

Yazan Doughan 162346
MA Critical Media and Cultural Studies

Theoretical Issues in Media & Cultural Studies
15PANC094

The Practice and Use of Family Photography

Word Count: 5,283

The Practice and Use of Family Photography

With their bias towards all that is 'mass' in media, media and cultural studies have generally overlooked mediation as an everyday practice. While one can list the names of several scholars that have written about photography as a mass medium, such as Barthes, Sontag, Burger, Baudrillard and many others, work on the role of photography in everyday life remains severely understudied. In this essay, I attempt to shed some light on the role which photography as an everyday practice plays in the self construction of human subjects.

There are at least three different ways in which one can look at family photographs. For example, they can be studied as a text produced at encounter of the photographer and the photographed. Most studies of photography, of which family photographs are not an exception, look at photographs from this particular angle. Within this framework, the study of photographs takes the form of a 'reading' or an interpretation. Such an analysis brings with it all the problems of interpretation and questions whether it is structural or hermeneutic and cannot escape the monologism of the interpreter and the presupposition of a meaning. It is for this reason that Barthes [1981] refuses to reveal the photograph of his mother about which he talks most in his book. He explains that for those who do not know him or his mother, the photo would not mean the same thing it meant to him.

One could also look at family photos as objects in a system of exchange in terms of their exchange or sign values [Baudrillard, 1981]. Such a study would look at the photograph as an object that is exchanged and disseminated within the family context. One type of family photographs is particularly worth such a study: the portrait photo. A third way, however, is to

look at them in terms of their use. The question in this case is not about what photographs mean or what their value is, but rather how, when, for what purpose they are produced and how they are used. In the first part of this essay, I will attempt such an analysis. In the second, I will move on to discuss the underlying presuppositions which the analysis reveals about the idea of the human subject. Before all this however, it would be necessary to say a few words about the research project itself.

About the research:

The research started as an ethnographic study of the use of photographs among Arab immigrants in London. I was particularly looking for immigrants from the Arab Levant; i.e. Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. The idea was to find a 'coherent' group who's cultural background was more or less similar to mine. The cultural proximity, I believed, would minimize the problems of dislocation inherent in most ethnographic work. These families were contacted through a common friend or acquaintance to create an element of trust, since people might be reluctant to share their private lives with a 'stranger', let alone expose them as an object for research. I also believed that this will make the project more manageable within the constraints of time.¹

Photographs were not equally important for all families interviewed. Indeed, all the families I have talked to had family photographs because that was the criteria for choosing these families in the first place, but not all of them cared equally about their photos and not all of

¹ While this strategy seems to have achieved the desired effect, it inevitably brought with it other problems some of which are probably beyond my recognition at the moment. One problem I could discern was how uncomfortable some were with being identified as Arabs. Although I have managed to meet some families who were willing to identify themselves as Arab, I cannot claim that the ideas discussed here are representative of Arab culture or Arabs in London, for that matter.

them were continually updating their collections. Some families only had old photographs put together, while the new ones were scattered in various places. Some families had specific photographs that they cared most about especially those of relatives that have passed away. Other families had some photos, but did not make much effort to put them on display. The ritual of viewing family photos was not shared among all families.

The arguments I am presenting in this essay are concerned with one particular case study, of a family for which photographs played a major role in their self articulation as a family and as individuals. What I am presenting here is merely one way to interpret the practice of photography in family contexts when looked at from a very specific angle. That being said, this does not mean that this interpretation is universal, nor that it is necessarily culture-specific or distinctively Arab. A much larger research in scope and breadth is required before making such claims.

