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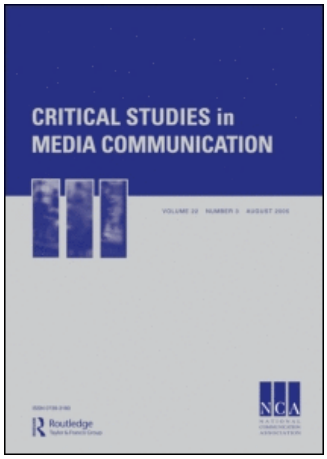

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Why We Say "Cheese": Producing the Smile in Snapshot Photography

Christina Kotchemidova

This essay explores the history of the toothy smile as a standard expression in snapshots. An analysis of popular photo journals throughout the twentieth century suggests that Kodak played a leadership role in shaping the conceptualization and the cultural habits around photography at the time when the technology was becoming mass-consumed. The Eastman Corporation actively and innovatively used the idea of consumer happiness in its persuasion work, skillfully exploiting visual codee.

Keywords: Popular Photography; Snapshot; Smile; "Say Cheese"; History; Kodak; Advertising; Consumer Happiness

The "Say cheese" smile characteristic of contemporary popular photo culture has a history.[1] Although its exact starting date cannot be established, we can easily contrast it to the invariably serious facial expression of nineteenth-century photos. Victorian families wishing to appear happy simply posed in front of the family property (Hirsch, 1981). The typical expression in early group photos and *cartes-de-visite* followed traditional European portraiture, which depicted solemn faces, occasionally softened by a Mona Lisa curve of the lips. In the fine arts a grin was only characteristic of peasants, drunkards, children, and halfwits, suggesting low class or some other deficiency (Schroeder, 1998). The only toothy smile in American nineteenth-century illustration art belongs to Huckleberry Finn—an Irish peasant child (Schroeder, 1998). Etiquette codes of the past demanded that the mouth be carefully controlled; beauty standards likewise called for a small mouth. Accordingly, the first photo studio in London, established in 1841, adopted the locution "Say *prunes*" to help sitters form

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a small mouth (Leggat, 1997). Professional studio portraiture to this day avoids big smiles (Schroeder, 1998). Yet open smiles are characteristic of twentieth-century snapshots[2] such as family pictures, yearbook portraits, and wedding photos, where "one cannot but be struck by the sameness of expression on the faces, from the bride and groom all the way to the flower girls. It is, what's more, a standard look, with all the participants mouthing *cheese* to summon up smiles" (Schroeder, 1998, p. 137, quoting King, 1984).

The few studies of the smile in photography relate the "Say cheese" custom to the speedy camera shutter, attractive faces in media and politics, and the rise of dental care which created the aesthetic of the teeth. Whereas prolonged posing in the early days of photography made maintaining a smile in front of the camera difficult, Trumble (2004) suggests that we started saying "cheese" with the acceleration of the camera click to emulate movie stars. Schroeder (1998) points out the role of orthodontics and mouth product advertising in promoting the image of white aligned teeth. Once orthodontic services helped liberate the mouth from constant regulation, he says, the smile became a social reality reproduced mass-scale in photos as the first generation of children growing up with braces came to maturity in the 1970s.

Yet wearing tooth braces did not become widely accepted *until* the late 1970s (Harding, 2000). A national study conducted 1963–1965 found that 2.5% of U.S. children aged 6–11 had used braces (Kelly, Sanchez, & Van Kirk, 1973). A second study conducted 1966–1970 on all U.S. children aged 12–17 found that 10.7% had used braces (Kelly & Harvey, 1977). So, only about 13% of U.S. children who turned 21 sometime in the 1970s had their teeth straightened. The number seems too small to define orthodontics as the main smile-producing factor. Therefore, instead of viewing the advent of the smile as a process of "mouth liberalization," which presupposes a natural desire to smile for a picture (albeit one long culturally banned), I propose looking at this twentieth-century norm as a cultural construction. Without a doubt, people have always smiled. But aesthetic criteria change over time and, in any case, the toothy smile was adopted as a standard in a certain time, place, and media culture, namely, twentieth-century American snapshot photography.

As a learned, symbolic behavior the "Say cheese" smile merits a critical communication analysis. Its widespread practice invites the Gramscian theory of "consent," where individuals willingly subjugate themselves to ideologies when offered no alternatives. The process is especially characteristic of monopoly capitalism, where information is monopolized by economic powers. Hall (1982/1995) proposes the notion of "cultural leadership" to explain the diffusion of consent in formally democratic societies. For example, media exercise ideological leadership when they construct meanings favoring the interests of the powerful and legitimize them by "aligning" to the general interests of the majority (Hall, 1982). In the case of new technologies, cultural leadership is easily gained by unique expertise and producer's power. Thus technologies often create hegemonic cultures in line with the interests of the principal agent spreading the technology. For example, that photography changed the concept of news by giving it a strong visual bias is well known; but Goldberg (1999) shows that this transformation required the agency of powerful press institutions

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publishing photographs, such as the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, the French *Vu*, and the American *Life*. According to Goldberg (1999, p. 203), "With the growth of the picture magazines the picture culture triumphantly took over, without so much as a battle. Society, long since infiltrated, happily surrendered." Hence, our empirical observation of the learned consensual practice of the photographic smile raises the question: *how* did this consensus arise and *who* produced it? Answering this requires looking at the driving forces that made photography a mass habit and exploring their cultural role.

