

Over the past 25 years, photography has moved to centre stage in the study of visual culture and has established itself in numerous disciplines. This trend has brought with it a diversification in approaches to the study of the photographic image.

*Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* offers exciting perspectives on photography theory today from some of the world's leading critics and theorists. It introduces new means of looking at photographs, with topics including:

- a community-based understanding of Spencer Tunick's controversial installations
- the tactile and auditory dimensions of photographic viewing
- snapshot photography
- the use of photography in human rights discourse.

*Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* also addresses the question of photography history, revisiting the work of some of the most influential theorists such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and the *October* group, re-evaluating the neglected genre of the *carte-de-visite* photograph, and addressing photography's wider role within the ideologies of modernity. The collection opens with an introduction by the editors, analysing the trajectory of photography studies and theory over the past three decades and the ways in which the discipline has been constituted.

Ranging from the most personal to the most dehumanized uses of photography, from the nineteenth century to the present day, from Latin America to Northern Europe, *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* will be of value to all those interested in photography, visual culture, and cultural history.

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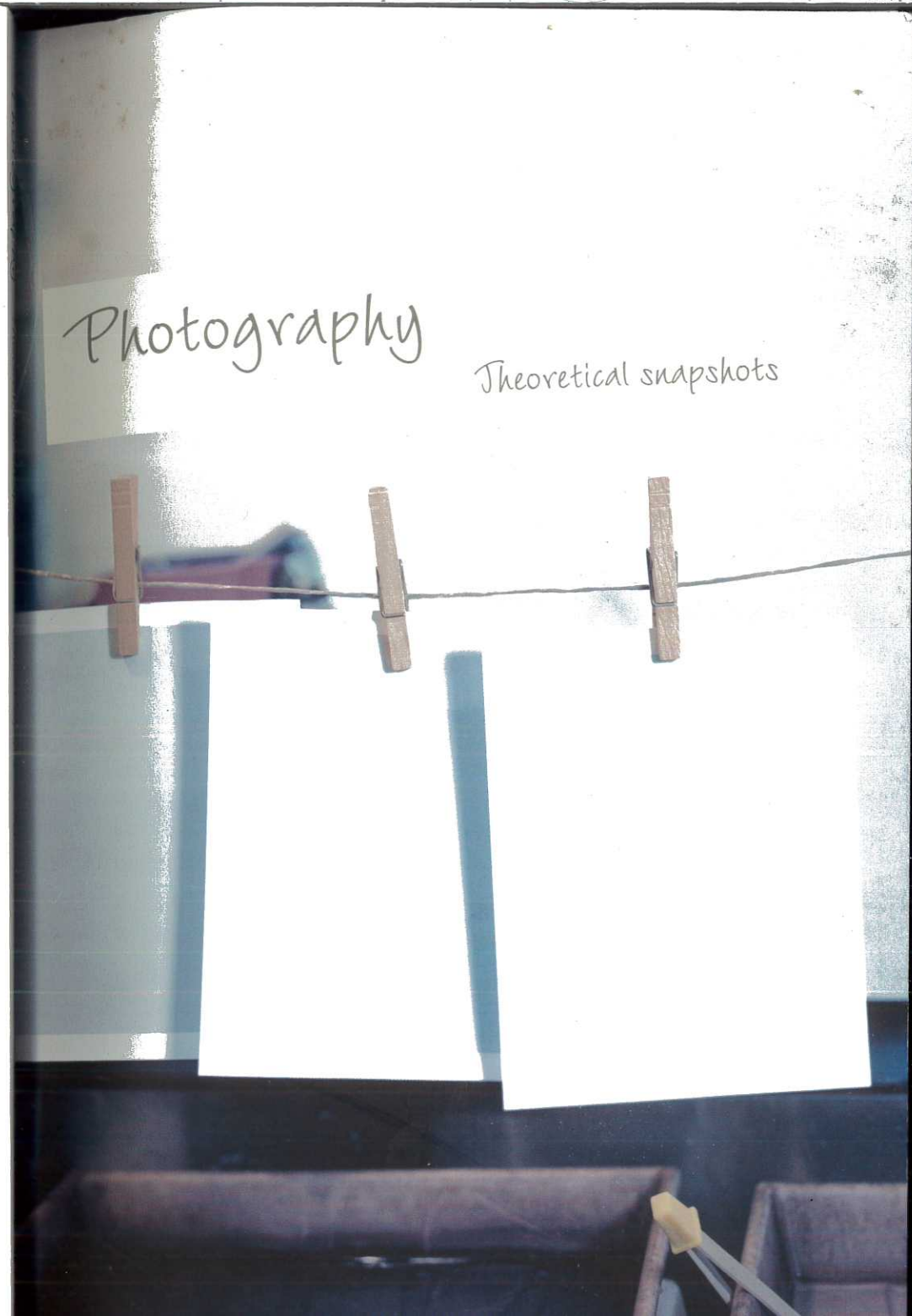
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## PHOTOGRAPHY