This family interviewed comprised of a father, a mother, two sons and a daughter. The elder son did not live with the family and did not participate in the interviews. The father, a Lebanese, and the mother, a Syrian, had come to London in 1980 after the father has been offered a job at an Arabic newspaper there. The couple came to London thinking they will be staying there for a year or a few years at best. After a few years they had their first child and ended up staying there until now. The mother has traditionally been the keeper of the collection devoting much of her time to keeping, classifying and arranging the photographs. The children had their own collections, but also shared those in the family albums and often took them out to look at. Some of the photos were framed and displayed in various places around the house, in the living room, hallways and bedrooms. Other photos were arranged

either in albums, particularly those of specific events like weddings, or of specific individuals. The main bulk of the photos, however, were arranged in archive boxes and classified chronologically by year, month and the occasions on which they were taken. These boxes documented the life of the family month by month over many years. Other photos were still in envelopes by the film roll waiting to be classified and put into albums.

I had two meetings with the family. The first was an introductory one in which I got to know the family and have a look at their various photographs. Many themes came out of this meeting each of which could have been pursued and explored further.² In the second interview, I revisited some of the themes discussed previously which I found more interesting and the family was more comfortable to talk about. Some initial conclusions were developed after the first interview and were discussed in the second. In both interviews, there were not specific questions asked, but rather general themes discussed as a group which also lead to other themes.³

Conversation:

The following is an extract from a conversation I had with the family in my second visit. I have rearranged the parts here to make it flow better. A fuller and better contextualized version of the conversation is provided in the appendix.

Father: *There are two types of photos: some are determined by those that are being photographed and others are determined by the photographer because he'd chose a*

2 For example, the research could have focused on the fact that the photograph were kept by the mother rather than any of other members of the family, or it could have focused on the story of the grandmother photograph and the inclusion an exclusion of certain events from family inscription.

3 The level of contribution by the participants varied from one interview to the other. While in the first interview the children lead most of the discussions, in the second the father was more eager to talk than the rest. The father's interest, I have learnt later, was due to the fact that he was about to start writing his autobiography and found the conversation helpful. The children, on the other hand, said the conversation was helpful for them to understand their relationship to their parents and each other.

certain shot at a certain moment, just like photojournalists. But anyway, we usually end up remembering and talking about what is not in the photo. It is the memory that is triggered by the photo. It is about mental associations.

Self: *What would you miss if you were never able to take and keep photographs? What I am asking is basically why are photographs important to you?*

Son: *Well, for me, I will not be able to know what has happened before I was born, what my father and mother used to look like, how things were.*

Father: *Photographs are memory, they are history. Of course memories exist without the photos. You can sit and talk about them, but with photos it's different. You visualize memories. They become something that you can see.*

Mother: *Yes, one can tell memories, but with photos you can ask questions. The kids would look at the photos and say who's this? What's the relationship between this person and that person? Why are things this way? We come across things that we usually do not think of when we remember events.*

Father: *Memories have no meaning. It is not simply about remembering. It is the feelings that come with memories that matter. You relive a certain experience through the photos and try to feel how you felt then and it comes back to you.*

Self: *But why are memories important any way? Why do you need to remember?*

Father: *To look at yourself, remember yourself and reflect on it. Some people say: the rest of my life starts tomorrow. I don't believe this. Your life is continuous, the past, the present and the future.*

Mother: *Sometimes we wonder: what would have happened if we did not do so and so, how would our lives have been now? For example, what if we did not come to London? You know, when we came here we thought we'll be staying for a year only. Twenty five years later, we are still here.*

Father: *Yes, what would have happened if we had not come here in 1980 and stayed in Lebanon to witness the Israeli occupation in 1982? I mean politically and militarily. She says I would have been killed like one of my friends who fought in the war and died in 1985. Maybe, who knows! [...] at every point you are confronted with a set of choices and you make a choice and these lead you to other events and choices that you make. At every point you have a field of vision, you can see what is within your field of vision, the 180 degrees in front of you, but what's outside it, what's behind your back, you don't see and you can't see. You make a choice according to what you see... Sometimes, your choices, your field of vision is limited. For example, in 1990 the British government detained some Arabs here without charges when they were preparing for the first war on Iraq. Some of these were my friends. It did not happen to me, but if it had, I would have probably said: to hell with you and your country I'm going back to Lebanon. My field of choices would have been very narrow then. There is always choice and there are always things beyond your control. You could put a plan for your life and say I will do so and so and I achieve this or that, then you'd step outside the house and you'd be run over by a speeding crazy driver. What's the use of your plans then? I am not saying that one should not make plans, but they change, this is life.*

