Owens: Suburbia and Our Kind of People: American Groups and Rituals

Howard S. Becker
Northwestern University
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REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION


Reviewed by Howard S. Becker Northwestern University

Bill Owens works for the Livermore (California) Independent. In that capacity he photographs the people of the community the paper serves, producing pictures they see in the hometown paper's next edition. He photographs their homes, their yards, their parties and other leisure activities, their voluntary organizations and meetings, their hobbies, their civic activities, their children, pets, and possessions. He has used the entree his newspaper job gave him, and the equipment he used for it (a large press-style camera and fill-in flash), to make the photographs that appear in these books.

Our Kind of People concentrates on public matters, the meetings, members, and social affairs of a wide range of clubs and organizations—everything from Kiwanis and Rotary, through the Masons, Elks, VFW, AAUW and Soroptimists, to the Cub Scouts, Blue Birds, and John Birch Society. The pictures look very familiar. Both the lighting and framing use the same conventions to describe the same kind of subject matter as the high school and college yearbook. You see the standard shots of club officials, in full regalia, standing amidst their organizational paraphernalia (Figure 1). You see the standard "informal" shots of members serving meals, awarding prizes, dancing and partying, and engaging in the club's characteristic activities (fashion shows, bingo, sports, whatever). You even see the standard shots of the carefully set table of party food, and of the guests eating it. If Livermore had a yearbook, Our Kind of People would be it.

I don't want to give the impressions that these photographs are amateurish. On the contrary, they are artfully made, each image containing, carefully stowed away within the outlines of the frame, a large amount of information about what's being done and the people who are doing it. Owens handles compositional details carefully and unobtrusively, so that we see what he sees without any "arty" mannerisms making us aware of how he directs our attention.

The analogy to the school yearbook is less apt for Suburbia, the earlier and somewhat more intimate book. The students who appear in yearbooks don't yet have homes and families of their own to be photographed. Still, the pictures have that look of being casually posed, of being naturally artificial. People assume the stylized formal poses conventional to the genre (e.g., the dozens of family photos, in most of which the male has his arm around the female), but they do so with the knowing grin that suggests they needn't be too careful about how they look because, what the hell, it's all in the family, isn't it?

Not all the pictures in Suburbia have that quality. A number of people hint at another kind of complicity with Owens, intimating that between them they know something the other residents don't, whether it's the sexual freedom of the couple with mirrors all over their bedroom ceiling, the alienation of the couples who say they are hiding (what?) behind the suburban mask (Figure 2), or (most touching) the young Caucasian woman in curlers holding an Oriental baby who says, as she contemplates her disordered kitchen, "How can I worry about the damned dishes when there are children dying in Vietnam?"

In either case, the people cooperate in making the pictures, secure in the feeling that those who see them will interpret them in the "right" way. They know that what they mean as a joke or say with irony or show tongue-in-cheek will be understood as they intend, because they know that the viewers are themselves. Just like the college yearbook, the hometown paper circulates essentially among like-minded people—if for no other reason than who else wants to see our Fourth of July block party or the annual bridal-gown fashion show of the Valley Christian Women's Club (Figure 3). Everything shown will be judged by the appropriate standards shared between those in the picture, those who see it, and the photographer. In fact, the three roles are almost interchangeable. Hundreds of people and groups appear, Owens and his extended family among them.

If Suburbia and Our Kind of People exhibit, both in the way they were made and in the way people cooperated in making them, the characteristic features of a community creating mementos to be shared and enjoyed within its own boundaries, then we can understand the quite different reactions they have provoked since publication. The intellectual and artistic communities to which books like this are presented (and who surely furnish the bulk of the audiences for exhibits like the one at San Francisco's DeYoung Museum in which some of these photos appeared) typically take this material as the latest highbrow denunciation of suburban Middle America. The publishers quote a New York Times review: "What we have here is a bourgeois hog heaven." Both the pictures and the text (made up of people's comments on their own pictures) seem to highbrow audiences to provide, naively, all anyone needs to justify condemnation of a crude, uncultured, grossly materialistic, foolish way of life. What else could "hog heaven" mean?