Kodak's Cultural Leadership

In the United States the photographic industry of the first half of the twentieth century was virtually a Kodak monopoly (Brayer, 1996). Eastman Kodak developed giant film-manufacturing and photo-finishing industries and maintained long-term market dominance in the camera, film-making, and film-developing businesses (Flynn, n.d.). Other companies in this sector were much smaller and so, instead of trying to compete, often preferred affiliating with Kodak. Between 1892 and 1912 Eastman acquired 62 photography-related companies. By 1915 it produced 90% of all U.S. film; one judge said it controlled between 75% and 80% of the entire photo trade and "obtained a monopoly thereof" (Brayer, 1996, p. 394). The Eastman Corporation was periodically sued under antitrust law for monopolizing the market, for the first time in 1902, and until as recently as 1997 (Brayer, 1996; Flynn, n.d.).

Until the turn of the century photography had been the province of the well-to-do. With the production of the $1 Brownie camera in 1900, however, Kodak aggressively set out to create a mass market. As Slater (1991) observed, Kodak "grew by selling the very idea of photography to the public" (p. 57). Each year it turned out dozens of books and pamphlets designed to advise both beginners and more advanced photographers (West, 2000). It produced series of manuals, such as *Kodak Primer* (1888), *Kodak Trade Circular* (1899, 1916), *Do I Want a Camera?* (1913), *At Home with Kodak* (1922), *The Home of Kodak* (published every several years), *Kodaks and Kodak Supplies* (1917), and *Kodak Salesman* (1915, 1928), among others. It owned the major trade journals in the early decades of the twentieth century: *Studio Light*, *Kodak News*, *Image*, *The Kodak Recorder*, *Aperture*, *Kodakery*, *Kodak Magazine*, as well as other minor ones. Kodak also partially sponsored the remaining trade journals it did not own. This vast literature was targeted at a wide range of amateurs and vocational photographers. For example, *Kodakery* was subtitled "A magazine for amateur photographers" whose editors and contributors "knew how to write about it [photography] in a simple way that the amateur could understand" (West, 2000, p. 52); *Studio Light* was named "A magazine for the profession" defining the professional photographer as "a happy combination of the practical common sense businessman and the artist" (Manipulation troubles, 1915, p. 4).

During the first half of the century Kodak also heavily advertised in all prominent national magazines: *Century*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *McClure's*, *Scribner's*, *Truth Magazine*,

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Scientific American, *Cosmopolitan, Ladies' Home Journal*, *Munsey's Magazine*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Youth's Companion*, *American Boy*, *St. Nicholas*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Country Life in America*, *Field and Stream*, *Outing Magazine*, *Illustrated Outdoor World and Recreation*, and so on (West, 2000). It seems fair to say that Kodak pioneered and dominated the bulk of what was published on photography at the time when photography was first becoming popular.[3] By establishing itself as the leading expert on photography, the company exercised cultural leadership and actively framed the way photography was to be used and conceptualized in the culture at large. Emerging photo magazines belonging to other companies, such as *American Photography*, owned by the American Association of Photographers, usually reproduced the Kodak paradigm in their educational and promotional materials. As Nickel (1998) said, "Eastman created not just a product, but a culture" (p. 10).

Stuart Ewen (1976) has pointed out that cultural habits are often created in relation to products; various industries help form mass habits with their educational and advertising campaigns. Early twentieth century producers of goods and services claimed to be civilizing the consumer while teaching him/her manners and style in line with their own corporate interests. For example, the toothbrush industry sponsored "tooth-brush drills" in schools. Language institutes cultivated the mastery of English as part of a graceful social self (Ewen, 1976). Kodak contributed to the tendency of civilizing Americans by creating the ethic of picture-taking.

Constructing Photography as Fun

The primary strategy of American advertising shifted during the 1920s, when the "warning" type of ad gave way to the "product-satisfaction" ad (Lears, 1983; Marchand, 1986). Early twentieth-century advertising pointed to human handicaps and threatened the consumer with social failure if s/he did not remediate with a certain product. For example, Listerine warned that bad breath led to spinsterhood (Fox, 1984). Anti-dandruff shampoo ads attacked readers with dandruff as "guilty" (Marchand, 1986, p. 21). But in the 1920s advertisers started emphasizing the positive experience of using a product. Given the success of a Metropolitan Life Insurance Company ad campaign that stressed a healthy and happy life, portraying consumer happiness became the paramount directive of advertising (French, 1926). Soap advertising sold "afternoons of leisure." Radios, to take another example, were promoted with the claim: "Here is a picture, not of a radio, but of keen enjoyment" (Marchand, 1986, p. 23).

Eastman Kodak was one of the pioneers in this focus on the pleasure of consumption. As early as 1893 the company introduced the Kodak Girl, a stylishly dressed girl who functioned as Kodak's primary sales icon for 80 years, most prominently between 1910 and 1950 (Coe, 1989). Shooting pictures of children, vacations, outings, and picnics with a portable camera, the Kodak Girl seemed to enjoy herself fabulously. The message of consumer happiness radiated from her ever-present smile (Figure 1).

