

Reviews and Discussion

Exploiting the Vernacular: Studies of Snapshot Photography

Jonathan Green, ed. *The Snapshot*. Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1974. 126 pp. \$8.50 (paper).

Ken Graves and Mitchell Payne, eds. *American Snapshots*. Oakland, Calif.: The Scrimshaw Press, 1977. 119 pp. (No price.)

Brian Coe and Paul Gates. *The Snapshot Photograph — The Rise of Popular Photography 1888–1939*. London: Ash and Grant, Ltd., 1977. 144 pp. \$6.95 (paper).

Michael Lesy. *Time Frames — The Meaning of Family Pictures*. New York: Pantheon, 1980. 144 pp. + xxvii. \$8.95 (paper).

Julia Hirsch. *Family Photographs — Content, Meaning and Effect*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. 139 pp. \$14.95 (cloth).

Review Essay by Richard Chalfen Temple University

Interest in snapshot photography continues to grow as many diverse forms of photographic imagery attract critical attention. Photography is now commonly discussed in contexts of fine art, folk art, and a variety of forms of nonart; a list of fifty snapshot-related articles is easily compiled. As expected, considerable diversity exists in conceptual perspective, in ways of defining a snapshot, and in the intended audience for different publications. Discussions of snapshots can usually be placed in one of the following categories: (1) the place of amateur photography in the historical development of photography; (2) instructions and advice for improving snapshots and family albums commonly found in newspapers and popular magazines; (3) the relationship of snapshots to folk art and/or fine art; (4) the significance and "strength" of snapshot imagery related to "the snapshot aesthetic"; (5) the psychological interpretation of snapshot imagery and/or uses in psychotherapy; (6) collections of "interesting" snapshots packaged in album format; and (7) social and/or cultural analyses of snapshot collections.¹

While our frame of reference is amateur photography, we must recognize that as specialization in photography has increased, the designation "amateur" has also become very diverse and sometimes quite confusing. For instance, we recognize that historically many amateur photographers have made valuable contributions to public photographic records. The

term amateur could mean "nonprofessional" to create a separation from people who earn the major portion of their incomes from photographic "practice." But still we encounter varying degrees of serious amateur work alongside examples of snapshot photography produced by ordinary people who are indeed serious and certainly persistent but in very different ways. Early travel and tourist photographers, members of camera clubs, or regulars on photo-safaris represent one extreme; family photographers making pictures on weekends, vacations, and other off-times fall at the other extreme. The reference point for the following comments will be the latter end of this amateur designation.

The five books selected for review offer different perspectives on the relevance of snapshot content and style—specifically art (Green), art history (Hirsch), folklore (Graves and Payne), social history (Coe and Gates), and psychoanalysis (Lesy). It will become clear how each book defines, values, and utilizes snapshot imagery. Discussion will lead to one context that continues to be overlooked: namely, snapshot photography as a mode of visual/pictorial communication.

Green

Perhaps the most indirect approach to snapshot photography appears in Green's *The Snapshot*. Essays by Lisette Model, Tod Papageorge, Paul Strand, Steven Halpern, Walker Evans, John A. Kouwenhoven, and Judith Wechsler all make reference to snapshots in different ways. The book includes photographs made by Emmet Gowin, Henry Wessel, Jr., Tod Papageorge, Joel Meyerowitz, Gus Kayafas, Nancy Rexroth, Wendy Snyder MacNeil, Richard Albertine, Garry Winogrand, Bill Zulpo-Dane, Lee Friedlaender, and Robert Frank.

Green's intention is to examine "the vitality and ambiguity of the naive home snapshot and its bearing upon a variety of approaches used by contemporary photographers" and "to articulate the snapshot's nature or its relationship to sophisticated photography . . . and the mainstream of photographic production in the twentieth century" (p. 3). It becomes clear that readers (and viewers) are expected to gain a better understanding of the "naive home snapshot" by better appreciating the included work; Green acknowledges that the "photographers represented here . . . are not snapshooters but sophisticated photographers" (p. 3). Authentic snapshots appear infrequently in several of the short essays.

Green has organized this Aperture edition as an indirect explication of what some have called "the snapshot aesthetic" or "snapshot chic."² For instance, Green sees a unity in the "intentional pursuit of the plastic controls and visual richness hinted at in the

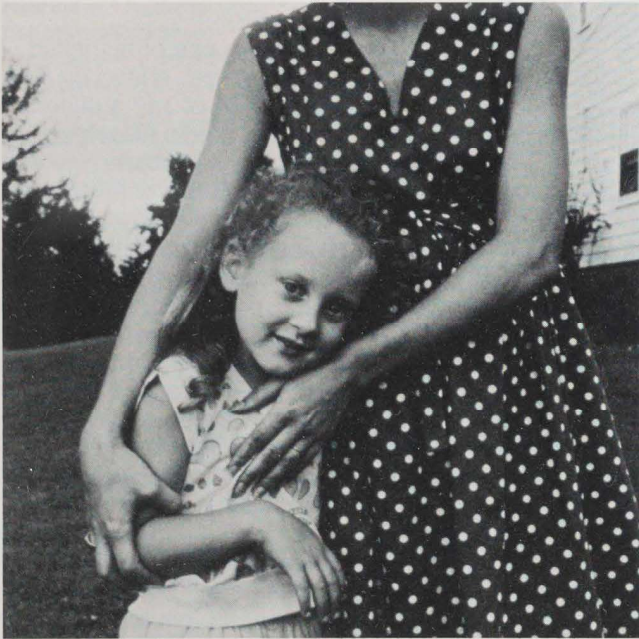


Figure 1 Emmet Gowin. From J. Green, *The Snapshot* (1974), p. 12.

work of the casual amateur, and their explorations of familiar subject matter" (p. 3). In an attempt to distinguish "snapshots" and "photographs," Joel Meyerowitz notes: "While they [his images] were made in the swift and artless manner of the snapshot, it is their cumulative formality and their insistent vision that makes them photographs" (p. 36).

Further clarification of this distinction requires a survey of what is meant by "snapshot." Green's book is particularly interesting with respect to the definition problem mentioned elsewhere in this review. One striking characteristic of his collection of essays is the obvious lack of agreement on what is meant by snapshot photography. At one extreme, we find that Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlaender refuse to make meaningful differentiations. Winogrand summarizes this attitude by asking, "What photograph is not a snapshot . . . ? . . . There is only still photography with its own unique aesthetic. *Still photography* is the distinctive term" (p. 84; emphasis in original).

