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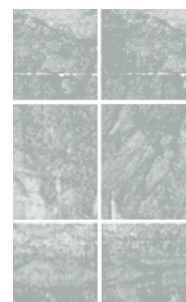
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## Digital cameras and domestic photography: communication, agency and structure

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to open up debate on the nature of communication in digital domestic photography. The discussion locates itself between the putative poles of 'digital democracy' and 'digital literacy', questioning the communicative co-ordinates of the snapshot and identifying the 'idiomatic genres' in which it takes place. The authors argue that digital cameras enable domestic photographers to take 'good' or professional-looking photographs and make certain capacities of professional cameras available for consumer use. Conversely, however, they argue that the question of critical understanding of the politics of representation in domestic camera use remains, since technical proficiency is not necessarily always accompanied by analysis. One reason suggested for this is that, frequently, the uses of photography are insufficiently analysed. The article therefore criticizes the idea that (domestic) photography can be understood in terms of 'language' without paying due attention to the use of photography to capture the nonverbal.

### KEY WORDS

'affordance' • agency • digital democracy • digital literacy • genre • idiom  
• 'language' • nonverbal communication • politics of representation • structure

In the popular imagination, digital imaging has been seen as a matter of modification and mutability. The modification arises from all the post hoc touching up that was employed in analogue photography in such spheres as advertising and fashion that is now, through specialized software, available to domestic camera users. This is coupled with the mutability of the image at the point of 'production' (as opposed to 'post-production') in the touch-of-a-button effects that digital cameras offer.

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Along with modification and mutability, the so-called 'digital age' has also ushered in concerns over the extent to which mediated existence is 'virtual' or 'reified'. Digital imaging has played a role in 'virtual' existence, particularly as it has sustained some aspects of internet communication, but also in the sense that it has contributed to the putative unreality and the unreliability of mass mediated communication (Wheeler, 2002). Conversely, digitality has also contributed to feelings of reification in which the only yardstick of truth is that which proceeds from heavily mediated messages. In terms of practice and sign making in a digital age, however, two further, possibly artificial, poles have emerged. The first is 'digital democracy', in which digital technologies, particularly those to do with imaging, grow at a very rapid rate and become available to consumers outside a purely industrial setting to the extent that information imbalance is, in some measure, ameliorated. The second is the more sobering perspective of 'visual literacy', typically associated with the Halliday-influenced work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (e.g. 2006), which identifies in visual 'language' a series of constraints that are in some ways analogous to the constraints of verbal language. This position is well known and represents a reasonable understanding of the checks and balances that characterize the contemporary visual, and, perhaps more specifically, digital age (cf. Kress, 2003). Nevertheless, in what follows we wish to question some of Kress and Van Leeuwen's imperatives both in the consideration of 'critical literacy' and in considering the idea of digital democracy: that is, digital democracy as a *potential*; not so much a utopia, but rather as part of quotidian attempts to enhance communication. We present a necessarily provisional overview of domestic digital camera use, an area which, although thus far under-theorized and even less well researched ethnographically, is the subject of a major consumer boom.

Digital cameras are one of the fastest growing consumer markets in the West, partly as a result of their incorporation into the latest generation of mobile phones. At the same time, digital imaging is fast rendering film unfashionable and economically unattractive to many of the big players in camera sales. The vastly accelerated process whereby a photographer can now capture a digital image and dispatch it for publication via the internet almost immediately afterwards has, by comparison, made film seem far too slow and costly for most businesses. It has led to the rise of 'citizen journalism', the 'digital amateur' and further erosion of the authority of the professional photographer. For this, and other reasons, the consumer boom in digital cameras has not simply amounted to another straightforward step in the onward march of established capital. Major players such as Kodak underestimated the rise of digital cameras, were slow to enter the market and were unready for some aspects of the new era of the visual heralded by digital imaging technology at a domestic level. The 'domestic' component of this phenomenon has been crucial, both because it entails a mass market and because it puts into the hands of some members of the public means of

imaging which were, until very recently, only in the hands of industry and which thus contributed to an imbalance of power in the economy of signs.

Put simply, the question for visual theory that arises from the digital camera boom concerns whether digital cameras teach, facilitate or otherwise enhance visual literacy among the public. Do they enable command over imaging? Do they foster any sense of the world of representation beyond the act of taking domestic photographs and communicating on a very localized, personal level? We would begin by suggesting that widespread uptake of digital cameras can inculcate the disposition of seeing the world through a viewfinder or a screen; it can also encourage the making of basic choices about representation. As such, domestic digital cameras harbour the potential to induce a more self-reflexive attitude towards media in general. Before widespread empirical work on digital camera use proceeds, we would argue that it is worth taking seriously the capacity of self-reflexivity inherent in domestic photography.

