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Spaces of Contrast: Robert Frank's America Through a Heterotopic Lens

Abstract

This paper explores Robert Frank's seminal photobook *The Americans*, using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, as discussed in his 1967 lecture *Des Espaces Autres*. By analyzing the visual and thematic elements of the book, this study explores how Frank's depiction of 1950s America challenges conventional narratives of American identity and space. The research places Frank's work in the socio-political context of post-war America, emphasizing how his photographs capture both the utopian ideals and the underlying societal tensions of the era. His images, often subtle yet powerful, document scenes that reflect a fragmented and multifaceted nation, revealing disparities between appearance and reality. The concept of heterotopias, as described by Foucault, offers a broader look at Frank's images, through which we can analyse their complex and paradoxical nature. His photographs not only represent physical spaces but also evoke mental and social spaces that are layered with meaning. Examining *The Americans* from this unique perspective reveals

its heterotopic content, allowing the viewer to notice the coexistence of different social realities, albeit occasionally in conflict. By providing an insight into Frank's photographic narrative and its correlation with Foucault's theory, the study aims shedding light on the ways in which visual media can reveal complex social dynamics and question established cultural norms.

Key words

Heterotopias. Michel Foucault. Photobooks. Photography. Robert Frank. *The Americans*.

Introduction

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time*
- T. S. Eliot - Four Quartets -
Extract

One year, sixteen thousand kilometres, seven hundred and sixty-odd rolls of film, and twenty-seven thousand photographs (Lane, 2009). Eighty-three black and white frames were distilled from this journey and were published as a book in Paris two years later in November 1958, under the title *Les Américains* (Figure 1) by prominent French publisher Delpire. The work, which later became a global phenomenon under its new name, *The Americans* (Figure 2), created by none other than the hitherto unknown Swiss photographer Robert Frank. *The Americans* changed the face of photography irreversibly. From the moment it was published in the United States (US), *The Americans* divided photography circles in the country. While one group found the work technically crude and inadequate (Dunford, 2011), others, such as the famous American photographer Walker Evans, one of Frank's biggest supporters, praised it as "refreshing and almost sarcastic" (Badger, 2007). The book found itself in the midst of the post-World War II baby boom, Beat Generation, and the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1950s.

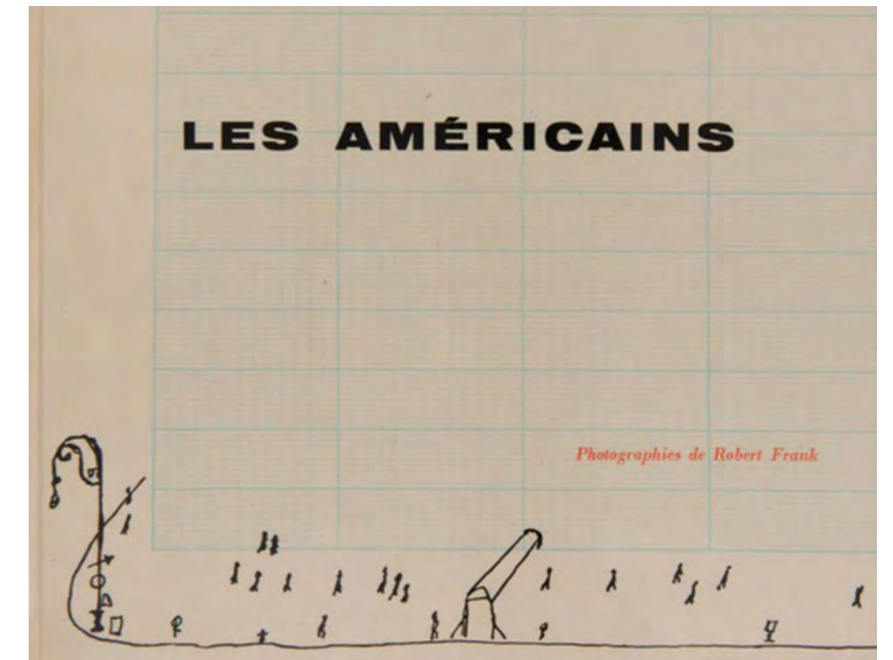


Figure 1: *Les Américains*, 1958
Source: Frank (1958)



Figure 2: *The Americans*, 1959
Source: Frank (1959)

The Americans was and still is a work that asked questions about what could be done with photography, and most importantly, what photography *could be*, rather than what goals could be achieved with the medium and what social changes could be accelerated with it.