Other solutions to the definition problem tend to follow specific mechanical attributes of camera technology. This type of thinking reverts to dictionary references such as Hawker's 1808 use of "snapshot" as a hunting term—a hurried shot taken without deliberate aim—and Sir John Herschel's subsequent application to making photographic images as fast as one-tenth of a second (Kouwenhoven, pp. 106–107). Influence of this technological base appears in Paul Strand's essay: "I have always taken the position that the word 'snapshot' doesn't really mean anything. To talk about it you almost have to begin by asking: When is a snapshot not a snapshot? When is a photograph not a snapshot?" (p. 46.) Strand later answers his own question as follows: "The snapshot . . . is also more or less synonymous with the hand camera . . . you might say it is a snapshot when it becomes necessary to stop movement . . . having really enough film or plate speed and shutter speed to make it possible. . . . Any photograph that stops movement can become a snapshot" (p. 49). This line of reasoning allows Strand and Papageorge to discuss the work of Cartier-Bresson, Edward Weston, Walker Evans, and Andre Kertesz. Needless to say, grounding a definition of snapshot in technical terms is not very helpful in reaching a better understanding of photography as a social form of visual communication.

Kouwenhoven takes us several steps further when he refers to characteristic behaviors of people making photographs and people being in photographs: "Snapshots are predominantly photographs taken quickly with a minimum of deliberate posing on the part of the people represented and with a minimum of deliberate selectivity on the part of the photographer as far as vantage point and the framing or cropping of the image are concerned" (p. 106). Here the definition emphasizes behind-camera and on-camera styles of behavior.

A fourth approach stresses the snapshot as a ubiquitous and common form of photographic expression. For instance, Tod Papageorge states: "For me, the word 'snapshot' is tied in meaning to the family album, a book which brought to photography a new vernacular form" (p. 24). And finally, attention to style is suggested by Steven Halpern: "From its beginning the snapshot has had two basic characteristics: a constant focus on family life and an informal, casual style that was consistent with the new freedom within the family and derived from the mobility of the hand held camera" (p. 66). We have come full circle to a reliance on the technical base.

At still another extreme, Lisette Model suggests a psychological perspective as an orienting framework. She states: "Snapshots can be made with any camera—old cameras, new cameras, box cameras, Instamatics, and Nikons. But what really makes them occur is a specific state of mind" (p. 6).

In summary, Green seems content to foster a sense of "ambiguity of the naive home snapshot" mentioned in the book's introduction. For purposes of additional scholarly consideration, further clarity is needed.

The photographs in *Snapshot* can be used in instructive ways. These images provide us with negative examples (in an ethnomethodological sense) of taken-for-granted characteristics of snapshot style, form, and content. Stated differently, the snapshot aesthetic represents a series of structural transformations; artists have purposefully rearranged and manipulated familiar code characteristics of the vernacular snapshot image. One useful exercise is to "unpack" the work of Emmet Gowin to learn more about such conventions as (1) smiling for the camera; (2) the tendency to segment body parts (most noticeable when the frame cuts off people's heads); (3) the centrality of family pets; (4) the juxtaposition of family members, favored relatives, neighbors or friends with valued material culture; and (5) making snapshots during happy occasions, moments of collective pride, and the like.

Finally, we can benefit from recognizing specific examples of artcentric descriptions of snapshot style. Model claims the snapshot "isn't straight. It isn't done well. It isn't composed. It isn't thought out" (p. 6); Kouwenhoven adds characteristics as a minimum of deliberate posing and minimal image composition. Comparisons are obviously being made to "artistically approved" conventions of camera use, which, in turn, strengthen segregation of elite and vernacular forms of expression. Readers are reminded that snapshots are frequently ridiculed because of too much posing (or "hamming for the camera") and because the cameraperson waited too long to get the "best shot." What may be considered a "decisive moment" in one genre may be an irrelevant moment in another.

Graves and Payne

In sharp contrast to Green's sparse use of authentic snapshot imagery, *American Snapshot*, edited by Ken Graves and Mitchell Payne, consists of 112 authentic snapshot photographs. Jean Shepherd's three-page introduction, followed by a 347-word "Authors' Foreword," provides readers with some contextual information by explaining that Graves and Payne spent two years "armed with a National Endowment for the Arts grant [going] from door to door . . . asking to see people's home snapshots" (p. 5). They confess to having no idea of what they would find—which I find somewhat strange. Their final selection of images was based on the following notion: "We were on a search for those pictures which were complete visual statements, needing neither explanation nor rationalization. We picked images which were extraordinary for us, relying on our own photographic intuition and sensitivity" (p. 9).

This book offers no definition of snapshots. Instead, Shepherd classifies the pictures as a "definitive collection of twentieth-century American folk art" and as "a touching, true, Common Man history of all of us who grew and lived in America in this century" (p. 5). It remains unclear, however, how this material relates to other forms of folk art such as weaving, decorative sculpture, bark paintings, body scarification, and the like. The common thread seems to be "folk-made," but why call it art? A gratuitous label perhaps, but not much more.

Several kinds of questions can be asked about *American Snapshots*: (1) How well do the images selected by Graves and Payne represent the "real" world? (2) How well do these images represent the accepted and shared conventions used by snapshot photographers to represent the real world? Or, stating the second question in a different way, (3) How does this collection of 112 photographs illustrate the symbolic world of snapshot representation? For purposes of better understanding snapshot accounts as structured forms of visual communication, the second and third questions need further attention. As in all snapshot collections, we see how the world was looked at through cameras used by untrained photographers and how (in the case of an album) a particular visual report was structured. In a sense, questions regarding what the world looked like through "evidence" produced in snapshot form are very misleading. More to the point, perhaps, is a realization of how people wanted "the world to look" and how they wanted to remember it in a subjective collusion between memory and pictorial forms.

In a very real sense, Graves and Payne have "re-albumized" the snapshot look at life. It is instructive at this point to review the symbolic rendition of life created by these authors and held between the Kodak-yellow covers of their book. The majority of the

Figure 2 "I had the negative retouched because we thought this girl's parents wouldn't like it—knowing she had been with all those men" (Berkeley, California, about 1916). From Graves and Payne, *American Snapshots* (1977), p. 97.



images were produced in two general types of settings—around the house (more outside than inside) and in what appear to be vacation places. All but two pictures include people; younger children are commonly featured. Half of the collection shows two or more people; snapshots frequently document affinal and consanguinal ties. With no direct knowledge, we are meant to assume such relationships as husband-wife, father-child, mother-child, grandparent-grandchild, siblings, boyfriend-girlfriend. The couple seen in bed (p. 70) is very unusual.³ Of course the issue of identification is generally not problematic for "real life" album makers and viewers. Characteristically, animals are also common in these pictures (dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, birds, squirrels, and dead fish), and in two cases stuffed animals (dog, rabbit) are also included. Holidays, celebrations, and parties are given attention; a birthday, a wedding anniversary, a first communion, Easter Sunday, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving dinner, and a family dinner are all represented. In short, if we agree that snapshots illustrate highlights of the life process, this sampling comprises highlights of highlights.