### **COMMUNICATION IN DOMESTIC PHOTOGRAPHY**

What little available literature there is concerning vernacular photography has tended to be equivocal in its categorizations. The general catch-all concept of 'the snapshot' tended to dominate discussion in the past, although writers and critics rarely distinguish between wedding snaps, travel snaps, pet snaps and family snaps. Although his own work is focused on the 'home mode', Chalfen (1987) notes that the 'snapshot' can refer broadly to any hastily taken picture and the term actually derives from hunting, denoting a hurried gun shot taken without deliberate aim which was applied to photography for the first time as early as the 1860s (p. 72). The casual domestic photographer, the mobile phone snapper and the amateur enthusiast may also need to be considered under separate headings at specific junctures in the debate, possibly according to the degrees of deliberation they employ in their photographs and the specific uses to which they are put. Yet, on reviewing the literature, it is apparent that academic books and articles dealing with photography as an art, and photographers as artists, far outweigh the meagre proportion of texts dealing with vernacular photography. Even the recent special issue of the journal *Source* (2005, dedicated to vernacular photography) looks at the subject with a museum and gallery interest. One honourable exception would be the edited collection *Photography's Other Histories* (Pinney and Peterson, 2003) which remedies a gap in the scholarly literature. The collection consists of a set of papers contributed by anthropologists looking at the uses of photography in developing nations. Stallabrass (1996) has discussed domestic digital photography but his discussion is largely orientated towards a Frankfurt School influenced critique, an approach we have explicitly avoided here.

Chalfen's study of analogue photography, *Snapshots: Versions of Life* (1987) remains one of the key texts on domestic photography considered in terms of its 'uses'. His work provides an extensive meditation, based on

research into family albums, on 'Kodak culture' and the 'home mode', taking in both home movies as well as snapshots. Much of what we argue here concurs with Chalfen's findings, although there are significant differences, as will be seen. *Family Snaps*, edited by Jo Spence and Pat Holland (1991), also provided one of the most important critical discussions of domestic photography, while Annette Kuhn's *Family Secrets* (1995) offers a psychoanalytic approach to her family, which relies on an analysis of family photographs. More recently, the so-called 'snapshot aesthetic' has become a high profile concept, following the success of photographers such as Nan Goldin and Wolfgang Tillmans, whose work self-consciously draws on the idea. Partly as a result of the fashion for the snapshot aesthetic among artists, exhibitions of vernacular photography have been organized in art galleries and museums, making the humble snapshot available for appropriation by art lovers.

As Douglas R. Nickel (1995), the curator of one such exhibition remarks:

There is a fascination to certain examples that allows them a kind of afterlife, a license to circulate in other contexts. When the image is severed from its original, private function, it also becomes open, available to a range of readings wider than those associated with its conception. (p. 13)

Nickel also points out that 'the snapshot remains by far the most populous class of photographic object we have, and it is as yet, without a theory' (p. 9). Elsewhere in the exhibition catalogue, Lori Fogerty notes that:

most of the criteria we usually associate with photographs in a museum – works of personal expression, made with an aesthetic or at least social intent, by a self-conscious artist or professional – are absent. The very idea of the unique or rare object is thrown into question by the snapshot, since all of us own them, have taken them, have been their subject. (p. 8)

It is interesting that Nickel ultimately defines the snapshot in terms of the emotions, acknowledging that the topic may be met with distaste in much academic discourse:

we must be prepared to enter the terrain customarily regarded with much suspicion by the scholar: that of affect. The snapshot is, by design, an object of sentiment . . . the family photograph is forged in the emotional response its maker has to a subject, a relationship characterised by its sincerity. (p. 14)

Like Nickel, Don Slater (1995) finds the essence of the snapshot in its affective tonality, although unlike the former, he is much less sympathetic to

the idea, moving from the term 'sentiment' to the more pejorative 'sentimentality'. Slater describes the snapshot as an 'idealisation', which imposes 'a filter of sentimentality' over its subject matter:

The most common photographs are of loved ones – partners and children – taken during leisure time, times of play . . . [The snapshot] is sentimental because it attempts to fix transcendent and tender emotions and identifications on people and moments hauled out of ordinary time and mundanity, the better to foreground an idealised sense of their value and the value of our relationship to them, in the present and in memory. (p. 134)

Despite this equation of snapshots with domestic sentimentality, emotion in communication demands analysis. Future research in media and communication studies will have to take more seriously the findings of Damasio (1995) and others that the emotions are central to critical reasoning, not a distorting 'filter' that has to be removed before we can see clearly. Part of this shift will also involve the acknowledgement that there are many kinds of code that may be in play in the production, reception and taking of photographs, including, but not limited to, the verbal, the written, the visual, the tactile – each of which carries with it a dynamic affective charge. This is not confined to the photograph itself: it is central to the success of leading brands. Reviewers frequently comment, for example, on the unique qualitative experience afforded by Nikon cameras (see, for instance, [dpreview.com](http://dpreview.com)'s review of the Nikon D40 entry level DSLR).