Self: *So how does it feel to see your self?*

Daughter: *When I see my photos as a toddler, it makes me think that many things must have happened along the way for me to become what I am now. Between then and now there is a lot of change. But my own photos do not move me. I am moved when I look at my brothers' photos, or our photos together, I would be like: Oh look at Samer, he's like a teddy bear! Or for example there is a photo of Wissam hugging me when I was four, I think that was the last time he had ever hugged me.*

Self: *And your parents?*

Daughter: *We find the old photos of our parents funny. There is a photo of my father with huge glasses, they looked like goggles, and big afro hair, with a shirt that had a big drawing on it. I think it was a dragon or something...*

Father: *[laughing] it was an eagle.*

Daughter: *whatever, you looked really funny.*

Father: *[laughing] shut up!*

Daughter: *and my mom, she looked like a hippie, with big hair and weird clothes.*

Mother *[laughing]: Yes, this is an interesting thing. It was weird. He saw the photo and couldn't stop laughing "mom was a hippie", he said. Back then, I didn't think I looked like a hippie, I just liked to dress comfortably.*

Daughter: *I like to dress comfortably now, but mom wouldn't agree.*

The chronotope of the family album, discourse and the subject:

I will start my analysis with the intrinsic features which define family photo albums as a narrative, as a genre, and the kind of a story they articulate. Photo albums are not discreet units. Each of the albums is an episode in a series of interconnected novels, as a subplot within a master plot that is only constituted by the subplots. The subplots include the stories of the various nuclear families, different periods of time, and occasions. Various characters enter into the story and join others moving between one sub-plot and the other. A child is not only the son or the daughter of his/her parents, but also an active participant in family events. He or she have their own lives as well, they are students, they play sports, paint and are

eventually husbands and wives. Other characters join into the story as friends, colleagues, neighbours and even passer-bys in the street. They come into the plot and out of it at different stages. Some characters can drop out of the story completely when they die or cease to have a connection with the family. There is no way for one to disentangle one character from the rest in the plot. Although there are main characters and secondary ones in this scheme, main characters do not necessarily remain the main ones. The family-story starts (when did it start? Was there a really a starting point?) with two separate stories of the father and the mother. The two stories are then joined when they were married. When a child is born, it joins into the story; when this child goes on later to form a new family, another narrative is started from the old one. The narratives of the various nuclear families extend in different directions, but they do not remain parallel to each other nor do they diverge completely; they rejoin and reconnect as part of the grand narrative of the extended family. This continuity of the extended family and its photo albums is maintained through the distribution of exact copies of the photographs of events common to several nuclear ones. The reconstruction of the narrative is always possible if it is partially lost through the recollection of its various parts at the meeting points between the nuclear family narratives.

Bakhtin [1937-73 in Holquist et. al. 1981] asserts that “every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope” (258). Although Bakhtin does not offer a clear definition of the chronotope, throughout his essay he offers the reader glimpses of what he intended by it. First, he defines the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature... [It] expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)... [It] is the formally constitutive category of literature ... [that] determines to a

significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” [84]. In the concluding remarks on this essay written some forty years after it was started, he asks “What is the significance of all the chronotopes? What is most obvious is their meaning for narrative? They are the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and united. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative. [...] Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means of materializing time in space, emerges a centre for concertizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel” [250]. He also stresses throughout the essay that since time has prominence over space in the novel, the chronotope is mainly about time. The chronotope, then, is essentially about the visibility and visibility of time, i.e. the visualization of time and making it visible. But time and space as such do not exist without human experience. The time-space(s) articulated in the chronotope are essentially the time-space of events, of the subject(s) represented and consequently is the image-making of the subject through the visualization of events.

