It's about Time. Disappearing Images and Stories in Snapchat

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Abstract

This article first presents the developments of Snapchat - famous for its disappearing images - from a video messaging tool to a social network and especially to a Live storytelling platform that involves the instantaneous and collective production of photos and short videos on an event curated by Snapchat. Citing Galloway's "interface effects," it is then argued that the crowd-sourced images created in the moment and the disappearing acts underneath them are conditioned by modes of emplacement marked by branding, datafication, and profiling. What kind of time- and place-based aesthetics emerge at the juncture of Snapchat's appearance and disappearance, movement and containment, storytelling and branding? And what are the implications for the user's position?

Résumé

Cet article présente d'abord les développements de Snapchat, bien connu pour ces images qui se suppriment au bout de quelques secondes. L'application s'est transformée d'une messagerie vidéo en réseau social, plus particulièrement en une plateforme de récits de vie en direct basée sur la production instantanée et collective de photos et de courtes vidéos sur des événements organisés par Snapchat. L'article s'appuie sur la notion d' « effets d'interface » (Galloway) pour démontrer que les images prises sur le vif par les participants ainsi que les activités également éphémères qui les sous-tendent sont en fait déterminées par des mécanismes de marquage (« branding »), de mise en données (« datafication ») et de profilage (« profiling »). Il s'interroge ensuite sur les nouvelles articulations temps-espace qui naissent à la jonction des images Snapchat qui apparaissent puis disparaissent, des mécanismes de mobilité et de clôture, de la narration et de la logique des marques ? Enfin, l'article examine les implications de Snapchat pour la position de l'utilisateur.

Keywords

Snapchat; ephemeral image; storytelling; Interface effects; aesthetics

Introduction

In the Summer of 2016, as this piece goes to press, a lot is being written, blogged, and tweeted on the fraught relations between Instagram and Snapchat, particularly the former's recent adoption of the "stories" function that we primarily associate with Snapchat and the latter's announcement that youngsters will now be able to also save their "snaps" in a "memories" feature if they want, just like their parents do on Instagram.[1] The mutual imitation between these mobile photo and video sharing platforms is expressive of a deep competition that has accelerated ever since Evan Spiegel, CEO at Snapchat, refused the three billion dollar takeover bid by Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook (owner of Instagram) in 2013. The race between the two giants has everything to do with who owns the access to the messages, pictures, and videos of the millennials, especially since Facebook (2004) and Instagram (2010) are increasingly seen as the "older" social media generations. In contrast to the parents and grandparents who are here to stay (on Fb), Snapchat has presented itself as the young alternative steeped in casualness, informality, and disappearance of images. Interestingly, an integral part of its success has been its storytelling function, now copied by Instagram. What do fleeting images have to do with stories? And what exactly is the turf on which Spiegel and Zuckerberg are fighting their battles? It all has to do with time.

It is about time to treat Snapchat on a par with the older social media platforms that have received so much attention in media studies; to study it not in isolation but as a paradigmatic example of a larger ecology of online activity, which I will call "the interface effect." Thus, I approach the mobile app not in an instantly celebratory fashion of "happy snapping" – as some bloggers cited in this article have done – but critically as someone who takes the time to understand how the protocols of snapping have been integrated into everyday life. Hence this article presents the recent developments of Snapchat from a photo (and later video) messaging tool to a social network and finally to a crowd-sourced storytelling platform.[2] The latter involves the instantaneous and collective production of photos and short videos on a "Live" event selected and curated by Snapchat. It typically concerns users at that particular location shooting a highlight of the festival, contributing a native language greeting at the site, filming a selfie at a sports competition, etcetera. The extremely popular live feeds are a recent addition to the otherwise personal Snapchat functionality. They are a form of flashmob broadcasting tied to a particular event at a particular place.