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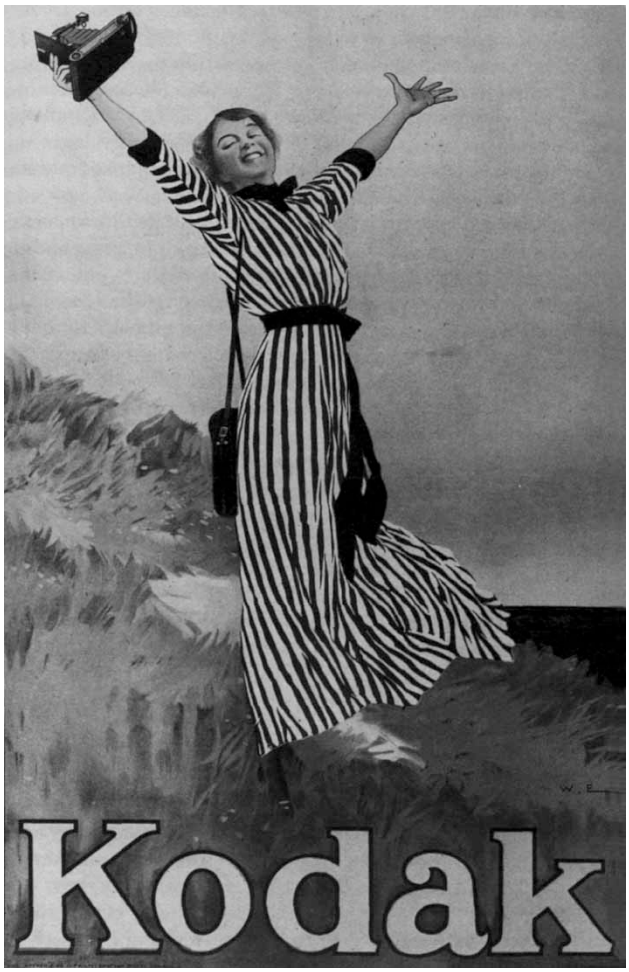

Figure 1. Kodak girl poster, 1913.

Kodak marketed photography as play. The hard labor of film-developing and photo-printing was reserved for the Kodak laboratories, a point stressed in the company slogan, "You press the button, we do the rest." Shooting pictures, in contrast, was presented as simple enough for girls to handle. Cameras were marketed as toys and children were featured in Kodak ads (West, 2000). Brownies, named after the little folk creatures of children's tales, were donated free to 12-year-olds, with the hint that adults could also use them (Coe, 1989). Simplicity, experimentation, and fun became the hallmarks of the photographic experience.

Nonetheless, since to be photographed is not necessarily a happy experience, Kodak did an enormous amount of work to construct the experience of the sitter. Even today people in many societies tend to shy away from the camera. Children are often frightened by cameras. Many tribal cultures avoid having their likeness taken (Trumble, 2004). Sontag (1977) argues that taking someone's picture is

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a predatory act that transforms the sitter into an object symbolically owned. Indeed, much of the language around photography derives from the hunting metaphor (to "shoot" a picture, to "capture" a scene, to "aim" with the camera, to "catch" a moment; a "snap-shot" being a quick gunshot taken without deliberate aim, and so forth). The use of the camera resembles the use of the gun which, for Sontag, makes photography a fantasy tool of power. Shooting is based on gazing, an act of intrusion itself, often associated with sexual aggression. Historically, women have been the object of gazing more than men, and some societies with highly differentiated gender roles, such as some rural Middle East communities, continue to regard photography as an occupation more appropriate for men than women. For Berger (1972/1982), the subject-viewer and the painted woman-object in the European genre of "the nude" are bound in a power relationship. This structure is fully valid for photography, where the power of the gazer is enhanced by the protruding apparatus aimed at the human object.[4]

Not surprisingly, early amateur portraits published in *Studio Light* showed a sense of unease and fright before the camera (Figure 2). This nervousness had to be overcome if photography was to become popular. Kodak set out to mastermind the process. As a first step in engineering photographic consent, the company instructed professional photographers how to lure customers into the studio. Its journals recommended using the discourse of pleasure.

> I would tell people . . . that it is now just as enjoyable to go to a studio as it is to go to a large drapery establishment. I would talk about the charming pictures which show the latest fashions in dress, about the new styles of finishing and mounting, toys for amusing children—in fact, anything pleasant.

Thus advises an anonymous photographer in *Studio Light* who refuses to be called an "operator" and insists that the term "the operation room" should be replaced by "studio." "I would never refer to being photographed as an 'operation', I would never speak of 'instruments' . . ." ("Is there a better name?" 1915, p. 4). Kodak's journals framed the photographic experience in the discourse of shopping and playing, while carefully avoiding the discourse of surgery, for example, which provided another possible way of talking about photographing but was obviously not in its interest. During the first two decades of the century Kodak assiduously worked with its first group of customers—the studio photographers—to build a positive attitude among its next round of customers—those using studio services and getting ready to buy a camera of their own.

Step two entailed urging professional photographers to tour residential neighborhoods door-to-door and offer to take people's pictures at home. Home portraiture was recommended over studio portraiture because sitters would be accustomed to their surroundings and therefore more relaxed. In magazines for professional photographers Kodak promised: "The lady who is photographed in her own home likes the idea because it is a convenience to her and she is naturally pleased" ("A profitable investment," 1915, p. 10). Presumably, this pleasure would show in her expression and later she would like her photo.

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Figure 2. Snapshot, *Studio Light*, 1915.

The third step was associating photography with celebrations. Kodak encouraged photographers to recruit clients during the holidays, when people were generally cheerful and might be more inclined to subject themselves to the awkward experience of being photographed. Taking photos was made part of festivities, unlike in the nineteenth century, when taking a portrait was an event in itself. Every year, months before Christmas, the Kodak journals reminded photographers to advertise actively before the holidays and then tour people's homes during the holidays ("Advertise," 1915). With Christmas over, *Studio Light* urged photographers to prepare for Easter ("Sloganize," 1916).

