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Photography and Self-Identity

by

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INTRODUCTION

Photography can be considered as omnipresent in everyday life. It has a variety of functions, from being used as law-court evidence, to being a leisure activity. All of these functions exist because of the photograph's contribution to the production and dissemination of meaning. However it is this seemingly obvious meaning, which belies the photograph's subtle complication, as the meaning of a photograph is only understood through what we add to it. Photograph's do not in themselves preserve meaning. They only offer appearances which have been prised away from their meaning.

Photograph's are perplexing objects that can be, at the same time, deeply personal and completely unrelated to us. As Barthes discovered, the very essence of photography is a superimposition of reality and of the past. It is that an individual may look at a photograph and say without denial that, "This has been." The photograph is an actual record of light emanations from a real body, a trace left behind like a footprint or a death-mask. Is this then the root of photography's strangeness, and reason behind it's fascination. The aim of this thesis is not to mythologise photography or invest it with influences beyond that which it has. The aim is to investigate the associations between photography, and the person. If photography has changed how we see, then how much

has it altered the way we perceive ourselves and other people? Has it had any influence whatsoever in the formation and maintenance of our self-identities?

In chapter one, photography is firstly placed within a historical context, for the purpose of analysing the impact it's invention has had in changing perceptions. Photography is then discussed within the family environment, where it may be used as a tool to construct and map-out collective identity, and a sense of belonging. This leads to a discussion of Roland Barthes' own analysis of his family photographs in the wake of his mother's death. His book *Camera Lucida*, which examines the themes of presence and absence; and the relationship between photography, history, death, and the person; is discussed in association with Barthes personal bereavement.

Chapter two seeks to make an account of self-identity in terms of the psychological make-up of the individual. Central to this enquiry is that: "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going," (Giddens, 1991:54). It is supposed that an individual is constantly filtering out anxiety about the dangers of everyday living; and that 'trauma' might be one of the most defining aspects within the construction of self-identities. This chapter poses that photography is one of various techniques used to prevent any dissociation of self-identity from the physical self, by attempting to cement the two firmly together. An example of this can be seen in the work of the American photographer, Nan Goldin. Photographs are objects which preserve appearances from the past and can enable an individual to construct and maintain a biography (to understand how we have become). The issue of trauma is a common denominator within the work of Barthes, Goldin, and Spence (discussed in chapter three).

Central to a reading of chapter three is the idea that a camera sees very differently to the human eye. This difference in seeing is not only restricted to the camera's ability to see faster, but also to it's ability to outcontextualise (through framing), and to make us stare back at ourselves and others as objects. This chapter is an exploration of photography's

ability to make visible invisible structures. Examining the work of the English photographer Jo Spence, this discussion investigates the validity of her claims that photography can be used as a form of therapy, in which to re-write our individual pasts. Spence's work centre's itself around investigations of self-identity.

CHAPTER 1

> Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History,
> except in the form of myth. The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end
> to this resistance: henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we,
> see on paper is as certain as we touch. (Barthes, 1981:87)

What is it that makes photographs, one of the most widespread sources of imagery in contemporary culture, so problematic and difficult to define succinctly. Is it because they irrefutably yield up the past to us, we who rarely believe anything other than what we can see and touch. Or perhaps we enjoy the questions, speculations and fantasy that surround 'the self'. For the photograph has enabled us to look at ourselves differently (than in a mirror), and has given us a new way of seeing. Barthes remarked that, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity," (Barthes, 1981:12). An advent-ure where we may gaze uneasily at ourselves fixed permanently on fragile paper. We have become 'other', we have become objects, and we have brought this on ourselves with the snap of our cameras.

1839 was an important year in the history of photography. On 7th January the Frenchman Louis Daguerre announced to the world that he had discovered a method of fixing an image of light to a metal plate treated with chemicals. On 31st of the same month William Henry Fox Talbot, after hearing of Daguerre's announcement, hurried to present the results of his own independent photographic experiments to the Royal Society, in London. These events marked the beginning of photography as a professional medium.

Photography remained a professional operation, possessed only by those with the money to spend on such a luxury, until 1888 when the American George Eastman introduced the Kodak camera. His aim was to mass-produce cheap and easy-to-use cameras for the 'man in the street'. With his slogan, "you push the button, we do the rest", photography entered the domain of the domestic and ordinary. People who had never thought of taking photographs themselves, suddenly found they could. Kodak cameras were bought and introduced into the home environment, and from the beginning the family was the focus of attention. Photography had found a form - cheap, easy, and disposable - which encouraged a more 'natural' inclusion in everyday life. By 'natural' is meant in accordance with human nature, for the stern gazes of the Victorian family staring out from the mirrored and metallic surface of the daguerreotype was replaced by 'the smile'.

Nineteenth century photographic techniques dictated to an extent the behaviour of the subject before the camera, because of its laboriously long exposure times. One may say that under the scrutiny of these 'slow' cameras, the subject became an object twofold. Firstly, while supported by an upright structure (a head-rest invisible to the lens) the subject assumes a long, immobile pose. Secondly, as a portrait image on a cold piece of metal. It was difficult to 'be yourself' amidst this technical inadequacy, and this encouraged representations of 'the person' that were relatively non-personal, or that did not attempt to perceive that person's individuality within their character or personality. Instead the emphasis was placed on depictions of office, affluence, education, social standing, or religious faith. It was a representation of individualism over individuality.

Therefore the changes in photographic practice that the Kodak camera created were very marked. These changes invented the snapshot photograph, and revolutionised practices of self-representation.

> Photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation - the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told. (Hirsch, 1997:6-7)
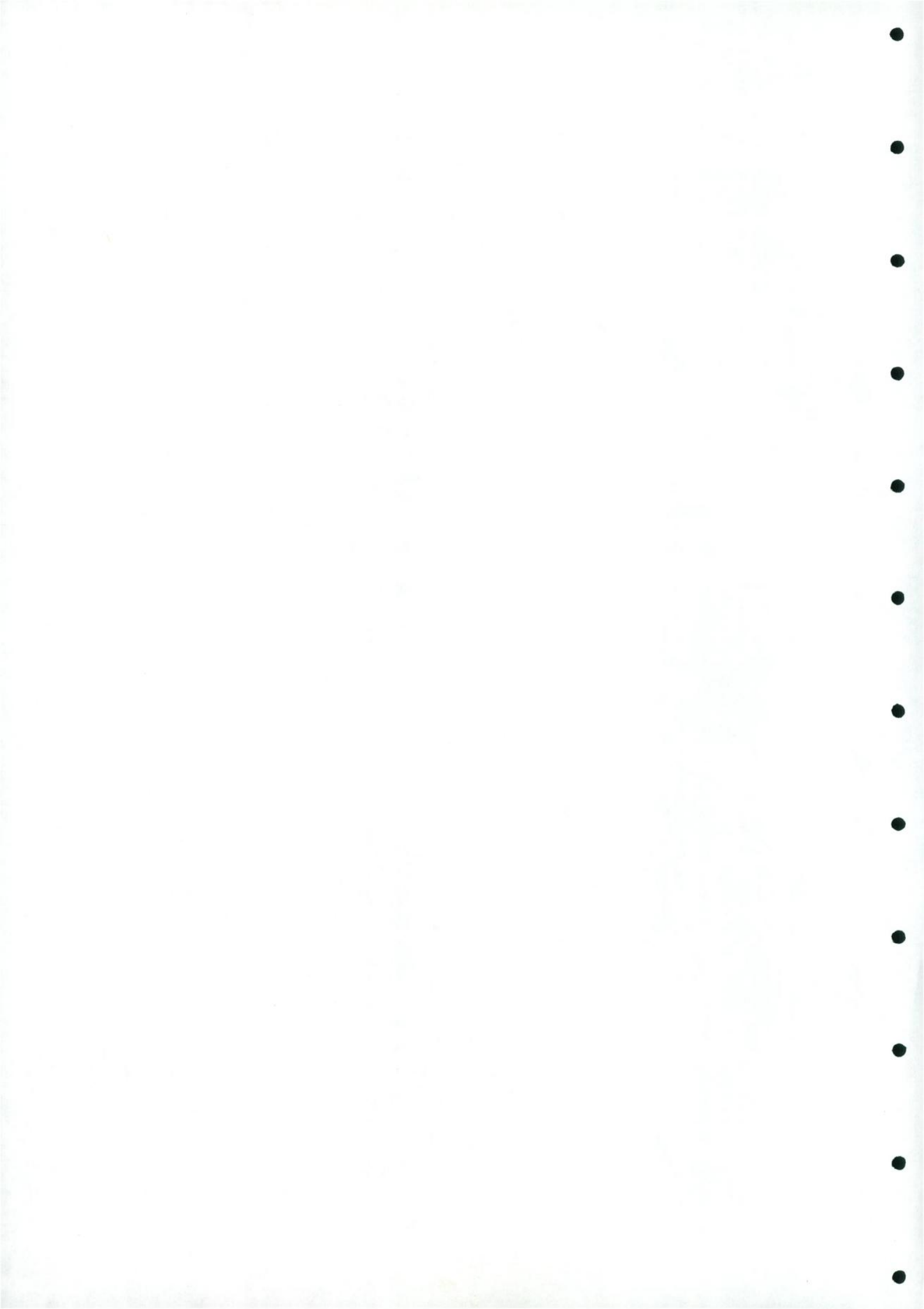
Now, more than one hundred years later, little of this has changed. A family photograph will present the cohesion of the family, and operate as an instrument of its togetherness. Displayed in gilt frames or pinned with (seeming) carelessness to pinboards or refrigerator doors, they exist in the present moment for the benefit of both family and non-relatives. A family snap-shot on a pinboard may be surrounded by a deluge of everyday trappings - birthday cards, appointments, letters, old pass-port photos and children's drawings. It is both undermined by the normality of its surroundings and yet exalted into everyday life; a far cry from the over-precious and formal daguerreotype. The display evokes a range of associations by and within the activities of the present.

Reflection upon these activities of seeing, recording, and displaying will alert us to disguised cultural practices, where coding and stereotyping are cleverly concealed from conscious awareness. Photographs are essentially a constructed representational form. Constructed even by those (camera) operators and (photographed) subjects who plead ignorance to the functions and meanings in play.

Photography was not always understood to be constructed (and suspicious). In the early twentieth century at a time of widespread use, photography became the dominant and most 'natural' way of referring to appearances. It was believed that photography was transparent, offering direct acces to the real. (That the photograph was truth). This notion however, was shattered by its deliberate use as a means of propoganda during the Second World War.

The photograph chronicles family events; and the very operation of taking the pictures themselves, may account for much of the behaviour witnessed at these events. The act of posing, as has been described in the techniques of taking a daguerreotype - is the very act of making oneself like an object. More accurately, posing is the process whereby we transform ourselves into an image in advance. A person observed by the lens, automatically transforms themselves. They are well aware of the photograph's ability to create or abase their body. It is as if we (figuratively) derive our existence from the

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photographer and the expectation of this moment is anguished. This anguish is what makes us 'camera shy' - the production of a camera in public, will result in altered behaviour. These alterations are not restricted to the subjects of the photographs, but are also to be found in the operator. The operator (of the camera) becomes a blatant observer, and the focus of anguish. By gazing through the lens he simultaneously establishes himself as 'the observer', but also begins a process of transforming what he sees through the lens into an image in advance (of releasing the shutter).

This is a strange situation where living beings are turned into things. Barthes describes it as experiencing, "a micro-version of death....I am truly becoming a spectre," (Barthes, 1981:14). It is in *Camera Lucida*, that Barthes makes the likeness between photography and death. This arises from his reflection upon the processes of taking photographs, and posing for them; and his exploration into the associated anguish. It is in photography that we enter into a *flat death*, and it is this that we search for in photographs of ourselves.

Camera Lucida - Roland Barthes final book - examines the themes of presence and absence, and the relationships between photography, history, death, and the person. It begins as a general analysis of how photography acquires meaning, before venturing into a sort of autobiographical lamentation. In all of this, it is photography which is under scrutiny, and it is it's perplexing relationship to our most intimate moments which propelled Barthes to write. The book is a valuable source for an investigation into photography and many references will be made to it in this thesis. Indeed, it was valuable in facilitating a further understanding of a 'theory' of photography, as some of the ideas were articulated here for the first time.

> I wanted to learn at all costs what photography was 'in itself', by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images....I wasn't sure that photography actually existed. (Barthes, 1981:3)

In his analysis, Barthes eventually identifies two distinct factors in our relationship to the image. The first he calls the *studium* - 'a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment', and

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the second is the *punctum*, 'a sting, speck, cut, little hole'. The *studium* is present in the most widespread types of photograph, such as the news photograph or even the pornographic image. It incites an interest, but not a love; and it can be readily dismissed.

