

# Framed

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Catherine Zuromskis. *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images*. MIT Press, 2013. 264 pp.

Like its subject, Catherine Zuromskis's *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* straddles the realms of public and private, high and low art. She considers the "snapshot" within an American middle-class context: those who bought the first Brownie cameras and, over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, took the requisite photos. Christmas trees, babies in bathtubs, prom dates standing awkwardly together at the bottom of the stair, all of these images shape not only our expectations for our own family albums, but also – therefore – what it means to lead a normative middle-class life. Though Zuromskis's consideration of the snapshot genre focuses primarily on amateur photographs taken of private moments, her aim is not to define the snapshot according to these specific terms. Instead, she seeks to destabilize our concept of what the term "snapshot" – as well as the terms "amateur" and "private" – might mean in a broader social and artistic context. By reading deeply into the "social life" of the seemingly innocent snapshot—its varied functions "as an object, a commodity, a set of conventions, a discourse, and a form of cultural and political agency" (11)—Zuromskis ultimately makes good on her promise to get her "hands dirty" by engaging "in the messiness, the real-life particularities and contradictions that roil beneath the surface of a genre that often seems too banal to merit scholarly consideration at all" (11).

Haunting the work, as is only just, is Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, and in particular the famous Winter Garden Photograph: the image of Barthes's deceased mother as a child. Though Barthes describes the photograph in detail, the photograph itself is withheld – suggesting both its ultimately private, and ultimately contingent value. By depicting through their very materiality what *is not*, or what is no longer, all photographs can, to a certain extent, be considered both present and absent. This peculiar quality – what Barthes, quoting Blanchot, refers to as the photograph's "absence-as-presence" (106) – becomes even more pronounced in the study of snapshots, which so often hold, like Barthes's Winter Garden Photograph, only highly subjective value and meaning.

Though Zuromskis's chief aim is to disrupt the romantic notion our culture continues to perpetuate about snapshot photography – that snapshots are "innocent,"

utterly frank – she certainly does not dismiss, or shy away from, the private mystery Barthes points to at the heart of the image. Despite its ultimate “conventionality,” as a cultural practice snapshot photography has, Zuromskis argues, “an unruly side as well, one that is perhaps most intensely evoked by the figure of Roland Barthes grieving over the photograph of his late mother as a child” (13). By recognizing and confronting the complex relationship between subject and object – on the one hand intensely personal, contingent and perhaps ultimately untheorizable, and on the other, socially constructed, decidedly *unoriginal*, and highly controlled – Zuromskis refuses to reduce the snapshot to either one or the other. Nor does she simplify her approach to the genre by pretending that aesthetic and cultural ideals can be easily separated. Instead, she looks at both together, urging us to recognize along with her that it is precisely those images we find “too boring or common to merit consideration” that “require a closer look.” (17). Embedded within our private lives, Zuromskis admits, these images may seem “natural and inconsequential;” but, for this very reason, “they have the power to function on the register of myth” (17).

Because of “the aspirational fictions” the snapshot often records, within a genre also invested with “documentary” truth-value, snapshots “allow us to record ourselves and our histories as we would have them remembered” (33). It is for this reason that the snapshot has often been used as a powerful tool for marginalized groups seeking to “construct alternative visual cultures to those perpetuated by mainstream society” (33). As the writer and social activist, bell hooks, has argued, for example, it was the rise of snapshot photography in African-American communities that – in distinct contrast to the “repressive social constructs advanced by lynching photography and racial stereotypes” (33-4) – allowed for the development and expression of a complex and individualized black culture.

More commonly, however, “alternative” relationships to snapshot culture are exploited only in order to reinforce the status quo. In Chapter Two, Zuromskis provides a fascinating analysis of the 2002 film, *One-Hour Photo*, as well as various episodes of the television show (1999-present) *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. In both cases, Zuromskis argues, the “dangerous or deviant” (93) relationships to snapshot culture represented (voyeurism, pornography, violence), are used as negative examples to the norm, and serve ultimately to reinforce the idea that “criminal acts are a structural part of society, requiring ongoing policing” (95). In this way, Zuromskis acknowledges the ways our culture is shaped not by what is actively promoted but what is actively repressed.

