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**Robert Frank: 'The Americans' - An investigation of how it challenged
photographic convention, and the effectiveness of its critique.**

***This dissertation is submitted
In partial fulfilment for the award of:***

BA (Hons) Photography

November 2016

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Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisor, Jamie MacDonald, for his guidance and advice given. I would also like to thank Sarah Greenough and Johnathon Day for their research, knowledge and detailed writings of Robert Frank's work. Finally, I would like to thank Robert Frank, for his persistence and passion in following his heart.

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www.pedromeyer.com/galleries/usa (12.13.2016)

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to investigate Robert Frank's work in his photobook 'The Americans', and will consider how his work challenged photographic convention. Chapter 1 will provide evidence of the influence that Frank's work had on contemporary artists. It will then provide context through a brief history of photography, which will work to detail the conventions established within the medium in the 1950's. This is important, as it was these very conventions that Frank's work aimed to challenge. Alongside photographic convention, American culture of the 1950's will also be examined. A unique time in American history, an era of 'golden ages', but under the surface of advertising photography and growing mass produced commercialism, lay the realities of the cold war, and America's own internal struggle with the civil rights movements for example. This was the America that Frank observed, and understanding this era is critical to reading and interpreting Frank's work. In chapter two, two images from different chapters of 'The Americans' will be analysed in detail. These readings will also take into consideration the writings of Sarah Greenough and Johnathon Day. Their extensive works have offered their own interpretations of such images, and this essay aims to provide a further in depth analysis.

Chapter 1

Frank's 'The American's' is a photobook that presents a visual critique of America, significantly, this was from a subjective perspective. "*Frank's seminal book The Americans (1958-59) represented the first significant challenge to America's image of itself.*"¹ This quote by Frederick Gross refers to the idea that photography not only serves as document, or as voice for social change, but also of a photography that challenges. As Greenough and Brookman said of 'The Americans', it was "...a startling revelation... Frank looked beneath the surface, scrutinizing the culture with an honest but passionate vision to reveal a profound sense of alienation, angst, and loneliness."² His work was recognised for "...The immediacy, spontaneity, and compositional anarchy in his picture frame..."³ From this body of work, his influence spread and continues to do so. From artists, such as Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand, to other artists such as Nan Goldin. Propelling the snapshot aesthetic into the genre of art, we can see Frank's influence in Goldin's work in 'A Ballad of Sexual Dependency'. This aesthetic, "...combined the immediacy of family snapshots, the authenticity of documentary images, and the increasingly informal style of news pictures..."⁴ Both works contain references to both poetry and music. In the introduction to 'The Americans' by Jack Kerouac, he writes,

What a poem this is, what poems can be written about this book of pictures someday by some young new writer high by candlelight bending over them describing every grey mysterious detail...⁵

Goldin's work which, "...shows the struggle for intimacy and understanding between friends, family, lovers..."⁶ uses the word 'ballad' in its title, one that relates to poetry, music and song, and her work was initially shown as a slideshow which was

¹ GROSS, F. (2012) *Diane Arbus's 1960s: Auguries of Experience* p. 33

² GREENOUGH, S. and BROOKMAN, P. (1994) *Robert Frank: Moving Out* p. 24

³ GEFTER, P. (2009) *Photography After Frank* p. 9

⁴ GEFTER, P. (2009) *Photography After Frank* p. 27

⁵ FRANK, R. (1995) *The Americans* p. 7

⁶ HAWKINS, J. (2015) *Downtown Film & TV Culture: 1975 – 2001* p. 128

accompanied by music. Frank's work too, has often been referred to in relation to Jazz, as Jonathon Day explained that his work had,

...similarities to jazz improvisation, living creatively within the moment while being always aware of the structure into which that moment's responses fit... Frank was grasping for the moment...⁷

Regarding the images themselves, Figure 1 shows how Frank shot in black and white using natural light, but the immediacy, intimacy and passion of his work can be read through his blurry and grainy images, a completely conscious decision,

Many of his evening and indoor images are out of focus. His selection of these photographs for inclusion reveals a preference for the flawed record of a moment over technical perfection.⁸

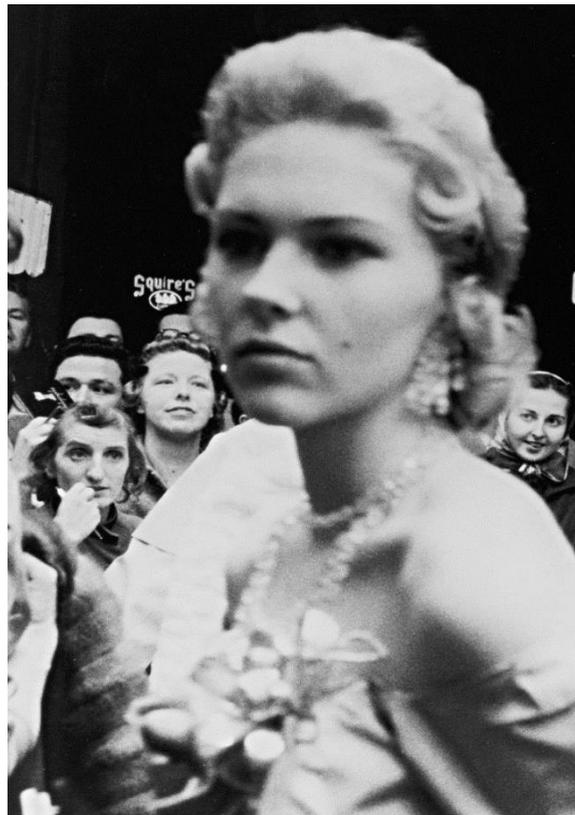


Figure 1: Movie Premier – Hollywood

⁷ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 42

⁸ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 42

Figure 2 shows how Goldin shot in colour, using harsh lighting from a front flash that worked to signify the intimate nature of her work.



Figure 2: Brian with the Flintstones, New York City

One can also consider the perspective these two photographers were working from. Goldin was an insider in “...*the gritty world of sex and drugs...*”⁹ Frank, as Greenough commented, had the benefit of being both outsider and insider, “*Rebellious anger, coupled with an outsider's detachment and an insider's love, is at the heart of The Americans.*”¹⁰ From the 1980's work of Goldin, to the mid 90's work of photographer Pedro Meyer. A Mexican photographer, similar to Frank, was an outsider and also received a Guggenheim fellowship. As Frank did, “...*Meyer undertook a major road trip... in search of his own critical and satirical vision of the United States.*”¹¹ Interestingly in an interview he explained,

That now-legendary book by Robert Frank broke new ground for the presentation of content and the aesthetics of the photographic image. So

⁹ KORT, C. and SONNEBORN, L. (2002) *A to Z of American Women in the Visual Arts* p. 78

¹⁰ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* p. 4

¹¹ KAPLAN, L. (2005) *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* p. 158

when I started my journey picturing North America, Frank's book was a reference that no one would let me forget...¹²



Figure 3: Television Studio – Burbank, California

Comparing Figure 3, an image from Frank's 'The Americans', with Figure 4 from Meyer's 'United States' work, one can visually read the similarities, and therefore the influence that Frank eventually had upon Myers becomes evident.



Figure 4: The Prophecy, New York

¹² KAPLAN, L. (2005) *American Exposures: Photography and Community in the Twentieth Century* p. 158

The examples of Goldin and Meyer provide evidence of Frank's lasting legacy and influence. Meyer, referring to his work as legendary, and Gross, as many others have, referring to his work as seminal. In order to understand and appreciate the reasons why Frank's 'The Americans' became 'seminal', one must consider its placement in the history of photography, particularly in relation to the established conventional aesthetics and rising trends of the 1950's.