Besides space also time is crucial to this storytelling platform: it is about being there in the moment. Characteristic of Snapchat is its ephemeral nature. In contrast to other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, its user-generated content is automatically deleted after a short period of time. This capacity for self-deletion has stimulated youngsters to upload "snaps" in real time that are often intimate, spontaneous, insecure, and blurry. When uploaded at the live event and sent to Snapchat, the editorial team decides which of

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1   Kimberley Mas. "All of the Ways Instagram Stories and Snapchat Stories Are the Same" (9 August 2016). *The Verge*. Available at http://www.theverge.com/2016/8/9/12402720/instagram-stories-vs-snapchat-features-comparison-video. Accessed 10 August 2016. Karissa Bell. "Snapchat May be Outgrowing Its Disappearing Photos" (7 July 2016). *Mashable*. Available at http://mashable.com/2016/07/06/snapchat-memories-feature/#GA2dNkPj3mqc. Accessed 10 July 2016. William Turton. "Snapchat Is Ruined" (7 July 2016). *Gizmodo*. Available at http://gizmodo.com/snapchat-is-ruined 1783205205?utm_medium=sharefromsite&utm_source=-Gizmodo_facebook. Accessed 10 July 2016.
2   This essay is based on a presentation delivered at the *Visualizing the Street Conference*, at the University of Amsterdam in June 2016. It could not have been written without the input and research of my MA student Kyle Fageol, who introduced me to Snapchat in the first place. Thanks also to Sebastian Scholz, Jan Baetens, and a third anonymous reader for their generous comments and advice.

these spontaneous contributions are made public for one day and hence what kind of stories are momentarily told about certain events or cities in what visual styles.

In this contribution I will first introduce Snapchat at some length for those readers who are not familiar with it. Then I will analyze the time- and place-based aesthetics of the photos and videos enabled by the Live storytelling platform. I will argue that the images created in the moment and the disappearing acts underneath them are conditioned by modes of emplacement marked by branding, datafication, and profiling. What kind of time- and place-based aesthetics emerge at the juncture of Snapchat's appearance and disappearance, movement and containment, storytelling and branding? And what are the implications for the user, caught as he is between the individual acts of "snapping" and the larger forces of the "the interface effect." Following Alexander Galloway (2012) this essay conceptualizes interfaces as "autonomous zones of activity," not things or objects but processes: "Interfaces themselves are effects, in that they bring about transformation in material states. But at the same time interfaces are themselves the effects of other things, and thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them" (vii). In what follows we will disentangle these larger forces constituting the Snapchat interface through the changing spatio-temporal aesthetic regimes of movement and containment that position the user at the juncture of self and world in a particular way.

Snapchat for Beginners

First it is worth mentioning the history of Snapchat.[3] It started in L.A. in 2011 as a messenger app and personal photo plus video-sharing service whose primary innovation is the self-destroying image. As the name of the app suggests, it literalizes the ephemeral and conversational aspects of phone photography. Snapchat enables sending messages, snapshots, and short clips that are produced through its interface, fleetingly and in the moment like face-to-face interaction. It does not allow you to send archived photos from your device, for instance. They have to be taken and sent immediately. After your contact has opened your "snap," it disappears within ten seconds, depending on the time-frame the sender has set, so interacting with it has to go fast as well. But increasingly there appear ways to save it: through a screenshot on the mobile device, Snapchat's replay button, and all kinds of third-party Snapsaving apps. Hence in an attempt to regain control, the company is currently rolling out a new feature called "Memories," enabling users to archive their pictures within the app. More about that later. Snapchat can be used as a private, temporary, one-to-one visual communication, with selfies as the preferred vehicle for fleeting contact. (And yes it was originally popular among youngsters "sexting," i.e. sending nude pictures).

Since 2013 it has also functioned like a social network, enabling one to compose a longer narrative stream of ten seconds' snaps on a feature called My Story and share that storyline with a list of friends and followers for twenty-four hours. One can also add texts, emojis, layover graphics, and augmented reality filters to the live stream and remove or add pictures in the feed. Interactivity is limited.