So, what kind of a chronotope do family albums construct? What kind of subjects is articulated through them? First, it is important to note that the arrangement of photos in the albums is always chronological. Time is the important dimension, not space. The basic unit of any single album or series of albums is the event, but events are arranged in the sequence of their occurrence. Albums are never classified according to spacial themes (for example, albums of each city or house in which the family lived). This is not to say that space has no role, for all events take place in a certain place and this place is often remembered and talked about when the photographs are being discussed. But the continuity perceived and constructed

through the arrangement of the photographs is the continuity of time. Space, comes in and out of the narrative just like secondary characters do. When the family goes to Beirut for a visit, the city suddenly pops up into the narrative, when they go back to London it disappears, but only for a while until the next visit. In the mean time, Beirut remains part of another story, or other stories, that transform it in the background. Moreover, the family-chronotope is concerned with the events of daily life. It is the chronotope of the mundane, the typical, the quotidian. It is intrinsically non-catastrophic, nor heroic whether in a good or a bad sense. To put it in the language of Morson et al [1990] commenting on the work of Bakhtin, it is 'prosaic' rather than 'poetic'. Dramatic events that drastically impact the life of the family, whether they are internal or external to it, have no place in this chronotope. The narrative goes at a steady, continuous pace, neither speeding up nor speeding down at any point. It is also a happy and private chronotope. Disputes, funerals, accidents and stressful events of daily life are not mentioned. The event of the family album is the birth of a child, the celebration of a birthday, the vacation, the family visit, barbecues, games, the chat over some morning coffee and a cigarette. Public life, such as work related activities, political or social life outside the family is hardly ever shown. The circulation of the narrative also remains deeply private and confined more or less within the family and its circle of friends.

So far we have described the particular features which constitute the family album as a genre of narrative, but does the family-chronotope of the happy everyday life constitute the family's history? For an outsider to the family and the practice of photography who happens to be a realist, the answer would probably be a yes. However, the family members, this is certainly not the case. The family members who are themselves the producers and the viewers of this story, its speakers and listeners, its addressers and addressees, are well aware of their

photographic practices. They are aware of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, articulation and disarticulation inherent in any form of representation. A photographer takes the photo from a certain point-of-view, he chooses where to look, when, what to see and what not to see, what to include and what to exclude. He chooses how to see things as well, from near by or from far away, from below or from above, using this focal length or that, with flash or without. But at the same time, those who are being photographed are the photographer's accomplices. When they are aware that they are being photographed, they pose for the photo, they smile, look proper, hold their drink glasses, look in the direction of the camera and maybe arrange themselves in one way or the other. They could also act subversively, accentuating their improper look, or diverting the attention from it to another improper one; they make funny faces, fool around, jump in or out of frame. If they are not aware of the act of photography, they are still involved in it. They act, look in certain directions, decide what to do where and when. Perhaps the family photograph should be understood as the product of a discourse that takes place in the photographic event and involves complex agency, rather than surveillance and submission, to use two Foucauldian concepts. However, the discourse taking place in the photographic event is not the only one that is involved in the production of the final narrative. Developing the film, printing the photographs and deciding which photographs to include in which album and in which order, which of these photos or albums should be shared with who, are all discursive practices that are productive of the narrative through multiple forms of complex agency.

As Foucault [1970] explains, any discourse is constituted by a relation between the institution – most importantly in our case, the institution of the family – which strives to articulate discourse through constraint and control, to impose closure on it; and the desire of the subjects

within the discourse, which wants discourse to be infinitely open and unrestricted. The family tries to achieve mastery over discourse through prohibition, the ritual of the circumstances of speech (the division between reason and madness), the privileged exclusive rights of the speaking subject (the distinction between true and false), 'rarefaction' or the impoverishment of meaning particularly through commentary, and finally through determining the conditions of application by imposing roles on the speaking subjects and restricting access. The first three types of practices, external to the family discourse, are evidently in operation. Certain topics are considered taboo in family narrative and are not allowed to be documented. The mechanical rational of photography also imposes its own discipline. The arrangement of the photos imposes more and more restrictions on the narrative. But this is not all. Photographs are usually shared and viewed in groups, they are commented on by the knowing subjects, mostly the parents, who by virtue of their age are considered more knowledgeable of what actually happened than their children. Commentary is repeated, ritualized and institutionalized to impoverish the meaning of events, to limit them to one or few plausible interpretation.