As a result of the controversy it generated, it was embraced by a wide intellectual circle, especially on issues concerning the narcotic effect of mass culture, materialism and social conformism (Marien, 2011). Indeed, Frank's photographs demonstrated an America from a very personal point of view; not shying away from being subjective and transparent. Without having the grandiose and politic distance, Frank managed to create a vision that not only represented his intentions, but also offered an insight into what it was like to live and breathe in 1950s America. In his application for the Guggenheim Fellowship (Figure 3) to finance his project, he said: "Work of this type, I believe, to be found carrying its own visual impact without much work explanation. The project I have in mind is one that will shape itself as it proceeds, and is essentially elastic. The material is there; the practice will be in the photographer's hand, the vision in his mind." (Teoli Jr, n.d., no pagination)

It can be seen that Frank wanted to make a documentary project with a fly-on-the-wall or nonchalant approach, rather than adopting the gratifying and artisanal

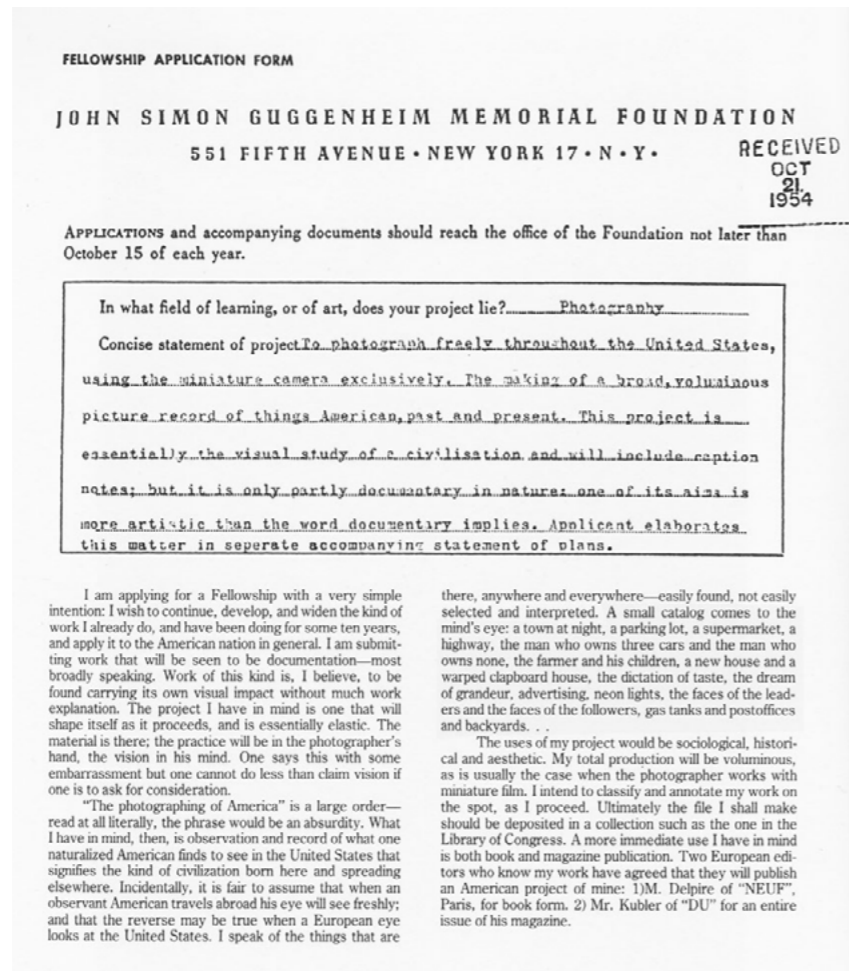


Figure 3: Robert Frank's Guggenheim Application
Source: Teoli Jr. (n.d.)

