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Cancian: Another Place

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Cancian: Another Place

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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 editorship of Heider suggests that a number of anthropological books based on photography might be planned. *Another Place* is Cancian's third publication on Chiapas, the result of contact and research spread over 13 years. Much of the

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 lifespace 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 pat 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 also may 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-

standable. Certainly there was then, and apparently there still is now, conflict and confusion between scientific observation and what can be considered the artistic impressionism of the camera record.

Twenty years ago, as a photographer, I entered the field of visual anthropology over the very issue that is raised by *Another Place*, the disciplined process of the scientist that has separated him from the sensory and creative role of the popularly conceived artist, writer, or photographer. The issue is not the historical conflict between objective and subjective reason and observation, but the methodological shallowness of traditional anthropology that has obscured the full dimension of human beings. As I write I have *Another Place* before me and also the manuscript of a forthcoming book by a close colleague of Cancian's, George Collier, on the acculturation process of Chiapas Indians. George Collier's text, a comprehensive and provocative work, is expressed in the classical objective language approved by scientific anthropology. *Another Place* could be Frank Cancian's effort to go beyond the limitations of scientific expression, a flight into the sensory process of recording with the camera. If indeed this is the motivation, this book is an eye opener of what happens when the anthropologist leaps into the heady stream of art expression.

The space between objective analysis and the often subjective personal recordings of the camera is apparently too broad, for *Another Place* falls into the limbo between these extremes and demonstrates again the cliché that science and art are wholly incompatible. There are, of course, many of us who believe this is not true and even that the scientific record without the creative process is humanly dead. Visual anthropology is this battleground between the objective materialism of limited scientific investigations and the open process of the intuitive and emotional experience that many insist are wholly the domain of art. We can demonstrate methodologically how the sensual recordings of the camera *can be* and *have been* controlled to support the most critical scientific processes. Three decades of anthropologists, beginning with Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, have demonstrated the unique function of photography in anthropological research. Cancian may reply that this is not the issue, and that he was clearly departing from research and seeking another level of both recording and communication. I sincerely feel this *was* Cancian's intent. But as an anthropologist, *what is he trying to explore in this book?* There is certainly one area where this search could lead: to the humanistic and sensual communications about culture, the frontier of *ethnographic film*.

If this book falls into limbo, it is simply because the author's use of the medium of photography is confused. But why the confusion? Reasonably this question also asks why did Cancian want to retreat from anthropology? Maybe this answer would be the joint reason for anthropology's involvement with ethnographic film. In appreciation of Cancian's efforts, let us point out that many devotees of ethnographic film may be no clearer in their motives. As Cancian states, "I know that these and similar things provide the form of daily life. But they really make very little difference." In terms of materialistic anthropology they *don't*. But in the eyes of visual anthropology they make *all* the difference. After looking through *Another Place*, the differences that really seem to matter are the qualities of eyes and the fluency and composure of bodies. These people cannot be found in Liberal, Kansas, or Sleepy Falls, Iowa. What Cancian's records hold are the human delicacies that many statements in anthropology, for reasons of discipline, have left out. And it is this awareness that makes Cancian and multitudes of anthropologists reach for the camera, an eye that *can* record these nuances missing from the written anthropological record.

At this point Cancian and all anthropological photographers face the challenge that the technological process of photography by itself communicates nothing. This is as true as the reality that "cameras do not take pictures," as stated by Paul Byers, "only people do." In the same reality a scattering of pictures or hundreds of feet of film also may say nothing. Only the coherent eye of the editor-anthropologist can sequence photography into communication. And this is what does *not* happen in *Another Place*. Certainly there is communication in these eighty pictures, but we might never know this content unless we took a pair of scissors and went through the creative editing process, unscrambling and uniting all the visual sentences in this book.

There is so much more content to Frank Cancian's photography than can be experienced in the staggered journey of this book. Surely if Cancian's thousands of negatives were edited and cut and put back together, as is film, the result would be an outstanding book of visual anthropology that would tell us of all the differences, the complexities, and the humanities of Zinacantecos' life.

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