

Familiarising the Documentary or Documenting the Family?
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Recent critical debates about photography have seen the emergence of two dominant theoretical positions on the nature of the photographic. The first theoretical approach is premised on the relationship of the photographic image to reality, while the second theoretical approach has emphasised the role of the interpretation of images and thus the reading, not the taking, of the photograph is central (Price and Wells 1997: 51)

My discussion of documentary and personal photographs, will subsequently touch upon many of the critical issues involved in the debates hinted at above. At present, a key point I want to make, is that there exists a certain amount of overlap between these two theoretical positions which is central to the argument of this paper. The points of intersection are to be found in the growing interest amongst critics and theorists, of the photographic image, in the context and uses of photography. It is this emphasis on context and use, which differs to the emphasis placed by semioticians on signifying systems (Price and Wells 1997: 51) I want to argue that it is at this point of convergence, that personal photographs enter the documentary act. It is a point at which personal photographs, as a genre, pushes and stretches its own limits as well as the limits of the documentary and therefore, contributes to a revaluation of personal photographs as trivial and documentary photographs as somehow closer to the 'truth'.

This chapter, therefore, unfolds within this conceptual space, suggested above, and will attempt to argue that it is not the objective presence of the photographic image which hangs in the balance. On the contrary, what is of central importance in photographs are the force fields within which they generate and attract meaning (Price and Wells 1997: 51). Hence the question ; do personal photographs bring a complex richness and depth to the documentary project? Do they undermine the historical claim to integrity traditionally held by the documentary project? This argument will show that one cannot avoid a critical consideration of the 'image' text, the processes that go into its production as well as the processes of interpretation. The nature of the photographic, also demands a critical account of the social relations within which meaning is produced and operates.

Approaches to, for example, the processes of interpretation have always been underpinned by notions of the 'real' and such approaches have been challenged in recent debate. It comes as no surprise then, that photography, "is reassuringly familiar, not least because it seems to reproduce that which we see, or might see. In so far as visual representation contributes to constructing and reaffirming our sense of identity, this familiarity, and the apparent realism of the photographic image, render it a particularly powerful discursive force." (Price and Wells 1997: 51).

A discussion of photography is inevitably based upon certain assumptions about the nature of the photograph, and this discussion is no different, but frequently such assumptions are perceived as given and therefore, they lack critical interrogation. It is thus necessary to explore various attitudes to photography, the contexts within which the medium occurs, the ways in which it is used, as well as the critiques on the nature of the medium itself. Such an exploration is especially crucial to the historian, whose professional training has been incomplete when it comes to issues around the visual and visual literacy. Barthes, the French cultural critic, has highlighted the important fact that photography is deeply implicated in the construction of history. He argues that developments in the 19th century gave us both 'History' and 'Photography' (Barthes 1984:93). In other words, he is referring to the crucial relationship between history and memory, arguing that history and hence memory, is implicated by photography, which Barthes described as a flighty witness to the construction of history and hence, memory.

In the first half of the 20th century, the power and status of photography increased due to it being considered one of the most important actors in modern society. Simultaneously, photography came to exemplify a specific 'way of seeing' which was indicative also of the significant political power attributed to photography (Price and Wells 1997: 26). These shifts in the status of photography, brought about shifts in theories of vision, and in the ways in which the 'photo-eye' promised to 'show' us the world as never before, "Photographs, moreover, validated the experience of 'being there' and pinned down the changing world of appearance through its status as record and document" (Price and Wells 1997: 26).

As early as the 1930's, in Britain, characteristics specific to photography had already been acknowledged by concepts such as “straight photography”, “documentary” and “instant vision” (Price and Wells 1997: 15). Indeed, Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1991) argues that in the 19th century almost all photography was, what would later be described as documentary. The ontological debates which circulated around the early 1900's, were fueled by realist notions of ‘photographic truth’ or the authority of the image and this shaped the representational task that photography significantly began to fulfill.

The 1900's also saw the budgeoning of popular photography in Europe. As a result, the status and significance of popular photography became re-examined because it posed a challenge to the already established documentary tradition (Price and Wells 1997: 29). My use of the term ‘popular’ follows writers like, Price and Wells (1997), Spence (1995), Holland (1991/5) and Hirsch (1981), where they use the term to refer to all photographs intended for personal use, including those taken by a professional photographers either inside or outside of a photographic studio (Price and Wells 1997: 29). Therefore, the range of the term includes postcards, photographs taken by clubs and societies, as well as pictures of special events.

The critical re-examination of popular photography, largely took the shape questions around the ‘where’ and the ‘when’ of the photographic image. This approach ignores questions of artistic significance in its concern with the authoring of the image, in popular photography. Price and Wells suggest that this was the result of the escalated use in popular photography as social-historical evidence, which also resulted in a silence around questions concerning the status of the photograph as evidence (Price and Wells 1997:31). Photojournalism, during this time, was also complicit in upholding the belief that what photographs do is present the past ‘as it was’.

In considering the early histories of both documentary and popular photography, the relationship of the medium to the construction of history is paramount, this is especially so in the South African context.¹ Those who advance these claims argue that the camera records the ‘real’ state of things, because it offers an unmediated representation of things. This specific idea of authenticity was vigorously challenged and in defense it was argued that it is not so important that we place our trust in the mechanical properties of the camera but that this trust would be

better placed in the personal integrity of the photographer. Therefore, the belief in the 'reality' revealed by the camera became strengthened by the emphasis on the character of the photographer. The photographers' manner, insight and ingenuity would validate the authenticity of the image, "The authoritative power of the image, its 'truth', became extended to the image-maker who was accorded the power to achieve this." (Price 1997: 66)

Any photograph which is presented as evidence of past occurrences and conditions, has as its primary premise the accuracy of the photograph as document or record (Price and Wells 1997: 33). Even though this premise is often validated by statements concerning sources, dress codes, the when, the where and so forth, critical investigation highlights that there are broader questions pertinent to visual communication and the processes of interpreting images, that needs to be taken into account.

