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Mark Silber
Boston University

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The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater. Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Millerton, New York: Jargon Society, 1974. 84 pp., photographs. $10.00 (cloth).


Reviewed by Mark Silber
Boston University

Perennially debates appear regarding the interpretation of visual images—still and film—over reality and universality of the communicated message, and over the innate faculties necessary for interpretation of these capsules, from person to person through time and space. Ultimately, the most successful message is communicated from the individual to himself. And, undoubtedly, any other audience implies a digested interpretation through additional filters of culture, subculture, to the individual. Thus any student of visual communication will have to deal with modes, deviations, prevalence, and exceptions in interpretation. Confusion and debate exist because most students agree that images suggest to them certain messages. The same arbiters cannot agree that the message is the same for the photographer and the interpreter of the final image. The reality of the image, as well as the myriad messages implied by the choice to produce that image, is subjective and objective at the same time.

Because photographs contain a great array of information—in their contents, composition, contrast, tone, perspective, sequence—it is possible for one member of the audience to choose one symbolic constellation for reflection while another member may construct a completely different symbolic aggregate. Thus the two will be viewing the same photograph or a series, perceive different messages, and comment on the inability of the images to communicate the intended message. A recent example of such double-blind communication appeared between Collier and Cancian. Collier viewed Cancian's book and said "the book has no layout, no sequential relationships; pictures tumble one upon the other with little association" (1974:60). Cancian replied: "I hope the message of commonality gets through often enough to the viewer to make him or her identify with some Zinacanteco experiences . . ." (1975:61). It seems as if the two individuals—the photographer and the critic—were looking at completely alien topographies. One saw the valleys; the other, the peaks.

In a review of literature on symbolism, Firth noted that "in situations of everyday life our senses are being constantly stimulated by a variety of impressions, among which we have learnt to pay attention to some as being specially significant because they are signs of something else in which we are interested" (1973:63). Perhaps it is this differential perception of significance in chaos that reflects the variability in symboling from culture to culture and individual to individual. An illustration of an assumption of this concept is found in Worth and Adair's study of Navajo filmmaking:

We assumed that . . . people would use motion pictures . . . in a patterned rather than a random fashion, and that the particular patterns they used would reflect their culture and their particular cognitive style (1972:11).

An intuition of some "importance" of visual images—particularly photographs from the 19th century—is expressed in the first sentences of a chapter on collecting old photographs: "Do not throw away old photographs—however small and/or insignificant they may at first appear . . . within almost any small number of cartes and cabinet portraits there are invariably two or three photographs at least of real worth and interest; mirrors of age . . ." (Mathews 1974:78). Since the photograph is purported to represent a fragment of reality, then it is proposed that the portrayed object and context will be implicitly understood.

Doubtless, photographic images mean something. The question that some students of visual communication try to tackle is: What do these images mean? It is a Sherlockian dilemma. Individual images, generally, are out of context and are primarily important to collectors (individuals and institutions) who, as a rule, are not interested in the study of culture, context, or the ideology of process and production. Again, it is these individuals who first attempt to preserve items because of the collector's interest in oddity. A social scientist, on the other hand, is generally concerned with trends, prevalence, and meaning on the level of culture. For the social scientist, collections of specific "unique" old photographs may be useless because they may not be representative (modal) of subject matter manner of
production, or the photographer’s original intentions for a specific audience.

In my review of the photographic books below, I will concentrate on how the content of each book may serve the social scientist’s study of symboling through the photographic medium. I will analyze these books from the following problematic concerns: Are these books helpful in determining the mode and intention of the photographer and the audience for whom these images have been created? What do the photographic images convey? The basis of judgment is the content of the photographs—as opposed to contrast or composition. Nor do I intend to evaluate the quality of the photographs as would a critic of the photographic medium.