The emotional charge of the snapshot, of course, is also bound to its cultural and economic co-ordinates. The snapshot was born with the introduction of the Kodak camera in the summer of 1888. The camera had a basic lens with a barrel shutter and came pre-loaded with 100-exposure roll of film which could then be posted to Eastman's Kodak factory for processing. Kodak's famous slogan ran: 'you press the button – we do the rest'. The success of the camera was phenomenal: as Nickel (2005) remarks, Eastman created not just a product but a culture (p. 10; cf. Chalfen, 1987). Yet, along with the rank amateurs, grew enthusiasts with aspirations to higher technical and aesthetic standards. Indeed, there was (and is) a considerable middle ground which makes it difficult to delineate between these two categories. Many casual domestic photographers took a lot of photographs and learned about framing and composition as they went. As Alden (2005) puts it: 'knowingly or not, amateurs would adopt the rhetoric of professional photographers' (p. 8).

However, serious film-based photography is a notoriously expensive hobby, with initial outlays of £25,000 not uncommon for a fully equipped studio with darkroom. Although Photoshop now puts advanced darkroom capabilities in the hands of amateur digital photographers for a mere £600 (or c. £60 for Photoshop Elements, the cut-down version of the software),

there is still a significant economic and status divide between amateur and professional, artisan and artist. Actual mastery of Photoshop is also a steep learning curve. Unlike professional industry or art photographers, amateur photographers have traditionally not had access to a regular public audience for their work. In spite of the fact that magazines such as *Amateur Photographer* have featured the work of enthusiasts, few will become well known (although with the arrival of new internet sites such as *Flickr*, *ImageShack*, *Fotolog*, *Fotki* and *PBase*, new spaces of exhibition and discussion are opening up). As a consequence, genres of amateur photography have tended to remain fairly limited in scope. However, this does not mean that they can necessarily be reduced to 'language' or delimited codes; rather, they are bounded by audiences and what camera users do, with available technology, in respect of them.

### GENRES OF DOMESTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Given that domestic photography is concerned with a limited space of production, dissemination and consumption, one useful way to consider its communicative action is through the figure of the idiom. Notwithstanding its linguistic bearing, Feldges (2008) suggests that most photography can be considered *idiomatic* because of its constraints of production and the limits on its audience. He therefore identifies four main 'idiomatic genres': idiomatic micro-communication; creative macro-communication; the presentational spectacular; and the scientific idiom. The photographs that follow, bar the 'scientific' one, have all been taken by amateurs using consumer digital cameras. They show that the existing idioms are readily available for amateurs to produce pictures. But there are a number of other issues that they illustrate which, although seemingly straightforward, are rather important.

The following seven pictures of a 16-month old boy on a swing are an example of idiomatic micro-communication. The pictures were taken by the parents solely for the viewing, in the first instance, of the parents and the boy's grandmother, all members of the same idiomatic network. The idiom is limited by the intended audience, but also by the purpose of the sign making in the production of the photograph.

It is pretty clear from this selection of photographs that the purpose was 'simply' to capture the boy's enjoyment of the swing, his expression of delight, a full view of his face, a sense of what he looked like in general at that age and that moment, and to do so with certain fundamental aesthetic factors taken into account (for example, instances when the early Spring sun, low in the sky, was not shining in his face). In short, the main aim was to capture nonverbal communication, from the boy and by the scene. As such, this set of parameters does not differ from those in operation with idiomatic micro-communication in analogue, film-based photography. The difference, though, is to do with choice: in the past, the expense of getting films developed prevented domestic photographers from making numerous



Figures 1-7 Idiomatic micro-communication. Photos published with permission.





**Figure 8** Creative macro-communication. Photo: Nick Haeffner.

pictures in the search for an image that approached perfection for the purposes at hand. In digital photography, multiple pictures can be taken at no further expense and low-level aesthetic judgements can be made at the point of production (by viewing each picture in the LCD monitor) or later, on a computer (if the pictures are being uploaded there). Although it may seem like small beer, digital cameras facilitate the executing of minor decisions about the effectiveness of sign making in the idiom, as well as an apprehension of the diversity of what signs can signify.

The next picture (Figure 8) is a landscape taken by an amateur photographer from a moving coach and is an example of what Feldges calls creative macro-communication.

The pocket digital camera easily facilitated a slow shutter speed for taking the photograph. The photo has subsequently been rendered in monochrome using Photoshop. This represents a considerably larger idiom than that of micro-communication. It is possible to make out what it is a picture of, but there are no specific co-ordinates for reading the picture and thoroughly delimiting the audience in the way as there were with the photographs of the boy (Figures 1–7). At the same time, there is sufficient doubt about what is pictured to raise some interest, and that interest is potentially harboured by an audience whose size is dictated by their capacity to appreciate, broadly, 'creative' image making in general. The other interesting feature of this idiom is that it downplays the authorship function relative to that of micro-communication. Domestic analogue photography, of course, does not prohibit creative macro-communication; it is possible,



**Figure 9** The presentational spectacular. Photo: Nick Haeffner.

although less probable, to produce a macro-communication that is creative using a traditional analogue camera. However, digital cameras make it that much easier and that much more likely, since they come with an array of technology that was only previously available to professionals at a very high price.