There has been an increase in situations where official versions of history are challenged by non-formal histories that use photography to construct a history based on the idea of 'popular memory'. However, this approach should cautiously be followed if one is to avoid falling into the trap of treating photographs as fact instead of as the densely coded cultural objects that they are. Alan Sekula has warned that, "Ultimately, then, when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretense to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience" (Sekula 1991:123) ²

The discussion thus far highlights that the medium of photography is characterised by a certain ubiquity and "that photographs have always circulated in contexts for which they were not made" (Price and Wells 1997: 33). It is a crucial part of my argument then, that contained within the frames of the photograph, there exists no singular, exclusive, inherent, authentic, and indigenous meaning. Linda Rugg, has similarly argued that " Photography did not create the disturbance [...to civilisation..]; photographic technology, like other human inventions, offers an extension and realisation of already-imagined images" (Rugg 1997: 2).

Rugg also describes the evidential power of the photograph which operates in our everyday lives

when she reminds us of our images on passports, identity books, student cards and so forth, in which the status and agency of our photographic selves are continually verified (Rugg 1997: 2). In this way photographs, as physical evidence, fix the subject in the tangible world and elicits a verification of the imminent, and concrete individual. Rugg describes this effect as a “double consciousness” in the operation of photography, “It is our belief in this aspect of photography that allows us to admit photographs as evidence in courts of law and persuades some that the dead or heavenly emissaries can be captured on photographic film.” (Rugg 1997: 2). Rugg describes, what is a two-sided awareness in photography being able to [re]present a multitude of ideas and diversity in the likeness of the same person, against photographys’ insistence on fixing the subject which it locates in a body, a place and a time (Rugg 1997: 3)

This raises questions around the concept of reference, which is indeed problematic to a discussion of documentary and personal photography and this inevitably demands that the issue be unpacked in all its complexity. It is precisely at the center of these debates that personal photography emerges to remind us that what is being said” ‘out there’ is ‘not all there is to be said’ “ (Spence 1995: 102).

The idea of the documentary is a powerful one and it has circulated across the globe since photographys’ humble beginnings in Europe, in the 19th century. The term, documentary, is indicative of this power and any one dictionary is likely to define it along the lines of providing a factual record or report. Therefore, a crucial element in documentary practice is the authority attributed to the documentary photograph. This is significant when one considers that right at the outset, photography was bestowed with of an infinite ability to supply us with images of the world, its handmaiden in this colossal task proved to be the form of the documentary because, more than any other photographic form, it most faithfully attempted to transcribe this reality. (Price and Wells 1997: 50)

Photography grew up in the age of Empire and imperialism. The camera gave a new authenticity to the demand by twentieth century European people, who possessed an immense penchant, for images of native people and this in turn led to photographs attaining the status of historic site (Price 1997: 60). Travel photographers thus came to be called documentary photographers.

However, as mentioned above, Godeau (1991) points out that almost all photographs during this time was described as documentary. Is it possible then, to make distinctions between kinds of photographs? In so far as documentary is concerned, various critics have defined it in terms of its historical association with unique kinds of social investigation, “The photographer’s goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change “ (Ohrn 1980: 36).

This does not mean that the nature of an image is criteria enough to classify it as ‘documentary’ in some essential way, but that the documentary project can be discerned by exploring its particular contexts, practices, and the institutional forms, within which it occurs (Price 1997: 64). Indeed, as a work which is located in the history of a particular kind of social investigation, it employs its own forms, conventions and tropes. Martha Rosler (1989), argues that the documentary is a project concerned with the past and thus it can only be understood when looking toward history. This history, regardless of transformation and change in technology, fashion and practices, has always had as its priority the claim for documentary to be exceptional in status, at an ontological level. And it is precisely these underlying ideas regarding truth and authenticity, that has ensured the longevity of the documentary’s ‘unique’ relationship to real life (Rosler (1989) in Price 1997: 64).

In recent debate around the nature of the photograph, the implicit claim of the documentary project - to offer us a disinterested and true picture of the world - has become increasingly problematic to theorist and critics (Price 1997: 66)

The streets of Europe, during the 20th century, were literally cluttered with photographers, but the documentary photographer was set apart from this offensive group in the belief that their work would improve the lot of the subjects in their photographs (Price 1997: 71). The documentary photographers’ interest lay in exposing the dreadful conditions of life and in the process often presented those they recorded as passive sufferers of poverty, rather than as active agents in their own lives. Often it is images of the poor, and the dispossed, “people whose lives had about them and air of being simple, real and untrammelled by the overt complexity of middle class existence” who were photographed (Price 1997: 66).

The association between photographer and subject, and of the power relations mediated between them could very well be the subject of an entire chapter. This context gave way to many interesting social interactions between the photographer and the photographed, where social distance and distinct separate 'ways of life' were often highlighted. The idea of photographic subjects as resourceful in terms of useful facts, led to a consideration of the subject of representation as potentially exploited in this exchange (Price 1997: 85).