The *punctum* on the other hand, is primarily a trauma, which breaks the *studium*. It is a sudden prick, an accident which bruises and remains poignantly with a person. It is a detail in the photograph which instantly shatters and transcends the initially docile interest. Regardless of the *punctum's* speed of affection, there are elements of a discourse contained within its operation. "It is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there," (Barthes, 1981:55). This statement touches upon the element which underlines the problematic nature of the photographic image. It is the complication that belies the photograph's seeming simplicity. That is, that any photograph is part of a larger language of meaning which we bring to our experience of the photograph. It engages discourses beyond itself; a series of previous and overlapping meanings and associations.

By this rationale, the *punctum* is therefore deeply personal. However, is it possible that the *punctum* could be shared? Could the particular detail in a photograph which provides the '*punctum* shock of recognition' for one person, be the same detail that triggers this effect for another person? After all, what we 'add to the photograph' pertains to cultural and historical discourses which might themselves be shared between persons.

Ultimately, the puncture of the *punctum* is time itself, and Barthes reveals how this has come about. He insists that photography is unique among all other representational forms in its relation to the referent (the subject). This uniqueness is the fact that in a photograph the subject 'has been' a 'real' thing; it has existed. Without it there would have been no photograph. Photography cannot 'imagine' things like a painting can, but it is bound physically to record only that which has materially existed.

> The Photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body,
> which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am
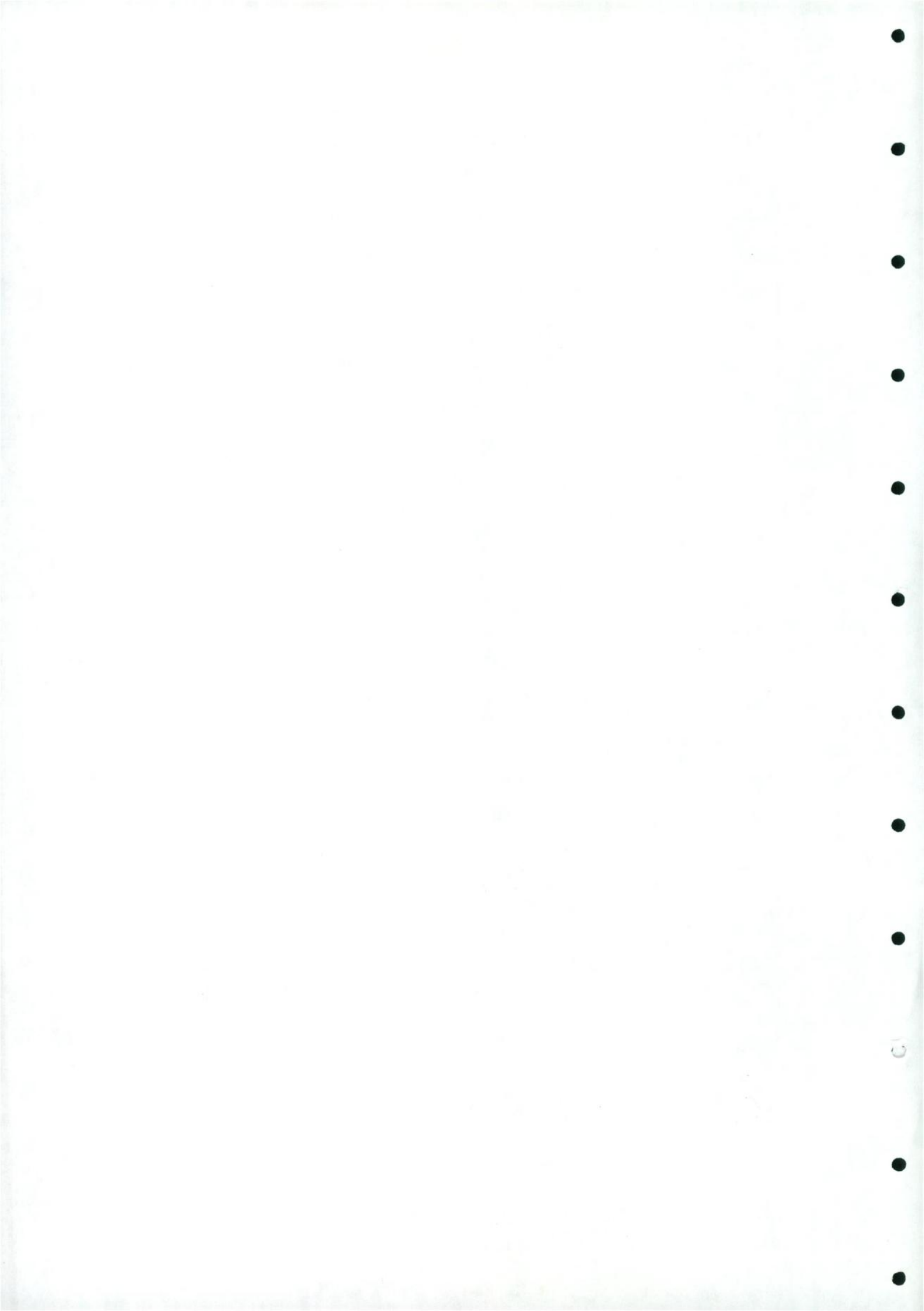
here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (Barthes, 1981:80-81)

Barthes describes this as being photography's *noeme*. It is its 'essence', and the element which he originally set out to try and find. It is especially poignant for him as the writing of *Camera Lucida* took place in the wake of his mother's death. Barthes makes no efforts to conceal just how unbearable this loss has been, and so it must seem as though the umbilical cord he refers to has itself been severed. Cut free and floating, he struggles and searches through his collections of old photographs for the one image of his mother that might repair this damage. Acknowledging over and over with each photograph of his deceased mother that *this has been*, he searches for the one that contains the shock of 'complete' recognition. Many of the images contain aspects of her, but refuse to give her up completely. He eventually finds 'his' photograph, and to his surprise it is a picture of his mother as a child. She is five years old standing with her brother in a winter garden. and it is the child's 'sovereign innocence' which reveals the essence of his mother. It is a photograph taken beyond Barthes' lifetime, before he was ever a thought in his mother's mind; yet it is possessed with the ability to reach across this divide. (To reconnect him umbilically.) This image of childhood returned Barthes not only to his mother's gentleness, but to the child she had become in the final stages of her illness. It was as if he became her mother when he nursed her.

