Avertissement

Ce texte est la reproduction à l'identique de mon mémoire de maîtrise soutenu en 1979. J'ai décidé de ne pas le réviser mais de le livrer tel quel, bien que nombre de passages me semblent aujourd'hui discutables, simplistes, parfois même erronés. Pourtant, certaines lectures, quoiqu'un peu maladroites et empreintes d'un certain romantisme, gardent, me semble-t-il, une valeur et proposent des pistes que je ne renie pas. Enfin, c'est un témoignage sur une époque de l'écriture photographique.

Il faut se rappeler qu'en 1979 nous disposions de peu d'outils théoriques et de bien peu d'exemples de travaux universitaires sur la photographie susceptibles de guider le chercheur débutant. La lecture symbolique et la mise en relations assez fruste entre formes visuelles et formes sociales et politiques nous tenaient lieu de méthode. Quant au travail classique d'histoire de l'art, il était, sur des photographes contemporains, quasi-impossible en l'absence d'accès aux archives (et dans mon cas malgré des efforts non négligeables). C'est ainsi que j'ai travaillé en tout et pour tout sur deux volumes d'images, la monographie Aperture de Diane Arbus, seule publication de ses images à l'époque, et *The Americans* de Robert Frank, heureusement ré-édité l'année même où je préparai le mémoire. Quant aux ressources bibliographiques, je n'y ai eu accès que parce que je vivais à l'époque à Toronto. Cela eût été totalement impossible en France.

Enfin ce travail témoigne, avec naïveté mais sincérité, d'une époque où, après avoir pratiqué la photographie parfois de manière très poussée une génération de jeunes gens tentait d'inscrire la photographie dans le paysage universitaire.

Université Grenoble III

The Other Side of Paradise

The Worlds of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus

Mémoire de maîtrise d'anglais

soutenu par Jean KEMPF

Directeur : Joseph MONIN

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"In the beginning all the world was America."

John Locke

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And eventually thanks to Françoise without whom — as the traditional phrase goes — this paper could never have existed, for her care and affection, and her saving the manuscript from several premature deaths.

Prologue

"Education is ideally civil defense against media fall-out." Marshall Mc Luhan

"...l'imagination est le pouvoir : celui qui peut distribuer, imposer des images, celui-là est le maître des hommes, donc des choses." Gilbert Durand

There is no denying it. We live in a world of images. Television, magazines, billboards, posters, family albums, images of every kind invade and pervade our environment, deeply altering it and us at the same time. This statement seems, in this cynical late twentieth century which has often been called the age of the image, the tritest of truisms, but is nevertheless a fact that, although more or less recognized, is still to be thoroughly understood.

We use images, we create them, disseminate them, but very little is yet known about their intimate working and their long-term effects. The first genuine "audio-visual" generations came of age in the seventies, and it is only in the past ten years that photography has become a real object of concern for critics and the public at large.

But, although the body of serious photo criticism is ever growing, there are still too few studies which really tackle the productions of a single photographer and project them in perspective. Most approaches though often perceptive seldom dissect the inner mechanisms of a body of photographs, and much less a single photograph. [1]

Most studies concerning photography approach it as a fine art, somewhat at the same level as painting and only accumulate generalities, vague feelings, and declarations of intention, or simply use it as a pretext to promote ideas on the role the medium should or should not play. Similarly the question which is often raised is that of deciding whether photography is or is not an art.

Let us say, as a preliminary point, that we shall make do with this interrogation as it seems to us rather pointless. The pleasing will be left to each one of us to appreciate for him/herself. What we shall attempt to do rather is more modestly (but perhaps some will say more daringly) to go beyond

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[1] Similarities with the written word are not totally impossible but they are risky. Indeed, too often photographs are taken as literary statements, as optical translation of a verbally conceptualized notion, which they are not. A photograph is a visual statement about an idea which, most of the time, never existed as a construction of words. This is why a comparison between a book of photographs and a work of fiction can only be partial. They both talk about something, both deliver a message, and both use modular elements. But a single photograph is at the same time a word, a sentence, and a chapter. It is a coherent, complete, self-sufficient utterance, an independent organism whose value is increased by but not linked to parallel utterances.

the concept of beauty and art — upstream as it were — towards the *meaning* of this complex mesh of signs called a photograph. We shall look at it, at the photograph by itself, but in context as well and thus try to dissect its inner logic, its own independent life and then relate it to others.

For this trip into the printed image we have chosen the published works of two American photographers, Robert Frank and Diane Arbus[2], who remain to this day very little studied. We shall set them in their historical context and, through the study of their productions and of their comparative approach of America, come to a better understanding of their *worlds*.

If we want this trip to be profitable there are a few things to which we shall have to get accustomed. As we have to read a book and react to it to make it live, we have partially to create the photograph that is given to us. The method is well known. It is traditional of the studies of literature. What is, at first, a little more difficult to get used to is to consider a photograph seriously, as something constructed as opposed to an *objet-trouvé*. The second obstacle is the necessary understanding of the visual codes which, though totally different from literary ones, are nonetheless linguistic, for photography is a language, but a language of a different kind, using different elements and different codes.

But, if we step inside this apparently puzzling world of signs we may discover a mind, a man or a woman, looking out on the world and creating from it a personal universe which is not the real world, of course, but simply an aspect of our common environment. The photograph thus appears as the living meeting place between the reality out of which it is born and an inner world of phantasy which is the photographer's.

For photographs speak, produce meanings, sometimes about very subtle things, as fleeting as essences or as powerful and obvious as basic emotions. They talk about man's destiny or about everyday life. And sometimes they fail and remain silent.

What we wish to do here is not so much interpret these photographs for the reader, but only suggest a possible way of approaching them, a few directions toward their fuller understanding and appreciation. We very well know that truth about the world is but a myth, and that the best we can hope for are only partial, limited, individual truths. What we present therefore is only one among the multitude of aspects that these photographs give us to explore. We are out to meet images and their makers. May the encounter be controversial.

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[2] Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York, 1959, 1969, 1979); *Diane Arbus* (New York, 1972)

An Encounter

"To produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation..."

Robert Frank

"A photograph is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know."

Diane Arbus

Among the huge production of photographs on or about the U.S.A., many have quite a lot to say, say it well, and thus deserve attention. In front of such abundance and quality, selection was difficult. The final choice of Robert Frank and Diane Arbus was therefore a personal one. Their photographs, strange and puzzling as they are, found a certain echo in us, and though, at first, everything seemed to oppose them, we sensed, deep in their existence, a continuity of purpose and vision, some kind of long moaning, of sorrowful message to which one could hardly be indifferent. The question was then to know if a deeper and more thorough analysis would confirm this first impression.

The first elements which came to further the immediate instinctive feeling of continuity were of a chronological order. Indeed each photographer developed his own career in a single decade, the fifties for Robert Frank, the sixties for Diane Arbus.

Two Decades

Most of Frank's photographic work, particularly *The Americans*, was done between 1949 and 1959 when he quit still photography to devote himself to film-making [3]. Diane Arbus, on the other hand, who had been a fashion and commercial photographer until 1959 (collaborating first with her husband Allan Arbus) decided at the end of that decade to devote herself to her own personal research, that she would continue until 1971 when she committed suicide.

But this fact would have been no more than an interesting coincidence if it had not found a very significant echo in the history of the United States [4]. The fifties and the sixties were two eventful and complementary decades for the country. The fifties were one of maturation, a slow crescendo, very

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[3] The legend says that he lost his Leica and never even bothered to replace it.

[4] The continuity between the two decades is stressed by William Manchester in his book *The Glory and the Dream* (Boston, 1973). He titles his chapter on the 1951-1960 period "Sowing the Wind", and on the 1961-1968 period "Reaping the Whirlwind".

slow at first starting with the last throes of a scandal-ridden Democrat Administration and the fairly uneventful election of Dwight D. Eisenhower as president in 1952, suddenly speeding up after 1957 which saw the Little Rock racial riots and the launching of the first sputnik by the Russians. It was in fact the decade which made America enter the postindustrial era, a period of general material welfare, exposing in return the country's basic contradictions all the more obviously.

It was not a decade of intellectual freedom and progress but rather one of stifling conformity, of dull silence. Apathy and tiredness were somewhat understandable however. War, frantic intolerance, and the threat of nuclear holocaust dominated it: the Korean war, the Cold war, and a racial war at home. Concurrently, a general economic prosperity was producing new items (like the car) and new means of achieving a better and greater welfare at least for a majority; in short a decade of growing contrasts, of growing antagonisms first between two violently opposed trends: the political side, conservative and dull, and the economic one — bright and hopeful; and then between two social groups, the have and the have-not.