One striking characteristic of this collection is how people "show off" some significant part of their lives. In some cases we see adults presenting their children to the camera, male adults flexing muscles, and females striking a flattering cheesecake pose; cars, animals, and the rewards of fishing are presented as prized possessions; neatly arranged house exteriors and interiors are shown; athletic abilities (somersaults, ice skating) are demonstrated. In this context we also see people dressed in a variety of uniforms: cheer-

leaders, majorettes, and the armed forces are included. We are tempted to speculate on how snapshot images function as valid projections of human values—but values that involve the positive and public views of life only. Readers should be reminded that life is full of private moments, also valued in positive ways, but moments that are explicitly inappropriate for snapshot representation.

Graves and Payne also do a good job of including several stereotypic stylistic features of snapshot photography. For instance, eight photographs include the photographer's shadow. Snapshot aesthetic photographers use this feature as the artist's "signature."⁴

Only eight images have captioned information beyond place and date. This technique conforms to the authors' choice of images that could stand alone. Herein lies a great confusion. Graves and Payne have asked their readers to appreciate and "read" the snapshots without contextual information beyond the knowledge that we are looking at someone's snapshot. However, in eight cases we are asked to think about the imagery in a different way, since additional information has been included—information that relates the imagery to the lives of the people involved. Under one photograph of eight men and one woman we read: "I had the negative retouched because we thought this girl's parents wouldn't like it—knowing she had been with all these men. Berkeley, California, about 1916" (p. 31). Under another picture of a man drinking from a bottle, we read: "This is the typical picture of a nervous bridegroom . . . calming down with a Pepsi. 'Junior' was 31 before he decided to take the big step. Reno, Nevada, 1967" (p. 74). In an-



Figure 3 "I was representing my sorority wearing a swim suit and bag of my choice" (University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1966). From Graves and Payne, *American Snapshots* (1977), p. 97.

other example, under a picture of a woman in a bikini with a paperbag over her head, we read: "I was representing my sorority wearing a swim suit and bag of my choice. University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1966" (p. 97). In these cases, the interpretive task is of a different order since metacommunicative information has been attached. We are no longer appreciating the photographs only as imagery; the construction of meaning must follow different routes. We are asked to consider the relationship of the photograph to knowledge shared by the snapshot photographer and the people appearing in the image as well as the people who were originally intended to see it. In this sense, it is not entirely clear how Graves and Payne wanted us to think about this collection. At one extreme the authors could be accused of exploiting two situations: one, the cult popularity of collecting coffee-table photography books; two, the contemporary interest in learning about oneself through personal latent meaning held in snapshot imagery.

In this light, there are several confounding contradictions between Shepherd's introduction, the authors' statement of intentions, and the 112 photographs that have been reproduced for this book. Shepherd emphasizes notions of "the Common Man," the simple householder, the nameless picture taker "*Humanus Americanus* (Common)," and folk art—stressing an appreciation of the ordinary snap-

shots. Yet most of the photographs we see are called "extraordinary" by Graves and Payne. The authors admittedly sought photographs that were complete visual statements. This criterion separates and isolates their final collection of pictures from the vast majority of snapshots that rely, more than other photographic forms, on shared knowledge of caption and context.⁵

There is indeed something "special" about every image that appears in *American Snapshots*, but special in a frame of reference that treats images in and of themselves. Here Graves and Payne are suggesting a frame of reference or significance more commonly associated with art criticism and art appreciation. That is, the requested construction of appreciation is unlike what happens when ordinary people go about admiring and treasuring their ordinary snapshots. This may, in fact, just be a more subtle version of what Green is doing in *The Snapshot*.

There remains a reluctance in this book, and several others mentioned in this review, to show the nonspecial examples and to explicate the logic of appreciating the vernacular form in contexts of everyday life. For instance, in spite of a determined effort to "honor" the commonplace, Shepherd's ambivalence and regrettable elitist stance are revealed as follows: "Of all the world's photographers, the lowliest and least honored is the simple householder who desires only to 'have a camera around the house' and 'to get a picture of Delores in her graduation gown.' He lugs his primitive equipment with him on vacation trips, picnics, and family outings of all sorts. His knowledge of photography is *about that of your average chipmunk*" (p. 6; emphasis added). Again we witness the inevitable impossibility of appreciating (or honoring) snapshots in the context of their original creation and use. The point is that the "simple householder" does have an adequate knowledge of photography to produce pictures that family members value over all other genres of photographic imagery. George Eastman and Edwin Land have already seen to this. Viewers may be justified in accusing the authors of assuming a condescending air, mocking the trivialities of snapshot content and style as a vulgar form of photographic expression. The main question is how they wanted snapshots to be treated as meaningful. Obviously, imagery can be meaningful for different reasons and in different ways. Readers of *American Snapshots* can never reconstruct the extended set of signs and symbols recognized as meaningful for their original custodians. Snapshots are personal views embedded in contexts of private information. When these same snapshots "go public," stripped of intimate webs and networks of meaningful relationships, they become something else and are exposed to a variety of interpretive schemes. This would appear to be true even when 112 individual snapshots from

over 100 collections are repackaged in book form—regardless of whether or not the back covers are Kodak-yellow.

Coe and Gates

The integrity of snapshot making and the value of snapshots as a pictorial form are better addressed in *The Snapshot Photograph* by Brian Coe and Paul Gates. They deal less with the artistic edges and extraordinary qualities of snapshot imagery and more with characterizing the emergence of snapshot photography and its potential contribution to scholars of social history. They present a much more tempered and restrained evaluation of snapshot photography and, in doing so, contribute more directly to a study of the sociocultural dimensions of visual/pictorial communication.

Coe and Gates initially consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* for a definition of snapshot: a "shot taken with little or no delay in aiming; instantaneous photograph taken with a hand camera" (p. 6). The authors then add:

We shall not consider the advanced photography of the expert using complex and expensive apparatus, nor, for that matter, the deliberate use of simple cameras by sophisticated photographers in order to achieve a "naive" effect.⁶ We are concerned only with the kind of photography within the scope of the humble box camera, or of the simple folding camera used by the amateur. Since such cameras were usually capable of making time exposures, our definition of snapshot can be expanded to include such photographs. Indeed, it is not the length of the exposure but the intention behind the picture which distinguishes the snapshot: a photograph taken simply as a record of a person, a place or an event, one made with no artistic pretensions or commercial considerations. (pp. 6-7)

This stance creates several interesting relationships with points made in other books in this review. First, Coe and Gates attempt to reduce a reliance on technological determinacy while elevating views of intention and pragmatic concerns. However, here there is a tendency to oversimplify certain manifest needs to record and document. A communications perspective would call attention to investigating latent and implicitly realized functions of snapshot imagery, many of which inevitably include communication. Second, the authors offer no sustained attention to how people use their snapshot collections. They prefer to focus their discussion on picture making and on relationships between nonprofessional photographers and simple, mass-produced cameras. And third, we see how Coe and Gates eliminate most of the visual examples contained in Green's book, *The Snapshot*. These authors remind us on several occasions that

we should be sensitive to why different kinds of photographers make pictures and to understand that different communications intentions have produced different views of life.

