ROBERT FRANK:
“Robert Frank’s America”

By Jno Cook, Afterimage, March, 1982

“What do you want from a county with only two hundred years of history?”

- My Father

Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, which I think is the most important single effort in photography in this century, is also the most enigmatic. For 24 years the book has remained nearly impenetrable. There has seldom been any question of its intensity, its cohesiveness, or its uniqueness. The question has been what it is about. It is the purpose of this essay to investigate that question and, specifically, the book’s stubborn refusal to answer it.

Opacity has been one of the most important aspects of the book: it is this that has allowed it to be accepted by photographers of widely differing interests, and this that has extended the book’s range of influence, for the diversity of understandings produced a multiplicity of responses in the work of individual photographers.

To realize the extent to which the content of the 83 photographs in *The Americans* has been glossed over one can look at what has been said about it over the years. For the most part, criticism as well as enthusiasm has centered on Frank’s style of photography and on its formal aspects. Until recently, no one delved into the content of his pictures. The style, however, evoked a plethora of reactions. It was Frank’s lack of respect — his careless, off-angled, acompositional, grainy images — that caused a flurry of disapproval from the critics of the popular and professional photopress when the book appeared in the U.S. in 1959. [1] “Warped” and “sick” were just two of the adjectives used. [2]

These critics read his style well, perhaps better than anyone since. The feeling among them was unanimous: this was not how America was to be shown. But what was at issue was a larger matter than patriotism. The challenge of Frank’s work in the late ’50s lay in his treatment of his subject matter and in his use of a photographic style well out of the mainstream of representational conventions. *The Americans* involved a matter of how things were shown. [3]

But the book was noticed. Younger photographers liked the openness of Frank’s street photography; indeed, Frank’s way of treating his subject matter, even his subject material itself, were vindicated by their wholesale adoption by a generation of photographers. And critics, too, gradually came to look on *The Americans* as seminal, as a breakthrough, but the recognition of its influence was slow.

Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography*, certainly the standard text, gave only minor mention to Frank’s work in the 1964 edition. [4] Newhall deferred, in fact, to a description by Walker Evans. [5] Newhall’s caution was prudent, for throughout the ’60s no one had much of an idea of what *The Americans* was about. But the images were widely anthologized, and the book was eventually reprinted by Aperture in 1968. [6]

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By the ’70s, even though many photographic textbooks still failed to mention *The Americans*, some definitive opinions had been arrived at. The work was then...
variously described as a harsh look at America of the '50s, as a new iconography, or as a personal and expressive response. These ideas were often used in combination.

By the '70s it was also clear that *The Americans* represented the most influential, and therefore the most important, work in photography in the preceding 20 or 30 years. There was no longer any doubt that it had turned American photography around. As Ralph Gibson recalled, “It hit the photographic community with the impact of a pole-ax.” [7] Harold Jones said, “After Robert Frank's pictures, ordinary photographs in Life would pale.” [8] Arnold Gassen wrote of the overnight transformation of photography of the social landscape. [9] And in 1978 Szarkowski noted the difficulty younger photographers would have in understanding “how radical Frank's book was when it first appeared.” [10]

But these accolades do little to explain how the book was important — except in terms of its revolutionary style — and they say nothing about what the images in it mean. *The Americans* continued to be addressed in terms that are either general or meaningless. Szarkowski, in fact, made a good case for avoiding their content altogether. In the catalogue for the exhibition “Mirrors and Windows,” published in 1978, he summarized the initial reaction to *The Americans* by saying, “It was... not the nominal subject matter... that shocked the photography audience but the pictures themselves...” [11]

Today the pictures no longer shock us. Today only one quality stands out — their muteness. Twenty-four years later, those images still never describe fully, never seem to make a clear point. A strange subliminal feeling is generated by the book because of this lack of a clear, rational — that is, verbal — equivalent. There are photographers — Gary Winogrand and Lee Friedlander are examples — who have taken up that illusive opacity and made it a life project, a separate way of seeing the world. And what is that? Szarkowski has described Frank's work as, “kaleidoscopic, fragmentary, intuitive, and elliptical.” [12] But that string of adjectives only acknowledges once again the troublesome surface quality, the boundary we cannot seem to pass beyond. It is not surprising to see that a recent page-by-page analysis of *The Americans* has taken the metaphor as a starting point. [13]

That reputation for opacity has fascinated me over the years, especially since I do not view the book that way. When I first saw work from the *The Americans* I could make no sense of it. It wasn't political. It wasn't an exposé. It seemed only to deal in street photography enlightened by some perverse sense of humor, at times pervaded with an undirected melancholy. Only when I was told that this was the work of a Swiss national did it make sense — and then instantly.

Well, it made sense to me. I saw *The Americans* as a caustic anti-American polemic. It did not deal, as we already knew, in politics; it did not deal with race issues or poverty. It did not present a new exposition of reality. *The Americans* dealt with culture. That is, it dealt with our culture, but not on our terms. Let me give my qualifications. I'm also an immigrant. I arrived five years after Frank did, from the Netherlands, a country quite similar, culturally, to Switzerland. Both of us, I would presume, arrived with similar, if not identical, ambivalent attitudes — European attitudes, and specifically European post-war attitudes — toward America, largely uninformed and then arrested with the act of immigration.