A fermenting America at mid-decade, more middle-class than it ever would be, is what Frank saw and explored with his book. He was particularly well equiped to look at the U.S.A., encountering the continent in all its breadth for the first time. Being a foreigner [5] and looking at the country he had chosen to live in, he adequately mixed the right amounts of love and critical spirit or, as Walker Evans says, "he responded to America with many tears, some hope, and his own brand of fascination...." [6] Coming from post-war Europe, he saw an amazing world, a strange monster in the making, almost a surrealistic vision. [7]

But things started to speed up roughly after 1957, by the time Frank completed his book. The first signs of a new era had been the censoring of Joseph McCarthy by the Senate in July 1954 for "a conduct unbecoming to a member", and further signs were now coming up such as the ghetto riots, the birth of the black movements, and the mobbing of Richard Nixon in Caracas in 1958. [8] America was moving again after almost a decade of relative social immobility, one should even say paralysis. [9]

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[5] See his biography at the end of this volume.

[6] U.S. Camera Annual 1958, p.90.

[7] It is interesting to compare Frank's approach with Ernst Haas's, especially as seen in his work *In America* (New York, 1975). They are both from German-speaking backgrounds (Haas is Austrian) and they immigrated to the U.S.A. roughly at the same time (Haas in 1950, Frank in 1948). Their subject matter is more or less identical and they start from basically the same raw material. The results, however, are miles apart. Haas uses rich and joyful colors where Frank plays with a grating contrast of black and white. America seen by Haas is a land of beautiful things and beautiful people. Beauty for Haas is to be found everywhere, it is America the Beautiful and the Picturesque, a land of hope and glory where people live in peace, love, and harmony. We shall see how different Frank's America is.

[8] Nixon who represented at the same time the imperialistic power of the U.S.A. and the Vice-President of the Witch Hunt.

[9] Called successively "The Dismal Decade", "The Years of Neuroses", "The Age of the Vacuum Tube".

Another sign of changing times was the entering in the intellectual arena of the Beat Generation who would, together with President Kennedy, usher in the sixties. Frank, who associated a great deal with many Beats (Allen Ginsberg among others), often collaborated with one of their priests, Jack Kerouac. [10] Of the Beats he had the radical style, almost surrealistic, and the concern for people and their environment, while at the same time refusing the institutional solution, the involvement in party politics. It was the Beats, however, who made radicalism re-enter American life. Their philosophy and approach to things sharply opposed the complacent conservative approach of the fifties, violently attacked the commonly accepted materialist creed, and moved the concept of happiness from the social group back to the individual; [11] a more personal, interior research as opposed to a sort of communal melting pot of unaccepted and somewhat castrating peer pressure.

It is in this context, and in the opening of a new era in politics, that Diane Arbus began to work on the portraits now collected in the posthumous Aperture Monograph. Although Arbus was probably more psychologically than politically minded [12] the social climate of her time could not but influence her work. She lived in New York which is the center of many political and social avant-garde experiments and demonstrations, and that whole shift in the American way of being, from the new style in the presidency to the impact of the Vietnam war on the minds of the people lies behind her photographs.

From the common face of Frank's Middle America, the day-today visions of urban landscapes, meeting places, and highways suitable to the increasing middle class of the fifties, with Arbus we move onto a more personal America — if only because made up of individual portraits of Americans — gaining more finesse, departing from the sociological for the psychological and eventually, as we shall see, from the "topical and the temporal" for the "prototypical and mythic." [13] This evolution clearly shows a movement parallel to the history of ideas but not totally identical with it, a direction which helps us see the two photographers in a complementary, almost evolutionary perspective.

Beyond Stylistic Differences

"We have come to view the world not as a stable place but as a web of overlapping illusions as an everexpanding function of memory as a manifestation of irrational responses and perverse desires, and as an obstacle course in which man is forever

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[10] Kerouac wrote the introduction to *The Americans*, and collaborate to Frank's first movie *Pull My Daisy* (1959).

[11] William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*, pp.889-893; Peter Carroll and David Noble, *The Free and the Unfree*, pp.369-378.

[12] Doon Arbus, "Diane Arbus", in *Ms Magazine*, October 1972, pp.44/ 52-3. Marvin Israel, "Diane Arbus", in *Creative Camera*, May 1974, pp.164-173.

[13] John Szarkowski, in *Diane Arbus*, An Aperture Monograph.

trapped."

Frederick R. Karl [14]

But what has so far hindered a fruitful comparison of the two photographers is mostly their stylistic differences. Assuredly, at first glance, the two styles are clearly differentiated from one another and from other photographers'. But paradoxically these differences bring Arbus and Frank even closer together for beyond superficial technical differences three more fundamental traits they have in common are to be noted.

A break from their predecessors

First of all their sharp break from their predecessors and contemporaries. Radical and iconoclastic as few dare to be, theirs is a strong personal style, a style which produces photographs which are anything but common and trite; strong subject matter allied to personal features, not merely safe tricks learned from others, thus creating original and powerful works that few photographers can achieve.

Frank, although not the first photographer to build his picture-making around the miniature camera [15] created a style for himself, particularly in the series we are studying, catching life not in its minute details but in its groups of shapes, its broad outlines, systems or movements almost in a dynamic way. It is a world of pronounced features, of great contrasts, a world filtered through teary eyes. [16]

Things and situations have the approximate and fleeting quality of life itself, the focus is often imperfect, the depth of field small, outlines are blurry, the frame sometimes slants and composition is often odd. In short it represents a total divorce from the theories of print quality [17] and classical composition as described by people like Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, or even Henri Cartier-Bresson. [18] Frank dares to depart from the traditional canons set by the masters (even if the masters were considered *avant-garde* themselves) and dares to pave his own way among many pitfalls and quick-sands. Frank photographs more to share his feelings than for the act of photographing itself:

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[14] Quoted by Colby in *American Culture in the Sixties*, (New York, 1964) p.126.

[15] Since the 1930s photo journalists such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, Alfred Eisenstaedt, to name but a few had revolutionized the technique of photo-reporting by the use of a (then) newly created camera, Oscar Barnack's Leica. This camera was to change radically the photographer's and our vision of the world.

[16] Leo Rubinfien, "Robert Frank in Ottawa", in *Art in America*, May-June 1978, pp.52-55.

[17] The fine print, as it is called, is a print which,, through careful treatement and manipulation is supposed to produce a balanced image where all the shades, from absolute black to absolute white, are present and approach as closely as possible the exact atmosphere of the original scene.

[18] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, (New York); "Henri Cartier-Bresson on the Art of Photography", in *Harper's*, November 1961, p.74. , "Nul ne peut entrer ici s'il n'est pas géomètre" in *Le Monde*, September 5, 1974.

"You don't photograph because you have a camera, you photograph because you have eyes and because you have something to say." [19] He thus asserts the primacy of the instinctive reaction over the technical and the machine, which is the first step to achieve any true originality in the medium.

And so it is for Diane Arbus. If on the one hand her techniques and her "field" (portraiture) are as old as photography itself, on the other hand the way she goes about her subject is most definitely original. Working within a classic frame she uses the means (the whole set of techniques) to her own ends. Perfectly square format making composition extremely difficult, and emphasizing the central character (or subject), harsh strobe lighting, clean, precise, clinical; no complacent and self-indulging portraits here but a dedication to a personal vision and chiefly to a personal obsession: difference. "What I'm trying to describe is that it's impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's. And that's what all this is a little bit about. That somebody else's tragedy is not the same as your own" [20] or as her very close friend Marvin Israel said: "She was entranced by difference, the minutest variations, that from the beginning nothing, no two rooms, no two beds, no two bodies or any parts of them were ever the same." [21]

As with Frank we are here facing a process of creation where concepts are born first in the photographer's mind. [22]

New Documentarians

The second stylistic point of convergence is fairly obvious but the terminology here is highly ambiguous. We shall say that they are both documentarians. The problem, however, lies in defining the term. Very roughly a documentarian is a photographer who looks at the world around him, is a witness to places, people, events in his environment, and establishes the primacy of his subject over himself. In other words he lets the subject be, or happen, and vows a total fidelity to the thing as seen. But, obviously, the definition fails immediately to provide any satisfying working description of the phenomenon. Seeing is indeed a very biased act, as is every act of communication (that is ninety per cent of human activity as we very well know). Furthermore, we have just found out that Frank and Arbus both established the primacy of the concept. We shall therefore call them "New

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[19] Edna Bennett, "Black and White are the Colors of Robert Frank", in *Aperture*, 9:1, 1961.

[20] Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus*, (New York, 1972), p.2. — hereafter cited as *Arbus*.

[21] Marvin Israel, pp.164-173

[22] This question leads to the problem of the place of the maker in a photograph. The mechanical reproduction of images has long been denied the status of art, on a par with painting, because of its apparent automaticity. Without debating of the question of photography as a fine art, it is possible to say that the personal usage of the medium by the photographer is even more important than in painting. It is absolutely capital, if the photographer wants to achieve any credibility, that the picture-taking be a highly thoughtful act.