In their most significant chapter, entitled "The Social Background," the authors attempt to reverse an accepted elitist position regarding the "cultural" value of snapshot images: "Superiority, scorn and humor notwithstanding, many millions of snapshots made with the simplest of cameras have brought pleasure and satisfaction to their creators" (p. 9). They make repeated reference to the significance of how ordinary people behave with cameras and how their intentions, "uncomplicated approach," and "naive" photographic results deserve equal time in historical and cultural significance. This is a very refreshing stance in light of much photographic literature, which seemingly implies that snapshots do not exist or that such leisure, nonserious activity is not acceptable material for study. Coe and Gates's narrative maintains a sincere and unaffected tone, which stands in marked contrast to the distracting and unfounded claims that characterize Shepherd's introduction to *American Snapshots* and, as we will see, Lesy's introduction to *Time Frames*.

Part of their argument regarding cultural significance involves understanding how snapshot images represent a part of the historical record: "Just how much we owe to the snapshot and its unique view of the world of our forefathers is apparent if we compare it with other contemporary forms of the photograph" (p. 10). Coe and Gates bemoan the tendency of ordinary people, as enthusiastic amateurs, to copy artistically structured forms. They feel too many amateur photographers "chose to apply their skills and equipment to the production of a seemingly endless series of 'picturesque' subjects inspired by contemporary academic painting" (p. 10). I will return to this point when discussing Hirsch's book, *Family Photographs*, later in this review.

The authors continue by developing their point that different kinds of photographic forms contribute to the historical record. They suggest that both studio photographers and professional photojournalists worked toward particular choices and arrangements of reality. Different kinds of historical evidence are produced by different kinds of photography. For instance, snapshot photographers have produced detailed records of the commonplace that were not available before 1888, not possible for the studio photographer to capture, and not considered newsworthy by other professional photographers. Background details of these images take on added significance in the sense of material culture inventory, styles of dress, fashions of interior decoration and house plan, architectural detail, and the like.

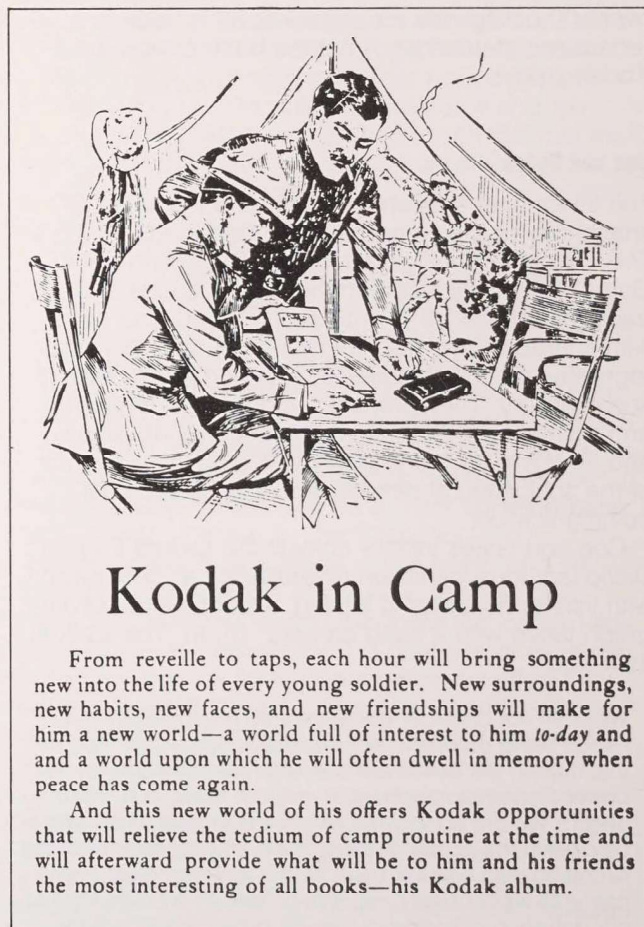
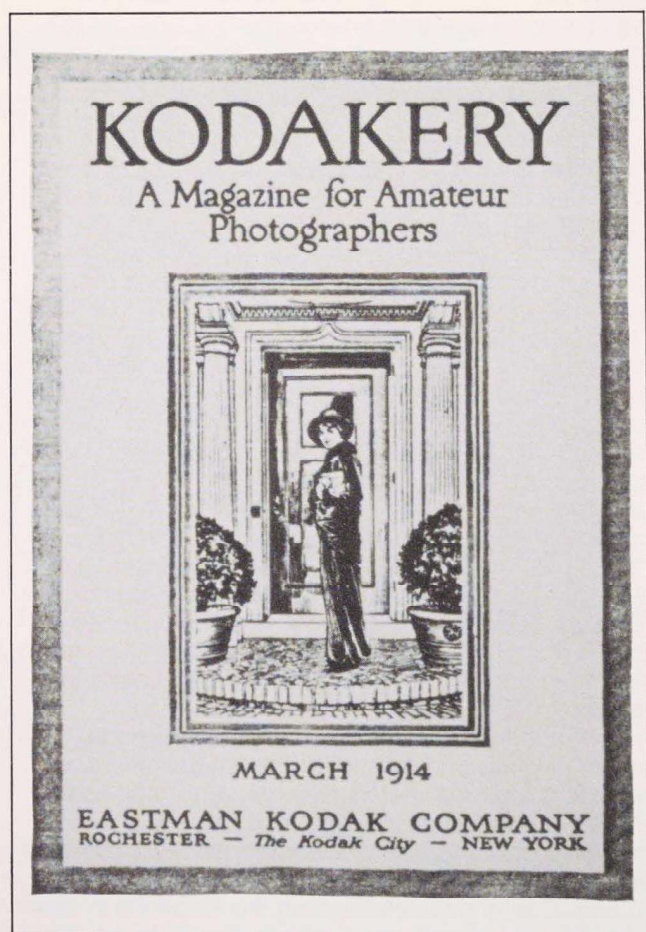


Figure 4 (left) The first issue of the magazine *Kodakery* appeared in the United States in March 1914. (right) In 1917 soldiers were encouraged to use photography to record their new experiences. From Coe and Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph* (1977), p. 34.

Perhaps the authors place too much importance on what snapshots can show with regard to "truth" value and to showing how people "were" versus how people "looked" when they wanted to impress others, as in studio portrait examples. Consider the following statement: "... the fact remains, that by reason of circumstances of their taking, snapshots started out with a far better chance of truthfully depicting the character of their subjects than the professional studio production could achieve" (p. 11). Surely we have different constructions of "truth" in each case, and we have (or should have) learned to value each construction in different ways. Our job is to understand better the social circumstances surrounding each construction as a relationship between several factors—technological possibilities, image production and use, and concepts of social reality.