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3 The following brief history is based on what Snapchat has posted on its website https://www.snapchat.com and blog http://snap-chat-blog.com/. Readers not familiar with the app are advised to visit these and also check out Snapchat's online magazine *Real Life* at http://reallifemag.com/. Not that much has been published on Snapchat in the academic world, but I found the following items particularly insightful: Anderson (2015), Palmer (2014), Wargo (2015). Further references to online blogs are added in footnotes, not in the bibliography.

From 2014 onwards Snapchat has added new functionalities alternatively called: Our story, Live Story, Live Events, and lately only Live. This live streaming platform is more like YouTube and allows users to upload footage of ten seconds on a Live event or city chosen by Snapchat and make it visible to the two hundred millions of Snapchat users during the lapse of a day. Snapchat hosts several Live events a day. For instance, on Sunday 24 April 2016 the Live events to which one could contribute were: New Orleans Jazz Fest, Dutch Flower Festival, Live from Las Vegas, Earth Day, World Cheer Champs, and Passover.

Since in its Live platform Snapchat offers a form of user-generated television in the moment, several media companies have made expensive contracts with the app. Besides applications such as snaps, chats, stories, and live events, the interface offers a "Discover" page with breaking news and entertainment from a series of official mobile channels such as CNN, National Geographic, MTV, Comedy Channel, Daily Mail, Buzzfeed, Vice, all of which repackage their newsfeed in a Snapchat style: brief, fleeting, and palatable to youngsters who rarely watch television or read a newspaper.

As said, the crowd-sourced content on the Live platform must be shot through the Snapchat interface and on location – so you have to be present at the event and have your device's location services turned on. You can also add Snapchat geofilters so that your location at particular festivals and the time frame are recognizable to editors and audience. Landing on the Live platform takes a while and is highly competitive as curators on the East and West Coast sift through thousands of footage and display only about sixty of them on a dailbasis. Often the winning clips are stitched together in a couple of minutes along a horizontal narrative line, starting with footage in the morning and ending at night; or first introducing an event, then a taste of it from various perspectives, at the end a conclusion. The Live feed is constantly updated, and it is up to the viewer to find out what is new in the stream. While touching the screen allows one to skip to the next snap, recently the storyline has been extended to also run vertically. Swiping up from below enables viewers to see more – hidden -- footage on the same moment in the storyline, thus adding depth to the snap. I will return to this later. Besides showing real-time user-generated imagery, the Live event occasionally hosts snaps produced by Snapchat employees or the organizers of the events themselves as they shoot peaks behind the scenes, e.g. in locker rooms or studios.

Needless to say, all of this leads to a massive immersive experience of the cities and events covered on a daily basis and has led major events and brands to partner with Snapchat to tap into its millions of live audience, most of whom are somewhere between eighteen and thirty-five years old. Featured on Live have been: The Olympic Games, the NFA, the NBA, the Hajj to Mecca, the 2016 presidential campaigns, The Oscars, the Music Awards, all kinds of music festivals, fashion weeks, the Oktober Feste, but also region-specific local stories on college events or debates.

Also several retailers, celebrities, big companies and brands have opened their own Snapchat accounts and bombarded their followers and customers with photos, snaps, messages, and live video feeds for one day, always presented in the typical Snapchat style: a maximum of ten seconds long and covered by digital markers, stickers, and filters. Customers can use the standard filters, or they can create their own, thus displaying their creativity while contributing to the brand name. Price tag at the time of writing: five dollars per personal filter for an eight-hour block.

Aesthetics of Time and Space

So what kind of time- and place-based aesthetics emerge at the juncture of Snapchat's appearance and disappearance, storytelling and branding? And what are the implications for the user's positioning? In what follows I will limit myself to a general discussion based on video clips that were contributed to what was once called "Our Story," then "Live Event" – with subcategories "Cities Live" or "Passport" – now it is simply called "Live." The labels and icons under which applications are presented are as unstable as the imagery they curate. As this article goes to press, for instance, Snapchat has announced a new function called "Memories," which will enable users to also archive their photos and videos within the app, search them, and send or edit them as My Story at a later stage.[4] And while this latest – archival - addition to the interface seems to counter the ephemerality typical of Snapchat, while accommodating the needs of older users, I would like to insist that it affirms the dynamics of Galloway's "interface effects" mentioned at the beginning and explored below: rather than as a personal fleeting image the Snapchat contribution needs to be seen as the effect of an interface-in-motion at the juncture of time and space, one instant image and larger forces of containment, a creative individual and the closure of the brand. Let me illustrate how these tensions at the heart of the app have generated a peculiar spatio-temporal aesthetic order of live events characterized by movement and containment.

