

Interpreting Images of Motherhood: The Contexts and Dynamics of Collective Viewing

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Abstract

Our research is concerned with cultural representations of birth and mothering and, as part of this, we are engaged with debates concerning competing theoretical and methodological approaches to the analysis of visual images. In particular we are interested in how meanings of an image are reflexively produced, managed and negotiated. That is, whether and to what extent interpretation is influenced by personal experience, emotion and memory; the ways in which the context of viewing may mediate meaning; and how the relationship between researcher and research subject may shape the interpretative process. In order to explore such questions, this paper draws on the tape-recorded discussion of a group of women collectively viewing images of new mothers. These included photographs of mothers and their newborns taken by the Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra, and photographs of us, the authors, as new mothers, taken by our respective families.

The paper blends the analytic framework of conversation analysis and discursive psychology in order to consider both our own and the discussants' responses to these photographs as they emerge through the dynamic and discursive process of collective viewing. In addition we consider the significance of our own and the discussants' biographies and reproductive experiences, as they are made visible in the talk-in-interaction, for the meanings generated by the group's engagement with the photographs. Through this reflexive approach we highlight the significance of the interplay between broader cultural narratives, genres, memories and experiences for the interpretive process and the analytical challenges posed by collective viewings of images in which meanings are discursively situated, negotiated and silenced.

Keywords: *Visual Sociology, Photography, Motherhood, Audience, Conversation Analysis, Visual Methods, Reflexivity*

Theoretical starting points: Images, contexts and audiences

1.1 The starting point for this research was the theoretical challenge posed by our individual and shared reactions to a set of photographs by the photographer Reneke Dijkstra. Dijkstra's images of Julie, Tecla and Saskia - photographed respectively one hour, one day and one week after giving birth - depict women with their babies, gazing naked and bloodied at the viewer. For us these images, which can be viewed at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ArtistWorks?cgroupid=999999961&artistid=2666&page=1> generated immediate, powerful reactions including our interpretation of the women as intensely vulnerable (or the images as depicting vulnerability). However, it became clear through our discussions together that we had both arrived at these interpretations from somewhat different perspectives: Janet being primarily concerned about the physical frailty and possible exploitation of these particular women and Helen about the vulnerability of birthing women more generally that these images appeared to represent and reinforce. Janet, who had originally viewed the images as part of an exhibition in an art gallery in Chicago, initially responded in a way which she felt had been mediated by this context. For her, the public nature of this viewing, exacerbated by the magnitude of the images in this space (approximately 10 x 14 feet) highlighted ethical dilemmas of viewing subjects who may not have anticipated the ways in which their images would be made available. Helen's reaction on seeing the photographs in a book about the exhibition was much more explicitly shaped by her own experiences of giving birth and the ways, for her, that these photographs seemed to resonate with other images of pregnant and birthing women (for example in obstetric text books), reflecting and reinforcing what she felt was a particular medical-technological view of birth (Arney, 1982; Davis-Floyd, 1994; Devries et. al., 2001; Rothman, 1982; Wagner, 2001; Young, 1990).

1.2 We understood that our experiences had been mediated by the viewing format and context but we were interested in how we might understand our different reactions with reference to current theoretical perspectives on the interpretative process including contemporary debates concerning the extent to which interpretation is mediated by personal experience, emotion and memory (for example, Batchen, 2004; Guerin and Hallas, 2007; Hirsch, 1999; Kuhn and McAllister, 2006). Given that we were aware of the ways in which our initial interpretations had shifted during discussions together about the different meanings Dijkstra's images held for us, we wanted to explore the dynamics of a collective viewing process, in which people interpret images together in a shared social space.

1.3 This article maps our attempts to develop a methodology for capturing and analysing interpretation which not only enables a rigorous analysis of the ways in which multiple readings emerge and collide in the interactions of viewers but also what these interactions reveal about subject positions and lived experiences. In this way, the paper offers both an alternative conceptual approach to understanding how meaning is made, managed and negotiated in the process of interpretation but further, arising from this empirical work, considers the potential of the visual as a research method for capturing narratives, memories and understandings which extend beyond the range and scope of the purely logocentric. We begin by critically engaging with the literature on the interpretation of photographs which reveals a range of theoretical positions and methodological approaches wherein the question of how to theorise and negotiate the different private and public contexts that give meaning to photographs is a central concern. However, following an examination of how different approaches have theorised the viewer and the viewing context, we suggest that there is more to be done in engaging with these in ways which make visible the dynamic and discursive milieu in which people view images. We then outline the empirical research which we conducted and consider the potential of a discursive approach to meaning-making and the interpretative work that people do when viewing images collectively. To investigate this we set up a discussion group of ten women, which included ourselves. Together we viewed the three Dijkstra images and photographs of ourselves, the authors, also taken shortly after giving birth. Drawing on the theoretical framework of conversation analysis (CA), we examine the mundane talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 1968) of this discussion group. We argue that such an approach can enable a richer understanding of the intensely complex and political nature of the interpretative process, in which who could speak and what they could say about the photographs was contingent upon experience claims, which were themselves sustained by wider discourses of female identity. In this, our approach reinforces Stuart Hall's comment that 'knowledge is always implicated in power and power implies limits on what can be seen and shown, thought and said' (Hall, 1999: 311).

Interpreting the visual

2.1 A review of the literature on the interpretation of photographs reveals a range of theoretical positions and methodological approaches to the question of interpretation. Of central concern in these literatures is the question of how to theorise and negotiate the different private and public contexts that give meaning to photographs. This is elaborated by Rose (2001; 2007) in her influential book in which she divides the key approaches according to the primary empirical focus each places on the 'sites' that meaning is made. These can be briefly summarised as: the site of 'production' (i.e. what was in the photographer's mind when s/he composed and shot the image); the site of the 'image itself' (the ways in which an image is shot, the scene is lit and its subjects composed) and the site of its 'audiencing' (the ways in which an image is interpreted by its viewers). In this section we consider the ways in which each of these analytic genres have theorised the viewer and the viewing context and the implications for our own interests and concerns.