His search for his mother's identity - for the shudder of recognition - is also a search for his own identity. Within this context he is looking to discover himself, for as we recall, the punctum includes what we 'add' to the picture. A connection made of this kind (Barthes to the winter garden photograph), is a connection which touches deep within the self. It evokes questions about the influence of photography in relation to how we perceive ourselves and our world. If photography can give us moments of profound realisation, then how much can it affect our perceptions of identity?

CHAPTER 2

> I must ask myself: Who is like what? Resemblance to a conformity, but to
> what? to an identity. (Barthes, 1981:100)

An account of self identity must be made in terms of the psychological make-up of the
individual. This will enable a greater understanding of the relationship between
photography and self-identity. The main source (for this thesis) of information about
theories on the development of 'the self' and 'self-identity' has been Anthony Giddens'
book, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

An account of self-identity begins with the premise, "that to be a human being is to
know, virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is
doing and why one is doing it." (Giddens, 1991:35) (It is important to note here that
philosophically we don't necessarily know what we 'know,' and that there isn't necessarily
any objective explanations for all cases.) As Giddens' statement implies, our daily
activities are monitored reflexively, and this is a sort of natural responsibility which
belongs to every individual. In other words, a person is normally able to provide meanings
and reasons for the behaviour in which they are engaging in at a particular time. This is a
discursive consciousness of the conditions of our actions; however there are also actions
incorporated within the continuity of everyday activities which are 'taken for granted'.
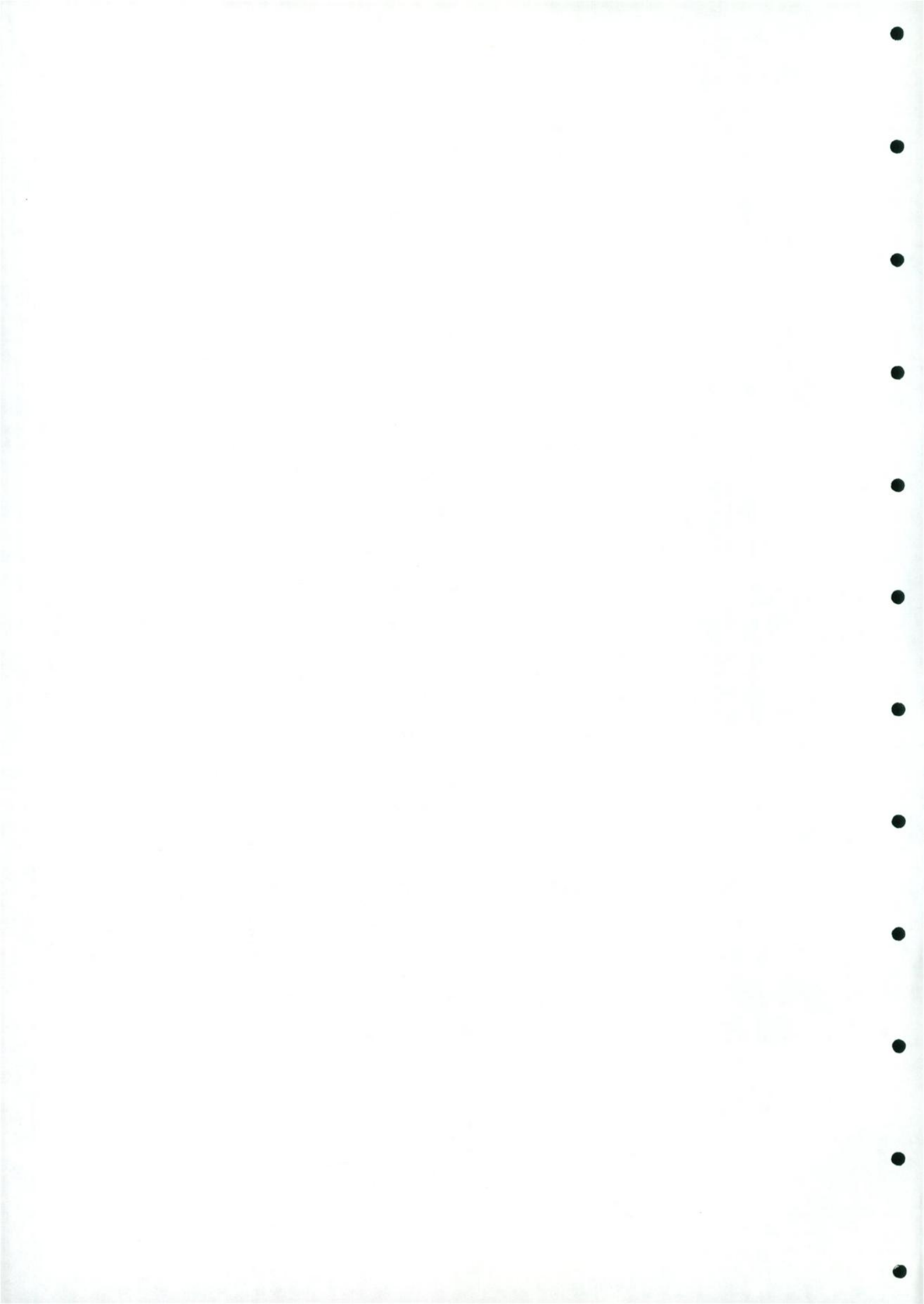
These activities are carried out at the level of ' practical consciousness' - these being non-conscious (as opposed to unconscious) actions.

"Practical consciousness is the cognitive and emotive anchor of the feelings of ontological security characteristic of large segments of human activity in all cultures," (ibid:36). Practical consciousness provides the basis for our sense of the continuity and order in events, and of our sense of being. However, on the other side of this sense of security, and of the 'triviality' of day to day actions and discourse, exists chaos. "This chaos is not just disorganisation, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons," (ibid:36). This sense of the shared reality of things is both fragile and robust. We fear the loss of this sense of reality, yet are reassured by its sturdiness as conveyed by its reliability in the context of daily social interaction. We are reassured by an awareness that practical consciousness is reliably at work, yet we are simultaneously perturbed that it does this seemingly of its own accord.

There is then, a 'faith' in the coherence of everyday life, and a trust that reality is somewhere existentially anchored. But how is this achieved? Trust is acquired in early experience as an infant, when we rely totally on other people - the caretakers. This 'basic trust' provides us with the hope and 'the courage to be', and is the connection from which self-identity later emerges.