Frank's work in 'The Americans' can be said to belong to the genres of landscape and social documentary, and these genres had their own established conventions that were developed up until the 1950's. The birth of photography itself began with the Daguerreotype, but also with the landscape genre,

Landscape photography began more or less at the time photography was invented. One of the first photographs taken by Louis Daguerre was made in 1839 of a Parisian view of the Seine and the Tuileries. One could argue that this was the beginning of urban landscape photography.¹³

However, due to the long exposure times required, the Daguerreotype was popularised with the portraiture genre, although landscape daguerreotypes were still produced. "*Its resolution of detail is astonishing, showing with extraordinary clarity the scene before the photographer.*"¹⁴ These landscape daguerreotypes focused on capturing such detail in an objective scientific-like manner, devoid of influence from Romantic Era paintings, "*...the intent of the photographer was to record an exacting and unsentimental view of the landscape.*"¹⁵ The development of Fox Talbot's negative calotype was a key point in photography's history. The negative allowed for unlimited reproduction of a photograph. Both the daguerreotype and the calotype were two processes that created two very different aesthetics, sparking early the debate between art and science. Consequently, various aesthetic movements in landscape photography developed.

¹³ PERES, M. R. (2007) *The Focal Encyclopaedia of Photography: Digital Imaging, Theory and Applications, History, and Science* p. 333

¹⁴ BADGER, G. (2013) *The Genius of Photography: How Photography Has Changed our Lives* p. 16

¹⁵ DAVENPORT, A. (2000) *The History of Photography: An Overview* p. 60

Earlier in 1768, Reverend William Gilpin wrote of the picturesque, and although his ideas were “Initially developed as an aesthetic theory for gardening and landscape painting...”¹⁶, his aesthetic and philosophical principles were applied to photography, which became the beginnings of the Pictorialism movement. The Victorians considered that emotions relating to a landscape photograph “...were measurable and were categorized as experiences of the Beautiful, the Picturesque, and the Sublime.”¹⁷¹⁸ The picturesque aesthetic flourished, and considering the growth of industrialisation, “...offered images of a rural idyll quite at odds with the reality.”¹⁹ Figure 5 shows Camille Silvy's 'River Scene, France'. An example of this picturesque aesthetic, but it also works as an early example of how landscape photography could carry cultural and social commentary. Of particular interest is not just a commentary, but the possibility of a critique.



Figure 5: River Scene, France

Haworth-Booth offers his analysis of the image,

¹⁶ RYAN, J. and J, SCHWARTZ (2003) *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* p. 123

¹⁷ TAYLOR, R. (2007) *Impressed by Light: British Photographs from Paper Negatives, 1840-1860* p. 18

¹⁹ CLARKE, G. (1997) *The Photograph* p. 55

A reading in terms of class would run on the lines of, say, private property (capital) represented by the young couple with the nice clothes, garden, and boat on the left bank, in contrast to the motifs of common ground, working-class (granted, they are in their Sunday best) labour represented by the mainly seated figures in the meadow on the right bank.²⁰

Coinciding with the pictorial and the picturesque, Peter Henry Emerson developed the Naturalistic aesthetic, an idea that *"...the human eye does not see everything in sharp focus. It focuses selectively, so the camera must do the same."*²¹

In the American west, photographers Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, were concerned with surveying the geology of the landscape, *"Although many of their images have a particular beauty, the intent while photographing was one of recording visual "facts" of western landscape."*²² It was to be later in the twentieth century that Ansel Adams combined the ideas of documenting the landscape with that of his own transcendental beliefs to new heights with his *"...grand and operatic..."*²³ images of Yosemite National Park. He became one of the founding members of the f/64 group in 1930, which was *"...bound by a search for beauty in "straight" photography."*²⁵ They considered 'pure' photography as *"...an art consisting of two-dimensional representations taken with the camera and without manipulation of the images with painterly or graphic devices."*²⁶ Their aesthetics consisted of *"...sharp-focus realism..."*²⁷ Although working in Paris, Eugene Atget's urban landscape work is often considered as one of the

²⁰ HAWORTH-BOOTH, M. (1992) *Camille Silvy: River Scene, France* p. 46-47

²¹ CLARKE, G. (1997) *The Photograph* p. 40

²² DAVENPORT, A. (2000) *The History of Photography: An Overview* p. 62

²³ BADGER, G. (2013) *The Genius of Photography: How Photography Has Changed our Lives* p. 24

²⁵ DAVENPORT, A. (2000) *The History of Photography: An Overview* p. 68

²⁶ YUEDI, L. and CURTIS, C. L. (2014) *Aesthetics of Everyday Life: East and West* p. 85

²⁷ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 17

"...masterworks of documentary photography"²⁸ and aesthetically, was an early example that championed this concept of pure photography. Following the 'pure', the 1930's saw the greatest development of the documentary aesthetic seen in the photographic work of the Farming Security Administration. "*The term documentary photography came into use during the depression years, when telling pictures of poverty-stricken farmers awakened Americans to the need for social reform.*"²⁹ Photographers such as Dorothea Lange used a 35mm camera, whilst others such as Walker Evans, "...recognised as the paradigmatic figure of documentary"³⁰ used large format cameras. The 35mm camera itself was a technological advancement in photography that led the way for the genres of reportage and photojournalism. Photo stories and photo essays were well established in the 1950's "...usually arranged so that images served some kind of linguistic narrative."³¹ Coinciding with the popularity of such magazines and publications, the 1950's of America was a nation of prosperity experiencing an economic boom. With it, came the rise of commercialism and hence too, advertising photography that "...came to dominate advertising in magazines, newspapers, and catalogues."³² Advertising photography bought a new rhetoric, one famously critiqued and analysed in the 1960's by semiotician Roland Barthes.

Advertising in 1950's America is an important aspect to consider in relation to Frank's work in 'The Americans'. The 1950's itself has been referred to as "...the Golden Age of branding and franchising..."³³ Arriving in New York in 1947, Frank worked for the magazine Harper's Bazaar in fashion photography, and later "...continues as a freelance photojournalist with occasional advertising assignments..."³⁴ Later in 1958, Frank made comment on these commercial commissions,

²⁸ MANN, M. (1972) *Documentary Photography* p. 13

²⁹ MANN, M. (1972) *Documentary Photography* p. 7

³⁰ HERON, L and WILLIAMS, V. (1996) *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850's to the Present* p. 154

³¹ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 48

³² BLANCHARD, M. (2013) *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia* p. 23

³³ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 11

³⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 366

Mass production of uninspired photojournalism and photography without thought becomes anonymous merchandise. The air becomes infected with the smell of photography.³⁵

What exactly did Frank mean by this 'infection' of photography? The answer lies within the political and social climate of 1950's America. Commenting on photography of the era, Guimond explains that,

...by the mid-1950's many issues of Life and Look were filled, cover to cover, with nothing but good news about the nation's economy and prosperity - all illustrated with pictures of the satisfied consumers, happy families, grinning young people, and smiling workers...³⁶

The reason for this, Heimann argues, was to "...counter the harsh realities of nuclear annihilation."³⁷ The end of World War Two may have resulted in a post war economic boom for America, but the war also ended with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Relations between Russia and America were weakening, and an arms race ensued leading to the Cold War. American advertisers responded, "...in an attempt to put a positive spin on the H-bomb and doomsday predictions"³⁶ and "...embraced nuclear power..."³⁸ Figure 6 provides an interesting example of this.