The site of production: 'What's in the producers mind'

It's not that I want to force people, showing things that they don't want to show, but *I find it much more interesting to photograph people at the moment when they don't have everything in control*' (Dijkstra, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cruelandtender/interviews.htm>>, our emphasis)

2.2 The site of production, as Rose (2001) and others (c.f. Christmann, 2008; Jewitt, 1997) elaborate, encompasses the technological aspects of image production (the camera and film technology that shapes the form of the photograph); its compositionality (the social and historical context of image production including its genre) and the social modality, which includes an appreciation of the social, economic and political context in which a photograph is made as well as the specific intentions of the photographer. While auteur theory, as this latter approach is often referred to, has been the subject of particular criticisms (c.f. Barthes, 1977: 145-6), interest in the motivations of the individual photographer continue to shape public discussions of visual media. Tate Modern's web-site, for example, includes an interview with Dijkstra in which she is asked about her intentions when she made these images. She explains:

A very good friend of mine gave birth to her second child and I was there to help her .. it was a very tough experience to see her in more and more pain and at the end I couldn't even talk

with her any more... when the baby was finally there she showed it to me like very proud and at the same time very confused and exhausted but also very happy and soI thought it was such an emotional moment I would like to see if I could capture such a moment in a picture... (Dijkstra, <<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/cruelandtender/interviews.htm>>)

2.3 However, while Dijkstra's comments provide seemingly compelling insights into her work, there are a number of problems in terms of their status as 'truth' claims. Firstly, such statements are not always available to viewers; in our case we heard Dijkstra's interview a considerable time after initially viewing the images. Secondly, we would argue, they need to be interpreted in the framework of the immediate social and discursive context in which they are articulated. Dijkstra's explanation, for example, was not recorded when the photographs were originally taken but rather to accompany a later exhibition of her work and, thereby, in a context in which she might be expected to display a particular creative authority. In so doing, Dijkstra draws on the familiar trope of birth as a painful rite of passage and birthing women as simultaneously vulnerable and powerful (Balaskas, 1989; Flint, 1986; Kitzinger, 1988; Kukla, 2008). In other words, Dijkstra positions her work within a socially and culturally located view of birth, albeit one which may or may not resonate with viewers' responses to her photographs. It is thus perhaps more useful to interpret Dijkstra's comments as both drawing on and sustaining dominant cultural ideologies and as evidence for the complex and multi-layered, contextually driven nature of meaning. While a critical examination of her claims may facilitate an understanding of the personal and wider social and political context in which a photograph is made and/or displayed, an approach which focuses primarily on the intentions of the producer cannot capture the complexity and multiple meanings of an image as it is experienced by its audience. In order to engage with this at a theoretical level we turned to a second tranche of literature, semiotics, which we now consider.

The site of the image: Signs and semiology

2.4 An important and widely accepted methodological approach to interpretation is the study of signs or 'semiology' in which analysts attempt to formulate the ways in which the meanings of the image are made (or conveyed) through an analysis of the properties and composition of the photograph itself (c.f. Williamson, 1978; Jewitt, 1997; Jewitt and Oyama, 2001; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). As Bal and Bryson (1991) explain:

Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs. The core of semiotic theory is the definition of the factors involved in this permanent process of signmaking and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help us to grasp that process as it goes on in various arenas of cultural activity (Bal and Bryson, 1991:1).

2.5 A significant and often cited contribution is Jewitt's (1997) seminal paper in this journal in which she examines the construction of male sexuality in sexual health literature and in which she suggests that the meaning of a photograph is inherent in its 'grammar'; that is, derived from the way in which a scene is shot and subjects and objects configured within it. For Jewitt and others (e.g. Williamson, 1978) consideration of the audience is confined to an exploration of the ways in which the properties and composition of an image function to engage with the viewer in particular ways through the concept of 'preferred meanings'. As Jewitt and Oyama (2001) suggest, the ways in which the subjects of an image may be placed at, above or below the viewer's eye level connotes, respectively, symbolic equality, power or lack of power. Likewise, the concept of 'frontality', whether the subject of an image is posturally oriented to the viewer or in profile, is approached through a theoretical consideration of the way that the composition engages with or 'appellates' the viewer rather than an empirical exploration of the ways in which images are experienced by audiences.

2.6 The application of these concepts to Dijkstra's images is, however, difficult. Analysis of the images of Julie, Tecla and Saskia indicate that the women are on the same plane and are posturally oriented towards and gazing directly at the viewer, signifying, according to semiotic theory, their engagement and symbolic equality with the viewer. Yet, such a reading conflicts with what we interpreted as the intense physical vulnerability and isolation of these women and birthing women more generally. We also recognized that our interpretations are difficult to disentangle from our own experiences and memories of giving birth and being photographed as new mothers and from their differences and continuities with representations of mothers and infants in obstetric text books, birth literature, family albums and social networking sites (Balaskas, 1989; Department of Health, 2009; Kitzinger, 2008; Fraser and Cooper, 2009; Stoppard, 2009). For us, then, what is interesting about these images is the polysemic and potentially diverse readings that they generated and which semiotics cannot 'get to grips with' (Rose, 2007:9); a position which realist semiological approaches overlook, taking 'as given, precisely what needs to be explained: the relations and practices within which discourses are formed and operated' (Slater, 1983: 258).

The site of the audience: What's in the viewer's mind

2.7 As the previous section elaborated, a central problem with image-based interpretative approaches is their lack of engagement with the perspective of the viewer. This argument is articulated by Rose (2001) in her discussion of her students' shifting interpretation of the iconic Doisneau image, '*An Oblique Look*' (http://farm1.static.flickr.com/175/412869745_259c6b3498_o.jpg) which appear to mirror wider cultural shifts in the representations and experiences of gender and sexuality. While Rose is keen to emphasise that these observations are not derived from a systematic study of audiencing, her analysis suggests important ways in which grammatically un-changed 'images can be read differently by different audiences: in this case by different genders and at different historical moments.' (Rose, 2001: 27).