Movement

Pictures curated on the Live platform play with the aesthetics of the live event. The imagery is evanescent, fleeting, immediate, in the moment. Live events typically host short clips of less than ten seconds with hasty impressions, jumpy editing, and chaotic storytelling. In many ways Snapchat imitates the liveness of the old television format, prior to the Internet, with no opportunity for replay. Once it is broadcast it is gone.

Closely related, Snapchat promotes aesthetics of fluidity and impermanence: the format of the platform constantly changes, contributions do not last, and identities created through the app are a "liquid self" more than a series of fixed categories adding up to a proper social media profile. In the words of Nathan Jurgenson, researcher at Snapchat: "I wonder how we can build social media that doesn't always intensify our own relationship to ourselves by way of identity boxes. I think temporary social media[5] will provide new ways of understanding the social media profile, one that isn't comprised of life hacked into frozen, quantifiable pieces but instead something more fluid, changing, and alive."[6]

Typical are contributions on the go. The Live event functions like a flashmob with like-minded youngsters gathering in and moving through the same place. There are a lot of clips by people walking, driving, cycling through the broadcast place, which delivers what P. Claire Dodson calls "a messy, shaky camera version of live-tweeting."[7] When the mobile camera stops to focus at all, it leads to unstable, blurry, grainy, badly shot,

4 "Introducing Memories" (6 July 2016). *Snapchat Blog.* Available at http://snapchat-blog.com/post/146998839575/introducing-memories. Accessed 15 July 2016.
5 http://snapchat-blog.com/post/55902851023/temporary-social-media
6 "The Liquid Self" (20 September 2013). *Snapchat Blog.* Available at http://snapchat-blog.com/post/61770468323/the-liquid-self. Accessed 15 June 2016.
7 "Why Snapchat's Live Stories Are the Most Powerful New Social Media" (21 October 2015). *Fast Company.* Available at http://www.fastcompany.com/3052322/why-snapchats-live-stories-are-the-most-powerful-new-social-media/1. Accessed 15 June 2016.

and noisy pictures. For this reason one may well call most of the contributions not only ephemeral and mobile but also anti-aesthetic, generating a feeling of immediacy and authenticity.

Aesthetics of discovery, revelation, exploration, and surprise typical of the tourist industry characterize the Snapchat platform. Upon the sudden announcement of the Live event one day before it starts ("Surprise! Your city will go Live tomorrow"), we are expected go there at once and discover for ourselves. The idea is to jump from one place to the next, go out into the world, seek adventure – albeit within the comfort of millions of others - and record it through the mobile camera. In that sense Snapchat promotes tourist explorations into cities only the better to capture them instantly through the app and, if lucky, be selected on the platform. As to the Snapchat user watching in the safety of his couch, he derives pleasure in his role of virtual tourist with the world at his fingertips, ready to "explore" more at the bottom of the image or at the Discovery page through the eyes of National Geographic or any of the other media partners.

Containment

Running counter to the ephemerality of the movements are strategies of emplacing or embedding the snaps in the temporality of the storyline. The ten seconds' snaps are casually taken in the moment and immediately sent off, but once landed on the Live platform they are presented as part of a larger narrative arch that runs from morning to midnight. Often the stream ends with the selfie of a user wishing Snapchat goodnight. While the individual clips celebrate the instantaneity and ephemerality of the event or place visited, the edited presentation online suggests the continuity and closure of the Snapchat brand. Moreover the singular footage (of less than ten seconds) is combined with other images in a story that lasts up to five minutes but covers the events in one day. In narratological terms we say that since the viewing time is short – a couple of seconds for the singular clip or a few minutes for the story - while the time of the story told is longer (it covers and lasts for one day), we are dealing with an elliptical editing suggesting speed. By touching the screen the user can increase and get immersed in the speed.