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- 19 Gordon Machbirr is Burarra photographer at the Maningrida Bilingual Literature Production Centre, Arnhem Land in Australia, see Poignant (1992). For similar sentiments in a British context, see Rose (2003, 2004).
- 20 *Lost Identities: A journey of rediscovery*, 1999, <<http://www.head-smashed-in.com/frimidentity.html>> accessed 19 April 2006).
- 21 For a discussion of the importance of naming and photographs, see Brown and Peers (2005). In relation to their project with the Kainai Nation, Canada, they discuss the embodied processes through which 'named' photographs shifted from being 'anthropological types' to 'named ancestors' embedded in local historical practices.
- 22 This is not unlike Merleau-Ponty's (1962: 93) description of the double sensation of touching one's own skin.
- 23 The viewing of photographs in digital or camera-phone environments is rapidly shifting the embodied practices of image viewing and sharing. See Cubitt (1998); Sutton (2005).
- 24 As Stewart (1993: 31) has pointed out, 'touch' is strongly linked with emotion (at least in English): 'I am touched' means 'I am emotionally moved'.
- 25 Batchen's (2004) analysis of 'vernacular' photography has also stressed the importance of the tactile but does not explore the nature of the tactile.
- 26 Mitchell (2005: 263) summarizes theories of vision from Descartes to Oliver Sacks, which have emphasized the centrality of touch in vision. See also Lindberg (1976).
- 27 An extended consideration of this topic might explore the kinaesthetics of photographic engagement, drawing on a wide range of material from the anthropology of movement. For an overview of the field, see Farnell (1999).
- 28 See, for example, Finnegan (1970); Tonkin (1992: 51–2); Ong (1982).
- 29 There are ways in which one could extend this analysis to smell and perhaps even taste. Carolyn Steedman (2001: 70) has written, in a way that might be extended to photographs, of the 'feel' of the archive and the smell of past paper, the dust from decaying paper and leather that coats the hands making them dry, stains the clothes, and catches one at the back of the throat. Régis DeBray (1996: 153–4) has also connected photographs with smell: 'Is not a photograph as affecting as an odour, unexpected and poignant? We might even think of it as an odour for the eye, set down and made perennially fresh by the material [...] that has received the graphic image of a person long since fled: an odour that remains.'

## Chapter 3

### On snapshot photography

#### Rethinking photographic power in public and private spheres

Catherine Zuromskis

I

In May of 2004, the late cultural critic Susan Sontag made her final pronouncement on the moral destitution of photography in an excoriating article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled, 'Regarding the Torture of Others: Notes on What Has Been Done – and Why – to Prisoners, by Americans'. Her subject was the then recently discovered photographs of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. One of the most egregious of these images (fig. 3.1) depicts two smiling American soldiers, Army Specialists Charles Graner, Jr. and Sabrina Harman, posing behind a pile of naked, hooded prisoners. Echoing her positions in *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag regarded these photographs as evidence of an increasing complacency toward violence in American visual culture. Citing conservative justifications for the photographed acts of torture – that the prisoners were hardly innocent and that it was all in fun<sup>1</sup> – and evasions that address not the volatile content of the photographs but the very fact of their existence as a threat to the safety of American soldiers, Sontag posits a numbing of American sensitivity and morality towards images of suffering. As more and more photographs are taken and consumed, Sontag argues, the world is atomized into a series of disconnected images and anecdotes. By embracing these isolating images, she charges, we have abandoned political agency, cultural intimacy, and moral accountability in favour of an anaesthetizing flow of visual content. Thus, regarding the images of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib, she concludes, 'the photographs are us', the grim ethical legacy of our unbridled fascination with photography (Sontag 2004: 26).