You arrived, certainly with hope, but also with a feeling of loss that could subside to a wistful sadness or grow to a disappointment in the new lover that had been taken for life. What was that really like? John Brumfield, in a recent essay in Afterimage, speaks of Frank coming from a devastated Europe, as if he escaped the horrors of a DP camp. [14] It is an error to compare the personal life of an individual to the economics of a nation, however: it makes Frank into a refugee. This was hardly the case.
He arrived by free choice, like almost all the post-war immigrants, and as a middle-class citizen of Switzerland. The choice to leave could have carried with it considerable hesitation and ambivalence. Frank could have stayed. If we are to look for a stage from which Frank might have operated we have to look not toward national life, but personal life, a personal life embedded in family and culture.

In addition, the suggestion that Europe lay utterly devastated is a misrepresentation, as could perhaps be guessed from the political oratory Brumfield quotes to support his view. [15] Despite all the tribulations of World War II, there was little question about the quality of life for the middle class in the '50s. The war, for the survivors, was over. The economy, not to be measured by American standards, provided jobs, housing, and food. Europe, in fact, was regaining the momentum lost during the war years. Switzerland had remained physically outside of that war.

Then why emigrate? — because the land of wealth and opportunity in those days certainly was the U.S. In America you could afford a home, a car, and later a TV. The European middle class lacked all of these. (With equal family on both continents, this was exactly true for my family in the early '50s, except that the oldest European generation owned their homes.) You emigrate because jobs are tight, and you realize that it will be a long time before you, being one of the younger members of your family, will also own a home. You emigrate because you are confident in your skills and your ability to find work.

And, God, what a land of plenty the U.S. turns out to be. America... where they pay you four or five times what you make in Europe, where you eat meat daily — not just on Sundays — and where every day you eat white bread. "When I got to the New World I thought I was lucky," Frank recalled 24 years later. [16]

But consider what you give up. To begin with, you leave behind your language, and with it all capacity for finesse and every nuance of the life you grew up with. But much more is involved. If you were to hope to regain that aspect of life from your daily intercourse in English, from the newspapers and magazines, or from radio and TV, you would be sadly disappointed. These media speak to a nation where the population, despite 12 years at school, seems to have barely received a fifth-grade education by European standards.

When my father stepped off the boat in 1952, he spoke in English. It wasn't his native tongue, but he had been brushing up on it for a few months. It could just as well have been French or German; he had studied all three in high school. That's middle-class by European standards. In America owning a car and a TV makes you middle-class. America, to Europeans of the '50s, was a land of cultural barbarism. The shock of it, despite the forewarning Frank must have had, might have been like being transported in time to the Klondike gold rush, or worse yet, finding oneself suddenly in Europe of the Dark Ages.

And the actualities of immigration are not at all like the romance of Twain's Connecticut Yankee. One does not take control with either wit or skill; one stays above the barbarism by holding on to what one has. What in Europe might have been an attitude of disdain tinged with jealousy is expressed as a sadness, a disappointment, when transposed to the U.S. Frank's book, more than anything else, expresses this sadness, as it also expresses that disdain and criticism.

It shows America as a county lacking taste, humorless and impoverished. Frank's disappointment brought an awareness of the superficiality of American life. especially the discrepancies — not hypocrisies — arising from the American lack of awareness of the self: he repeatedly points to the masks and facades that Americans put on so readily and wear so unawares.

“What do you want,” my father used to say, “from a country with only 200 years of history?” As Europeans you identify with 2,000 years of history. You speak of how Caesar turned at the Rhine. You know the Roman names, and they matter still: Ultra Jectum, a stone’s throw over the Rhine, now Utrecht — that’s where my father was born. Or was it, as he used to suggest, that his forbears came out of the wilds to throw stones at the Romans? There are many places like that in the old world. The European with any education identifies with the land through its history. The architecture of European cities in the '50s still related to the land; there were reasons why things were built the way they were, reasons reaching into antiquity.

I have not heard the terms Old World and New World for a long time. Europe, too, has changed. But in the '50s, the term New World was all too apt for the U.S. — a land of meaninglessness, architecture, of endless renewal and rebuilding almost all within the memory of its older citizens, a land senselessly and ruthlessly lacerated with roads and highways, strewn with cement-block buildings, utilities, and advertising competing for attention. Does the American identify with the land?

The white American is denied this in Frank's book; with few exceptions only the black and the dead are shown in the landscape. Look at the photos from Butte, Montana. One cannot drive to Butte without traveling through a landscape that
would rival all the mountains of Europe. But what does Frank show? — a view from a hotel window that reads isolation, and the unlikeliness of a Navy recruiting office a thousand miles inland. How, for that matter, can Americans even know their land when most of them live in megalopolic cities? Americans, Frank maintains, have no sense of where they are just as they have no sense of where they come from.

When Frank depicts architecture it is not as a metaphor. It is as a bitter comment on the phoniness, the meaninglessness of such things as the Greek or Roman decorations of a façade — meaningless in that the American has no claim to such designs, no basis for their use, and worse, no comprehension of their origins. The American, Frank says (and he says so over and over), has no culture, no history, no relationship to the land. America is like a land of children wearing masks, acting out roles with no comprehension of the self, no awareness of the infinity of history and humanity, no awareness of what is called culture.