'Trust,' for the infant, is acquired in a learning process; for the "very young child is not a 'being', but a 'going-on being', who has to be 'called into existence' by the nurturing environment which the caretaker provides,"(ibid:39). The infant must learn to emotionally accept absence, and to have faith that the caretaker will return. Absence provides the space in which the infant can separate the identities of the caretakers (the parents). It is also the space in which an awareness of its own 'being separate' may emerge. These are the beginnings of the process of *embodiment*, whereby the identity of an individuals is constituted through the recognition of their possession of 'a unique body'. The recognition

of *embodiment* begins unconsciously in the early stages of infancy. This relates very much to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and Lacan's notion of the 'mirror stage'.

> A child's sense of identity arises out of the internalisation of outer views of itself....The child recognises the reflected image, identifies with it and becomes aware of being an entity separate from its mother. The child, who at this infantile stage is an ill-coordinated set of drives, constructs a self based on its reflection either in an actual mirror or in the mirror of the eyes of others. (Woodward, 1997:44)

This first encounter with the reflected and embodied self which is contained within boundaries, is - according to Lacan - the encounter which sets the scene for all future identifications. It is where the infant reaches a sense of 'I', and the beginnings of self-identity. Although this 'I' is something that has been reflected back to the infant by something outside of itself, from the place of 'the other'; the infant experiences this sense of self as if it was produced from within.

Thus according to Lacan, identity arises from a 'lack'; that is from the absence of the mother from which it was once a part. This lack causes the infant to long for oneness with the mother, and as this is not possible (because we cannot undo this awareness of *embodiment*) the infant identifies with figures outside of itself. There is:

> an ongoing process of identification, where we seek some unified sense of ourselves through symbolic systems and identify with the ways in which we are seen by others. Having first adopted an identity from outside the self, we go on identifying with what we want to be, but which is separate from the self, so that the self is permanently divided within the self. (ibid:45)

These symbolic systems (the object of identification) can be systems of representation, including photography. For example a photograph can create the possibilities of what we are or what we can become. We can attribute qualities to ourselves and transfer associations, making it possible to see ourselves in the image presented.

The moment of realising our own unique *embodiment*, and separation from the mother is a traumatic event. However, our dread of the chaos that seems so immanent is subdued by our faith in the coherence of everyday life and the trust we have in our caretakers. The

'basic trust' a child invests in its parents can be seen as the basis for an ongoing security against psychological risks and dangers confronted throughout life:

> (basic trust) can be seen as a sort of *emotional inoculation* against existential anxieties - a protection against future threats and dangers....It is the main emotional support of a defensive carapace or protective cocoon which all normal individual carry around with them as the means whereby they are able to get on with the affairs of day-to-day life.(Giddens, 1991: 39,40)

The protective cocoon is very much an 'unreality' rather than a guarantee against danger. It stems from 'basic trust', and this in turn depends on the performance of early caretakers for the success of its development. Therefore our sense of safety, and security in a world fraught with danger depends on many things which are all relative. Our necessary but false sense of 'invulnerability' is itself vulnerable; and the protective cocoon can become shattered momentarily. An example is of the individual who witnesses the scene of an accident, and is shocked into realising the many dangerous possibilities which exist beyond their control. The feeling soon passes and the individual soon carries on as before.

Anxiety depends on a person's knowledge, awareness, and sense of power in relation to the external world. Anxiety (as opposed to fear) is without an object, it has no specific threat, but it is instead a sort of generalised state of emotions. Anxiety can cause unconscious repression; it has its roots in the infant's fear of separation from its caretakers. Again it is trauma and anxiety about its possibility that is the motivation here. It is a reaction against the pain of helplessness; the very core of the emerging self is threatened by separation.

To be secure about 'our being', and to be certain in ourselves we must possess answers to fundamental existential questions which affect all human life. These questions are, to an extent, prompted by anxiety. It has already been discussed how anxiety is subdued by practical consciousness; our faith and trust in people; and in the coherence of everyday

life. The desire for answers to existential questions is a desire to understand the duality of chaos and order that an individual experiences.

Giddens has successfully distinguished four types of existential questions. The first is answered by the infant, and concerns existence itself. "In 'doing' everyday life, all human beings 'answer' the question of being; they do it by the nature of the activities they carry out." (Giddens, 1991:48) It involves an awareness of an external reality, of objects people and events; and it is different to, but very much related to the infants' realisation of embodiment as already discussed.

The second existential question concerns the relations between this 'realised' external world and human life. It involves an awareness of the finity of life; of being nature yet set apart from it. It is of being conscious of an 'event horizon' which is our own mortality. This, as has been considered, is one of the primary motivations behind our feelings of anxiety. The anxiety begins as a fear of loss of the caretakers, in whom an infant is completely dependent. As the infant develops, and becomes more aware, these fears become attributed to the self.

A third type of existential question concerns an individual's experience of others, and how they interpret the traits and actions of other individuals. Are we only able to know another person's feelings and experiences on the basis of empathy? If trust in others is at the origin of the experience of a stable external world and coherent self-identity, then our experience of other individuals is extremely important. 'Faith' in the reliability and integrity of others is at stake if our experience of them is a negative one. However, the responses of other individuals are necessary as they observe one another and, to an extent, require individuals to be accountable for their behaviour.

The fourth existential question concerns self-identity, and what it actually is. It seeks to define something that is relatively without form. That an individual is reflexively aware, is the key to understanding self-identity. Self-identity is what an individual is conscious of (self-conscious) and it is not something 'given', but is something that must be created many

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times and continually sustained reflexively. "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography," (ibid:53).

A person with a normal, or coherent sense of self-identity will have the following characteristics: Firstly they will have a feeling of biographical continuity, which can be grasped reflexively and communicated to others. If this is not achieved then the person may feel that their biography (history or herstory) is inconsistent and discontinuous. Time already experienced, can become a series of random and separated moments which disables the sustaining of a continuous narrative. It is worth noting here that photography provides a history which is random and fragmented. "Through photographs the world becomes a series of unrelated, free-standing particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *fait divers*." (Sontag, in Berger, 1980:49). Photographs have often been referred to as 'a replacement of memory'. This would infer that the camera unburdens us of the need to remember; and this may cause loss of memory. Photography may then contribute to the dislocated, discontinuous biography of a person, causing the formation of self-identities which are fractured.