Within a week of its publication, Sontag's position was, not surprisingly, echoed by *Times* op-ed columnist Frank Rich and savaged as a 'freewheeling, incoherent, anti-American diatribe' by *The National Review* (Goldblatt 2004). The article, in my view, drew much-needed attention not to the acts portrayed in the Abu Ghraib photos *per se*, but to the photographs themselves and the very fact of their existence in our image-saturated culture.





Figure 3.1 Army Specialists Charles Graner, Jr. and Sabrina Harman posing with prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison.

were taken and for whom. At the same time, however, something about the article made me bristle. It was not that I disagreed with Sontag's political stance – far from it. Like Sontag, I was and continue to be appalled by the unjustified onslaught of American imperialist violence in Iraq. And I too was disturbed by the pleasurable ease with which the perpetrators of 'prisoner abuse' posed alongside their victims, and the quickness of the conservative administration to rationalize away such concrete evidence of gross military misconduct. But I felt that underlying this justified political rant, in her own circuitous way, Sontag was really pointing the accusatory finger *at photography*, suggesting that the medium itself was complicit in the creation of a culture that could produce, and in certain tacit ways support, images like this one.

This position was not a new one for Sontag; she always had a somewhat contentious relationship with photography. From her earliest writings on the subject, Sontag has struggled to reconcile her deep fascination with photographs with an insistent sense of the specious morality of the medium. While she is quick to acknowledge the way that photography enthral its viewers, offering beauty, fantasy, knowledge, and a democratic aesthetic on a scale unparalleled in other visual media, she also states in no uncertain terms that 'there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera' (1977: 7). As a machine of distance (whether physical, psychological, or aesthetic) the photographic apparatus is also a tool of domination. By taking up the camera, she argues, one chooses voyeuristic detachment over immersive experience. Aesthetically speaking, Sontag views this as an essentially surrealist enterprise: automated, alienating, and trespassing on alternate realities. But she also reads this voyeuristic act as inherently violent: photographs 'appropriate' and 'incriminate'; they 'turn people into objects to be symbolically possessed' and are 'a potent means of gaining control over' another. In one passage, she likens the camera to a gun and photography to 'sublimated murder'. In another, she cites the plight of the wartime photojournalist who must choose between capturing an image and saving a life (1977: 4–18).

Photographs like the one reproduced here seem tailor-made to illustrate Sontag's position. The scopophilic domination of the helpless prisoner/subject by the cruel and unflappable soldier/photographer fits perfectly into Sontag's binary model of photographic power. The photographs taken at Abu Ghraib were integral to the acts of torture being carried out. Particularly in tortures like simulated sex acts, the presence of the camera was designed to heighten the prisoners' humiliation and degradation. Moreover, by documenting these acts on film, prison guards underscored their control over the prisoners both in the moment and into the indefinite future.<sup>2</sup> And thus, Sontag suggests, however instrumental they may have been in exposing military misconduct, these images are always already implicated in the acts they depict: 'The horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that