Even more characteristic of idiomatic modes shared by both digital and analogue photography is the category of the presentational spectacular as exemplified in the photograph in Figure 9, taken by an amateur.

Amateur photographers who are planning to take anything more than 'point and shoot' family snaps will customarily seek to photograph naturally occurring objects in a 'realistic' way, eschewing the kind of 'trick effects' Barthes (1977[1960]) identified early in photographic theory and focusing, instead, on the spectacle of the object itself. Frequently, this involves the voluntary or involuntary photographing of an object with concomitant attention to the way it may impose itself on a particular purview in an unusual or impressive manner. In this idiomatic genre, the spectacle of naturally occurring events can increase in magnitude and intensity according to the expansion of the idiomatic network. A common example of this is those photographs that become news items. The benefits that domestic digital cameras offer to this process are banal, but worth noting: they are mainly to be found in the ability to quickly select higher ISO numbers for low light photography and the ready accessibility of pocket cameras themselves, often built into mobile phones.

The scientific idiom, instanced in the photograph in Figure 10, is frequently closely related to the presentational spectacular in its effects, but is marked from it in its usual intent, and in that it is generally the preserve of professionals.

Feldges suggests that this idiom constitutes the 'most rational' use of photography because it is employed solely in the purpose of scientific explanation and exploration. The interpretation of scientific idiom photographs such as this one relies on empirical codes rather than symbolic ones.



**Figure 10** The scientific idiom. Photo: Nick Haeffner.

Such photographs are generally repeatable in similar form and, within their idiomatic, scientific communities, audiences will impute authorship to their producers, particularly if they are presenting new knowledge through the photographs. Domestic digital camera use seldom exemplifies the scientific idiom; yet it sometimes acts in a similar, partly traditional, way in the process of revelation and 'truth'. It is here that the pronounced drive in snapshots to 'show' an event or people, so closely associated with the 'home mode' or family orientation (see, especially, Chalfen, 1987: 98–9), evades its domestic moorings in a fashion that is especially facilitated by the availability of consumer digital cameras. There are already a number of celebrated instances of this, one of which is discussed below.

All these examples evince a kind of 'literacy', to use the common linguistically orientated parlance once more. The final three idioms, in particular, represent an informed use of photography which has some sense of technique, practice and tradition. They are reminiscent of the work of enthusiastic amateurs or what is sometimes called the camera club mentality, operating efficiently in a very limited idiom. The scientific idiom is a developed version of this; the idiomatic micro-communication examples, on the other hand, only exemplify 'literacy' at the level of anticipating choices to be made in the selection of pictures at the moment of uploading. Yet, it should be noted that while all this sign making constitutes a kind of literacy, it is not necessarily a *critical* literacy which one would, perhaps, hope to be unleashed by 'digital democracy'. Proficiency at the formal level in such idiomatic photography can be high but frequently absent is critical reflection on both the politics of representation and the referent.

The question that follows from these observations on photographic idioms and the sign-making practices associated with them, then, concerns the possibility that widespread digital camera use may contribute to the democratization of critical insight or, put another way, will lead to greater media literacy. Certainly, the surveillance and legal functions of photography would seem to have been further problematized in recent years. Echoing some of the popular concerns and opportunities we outlined at the start of this article, Mitchell (1992) suggested that:

Protagonists of the institutions of journalism with their interest in being trusted, of the legal system, with their need for provably reliable evidence, and of science, with their foundational faith in the recording instrument, may well fight hard to maintain the hegemony of the standard photographic image – but others will see the emergence of digital imaging as a welcome opportunity to expose the aporias in photography's construction of the visual world, to deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure, and to resist what has become an increasingly sclerotic pictorial tradition. (p. 8)

The challenge of domestic digital photography to the 'increasingly sclerotic pictorial tradition' is located in the potential for critical understanding of the photographic text that the technology can facilitate. Re-framing the matter, we might declare it to be a metamorphosis of the roles of structure and agency in this field of representation.

### **STRUCTURE AND AGENCY**

The idea of amateur photography transforming the polis is not exactly new (see Benjamin, 1973[1935] and Kracauer, 1995). The proliferation of non-professional photographers led to hopes in the 1970s that the medium could inaugurate a demystification and politicization of the media. Among those who advanced this view of domestic photography was Don Slater, who edited the journal *Camerawork* in the early 1980s. As Slater (1995) explains:

the 1970s saw numerous currents of radical photography which considered the potential of photography for empowerment in everyday life: in education, documentation, alternative politics, etc. To some extent these currents touched upon domestic photography, particularly through Jo Spence's work. (p. 143)

Those who sponsored the idea of empowerment envisaged a progressive politics of image making in which practice itself would transform ideology and social institutions:

why could we not see people – cameras in hand – telling their lives – to themselves and to others – in a narrative cut to their own dreams, desires, anger? . . . Could that arch-enemy, the root of representational tyranny – the myth of realism, of the factuality of images, of the naturalness of meaning – survive the people's own experience of making images? . . . Could we not enlist photography in the ranks of counter-hegemony and prefigurative culture? (p. 144)

In Slater's view, 'the question of the fate of the photographic image in everyday digital photography resolves into the tangled structuring of leisure experience at the meeting point of consumer capitalism and the construction of family identity' (p. 137).