The practice of visiting homes with a camera during the holidays created the link that amateurs picked up between family photographs and holidays. Kodak's journals taught photographers to take pictures of birthday parties, commencement parties, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and other happy occasions. Kodak aimed to preserve not

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just any important experiences but specifically happy ones. For example, it briefly considered promoting postmortem photography but abandoned the idea under the motto that "Kodak knows no dark days" (West, 2000). It avoided associating photography with sadness, work, and the humdrum of everyday life. Instead it focused on vacation, leisure and pleasure. From the moment the camera became light enough to carry around, Kodak advertisements featured the slogans "All out-doors invites your Kodak," "Springtime is Kodak time," "Kodak as you go," "Take a Kodak with you to the Pan-American Exposition," "Don't let another week-end slip by without a Kodak," "Vacation days are Kodak days," and "Save your happy moments with a Kodak" (West, 2000, pp. 36, 39, 71, and plates 1, 2, 14; see also Brayer, 1996, p. 136). The camera was recommended for trips to Europe, the country, or the ocean; family parties; hiking and picnicking; rides by car, bike, and horse; and so on (Coe & Gates, 1977; Goldberg & Silberman, 1999). Thus, it was life's pleasurable moments that comprised the snapshot subject matter. Slater (1991) writes:

> [T]he domestic camera was from the start blind to the everyday (in terms of how it was sold rather than how it was used): not Mom in the kitchen, but the family at its special Christmas meal or birthday parties; not Dad going to work (let alone *at* work) but Dad with 'his' new car or being silly at a picnic. (p. 58)

As a result, photographs of ordinary domestic tasks are extremely rare and now highly valued in photographic collections (Coe, 1989). But the focus on happiness did not occur "naturally" among the public. Rather, the industry educated photographers and sitters in it.

Kodak's strategies for popularizing photography created the habits of shutterbugs over the decades. The strategies were picked up by other trade journals and applied by professionals and amateurs, all of whom shared an interest in making photography appealing. Well into the 1950s *Popular Photography* continued to remind photographers to "keep the model happy" (Gowland, 1953, p. 138). Experienced photographers advised novices on how to treat subjects: Be as friendly as possible, talk to them, make them talk about themselves, make them feel they are in good hands, and win their confidence (Halsman, Wergeles, Fried, & Bachrach, 1957). All of these methods were used to produce a happy look on the sitter's face. Producers of various photography-related goods advertised through the idea that photography served to preserve pleasurable experiences (Figure 3). Thus it was only by special efforts and carefully designed tactics that the photographing experience was ultimately constructed as desirable, rather than discomforting. Kodak's scheme was spread further by other companies and individuals involved in the business and the hobby of photography, eventually engaging everyone in a Kodak-defined snapshot aesthetic.

Encoding the Message and Naturalizing the Code

McLuhan (1964/2001) pointed out that the medium carrying a message shapes that message at least in part, because the physical characteristics of the medium limit the symbolic forms the communication may adopt. Thus, the vehicle of communication

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Figure 3. Ansco advertisement, 1945.

helps determine the sensory and symbolic mode of encoding the message. Kodak's preferred communication medium was the magazine, the mass medium in vogue at the time when Kodak was campaigning to popularize photography.[5] Magazines offered Kodak a wonderful opportunity to show easily and clearly what its products and services could be used for: making pictures just like the ones on the page. At the same time, Kodak intended to emphasize that the consumer would revel in this activity. The magazine medium of choice offered an iconic code which proved to be economical and effective. Over the second decade of the twentieth century, many advertisers were already using the smile, the most widely recognized symbol for human happiness, to convey the idea of pleasure with their products (Schroeder, 1998). A popular advertising textbook published in 1920 recommended showing "someone enjoying the article," such as "a man smiling as he puffs at his cigar" (Tipper, 1920, pp. 158–159). Kodak was no more original in its choice of sign than any other advertiser. Placing the consumer

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smile in the pictures that Kodak promised anyone could produce, Kodak's advertising provided a model for how subjects should look. This model was amply disseminated at the time when the vast public was getting into a habit of photography. Having saturated magazines with advertisements of smiling faces on snapshots, the industry defined the standards for a good snapshot (Figure 4).

By the mid 1940s the smile was essential to popular photographic culture. In 1944, one photographer took snapshots of 30,000 military men and women for the U.S.O., using wisecracks "to captivate a spirit of mirth" (Billings, 1944, p. 33). All nine soldiers in the portraits accompanying the story of this accomplishment are indeed smiling widely (Figure 5). These smiles did not express joy in going to war. They were artfully provoked. Billings (1944) testified that the families of the soldiers appreciated the photos, especially if their loved one perished. By World War II, photographers and laymen were so engaged in the culture of the snapshot smile that apparently no one

Figure 4. Kodak advertisement, 1940s (courtesy of © Eastman Kodak Company)

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Figure 5. Service portraits, 1944.

was bothered by the discrepancy between the photographs' happy looks and the tragic events of reality.

Photographers' organizations such as the American Association of Photographers supported the Kodak model for facial expression because it promoted the trade. They further disseminated it in their own publications with tutorials earnestly embracing the advertising ideal. A simple juxtaposition of advertisements and educational articles shows that both are part of the same culture. Compare, for instance, the 1949 photo illustrating a lesson on home portraiture (Machennan, 1949; Figure 6) to the 1945 advertisement for rolls of film (Figure 3). The "informal portrait" the 1949 article commends replicates the same facial expression on the same type of subject in the same piano setting of the 1945 advertisement. Obviously, amateurs learned from advertisements, a process encouraged by trade organizations. The visuals ensured that the advertising ideal was accurately replicated, thus making popular photography an extension of advertising culture.

