



Studies in Visual Communication

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Fall 1978*

Article 7

1978

Banish: City Families--Chicago and London

Richard Chalfen
Temple University

Recommended Citation

Chalfen, R. (1978). Banish: City Families--Chicago and London. 5 (1), 63-65. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol5/iss1/7>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol5/iss1/7>
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Banish: City Families—Chicago and London

REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

City Families—Chicago and London. Roslyn Banish. New York: Pantheon, 1976. ix + 181 pp., photographs. \$7.95 (paper).

Reviewed by *Richard Chalfen*
Temple University

Roslyn Banish has published a collection of photographs and narratives that merits the attention of students of ethnographic photography, documentary photography, visual anthropology, visual sociology, and people generally concerned with the behavioral and conceptual dimensions of "image management." *City Families* provides us with interesting lessons regarding: (1) the use of photographic imagery for students of society and culture; (2) the value of integrating images and people's comments about their own images; (3) the problematic nature of some unquestioned assumptions of what it means to certain people "to have their picture took"; and (4) the needs and importance of presenting contextual information regarding "the frame" of visual recordings. I will comment on each of these points in the following review and suggest a few "next steps."

In 1973 Banish began to make family portraits of people who lived within the same London neighborhood. Subsequently her publisher suggested that she select a comparable Chicago neighborhood and produce a comparable set of portraits. The first half of *City Families* contains 41 photographs of families living in the Pimlico section of London; the second half consists of 40 portraits from the Lincoln Park area of Chicago. Each photograph is accompanied by statements extracted from interviews conducted by the author with family members. An attempt was made to homogenize these narratives by asking each family to respond to the same questions, such as where family members were born, how they came to live in Pimlico/Lincoln Park, why they like their neighborhood, and so on. In addition, Banish includes a short section on what family members felt about their portrait and, in some cases, what the family felt about having its portrait appear in her book for many unknown readers to see. In most cases, the family portrait appears on the right-hand page with comments by family members on the left-hand page. All the photographs have been reproduced very well, and the book has an overall attractive appearance.

My enthusiasm for Banish's work and hence my decision to review and recommend it in favorable terms results from the simple observation that the photographer/author has given viewers/readers some idea of what is being shown in terms both of who these people are and how they came to be presented to us in this mass-produced symbolic form. In different terms, we are

given information along several contextual dimensions that are frequently ignored and eliminated under some unquestioned assumptions that the photographer/writer as *artist* is simply not accountable for his/her methods, photographic strategy, initial intentions, motivations, and/or expectations. For instance, Banish offers her readers some information on where she found her subjects. She sought cross-sections of English and American families living in heterogeneous neighborhoods in central London and Chicago. Banish also provides us with some information on the procedures and methods of her photographic project. She recruited "volunteer families for subjects, by putting up illustrated notices explaining my project and intent" (vii). (It would have been a nice touch to publish the exact wording of this notice.) As part of this explanation we learn something about the social relationship and contractual agreements established between the photographer and her subjects: "Everyone I photographed either signed up . . . or was later referred to me by those already photographed. . . . All families had an appointment to be photographed. They could prepare in any way they chose, without instructions from me. . . . They could clean or not clean their houses in advance. If a preference for background was stated by the family, I respected it, lighting conditions permitting" (vii-viii). Banish reveals some of her feelings as a photographer and her intentions: "The voluntary aspect of this procedure was important psychologically to me, because starting out with willing subjects put us at ease. . . . More important, it was knowing how easy it is to take unkind advantage of one's subject with a camera, and not wanting to do that" (vii).

Banish further stated that her "aim was to produce a photograph that would be pleasing to both the family and myself" (viii). She apparently made several photographs of each family (specific information on how many photographs were made is not given), and subsequently made her choice. Banish then returned to the family and elicited its responses to her choice by asking such questions as "Is this photograph a fair description of you?" and "Would strangers get the right idea of you from this photograph?" (viii). Banish found that most families agreed with her choice, but she also includes instances of disagreement. In six cases, she presents us with two photographs of the same family and its preference for one of them (only one in the Chicago section, but five in the London section). An interesting next step might be to present several families with a series of six portraits of themselves. The accompanying narrative could then include all their approving and disapproving comments, preferences for certain images of each family member, discussions of significant distinctions and points of contrast, and the like.

Through this technique, Banish introduces comment on herself, her project, her methods, and on her subjects' feelings about being part of a symbolic event. A lot is to be learned from the rare negative comments:

Mrs. Woolley: I don't like the photographs. I find the children looking incredibly unnatural. I think your sort of aim really was to set people

up formally, and within that aim I would find it difficult to feel comfortable . . . We're not formal, and I think we all go a bit goofy when we're lined up to be shot [p.14.].