It would be interesting, in light of this, to learn more about Zuromskis’s thoughts on those snapshot images we do *not* see, those photographs – the “falling man” photos after 9/11, for example – that have been systematically withheld. I wonder further,

what Zuromskis might have to say about the Abu Ghraib torture snapshots, or other “unofficial” trauma and war documentation that has proliferated over the last fifty years? What insights she might have, that is, into the way these documents have worked to shape our cultural consciousness (or lack thereof) of the social and political issues that surround us.

Although Zuromskis acknowledges both the affirmative and restrictive role snapshot photography has played in shaping identity and reframing collective histories, the absence of any discussion of these more politically and socially charged chapters of snapshot history is conspicuous. One wonders where the pseudo-scientific phrenological studies that contributed so dramatically to racial profiling, and mug-shots fit into Zuromskis’ account, for another example – which begs the question as to whether these photographs actually qualify as “snapshots.” If we acknowledge – as Zuromskis argues we must – that even middle-class American “baby in the bath tub” snapshots are pre-meditated, culturally defined, and oriented toward a very particular end, what is the real difference between these politicized and racialized images and those that provide the focus for this study? Attention to this question would force Zuromskis to clarify her definition of the genre in worthwhile ways. Similarly, a consideration of trauma and war photography might further nuance Zuromskis’s discussion of the ways in which snapshots have participated in – indeed embodied – our tendency toward “the practice of manufacturing rosy revisionist histories” (65), and force the question regarding the difference between public documentary and private memory.

This latter issue is one that Zuromskis raises but ultimately leaves unresolved in Chapter Three, where she turns to the problem of situating the snapshot within the space of a museum. Though “the designation of the snapshot as ‘art’ in a museum context may valorize an underappreciated genre,” it also serves to neutralize “the affective and political possibilities of bringing this popular, vernacular image culture into a public sphere of reception” (118). Her examination of influential exhibitions –beginning with Edward Steichen’s famous show from 1955, “The Family of Man” –calls attention to the important shift that takes place with the advent of snapshot photography within the museum, whereby the role of the *curator*, not the artist, is brought to the fore. In presenting snapshots (the authors of which are often either irrelevant in the museum space, or unknown), it becomes the curator’s responsibility to situate the work for the public in both aesthetic and cultural terms.

Highlighting the polarities of the genre as a whole, such exhibitions emphasize either the *message* of the photographs to the exclusion of the *medium* (Steichen’s exhibition, for example, which was essentially documentary and ideological in nature – evoking, as Zuromskis notes, “diversity and difference only to magically dispel them in the

name of a superficial and sentimental unity” [124]), or the *medium* to the exclusion of the complex social and political network to which the snapshot is bound (John Szarkowski’s 1962 exhibition *The Photographer’s Eye*, for example, which focused on anonymous and private “snapshot” photographs in an effort to endow the genre “with the rarified air of high art” [137]). Steichen and Szarkowski are similar, however, at least in one regard, which Zuromskis notes. Both, she argues, managed to establish “radical new discourses for understanding [snapshot photography] and its function, and thus did not so much dismiss the author altogether as take his place, resituating aesthetic genius from photographer to curator or photographic visionary” (148).

In Chapters Four and Five, Zuromskis discusses the photographic oeuvres of Andy Warhol and Nan Goldin in similar terms. By emphasizing their distinctly different approaches – Warhol’s distant and self-conscious, intent on exposing the limits and superficialities of image and relationships; Goldin’s emotional and intimate, intent on exposing the “real” – Zuromskis draws attention to the ways in which both exemplify two very different, inextricable, aspects of the snapshot form. Andy Warhol’s photography, particularly his early Factory work, has, Zuromskis argues, long been under-recognized for its complex social and political engagement. “Warhol’s unique approach,” she writes,

employed the visual and social dynamics of the photograph as a vital tool for problematizing social stratification and complicating binary separations between public and private, mainstream and counterculture, celebrity and fan, and art and life (188).