But there is more. Interestingly, the narrative can be accessed not only in a horizontal but also a vertical line. We can swipe vertically to see further footage if we want. While the horizontal narrative (of a few minutes) suggests an automatic passage of time – first, next, finally – in a logical, even chronological storyline, the vertical line, opened at the bottom through a click or swipe, extends a given moment in the story with more (hidden) footage and adds simultaneity and spatial depth. While the horizontal line foregrounds the narrative arch of the story (from beginning to end), the vertical one zooms in on the moment, adding further details, filling in the background so to speak. The former suggests progress and diachronic action, the latter adds synchronicity and simultaneity. It is up to the viewer to decide how much he wants to further "explore" vertically and "reveal" hidden layers at the bottom through vertical swiping. In other words, willfully diverging from the horizontal plot and getting lost in the moment vertically depends on the extra time the user wants to spend on it. In narratological terms we say that since the viewing time is longer than the moment covered by or in the story, we are slowing down the narrative while also adding depth – layers - to it. The passage between the horizontal and vertical line is all about moving to our own rhythms: granting brief moments a longer or shorter lifespan at will.

Just as the ephemerality of the image is contained by incorporating it in the logic of storylines described above, the rhetoric of adventure is couched in stereotypes. Much like the storylines stereotyping is a strategy of contextualizing or emplacing that adds a certain closure, in this case a moment of identification if not of branding. The user-generated content displayed on the Live platform typically and predictably contains pictures of busy anonymous streets suggesting an urban feel; masses of people are seen from above in a panoramic view; touristic architectural icons situate the anonymous streets in a recognizable city flavored by the scenes of music, dance, and food we normally associate with it. If a true explorer moves towards the risk of the unknown, Snapchat's tourist ends up in the security of the cliché. The coverage of Middle Eastern cities, for instance, has led the journalist Yara al-Wazir to ask:

> While I realise that the stories are based on user-generated content, the Snapchat team is responsible for filtering through submissions and choosing what to feature. Unfortunately, the filters that have been used paint a picture of men who play with lions in their pools, play and watch football at grand stadiums, drink tea in the middle of the desert, and don't do anything particularly productive. The beauty of the cities, especially Kuwait and its long scenic coast, is largely ignored. I watched the series of pictures and videos and cringed – why is Snapchat perpetuating Middle Eastern stereotypes? When I watch the Snapchat stories from around the world, I am left inspired and longing to visit those cities. When I watched one of Kuwait, a country that I spent the majority of my high school years in, I struggled to see how those images would inspire tourism.[8]

As always the clichés are what a group has in common – in the quote above it is the West – and what brings us together in a certain way. In its style of editing Snapchat's Live event emphasizes the collectivity of crowd-sourced submissions on one place. Rather than a singular smooth unified vision, Snapchat's fragmentary editing of individual snaps emphasizes seriality delivered by the many, always producing more of the same. The Live event is about a mass broadcasting that is steeped in serial repetitions, creating a recognizable field of crowd-sourced viewing indifferent to specificity or otherness.

Other ways of emplacing the movement concern the addition of graphic layers. What makes Snapchat so popular among youngsters are the many filters, drawings, doodles, emojis, stickers, augmented reality animations you can add to your pictures. These filters are modes of layering the images, adding emotions, humor, interpretations, indeed elements of a storyline. They suggest an impression of the amateur as creative but in fact are ways of expressing something about ourselves within a technologically expanded visual field. They add a meta-level to the picture that says something about the taste, mood, age, sentiment, and probably gender of the user. Someone choosing goofy filters could be a teenager; little hearts are typically chosen by romantic girls. Moreover when an event goes live, accessing the Snapchat app on location also enables you to select geofilters that are unique to the event and that visibly mark the images with its logo but also the place, time, and temperature at the time of production.