Mrs. Gray: . . . He (her husband) spoilt the photo because he hadn't a coat on [p.82]

Mrs. Charge: . . . It would have been better if you had caught everybody sitting doing something, rather than standing in a group. It wouldn't look so artificial (p. 48).

An interesting remark was made by one gentleman who would not agree to being photographed with the rest of the family:

Mr. Homans: No, I will not have me photo done. I will tell you why. Now since I come out of the Army now I've had me photo done once with my people. And it seems I'm superstitious against it. Because since I had me three brothers and my father done together, it seems we all broke up and we're all gone a different way. If anybody goes to take a photo of me, I turn me back, because I don't like it [p.36].

Banish's decision to include these remarks is very appealing. I found myself reading each family's remarks about its picture first and then reading the autobiographical material. I also caught myself skipping over the seven families on which, for some reason, no comment is given. Somehow, in the context of this entire collection of portraits, these "No Comment" families were not quite as interesting as the others.

With regard to the ubiquity and importance of "private" photographs (see Goffman 1976:78) displayed in households, we see that 18 families chose to be photographed in front of, or with, previously taken photographs of family members. For instance, we see enlarged snapshots (p. 89), portraits that appear to be of the Sears Roebuck variety (p. 111), travel photographs (p. 103), baby pictures (p. 143), wedding photographs (p. 47), and, in one case, a large painting made from "an old photograph of my mother as an infant" (p. 92-93). In another instance, the family made direct reference to other photographs:

Mr. Bertucci: I think we may have been more relaxed if we didn't prepare for being photographed, but we did. We wanted a formal photograph.

Mrs. Bertucci: . . . And we'd never had a formal portrait taken

Mr. Bertucci: And also we'd spent considerable time before that looking at old family photographs.

Mrs. Bertucci: That's right. We spent several weekends looking at old family photographs [p.100].

Another source of my enthusiasm for this book derives, in part, from comparisons with other attempts to communicate visually about "ordinary" people in their familiar home surroundings and in the context of everyday life. I am not criticizing the artistry or excellence of photographs presented to us in Bruce Davidson's *East 100th Street* (1970), Bill Owens' *Suburbia* (1973), or much of the Farm Security Administration work done in the 1930s by Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Walker Evans, and others. However, for people who want to learn something about these photographically represented people, such books are very frustrating. Banish indirectly speaks to this issue as follows: "My decision to interview families . . . came

from the realization that the photographs on their own left out too much information . . . such as "Who are these people?" "Where did they come from?" "What are some of their concerns?" So six months after I had made the photographs, I returned to the families with my tape recorder" (viii).

Without this additional information, I feel that viewers derive culturally structured inferences based on subjective perceptions and ethnocentric judgments from a comparatively meager corpus of visual information. However, when we acknowledge the manipulative power of the person-with-the-camera, the variety of motives and intentions that might be involved, and the subjectively and culturally varying opinions and attitudes of what different people understand about having their pictures taken, etc.—and when we are given no information on these matters—I think we are left with simply an attractive collection of pictures about some group of human beings.

Before I sound too heavy-handed and out of context, let me add the following: The previous remarks are clearly not applicable to all "kinds" of photographic endeavors. It appears we are not supposed to ask the same kinds of questions about all kinds of photographic representations. With respect to artistic work, we have tacitly agreed that our "artists" are not accountable for their methods in the same way our "scientists" are accountable. If we apply the wrong criterion of evaluation, somehow we don't "understand" what is being shown. One might argue that Davidson's photographs of Harlem residents are valuable because they are good photographic portraits, and that is all that counts. I find this acceptable with respect to photographs of sand dunes, green peppers, nuts and bolts, forest scenery, animals, and the like. However, when it comes to images of individual human beings or collections of people, whether in contexts of "art" or "non-art," we must always consider the troublesome issue of relationships between people—people as photographers and people as subject matter.

Howard Becker, in his review of Bill Owens' *Suburbia*, expresses this concern as follows:

Photographers and anthropologists share a concern for whether the dignity of the subjects of the pictures has been respected. Did the photographer allow the 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? [1976:63]

Banish's *City Families* seems to gain some ground on these troublesome questions. By asking for volunteers, by allowing her subjects to prepare themselves and their "settings" in any way, and by allowing them to comment on the chosen image, we as viewers/readers are given an unusual package of ethnographic information. The book provides us with an interesting example of a sensitive and sensible photographer reflecting out loud on the making of photographic images as a social and communicative event. Whether in the context of "photo-elicitation" techniques (Collier 1967), developing an ethnography of photographic communication (Chalfen 1976), better un-

derstanding "the presentation of self in symbolic form" (Worth 1972), or a reflexive visual anthropology (Ruby 1977), Banish's *City Families* should serve as a valuable and innovative contribution to our literature.