In the same way that Warhol’s paintings “blur the line between art and commercial culture, painterly expression and mechanical reproduction,” so his photographic work, notes Zuromskis, exposes “the gray area between photography’s newly acquired status as a legitimate fine art and its commercial appeal as a domestic and social pastime” (205). Though she is intent on rescuing Warhol from the charge of “mere” superficiality, she also acknowledges and celebrates Warhol’s emphasis on his art – and therefore his social and political existence – as essentially mediated. Warhol’s pronouncement that “the reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine” (233) also applies, in Zuromskis’ view, to his photographic practice. But this “mechanic” approach does not limit the emotional impact or social value of Warhol’s work. Instead, Zuromskis argues, Warhol’s insistence on “technological mediation” actually facilitated for the artist “a deeper psychological and emotional intimacy, a connective circuit, as his book title suggests, ‘from A to B and back again’” (233).

In the work of Nan Goldin, the *message*, not the *medium*, is of primary importance. She insists, and is dependent upon, both a framing narrative (read: “rosy revisionist

history”) and the “innocence” or candidly honest quality she assumes to be implicit within her photos. In this way, argues Zuromskis, Goldin aligns herself, especially in her early work, with normative middle-class American snapshot practices. But in an analysis of Goldin’s 2004 exhibition, “*Soeurs, Saintes, et Sibylles (Sisters, Saints and Sibyls)*,” the artist’s “most tortured and most dramatic work to date” (300), Zuromskis recognizes in the artist’s work “a new engagement with snapshot photography, its cultural function, and, significantly, its limitations” (304). Like Roland Barthes’s treatment of the Winter Garden Photograph in *Camera Lucida*, Goldin’s *Sisters* “seems to confront for the first time a presence that is always already an absence, a taunting reminder of the passage of time and inevitability of death” (304). It is only through this acknowledgement, Zuromskis contends – an acknowledgement of what the photograph “cannot show” – that there can be any true understanding of the nature of the genre itself. *Sisters* also gestures toward the oppressive cultural role snapshot images have played by including images by Jean-Martin Charcot, a celebrated doctor and acknowledged expert on the condition once known as “hysteria.” Charcot worked at the Salpêtrière hospital – famously, a “repository of marginalized culture, housing prostitutes, the insane, the diseased, and the destitute” (Zuromskis 306-7). His research included frequent photographic documentation “of female hysterical patients...in convulsive and performative poses” (307). Zuromskis observes:

Evoking one of the foundational paradoxes of snapshot photography, Charcot’s photographs are both transparent scientific documents of the patient’s (invented) pathology and, at the same time, utterly contrived and framed by a cultural lexicon of emotional states from ecstasy and menace to crucifixion and self-sacrifice (307).

Over time, Charcot’s patients began to realize that “the photographs for which they were posing ultimately reinforced the repressive pathology of the institution itself” (307). This realization is one that Zuromskis reads as implicit in Goldin’s *Sisters*. It also serves as a powerful message with which to conclude her study.

A brief coda, which takes up the question of the ways snapshot photography has changed, or will, since the advent of the digital age, only further emphasizes the snapshot’s significance. As snapshot technology changes, what does *not* – will not – change is the snapshot’s intrinsic relationship (at once both reflective of, and resistant to) its contemporary social and political milieu. The paradoxes and polarities, which – as Zuromskis convincingly argues – have been evident within the practice of snapshot photography since the days of the very first Brownie cameras, will only continue to proliferate and abound. “While the conventions of snapshot culture stand as rigid as ever, the boundary between the private photographic practice and cultural ideology, between personal acts and public rhetoric is becoming ever more permeable,”

writes Zuromskis. It is for this reason, she concludes – and her own study proves a powerful affirmation of these final words – that “the politics and possibilities of snapshot photography’s social life become ever more relevant” (319).

### Works Cited

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