2.8 The significance of individually mediated meanings is elaborated in the body of psychoanalytically informed feminist analysis in which authors revisit childhood photographs, reflexively interrogating their shifting interpretations in order to critically interrogate gendered and classed subjectivities. In this respect, Walkerdine's (2006) vivid and highly personal account of two childhood photographs of herself, in which she makes explicit her fantasies about what these images represent in the context of a gendered, patriarchal culture, provides a strong case for the ways in which responses to photographs are dynamically shaped and fluid. Similarly, within ethnographic approaches Pink's (2001) reflexive analysis of a series of researcher-generated photographs is enormously helpful in elaborating the ways in which meaning is layered through multiple viewings and different viewing contexts and through which:

... the images can be thought of as icons in which a range of different meanings may be invested... that may not obviously or directly form part of the visible content of the image (Pink, 2001: 100).

However, whilst these literatures provide a useful theoretical and conceptual alternative to the 'linear' (Törrönen, 2001) interpretative model suggested by semiotics, the focus on individual responses elides the discursive, dynamic and collective aspects of viewing photographs.

2.9 This neglect of the interpretive activities of viewers in the analysis of photographs and visual media more generally has been noted within the wider social science literature. Harrison (2002: 864), in her review of visual methodologies within the sociology of health and illness, suggests that 'the idea of "audience" remains the most underdeveloped and problematic area for the visual sociologist'; a view also evident in Livingstone's (2003:5) critique of media research which she describes as failing to engage with the 'changing social and cultural contexts... (which) shape audience practices'. Rose suggests similar methodological shortcomings within the film studies literature, commenting, humorously, that, despite the characteristic interest in the notion of fantasy within this genre 'no one apparently ever went to any actual audience of any particular film to explore the fantasies of any real spectators' (Rose, 2007: 197).

2.10 While, within cultural studies, the practices and dynamics of watching television and film may be largely unexplored (although see Skeggs et. al., 2008) at a theoretical and conceptual level the proposal that audiences actively make sense of visual media rather than passively absorbing them is helpful. In this respect Hall's (1980) conception of audiences as drawing on both semiotics and internalized interpretative frames and Morley's (1980) classic work on TV constitute a groundbreaking methodological shift to include a consideration of the viewer. However, as several commentators note, these studies are concerned with the ways in which households consume (e.g. who decides what 'the family' will watch) rather than how viewers interpret visual media (Livingstone, 2003; Törrönen, 2001). Additionally, perhaps because of the complexity of watching people watch TV, much audience reception research is confined to interview and focus group generated accounts. As such it cannot capture audiences' lived engagement with the visual. Furthermore, the conceptualisation of the audience, within the broader visual sociology literature, as 'autonomous individuals with little or no influence on (or from) others who are also viewing' (Warren, 2007) means that neither can it elaborate on the ways in which the viewing audience collectively mediates the process of viewing. From our perspective, in which we are interested in the ways in which subjects respond to Dijkstra's photographs, including when they are displayed publicly and privately, this is problematic. What is needed is a methodology for capturing and analysing interpretation which makes visible respondents' individualised and collective relationships to signs, enabling a rigorous analysis of the ways in which multiple readings emerge and collide in the interactions of viewers.

Aims and Methods

3.1 The aim of our research, then, was to consider the potential of a discursive approach to meaning-making in order to explore the interpretative work that people do when viewing images collectively, in shared social spaces. In order to investigate this we convened a discussion group of ten women, including ourselves (n=2) as participant-observers/ facilitators. Each of the discussants was employed, engaged in

postgraduate study or affiliated to the University at which we were both employed. The sample, who were recruited via the University's intranet, ranged in age from their mid-20s to approximately 60 years of age and included six birth mothers (of which we, the authors, constituted two) and four who were then 'childless'/ 'childfree' (Letherby, 2002). Information about maternal status is included as it was made visible and relevant in the group's interactions rather than as a pre-defined analytic category (c.f. Kitzinger, 2000). Prior to the discussion, a paper was circulated to participants describing the aims and purposes of the research and requesting permission to record the session to which we would bring photographs of new mothers. At the meeting we reiterated the aims and purposes, including that we wanted to 'record .. a spontaneous consideration.... (of) your responses... on seeing the photographs' and circulated the three photographs taken by Rineke Dijkstra of mothers with their newborns (see earlier link). We also included 'family' photographs of ourselves taken with our newborns; the implications of which we discuss in the next section alongside our reflexive account of the talk generated by the group. The discussion lasted for one hour and was audio-taped.

A reflexive-discursive approach to interpretation: Methodology and transcription

4.1 Building on the analytic concerns of Pink (2001), Rose (2007) and Bal and Bryson (1991), we wanted to develop a methodology to capture and engage with the interpretative process as it is made visible in the discursive work that people do when viewing images together. Drawing on the theoretical framework of conversation analysis (CA), the ways in which viewers respond to, negotiate and make apparent their understandings of photographs is observable in the everyday methods that they employ when they view images together. CA's analytic focus on the mundane talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 1968) that people use to make and display meaning enables an understanding of the interpretative process as a situated, socially mediated process (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Have, 2001; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Wooffitt, 2005). As Taylor and Littleton (2006: 24) note, 'meanings are not the stable properties of objects in the world but are constructed, carried and modified in talk and interaction'. Further, CA's attention to talk practices or 'ethnomethods' allows an empirically drawn analysis of the ways in which 'context' is embedded in, accomplished and made visible through the situated interactional work that people do when viewing images collectively. In other words, we are suggesting that, through the analytic resources of CA it is possible to elaborate the ways in which viewers attend to both the local interactional context and the wider social, political and cultural milieu in which the viewing takes place.