The agency which photography seems to offer as a potential has to be considered in relation to the structures within which it operates and which it brings into being:

Taking photographs itself is structured (with Kodak mass photography as the paradigm of structuring a complex skill into a few simple actions – 'You press the button . . .') and is regarded as an intrinsic part of other leisure event-structures: holidays, time-off, special occasions (Christmas or wedding). It fits into the commodification of

leisure generally and is part of their commodification: we are encouraged to photograph our lives in such a way as to frame them as leisure events (p. 141).

Furthermore, when domestic users get to the point of developing their relationship with photography, Slater argues that questions of technique serve to obscure any consideration of the ideology that lies behind image making. An important factor in this craft/technique/consumerist nexus is the consumer press, which offers a large range of magazines promoting lenses, tripods, filters, carrying cases and other accessories, often through editorial pieces explaining how to get the 'best' images (the aforementioned 'camera club mentality' or 'hobbyist photography') (p. 142).

It could be argued that since Slater published his article in 1995, a wider range of amateur publications exists with some titles, such as *Digital Photographer*, showcasing the pictures of photographers whose work is celebrated for its challenging nature. Such publications can count on the readership of a growing band of workers in the culture industries of design, music and IT, characterized by Bourdieu (1986) as the 'new petit bourgeoisie', a rapidly expanding social group which has an ambivalent relationship to traditional bourgeois norms. Such people are highly likely to pursue digital photography as a hobby, partly because their workflow is most likely to have been thoroughly digitized in the last 10 years, in the interests of business efficiency. Such users have an easy familiarity with digital technology and an interest in new developments. They also value forms of culture previously held to be bohemian (jazz, exotic travel to unusual destinations, modern art), which, in contrast with their scruffy, rough and ready forebears, they usually consume in thoroughly bourgeois surroundings. However, a quick survey of the shelves of a London newsagent suggests that consumerism, not photography, is still the dominant theme of these magazines with titles such as *What Camera?*, *Which Digital Camera?*, *Digital Camera Buyer* and *Digital Camera Shopper* making explicit what titles such as *Photography Monthly* and *Amateur Photographer* are too reticent to admit: that their primary purpose is to deliver readers to advertisers.

Since we have raised the question of how easy users feel with digital technology, it is worth briefly returning here to the haptic dimension of digital photography, especially since product designers put so much thought into this aspect, in contrast to the relative neglect it has suffered at the hands of scholars of communication. In this respect, the concept of 'affordance' has recently achieved some prominence in discussions of the agency which users may exercise in relation to technology. Gibson (1979) described affordance as all the 'action possibilities' available to the actor independent of the individual's ability to recognize these possibilities. The concept was given influential revision by Norman (1999) who not only distinguished between 'real affordances', 'perceived affordances' and 'cultural conventions' but also illustrated their haptic co-ordinates. The real affordances are linked to

physical constraints on action. The perceived affordances take account of an actor's goals, values, beliefs and interests. However, the cultural constraints are conventions shared by a cultural group. Norman writes:

A convention is a cultural constraint, one that has evolved over time. Conventions are not arbitrary: they evolve, they require a community of practice. They are slow to be adopted, and once adopted, slow to go away. So although the work implies voluntary choice, the reality is that they are real constraints upon our behaviour. (p. 41)

Norman asks, 'what is it about this object that makes people want to use it in this way?' He concludes that the object (in our case, the digital camera or computer software interface) must 'talk' to us in some kind of a 'language', recommending some uses and discouraging others. Norman's work has been very influential on a generation of designers working in technology, many of them camera and computer designers, preoccupied with creating user-friendly interfaces that require a careful consideration of the sense of touch.

However, Norman's work fits in with what has been called the administrative tradition in communication studies (identified with North America and emphasizing improving communication, often with a business model in the background). This contrasts with critical European communications research that places much greater emphasis on the social and political aspects of communication. One could therefore view the notion of affordances in the light of two traditions of thought. In the North American model, the emphasis would be on making digital imaging technology ever more efficient and popular with consumers. In the European tradition, however, this kind of 'means-end' or 'instrumental' rationality is viewed as one of the ways in which potential citizen photographers are (lamentably) turned into consumer photographers. From a Foucauldian perspective, the 'freedoms' afforded by consumer technology turn out to be simply more efficient ways of ensuring our subjectivization to consumer society and all the hidden assumptions that underwrite it. A further issue lurks behind the concept of affordances, too. It has recently been incorporated into actor-network-theory which distinguishes between prescription, proscription, affordances and allowances, and concerns itself with what a device allows or forbids in relation to the actor (Latour, 2005). Actor-network-theory, with its emphasis on the idea that researchers are always lagging behind the changing world that informants are involved in making, would be a fruitful ally in the ethnographic research that is needed to begin to understand domestic digital camera use.