Of course, that infinity of history is European history, and that infinity of humanity too, is European. If Frank made an error in judgment it is founded in this myopic, centuries old, European chauvinism. To the European the term “culture” does not mean milieu, but culture as it is used to describe a cultured person, a refinement of thought, manner, and taste that represents the culmination of the history of a people. It is a concept that is defined in nationalism, in the access to his- tory, in the achievements of the past, and in a chauvinism that judges others against a standard of propriety akin to that of being “civilized.”

It is therefore more than just a personal acquisition: it is the whole atmosphere of one’s existence, and it is defined in terms of the accidentals of a social environment, the non-essential attributes and qualities that become symbols for culture. It is the expected behavior of one’s peers and countrymen. For the European, especially the middle class, participation in culture is a matter of social necessity, the important quality of life that allows all to feel equal. American culture, in contrast, still partakes of frontier egalitarianism.

The necessity of personally embracing culture to lessen class distinctions doesn’t exist here: in America everyone is first of all equal. And, as William Carlos Williams has pointed out, what passed here as culture was false in being an imported version of European high culture, inauthentic, and unspecific to the American condition. [17] Certainly Frank recognized that something was lacking. The very concept of culture was not translatable into English. Culture, as Frank would see it, could not be easily defined, but it could be accurately felt, and its absence was a keen disappointment.

The Americans is a bitter book and alien. As Americans we could not read it. What was depicted as crass was seen as social commentary. Where the book points to class distinctions, we read economics. Where Frank deals with pointed description, we see metaphors. And when Frank explicitly doles out sarcasm, especially when he speaks to our littleness, we misread him entirely because we are little, just as we are provincial and parochial. We are backwards, barbaric, uneducated, but mainly uncultured. We are ill at ease in our environment, we wear uniforms and costumes with dead seriousness, we mimic Europeans without knowing why. We are reported to be classless, yet we draw severe racial and economic distinctions. We are rich, yet we have needless poverty. We pretend to sophistication, yet are spiritually impoverisher.

Contradictions, pretense, shoddiness — that’s how Frank presents us. Would an American understand that? No people would admit to such ugliness, agree that their lives are a pretense, their culture artificial. It would matter little if Frank’s thesis were irrelevant or incorrect: enough had been gleaned from the tone of those pictures to make the early critics very angry.

But the specific charges were lost to the lack of that European overview. Indeed, Frank’s particular attitude might be totally inaccessible. It is European of the late ’40s, but out of touch with European thought of the ’50s. It has allied itself with the American disdain for America as expressed by the Beat Generation, but I do not think it is the same. Whereas the work of Ginsberg or Kerouac remains American, and remains readable, despite its harshness and joylessness, Frank’s expression does not. Frank has a different axe to grind, and it is honed on a disappointment which surpasses what the Beat writers can grieve for. Like a Celt from a barrow, it has a magic of another age, another culture, a wider overview. It is telling that the book was readily published in 1958 in France, as Les Américains, after it had been rejected by American publishers (even though Frank’s work had been done under the auspices of a Guggenheim Foundation grant). [18] In France it came out as a clearly anti-American book.

The photographs were accompanied by an 84-page text of quotations and anecdotes collected by critic Alain Bosquet, presented under headings such as, “The Civil War Continues,” “Isolationism,” “An Incorrigible Idealism,” “Uniformity.” “The Intellectual is Suspect,” “Religion or Religiousity,” and “The Almighty Dollar.” [19]

One of the anecdotes serves well to give the feel of the text.

On the first day I ate in a ‘drugstore.’ A stool, a paper napkin from a dispenser.

Drugs and cosmetics. Affluence. I said to the man behind the counter, “Thank you very much. Goodbye.” He looked at me with irritation — I had made him lose three
precious seconds. You suspend politeness and along with that the conditional and the subjunctive. You don’t say, “I would, perhaps, very much, like to have...,” You say, “I want –.” [20]

This note by Bosquet succinctly expresses contempt for the meager economies which make eating a trial rather than a pleasure. These are set off by the signs of the American abundance, as if to say, why is this necessary? The reason, Bosquet suggests, lies in the American drive to make every minute profitable. This note is one of a number that are offered not as observations but reproaches: they are addressed to us.

It is typical of the tone and attitude that runs through most of the text. The point, for example, of the quotations (which constitute most of the text), is to show how American intellectuals — mostly familiar names, ranging from Benjamin Franklin to Adlai Stevenson — have seen their nation. Like Frank’s photographs, they are presented as a self-indictment, and therefore indisputable.

TEXT EXcerPTS, 1958 EDITION OF THE AMERICANS

The excerpts for the 1958 Robert Delpire edition was compiled and edited by Alain Bosquet. The excerpts translated are from Bosquet’s “Petits Télégrammes aux Américains.” Translations are by Nathalie Magnan and Catherine Lord.

- Every year there is a national holiday in honor of new citizens: it is not they who thank you, it is you who thank them. The American, in America, cannot understand that the entire world doesn’t wish to become American. Let’s be fair: Americans who come to Europe after a while can’t imagine that one would wish to remain American.

- In a restaurant on Broadway, there is on each table a photograph of the complete menu: one sees what one is going to eat. It’s practical, and it avoids surprises. You have a horror of surprises. One insures oneself against surprises of fate: accident, death, unemployment will bring in so much or they will cost so much.