But is it really that simple? To be sure, this image constitutes an act of aggression, but it is also distinct from many of the public modes in which photographs of atrocity are often disseminated – the artistic and journalistic war photographs, for example, that form the basis for Sontag's investigation in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. What struck me immediately upon seeing the Abu Ghraib photographs in general, and the above image in particular, was that despite the overt violence of the subject, the visual style of the photograph most resembled that of a common snapshot. It was clearly made by an amateur with a digital snapshot camera, presumably (if the soldiers' expressions are any indication) for pleasure. In its central composition, its carefully orchestrated pose, and the clichéd 'thumbs up' gesture, the image recalls candid photographs from a family vacation or an outing with friends – except that instead of posing alongside a sand castle or the fishing trip's catch of the day, these snapshotters pose alongside debased and humiliated prisoners. And it is for me the snapshot quality of this image that makes the scene all the more horrifying: by combining the unmitigated violence of the actions depicted with this unsettlingly familiar photographic rhetoric of the snapshot, the image seems to posit torture as the norm, a banal and unremarkable part of everyday life.

I call attention to this fact because the snapshot genre has always seemed a pregnant omission in Sontag's writings on photography. While her approach to the photographic medium is deliberately wide-ranging – considering both vernacular and aesthetic examples – Sontag devotes only a few pages in the entirety of her writing on photography to the lowly, ubiquitous snapshot. This is perhaps because the unique characteristics of the genre pose something of a challenge to Sontag's rigid, binary formulation of photographic power. How, then, might the codification of this image as a 'snapshot', alter Sontag's interpretation? Reading every photographic act as one of aggression and detachment, Sontag not only essentializes the medium, ignoring the mutability of power in different genres and individual photographic instances, but she also disregards social constructions of power that organize photographic meaning on a grand scale. My aim, then, is not to contradict Sontag's assertion that power is always embedded in the rhetoric of the photograph, but to articulate that power differently, as a struggle between discrete and private photographic acts and the publicly constructed ideology of photographic norms. In so doing, I seek not to redeem images like the one above, but to open them up to closer scrutiny. Indeed, it is precisely because these photographs are so awful, and so politically loaded, that I think they deserve a more careful exploration than Sontag's justified but limiting moral outrage allows. In what follows, then, I will explore the genre of snapshot photography in more detail in the hope of complicating Sontag's essentialist (and essentially moral) reading not only of the Abu Ghraib photographs but also of the medium as a whole.

## II

Let me begin by looking at a very different image: the man pictured here is my father and the child in striped trousers is me, circa 1973 (fig. 3.2). While genre distinctions can be slippery, I think my readers will generally agree that this image qualifies as a 'typical snapshot'. I use the term 'snapshot' to describe an amateur form of image-making, requiring little or no photographic skill on the part of the photographer. Theorists of the genre have characterized the snapshot in terms of its intimate social function and its simple and straightforward visual style.<sup>3</sup> The subject (here the familiar parent and child pairing) generally has considerable personal or emotional significance for the photographer (in this case my mother), and the photographer maintains this emotional emphasis on the subject by circulating the image within a distinctly private, often familial sphere of consumption. Whether placed in a silver frame, pasted in an album, or tucked away in a shoebox, photographs like these constitute emotional touchstones, personal totems, and conduits to happier, simpler times within their particular networks of consumption. I am particularly drawn to this photograph because of its framing. My mother shoots from slightly below eye level with my father, emphasizing the thrilling vertigo of my position atop his shoulders. But such aesthetic concerns are ultimately secondary, as long as the snapshot fulfils its basic indexical function. Indeed, snapshots often seem designed to be as stylistically unremarkable as possible. The identifiable visual rhetoric of the genre is one of utterly banal visual conventions: frontal posing, central framing, demonstrative gestures of affection, and the all-important smile. But what these conventions lack in originality they more than make up for in affective function; in combination with the emotionally significant subject and a sphere of eager and intimate consumption, these conventions above all others testify to the intimacy and complicity of the familial bond.

