

## A landslide of forgetting

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According to a report published in the Washington Post in 2015, interest in Yosemite National Park “sky-rocketed” after Apple made the mountain range the name and face of its 2014 desktop operating system. On the day of its release Wikipedia traffic and Google searches spiked, and in the week following hotels.com saw a 21% increase in hotel searches around the area. This translated to a 54% increase in hotel searches over the year, and an upwards jump in visitor figures to the park itself in 2014 compared to 2013.

This surge in popularity was most likely caused by the aspirational images that Apple chose for the operating system’s desktop wallpapers. In each of the dramatic vistas, the park’s characteristic cliff faces are monumentalised against a backdrop of sunset-tinged clouds. Devoid of manmade structures, they speak of the “great outdoors”—an apparently wild, untamed landscape as yet untainted by human interference.

What’s interesting about these statistics, is people’s continuing faith in photography. Despite it being widespread knowledge that the objective reality of a photograph is constructed—whether by framing, staging or digital manipulation—people are still seduced by the world presented to them by the snapshot. The picture they daydream about on their desktops is not an idealised depiction, it is a real, four-wheel driving experience, that exists a car or plane ride away.

This tendency for photography to not only seduce, but delude, is the subject of Lola Bunting’s six-part photographic series, *A Slow Descent* (2015/18). To make the series, Bunting collaged images of mountain scenes—some found and some she made using model scenery—to paper and other surfaces and photographed them against a grey background. She then experimented with the orientation of the images, flipping or rotating them to create ambiguous compositions. Although the images look like they have been constructed digitally, they are made almost entirely using manual processes.

Like Apple, Bunting chose alpine imagery for its legacy in Romantic painting and travel photography, as well as for its connotations of luxury and wealth. The mountainscapes do not represent a particular place, but an idealised one, a perfect landscape that exists outside of time and space. As Susan Sontag puts it, they are “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence” (Sontag, 1979, p.16)—the moment they capture being longed for but ultimately unattainable, much like a happy memory.

However, while photographs are generally *fixed* (excuse the pun), memory is in a constant state of flux. This is reflected by the fragmentary nature of the images which is intended to suggest the disjointed, and only partial picture humans retain of the past. This imperfect record is, to Bunting, what gives the memories that are recollected value.<sup>1</sup> Forgetting privileges the important details over the mundane or *forgettable*. It “defines our memories” she says, “draw[ing] a line around [the] images and name[ing] them” (Bunting, 2015).

Since its inception the camera has been an *aide memoire*, a device available to record the past and immortalise it. Invented in an era when the human landscape has changed at a “vertiginous rate,” it has captured “untold number of forms of biological and social life” that are endangered, or now extinct (Sontag, 1979, p.16). In this light the photograph is nostalgic because the moment it reproduces has already happened and is hence irretrievable. (It is not coincidental that Apple chose images of rugged, unpopulated terrain for its desktop imagery. It is aligning itself with a former time, of the wild

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1 In this Bunting follows anthropologist Marc Augé, who wrote in his 1998 essay, *Oblivion*: “It is quite clear that our memory would be ‘saturated’ rapidly if we had to preserve every image of our childhood, especially those of our earliest childhood. But what is interesting is that which remains... Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are crafted by the sea” (Augé, 2004, p.20).

American west and the country's pioneering spirit.)

Plato in his *Phaedrus* examines the consequences of externalising memory to objects like letters or photographs. In it his protagonist, Socrates, recounts how when Theuth first put forward writing to Thamus the King of Egypt, the king met the invention with scepticism, saying it would “produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory”. Rather than finding an “elixir of memory” he said, Theuth had found an elixir of “reminding” (Plato, 1925).

Plato's conundrum foreshadows not only the camera, but devices like phones and tablets which store information that would have previously been committed to memory, such as phone numbers and calendar appointments. According to behavioural researcher Betsy Sparrow and her colleagues, use of these devices has a direct effect on people's ability to recall information. Their 2011 study published in the academic journal, *Science*, suggests that people's recall rates are lower when they expect to be able to access information in the future. Instead, they remember where and how to find that information. The unfortunate consequence of photographing everything therefore, might be that the memory of an event is replaced by a photograph of it. While it is easy to confuse the images captured by photographs as memories, they are only reminders of memories rather than memories themselves.

Bunting describes the descent referred to in the series' title as being double edged. It is a return to one's starting point, as well as a downward journey into the unknown. An acknowledgement, she says, “that time itself renders the past unrecognisable”. The photograph is similarly paradoxical—prompting one to both remember and forget through its ability to record information. It is akin to the creative process, for which going forwards can feel like going backwards. Or trying to remember—which is often less successful the harder one tries.

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