- All week you manage your existence in the most rational way: you run on pills, vitamins, calories, whole milk, preservatives. Saturday night comes. Alcohol lets you do everything. It is your freedom. In France, and in other parts of the world, one gets drunk by chance, in enthusiasm or sudden sorrow: you, you are the only ones to get drunk with premeditation. You say, “Come at six; we’ll eat, then we’ll get dead drunk.” The program is clear, and minutely planned. I knew a soldier who had spent many months on one of the Aleutian Islands: he was paid a bottle or whiskey (forbidden at the garrison), the equivalent of a year’s wages. It is true that alcohol lets you make love without too much remorse.

- Abstraction is forbidden to you, and consequently, wit. More or less ordinary people (car, television, etc.) to whom I talked about poetry all told me, “Nice hobby.” If I insisted that it was more, they asked me, “How much do you make doing that?”

- You work more than other people, by inclination... or is it from the inability to divide yourselves in half? I have known some high officials who return in the evening, from nine to midnight, to work at the office, because they needed an activity and also because it seemed less tiring to them than finding a new activity.

- In general, you are neither snobbish nor pretentious. You lie little for the sport of it. Consequently, you are natural and indiscreet. A man of affairs told me, at our first meeting: “Long ago, my wife had a Caesarian, which made my daughter a little retarded.”
A young woman from the Middle West whose coat I held out for her said to me, “I can do that myself.” That was to indicate we were equals and that she didn’t have to submit to my European gallantry, which was a little insulting to her. As she was nice and kindly she quickly understood that I hadn’t wanted to put her in an inferior position. We left the town in a car, and the car — as is proper — served as a shelter. In your country, it is rarely a question of undressing to make love. One feigns surprise, that surprise one fears so much. Thus love resembles rape, without the violence of rape. Tenderness too is interchangeable. I wanted to ask my companion, “Are you sure that we haven’t loved each other somewhere else already?”

You have no respect for the past. A skyscraper thirty years old disappears to make room for another skyscraper, which will last twenty years. You change quickly and you show little stubbornness. In addition, you haven’t a lot of pride. From whence your reversals, your about-faces, your infidelities, your fashions. One can always hope, therefore, to persuade you, to dissuade you, to make you deviate from a tradition that you don’t yet have. A dead dog in the sky is enough for you to go from blind self-sufficiency to the most masochistic panic.

Where are you going? Happiness, which you confuse with technical progress, has played some nasty tricks on you. Are you going to go to sleep in the laziness of a practical mind which prefers numbers to words and graphs to ideas? Then the world will escape you. That would be a pity: we very much like, with our rather perverse pride, giving you lessons in civilization.

But when the book was published in the U.S. by Grove Press the following year, the indictments of the French edition were omitted. A retraction? After all, 10 years away from Switzerland, Frank had become an American. You just can’t go back to a farm in the Swiss mountains when you have family and friends in the U.S., professional standing, and a knowledge of the economics and way of life. Then, too, there is the growing appreciation for your work, even if it is misplaced.

That apparent retraction — the change in format — changed the tone of the book. It removed much of the bitter polemicism. *The Americans* could now be seen in other ways.

Even before the U.S. publication of his book, Frank seemed to be turning elsewhere. A portfolio of prints done in 1958, pictures taken from a moving city transit bus, was accompanied by a statement which declared, “These photographs represent my last project in photography…. I knew and felt that I had come to the end of a chapter.” [21] In a way Frank’s abandonment of still photography sanctified the project of *The Americans*. It was as if the book had been a last and final statement.

Little wonder, then, that many viewers were quite ready to accept the book as a personal statement, to understand it in terms of what was to be called his “intensive response to the moment.” [22]

The Grove Press edition certainly looked and felt different from *Les Américains* — more like a travelogue, but without the idealizing point of view we might expect from such a document. The captions were expanded to include the labeling of activities, so that, for example, “Hoboken” became “Parade — Hoboken.” The French text was replaced with an introduction by Jack Kerouac. Because most viewers were unfamiliar with the French edition, the book effectively made a fresh start at a dialogue. The introduction by Kerouac also served to Americanize the book, for he was identified with those vocal and highly visible homegrown critics, the Beats.

Kerouac starts:

“That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral. That’s what Robert Frank has captured in these tremendous photographs taken as he traveled on the road around practically 48 states in an old used car.... [23]"

It’s disarming, and it makes little sense as a companion to Frank’s photographs. Kerouac reads like a night-time Beat poet, self-indulgent, taking pleasure in the pictures and in describing them. Even the relationship between Frank’s hardhitting pictures and the Beat stance seems tenuous. The Beat’s languorous deprecation of America was something that could be ignored-and eventually was.

As time passed and the Beats faded, and with that the novelty of acting out a social critique, Frank’s book could be seen in similar terms: as a reflection only of past days. For some that crazy feeling Kerouac spoke of came to be the record of the days that closed the McCarthy era. When those days were seen in retrospect as ugly and filled with anxiety, then *The Americans*, by virtue of the ugliness and that vaguely unpleasant feeling it seemed to deal in, became identified with that era. That became another understanding of *The Americans*.

To summarize, a clear interpretation of Frank’s work did not come forth. As Leslie Baier recently pointed out, Kerouac’s preface to the book, along with Evans’s brief essay and a piece of Gotthard Schuh, both done in 1957, were the only criticisms of any substance on Frank’s work for nearly a decade. [24] For the critics, especially, the book remained a mystery. The pictures not only stayed mute, but proved impervious to formal analysis. We find, for example, photographs with precise...
framing next to photographs which display the careless gesture of a grab shot. The diversity was too great to make any formal sense of the pictures, and this remained true as long as they were looked at as individual pictures.