In her brief treatment of the subject, Sontag attempts to fit the snapshot (or, as she more broadly defines it, 'popular photography') into her larger analysis of the medium by focusing on the public face of the genre: its ritual conventions. Popular photography, she says, is primarily 'a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power' (1977: 8). In a somewhat circular argument she suggests that we take pictures because not to do so would be unthinkable. The photographic act dispels anxieties of unbelonging by providing a socially acceptable and minimally intrusive form of engaging with others and claiming life experience. The tourist who snaps pictures everywhere she goes alleviates fears of being in an unfamiliar place by colonizing new spaces through her lens. And the nuclear family maintains superficial bonds to an increasingly distant extended family through a cluster of mute faces staring from frames on the mantelpiece. In either case, Sontag's reasoning suggests, the photographer or the photographic consumer maintains a symbolic connection through the photograph but one that is precisely only symbolic, supplanting real interaction



Figure 3.2 The author and her father, c. 1973. Collection of the author.

While the picture of my father and me provides a good example of the affective function of the snapshot described above, it also fits well into Sontag's mechanics of distance and aggression. The photograph is, by all accounts, a 'good snapshot'. Both subjects are fully visible and smiling. The pose is significantly carefree (signifying spontaneity) as well as one of affection (denoting familial intimacy); and of course, since it captures the child at a young age it fulfils the all-important role of preserving the fleeting moments of youth. The image is then designed to fulfil the social imperative of documenting familial closeness. By snapping this picture, having it developed, sending prints to relatives and archiving it in an album, my mother arrests any anxieties she might have about being a good parent. Yet in order to do so, Sontag might suggest, my mother had to extricate herself from the familial interaction itself. As iconic as the image might become once it is memorialized in a frame or the pages of an album, my mother can only ever enjoy this moment voyeuristically. Thus, she chooses distance and the opportunity to possess a trace of the past over the chance to live in the present.

This kind of analysis is convincing but, I think, incomplete. By focusing on the ritual of snapshooting, Sontag accounts for one of the most striking aspects of snapshot photography: the way that, from one individual to the next, private snapshots look remarkably the same. This is why I can show a personal photograph in the public context of this book and feel confident that my readers will understand its rhetorical meaning even if they do not recognize the subjects. Sontag also perceptively notes that photography gives a form of agency to the individual with the camera, a means of signifying a connection to people, places, or events (even if that connection ultimately distances as well). Where I think she missteps, however, is in collapsing the ritual conformity and the individual agency of snapshot production and consumption into one impulse, as if to imply that popular photography coalesces organically into ritual practice. In contrast, what strikes me as interesting about the snapshot, and that which makes it such a provocative object of study, are the instances where these two agendas refuse one another, playing out the struggle between cultural norms and individual desires through the rhetoric of the image.

### III

Here is another typical snapshot: a boy and girl (brother and sister perhaps?) strolling happily down the beach (fig. 3.3). Or at least this appears to be a typical snapshot but for the fact that it is in a 1952 advertisement for a Kodak camera (having been used for another campaign two years previously). Sontag emphasizes the ritual function of the snapshot in certifying familial bonds, but because of her ontological approach, she is far more interested in the qualities she can locate in the medium itself than in the social, cultural, and political influences that construct its use. But images like this testify to the way that ritual photographic



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aspects of snapshot culture we consider natural or inherent are, in fact, socially and commercially manufactured. Nancy Martha West has shown, for example, that snapshotting was first associated with outdoor leisure activities like biking, skiing, and picnicking (West 2000). Only after Kodak began to advertise snapshot cameras as a means of documenting family life and emotional relations in the domestic sphere did snapshot photography gain such a poignant and important role in the chronicling of sentimental family histories. As an example of just such a promotional image, what is interesting about the photograph in this advertisement is that despite its conventional appearance, the image is simply too good to be a real snapshot. The subject is candid, but the children are too perfectly framed, shot in close-up and at eye level. Despite their proximity to the photographer they seem oblivious to his presence. In addition, their (fully visible) expressions and gestures are highly demonstrative of a kind of accord and mutual generosity that may be something of a rarity in real-life sibling interaction. This photograph, then, like any number of images circulated publicly through Kodak and Polaroid promotional material, popular photography manuals, print advertising, and even the photos filling empty picture frames at the store, presents a carefully constructed visual ideal, designed to direct and normalize our individual notions of what can and should be considered a ‘good snapshot’.