The authors seem to contradict themselves when discussing the random or deliberate construction of the snapshot view. In one instance, Coe and Gates claim: "The snapshot, taken on impulse, perhaps almost at random, with no attempt to manipulate the subject or to wait for ideal conditions, may come closer to supplying the historian's needs" (p. 11). And yet, just a few paragraphs later, they say: "A brief glance through any snapshot album will reveal many pictures where painstaking efforts have obviously been made to set things up 'nicely,' to make sure everyone concerned looked their best" (p. 11). Though each of these judgments may be relative to other genres of photographic recording, my experience tells me to side with the latter evaluation—that deliberation and "setup" are somehow involved. But, again, the model of how appropriate views are organized differs across genres of imagery and possibly across different sociocultural circumstances.

In another instance, Coe and Gates offer us a clarification of what Shepherd and Graves and Payne meant by describing snapshots as a modern folk art. A sensible posture is stated as follows: "If by that [folk art] we mean an enduring value unselfconsciously achieved, then perhaps some snapshots may fall into this category" (p. 14). In fact, the authors speak directly to the task assumed by Graves and Payne as follows: "Any examination of a large sampling of snapshots will reveal a surprising number of pictures which transcend the straight-forward and mundane purpose for which they were taken" (p. 14). But might not a cultural evaluation of the "mundane purpose[s]" reveal more than initially expected? The authors continue: "It is difficult to define the degree to which these pictures, their production motivated by the usual reasons of sentiment, record or souvenir, attain to something more" (p. 14). Regardless of overt expression of intent, an analysis of latent functions, unacknowledged motivations, and even social pressures call for revisions of such reductive conclusions as "mundane purposes."

The remaining chapters, 2 through 6, trace the emergence and development of mass-produced cameras and the field of amateur photography. This interesting account includes marketing strategies and advertising campaigns as they appeared in England. Coe and Gates begin in 1888, when Eastman Kodak marketed their first cameras, and end in 1939, when "most of the technical advances we enjoy in present-day snapshot photography had either been introduced or foreshadowed" (p. 8).⁷ A social-historical perspective is given to such topics as early public exhibitions of snapshot photography ("The Eastman Exhibit of 1897"), the emergence of camera clubs and photography contests, the popularity of tourist photography, the amateur use of cameras during war-time (see Chapter 4, "The Soldier's Camera"), and



Figure 5 Contrast the snapshooter and the "serious" amateur photographer in this exotic location, 1905. From Coe and Gates, *The Snapshot Photograph* (1977), p. 74.

strategies to promote the use of cameras by women. Mention is also made of relatively unknown British publications, such as *The Kodak News* (1895) and *The Kodak Recorder* (1905), as well as certain American editions, such as *Kodakery* (1914) and *The Kodak Magazine* (1923).

The album sections of *The Snapshot Photograph* (pp. 47–135) are devoted to pictorially illustrating "perennial themes . . . a few obvious categories . . . broadly classified as people, leisure activities, sea-side and holidays, the urban scene, transport, people at work, interiors, and events" (p. 15). Interestingly, the authors have included photographs of people using cameras as well as the results of camera use—and in one case, a comparison of the snapshooter and the serious amateur (pp. 74–75).

In summary, by stressing the unexplored value of snapshot photography to social historians, Coe and Gates offer many important starting points for scholars of visual/pictorial communication. They emphasize the study of what ordinary people did with photographic equipment as an expressive medium—expression in the broad context of communication more than the restricted context of art. In doing so, the authors recommend more balanced attention to how manufacturers of amateur cameras promoted the production of a snapshot view of the world—a view that stands alongside other conventionalized views produced by professional studio photographers, photo-journalists, and fine-art photographers.

Lesy

Another historian, Michael Lesy, has published a book on snapshots that could not be more unlike the contribution of Coe and Gates. *Time Frames—The Meaning of Family Pictures* (1980) is comprised of a seventeen-page introduction followed by eleven sections that approximate case studies of what couples and individuals told the author about their lives in relation to their snapshot collections. Lesy's initial theoretical position draws upon examples from these sections. For purposes of this review I will concentrate on evaluating how the author relates snapshot imagery to individuals, to a notion of society, and to culture.

In the introduction, Lesy discusses how he began to collect and study snapshots from dumpsters behind photo-processing plants; he recounts his personal frustrations in trying to persuade his academic colleagues that "the use of photographs as data was of the most remarkable importance for the humanities and social sciences. . . . I began to imagine that all my intellectual colleagues were Calvinists, and all my photographic friends were deaf mutes" (xii).⁸ Lesy studies pictures as symbols—symbols which are best interpreted within contexts of comparative methodology and psychoanalytic theory.

For scholars of culture and pictorial communication, Lesy has a flair for saying the right thing: "... a photograph (is) a cultural artifact . . . tangled within a whole culture that (is) itself pinned within a social structure" (xii). He even sensed the importance of doing fieldwork on and with snapshot photographs. Lesy sat in the kitchen of old hometown friends, going over their albums and snapshots, asking to be told about their many pictures—"Wave after wave: recapitulation, conjunction, revelation. Again and again . . . the people told me stories; they spoke parables; they made confessions. They told me tales; they recounted epics; they recited myths: They told me the way things *really* are . . . they told me the Truth" (xiii–xiv). Lesy makes it clear that this is not sociological truth: "It has nothing to do with the quantitatively verifiable data that professional social scientists hope and image are the only things of which the social world is composed" (xiv). We should be grateful, perhaps, that he spares comparable notions of "anthropological truth."

With axes ground and lofty ideals proclaimed, Lesy introduces readers to his theory of pictures "as psychic tableaux . . . like frozen dreams . . . whose latent content is enmeshed in unconscious association, cultural norms, art historical clichés, and transcendental motifs" (xiv). Lesy searches his snapshots for visual evidence of such motifs as (1) love, intimacy, and family life; (2) war; and (3) work. He calls our attention to the frequent juxtaposition of men with

telephone poles, towers, heavy machinery, and weaponry; women with trees, water fountains, swimming pools, and rivers, in settings such as oceans, parks, and gardens—"as such they [representations] exist neither as objects of material culture nor as social artifacts, but as symbols that express states of mind, engendered by love" (xvi). Lesy's interpretation of the meaning of such frequent symbolic representations is through a psychoanalytic framework structured by the writings of Freud and Jung.

Lesy then proceeds to give five examples of his analysis taken from snapshots and collected narratives about the images. As might be expected, we are pointed toward uterine and phallic symbology, unconscious tendencies of "acting out," images of the origin of the universe, cosmic artifacts, transcendental visions, and gestures of immortality, to name a few. At times, Lesy's search for hidden meanings approximates the search for subliminal sex in studies of advertising.⁹

In all honesty I remain unconvinced about the validity of Lesy's analysis and must question the value of his contribution. Where does this mode of explication take us? Lesy never seems to bring us back to the realm of the social and to the roles that snapshots play in cultural identity and maintenance. While Lesy offers us clever and amusing passages, my admittedly conservative spirit in such matters begs for a more convincing argument. Readers of *Time Frames* are likely to feel they can produce another selection of material—specific snapshots that demonstrate another pattern of frequencies and alleged significations along psychoanalytic principles. But would a different collection of evidence make any more of a contribution? I doubt it.