It was John Brumfield who first looked at The Americans, in print, as a book — an organized sequence, not just a random collection of pictures. [25] A formal identity now seems to come forward, which includes the codified order of the photographs (unchanged through four printings), and the remarkable internal development of visual themes that carry through the pages like a cadence of rhymes.

Brumfield demonstrates his proposition in two ways. First, he finds a coincidence of mood and tone between the photographs and the political and social atmosphere of America in the '50s. Second, he performs a reading of the content of the photographs. The first approach seems conjectural: the contiguous use of text on two different topics — national politics and descriptions of the photographs — tends to suggest a connection between them, but little is proven. Brumfield’s assumption is that a work is representative of an era; it seems as if he is proceeding backwards from the tone of the photographs to some fugitive feeling now associated with the politics of the '50s.

In fact, tone rather than subject becomes the content of those photographs. Capital is made of anguish in the attempt to make that tone universal. We are told, in effect, not that The Americans may have expressed how Frank felt, but that it told us how we felt. Yet we also know that by and large it has been photography’s task to falsify reality in the presentation of a hopefulness and confidence which has no more claim to truth than Frank’s expression of anguish.

Brumfield’s other method of suggesting this coincidence of moods, however — his reading of the pictures — is innovative and powerful, and leads to some amazing insights and a rich exposition. It is also, I would say, a personal interpretation — even though many of us would agree with his view. We would agree because the reading is American, and the underlying assumptions are American. But I feel those assumptions are incorrect.

Brumfield’s reading, based on finding personifications and allegories, is a figurative reading which treats The Americans like a romance. It sees the subjects of Frank’s photographs as stylized figures and psychological archetypes rather than real people. "We are being introduced to a cast of characters," Brumfield writes, "but, like figures from a medieval drama, they are types, not personalities." [28] His method of cracking the content of those pictures consists of defining a particular use of the metaphor. (The need for limiting the definition is obvious, since the metaphor is the most open-ended of all figures of speech.)

The use Brumfield imputes to Frank centers on the thesis that a set of socially defined (one might say culturally defined) connotations exists for the public and private symbols (one might say icons) which appear with such regularity in The Americans. The American flag is used as an example. Frank’s use of such a set of connotations would have involved creating secondary meaning from an interplay of what is shown in his photographs against what is connoted by the very appearance of those symbols.

What is wrong with that is the insistence on metaphor, and in particular the application of connotative conventions. It assumes something very strange, and most likely, untrue. It assumes Frank to be an American. It assumes that he is American in his attitudes, in his point of view, in his familiarity with American connotative conventions. It assumes not only that he would be sure of their use, but that he would be willing to give recognition to them.

I think that therein lies the error. I know from my own experience, and I think it is safe to generalize, that eight or 10 years are not enough to acclimatize an adult to a foreign culture, not enough to reach such surety with a language, visual or verbal, in all its connotative and denotative forms, as to be able to construct a masterpiece of allegorical form, especially one that would depend so heavily on conventions which might be commonly held but are seldom expressed. [29] I think that if Frank had actually attempted such a metaphorical construction it would have been all too transparent.

And what are those signs and symbols for which these connotative conventions are said to exist? Certainly the flag, but what are the others? They would seem to be the automobile, the juke box, the TV set, the highway, the public eating place, signs and posters, various phony decorations, outlandish costumes and clothes, and also our
parks and our assorted electric machinery. Certainly some of these hold symbolic meaning, especially an object like the flag.

But it soon becomes problematic to list connotative conventions for these other repeated icons, and with those problems their use and function in a metaphorical system is thrown into doubt. How much agreement, for example, is there when it comes to the connotations of automobiles, or bars, or funerals? If these become rhetorical devices for Brumfield, just as they were new-found icons for Szarkowski, it is because they are out there and they always were. They speak to us just as they speak about us, and if their ubiquitous appearance suggests symbolic significance it only speaks to the fact that we still can’t see ourselves as we are.

Brumfield’s insistence on figurative meaning, admirable as such a hypothesis might be, again avoids the question of literal meaning. Why would a photographer with such facility in the real wish to put together a document which could only be read at a secondary level of meaning?

Why would Frank want to create a melodramatic characterization, a stylized typology, which, if we are to believe Brumfield, dealt with social issues and philosophical positions such as “an alienation amounting to nothing less than ontological anguish.” [30] We would be led to regard The Americans as having only symbolic significance. This seems yet another dismissal of the genuine grit of those pictures, another denial of their actuality.

And as a metaphorical document the intent of The Americans would be fully bracketed by the production of that book, leaving nothing open for the ambivalence and uncertainty that Frank himself expressed about the project. Consider what Frank said in his application to the Guggenheim Foundation: that it was his desire to “produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact of which should be such as will nullify explanation.” [31] Does a metaphorical system lend itself to a reading which projects authenticity?