This visual ideal is at once unattainable and, in a way, invisible. On the one hand, the ideal snapshot is deliberately distinct from the prevalence of ‘real’ imperfect images, so often marred by frowns, blinks, blurry turns of the head, and accidental thumbs across the lens. It sets the bar intentionally high, ensuring that snapshotters will take lots of pictures, buy lots of cameras and film, and invest more emotional energy in the image when it comes out well. However, as dominant as this ideal is, it is also internalized, hegemonic. Emphasizing visual simplicity and the fundamental emotional bonds between photographer and subject, snapshot photography is a mode of image-making that is constructed precisely to seem unconstructed, manufactured to be read as spontaneous. The naturalization of this ideal is central to the importance of the snapshot in American culture. Snapshots are proof positive of domestic and social harmony, potent symbols of the American Dream accessible to (almost) any member of the general public. With their firm footing in traditional values, to borrow an idea from Lauren Berlant, snapshots produce normative cultural citizenship through private actions.<sup>4</sup> The more we ‘impulsively’ strive for this photographic ideal, the more such symbolic conventions are cemented into American culture. What I want to posit then, in contrast to Sontag’s model of the photographer driven by a compulsive need to appropriate ritualistically and colonize the world around her through her lens, is an external, regulating discourse of snapshot meaning, one that advances commercial and moral-political agendas, but also one that conceals itself within the notion of a naïve, unstudied, and instinctual mode of photographic production. Furthermore, insofar as she reads these conventions of photographic practice as essential to the medium itself, Sontag not only ignores the hegemonic forces invested in photo-

Figure 3.3 Advertisement for the Cine-Kodak Royal Magazine Camera, July, 1952. © Kodak. Image courtesy of George Eastman Collection, George Eastman House.

## IV

As I have suggested, however, the hegemonic conventions of snapshooting are only half of the story. While snapshot photography operates within a highly normative structure, this structure is inhabited by a collection of singular, disparate photographic acts. These acts – polymorphous, individual, and rooted in personal, even clandestine desires – contradict the social and cultural conventions of snapshooting in subtle but important ways. Challenging the notion that snapshot photography can ‘mean only culturally’, photography scholars have argued that snapshots are vital tools in the preservation and creation of individual histories and memories (Kuhn 1995). Paramount to this function is the memorialization of things at their best. Thus, while snapshots draw much of their emotional cachet from being photographic – and therefore, it is assumed, unfailingly truthful – traces of the past, the image itself often offers a distinctly rosier and inaccurate version of the events portrayed. A week-long family car trip marred by arguments and tears can still produce the perfect portrait of the entire family, harmonious and smiling, in front of the Grand Canyon. Or there is this photograph (fig. 3.4): me again on the far left, a few years ago, with some fellow graduate students who, like me, were attending a six-week summer program at Cornell University. While the impressive Taughannock Falls, off camera right, provided the impetus for general picture snapping, the real focus was on the making of memories and connections between the participants. Insofar as this photograph signifies that the five of us were there in front of the waterfall on that day this photograph is an accurate representation of reality. But there is more going on here. At the time this image was taken, we did not know each other well, but by picturing us together this photograph signifies a mutual affinity between the sitters: we are posing as friends despite the fact that we are not, yet, and may never be. As such we have internalized the rhetoric and conventions of the snapshot, and are fulfilling our social duty, preemptively even, by posing for a picture together. This image then represents a fantasy of substantive bonds between the subjects and a speculative claim on possible future intimacies.

This speculative claim is particularly loaded in the case of the man I am seated next to, Daniel, who is now my husband. At the time this photograph was taken, we had engaged in a brief flirtation at a few social events, but neither of us had yet articulated our feelings to one another. As people milled about at the base of the waterfall, someone, I can’t remember who, waved me into this group to pose for a picture. Motivated by my accidental but photographically symbolic proximity to Daniel, I passed my camera to the photographer for my own version of the image. Given that no significant intimacy had yet occurred between Daniel and me, the gesture had multiple functions. First, by posing for this photograph and by asking the photographer to take the picture again with my camera I am signifying my attraction to Daniel, my desire for future closeness. Daniel, by doing the same, is reciprocating that gesture, but since the future of our relationship is uncertain, the gesture is also a way of marking the present moment as significant.