In a push to boost tourism, Las Vegas advertised heavily about its proximity to testing sites. Visitors were encouraged to view the blasts from the middle of town and on the rooftops of the casinos.³⁹

³⁵ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 22

³⁶ GUIMOND, J. (1991) *American Photography and the American Dream* p. 207

³⁷ HEIMANN, J. (2003) *All American Ads: 50's* p. 55

³⁶ HEIMANN, J. (2003) *All American Ads: 50's* p. 4

³⁸ HEIMANN, J. (2003) *All American Ads: 50's* p. 4

³⁹ HEIMANN, J. (2003) *All American Ads: 50's* p. 189

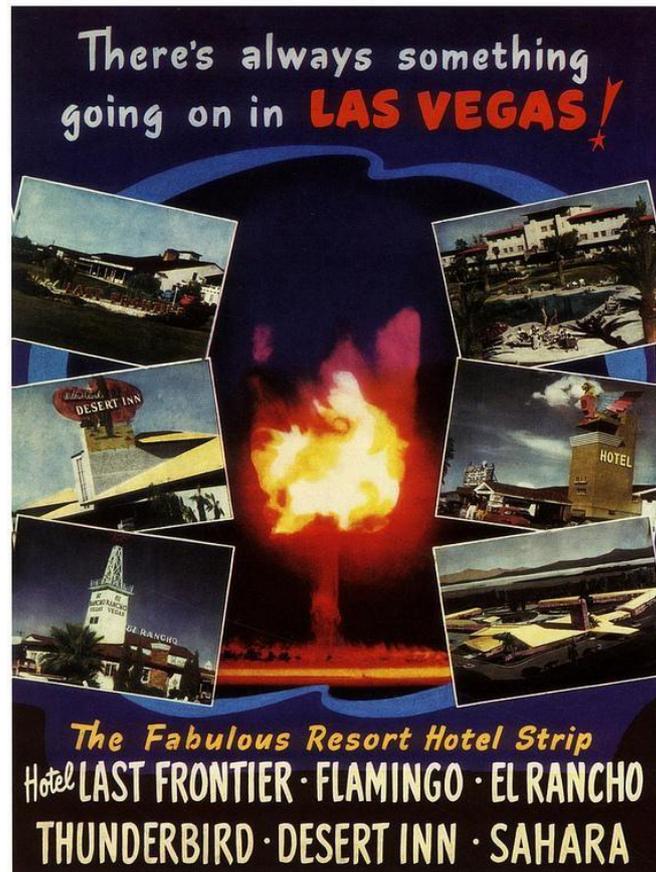


Figure 6: Las Vegas, 1952

The combination of increased disposable income and the rise in number of new home owners, provided advertisers a wealth of opportunities to target consumers. Perhaps it was this very atmosphere that Frank was alluding to when he spoke of the 'smell of photography.'

The economy continued to prosper, as returning soldiers, many now out of college, started families, bought homes, and became active consumers, eager to participate in the American dream.⁴⁰

As an outsider, Frank lived and worked surrounded by this atmosphere of capitalism and consumerism. On reflection, working for Harpers Bazaar, Frank commented that,

⁴⁰ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 33

Brodovitch was interested in producing the magazine and he turned everything to that direction. He tried to make me into a fashion photographer. And as for the staff photographers at Bazaar, there was no spirit there. The only thing that mattered was to make more money. I know that I could not gain by staying in that atmosphere very much longer...⁴¹

Frank had no interest in the security that could be found through monetary gains, he grew unhappy and restless, and instead chose to travel, *"I went to Peru to satisfy my own nature, to be free to work for myself... I did what I felt good doing."*⁴¹ Peru being one of the many places he travelled to before starting work on 'The Americans', for example he travelled to Spain, Italy, France and England, expanding his horizons and exploring the direction he wanted to take his personal vision in photography. Alongside advertising and fashion photography, Frank expressed his desire for personal expression further when commenting on the popular narratives found in picture stories, *"That was another thing I hated. Those god-damned stories with a beginning a middle and an end."*⁴²

As Frank struggled to fully give himself to advertising photography and went on search for a new direction in his own personal vision, American art photography found itself in a similar position. New York, where Frank had first arrived in America, become a congregation for various creatives aside from photographers, including *"...designers, poets, writers, and critics from around the world, who were eager to find outlets for their work."*⁴³ Frank's time in New York had exposed him to these bohemian experimentalists and *"...celebrated an art that was full of risk and highly expressive of personal experience, even one that was as much about the spontaneous act of creation as it was about the finished object."*⁴⁴ In photography,

⁴¹ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 24

⁴¹ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 24

⁴² DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 51

⁴³ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 17

⁴⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 17

the prominent conventions of the landscape and documentary genre outlined earlier,

...no longer seemed as relevant as they had a decade earlier. In their place, many called for a more personal and subjective form of expression in photography. Merging the real with the poetic... one that was less faithful to the facts before the camera and more expressive of their experience of them.⁴⁵

What is of particular interest however, is a point raised by Guimond, commenting that in the 1950's, there's a particular missing element in the genre of social documentary photography, that of a wider social and cultural criticism. Advertising photography may have worked to dull the realities of the arms race and the cold war, but it also worked to propagate a new version of the American Dream, one that embraced consumerism. However, America had troubles of its own, "...*the dawning of the civil rights movement, the growing ethnic diversity of the country, the rise of consumer culture, the disaffection of youth and of women – but their full import was largely suppressed or dismissed.*"⁴⁶ It's true that photography had indeed addressed particular social issues, for example Jacob Riis photographed the appalling conditions of the New York slums campaigning for social reform. Lewis Hine too, used his camera for social reform, his child environmental portraits working to enforce a change in child labour laws. Guimond refers such works from Riis and Hine as "...*a tradition of what can be described as issue-orientated criticism; that is, criticism of specific social problems.*"⁴⁷ The work of photographer Authur Fellig, also known as Weegee, published his photobook 'Naked City' in 1945 that dealt with the violence of America through his photographs of criminals and crime scenes. Although as Guimond explained, this was 'issue-orientated' and didn't make criticism on American society as a whole. In fact, Weegee's work became "...*became something of a bestseller and was the basis of a movie and a*

⁴⁵ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 17

⁴⁶ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 33

⁴⁷ GUIMOND, J. (1991) *American Photography and the American Dream* p. 211

television series."⁴⁸ Guimond continues, "...there was no clear, definite tradition of using photography to criticise American society and its values in general terms."⁴⁹

Where photography up until the 1950's hadn't delivered such a visual critique, there were writers who were "...willing to criticize the United States and its way of life."⁵⁰

Booker, writing of the 1950's, speaks of an era full of various 'golden ages', but also comments as did Guimond, that behind these golden ages lay a darker tone. For example, Booker explains that "...the growing importance of science fiction... did begin in the 1950s, which are still often regarded as the "golden age" of the genre."⁵¹ but often turned "...into visions of coming dystopian nightmares."⁵² From science fiction to rock 'n' roll, "It was the Golden Age of rock 'n' roll..."⁵³ but was considered by adults as "...a total breakdown in American morality..."⁵⁴ Television is another important example, "It was also the Golden Age of television, a medium that came into its own during the decade."⁵⁵ but was "...designed largely as an attempt to assuage the various fears of the decade."⁵⁶ The underlying message is that although he recognises that "There were more "golden ages" in the 1950s than in any other decade."⁵⁷, each of these had a darker truth that was essentially the underlying characteristic of 1950s American society. Writers and critiques of American society were also within this 'golden age',

In fact, the decade was one of intense self-examination and critique, so much so that it might even be considered a Golden Age of American social criticism, or at least of engagement of American intellectuals with

⁴⁸ WARREN, L. (2006) *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Photography: Volume 1 A-F Index* p. 729