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8   "Why Is Snapchat Perpetuating Middle Eastern Stereotypes?" (3 May 2015). *Al Arabiya Network*. Available at http://english. alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/05/03/Why-is-Snapchat-perpetuating-Middle-Eastern-stereotypes-.html.   Accessed 15 June 2016.

So Snapchat's filters are as much modes of layering, augmenting, and commenting on the pictures taken as they are means of explicitly tagging, locating, and identifying the maker. When applied to city views, this virtual tagging immediately recalls another older mode of tagging, namely graffiti, physically leaving your signatures on walls. The difference, however, is that in the case of Snapchat these filters added to our pictures give us the illusion of choosing what we add but in fact produce data about the user that the user himself does not control. Neither do these metadata disappear in ten seconds along with our snaps. They become valuable information mined and sold to companies or delivered to National Security Offices on the basis of which corporate and state power gets built. Snapchat's privacy regulations are very explicit about that: The information users generate through using the app, accessing content, communicating with others is stored and shared with other parties. Many of their services "require us to collect images and other information from your device's camera and photos. We'll access your camera and photos only after you give us your consent." As to the snaps sent to one of the public features, "we may retain the content indefinitely."[9]

This brings us to a crucial point in my discussion of emplacing the movement and reintroduces Galloway's "interface effects." Snapchat's geofilters, lenses, and layover graphics emphasize imagery in the making: as being constructed, as a way of doing or, better still, of interfacing and *processing*. Besides taking pictures, we can comment and write on them, tag, and rework them. That is, do something to and with them while adding information or data. Choosing (mostly) two-dimensional graphics – texts, drawings, location-based logos – to go with the video or photographic imagery, we produce images inscribed in "an interface awash in the flows of information" (Galloway 40), in a zone of "indecision" between inside and outside, this specific image just taken and the larger forces that engender them. All the acts of production, consumption, and datafication through which mobile photography is being processed in an age of social-networking-overload are here explicitly made visible through special filters and features as part of the Snapchat brand. Ironically, while all these features put Snapchat squarely in an ecology of doing, making, sharing, and tagging – world-making rather than simply representation - the platform offers little possibilities of social interaction, as the app is completely walled off. You need to be inside the app to access the content. Related to this closed garden is the fact that the app does not enable features we find on other social networks: one cannot comment on other people's footage, like it, download it, share it—except through external functions such as the device's screenshot, and special Snapsaving apps. In other words, rather than networking and interacting Snapchat's Live event promotes a field of taking, viewing, writing on images that is heavily controlled by the company. Its filters are ways of emplacing and formatting the images in an environment defined by the Snapchat interface. If the urban imagery that is produced on the Live platform has an impact on how youngsters perceive the cities around them, then they will also expect the visual fields of and in cities to be inflected by data, metadata and by strategies of blatant branding, locating, and profiling.

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9 Snapchat's privacy regulations can be consulted at https://www.snapchat.com/privacy. Accessed 1 August 2016.

Branding the User as Amateur

As may have become clear by now, Snapchat thrives on a particular visual style that is at once excessive in its movement and containment (by the interface). What makes a visual analysis of the platform urgent and impossible is its ephemerality. Since pictures taken through its interface are meant to disappear after a few seconds or, at best, are curated as My Story or on Live for twenty-four hours, what we are dealing with is a convergence of visibility and invisibility: the appearance and disappearance of images as flows (of information). Important in the context of Galloway's interface effects as "stories of larger forces" mentioned earlier, is that the images may be short-lived, but seen as larger flows – invisible and hidden – they have a long afterlife we cannot see and we do not know. What happens to the pictures we send once they disappear? Snapchat has it privacy regulations, but there is never a way to enforce security let alone ephemerality. If the receiver takes a screenshot of the photo sent, Snapchat informs the sender. But what if someone takes a picture of my snaps through another device? In the case of the footage sent to the Live event, to what purposes is the content kept indefinitely? How much information about my time, location, device, patterns of usage is generated on what server and for whom exactly?

