

Photography and film: Robert Frank : the contradictory reality

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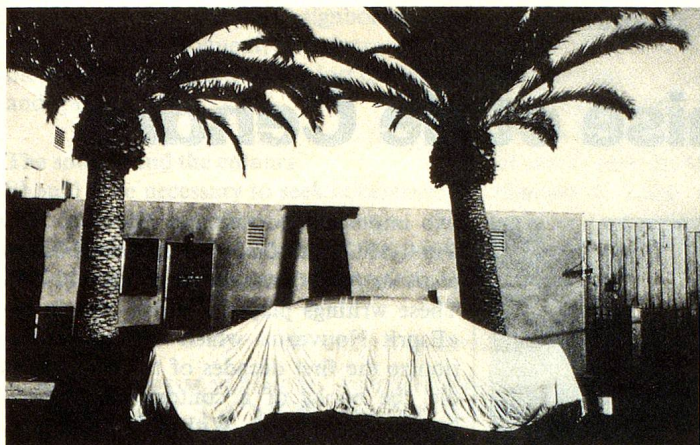
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Robert Frank, Long Beach, California, 1956



Robert Frank, New Orleans, 1955–1956

Photography and film: Robert Frank

The contradictory reality

The Americans, Robert Frank's best-known book, met with a storm of disapproval thirty years ago. Today, Frank has become the idol of a whole generation of artists while, in the meantime, he himself turned to film-making. The Lausanne *Musée de l'Elysée*, the photo museum which has rendered such great service in promoting photography, held a retrospective of his work this spring.

Through the window, the camera films a deserted New York street. And the deep voice comments in slow, deliberate words: «Being famous – it's like the old newspapers blowing about in Bleeker Street».

Famous in spite of himself, this Robert Frank. And all on account of a book of photographs which no one wanted to publish, until the editor, Robert Delpire, took the crazy risk in 1958. When it came off the presses, *The Americans* was criticised as gloomy, depressing, perverse and even sinister. Today, people brood over it as over a bible; theses are written on it, and on Frank; young photographers retrace his footsteps in pilgrimage over all or part of the long journeys he made (forty-eight states in one year) which gave birth to the work; film-makers such as Wenders and Jarmusch profess to have been deeply influenced by the universe of Robert Frank.

But what universe, in fact? To understand it we have to immerse ourselves in the spirit of the era. In 1950, Robert Frank – born in Zurich twenty-six years earlier – left Switzer-

land, this «country of the middle», where he hardly felt at ease, for the United States. Four years later he won a Guggenheim fellowship to paint the portrait of America. Not the America that smiles optimistically from the reportages of *Life*: «I threw myself into the deep end, as it were, and when I came up I found myself face to face with a touching, sad and cruel humanity.» Frank haunted the Woolworths, the gas stations, the post offices, the sleazy hotels. Ten years in advance of his time, he shows another hidden and yet omnipresent country – that of the little people, the underprivileged and the losers. His images often showed tilted horizons and arbitrary cropping of elements, were frequently grainy and blurred, for he cared little for focus and sharpness. He photographed empty places where «nothing happens» – images poles apart from the efficient reportage which keeps to the inside of the sidewalk. His photographs express the tension and the urgent sense of survival of a humanity which comes into contact with the establishment only in popu-

lar magazines or through the television. The photographer Robert Frank feels a deep sense of fellowship with the people he portrayed. He reveals, in them, that paradoxical truth which, ever since, was never to cease to haunt him: «It's so very beautiful to be alive, but life can also destroy you. You have to be strong to carry on.»

Robert Frank, photographer, has become a myth; his style has left a mark on two generations of keen photographers. But man eludes categories. Two years after the publication of *The Americans* he cast his still camera aside and turned exclusively to the cinema. His images were then already regarded as highly subjective, forcefully projecting the personality of their creator; in going over to film-making he pursues the intention still further.

Like those of Godard, the films of Robert Frank give rise to all the irritations and emo-

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tions of a private diary thrown in the world's face. One of the most recent – *Home Improvements* – mixes an obsessive and meticulous description of small daily doings, of the state of the weather, with a dizzy and headlong laying-bare of the emotions. Embarrassed, the viewer follows Frank into the corridors of a psychiatric hospital in the Bronx where his son, Pablo, is being held. In the face of so much bewildering intimacy, the roles are reversed, the watcher suddenly feeling himself to be the watched; a tragic and cryptic scene in which the father says, offstage, in his drawling voice, that he will do everything to get his son out of the asylum and also in which, simultaneously, his fascination for a madness which is perhaps the ultimate outcome of rejected compromises, shows through. This Frank – the Frank of films, of scribbled-on Polaroid prints («Two tremendous tools so close to life that they are death at the same time») remains marginal, a fringe figure in his hut in Mabon, Nova Scotia. Perhaps because his immodest intergrity is so frightening. Basically, the situation has hardly changed since the publication of *The Americans*. Robert Frank accepts the inevitable with rationality: «I like to have to fight to defend my view of things and to make my ideas live.»

