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## photography and its circulations

*Professor Gillian Rose*

*The Open University*

Photography is an imaging technology which has been put to very diverse use, as Patrick Maynard has reminded us.<sup>i</sup> Many scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences are enamoured of some of those uses, and have focussed on particular sorts of photographs at some length. Their overwhelming preference is for photographs of people and places, that is, photographs in a figurative, pictorial tradition of imaging. Such photographs have been approached as part of that uniquely human process of making meaning, of recording and interpreting the world by creating images of it. And because photographs always show something that has passed – a pose no longer held, a place no longer looking like that, a person no longer alive – they have persistently been associated not only with what has been, but with death itself. The final book written by Roland Barthes has been hugely influential here. *Camera Lucida*, as is well known, is a sustained meditation on the nature of the photograph, structured by Barthes's search for a photograph that would remind him of his mother after her death.<sup>ii</sup> Writing at length on the way a photograph is a "certificate of presence" showing incontrovertibly "what has been", Barthes concluded that "with the Photograph, we enter into *flat Death*".<sup>iii</sup> Drawing inspiration from Barthes, not always explicitly, as well as a range of other theorists, there is now a certain elegaic school of writing about photography which approaches photographs through themes of loss, absence, desire and death.<sup>iv</sup> All this suggests that photographs are one way of addressing what it is to be human in the sense that, confronted with proof of the inevitable passage of time, of decay and of death, the viewer of a photograph has no choice but to contemplate their own mortality.

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Or, of course, that viewer could see a photo as just so cute it simply has to be printed onto a mouse mat, or held on the fridge door with a magnet. Or made into a magnet – or a key ring. Or turned into a shrine complete with frame, plinth and bronze booties.<sup>v</sup> A photograph tucked into the frame of a dressing-table mirror can be treasured as a memory of a perfectly happy moment; another might be framed to record a proud one.<sup>vi</sup> For as well as those intense meditations provoked in some critics by some photographs are other, very different encounters with photos, which tend not to be accorded quite the same attention or respect by critics – perhaps because they happen not in the archive or the gallery, where detailed and sustained attention and reflection are the expected forms of attention,<sup>vii</sup> but in ordinary houses.

Family photography is a hugely popular past-time. Of course its technologies and practices have changed historically, but ever since its invention it seems that those who could afford to do so would own photographs of their loved ones, kept in albums or storage boxes or framed, carried with them in locketts or wallets, sent to others as postcards or tucked in letters or as an email attachment. In the global North now, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who didn't possess at least a few snaps of some family members, and with the popularity of digital cameras hooked up to home computers it would be possible to find some people with thousands. (In the UK alone in 2005, an estimated 39 million rolls of film were processed, 20 million disposable cameras used, and 2.8 billion digital images taken.<sup>viii</sup>) Yet there is little interest in this extensive image-making and image-sharing among the large number of academic critics now writing about contemporary visual culture, and even less in excavating historical examples of everyday encounters with ordinary photos.<sup>ix</sup>

The work that has been done on contemporary family photography is generally rather dismissive of it (Geoffrey Batchen and Richard Chalfen are exceptions here).<sup>x</sup> Most discussions of family photographs begin by defining them as photos that show members of a family. It is then demonstrated that family snaps show those family members in particular, limited ways: usually as happy and at leisure.<sup>xi</sup> There are no photos of mum doing the ironing, or at work in her office in the family album; there are no photos of teenage tantrums and very few of sick children in the My Pictures folder on the home pc.

