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Akeret: Photoanalysis

Richard Chalfen
Temple University

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BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Richard Chalfen
Department of Anthropology
Temple University

The main thesis of Akeret’s Photoanalysis is an important one, one that deserves additional study by students of visual communication. He asserts that more attention should be given to photographic images that we either take ourselves, pose for, or merely look at on a day-to-day basis. However, the author fails to build upon this notion sufficiently. Beyond this obvious assertion of the need for attention, the book has little to offer communication scholars other than to serve as a good “bad example” of how to think (or not to think) about photographic communication.

The book’s eleven chapters are divided into three parts. The first nine chapters, roughly the first half of the book, are devoted to analyzing personal photographs. Akeret describes photoanalysis as “the study of photographs to arrive at personal and interpersonal insight . . . It is a psychologically sound method of increasing self-awareness, and . . . it can help anyone become visually sensitive to the nuances of personality and interpersonal relationships that are recorded in photographs” (p. 9). Akeret additionally states that photoanalysis “is a discipline with specific guidelines and workable techniques; but it is a skill that can be learned by anyone” (p. 9).

Akeret developed his methods in his private practice of psychoanalysis over a 20-year period of time. He states: “The results of that work have led me to the conclusion that all photographs of people have some kind of psychological story to tell” (p. 17).

In the early chapters, Akeret offers several examples of how he has used photographs of the family album or snapshot genre in his psychoanalytic interviews and therapy sessions. For instance, he asked patients if they either carried personal photographs or if they could bring several photographs from their family album to a later session. Akeret then began “to ask questions and make relevant observations: ‘Does your father always look so depressed?’ or ‘None one seems to touch anyone’ or ‘Your parents look very pleased with you’ . . . While seeking answers, I am also encouraging the person to ask his own questions and make his own observations about the photos” (p. 17).

Akeret continues by outlining the therapeutic potential of photoanalysis. For instance, he states that “Photoanalysis can help determine the reality of present and past experiences, and can aid the individual in a more precise and accurate recollection of those experiences” (p. 20); “Photoanalysis can activate those psychological resources of an individual that are beyond awareness” (p. 24); and “Photoanalysis can be extremely useful in uncovering the subtleties and complexities of an individual’s relationship with other people” (p. 27). Again, the author uses several interesting examples from his practice to illustrate these points.

Akeret then discusses the actual procedure of photoanalysis by giving readers a list of questions and instructions to apply to any photograph. This long list includes such questions as: “What is your immediate impression? Who and what do you see?” “How do the people in the photo feel about their bodies?” “What do you notice about the emotional state of each person? Is he: shy, compliant, aloof . . . angry, weak . . . bright, curious, sexy . . . bemused, correct . . . satisfied, depressed?” and “Do you see love present?” (p. 35). Akeret instructs students of photoanalysis to “learn to read any photo as you would read a book, from left to right, then downward. Go over it again and again . . .” (p. 35).

In the second half of the book Akeret applies a similar set of analytic notions in order to discuss “what public photos actually reveal.” Public photographs are those that appear in the context of mass communications such as books, magazines, or newspapers. Akeret also includes photographs that were originally produced for private or personal use and have been put in a public context (see photograph of Charlie Whitman, standing with two rifles on a beach [p. 174], and childhood photographs of Henry Luce [p. 176], Harry Truman [p. 178], and Lyndon Johnson [p. 181]. Akeret admits that he is less certain of his analysis of these photographs as compared with personal photographs which could be validated in interviews with his patients.

The concluding chapter offers a series of photographic images which readers can analyze for themselves. As a last note, Akeret invites his readers to compare their observations with his by writing to the publisher for a complimentary copy of his observations of the same photographs.