Photography came to establish itself as a major participant in an extensive series of projects to investigate subjects that had already been the topic of examination in reports, surveys, philanthropy and literature. As a genre, the documentary established itself as the benevolent 'eye' of investigation into health, housing, education, economic conditions and the moral state of the impoverished. These photographic surveys more often than not, emanated from state departments, newspapers, independent scholars, medical practitioners, religious leaders and philanthropic bodies, "In recording the lives of the poor, the 'real', here takes on a class inflection which it was not to lose in documentary work for many years". (Price 1997: 66) (Williamson 1994: 238).³

Therefore, by the beginning of the 20th century, the 'social problem' framework within which the documentary cast its subjects, was already dominant (Price 1997: 77). William Scott, argues that "This is how documentary works...It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak...since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium...The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content" (Scott 1973:14). In other words, in order to play a constructive role in modern society, facts about the social order are required and the documentary functions on the basis that it can help us achieve our roles in society by presenting these 'social facts' to us in an exciting form.

As such, documentary is defined as a kind of ideologically reinforced common sense divorced

from critical engagement. It imposes meaning rather than makes meaning, it restrains the reader or its audience from accomplishing an act of interpretation with regard to the 'text', and thus "the putative power of the camera (to be an unmediated form of communication) is applied to a genre which is now held to be able to transcend the discursive structures of any particular form" (Price 1997: 83). This describes what has been called the 'documentary gaze' because it is based on the assumption that 'the facts themselves speak'. Often it is workers, and the poor, who are captured in the documentary gaze, which modifies them into facts. In this process meaning is unequivocally imposed on the subject. Therefore, to the critic and theorist, such a process demands critical confrontation.

One of the central challenges to the documentary project came from James Agee (1939), when he reflected on an earlier photographic assignment, "It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings ...drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of photojournalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings...for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings in the name of science of 'honest journalism' " (Agee & Evans 1939: 7).

Agee in his comment, articulates a central criticism against the documentary project during this time, "in the name of revelation and reform, the documentary photograph inevitably preys upon its subjects, aestheticising their suffering or turning them into passive icons of poverty and destitution" (Price 1997: 89). This criticism also called into question whether or not the documentary project can achieve the reformist political aims it set up for itself. This is based on the assumption that the documentary can, at most, show squalor, misery, desperation and hopelessness but can not really do anything about shedding light on the reasons behind these problems (Price 1997: 90).

Indeed it would appear that the eye of the camera has difficulty in revealing domination and its justification, as well as collective struggles and resistance. Revolutionary politics was, during the 20th century, not unheard of and many people were committed to the principles of revolutionary politics, rather than the liberal social politics of the day. The liberal social values underlying the

documentary project was critiqued by Martha Rosler when she argued that “ [journalistic attention]...did not perceive those wrongs as fundamental to the social system that tolerated them - the assumption that they were tolerated rather than *bred* marks a basic fallacy of social work “ (Rosler (1989) in Price 1997: 90) However, a thriving critical film and photography practice existed alongside the documentary which challenged the underlying assumptions of the documentary project, but the nature of documentary reportage remained largely the same (Price 1997: 90).⁴

The problematic within which the documentary project found itself, relates to the question of referentiality and how this impacts on documentary meaning and form. Could documentary photographs continue to faithfully claim to ‘show’ us the social world? (Price 1997: 92). This question became increasingly difficult to answer because in authenticating that which is called documentary, particular conventions, technical processes and rhetorical forms are engaged with and the very idea of the objective camera, is thus undermined. Hence its claims to referentiality, to be more truthful to appearances than other forms of representation, is threatened (Price 1997: 92).

The period after the second World War ushered in new challenges to the debates surrounding ‘truth’ and the nature of documentary photography. In Britain ,especially, the thrust of 1930's politics, the social democratic values which governed documentary practice, had waned in its intensity by the 1950's (Price 1997:92). ”The old documentary project began to give way to a heterogenous practice which explored the world in terms of particular subjectivities, identities and pleasures”, which meant that the focus of documentary and the scope of its themes branched out to include anything that the photographer found absorbing and the earlier emphasis on facts now mattered less than appearances (Price 1997: 93).

In the late 20th century, the new ways in which photography was theorised and questions around its functionality, as well as its role within the field of cultural politics, became pertinent. The debates photography entered into concerned the ways in which specific signifying systems impose order and fix certain sets of meanings, rather than whether or not a photograph sufficiently reveals or reflects a pre-existing reality (Price 1997: 94). The photograph, it was

thought, does not contain within it a unique and essential likeness to reality but complex sets of technical and cultural forms that need to be decoded (Price 1997: 95). Therefore, critics began to investigate the ways in which photographs function as signifying systems.

So naturalised is our photographic vocabulary that we speak of 'taking' photographs rather than 'making' them. Why is it that the evidence of their construction is so invisible to us? Instead, photographs appear as if they have been directly produced by the world itself. Thus, the carefully constructed nature of the photograph, as cultural object, is hidden. The role of the spectator also came to be questioned and acts of looking were no longer thought to be impartial and naive, but were analysed for the purposes of detecting the sorts of psychic pleasure and relations of power that circulate within this process (Price 1997:96). The concept of power operating in this analysis is drawn from the work of French philosopher, Michel Foucault.⁵ In terms of this definition, the documentary projects' claim to 'truth', as a special kind of knowledge that allows us to escape the far-reaching tentacles of power, is invalid because truth and power are inseparable.

John Tagg, in *The Burden of Representation* (1988), examined the enormous growth in the power of photography in the late 19th century and tracked photography's involvement in the development of particular types of surveillance and observation. The documentary form is thus viewed as part of a process of examination that is " 'a procedure of objectification and subjection', in which ordinary lives are turned into accounts -into writing or, for that matter, into photographs." (Price 1997:96). Analysing the documentary in this way, cast doubt on the project's long relationship with the reformist social project. Therefore, Tagg's examination shed light on the function of documentary by emphasising its apparent and tacit use as a means of surveillance and control, rather than the documentaries' ability to uncover the character of desperation or poverty in the service of social reform (Price 1997: 96).