However, despite all discursive practices of mastery and control, there is always an essential openness and unfinalizability inherent to discourse. Photographs have no meaning in themselves. They are mere instruments for thinking and remembering by subjects.

Remembering is an event in itself. As the above conversation indicates, people are not only aware of the non-realism of photographs, they are also unconcerned about it. What the photograph represents does not predetermine the memory, because memory works through 'mental associations' that are contingent to the signification of the photograph. But how do these 'mental associations' work? Are they predetermined by a certain mechanism or overdetermined by a structure? As the father's answer to the question about whether

photographs trigger the same memories all the time indicates, the answer is no. Perhaps the best way to understand this process is through the framework of Peircian semiotics, where a sign is brings an interpretant into a relationship with an object. The interpretant becomes in turn a sign in another triad, and so on ad infinitum. There are no final meanings that arrest the process of signification.⁴

Similarly, the practice of commenting on the photos for the purpose of finalizing events by the various agents stands in constant tension with the uncertainty and undecidability involved in the interpretation of any event. Photographs are not a reflection *of* what has happened, but are rather tools that allow for a reflection *on* what has happened. This statement entails two things. First, that photographs in themselves are not memories since memories are necessarily in the mind of the remembering subject. What photographs do is allow the subject to remember through connecting the events represented in the photograph itself, with what is outside the representation. The memory is not predetermined by the photo or the event photographed, but is rather contingent upon the event of viewing the photo. Second, memory has no meaning in itself, just as much as events have no meaning [cf. Ricoeur, 1971]. Meaning is the result of a subjective reflection on events and memories. It is this subjective reflection that practice of family photography is ultimately set to achieve. The same photographs, through which the institution attempts to fix meaning by means of prohibition and rarefaction; these same photographs provide the material foundation for the destabilization of this fixity through subversion and counter commentary. The daughter's commentary on her mother's photo as a hippie is a good illustration of that. Thus far we have

⁴ Compare this to De Saussure's semiology where the relationship between the signifier and the signified is fixed, or with Barthes' corrective where there is one layer of signification that is fixed (denotation) and another that is historically produced (connotation). Both accounts fail to explain the marked undecidability of any sign and its inability to fix meaning.

described the general characteristics of family photographs as a genre and explained how they come about this way. The next step is to look at their use value, what function photographs serve.

The above line of thought invokes Collingwood's idea of history [1993 (1946)] where history is not about documentation and records, or about remembering, but rather about the re-enactment of past experiences. For Collingwood, history is “(1) a kind of research or enquiry, (2) that takes past human actions as its object, (3) proceeds by the interpretation of evidence where evidence is a collective name for things which are singly called documents and (4) for the purpose of human self knowledge”. He goes on to elaborate on what self knowledge is to say that it entails “knowing what it is to be a man (sic), what it is to be the kind of man you are and what it is to be the man you are and nobody else” [9-10]. Furthermore, the act of interpretation, or history construction, is itself an event, an action that is historically situated and is part of history itself, and hence history can be constructed and re-constructed endlessly and with it the self, or the human subject. The subject constructed by this process is necessarily historical and cannot be imagined outside its historical context. Actions by subjects which have preceded the existence of a certain subject play a role in its constitution, and thus the self-knowledge of the subject requires a knowledge of what happened before its existence. Within such a framework, both the conflation of the notion of the subject with that of the individual and the dichotomy between the individual and the collective becomes deeply problematic. The human subject presupposed here is a producer and a product of discourse as a historical process. It is not a subject of essence, but rather one that is historically situated, shaped by and participates in shaping that history. This subject engages dialogically with itself in the family narrative inscribing itself in the story and letting itself be inscribed in real life in

the process. The chronotope of the family album can be said to have a dialogic relationship to the chronotope of the subject's daily life.