Documentarians" [23], thus uniting the two *lignes de force* which preside over their relations to the outside world reinterpreted through a personal grid. They are not fooled by objectivity and its lures, and are indeed very conscious of presenting a highly personal vision of it. They also put the signified of a picture over the signifying, or in other words the message, what a picture says, over the work of art. [24] As Diane Arbus puts it: "I really think what it [the photograph] is, is what it's about. I mean it has to be of something. And what it's of is always more remarkable than what it is." [25]

Perhaps the best definition one could give of what the "New Documentarians" are is to say that they drop the philosophy of objectivity and the innocent approach which had been those of all documentary photography. They abandon what could be called a Whitmanesque attitude in photo-reporting. [26] They are, in a sense, in the situation of the novelists facing photography itself. As its "mechanical reproduction of reality" was depriving them of their hold on reality (particularly as claimed by naturalists), they were more or less forced to look for new spaces to conquer, and, led by the recent discoveries of psycho-analysis and to some extend of endocrinology, set forth to explore and map the equivalent of what Claude Bernard called the *milieu intérieur*. Similarly, these mid-twentieth century photographers stepped in, got involved, and became, instead of a mirror of things seen, a selective and powerful magnifying glass.

Subject and Echo

The third converging point is probably the most important. It is the question of subject matter and that of echo.

Subject matter is the result of the first basic reading operated on a photograph, aiming at identifying the situation, theme, or main focus in it. [27] Echo is, for its part, beyond subject matter or information, and is the result of a second reading, a level upper in synthesis and belongs to interpretation and further conceptualization.

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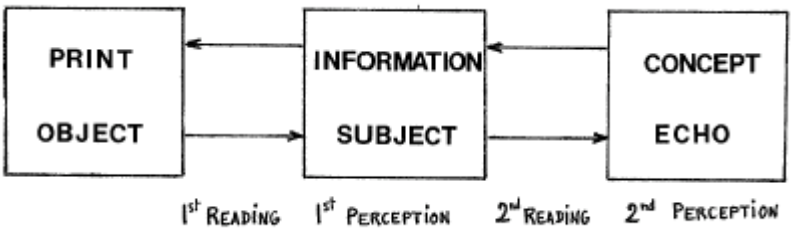
[23] Prom the exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art "New Documents" prepared by John Szarkowski and showing works by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand.

[24] Which is to say that they do not make art but they produce meanings, and that they do not really care for the print itself as object. Frank's image quality — blocked highlights and shadows — and his print quality — very raw printing — show his relative indifference toward the object itself. Diane Arbus had a similar attitude: "I do not have a holy feeling for it." (*Arbus*, p.15).

[25] *Arbus*, p.15.

[26] See Walt Whitman's “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*.

[27] Of course the first reading is not innocent and substantial variations may occur from one individual to another. However, we believe that it is the very first level of a synthetic approach, and in fact the very first instinctual conceptualization. That is why we made it the center of our analysis, going both upstream toward the print and downstream toward what we called the echo.



At these two levels we discover a parallel evolution from Frank to Arbus, a widening of echo and a narrowing of subject matter, or as Arbus put it: "It was my teacher, Lisette Model, who finally made it clear to me that the more specific you are the more general it'll be." [28] In other words, in the isolation of one figure one can mirror the most essential aspects of society and man. [29]

Frank goes down in the street to look around him at people and "people's things." [30] His topic is as broad as it could be: it is the Americans. He very strongly perceives the relationship between people and environment, and therefore deals in general shots most of the time. He gives an embracing view, and glimpses of a world where man is as important as the objects around him; and very seldom does he approach his subjects for a close-up portrait, particularly of an individual alone. But often the impact of these photographs does not go beyond a fairly general criticism of the urban condition. Eventually, it is the radiography of a society more than a metaphysical message on man's destiny.

Quite different is Arbus's approach. She starts where Frank had stopped, just before the close-up.Her environments recede in the background and go out of focus, while people become very sharp and occupy most of the surface of the photographs. At this point they are still the same people as Frank's (compare Frank's couple at Reno [31] and Arbus's *Young couple on a bench in Washington Square*; or *Cocktail Party* p.117 and *Four people at a gallery opening*; or *Political Rally* p.127 and *Boy with straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade*; to name but a few), but this is only a beginning as she soon goes on and down to the core of things. Her working shot is the close-up, the direct contact, the intense focus on these Americans, these people who do not quite fit into a generalizing and simplifying view. With her, people become individuals, and individuals proclaim their differences. When you look at them carefully they are all different, and Arbus's art is in exploring these discrepancies. They cease to be only a part of the environment. They become the event itself. They take on a new dimension and somewhat become metaphors of a wider, more general message. As her subject matter becomes more and more precise the implications carried by the photographs become less and less centered on American life and reach the level of the whole humanity. They become statements on Man, the human condition, on ourselves.

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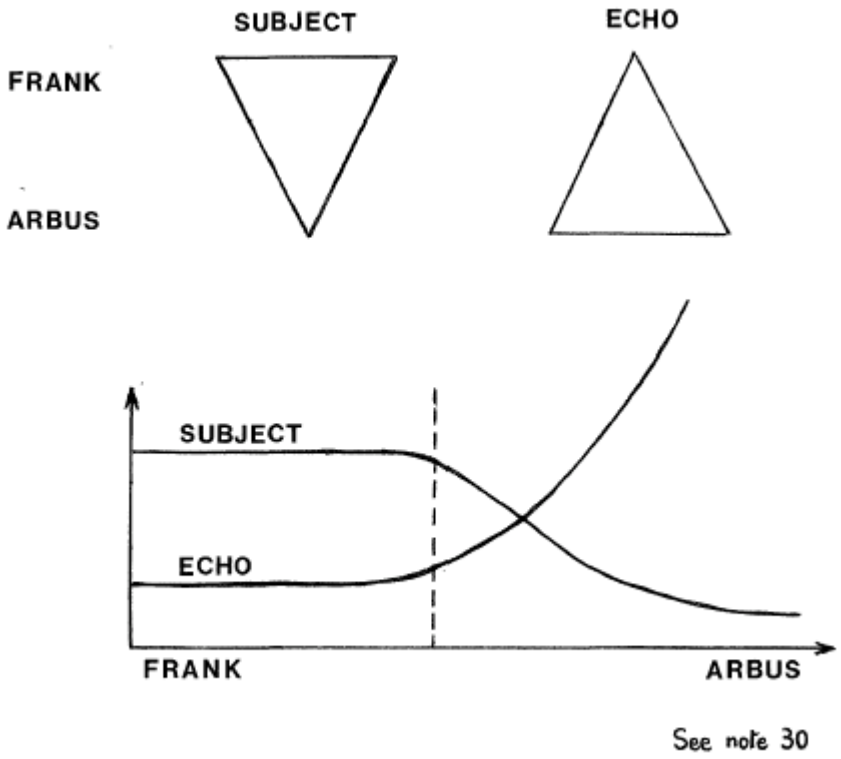
[28] *Arbus*, p.2.

[29] Peter C. Bunnell, in *The Print Collector's Newsletter*, January-February 1973, pp.128-130.

[30] The phrase is Lee Friedlander's defining his photography.

[31] Robert Frank, *The Americans* (New York, 1979), p.173 — hereafter cited as *Frank*.

As we see, and this idea will constantly undergird our study, we are faced with two functions, one increasing and decreasing, both at the same speed: subject matter narrows while echo widens. Brought back to a plane they can form two complementary pyramids.



This opposite variation [32], its nature and meanings, will be the backbone of our analysis that we shall conduct along two thematic poles. In a first part we shall be concerned with the environment, what man's surroundings are and how, caught in the photographer's frame, they form a system of notations, a landscape of meanings.

Then, in a second part, we shall deal with the people themselves, and try to bring out Frank's and Arbus's visions of man and their philosophies of life.

The conclusion will eventually attempt to put all the elements in perspective, and open some directions in the study of photography as a major means of expression.

[32] Of course, it is impossible to compare the absolute values on these two functions as they represent two different quantities. The only possible comparison is that of the variations of the two curves.

The environment

"Americans feel the reality of their country to be so stupendous, and mutable, that it would be the rankest presumption to approach it in a classifying, scientific way. One could get at it indirectly, by subterfuge — breaking it off into strange fragments that could somehow, by synecdoche, be taken for the whole."

Susan Sontag

Cigarette or jukebox, forest or building, unless it is a magazine or a car, the environment is the multitude of objects and situations which surround and envelop us. In Frank's and Arbus's photographs man is always present and if he is not there in person, as in *X-mas tree in a living room in Levittown* or in *Crosses on the scene of a highway accident,*[33] his hovering presence is always felt. He seems to have pervading qualities of ubiquity for he literally invades his surroundings with his productions, and transforms them into an environment, which is a place that he has appropriated by loading it with meanings.

Objects are particularly powerful in this system. These artifacts have a tremendous influence on our lives. We have created them to serve us but they have started a life of their own and now function totally independently. In other words, the primordial relation of man to his inanimate creations is perversely inverted, and he falls a victim to his own signs. A classic example of the development of this process is the car which, after being created as a means of transportation, became a status symbol, the instrument of an expression of power (that is why it *is* a language [34]) and has more or less enslaved him to its production of meanings.

But environment, as it is understood here, is wider than the world of objects alone. Nature, which roughly encompasses all the non man-made "objects" that surround us, is also fundamental. Nature is properly an enviromnent. It should not be viewed as something which just happens to be there. It is a cultural phenomenon, an object of culture that we perceive and use as a language, an instrument to produce meanings.