⁴⁹ GUIMOND, J. (1991) *American Photography and the American Dream* p. 211

⁵⁰ GUIMOND, J. (1991) *American Photography and the American Dream* p. 210

⁵¹ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 2

⁵² BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 10

⁵³ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 5

⁵⁴ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 10

⁵⁵ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 5

⁵⁶ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 10

⁵⁷ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 5

public issues. In the decade, one analyst after another excoriated American society for, not only its complacency and conformism, but also its shallow materialism. And these critics gained considerable public attention.⁵⁸

Booker makes an important point however about the 1950's, "...*the problem was not a lack of critique or even a lack of attention to this critique, but a lack of ultimate effectiveness...*"⁵⁹ and "*any truly damning critique of capitalism immediately made its author suspect as a potential communist.*"⁶⁰ Frank came directly into contact with this undercurrent of suspicion in 1950's America when he was arrested during his travels across America photographing for 'The Americans', having being accused of being a criminal or a communist "...*because of his looks, religion, and foreign birthplace...*"⁶¹ Although such an experience only served to deepen his understanding of American life. "...*Frank understood what it meant to be an American at that time of cold war politics...*"⁶² Considering the context of the era, when 'The Americans' was published in America, it "...*was seen by many as a scathing condemnation of the country and its people.*"⁶³

⁵⁸ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 11

⁵⁹ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 12

⁶⁰ BOOKER, K. M. (2001) *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964* p. 12

⁶¹ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 125

⁶² GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 332

⁶³ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 315

Chapter 2

Having considered the photographic context, and both the societal and cultural contexts of 1950's America, we will now look closer at two of Frank's images, in an attempt to bring understanding of its impact with his pioneering use of the medium of photography.



Figure 7: Café – Beaufort, South Carolina

Figure 7 is the twenty second image out of eighty three used in 'The Americans'. Frank produced a complex photobook removed from the clear and concise structures and narratives used in popular magazines of the era, and his dislike or even hatred of such popular structures was referenced earlier. Therefore, Frank set out to produce something far more complex and challenging, but equally as important, something that didn't rely on the single image, but instead through the sequencing and editing of various images through themes.

...in his book on America, meaning would be garnered through a deliberate progression of images that did not rely on obvious side-by-side

comparisons but instead engage readers in a much more active manner, asking them to recall what they have seen on previous pages and reflect on their relationship to what they currently saw.”⁶⁴

Therefore, to begin understanding an image such as this, one must start by considering those that preceded it. Although not directly preceding it, Figure 8, ‘Fourth of July – Jay, New York’, is the fifth image prior.



Figure 8: Fourth of July – Jay, New York

⁶⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 134

Greenough explains, "*Frank had identified some of the "symbols" he wanted to peruse... "Flags" as one of his subjects.*"⁶⁵ Day further expands on Frank's reasoning for this,

The American flag is its country's most recognizable symbol. It is a pictogram of nationhood, of unity, of the American way... Frank, not surprisingly, chose to structure 'The Americans' around this strongest of ciphers... Flags... remain significant within the work, and are crucial to its intent.⁶⁶

Frank used the power and meaning of the flag, to separate the book into 'chapters', using the flag as a visual device. Instead of the written word to highlight these chapters, one has to 'look' to recognise and acknowledge them, as Greenough explained, Frank's work is about the "...*things seen but not looked at or examined.*"⁶⁷ Interestingly, by the book being titled 'The Americans', it could be argued that one expects the presence of the American flag, and so in the viewer's expectation of it, it can become overlooked. Frank was fully aware of this, and he chose its visual power as a way of creating chapters within the book. The image in Figure 8 is regarded as being the second chapter of four in total.

Reading the image presented in figure 8, at its most basic, we are presented with the dominant image of the American flag, covering three quarters of the frame. Underneath, two girls, to the left, a boy and to the right two men. In the background, through the flag we can see a collection of trees, and the grass beneath these people suggests this is possibly a park. Taking a closer look at the two girls, observing the slight blurriness of their legs and their posture, this suggests movement, not so much walking, but of skipping along. Holding balloons and seemingly each other's hands, possibly sisters or friends, and yet apparently oblivious to the large flag that hangs above them. The boy in the lower left of the image displays a somewhat bored or

⁶⁵ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 120

⁶⁶ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 71

⁶⁷ *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 120

disinterested expression, his hands preoccupied with something else, possibly a toy. It also appears his age is older than that of the two girls. To the right of the image, two adult men appear to be talking to each other, and at any moment, likely to walk across the frame. The man in the foreground with hands in his pocket, suggestive of a relaxing stroll. A small crowd of people can be seen in the distance, with what appears to be a teenage girl can be seen. Of particular interest is the fact that the people clearest of all, the two girls, the two men and the boy, appear oblivious to the flag, which we know exists in this image as a celebration of Independence Day from the caption provided, but they also appear oblivious to themselves. The two girls nonchalantly skipping, the two men engaged in their own conversation, and the boy either completely disinterested or perhaps preoccupied with the particular object in hand. In fact, it could be said, that the only observer here, is Frank himself. If we consider this, it can be suggested that it is only Frank who is looking at America, curiously too, here, America, or the Americans, aren't looking back at him, far too engaged in their own world. Of the people, Day suggests, that here, there is a "...*theme of adults and children...*"⁶⁸ Expanding on this further he considers that Frank "...*is inviting us to look at the actual people, everyday individuals rather than archetypes or stereotypes, who stand beneath and at the edges of the Star Spangled Banner.*"⁶⁹ The people present in this image also provide reference to what part of this second chapter is about, "*Other pictures in the first half of this chapter also depict people at "play", to use Franks words...*"⁷⁰ Greenough expands upon this theme of play,

...although the concept of play implies at least a sense of enjoyment if not the happiness spoken of in the Declaration of Independence, these Americans seem grim, lost, tired, and even threatening, rather than relaxed, carefree, or at peace.⁷¹

⁶⁸ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 134

⁶⁹ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 134

⁷⁰ *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 185

⁷¹ *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 185

To what extent these people here appear as 'grim', 'lost' or 'tired' is debatable however. There is certainly nothing explicitly threatening, rather it could be suggested that ignorance and disinterest is the also a theme here. That is, their ignorance of the realities of what really occurs in their own country, their inability to see such as things, the very things that Frank is aiming to 'expose'. This ignorance to the issue of America solidified by the presence of the flag, which takes up such a large space in the frame. As discussed earlier, it has been used a visual cue for the separation of chapters, but as a single image, further meaning can be found. Unlike the first image in 'The Americans', as seen in figure 9 below, what's particularly interesting here is the flag's opacity.



Figure 9: Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey

The opacity of the flag, used by Frank to visually suggest that he is looking beyond the patriotism and the American dream, in search for a truth seldom seen. Day also recognises that the flag “...represents the dream of a new way, a new and better life. The flag is the symbol of all this, yet it hangs torn, mended, and mostly

*ignored.*⁷² The repaired elements of the flag as enticing as the opaqueness as it leaves us to question, ‘what of America is torn? Or ‘what of America needs repair?’, and ‘why do these Americans seem so oblivious to their own country?’ The black and white aesthetic arguably works here too, the red, white and blue colours of the flag cannot be seen, instead, we see the form of the stripes and the stars for what truly are, rather than being blinded by the patriotic symbolism found in these colours.

The first image of the second chapter provides visual clues that point to themes such as age, play, patriotism and ignorance. Figure 7 will then be analysed to ascertain how these themes have followed through. Frank’s caption for the image explains this is a café in South Carolina, one that’s visually far removed from the image seen below in figure 10.