Concluding Remarks:

As I have mentioned earlier, this research does not claim to be comprehensive, covering all the possible practices and uses of family photo-narratives, nor does it claim to be exhaustive of all the aspects pertaining to the particular practices discussed. What I have tried to achieve in this essay is to shed some light on an important form of mediation that has been generally overlooked within media and cultural studies. In addition to the thoughts discussed above I would like to add a few comments to conclude.

It is important to note here that the construction of the self is never done through the image of the self. Contrary to Lacanian theory [Fink, 1995] which stresses 'identification' with the self-image, family members seem to construct their selves through interpreting the actions of others in the photographs. Lacan argues that the self, driven by its lack – primarily a lack of coherence – can only be constructed through a self-image and therefore the subject is endlessly decentered. The subject identifies with its self-image from one of two subject positions: either the Ideal-Ego (when the self is looked at favourably), or the Ego-Ideal (when it is looked at unfavourably). In this scheme, the subject feeds on itself or images of it; it cannot have any other relationship but identification with itself. However, the father's and daughter's comments seem to refute such claims. While the self is looked at as an other, the relationship with this other can also be a relationship of indifference. As the daughter points out commenting on the photograph of her brother hugging her, or the son commenting on the need to know what went on before he was born, or even the fact that history cannot exist

without discourse; the image of the self is always constructed through the actions of others. This argument undermines the central role usually given to 'identity' and 'identification' in media and cultural studies.

This research also helps undermine accounts of media determinism and the various conceptions of media reception based on sender-receiver models of communication. In its least essentialist form, that devised by Hall [1980], the lack of identity of media message and interpretation at the two ends of the production/consumption cycle is explained by a lack of symmetry in ideological frameworks of producers and consumers of the media message. If that was true, then a case where the producers and consumers of the media message are one and the same, then message will be decoded back to its original form before encoding – provided that the human subject is rational and coherent, that is. Clearly, this research has refuted such claims. It has also, I hope, shown the limits of thinking of media as a text that encapsulates a meaning.

Appendix: Partial Transcription of Conversation

On Memory:

Daughter: You only photograph happy events. For example we never took photos of funerals. It is always happy events.

Mother: Yes, that's an interesting thought.

Daughter: It is not that you do not want to remember the bad things, because you end up remembering them anyway. it's just like that.

Mother: But remember when your aunts were dying of cancer? You went and took photos of them before they died. They looked miserable and frail.

Father: That was a special case. You wanted to take a photo of them before they died because we did not have any recent photos of them. The ones we had were very old. When you see the photo of someone who's now dead, you might feel sad, but that does not happen often, you usually remember the good moments you had together and that's it.

[...]

Self: But don't you agree that photos are always staged. For example if we'd want to have a group photo now, we'd set the camera or ask some one to take the photo and then we'd arrange ourselves in front of the camera and smile.

Father: You're right, but not all photos are like that. When you have many people doing different things, they are not always conscious that they are being photographed... Well, there are two types of photos: some are predetermined by those that are being photographed and others are predetermined by the photographer because he'd chose a certain shot at a certain moment, just like photojournalists. But anyway, we usually end up remembering and talking about what is not in the photo. It is the memory that is triggered by the photo. It is about mental associations.

Self: What would you miss if you were never able to take and keep photographs? What I am asking is basically why are photographs important to you?

Son: Well, for me, I will not be able to know what has happened before I was born, what my father and mother used to look like, how things were. These are things that I haven't experienced myself.

Father: Photographs are memory, they are history. Of course memories exist without the photos. You can sit and talk about them, but with photos it's different. You visualize memories. They become something that you can see.