The very use of any figurative form involves the risk of misreading. And what form, what device could be used that would “nullify explanation”? In my mind it would be such directness in presentation that no secondary meaning could be derived from the book — at least not in terms of what we generally think of: stock visual statements, trite metaphors, easy symbolism, transparent ironies. These were the devices of the illustrated magazines, economical attempts to allude to higher meaning through what Walker Evans had called, “woolly, successful ‘photosentiments’… mindless pictorial salestalk.” [32]

This was the very thing that Frank had been steadily moving away from. Szarkowski has noted this, and Walker Evans made mention of it. [33] “Irony and detachment” is how Evans summed up those photographs. Those are intellectual qualities, not at all in character with the allegory, the metaphor, or the dramatic unfolding which Brumfield suggests. [34] When those photographs come together in The Americans they partake in a continuous form which is related to the satire, the critique, the exposition. The primary figure of speech is irony, as Evans correctly noted. That is what the secondary meaning hides behind. Irony doesn’t allow resolution, doesn’t allow penetration by those against whom it is directed. Frank’s irony is directed at us.

But what exactly were Frank’s photographs meant to illustrate? Allow me to present the most transparent meaning of the first few. The first photograph identifies the folks with the flag as Americans, [35] but there is also a comment about the appropriate use of the flag. Any Boy Scout knows that flags are not to be used as bunting. A flag hung against a building speaks of a callous and unthinking attitude, of a citizenry which lacks the thought to provide a proper respect for a national emblem.

Those first images are also about clothes and costumes. It starts with the drab clothes of the women in the first photograph set off against the dress coats and
high hats of the city fathers in the second. It is more than just a distinction of class and station, it’s a matter of how that is accomplished. It is the absurdity of those hats from another century — what purpose do they serve in Hoboken? This sort of costume for public occasions in European towns would have a tradition dating back perhaps hundreds of years, but in Hoboken it smacks of mimicry.

The third photograph continues these observations. Now it is the silliness of being a billboard, of wearing Kefauver’s head on your chest just as that frieze wears a bodyless head. Perhaps a comment about political fervor, there is also something sinister about this photograph, for something else strikes through that pose and that angle: the image of the demagogue. It could be Hitler again, or Mussolini, all too immediate for the European. But the reality is quickly tempered by the surrounding images; though everyone is watching, as Brumfield points out, there is no interest or agitation. [36]

The idea of pretentious costumes used in childish affectation and worn without comprehension continues. Is the fourth photograph, Funeral — St. Helena, South Carolina, really about social stratification, as Brumfield suggests tangentially? Is that gripping hand on the mouth a symbol for the powerlessness of the Negro? Perhaps, especially since the gesture has clear and universal psychological meaning. But are we then to take that gesture as a metaphor for the grief and lack of power of blacks in America?

I think that to do so is to project our contemporary racial consciousness onto images of another era. Neither the Beats nor, I would think, Frank, had developed such an awareness. The Beats callously admired blacks for being able to live in poverty but never gave any thought to changes in the political power system. Neither was the middle-class European of the period significantly aware of racial issues; it was the automobiles and the formal attire that were significant. Negroes owning automobiles? Negroes in formal wear? It’s a put-on. It’s a facade.

Such thinking is a monstrous bigotry today. But that’s where bigotry comes from — firmly held, uninformed ideas about propriety. Notions of propriety can be enlightening, but just as often they can be petty and lacking in generosity. The next two photographs select a different constituency and continue the commentary. Even today, Western dress is a gross affectation in most parts of the county, including Detroit, as is the civilian use of an army uniform. But that interpretation derives from the point of view of the pragmatic, republican, Calvinist citizen of Switzerland. It’s not American. We accept the right to wear cowboy hats without hesitation. It never occurs to us to ask if that is what those pictures are about.

Another theme that runs through those first few photos, starting with the barely perceived gesture of one of the women in the first picture, is the mouth. In the seventh photo, Navy Recruiting Station, the mouth finally speaks, saying. "Ask me about it." The businessmen, enroute to Washington, strain to hear, as does the young lady at the movie premiere — être aux écoutes — certainly the kids at the candy store and I suspect that those kids at the Motorama, too, have entered their car to listen. [37]

But while this ties the images together, their primary message is wholly different. The reading of Navy Recruiting Station is in its comment on provincialism, seen directly in those feet on the desk, and something more in the strange display of a flag tacked to the wall. That flag looks as forced and contrived as, for example, the oversized portrait of Lenin that might hang in a similar small government office in Russia would look to us. The European of the ’50s was suspicious of such overt and oversized nationalism; swastikas came in that size too.

The stars of the flag in the recruiting station, which are repeated in the following photograph, just as stripes appear in the photograph that precedes it, serve to introduce a concurrent theme which runs through the following pictures. It is a theme of stars, stardom, and acting: first those tycoons in the star bedecked club car, then the starlet of the movie premiere, followed by kids listening to stars, kids playing at being stars, and kids acting as if stars. Everyone is obsessed with stardom in America. Paul Goodman summed it up in 1956: "We live increasingly, then, in a system in which little direct attention is paid to the object, the function, the program, the task, the need; but immense attention to the role, procedure, prestige, and profit." [38]

Is what Frank is showing us a visual metaphor for concerns like Goodman’s? I don’t think so. Frank’s photographs are no more metaphors than the examples Goodman uses in his book to demonstrate his summary. That needs to be remembered. Frank’s photographs should first be looked at as examples, as demonstrations. He dealt in direct evidence. And the task of taking photography down to absolute fact, of drawing directly from daily life, was the very thing photojournalism had avoided — purposely so, for the reduction to raw reality inadvertently degrades the subject to a mode of low irony. The distinction between fact and satire becomes difficult to make; raw realism introduces too much unbelievability.