4.2 In order to make these practices visible, data was transcribed according to the system originally developed within CA by Jefferson (1985) and which continues to evolve (c.f. Goodwin, 2001). The transcribed data follows closely the original audiotape, detailing the talk-in-interaction of the participants as expressed through their speech and its pitch and intonation, including details of non-lexical items such as laughter, in and out-breaths, 'um's', 'er's. These are included because they have been repeatedly demonstrated, within CA, to do important interactional work (Kitzinger, 2000; Wooffitt, 2005). As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998:6) elaborate, rather than being 'vague and inconsequential' these items 'declare a position in some way or another'. The ways in which utterances are produced and formed has interactional consequences, imposing a conditional relevance on what may be said next, signalling its relevance and appropriateness in the continuing interaction (Sacks et. al., 1974). For this reason, data is presented within the paper, not as isolated utterances but as sequences of talk which display the sequential 'turn by turn' accomplishment of interaction (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984). The analytic focus on the ways in which these turns at talk are locally shaped, structured and managed makes visible the methods by which the discussants themselves not only orient to, negotiate and make relevant preferred meanings but also silence each other. As Kitzinger (2000) elaborates:

these tiny and insignificant details *are relevant to the participants* in the conversation, and systematically affect what they do next, and how they do it. If we want to understand what people are saying to one another, and how they come to say it, and what it means to them, then we, as analysts, have to attend to their talk *at the same level of detail as they do* .
(Kitzinger, 2000: 174, original emphasis)

4.3 Our focus on the form of talk is fused with our methodological interest in the ways in which discussants employ descriptors and 'membership category devices' including gender categories such as woman, girl, mother (and potential mother) (Edwards, 1998). Our interest in the ways in which these value-laden cultural resources are invoked and/ or refuted reflects CA's interest in how verbal categories are employed in talk including how they define and regulate membership of social groups (c.f. Edwards, 1998; Kitzinger, 2000). As we explore, the ways in which participants describe and label things, themselves and others and how their choice of a particular category is selected at a particular moment in talk is intensely political and has specific relevance to the immediate interaction. A further analytic focus which CA methods make possible that we consider important is a reflexive consideration of the researcher's role. Within CA and discursive analysis the emphasis on empirically exploring the ways in which social science data is produced in and

through the situated interactions of the researcher and the researched constitutes an important alternative to the 'interminable self analysis and disclosure' (Finlay, 2002) which can afflict reflexive approaches.

4.4 Building on this body of reflexive, interpretative work (c.f. Lomax and Casey, 1998; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Speer and Hutchby, 2003), we propose an analytic focus on our research practice as it is observable in our interactions with participants. This includes a consideration of the values encoded in the photographs we selected of ourselves and which were made visible in our own and participants' talk-in-interaction. Thus, while we may have been motivated to show, through our family photographs, an alternative representation to Dijkstra's images which (in our view) depicted childbirth as something done *to* women rather than done *by* women, we acknowledge and explore through our reflexive analysis, the ways in which these images may be interpreted as reinforcing stereotypes of the 'beatific' mother (Johnston and Swanson, 2004; 2003) in ways which anchor women's bodies in reproductive roles (Annandale and Clark, 1996:25) and which privilege the maternal and suppress 'childless' and 'childfree' identities (Letherby, 1999, 2002). An awareness of our contributions to the process of collective viewing, including how this structured the immediate discursive context in which meanings were negotiated but also the ways in which researcher-discussants were dynamically positioned and positioned themselves vis-à-vis wider cultural narratives, is important for understanding the process of meaning-making (Silva and Wright, 2005). Not least it makes explicit the intellectual and personal presence of the researcher and its implications for female identity and feminist scholarship (c.f. Bott, 2002; Jensen, 2008; Lankshear, 2000; Letherby, 1999, 2000, 2002; Ribbens, 1993).

Analysis

5.1 Drawing on the audio-taped and transcribed material and through the analytic resources of CA, our analysis explores the ways in which viewers made meanings through their reactions to particular images and 'signs' which were mediated by the immediate gendered political context of the discussion group and wider discourses of birth and maternal identity. However, as our methodology captures, this process of meaning-making was intensely complex and political. Who could speak and what they could say about the photographs was contingent on, amongst other things, experience-claims which were themselves sustained by wider discourses of female identity and in particular essentialist discourses which privilege and conflate the idea of women as mothers. This closed down opportunities for participants who were positioned outside this normative category to speak. A second interpretative framework through which participants articulated meaning drew on wider representations of birth and mothering, especially from art and popular culture, in order to make sense of the images. The concept of 'genre' was thus immensely helpful to the participants. Moreover, and as might be expected in an increasingly visually mediated world (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Livingstone, 2003; Mirzeoff, 1999), participants displayed a sophisticated awareness of the idea of genre and the way in which it operates to allow alternative and culturally taboo perspectives. By viewing both sets of photographs through the lens of genre, participants began to see all the images as particular constructions of maternal identity and meaning as fluid and contingent. These different interpretative resources were the subject of ongoing negotiation which, as we now explore, CA makes visible.

Responding to signs: Experience, emotion and memory

6.1 Our analysis demonstrates that viewers respond to photographs, and specifically to particular features of an image in highly individualised ways. Discussants made explicit connections between Dijkstra's images, our family photographs and their own feelings, emotions and memories. This was not a generalised response. Rather, redolent of Barthes' (2000) description of being 'pricked and bruised', individual discussants drew on specific features of the photographs, from aspects of the women's poses such as 'hunched' shoulders and 'black' eyes which resonated with their own memories and experiences. Signs clearly invoke particular recollections and responses which are central to viewers' interpretations which are both intensely personal while, at the same time mediated by the immediate discursive context (the gender of the group) and wider cultural discourses (about birth and mothering). As the following sequence of talk indicates, Heidi's initial sense-making of Dijkstra's photographs is intimately intertwined with her experiences of childbirth and her recollection of these experiences which are themselves mediated through photographs taken, viewed and re-viewed of herself after the birth of her own son:

Sequence One: 'I can see two photographs'