A third position can also be developed in response to a criticism that both the positive and negative approaches just discussed take too much of a broad-brush approach. Rather than asking how digital imaging devices can be purified of inefficiency or ideological distortion on a grand scale, we will

try, instead, to get a more nuanced understanding of how people interact with them, what they want to get out of them and why. As a preliminary measure, this would entail a consideration of the diverse amateur uses of cameras, what users are trying to get out of the photograph and what they are trying to get out of the technology, and how they place these within, and possibly expand, genres of sign making. In this configuration, it is not sufficient to just posit a dialectic of structure and agency. The same goes for the role of language in photographic sign making. It is not enough to rest between a hard version of the Hallidayan perspective (to the pole of linguistic structure) and the soft version (to the pole of choice). Rather, it is necessary to trace out the fluctuations between the two in concrete situations.

Consider the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison (Figure 11, below) which suggest that the practices of amateur digital photography can rupture the synergy of public discourses which surround it in consumer culture.



**Figure 11** Abu Ghraib. Digital image: public domain.



Ironically, in this case, such a rupture was unintentional and it is possible that the photograph originally arose in a different idiom. Nevertheless, it points to an interesting contradiction in the relations between established power and mass media. In our current climate of feral competition for ratings and circulation, the media are generally perceived as trying to appear more populist and have become more sensationalist. This does not mean that they are necessarily 'speaking the truth to power' – far from it in many cases. However, it does mean that the amateur photographs taken at Abu Ghraib, which proved devastating to the political establishment in the US and in the UK, proved to be an extremely lucrative commodity for the media who ensured that their dissemination was the best that modern media can achieve. The photographs also led to much discussion on enthusiast websites such as *dpreview.com*, which normally specializes in reviews of the latest photographic gear. For months, the site teemed with furious postings from visitors arguing about the 'appropriate' uses of digital photography and the veracity of the digital image. For once, anger and passion about politics ruptured the otherwise bland discourse on hobbyist photography. For many, the personal connected with the political in reasoned and informed discourse about the wider implications of digital technologies. However, other respondents, echoing our opening comments on views of the digital age, refused to believe that the Abu Ghraib images were 'true'. Still others were led to a crisis of faith in their support for 'the war in Iraq'. Were these images not 'snapshots' in the broad sense, outside of the family, in which we have begun to discuss them earlier? And, if so, do generalizations about snapshots still hold? Although the circumstances in which these photographs were taken and the motivations of the camera users are still not clear, it is nevertheless true that their subsequent circulation gave them the status of artefacts of citizen journalism. Furthermore, one final point should be made: although the referents are clearly to be understood as linguistically placed social actors, the most striking fact about the Abu Ghraib pictures is that the nonverbal communication, captured in all its naked brutality, is so overwhelming as to precede such linguistic placing.

From the mobile phone photos used to rouse a demonstration (Robertson in Langford, 2005) to Eliot Ward's amateur images of the London 7/7 terrorist attack, digital amateurs have been not just consumers of the media but producers of it too. Sontag (2004) has criticized the tendency of some theorists to speak of 'spectacle' and 'spectators' when referring to photographic reportage of such events:

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalises the viewing habits of a small educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment ... it assumes that everyone is a spectator. (pp. 109–11)

Nevertheless, as Crawford (2008) points out:

If one grants Sontag a victory, it comes with two qualifications. First, in an image-event such as 7/7, both the producers and consumers of imagery are likely to be 'a small educated population living in a rich part of the world.' Where there is a tendency in counter-cultural circles to refer to the media as an 'it' or a 'they', we are no longer permitted the luxury of this separation. We *are* the media as Ward's mobile phone photograph clearly demonstrates.

Perhaps, however, this is a somewhat isolated example, untypical of the practice and consumption of amateur digital photography, although, crucially, it is an amateur snapshot facilitated by a domestic technology. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to revisit the questions posed earlier. Is there an amateur digital photography practice which questions ideology – (a) at the level of the politics of representation; and (b) at the level of the referent?

Our preliminary thesis is that there is but that it is limited. Much-needed ethnographic research in the area would have to pose classic questions of communication:

- How was the image captured?
- What was the object of representation?
- Where does it circulate?
- To whom and why?

Where can these questions be posed and how can we attempt to get the public to begin asking them more systematically? One answer is within the institution of the university. However, it is still necessary to acknowledge that the university is not in reality an institution of free enquiry. Teaching and research are carried out within specific frameworks that involve powerful imperatives and constraints. Perhaps it is not enough to get our students to read articles and carry out their own research. It may even be the case that among the alternative methods to inculcate self-reflexivity, digital imaging itself can be used to look critically at the institutions in which it is studied.