That reaction, however, provoked a counter-reaction among documentary photographers, visual anthropologists, and others who worry about the relations between societies and the people who come from outside to study and report on them. The reaction was not so much to condemn Owens as to try to settle the question of his intentions, apparently on the premise that the important thing was whether his heart was in the right place. Photographers and anthropologists share a concern for whether the dignity of the subjects of the pictures has been respected. Did the photographer allow people to present themselves as seems most suitable to them, allowing them to conceal what they feel to be inappropriate, unworthy, or unrepresentative? Or did the photographer search out hidden and shameful aspects of their lives, things they would prefer that no one else see? A grave difficulty for anyone concerned with ethnography of documentation arises here, for a complete record of a way of
life must necessarily contain what people would prefer it not contain. Otherwise, the project degenerates into public relations. It is often taken as obvious that one should respect the dignity of subjects, but that is only conditionally true, the condition being that the respect is for their full humanity, what is blameworthy as well as what is praiseworthy.

In any event, commentators have had a hard time deciding whether Owens has been respecting the dignity of suburbanites, as he has insisted, or exposing their worst faults to public ridicule (as has seemed obvious to so many commentators). You can't find the answer in the pictures or text. They seem neutral on the matter, showing what they show in a way that provides evidence for either conclusion. The clue to the answer, I think, is the resemblance to the college yearbook noted above. Insofar as the pictures are seen by members of the community pictured in them, the same community the photographer belongs to, the pictures do respect people's dignity. Whatever looks undignified will be understood not to be the whole story about those people, but rather the special aspect of oneself as "just folks" appropriately revealed to one's peers on such occasions. The pompous organizational poses will be interpreted not as clues to essential character but as a convenient convention with which to record materials historically important to the community. Community people can add whatever information the pictures lack, on the basis of personal knowledge and experience with those pictured.

Conversely, when people from outside the community, and especially people from a somewhat higher class and brow level, see the photographs, they add the missing information on the basis of second-hand sources at best, sheer prejudice at worst. The pictures are sufficiently selective in what they show that they allow all kinds of inferences about what is not shown, or could never be shown but would necessarily have to be inferred: the basic character of the people and the basic quality and themes of their culture and communal life. If you have already absorbed the standard intellectual put-down of suburbia (as I plead guilty to having done), it is very easy to find in Owens' book all the ammunition you want: men whose stomachs spill over their belts, presumably because of the beer and food we see them downing; women in curlers, in hair styles and clothing that seldom penetrate university life; homes furnished in quintessential "bad taste"; reactionary politics, gun lovers, anti-abortion fanatics, swimming pools, suburban sprawl, and Little League sports. You can also find the negations of all these, but it is easy to write those off (as some of the people themselves seem to) as exceptional cases that don't require revising our conclusions.

The point is that the pictures change their meaning when the viewer has no personal experience of what he sees with which to fill in the information that cannot be shown but must be inferred, no personal acquaintance against which he can check the global cultural and characterological generalizations the photographer suggests. This will not be news to those who take an anthropological view of visual experience, or should not be. If more people took that point more seriously we would be spared unending debates over such insoluble questions as whether the "real" meaning of ethnographic photographs like Owens'. Owens' pictures are both respectful and condescending, sympathetic and contemptuous, depending on who is looking, where, and when. Those who know the social world they picture well can fill in the full story that would prevent simple condescension; those who don't will do better or worse at this depending on the depth of their cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

The best use to which we can put Owens' two books is to stop worrying over these moral questions and treat them as the simple ethnographies they are. They contain a wealth of information, as Owens intended they should, about suburban people and lifestyles. They cover a wide range of subjects, although work, religion and politics are conspicuously absent. As ethnography, they remain pretty much at the level of cataloging culture traits, an activity that anthropology left behind years ago. The sequencing of the images, far from suggesting or embodying any comprehensive understanding of community life, relies chiefly on repetition or irony (e.g., a Nativity scene, live children playing the parts, with a picture of a group of anti-abortion pickets on the facing page) to provide continuity. That problem—how to use the sequential possibilities of the photographic book to convey theoretically interesting statements—seems to me the next big problem visual social science must solve. The contemporary flood of ethnographically oriented work by photographers, of which these books are a part, will probably not be much help with that problem. In the meantime, they provide good examples of how to pack single images with large amounts of theoretically useful information.

Figure 1 "The Masons is the oldest fraternal organization in the world. We believe in God, Brotherhood and charity. We stick together and stay middle-of-the-road. As a Mason you are never down and out. There is always a brother to help you." (From Our Kind of People, © Bill Owens.)