Perhaps it is important here to indicate that the books under review have one thing in common: Each book contains an array of photographs—photographs which are generally referred to as “snapshots”—primarily intended to portray an inclusion in the family album. With the exception of Lucybelle Crater, which I believe was created to illustrate a “universal” family album, the images in the books by Noren, Seymour, Dorfman, and Banish are interspersed with explanations of the subject matter in the photographs. Green suggests that the photographers in his book—The Snapshot (1974), for instance—are “not snapshots but sophisticated photographers. Yet, their intentional pursuits of the plastic controls and visual richness hinted at in the work of the casual amateur, or their explorations of familial subject matter, involves their work with the ongoing tradition of the home snapshot” (1974:3). In other words, as opposed to the home-mode amateurs, these photographers have a vision and are aware of their own style, which is imitative of the “universal” amateur style rendered for the home audience album. The photographs in this review were made by both amateurs and professionals and may be classified as those of the snapshot genre.

Noren’s The Camera of My Family is a document of a representative collection of visages of members of her genealogical line. This book is an interesting collection in that accompanying elaborations of the individual’s mementos, such as marriage licenses, letters, and anecdotes, explicate the life-style of an upper-middle-class family coming from Germany and then dispersed throughout the globe after World War II. This book is important as a document. However, it could be more useful for interpretation of symbol and meaning, in the context of the picture-taking activity, if the reader were given information about the author’s selection process and the frequencies of the types of photographs that appear in the original albums. Moreover, there is a dearth of information about the reasons for taking pictures, about inclusion of items in the family album, and about the individuals who took interest in taking photographs of the family. The collection is remarkable in that it contains a transition from photographs of the family in the 1850s to the present. Thus, it offers a possibility for an analysis of the method of posing, selection of backgrounds, and history of the period. The only note relating to the photographic activity of the families is made by the author in passing: “My father’s family was clearly not as interested in documenting themselves visually, and thus there is not a fraction of the material available” (Foreword). The question of this book, as well as the others, is: Why do members of one family choose to photographically record themselves while others do not?

Meatyard’s collection of 64 prints and some accompanying texts attempts to portray a family album. I believe this book to be a statement of universality from (1) the contents of the photographs—people in masks in various poses in familial settings—and (2) from the text—a collection of arbitrary prose and poetry attempting to elucidate and contribute to the preceding 64 images. In the first “cogitation” Jonathan Williams writes to Meatyard:

There is something more hypnagogic than demagogic in proposing that, instead of sheep, one start counting 210,000,000 Americans, all with the same name, all eating at the very same time the very same interchangeable McDonald’s hamburger. It is like a prelude of the Last Judgement [p. 73].

Different people—always in pairs—wear the same two masks. Meatyard replies:

Last Judgement is very strong, but, Judge, the mask ain’t me. I am the mask. In the final picture, as you might have partially noted, I am wearing Lucybelle’s mask and clothes and she is wearing mine. . . . I think I have been able to eliminate the idea of a third person: the Intruding Photographer. Natural in their own right, unlike so many portraits” [p. 73].

On the contrary, there is nothing in the photographs to indicate a change of clothes or body, but maybe that is irrelevant. The only obvious distinction of the collection of these photographs is that people change, masks stay the same, scenery changes, and all the participants pose, that is, they are all conscious of the picture-taking process. From this evidence, I judge that anonymity is achieved through masks. The anonymity with the addition of the name “family album” implies universality of the family-album-type imagery, but is unlike any family album I have seen. Even the essence of “family album” is missing.6 The book suggests a “feeling” and an emotion, but the quality of that emotion is elusive in the attempt to achieve analytical force. The book should be used to examine why and how the authors think that the family album should be conceived in this particular manner.

