Family snaps are one of the most ubiquitous and familiar sorts of visual images; as the previous chapter described, they are taken, reproduced, archived and displayed by vast numbers of people. For much of the critical literature that has discussed them, though, it seems that their familiarity has bred only contempt. Both what family photos show, and how they show it, have incurred critical displeasure.

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 (although, as Jo Spence [1986] remarked, most family albums contain a token photo of a screaming baby), and at leisure (see for example Chalfen 1987; Cronin 1998; Halle 1993; J Hirsch 1981; M Hirsch 1999; Slater 1995; Spence 1986; Spence and Holland 1991; Stokes 1992; Titus 1976). 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 computer. 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 (Bourdieu et al. 1990; Chambers 2001, 2002; Spence 1986).

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. It is this uppolished style, as well as the conventionality of their subject matter, that has contributed to the less than positive critical reception received by family photos. To Susan Stewart (1984, 49), ‘all family albums are alike’, for Richard Chalfen (1987, 42) they have an ‘overwhelming sense of similarity and redundancy’, and to Geoffrey Batchen (2008, 123) they are ‘cloyingly sentimental in content and repetitively uncreative as pictures’. Don Slater (1995, 134) remarks that family snaps are ‘generally regarded as a great wasteland of trite and banal self-representation’, while Jessica Evans (2000, 112) claims that it is in family photography that ‘the most stultified and stereotyped repertoire of composition, subject-matter and style resides’. Moreover, this monotony is probably ok since apparently no-one cares about their family photos very much anyway, or at least not for very long. For family photos rapidly become unimportant to their owners, at least according to Don Slater, who
claims that ‘at most, we look at photographs as a kind of one-off reliving of a recent leisure experience (a quick look at the holiday snaps when they come back from the chemist)’ and that ‘emotional investment in these images maybe intense but is generally short – they gradually become invisible’ (Slater 1995, 141, 146; see also M Hirsch 1997, 10).

But why is the limited subject matter of family snaps seen to be such a problem? Does their repetitiveness really deserve to be described as stultified and stereotyped, and as banal and trite? Do family photos really become invisible to their owners? Do we at most take just a quick look at them? And if, according to Bourdieu (1990, 76), ‘ordinary practice seems determined … to strip photography of its power to disconcert’, why should we assume that the inability to disconcert somehow constitutes a failure on the part of ‘ordinary practice’, as Bourdieu seems to do? What, indeed, is ‘ordinary practice’ in relation to family snaps, and what does it achieve? Perhaps if what is ordinarily done to and with photos was given more attention, their sentimentality and repetition might become rather interesting, instead of a reason for dismissing them?

That, at least, is the wager of this book, which follows in the path of the very small number of critics who have explored what gets done with family snaps: critics which include Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators (Bourdieu et al. 1990), but also Richard Chalfen (1987, 2002), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981), David Halle (1993), Katrina Hof (2006), Jonas Larsen (2005, 2008) and DL Jacobs (1981). They have all paid attention to the many things that are done with family snaps, particularly how they are made, stored and displayed. In other words, they have focused not only on the photos themselves, but also on the social practices in which they are embedded.

Bourdieu’s (1990, 7) discussion of family snaps emphasised how heavily the activities in which photographs participate are rule-bound:

> While everything would lead one to expect that this activity [photography], which has no traditions and makes no demands, would be delivered over to the anarchy of individual improvisation, it appears that there is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice.

His study then proceeded to explore the conventions that govern what is done with photographs, including family snaps. Family photos are a particular sort of image, then, but as the first section of the chapter emphasises, to stop there in their analysis is to misunderstand their power and effects. They are a particular sort of image with which specific things are done. The second section of the chapter examines how the relation between a photograph and what is done with it should be theorised, while the third section emphasises the importance of place to these relations. Different things are done with photographs, in different places, and it is not until family photographs are thought of as assemblages of both a certain kind of object and a certain kind of practice that their importance can be fully appreciated. For Bourdieu, that importance rested on the practices of family
photography being no more and no less than the performance and sign of familial integration, ‘reinforcing the integration of the family group’ (Bourdieu et al. 1990, 19). More recent writers have developed a rather richer account of what is done with family snaps, and what the consequences of those doings are, however, as does this book in the chapters that follow.

**Family photos as images**

The descriptions quoted at the beginning of this chapter, about the content and style of family photographs, are correct. Family photos do indeed picture happy families doing anything but work. At another level, however, these descriptions and the pejorative judgements that so often follow are entirely beside the point of family photography. All my interviewees were perfectly clear that their albums were very selective visions of their family life. One of my interviewees precisely summed up the criteria for putting together a family album as we looked through one of hers:

> You sort of take all the sort of best bits and you know the funny bits and the and the nicest bits and the big bits you know like birthdays, [the] first photo. Like that first one is the most unflattering photograph [chuckles]. But then it’s like quite a big one cos that was the very – you know just like an hour old or something.

No matter how ‘unflattering’ or, we might surmise, ‘banal’ or ‘trite’, certain photos just have to go in the album, while photos of other things simply never get taken. (Some scenes are, as Bourdieu [1990] notes, not visible as photographable.) And none of interviewees could see any problem in the selectivity of family photography. Another mum told me, ‘I had breast cancer, nearly five years ago now, and my husband took a few photos of me with no hair. Obviously didn’t go into the photo album. I don’t know where they are actually.’ And she went on:

> I mean you don’t take photos of sad things. You only take photos of happy things, happy, happy trip or party or friends or, so when you open a photo album it’s actually happy happy, happy things, happy memories, happy events … I mean we do remember it, you cannot not remember if you had an illness, but why do I have to open a photo album and see myself there? This is something that I will remember in my mind for ever and ever, I don’t need to see it in the photo, and I don’t need other people to see it.

Moreover, none were particularly concerned about the visual quality of their snaps. Obviously, heads chopped off and pictures completely out of focus were not particularly sought after; but only two of my interviewees with digital cameras regularly bothered to remove red-eye from their photos using their computer’s
software. Indeed, many of my interviewees made a clear distinction between their family snaps and what they all called ‘arty’ photographs. ‘Arty’ photographs were those that conformed precisely to the criteria that the critics cited above lament the absence of in family snaps: photos that took an unusual perspective, or broke with the rules of content, composition or pose that govern family photography. ‘Arty’ photos were usually shown to me in a rather apologetic way, as if I might see them as pretentious or silly. In contrast, the visual quality of family snaps was almost never apologised for, and I was shown several photos that were almost unrecognisable as pictures but were nevertheless kept in the family photo collection because they had been taken by a child and were precious because of that.

Those photos that don’t show anything very clearly but are nonetheless kept because of who took them suggest to me the crucial point about family photography. Family photographs cannot be identified solely on the basis of what they show – families at leisure, photographed in a particular way – as so much of the critical literature assumes. It is certainly the case that family photos only picture a certain range of subject matter, in a certain way: they are indeed a specific kind of image. But their content is only part of what defines them as family photographs. Equally important is what is done with them. Family photos are particular sorts of images embedded in specific practices, and it is the specificity of those practices that define a photograph as a family photo as much as, if not more than, what it pictures. What is important in a family photograph is: who took it; who it shows; where and how it is kept; who made copies of it and sent them to other people; who those other people are; and how it gets looked at by all those people. As Chalfen (2002, 143) says, family photos are photos that get taken by a member of a family, that show members of that family, and are viewed mostly by other members of that same family, and often by a few close friends. (Hence the importance of the final phrase in the quotation above, ‘and I don’t need other people to see it’: it is simply assumed that family photos will be shared with others.) So a photo that is a blur of flesh and shadow is kept by a mum because it was the first time her daughter wanted to use the camera, not because it actually shows anything much at all; and it is the taking and the keeping as much as the referential content that makes it a family photo.

As several writers have recently noted (Batchen 2008; Cohen 2005; di Bello 2008; Edwards 2002; Larsen 2008; Maynard 2007), most photography criticism almost entirely ignores the social practices in which the taking, making and circulation of photographs are embedded. Instead, it focuses on exploring the semiotic significance of specific photographs, treating them only as ‘dematerialized images, loci of meanings’ (di Bello 2008, 148). In their introduction to visual culture studies, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001, 45–71) helpfully point out the roots of this search for the meanings embedded in the image; their discussion returns to Stuart Hall’s 1974 essay on the coding and decoding of meanings, in which semiology and Foucauldian discourse analysis sit rather uneasily side by side (Nightingale 1996). I agree that the usually unproblematised conflation of a watered-down semiology with a thinned-out version of discourse analysis are at
the root of much contemporary analysis of visual culture. In a methodology so taken for granted as to be almost invisible, the signs in an image are interpreted in relation to wider discursive structures, and those wider discursive structures are understood as producing unequal relations of class, gender, race and sexuality, to list only their main dynamics. Hence the substantial body of work on family photographs that focuses on their content in order to examine the genre’s reiteration of social positions and relations.

While as a methodology this semiological/discursive approach has been, and remains, enormously productive in showing how social power relations are (re)articulated through visual images, it’s also a paradigm that’s recently been subject to some criticism. Deborah Poole (2005), for example, worries that readings of photos that aim to reveal the reproduction of colonial, racist, patriarchal and bourgeois visions of people and places often seem to end up inadvertently replicating that same powerful vision (and see Baer 2002; Pinney 2003). Michael Ann Holly (in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey 2005, 88) has commented that the urge to study visual culture simply in order to critique it seems ‘to have sacrificed a sense of awe at the power of an overwhelming visual experience, wherever it might be found, in favour of the “political” connections that lie beneath the surface of this or that representation’. She goes on to suggest that the critical–theoretical rigour with which so many visual culture studies are conducted may have a deadening effect on images. ‘There are many times,’ she says, ‘when I yearn for something that is “in excess of research”’ (Holly in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey 2005, 88).

Many art historians have long argued for the agency of images, of course: for the way in which the formal qualities of an image can intervene in, and realign, discursive fields to specific effect. The importance of the material qualities of visual images and objects is also central to anthropology as a discipline. Recently, however, interest in the material specificity of objects has become widespread in the social sciences, and has intersected with an emphasis on the social as constituted through practice. Authors in a number of fields have turned to notions of both materiality and practice to explore what might both reproduce and exceed discourse and meaning (for example, Daniel Miller, Alfred Gell and Tim Ingold in anthropology, Bruno Latour and Anne-Marie Mol in science studies, John Law in sociology and Nigel Thrift in geography). As I continued working with my interviews, I found myself turning to these sorts of literatures as I began to take seriously the tactile materiality of family snaps, and the fields of affect and constellations of practice which I found them inhabiting. While I can hardly claim that family snaps offer ‘an overwhelming visual experience’, they nonetheless remain extremely common images which are very important to many people (particularly, as Chapter 1 suggested, to women with children). In dismissing them as ‘trite and banal’ and ‘stultified and stereotyped’, semiological/discursive critiques demonstrate that, while they might be very effective at critiquing certain kinds of power, they are quite unable to understand the peculiar power that family photos hold over so many people. Banal and stereotyped they may be, but family
snaps have existed in different ways for well over a century now, all over the world, and they continue to be made in huge numbers. Indeed, my research suggests that, in places where digital cameras are widespread, they are being taken in greater numbers than ever before. Perhaps their ‘meaning’ is only part of their story.

Photographs as objects embedded in practices

When I started my interviews with women about their photos, though, I was assuming that I was searching for what the photos meant to the women I talked with. Hence my decision to undertake interviews, because talk is generally assumed to convey meanings, even if often implicitly and unintentionally. However, like some other researchers also examining everyday objects and practices (Cohen 2005; Latham 2003), I found that my interviewees were not very articulate about what the photos meant to them. Instead, they were far more expressive about what they felt about their photos and what they did with them. All my interviewees were generous enough to show me at least some of their family snaps, and often very many, when I visited them in their homes. We chatted over hundreds of photos, laughed at some of them and fell silent with others. We discussed when they took them and why, what sorts they liked and which they didn’t. I learnt very quickly that all of my interviewees felt obliged to do things with their photos once they had been taken. They all agreed that photos needed dating at the very least. Photographs taken with a film camera were always printed, and sometimes kept in the envelopes or boxes they arrived in from the developers, and then stored in cupboards or boxes devoted to them. Albums were also used for storage, especially the ‘flip-over’ kind. One interviewee had a fireproof metal box for especially precious photos. Digital photos were downloaded onto computers and put into labelled folders, and some had prints made of them. Some printed photos were selected to go into special albums; others might by chosen to be framed or propped up somewhere unframed. Some were made into collages, or pinned onto a noticeboard; some were put into purses or wallets, some were taken into workplaces. Very, very many were sent off to family and close friends. And many photos were looked at long after they’d been downloaded or printed.

As I learnt all this, I also found myself feeling caught up in what I started to call the ‘doing’ of photographs during the interview. As these women showed their photos to me, I started to feel I was not just seeing, but actually participating in what family photos are about. Since I recruited my interviewees by snowballing from friends of mine, I guess I was seen as a friend of a friend by my interviewees, a basically sympathetic conversant, and my interview, while never not being a research interview, was also inflected by something else as we laughed at cute photos and I admired holiday locations. Interviewing these women in their homes allowed me to not just to look at but to share their photographs with them, and to see how they, how we, were with them, to participate in some of the various ‘practical, bodily handlings and performances’, as one definition of practice
has it (Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe 2002, 14), in which family snaps participate. I took notes about how we looked at the photos (in particular how important touching and holding them is, a point I’ll return to in the next chapter). By participating in part of their photographic work for the length of our interview, I got a sense of how these women lived with their photos both from their words but also from how we did the talking and the looking (and the holding) together. As this sense of not just talking about, but also doing family photographs grew, I began to think more about its significance. What I was moving towards, in effect, was sense of photographs as objects participating in an elaborate, multifaceted practice and through that participation, producing a specific and sometimes intense set of meanings, feelings and positions.

So, as the interviews progressed, as well as what family photos signified, I was prompted to think more about what was done with them and what feelings that entailed. This does not suggest that I was no longer interested in what the photographs represented, but making meaning is not all that photographs do. To explore their other effects, I started to find it useful to treat family snaps less as meaningful images, and more as objects embedded in practice that produces various effects.

Thinking of photographs as objects is a simple exercise with productive consequences. Think of photographs as material objects with specific qualities: size, colour, pattern, texture. As an object, a photo is always more than just its image:

A photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image. As such, photographs exist materially in the world, as chemical deposits on paper [or, we might add, as electrical signals in an image sensor], as images mounted on a multitude of different sized, shaped, coloured and decorated cards, as subject to additions to their surface or as drawing their meanings from presentational forms such as frames and albums. Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space. (Edwards and Hart 2004, 1)

After all, as well as paper prints or files, photos can also be printed onto mugs and bags, for example, or made into calendars, or enamelled as memorials on gravestones, or made into shrines or protest posters. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Edwards (2002) suggests a vocabulary that can acknowledge these diverse ‘morphological possibilities’ (Batchen 2001, 59). She says that there are three aspects to the objectness of a photograph. First on her list is its visual form, which is what the photographic image shows; second is its material form, for example whether the paper it’s printed on is glossy or matt, whether it’s torn, what kind of screen the picture is seen on; and third is its presentational form. Photographs always come presented to their viewers in some specific way. A printed photo is in a frame or under a fridge magnet; a digital photo is in a computer slideshow or on a mobile phone screen. Edwards’s list allows us to consider the specific material qualities of any photograph, and these can be described as its ‘affordances’, following Gibson
An affordance is ‘the design aspect of an object that determines just how the thing could possibly be used’ (Larsen 2008, 146); affordances are the material qualities of an object that allow some things to be done with it and not others.

Edwards’s (2002) list is helpful in its acknowledgement that photos are not free-floating images but rather material objects with a wide range of material qualities. However, it is crucial to think about the material affordances of a photograph in conjunction with what is being done with that photo. Only some of an object’s affordances come to matter, depending on what people do with that object. Many photographs are printed on small rectangular pieces of paper, for example, which allows them both to be put into envelopes and also to be burnt easily. That snaps often accompany letters and are hardly ever set fire to, however, is an effect not of their affordances but of what is done with them by people. So what people do with photographs is not an optional analytical extra; it is fundamental to exploring photographs’ effects in the world. As Arjun Appadurai (1986) insisted some time ago now, objects are inseparable from the practices in which they are embedded. Although he focused on the question of the meaning of specific objects, arguing that ‘things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with’ (Appadurai 1986, 5), he insisted that those meanings were inaccessible unless what was done with those objects was examined. Objects matter in the context of social practices.