- 20 **Heidi** I can see two photographs of
 21 me:: (0.2) in my mind now alongside the::se and I thought
 []
- 22 *Others* m::
 23 **Heidi** of them immediately actually::: (.) but I was
 []
- 24 *Helen* Did you
 25 **Heidi** was kind of (0.2) a bit in shock after I had given birth so I was totally
 26 covered up and all you can see is my fa::ce (0.4) and one face I looked like
 []
- 27 *Other* um
 28 **Heidi** totally blissful-the way you are supposed to look (.)
 []
- 29 *Helen* ahah
 30 **Heidi** and the other where-and the other one (0.2) it frightens me to look at it
 31 I look like (.) like like I'm dead actually (.) like a corpse or
 []
- 32 *Other* ah::
 33 **Heidi** something (.) honestly I do. My eyes are just (.) gone (.) and
 []
- 34 *Other* ((murmur))
 35 **Heidi** my jaw's sla::ck and it looks like the way I might
 36 look ahah) when ahah
 37 *Helen* yeah
 38 **Heidi** like I really and the two of them are the two ways that I
 39 kind of (0.3) my way into that that particular that that birth that I have
 40 (0.3) I mean (0.2) it wasn't (0.2) anything (.)
 41 I mea::n (0.4) I think th-the one I found to be the the (.) there's there's
 42 the body being totally exposed and unu::sually exposed and the (.) body
 43 being exposed when it's an unusual leaking sha:pe you know
 []
- 44 *Helen* um
 45 **Heidi** - milk and blood and everything (.) but there's also
 46 something about that kind of tha:t (.) there's something about the
 47 (.) rawness (.) of that::: fa↑::ce and
 []
- 48 *Other* um↑:
 49 **Heidi** (.) you know (.) what your body's just been through written on your face
 50 (.) that I've (.) you know (.)
 []
- 51 *Other* yeah::↑
 52 **Heidi** I don't think I'd share it with the group (.) actually
 []
- 53 *Other* um::
 54 **Heidi** but the blissful one I'd be delighted to! It's one of my
 []
- 55 *Others* ((murmurs))
 56 **Heidi** favourite photographs (.)
 57 *Others* ((murmurs))

6.2 As Heidi explains, it is not the 'total exposure' of the women's bodies that evoke a particular response for her but the ways in which the bodies are 'unusually exposed' (leaking milk and blood) and especially the 'rawness' which, as she describes, encodes both the embodied experience of childbirth and her own memories of childbirth during which she had been photographed looking corpse-like. As well as demonstrating an immediate, personalised response to the photographs, Heidi's comments also reflexively acknowledge the idea of photographs as canvasses to convey multiple, negotiated meanings and the 'significance of the image for understandings of the self' (Lury, 1998:2). As Heidi explains, there are two images, taken within moments of each other, which tell particular versions of her birth story and birth narratives more generally. One of which, she suggests, echoes the familiar and publicly acceptable face of birth; the 'blissful' contented new mother and one, which is private and largely (arguably) invisible from public discourse. The latter she suggests portrays the unpredictability, shock and trauma of childbirth. This theme of private and publicly acceptable narratives and images of childbirth and motherhood was a

recurring topic in the discussion which we will return to shortly

6.3 The connection between personal experience and interpretation which Heidi's narrative makes explicit is also evident in Carla's response to the photograph of Julie in which she is wearing disposable maternity briefs. As Carla explains, seeing these 'triggered' memories of similar pants, that she had purchased in preparation for childbirth, and their painful association with the birth of her child. In her narrative, which shares some of the same organisational features and rhetorical devices as Heidi's account, the briefs are symbolic of a painful memory of birth 'gone-wrong', feelings of failure, unpreparedness and have being 'let down' by a conspiracy of silence about the embodied experience of childbirth (Miller, 2005; Pollock, 1999):

Sequence Two: 'Ooh I've had pants like that'

58 **Carla** because at first I thought 'ooh, I've had pants like that (.) Weren't
[
59 *Others* yes
60 **Carla** they horrible!
61 *Other* yes
[
62 *Other* um
63 **Carla** You know, that was my very first thought (.)
64 But it's not my first thought that I would then share
65 [(want to share)
66 *Other*
67 **Carla** in this sort of thing (0.4)
68 I mean, now you've obviously given permission to us to
69 talk about other things it triggered off (.) all sorts (.) of things (.)
70 *Others* Um um
71 **Carla** and all those memories come flooding forward.
72 []
73 *Other* um
(1.4)
74 **Carla** But it's interesting because that's all happened (.) and I think
75 from a research point of view that fascinates me,
76 because that's my private, (um um um) internal voice
77 *Other* []
yes

And (some minutes later in the transcript)

200 **Carla** It's like there's a shared women's story, isn't there (0.4) of giving birth
 201 (.) and it's like there are myths of: 'it's painful but we
 202 don't actually talk about it' - you know?' We don't actually
 203 I remember the horror I → I went to NCT classes (.) which (.) did
 204 not prepare me for the sheer horror of giving birth in my
 205 circumstances which was a very difficult first time.
 206 Lots of women go through very complex first time births → and my
 207 NCT class which had all been breathing (h) and you know
 208 ahah they were the ones I bought
 [

209 *Others* ahah

210 **Carla** the pants from and that's why immediately
 211 it triggered it off! You know because the NCT said they were
 212 really good pants

213 *Others* ahaha
 [

214 **Carla** ahaha and I remember I was furious at the NCT the very
 215 next day, because they'd let me down
 216 My body had let me down. It wasn't normal and natural and nice.
 217 It was raw and (0.4) bloody and horrible and the cut and emergency
 218 and (0.2) you know threatening and risk and all of those terms which
 219 (0.3) you know we don't take part in until after the event

220 *Others* yes yes yes.

221 **Carla** Then you meet another woman who's had an awful birth
 222 and you talk but then you're only allowed to speak that story for so long

223 *Others* yes

224 **Carla** You can't carry on telling that story, else you're seen you know to not
 225 get over it you have a problem. You're only allowed to relive that
 226 painful – the actual event of the birth for a short, short legitimate time
 227 and you focus on this lovely image of being the mum. And so our
 226 actual stories of giving birth are very sanitised really aren't they? which
 227 these pictures contradict.

228 *Others* um

6.4 Carla's response, like Heidi's, is both personal and emotional and, as such, is significant in the context of theoretical approaches such as semiotics which seek to explicate meaning in the signs and composition of an image. Carla's comments make clear that while disposable pants might have a common, publicly available meaning, they are also invested with personal meanings which are brought to bear in the process of viewing. Of further methodological importance are the ways in which these personal responses may, more often, remain unvoiced. While both women explain that these were their 'very first thought'(s), these are not thoughts they would typically share. A comment which receives support from other members of the discussion group (indicated by the overlapping 'want to share' at L66 and 'yes' at line 77). Rather, as Carla makes apparent, there are two culturally available birth stories; one which is sustained by beatific portrayals of motherhood and the largely invisible private version which may be shared in particular social circumstances (with others who have had an 'awful birth') and in a socially delineated time-frame (Pollock, 1999).