Jean-Claude Péclet
Deputy Editor-in-Chief of «L'Hebdo»

Art exhibitions

10 July to 20 Sept. Kunstmuseum, Lucerne:
Augusto Giacometti

25 September to 3 January 88: Kunstmuseum Bern: *Paul Klee*

A series of events are taking place to mark the 100th birthday of *Le Corbusier* (complete programme obtainable from: Service des affaires culturelles, CH-2300 La Chaux-de-Fonds):

15 May to 17 Oct. Heidi-Weberg-Haus, Zurich: «From Design to Completed Work» (four consecutive exhibitions on architectural work).

6 June to 2 Aug. Architecture Museum, Basle: «Raoul La Roche and L.C.»

11 June to 20 Sept. Halle aux Enchères, La Chaux-de-Fonds: «L.C. by Poster»

13 June to 4 Oct. Musée des Beaux Arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds: photos, drawings, gouaches, projects (3 expositions)

July – Sept. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Fribourg: «Architecture in India»

Centenary Blaise Cendrars

De Braise et de Cendre



Blaise Cendrars in the 1950s in Paris (photo from the book «Cendrars entdecken», Lenos publ., Basle).

The personality of Blaise Cendrars, with its cortège of legends and mythomaniac fabrications, has for too long eclipsed a genuine work of artistry, probably one of the most representative of our century.

Swiss by birth (in La Chaux-de-Fonds), the writer Blaise Cendrars indeed took pleasure in covering up his tracks, in confusing reality with make-believe, as much, it seems, from an all but pathological necessity as from a kind of esoteric humour. It was always so, with this gallimaufry of stories which served him as biography; he himself mixed them with consummate skill – these stories which were very quickly to be accepted by commentators who took his utterances and writings for gospel. And even though certain, more down-to-earth spirits have since attempted to re-establish the truth, the myth that Blaise Cendrars conjured up still clings to him. Blaise Cendrars? Fighter, soldier of fortune, adventurer enamoured of a dangerous life. Today, it is imperative that we revise this image, picturesque and even unflattering as it is, because despite the supreme contempt which he liked to air for literary matters, Blaise Cendrars above all compels recognition as a prodigious writer.

The fact that his works can seem to be heterogeneous and lacking any reassuring coherence does not make an approach to them at all easy. At the beginning there are

two important poems: *Les Pâques à New York* (1912) and *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* (1913). These writings played a direct part in the «Esprit Nouveau» which was to revolutionize the first decades of the century, as did the books of a contemporary, Guillaume Apollinaire. With the difference, however, that the poetry of Cendrars, freed from the classical metre and from punctuation, carries within itself a brute energy, a rhythm, a movement, rendered by a tongue and in a style both savage and spontaneous, in which latter-day words, judged antipoetic by the schools, abound. Cendrars explored this road, almost to the bitter end, until 1929, the year he abandoned poetry definitively. But with his bursts of eloquence he opened up new perspectives to the genre – for re-establishing, by suitable means, contemporary reality.

From the written word to the image

It is therefore not astonishing that this avid spirit was also interested in cinema, working *inter alia* with Abel Gance. But the world of the silver screen held many disappointments in store for him and, anyway, Cendrars was not one of those who confine themselves to one domain. He hurled himself passionately and pell-mell into black art, the work of young painters, the demi-monde, all the while conjuring up many a prodigious affair; and above all there was the travelling: travelling, even, to satiety; travelling around the world; travelling to the inner being of make-believe and imagery.

In the novels he wrote, the heroes have something in common with each other. General Suter of *L'Or* (1925) and Jean Galmot of *Rhum* (1930) both amassed fortunes before ending their lives in poverty. And always there is movement. The baroque book of violence and madness: *Moravagine* (1926), that extraordinary apologia for anarchism, is often interpreted as an exorcism of the negative forces of man. Its pendant, the adventures of Dan Yack (from the book of the same name) symbolizes another quest for the ultimate, mobilizing, *grosso modo*, positive forces. Later, his chronicles, his *opera magna*, rightly held to be his masterpieces, are essentially autobiographical in character. In *L'Homme Foudroyé*, *La Main Coupée*, *Bourlinguer*,