The documentary, as I have shown, was grounded in the idea that it chronicled and depicted commonplace life, however this idea of 'ordinary, everyday life' became problematised. Don Slater argued that society reached a point where they could move from being consumers of images to becoming active producers, "The camera as an active mass tool of representation ins

a vehicle for documenting one's conditions (of living working and sociality; for creating alternative representations of oneself and one's sex, class, age-group, race, etc; of gaining power of analysis and visual literacy) over one's image; of presenting arguments and demands; of stimulating action; of experiencing visual pleasure as a producer, not consumer of images; of relating to, by objectifying, one's personal and political environment." (Slater 1983:246).

The problem alluded to here, concerns the question of how we represent ourselves? Slater suggest that the documentary project, may not be the ideal photographic form by which 'representations of ourselves' can be achieved because of its historic dominance as a practice, as well as its explicit claims to transparency. Community groups and feminist collectives especially argued against the limitations of the documentary form and used a variety of montage techniques, together with text and slogans, in their photographic projects to politicise activities and concepts such as motherhood, housework and child-care, in order to overcome the perceived limitations of documentary photography (Price 1997: 98 and also Spence (1995: 149/192)).

Jo Spence, one of Britain's pioneering photographers during the 20th century, was led to documentary photography through her engagement with personal experience, political understanding and critical theory. Her approach to the documentary project was highly critical and she expressed her concerns, most vociferously, in a keynote paper presented at the first National Conference of Photography in April of 1987, in London (Spence 1995: 100).

Spence argued that documentary photography, in its most critical form, is usually a method of soliciting those in power, or sway 'public opinion' that significance be taken of something which needs to be attended too, but which is being ignored. Thus it assumes, in addressing its audience in this way, "that there are universal people 'out there' who have uncomplicated, rational minds, who can perhaps be persuaded or shamed into action by the petitioning claims of such photography" (Spence 1995: 100). This strategy does not consider that there are political and economic factors which influence various audiences and their responses. Appealing to the intellect also does not question of how peoples' minds work 'out of consciousness', which may not be in any way comparable with the so-called rational mind (Spence 1995:100).

For Spence, the problems of the dominant practices of documentary photography have remained (Spence 1995: 101). Documentary practices, are useful insofar as they illustrate what appears to be happening in the social world but such practices are still unable to depict how institutional structures work. They are also unable to demonstrate how we feel or negotiate within these structures. Therefore, questions of self-documentation or self-representation, as individuals, remain unanswered within documentary practice. In other words, that which we most might wish to document (such as, sexual harassment, discrimination, power struggles within the family) is regarded as shameful or embarrassing because of the “fear that we might be judged by revealing the very concerns we are engaged in understanding and perhaps challenging” (Spence 1995: 101).

This brings Spence to the crucial question of where do we begin to reinvent a documentary practice within the family, where the most controversial of power struggles occur, between men and women, and between adults and children? (Spence 1995: 102). Alongside the numerous documentary image are the kinds of pictures we choose to make and select of our own lives, which we keep in family albums or in personal photographic collections. Photographic markets have termed this ‘amateur’ photography. The agenda of images given a currency in amateur photography is even more limited, but still many of us continue to collude in the fantasy that the complexity of our lives can be easily packaged into these tiny prints, “Where then, within the private sphere, do we keep a counter-history, which will remind us that what is being said ‘out there’ is ‘not all there is to be said’ “ ? (Spence 1995: 103).

Personal photographs are a particular kind of ‘memory text’ but it would appear that they only become placed within social reality when the images define a particular historical moment or ‘event’ or personality. The persistent idea that personal photographs have a limited currency within historical and documentary practice, is linked to the idea that history and hence, the documentary, occurs only within the public sphere. This idea does not explore or raise questions about the counter histories that personal photographs offer and how these histories, and factors such as the personal, the political, the economic, the dramatic, the everyday and the historic, are all parts of the same whole (Kuhn 1995:7).

Personal photographs, therefore, have to be viewed in relation to various discourses and institutional systems. According to Marianne Hirsch, these include particular ideas of familiarity,

the technology of the camera and its by-products, the photographic image and the context of the family album, in order to show the crucial connection between photography's social functions and the ideology of the modern family (Hirsch 1997:48). This also includes analysing the development of the camera and film in tandem with the creation of an archetypal family image, an image which everyone would desperately seek.

The development of family photography as a genre, under the rubric of personal and popular photography, is itself an indication of the domestication of everyday life and the expansion of 'the family' as at the core of a century-long movement to a consumer-led, home-based economy. Therefore, personal photography has evolved as part of the interweaving of leisure and domestic, which has development in tandem with the history of photography itself. (Holland 1997: 106).

Indeed, the relationship between the ideology of the family and photographic technology is one of mutual support, occurring at particular historical moments, which continues to connect the practice of photography with the ideology of the modern family (Hirsch 1997: 48). Therefore, practices and conventions of family photographs, "...consolidate family and group identity - with its dreams, fantasies, and aspirations - whatever that group might be" (Hirsch 1997: 47). As such, personal photography and especially the family album, increasingly came to be the primary tool of self-knowledge and representation, for the individual, which took place historically alongside the development of the modern bourgeoisie family. Personal photography became a means by which the family's story could be told over and over again. By the late 20th century, in many cultures, the family photograph became widely available as a medium of familial self-presentation which took a lot of the strain off family life because it contributed and maintained an illusion of family unity, but Hirsch has argued that this simultaneously damages family life because the type of images created are such that real families cannot possibly live up to (Hirsch 1997: 8).