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Figure 6. Informal portrait, 1949.

That the medium of choice was visual particularly helped the Kodak message to be uncritically received. Neil Postman (1979) points out that each medium or mode of communication is characterized by physical and mental biases that encourage certain intellectual predispositions, or ways of thinking and learning, within the culture dependent on that medium. For example, language runs in time and thus creates temporal links between the units of meaning in the communication. Regular use of language cultivates a habit of focusing on what is to follow while keeping in mind the preceding information. Language users come to think of the world in terms of origins and outcomes or reasons and consequences, the basic principle of rational thought. Thus, language and literacy foster the cause-effect paradigm of thinking. Historically, this has made us more analytical and critical, especially after the printing revolution produced the mass habit of reading (Eisenstein, 1983; Ong, 1982).

Unlike writing, visual forms do not flow in time but offer all the information in space simultaneously. The units of meaning in a picture establish relations of proximity without forming a sequence. Looking at visual signs, we are less inclined to think about beginnings and outcomes; therefore, we become less analytical. For McLuhan (1964/2001) the transformational power of photography is in mirroring the external world by a kind of automation, which eliminates the syntactical procedures of the rational mind. This gestalt communication appeals to the eyes, emphasizes the physical rather than the abstract, and does not call for much pondering.[6] Overall, reasoning is less characteristic of visual communication than it is of language communication (Postman & Paglia, 1999).

I suggest that the model of the smile was readily absorbed in popular photography partly because it was imparted visually. Had it been discussed in the articles that

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educated readers about photography, it would have had to be explained and justified. "Why should we smile for a picture?" would have been a logical question for writers and readers to consider. Yet none of the trade journals under review ever raises the question. The smile just sits in the visuals, taken for granted. It is *assumed*. In a McLuhanesque sense, it was internalized by the public as part of the informational environment of the technology that produced it.

Photographic tutorials split the message defining a good snapshot into two parts, using the two types of code magazines offered to two different ends. The text focused on technique, explaining how to use the photographic equipment, manage the light, set up angles, and so forth, in order to "catch a great moment" or "a natural expression." But texts never defined in words what a great moment was or what exactly "a natural expression" was supposed to be. This task was left to the illustrations. The chosen moments and expressions were consistently cheerful. The model of the smile was bestowed as gestalt without discussion. For example, a 1958 tutorial on the use of the exposure meter is illustrated by several pictures. Each illustration with a face has an open smile. Yet the text never mentioned subjects' moods or behaviors; it is strictly a lesson in using equipment. What results from this use of equipment are pictures of happiness having no alternative ("A guide to outdoor exposure," 1958).

As programmed by Kodak, photographic happiness was constructed in the culture implicitly rather than explicitly. Photographers usually about their pictures as "spontaneous," "candid," and "unposed" while their subjects were invariably smiling (Hanson, 1949, p. 480; "Planned portraits with a candid look," 1957, p. 70). "Advertorials," promoting photography under the guise of news stories, instilled the smile through the claim of representing reality. For example, one writer (Biba, 1949) reported on the school successes of two teenagers who made a hobby of photography, and listed several reasons why parents should buy their children cameras. All 18 subjects in the illustrations accompanying that story smile widely, including a small child. One teenage girl, taking a big stride to throw a bowling ball, displays a toothy smile instead of concentrating on her throw. The journalistic style of the piece presupposes that these ideal appearances are a documented reality.

The process of naturalizing the smile in photo culture can be traced well in child photography. Early in the century, Kodak recommended ensuring pleasant surroundings and engaging the children in play with toys or other pleasures that were likely to show up in the children's expression. "Catch them at play and show them in happy moods" was the leitmotif ("Our illustrations," 1917, p. 12). A 1919 article praised portraying "natural, happy children caught in pleasing and characteristic attitudes" ("Mrs. Emma Hilton—photographer of children," 1919, p. 11). The Kodak camera was often commended for its speedy and smooth clicking, which allowed photographers to get "despairingly attractive poses of them [kids] every time" ("They pose themselves," 1918, p. 18). Similarly, in 1933, a photographer advised beginning photographers to produce a toy squeaking dog at the moment of snapping, which would cause "instant merriment and a perfect picture" (Longaker, 1933, p. 296). In the 1940s, child photography was declared "happy, satisfying work" bound to result in smiling children's portraits

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(Duggins, 1944, p. 28). In 1953, *Photography* listed "seven keys to outdoor child portraits," including use of props, which were said to produce pictures like the ones accompanying the article, where five out of six children portrayed were smiling widely (Dunn, 1953).

In the 1930s the trade journals still published some portraits of children with serious or pouting faces. But these disappeared by the 1950s, when photographers were essentially required to "work with a happy, contented child" (Garfield, 1955, p. 62). The magazines' apparent policy of "catching smiles" constructed the happy child. Pictures contrived with the help of toys and a lot of adult performance were proclaimed to be "capturing life." Thus, through adroit linguistic and visual discourse the journals subtly conflated "the ideal" and "the real," which, of course, is a fundamental dynamic of culture and accounts for the transformation of models into norms. But the articles published in these trade and hobbyist journals reveal the tension between the realities photographers encountered and the idealized "reality" they were trying to portray. Szasz (1958) admitted shooting about 300 pictures of a child before she selected a few to illustrate an article. "Take expressions by the dozen, then select the good ones," was her recommendation (p. 61), which, among other things, furthered the consumption of film and photo-services. More recent articles talk about the art of "casting kids" (Reznicki, 2000a) or "directing kids" (Reznicki, 2000b), and narrate parents' ordeals in following their children around with a camera until a smile is obtained (Leonard, 1995). With titles such as "Smile . . . or else!" (Leonard, 1995), it seems almost heretical to suggest that an unsmiling child could make a good picture seems.