Lesy convinces readers to overlook the social and cultural implications of his material in favor of describing a Family-of-Man set of universals. One possible result of this strategy is that it will close off, cancel, or negate the value of examining cross-cultural variations in snapshot communication. It would be a shame to eliminate this meaningful line of inquiry for scholars of pictorial communication. While Lesy feels comfortable criticizing sociological theory and method for asking only questions that can be spelled out in quantitative forms, one might argue that Lesy either asks questions that have already been answered or provides answers through unassailable arguments.

Readers should also be aware of one important incongruence with regard to theory and method. Lesy pleads for a humanistic approach; he states the im-

portance of actually talking to people with and about their snapshots in patient and inquiring ways. However, these field methods seem to be unrelated to his chosen mode of explication. Lesy has produced what could have been "a study of culture at a distance" in spite of the fact that he had established intimate working relationships with family members. The same kind of analysis could have been done without spending so many hours in his friends' kitchens.

Contradictorally, Lesy's interview material that comprises the majority of *Time Frames* demonstrates an important relationship between snapshot photography and the collecting of life histories. The following 142 pages are devoted to eleven examples of couples (Peggy and Jack, Manny and Marilyn, Herb and Lin) and individuals (Jimmy, Annette, Jacob) speaking about their lives. Lesy uses people he had known or had known of for thirty years. They were first and second generation Jewish immigrants who lived in Buffalo, New York, at the time of these interviews. From many hours of storytelling, Lesy has included their statements of the problems of growing up, getting married, personal victories and defeats, and their expectations and associated disappointments.¹⁰ The implication here is that the information we get in spoken/written forms does not have to match what people select for visual/pictorial rendition. Throughout these eleven chapters, we hear repeated versions of psychological and interpersonal problems, troubles, heartaches, and disasters—stories stimulated by looking at the snapshot collection. The lesson is that culturally structured conventions of making snapshots prevent visual/pictorial counterparts of troubled and problematic times of life. When we examine Lesy's transcriptions, we find that in 142 pages of transcribed dialogue, only two references are made to pictures chosen for the book (pp. 117, 130) and only a few other references are made to pictures not shown (pp. 60, 134). It would appear that while positive and negative moments in life are suitable for verbal rendition, only the positive ones are appropriate for recognition in the pictorial-snapshot version of life.¹¹ For another treatment of "structured absences," readers might enjoy David Galloway's novelistic descriptions of five family photographs in *A Family Album* (1978).

In summary, for a 160-page book, Lesy tells us surprisingly little about snapshots and family pictures. Readers are treated to a lively and speculative introduction to a psychoanalytically based theory of meaning and then left to themselves to fall into a series of somewhat depressing family stories. There are important lessons to be learned, but readers must discover certain interesting points on their own and in rather indirect ways.

Hirsch

The most recent of the books considered in this review is *Family Photographs — Content, Meaning and Effect* (1981) by Julia Hirsch, an English professor at Brooklyn College in New York. Several starting points are shared by Lesy and Hirsch. They both work from a personally motivated curiosity about personal relationships between family photography and the lives of their custodians. They also share a concern for an understanding of "meaning" in pictorial imagery, a word that appears in the subtitles of their respective books. And, third, both authors seem comfortable with psychological explanations for describing why people include what they do in their personal photograph collections. At one point Hirsch notes: "If, as Marshall McLuhan once said, the age of photography is the age of psychoanalysis, then formal photography belongs to Jung and candid to Freud" (p. 105). We have seen Lesy try to get the best of these two worlds; Hirsch takes us in another direction. Beyond these few correspondences, Hirsch and Lesy offer many more differences than similarities.

Hirsch initially takes drastic measures to limit her study of family photographs, a strategy which diminishes her contribution to our understanding of snapshot photography. A family photograph is defined as an image that "contains at least two people, though it may contain a score" (p. 3), and it must "show a blood tie" between people in the picture.¹² Later the author adds: "Family photography is an aesthetic, social, and moral product of which the family is at once seller and consumer. . . . Family photography is not only an accessory to our deepest longings and regrets; it is also a set of visual rules that shape our experience and our memory" (pp. 12–13). This approach helps Hirsch align modern photographic representations of "family" with painted renditions of family ties produced in previous centuries and other pictorial modes. We cannot ignore, however, how this definition eliminates so much of what is commonly referred to as family photography—that is, photographs that have been made by or include family members. Pictures of individuals are *de facto* excluded, as are many kinds of tourist photographs and pictures of family friends, pets, special places, memorable scenes, celebrated events, and the like, all of which may necessarily include more than one person and/or a "blood tie." Readers may notice that the term "snapshot" appears less than a dozen times throughout the book. Thus while Hirsch's initial definition allows for snapshots, it does not welcome certain variations in context which stray from the diachronic parameters the author wishes to use.



Figure 6 Henry Wessel, Jr. From J. Green, *The Snapshot* (1974), p. 74.

After introducing her perspective, Hirsch devotes one chapter to a diachronic, cross-medium review of previous pictorial (painterly) genres that focused on family ties, groupings, and affiliations. Hirsch asks readers to understand and contextualize family photography as a modern version of how families have been pictorially recorded through time in a variety of media. The author describes the significance of models and conventions established during the Renaissance, a time that “took the family out of the margins of manuscripts and gave it visual independence” (p. 21). Readers are given several lessons in art history to illustrate Hirsch’s thesis that “the Renaissance family portrait is the precursor of the family photograph because it shows the family as self-contained (p. 35). . . . The metaphors that have shaped family portraiture have also shaped family photography and recognizing them enables us to control the allusions our photographs make” (pp. 41–42).

For Hirsch, three key metaphors unite this pictorial history of the family: “The family as a state whose ties are rooted in property; the family as a spiritual assembly which is based on moral values; and the family as a bond of feeling which stems from instinct and passion” (p. 15; see also pp. 46–47). Knowing that these metaphors have been maintained through five centuries of pictorial forms, Hirsch attempts to persuade readers that the Renaissance set the agenda for nineteenth- and twentieth-century family photographs. Her claim is that conventions were established for struc-

ture, form, composition, format, settings, topics, poses, and expressions. Chapters 3 and 4 illustrate a continuity in how Hirsch’s key metaphors have been expressed through selected examples of paintings, drawings, early studio photography, and a few examples of contemporary snapshot photographs. The author’s argument regarding the painting-photograph dialectic appears simplistic and does not account for contributions by Scharf (1968), Coke (1972), and Galassi (1981). As with the Lesy book, the selective use of pictorial evidence damages the cogency of her argument.