Figure 10: Drug store – Detroit

⁷² DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 74

Figure 7 displays a café that appears far simpler in its appearance and presentation as opposed to that of figure 10. In fact, the simplicity of its wooden structure and wooden furniture, may evoke memories of Walker Evans photography of the Floyd Burroughs's Home as seen in figure 11.



Figure 11: Washstand and Kitchen of Floyd Burroughs's Home, Hale County, Alabama

Walker Evans was able to create a sense of beauty in the formality of framing, composition and the placement of objects in the scene, but also through the functionality of such objects. Evans' images, created with a large format camera resulted in focused and sharp realism. Franks image, although possibly echoes an essence of such beauty, is full of complexity. Besides the clear deviation from naturalistic photography with its skewed horizon, one element of this complexity is evident with the presence of this jukebox. A huge object, having no particular

function in life other than to provide entertainment, stands in this café, towering above the table and chairs, and also the baby. The jukebox appears as a large metallic object, juxtaposed against the wooden surfaces of the café. It's also representative of the theme of 'play' in this chapter. Visually, it works as a symbol of popular music and the developing rock culture of the era. The presence of the baby is as significant as the jukebox. The baby appears to have been placed beside the jukebox on a pillow, on the floor and apparently left alone, their parents presumably out of frame. Day comments that "*The relationship between the jukebox and the black baby is fascinating; it functions perhaps as a 'robot-nanny', echoing science fiction...*"⁷³ An interesting reading of the image. Alternatively, Greenough suggests this image is "...*unresolved, uncertain, and filled with questions more than answers.*"⁷⁴ Greenough's comment strongly suggests something of the subjective experience Frank aimed to capture, but one could consider what this subjectivity may relate to. For example, considering the context of 1950's America, this was a country experiencing a struggle with civil rights, segregation of races in its society still common place. Frank, although an outsider to such a struggle in America, could perhaps share an understanding of such a struggle, particularly as he "...*was well aware of the persecution of Jews in Germany.*"⁷⁵ Aside from this subjectivity, one could also read further into the meaning of the jukebox and the black baby. If the jukebox serves as icon of rock 'n' roll music, in considering the development of the genre, we discover somewhat of a contradiction in American culture. Aquila explains that,

No doubt the movement of large numbers of blacks to northern metropolitan areas... during and after World War II was also greatly responsible for the whites' discovery of rhythm and blues. As blacks migrated northward to jobs in industrial centres, they created new markets for the entertainment industry... Though black performers still found it difficult to break into the segregated, predominately white, popular music market, their rhythm and blues soon found the way to the

⁷³ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 136

⁷⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 124

⁷⁵ GREENOUGH, S. and BROOKMAN, P. (1994) *Robert Frank: Moving Out* p. 41

radios of many dial-twisting white teenagers, who eagerly listened to the strange new sounds.⁷⁶

It was this "...*rhythm and blues sound, which later became associated with early rock & roll...*"⁷⁷ Consequently, rock 'n' roll developed into a genre that "...*fused the music and mannerisms of both the black and white working classes...*"⁷⁸ How ironic it is then, that Frank should present us with an image of a jukebox, iconic of rock 'n' roll, in combination with a black baby in South Carolina, a state known for its history of segregation. From 1897, "...*segregation became more than ritualized custom; it became the law.*"⁷⁹ It could be said therefore that the jukebox in this image, represents a merging of black and white cultures, whilst ironically, the black baby lays alone in the café, as if to represent segregation and isolation. Considering this reading, the image is transformed from that of 'play' to one which makes a curious political observation or statement, albeit one created from a subjective point of view.

Another image of interest in *The Americans* is that referenced by Kerouac at the end of his introduction, "*And I say: That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what's her name & address?*"⁸⁰ The image Kerouac refers to is shown in Figure 12.

⁷⁶ AQUILA, R. (2000) *That Old-time Rock & Roll: A Chronicle of an Era, 1954-1963* p. 4

⁷⁷ AQUILA, R. (2000) *That Old-time Rock & Roll: A Chronicle of an Era, 1954-1963* p. 4

⁷⁸ BERTRAND, M. T. (2000) *Race, Rock, and Elvis* p. 12

⁷⁹ LAU, P. F. (2006) *Democracy Rising: South Carolina and the Fight for Black Equality Since 1865* p. 6

⁸⁰ FRANK, R. (1995) *The Americans* p. 7



Figure 12: Elevator – Miami Beach

As exemplified from the previous discussion of the image taken in South Carolina, the image in Figure 12 then, belongs to the third chapter of the photobook. Again, as previously recognised, the image that begins this chapter, seen in Figure 13, provides visual clues to the themes that follow and then lead to this 'elevator girl'.



Figure 13: Bar – Detroit

Interestingly, both Greenough and Day differ in their interpretations of what this image signifies for this chapter. Of the chapter in its entirety, Greenough suggests that it “...presents those few areas of deviance and non-conformity, as well as the strength and vitality that Frank saw in African-American society, motorcycle gangs, alternative religious sects, young people and music.”⁸¹ Specifically of the image in Figure 13, she suggests the image works to “...question the act of looking.”⁸² Her observation explains how “...these sober portraits of two of the country’s most revered presidents, who look at us with knowing but tired eyes, invite our careful examination.”⁸³ She continues by remarking how the image in Figure 14 that precedes it “...metaphorically alludes to the nature of Frank’s project – to look inside 1950’s America... it also reveals his desire to fold us as viewers into his vision and his quest...”⁸⁴