A good picture, thus, must be sought and found among multiple moments and multiple shots. Yet it is proclaimed to capture the "natural reality." A series of articles in *American Photography* in the mid-1930s consistently constructed the "natural" in photo portraiture.

> Our aim is to select as natural an expression as possible and to select the proper moment that it is best defined. The expression of the face is unquestionably the most important part of portraiture. It is the finishing touch towards which all effort is directed. The expression gives the spark of life to the image and that is as near as we can approximate the record of aliveness. (Jourdan, 1936, p. 738)

If the goal is "aliveness," then expressions of fatigue, boredom, or even quiet composure, although no less natural and part of life, must be excluded. Hence, not only were certain expressions encouraged in picture-taking while others were discouraged, but those encouraged were proclaimed to be more lifelike. What the discourse of photography disguises is that it is not people's normal expressions that are "lifeless," but photographs themselves. The liveliness of the human face does not consist in one particular expression or another, but in the incessant, dynamic change of expressions. Precisely the freezing of that change on film is what deprives the face of "the spark of life." Admitting that, however, would point out the deficiencies of photography as a medium of representation—something in which the industry had no interest. Cultivating the photographic market and conjuring the social espousal of

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photography required enveloping photography in a kind of rhetoric that concealed its lifelessness, and training photographers to compensate for that lifelessness by emphasizing liveliness. The project involved the emblematic representation of affect.

Eventually, the construction of the happy reality replaced reality and the fact that photographs were constructed ceased to matter. Here is how professor and historian of photography Margaret Harker, writing in 1989, analyzed a 1937 photograph (Figure 7):

> Although this photograph looks like a successful holiday snap it was a very carefully planned and well-organized photograph to be used for publicity purposes. It could have turned out to be obviously contrived and unnatural but the great skill of the photographer has produced a spontaneous and happy family "snap." (Harker, 1989, p. 118)

Figure 7. Happy family at seaside (from *The Story of Popular Photography*, edited 1989 by Colin Ford, published by Century Hutchinson; © National Museum of Photography Film and Television 1989; reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.).

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Skill produces spontaneity and the distinction between the authentic and the faked is lost with our postmodern realization that all we can do is live with our human constructions. Whether a picture is selected out of dozens of pictures, or has arrested one of a million moments, or is deliberately posed—in any case, it results from intentional human action. Popular photo culture accomplished its creators' intents.

The American Specific

The fact that many cultures today use the English word "cheese" to simulate a smile in front of the camera (Trumble, 2004) suggests that the practice has been exported with globalization. Yet the ethic of the toothy camera smile is not valid for all cultures. Snapshot culture shaped up slightly differently in various countries in relation to the larger socio-economic and cultural context within which photography became mass-consumed. A brief comparison between the popularization of photography in the U.S. and Germany shows the relation of the photographic smile to consumerist and commercial tendencies.

From the beginning of the century, Kodak employed a powerful economic incentive to encourage consumers to join the growing cohort of shutterbugs. Every year it organized photo contests that were well publicized by its journals and juried more by major advertisers than photography experts.[7] Photographers were promised both laurels and cash for participating. The winning pictures were used in Kodak ads, so the measure for "good pictures" was entirely provided by the advertising ideal. For example, the 1915 Kodak Competition declared: "A picture has no advertising value unless it suggests to a mother or father the pleasure their children could have by using a Kodak" ("Kodak advertising competition," 1915, p. 8). Six months later, the winning pictures featured rather lame smiles that photographers obviously sought in an effort to meet the requirement of pleasure. Over the decades, the benchmark of pleasure was reinforced and the symbol for it was cemented: Kodak's judges invariably rewarded pictures showing smiling faces.

Kodak deliberately worked to spur the use of photography in advertising since that promoted consumption of its photo services, materials, and equipment. Its journals prompted photographers to produce pictures which, if not winners with Kodak, could be sold to other advertisers. Appreciating the prospects of earning some money from their hobby, amateurs often sought the paramount motif of the smiling face that sold pictures and made them contest winners. *Studio Light* explicitly cultivated advertising photographers: "Our contests have taught the photographer something of 'selling appeal' requirements and, we trust, have given him a clearer idea of the sort of human interest pictures that make people want the articles the pictures advertise" ("Advertising contest results," 1918, p. 15). "Human interest" here equals consumer happiness. In the culture of consumption, the interests of the producers are presented as those of the consumers and advertising is assumed to serve both consumers and producers. Thus the commercial photograph gained cultural value. Kodak simply epitomized the capitalist enterprise. Striving to make its products useful, Kodak found a significant practical application for them and, in conjunction with that, promoted an aesthetic

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that benefited everyone. Creating popular photo culture in the conditions of flourishing capitalism, Kodak was working for the public good, which was also accepted as the personal good. In 1919 *Studio Light* readers were advised to produce pleasing pictures of animated women and children at play in the sunshine. The justification—"Make it your policy to make pictures that will sell more and still more photographs" ("Pictures that sell more pictures," 1919, p. 22). Twenty-five years later, the policy was echoed by hobbyists, such as a freelancer who advocated that the first thing a "dazed photographer [should] look for" were "action vacation pictures of people at play in pleasing surroundings, and in vacation spots" (Macpherson, 1945, p. 14). Why? The author vouched from his own experience that such pictures were sellable not only to advertisers but also to newspaper and magazine editors for illustration purposes. He backed up his statement with a photograph of a smiling sunbathing girl said to have been sold to an art publication "for quite a good price" (p. 16).