‘Practice’ is now a heavily theorised term. A succinct definition is offered by Theodore Schatzki (1996, 83), who describes a social practice as a cluster of ‘doings and sayings’. Andreas Reckwitz (2002, 249) elaborates:

A ‘practice’… is a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

A practice is a fairly consistent way of doing something, deploying certain objects, knowledges, bodily gestures and emotions. It is through practices that social relations and institutions happen, and through practices that subject positions and identities are performed. This book understands family photography as a practice in this sense, and there are of course many other kinds of practices in which photographs participate (Maynard 2007). The next chapter will explore family photography practice in some detail, and Chapter 4 will elaborate how family photography practice creates both families and mothers in particular ways. In Schatzki’s terminology, the practices that constitute family photography are ‘integrative practices’: that is, they are one of ‘the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life’ (Schatzki 1996, 98). Schatzki (1996, 98–9) usefully suggests that integrative practices have three aspects. The first of these is what he calls ‘understanding’. This is the usually unreflective capacity to do and say appropriate things: that is, knowing how to identify, undertake and respond to specific practices. Secondly integrative practices
How to Look at Family Photographs
draw on ‘explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions’ (Schatzki 1996, 99),
and Chapters 3 and 5 will explore what rules govern what is done with family
photos. Thirdly, integrative practices happen through what Schatzki (1996, 89)
calls ‘teleoaffective structures’. Teleoaffective structures have two components:
first, senses of project, goals, purposes and beliefs (hence ‘teleo’); and secondly,
feelings, moods and emotions (hence ‘affective’).

Schatzki himself says rather little about the ‘affectual’ part of teleoaffective
structures, but in understanding the practices in which family photos are embedded,
the notion of affect is crucial. ‘Affect’ is a complex term which has quite distinct
genealogies, and I introduce it here simply to underline the importance of emotion
and feelings in relation to the practice of family snaps. Reckwitz (2002) goes to
greater lengths than Schatzki to emphasise the importance of emotion and feeling
to practices, and this is important for understanding family photography as a social
practice, for the practices in which photos are embedded carry not just meaning
or symbolic significance. They also articulate specific feelings. My interviewees’
talk expressed various feelings, but their feelings were also corporealisethrough
gestures, for example (Katz 1999) – especially touching and holding photographs –
and complex feelings were also often articulated through the apparently rather
banal things that are said about family snaps, in what Denise Riley (2005, 70) has
called ‘the ardour of utterance itself’. Chapter 4 explores the specific emotionality
of family photography practice in more detail, and later chapters also emphasise its
importance for when family photos leave domestic spaces and enter, for example,
the public spaces of newspapers.

It is the work of various anthropologists that most clearly demonstrates
empirically the social practices that surround and saturate particular kinds of
photographs: the way they are embedded in specific, integrative practices and
only make sense in relation to those practices. Christopher Pinney’s work is
exemplary here (Pinney 1997, 2003, 2004, 2008; see also Edwards 2001; Lewis
2004; MacDonald 2004; Poole 1997). He insists, for example, that there is no one
field of photography. Rather, photography is a ‘globally disseminated and locally
appropriated medium’ (Pinney 2003, 1). Although, as Pinney remarks, standard
histories of photography usually tell of story of British and French invention
which is then adopted elsewhere, there were photographers in India, Africa, South
America and China taking photographs pretty much as soon as cameras were
invented, experimenting with photographs just as the first European photographers
experimented, and inventing specific, if hybrid, visual traditions just as European
photographers did. The production of certain kinds of photographs, as Pinney
in particular emphasises, is one site around which a range of specific practices
congeal around certain kinds of photographic objects. Taking family photographs
is seen as particularly unavoidable around the birth of a child, for example; it
seems to accompany the birth like an especially persistent visitor, determined
to see the baby at all moments. The viewing of photographs is another equally
conventionalised site of specific practices, in which I felt I participated when I
undertook my interviews.
Photographs are thus made and looked at as part of specific social practices, and this is not a relation that leaves the photo untouched. Certain constellations of practice utilise some of the affordances of an object and not others. An image has a specific range of qualities as an object, but it is only when someone uses the image in some way that certain of those qualities become activated, as it were, and significant. When that use changes, the photograph also alters, as it is seen and done differently. It was another anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas, who, in his influential book *Entangled Objects*, took this argument about the importance of context to the significance of objects to an extreme, going so far as to claim that ‘objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become’ (Thomas 1991, 4). While Myers (2001, 54) suggested that recontextualisation became a ‘reigning concept’ for a certain approach to visual objects, both Pinney (2005), and Thomas (1999) in later work, emphasise that the material qualities of an object are never entirely irrelevant to the ways in which it is used. The material qualities of photographs may be subject to the ‘mutability of things in recontextualisation’ (Thomas 1991, 28), but the affordances of an object still make specific doings possible and others impossible.

Photographs and the practices they are contextualised by are thus caught up in a process of mutual constitution. Pinney (2004, 8) even coins a neologism to emphasise this process: ‘corpothetics’, where the efficacy of an image works only in relation to a particular embodied observer, and in which both are constituted by their encounter. The affordances of family snaps allow only some things to be done with them, and what is being done with a photo engages with only certain of its affordances, leaving others latent as a ‘substrate’ or ‘excess’, to use Pinney’s (2003, 3) terms. The size of printed family snaps, for example, allows them to be picked up individually (di Bello 2007), and they frequently are; and the next chapter demonstrates that one of their most significant ‘perceived affordances’ (Larsen 2008, 146) is the indexicality of what they show.

Specific practices of production, circulation, display and viewing constitute family photographs as particular kinds of images, then: family photos cannot be defined simply by their visual content. But if thinking of photographs as objects is useful because it focuses both on the material qualities of a photograph and on how some of those qualities are emergent in specific social practices, it is also useful because those constellations of objects and practices are productive. They are productive both of certain sorts of images – since, as we have seen, specific practices valorise only certain of the material qualities of any visual object – and they are productive of subject positions and relations. ‘The things that people make, make people’ (Miller 2005, 38). Schatzki (1996) says as much too. Practices are what allow subject positions to happen – a person becomes a ‘cook’, for example, while undertaking the practices associated with ‘cooking’ – and practices also induce relations between subjects. ‘A practice establishes a tissue of co-existence among its participants that arranges them vis-à-vis one another’, says Schatzki (1996, 172), and this can include relations with other people as well as with objects (Noble 2004). However, working with family photographs suggests
that both subject positions and relations need rather more careful thought than they have hitherto been given by many advocates of ‘practice theory’, a point also made by Noble (2004) and Reckwitz (2002, 256). As the body of psychoanalytic-inspired feminist work on family snaps makes clear, family snaps can carry a very powerful charge (see for example Kuhn 1995; Walkerdine 1991), and this book argues that this is as true of the banal and repetitive photos that constitute so many family photo collections as it is of the photographs of themselves as children singled out for reflection by those feminist writers. This demands a much more complex sense of the subjectivities performed through practices than appears, to take one example, in the work of Elizabeth Shove and her collaborators, where past encounters between individuals and cameras simply produce people who either do or do not use digital cameras (Shove et al. 2007). Here, the subjectivity produced by considering practices seems reduced to little more than a tool-user. Instead, a large part of my argument here will focus on the complex, ambivalent and emotional subjectivities wrought with family photos, and I will argue that it is only by considering both the doing and the feeling of family snaps that we will understand why it is a practice done overwhelmingly by women.

It is now clearer what is at stake in making the claim that family photography should be seen as a practice rather than as a type of image. Appadurai (1986, 19), focusing on what is done with objects, notes that that doing ‘both reflect[s] and constitute[s]’ social relations and identities, while Pinney phrases this in performative terms. ‘Images are not representations in the sense of a screen onto which meaning is projected’, he says; they are instead ‘compressed performances’ (Pinney 2004, 8). That is, the significance of objects and viewers do not pre-exist their mutual encounter through specific practices. A certain kind of doing will produce the image as a certain sort of image, as certain material qualities are engaged with and not others, and an encounter between an image and specific practices will also constitute the viewer as a certain sort of viewer. The key question to ask, then, is less ‘what does this image show and what does it mean?’, than ‘what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act?’ (Bal 2003, 9). What happens, for example, when a woman pauses to looks at a framed photo of her baby when she pulls the curtains to at night, or decides to scroll through a folder of holiday photos once she’s finished doing her email? How do the photos become certain sorts of images, what is seen in them, and how do those women become certain sorts of mothers as they look at snaps of their children in particular ways? How is a newspaper reader positioned as she looks at a family snap of a missing child, or of a person who died in a bomb explosion? How certain subject positions are constituted through specific ways of seeing family photos is one of the key themes of this book.
Practice and place

I want to emphasise one further element of my account of doing family photos. So far I have discussed their material qualities, the integrative practices in which they are embedded and the productivity of that interrelation between materiality and practice, particularly in terms of the social positions and relations that are created as practices are performed. What I want to add now is the importance of where photos are seen, or the ‘setting’ of visual practices (Schatzki 1996, 115). Practices always happen in specific places, and this makes a difference to their performance, as the notion of ‘recontextualisation’ suggests. As photos move from one place to another – from family album to art gallery wall, say (Parsons 2008) – they are looked at differently, and look different.

There are three dynamics here (Jansson 2007). First, how things are seen is governed by the material structure of the place: screens, pillars, seats, for example. Secondly, tacit knowledges and rules specific to a place usually invite quite specific performances of seeing (which include specific modes of bodily and other sensorial comportments). These include ‘the practices of looking invested in any object’ (Bal 2003, 11). Sitting in a cinema seat, for example, the etiquette of where to put coats and bags, what to eat and drink there and how, when you can talk and when you shouldn’t, the specific kinds of gazes given to adverts, trailers, films (as opposed to invited by them, about which we know a lot) ... all these things are peculiar to cinemas, and vary between different cinemas. Phil Hubbard’s (2003) work on British multiplexes demonstrates very clearly, for example, that when people decide to go see a film, they are not simply deciding what film they want to see; they also make decisions about the place they want to see it in, because different cinemas have different ways of being done. Multiplexes, for example, are valued for their ease of parking, comfortable seats and for the feelings of safety and security they generate. Specific ways of doing seeing, then, are performed in specific places. Thirdly, though, it is the practices undertaken in those places which reproduce them as those sorts of spaces (or not). If everyone started to wander in and out of all the cinemas in a multiplex just like they wander in and out of galleries in a museum, strolling down a side aisle, along the front and up the other side, inspecting the walls all the while, it would no longer be a cinema. Schatzki (1996, 115) recognises this dynamic between practices and their places thus: ‘not only are settings set up to house particular practices, but their setups anchor spaces established by those practices’. Practices of looking, then, are also about the practising of places.

The site of viewing family photographs was something that I now see as one of the most important aspects of my interview work. Visiting all these women in their own homes, sitting down at a table with them with photos spread out in front of us, or sitting next to them on a sofa, sharing an album or passing photos hand to hand (both positions dictated by the small size of family snaps), in their living rooms, their kitchens, their studies, and talking with the photos around us gave me that sense of participating in their photography practice that I’ve already
noted. It also gave me a strong sense of their domestic space, and in being in that
domestic space, I looked at those photos in a certain way. I wasn’t looking at them
as I would if they were in a gallery wall; I wasn’t making aesthetic judgements
or analysing their critical intent. Instead I was being told about – I was learning
about – different family members, different holidays, different family moments.
All the women I spoke with talked me through their photos in a very similar way,
giving me information about who was in the photo, where it was taken, and who
had taken it, skipping some photos, talking at length about and with others. I
responded with questions along the same lines. In that sharing, we were making
that space domestic by looking at the photographs in a particular way: as family
snaps. We were in a domestic space that both invited that kind of looking and
which, through our looking, was reproduced as domestic. The chapter after next
explores that particular domesticity more fully, and Chapter 5 presses its spatiality
further; while Chapter 7 looks at what happens when a family snap gets looked at
in a very different kind of location.

Conclusions

Family photographs are undoubtedly specific kinds of images. Whether made
by film or digital cameras, family photos picture a limited number of things
in particular kinds of ways. The range of content in family photos is indeed
‘astonishingly narrow’ (Halle 1993, 104). Because of this, an image’s production
as a family snap is usually obvious from its appearance. Your family photos will,
in some ways, look a lot like mine: not in terms of who they picture, of course,
but in terms of how they are pictured, where they are pictured, and what they are
pictured doing. However, as this chapter has argued, what a particular photo looks
like is not sufficient to define it as a family photo. To be a family photograph,
an image has to look like a family photo but also to be treated like one. It has to
have family photography things done with it. It has to be a participant in family
photography practices.

Those practices encounter family snaps as particular kinds of objects – rolls
of film, prints, disposable cameras, digital files – and make particular things of
them. The possibilities of that making are not infinite. They are limited both by
the affordances of the photos and the integrated practices being undertaken. But
in that doing, both photograph and practice are constituted – and may indeed be
reconstituted in slightly, or even radically, different ways (Shove et al. 2007; Pinney
2005). What is also constituted in the encounter between object and practice are
subject positions and social relations. The next chapter puts some empirical flesh
onto these theoretical bones by looking at what sort of objects family snaps are,
and at what my interviewees said about and did with theirs. The chapter after next
looks at what happens as a result of those sayings and doings. Among other things,
and in a move which distinguishes this study from many others exploring the
uses of technologies, it pays careful attention to the feelings and subject positions produced as family photography is done.
Chapter 3
What is Done with Family Snaps?

For very nearly all of my interviewees, making family photographs was an important part of their family life. All of them stressed how important it was to take photos of their family members, and in particular of their children. They all felt compelled to take photographs of their kids, especially when those children were very young (Titus 1976). The mums told me about the many, many photos they’d taken of their children when they were newborn: ‘tons and tons’, ‘masses’, ‘every time Andrew moved he got to have a photograph’, ‘we were clicking all the time’, ‘we’ve got pictures of Jenny breathing, sort of, smiling, breathing, eating’, ‘you know, everything he did – and they don’t do anything! – I went, “take a photograph, take a photograph”, so we’ve got like loads.’ As their babies grew, all these mums agreed with Tina when she said, ‘you just have to make a conscious effort to keep snapping away I think’. I was shown albums and albums and boxes and boxes and folders and folders of photographs, and photos were on display everywhere in almost all the houses I visited, even in the toilets; they were ‘dotted about’, ‘all round’ and ‘anywhere’.

Photos were not always treated as particularly precious objects: I was told of photos ‘shoved’, ‘bunged’ and ‘whammed’ into storage boxes or albums, and the process of downloading digital photos from cameras onto home computers was never given any attention by my interviewees. The practice of taking photographs was also trivialised. All the mums were laughing when as they talked about just how many photographs they’d taken of their babies. They were laughing at themselves for their desire to photograph repeatedly babies who, as Fiona said, aren’t doing anything – ending up with hundreds of photos showing more or less the same thing. But if the sheer numbers of photos were funny they were also a bit embarrassing when someone else was looking at them all. There were even suggestions that such a compulsion to photograph was a kind of pathology: Sam described herself as going ‘mad’ when she took lots of photos on a recent trip with her two-year-old daughter to Australia to see her brother, while Leah said she took photos of ‘really stupid things’ and Tina said she was ‘getting better’ now her kids were older and she was taking fewer photos of them.

So what is it about family snaps, that so many are produced despite it all seeming a bit daft to the people doing it? This chapter explores family photography as it is done by a group of middle-class women living in south-east England. The previous chapter described what its approach to family photography will be. It argued that family snaps should be understood as particular kinds of objects with specific material qualities, and that what is done with them is as important as what they look like; it also argued that family photographic practice produces both
subject positions and social relations. This chapter is going to explore, first, what kind of objects family photographs are. To do that, the chapter turns both to the affordances of the photos themselves, but also to how the women I interviewed talked about them and to some of the things they did with them. For, as I argued in Chapter 2, objects are a combination of some of their specific material qualities together with how those qualities are mobilised by people talking about, and doing things with, those objects. The chapter then describes more fully the range of things that my interviewees did with their photographs. One of the first things I learnt from these women was both how elaborate but also how rule-bound their family photography was. As a practice, it is both extensive and remarkably similar across all my interviewees. Just what it constitutes in terms of subject positions and social relations will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Family snaps as objects**

Following Edwards’s (2002) explication of the materiality of photographs, let’s begin with the visual content of the photographs belonging to my interviewees. If all but one of these women wanted to show me their albums, framed photographs and computer folders, they also all urged me not to feel I had to look carefully at every single photo. Partly this was due to the sheer numbers of photographs they had, and partly it was because they knew I didn’t know the people pictured – and as I will argue below, knowing the people pictured is vital to the viewing of family photos. But it was also because my interviewees knew their photos were repetitive. Sarah, for example, said she used ‘any excuse’ to show her wedding album to visitors, but ‘You don’t like to bore people, do you. “Would you like to see my wedding album, it’ll take an hour!” That’s when I say, please flick through fast. Because they’re very samey.’

The fact that family photos are boring because they are ‘samey’ is a point made repeatedly by the critical literature on family photographs, as Chapter 2 noted. Many critics have commented on the limited subject matter of family snaps, but these criticisms of what family snaps look like entirely ignore what the people actually making such repetitive images say about, and do with, their family photographs.

There is no doubt that family photos are indeed limited in style and subject matter. This has been confirmed by at least three large-scale quantitative surveys of family photo collections (Chalfen 1987; Cronin 1998; Halle 1993), and I saw no evidence in the many, many photographs I was shown in the course of my interviews to suggest that the conclusions of those studies were inappropriate for the women I spoke with. My interviewees described their photos as showing happy, everyday sorts of things. As Humeira said:

In fact I find myself photographing everyday kinds of things, so, er, either they have some friends over and they’re just playing, or they’re drawing something...
or playing out and it’s a nice day, it looks sunny and you take a photograph, so that kind of thing.