Instead, members of a family are shown on holiday, or at birthday parties, or in their back gardens, or at a weekend barbecue, or on an outing to the local park. This has led family photographs to be criticised for perpetuating an idyllic image of the nuclear family, cementing only dominant visions of its classed, gendered and racialised identity.<sup>xii</sup> Many feminist critics, for example, see family photographs as especially problematic representations of feminine subjectivity. Often citing the work of photographer and writer Jo Spence as inspiration, critics such as Jessica Evans, Deborah Chambers, Valerie Walkerdine and Annette Kuhn all find the images in the family album especially oppressive for women.<sup>xiii</sup> Family albums, they say, contain distorted and misleading visions of family life in which only happy times and leisure spaces appear. "They will be shared, they will be happy," says Kuhn, "the tone of seduction is quite imperious".<sup>xiv</sup> The fragility of contemporary family relationships is obscured, they say.<sup>xv</sup> Their erasure of domestic labour, and the restricted emotional tones they convey, means that, for these feminist critics, family photo albums are complicit with women's physical and emotional exploitation. Hence as images they are deceptive. When it comes to family photos, warns Simon Watney, "appearances are not to be trusted".<sup>xvi</sup>

As well as what they show, family photos are also said to be recognisable from how they show it. It is frequently remarked that family photos are not visually innovative. The poses and the events are predictable; the compositions are banal; red-eye and wonky framing are acceptable. So it is that both the conventionality of their subject matter and their unpolished style that have contributed to the less-than-positive critical reaction received by family photos. To Susan Stewart, "all family albums are alike",<sup>xvii</sup> Jessica Evans claims that it is in family photography that "the most stultified and stereotyped repertoire of composition, subject-matter and style resides",<sup>xviii</sup> and even Richard Chalfen has to admit that they have an "overwhelming sense of similarity and redundancy".<sup>xix</sup> And if many critics have remarked on the very specific version of family life and domestic space that family snaps help to produce, others have noted the ways in which other places and people have also been represented very selectively in other photographic practices. Several geographers and anthropologists, for example, have looked at archives of photographs, often those brought back to imperial cities by

colonial expeditions, and explored the particular ways in which distant places were represented by those images.<sup>xx</sup>

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And yet family photographs remain extremely popular; so many things are done with them, and done usually by the very women whom they are supposed to be misrepresenting. For many people, putting family photos out on display in a house signifies that the house is now a home, a family home. (Family snaps are often one of the first things that get unpacked after a house move.) They show that this house is a home, to a family perhaps but also to one or more members of other families living elsewhere. Familial relations are also maintained between different family homes in part because copies of photos are sent between family members that trail the connections of family as they travel and come to rest. As many historians of photography have noted, photographs have been made to travel ever since the technology began to develop in England and France in the 1830s,<sup>xxi</sup> and a large part of what is done with family snaps is to send them to distant family and friends; family photos cross oceans and continents, popped into letters, framed as christmas cards, attached to emails and up- and downloaded on photo-sharing websites. So grandparents have photos of their grandchildren, children of their parents, nieces of aunts. In this way the space of one home, one part of a family, infiltrates the walls and shelves of other homes, other families. And in being thus entwined with the familial, these ordinary pictures are also part of the domestic, the intimate and the private.

How to understand the importance of family snaps to how domestic and familial spaces are made? Other work has begun to consider the spatialities of photographic images rather differently, however, thinking a little less about what they show and more about what was done with them.<sup>xxii</sup> How were they made and where were they kept? How and where are they displayed? How are they looked at? And how and where do they travel? And in this work, photographs start to look a little less imperious and a lot more mutable. Many historical accounts of women's photographic practices suggest that photographing family and friends, and doing things with those