documentary style of his time. He also believed that it was additionally the journey itself that would give shape to the progress. In terms of style, Frank created a visual structure that can be called stereotypical or even cliché in terms of the subject matter. *The Americans* is full of icons that made up 1950s American identity: flags, jukeboxes, diners, cars, cowboys, politicians, movie stars and, of course, roads – and being on them (Clarke, 1997). Frank

transformed fragments of the material wealth of the post-war US, treating them as conduits for insidious commercialisation that alienated individuals from each other (Marien, 2011). The following sentence by Jack Kerouac, one of the legendary figures of the Beat Generation, who also wrote the foreword for the book, fittingly describes the aforementioned alienated people: "After seeing these pictures, you end up finally not knowing whether a jukebox is

sadder than a coffin" (Frank, 2017, no pagination). Frank's work is more than just a record of everyday life in America of course; it is also a critique of materialism, conformity, and the illusion of the American Dream. His photographs show places and times that are both familiar and strange in an uncanny manner. They show places that look like they are familiar but have a deeper, more unsettling truth to them.

Here, I would like to introduce Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopias*, which can help us understand the contradictory nature of those spaces, and propose using it to better understand Frank's work. *The Americans* challenged the traditional ideas of what it means to be American, just as Foucault's heterotopias do with traditional ideas of space, therefore I believe that by combining Frank's work with Foucault's thought-provoking concept, we can achieve a profound understanding of *The Americans* and the Americans.

1 Robert Frank's Americans and the Heterotopias

In March 1967, French philosopher Michel Foucault gave a lecture and opened the acclaimed concept of heterotopia in great details. Years later and just about four months after his death in 1984, it was published in the journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*. Since then, the concept has quickly gained a prominent place in various academic studies. According to Foucault, heterotopias

have the power, or at least offer the opportunity, to change the conventional understanding of space. Inevitably so, they inspire artists who are seeking to challenge the viewers' way of seeing. For those who look at the concept of space as being not only limited to the physical, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias* (Foucault, 1984; see also Foucault, 2002) surely is an inspiring text in order to understand the multiple layers and characteristics of spatial relationships and the human experience of spaces. Foucault elaborates on the notion of heterotopia through six principles. Each of these principles provide insights into contexts imbued with meaning, contradiction and purpose. By introducing these principles briefly, I believe the connection between the concept of heterotopia and Frank's work will be better understood with parallels to his visual themes.

Foucault describes the first principle as "crisis heterotopias". These are unique and mostly temporary spaces where individuals find themselves in states of crisis and even deviation. Some of the examples given by Foucault, such as boarding schools, military camps, and honeymoon trips are all signifying states where one deviates from societal norms or is marginalized from the mainstream. These spaces accommodate individuals on the periphery of society, reflecting the concept of heterotopia associated with crisis and deviance. Frank, indeed, shows

us marginalization even at the compositional level, by cramping and isolating his subjects at the very beginning of his work (Figure 6), setting the mode by challenging viewers' expectations with a dominating opener (Day, 2011).

I would like to merge the second and fourth principles as they deal more with the temporal aspects of heterotopias. For the second principle, Foucault illustrates the relationship between society and the deceased using the example of cemeteries. As civilizations adopt a more materialistic orientation and religion diminishes in influence, the allocation of space for cemeteries in urban areas has transformed. This situation is mostly associated with society's evolving understanding and management of death, as modernism emerged in history. This principle asserts that a pre-existing heterotopia may function differently as history unfolds, and the changes in that heterotopia will be closely associated with the transformations occurring inside the society. As for the fourth, Foucault coins the term "heterochronies" in order to better explain this principle. Foucault divides the heterochronies into two major sections: those that are accumulating time perpetually, such as museums and libraries and those that fix time to an ever-repeating now, such as vacation villages. Heterochronies function by offering "slices of times" to society and make them able to "break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 1998). Without going into the evident changes in both significance

and relevance *The Americans* had been through or exploiting the photography's very own power of creating slices of times, I wish to emphasize more how Frank's oeuvre is deeply entrenched in American iconography and the artefacts of *Americana*, such as diners, jukeboxes, drive-in cinemas, vast highways, cowboys and flags (Figure 4). Over time, many of them have



Figure 4: Robert Frank, Ranch Market - Hollywood, Bar - New York City, Drive-in Movie - Detroit, Bar - Detroit

Source: Courtesy of The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

diminished in influence, abundance, or have been melted into symbols, existing as relics of the past that allow its users to experience a sense of "then".

