

ESRC interdisciplinary workshop: MEDIAPOLIS  
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## **thinking about domestic and other images in urban spaces**

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Although my work has never engaged specifically with the discipline of media studies, I do have a longstanding interest in questions of representation, difference and power. Over a period of time, however, along with many others, I've moved somewhat away from the notion of representation, and towards an approach more concerned with the practices through which the social field is constituted. (This shift, of course, underpins this workshop too.) 'Practices' are the doings and sayings that articulate social positions and relations as they are done, according to Theodore Schatzki, and my particular interest surrounds the doings and sayings that are produced in encounters with visual images. To be accurate then, I'm now not so much interested in visual images and the discursive fields that give them meaning than with, to quote Mieke Bal, "performing acts of seeing", or "visual event[s]". To quote Bal again, I'm interested in "what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act." For me, looking is a practice, an encounter between a subject and a visual object in which both are constituted in specific ways.

Empirically, I've been developing these arguments in two contexts. The first has been a series of studies of mothers and their family photographs. My arguments have been based on interviews with middle-class, white women with young children. I was interested in why photos were so important to them, and the interviews were intended to find out what the photos meant to these women as a way of answering that question. But as the interviews proceeded, I found that my interviewees were not very articulate about what the photos *meant*. Instead, they were far more expressive about what they *felt* about their photos and what they *did* with them. I've ended up arguing that family snaps are not best thought of as a certain kind of meaningful image. It is certainly the case that family photos only picture a certain range of subject matter, in a certain way. But their content is only part of what defines them as family photographs. Equally important is what is done with them. What is important in a family photograph is: who took it; who it shows; who made copies of it and sent them to other people; who those other people are; and how it gets looked at by those people. Family photos are photos that get taken by a member of a family, that show members of that family, and are viewed mostly by other members of that same family, and often by a few close friends. I've then gone on to argue that what happens with family photo things are done with family snaps is that specific visions of family life as 'togetherness' are displayed and performed, as is a particular, ambivalent, aspect of maternal subjectivity.

Not long after I'd started interviewing mothers about their family snaps, similar sorts of photographs started to make quite other sorts of appearances: not in houses, this time, but in a range of public spaces, often as an effort to find a missing person: after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001, for

example; after the tsunami that devastated large areas around the Indian Ocean on 26 December 2004; and in the UK, after child abductions. I've paid particular attention to the photographs of the people missing and dead after the bombs in London on 7 July 2005 used by UK newspapers. Family photos of people missing were turned into posters by anxious friends and relatives, photographs of these posters were printed in newspapers, the papers carried many photographs of those feared missing, reprinting the same photos as the names of the dead were confirmed. I'm very interested in what happens when family photos leave their usual domestic habitations and go public in such circumstances.

This interest dovetails, in theory at least, with my second current research strand, which is an ESRC-funded project on how people experience two 'ordinary' town centres. With Monica Degen and Begum Basdas, I've been trying to explore the ways in which ordinary practices, performed in conjunction with the built environment and other objects, constitute the the sociality of the town centres. The practice I'm particularly interested in is the visual, of course, visual practices (which are very rarely only visual). I've been looking at how people look, and finding that they look in all sorts of different ways, and also make images too, with cameras, of themselves in these spaces. That is, everyday sociality entails a complex range of visual practices, performed in conjunction with the affordances of corporeal and non-human things.

It's that understanding of practised urban space into which I'd like to place those family snaps that go public after disasters and disappearances. How do those images enter that visual field, how do they shift it? Does their domesticity meet the public halfway (to adopt a phrase from Benjamin)? Do they become hybrid objects, as Fred Myers suggests, neither domestic nor public, and if so, what happens?

However, my work so far on these public family photos has concentrated on their representational qualities. This is partly because I'm working with Michael Warner's productive and provocative understanding of the public as constituted by being addressed, I think. The mass media certainly addressed and thereby constituted, on Warner's logic, a public in July 2005, a public made to be emotional in part by the use of family snaps. They addressed a public by using other photos too, which carried very clearly gendered and racialised constructions of social difference, it seems to me. In particular, naturalised gendered difference was used to erase – even if fitfully and partially – the significance of racialised differences. Methodologically, I reached this conclusion by exploring the papers' textual and visual rhetoric of address by sitting in a library going through their back issues; which is also what Berlant and Warner do, presumably, with their own sources. But I'm not entirely comfortable with this as a method. It not only seems to return to that representational moment that I found fruitfully displaced when my methods were more focussed on practice: it also seems to return to an encoder/decoder model of cultural production that all too often ends up falling into a whole series of oppositions that don't get us very far in understanding how the media works in urban spaces now (eg producer/consumer, hegemonic/counter-hegemonic).

So that's why I'm at this workshop: to think and learn more about how media objects – newspaper photos, let's say – are practiced in urban public spaces, and how

we can theorise their role without lapsing into critical languages either of representation or of reception.