The early chapters of the book contain several attempts to develop a systematic framework for studying photographic images in a photoanalytic mode. As I have summarized, Akeret offers discussions of some procedures and guidelines for photoanalysis. However, the latter sections of the book are little more than an anecdotal annotated picture book. The book’s 241 photographs, however, are generally well reproduced. It is too bad that in a few examples, it is almost impossible to see the important behavioral cues that Akeret describes.

The book contains several systematic confusions that repeatedly appear. The remainder of my review is directed toward bringing several of these confusions to the surface, and discussing the issues involved. The first difficulty that I have in taking Akeret’s work seriously involves his lack of any discernible model of visual communication in general, and photographic communication in particular. In many instances, Akeret describes pictures as “saying” something, “telling us” something, “scream[ing]” warnings (p. 175), and, in some cases, “suggest[ing]” the future (p. 29). What may be taken as a simple and conventionalized semantic mistake, I think of as a fundamental error, which, in turn, when so consistently made, promotes a false method of interpretation and analysis. A parallel confusion about the
terms employed in describing camera use is diagnosed and clarified in several papers by Paul Byers (1964, 1966), specifically in one entitled "Cameras Don't Take Pictures" (1966). It is in the sense of that title that photographs also do not "say" anything. Our attention should be directed at what people (both photographers and photograph viewers) say about pictures which, in turn, demands that we know more about modes of perception, conventions of inferring and intending, interpretive strategies and patterns of inference. In other words, a great deal of background work is needed before we can say what is happening (especially in terms of meaning) in any photographic communication event.

The most obvious criticism of Akeret's method of photoanalysis involves his neglect of contextual information about the photographic "event" that produced a particular single thing that we call a "photograph." Again the fault lies in having no conceptual framework for visual communication. Throughout the book, repeated reference is made to the manifest content of individual photographs. Akeret sensitizes our perception to examples of kinesic, proxemic and tacesic behavior. For instance, in one photograph of a young person performing cartwheels on a beach, Akeret observes, "She is a superb example of control and freedom blending together in body movement. Some people feel awkward living in their bodies, but this young girl is completely at home in hers" (p. 120). In another instance, while analyzing a photograph of a "typical pre-World War II Swiss public school class," Akeret suggests that we look at "how the students are packed in like sardines in the last rows, while in the first three rows they are spaced out and less crowded" (p. 62). In a family album photograph of an eleven-member family group (p. 57), our attention is called to how the "older sister is trying to make contact through touch, extending her right hand and arm around her sister's shoulder. With her left arm, she reaches toward her younger sister's right arm.... Their hands meet and most likely touch. But again the younger sister controls the contact, even limits it with her left hand which she uses as a barrier by clamping it down on her right arm" (p. 56).

Additionally, Akeret asks that we attend to the significance of posture, facial expressions, use of hands, hair length, and so on. In one instance, he shows us three photographs of young girls from different families, and suggests that each of "their facial expressions activates different feelings" (p. 109). Akeret asks that we find one word that best captures the feelings evoked by each photograph. In the case of the second example, Akeret states that he "would say 'shock'... because the formation of the girl's mouth indicates that the visual impact of whatever she saw was sudden, extreme, and unexpected" (p. 109). In another series of pictures of three brothers, Akeret observes that "the positioning of their hands and their facial expressions are remarkably different and revealing" (p. 108). Akeret says of the first brother: "The oldest son looks self-absorbed, contained, and controlled. His face shows a faint trace of feeling, but he is not about to share it. His neatly folded hands separate and seal off the world" (p. 108). The author calls our attention to observing hair length in an interesting series of family album photographs spanning a period of three generations. Akeret says of one photograph: "This child has long hair and is a model of feminine attractiveness" (p. 50). Later we read: "The mother now has long hair, braided and in a bun, and is holding her youngest daughter, who gives the impression of being a wild little gypsy" (p. 50).

Later, attention is also called to examples of head tilts (pp. 106-107) and "leggy showmanship" (pp. 116-117). However, because the author fails to acknowledge that much systematic research has been done on these modes of communication (with the exception of brief reference to Birdwhistell and Ruesch), his sensitization remains on a shallow level.