In the third principle, Foucault emphasizes the heterotopias' capability of juxtaposing numerous layers that appear conflicting within a singular location. Here, Foucault cites how theatre and cinema

convert two and three-dimensional spaces into narratives, and goes onto detailing Persian gardens, with their superimposed meanings, representing a microcosm and being a major inspiration for Persian rugs, which is another conversion of a three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional one. *The Americans*, too, provides layers of social strata from a land of conflicting

realities, i.e., the USA. Perhaps one photograph attained such significance in this sense for Frank, so much so that it became the cover of the book's US edition (Figure 2) and still remains so to this day. *Trolley - New Orleans* (Figure 5) is indeed one epochal image that both transcends and leaves its mark on its own time. In an open composition, the viewer sees a public trolley filled with its passengers stretched

out from one end of the frame to another, permeating the whole frame. We see the trolley's passengers divided into equal frames, yet this is a photograph of inequality. Arthur Lubow (2020) describes the sequence from the front to the rear as a step-down hierarchy and it indeed was, as a matter of fact, in the segregated southern states of the USA. With one picture, Frank has managed to bring out the social contrast and its conflicting layers within a singular space.

Space, is indeed one of the most multi-layered, highly elusive concepts out there, since it has profound relationships with all that it affects and is affected by. Foucault states the space we live in is heterogeneous and we, the people, live in a group of relations shaped by spaces that cannot be reduced to one another, and certainly cannot be superimposed on one another either (Foucault, 2002). What Foucault tries to emphasise is that the coexistence of multiple temporal and spatial dimensions are interconnected, yet they are also characterised by a contrasting relationship. Heterotopias may not involve exclusions, but they also lack real intersections, too.

According to Foucault, heterotopias necessitate the performance of specific rituals for admittance or impose entry as a requirement. In this fifth principle, Foucault gives the example of mosques having specific clothing codes and how individuals must



Figure 5: Robert Frank, Trolley - New Orleans

Source: Courtesy of The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

perform ablution (the ritualistic purification) in a prescribed sequence to pray there. On the other hand, there are other heterotopias that can be defined as more exclusionary, even when they seem simplistic in nature. Here, Foucault extends the example of motel rooms rented for illicit love affairs, where the parties of the affairs are completely sheltered and isolated from the outside world.

In the final and sixth principle, Foucault emphasizes the functionality of heterotopias in respect to all external spaces. Either they will establish an illusory environment that unveils authentic spaces, or they will fabricate an entirely distinct reality characterized by meticulous order, as exemplified by life in the colonies in the Americas, or military service, where even the arrangement of one's bed adheres

to specific regulations or protocols. I, once again, aim to integrate two principles, the fifth and sixth, by examining how Robert Frank applied his outsider perspective to a foreign nation, then reflected on it through his photographic body of work. In his seminal work *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960*, John Szarkowski states (1978) a dichotomy between photographers; some being a mirror, reflecting a portrait of themselves, or a window, through which we might better know the world. With *The Americans*, Robert Frank is both a mirror and a window; a mirror in the sense that he undertakes a voyage that ultimately becomes not only a renowned work about the American people, but also a testament to his very own visual response to them, and a window by showing Americans the America and America the Americans. The work provides a unique perspective into the varied

and occasionally contradictory experiences of individuals in the US. Even as an outsider, Frank knew his "European eye" would bring a fresh look (Figure 3) and make it a more honest response, a clearer reflection upon the country he was trying to observe. Foucault, too, gives mirrors as an example to further articulate the concept of heterotopia by stating when we look at a mirror, we see ourselves in a place where we are not, and since the mirror enables us to see ourselves there, where we are absent, its status should be considered a utopia. However, a mirror exists in reality, and it counteracts the position that one occupies; therefore, it is also a heterotopia (Foucault, 2002). When one brings together the concepts of the duality of mirrors being both utopias and heterotopias, and the common analogy that photography is a mirror turned towards people, it can be better understood how *The Americans* can be regarded as one of the most important cultural products of 1950s America, reflecting both the post-war optimistic and utopian sides, and the one that lacks genuine intersections in between.

