2015) *The Lumière Galaxy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Erll, A (2011) Travelling Memory. *Parallax*, 17:4, 4-18.