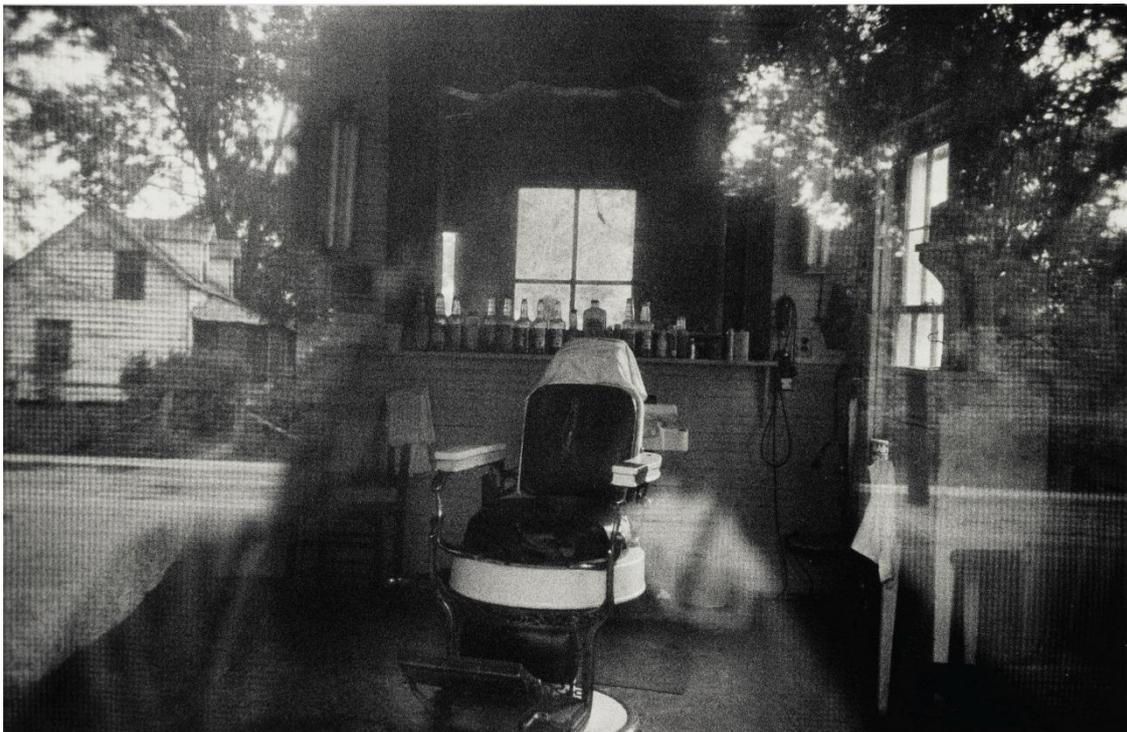


Figure 14: Barber shop through screen door – McClellanville, South Carolina

⁸¹ GREENOUGH, S. and BROOKMAN, P. (1994) *Robert Frank: Moving Out* p. 113

⁸² GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 186

⁸³ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 186 ⁸⁴

GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 186

Yet as the chapter progresses, Greenough continues that “...*the third chapter is also about the media, religion, work and politics.*”⁸⁴ A statement which further reinforces the complexity of Frank’s work. Alternatively, Day offers the suggestion that this chapter is an “...*examination of essential American icons...*”⁸⁵ Day considers what meaning can be found when looking at Figure 13, these presidential portraits, the flag, which “...*appears to be vacuum-moulded plastic...*”⁸⁶ and the rather strange, yet comical and again, presumably plastic, fish which hangs underneath. For Day, the portraits serve as patriotic icons of America, as does the flag, but the plastic nature of the flag and the fish work as comment of America’s developing consumer culture, with its industrial mass productions of the cheap, so becoming icons themselves. Day recognises that “*Frank is celebrating the facility of the vernacular decorators who created this assemblage.*”⁸⁷ and how “*The kitsch, the cheap and the tacky sit comfortably next to the nations dearest symbols.*”⁸⁸ Day asserts that in order to understand what is essentially ‘American’ about America, one has to recognise the importance of the old, the patriotic, the cheap, and the ‘kitsch’, which is “...*essential to an understanding of this civilisation.*”⁸⁹ As Day’s reading of this chapter continues, he identifies further American icons and symbols, “...*the barber shop is an American symbol, an icon...*”⁹⁰ to the “...*archetypal 50s chic...*”⁹¹ of the biker in ‘Newburgh, New York’, to the pamphlets that advertise democracy in ‘Luncheonette – Butte, Montana.’ However, when it comes to discussion of ‘Elevator – Miami Beach’ in Figure 12, Day considers that his reading of this chapter is possibly ‘mistaken’, “...*whether this image truly includes anything that is ‘iconic’ is questionable.*”⁹² He suggests that perhaps this image works as a ‘caesura’, as if working as a break within Franks “...*sad poem...*”⁹⁴

⁸⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank’s ‘The Americans’* p. 186

⁸⁵ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 142

⁸⁶ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. p. 75

⁸⁷ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 75

⁸⁸ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 141

⁸⁹ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 75

⁹⁰ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 141

⁹¹ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 142

⁹² DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank’s The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 143 ⁹⁴

FRANK, R. (1995) *The Americans* p. 9

Considering Greenough's and Day's interpretations, Figure 12 will be examined in closer detail. The viewer is presented with a photograph that displays representations of both movement and stillness. This unknown girl stands motionless, amidst the black and white human forms of movement. To the left a woman, who wears what appears to be a piece of fur clothing, which could be seen as a signifier of wealth. Her figure blurred, one can perhaps sense her determination to leave the elevator as whatever can be discerned of her gaze, remains fixed and focused straight ahead. To the right, the silhouette of what appears to be a bald man wearing glasses. His face appears to be slightly facing down, as if he acknowledges the presence of this motionless elevator girl, but one can perhaps imagine he walks past, eyes fixed to the floor, as if to glance at the girl would be something of a social faux pas. Considering this, it could be said there's sense of 'forced ignorance' of this girl's existence, as if to acknowledge her would be against the rules of society. Consequently, an air of arrogance feels somewhat apparent between these two people. This motionless girl almost seems to hug herself against the metal surfaces of the elevator, her hands closed into herself. Clearly a youthful girl, her expression is by far the strongest element here. As these apparently wealthy blurred figures move past her, so too, she ignores them. Her eyes seemingly fixed towards the ceiling of the elevator, which one can only imagine is nothing but more steel. Considering the sense of such a fixed, almost exaggerated gaze, exaggerated in the way a child perhaps would, she appears to find it far more comforting to watch the ceiling, than dare look at these, in the words of Kerouac, 'blurred demons'. This then suggests that she holds no admiration for these people, no jealousy for their wealth or social status. The black and white aesthetic lends itself beautifully in this image. The mechanical surfaces and textures of the elevator feel cold, and yet amongst these simple forms of black and white 'demons', there stands an isolated, possibly lonely or even resentful girl, who although is represented in black and white, is in fact full of colour. And for some, perhaps it could be argued that she is the warmth that contrasts the cold ignorance of the wealthy, and the cold mechanical steel. It was only Frank that could see this, more so capture this girl with such a colourful expression on black and white film.

This blurred and grainy aesthetic provides some very interesting points for further consideration. As mentioned earlier, Frank's photograph involves both motion and stillness, and has used this to great effect. The writings of Peter Wollen are relevant here. He asserts that "*Photography is motionless and frozen, it has the cryogenic power to preserve objects through time without decay.*"⁹³ Indeed, Frank's image has rendered this girl, these people, this event as 'frozen', and thus they remain preserved, yet it could equally be argued that this image is in fact full of motion. The blurriness is the obvious aspect of this, but in its blurriness, is perhaps not a frozen moment in time, but a repeated one, on a constant loop. Accept here, motion and the passing of time doesn't result in decay. Like a film, the movement, the moment and Franks experience of such, is preserved, and it was this perspective that was so powerful in his work. He said himself that, "*He did not want the photographs dissected as discrete, precious objects, but rather, meaning to be garnered from the concentration of the whole.*"⁹⁴ Franks intention therefore, was to essentially break free from the restrictive frame of the single image, creating a work where time is preserved but interestingly has the freedom to keep moving, motion is therefore key to his photobook. The image of the 'elevator girl' is one particularly strong example of this. Such 'movement' and 'motion' was something new in the 1950's genre of documentary photography, especially when we consider Franks elevator girl in relation to Evan's sharecroppers and Lange's migrant mother. Figure 15 is a portrait of a Farmer's Wife by Evans.