Figure 3.4 The author with friends at Taughannock Falls, near Ithaca, NY, summer 2004. Collection of the author.



my flirtation with Daniel goes nowhere, a trace of our mutual desire will still be available for me to return to through the image.

I want to suggest that the individual dynamics of this photograph pose a challenge to Sontag's model of photographic power. First, the most persuasive counter-example to Sontag's posited 'act of aggression in every use of the camera' is the snapshot's emphasis on emotional relations. Snapshot photography is constructed as a private mode of interaction between individuals; to pose for a photograph, to pose with someone in a photograph, or to solicit a pose in order to take a photograph, are all, within the realm of snapshooting, conscious gestures of intimacy. If one of us had resisted the photographic act, demonstrably refusing to be included in the image by scowling or turning away, the snapshot moment would have been ruined. There is, then, a power dynamic at work here, but it is not quite as simple as Sontag would suggest. The snapshot depends upon the sharing of photographic power, a collaboration between the photographer who knows how to frame the image and trip the shutter, and the sitter who knows how to pose, smile, and hold still so that her image will deserve revisiting later. In some cases, this subjective agency eclipses the photographer's power entirely, as when the tourist relies on a passing stranger or a self-timer and a well placed rock to document her vacation memories.

On the individual level, then, the snapshot radically decentres the simple binary of photographer/self *versus* subject/other, resituating the photographic act as a connective or dialogic gesture that manifests agency on both sides of the lens. On one level this mutual agency serves to reinforce the hegemony of snapshot convention by establishing real-life intimacies through photography. However, I would argue, as well, that snapshot photography offers individual opportunities for non-conformity, for subtly challenging the dominant ideology of snapshot practice through private photographic acts. Poised at the cusp of cultural normalcy and individual anomaly, the snapshot is engaged in both repressing and revealing the truth of the latter. As I have noted, even if a closeness had never developed between Daniel and me, I would still have a photographic fiction of that closeness; and while snapshot culture dictates otherwise, I would have had the power to enjoy that fiction as private visual fantasy. Popular culture is full of cautions against the fantasy misuse of such potent images. From the iconic scene in *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry 1981) in which a hysterical Joan Crawford violently eliminates an ex-lover from her past by cutting his face out of every one of her photographs, to tales of child pornographers turned in to the authorities by photomat technicians, to the protagonist of *One Hour Photo* (Mark Romanek 2002) who constructs a fantasy family through stolen snapshots, popular culture seems to offer almost as many negative examples of snapshot practice as positive ideals. These examples are presented as dangerous, perversions of photographic decency, but as such they are also sites of political possibility. Indeed, I suggest that the close regulation of this private culture of photographic production through hegemonic conventions speaks to the very

## V

So which is the case with the Abu Ghraib photograph? Are Graner and Harman's photographic instincts in some way guided by the hegemonic force of snapshot culture or do their snapshot memories of torture in an Iraqi prison constitute an aberration of this most banal mode of image-making, revealing perversion and moral decrepitude? In my analysis of the genre as a whole I have tried to resituate Sontag's formulation of photographic power from the domination and objectification of the subject by the photographer or viewer, to a struggle between monolithic photographic conventions and swarming individual practices.<sup>5</sup> And I think this model nicely illuminates if not the meaning of the Abu Ghraib photographs, then at least the cultural struggle to interpret them. On one side there is Sontag (and many others), who ignore the cultural associations of the snapshot genre in order to indict these images and the conservative spin machine that has worked so hard to neutralize them. While she refers to the photographs as 'snapshots' in passing, Sontag is far more invested in comparing these images to public and commercial photographic modes: photojournalism, pornography, and notably, the souvenir lynching photographs of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American South.<sup>6</sup> Because the Abu Ghraib photos were 'meant to be circulated and seen by many people', she says, they indicate a public audience for and acceptance of the atrocities they depict (2004: 28). On the other side of this interpretive struggle are the members of the Bush administration who emphasize precisely the private nature of the snapshot image. If we take the conventions of snapshot photography at face value, the amateur look of the image and the grotesque 'thumbs up' point not to a systemic problem, but rather to the deviant dealings of a few morally deficient individuals acting purely on their own impetus.