Just life, like going to the park on a snowy day, it’s not an event but it’s something that happened. (Rina)

Snaps show kids ‘doing daily things’, as Judith said. Many of the mothers I spoke with also made an effort to take photos when a toddler did something new. ‘If Tia’s doing something really cute or new or funny in our eyes I’ll try and get her,’ said Sharon.

Baby albums were felt to be especially generic, especially in the photos of ‘firsts’: hospital visitors, first time home, first outing, first smile, first solid food, first tooth, first steps first pair of shoes, first birthday party (when the album usually ends), ‘all the usuals’. Although I was never told to flick quickly through these particular albums – baby albums, for most of my interviewees, were especially resonant – nonetheless the mum showing me her collection of baby photos would make it clear she knew that it was hardly unique in its subject matter. ‘You must have seen loads along the same lines’, Helen said, and Jane listed the conventional pictures in a sing-song voice as she showed them to me, to indicate her awareness of their banality. Jeanette laughingly described herself as ‘sad’ for the predictability of the baby album she’d made, and several mothers with older children had series of photographs of birthday parties, first days at school, school shows, and so on. Elizabeth told me: ‘the birthdays are always sort of us waking up, and it’s become a tradition now, let’s take a photograph of us all in bed together while the children open their birthday presents’.

For all of them, photos were about picturing happy moments and feeling happy. Here is Rina again, whom we heard in Chapter 2 explaining why there were no photos of her when she was ill in their family photo collection:

I mean you don’t take photos of sad things. You only take photos of happy things, happy, happy trip or party or friends or, so when you open a photo album it’s actually happy happy, happy things, happy memories, happy events, and … so when I look through a photo album, it’s a very very positive uh uh erm activity.

Elizabeth agreed:

It’s just sort of nice memories, you know life is, I don’t know, I mean I feel life at the moment, our lives, are pretty kind of, you know I’m sure everyone feels like this, you plod through life and those memories of, you know those lovely images just make you think of those sparkling moments.

Family photographs do indeed show family members happily at leisure, and their makers are well aware of that.
However, the object-ness of family snaps is constituted by more than just the visual content of what the photographs show; there is also their material form. Thus they can exist as paper prints, or as digital files on a screen, for example, and a few of my second group of interviewees commented on the difference between digital photographs on screen and printed film photos. While Elizabeth commented that the colours of digital photos weren’t quite right, other interviewees thought they were ‘fantastic’. There was no consensus on this point. What was of more concern to my interviewees in relation to digital images and printed ones, though, was their accessibility, which is related to their presentational form. Rina, for example, felt that digital images were less accessible to her than photos printed and put in albums:

I actually feel a bit sorry that it’s a digital time now because I won’t go and sit at the computer and look at, I actually like to, I’m very old-fashioned, I like the radio, I like to browse through photo albums, yeah, it’s just, it’s nice, brings things to life.

Later in the interview she joked that she had to fight with her husband and daughter to get time on the computer, and the only thing she did regularly on it was the weekly food shop. But this question of the accessibility of digital images to viewing was important to several of my interviewees. Almost everyone I spoke with, in both sets of interviews, mentioned how much their children enjoyed looking through family albums, and how much they enjoyed looked at them with their kids (the chapter will return to this point). About half my second group of interviewees, though, made comments to the effect that ‘it’s just easier to pick up an album and look through it rather than sit at the computer’, to use Humeira’s words. To be adequately accessible, for many (but not all) mums, photos should be printed, and Tami had just bought a new printer to print a large number of her digital photos so that her kids could look at them whenever they wanted to. Other interviewees were perfectly happy taking their cameras to a supermarket or a high street shop to get photos printed.

For yet others, getting digital photos printed didn’t always happen. As Elizabeth rather sheepishly explained:

You never really put them into print like these ones, and the intention is always there, and the idea is that you can have a really good set of prints, but getting down to doing it, like anything, is sort of er … you know, is quite difficult.

As Noa pointed out, with a film camera you have to get prints, but with digital image files on a computer, you don’t:

You sort of have to print the pictures yourself and it seems like something not natural to do when with the analogue camera you don’t really have any other choice, you have to print them, or at least it’s much more natural.
Noa describes the need for a film to be developed in order to see its photos as ‘natural’, and for many of the women I interviewed, that naturalised practice was carried over to their digital camera’s memory cards. But not for all. Others were settling, if somewhat uncertainly and with some doubts, for their screens replacing their album pages. This seems to me to be a moment when the affordances of the combination of a digital camera with a home computer was shifting what some women at least were doing with their family snaps, with the screened slideshow replacing the photo album.

Whether kept and looked at as a print or a file, though, all my interviewees shared what for them was the most important aspect of the visual qualities of their family photos: their truthfulness. Their photos showed them what their family really looked like, and this is the key quality of family snaps, made possible by the camera technology, but also, and crucially, by what my interviewees said about their photos and also by what they did with them. Photos are understood as visual objects that show what something or somebody really looks like (Chalfen 1987, 133).

The truthfulness of photos has been the subject of much theoretical discussion, most of it centred on the claims made by Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* (2000). That book begins with his desire to find the essence of photography: ‘by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images’ (Barthes 2000, 3), and for Barthes the essence of photography is the way it shows ‘only and for certain what has been’ (Barthes 2000, 85). Photographs carry a trace of what was there when the shutter snapped, and so they reassure us that their referent – what they picture – really existed. ‘A pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe’, he says (Barthes 2000, 5), looking at a photograph. For Barthes, it is the ability of the photograph to carry a trace of its referent that is photography’s distinguishing feature: ‘photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, never as to its existence’ (Barthes 2000, 87). Rosalind Krauss (1986) elaborated on Barthes’s argument to claim that photographs are therefore indexical images: they are a sign connected to its referent by some kind of physical connection, in this case light reflected from objects onto light-sensitive film or, more recently, onto photovoltaic cells.

Debate continues about whether ‘indexicality’ is the correct term for the showing of ‘what has been’, and whether it is a quality inherent in all photographs (Elkins 2007). I concur with those authors who follow Barthes in seeing ‘the absolute Particular’ of photographs as an essential quality of their images (Barthes 2000, 4). Indexicality is an affordance of photographic images. As an affordance, it is one of a photograph’s inherent qualities; but it is only realised and significant as it is ‘activated’, as it were, by particular practices. Hence indexicality may or may not matter to a particular photographic practice; and if it does, it may have quite diverse effects, as Christopher Pinney (2008) has argued. Truth claims using photographs are thus contingent and depend as much on the viewer as on the image itself (McCauley 2007), and Pinney (2008) has discussed a range of competing
indexicalities that legitimate quite different versions of what is apparently the ‘same’ photograph.

There is no doubt, however, that the indexical affordance of their photographs was taken for granted by all my interviewees, co-constituted by my interviewees in their doings and sayings with their photos (and perhaps this conviction contributed to their reluctance to use photo-editing software). Thus it was not surprising to see that three of my interviewees had made prints of their baby’s hand or foot and put them with photographs, either in an album or a frame. The photograph is seen as an imprint of a scene, if you like, just as a handprint marks the form of an actual hand. All are evidence of ‘an intractable reality’ (Barthes 2000, 119). Indexicality was produced through three further aspects of their practice. First, all the photographs, whether on paper or on screen, were taken as evidence of what people looked like. All the mums I talked with showed family photos to their young children and babies to in order to teach them who was who in their family, and all were delighted when their children could put names to the faces in photos. This assumption of likeness also animates the sending of photographs to family and friends:

It’s quite nice to send photos of him, because if he, you know my grandmother doesn’t see him that often you know he changes so much so. You know it’s nice for her to keep up to to date. How he looks really. (Helen)

And I mean my parents they love, as I say they love them, because they can see what they’re like. What everybody’s doing. (Linda)

First grandchild, so my parents were very keen to see everything. (Sharon)

Just a reminder of, for the children as well, how their cousins, er look and developing and looking. And they send photographs over through the year. And then so do we. (Tina)

It’s nice to, it’s a way of keeping in touch, obviously, as er, and it’s a way that Ruth can see her cousins and nieces. (Rina)

Photographs are looked at, and sent to others to look at, because they are seen as accurately showing appearances.

Secondly, some photographs were described as showing a truth that the mother herself could not see at the time. Karen, for example, commented about the few photos that she and her husband had taken of their son when he was ill by saying:

And it’s funny, that period he was unwell, there’s a few photographs but the ones we’ve got, we notice how, we can see, looking back now how unwell he actually was. And at the time when we were in the thick of it and the child’s ill, you don’t
sort of see it. You know he’s unwell but you don’t see it so much in him. But looking back you know, you can actually see how unwell he was.

Photographs are seen as offering a different and more accurate view than being ‘in the thick of it’. Diane too had to cope with a very ill baby, and when I asked her what she felt looking back on pictures of Jenny as a baby she said:

I can’t actually, you know she was so ill, and it was such a desperate time … I was totally alone with a desperately ill child. And I can hardly remember anything, of er, I was I think I was so exhausted after the first, that four or five years had elapsed. So I need the photograph to think, ‘Oh my goodness she was a baby!’ Erm I hardly remember it. It was just you know it was horrific.

More prosaically, Noa relied on a photo to show her what her two-month old daughter really looked like: ‘at that time I thought she was beautiful but now she looks like a little monkey – I know how she looks now [laughing]’.

Thus photographs are seen as carriers of true evidence of what was there when they were taken, truer even than the human witnesses to those scenes. All the mothers I interviewed thus also mentioned the importance to them of the memories that looking at photographs prompted; for several, it was their most prized quality. ‘I just think it’s just a nice constant reminder’, Tina said, while looking at photos for Claire ‘just joggs the memory’ and for Jeanette ‘it just makes me remember, you know, the time’. The effect of photographs’ truthfulness is to act as a prompt to memories that may otherwise not be recalled. Several mums used photographs as a ‘log’, as Jeanette called it, of their child’s development. As Sharon said:

I wanted documentation. Sometimes I’ll do something to document so I won’t forget it.

Cos I know how much they change, and I just, I just wanna remember them really of of the different stages and stuff. (Sam)

Erm don’t know, it’s like developmental moments now that go into an album. (Linda)

The third way in which the indexicality of a photograph was asserted was in those moments in interviews when the photo was addressed or described as if it was the person it showed. Now of course, when photographs are shown to someone, as so many were to me in these interviews, the way they are described does exactly that. A photo is shown and you are told, ‘this is my brother’, ‘that’s Elena at her first birthday party’, ‘this is the best man and his girlfriend at our wedding’. This is – the expression in full would be ‘this is a photo of’, but ‘the photo of’ drops away and, as Batchen (2000, 263) remarks, ‘all of us tend to look at photographs as if we are simply gazing through a two-dimensional window...
onto some outside world’. But in the interviews the photograph really did seem to be treated as if it was what it pictured. Thus Linda said of a photo of her boy, ‘it is nice to have a look at him’, and Paula, like Nikki, worried about not being able to see all the framed photos on her sideboard in terms of the people in the photos hiding each other: ‘I was always really conscious you know that somebody was blocking somebody else out.’ Shally talked about a calendar that her sister-in-law had made using family snaps as if it actually contained the people it showed: ‘I think because we are living in England, they seem to kind of, “oh they should have the family there in a calendar”. Because I think they themselves, they keep us in their calendar! [laughter]’

And then there were Diane and Sam, who both expressed some anxiety about having certain sorts of photographs in their bedrooms; Sam said ‘some people find it a bit strange that you’ve got your children in your bedroom’, while Diane was rather self-conscious when she told me she had pictures of her mother and father on her bedside table. Both seem aware of taboos about children, parents and sex, and to feel that having a photo of onlookers to the marital bed was in some way similar to having the actual parents or children there. It was Diane again who spoke about a photograph of her mother as if it was her. Talking about a photograph of her mother in a frame on the television cabinet, she said, ‘She’s really my soulmate, my Mum I just adore her so. Yeah I like her there. Er she’ll stay in the lounge [laughing].’ Hence, I would suggest, the importance of being able to touch and handle photos for some of my interviewees. It’s almost like touching the actual person.

From this discussion, it has become somewhat clearer what kinds of objects family photographs are. Whether printed or on screens, family snaps have two key perceived affordances (Larsen 2008). Forged from both their own material qualities and some taken for granted attitudes towards them expressed in both saying and doing, they have a specific visual content – of family members happily at leisure – and they show those people and scenes truthfully, so truthfully indeed that some photos seem to substitute for the actual person they picture (although it is acknowledged they do not show the whole truth of family life). The next section discusses what is done with these objects.

What is done with family snaps?

A great deal is done with these photographs. Indeed, while family photos never show domestic labour, for my interviewees they were an important part of it. Elizabeth, for example, described ordering her family snaps as ‘one of my jobs’. This work is, to quote Reckwitz (2002, 249) again, ‘a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another’, and it follows certain rules and precepts which, as Schatzki (1996) argues, are inherent to integrative practices.
One of the rules, according to my interviewees, was that photographs should be dated, if the camera didn’t do it for them. They described themselves as ‘good’ if they did this; as Emma said, ‘I was so good and labelled the fronts of the, of the erm wallet, you know sort of Bella first week, or Bella first month.’ Most printed photographs were also put into some kind of organised storage, either in the envelopes or boxes they arrived in from the developers and then in cupboards or boxes devoted to them; or they were taken out and stored in albums (one interviewee had a fireproof metal box for especially precious photos). More women in my second group relied on their cameras or software to date photographs, but they nearly all also organised their photos into files labelled by date, or by important events that generated lots of photos: ‘I’d name them “June to July 2005” or “Pesach 2002”’.

Apart from storing them, I want to emphasise four other things which are done with the photos, whether printed or digital. First, making albums is very popular. Every mother except one in my first group of interviewees was either making a photo album or planning time in the future to make one; going through photos and putting an album together was seen as time-consuming and therefore difficult, but also as necessary and pleasurable. In my second group, about half were planning albums, since, as the previous section pointed out, albums were often seen to be a much more accessible way of looking at photos than computers were. Merav, however, explained that she hadn’t made an album for her second child because she now had digital photos: ‘I never made a photo album, which I suppose wouldn’t be the case if we wouldn’t have the computer, I suppose I just thought we’d see them on tv or whatever.’

Secondly, some photos would be chosen for display in the house, and, far less often, elsewhere. Some were individually framed, or propped or pinned up somewhere unframed; some were made into collages; some were put into purses or wallets, and some were taken into workspaces. All but one of the women I spoke with had family photos out on display in their home. Although most were quite unself-conscious about this, there was a small but significant number of mums who were less keen on this sort of display, especially of their children. They felt that it was inappropriate to centre so much attention on a photo. Noa, for example, told me:

It’s also something that um … in a way it seems like it’s really like kind of … to admire someone, to hang it on the wall or, and I’m not saying I’m not admiring my child, but erm … I don’t know, it’s weird for us to hang it on the wall, so erm … less modest or something. So we don’t have really this … feeling to do it at all.

This feeling that it was rather boastful to have photos of your family, especially your children, hanging on your walls or standing on your shelves, was shared by several of the women I recruited through the Israeli friendship network, and Merav told me she thought it was a cultural difference. Her own photo display, she said,
'comes from my side of the family and it’s the American side of my family. It’s not an Israeli thing to put pictures of yourself or people around the house, certainly not live people.’ And she went on:

I think just generally most people in Israel don’t have, not a lot of pictures around, not, you know, frames and whatever, but in America it’s very popular, so my parents do have them because my mother comes from America and my sisters, um…

However, not all the Israeli women I talked with felt the same, and some of the other women I interviewed had similar misgivings. Despite this concern, only one of my interviewees, an Israeli woman whose husband ‘really suffers’ when he sees family photos framed on display, had absolutely no photos out on display in her house.

Thirdly, whether out on display, in albums or in storage, the photos were looked at, and that too is a kind of doing. We’ve already heard Slater (1995, 141) asserting that ‘at most, we look at photographs as a kind of one-off reliving of a recent leisure experience (a quick look at the holiday snaps when they come back from the chemist)’ and that ‘emotional investment in these images maybe intense but is generally short – they gradually become invisible’ (Slater 1995, 146). In contrast, the women I spoke to insisted that they do look at their family snaps, including old ones, and often: ‘a lot’, said Shally. They do this, like Judith and Jeanette, when they work on their family albums:

I do look at them and particularly the ones in the albums erm I look at a lot. Well when I say a lot, probably, probably once a month I’ll look at hers because I’ll be putting new photos in. (Jeanette)

They do it as part of their everyday routines of domestic labour. Here are Karen and Tina:

You know, I I suppose because they’re in that bay window. I have to look at those. You know you can’t help but you know, you draw the curtains at night. I look at them, maybe only for one second, but you know my eye catches them and I think, well I look at them.

Erm I like the photographs because they’re there, you don’t have to go hunting for the video … erm er If I’m dusting or something then I’ll you know I’ll pick them up and have a proper look at them.