⁹³ WELLS, L. (2003) *The Photography Reader* p. 78

⁹⁴ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 115

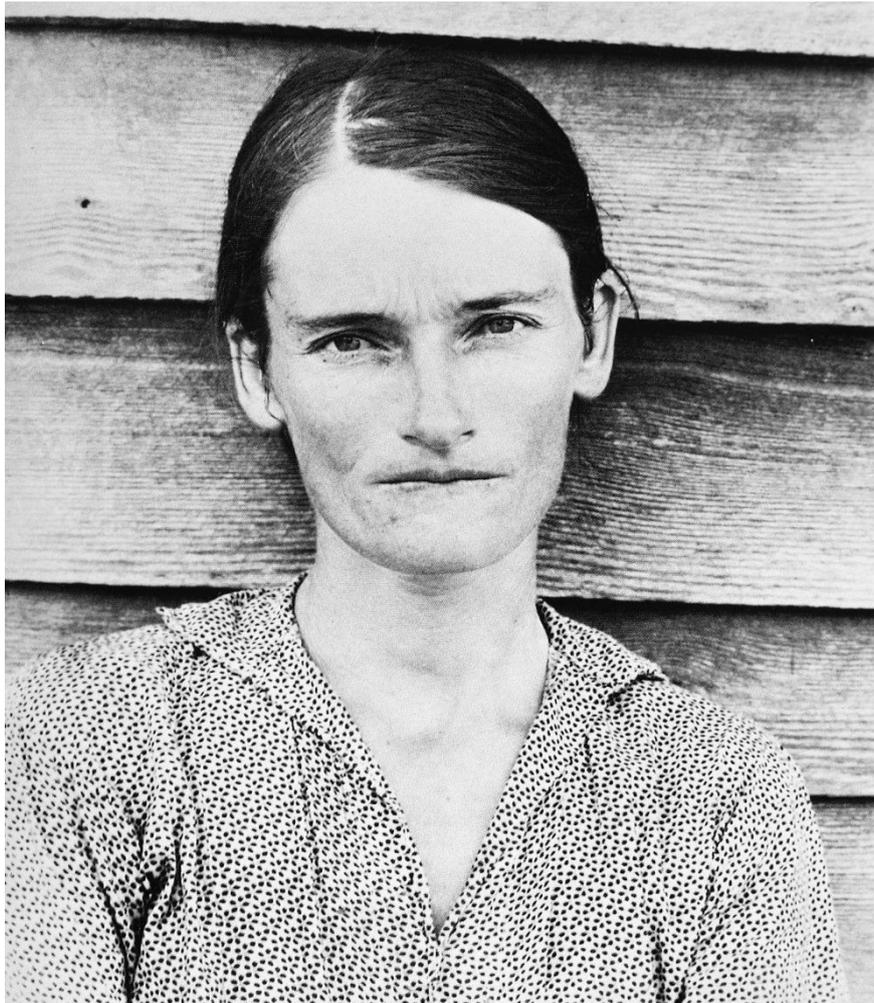


Figure 15: Allie May Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama

Evans large format portrait, with its high level of detail, clarity, photographic sharpness and realism, is in stark contrast to that of Franks elevator girl. Frank, working to capture his experience of America, Evans however, “...exhibits a notable emotional distance in much of his work. He presents his working men, women and children for scrutiny...”⁹⁵ Considering Wollen’s writings on the idea of photography as being frozen, Evans’ portrait seems a far better candidate to support this. The subject is still, in focus and as sharp and clear as the background, motion and time certainly do feel cryogenically frozen, decay impossible, and therefore can be ‘scrutinized’. The aesthetic lending itself closer to the forensic, a study of both subject and detail. Figure 16 shows Lange’s Migrant Mother image.

⁹⁵ DAY. J. (2011) Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography p. 15 - 16

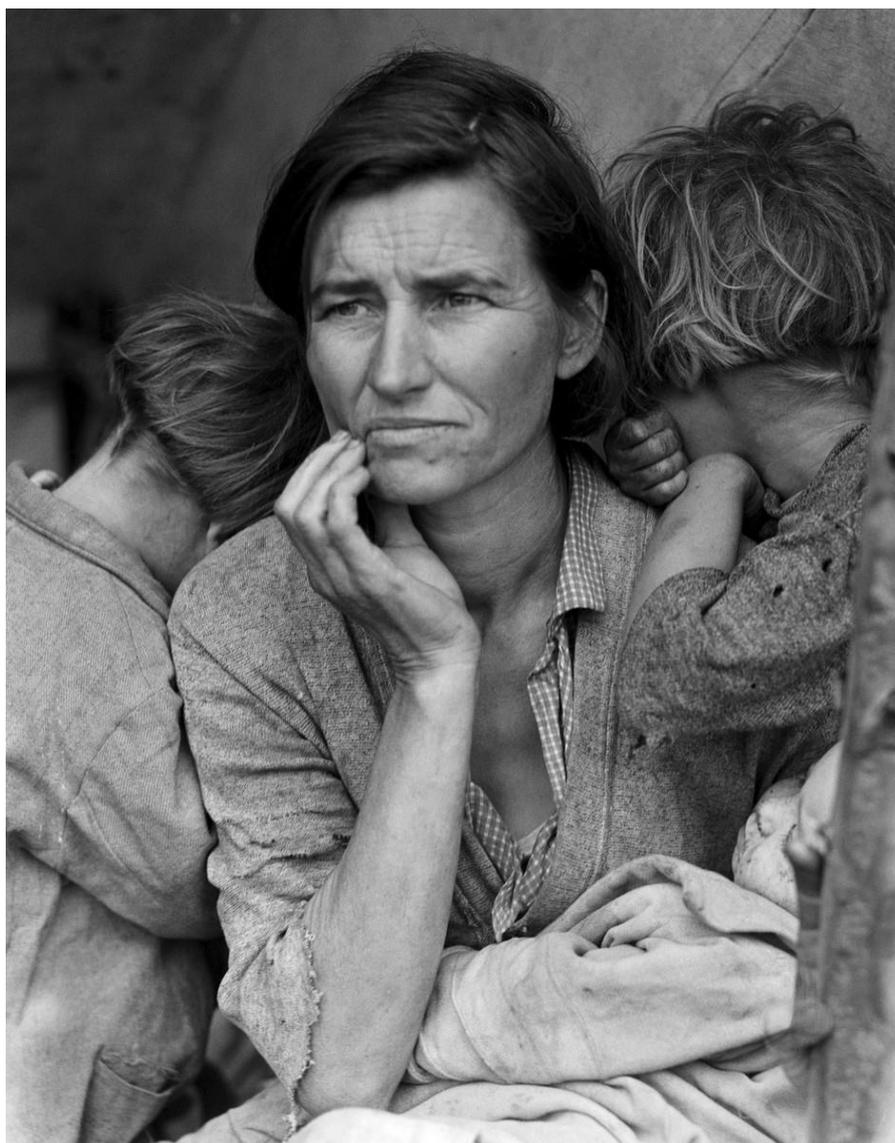


Figure 16: Migrant Mother

Alternatively, Lange used a view camera when photographing this woman. Considered to be an empathetic image as it captured a “...*suffering woman who must bear all pain for the sake of her children and yet survive.*”⁹⁶ Lange’s image is often referred to as being ‘timeless’ or as a “...*timeless icon*”⁹⁷ Yet the image remains static, the mothers pose as frozen as the children that surround her. In becoming a ‘timeless icon’, the image almost begins to resemble a stone statue rather than a photograph, crafted not from raw materials, but from time itself.

⁹⁶ DAY, J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 15

⁹⁷ GRANT, C. and WAXMAN, L. (2011) *Girls! Girls! Girls! in Contemporary Art* p. 51

Franks image of the 'elevator girl' however, is full of motion, and arguably remains timeless too because of its contrasts of the rich and the poor, but, as with Lange's image, also for the expression this girl holds.

The 'Migrant Mother', as with Evans' 'Farmers Wife', remains fixed in the frame, motionless, the people they present have become 'frozen', considered as powerful single images, nothing is left to the imagination outside of the frame. Recalling the context of the 1930's when both these images were taken, they were published and circulated in magazines, these powerful single images worked to 'sell' a social issue to heighten awareness. Franks images however, were never intended to exist in such a context, and yet another reason they remain timeless is due to his complex editing in 'The Americans'. For example, Day commented on the image in Figure 17 that, *"In its feeling of abandonment, its lack of living humanity, this image is timeless."*⁹⁸



Figure 17: Santa Fe, New Mexico

⁹⁸ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 103

An image such as this, although displays a 'static' scene, arguably remains relevant even today, and therefore becomes 'timeless'. In fact, it was in 1956 that "...*Marion King Hubbert made the now famous prediction that indigenous oil production in the US would peak in 1970... which turned out to be valid...*"⁹⁹ Franks book was published between 1958 and 1959, but an image such as this can potentially be read as being relevant to the world today, "*The controversies surrounding peak oil are as intense as those concerned with global warming, and the two debates in fact closely resemble one another.*"¹⁰⁰ His images were organised in themes, creating a critique of America, but the power of his photobook arguably continues with modern readings. Almost as if Frank subconsciously made comment not only on themes such as isolation or the 'abandonment' that Day speaks of, but also of far wider implications that still make comment on America itself, as well as one that reaches the rest of the globe. In comparison, Evans' and Lange's iconic images remain fixed in context, frame, time, and theme.