Mother: Yes, one can tell memories, but with photos you can ask questions. The kids would look at the photos and say who's this? What's the relationship between this person and

that person? Why are things this way? We come across things that we usually do not think of when we remember events.

Daughter: You look at a photo and you see some stairs and you think: what came after these stairs? Where were we when this photo was taken? And someone would say: Palmyra. Then you start thinking what happened then.

Father: Memories have no meaning. It is not simply about remembering. It is the feelings that come with memories that matter. You relive a certain experience through the photos and try to feel how you felt then and it comes back to you.

Self: But why are memories important any way? Why do you need to remember?

Father: To look at yourself, remember yourself and reflect on it. Some people say: the rest of my life starts tomorrow. I don't believe this. Your life is a continuum, the past, the present and the future.

Self: Does that mean that you'd get the same feelings about a certain event whenever you see its photos?

Father: Of course not. It depends on where you are now and what you actually remember. Every time you look at a photo you remember different things. A photo captures a fracture of a second of a whole day event. It is not everything. The other day we were looking at some photos of a visit some friends made to our house a few years ago. We had a tennis ball attached to a pole by an elastic band, and we were goofing around with it, you hit the ball and move away from it so that it wouldn't hit you in the face, but it would go round and hit you from the back...

Daughter: Yes and I'd look at the photos and say: wow the swimming pool used to be smaller, and the garden was quite different.

Father: Or you'd remember that on that day uncle so and so brought some avocados and after we ate the fruit we planted the seed in the garden and now it is a tree... The other day we were talking about the possibility of an American landing in Lebanon, and I remembered when the Americans made a landing in Lebanon in 1954, I was only 8 years old then, and they gave me some chocolate. My friend, who was 10 then, said: "yes, I remember that and they also had some hot meals in aluminium containers." You know, I wouldn't be exaggerating if I tell you I remembered the taste of chocolate in my mouth at that moment.

[...]

On the order of photos, narrative and the self:

Self: You have two types of photos: the ones that are framed and displayed as single frames, and the ones that are ordered in one way or another, in albums or boxes.

Father: Well, the single frames are not fixed, we keep changing them. For example, can you

see that photo of Wissam? This is his photo when he was in the choir. This is an old one, we will soon replace it with an up-to-date one. The other photos as well, for example we may have a new good photo to replace one of the ones currently framed. Of course, there are fixed ones, like my mother's photo, or my wife's father, the very old ones.

Self: And the arranged ones?

Father: The arranged ones, you have my photos when I was single arranged separately, and my wife's photos when she was single separately. Then you have our photos after we got married together, then you start having the children and so on. You have people that die, so they drop out of the story.

Self: It's a story then?

Father: Yes, the story of our lives. Where we were, where we went, where we are now, what happened. It is not about nostalgia, just curiosity.

Self: How would you feel when you look at yourself in photos?

Father: I feel serenity, I feel calm.

Mother: Sometimes we wonder: what would have happened if we did not do so and so, how would our lives have been now? For example, what if we did not come to London? You know, when we came here we thought we'll be staying for a year only. Twenty five years later, we are still here.

Father: Yes, what would have happened if we had not come here in 1980 and stayed in Lebanon to witness the Israeli occupation in 1982? I mean politically and militarily. She would say I would have been killed like one of my friends who fought in the war and died in 1985. Maybe, who knows!

Self: Do you look positively or negatively at your self when you see your photos?

Father: Neither, it is not that I regret anything or that I feel proud about things. You just try to understand what happened and how you ended up here, not judge yourself. Of course it all depends on where you are standing now. For example if I was flipping burgers at McDonalds I might look back and say: how did this happen? Why? ... Some friends of ours had two kids. They said they were their kids, but in reality I think they adopted them, anyway that's not the issue. When they look back they regret having children and think how burdensome it was to have them. It depends on where you are now... at every point you are confronted with a set of choices and you make a choice and these lead you to other events and choices that you make. At every point you have a field of vision, you can see what is within your field of vision, the 180 degrees in front of you, but what's outside it, what's behind your back, you don't see and you can't see. You make a choice according to what you see... Sometimes, your choices, your field of vision is limited. For example, in 1990 the British government detained some Arabs here without charges when they were preparing for the first war on Iraq. Some of these were my friends. It did not happen to me, but if it had, I would have probably said: to hell with you and your