REFERENCES CITED

- Becker, Howard
1976 *Review of Suburbia. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 3:63-64.
- Chalfen, Richard
1976 *Studies in the Home Mode of Visual Communication. Working Papers in Culture and Communication* 1(2):39-61
- Collier, John, Jr.
1967 *Visual Anthropology—Photography as a Research Method.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Davidson, Bruce
1970 *East 100th Street.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Goffman, Erving
1976 *Picture Frames: Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 3:78-91.
- Owens, Bill
1973 *Suburbia.* San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books.
- Ruby, Jay
1977 *Exposing Yourself or the Rise of Self-Consciousness in Film and Anthropology.* Manuscript, files of the author.
- Worth, Sol
1972 *Toward an Anthropological Politics of Symbolic Forms. In Reinventing Anthropology.* Dell Hymes, ed. Pp. 335-364. New York: Pantheon.

About Documentary: Anthropology on Film. A Philosophy of People and Art. Robert Edmonds. Dayton, OH: Pflaum Publishing, 1974. 115 pp. \$4.75 (paper).

Reviewed by *Jim Linton*
University of Windsor

In his preface to Edmonds' book, Lewis Jacobs exclaims:

How refreshing it is to come upon a new book about documentary that doesn't present yet another interpretation or evaluation of Nanook! In fact, nowhere in it will you find attention given to the interpretation or evaluation of any individual documentary film.

There is no denying that the study of documentary (as well as of film generally) has been too shortsighted and repetitive in nature. The recent publication of an erudite but basically standard history of the documentary by as eminent a scholar as Erik Barnouw (1974) would seem to underscore this deficiency. One must be grateful, then, for Edmonds' raising of the larger questions related to documentary film, since Rotha (1952) and Grierson (Hardy 1971) seem to be the last ones to have seriously done so.

In dealing with these general theoretical matters, however, Edmonds' ignoring of specific films causes him to

work entirely deductively, an approach completely at odds with his avowed method of teaching and inquiry. This deductive approach, combined with a tendency to consider documentaries mainly as works of art, leads Edmonds to talk about the documentary in basically creator-oriented terms with virtually no concern for historical context.

Such an orientation makes him vulnerable to the first trap for writers on documentary film: defining "documentary." Edmonds feels he has solved this problem by disentangling the material of documentary from the manner of its presentation. The characteristics of the material are what are used to classify films as documentaries, while questions about the manner of presentation become questions related to evaluation.

What then is the documentary film? "Documentary is simply [?!?!] anthropology on film!" (p. 14). Or more fully:

The subject matter of documentary film is, we have agreed, the various relationships of mankind in this world—the relationship of man to his environment, man to his work, man to other men, these relationships taken singly, or in any combination. From this we have further agreed that a simple collective term for this kind of subject matter is anthropology [p. 57].

This simplistic solution is, of course, no solution at all. Just as any other film (as Worth [1966] points out), the documentary is first and foremost a form of communication, and in Edmonds' own words:

the meaning of each of the terms of a communication, and the meanings of the collection of terms, exist because of mutual convention arrived at by the parties to the communication [p. 8].

From this perspective, documentary film is a genre (or a collection of subgenres) in the sense that genre involves a cultural consensus (on the part of the audience rather than an individual critic or analyst) as to what is meant by the genre term (Tudor 1970). This means that for the documentary there are popularly recognized and accepted methods (i.e., conventions) of presenting "reality" filmically.¹ And Sari Thomas (1974) would go so far as to contradict Edmonds completely, claiming that structure rather than content is what determined viewers' acceptance of films as depictions of reality.²

It is not as if Edmonds is altogether oblivious of the conventions surrounding documentaries. He says at one point:

Some of the criteria [used to make choices] are based on conventions accepted by the society which the maker and the respondent may share. Such community may be in cultural tradition and convention, sub-cultural convention, or historical contemporaneity [p. 39].

But Edmonds' exclusive interest in the artistic nature of documentary, his emphasis on the vision or "style"³ of the great documentarians which caused them to surpass the perceptual bonds of cultural viewpoint, and his overwhelming concern with the individual viewer's response precludes a fuller exploration of this important observation.

This complex of factors also leads Edmonds into some