Frank on the one hand dismissed the need to present information in the mildly romantic and stylized manner of the illustrated magazines, but on the other, his pictures failed to make their point, their comparisons, or their anecdotes within our schema of understanding. If they had — that is if this had been an American
photographer giving expression to American concerns with photographs drawn from such a dead level of life — it would not have worked.

But Frank did strike a nerve, although it would be more accurate to say that he irritated our collective nervous system. The reason The Americans struck us so hard was that Frank worked as if ignorant of American social ethics. Some of the topics which he addressed visually (the emerging race issue is an example) would have been seen as moralizing if done by an American photographer working within the established visual equivalents of the venacular of American thought. What Frank did with his photographs, unexpectedly, was something totally unfamiliar, something which crossed boundaries only vaguely recognized by Americans.

It becomes as difficult as it is needless to continue addressing these pictures individually, and embarrassing. Certainly not all of them are as suggestive or as alarming as Political rally — Chicago and Recruiting Station. Often they do nothing more than point, for example, to those loud shirts which first came into prominence in the '50s — so immodest and vulgar in European eyes — or to the tact that both children and adults will take off their shirts in the summer heat. But then, few Europeans realize that Chicago is on the same latitude as Rome, and that the climate in the U.S. ranges from mid-continental extremes of heat and cold to the subtropical.

Realizing these things — and realizing the other vast differences in demography, land use, and the differences that these ultimately bring to American citizens — is helpful in understanding the basic issue which must lie behind any of Frank's pictures: why it was taken, why the activity or the situation was of note. Not to know these things makes it difficult to understand the literal content of Frank's work, and leads to assigning a meaning which simply doesn't exist to many of his pictures.

An example is U.S. 285 — New Mexico, which has been one of the most enigmatic photos of The Americans. It has always seemed inexplicable in terms of the other images. A highway receding to the far horizon had been photographed repeatedly, and often better, especially in terms of what we would expect it to say. Gassen notes that it is a Dorothea Lange photograph. [39] Why then would Frank want to repeat it? One reason, of course, for an artist to repeat a past image is to play with the possibilities inherent in historical allusion. This seems likely in the case of U.S. 285, because there are a number of photographs in The Americans that recall the work of others. But I think Frank had something else in mind, and if he consciously made the allusion it would have been to set that meaning against his intent in using it. U.S. 285 also appeared among the 33 pictures first published, in 1957, in U.S. Camera Annual 1958; [40] only 15 reappear in The Americans.

Edited out were photographs which were easily read or obvious constructions, and a few which were interesting but not archetypally American. The Joan Crawford photo, for example, is left out, and for good reason, for it presents itself more as a photo-gag than anything else. It has the look of a Cartier-Bresson, and something of Atget, but also it presents a situation which might occur anywhere in the world. An overwhelming display of posters is not particularly American. But then why did Frank keep U.S. 285 when it seemed so transparent?

Walker Evans seems to have been puzzled by that photograph also, for he specifically addresses it in his introductory remarks to Frank's portfolio of 1957. "In this picture, instantly you find the continent," Evans says, "The whole page is haunted with American scale and space, which the mind fills automatically." [41] He then goes on to write of how that space is filled, but his description is of feelings provoked by Frank's other pictures.

Evans seems to be trying to match this particular photograph to the claims he has made for Frank's work: its "irony and detachment," and the critical clarity that distinguishes Frank from the romanticizers of the illustrated magazines. [42] But U.S. 285 certainly doesn't look ironic and detached, and Evans's attempted justification doesn't ring true. He is probably correct, however, to suggest that U.S. 285 makes reference to space and long distances, as well as, I might add, emptiness. The emptiness of that landscape was selected, I suspect, not to point to scale, but to make a very emphatic point about the highway stripe, which dominates the picture.

Think of the highway crew that carefully painted that dashed line over perhaps hundreds of miles of empty county roads. Think of highway crews everywhere doing that, everywhere making decision about where it is safe to pass, and where it is not. Down comes the brush: "Do Not Cross Solid White Line In Your Lane." Everywhere, too, Americans obey those solid white lines. The American might not meet another car in a hundred miles, have 10 miles visibility, yet the American stays in his lane despite road camber and close shoulders, now and again making a mental note not to pass when that solid line appears. That's why the car had to be in Frank's picture.

What is being described is American — typically American, and absurd in many ways. It is no less absurd perhaps than the companion photograph, the one that follows U.S. 285, where a sign says: "You Must Be 21 And Prove It." That sign is located between two of the dashes in the highway stripe across the back of the bar.
Both pictures comment on the socialization of Americans, a sheep-like homogeneity in radical contrast to what we believe ourselves to be, and strange behavior for a people that pride themselves on their freedom: hypocritical, Frank might have suggested, or puritanical in not being able or willing to distinguish between moral and civil law.

But it is difficult, as an American, to read these pictures like that. We would have to see beyond things which we take for granted. We would have to be from elsewhere to think of those highway stripes as orders, and then to note how Americans obey those orders implicitly and under all circumstances, as if to do so were a virtue. That observation also derives from a European point of view. While American roads were built in the '20s to accommodate the automobile, perhaps complete with stripes, European roads date from antiquity and the question of their appropriate use by automobiles is only a recent one.