⁹⁹ GIDDONS, A. (2009) *The Politics of Climate Change* p. 38

¹⁰⁰ GIDDONS, A. (2009) *The Politics of Climate Change* p. 38

Conclusion

Frank's photobook was published at first in France in 1958, and the following year in America in 1959. Considering its challenging nature, and the fact that it was published during the height of the Cold War, 'The Americans' was at first met with criticism. "*The Americans was seen by many as a scathing condemnation of the country and its people.*"¹⁰¹ Referred to with comments such as misleading, flawed, ugly, disturbing, something that would only spread a message of hatred and disgust of America. The book was eventually declared out of print due to such negativity. It wasn't until the late 60's that a new edition of his photobook would be released. However, since its first release, the issues that Frank addressed in his work had "*...erupted into the collective consciousness...*"¹⁰². It was to be the younger photographers of the era that were to "*...embrace the book with a cultlike following.*"¹⁰³

This investigation and subsequent analysis of Frank's work in 'The Americans' has revealed the complex and challenging nature of his photobook, but also the complexity of the era itself. Frank was able to look behind the facade of the 'American Dream', scrutinising and exposing the realities he discovered that hid behind the wealth of advertising photography and commercialism. Frank's work also challenged and rebelled against the established photographic conventions of the era, as we have seen when comparing his work to that of Walker Evans. In his disdain for the popular narratives that existed in photographic publications of the era, Frank created a unique and powerful edit in his photobook. Although structure exists, as we have seen in the reading of just two images, they do not remain static in the photobook. From a philosophical perspective, when considering the writings of Wollen, it was argued that Frank's photographs in 'The American's' are not frozen in time. As they move freely across the pages, they move freely across time. The themes explored in his work still as relevant today as they were then. We can consider Figure 7, 'Cafe - Beaufort, South Carolina' again. This essay presented a

¹⁰¹ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 315

¹⁰² GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 316

¹⁰³ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 316

reading that considered the interactions between the black baby and the jukebox, and the reading concluded with an observation of the merging cultures of rock and roll music. The reading constrained itself within the context of the 1950's, and yet a modern reading may consider how this merging of cultures that occurred in rock and roll music is witnessed in America today. The music of rap artist Eminem is particularly significant in modern American culture. "*...he is more successful than any black artist working in the same style, though the style emerges from black communities.*"¹⁰⁴ It could be said therefore, that perhaps a truly modern reading and interpretation of Frank's work is required, as this would certainly attest to the power of his work. Frank's images contain representations of people and objects in the context of the 1950's, but as in 'Cafe - Beaufort, South Carolina', what the image thematically represents is arguably still relevant. If there is such movement in Frank's work, then one is left to question, why are the readings given by writers such as Greenough and Day so static, and constrained within the 1950's?

It is also important to recognise that every reading of 'The Americans' is an interpretation, and is therefore different for everyone. If we consider semiotic theory, specifically the writings of Roland Barthes, each image would result in different individual connotations. It's highly likely that those reading from America will interpret Frank's images differently than those from England for example. The studium or punctum found in Frank's images also becomes a phenomenological matter. This would perhaps explain why the readings of Frank's images tend to focus on wider social issues, such as politics, race and class. And yet Greenough commented herself that Frank's work "*...speaks to the heart, not the mind.*"¹⁰⁵ Again, this speaks of the complexity of Frank's work, as it is essentially a subjective document. As much as the society and culture of 1950's America exists in the images, so too is Frank's experience. As this essay has shown, this was conveyed through the blurriness of his black and white snapshot aesthetic, but is also clear in his last image in 'The Americans'. Frank's wife Mary sits in their car, with their two children huddled up closer. They appear tired, cold, marooned on an isolated road, as if lost. Although Day explained that this image "*...comments on a classic*

¹⁰⁴ YANCY, G. (2005) *White on White/Black on Black* p. 44

¹⁰⁵ GREENOUGH, S. (2009) *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'* p. 116

*Standard Oil advertising image*¹⁰⁶ it is also Franks personal experience that resonates within the image. When considering individual readings of 'The Americans', one is left to question, what of the experience of the reader? What do they find in their heart from Frank's work? In fact, we are left to question, has anyone provided a full, written and subjective description of Frank's work? Does a subjective piece of work not deserve a subjective response?

Considering 'The Americans' is often regarded as a critique of America, one is left to wonder how effective such a critique actually was. Franks work may have had an impact on the medium of photography, but like the works of Riis or Hine, whose photographic social critiques incited social change, Franks did not. Rather, it served as a personal observational record. For this, his work became influential for photographic artists, but ultimately, his critique didn't result in any cultural or social change.

Finally, of particular interest is the comment Frank made that led him to create 'The Americans' in the first place. He spoke of the 'smell of photography', and the essay provided explanation of this in reference to advertising photography. Frank's work, as argued above in this conclusion, is capable of movement not just within the pages of 'The Americans', but also within time. Frank's comment too, regarding this 'smell' and 'infection' of photography is not only relevant in the 1950's, but is true of today's world. A world which has become saturated in photography, more so than in Frank's era. Without question, the technological advances of digital cameras, the development of mobile phone cameras, and the internet, has resulted in a world where photographs and images constantly permeate our lives. Franks 35mm allowed him to shoot 500 rolls of film, but modern digital photography allows an increase of thousands. The sharing of such images on social networking websites has exploded. It was reported for example, that on Instagram, there are "*Over 80 million photos are uploaded each day*"¹⁰⁷ In fact, artists have such as Erik Kessels have commented on this. Kessels exhibition was titled, '24 Hrs of Photos', in which

¹⁰⁶ DAY. J. (2011) *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* p. 113

¹⁰⁷ 'Marketing: 96 Amazing Social Media Statistics and Facts for 2016'

<https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/96-amazing-social-media-statistics-and-facts-for-2016/> (16.11.16)

he printed around 350,000 images that were uploaded to Flickr, to which he explained, “I visualize the feeling of drowning in representations of other people’s experiences.”¹⁰⁸ Figure 18 presents an example of this sensation of drowning.



Figure 18: Contact Photography Festival, Toronto

It is this very idea of 'drowning in representations' of experience that is exactly the issue. A huge reason for Frank's work becoming seminal was that it reflected a deeply personal experience, a unique and new perspective in the 1950's. However now, we drown in this 'infection' and 'smell' of photography, both in the genres of subjective and of course advertising. But from the 1950's to today's world, what true conclusion that can be gathered from Frank's work is clear. No matter what technological advancements occurred in photography in the years that proceeded the 1950's, Frank reduced his personal experience of America down to just 83 black and white photographs. From this, he crafted a photobook that laid bare the visual iconography of an entire society, and then some. His work is therefore considered seminal because of its simple, yet remarkable use of the 35mm camera, with his

¹⁰⁸ 'A Visual Remix: On Photography' <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/a-visualremix.html> (16.11.16)

photographs that destroyed convention, and reinvented the meaning of photographic art through a personal unique vision evident within the complex editing he presented. It remains only to observe that intelligence is at the heart of 'The Americans', as much as Frank's own heart.

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