Pertinent to my discussion of personal photographs is my obvious interest in them. They, fascinate me for essentially two reasons; firstly, the family romance, that has been made possible through the technology of the camera, which relies on a form of representation that cuts across classes and disguised social differences, through assumed referents and an approximate

relationship to reality. This no doubt, disguises the ideological value of the family photograph in itself as well as the fact that photography is an economic institution with its own structures and ideology. At the end of the 20th century, especially, the taking of snapshots has become a particular type of leisure pursuit that underpins a specific form of family life. (Holland 1997:107)

The second reason concerns the various uses to which personal photographs can critically be put. These uses vary from using photographs as non-written and alternative primary sources in historical and documentary practice, to challenging universalized notions of gender, race, positions of sexuality, disability, age or power, as well as for psychoanalytical questions and practical photo-therapy work, memory and identity work.

Why do we treasure the photographs we keep for ourselves? Certainly the quality of the print matters less, than the context and part it plays in corroborating and challenging the identity and history of its user. Private photographs, by themselves are thus, what Bernstein (1971) has described as a 'restricted code' (1971), that depends on knowledge of the context that holds them in place, for specific meanings (Holland 1997: 106). Removed from that context, they appear fragile and momentary, suggesting little in terms of either aesthetic pleasure or historical documentation. The strange fascination of personal photographs comes from this contrast between the almost intolerable richness of the medium, against its negligibility and triviality (Holland 1997:107).⁶ And although they hint at tentative and eerie clues, the empirical historian would do well to treat them with extreme caution.

Judith Williams, in a chapter entitled 'Family, Education, Photography', argues how the rise of family photography -both photographs of (the) family and the situating of photography within the family- is not merely an innocent pleasure, but part of the incredibly powerful (if strangely invisible) production and reproduction of the bourgeois family form. She highlights the fact that to many radical feminists and government ministers alike, the importance of the family, as the backbone of the nation, has been acknowledged. Williamson explores how the crucial functions of the family, as an institution, have been well-documented by feminist and Marxist writers who have focused on the economic value of the family to capitalism and the direct ideological role the family plays in the socialisation of children and thus, maintaining the status quo (Williamson

1994:236)⁷

Williamson, however, affirms that photography offers an important, enjoyable and potentially radical access to the self-representation and documentation. The critical question Williamson arrives at is, can this potential be deliberately and uniformly attained (rather than accidentally or occasionally) given the constraint imposed on images by the ideology of the family? (Williamson 1994: 243).

Williamson arrives at this question through a discussion of the State and the representation of the family, in photography, "...while drawing heavily on the economic and social support of the family the government can manage to suggest that this burden is a gift of freedom, a seal of separateness from itself. The representation of the family...provides a common sexual and economic goal: images of family life hold out pleasure and leisure as the fulfillment of desires which, if not thus contained, could cause social chaos." (Williamson 1994:236). Indeed, these images have unwaveringly taken the form of photographs and all these kinds of personal photographs, - individual portraits, weddings and other similar special events, school and college pictures, professional and amateur - coalesce with family photography. The exceptions here are, of course, the criminal type mug-shot or photographs required for identity purposes.

Traditionally wealthy families recorded their ancestry through oil paintings of the entire family group, surrounded by material possessions. Poorer families were also painted, but not always at their own request, as featured as subjects for the more liberal minded artists who would, in this case, keep the painting and not sell it to their poor models. This tradition lingers on in documentary photography, where the poor, the foreign and the injured are still regarded as having no stake in the images they provide. With, what Tagg (1988) has described as, the 'democratisation of the image' in the mid-19th century, the gap between these groups became considerably narrowed. (Williamson 1994: 238; Holland 1997:122-32)

Early photography, and especially paintings, were very expensive but with the possibility of photographic printing on paper this form of representation was brought within the reach of many. Photographs were taken in the photographer's studio and here clients of all classes could choose

a variety of props and backdrops, which the photographer supplied. By the early 1900's, working, middle and upper classes alike, adopted shared conventions of pose and setting "Photography played...a central role in the development of contemporary ideology of the family, in providing a form of representation which cut across class, disguised social differences, and produced a sympathy of the exploited with their exploiters. It could make all families look more or less alike" (Williamson 1994:238).⁸

More people began to own photographs as a result of the democratisation achieved in the image and this was extended to the means of production of the image. In other words, as the technology of the camera became cheaper, so more people could own cameras. "With the daguerreotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken -formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same - so that we shall only need one portrait" (Kierkegaard 1854 in Sontag 1977: 207)

The proliferation of images also had an impact on the mass photographic market, obvious in the distinction drawn between 'professional' and 'amateur' photography. This distinction is crucial, because with the means of production available to the masses, so to speak, control over the kinds of images produced became more important. Therefore, convention in practices and the advertising business, explicitly sent the message that while everyone may use the same equipment, 'professional' and or 'documentary' photographers are allowed to take completely different types of pictures from the 'amateur'. Indeed, personal photographs are meant to illustrate exciting holidays, and days at the beach instead of capturing images of foreign political events (Williamson 1994:238; Holland 1997: 133)

Despite the ideology of 'home' as the hub of family life, and its inward-looking ideas, most personal pictures are in fact, of time away from the home. This coincided with the increased mobility of families. (Holland 1997:134). Photographic mass markets thus encouraged the theme of looking outwards and the new photographer was encouraged to take advantage of the new facilities for travelling - the train, the motorcar, the bicycle- and point their camera at the picturesque and the unusual.

It was largely toward women of the middle classes that the message of looking inwards towards the domestic and creating an exclusive record of ones' family, was directed. The new technology was indeed gendered. Williamson says that "Perhaps the most influential family image in our culture has been that of the Madonna and child; father was absent long before he had to hold the camera" (Williamson 1994: 237) However, the new technology in small, reliable 'instamatic' cameras and so forth with easy operating instructions, suggested that the woman of the house could use it also (while the chemicals and other technical contraptions could be left to the men). And what a surprise that the photographic content of a womans' activities was her home and children? (Holland 1997: 129).