Seymour’s A Loud Song is a grouping of the author’s family photographs. Some have been produced by his father, who was a studio photographer; some have been produced by the author. As in Noren’s book there are mementos of the family, such as letters, photographs, and narrative. Seymour’s text is replete with expression of feelings and emotion about his family and friends. The author suggests that the book is “an attempt to use the photographic image as a language, and with that, to make literature . . . an attempt to survive—to preserve my identity. . . . It is fiction as much as fact, it is fantasy.” However, the story board is not explicit. The turgid beginning, in photographs and prose, ends in a whimper of abstraction. For instance, while we find explanations about individuals in the first part of the book, explanations do not appear in the last part. Headliners such as “Here are a few friends” or “The light of my life” do not give a
clue to the meaning or purpose of those images in the context of the whole work. Seymour asks in the introduction: "Is it exhibitionistic?" In the context of logical analysis, this book does not reveal or exhibit enough.

If I were reviewing the book for a general audience, I could say that Elsa Dorfman’s *Housebook* is a “delightful revelation of her most intimate secrets.” But that is not relevant in this context. Here photographs are used to show readers what her “friends look like.” As a photographer, Dorfman was aware that she was reaching a specific audience of literati who would delight in the portraits of the famous—Ginsberg, Danny Kalb, Ferlinghetti (poets and writers of the circle of Cambridge/Berkeley intelligentsia). She describes her interest in her audience as follows:

In October 1972 I got the idea to hawk my photographs from a supermarket shopping cart at Holyoke Center . . . Mazur, and some of my students were astounded. “You’re making your work too available. People won’t take care of it if they don’t have to pay a lot of money for it. You should wait to be in a gallery,” they advised me. But I wanted to see what people liked, what they didn’t like [p. 70].

In a way, Elsa’s *Housebook* is a family album, in the sense that her friends and her outgoing intimacy are shared with all with whom she comes in contact. It is directed specifically at the above audience and at the reader, with whom she would like to be friends and share intimacy. Curiously, however, the process of selection—the logic of choice of one image over another or the choice of a smile over a frown—is not clear. It would be interesting to discover how the individuals in the photos perceive themselves—do they like the photos of themselves? Are these images representative of the audience? I would surmise that an interview with self-perceptive Dorfman would easily elucidate her selection and intent.

One of the most unusual collections of photographs that I have seen is Banish’s *City Families*. The uniqueness of her approach is not in the types of photographs or subject matter which she utilizes. Rather, the unique qualities of her book are in the format and in the method of her interaction with her subjects. Unlike most other photographers who take their photographic representation to be a true and “real” description of the subject, Banish questions her subjects about their feelings in regard to the photograph. She knew “how easy it is to take an unkind advantage of one’s subject with a camera, and [she did not want] to do that” (p. vii). Shortly after taking the photographs of her subjects, she returned to ask them: “Is this photograph a fair description of you? Would strangers get the right idea of you from this photograph?” (p. viii). Thus she asked them to conceive of the audience—the strangers—to dissociate themselves from their bodies and to interpret the imagery in terms of conveying a respective reality.

Banish gets an interesting spectrum of response which makes this book invaluable to the student of photographic imagery. In showing Mr. Jeffcock, an English stockbroker and his family, she gets the following reply:

Mr. Jeffcock: People would get the completely wrong idea but it’s the one that we try desperately hard to give (laughter). But I mean, in a way they would get quite the right idea. . . . Well, if you show a photograph of a man and a woman relatively well dressed, with four tidy children and in a comfortable drawing room on a large sofa with a dog sprawling on the floor and some pretty furniture, you get an impression of great elegance which is much more apparent to somebody who doesn’t live in it than to those who do.

Mrs. J.: You don’t see the cigarette burns on the sofa . . . [p. 88].

Mr. Luhman, a Chicago lawyer:

I think that photograph definitely looks and feels like us. It’s very hard to say what other people would see in it [p. 178].

Mr. Harrington, a policeman:

The only thing is that you wanted me in uniform. I usually work in civilian clothes [p. 180].

Whether a photograph is produced by an amateur or a “snapshot photographer” who is working in the style of the amateur, this kind of feedback is indispensable in determining the perception of the audience by the photographer and in ascertaining the symbolic structure of the photograph for both participants: What facets of the photograph are most important (the expression, position, tone) in determining the intent, and how does the photograph function as a symbol? This approach is basic in the empirical determination of the symbolic value of the documentary image.