The snapshot shown in Figure 12, speedily facilitated by a digital camera, was taken on a holiday visit to the US outside a well-established university. It shows a sculpture of birds in flight in front of university buildings. Beneath the statue is a person, probably a student. A preferred reading of the image would talk about the statue as a symbol of all that is great about the experience of university study: the freedom to allow your ideas and your spirit to soar to new heights, like the birds in the sculpture. The (incidental) presence of a student of non-Western appearance could be seen as evidence of the inclusive and universalistic aspirations of the university.



**Figure 12** The university experience. Photo: Nick Haeffner.

Such a reading fits well with what Wernick (1991) has called our 'promotional culture', in which modern public communications have become all about selling something and in which public institutions are constantly trying to sell themselves to potential customers. However, other readings of the image are readily available. For instance, note that the statue is made of metal and is therefore an image, not of dynamism but of stasis, suggesting not freedom but rather inflexible authority. Is the intellectual achievement apparently celebrated in the statue, or that of the student, or of the intellectuals whose work they must learn to cite? The scale of the photo has the student dwarfed beneath this monumental metal monolith, suggesting perhaps the extent to which universities still require the subjection of

those who study within them to a vast administrative bureaucracy and an institutionalized mode of life. Certainly, the student's nonverbal communication suggests a reading other than the 'preferred' one.

Thus it is necessary to acknowledge that while, on the one hand, the modern university can and should encourage critical literacy in relation to the image, it is nevertheless part of the problem as well as part of the solution. It may be that the development of a critical disposition towards digital imaging in the future will come just as much from outside the university as from inside it. It may happen as the previous decorum of public discourse, conducted through the appropriate authorized public channels, is rudely disrupted by the explosion of web-enabled chatter, about which it is unwise to pass judgement based on generalizations. For it is through public discourse on the ubiquity of nonverbal communication in the digital age that we are witnessing not only the questioning of technology and the politics of representation, but also the putative linguistic basis of both.

## CONCLUSION

In following suggestions that troubling dichotomies have emerged in the digital age, we have attempted to place consumer digital cameras and domestic photography in the prominent position we believe they demand. As with all technologies, digital cameras are embedded in discourse. There is simply no escaping the fact that amateur digital photography is caught up in a defined politics of representation. Yet, equally, it would be folly to assume that technology is automatically complicit with existing discursive structures. We need to take seriously the capacity of self-reflexivity inherent in digital domestic photography, defined as the non-professional use of consumer digital cameras including, but not confined to, family snapshots.

Digital domestic photography is also embedded in 'uses'; indeed, it is constituted by its uses. Chalfen's work (1987) makes this very clear by demonstrating how the study of social and cultural contexts of camera use in the 'home mode' creates a 'symbolic world'. Similarly, in a more recent investigation of a new technology, Horst and Miller's (2006) anthropology of mobile phone use in Jamaica, it is observed that in the literature on telephony 'texts that consider the widest possible context for understanding the usages and consequences of the telephone [are] much more effective than those that start too narrowly from a supposed intrinsic quality of the technology itself' (p. 11). This echoes Chalfen's (1987) finding that 'technological innovations are, and will continue to be, less important than *culture's* contribution to providing a continuity in a model and pattern of personal pictorial communication' (p. 166). These are strong points with which, in some measure, we would concur. The danger of any investigation of a specific and new medium, particularly an investigation as preliminary as this one, is that it tends to identify novel features in relation to other media and, often, to imagine that those features are immutable characteristics of the medium. As Mitchell (2005) argues:

accounts of media tend to disavow their constructed character, presenting the medium as possessed of essential characteristics and a certain natural destiny. This is especially true of photography, which seems to license every commentator to make pronouncement on its essential character, even when their aim is to deny any essentialism. Thus, the very theorists of photography who have done the most to open up the limitless variety and complexity of photographic images invariably wind up at some point declaring an essential teleology, a fixed center in the labyrinth. Photography's true nature is found in its automatic realism and naturalism, or in its tendency to aestheticize and idealize by rendering things pictorial. It is praised for its incapacity for abstraction, or condemned for its fatal tendency to produce abstractions from human reality. It is declared to be independent of language, or riddled with language. Photography is a record of what we see, or a revelation of what we cannot see, a glimpse of what was previously invisible. Photographs are things we look at, and yet, as Barthes also insists, 'a photograph is always invisible, it is not what we see.' (p. 474)

Yet, in focusing on the possible domestic uses of digital cameras and the location of those uses within loosely established idioms, we have hopefully circumvented much of the essentialism that Mitchell identifies. Furthermore, we would argue that there *is* a need to at least consider the potentialities of the new medium. Chalfen's (1987) work, for example, does not (and cannot) speculate on equivalent communication in the 'home mode' before snapshots became a widespread technological reality. In addition, his and other investigators' studies of family albums necessarily neglect to study all the photographs that families might discard or fail to place in albums or frames (because they are not good technically, contain a bad pose, a frown, and so forth). One of our points is that the technology of consumer digital photography allows the cheap generation of many more dispensable pictures which can be discarded at the click of a switch rather than forcing the photographer to wait and be disappointed after paying for their development on paper. Indeed, this may have a bearing on content and framing in the 'home mode' of domestic photography. One of the reasons that analogue photographs of people were taken in (often family) groups, for example, is the cost implication: taking one photograph of a number of people was cheaper than taking numerous photographs of different individuals. This is not to say that group photographs have died out with the advent of affordable digital cameras; clearly, they have not, because they are an entrenched mode of picturing for all the good reasons that Chalfen lists. But the possibilities for domestic photography offered by digital cameras beyond such modes should not be overlooked.