Hirsch introduces examples of “informal” photography—such as informal portraits (not made in studios) and candid snapshots—when the form and content conform to her basic premises regarding metaphor and continuity. Otherwise, one easily feels that the vast majority of family pictures (mostly snapshots) produced in contemporary times find little place in her argument. The author almost bemoans the advent of snapshot photography and how it has seemingly replaced an adherence to formal models of portraiture:

Figure 7 Lee Friedlaender. From J. Green, *The Snapshot* (1974), p. 112.



Candid photography . . . makes few demands of time and place; it embraces all human possibilities of pose and expression. Because it generally requires so little discipline both from the cameraman and from the subject, it is the medium of the amateur. . . .¹³ In candid photography anything can happen: the term itself makes no exclusions and no particular promises . . . [But] whatever the content of the candid shot, it is always about bodies in transit, almost gestures that we know can have been held for only a few moments. While formal photography is about condition and being, candid photography is about process and circumstance. (pp. 101–102)

Another statement of disdain, bordering on a sense of disgust with the unordered and hopeless confusion of snapshot content, appears later in the book:

The disorderly conduct which the candid camera immortalizes, even when it shows us fathers and mothers, cousins and siblings, increasingly obscures who's who, and what's where. Place, time, and role have yielded, in family photography, to more neutral and general studies of "relationships" which may or may not be those of blood, of household, and of property. (p. 111)

Readers can treat these statements in several ways. Some might feel that since the author staked and defined her territory early in the book, she is justified in her negative approach to what is happening now in ordinary, everyday snapshot photography. If one initially disagrees with the author's restrictive definition of family photography, however, one feels justi-

fied in concluding that her collection net has not been cast far enough or that the meshing is woven too finely. In the latter case, the author's explanation does not seem to keep pace with current snapshot photography.

Several additional points need clarification. The author cites a frequently heard claim that small, lightweight, portable cameras can be used anywhere to take pictures of anything. Fast shutter speeds, sensitive film stocks, and the low f-stop lenses can stop motion and record an image under any light conditions; the technological possibilities are ready to be exploited. However, the nonprofessional snapshot photographer (Hirsch's "candid" photographer) is more restricted by social and cultural "demands" than by technological ones. All human poses and expressions are not found in a family's snapshot collection; snapshots do not demonstrate an "anything" or "everything" perspective.¹⁴ Hypothetical freedom of choice with regard to content and technique are seemingly controlled by socially maintained notions of appropriate behavior. Examples of candid photography as described by Hirsch can be subjected to a sociological analysis regarding participants, settings, topics, and features of code that are not too unlike what she suggests for "formal" photographs.¹⁵ However, the author concludes: "We can deduce very little sociological evidence from the groupings we find in family photography" (p. 95).¹⁶

Hirsch chooses a common direction, one not favoring the social but rather the psychological and psychoanalytic. She states:

Our reading of candid photographs leads us easily into a vocabulary of psychoanalysis. We have no alternative, since candid pictures show us personalities and behavior. . . . Candid photographs take us into the realm of abstraction, of subconscious . . . like inkblots or obscure poems. . . . But if we look at this photograph (a candid snapshot) as a sociological document, we shall not have seen enough of it. We shall not have seen enough of the faces and bodies, the muscles and nerves that make candid photography so intimate, so compelling, and, often, so disturbing. (pp. 109–110)

The author raises the same set of dilemmas that leads photo therapists like Robert Akeret to walk around the social characteristics of a photographic interaction and rely instead on psychoanalytic directives and interpretations (Akeret 1973; Chalfen 1974).

One additional point is relevant to any discussion of snapshot communication. Hirsch's analytic comments demonstrate a problem for all scholars of personal documents. Consider the following examples. When Hirsch is describing the people in certain family photographs, she says: "We do not know how they are related to each other; we do not know their precise claim to this location. But the harmony of people to setting satisfies us that they all belong here" (p. 51); "In the snapshot of the couple next to a Christmas tree, place also matters little. What the photograph does tell us is that they observed an annual rite" (pp. 62–64). The problem that I must confront when working with these statements is the relationship between the observer(s) and the people represented in the photographs. What are the exact reference points for these uses of "we," "they," and "us"? And when we read "place also matters little," we must ask to whom? Do these personal pronouns refer to an analytic observer of an unfamiliar collection of family photographs, or are the references to someone who is intimately familiar with his or her own family picture? This difference in observational stance is very important to making sound or merely speculative inferences from these pictorial genres. The background knowledge of specific participants (picture custodians) can never be duplicated totally by an outside observer. The closest we get to an acknowledgment of this problem appears on the next to last page of Hirsch's book: "But finally we bring to family photographs far more than our eyes. We bring all that we know of what lies beyond the edge of the picture. We bring our knowledge of childhood and adulthood, and all that goes on between and beyond" (p. 131). With regard to other people's pictures, Hirsch adds: "We can understand the photograph even of strangers because we know that pictures of families are made and

stored in the same ways that families themselves endure" (p. 131). However, this does not offer any substantial guidance for interpretation or cultural analysis. Scholars of visual communication can and should be working toward an articulation of the social and cultural dimensions that structure personal imagery. This situation will be helped when scholars begin to do systematic fieldwork on this corner of our symbolic environment.

Summary

By combining the five books reviewed in this essay, students of pictorial communication are introduced to alternative ways of studying the significance of snapshots and family albums. It is especially instructive to see how different critical perspectives and disciplines interpret the snapshot's interpretation of life. Different definitions of the snapshot, the choice of different examples, and the use of different theoretical stances lead to alternative explications of what's there and what's worthy of critical attention. Clearly I have interpreted the significance of each book through a particular perspective; I have tried to evaluate each contribution in terms of understanding better how snapshots work as "image events" embedded in processes of interpersonal and small group pictorial communication.

Several generalizations about these books are possible. It appears that psychological directions are preferred to social ones. Stay-at-home conjecture and speculation appear to be more common than explanations grounded in some form of "fieldwork." Authors prefer to work from either their own picture collections and personal experiences or from collections belonging to a few relatives or friends. This strategy may, in fact, preclude a curiosity for the significance of relating meaning and context. Sampling a variety of snapshot collections from a spectrum of social groups is uncommon. Perhaps the unexplored assumption that all snapshot collections and family albums are the same justifies this restricted view. Ethnic, regional, social class, or subcultural variations are apparently not worthy of consideration. On the other hand, when some form of sampling is accomplished, as in *American Snapshots* and *Time Frames*, the authors direct their observations toward aesthetic or psychoanalytic notions, treating the visual materials as folk art of psychic tableaux. Parallels to art and literary criticism seem to outweigh the relevance of applying social or cultural analysis to pictures. It may be that social and cultural characteristics are easily stated since, according to some critics, snapshots are too easily made. In summary, these five books,

plus a few case studies such as Catherine Hanf Noren's *The Camera of My Family* (1976) and Dorothy Gallagher's *Hannah's Daughters* (1976), provide an excellent overview of approaches with one exception—the treatment of snapshots as social and symbolic communicative forms. Clearly, the social communication perspective is underrepresented in this collection of writings.