Environment is particularly important in photography where a supplementary selection process intervenes to include or exclude all or parts of it, to magnify or obliterate it, in other words to mediate it through technique. This makes the reading of the environment in a photograph at the same time a capital operation and a very complex and slippery one.

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[33] In *Arbus*, and in *Frank*, p.109-

[34] This theory is developed much more subtly and in many more details in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* and *Le système de la mode*.

Although the human element is most of the time at the center of Frank's and particularly Arbus's photographs, backgrounds and surrounding elements have a different importance for each photographer. Frank, with his wide-angle vision, puts a great deal of environment in his frames, while Arbus, reducing her scope, goes for a greater simplification and purity. Objects in her pictures are less numerous, backgrounds simpler, oppositions and reinforcements stronger.

Atmosphere

"The medium is the message"
Marshall Mc Luhan

One of the primordial factors of environment in a photograph is paradoxically an element which is seldom perceived, and which, moreover, strictly belongs to technique. It is the original coding process: lighting and texture. Those are the elements which shape the message, the elements of style which create the first environment conditioning all the others.

Lighting and texture are undissociable for they are both based on the relative oppositions of surfaces of black and white. [35]

Black and White

We may note a fairly clear evolution from Frank's raw style and its vague, blurry pictures, to Arbus's sharp, clear, almost clinical rendition of her portraits. This evolution, however, is far from being the taming of an expression. The violence of her lighting equals at times Frank's splashes of light falling from bare bulbs, or the crying halos around his monumental jukeboxes. We are rather faced with a camera becoming more precise, more accurate, carrying more information, and going deeper by getting closer to people's skins.

Significantly both Frank and Arbus use black-and-white. [36] In black-and-white things are much more clear-cut, which does not mean they lack subtlety. Indeed between extremes, a wide range of greys can produce, if properly used, fine nuances, penetrating deep, brushing over surfaces,

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[35] The printing influences a great deal the reading and appreciation of a photograph. Whether you look at a direct reproduction from the negative, that is the product of an optical-chemical process, or at a mechanical reproduction in a book or a magazine, the number and quality of details, the subtlety of the various shades of grey, and the general impression of force produced by the picture will greatly change. Even two prints from the original negative can be, and often are different. To this effect it is interesting to compare the 1969 printing of *The Americans* and the 1979 one in which whole parts of some photographs appear which had previously been hidden.

[36] "Black and white are the colors of photography... To me, they symbolize the alternatives of hope and despair to which mankind is forever subjected." in "Black and white are the colors of Robert Frank" in *Aperture* 9:1, 1961.

suggesting more than telling, and creating a very sensual presence. Things are simply neater, better organized around two extremes only, one of brilliance, one of gloom. Of course the result is further removed from reality and although our culture has taught us how to read this "translation" we still sense it as such. Dissimilar colors are changed into the same shade of grey, some contrasts disappear, others are created. We are therefore in the presence of a real coding process, a transformation of elements along predetermined lines.

If we were to use Marshall Mc Luhan's terminology [37] we would say that Frank's photographs are "cool" while Arbus's are "hot". By that expression we would mean that Frank gives us mostly outlines, shapes, and contours, that his photographs sketch a scene while showing very little texture [38], or very little information on what we see.

His photos are snapshots, that is "natural, intuitive responses to the moment." [39] What allows us to step into the picture, to identify its components, is the product of additional information that we have to supply ourselves. Their reading therefore requires a fairly great effort on the part of the reader, and always remain very distanciated. On the other hand Arbus's photographs are extremely rich in information (ie "hot"). They show us with great clarity very subtle reflections on people's teeth or the smallest pore on the sitter's skin[40] or even the tiniest piece of hair. The impression of truth, and of a third dimension, is thus stronger. Things and people appear surprisingly real, almost alive.[41]

Frank's Way

In contrast with Arbus's photographs where everything seems so clear, Frank strikes us as producing very dirty and messy prints. Their contrast is often aggressive. His pictures are more splashes of light and holes of blackness than continuous-tone photographs. Suddenly, and next to blackness, a glaring white pool of light bursts engulfing details and bumping against darkness. The deep black surfaces without nuances lurk everywhere, catch the eye and do not let it go. Whatever happens there is not spelled out, and we are forced to rely on our imagination to explore this world that we are unable to penetrate visually with our imagination.

As a result of the perpetual fight of black and white over the territory of the frame, lines are blurry, shapes imprecise, and forms sometimes melting over one another, thus creating a feeling of motion. This constant movement of people and things, this dynamic process of instability under our very eyes is particularly striking in the moving car in *St. Petersburg* (p.77) opposed to a foreground of old people stuck in their motionless position; or in *Bar, New York City* (p.97) where the body looming in

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[37] See *Understanding Media* (New York, 1964).

[38] See Salt Lake City, p.119 or Yale Commencement, p.53-

[39] Gerry Badger, p.123.

[40] See Young man in curlers at home on West 20 street and Blonde girl with shiny lipstick.

[41] The effect is reinforced by the huge size of the actual prints.

the right hand corner seems to keep escaping some doomed science fiction set; or even in probably one of the most meaningful of all of Frank's photographs *Elevator, Miami Beach* (p.99). The essence of his art is concentrated in this single shot, marvelously composed and with a very remarkable texture as well. This picture offers two levels, or dimensions, the sharp one and the blurry one. On the other hand, the elevator-girl shows a very simple expression, calm and sad at the same time, and photographically speaking a very readable face (though in Frank's manner it is limited to the most essential features). On the other hand, sharply opposed to her, out of focus, and deprived of nuances, are the two customers. They are black, impressive, overbearing but are denied any individualized face. They move when she does not, when she clings to her control panel but they are just a soulless, uninteresting curtain. [42]

Added to this play on focus and great masses of "colors", Frank gives his pictures a peculiar feel through his use of grain. Grain is everywhere, smaller or bigger, more or less obvious, but everpresent. On top of softening edges and eating up details it creates a fine screen spread all over the photograph, distancing the viewer from the subject and making him aware of the fact that he is not looking at reality but at a substitute for and a projection of it. This grainy texture develops the effect produced in *Barbershop through screen door* (p.87) giving birth to a world of unreality, mystery even, and generating this vague feeling of otherness or alienation one experiences at the look of these other scenes of life in America. Perhaps even, as Leo Rubinfein suggests, it communicates a sense of spontaneity, almost pain at this spectacle, a view through the teary eyes of the Beat in search of America.[43] But maybe one of the most important effects achieved is that he refuses to fool us with the realism trick; his is a vision, and a personal one. Lighting, and the way Frank uses available light has a lot to do with the pervading mood of blackness in his photographs. He never adds any light to the scene, and refuses, as opposed to what many photographs do, to disturb the existing balance of light. Natural lighting, however, is often anarchical, and is hardly ever fully suitable to picture-taking. Many zones are normally lit while others are in deep shadows with details melting into a compact black mass. Natural, or to be more precise *available* light, is therefore very unbalanced, very jarring;[44] a natural imbalance even furthered by the properties of the films used.[45]

So as to even further this tendency, Frank shoots many of his pictures inside buildings, bars, fast-food places, or factories (34 out of 84) where shadows are even more numerous, often under a poor

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[42] One may note that the man on the right is fat and wears glasses, which is the only thing we see of him, and that the woman's mink is but a thin white blur and her elaborate hairdo a shapeless black mass.

[43] Rubinfien, pp.52-55.

[44] Natural light is usually taken in the sense of sunlight, while available light is the sum of sunlight and existing artificial light.

[45] Film usually increases contrasts (particularly high-speed film such as that used by Frank) and tends to block highlights and shadows. Thus, any photograph, even taken under the best conditions will look different from the reality seen, unless by a skillful play of lights and reflectors one can recreate an impression of “truth seen”.

single-source lighting or at dawn or dusk.[46] Prevailing darkness against light spots, almost schematic vision drawing silhouettes of zombi people, and isolating figures a little in the manner of the French photographer Henri Atget, life according to Frank appears as a melancholy and claustrophobic experience from which escape is almost impossible, so strongly closed is the visual system.[47] The world seems to be a dark place indeed, and if not an evil one, at least one as unfathomable as the faces of these black people in which so little can be discovered.[48]

Light falls from up above, harsh and unidirectional as some removed divine power, unescapable, and violent; [49] glaring highlights shock us and deal visual punches we cannot do anything about.
The photograph becomes a battlefield orchestrated by the photographer. He deliberately breaks with a tradition of technical quality and balance. He photographs because he has a compulsive urge to speak, and he does it as he feels it, powerfully, even brutally, eyes wide open, beholding the chaos.

Arbus's Way

Things are different with Arbus who does not break quite as obviously with tradition.