In the above quotations from Akeret's text, readers should also recognize that the author has gone considerably beyond any sense of objective description of manifest content. The author consistently makes intuitive inferential leaps to produce what I judge to be unsound and unjustified conclusions.

In addition, Akeret's book suffers from a much more fundamental omission. As "outside" participants in the production of these visual symbolic forms we have little or no information about what we are really looking at. For instance, are we looking at natural behavior (in terms of candid on-camera behavior), or are we looking at examples of fabricated or staged behavior that has somehow been coerced to fit someone's image or model of what appropriately looks "right." We have no information on what lies outside the borders of the photographic image. Akeret is seemingly unaware of this problem when he twice toys with the idea of information missing in cropped photographs (pp. 221-222, and 224-225). In all of his other examples this idea is ignored. Second, he offers no information on any type of verbal interaction involved in the photographic event, such as posing instructions that might have been given by any one of the participants during the photographic event.

Akeret appears to insist that despite all potential sources of influence on on-camera behavior, a special "truth" quality emerges from a photographer-subject interaction—an event that might contain all the special qualities of the "decisive moment" as described by Cartier-Bresson (1966). To agree or disagree with this proposition, we certainly must seek to learn more about photographic events and the significance of that special moment. Photographic events include interactions between people using cameras and people on-camera as well as interactions between people looking at pictures and the content of the pictures per se. The literature contains very few systematic investigations or even objective accounts of photographic events; reports tend to be written about the technical dimensions of the photographic enterprise rather than behavioral ones that might characterize photography as a process of communication.

Akeret does acknowledge that "every photograph is the result of a complex relationship among photographer, subject, setting and culture" (p. 32), and he later maintains the desirability of knowing something about these components. However, readers must conclude that these remarks are only attempts to cover future criticisms of the book since the author consistently ignores his own good advice and repeatedly makes intuitive psychologically oriented inferences based on no sensitivity to these important contextual factors.

Another source of confusion results from the logical extension of not knowing what we are looking at in the
photographs he shows us. Akeret appears to be unaware of the possibility that we may "handle" or "operate on" (in the cognitive sense) these symbolic forms in different ways. Any statement of meaning must be derived from a minimal understanding of alternative interpretive strategies and culturally structured cognitive frameworks. For instance, we are forced to ask the following important questions: Do we look at and decode all pictorial representations in the same way? Do we operationalize the same interpretive strategy for the "reading" of all visual symbolic forms, such as cartoons, paintings, drawings, photographs, films, etc.? (Gombrich, Hochberg, and Black 1972). Do we activate the same interpretive strategy for understanding situations and behavior that appear in real life versus situations and behavior that are presented in mediated symbolic forms? A subtler distinction that must also be understood and dealt with involves the interpretation of images that we know or access to be "natural" versus those that we understand or infer to be staged (Worth and Gross 1974; Worth 1974). Thus to say that Akeret has not adequately accounted for visidistics, is thus thought of as the study of specific statements about meaning from the observation of photographic communication. Worth describes which treats that these speech events and acts can be described and compared in terms of specific components (participants, settings, topics, etc.) and a variety of functions (referential, expressive, poetic, etc.). For our purposes, the importance of this sociolinguistic framework is that it provides investigators of communicative codes other than verbal expression a more balanced account of the use of photographs, citing several examples of causing more harm than good by introducing photographs into an interview. Akeret only tells us success stories.

The book suffers in one additional comparison. In terms of using photographs to examine patterns of human behavior, much better examples are provided by Bateson and Mead in Balinese Character (1942) and by Mead and Byers in The Small Conference (1968).

Some readers might feel that the critical nature of my review is, in fact, out of context, that the book has been created as a light and humorous addition to standard cocktail talk, and will take its rightful place alongside other examples of this genre, namely Body Language (1971), Is Your VW a Sex Symbol? (1973), and the like. For the serious scholar of visual communication, looking for something different from cocktail party chatter, Photoanalysis will be a great disappointment.