Thus far we are able to divide personal photographs two main types: the formal, of weddings, christenings, graduation and so on, where professional photographs are still frequently used, and the informal, of holidays and other leisure time. The formal are a record, evidence that the ritual landmarks of life have been reached, and these pictures have much in common with early 'posed' family pictures. However, informal picture taking welcomed the arrival of the element of 'fun' as a necessity in contemporary family photographs. Williamson argues that, "...in this modern 'democratic' idea, just as in the earlier leveling notion of the *dignity* of the family, photography plays a formative role" (Williamson 1994: 239).

The 'instant fun' offered by camera advertising is both the fun in taking the picture, that process that takes place 'before your eyes', and the fun within the picture, smiles and happy moments frozen into an object that create, yet another, systematic representation of childhood and family life. The more visible the process, the more indisputably real the content. And the dominant content, in home family photography, seems always to be pleasure. In earlier family images it seemed enough for the family members to be presented to the camera, "...to be *externally* documented; but now this is not enough, and *internal* states of constant delight are to be revealed on film. Fun must not only be had, it must be *seen* to have been had "(Williamson 1994: 239)

This has raises the psychoanalytical question of repression and how this functions in family photographs (Williamson 1994: 240; Spence 1995) . Advertisements, on the outside, erase the oppressive experiences of being in a family in pictures of happy, product consuming families.

On the inside this experience is erased, within the family, by certain photographs that are omitted from the family album, crying children, divorced spouses, angry parents and so forth. Therefore, it is of great significance within a family which photos are kept and which are discarded, and also who takes photos of whom. Personal photographs are embedded in the lives of those who own or make use of them. Professional photographs also assume a contract between photographer and subject quite different from other types of photography, “ Personal pictures are made specifically portray the individual or the group to which they belong as *they would wish to be seen* and as they have chosen to show themselves to one another” (Holland 1997:107)

However, the important question of *whose* memories are being made in personal photography still remain? It is by and large that of the parent that family photos represent, since parents take and select the pictures. However, as children we are offered a ‘memory’ of our own childhoods, made up of images constructed entirely by others, “ The hegemony of one class over another in representing public history, which offers us “memories” of social life through TV and news photos, is paralleled in microcosm by this dominance of one version of family history, which represses much lived experience “ (Williamson 1994: 240-1) .

Walter Benjamin says that “photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious” (Benjamin (1972) in Williamson 1994: 241) He refers to the development within psychoanalysis that nothing repressed ever disappears, as such we may often be able to read in family photos ‘clues’ to their repressed elements. ‘Education’ works alongside the family in repressing children and guiding them towards their proper role in society - school and college photos depict this with their family-like groupings. However, most schools today have replaced or supplemented the giant school photo with individual photographs not unlike studio pictures which the child’s parents can buy. This shift, has been described by Williamson as reflecting the trend from formal to more “personalised” family photography (Williamson 1994: 241).

All the ideologies incorporated into domestic photography - democracy, choice, fun, leisure - are also reproduced on a large scale in public photographs which, in modeling themselves on the family photograph’s format, can more easily tap ‘family values’ (Williamson 1994: 243) In order

to see how this has worked, one need only consider a political election campaign. Therefore, the kinds of 'private' photography are especially important in the public sphere where it is used to guarantee the intimacy and identification of audience and subject. Hence, we are able to identify and feel sad with the family of the industrialist kidnapped by 'terrorists', as well as participate in the glamour and excitement of royal weddings, and take an interest in the children of film stars. (Williamson 1994:243)

By the late 20th century, the gap between the enrichment and proliferation of ideal images of family life and the complexity of its lived reality led to damning critiques of personal photography. Unhappy childhoods, broken families, child abuse, rebellious teenagers and incessant poverty are only a few of the all too common experiences not recorded in domestic photography. The family image was no longer seen as solid and secure but characterised by fractures and contradictions. It was argued that 'the family' itself, as an institution, came up against its own limitations and could be now best be described as divided, individualised and hypocritical. The cohesive function of family photography became increasingly undermined by the disruptions of family obligations that went against the fulfillment of individual pleasures (Holland 1997:137).

It is highly probable that the most frequent photograph in anyone's album is the simple shot of a subject presenting itself to the camera, standing, perhaps in front of a famous landscape or beside an object like a car or boat, but basically just being there. But such images are highly unreadable, depending heavily on knowledge of the subject, on why the picture was taken and the context within which it occurs. Stuart Hall pointed out that such presentations and such innocence will necessarily be deceptive, subject as it is to pressures from outside the frame (Holland 1997: 139).

Many of the radical history movements of the late 20th century called for a rereading and re-viewing of family pictures and these brought different ways of understanding history, more sensitive to the type of information carried by everyday documents, including personal snaps. Not only academic historians, but also reminiscence groups, women's groups and local historians, set out to challenge the politics of traditional history writing by looking at the past from a different perspectives -of women, black people, working-class people, and many other minority

groups. (Holland 1997: 139).