6.5 The hegemonic authority of the 'normal, natural and nice' birth story and its power to shape what may be both seen and spoken about birth is evident in the way Carla speaks about the images she is viewing and in the rhetorical work she does in this context. Close inspection of the sequence indicates that Carla is not simply presenting a view about the difficulty of giving birth as represented in Dijkstra's photographs. Rather, she works up a particular position about the physiologically and psychologically traumatic nature of birth and its aftermath in a way which attests to its status as non-normative and taboo. This can be seen, for example, in her deployment of an insertion sequence at L203-206 in which, in talk uttered more rapidly than surrounding talk, she breaks off from her claim that birth is painful and its pain unspoken, in order to explain that she was left unprepared, like many other women, for the difficulties of giving birth for the first time (c.f. Miller, 2005). Carla can thus be seen as both authenticating and giving evidence for her claim to know this and accomplishing a form of moral accounting work in order to counter possible negative assumptions about her traumatic experiences and failure to birth 'properly' (Kukla, 2008; Lyerly, 2006). The inclusion of this sequence which extends her turn and which she must do additional work to retain (by increasing the pace of her speech) is indicative of potential 'trouble' and as rhetorical work which guards against the construction of a 'deficit identity' (Reynolds and Taylor, 2004) in the context of the cultural hegemony about 'normal' birthing experiences. Such accounts are ordinarily negatively sanctioned and largely invisible (Miller, 2005), both 'everywhere and nowhere... shamed to the edges of conversation' (Pollock, 1999:1)

6.6 The authority of this normative idea is sustained, as Carla explains, in 'this lovely image of being a mum' (L227). Carla's comments here drawing on the powerful genre of mother and baby photographs reflected in the images of Janet and Helen. This idea of a public and a private childbirth discourse which mediate both what can be seen and said about birth was a recurrent thread in the discussion. Jill, for instance, highlighted how public and private discourses reflexively contribute to sanitised photographs of women ('Looking like a normal "just given birth" mum') and the silencing of private accounts which attest to the momentous exertions of childbirth, its unpredictability and unsettling association with risk. The ways in which these discourses were made visible through these photographic genres suggests ways in which the visual might enable women to give voice to hitherto stigmatized identities and has important implications for the potential of the visual as a research method for capturing hidden or difficult to articulate narratives, memories and experiences.

Responding to the social: mediated interpretative work

7.1 In the previous section we explored how participants responded in visceral and emotive ways to features of photographs whilst also exploring the ways in which these interpretations were socially mediated by hegemonic ideas about what is appropriate to say in the discussion group. Mothers whose experiences differed from dominant ideologies about childbirth could be seen to do extra discursive work to avoid the potential stigma associated with non-normative feelings around childbirth which these images could be seen to both reinforce and resist. In this way, then, the wider discursive and cultural contexts can be seen to mediate the interpretative process. In this section we extend the analysis to consider the ways in which the immediate discursive context of the discussion group, including our own contributions as researchers, appeared to mediate these public and private meanings, rendering some visible and others, as we shall see, less so. As Carla explains, the discussion group context enabled her to articulate a range of reactions to the photographs but it is important to note that these were not immediately voiced rather, they emerged sometime into the discussion and only after one of the authors (Helen) had expressed her surprise that no one had yet mentioned their own birth experiences:

Sequence 3: 'What's really interesting'

9 **Helen** Y↑ e:: ↓s. (0.4) well you see (.) Janet and I:: (0.2) what's really
 []
 10 *Other* um
 11 **Helen** interesting so far, is that (0.2) Janet and I can't stop- maybe because
 12 we've now we've talked a lot about these (h)
 13 we can't help talking about them in relation to
 14 our own birth experiences and I expected
 15 people to want to talk about their own (.) birth experience
 16 but nobody has ahah ((laughter bubbling through 'nobody has'))
 []
 17 *Others* ((several people begin speaking at once))
 18 *Other* actually I
 []
 19 *Other* it's interesting
 []
 20 *Heidi* I can see two photographs of

7.2 As the transcript displays, Helen's comment generates a great deal of enthusiasm evidenced by the competition for a turn at talk at L17-19 which elicits, in turn, contributions from Heidi, Carla and Jill about the ways in which the images resonated with their own birth experiences. While initially discussants struggled to verbalise responses beyond particular familiar representations of 'happy smiling mums', once they are 'given permission' to draw upon personal experience in their interpretation of the images they do so energetically while articulating that this talk is non-normative in most other contexts (Miller, 2005; Pollock, 1999). However, in opening up discussion in this way opportunities for women who hadn't had children were simultaneously closed down. As a result there are lengthy sequences during which non-mothers are largely silent or in which their contributions appear to be determined by their construction as potential mothers as the next sequence illustrates.

Sequence 4: 'As someone who hasn't had children'

- 1 **Louise** It's funny as someone who hasn't had children
2 and when you gave me the pack, because I'd already seen
3 them, I was like 'oh let's get through these' and I came to these ones
4 ((family photos)), and I was like 'oh that so nice,' and just feeling really
5 relieved (0.2) and that was very attractive. Whereas the first few were really
6 difficult (.) to look at.
7 *Others* right
8 *Helen* yes
9 *Louise* *to live with really*
10 *Jill* -But even as somebody that's had children, I found them difficult to look at.
11 It's not a (.) pose that I was in myself. Whereas the others then yeah I- it could
12 be anyone really but those (.) it's just so (0.6) just not what you expect, is it? -
13 *Heidi* -But was it something for you
14 *Heidi* thinking (.) 'I might go through this at some point?' and it's kind of
[]
15 **Louise** Yeah Yeah! This is something I've got to think about and
16 I've got to look at. Oh - it's okay there is positive images and you know
[]
17 *Heidi* yeah
18 **Louise** they do look happy and they're very beautiful pictures
19 *Carla* But this ((Dijkstra' images)) is more painful isn't it?