And they do it, like Hero, when the photos simply catch their eye. Talking about a photos of her father, her parents-in-law and her children, she said they were: ‘near where the mirror in the bedroom is so every morning I would you know even subliminally look at those photos and occasionally feel quite – I do feel quite sentimental about those’. Photographs are looked at, then, by the women.
They are also looked at by mums with their children. All the mums told me that they often looked at family photos with their children, whether that was looking through an album or watching a computer slideshow. Claire said, ‘When the weather’s bad or just moments when we haven’t got anything to do, I’ll get the albums out, my husband enjoys looking at them, and the children do, so that’s when I feel it’s of benefit.’ Mums with younger children often remarked with surprise at how much their babies and toddlers loved looking at family photos, and all were delighted, like Karen, when their young children could tell them the names of the people pictured: ‘because usually he he points people out, which is great’. For mums with older children, photos were looked at together for fun, to fill a rainy afternoon, for school projects. Although several mums felt, as I noted above, that albums of printed photographs were preferable to computer slideshows, the several mums with family photos on their computers talked about looking at slideshows with their children in just the same way as the mums with albums did. Hero even preferred slideshows:

I like the little way that you can have a little film show of your holiday, I, for me that’s still a novelty, that you just put the thing on and it just clicks through and you can all sit round and say, ‘Well, wasn’t that good’, and somehow to me that’s more fun as a participatory activity than just handing the things round.

The fourth significant thing that happens to family photos was shared by all but one of my interviewees: they sent family snaps to other family members and, less often, to close friends. All but one of the women I interviewed sent photographs to their own parents (sometimes specified as their mother in particular), and photos were also sent to, for example, their husband’s parents, to their children’s grandparents, to their own sisters and brothers, to aunts, uncles and cousins, to nephews and nieces and to particularly close friends. Sending photographs to family members clearly reflected, and reaffirmed, the emotional closeness of family relationships, since several of my interviewees explained to me that there were also family members to whom they did not send photos, or sent fewer of them. Rachel did not send any to her mother-in-law because she did not get on with her. Tina knew that her husband’s parents cared far less for pictures of her daughters than of her son, and Leah told me that, because of various family hostilities, ‘I can’t send to my mother-in-law photos of the other er stepmother-in-law, or for my brother I won’t send pictures of my sister.’ Hence these mothers enacted familial integration through their family photography work, but that work was unevenly distributed among family members according to the intensity of familial affiliation. It also often fades over time, as children grow and places become familiar. There are two moments when photos were sent particularly frequently, though: at the birth of a child, and after a move to a new country, although a steady flow of photos could continue for years after these events. Lots of photos got sent by some of my interviewees who’d just arrived in the UK from elsewhere to show their relatives what their new home
looked like. Sharon had also taken photos of Canada, which she’d left to come to Britain, to show the ‘drop dead gorgeous’ landscape of British Columbia, while Shally had brought with her from Israel framed pictures of the Sinai beach which she particularly loved. But far more commonly circulated than photos of places were photos of children. Sharon, for example, explained how she sent digital photos and videos to her parents and to her brother and sister-in-law in Israel when her daughter was born in Canada:

My parents were very keen to see everything ... what we would do is every week or so I would upload the cameras from my computer to my brother’s computer, and he would get, like, so we’re talking about a hundred pictures and videos ... it was motivated to make them happy and to keep them sort of in the loop a lot, I mean it did, it helped keep them in the loop, especially about everything that’s going on with her because I mean that was the hard thing, that they were so far away they couldn’t be there really.

As the previous section pointed out, all the women I spoke with assumed that photos would indeed show ‘everything’ to people who couldn’t see what was pictured for real.

The major reason given for sending family photographs to relations and friends – which Sharon mentions – was that they do not see the children of the family frequently enough: ‘they were so far away they couldn’t be there’. (Conversely, the one interviewee who said she had never sent a photo to her family – who lived in Pakistan – explained that she didn’t need to because they saw each other at least three or four times a year.) Most of Linda’s family was in South Africa, ‘so we email photographs fairly regularly ... they’re missing out on his growing up’. Tami, with family in Israel, said she sent photos to her dad, sister and sister’s mum ‘because they don’t see us. They see us twice a year or once a year and they want to see how the children look. They’re still a part of us, we’re still a part of them.’ And Rina pointed out that it was important for her daughter to see her relations in Israel: ‘it’s a way of keeping in touch, obviously, as er, and it’s a way that Ruth can see her cousins and nieces’. As well as the photos that the women I interviewed sent to their distant or not-so-distant relatives as prints or files, there were also various other circulations of photographs: photos put onto CDs, or printed, and taken as gifts when trips were made to other countries to see relatives; relatives who visited and made albums for my interviewees before they left; friends and relatives who sent photos via email to my interviewees; and photos were sometimes uploaded onto photo-sharing websites like Flickr or Photobucket to be viewed and possibly printed by others in distant places. Family photos are sent travelling, in various forms, very long distances.

So, photos are dated and stored, they are displayed in various ways, they are looked at by these mums, often with their children, and copies are sent in various ways to other relatives or to close friends. Printing them, though, as we’ve seen, is not as important to digital family photography; several interviewees claimed
What is Done with Family Snaps?

that digital photographs were somehow more difficult to print, and that they were therefore less accessible.

Another significant difference between digital and film cameras for some of my interviewees was that digital photos were sometimes much easier to discard than printed photographs. Printed photographs are extraordinarily difficult to dispose of. For despite the enormous numbers of photos generated by their desire to photograph ‘everything’, only two of the women I spoke with had ever thrown away any prints of their own children. (One was Diane, who had thrown out all her family photos that were not in albums or frames when she emigrated to England from South Africa; and the other was Shally, who took five or six photos of the same scene and then kept only the best one.) Usually when I asked an interviewee if she had ever thrown photos away, the question was greeted with horror: ‘I can’t’, ‘Never’, ‘I couldn’t bear to’. Even Hero, from my second group, self-confessedly ‘abnormally draconian’ about throwing things out, admitted that when she had a film camera, the prints she didn’t want to keep still got kept, on the pretext of using them for other things like postcards or kids’ art projects. Given their sense that photos are somehow the material trace of the person they show, this horror is not perhaps that surprising. Throwing away a photograph would be like throwing away (part of) the child, as Paula said explicitly.

Some of the mothers with digital photos had a rather different attitude to disposing of digital images of their children, however. A couple of them explained to me that one advantage of a digital camera is that you can indeed delete images easily, and five of my interviewees with digital cameras said they often deleted photos they had taken. Sometimes they did this on the camera, sometimes they waited until they could see the pictures on the computer screen before deciding which to keep and which to erase. Leah gave one reason for deleting digital photos: ‘when I’m taking them I’m deleting them, you know, in the process of taking them I’m deleting them, something I’m not happy I’ll delete again and again and again until I’m happy’.

Noa also deleted lots of digital photos in order to keep just the best ones; her other reason for deleting was shared with Diane from my first group of interviewees: moving house.

Most of the photos I would delete, so um – but it’s also because I’m taking the same photo many times and then I’m choosing one of them, and also why I hate to keep things I don’t like, I mean I have this trauma from moving four houses in four years [laugh] and having too much stuff, much much much too much stuff! So in all levels I don’t keep anything any more I don’t sort of I don’t like or I don’t use or don’t want to see it ever again, so I very easily delete photos and just keep those really nice photos that I really enjoy to look at them.

There were also four women with digital cameras I interviewed who (almost) never deleted any photos. Merav, for example, gave the same reason for not deleting photo files as Paula had for not throwing away prints: ‘I don’t usually
delete them, I put them in a separate folder, but that, that’s, I mean you won’t delete Sam, you won’t.’

Tami agreed. Deleting a digital photo ‘symbolises something’ in relation to the person it pictures: ‘it’s very difficult for me to throw out pictures of my children, even if they’re very bad I don’t always put them in the bin, I just put them somewhere … It’s an act like there’s, it symbolises something in a way.’

Deleting digital photos, then, is not always as easy as pushing a few buttons or striking a few keys, because digital photos too carry a trace of the person pictured.

Not all my interviewees experienced these differences, however. The question of the disposability of digital images is not in fact a simple difference between digital and analogue. For every mum I spoke with who happily deleted digital images, there was one who didn’t. And women with printed photos did sometimes throw some away, for the same reasons I was told digital images got deleted: moving house, or selecting the best photo from a group showing the same scene. Similarly, despite claims that photos on computers were less accessible than those in albums, almost all the women with digital photos seemed to spend just as much time looking at them with their children as the mums with albums. It appears that, although digital and print photos are somewhat different in their presentational forms, it is not their presentational form that matters most to these women. Rather, it is their visual content: what they show and the truthfulness of that showing. Hence pictures of happy moments, carrying a trace of the people pictured, are valued whether printed or on a screen, and it is those qualities that are both assumed and reproduced in the care taken to date, store, display, look at and share these repetitive and banal photos.

Conclusion

This chapter has described both what family photos are, and what is done with them. Indeed, it is not possible to describe what sorts of objects they are, without understanding what is done with them. While theoretical debate rages over the essential, defining quality of the photograph (Elkins 2007), women like the mothers I spoke with are getting on, doing a range of similar things with a certain kind of photograph and in the process creating a very particular sort of photo: a family snap. Family snaps picture members of a family happily at leisure, and they are dated, stored, displayed, looked at and circulated according to the rules of the integrative practice that is family photography. The perceived affordance that makes all that work possible is the indexicality of the image. It is because the photo is a true record of what was there when the shutter snapped – a physical trace of the bodies made visible, ‘a relic of the body of the beloved person’ (di Bello 2007, 85) – that the photo is almost impossible to throw away, and that it is worthwhile looking at, displaying in one’s own home and sending to others. The materiality of the photo allows these activities to happen.
The indexicality of the photographic image also in part explains why, for my interviewees at least, a rather traditional form of family photography continues to be practised. Recent technological changes do not seem to have had a radical effect on their family photography (see also Shove et al. 2007), in part at least because those changes have not challenged the indexicality of the image. Digital cameras, computers and printers arrived, the presentational form of family snaps changed somewhat, but what is done with those snaps seems to have shifted very little. Perhaps a few more photos are deleted; perhaps slideshows are sometimes substituting for albums. However, this hardly matters because the presentational form of family snaps is not their most important characteristic. Instead, it is the indexicality of their visual form which allows so much of family photography practice to happen: pictures that carry the trace of people enable the careful storing, displaying, looking and circulating of family snaps. Because of that, very little has changed in the shift from film cameras to digital cameras and home computers amongst my interviewees (see also Horst and Miller 2006; Shove et al. 2007), since those new technologies have not changed the indexicality of the photographic image in relation to this particular photographic practice.

In contrast, several critics have recently claimed that the development of digital technologies has indeed fundamentally changed family photography practice (Batchen 2008; Chalfen 2002; van Dijck 2008; Murray 2008; Rubinstein and Sluis 2008). Many of these accounts discuss camera phones, or assume that all family photography is now uploaded onto photo-sharing websites. Although camera phones and photo-sharing websites seem to be quite commonly used by people younger than the women I spoke with, the limited use made of them by my recent interviewees suggests that critics should not assume that all family photography has gone digital by using Flickr, for example, still less that ‘our … notions of everyday aesthetics’ are ‘shifting’ as a result (Murray 2008, 147). ‘We’ are making diverse use of digital technologies, with diverse effects, and studies of contemporary photographies would do well to remember that. The group of women I interviewed are, by and large, integrating new technologies into existing practices.

The next chapter looks in detail at the social relations and subject positions produced by my interviewees’ family photography practice, and this suggests both why family photography is so important to them, and some further reasons for why they have not rushed to embrace the full range of new digital technologies available. After all, as Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2006, 6) note, ‘technology is used initially with reference to desires that are historically well-established’. Patrizia di Bello has traced the confluence of certain desires with the emergence of family photography practice in her study of mid-Victorian upper-class women’s photograph albums, in order to understand how ‘photographic portraits have become our society’s privileged sign of emotional attachment’ (di Bello 2007, 8). The next chapter explores why the family photographic ‘portrait’ remains as important to the women I spoke with in relation to their families and their children as they seem to have been to the women di Bello discusses.
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In its discussion of what gets done with family photographs, Chapter 3 noted that one of the most important things that happens is that family photos are made to travel. A large part of what is ordinarily done with family photographs, whether prints or files, is about making them mobile. This is especially true of snaps of families with children: they are regularly printed and posted to family members, or sent on CD discs or with emails; they illustrate an annual family newsletter sent out with Christmas cards, and sometimes are sent to be displayed on Internet sites like Flickr; they are carried in purses and wallets and as keyrings; they appear as screen savers on workplace computers. This travelling is part of the way family snaps participate in maintaining familial togetherness. They are ‘a portable kit of images that bears witness to a family’s connectedness’, as Susan Sontag (1979, 8) remarks; their mobility reiterates and affirms that connectedness. When I asked Merav if it was her that usually took photos, for example, she replied, ‘it’s more I think my unofficial job to keep in touch and generally to do these things,’ as if taking photos and keeping in touch were the same thing. As the previous two chapters showed, maintaining a sense of being a connected family group was a very important part of family photography for all my interviewees, especially for women with family far away whom they saw rarely. Many of my interviewees had family members abroad, either permanently or temporarily. The women I spoke with in 2000 had relatives in South Africa, the USA, India, Italy and Australia – and in Scotland and Wales. In 2007, the interviewees I recruited through an Israeli friendship group had family in Israel but also in Argentina, Spain and the USA; one also had very close friendship networks in Canada. Other interviewees in that group had family in Pakistan and and USA. Despite these distances, I was often told about ‘close’ relationships that stretched across them and which were sustained in part by the exchange of photos, and there doesn’t need to be ‘a spread-out kind of a family’, as Humeira described hers, for all this to happen. Photos are also sent between family members living much closer to each other: Nikki frequently exchanged photographs with her sister, who lived five miles away.

These mobilities usually remain quite strictly within the realm of the family. As Chapter 3 showed, photos are sent to specific family members, and relatively few families, in the UK at least, seem prepared to upload their family photos onto Internet sites that can be accessed by anyone. None of my interviewees did so. The vast majority of family photographs move along familial routes and settle in domestic spaces. Certainly, the literature on photography has long emphasised the
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Mobility of some kinds of photographs (see for example Osborne 2000). Many scholars have discussed how explorers, travellers and anthropologists of the nineteenth century took photographs of people and places and then sold, displayed and archived them elsewhere (Edwards 2001; Ryan 1997; Schwartz 1996); how many people in the same period collected cartes de visite, small photos of celebrities or racialised ‘types’ mass-produced in industrial workshops and then sold and exchanged (Poole 1997); how art photographs travel from gallery to gallery between exhibitions; how commercial image banks now hold millions of images which are sold for use in magazines and websites (Frosh 2003); and how postcards journey between continents. Yet the mobility of family snaps has been given very little attention.

This chapter looks more carefully at the circulation of family photographs, and it does this not only to understand family photography more fully, but also to begin to establish a framework for understanding the movement of family snaps out of familial networks and their domestic spaces, and into the public spaces of the media and their audiences. As the introduction to this book noted, in the UK, family snaps are leaving their domestic habitations and circulations more and more often. While critical attention has been focused mostly on young people taking their own photos and uploading them onto social networking sites like Facebook, all sorts of organisations are also using family snaps as part of their publicity. In 2007, for example, the charity Missing People projected photographs of three missing children onto Marble Arch in London to publicise the 140,000 children that go missing in the UK each year. In the same year, the Alzheimer’s Society in the UK launched the ‘Million Memories’ website, which invited people to send in a family snap with a caption explaining what memories it held for them, at the same time requesting that they make a donation to the charity. Cancer charities, refugee charities and children’s charities are all using family snaps (or what look like them) in their publicity. In the mass media, family photos also appear more and more frequently. Newspapers now always carry family photographs of children who have gone missing or have died, for example. After the bombs in London in July 2005, many family snaps were photocopied with a few words and a phone number next to them, appearing in all sorts of public spaces where anyone could see them. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this book pay sustained attention to what happened when some family snaps went public in July 2005. This chapter, however, stays with family snaps and their families and looks more carefully at their circulations, which can stretch domestic space over long distances; and it looks at both their mobilities and their resting points.

The chapter begins though with a specific discussion of the mobility of images, including photographs: Deborah Poole’s book Vision, Race and Modernity (1997). Poole is concerned to develop a framework that focuses on how images travel and the consequences of that travelling, and to do so develops the concept of a ‘visual economy’. Poole conceives of the visual economy as ‘a comprehensive organization of people, ideas, and objects’ (Poole 1997, 8); it is used here to think about the many forms and directions in which photographs are sent travelling,
and the various spaces in which they come – often only temporarily – to rest. It is a way of thinking about how, as photographs move into various locations, the practices which made them mobile and the practices they encounter as they pause have specific effects. Although her empirical materials are very different from the ones examined here, I suggest that thinking about the movement of family snaps in terms of a visual economy is a useful starting point for understanding their mobility and its effects, both within and outwith their domestic circulations.

**Patterns of circulation in a visual economy**

In her book, Poole (1997) examines the circulation of paintings and photographs representing the Andes between Europe, North America and Andean South America from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Theoretically, Poole approaches her material as an anthropologist concerned with the relations between images and people. According to Poole, it is the exchange and referral between images and their makers and consumers that produce certain effects (1997, 7). Hence Poole argues that by the time that *cartes de visite* were patented in 1854, the notion of physiognomically distinct races was already established in South America by both European and South American observers. Peruvian photographers thus lost no time in producing *cartes de visite* of Andean Indians for sale both in South American and Europe and North America. The sustained production and circulation of these particular sort of serialised image objects worked with contemporary ideas about race to rearticulate human subjectivity, argues Poole. Both race and the visuality articulated through the *cartes de visite* were organised through typification and comparability, as well as through the pleasures of collecting and the demands of archivalisation. Poole locates the centrality of race to modernity in this homologous formation.