Perhaps, then, the truth of this image lies somewhere in between – drawing together public sentiment and private desires, official protocol and unauthorized actions. While we can be quite certain that this image was not meant to appear, as it did, on the front page of the *New York Times*, it also did not occur in a void. And the fact that images such as these follow the rhetoric of snapshot photography speaks not only to the disregard for human life and dignity on the part of the proud soldiers posing and smiling alongside debased Iraqi prisoners, but also to a military and political culture in which such images are seen as 'normal', 'all in fun'. Ultimately, I do agree with Sontag, but only in part. And I suggest, in contrast to Sontag's claim that the events at Abu Ghraib were 'designed to be photographed' (2004: 29), that photography is not so much culpable of the atrocities it represents as a window onto pervasive ideologies (in this case of racism and violence) that emanate unconsciously from intimate acts. As such, the revelatory nature of the medium is equally capable of aiding and undermining such ideologies. Which of these is the case with the Abu Ghraib photographs, I leave open for debate.



## Notes

- 1 Sontag illustrates this point with a quote from conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who, during a radio broadcast in May 2004, stated: 'This is no different than what happens at the skull and bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time. You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people. You ever heard of emotional release?' As quoted in Sontag (2004: 28–9).
- 2 Indeed, as Seymour Hersh has reported, some government officials understood the purpose of these images to be blackmail: 'It was thought that some prisoners would do anything – including spying on their associates – to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. [An unnamed government consultant] said, "I was told that the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population". The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said' (2004: 38).
- 3 See, in this regard, Julia Hirsch (1981); Marianne Hirsch (1997); Marianne Hirsch (1999); Kuhn (1995); Spence and Holland (1991).
- 4 In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Berlant challenges notions of an embodied public sphere with the assertion that American cultural citizenship is today, 'a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere' (Berlant 1997: 5).
- 5 In this notion of swarming individual practices I am much influenced by Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), in which he posits a dynamic relation between the established structures and institutions of power and the heterogeneous, fragmentary, and invisible practices of individuals.
- 6 On the parallels between the Abu Ghraib photographs and lynching photographs, see Apel (2005).

## Chapter 4

## Family photography and the global drama of human rights

Andrea Noble

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Most of us addressed or implicated by these forms of performance protest are not victims, survivors or perpetrators, but this is not to say we have no role to play in the global drama of human rights violations.

Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*

What *makes for a grievable life*? Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a 'we', for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

On 24 August 2004, the digital edition of the Argentine daily *Clarín* featured a colour photograph of a smartly dressed man in his mid forties holding up two black-and-white family snapshots for the camera (fig. 4.1). Like most family photographs, those on display in this image are in many ways unremarkable: a man and woman smile warmly at the viewer. Numerous details within each image accentuate the homely, relaxed intimacy of these family scenarios: the man's pipe; the bisected figure of the child who leans back into the embrace of the person we assume to be his father to get into the viewfinder's field of vision; and the arm that affectionately rests across the woman's shoulder. Although this couple is unknown to us, their pose is more than familiar in its everyday informality and predictability that is the hallmark of family photography as a genre. Displayed in their current context, however, these family snaps, whilst sadly familiar, are anything but ordinary. As the accompanying caption and text reveal, the man who proffers the photographs to the camera is Daniel Tarnopolsky, the only surviving child of Hugo Tarnopolsky and Blanca Edelberg, whose disappearance, along with two of their three children, in July 1976 was linked to agents of the military dictatorship. Their still images here bear eloquent testimony in the context of a photo opportunity staged to mark the compensation that ex-admiral Emilio Massera, a key perpetrator in the regime of state terror (1976–83), has been ordered to pay Tarnopolsky. To the