She operates, perhaps more than Frank, in a very established genre, the portrait. Basically, her pictures are, visually speaking, softer and much more balanced. All the shades of grey are present in a very continuous tone ranging from absolute black without letting either one take over the whole surface. She is, in a sense, more precise than Frank. She shows more of what she sees and goes beyond the stage of the sketch, she really invents a texture and gives her photographs a third dimension and thus an appearance of greater reality (a fact particularly obvious in her actual prints). As she uses a large format camera, an infinity of details further the impression of "being there", thus creating a bridge between viewer and subject. It is a little as if Frank's blurry lens were suddenly clearing up and the complex web of the world were appearing sharply for the viewer to see.

There is indeed a physical quality about her photographs, an undeniable presence felt through their depth. But what is really striking is that while Frank only used available light sources, quite a few of

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[46] Los Angeles, p.113; Chinese Cemetery, p.125; Salt Lake City, p.119; Cocktail Party, p.117; Mississippi River, p.105; Drive-in Movie, p.103.

[47] lan Jeffrey, "Robert Frank, an appreciation," *The Photographic Journal*, July 1973, pp.347-349.

[48] See p.19, 37, 47, 121, 123, 165, 175. As Michotte Van Den Berk says in "Le Caractère de réalité des projections cinématographiques" (in *Revue de Filmologie*, n° 3-4, October 1948, p.254) : "Les choses que nous voyons sont . . . instituées pour la plus grande part par les portions obscures de l'image, par les ombres, et même plus celles-ci sont opaques et plus aussi les objets paraissent massifs. Les grandes plages de lumière correspondant au contraire au fond aérien inconsistant . . . . Les ombres . . . nous apparaissent comme étant la couleur propre des objets."

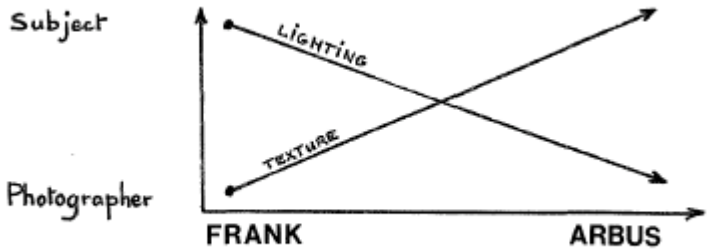
[49] Two photographs where the overhead lighting is particularly strong are *Casino*, p.73, and *Crosses on the scene of a highway accident*, p.109.

her portraits were made with lights totally controlled by the photographer. This difference had enormous consequences on her style.

First of all there is a lot of light in her prints. Light penetrates everywhere prying even in the tiniest corners, scrutinizing the field offered as a kind of violent inquisition produced by this great amount of instantaneous light. The result is very detailed clinical pictures with odd surreal effects, as a consequence of the upsetting of the traditional balance of light sources. Furthermore it gives birth to a powerful system of oppositions, frontly lit pictures being highly favorable to a strong front/back polarity (sharp foreground set up against a black background). John Szarkowski summarizes the characters of the flashlight very well: "It is a great simplifier. Its brilliant light falls off rapidly as it leaves the camera and imposes on the structure of the picture a tight planarity, drawing a brilliantly lighted main subject against a dark background. The character of the flashlight from the camera is profoundly artificial, intrusive, and minutely descriptive. [50]

On the contrary, when she does not use a flash she tries to have a very soft and diffuse natural light which, though it is far from giving the sharp contrast and details of flashlight, precludes deep shadows. The result is a softer if less "crispy" image, and, in this case, a good blend between subject and environment which explains why nudists in particular are always photographed with natural light, while most of her sexual and physical "freaks" are with a strobe. In one instance (*Woman with a locket in Washington Square Park*) the effect is particularly striking: the color of the sitter's skin, her hair and dress are rendered by almost the same shade of grey as the background, blending them, and only leaving standing out the two eyes and the locket.

Where Frank was creating a mood, Arbus puts forth facts, and despite the life-like qualities of her photographs, her presence and directivity are strongly felt, particularly through her lighting. It is as if she were focusing on the individuality of her subjects by making them sharper and clearer, while simultaneously making herself more conspicuous by drawing a part of the energy and interest of the picture to her, [51] or to put it graphically:



[50] John Szarkowski, *The Picture Press* (New York, 1972).

[51] The single source of very powerful light belongs to the photographer. She is the one, and the only one who has the total mastery of it. It falls on her subjects as she decides, and thus, as the light comes from her, imposes her "angle". Her sitters are then relegated to the mere role of reflector of the light she "produces".

Strangers in a Strange Land

"The illegible word, hangs in the vast American sky."
Henry James [52]

"Assuredly the gods who sent Robert Frank, so heavily armed, across the United States did so with a certain smile."
Walker Evans [53]

While on the stylistic level this double inversion is taking place, objects and places are being shaped into a world whose reality is the photograph and whose law is the photographer's vision.

The place and importance of the environment is, as we have said, greater in Frank's photographs than in Arbus's. With Frank, people and things are realized, equally and synchronically, into the world according to the photographer; a world centered on people, but not *only* on people. Frank's vision is much more inclusive and global than a simple look at Americans. Frank judges and comments on the world his camera mediates, but he always considers it as a whole which makes his approach more sociological, or more modestly social, than purely artistic. He particularly concentrates its character, probing its identity.

The City, a Cluster of Solitudes

The city, the extension of man's skin, [54] is obviously central to documents on the United States. Although surface-wise the cities are not the main part of the continent, they are its predominent force both by their population [55] and by their socio-economic influence. It was also for Frank, the immigrant, the easiest reality to grasp by its multifarious aspects and its variety of experiences concentrated on a small surface.

Frank's city is a sad world, a strange place where man is not much welcome. He appears as both the creator and the victim of this world of streets, crowds, and concrete. This is certainly not an original view for, since the eighteenth century and the very foundation of the American Republic, Agrarians have been fighting Industrialists, in the realm of ideas, in the political arena, and sometimes in the streets. As a result of the ancient opposition between Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians and of the fast expansion of industry in the United States, a country which up to the beginning of the 20th century

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[52] Henry James, *The American Scene*, quoted by Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York, 1977), p.66.
[53] Walker Evans, *U.S. Camera Annual 1958*, p.90.
[54] Marshall Mc Luhan, *Understanding Media*, pp.114-122.
[55] 74 % of the population lived in cities (1950).

was predominantly rural, and still is in parts, [56] the city with its growing burden of problems has been easily associated with evil, suffering, and man's depravity and fall. However backward, poor, and closed a milieu the countryside may be, Faulkner's or Caldwell's novels never produce the awfully black and hopeless atmosphere which is that of writers such as Upton Sinclair, Stephen Crane, or Nathanael West. Everpresent in Western philosophy and literature is this traditional and almost simplistic opposition between the urban inferno and the hard-but-free atmosphere of the country. Frank typically delivers much the same message. But even if he belongs to a tradition clearly established in the American art, his posture is original.

His view of America looks, because of the medium he uses, much truer and more objective than any written or novelized version of the same reality. [57] We of course know that this objectivity is but a fallacy but it works with undeniable strength. His second originality lies in that the style and method he forged, was new, ". . . a world unimagined by the serious photographers of his day . . . personal and emotional. . ."[58] but neither pamphletary nor didactic or politically militant. Indeed Frank does not seek to convert people, and his photographs are simply mood documents, sad pictures of a sad world, dirty pictures of a dirty world, violent pictures of a violent world.

This life is a harrowing experience where the prevailing note is that of loneliness in the kingdom of the fake. Frank's originality, however, lies in his power to make us participate in the process by first creating a repetitive motif of alienation, solitude, artificiality, and secondly by somewhat alienating even the viewer from the photograph.

The fake is almost obsessive in all his views of urban life, particularly when taken inside where harsh lights are too dramatic and too unnatural for a normal existence.[59] Houses once beautiful and elaborate constructions are now ramshackled, dilapidated, abandoned buildings (*Rooming house*, p.51) where a headless old man stands as another decaying pillar. "Time gnaws" they seem to say; remains of the past hardly survive, the past being itself "cannibalized", replaced by cheap and pretentious decors (pp.29, 31 55, 59). [60] People cease to be people and pasteboard advertisements exhibit the smile they cannot give (*Ranch market*, p.39). And indeed how could they when they always are so tense, so bored (pp.15, 19, 21, 39, 47, 77, 145, 149, 153, 155, 157), old before their time, or wear glittering jewels too bright to be real (p.145), or printed dresses together with minks (p.60)? Fake smile (p.131), fake cowboy (p.141), tacky shrine with fake portraits over fake beams (p.84), fake high class resulting in high vulgarity (p.73), the grotesque mixture of a portrait of Eisenhower and a

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[56] If the reins of the power are in the hands of city dwellers, and more precisely of Eastern city dwellers, the rural zones, particularly the Midwest have a very important role in the American economy, a role which is bound to increase with the new economic orders. One of the challenges American economy will have to face will indeed be in the production of food.

[57] That is why the sociologist Lewis Hine took up photography as a means of proving his written assertions on East Coast slums and child labor.

[58] *Frank*, dust cover.

[59] Although contrast is still strong outside, it is obvious that life outdoors is nicer, gentler and more balanced.