To look at personal pictures and tease out their meanings has meant that various different approaches to history have been brought into play. Community histories have been recognised; histories of specific groups of many different kinds. Personal photographs expect to be understood within an interpretive community, a group of users who share the same understandings of pictures which record and confirm valued rites of passage and culturally significant moments (Hirsch 1981: 58-9). Pictures of social interaction, symbolised by weddings, birthdays, anniversaries and so forth, have different significations for different cultural groups, who bring an instant recognition to the details by which the meaning of the event 'subtly overwhelms the personal aspect of the picture and fills it with allusions to tribe and ritual' (Hirsch 1981:59)

Family histories often tell of conflict with a community or marginality to it., of migration and mobility across the generations, so that the photographs that accompany family members shift in and out of different contexts of understanding (Holland 1997:139). Even while acknowledging visible community cues, family stories may cut across communal meanings and on investigation, many people find that their stories tell of hybridity and cultural mixing.⁹

Just as family histories fit uneasily with histories of communities, personal histories remain part of, yet often at odds with, the histories of families. "We do not care whether it was taken, like so many other ceremonial photographs, the day before the wedding or three hours later; we care only that the man and woman look like bride and groom and uphold the decorum of formal weddings" writes Julia Hirsch (1981: 62). Pictures which live up to expectation give enormous pleasure precisely because their familiar structure is able to contain the tension between an ideal image and the ambivalence of lived experience. While the historian searches for the truths of the past, the user of personal collection is engaging in acts of recognition, reconstructing their own past and setting a personal narrative against more public accounts (Holland 1997: 142; Kuhn 1995; Walkerdine 1991; Watney 1991). While on the surface family pictures may act as social documents, a closer examination reveals the complex of interrelations and scandal that weave through the soap opera of personal life (Isherwood 1988; Spence 1991; Martin 1991).

In exploring the ways in which one's present identity carries the weight of the past, personal pictures are able to act as an emotional center for individual self-exploration. Autobiography, 'memory work' and forms of self-expression based on settling accounts with the past have become central to feminist approaches. The disjunction between image and remembered experience, the uncertain borderline between fantasy and memory, the tracing of identity and a sense of self back through one's parents and their sense of themselves, the opportunity to relive or re-enact the past- these have all been ways in which family photographs have been used to recapture personal history and make sense of individual lives (Holland 1997: 143; Kuhn 1995; Spence 1987)

Such work has shed new light on the construction of complex identities, the accessibility of psychoanalysis in working through trauma and reliving intensities, the codes of domestic photography, class, gender, subjectivity, the processes of photography, sexuality, illness, teasing out the ways in which personal memory and childhood fantasy overlap, how both interleave with the social and with popular culture. Family secrecy can give way to a family horror story.

In the late 20th century we have increasingly begun to see that traumas do not only come from within the family. The expansion of poverty and the decay of inner city suburbs, have meant that the happy memories promised by the Kodak snap are a remote possibility for the disaffected youngsters and struggling single parents living in desolation, while the gap continues to grow between the comfortably off and the dispossessed. Therefore, despite the privacy of family discourse, the public narratives of community, religion, ethnicity and nation cannot be put aside. Where do family albums record these memories?

Perhaps personal photography has become too knowing. It remains a minor discourse, a knowledge without authority, but we would do well to attend to what it has to tell us. Historians who take note of the details of everyday life and of ordinary people's accounts, feminist writers and photographers, artists of various kinds, are all now making use of personal pictures. Recently many gallery photographers have taken the world of inner experience as their subject-matter, sometimes incorporating snapshots or imitating their style.

Documentary photography is certainly no longer bound to the political projects of the late 19th and mid-20th century, and today they take part in the endless circulation of images that is a distinguishing feature of the postmodern world. As such, there is a concern with the nature of images and their circulation; an elision between high and popular culture; a scepticism about the nature of 'the real' or 'the authentic'; and a suggestion that the discourses that once bounded and structured knowledge (such as history or science) have broken down. Under these conditions, what future might there be for documentary; is it a practice that has run out of history? One possible answer may be to look at the work of practising photographers whose projects are of a kind that would formerly have been labelled 'documentary' (Holland 1997: 101).

Would work that perhaps have multiple references to other images, that is unwilling to make authoritative statements, be documentary? Certainly if it fulfils the minimal condition of documentary: that it provide an account of events that have their own existence outside the frame of the photograph or the confines of the studio walls. We are no longer asked to accept that such images are impartial or disinterested; instead we inhabit a space between scepticism, pleasure and trust, from which we can read documentary images in more complex ways. (Holland 1997: 101)

In the production, meaning and uses of family albums pictures of the naked human body are scarce, except for birth (now fashionable). What happens to all the body pictures which we know are taken. Are they part of our unofficial histories of our bodies and our sexuality which we are unable to share with most people? Similarly, whilst the media is saturated with stories of victims, unhappy families, disasters, the family records we keep for ourselves seem to be decidedly lacking anything more than celebrations.[eg, quote from Kincaid and then sentence...family pictures are also about forgetting] Why is this so? Maybe we haven't grasped the uncomfortable fact that photography can be used in so many ways beyond the present agendas. (Spence 1995:191/192)

Such limited documentation of our private lives obviously gives us a lot of pleasure, but it means that whole areas of our lives go by without being recorded in any way. For instance, the time we spend working, the conflict, oppression, exploitation, power dynamics and achievements of this

world are seldom recorded. If, as has been argued elsewhere, we are on the brink of an overarching theory of representation, linking media, film and cultural studies to art history, we must now begin to take seriously the signs and symbols that people choose to make and keep to represent themselves and their everyday lives (Spence 1995: 192) .

The photographic medium provides one with the opportunity to walk through history and imagine the lives of distinct peoples. In the last few years there has been an increase in the interest in photography, specifically in the ways one looks at and interprets photographs and how identity and representation are constructed in photographs. This forces one to address image making and interpretation, subjectivity and representation. How have photographs been used? What are the implications of self-conscious imagery? How is gender portrayed? What assumptions are being made of images vis-a-vis the various 'others' and the roles they play? How does one explore the social or race consciousness of an image?