The second characteristic of a person with a coherent sense of self-identity is the establishment of a protective cocoon which 'filters out' anxiety about the dangers of everyday living. The protective cocoon is formed through early trusting and faith in the caretakers. A person who cannot sustain their protective cocoon will be constantly preoccupied by foreboding risks, and will attempt to blend with the background of their environment.

The final characteristic is that the individual accepts the integrity of his or her protective cocoon, and sees it as worthwhile. They have enough self-regard to maintain a sense of themselves as 'alive'. An individual who fails to develop trust in their own self-integrity, will obsessively self-scrutinize themselves, and will thus feel that their living spontaneity has become deadened.

These existential questions are inter-related with a persons' biography, which is something self constructed, and has a fragile existence.

> A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fiction. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self......In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going, (Giddens, 1991:54).

To have a notion of how we have become, it is of course necessary to be aware of our personal histories. This is achieved through memory, through other peoples' version of our biography, and through records of the past. Photographs are visual records of what has been, and due to the belief by many people in the existence of photographic truth, these visual records may be regarded by some as impartial. Memories can become attached to photographs, and it is logical to say that an accumulation of these photographs which represent and span the many years of an individual's life, will enable the maintenance of a particular narrative, which is ongoing. In consideration of Giddens' notion of self-identity being found in 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going,' photography can then be considered as an important means in enabling this.

The photographer Nan Goldin, believes photography has the ability to "validate her thoughts, reflect her changing identity, her experiences, and her feelings, by keeping a photographic record that no-one can control or re-write," (Goldin, 1997:278). Fundamentally, it is her belief that photography prevents forgetting. Goldin's New York world is one full of drug, sexual, and sexual-identity experimentation. It is a personal world that is consistently changing, and it is photography that records and regulates these changes. Her life and work is motivated by a need to explore and understand the permutations of the 'power' of sexuality. This awareness of the 'power of sexuality' began after her sister's suicide, when Goldin was only eleven years old. Goldin identifies that it

was sexuality and its repression that was influential in her sister's destruction. Goldin has written that she began photographing to save her own life, as a way of fighting off the same emotional and cultural problems that destroyed her sister.

> For years, I thought I was obsessed with the record-keeping of my day-to-day life. But recently, I've realised my motivation has deeper roots: I Don't really remember my sister. In the process of leaving my family, in recreating myself, I lost the real memory of my sister. I remember my version of her, of the things she said, of the things she meant to me. But I don't remember the tangible sense of who she was, her presence, what her eyes looked like, what her voice sounded like.
>   I don't ever want to be susceptible to anyone else's version of my history.
>   I don't ever want to loose the real memory of anyone again, (Goldin, 1986:4).

There seems to be a direct relationship between trauma and self-identity, as if trauma might be one of the most defining aspects within the construction of self-identities. Trauma can be thought of as like a secret wound, and something which can be recovered in a process of self-examination. For Goldin this wound has been her sister's death, and unfortunately for her, dealing with the loss of people close to her has been something constant throughout her life. Living in a community devastated by the AIDS virus, has meant that many of Goldin's portraits are now images that remember the dead.

Trauma can also be seen as the possible motivation behind Barthes' own exploration into photography and its meaning. Barthes trauma being the death of his mother. (Similarly, the issue of trauma features in the work of the photographer Jo Spence, as discussed in chapter three.)

It may be that trauma threatens the very core of a person's sense of 'invulnerability,' and evokes many questions and doubts concerning their grasp on reality. To confront and deal with trauma may make the individual's search for self-identity all the more vigorous.

Goldin's photographs seem to be trying to prevent any dissociation of self-identity from the physical self. By using the camera as a reflex action, and as a part of her daily routine,

she attempts to capture the essence of what surrounds her. It is her desire to preserve the sense of people's lives, and to endow them with strength through representing them.

Fig. 1.   Nan Goldin

Gilles in his hospital bed, Paris, 1993 (top)

Gotscho in the movie theatre, Paris, 1993 (bottom)

CHAPTER 3

> Imagine looking into a mirror. Instead of an act of pleasure, or confirmation, or vanity, think of it as an act of anxiety. Imagine then that every time you opened your mouth you were aware of the potential for 'giving the game away,' knowing you might be 'found out,' 'seen through.' That you faced the world as a masquerader. This was the story of my life from as early as I can remember....All that wasted energy in denying my own realities, my own needs, my own shared history. Think then of family snapshots as those partial mirrors where the masquerade of appearing to be something which you know you are not is viewed as a high achievement, (Spence, 1997:156)

A central idea in any discussion of photography is the simple fact that a camera sees very differently than the human eye does. The camera's ability to focus in horizontal plains; to freeze the fastest or slowest of movements, to frame and outcontextualise; and to fix forever (or for as long as the printed paper lasts) what it sees; are its defining differences. For these reasons photography has often revealed, and enlightened us to what was previously unseen. Photography can make visible invisible structures, for example an examination of family photographs can reveal, or create the concept of a network of looks and gazes which order and organise familial relations. The photos can record and reveal the often unconscious and seemingly invisible patterns structuring familial interactions. It is important to understand how individuals are positioned within social contexts and what the invisible structuring elements are that maintain them there.

In chapter two it was discussed how it is important to understand the 'taken for granted' but defining actions of practical consciousness. It may then be necessary for individuals to become aware of the extent to which the opposing forces of anxiety and trust shape and affect their behaviour. In all of these things, what is of importance are the invisible elements contained within the visible. This thesis proposes that photography may play an important role in redressing the past, in revealing the invisible, and hopefully enabling further and more vivid understandings of the self.

In 1887 Eadweard Muybridge exhibited his multiple exposure photographs of various animals and humans in motion. His most significant findings as a result of these motion experiments involved movements that were exceptionally fast and difficult for the human eye to distinguish. When Muybridge photographed a horse galloping, the world could see for the first time, the exact position of its legs in flight. This new information revealed just how inaccurate human visual perceptions could be - for many of the equestrian paintings made before and at that time were blatantly wrong. Overnight these society paintings - often revered - became ridiculous novelties, as a result of the camera's eye. Muybridge's photographs revealed to the world the invisible that was present in the visible.

This opinion of photography relates in many ways to psychoanalysis, which (in theory) may reveal, through therapy, what we know without knowing that we do. If the camera can mechanically reveal what we see without realising that we see it; then maybe the very nature of this 'revealing' relates in some way to the unconscious. Walter Benjamin has said that, "the camera introduces us to *unconscious optics* as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses," (Benjamin, in Hirsch, 1997:113). Photography may then be a powerful means by which we can probe the unconscious. It could be used to disturb and disrupt that which is repressed, producing powerful effects?