[60] The same idea is present in a few of Walker Evans's photographs.

lonely evening dress in an empty and artless store window (p.129); bad taste permeates the city and even invades the hereafter in the form of cheap — and gross — tokens of love from the living: plastic crosses and artificial flowers (p.139).

As for what is left of real nature, it grows wild and unkempt in a pitiful parody of open nature (*Backyard*, p.88). The result is a cluster of jarring elements fallen into disuse. No one is looking after the garden anymore, flower pots are broken, alleys overgrown by wild plants, and an old automobile is slowly rotting on the spot, sunk into wild grass as a remain of by-gone times. Even the old man sitting is but a remain himself, eaten away by the deep shadow of the striped canvas, sunk in his armchair, ready to disappear in the vegetation too, and actually almost confounded with it already. This photograph becomes a prophecy in itself. All the fake will decay, and be absorbed by this power which can forever be reborn from itself: Nature, which will eventually have the last word.

But, in the heart of the city, down in the very core, lies the reason for these people to be together: industry. The throbbing heart of the buzzing factory drives men as a magnet. Frank shows us only one picture of it, almost as if it were a shameful secret (p.111), but it is a very important one, central to the understanding of the alienation born of the city, and whose singleness makes even more powerful.

This assembly line in a Detroit car factory is approached as a medieval vision of Hell, brought forth with such vividness that one could almost hear the deafening noise of clashing iron. It is a very flat, compact, thick picture in which every single square inch is full of strange convoluted forms. There are very little actual details on focus although it swarms with a multitude of objects. Men are blurred, and movement, frantic activity, is at the center of this muddle of elements. This photograph is, we believe, at the core of the photographer's vision of man in the cities. Everything seems to converge here. It is the meeting point between man and his creation, but the act here is not one of creation but an adulterated and recuperated function of mechanical reproduction, perpetrated under — how symbolic — the light of a man-made sun. [61] Man is the instrument of his own alienation, the prisoner of a system he is doomed to reproduce endlessly (as on an assembly line), and to sink deeper and deeper into the bottomless tunnel.

Beyond, physical alienation prevails, this stifling feeling of being walled-in, trapped by rigid frames and concrete without the possibility of ever escaping toward the sky, a sky which is always denied and cut off. [62]

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[61] The photograph itself is built as a symetrical opposition of two identical rows of men separated by their constructions, as if they were building a wall between them with their own hands.

[62] With, however, two exceptions: *St Francis, Gas Station*, and *City Hall* where the sky plays an important part, for aesthetic reasons as a flat grey surface against which the main elements stand out; and perhaps for more semiological reasons, including the presence of the sun as a power and counterpoint to a black and overpowering spiritual world, while the gas station mediates between the spiritual and the temporal; and *San Francisco* (p.155), a picture probably taken in the North

The city is the place where people live and work inside under tungsten lights glaring from the ceiling (pp.27, 69, 73) or from strange surrealistic machines (p.97), or where the sunlight forces its way through closed windows (pp.25, 59, 101). Outside, an monotonous grey light falls over everything, making no shadows, washing out the harsh contrast, and leaving only a tasteless decor (pp.15, 23, 35, 43, 63, 65, 67, 141, 153).

The urban world is a wall, or rather a box in which "Men go to and fro like bubbles of wine." [63] In *Elevator* (p.99) or *Bar* (p.97) or even *Navy recruiting station* (p.25) the ceiling is low and the atmosphere heavy. Frank's very conscious composition constantly reinforces this feeling, shooting downward, cutting overheads, getting too close to his subjects (pp.23, 27, 43, 61), making them bump against the sides of his viewfinder (p.23) or placing two square shoulders symetrically surmounted by two balls of short thin hair as a huge foreground taking up half the frame (p.27).

But perhaps the utmost irony is reached in *Television studio* (p.131). All the strongest elements of Frank's panoply meet in this photograph to create a totally jarring ensemble secreting all the uneasiness of which he is capable. The star, starlet, or guest speaker, whoever she is, is placed on the left, facing an invisible audience, but looking away from it toward us, while she is half hidden by a black shapeless shadow, and while symmetrically a black box, a T.V. set, reproduces her likeness. In this picture Frank succeeds in this *tour de force* consisting in concretizing around the temple of the fake and the closed, a T.V. studio, all the oppressive feeling of city life by putting a living creature in a 2' by 2' wooden box, thus making simultaneously an extremely harsh comment on the limitations of his own medium devoted to trapping life in a lifeless frame.

Yet another aspect of the claustrophobic effect of the city is given in *Canal street* (p.49). Frank produces there the physical sensation of being drowned in a human sea. Against a dark background stern profiles go right and left, erected as a wall against which you bang your head. The photograph centered on the bald man, the young man behind him, and the old woman in front, has the fatal rigidity and inevitability of the concrete wall. [64]

Walls, bars, obstacles of every sort came back as a leitmotif in Frank's work. The physical barrier is often formed by the people themselves but it can also be some actual obstacle. For instance it can be the curtains of a hotel window removing to the background the whole city of black roofs and lonely streets, grey and sinister downbelow, "wet beneath the blue suburban skies;" [65] unless the separation is achieved by a steel plate and jail-like bars (*Trolley*, p.47) of a prison-streetcar; or sometimes, as in *Parade* (p.13) it is the marvelously symetrical composition of a brick wall and an American flag trapping three women inside their apartments.

Beach-Telegraph Hill area, where the sky echoes the lawn, and the two blacks echo the white city on rolling hills.

[63] Wazim Hikmet.

[64] A concrete wall not unlike the one in *Chattanooga*, p.153 where the couple looks as if propped against a blurred crowd, surrounded and isolated at the same time.

[65] John Lennon, Paul McCartney, *Penny Lane*.

Carried to extremes, the city, crossroads of information and culture as symbolized by the newsstand (p.65), is itself a wall, a solid mass of impenetrable concrete and glass reflecting your image. The avalanche of news and publications of all sorts is so huge that it ceases being a positive force to become another wall, another obstacle proclaiming the name and color of a reality forever alien. One is, as the streetlight on the same picture, or as this Jehovah's Witness selling his magazine (p.67) literally driven to the wall and crucified on it. [66]

With this last photograph we have more or less reached the end of the journey on the Golgotha of concrete on which a man, eyes deep in their sockets so as to give a foretaste of the corpse, is nailed while throwing his word of warning to his fellow-men: "Awake!", that is: "go away, refuse the assembly line, refuse such a life, and find your way elsewhere." Elsewhere, if anywhere, is outside the circle of the city, out of this dull and greyish atmosphere. And where can they go but to the country, the last place where, supposedly, things are still alive?

The Three Circles of Nature

Nature, however, is difficult to find in Frank's work (22 out of 83 photographs), and when you do find it, it is never simply in its pure aspect but occupied and remodeled by man and his constructions. It is almost impossible to escape the urban circle for the whole world seems to be some kind of extension of the city; Nature is invaded by roads, houses, cars, motorbikes, or gas stations, it is cannibalized by Progress [67] and thus eventually transformed into a remote branch of the central nervous system.

But, although it is never untouched, the country seems to be a nicer place to live in. The sun usually shines there (pp.57, 71, 121, 155, 17l) and people seem more natural, at least a little happier.

However, this is only very general, too general in fact for Frank, who is not so manichean. Things are not so clear-cut, and he certainly does not fall into the trap into which many passionate city haters fell and will fall. In his photographs there are at least three systems, or levels, that we must differentiate.

First of all there is in the heart of the city of concrete a last attempt made to retrieve real nature, at least parts of it. It is as most ultimate and desperate attempts, pathetic and touching. It is seen in palm-trees growing on a sidewalk, transformed by a fantastic lighting into two gigantic dust sweepers or neo-classic columns, guarding a silvery shape, in what could have been a Magritte painting. Other similar attempts are more discreet, such as people putting oak leaves in their hair for a cocktail party (p.117), or by wrapping around them the fur of a dead animal, usually a mink (pp.295 61), or by offering plastic flowers to their dead (p.139). Life and growth, symbols of Nature,

[66] The image on page 67 finds a perfect — if more dynamic — echo in *Political rally*, p.17, in which the orator, an awful grin on his face, as a man tortured by pain, is photographed arms open against a cross-shaped window frame.

[67] Sontag, p.65.

are turned into stale objects made for systematized possession and standardized symbolization. Eventually, perhaps most pitiful of all because most out of place, is this cowboy, symbol of the open space of the American continent, who finds himself in a New York City street, between two rows of buildings, sitting symbolically on a garbage can.

The second attempt to go back to what existed before the urban state is to park a little bit of the country in the heart of the metropolis, and to stimulate the existence of real nature in parks, picnic grounds, and other trapped versions of the countryside. But here, Frank's view becomes ambiguous.