photos like making albums, far from naively reproducing dominant ideologies of domestic femininity, often negotiates such ideologies with remarkable skill. This body of feminist work has paid most attention to the photographs and albums made by upper-class women in the mid-nineteenth century. Some critics, like Julie Lawson, Carol Mavor and Lindsay Smith have examined the photographs made by women in the 1850s and 1860s and argued that they share a distinctive, feminine aesthetic.<sup>xxiii</sup> Others, like Patrizia di Bello and Marina Warner have paid more attention to the albums in which such photographs were displayed.<sup>xxiv</sup> These albums were often heavily worked by their creators, with photographs cut and pasted into watercolour scenes, surrounded by painted flowers, or made part of abstract and surreal geometric schemes. Bello's work is particularly rich, exploring not only the albums themselves but how they would have been looked at in the drawing rooms of these women. She argues that, as Val Williams describes the albums made by Vanessa Bell in the interwar period, these earlier albums were "knowing";<sup>xxv</sup> these women were using photographs "to give materiality to their own culturally and socially specific desires and pleasures".<sup>xxvi</sup> An essay by Karina Hof on the current hobby of scrapbooking, unusual in its sympathetic treatment of an aspect of contemporary family photography, suggests that little might have changed. "On a small scale", she says, in a scrapbook, "life can be cropped, embellished and laid out according to available resources, aesthetic preferences and as contemplations on the past and dreams for the future".<sup>xxvii</sup> Drawing on this sort of work, then, family photography might be seen as a more ambivalent and complex field of cultural practice than it has often been given credit for, even by feminists concerned with women's domestic lives.

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It is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of family photographs both as images and as visual objects with which a range of things are done, if we are to understand their current mutations. Family photography is going digital, which is enabling some new things, while much is staying the same. Family photography is also going public in ways it has not been before. Increasingly,

family snaps are leaving the domestic realm and entering other spaces of circulation and display.

Now, family photographs have always travelled between family members. And, of course, some family snaps have long been visible in more public places. Framed photographs sit on many an office desk; in several European countries, it is taken for granted that a family photograph will embellish a gravestone. In the UK, such practices have been less popular until recently. However, in the past few years it seems that in there too, family snaps are entering public spaces of display more and more often. Once mostly restricted to being looked at only by the family and friends of the people pictured, family snaps are now visible more and more often to the gaze of strangers. Increasingly they are appearing on gravestones; they are uploaded onto social networking websites; they are printed onto shopping bags and t-shirts; they are published frequently in the mass media. In this sense, family snaps have gone public.

Why and with what effects? These are questions that it will surely take the skills of disciplines in both the humanities and the social sciences to address. And indeed, scholars from both fields are beginning to offer, if not answers, then at least a sense of an historical change in the constitution of the contemporary public that may provide some context for the public intimacy of family snaps on view to strangers. For it is being argued that qualities associated most with the domestic – the emotional, the familial, the intimate – are more and more at play in the making of the contemporary public sphere of political policy and debate. Lauren Berlant in particular has outlined the historical conditions for this shift towards the affective in public life.<sup>xxviii</sup> While none of these critics would argue that emotions were ever absent from the political public sphere, they do make a persuasive case that contemporary US politics, both domestic and global, depend more and more on emotive rhetoric and less and less on careful analytical debate. The political culture in the UK too is also changing in similar directions, towards what Roger Luckhurst calls a "traumaculture".<sup>xxix</sup> 'Publics' are now constituted through discussion and debate but also through the collective experience of 'feeling', and the self is centred as the conduit of the political through the performance of emotional display. This may be one reason why family photographs are entering public

circulation more than they ever have done before. They are objects which induce emotional responses, and they are appearing in public at a time when that public is also getting more emotional.

Berlant argues that such public intimacy by and large only affirms the (geo)political status quo, achieved both by what images and narratives are available but also by how they expect to make us feel. There is evidence that agrees with this claim.<sup>xxx</sup> However, as this short essay has also suggested, what goes on in private with family photos is far from straightforward; perhaps this suggests that their public manifestations are also more complex than Berlant's arguments imply. This is surely, among the many others suggested by photography's embedding in a hugely diverse range of practices, a topic for further transdisciplinary work.