country I'm going back to Lebanon. My field of choices would have been very narrow then. There is always choice and there are always things beyond your control. You could put a plan for your life and say I will do so and so and I achieve this or that, then you'd step outside the house and you'd be run over by a speeding crazy guy. What's the use of your plans then? I am not saying that one should not make plans, but they change, this is life. And you have the past and the present.

Self (to mother): You've arranged a photo album of each of your children, when they were born, as they grew up, etc. Why did you do this? Who did you expect to make use of it? Is it for you and their father?

Mother: No, it's for them. So that they can look at their photos and see what they used to look like. How they were and how they've become.

[daughter walks into the room]

Self (to daughter): We've been talking looking at yourself in photos, and the albums which your mom has prepared for each of you. Do you look at your album?

Daughter: Sometimes. Although it's been a long while since I have taken a look at it.

Father: Well you're very busy with school nowadays.

Daughter: Yes, no time.

Self: So how does it feel to see your self?

Daughter: When I see my photos as a toddler, it makes me think that many things must have happened along the way for me to become what I am now. Between then and now there is a lot of change. But my own photos do not move me. I am moved when I look at my brothers' photos, or our photos together, I would be like: Oh look at Samer, he's like a teddy bear! Or for example there is a photo of Wissam hugging me when I was four, I think that was the last time he had ever hugged me.

Self: And your parents?

Daughter: We find the old photos of our parents funny. There is a photo of my father with huge glasses, they looked like goggles, and big afro hair, with a shirt that had a big drawing on it. I think it was a dragon or something...

Father: [laughing] it was an eagle.

Daughter: whatever, you looked really funny.

Father: [laughing] shut up!

Daughter: and my mom, she looked like a hippie, with big hair and weird clothes.

Self: Yes, Samer has told me about this hippie photograph. How did you feel about that.

Mother [laughing]: Yes, this is an interesting thing. It was weird. He saw the photo and couldn't stop laughing "mom was a hippie", he said. Back then, I didn't think I looked like a hippie, I just liked to dress comfortably.

Daughter: I like to dress comfortably now, but mom wouldn't agree.

Mother: You know, I was studying at the American University of Beirut, I came from Syria, and the Lebanese, you know, they like to dress a la mode. I just wanted to dress comfortably. Even he thought I looked weird.

Father [smiles]: You know, in our days, hippie meant drugs and sex, but nowadays it's about dressing weirdly, being dirty and smelly.

Self (to daughter): So do you feel that you've grown up to become like your mother?

Mother: Not at all!

Daughter: No, I wouldn't want to grow up like my parents. But now that you've mentioned it, I guess I do want to be like them when they were at my age.

Bibliography:

- Barthes, R., 1981. *Camera Lucida : reflections on photography*, trans. R. Howard. London : Flamingo
- Bakhtin, M. M., 1937-73. 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics' in M. Holquist trans., C. Emerson et al eds., 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press
- Baudrillard, J., 1981. 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign'. In: Poster, M. ed., 2001. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. London: Polity Press and Blackwell
- Collingwood, R. G., 1993 (1946). *The Idea of History*, Oxford, New York : Clarendon Press.
- Fink, B., 1995, *The Lacanian Subject between language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Foucault, M., 1970. 'The Order of Discourse' in R. Young ed., 1981. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hall, S., 1980. 'Encoding/Decoding'. In: Hall, S. et al. eds., 1972-79, *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*. London: Unwin Hyman
- Morson, G. S. and Emerson, C., 1990. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press.
- Ricoeur, P., 1971. 'The Model of the text: Meaningful Action Considered as text' in Paul Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, , 1979. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press