We might briefly return to two questions cited earlier: "When is a photograph not a snapshot?" (Strand in Green 1974:84) and "What photograph is not a snapshot?" (Winogrand in Green 1974:84). My point is that these questions can be addressed when snapshots are conceptualized as symbolic forms that operate in patterns of social communication, in what has been referred to elsewhere as the home mode of visual/pictorial communication (Chalfen 1975, 1981). Snapshots and related home mode artifacts provide scholars with important lessons and examples of relationships between society, culture, and communication. Snapshots "work" (that is, they are understood and treated as meaningful) as visual communication because, as symbolic forms, they are embedded within contexts of shared codes of social behavior, understandings, and expectations. Conventions of shooting snapshots, appearing in snapshots, and creating appropriate inferences from snapshots are informally learned, shared, and used alongside other kinds of human participation in visual modes of communication.

The presentational format called "photo album" or "family album" continues to be popular in contexts of both amateur and professional displays. New editions of album like books are published regularly. Recent examples of the diversity include *Family Album: A Personal Selection from Four Generations of Churchills* by Mary Soames (1982), *The Auschwitz Album* (1981),¹⁷ and *The Dallas Family Album* by Robert Masello (1980), to mention just a few. One theme of this review has been to see how codes of authentic snapshot communication get put into other presentational formats and contexts. Given certain differences in authors' intentions, styles of exhibit, and projected audiences, there is always the chance of applying inappropriate schemes of evaluation and criticism. Most of these books fall somewhere between scholarly and popular publications, between the library shelf and the coffee table. Regardless of this potential flaw, the interpretation and appreciation of these books is reliant on implicit understandings we commonly hold about authentic snapshot imagery. I have suggested that each book has something to teach us about the relationships of everyday life and pictorial communication. It remains the case, however, that scholars of visual communication have much work to do on vernacular forms of interpersonal communication.

Notes

- 1 See Chalfen (1981) for examples of specific references to publications that fall into each category.
- 2 See Coleman (1979) for several critical reviews of professional photographers who comprise the snapshot aesthetic school.
- 3 Lesy also chooses to include bed scenes in the snapshots reproduced in *Time Frames* (see p. 31).
- 4 Examples include Gowin (p. 12), Wessel (pp. 17, 21), and Friedlaender (pp. 112, 113), all in Green's *The Snapshot*.
- 5 For a relevant approach to this view, see Gombrich (1972).
- 6 For instance, several professional photographers have used the all-plastic Diana \$1.50 camera. See examples by Ronn Gladis and Nancy Rexroth (Green 1974:54–63).
- 7 For an account leading up to 1888, see Jenkins (1975).
- 8 Lesy has acted as a spokesman for the academic consideration of snapshots as symbolic forms (1976, 1978).
- 9 For instance, see Key (1973).
- 10 We learn that several of the couples know each other (e.g., Manny/Marilyn and Bernie/Irene [see p. 83]) and two of the men are brothers (Bernie [of Irene and Bernie] and Jerry [of Jerry and Faye]). In fact, the same photograph of Jerry is used for two different families (pp. 81 and 93). Lesy has cleverly organized his transcriptions to let readers compare how two brothers describe the same incidents.
- 11 This same point is made by Kotkin (1978).
- 12 Sociologists Boerdam and Martinius suggest two approaches: "Family photographs can be defined in two ways: according to subject and according to the social environment in which they are used. In the former definition family photographs are all those photographs depicting relations or families. In the latter definition family photographs are all those photographs kept and looked at within a family. Both definitions include photographs taken by a professional photographer at the request of the family" (1980:96). Hirsch has selected a restricted version of the former.
- 13 I am reminded of a statement made by Alfred Stieglitz in 1897: "Every Tom, Dick, and Harry could, without trouble, learn how to get something or other on a sensitive plate, and this is what the public wanted—no work and lots of fun. Thanks to the efforts of these persons hand camera and bad work became synonymous" (Lyons 1966:108).
- 14 Social psychologist Stanley Milgram notes: "In principle, the camera could be used to record any visual event: stars, lakes, garbage, loaves of bread. But overwhelmingly, what people wanted to record were images of themselves and their loved ones" (1977:50).
- 15 An analysis along these lines is suggested by the "socioidistic" approach to the snapshot-related genre of home movies (Chalfen 1975).
- 16 Of course a lot depends on what kinds of sociological questions are being asked, but for one example of treating group portraits of wedding parties as sociograms, see Segalen (1974).
- 17 The subtitle of this book reads: "A Book Based Upon an Album Discovered by a Concentration Camp Survivor, Lili Meier."

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Norman Bryson. Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. 281 pp. £27.50.

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While literary criticism is now one of the most lively and innovative academic disciplines, art history remains by contrast very staid and traditional. As a group, art historians remain bound to relatively conservative ways of thinking and writing about art. Bryson's book must be understood against this background. It is perhaps the first serious presentation in English of an approach to visual art modeled on the French-style poststructuralism found now in much literary criticism. Bryson's book falls into two parts: a brief theoretical introduction and an application of that account to eighteenth-century French art. Because the interest of that historical study depends, ultimately, on the security of his novel and complex theory of paintings, I begin by considering that theory.

What is meant by calling paintings "signs"? A verbal or pictorial sign signifies something, and so we can focus alternately on the sign itself and on what it stands for. We see the typeface here used in printing the word "art" and can then think of the meaning of that word; analogously, we can focus first on the figural aspect of a picture and then on what it depicts. Images can be placed on a linear scale according to their ratio of figure to meaning. Thus, hieroglyphs are 1:1 illustrations of words, every feature of the sign contributing to its meaning. In realistic pictures the signified:sign ratio is many:1, for only some features of the picture are essential to picking out what is depicted. Finally, in abstract art that ratio is in effect infinity:1, since now the sign signifies nothing but is merely the pigment whose figural qualities we see.

Thus, realism in painting cannot be defined, as traditional art historians assume and as Gombrich argues, by the closeness of the painting to being an objective copy of what it depicts. Rather, a Masaccio fresco is more realistic than a window in Canterbury Cathedral because the Italian master supplies us with excessive or irrelevant information. The Bible requires that Christ be depicted without specifying His position in the picture space. Thus realism is established "by an instituted difference between figure and discourse . . . an excess of the image over discourse" (p. 12). Because realistic pictures look natural, we attach meanings to the image which really belong to the text signified by that image. Realism involves deception because we see the picture's meanings as *in* the picture itself.