The term Poole uses to integrate her account theoretically is ‘visual economy’. Thinking about the visual as an ‘economy’ has two advantages, she suggests. One is that the term ‘economy’ assumes that the field of images is organised. It is structured, and it is structured by social relations of inequality and power. The second advantage is that an economy refers to the production and exchange of material goods, and hence can speak of global flows of images. As she notes (Poole 1997, 8), it is easier to imagine that people in Peru and Paris were networked together through an economy than through a shared culture. She goes on to elaborate the term ‘visual economy’ using terms from cultural studies and political economy. The visual economy, she says, has at least three levels of organisation (1997, 9). The first is that of production, and her book pays a good deal of attention to exactly who was making which images and how. The second level of the visual economy’s organisation is that of circulation, and Poole sees part of her task as carefully tracking which images go where and how in order to understand in what relations of exchange images participate as they travel. Finally, she focuses on the reception of images. This does not entail investigating what a
photograph represents or signifies, though as David Campbell (2007) notes, the idea of visual economy entails an examination of what images do in circulation rather than just an interpretation of their iconography. To achieve this focus on ‘what images do’, Poole investigates an image’s accrual of value, and in this she is explicitly indebted to Marxian political economy. How was a specific image valued? She argues, deploying the terms rather loosely, that through the early and mid-nineteenth century, photographs of people indigenous to the Andes began to lose the ‘use value’ that they had until then held for their mostly European viewers: by ‘use value’, Poole means the way photos were valued as referentially accurate. Instead, they began to accrue a certain kind of ‘exchange value’. That is, they began to be valued for the way they represented individuals as ‘types’ who could be classified and serialised, a process which made individuals interchangeable and, as I have already noted, it is in this shift that Poole locates the confluence of vision, race and modernity.

Poole’s account has been valued by a number of commentators keen to ground photography in the complexity of social relations. Pinney (2003, 8), for example, works with her emphasis on unequal flows and exchanges in his discussion of ‘the extraordinary circumstances of inequality ... that gave rise to the vast majority of images inhabiting the colonial archive’. I also find her embedding of the specificity of certain photographs in particular social relations, practices and institutions very helpful. More importantly for this chapter, Poole’s careful account of the mobilities of photographs is also useful for thinking about how family photos move between different sites, with specific effects. Her emphasis on the valuing of photographs, and on what sort of value is produced in different kinds of movements, is especially helpful. The next section explores the circulation of family snaps between family and friends, and suggests that there are in fact two kinds of valuations going on. The following section then develops Poole’s account of the visual economy further, in order to allow family photographs to be seen as part of that economy.

**Photos as free gifts and photos as messages**

Most of my interviewees felt strongly obliged to send photographs of their children to their own parents and their husband’s parents. Indeed, the expectation is mutual, as several had been given a camera by their own mum and dad to ensure that the grandparents would indeed receive photos of their grandchildren. They are sent to grandparents as part of a mother’s obligation to her parents and parents-in-law, to ‘keep them happy’ as Sharon said. Judith commented:

> Photos are – at this point, photos are almost more of an obligation to send to people than, than anything more, I mean it’s nice to look at photos of Luke … but more than anything it’s like, ‘oh I should be sending photos out every few months’ … keeping them apprised of Luke’s progress and what he’s doing.
In these circumstances, sending those sort of photos, most of my interviewees did not expect photographs in return. It seemed obvious to them that grandparents were far more interested in the day-to-day doings of their small grandchildren than the grandchildren (or their parents) would be in the day-to-day doings of the grandparents. As Merav said, ‘it is more important for the other side’. In fact, some of the women with digital photos had struggled to find the correct format for the photos in order that they could be received as a gift by parents who were not confident users of a computer. Shally, for example, told me about her husband’s parents:

I used to send them a CD, I used sometimes to put the whole CD in an envelope and send that. But um Guy’s parents didn’t do anything with that … and when we came or when they come over here and they had a look in the album and said ‘oh we must have this picture’ and I say ‘oh well you have, I sent that a few months ago’, ‘oh this one, you should develop this one for us’, and then I realise that the best is I mean as a present … just develop something, put it in a frame and give that as a present.

Although Sharon did describe her parents as ‘good’ when they sent her a CD full of photographs of a trip they had taken to China, by and large the women I spoke to did not expect to receive photographs from their parents. The photographs they sent were therefore sent without expectation of return.

How should this mode of circulating family snaps be described? In colloquial speech, the photos would be described as ‘gifts’, but it is also possible to draw on anthropological work on gifts to understand more fully what the value of the photos is in this gifting. Now, ‘gifts’ are intricate objects in anthropology, theoretically contested and empirically complex. One long-standing argument is that to give a gift is to establish an obligation to return the gift, so that ‘the gift economy … is a debt economy’ (Gregory 1982, 19). However, Monica Konrad (2005, 41) suggests that not all gifting produces debt: some gifts are ‘free gifts’ (and see Parry 1986). Since my interviewees did not expect a return, it seems that they are making ‘free gifts’. Konrad (2005, 71–75) also argues, however, that just because free gifts do not create debts does not mean that they are motivated entirely by selfless altruism – which echoes my interviewees’ feeling that they were somehow obliged to make the gift.

Most importantly, though, in terms of the value of photos materialised by this free gifting, is the way in which, according to Mauss, when something is given as a gift it remains related in some way to the giver. ‘It is because the thing contains the person that the donor retains a lien on what he (sic) has given away’ (Parry 1986, 457). On this argument, family snaps as free gifts in fact always contain more than the people they picture: as well as the person or persons pictured in the snap, usually children, they also contain the donor – the mother sending the snaps to her family members. Here we can see how the value of the photograph in this gifting practice depends on, and intensifies, the value the photograph has in its
domestic space. As we have seen, in that space the photo carries indexical traces of the people it shows. In free gifting, when family snaps leave the domestic spaces of their makers and enter the homes of their makers’ close relatives, they travel as indexical objects, and their value lies in part in that indexicality. They are valued for their affordance of truthfulness and accuracy: they are a record of a child’s growth and character; a record of happy moments; in looking at them, happy memories are released (perhaps sometimes tinged with sadness at how things change). However, family snaps are also deeply embedded in the performance of the familial by my interviewees; indeed, sending a photograph to relatives is precisely a practice that performs family. That practice is part of the photo on its journey and receipt. Photos thus both picture persons, and evoke the things that particular people – mothers – have done with them. They thus contain both those pictured and those gifting. Sent travelling as free gifts, photographs establish and maintain relations between people because they create ‘bonds between persons by means of things which embody persons’ (Parry 1986, 457). The photographs made mobile as gifts, then, are weighty objects, dense not only with the presence of the people they picture but also with the trace of that person doing the sending.

There is another mode of sending photographs into circulation in the visual economy, however. In this mode, photographs are sent less often to parents (although they can be) and more often to other family members or to friends. They are sent with a much stronger expectation of receiving something in exchange. Above all, they are sent digitally, as part of emailing. In this form of circulation, sending a photo does entail an obligation to receive one in turn; if you are sent an emailed snap, you are expected to reciprocate. I will describe this second kind of family snap circulation not as gifting but as messaging, for reasons that will become clear at the end of this section, and I will also suggest that, despite the ways in which family photography practice has by and large integrated digital technologies into its most important achievements – the making of family, domestic space and mothering – emailing is itself a distinct practice which inflects family snaps’ affordances. The practice of emailing family photos is different from free gifting them, and, being embedded in different practices that call on different photographic affordances, the family snap changes somewhat when it is emailed.

Photos sent as messages have much the same visual content as photographs sent as gifts. They can show important events or everyday happenings, a child’s birthday party or a trip to the local park. Photographs sent as free gifts are not sent very frequently – no more than once a month – and photos sent as messages may not be sent much more frequently, although they often are. Photographs sent as messages, however, are sent as part of something that, for some of my interviewees, was utterly integrated into their everyday life: email. They are thus embedded in a practice distinct from family photography, one with its own rules and precepts, and that makes a difference to what kind of objects the photos become. A key feature of email practice is reciprocity: an email received produces an obligation to reply. Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2002) have emphasised the importance of such reciprocity in their work on email practice in Trinidad. Sending an email
to someone ‘demanded a response, and therefore created the conditions for sustaining relationships through reciprocity’ (Miller and Slater 2002, 189). This was certainly the case for my interviewees also. Being sent a photograph attached to an email produced an obligation to reply with one; conversely, sending a photo was accompanied by the expectation of receiving one from the recipient. This is very different from photos sent as free gifts, and has consequences for the value of the photos sent travelling in this way.

For half of my interviewees with computers and digital photos, emailing photographs was a normal part of their everyday activities. This is not to say it was something that they did every day, but that their photos, when they sent them, were part of an ordinary, routine activity. As Merav told me about her computer, once her toddler and young son were in bed:

I finally have quiet, it’s half past ten at night, that’s where I go. Um, either, I’ll use it to read newspapers, read newspapers from Israel … read a little bit of The Times or whatever, that’s what you do, and then of course you see all the emails that arrived today and some have pictures, and if it takes longer to download you know that you can expect a film with ten pictures.

Merav described the computer as ‘absolutely’ part of her everyday life. For Sharon, emailing between her friendship group in Canada was ‘kind of normal’ – ‘all the mums had either laptops or pcs and they all had digital cameras’ – and emailing among them was ‘quite active’. Leah, for example, emails five or six of her family after every weekend.

Digital photos are inserted into this normal activity, with varying frequency. Leah did it ‘from time to time’, usually after special occasions, while Noa scanned and emailed around ten photos every fortnight after she and her family arrived in Cambridge. Sharon, recall, uploaded photos of her daughter once a week to ‘a core mass of people in Israel that were really waiting to see every little, you know’, thing that her newborn daughter did; she also sent four or five photos every couple of months with an email to friends and family. Merav, meanwhile, had a period of sending photos from her webcam to her parents every day.

Photos can also be sent to a lot of people in this messaging mode. Merav told me: ‘there are many people in our, you know, mailing list when there are pictures. It is, not just the very close family, grandmother, our siblings, parents but aunts, uncles, friends.’ Sharon’s Canadian network had 15 mums in it, all sending photos to each other of their children. Noa told me of her family network:

I have a huge family and Gil also got a family, and I put a lot of time not only on sending the pictures and the letters but also, you know I also sent postcards to each, I have thirteen nieces and nephews so to each niece or nephew, and then birthday present to each one of them and to each one of my brothers and sister-in-law.
And Leah listed her recipients:

Fabian’s mum, and I’m sending to her husband, so I’m sending to both, because sometimes they are coming, they are never coming here together, so they are coming here in separate? And for Fabian’s father, Fabian’s two brothers, they all live in Barcelona, I send to my brother, that now is in Israel but was in Angola. Erm I’m sending it to my sister, to my sister’s son. Whom else … to my cousins, friends, we have friends in the United States, you know, they are sending us, we are sending them. I guess that’s it.

All these women also received a lot of photographs. Sharon listed the sorts of things she got sent:

these friends will send quite a few pictures so … so I get sent, a lot of people, I mean lots and lots of pictures … Vancouver … beach … this is a trip to Spain … and that’s a new dog, one of our friends got a new dog … Yeah so I mean just tons of people, and everybody’s, if they’ve got a kid …

These photos tended to stay in the inbox of the email software, eventually to be deleted, although particularly significant ones would be transferred into the women’s own photo collections.

When photos are sent as gifts in this way, they are sent above all as a means of ‘keeping in touch’ (van Dijck 2008). The interviewees who sent photos in this mode all used this phrase, or something very similar, as a means of explaining why they did it. For Noa it was a way ‘to keep in touch’, for Sharon a way of keeping people ‘in the loop’, for Leah it’s ‘like an invitation to be in some kind of touch’, Judith was ‘just saying hello’ and for Merav the camera was ‘a way to keep in touch’. The photographs are being used as a means of communication between people. In particular, they are a way of keeping in touch because photos have to be exchanged. Leah described her ‘invitations’ explicitly as invitations to exchange photographs: ‘it is easier just to send the photos and not to say “oh why are you not calling me”, it’s just like invitation to be in some kind of touch, I’ll send you pictures, you send me yours’.

Indeed, Sharon told me she had also sent photos of her daughter to friends because she had been ‘pestered’ so much by them: ‘I’ve got friends where it’s like, “well you haven’t sent us pictures of Tia in two months, what’s going on?” So some of the pictures, some of the pictures I actually put out because I was getting pestered.’

Even if photographs weren’t sent in return, some sort of response was expected. Merav told me her parents ‘respond immediately’ when she sends them photographs, and Sharon said it was the ‘feedback’ she got from her parents and brother and sister-in-law that kept her sending photos to them. Noa’s situation was rather different. In her case, her expectation of a response in return for all her efforts at keeping in touch was rudely disappointed.
I didn’t really get anything back from it. So er, so I got not only really depressed from that but also in some point I stop anything, I just stopped, I stopped keeping in touch with them really, just you know in telephone calls and er when we go visit there or something but I got really really disappointed in them, that they don’t know how to keep in touch.

Noa’s reaction was to ‘stop anything’, to stop sending all the photos and postcards and gifts. She was hurt and angry that her family refused to ‘keep in touch’ the way that she did. Leah, on the other hand, wasn’t bothered if she got no response:

> Look it’s like all relationships … erm, when you are living abroad … it is funny, some people are really good in keeping in touch, most of them not. We say in Hebrew, when you are far away from the eye you are far away from the heart, so loads of people, you know, not calling us, really good friends of ours. But I am not a person that will do the calculations, you know.

Although Noa and Leah have very different reactions to sending photos and then not getting a reply, both their comments suggest that it is less the photos themselves that matter when they are circulated as messages, and more the connection they are intended to signify. Sending a photo via email is less about the photo itself and more about what the sending indicates: an effort to ‘keep in touch’ by inviting a response. Hence Noa’s disappointment: her family’s failure to respond was a failure to stay in touch with her. It severed their connection. And hence Leah’s more resigned approach: sending photos is just like ‘all relationships’ and in all relationships, keeping in touch with someone far away doesn’t always happen. For both Noa and Leah, the photos and email were embedded in a network of communication that reflected larger familial and friendship ties, ties which should when emailing be reflected in reciprocal exchanges.

Photos sent as messages are on the move as part of an everyday activity, as part of networks of connection and communication. They are sent as an act of reaching out to make contact. They are participants in familial and friendship networks. As part of those networks, the photos and what happens to them once they enter this part of the visual economy is meant to reflect those networks accurately. The movement of emails and photo attachments both enacts and, it is felt, should reproduce that network. Hence the importance of reciprocity. Photos sent out that receive no response signify an invitation to keep in touch that has been refused or neglected. Although Leah said that she is ‘not a person to do the calculations’, she is absolutely right to point to the quantitative element in this mode of circulation. There is an expectation that the economy should be in balance and that what is sent is reciprocated.

Poole (1997, 11) remarks that images gain value not only from what they show, but also from ‘the process of accumulation, possession, circulation, and exchange’. Messaged photos clearly gain their value from their exchange for other photos,
which means that they become somewhat different kinds of photograph, with different values from free gift photos. Embedded as they are in a practice distinct from family photography – emailing – means that the photos themselves change somewhat as different affordances are put into play. In particular, participating in email exchanges strips family snaps of much of the density of memory, evidence, presence and affect that they carry when gifted. I would argue that the photographs circulated in this messaging part of the visual economy are less significant in and of themselves, less significant as visual traces of people, than are photos circulated as gifts. They are not primarily sent as a truthful record of a happy moment, to become a way of remembering and feeling family togetherness. Their indexicality, in fact, is no longer key. Rather, what is most important about photos-as-messages is their being sent, their mobility, their ability to be sent easily and quickly, to lots of people, often over long distances, just as a way of ‘keeping in touch’. In his discussion of young people’s use of camera phone photos, José van Dijck (2008) also suggests that the sending of a photo as a way to maintain a friendship network is indeed more about the sending/receiving than anything else, and suggests that ‘the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of visual communication increases’ (van Dijck 2008, 62). I suggest something similar is happening with emailed family snaps, and in this context, photographs become ‘less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated’ (Sontag 2004, 26). Hence my description of this mode of circulation as ‘messaging’. The content of messaged photographs is less important (though never unimportant), while what the material form of their digitality allows is more important: to be sent. Unlike photos that are gifts, in which what is shown is paramount, photos as message are responded to both in terms of what they show but also in terms of the act of sending them.

The visual economy, again

Two kinds of circulations of family snaps can be distinguished, then, and in each, the family snap becomes a somewhat different object. Sent as free gifts, family snaps are indexical objects, resonant with evidence, memory and affect. Sent as messages, family snaps are communications, whose arrival signals an ‘invitation’ not to familiality but to reciprocation. The different practice which sends them travelling animates different aspects of their affordances, and creates objects of somewhat different value. While free gift photographs are kept (though not necessarily in albums or on display), messaging photos linger in the email inbox for a respectable period and are often then deleted. So it is clear that the visual economy of family snaps is differentiated, and while a messaged photo does occasionally make it into an album, nonetheless the point remains: different kinds of practices shift the value of family snaps.