Barthes' strange realisation that the photograph is the 'advent of myself as other,' must be included in these thoughts of the unconscious and of repression. As has been discussed in chapter one, the photograph turns us into objects (a flat death). We may then stare

back at ourselves as printed, lifeless images; cold and objective. The object (the photograph) in our hands is the complete dichotomy of us that holds it. A portrait of a person is something completely separate, yet part of that person. It is like a prosthetic that represents us, and it is undeniable evidence that we have existed in a certain time and place. For what actually exists, 'frozen' to the surface of the photographic paper is an actual emanation of light that was once reflected from us. These facts present us with a strange, paradoxical situation; the photograph is at the same time deeply personal, and completely unrelated to us. It is distant yet near; it is safe.

This use of photography as a means of exploring the unconscious has been extensively developed by the English photographer Jo Spence. Since the 1970's Spence has used photography as the basis for work on issues of politics, education, identity, subjectivity, and mental and physical health. In all of this it has been her intention to challenge the boundaries between things, perverting the distinctions which permeate our culture and influence our thinking on the self and our personal lives. In the course of her work Spence began to use her own body as the theatre for most her photographic work. This was particularly motivated by the discovery of her having breast cancer in 1982, and the various physical, emotional, and psychological changes this caused. Jo Spence worked with active cancer in her breast until her death in hospice, on the 24th June, 1992.

Much of Spence's work seeks to reveal the unconscious optics found specifically within family and personal photographs. This supposes that meaning is forged through experience, and through normal interchanges with persons and objects that cannot necessarily be defined by words. The techniques she employs are irreverent and innovative - and the final products, which are often shown in galleries are conspicuous in their normality. Her methods attempt to open up and explore the silence and repression that permeates the family photo-album.

> Family pictures, in particular, offer conventional surfaces resistant to
> deeper scrutiny. They say more about family romances than about actual

details of a familial life. Since they say more through their absence than through their present content, they can illustrate the workings of an optical unconscious. (Hirsch, 1997:119)

Spence tries to define what this absence is within her own early photographic records:

There is no record of my appalling health....; no record of the pointless years shunted around schools inside formal education....; no record of hard work done for countless employers; no record of trying to please parents and other authority figures; no record of struggles.... Moreover, those "happy," "serious," "loving," "miserable," but always passive visual moments which do exist.....give no indication at all of the wider, social, economic, and political histories of our disgusting class-divided society. (Spence, 1986:82-83)

One wonders whether family albums really need to represent the mundane and negative. Surely for most people, the album is simply a collection of pictures that are there for no other reason than to act as a reminder of happy times and of loved-ones. It is undeniable that photography has much breadth and potential beyond what is being utilised, however it is doubtful whether individuals really desire to concern themselves with these untapped potentials. Family snaps are important to many people. "Market research from 1982 suggests that 39 per cent of respondents rated their family photos as the possessions they treasure most and would least like to loose," (Slater, 1995).

The phenomenon of the family album is something that has been completely constructed. It is completely logical that collections of personal images should be informally catalogued in books. However, we might wonder (for there are no set rules) what the guiding example is, that influences our regard of how a photo-album should look. Our very limited types of snapshotting practices may well be the result of advertising by companies such as Kodak, bombarding us with idealised 'baby' snaps, 'holiday' snaps, or birthday occasions. Much advertising seems to be directed toward the father figure, (or maybe it is to the wife who is thinking of a potential Christmas gift) for it seems that in this traditional and limited photographic practice, it is he that is the photographer. It seems that he is the one entrusted with framing and selecting frozen memories from times'

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continuity. An example is of a newspaper advertisement for the Handycam videocam by Sony: 'At last a daddy that's easy to smile for.' This is in reference to a new design without a viewfinder, where 'daddy' is now more a part of the actual moment being lived, and thus the moments captured by the camera are more natural and magical. This advertisement presents us with an opinion about image making - that is, that good videography (or photography) is motivated by intimate contact, and not by an obligation to make a good image. It is now an emotional reflex, instead of an expectant wait for that decisive and magical moment - rather in the manner a vulture waits for its prey.

Family albums are often a poor representation of an individual's real life. For Spence it is important to record the daily routines of work and rest, or of the daily running of family life, which often go unnoticed. Convention would discourage the representation in the family album of emotions or situations that are in any way negative. These things are usually concealed from view, for it is in the album that the family is on show, and 'naturally' it must appear to be a perfectly consolidated unit. Shame, guilt, loss, desire, nudity, and intimacy are - in general - avoided.

As was noted in chapter two, one of the characteristics of a normal sense of self-identity is that the individual will have a feeling of biographical continuity, which can be grasped reflexively and communicated to others. It is thus imperative for the maintaining of a sound self-identity, that the individual's biography does not seem fragmented and discontinuous. Given the importance of photographs as being traces of the past and enablers of remembering; then a family album which mis-represents an individual's life, can only contribute to the establishment of a fragmented self-identity. In other words, for continuity of biography, a variety of representations are needed. However, this requires that this sort of experimental photography has been consistently practiced over many years. In most cases, this will not be the case, and an individual's past will remain mis-represented in their photo-album. An alternative is then required - a method of working with the meagre resources at a person's disposal and of distinguishing what is really true

about that persons' biography in order to re-write and re-represent personal history and identity. All of these things are for one reason: the discovery of the true self. This is the fundamental concern of Spence's work on photo-therapy.

> We believe that we all have sets of personalised archetypal images in memory, images which are surrounded by chains of connotations and buried memories. In photo-therapy we can dredge them up, reconstruct, even reinvent them, so that they can work in our interests, rather than remaining the mythologies of others who have told us about that 'self' which appears to be visible in various photographs. (Spence, 1986:172)

Spence's method of photo-therapy was to act out herself at earlier moments, as well as moments of her mother's life, and have photographs taken of these scenes. Later, when the pictures are developed, she would spend time alone looking at the images, writing about them, or discussing them with a close friend. It was found that during the course of the acting and posing, many buried memories would re-emerge. Spence describes a memory she did not realise she had of her mother making sandwiches for the factory she worked in. This may seem to be a trivial gesture, but in reality it is something that is very much coded into her working class background. Spence's use of her mother is due to a personal wish to understand the different sides and moments of her mother's life. She describes her mother as acting the part of the 'martyr mother;' old, angry and disappointed, ironing clothes and cleaning the floor. In one session, the camera catches Spence dressed as her mother and sneering in the way she used to. When the photos were developed, Spence realises that, "I was looking at the way in which I sneer at myself," (Spence, 1986:190).