## notes

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- i Patrick Maynard. *Engine of Visualization: Thinking Through Photography*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- ii Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by R. Howard. London: Vintage, 2000.
- iii Barthes, 87, 85, 92.
- iv See for example Ariella Azoulay. *Death's Showcase*, translated by Ruvik Danieli. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; Ulrich Baer. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. London: MIT Press, 2002; Julia Hirsch. *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: Photography, Memory and Post-Narrative*. Harvard MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; Carol Mavor. *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Lady Hawarden*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000; Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984; P.Stokes. "The family photograph album: so great a cloud of witnesses." In *The*



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- Portrait in Photography*, edited by Graham Clark, 193-205. London: Reaktion Books, 1992.
- v Geoffrey Batchen. "Vernacular photographs." *History of Photography* 24, no. 2 (2000): 262-71, 266.
- vi Richard Chalfen. *Snapshot Versions of Life*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987; Gillian Rose. "‘Everyone's cuddled up and it just looks really nice’: the emotional geography of some mums and their family photos." *Social and Cultural Geography* 5, no. 4 (2004): 549-64.
- vii Gillian Rose. "Practising photography: an archive, a study, some photographs and a researcher." *Journal of Historical Geography* 26, no. 4 (2000): 555-71.
- viii PMA Marketing Research. *Consumer Imaging in Great Britain*. USA: PMA, 2006.
- ix Geoffrey Batchen. "Snapshots: art history and the ethnographic turn." *Photographies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 121-142.
- x Batchen, "Vernacular photographs"; Chalfen.
- xi Chalfen 1987; Hirsch 1981; Hirsch 1999; Don Slater. "Domestic photography and digital culture." In *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, edited by Mark Lister, 129-46. London: Routledge, 1995; J. Spence, and P. Holland (eds.) *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*. London: Virago, 1991; Jo Spence. *Beyond the Family Album*. London: Virago, 1986; Stokes 1992.
- xii P. Bourdieu, et al. *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Translated by Sean Whiteside, Cambridge: Polity Press 1990; Deborah Chambers. "Family as place: family photograph albums and the domestication of public and private space." In *Picturing Place*, edited by J. Schwartz and J. Ryan, 96-114. London: IB Tauris, 2002; Spence.
- xiii Spence; Evans; Chambers; Valerie Walkerdine. *Schoolgirl Fictions*. London: Verso, 1991; Annette Kuhn. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London: Verso, 1991.
- xiv Kuhn, 25.

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- xv Spence.
- xvi Simon Watney. "Ordinary boys." In *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, edited by J. Spence and P. Holland, 26-34. London: Virago, 1991, 30.
- xvii Stewart, 49.
- xviii Jessica Evans. "Photography." In *Feminist Visual Culture*, edited by F. Carson and C. Pajaczkowska, 105-120. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, 112.
- xix Chalfen, 42.
- xx James Ryan. *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997; Joan M. Schwartz and James Ryan, (eds.) *Picturing Place*. London: IB Tauris, 2002; Joan M. Schwartz, "'The Geography Lesson': photographs and the construction of imaginative geographies." *Journal of Historical Geography* 22, no. 1 (1996): 16-45.
- xxi Peter Osborne. *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- xxii Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart "Introduction: photographs as objects." In *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, edited by E. Edwards and J. Hart, 1-15. London: Routledge, 2004; Deborah Poole. *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; J. Larsen. "Practices and flows of digital photography: an ethnographic framework." *Mobilities* 3, no. 1 (2008): 141-160.
- xxiii Julie Lawson. *Women in White: The Photographs of Clementina Lady Hawarden*. Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1997; Mavor; Lindsay Smith. *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.
- xxiv Patrizia di Bello. *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts*. Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007; Marina Warner. "Parlour made: Victorian family albums." *Creative Camera* 315 (1992): 29-32.

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- <sup>xxv</sup> Val Williams. "Carefully creating an idyll: Vanessa Bell and snapshot photography 1907-46." In *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, edited by J. Spence and P. Holland, 186-198. London: Virago, 1991, 198.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Bello, 5.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Katrina Hof. "'Something you can actually pick up': scrapbooking as a form and forum of cultural citizenship." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no.3 (2006): 363-84, 381-2.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Lauren Berlant. "Poor Eliza." *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 635-68.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Roger Luckhurst. "Traumaculture", *New Formations*, 50 (2003): 28-47.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Gillian Rose. "Who cares for which dead and how: British newspaper reporting of the bombs in London, July 2005." *Geoforum* 40, no. 1 (2009): 46-54.

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