Ont the one hand he more or less shows city behavior directly transposed among the trees. The black couple (*San Francisco*, p.155) although resting on the grass looks tense, angry, and suspicious, still under the spell of a white city taking up over half of the frame. The group in *Belle Isle Park in Detroit* (p.157) looks sad and tired in a photograph where everybody seems to ignore everybody else. The trodden earth is bare, littered with beer bottles and paper plates (the remains of a hypothetic feast?). The only tree is but a big black trunk cutting the frame in half while one of its branches seems to encircle the two women and the child in the foreground, keeping them in a tight, enclosed space. The soldier, whose very presence in the picture is strange, is faceless and stands in a position closer to that of a big bird of prey than of a human being, while above him the pale grey lake looks like a shapeless, immaterial, and bottomless hole, a virtual non-existence merely used as a backdrop to a chaotic gathering of people. *Belle Isle, Detroit* is the Eastern echo of the same West-Coast reality shown in *Picnic ground, Glendale, California* (p.163) in which trees appear crooked, sickly, and leafless while the bare ground is covered with picnic tables and garbage cans in a washed-out composition whose center is occupied by a seated man who sadly gazes at the camera with what could hardly be termed an inspired look.

On the other hand things change in *Public park, Ann Arbor* (p.171). Now the sun shines, and shines brightly through a fairly dense foliage. Some kids and their sweethearts lie on the grass-covered ground in sculptural positions, pure play of lines and shapes interwoven in beautiful movements. But the almost idyllic scene does not go past the foreground, and we are soon reminded of the basic ambiguity mentioned further up: the background of these charming amorous frolics is a compact horde, of animal-like cars, glittering and aggressive watchdogs in sharp contrast with the gentle foreground. The heavy steel hand of the city does not let its prey go easily.

But in a last sequence (*Public park, Cleveland*, p.159) things seem to change for the better, in the last stage of this Nature versus City sequence. In this photograph there are no more cars, but a man alone. The ground is not bare anymore, and if a tree trunk still cuts the frame and the man in half, thus symbolizing a dissociation operated by what belongs to nature on the body and mind of the city dwellers, the man himself looks calm and rested. [68] Furthermore, he is partly undressed, exposing his bare body to the earth which is ready to accept it with its protective grass. He is (almost) barefooted, having left the symbols of civilization and estrangement from the earth at the

[68] The whole picture is built around the tree trunk and revolves around it, the idea of the circle being reinforced by the converging lines of grass and the shoe as spokes.

bottom of the tree. His position is that of the faithful praying, facing the ground, kissing it, hands flat and eyes closed. Of course the total move toward life, toward the earth has not been made yet for the man still wears the remains of a protective shield, his pillow, blanket, and socks [69] but he looks happy and serene (as opposed to the woman in *Belle Isle*) and freer than the teenagers of the Ann Arbor park (p.171), with nothing left to watch over him but a tree.

Frank's third vision of Nature is that of life in the country itself. Here we do not have city dwellers craving for a thicket, looking at nature as an extraneous element they are trying to integrate into their existences. These people live in the heart of the country, in little villages or rural settlements. Their life seems quiet, happy, and slow. Babies play freely in a simple environment of wood while the sun shines through the windows (p.55); a simply dressed woman with worker's hands looks over a young boy; men sitting against a chair-shaped tree are chatting; a man carrying a cross runs to the quiet Mississippi at dusk; a woman laughs in a field while the golden disc of the sun is setting behind her. None of this claustrophobic feeling generated by density here.

To understand this we only have to compare *View from hotel window* (p.63) with *U.S. 30 between Ogallala and North Platte* (p.70). Both are what could be termed landscapes, both are strongly composed, and both are empty of human elements. But everything is grey and dull in the town while the sun shines on the little country settlement. On page 63 the angle is downward, mountains block the background and curtains the foreground, as opposed to page 71 where the sky is huge over the flat plain. The mailbox and the telephone pole do not obstruct the picture like the hotel curtain but rather balance the frame by providing two strong vertical lines reinforcing the flat horizon.

It is the kind of visual game that Frank likes to play and of which *Barbershop through screen door* (p.87) is another good example. It looks a little like a surrealist picture at first glance. Trees and small-town houses seem to invade the inside of a barber shop in which an empty armchair stands, facing the viewer. A closer inspection reveals that the black mass in the center piercing the screen door and allowing us to see inside is, in fact, the photographer's shadow, and that trees and houses are only reflections on the windowpane. Despite (or is it because of) this visual trick, the picture exudes serenity and peacefulness. It perfectly recreates the atmosphere of the small town which has stayed close to what is true. The result is a picture of timelessness, of eternity, with the empty armchair awaiting us, the customers of an invisible barber, defendants or judges. [70]

There is, however, a point where city and nature meet, or, more generally, where earth meets steel; it is usually on a roadside, transformed for a moment into the "end of the road." Those who would never have stopped in this godforsaken Indian settlement (p.81) have died there, the victims of an

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[69] The case of the tatoo might be slightly different and could imply that, however hard man may try, he will never get rid of all his conditioning.

[70] It is interesting to note that all of Frank's pictures of nature, the one on page 71 excepted, were taken in Southern states, while city pictures were shot in the North or the West. Coincidence? reality of a cleavage between the industrial North and an agrarian South? or, once again, the development of a traditional theme?

urban object (the automobile), they have touched the earth, and now lie shapeless under the gaze of Indian farmers. Another example is these crosses marking the spot of an accident on the side of a highway (p.109) with a powerful sunray piercing through a rift in the clouds. Again here, time and superhuman power — be it God, the sun, or Nature — will eventually get the better of man however strongly he tries to hide and protect himself with his artificial shields.

These two photographs could summarize a possible reading of Frank's environment with its typical dynamics from the jail-like and fake city to the country where real life is in the making, to eventually the earth where everything ends and opposites are reunited.

Through the Broken Looking Glass, or The American Landscape Revisited by Diane Arbus

"I mean if you scrutinize reality close enough, if in some way you really, really get to it, it becomes fantastic."

Diane Arbus [71]

Arbus, a city dweller, born in New York City which is, if any, the city of cities, deals also very much with urban environments but in quite a different way. Let us not forget that her approach is much more personal than Frank's. She questions the city under quite a different angle, usually under the dichotomy inside/outside, artificial/natural light although this is not always the case. Although she operates within a well established genre, her process is, however, very personal in its "aggressivity". [72]

Where Frank showed a world in which people and environment were one, flattened on the two-dimensional paper, Arbus focuses on the sitters and rejects the environment to a clearly distinct background. Her world is also, unlike Frank's, a very intimate and personal one. She penetrates into people's homes, into people's secrets, into the remotest corners. Surroundings are therefore reduced to a minimum. They are only complements to the main topic. Even in her outside shots — on park benches particularly — the vegetation curtain stands, blurred and far away, as a commercial photographer's backdrop.

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[71] *Arbus*, p.2.

[72] Or, as Susan Sontag claims, in a more contemporaneous tradition. She develops (pp.32-33) the argument that "the Arbus photographs convey the anti-humanistic message which people of good will in the 1970's are eager to be troubled by . . ." with the result of ruling out "the historical understanding of reality". In fact, the question is to know if there can be any such understanding through photographs.

Backdrops

Indeed her backgrounds often look like backdrops, two-dimensional sheets, graphically expressive, almost too expressive to the point of being simplistic. It can be a simple black surface, dramatically reinforcing the expression and flesh tones of the model as in *Lady at a masked ball with two roses on her dress*, *Two men dancing at a drag ball*, *Jewish couple dancing*, *Masked man at a ball*, *Woman with a pearl necklace and earrings*, *Man dancing with a large woman*, *Girl in a shiny dress*. Sometimes the backdrop is not as simple, but is still mostly blank, fairly unobstrusive and only giving very few indications on the actual surroundings of the sitters: bare walls in *A young man in curlers at home in West 20th street*, *Identical twins*, *Four people at a gallery opening*, *The King and Queen of a Senior Citizens dance*, *Transvestite at a drag ball*; very blurred foliage: *Girl with a cigar in Washington Square Park*, *Loser at Diaper Derby*, *A young man and his girlfriend with hot-dogs in the park*, *Woman with a locket in Washington Square Park*, *Woman on a park bench on a sunny day*, *Young couple on a bench in Washington Square Park*.

Certain backgrounds on the other hand are extremely elaborate, full of various objects, or very heavy notations on the environment. But even then, the sitters are granted more importance than their surroundings.

This use of backgrounds does not seem too surprising for hers are posed portraits. Frank was exploring a people, a way of life, a social behavior. Arbus explores human beings, individuals who come to her as much as she goes to them. They come to talk about themselves as they would to a priest or a confessor, at least to someone able to recognize them. As Richard Avedon, the great portraitist and friend of Arbus's, said: "I often feel that people come to me to be photographed as they would come to a doctor or a fortuneteller to find out how they are" and "the photographs have a reality for me that people don't. It's through the photographs that I know them." [73] So as to even strengthen this approach and stress individuality she seldom puts several persons in interaction in the same shot, and she intensely concentrates on a single sitter.