The Kodak journals were instrumental in the hegemonic process that shaped popular photo culture around commercial values. They regularly invited photographers to describe their freelance experiences and celebrated every success. Subsequent trade journals picked up the strategy of publishing successfully sold pictures as a model for amateurs. Thus, selling pictures became the measure for good photography and established the aesthetic criteria. The creative process was shaped by the advertising framework, which also shaped public taste, starting with that of newspaper and magazine editors. Aspiring photographers aimed to replicate the consumer culture's ideal, thus developing habits that made up their own photographers' culture and eventually permeated their domestic photography. The commercialization of the snapshot is seen in the example of the Jacob Rupert Beer Company, which, in 1950, asked amateur photographers to submit close-ups of average people, not posed models, for its "Smile of Pleasure" advertising campaign. Forty of these were selected and bought for $250 each (Forman, 1952). Such initiatives provided a powerful cultural encouragement for the smiling standard. As consumer culture flourished, the commercialization of photography intensified: in the 1950s, hobbyist magazines abounded with such articles as "He turned a hobby into a big business" (in the October 1951 issue of *Popular Science*), "Photography is more than fun" (in the October 1951 issue of *American Magazine*), "His camera earns over $500 a day" (in the January 1952 issue of *Popular Science*), "Beaches are Mecca for summer photography" (in the August 1952 issue of *American Photography*), "Sell your vacation pictures" (in the June 1954 issue of *Photography*), "Selling summer snaps" (in the July 1954 issue of *Profitable Hobbies*), "Snapshot sales scheme" (in the May 1956 issue of *Profitable Hobbies*), "I was an amateur"(in the July 1958 issue of *Popular Photography*), and so on, not to mention books like *How to Make Money with Your Camera* (Forman, 1952).

The tendency to emulate the advertising model made snapshot photography closer to mass culture than to a creative (folk) art form. As the Frankfurt scholars have noted, the transformation of art into mass culture is usually accompanied by a powerful standardization process that homogenizes public taste. For Horkheimer & Adorno (1944/1976), the aesthetic of mass art—whether in popular music, film, or

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performance—is based on reproduction and is inevitably uniform. Style is reduced to expertise. Dwight Macdonald (1958/1998) described the homogenizing effects of *Life* magazine as occurring partly through the smile when "a full-page photo of a ragged Bolivian peon grinningly drunk on coca leaves . . . appears opposite an ad of a pretty, smiling, well-dressed American mother with her two pretty, smiling, well-dressed children" (p. 25). Ewen (1976) points out that advertising served as "the great Americanizer," engaging the nation in common cultural values and aesthetics (p. 64). Carried over from advertising to popular photography, the smile turned into a national camera ethos.

Germans have no expression equivalent to "Say cheese" and have only recently started to use the English one. Yet they produced the portable camera that kicked off the popularization of photography in much of Europe: the Leica, a product of the German microscope manufacturing company Leitz. The first "miniature Leica," produced in 1924, was immediately successful (Keller, 1989). However, Leitz did not engage in a powerful advertising campaign like Kodak's.

> The entire *Werbe*-staff [advertising department] consisted of Fritz Velten and Fraülein Günther, located in a small office across from the *Demonstrations-Raum*, the founder's former living room. What did this group know about promoting and advertising a revolutionary new photo product for the professional photographer and the general public? Nothing, nothing at all! (Keller, 1989, p. 51)

The German manufacturer used simple marketing tactics. It introduced the miniature Leica at the 1925 Leipzig Fair, where it provoked great interest (Balish, 1957). The first 30 to 40 cameras were placed in the hands of Leitz's traveling microscope salesmen, making the scientific community the first Leica-users (Keller, 1989). Domestic salesmen began demonstrating the Leica to major German photographic goods dealers, some of whom would purchase 100 cameras on concession from Leitz and loan them to their best customers. "Each customer became, at once, a living propaganda medium vis-à-vis his friends, thus increasing by word of mouth the sales potential, almost in the same manner as it is still practiced today under the term 'maven' or 'mentor'" (Keller, 1989, p. 54).

In 1928 Leitz hired an enthusiastic photographer, Heinrich Stöckler, to promote the Leica. His main initiative was not to design an advertising campaign but to establish the Leica School, which later became the Leica Academy. Engineering draftsman Anton Baumann toured Europe giving lectures on photography with the Leica (Keller, 1989). Books appeared, such as Curt Emmermann's 1931 collection of pictures by the first aficionados and Paul Wolff's *My First Ten Years with the Leica*, published in 1933, and *My Experience with the Leica*, published in 1934. The Leica was primarily promoted through the work of devoted photographers: Lothar Ruebelt, an enthusiastic skier, exhibited his ski-action photos; Ilse Bing produced impressive fashion photography; Adrian Siegel, a musician with the Philadelphia Orchestra, photographed famous artists; and Wolff, a Leitz employee, published spectacular photographs of Egyptian beggars, chemists performing a chemical reaction, and a pilot flying an open plane. Scientists used the Leica for scientific work, thus promoting

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the manufacturer: Wayne Hull pitched it in medicine, Paul Brandt in photomicrography, and Roman Vishniac in nature photography (Balish, 1957; Keller, 1989). The Leica made a name in the area of photo-journalism with the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Alfred Eisenstaedt (Balish, 1957). Willard Morgan, an American, used it on a safari expedition and started the magazine *Leica Photography* in the U.S. (Keller, 1989). But the Leitz Company published no magazines in German until 1949. Amateurs seemed to learn from photographs mounted in exhibitions and published in books, all of which emphasized science, exploration, and art, not vacation and pleasure.

