Summary

Family photography going digital

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This paper looks at contemporary family photography. Family snaps, that is, showing family members, taken by family members, for viewing mostly by other family members. It thinks about the importance of family photos as objects which almost every home has, in terms of how they construct notions of home and family. And it suggests that homes, as buildings, don’t always map directly onto the senses of family that family photographs help to create.

This argument is based on a series of interviews with middle-class women with young children in south-east England, and that should be borne in mind when reading this abstract: not everything here is necessarily applicable to all family photography.

I’ve been interviewing women for about eight years, and in that time, digital cameras and home computers have become ubiquitous in these sorts of households. But whether these women look at their photos in an album or on a screen, as a slideshow or as a pile of prints taken from a developer’s envelope, the subject positions and relations produced as these practices performed have not altered. Two things are produced:

1. family. Familial togetherness is crucial both to what family snaps picture and to what is done with them. Family snaps show family members together (favourite photos are often chosen on this criteria), they are displayed together in collages, in multi-frames, in displays of frames grouped together on walls or standing, in albums, in files, in slideshows; they are looked at together, by mums with kids and families looking at computer slideshows; and most importantly, they are sent to other members of family – this is very important, to perform togetherness at a distance.

2. mothering. While both mums and dads take family snaps, doing things with them is mothers’ work. So we might see photography as a technology for mothering – using technology in the Foucauldian sense – as a tool for achieving a certain subject position. And here I agree completely with Patrizia di Bello’s account of Anna Waterlow’s album 1850s and 60s. Patrizia says there must have been moments when Anna looked at her album as “a way to enjoy the children as absent” (97). I came to think that family snaps – seen and touched by these women as tangible traces of the bodies of their children – were a way to negotiate ambivalence of mothering. As a mum, you can look at photos, feel very close to a child, but then put album away, or shut down the pc, in ways that actual children never can be removed, and there is a certain pleasure in that putting away as well as in the looking.

Now, reading the literature on digital technologies, you can get the sense that everyone is adopting a whole series of technologies and practices all at once – that digital cameras, blogs, FaceBook, YouTube and Flikr are together transforming the
everyday visual culture of the developed world. But talking to my particular group of interviewees, however, it’s clear that only certain assemblages of technologies have become part of their family photography practice. None blogged, or YouTubed, and only two used photo-sharing websites; conversely, all looked at their photos via their computers. I would argue that for this group of women, digital technologies have been integrated into their existing family photography practices, and have therefore changed very few family photography practices.

Family photographs have been sent to family and friends ever since invention of photography of course, as Susan Sontag has pointed out. But to conclude, it’s useful to reflect on the implications of that mobility for notions of ‘home’. What space makes a home, exactly? A house, yes, and family snaps often among first things to get unpacked after moving house. But those four walls are also permeated by other spaces, familial spaces, brought there by photographs: holiday pictures, for example, pictures of other family members, and the knowledge that copies of the same photos are in the houses of other family members. A house that is a family home, then, cannot be defined by its four walls, and photographs are a key way in which its geographies extend outwards.

References and further reading


Rose G (2004) ‘Everyone’s cuddled up and it just looks really nice’: the emotional geography of some mums and their family photos Social and Cultural Geography 5, pp549-64

Rose G (2005) ‘You just have to make a conscious effort to keep snapping away, I think’: a case study of family photos, mothering and familial space, in Hardy S and Wiedmer C eds Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal Through Politics, Home, and the Body Palgrave Macmillan pp221-40