In conclusion, there remains two crucial points to be made about photographs; that they have a value as historical evidence and that by 'reading' the subject of much personal (and other) photography, that this subject may display an awareness of herself as the sitter, or subject, and an acceptance of her own alternative modes of expression and thus of her subjectivity as necessarily contradictory.

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1. Documentary photography in South Africa grew up alongside the development of political organisations of the 1980's in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle. The role documentary played was deeply implicated in the principles of the anti-apartheid struggle. Its primary aim was to alert people within S.A and the rest of the world to the political struggle and the social conditions in the country. Journals, such as Staffrider, as well as progressive magazines, provided a platform for much visual art, in the form of photographs which adopted many of the anti-apartheid principles of the time. It is significant that S. A documentary photographers and organisations, were sceptical of what they saw as some of the fundamental contradictions inherent in the tradition of documentary photography (Weinberg 199). This awareness of 'contradictions' within documentary practice, was heightened in the S.A. context because privilege was not only decided along class divisions but also by racial classification. The S.A documentary tradition thus came to occupy a highly contradictory space in the general development of thought around photography, but this is a discussion which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. What I want to draw attention to is the awareness, by the S.African documentary project, of the broader politics of representation around the nature of the documentary. However, it is in the nature of the forms which this awareness took that needs much critical attention. For further reading; Weinberg 1991; Badsha 1986; Godby 1993; Nixon 1986; Staffrider 1985)

2. This question is especially pertinent to the current South African context where the status of the documentary project as historical evidence is becoming increasingly important. Archives such as the Robben Island and UWC Mayibuye Center, house large collections of 'struggle' or documentary photography by photographers such as, Leon Levinson, Eli Weinberg, Ernest Cole and others. How are we to read photography and visual art after apartheid? Gordon Metz, Michael Godby and others have, in answer, suggested that the social documentary project in South Africa is still alive because instead of existing within the margins of apartheid society, it is now at the center of the 'new' South Africa. (See: Texts from symposium, *Bending Towards Freedom: Conditions and Contradictions of Cultural Production in (Post-) Colonial Societies*, 7th-8th September in Aula Nordica, Umea University). The fact that the 'center' or 'mainstream' happens to be public museums and galleries is highly problematic because the question then becomes; in these 'new' platforms with 'new' audiences, is it not the question of a particular photographic aesthetic, rather than a distinctly South African social documentary tradition, that has entered the 'mainstream'? Again, this is far too broad a question to answer in this chapter.

3. It would be interesting to examine a South African example for evidence of parallels or anomalies with the paradigm described here. Leon Levinson, for example, started out as a studio photographer but after travelling in Europe during the mid 1900's and learning more about photography, began taking his camera 'outside' of the studio.

4. The most interesting oppositional work came most interestingly from groups who considered the question of representation as central to political struggle and developed an alternative photographic practice. Often they were not motivated by revealing the way things looked in the 'real world' but to disrupt the surface appearance of the image in order to construct new meanings out of the old pictorial elements. See: Rodchenko in the USSR, the Berlin Dadaists. Some artists felt that, in order to work against the central tenants of documentary, the way in which meaning is approached needed to be reconsidered. They believed that meaning can be arrived at through manipulation and improvisation. John Hartfield - is best known for his incisive, politically charged photomontages. Indeed, numerous 20th century and more recent examples exist, but a comprehensive list would prove exhaustive.

5. Foucault does not see power as a force held by a specific social group which enables them to coerce another group, instead power is situated within the entire social system and its constituent parts. Therefore, power resides in all aspects of a knowledge system - for example - in the construction of the archive, the codification of information and the communication chains through which knowledge is disseminated

a) Michael Foucault *Space, power and knowledge* in S. During (ed) *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Routledge: London and New York (1993)

b) Michael Foucault *Two Lectures* in Dirks N, Eley G, Ortner S (eds) *Culture/Power/History*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey (1994)

6. Rugg L, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London (1997) Rugg traces the formation of self-imagery through the study of four literary autobiographers, Mark Twain and August Strindberg attempted (unsuccessfully) to integrate their photographs into their autobiographies. While Twain encouraged photographers, he was wary of potential fakery. Strindberg, believing that photographs had occult power, preferred to photograph himself. Because of their experiences under National Socialism, Walter Benjamin and Christa Wolf feared the dangerously objectifying power of photographs and omitted them from their autobiographical writings. Yet Benjamin used them in his photographic conception of history, and Wolf's narrator in *Patterns of Childhood* tries to reclaim her childhood from the Nazis by reconstructing mental images of lost family photographs. The discussions concerning Benjamin and Wolf are particularly interesting for exploring the ways in which the (absent) photograph is used metaphorically, by the respective authors, in attempting to making sense of their own histories and memories. See Rugg 1997: 232

7. Williamson, following Gramsci, refers to the argument that the family provides both the unpaid maintenance of the labor force and a floating pool of "reserve labor", namely women. The family together with the system of education, also share the role of socialising children into the accepted society. Williamson (1994: 236)

Williamson J, *Family, Education, Photography* in Dirks N, Eley G, Ortner S (eds), *Culture/Power/History*, Princeton University Press Princeton, New Jersey (1994)

8. For some good examples of this, and a more detailed discussion of the history of family photographs, see Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effect*, Oxford University Press: New York (1981)

9. For a discussion of this, see, Julia Hirsch (1981). She discusses wedding photographs of mixed marriages that must find a ways of dealing with two sets of cultural conventions. Ursula Kocharian, of Polish descent and her husband an Armenian from Iran, put together an album to show the complex ancestry of their sons, born in England. By 'reading' the pictures, and referring to influences from popular culture, she produced a document in which cultural political and family changes are displayed.