The books mentioned in this essay have several points in common. First, they imply that what they portray is reality; the reader is to understand and feel this reality for himself. Second, they document a progression and a transition from one time to another; they document a growth of the individual. However, these books differ remarkably in their approach. Seymour’s is an emotional, revelational account; Dorfman’s is a rational, detached, limited autobiography; Noren’s is a genealogical array of photographs; Banish’s book is an attempt at ferreting out perception through feedback. Individually these books would be of questionable value in the analysis of imagery. As a collection, they are valuable productions by photographers with a remarkably similar background and with an interest in the possibilities of communication via visual imagery. Thus, for the students of albums, images, perception, and communication, these books, along with the book by Green, are an invaluable aid.

**NOTES**

1 See especially the interesting review of theories of color perception in Marc H. Bornstein’s article. Bornstein touches on his explanation of “illusion susceptibility” among different cultures—that which was a riddle to Segall, Campbell, and Herskovits (1966).

2 M. F. Malik writes about the teaching program in Film and Television at the Concordia University in Montreal: “One area which is not usually followed at film and television school, is the area of audience.” Therefore, we have instituted in our school a special stream of education, occupied with the measurement and assessment of the film and television information impact on audiences [n.d.:7].


4 Scherer notes how “Harrington, a prominent ethnologist and linguist, requested in the 1930’s that his negatives of California Indians be...
printed extra light because his Indian friends did not want to see themselves with dark skin" [1975:69].

Becker, in reviewing Owens' Suburbia (1972) and Our Kind of People (1975), said that "Owens' pictures are both respectful and condescending, sympathetic and contemptuous, depending on who is looking, where, and when" (1976:64). What is the basis for interpretation of symbols in each context?

In my paper (1977) I have shown how the logic of organizing an album reflects the ideology of the milieu in which the album exists.

See, for instance, Davidson's East 100th Street (1970), Owens' Suburbia (1973), and Silber's Rural Maine (1972).

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Reviewed by Ray L. Birdwhistell
University of Pennsylvania

Mary Ritchie Key has presented us with an unusual compendium of bibliographic notes and items representing a body of material remaining from the research which led to her Kinesics and Paralanguage (1975). Professor Key, in her very useful and other-serving work as editor of her clearing-house, has earned the respect and gratitude of a wide spectrum of students, researchers, and interested onlookers. We have looked forward to the publication of this book to see whether it would focus more tightly upon problems left lightly touched on or broadly conceived of in her earlier discussion. This volume, however, neither in its discussion nor in its extended bibliography is definitive. The breadth of the author's interests, while productive of years of reading in the general area of body activity, leads to the presentation of a bibliography so diffuse as to suggest an absence of critical choice. And yet this judgment is probably unfair. From my point of view two contrasting theoretical frames are prevalent today in the general arena which might be termed "the relationship between human body activity and human communication." One of these positions, succinctly stated by Key, is "Human communication is body movement" (p. 5). The alternative position, which has governed my research and theory, is that the social processes involved with patterned human interaction employ the relationships between body activities. From this latter point of view "nonverbal communication" becomes that social behavior which can be seen regularly to influence human interaction even if the investigator ignores lexical behavior. All human societies possess and utilize language; they are not speechless when silent.

However, this question is perhaps moot for those who wish to get a perspective on the vast array of attitudes, observations, and reflections in these areas. I think that the "Research Guide" part of the title is a misnomer. But Mary Ritchie Key has deepened our indebtedness to her by the extended discussion (139 pages) and voluminous bibliography (approximately 300 pages). I look forward to seeing an annotated bibliography from her. I can think of no one more qualified to present one.

REFERENCE CITED

Key, Mary Ritchie


Reviewed by George Psathas
Boston University

This is a workbook-manual designed to introduce sociology undergraduates first to the study of visual images in their own society and second to the doing of