7.3 This hierarchy of experience-claims is evident in sequence four in which Louise locates her response to both sets of images in her reproductive biography as 'someone who hasn't had children' and the tentative suggestion that she might (suggested by her utterance 'feeling really relieved'). Such a positioning can be interpreted as a means by which she gives evidence for her interpretation of the photographs as both 'nice' and 'difficult to look at' and mirrors the deployment of biographically verified knowledge which dominated the earlier discussion. This privileging of maternal ways of knowing is reinforced by Jill's rapid uptake of a turn at talk at line 10. Her utterance 'but even as somebody that's had children...' can be seen to prioritise maternal status as offering unique insight into the meaning of these photographs and adds to the body of sociological, predominantly feminist analysis which documents and critiques the cultural legitimacy conferred to such insights (Annandale and Clark, 1996; Jensen, 2008; Letherby, 1999; Malson and Swann, 2003). Of further significance in this sequence is the way in which Louise's identity as 'someone who has not had children' is actively taken up and transformed into her status as a potential mother. As Heidi says, in a rapid uptake of a turn at talk at line 13 'But was it something for you thinking (.) 'I might go through this at some point?' to which Louise responds enthusiastically 'Yeah yeah! This is something I've got to think about and I've got to look at...'; her response attesting to the relevance of this status in this context. In such ways the women draw upon normative categories of womanhood to construct their own and each other's identities vis-à-vis the photographs. However, while Louise does not resist this positioning and even actively embraces it in this context, for other women it was more problematic. This can be seen in the different ways in which the discussants articulate their responses to a photograph of Janet and her baby illustrated in the following sequence.

Sequence 5: 'It's a classic Madonna pose'

- 7 Heidi And is there something about (0.2) I don't know if there was (0.3)
8 but kind of an awareness of (0.4) 'I'm posing with my baby (0.2)
- 9 Janet [Yes
10 in hospital the baby is in the crook of my arm-
- 11 Rachel -> Yes it's a classic Madonna pose ->
- 12 Heidi [This is my baby
13 ahah (h) You know, there's something almost quite um:: (0.8) standard
- 14 Others [aha
15 Heidi or obviously not rehearsed - because it's your first baby-
16 but kind of an awareness of stepping into having your first baby and being
- 17 [yes
18 one of a long, long line of women who have posed like this for a
- 19 Helen [yes
20 Heidi camera or a painter or whatever, you know?

7.4 Heidi typically uses the first person to talk about the image, her repeated use of the first person singular in the utterance 'I'm posing with my baby in hospital...' locates herself as the central character in the narrative suggested by the photograph. Rachel, by contrast, and in a form rarely observed in this discussion group uses the impersonal to introduce the idea of a genre of new motherhood imagery ('Yes it's a classic Madonna pose'). However, noticeably, her contribution is un-acknowledged. Rather, Heidi forcefully resumes her narrative: 'This is my baby..' In fact, the two women are making similar claims about the power of genre to inform the ways in which the group may both generate and interpret such images. At the same time, the ways in which Heidi's comparatively lengthy response vigorously employs the personal and finds acknowledgement from the group (the overlapping affirmative 'yes' at lines 9, 17 and 19) forms a marked contrast to Rachel's comparatively short and verbally un-acknowledged 'factual' claim. This suggests that, when viewing images there is a hierarchy of experience claims which, here, is mediated by normative assumptions about motherhood and its meaning. As this next section considers, this includes the values and assumptions that we, as researchers, brought to the meaning-making process through our choices of particular family photographs, our visible identities as mothers and in the particular discourses we ourselves utilised to talk about these photographs.

Navigating gendered assumptions: Mothers, gendered identity and the visual

8.1 We now examine the ways in which our interactions with discussants helped construct a particular (gendered) viewing context. In so doing, we reinforce our earlier points about recognizing how our contributions to the discussion group, not least the choices we made to include a selection of our family photographs, had implications for the interpretative work that our discussants were doing and our claims about how they did it. The photographs of Helen and her daughter were selected because, in her view, they capture moments immediately after her daughter's birth and the first days of motherhood in ways which challenge the physical discomfort and lack of agency of Dijkstra's mothers. Similarly, Janet's photographs capture, for her, the memories and experiences of the first few days of her relationship with each of her sons. At one level, both sets of images represent a particular historically contingent genre of mother and baby portraits. Janet's photographs, taken in the early 1980s, reflect a visual trope that is recognized and picked up in the discussion group's comments about 'fashions and trends and...ways of being photographed and ways of presenting baby' (sequence six below). Helen's photographs too, taken in the late 1990s, reflect a more recent genre of family photography in which parents and children are photographed less formally. These include the posed casualness created, and widely emulated, by Venture photography (<http://www.venturephotography.com/uk>) and more intimate family portraits captured and shared on social networking sites such as facebook, myspace and flickr.

8.2 However, it is important to consider how these meanings were employed hierarchically in ways which universalised women as mothers and potential mothers, mirroring and making relevant wider narratives of gender. This can be seen in the interpretations of Janet and Helen's photographs as reinforcing stereotyped ideas of the 'beatific mother' reproduced in religious and cultural iconography (sequence five earlier) but also in the ways in which these representations were invoked in discussants' narratives, perpetuating the hegemony that all women are or will be mothers (Johnston and Swanson, 2003, 2004; Letherby, 1999). As we have earlier noted, photographs of us were described as 'very beautiful' (line 18, sequence four).

Additionally, our discussants did, as the analysis of this sequence considered, position themselves vis-à-vis the dominant discourse that 'woman=mother=woman' (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006: 40).

8.3 This section will now briefly revisit these sequences in order to explore how our presence as researchers/discussants and the visible representations of ourselves as mothers in the photographic text contributed to discussants' interpretative work. This is examined with reference to the talk which immediately proceeds Heidi's response to the photograph of Janet and her son (sequence five, lines 18-20, reproduced in sequence six below) in which she invokes a meta-narrative in which feminine identity is located in pre-destined biological motherhood.