However, Poole’s account of the visual economy addresses differences within it only as part of a narrative of how the visual economy changed over the course
of the nineteenth century. She tells a particular story in which the global visual economy has moved historically from movements that produce one kind of value – use value – to exchanges that produce another – exchange value. Her work describes the emergence of a specific visual economy – what she calls the ‘modern visual economy’ (Poole 1997, 9) – in a particular historical period and between specific places. This is a capitalist visual economy, because it involves the production and exchange of photographs, among other kinds of images, as commodities. According to Appadurai’s gloss on Marx, ‘a commodity is a product intended principally for exchange, and ... such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism’ (Appadurai 1986, 6). Poole is careful to elaborate on those ‘institutional, psychological, and economic conditions’: she suggests that the exchange value of certain photos depended on a certain fetishisation of the difference that they showed (Poole 1997, 13); that the exchangability of commodities paralleled the serialisation, replicability and interchangability of racial types (Poole 1997, 14); and that the pleasures of collecting photos could be very close to the desire to accumulate commodities (Poole 1997, 113).

Commodities are objects made to be sold, and Poole (1997) draws on Walter Benjamin’s work to specify what qualities photographs have when they were made and circulated as commodities. She cites two essays by Benjamin written in the 1930s (Benjamin 1979a, 1979b) which do not in fact mention commodification explicitly. However, Benjamin does note that, early in the technology’s history, ‘businessmen invaded professional photography from every side’ (Benjamin 1979a, 246), and discusses two particular aspects of photography as a commercial business. The first is its success in selling certain sorts of photographs to the emergent middle-classes: carte de visite portraits for the family album displaying ‘foolishly draped or corseted figures’ (Benjamin 1979a, 246). The second is a consequence of the ability to mass produce and circulate the same image. Photography initiated ‘the age of mechanical reproduction’, as he famously says (Benjamin 1979b). He argues that the multiple reproduction of photographs of works of art both destroys the ‘aura’ of art by destroying its uniqueness, its site-specificity, the rituals surrounding it, and its presence; and similarly that cartes de visite banished the enigmatic mystery of very early photographs by recording appearances ‘as faithfully as any mirror’ (Benjamin 1979a, 248). A commodified photograph depreciates the presence of what it pictures (Benjamin 1979b, 223), and although Benjamin (1979a, 51) himself went on to suggest that photographs had their own ‘optical unconscious’ because ‘it is another nature that speaks to the camera than the eye’ (Benjamin 1979a, 243), and hence that even ‘the most precise technology can give its products a magical value’ (Benjamin 1979a, 243), many later commentators have followed his initial comments and suggested that the mass reproduction of photographs in a commercial context makes them predictable and banal. John Tagg (1988, 56), for example, describes such commodified photos as ‘unremarkable ... items of passing interest with no residual value, to be consumed and thrown away’, and Anandi Ramamurthy (2000, 168) says that
‘the commodification of the photograph dulled the possible creativity of the new technology’. Commodified photographs, it is thus argued, are mass-produced to be bought and sold, and because of that production they are repetitive, banal and disposable. In the context of Poole’s argument, commodification is specifically blamed for enhancing the equivalence and substitutability of cartes de visite and is thus made deeply complicit with racialised ways of seeing.

Given the racist consequences of the specific commodification of images that she tracks, Poole (1997) is also concerned to locate alternatives to the visual economy that she has conceptualised thus. In her book, she suggests that the indexicality of the photograph might lead to readings that resist its fetishisation, for example, and she also mentions the possibility of ‘subaltern regimes of vision that function to oppose (or even undermine) the dominant visual regime’ (Poole 1997, 19); there are, she says, ‘a diversity of visual subjectivities at work in any given “image world”’ (Poole 1997, 20). In more recent work (Poole 2005), though, she has elaborated an account of photographic ‘encounters’ as a means of conceptualising the possibility that some photos might be more, and do more, than commodities. She has argued that if a photograph is seen as evidence of an encounter between photographer and photographed, it might carry the possibility of openness, even of revelation. A photograph as an encounter might allow recognition of shared humanity across cultural difference (Poole 2005; see also Banks 2001). She recalls the way in which early uses of photography in anthropology actually found photographs rather unruly and wayward tools for classifying people; they pictured, as Pinney (2003) suggests they would, too much information extraneous to anthropological knowledges and they also let some viewers feel empathy towards the people pictured. She suggests that current criticism would do well to try and recover some of that difficulty, rather than seeing all photos as the expression of social power (for examples of this tactic, see the essays in Pinney and Peterson 2003). Importantly, though, Poole describes these critical possibilities for experiencing newness, surprise and difference as residing in specific encounters between photographers and those being photographed, rather than in the visual economy (Poole 2005, 171). In seeking photographic work that is not commodified, then, Poole looks outwith the visual economy, citing alternative regimes of vision or unsettling photographic encounters.

Poole’s work, then, theorises a global visual economy grounded in specific and local social relations, but the visual economy she describes empirically is an entirely capitalist one. In order to allow for something that exceeds such a capitalist monopoly on the circulation of images, she is forced to conceptualise regimes and encounters entirely outside of the visual economy. But why assume that the global visual economy is entirely capitalist? What if – as the previous section’s discussion of family snaps suggests – the visual economy is more diverse than that? What if non-commodified images and image-objects circulate within it as well as commodified ones?

One of the richest resources for thinking about the visual economy as not fully constituted by capitalist practices of circulation and exchange is the work
of Julie-Kathy Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006). As they have argued so effectively, no economy is, even in contemporary times, entirely capitalist. Gibson-Graham describe their project as an attempt to resist ‘the tendency to constitute “the” economy as a singular capitalist system or space’ and instead prefer to describe the economic as ‘a zone of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms’ Gibson-Graham (2006, xxi). I propose, therefore, that the notion of the visual economy should also be theorised as a zone of diverse economic forms.

We have seen that the circulation of family snaps is certainly organised, as an integrative practice, and global. Yet family photographs, in their familial circulations and displays, are not commodities. They are not bought and sold, even if as messages they are exchanged. It is true that, as Paul Frosh (2001) emphasises, they require commodities to be created: cameras, printers, paper, computer and so on. It is also true that, if we restrict the value of family snaps to their visual content, they appear banal, repetitive and trivial enough to be commodities, as Frosh (2001) also notes, attributing their repetition to the success of Kodak’s early advertising campaigns. However, as the previous chapter argued, family snaps cannot be understood through their visual content alone. What matters is how specific affordances of their material form become mobilised and valued through social practice, and family photography practice, in its domestic spaces and in some of its travelling, does not value family snaps because of their aesthetic originality, but rather because they show people as they really were. Family photos are traces of individuals, hence their repetition of content is precisely not substitutable or equivalent. Moreover, they establish relations not only between the people pictured and those to whom the photograph is sent; as this chapter’s discussion of free gifts suggests, those family photographs sent as free gifts also carry a trace of the person doing the gifting. That is, there is a trace of the labour that produced the gift. In these various ways, the family photographs sent travelling establish relations between people, not between objects. They are not therefore commodities (Gregory 1982, 41).

Importantly, though, this does not mean that they therefore have nothing to do with any economy. Economies can be organised in all sorts of ways. An economy ‘revolves about making, holding, using, sharing, exchanging, and accumulating valued objects and services’ (Gudeman 2001, 1), and it is therefore possible to imagine all kinds of forms of making, holding, using, sharing, exchanging and accumulating, quite apart from those that can be described as part of ‘capitalism’ and ‘commodification’ (see for example Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). Like Gibson-Graham, I think it is more useful to learn from such diversity by considering particular effects, than to posit an overwhelmingly dominant form of the visual economy and then be forced to seek alternatives elsewhere. Central to the arguments of this book is the claim that family photographs circulate through a number of overlapping but nonetheless distinct economic forms. Because these forms are nothing other than certain kinds of practices, the book shows how those photographs shift their appearance and effects as they participate first in one economic form and then another: in particular, in domestic and then in certain
public spaces. The previous section already started on this task, exploring the differences in value between gifted photographs and messaged photographs. For all its productive emphasis on the exchange of photographs and the effects of that exchange, then, there is a significant problem with Poole’s account: its refusal to acknowledge the diversity of forms of image circulation and exchange. If the visual economy is to be a useful concept, it must be expanded to include multiple economic forms.

Conclusion

So far, this book has paid most attention to what can now be termed the non-commodified circuits of the visual economy through which family snaps travel, come to rest, and are looked at, stored, taken out and put away again. The places where family photos halt have been described as domestic spaces: rather odd yet homely locations, in which here and there, presence and absence, now and then, are interlaced. The circuits through which the snaps travel have been named as familial, because they both trace and perform mostly the affiliations of kin. Repetitive and banal as they are, it is now possible to see how family snaps are crucial in constituting not only many domestic spaces, but also how they stretch relationships across distances too, incorporating people often far apart in the togetherness of family membership. Like money remittances, videos, food and cloth, to take just a few other examples, family snaps are members of that class of objects that are sent travelling to maintain connections between people far apart. In their travels, they may shift form somewhat, as they are sent as free gifts and as messages, but what has now clearly been mapped are the contours of a global visual economy which is not made entirely by commodity flows, but also by the diverse journeyings of family snaps.

However, a key question for this book is what happens when a family snap moves out of those familial circuits and domestic space? What happens when a family photograph moves from its home and into, say, a London street, where it is photographed by a journalist and later appears on the front page of a newspaper? Well, what is happening is that the photograph is moving from one set of circuits and sites in the visual economy to another. It might be said that it moves from domestic space into the rather different space of the mass media, and from non-commodified routes and halts to commodified ones. Gudeman (2001) describes such a move as being from a ‘community’ or ‘Up-close’ economic form to a ‘market’ or ‘Far-distant’ economic form; that is, from a form of circulation and exchange grounded in intimate (in this case, family) social relations, to a form of circulation and exchange in the public sphere that is anonymous and abstracted. Indeed, there is a long tradition in anthropology and social theory that has conceptualised and elaborated such a distinction (Bloch and Parry 1989; Gregory 1982). Following such a tradition, the distinction between a familial circuit of the visual economy and a public one might run as follows.
A familial, non-commodified global circulation of family snaps is constituted by the kinds of objects and exchanges discussed in this chapter. Although family photos have certain defining characteristics as visual images – they are records of family life, they only show happy moments, they are usually not striking compositionally or technically – the spaces and social practices in which these photos are embedded are equally important to their qualities and effects. They are taken by, and circulated among, members of a family, plus perhaps some special friends, and picture members of that same family. When they circulate, they are not exchanged for money, as are commodified images. They are put on display and looked at in houses, and displaying such photos is part of what makes certain places feel like homes. They are important, precious objects to their families, evoking happy memories and also sometimes producing a more intense emotional effect in specific viewers. Moreover, although their content is highly formulaic, they are not substitutable, transferable or collectable across different families as other visual commodities are. Many of them also contain not only the people they picture, but the person who sent them. They are not therefore easily disposable.

The ‘public’ circulation of images, in contrast, is described by Frosh (2001, 47) as a relatively autonomous ‘field of public scrutiny … which … is energized, regulated and perpetuated through the systematic production and circulation of photographic images as commodities’. Commodified photos are produced to be sold, and are seen by large numbers of people in spaces that are more or less accessible to many people. Just as Poole suggested that the circulation of cartes de visite turned human subjects into exchangable types, commodified photos lack impact and responses to them are thinned out and superficial. As well as Benjamin’s work, the arguments of Guy Debord (n.d.) are evident here, although more recent commentators have preferred explanations other than spectacularisation for the superficiality of commodified photographs (Rose 2007). For Susan Sontag (1979), people see too many of such images, while others, such as Avital Ronell (1994), have argued it is because they are framed in such a way as to empty them of significance. When in public, then, commodified photos become repetitive, banal and disposable.

Having emphasised two different modes of display, two different economic circulations and two different modes of seeing as ‘familial’ and ‘public’ in this way, it is immediately obvious that the distinction between these two sites is indeed a very crude one. These two circulations – familial and public – are not hermetically sealed from each other. Family photographs are used in artworks exhibited in gallery and museum spaces (Parsons 2008), and many people collect the old family photos for sale in junk shops and antique fairs, to give just two examples of where the boundary between these two is permeable. Indeed, Gudeman (2001) argues that no ‘market’ transaction is without ‘community’ considerations (see also Bloch and Parry 1989). My point is not to assert that there are, definitively, two global circuits of photographs, however. Rather, I simply want to suggest that there is more than one sort of global circulation of photographs. Not all circuits in the visual economy are fully commodified. Acknowledging the visual economy as
‘a zone of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms’ is the conceptual move that allows this diversity to become evident and productive.

It is important to emphasise the different cartographies of the visual economy. While this chapter has elaborated the familial circuits of that economy – emphasising that they are themselves diverse – the next chapter begins to outline more carefully the public space into which so many family snaps now enter. By exploring the practices of that space, it becomes possible to see how family snaps on a newspaper page are valued yet again rather differently. However, later chapters will also argue that the familiality of family photos lingers even when they are on the front page of a newspaper. That they do so is testimony to the diversity of the visual economy: some of its circuits are haunted by the effects of other circuits’ practices. Recognising this diversity and complexity is crucial if we are not to overestimate the hegemony of the visual economy so powerfully described by Poole. As she herself notes (Poole 2005, 160), such overestimations in the name of critique can end up inadvertently replicating what they criticise. By making the visual economy multiple, resources and tactics for resisting the commodification and other sorts of framings of images also multiply. Insisting that family snaps are indeed part of the visual economy is an important step in that multiplication.
On 7 July 2005, Hasib Hussain detonated a bomb on a bus as it drove through Tavistock Square in central London. Four days later, Marie Fatayi-Williams stood in a street near Tavistock Square. Her son, Anthony Fatayi-Williams, had been missing since the morning of 7 July, and had most likely been on that bus – but Mrs Fatayi-Williams couldn’t be certain of that; she didn’t yet know for sure what had happened to him because the authorities had not yet confirmed that he was among those who died in that explosion. So, with Anthony’s friends, she had organised an event. She had written a speech, or at least some notes, which she was holding. The press had been told she would be there: in front of her was a small table loaded with microphones and recording equipment; cameras were pointed at her, journalists were ready to take notes. Behind her were a group of friends and family. Mrs Fatayi-Williams was also holding, with a rosary, a photo of herself and Anthony taken at a party; her companions held posters of another photo of Anthony with the words HOW MANY MORE? across it, and the poster had also been printed onto the t-shirts that some of Mrs Fatayi-Williams’s supporters wore. (The Guardian, alone among British newspapers, published one photograph showing all this.) Mrs Fatayi-Williams’s speech that day made two demands: she wanted to know what had happened to her son, and she pleaded for an end to such violence. It was a powerful speech, and it was reported in all the British newspapers. All the papers also carried a photograph of her holding her photo of herself and Anthony at that party. This chapter is about the emergence of family photographs from their domestic spaces and into such very public modes of circulation and display in the aftermath of violence to the people they picture. What happens to and with such photos, no longer in albums or home computers, but instead on show in public, on newspaper pages, television screens and web pages?

The previous chapters have explored family photography as a set of practices undertaken with particular kinds of visual objects and examined at some length the familial and domestic spaces of family snaps. They emphasised how powerful the practices of family photography are, in their production of familial togetherness and their management of ambivalent mothering, and thus how important these apparently banal and trivial objects are to the women who look after them. They explored the complex spatialialities and temporalities of family photography. They examined the circulations and sites through which family photos travel and pause. This chapter, instead, begins to examine what happens when family snaps leave those domestic spaces, when they are taken from albums or frames or files or boxes, and enter another circulation in the differentiated visual economy: the public constituted by the mass media.
On 11 July 2005, Mrs Fatayi-Williams was making her family photograph public because she was hoping against hope that her son had survived the explosions, and was perhaps sheltering somewhere hurt and amnesiac, or perhaps horribly injured in a hospital bed, unable to tell doctors who he was. She was hoping, as so many people making posters from family photos had hoped in New York in September 2001 or Phuket in December 2004, that someone might recognise him from his photograph and let her know he was still alive. That was one reason for collecting photographs of him, getting them made into posters to stick onto walls and bus shelters, for holding that photo as Mrs Fatayi-Williams spoke to the microphones and cameras (there were other reasons too, as the next chapter will show). However, that motivation for showing photos of Anthony is not adequate for explaining how enthusiastically photographs of many of the missing and the dead were circulated in all sorts of public ways after the explosions, repeatedly, and long after those pictured had been found or their bodies identified. Photographs of Anthony and of almost all the other people feared missing or dead immediately after the attacks were shown again and again in British newspapers, and on various news-based websites, in newspaper supplements, and on TV news bulletins, for weeks after the bombings. Very nearly all of those photos were family snaps, and it is that public circulation of family photographs in the mass media that this chapter focuses on.