In a sense, Snapchat's play with temporality is more than a marketing of ephemerality (for naive users) in an age that everything is stored and archived. In many ways, Snapchat demonstrates and makes acceptable the immediacy of images dissipating as uncontrollable flows of information – and power - underlying not only the Snapchat platform but our whole digital image industry, from Netflix to Facebook. Melting into air or clouds, images-turned-data and metadata may be out of reach for the users, but they are also the technology-encrypted sources of corporate and state surveillance, and of monetizing tactics described by authors such as Hinton and Hjorth (2013), van Dijck (2013), and Andrejevic (2011) and explicitly admitted by the company on a website no-one reads. In this context the transience of Snapchat explicitly plays with, demonstrates, even performs a larger mechanism in social media ecology: the user's lack of ownership of the flows of data controlled by non-transparent business tactics and regimes of power.

And how about the user in this process? Why does the amateur keep filming what he does not control and nobody really looks at any length (but Snapchat analysts decipher indefinitely)? Why take pictures when the image is no longer relevant as image, only as a flow of information? According to media critic danah boyd, the private use of Snapchat is all about attention:

> When someone sends you an image/video via Snapchat, they choose how long you get to view the image/video. **The underlying message is simple: You've got 7 seconds. PAY ATTENTION.** And when people do choose to open a Snap, they actually stop what they're doing and look. In a digital world where everyone's flicking through headshots, images, and text without processing any of it, Snapchat asks you to stand still and pay attention to the gift that someone in your network just gave you. As a result, I watch teens choose not to open a Snap the moment they get it because they want to wait for the moment when they can appreciate whatever is behind that closed door. And when they do, I watch them tune out everything else and just concentrate on what's in front of them. Rather than serving as yet-another distraction, Snapchat invites focus.[10]

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10 "Why Snapchat Is Valuable: It's All about Attention" (21 March 2014). *LinkedIn Post*. Available at https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140321152822-79695780-why-snapchat-is-valuable-it-s-all-about-attention. Accessed 15 June 2016.

This may be true for Snapchat seen as a private medium of communication. Seen as an interface effect, however, the picture becomes more complex, full of the tensions described in this article. For instance, the two-dimensional overlay of graphics *splits* the attention at best: it tells us a story about the specific worldly event recorded, but it also identifies the user, gives him a place and profile of sorts. As to the public broadcast on the Live platform, the answer is even more complicated. Through Snapchat the user feels he is contributing to real-time events; his mediated presence is a mode of being there and sharing that unique experience in the moment. But seen within the spatio-temporal aesthetic regime of the mediated attention economy, it is all about presenting or branding the self as amateur. Let me explain this further.

Snapchat footage on Live event is like fast food: instant, globally transferrable, of poor quality, but also a sign of the immersive experience of the everyday, an affirmation of the pulse of time caught up in cycles of reproduction, consumption, information, and dissipation. There is always another moment to "snap," and yet there never is time enough. Thus the user is at once empowered and disempowered. The constant stream of clips together with the constant need and possibility to create and upload new images and react before the opportunity to respond is gone, produce a combination of agency, urgency, importance, adventure, agility, but also sloppiness, carelessness, casualness, and even – considering the monumental clichés in the feeds - exhaustion or ennui. There is a constant demand to go live for ten seconds to which it is impossible to respond completely. So the user approximates it, plays it, performs it in a negligent way. Like a real amateur. By participating in the Snapchat industry of (con)temporary appearance, the user approximates what we see daily without really seeing it: the multiple flows of daily life in our cities streamed in real time by amateurs with smartphones as they interface, mediate, process, and easily let go of images. But while on traditional social media such as YouTube the streaming lasts forever, on Snapchat it is short-lived and goes with the flow, so to speak. What lasts is the environment of the interface and the metadata the brand has on us.

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