Digital cameras are a fast-moving new medium: for example, the increasing pixel count of cameras and the fall in price of digital equipment in

the West, coupled with the increasing audio–video components of contemporary consumer cameras that make this a converged medium, threaten to supersede the current account. Nevertheless, we argue that, since it is a new medium, it is necessary to investigate and theorize digital photography's possibilities even as we proceed to examine uses. And there is a need to question the basis upon which 'uses' are conceived. Lurking behind anthropological accounts of the 'uses' of communication technology is a phenomenon which we are compelled to comment on in relation to the sign-making function of domestic digital photography in a visual/digital age: that is, language.

Thus, we have tried to question at least one of the views on photography that Mitchell identifies, that photography is riddled with language. Only a scant perusal of the foregoing is needed, however, to demonstrate that the present foray into the parameters of digital domestic photography is itself riddled with linguistic metaphors. The paradigm of 'language', with all its connotations of richness *and* constraints, is difficult to evade and is one contributing factor in the current predilection for, especially, Halliday's perspective on linguistic limits and opportunities. Yet, linguistic metaphors should not be confused with either linguistic determinations or even determination by language in the last instance. Despite the element of choice that is evident in much Hallidayan discourse theory, 'language' as constraining is central to its understanding of discourse. In *Multimodal Discourse* (2002), Kress and Van Leeuwen see their work in its relation to 'questions about cognition, learning, knowledge, subjectivity' within the frame of reference provided by 'the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis':

That argument, has remained inconclusive: in its strong form – that we cannot see, perceive, think outside of the categories provided by language – it seems untenable. Patently enough, we can, though we need to work harder to do so. In its weak form – that the categories of language provide grooves for habituated thought – it seems difficult to escape. (pp. 127–8)

Despite the difficulty of escaping language or verbal expression, we would venture a criticism of Kress and Van Leeuwen's palpably reasonable position. For all its even-handedness, this position remains a glottocentrist one, predicated on the primacy of verbal expression. Given the centrality of language in many human affairs, this must, of course, make sense. However, there is the risk of downplaying the nonverbal in the idea of 'literacy', while, at the same time, reducing the possibility of any escape from the clutches of language. In both ontogenetic and phylogenetic terms, this is a major mistake. As the work of Sebeok (especially 2001, 1991, 1988) and others working in contemporary semiotics is at pains to demonstrate, nonverbal communication is so much a part of the human repertoire of communi-

cation, particularly in human embeddedness in the predominant universe of non-human nature, that it is frequently repressed rather than simply ignored. So, too, with photography.

Effectively, what is captured in domestic digital photography is nonverbal communication, even if it is only the cheesy smile of the relative posing before the camera. Leaving aside the audio–video facilities available in many contemporary digital cameras on the amateur market, the message in a photograph is overwhelmingly nonverbal. For this reason, and bearing in mind the question of digital democracy, we would opt for the ‘weak version’ of Kress and Van Leeuwen. Where Kress and Van Leeuwen follow Halliday in identifying the semantic dimension as the realm of choice, we would seek to push matters further by shifting debate onto the issue of what people want from photographs (in the situation of ‘utterance’) and its nonverbal co-ordinates: the required pose, proper lighting, colour and exposure, and mimicry of the situation (see Chalfen, 1987: 71–99). Indeed, there may even be the desire for deception on the part of the photographer resulting in a photograph that is even more perfect than the real situation. Furthermore, that desire is often extended in the service of a belief in ‘full communication’, a false dream that the image will ‘say’ everything that was desired. Digital photography serves as part of the embellishment of such a dream through the fine tuning and tinkering with the image that it allows at the point of domestic production and, subsequently, through widely adopted image programs such as Photoshop. The popularly conceived mutability of digital imaging mentioned at the outset, then, offers a new opportunity or a new choice. It offers a ‘digital democracy’ where, seemingly, domestic camera use entails autonomy over one’s own images. But the opportunity occurs on a limited basis and does so not least because of a continued belief in the possibility of attaining a more perfect communication. That language would enable such perfection is obviously as much a fallacy as the idea of a photograph, conversely, saying ‘ain’t’ (Worth, 1981). Language can provide metaphors for understanding photography; but to insist that it is the basis for other forms of communication by humans invites misconceptions about the nature of signs as well as the nature of agency.

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