The primary object of Spence's study is her own psychic formation and her social and economic history. What she is discovering through her photo-therapy work is a deeply buried structure of shame in relation to her class and background. This is then explored through role-playing, and acting out memories in front of the camera. An example is of two photographs from the *Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class*
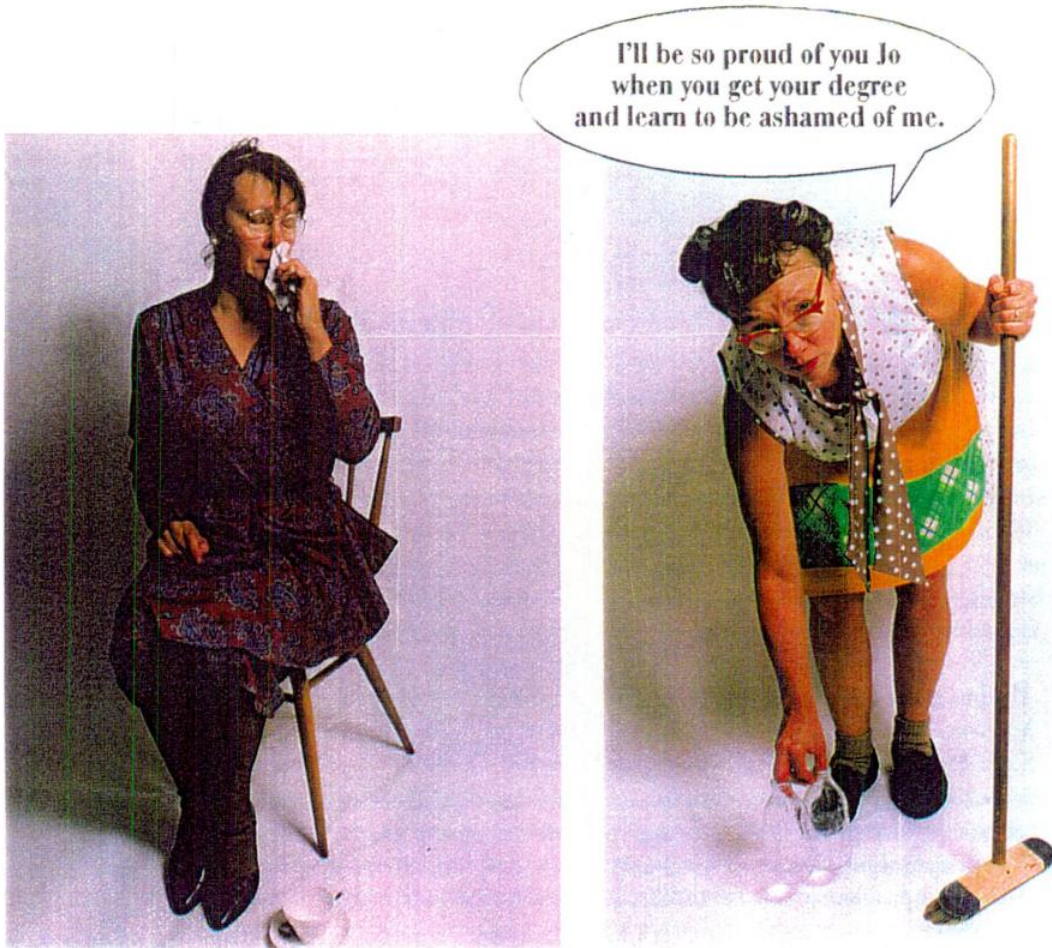
(Fig 2) Jo Spence/Valerie Walkerdine

Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries, 1988.

Boundaries, (Fig. 2), which show Spence enacting her personal stereotype of her mother. It is the mother Spence was ashamed to be associated with while in social flight from her class roots.

Snapshot and amateur photography may be generally regarded as a great expanse of trite and banal self-representation. Much of this is due to processes of idealisation of the self and family. It is not documentary photography that is taking place, but it is sentimental photography. Family photographs may be important possessions, and an individual may feel a strange sense of existential loss when a treasured image is lost or destroyed. However, it is ironic that family albums are in most cases rarely used. (The same piece of market research which indicated that in 1982, 39 per cent of respondents rated their family photos as their most treasured possessions, also asked questions about family album usage. The findings indicated that, "60 per cent of respondents looked at their family snaps only once a year or less."), (Slater, 1995:138). This might indicate that the family album is hyper-valued and that taking pictures is a taken-for-granted leisure activity. It may simply be that it is unimportant to regularly view the photographs, and that we simply need to know that they are there; as if they might exist to unburden our memories.

Spence's work offers a demonstration of self-representation as self-construction, by exposing how we actively impose codes of gender, family, class, appearance within the processes of posing for the camera, selecting and framing the photographed moment, and selecting the final image for presentation. It is not Spence's aim to mystify the family photograph by presenting it within the serious context of therapy. Rather, it is her aim to de-mystify it, expose it, and make it more usable. Editing the family album is both an operation on memory and therefore upon personal and family identity.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the associations between photography and the person. More specifically, to investigate a possibility that photography might influence the formation and maintainance of self-identities.

The function of taking photographs has caused a change in the way we perceive other things, other people, and more importantly, ourselves. It is in the photograph that we can become objects to be gazed at, where we can look at ourselves differently (than in a mirror). It is an awareness of transformation that Barthes referred to as, 'the advent of myself as other. If the camera possesses an ability to see differently, then it is logical to assume that it might reveal things previously unseen - to make visible invisible structures.

Photography has endowed the individual with a cheap and efficient means of self-representation. Through the work of Nan Goldin and Jo Spence it can be seen that self-representation is self-construction. Domestic photography holds out the possibility of telling a person's own story, and of revealing the cultural code's that are unknowingly self-imposed. For Goldin and Spence, the camera is an instrument that prevents forgetting, and helps to reveal and safeguard their own chosen and personal biography from other distorting influences.

Photography's most important element concerning self-identity exists within the notion that: a person's identity is found in their capacity to keep a particular narrative going. An individual's ongoing biography is the defining aspect of their self-identity. If photographs are visual records of what has been, and if each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end.

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