This review, I hasten to add, should not be construed as an attack on drinking, cocktail parties, or coffee table books, all of which have useful purposes in different contexts.

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Reviewed by John Collier, Jr. Departments of Anthropology and Education San Francisco State University

*Another Place* is a handsomely printed book with a brief text and 80 black-and-white photographs. On first examination this volume appears to be simply a portfolio of Maya Indian life. It may also be significant because it offers a starting point for reasoning and exploring further the contributions of visual communication for anthropology, for it places focus on the intellectual and creative role of the anthropologist.

Karl G. Heider and the author-photographer, Frank Cancian, are listed as “General Editors.” It is not stated whether this is a single publication or one of a series, but the editorial design and focus of the book. Beyond editorialism there may also be doubt in the author’s mind about photography’s place in anthropological research. This would be surprising, for Cancian has done much of his fieldwork with the Harvard Chiapas Project, which has used photography brilliantly in mapping and defining the social structure of Indian villages in the mountainous terrain of Chiapas. In one sense *Another Place* seems historical. Thirty years ago an anthropological book of this style would have been under-

photography was made under grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the Latin American Studies Program at Stanford University. The Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences “provided the lifescape necessary to plan the book.”

Why was this book made? And what is the anthropological significance of the title, *Another Place?* The introduction may suggest the author’s message.

Women put out countless tortillas and always walk behind men. Chickens are sacrificed to Maya Gods under crosses on a mountain-top overlooking the Catholic church. A proper meal is preceded by rinsing out the mouth as well as hand washing and Zinacantecos die easily of measles, a European disease.

Having spent three of the last thirteen years doing anthropological research among the Zinacantecos, I know that these and similar things provide the form of daily life. But they really make very little difference. Zinacantan is another place where people live [reviewer’s italics].

This observation reminds the reviewer of the opening in a social studies text: “People have to live somewhere, so everywhere there are some people.”

After dealing with the book’s introduction, the reader searches through the photographs to grasp further meaning of *Another Place.* But the book has no layout, no sequential relationships; pictures tumble one upon the other with little association. The book begins with a series of Indian portraits and continues with a scattering of photographs of childhood, four pictures of an unidentified European-type school, fiesta images in Zinacantan Center, commercial interaction in the town of San Cristobal de las Casas, back-strap weaving technology, domestic scenes, agricultural activities, photographs of religious life, prayers, and shrines. The book concludes with still more portraits. Pictures are dropped in indiscriminately—portraits, technology, and vistas of landscape—so that this structure is hard to follow through the pages of the book. Based on this design and content, the reader must decide whether this is a book of anthropology, photojournalism of travel in Chiapas, or simply a folio of art images. None of these categories describe *Another Place.* Frank Cancian, who is also Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Stanford, is technically a fine photographer. The book contains superb individual portraits that must reflect the spirit of the Zinacantecos. Yet we do not get an intimate sense of this community or the life of these Indians. If there were no text at all, the pictures would appear to be travel snapshots of a very good cameraman who spent a few weeks in Chiapas.

Considering Frank Cancian’s years of research with Zinacantecos, this impression is absurd and surely misleading. The author must have made thousands of negatives that he has taken over the years in the Chiapas region and an embracing file of photographs made consecutively in 1971 under a Wenner-Gren grant. The shallowness of this volume must rest on the editorial design and focus of the book. Beyond editorialism there may also be doubt in the author’s mind about photography’s place in anthropological research. This would be surprising, for Cancian has done much of his fieldwork with the Harvard Chiapas Project, which has used photography brilliantly in mapping and defining the social structure of Indian villages in the mountainous terrain of Chiapas. In one sense *Another Place* seems historical. Thirty years ago an anthropological book of this style would have been under-