More and more family snaps are making this move from the familial practices explored in the previous chapters of this book to more public forms of display and circulation. When ordinary people go missing, or die, for example, in extraordinary circumstances, the readers and viewers of newspapers and televisions are more and more likely to be shown pictures of the missing or the dead as they were when they were alive. Sometimes these pictures are formal studio portraits, and this is particularly the case if the dead man or woman was a member of the armed services killed in action. More often, though, we are shown an ordinary family snap: a young girl and her best friend wearing the shirts of their favourite football team; a pretty toddler photographed on holiday with her parents and siblings; a school portrait of a young boy. While British newspapers have a long history of publishing formal studio portraits of soldiers killed in armed conflicts (Taylor 1991), the practice of publishing everyday photographs of ordinary people caught up in violent events is much more recent. The first time newspapers in the UK printed a family photograph of every victim of a terrorist attack was after the explosion in Omagh, Northern Ireland, in 1998, when 29 people died. (Their photos are still on the BBC’s news website.)

This chapter will examine why it is that the British media in the last decade or so has started to publish such photographs. First, it will consider more carefully than did the previous chapter just how to characterise this mass media circuit of the visual economy. What is its public-ness? What practices constitute it? Is it simply the circuits and locations of the commodification of photos? What happens in that new context of display? The discussion is intended to offer a general account of the practices and spaces of a certain ‘public’ into which family photographs now
enter after violent events: the public of the mass media, particularly newspapers 
but also television and website news. The next two chapters will then examine in 
detail what happened with the family snaps of the missing and the dead in British 
newspapers in the aftermath of the explosions in July 2005.

Before proceeding, however, I should make it clear that I am not attempting to 
establish a clear distinction between a ‘public’ circulation of photos and a ‘private’ 
one, even though ‘public’ is a notoriously vague and uncertain concept which 
usually gains whatever analytical purchase it might have by depending, either 
explicitly or implicitly, on a contrast with a certain kind of ‘private’. Although 
the previous chapter ended by sketching a distinction between public and family 
photography, that was done in order to stress my argument about differentiated 
zones within the visual economy. I have not used the term private to describe 
family photography so far in this book. What is seen most powerfully when family 
photos are taken, displayed in homes, sent to relatives and looked at in albums 
or slideshows is ‘family’ – familial togetherness – so the book has used the term 
‘familial’ to describe those particular circulations. This is not simply a semantic tic. 
While insisting on the specificity and importance of domestic family photography, 
I want to avoid suggesting that the diverse forms taken by the visual economy are 
adequately summarised by a simplistic binary between private and public forms 
of circulation. The previous chapter showed that there are significant differences 
even within the familial circulations of family snaps, between photos freely gifted 
and photos sent as emailed messages, for example. The public circulations of 
photographs are much more diverse. This chapter will consider only the public 
constituted by the mass media, and the next is even more specific in its focus 
on newspapers. Even if it is impossible to draw simple boundaries between the 
multiple forms of the visual economy, then, this chapter nonetheless suggests that 
the mobility of family snaps – and indeed of other images – does take them to places 
where significantly different practices are at work. This chapter pays particular 
attention to what happens when one sort of object usually deeply embedded in 
one integrated practice – family snaps and family photography – moves into a part 
of the visual economy constituted by other kinds of practices and thus somewhat 
different objects – the mass-mediated public.

Theorising the public

When family photographs entered the mass media’s spaces of display and 
circulation in July 2005, they entered specific set of institutions and practices. In 
what sense were these practices ‘public’? Here, the work of Michael Warner (2002) 
is particularly helpful. Warner (2002, 72) insists that ‘publics do not exist apart 
from the discourse that addresses them’. His argument is that texts and images 
perform their publics into existence as they are read, seen and heard. A ‘public’ 
is the subject position that is the effect of such practices of reading, seeing and 
listening (Couldry 2004). Indeed, Warner (2002, 88) describes as ‘indispensable’
the need for ‘some kind of active uptake’ by those addressed as a public, in order for a public to be constituted. His argument thus chimes with the arguments of this book because it understands a public as coming into being when a certain object – a piece of written text, a photograph, a radio broadcast – gets read or looked at or listened to or, in other words, is articulated through a practice. Thus Warner argues that publics are made, not found. In particular, he argues that for a public to exist, it has to be addressed. A public has to be invented by being addressed by texts, images, or voices that imagine that a public is already there to be addressed. Although a newspaper, say, or a radio programme seems to speak to a pre-existing audience, Warner argues that in fact that audience is constituted as a public only as it reads the newspaper or listens to the radio. Thus there are as many publics, according to Warner, as there are moments of address; and it is for this reason that in his theoretical argument he does not discuss the performance of ‘the’ public, but rather the performativity of many publics, or of particular publics. Warner’s understanding of public is therefore, to use Kurt Iveson’s (2007, 3) distinction, a ‘processual’ rather than a ‘topographical’ understanding of the public. That is, on his definition, a public comes into being only when certain practices occur. It does not assume that specific physical spaces are always and everywhere public: streets, for example, or piazzas, or parks. In the same way, then, as domestic space must be thought of as achieved, so too must public space. (Indeed, one implication of Warner’s approach is that public space can and often does happen in houses – during the tv’s broadcast of the news, for example.)

Warner (2002, 65–124) elaborates his definition of what a public is in modern societies whose media are mass. In such societies, he says, addressing a public means addressing people who are strangers to each other; hence, ‘a public is a relation among strangers’ (Warner 2002, 72). Because publics are brought into existence by being addressed, the form of that address – its representational strategies, its rhetorical devices, its symbolic resources – matters very much to the sort of public that is created. That is to say, publics are mediated by cultural forms, and such forms often refer one to another, a process Warner describes as ‘the reflexive circulation of discourse’ (Warner 2002, 90). Since a newspaper or a billboard advertisement can never be quite sure exactly which individuals it is addressing, the membership of any particular public is indefinite. Their form of address is particular, however: addressing a public combines a sense of impersonal address with an impersonal address. There must be some element of impersonality, says Warner, since so many individuals are being addressed and it is never certain exactly who they are; but the address itself also implies some sort of direct engagement between addresser and addressee, often by adopting a certain affective tone such as intimacy or urgency, and members of a public are aware of this ambivalent, im/personal address. There is usually a punctual temporality to texts addressing publics in that they happen hourly, daily, weekly, monthly (although Warner [2002, 97] does note that this is not the case with new media and indeed with some newer forms of broadcasting, 24-hour news television channels:
for example). Finally, says Warner, such texts imagine a social lifeworld, with specific dynamics, institutions and relations.

Newspapers (the particular focus of the next two chapters) clearly correspond to Warner’s account of texts that address, and thus constitute, a public. They assume that their readership exists, and they are written to that constituency, imagining its lifeworld. Their address is thus personal, but it is also impersonal, since editors and journalists can never really be sure exactly who will read their paper, or flick through it or scan it or just read bits of it. They follow a specific and limited set of conventions in their text, images and layout, and are highly aware of what each other is doing. They appear regularly, either daily or weekly, and they produce their effects not only through their textual and visual structure (Chouliaraki 2006), but also through the practice of reading them. The significance of the practice of reading a newspaper is elaborated by Benedict Anderson (1983). Anderson, writing about the emergence of nationalism in the eighteenth century, remarks that one of the most important ways in which people could imagine themselves as part of what he called the ‘imagined community’ of a nation was by envisaging shared practices that all of a nation’s citizens could participate in. One of those activities was reading a newspaper, ‘performed in silent privacy’, says Anderson (1983, 39–40), but with an awareness that the same ceremony is being ‘replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others’. Reading a newspaper, then, is a prime example of the constitution of a public as ‘co-membership with indefinite persons in the context of routine action’ (Warner 2002, 76).

But how are those strangers understood, who are felt to occupy the same public space as a newspaper reader? For Anderson (1983), as I just noted, the shared consciousness of reading the same newspaper was crucial for developing a sense of a national identity among those strangers. Strangers who would never meet, says Anderson, could nonetheless imagine belonging to a national communality through the shared act of reading the same paper. Anderson was writing about a particular historical period, however. Various critics attempting to describe the present imagined community of mass-mediated publics, Warner included, continue to suggest that specific imaginings are central to the creation of national feeling. However, they have also begun to describe what they see as the creation of a rather different kind of mass-mediated public.

Producing the mass-mediated public

The 1990s saw a good deal of academic attention being paid to how the mass media addressed its audiences. Central to much of this discussion was a claim that the media’s narratives and images of disaster, violence and suffering were key to understanding its constitution of a certain kind of public. Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman (1997, 1), for example, opened an influential collection of essays with the statement that ‘suffering … is a master subject for our mediatized times’ (see also Botting 1999; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2007). While many of the
contributors to this debate were well aware that, as Warner (2002, 177) remarks, ‘at least since the great Chicago fire [in 1871], mass disaster has had a special relationship to the mass media’, there was also a general sense that something in this relationship had shifted in recent times, towards a more frequent and more intense use of images and stories of suffering, accompanied by ‘the rise of moral-emotional rhetoric from a marginal to a dominant position of power’ (Berlant 2005, 49) For some writers, this shift had been caused by an increasingly insidious feedback loop between the media and its audiences, based on the assumption that disaster attracts audiences. Disaster hooks in viewers to tv programmes, and disaster makes people buy newspapers. So the media like disaster and write about it and picture it in order to gain audiences, readers, ratings and profits. However, after a while, readers find pictures of suffering repetitive, or so this analysis goes. As story follows story and photo follows photo and film follows film, readers become bored or alienated by what they see. In this way, Susan Sontag (1979) argued, photographs of horrors shrivel sympathy, and their viewers start to occupy what Stan Cohen (2001) called ‘states of denial’. And the media know this; or, according to Susan Moeller’s (1998) account of ‘compassion fatigue’, they assume it. The response of news editors and picture editors is thus to ratchet up their depiction of suffering. They give their readers and viewers more gory stories, yet more horrific images, in more explicit detail. Indeed, this might partly explain the British media’s enthusiasm for reproducing family photos of the missing and the dead in July 2005, in that those images might simply be presumed to make the reporting of deaths even more moving and poignant.

These accounts of the media frequently end with suggestions about how to change this state of affairs, and usually, the suggested changes are based on blaming either the institutions of the mass media for the problem of compassion fatigue, or blaming audiences for being in denial. Moeller (1998), for example, concludes her book by demanding better journalism that would evaluate disasters in a more balanced and sustained way. Silverstone (2004), on the other hand, demands both better regulation and that audiences should take moral responsibility for what they see. Neither of these solutions address the question of why stories and images of suffering should be so prevalent now, though. They are surely correct to point out, as they do, that the reporting of disasters and suffering in places far distant from audiences in the global north is often superficial and often (although by no means always) gets a minimal response. However, the northern media’s fascination with suffering is not confined to reporting of famines, natural disasters and political massacres in the global south, and this is clearer if the media’s fascination with suffering is understood more precisely as a fascination with bodies. Starving bodies, murdered bodies, bodies torn apart in accidents or disasters, yes; but also celebrity bodies, gaining weight, losing weight, nipped and tucked, learning to dance or eat earwigs; and ordinary bodies watched 24/7 for their tears and sex and intimacies. The importance of embodiment to the making of publics is central to Warner’s account of the contemporary public, in an essay which was also published for the first time in the 1990s (Warner 2002, 159–86).
Warner’s account of the contemporary public is presented as a broad, historical analysis of modern societies with mass media, in which different kinds of addresses to publics have converged to produce what Warner calls a ‘mass public sphere’ and a ‘mass subject’ (Warner 2002, 176, 177). He begins by emphasising that the public, as it emerged in the eighteenth century as a space for reasoned political debate, assumed that the public subjects constituted by being addressed as such were disembodied; or at least, that their corporeal specificity was irrelevant to their public subjectivity. These public subjects were, in Claude Lefort’s phrase, ‘disincorporated’ (quoted in Warner 2002, 171). The specificities of bodies – the genders, races, classes, sexualities and so on that are articulated through them – were irrelevant when a person was interpellated as a member of that public. Warner (2002, 160) suggests that this is still the case, to a significant degree:

As the subjects of publicity – its hearers, speakers, viewers, and doers – we have a different relation to ourselves, a different affect, from that which we have in other contexts. No matter what particularities of culture, race, gender, or class we bring to bear on public discourse, the moment of apprehending something as public is one in which we imagine, if imperfectly, indifference to those particularities, to ourselves. We adopt the attitude of the public subject, marking to ourselves its nonidentity with ourselves.

Warner is clear that this disincorporation was, and is, not universally available to everyone. It was a position most easily occupied by white, literate and propertied men. In fact, denying the relevance of their bodily specificity to their subjectivity was a way in which such subjects could dominate many different kinds of publics. Conversely, those denied access to dominant publics were marked by their bodily differences, as female or black or juvenile or working class or gay. Hence ‘the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal’ (Warner 2002, 167).

Publics, then, were not uniformly available to all the people they addressed and in Warner’s telling, those excluded from participating in the public of the eighteenth century turned, if they could, to another sphere of publicness to articulate their position: consumption. Consumers are a public, says Warner, because when a consumer buys something, there is a ‘collective consumer witnessing our wants and choices’ (Warner 2002, 170). Buying things allowed those subjects excluded from the public to articulate ‘an endlessly differentiable subject’ (Warner 2002, 168). Bodily display is central to the processes of consumption, since consumption both marks and creates bodily differences, and the images and texts that saturate consumption practices are all about bodies. As consumption has become more and more important to capitalist economies, societies and cultures, so the display and modification of bodies has become more and more important. Warner emphasises how central the discourses of consumption are to contemporary public subjects; our every desire, even our most intimate ones, he says, are mediated in some
degree by public address. The result is, says Warner, that now ‘public body images are everywhere on display, in virtually all media contexts … to be public in the West means to have an iconicity, and this is equally true of Muammar Qaddafi and of Karen Carpenter’ (Warner 2002, 169). The importance of consumption to this analysis explains the dating of the emergence of this contemporary public to the 1960s (Foster 1996), the decade which saw the early development of mass consumer societies.

This powerful public of consumption has, according to Warner, inflected the disincorporated public of political addresses, not least because the all-too-embodied consumer subject, mired in its sex, its race, its class, was itself a product of the disincorporation of the mass public subject. One consequence of this convergence between the consuming subject and the political subject – the shopper and the voter – is the way in which political leaders now ‘increasingly take on the function of … actualizing the otherwise indeterminate image of the people’ (Warner 202, 172). Through these iconic figures, the boundary between the political public and the commodity public is unclear.

That boundary is also unstable. For Warner argues (and here it is vital that he has not conflated the public with commodification) that the tension between the positivity of embodied difference and the negativity of disembodied self-abstraction that exists within the contemporary public sphere has a particular symptom: a fascination with mass injury.

Being of necessity anywhere else, the mass subject cannot have a body except through the body it witnesses. But in order to become a mass subject, it has left that body behind, abstracted away from it, canceled it as mere positivity. It returns in the spectacle of big-time injury. (Warner 2002, 179)

The body returns because it has never really gone away, and in an era of mass consumption it is even more insistently present. Hence the importance of bodily spectacles in the media. ‘The notion of the public sphere has become inseparable from the collective gathering around sites of wounding, trauma, and pathology: sociality and the wound have become inseparable’ (Seltzer 1997, 24). Injured bodies en masse, Warner (2002, 179) seems to argue, both constitute the mass subject as disembodied, and mark the violence of that disembodiment, inflicted on the mass self but visualised through other damaged bodies.

Like other writers discussing images of disaster and damage, Warner is particularly interested in the emotional stance of the mass subject produced as part of this public and its visual practices. He sees this stance as ambivalent, suggesting a mix of sadism and sympathy in his comment that ‘inflicting and witnessing mass injury are two sides of the same coin in disaster discourse’ (Warner 2002, 179). Other critics have also focused on the ambivalent spectating of horrible body images. Hal Foster’s (1996) account of the photographic images of celebrity and/or disaster manipulated and then printed in groups by Andy Warhol also evokes a doubled way of seeing, suggesting that Warhol’s repetitive art practice both hides
and displays the violence of the (Lacanian) real. So too does Susan Lurie’s (2006) account of looking at photographs of people jumping from the burning towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Lurie examines the compulsion to look at photographs of bodies falling from those towers, and suggests that the images and the text of the newspapers in which they (briefly) appeared invite readers to both identify with the bodies and to repudiate that identification in an oscillation between compassion and horror.

The next two chapters will explore in some detail the emotional responses demanded by the British press after the 2005 bombings, and will argue that it too was complex and unstable. The question that needs addressing now, though, is – why consider the emotional response to such images of disaster at all? What is happening in this public sphere if it seems no longer to be a sphere of evidence and debate – the classical public sphere dissected by so much social and political theory – and instead the pressing analytical question appears to have become, what does the mass subject feel?

The critic whose work has most directly address that question is Lauren Berlant (1997, 1998, 2004, 2005). Like Warner, her work traces an historical genealogy of the convergence of different kinds of public: in her case, between the public of politics and the kind of public produced by the mass entertainment industry in the USA. She looks at a range of novels, films and television programmes in order to understand the emergence and development, from the 1830s onwards, of what she calls the ‘intimate public sphere’ (Berlant 1997, 4). This is a public sphere constituted by certain kinds of feelings and affect, and it assumes and addresses, and thus produces, a specific public subject: ‘the person as a subject with moral feeling, and especially with a capacity for feeling and responding to the suffering of less fortunate others’ (Berlant 2005, 51; see also Boltanski 1999; Brown 1995). Such a subject depends on the assumption that suffering and pain are universal, and that anyone can therefore imagine anyone else’s pain. This subject is constituted by reading or seeing, or hearing about, scenes of suffering, and getting emotional about them.