In Europe neither the economy nor the ubiquity of automobiles were sufficient at any time since WWI to merit paying attention to county roads. Little wonder that Frank might suggest that this picture illustrates how the American doesn’t seem conscious of his actions, and doesn’t examine them to conclude that maybe each driver should be left to trust his own judgment with respect to the use and occupancy of highways.

If this is difficult to understand or see, at least we should be aware of the magnificent pun contained in U.S. 285. It’s more than just a picture about stripes: it is obviously night and therefore it is about stars and stripes. Both are lit, and both are also lit in the following photograph, where they undulate like a relief of the landscape in the preceding picture. U.S. 285 is now a personification of the American flag, a metaphor if you will. Walker Evans didn’t think of it that way. Nor did Jack Kerouac. Kerouac saw the whole of The Americans as a journey. He described U.S. 285 as:

Long shot night road arrowing forlorn into immensities and flat of impossible-to-believe America in New Mexico under the prisoner’s moon. [43]

Brumfield doesn’t describe the picture, [44] and for good reasons maybe. It’s been 20 years now and the realization has come to most readers that Frank’s book wasn’t just about such simple things as the vastness of the American landscape. Exactly what it was about has remained uncertain. We have been unwilling to admit that perhaps that photo of the highway is about the highway and about the stripe that dominates it.

We still look at those pictures with eyes trained to Romanticism. If, however, we had been capable of penetrating the irony of U.S. 285 to see the car approaching on the correct side of that stripe and the utter emptiness of that road, we would have been seeing what it was Frank had in mind. The picture is neither metaphorical nor symbolic — no great quality of American life was being alluded to — it simply demonstrates a single aspect of the American character.

I don’t need to continue with an analysis of Frank’s entire book. The point is that there was an underlying point of view, and an awareness of that should keep our metaphorical leaps in check. [45] That Frank’s book came from America of the ’50s is unquestionable. Whether it has anything to do with the ’50s is problematic. That the tone of the book is harsh, sad, and expresses a certain anguish is almost universally agreed upon. That this represents anything more than the stance of the author is questionable. That Frank makes use of sarcasm, irony, and humor in his images I would agree to. That these extend to a system of metaphors, and ultimately to an allegorical narrative, is uncertain. That Frank set out to create a contemporary document of America we know. That this document should be taken for anything more than the images it presents is a misreading.

In the end the ultimate utility of The Americans might not lie in reinterpretation, but in what has already been made of those pictures by the photographers who saw them. Perhaps there is no real need for penetration. Perhaps the best critique has been performed already by those practitioners who saw The Americans as if it were polished obsidian, and went out to construct their own impenetrable visions of the world.
Notes

(1) Robert Frank, The Americans (New York: Grove Press, 1959). I would like to thank Alex Sweetman and Peter Thompson for their encouragement.


(3) Which is the thesis developed by Szarkowski in op. cit., pp. 17 – 20.


(6) One of the more widely distributed anthologies was Szarkowski’s The Photographer’s Eye (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). Five photographs by Frank are included in the 172 illustrations, making him, in terms of the number of pictures reproduced by a single individual, fifth among the 95 photographers. Aperture reprinted The Americans again in 1969 (New York: Grossman Publishers), and in 1978 (Milton, N.Y.).


(10) Szarkowski, Mirrors and Windows, p. 19.


(12) Ibid.


(14) Ibid., pp. 9 – 10.

(15) Brumfield quotes Winston Churchill from a speech which could only have been applicable just after the end of WWII, if at all.


(19) Ibid., ad passim.

(20) Ibid., p. 6, from “Petits Télégrammes aux Américains.”


(22) Gassen, op. cit., p. 146.


(25) Brumfield, loc. cit. But only an introductory “cycle” of 17 pictures is identified.


(27) Brumfield, loc. cit., p. 8.

(28) Ibid., p. 11.

(29) Cf., Paul Goodman, Growing up Absurd (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), which deals with the same conventions, especially in Chapter 5, “Patriotism.” Goodman maintains that these conventions are the vocabulary of youths and adolescents.

(30) Brumfield, op. cit., p. 12. Consider, also the incessant punning. What does that black, and occasionally vulgar, humor have to do with a political and social rhetorical dramatization? Noticing that many of the puns are based on French expressions one comes to realize how little the book is derived from American sources. By comparison see the extremely reasoned and sensitive analysis by Leroy Searle, “Poems, Pictures and Conceptions of ‘Language’”, in Afterimage, Vol. 2, No. 10 (May–June 1975) pp 33 – 39.


(32) Evans, loc. cit.

(33) Szarkowski, Looking At Photographs, loc. cit.; and Evans, ibid.

(34) The intellectual quality also shows in the humor and in a certain amount of moralizing.

(35) Picture references are to the 1970 Aperture reissue of The Americans. Although the order has remained unchanged through all four editions, the cropping, sizing, and emphasis of the photographs has changed.

(36) This device, i.e., bringing up a point of criticism and then negating it, is used consistently throughout the book.

(37) To the car radio, that is.

(38) Goodman, op. cit., p. xiii.

(39) Gassen, op. cit., p. 138.


(41) Evans, loc. cit.

(42) Ibid.

(43) Kerouac, op. cit., p. 5.

(44) But he calls it “emphatically transitional.” Brumfield op. cit., p. 15.

(45) And Caution against notions at an international style of photography, or the existence of a visual lingua franca.