Sequence 6: 'It's almost like everyone gets to have a picture'

18 of a long, long line of women who have posed like this for a
[
19 *Helen* yes
20 *Heidi* camera or a painter or whatever, you know?
21 *Helen* Yes! interestingly, during- whilst we were getting ready (to come)
22 another colleague Joe Smith his daughter-in-law has just had his
23 first grandson. He e-mailed me all these pictures of the baby
24 in hospital with his daughter-in-law, and I really wanted to ask his
25 permission to bring them, because they are a version of this (0.2)
26 It's almost like everyone gets to have a picture
27 *Janet* -I mean that's nearly 30 years old now, so that's the sort of-
28 *Rachel* -Down to the white frilly nightie!
29 *Janet* Do you know when I looked, I thought 'God! I think
30 that's (maud.) the same nightdress!
[
31 (All) ((laughter)) ((laughter))
32 *Carla* And you've still got it-haven't you!
33 (All) Laughter
34 *Janet* I'll give it a shake just in case I need it again.
35 *Heidi* But it's interesting (0.4) I'm thinking about now there's lots of ways
36 that babies get photographed. There's always one of someone
37 holding a little foot or clinging on...you know? (0.4) Sort of
38 (All) (murmurs)
39 Fashions and trends and kinds of ways of...
((sequence continues with participants discussing the more recent
trend for photographing babies in 'flower pots and cabbages'))

8.4 Here we can see how Helen's response at line 26 does not challenge or resist Heidi's interpretation. Rather, her utterance 'It's almost like everyone gets to have a picture' can be seen to affirm the suggestion that all women will, at some point in their lives, be represented in this manner (and the implication that they will be biological mothers). In this way, like Heidi, she infers the dominant discourse of 'motherhood for all' (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006) and through which the discussants elaborate on the ways in which mother and baby photography is both ubiquitous ('Down to the white frilly nightie!') and subject to 'fashion and trends'. Of further relevance is the ways in which these ideas are articulated with particular reference to Janet's reproductive capacity, made possible through the visible representation of Janet-as-mother in the text of the photographs and her physical presence as a researcher-discussant. This enabled discussants to position Janet according to the pronatalist discourse (that all women will be mothers and that all mothers will want to repeat the mothering experience) in ways which subtly reinforce this hegemony which, in the normative order of conversation, are difficult to resist (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

8.5 This analysis illustrates the ways in which the viewing context was shaped by our activities as researchers and, importantly, how these activities were themselves shaped by the wider discursive milieu in which gendered hierarchies of woman-hood structure society. In making visible 'what is frequently silenced... the differences between women' (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006: 35) this analysis adds to feminist research in order to elaborate the ways in which sanctioned and stigmatised identities are co-produced in 'live' interactions between women. In this respect, the ways in which our activities enabled some women to reveal non-normative identities which, in turn, rendered others less visible, suggests the ways in which all women, irrespective of maternal status 'are positioned and have to position themselves in relation to pre-existing narratives of gender' (Ramsay and Letherby, 2006: 35). While Gatrell (2010); Kukla (2008), Hoffman (2009) and others (c.f. Arendell, 2000) suggest the ways in which maternal identities are 'silenced' and 'measured' and Ramsay and Letherby (2006), the power of meta-narratives in shaping non-mother's gendered workplace experiences, our analysis makes explicit the ways in which pre-existing hierarchies of

gender are talked into being in interactions between women of varying maternal status in ways which reaffirm dominant social norms.

Summary and Conclusion

9.1 In summary, we have suggested that a conversation analytically informed engagement with the interpretative process can be helpful in exploring the ways in which viewers respond to and make meaning when they view images together. In contrast to theoretical and methodological approaches which are concerned with the sites of the image and its production as sources of meaning-making, the theoretical framework of CA makes visible the social forces which mediate and inform viewers' interpretative work. As we have elaborated, meaning is personal, contested and co-constructed in the process of viewing images collectively. Viewers draw on personal experience which is both reflexively informed and negotiated in the context of dominant genres of representation and hierarchies of knowledge. Who may speak and who decides what is relevant in this context is mediated by experience-claims, bound up with reproductive histories, hierarchies of knowledge and wider visual representations and discourses of birth and motherhood. Our analysis, and particularly the suggestion that some views may be rendered invisible by hegemonic ideas and hierarchies of experience has methodological implications for researchers working with the visual and for considering how the significance of emotion and memory can be integrated into such work. Additionally, our work points to how the visual may usefully add to logocentric methods, facilitating the narration of accounts ordinarily stigmatised and silenced. However, we add a note of caution about the ways in which, by making particular dimensions of the personal powerfully present, collective viewing may also result in other identities being afforded less status or value.

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Appendix

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
11	Line number: Each line of transcribed talk is numbered to facilitate reference
Helen	Denotes the speaker. Discussants are referred to by pseudonyms
Other/s	Refers to an unidentified speaker/s
[]	Indicates an overlap in speakers' talk
(0.5)	Indicates a pause in speech, in this case of 0.5 seconds
(.)	Indicates a pause of less than one tenth of a second
-	Indicates no pause between speakers
<u>word</u>	Indicates speaker's <u>stress</u> on a word or phrase
Word	Indicates a quietly spoken word or phrase
(word)	Indicates transcriber's uncertainty about what was said
wo:rd	Indicates extension of the word or sound preceding. Indicates lengthening of the sound preceding the colon. The more colons the longer the length of the sound. e.g. <i>Saturday:::</i>
word↑	Indicates a rise in intonation occurring in the sound preceding the symbol. May also be used ↑word↑ to indicate an entire word or phrase produced as such.
word↓	Indicates a fall in intonation occurring in the sound preceding the symbol. May also be used ↓word↓ to indicate an entire word or phrase produced as such.
.h.h	Indicates an out-breath
h h	Indicates an in-breath
←word←	Indicates a word (or phrase) spoken more slowly than surrounding text
→word→	Indicates a word (or phrase) spoken more rapidly than surrounding text
((word))	Indicates transcriber's description
. ? ,	Indicates speaker's intonation
aha	Indicates laughter immediately preceding and or bubbling through a word or phrase as indicated by its position in the transcript

Adapted from system developed by Goodwin (1981); Jefferson (1985) and Heath (1986) and described in Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and Silverman (1993).

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