2 Why Photographers Travel and Why Are Travels Photographed?

The Americans is a book that contains photographs of people, places, and things but cannot really be considered as being within the main genres of portrait, landscape or still life. Nevertheless, one might say that the book is molded in the form of *social landscape*. There



Figure 6: Robert Frank, Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey
Source: Courtesy of The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

is, of course, an important reason for Frank's choice of this form, and that reason is the privileged position that landscape occupies in crystallising the image of social, political, economic, ideological and highly personal aspirations and desires (Bate, 2009). Etymologically speaking, the word landscape differs from scenery or vista by offering an insight to its condition; given or pre-existing. Therefore, in the genre of landscape, the viewer is confronted with the interaction between places and people (Antrop & Van Eetvelde, 2019).

What makes Frank's vision unique is that his work is first and foremost a non-American's view of and on Americans, as he also mentioned in his Guggenheim application (Figure 3). The photographs of people and things are almost like characters in a fable, not particularly used to

describe America or Americans, but about the idea of these two. The reality, as in all photography, creates an illusion about itself and transforms into a *false friend* in the world of images. It becomes less of itself the more it tries to be factual. Without pointing out its indexical characteristics, one can consider photography as an interstate journey in between reality and its representations.

Robert Frank states that photography is a solitary journey and the only course open to creative photographers (Marien, 2011). A foreigner, like Frank, would constantly create new conditions for himself and by definition can change his or her "state" of affairs by being on the road. In each of the places this foreigner is in or at, he or she maintains a life that does not intersect with the conditions

in which he or she was born, and in which its permanent residents reside. It is almost like Frank borrows the life from the residents, much like his photography borrows glimpses of moments from their ongoing lives. From this point of view, Frank's state of being an immigrant and on a journey through the states creates this perpetual progress of being in mutually exclusive but never-intersecting places, which can be seen as a heterotopia.

One great example of this situation can be seen at the very beginning of the book. The opening photograph, *Parade - Hoboken, New Jersey* (Figure 6) not only sets the stage and the mood for the work, but also gently raises the curtains for the mysterious relationship between the place and identity. Art historian Sarah Greenough explains that this image effectively captures the fundamental concepts explored in the book. Greenough notes that the flag serves as both a unifying and divisive element in the image, representing the intricate connection between an individual and their national identity (Greenough, 2009). The flag's prominence and the concealed faces indicate a conflict between individual expressions and the dominant narratives administered by the nations. This clashing situation can inevitably form a certain level of alienation in society, when individuals are overshadowed by powerful concepts such as national identity and Americanness.

The Americans holds a significant position in Americana culture and unquestionably enjoys a revered, almost cult status among fellow photographers all around the world (Eskenazi, 2012). The collective impact of cultural productions, movements, and events in the 1960s have transformed the "on-the-road photographer" into a Don Quixotesque character. Indeed, the upcoming cohort of influential figures in American photography, including pioneer colourists like Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, and William Eggleston, discovered and crafted their iconic works while travelling long-term across the US, making the country the central focus of their narratives. Some of the most notable works by these three photographers, Shore, Sternfeld, and Eggleston, also bear significant connections to the titles of their respective books: *American Surfaces* by Shore, *American Prospects* by Sternfeld and *Los Alamos* by Eggleston, in which the photographs are from all over the US, but named after the city where the atomic bomb was developed (Soth, 2010).

Photography has a significant impact on the journeys as it can motivate individuals to devote themselves to photographic projects, and pursue photography as a lifelong passion and profession. It is also evident from the myriad of titles published throughout the history of photography that photography and travelling go hand in hand and seem to be enjoying a happy marriage. The works mentioned above and similar are not frivolous attempts to capture

some eye-candy imagery to impress peers and viewers, but are also deep explorations of American identity and experience (Greenough, 2009). However, why is it so important to tell a story through a series of pictures instead of a single picture, and why does the journey hold such a central position in those stories?