While Warner (2002) analyses the centrality of such scenes of bodily suffering as a structural effect of both a disincorporated public and an increasingly dominant discourse and practice of consumption, Berlant focuses more on the political consequences of the ‘mass norms of affect’ (Berlant 1998, 637) structuring the contemporary public. Constituting a mass public through scenes of suffering, she suggests, is a manoeuvre with uncertain political effects. The members of a mass public moved to empathise with the sufferings of exploited others may realise that they are themselves (or some of them, at least) equally suffering and equally exploited by structural inequalities and injustice. Berlant (1998, 648) calls this ‘the radical threat and the great promise’ of various public displays of suffering, and suggests that this threat and promise may be particularly evident to women, on whom the burden of feeling often falls most heavily. In empathising with others exploited because of their gender, some women may recognise, and act to resist, their own exploitation (see also Cvetkovitch 2003). However, Berlant’s historical
account suggests that the threat and promise of affective politics has rarely been fulfilled, in part because acts of empathy have become ‘sutured, with a therapeutic intensity, to acts of consumption’ (Berlant 1998, 646). Feelings follow the patterns established by the limited plots and narratives of novels and films; buying a book or a cinema ticket is buying an education in what and how to feel (Bronfen 2006). Hence, another effect of empathising with suffering has been much more common, and this effect Berlant calls ‘the politics of sentiment’. The politics of sentiment happen, says Berlant (1998, 638), when an intimate mass public witnesses something together, feels something together and feels that feeling will itself somehow make things better.

The politico-aesthetic tradition of sentimentality associated with the novel is especially animated when a critique of the violently rationalized world is put forth in the name of authenticity of feeling, especially the feelings of love and suffering, the claims of which stand on the high ground of an ethics beyond politics; sentimental politics are being performed whenever putatively supra-political affects or affect-saturated institutions (like the nation and the family) are proposed as a universalist solution to structural racial, sexual, or intercultural antagonism.

In the politics of sentiment, feeling itself suffices to constitute a public subject, and hence ‘the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy’ (Berlant 1998, 641).

Berlant (1997, 2) also argues, however, that this sentimental politics has been ‘a desired effect of conservative cultural politics’ and that it has been ‘tactically appropriated’ by various right-wing political projects in the USA (Berlant 1998, 655). She argues that the Bush administration was heavily dependent on the politics of sentiment – it has been remarked that Bush’s ‘affect-laden images or utterances are produced in such a way as to make the need for a reality check unnecessary’ (Bronfen 2006, 22) – and Berlant emphasises how compliant are mass media in this cultural politics:

The airwaves are saturated with incitements to keep citizens linked to each other through the belief that the version of experience they see digested on-screen is composed of their own, simultaneous, spontaneous, identical, and fully-fleshed out sensations in response to events deemed clearly worthy of noticing in a particular way. (Berlant 2005, 52–3)

Particularly after the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001, politics in the US has been ‘the scene for the orchestration of public feelings – of the public’s feelings, of feelings in public, and of politics as a scene of emotional contestation’ (Berlant 2005, 47). Passive empathy was what was expected of the sentimental public subjects addressed by both the mass media and the state in the aftermath of 9/11, a passivity which, as Berlant (2005) notes, allowed the US state to ride
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roughshod over any number of civil rights (see also Young 2003). The next chapter will return to the political effects of the feelings incited by images of disaster in more detail, when it examines the reporting of the bombs in London in 2005.

This analysis by Warner and Berlant describes a change in contemporary US public culture. Various commentators have suggested that the public sphere is becoming increasingly intimate in the UK too. Increasingly, the public there is also constituted through the emotions invited by displays of suffering and bodily trauma, and intimate views of bodies and psyches. Nicole Matthews (2007) points out that British television has more and more often screened personal testimony as part of an intimised public address, while Barbie Zelizer (2005) suggests that the use by British newspapers in the late 1990s of photos of people about to die in violent situations were precisely about stimulating and arousing their viewers, making them feel. Roger Luckhurst (2003) also looks at journalism, as well as art and psychology in the 1990s, and concurs that the contours of the mediated public sphere were indeed changing, such that the public was constituted by shared feelings of and with damaged selves. He coined the term ‘traumaculture’ as a way of labelling ‘the conjuncture of discourses across a variety of professional, political and cultural sources that locked a powerful account of selfhood into place’, an account of a self somehow traumatised and of the ‘subjective and communal identification with or projection into’ the suffering of that self (Luckhurst 2003, 28).

It is perhaps now easier to see how and why ‘suffering … is a master subject for our mediatized times’ (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997, 1). The mass media is full of stories and images of suffering, and this is not simply the fault of irresponsible journalists, poor regulation and apathetic audiences, pace Moeller and Silverstone. Rather, following Warner (2002) and Berlant (1997), it is also a consequence of the convergence, in modern societies, of a public which depends on both self-abstraction and corporealised positivity with a sphere of consumption that sells commodities as constituents of the embodied and emotional self. It is in scenes of bodily suffering that the corporeal, excluded from some publics and demanded by others, can feel both its erasure and its return. Suffering is also a master subject because that is how the public constituted by such stories of suffering are expected to react, with empathetic feeling for others’ painful feelings: in that sense, seeing pictures of bodies close up is part of what Rey Chow (2006, 22) calls ‘the collective frenzy of our age’ for shared interiority. That public is constituted not just by hearing or seeing suffering, but by suffering itself, in its turn.

Family photos in the intimate public sphere

Drawing on the work discussed in the previous sections, we now have a better idea of the ‘public’ into which family snaps moved more and more often during the 1990s. Warner suggests that escalating consumption intensifies the dynamic between positivity and self-abstraction for modern public subjects and creates ‘a
violently desirous speculation on bodies’ (Warner 2002, 183). That speculation extends now from the picturing of distant suffering (Campbell 2003, 2004, 2007), to the fascination with celebrities, to the vogue for ‘reality television’, to the display of bodies as trophies on all sides of the War on Terror (Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2007) – and, I would argue, to the appearance of family snaps in the mass media. An intimate public is an embodied public, and when family snaps appear in newspapers, they appear as some of those bodies making their appearance in the mass media. (Family snaps are usually cropped when they appear in media texts, to cut out anything other than the bodies on show.) Their appearance makes the claim that ‘images in the public media display the public to itself’ literally come true (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 12), and because the people pictured in those family snaps in public are almost always there as victims, in their framing as bodies abused, they catalyse the feelings of trauma through which the contemporary intimate public is constituted. For they appear most often as photos of bodies missing from that public: abducted, disappeared, murdered. They appear both as the public and as gaps in the body public; they are absent, gone, dead; they are the public’s wounds. As such, and as the traumatic gap (Luckhurst 2003), they are pictured again and again by a mass media needing to both show and deny that wound. In this context, the play of absence and presence so important to family snaps also articulates the ambivalence of showing death in public suggested by some commentators on the mass-mediated, intimate public sphere (Foster 1996; Lurie 2006). There and gone, absent and present, family snaps of the victims of violence photos both show a public and constitute one in the feelings they provoke.

For, finally, family photographs are powerful conduits for what Luckhurst (2003, 28) called the ‘subjective and communal identification with or projection into’ suffering. After all, nearly everyone has family photos, and nearly everyone can recognise one: not only recognise it as a particular sort of image, but also, crucially, recognise the practices and relationships in which it was embedded in its domestic practising. Family snaps are objects that are central to the making of family, mothering and home. Used to picture the dead, they can allow other viewers to ask, what if that was my daughter, my father, pictured there? What would that feel like? We all recognise family snaps; and when they appear in the intimate public sphere as pictures of the abused and dead, we can all empathise with the grief and pain for whom those photos are just that, family snaps. Their pain becomes our pain, as we imagine what they must be suffering, and we become the intimate public sphere as we think and feel these things.

It is no surprise then that as the mass mediated public becomes more intimate, family snaps should find themselves participating more and more in its visual economy: indeed there are aspects of family snaps that enable their transition to public display. Two I have already mentioned – the play between presence and absence in photographs of people, and their conventionality – and one more stands out: their relationship to memory. As I have noted before, the women I interviewed were very much aware of the ways in which their family photography
practice, while highly significant to them, was also widely shared. They knew that many other women did the same things with their cameras, children and photos as they did, and that their photos were very similar to many other family photos. That is, the women I interviewed are aware of both the individual uniqueness and significance of their photos, and of the photos’ generic and shared qualities. For all their detailed variations, family photos are usually immediately recognisable as such, and it is that recognisability that allows the empathetic suffering that constitutes the intimate public. It also parallels exactly the address of a newspaper to a public; like newspapers, the address of family photos is both personal and impersonal. Moreover, the way that family photographs are taken in the knowledge that they will, in the future, serve as a record for what human subjects may forget then but know now that they want to remember, closely parallels Berlant’s (2005, 49) account of the role of the mass media in “making the collective experience of now, “now” being a space- and time-making event deemed important as the present moment of a future history’. Family photos, then, are not entirely alien to publics. In certain respects, what is done with them is similar in both familial and public contexts.

My argument here, therefore, is that family photos enter the mass media of the intimate public sphere as a way of evoking feelings of grief and horror and thus constituting an intimate public sphere. The next chapter will elaborate this claim by looking at the photos of the missing and the dead after the bombs in London in 2005. However, I also want to lay the foundation of the chapter after that, which tries to find ways to look at those family snaps differently. Family snaps can appear in public, and can address a public, but I don’t want to argue that in that move, they become fully public. I do not want to theorise the move of photographs from one circuit of the visual economy to another as a complete recontextualisation. Instead, I want to suggest that family snaps also stay, somehow, a little domestic when they appear in the mass media.

Here it is important to remember that neither Berlant or Warner equate all publics with the public of commodity consumption. Instead, both are concerned to track the intersection of consumption with other forms of publics: with the disincorporated public of political debate, in Warner’s case, and with affective norms in Berlant’s. While these intersections are powerful, in these accounts the consuming public is not co-extensive with an intimate public or with a political public. Moreover, both Berlant and Warner take care in their work to emphasise the existence of other publics. Warner (2002) conceptualises ‘counterpublics’ that resist the dominant alignment of publicness with consumption, and, most interestingly, Berlant pauses in her analysis of the ‘intimate public sphere’ when she discusses something she was sent by her sister as she was writing a chapter for her book: a family video, showing the first two years of her nephew’s life. She describes the video as part of ‘a communication network [among parents] about fertility, family, and the technology of memory that enters the register of public discourse in ways oblique to the rest of this essay’ (Berlant 1997, 133). I find this description of something entering ‘public discourse’ from familial spaces arresting.
and suggestive, and in considering the emotional effects of the insertion of family photographs into mass circulation newspapers, I would argue it is also necessary to retain a sense of their ‘obliqueness’ to the public of newspaper circulation. While in some ways family snaps do fit newspaper practices, I also want to argue that family photos remain somewhat different from other sorts of photographs carried by the papers.

How is this ambiguous status achieved? I would argue that this ambiguity exists as another effect of the recognisability of family snaps. While that recognisability can constitute an intimate public sphere, it produces that public precisely by evoking domestic practices. Newspapers are after all addressing people who know something about photography. Frosh (2001) remarks on the widespread familiarity with commodified photographic practices, but of course, as I’ve already argued, domestic photography practices are equally familiar to a great many people. When family snaps are seen in newspapers, then, they not only look like family snaps, they also look like they don’t quite belong there because their readers know that what is done with newspapers is not the same as what is done with family snaps, and vice versa. Most importantly, perhaps, public-making texts like newspapers are addressed to strangers, while family photos in familial circulations never are. Family snaps are not looked at regularly in the way that newspapers are looked at regularly; their viewing is more haphazard and occasional. Nor are they easily disposed of once printed; unlike newspapers, which are thrown away without a second thought, photos are objects to kept, gifted or exchanged, not routinely abandoned. (The transience of mass-reproduced images is emphasised by Benjamin [1979b].) All of these differences between what is done with newspapers and what is done with family snaps are widely shared and well-known to the readers of newspapers.

When reproduced in newspapers, then, family photos appear as objects partly in place – in their play with presence and absence, in the familiarity of their conventions, in their role in relation to memory – but also partly out of place. Their less than complete entry into this public is described by Benjamin when he remarked that ‘technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself’ and that such a situation ‘enables the original to meet the beholder halfway’ (Benjamin 2003, 43–4). Like ‘oblique’, ‘halfway’ does not imply the total assimilation of the reproduced image into its new circulation. What results, then, when newspapers carry family snaps is a partial misalignment between the reproduced family photograph and its public place in the visual economy. The chapter after next will return to this misalignment.

**Conclusion**

A year after the bombs exploded in London, BBC journalist Fergal Keane interviewed Mrs Fatayi-Williams in her home in Nigeria. Once again, she carried
a photograph of Anthony and was shown carrying it by the BBC’s coverage of the interview. Once again, the photograph was making Anthony present. ‘This is Anthony’ were the first words of Mrs Fatayi-Williams’s speech in London in 2005; not, ‘this is a photo of Anthony’ or ‘this is what Anthony looked like’, but this is Anthony. In 2006, talking in her home, she said:

Sometimes I’ve found it hard to accept that he’s not going to walk through that door, that I’m not going to have those hugs any more, that he’s not going to phone and I can only speak to Anthony through his photo … ‘But he’s saying: “Mummy, I’m there with you, can’t you feel my presence?”’ and I feel his presence. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/5152180.stm, accessed 11/04/07)

Many accounts of the impact of photographs concentrate on this quality of presence, and as Chapters 3 and 4 of this book argued, presence is indeed crucial to the quality of family photos in their familial displays and circulation. What the first part of this chapter has argued is that, when family snaps leave their domestic spaces of display and enter the sphere of the contemporary mass media, their indexicality becomes less important in understanding their effect. The media reproduce family snaps almost always as a means of picturing victims of violence. Thus, what becomes more important than their indexicality is the affective power of such photographs in addressing an intimate public which, when it sees those photos as picturing its own wounds, feels suffering.

Focussing on indexicality as the key theoretical term with which to understand photographs is to ignore many of the other things that photographs do with people (Cohen 2005). Indexicality is indeed very important to familial photography in its domestic spaces, but indexicality is not helpful in addressing all of the issues surrounding the public display of photographs; it does little to address the whole question of the diverse circuits of the visual economy through which family snaps travel, with many other images and objects, in highly differentiated ways, more and more often, for example. This chapter and the previous one have also argued that, for at least some photographs in public, the concept of commodification does rather little to help analyse their effects either. While it is certainly true that many photographs circulating in publics are commodities, family snaps are not. However, this chapter has suggested that the fact that they are not commodities does not mean they have no place in certain kinds of address to publics. On the contrary, in recent times the mass media’s address to an intimate public sphere has found family photographs a very congenial text to deploy. As a widespread integrative practice, family photographs can indeed evoke an effect in strangers: not through knowledge of who they picture, but through a familiarity with how they are pictured, with the practice of family photography. Recall that, for Frosh, the defining characteristic of a photograph in public is its commodification. For him, the ‘public’ circulation of photographs is a relatively autonomous ‘field of public scrutiny … which … is energized, regulated and perpetuated through the systematic production and circulation of photographic images as commodities’ (Frosh 2001,
47). In relation to the intimate public sphere that I am tracing, I would argue that the public circulation of these photographs is, rather, a field which is energised, regulated and perpetuated through the systematic production and circulation of feeling suffering, produced by a widespread knowledge and experience of family photographic practice. Once again, the importance of thinking about the practices in which photographs are embedded is clear.

Chapter 8 will return to the suggestion that, although family photos are indeed part of the address to an intimate public sphere, they also remain somewhat out of place in that sphere. The next chapter, though, will trace the contours of an intimate public as it was addressed in the summer of 2005 by British newspapers. As we will see, picturing bodies and feeling suffering was central to that address. However, the bodies pictured were highly differentiated, in ways that Warner’s account does not imagine. In Warner’s argument, ‘a violently desirous speculation’ is directed at injured bodies of all kinds, it seems: at bodies mangled in car crashes, burnt in airplane disasters, bloated from drugs or scarred by cosmetic surgery. However, it is important to recall one of the persistent complaints made about the media’s images of suffering, which is that some people’s suffering is pictured differently from others. In particular, the mass media in the global north are very reluctant to print pictures of the corpses of people from the developed world. The media of the global north very rarely address their publics by showing them corpses of people like themselves. Instead, if such dead people are pictured at all, it is with pictures of them as they were when they were alive, often using family snaps. The dead bodies that are pictured are the bodies of dying and dead people from the global south (Perlmutter 1998; Taylor 1991; Wells 2007). In the coverage of the bombs in London in July 2005, there were no photographs of dead bodies. Indeed, there were very few photographs of injured bodies. In the photograph which came to be one of the iconic images of the bombings – the photograph of the bus on which Anthony Fatayi-Williams had indeed been killed, taken only moments after the explosion which ripped its rear end apart – the only visible bodies were the shocked bodies of passengers at the front of the bus, alive, standing, horrified. The next chapter pays careful attention to the bodies produced by the press coverage of bodies after 7 July 2005, and suggests that in the intimate public sphere, not all bodies are suffered with equally.