The print advertisements for Leitz were unlike the typical Kodak advertisement. Instead of showing consumers delighting in camera use, Leitz for the most part showed the camera *per se* with accompanying textual information. Emil Keller, a long-time Leitz employee, remembers:

> When I was in London in 1935, we used placards to advertise the Leica. Practically every red double-decker bus in London had a bright green placard, 24 by 30 inches, on the outside of the rear entrance with the legend: "How'd you like a Leica?" The telephone number and address of Leitz London was at the bottom. (Keller, 1989, p. 55)

Friedrich Rüttinger's collection (1986) of the 142 most significant Leica advertisements that appeared between 1925 and 1950 contains only 18 carrying smiles. Many of the advertisements featuring human faces show the model concentrated on doing something but not necessarily expressing pleasure (Figure 8); and some appear even melancholic. The policy of consumer happiness did not permeate Leitz's advertising the way it did Kodak's.

While American photographers targeted advertisers, German photographers tried to document social reality. Before World War II, little professional training in journalism was available in Germany, so "anyone who felt he had the makings of a photo-journalist went as an apprentice or an assistant to a publisher or established feature photographer and tried his luck" (Rosenberg, 1954, p. 26). Sequence shooting—a series of pictures on the same theme—was conceived by German shutterbugs and later developed into the genre of the photo-essay. German amateurs aimed for gripping pictures of local events that they could sell to newspaper editors. Many carried the camera around their neck, always on the ready for a situation (Rosenberg, 1954). Advertising photographs typically portrayed the products without any human presence, instead producing a full, sharp view of the marketed object (Brill, 1954).

Stöckler's book (1954), which may be considered a Leitz publication, included a chapter on portraiture. Consideration was paid to light, color, the pose, centering the model, retouching skin blemishes and wrinkles, and so on; but the smile was neither mentioned nor part of the illustrations (Saebens, 1954). Advice on children's portraits focused on light and speedy flash but no recommendation was made to "catch them at play and show them in happy moods." Besides, Leitz did not monopolize the film-development and photo-print business in Germany as Kodak did in the U.S.

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Figure 8. Leica advertisement, 1932.

In the 1930s the Leica faced the competition of the Zeiss and Rollei cameras and the German market was open to foreign products, including American. Local photographic shops offered photo services, but many photographers developed their own film and produced their prints themselves. The slogan "You press the button we do the rest" would not have applied here. That is, photography was constructed more in relation to ideas about precision, meticulous work, and truth, rather than fun. Obviously, the larger cultural and historical context, perhaps the shadow of World War I, played a role in the ethos and strategies of German advertising.

The inter-cultural comparison briefly sketched here helps contextualize the "Say cheese" smile. In the U.S., snapshot culture developed in parallel with consumer society. As the economy was producing more and more goods, citizens had to be trained to consume those goods and carve out the leisure time in which to enjoy them (Ewen, 1976). Kodak represented the economic powers with a stake in the project.

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Nationally, the education in consumerism was carried out by advertising, which played an important ideological role in stabilizing American society, especially the vast immigrant workforce, by providing a vision of happy, satisfying life within the system (Ewen, 1989). Part of that vision was the image of the happy self that popular photo culture embraced. The cultural leadership in photography constructed photography's use in the culture while the technology was still young and it did so in accordance with the consumerist ideology in which it had a vested interest. The hegemonic mechanism characteristic of monopoly capitalism accomplished the rest. The code for the happy self thus became a cultural norm. As Ewen (1989, p. 85) notes, a fissure remained between the material conditions of existence and "the psychological modes of understanding that existence," which were shaped by advertising. That fissure is still visible in our common snaps. No matter how bored we are at a social gathering, we always smile for the picture.

Notes

[1] According to Swartz (1996), the manipulative phrase goes back to 1912 and is associated with the New York photographer Entfield Flimsham; Trumble (2004) attributes it to British schools of the 1920s.

[2] Most studies on popular photography agree that today the smile is an indispensable feature of snapshots. In addition to Schroeder, see, for example, Beattie & Grundberg (1992), p. 13; Beloff (1985), p. 181; Coe & Gates (1977), pp. 77–98; Goldberg & Silberman (1999), p. 17; Holland (1991), p. 10; Klein (1991), pp. 144–145; Walkerdine (1991), p. 35.

[3] The first photographic boom was at the time of World War I and by World War II practically every home possessed a camera (Coe, 1989; Harker, 1989).

[4] Kodak reversed the stereotypical gender roles of the act of gazing by making the photographer a girl (the Kodak Girl) in an effort to construct photography as pleasure and underplay its implications of power.

[5] In 1900, combined magazine circulation was 65,000,000 an issue. It was 128,621,000 in 1923 and 202,022,000 in 1929 (Peterson, 1964).

[6] That is not to say that we do not analyze pictures rationally, only that analysis requires more special effort than in verbal communication, where linking reasons and consequences is an indispensable mental habit reinforced by the act of speaking or reading.

[7] For example, the 1916 jury consisted of two photographers and three industrialists—the publisher Conde M. Nast (1873–1942), the advertising manager of Wells Fargo, and the vice-president of Seaman, Inc. ("Advertising contest results," 1917).

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