Regardless of their durations, journeys encompass not only physical movements but also mental and emotional migrations (Papageorge, 1981). Thus, the US, a nation renowned for "uniting its states", provides artists with the chance to create a conceptual framework that is connected to all other spaces, but which does not necessarily intersect with them. This makes America an ideal enigma and a heterotopia for artists. For Jack Kerouac, this journey was his novel *On the Road*, for Bob Dylan his paramount album *Highway 61 Revisited*, and for Robert Frank, *The Americans*. They all wanted to understand and describe what it is like being on the road, and more, they wanted to tell things in their own way. Photographers are on the road because they take photographs; they take photographs because they are on the road.

Given the intrinsic connection between photography and journey, why then the need for a book? Wouldn't the *bookization* of the images, making them permanent in one place, be contradictory to this connection? In the case of *The Americans*, we know from Frank's application (Figure 3) for the Guggenheim Fellowship that the

book form was an intended outcome. The book serves as a new world in which Frank weaves the huge material at his disposal and presents the experience of his great journey. As mentioned before in this essay, Frank was a photographer who thought about what could be done with photography and the book creates a space of illusion - a heterotopia - by exhibiting a vast selection of places and the lives in them.

Conclusion

There are major meeting points in both Foucault's text and Frank's work. In his analysis, Foucault describes the concept of heterotopia as a unique space that brings together diverse layers of meaning and different spatial dimensions that may exist within a single location. These spaces are where norms are suspended, challenged, or inverted, allowing for a unique exploration of difference (Hetherington, 1997). Similarly, Frank created a thought-provoking portrayal of 1950s America, revealing a complex web of different social experiences that coexist within the US. Frank's high contrast, black and white images also contrast social and economic conditions, emotions, and societal divisions. The contrasts in this context give rise to a perception of America as a heterotopic realm, where multiple versions of "Americas" coexist, albeit in states of invisible tension. Furthermore, heterotopias frequently question - and sometimes even disturb - established societal norms and present alternative perspectives on how to perceive and engage with the world. These

heterotopic spaces challenge the conventional understandings of time, space, and social order, much like *The Americans*, which challenges the romanticised portrayal of post-war America. His raw and unfiltered images reveal the deep-seated social tensions and contradictions of the era. Frank's work indeed presented uncomfortable realities that challenged the prevailing narrative of American prosperity and unity for many. *The Americans* presents a captivating visual landscape that invites viewers to explore the intricate, underrepresented and contradictory aspects of American society. In a similar vein to Foucault's heterotopias, Frank's photobook challenges the traditional narrative of America, unveiling a much more complex reality. Through an exploration of *The Americans* from a theoretical perspective, one can develop a more profound understanding of how Frank's work encapsulates the complex and sometimes conflicting aspects of American society during the 1950s.

This research reveals that Frank's work not only documents 1950s America but also creates a dialogue with the social and spatial constructions of that era. *The Americans* encapsulates multiple and contradicting realities of a country in the book form of just 83 photographs. It is true that Frank stirred the pot for some and challenged the viewers' conventions about post-war America, yet he also showed a sense of connection, too. Frank changed and is changed. While trying to be a mirror, his immersive journey was also



Figure 7: Robert Frank, U.S. 90, en route to Del Rio, Texas

Source: Courtesy of The June Leaf and Robert Frank Foundation

an intimate window for himself. In *The Americans*, we see a photographer who, without intervening in the situation of people and places,

accepts the phenomenon of the clichéd iconography of the American social landscape. Yet, the work is not just a documentation; but a personal

interpretation of a yearlong, intense experience of being on the road and photographing. It is not merely a catalogue but a story – Frank's own.

This all becomes more vivid in the final picture of *The Americans* (Figure 7): A car pulled over on a long and empty road, a woman with sleepy eyes and her kids asleep on her shoulder. This is the family of Robert Frank. The search for coexistence, genuine intersections and inclusion now becomes a reality for all of them. The journey of and for *The Americans* is over, but for them, the journey of becoming part of this society is just beginning.

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