Interiors

Very little is shown of the city as such, a brick wall with an air conditioner (*Boy with a straw hat*), an odd-looking steel mail box resembling some space object (*Man at a parade*), a few blurred buildings (*Woman with a veil on fifth avenue*), and a dirty sidewalk with a brickwall covered with graffiti in a not-very-nice New York neighborhood (*Teenage couple on Hudson street*). A few very schematic elements are enough to locate the scene socially and geographically while not hampering the reading of the picture. The consequence of such an approach is a series of photographs dealing mostly with people's interiors, with their intimate living quarters, their living-rooms, their

[73] Introduction to *Portraits* (Aperture, New York).

bedrooms, and in two instances their dressing rooms; or, in other words, a reduction of the urban world to the dimensions of the "home".

For Arbus the city is obviously not the street, as it was for Frank, but the home, the shelter and shield of the individual. But — and that is where she becomes a *fundamentalist* of sorts — the chosen shelter is often messy, makes the viewer feels the dirty sheets and clammy air, the unhealthy lighting, the cheaplessness and tastelessness of furniture. The searching light of her flash goes for the detail, the broken chest of drawers, the dirty underbed or the soiled wallpaper. She presents us with an overwhelming avalanche of little facts, hard, biting, and — or so it seems — socially condemning. Indeed, the deliberate showing of a negatively connotated background in conjunction with marginals or semi-marginals in what pretends to be an effort of objectivity, is in fact a way of rendering them contemptible in the eyes of the common reader. [74] When she makes a portrait, the sitter cannot in the end show himself as he wants to be, under his best social mask, [75] for, although Arbus pretends to accept this mask, she plays it simultaneously against a background which most of the time destroys all the sitter's efforts.

The first step is taken with a very deceptive picture of a *X-mas tree in a living room in Levittown*, maybe one of her most typical shots. It acts like a break in the good conscience, creates a first uneasiness. After all Levittown, N.Y., is an upper-middle-class suburb, a highly sought-after area, and, under a first cursory inspection, this living-room looks relatively cosy. But further scrutiny reveals a strange emptiness, a large hole in the center only accentuating the disturbing effect of the armchair in the foreground. Then, one by one, we begin to notice odd things, the cellophaned lampshade, the artificial flowers, the "antiseptic Christmas tree" [76], the blank walls, the two clocks not showing the same time, and the empty T.V.-screen mirroring in its glaucous eye the room itself. And, suddenly, it all falls into place, as it were. The edifice collapses and we cannot help seeing, not what this living-room wants to be, but its fake protective covering that Arbus herself sees: an unlived-in place, cold, sterile, and standardized.

This process of degradation goes on, each time with less and less ambiguity. Each interior is more dreary than the other, and we are slowly driven to the conclusion that her environment, unlike Frank's, is here the product of a conscious choice which, however pitiful it might be, is but the direct reflection of their unfathomable alienation. It is particularly the case in the Bronx living-room of Eddie Carmel's parents (*A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx*) and once again its cellophaned lampshades, its covered armchairs, and its reproduction of a master's painting on the wall, lighted as in a museum by a little overhead lamp; or, in *Retired man and his wife in a nudist*

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[74] Even if the standard (not to say: normal) viewer hardly sees the background, at least consciously, it is one more element which can be used to alienate marginals and even "normal" people from the sympathy and understanding of the man in the street.

[75] "Face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (New York, 1967), p.5-6.

[76] Alan Levy, "Working with Diane Arbus", *Art News*, Summer 1973, pp.80-81.

camp one morning, the grotesque contrast between the naked couple in the living-room and their two portraits in the nude over the T.V. set and the cheap, artless semi-erotic painting on the wall. What is in fact paradoxical in this shot is that it is not their nudity which is shocking — it looks almost indifferent — but their nakedness, a certain spiritual dearth more profound and how much more pathetic.

Tastelessness finds also a beautiful illustration in *Lady bartender at home with a souvenir dog*. This woman looks almost like a souvenir doll herself: expressionless face, towering hairdo seeming to be glued to her head, dyed hair, eccentric eyebrows, fake leopard vest, and little finger sticking out, everything in her embodies the fake world she lives in. And the surroundings also are in her image: chequered linoleum, souvenir dog on a gilded table, and wall decoration representing a king of clubs. Although everything is clean, the whole place oozes cheap and low-class chic as well as a profound lack of taste. [77]

But so far Arbus only comments on bad taste, on the hollowness of what is the center of the home, a room of pride where one entertains guests. Bedrooms also have a very special atmosphere, intimate and secret. Sanctuary of the body, they are, in a sense, fundamental. But they are shown as even shoddier than living-rooms, as inspiring a visceral hate of dirt and flesh, which are, in Arbus's system, very closely associated.

Crumpled sheets, telltale signs of lack of order, sloppiness, and sometimes fornication (Two friends at home, Naked man being a woman, Girl sitting on her bed with her shirt off, Transvestite at her birthday party, Mexican dwarf in his hotel room in N.Y.C.), and naked bodies looking singularly unattractive, they all come back as a motif. In Girl in a coat lying on her bed the ashtray lies on the white bedspread, the wall is cracked, a large cheap painting is propped upside down against it, and a couple of intruding elements on the left side and the right corner of the room add to the general chaos. In Transvestite at her birthday party the muddle is even greater: the transvestite listlessly lying on the bed on which stands a dripping birthday cake, a pin-up calendar, a broken mirror, a souvenir napkin, little rubber balloons on the wall, a half-broken chest of drawers, and a low camping table with cosmetics. Everything, wherever you go, reflects an absence of means and an absence of taste: dirty wallpaper in Girl sitting, dirty wall and dirty dishes in Two friends, dreary lighting in Transvestite with torn stocking.

Perhaps the strongest comment is to be found in *Naked man being a woman.* The bedroom, probably a hotel room where this man takes refuge, is set as a theater, two parting curtains discovering the "stage". But the curtains are soiled, are not even hemmed, and the "stage" is a mess. In the foreground a sweater was thrown on a chair, and the ground is littered with papers, cigarette butts, a can of pop, and a portable stove. They produce a powerful contrast with the man trying by his pose to look attractive, and the whole creates, together with the sheets and clothes thrown at random on the bed, an opposition to the central character. While this man tries to negate his sex by

[77] See similar lower-class environments in A woman with her baby monkey and Seated man in a bra and stockings.

affirming the opposite one that he finds more valuable, and thus making an effort to go — in his system of values — upward, his surroundings betray him and pull him in the opposite direction, taking away all credibility from him, and making him all the more pathetic. [78]

Another biting comment on the pathos of these rooms is made in two pictures of dressing-rooms (*Burlesque comedienne in her dressing-room, Topless dancer in her dressing-room* [79]). Glamorous and intimate places where stars dress, sign autographs, are caught unguarded by candid photographers, entertain admirers, and conduct their intrigues, dressing-rooms have for most people a certain aura, just as bedrooms do. But everything in these two looks unglamorous, shabby, and vaguely repulsive. The dressing-room of the burlesque comedienne is the perfect counterpoint to her pretentiously fancy outfit. The walls badly need a paint job, the floor is cracked, the garbage can full, a high-heeled shoe lies alone, odd and out of place, and on the table are various objects ranging from a rubber balloon to cosmetics, generating a feeling of unkemptness and pretentiousness.

Much of the same is achieved in *Topless dancer* by different means. The dressing table and the room do not look particularly untidy or shabby. The decor itself is fairly common, with even a little touch of class, perhaps to be read as ironical in such a context, with a Leonardo da Vinci poster, half hidden, one must say, behind a bunch of dresses and coats. But a series of intruding features come to destroy the message that the sitters attempt to deliver — a process that we know very well by now: coats hanging in the upper left corner, the slightly tilted frame breaking the symetry of the picture, pairs of shoes in the lower right corner, a blurred object in the lower left one, the start of a room on the right hand side, a electric fan, a box of matches and a warped coat hanger on the carpet, and, underneath the table, a handbag and a white paper bag. These elements disturb the reading of the photograph and accentuate the vacuity of the dancer's doll face. Her grotesque pose and odd-looking white breasts depersonify her, somewhat reifying her into a doll. Then she can be assimilated to the furniture, and swallowed by the background. The human element has disappeared from the picture.

A similar instance of reification happens in *A widow in her bedroom*. The woman is reduced to the status of jewelry display, and she is equated to the background. Her rigid pose, her size in the picture, and her position between the Chinese vase and the table cluttered with statuettes and various oriental artifacts (both vase and table are taller than her) make her one more exhibit in this museum-bedroom, filling up her empty life with an accumulation of objects. [80]

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[78] Note the upward/downward opposition paralleled by the dark/light opposition of the back wall.

[79] Note the symetrical geographical distribution, one on the East coast, one on the West coast.

[80] There are, however, four notable exceptions to the motif: Russian midget friends in a living room on 100th street, Triplets in their bedroom, Lady in a rooming house parlor, Woman in her negligee.

A morbid fascination for the gutter

Arbus's obsession with dirt and vulgarity, which goes to the point of transforming her sitters into still-lifes is not altogether surprising (the French term, *nature morte,* would be more appropriate). In photography, particularly in the American documentary tradition, the central theme is often the pathos of life, a morbid fascination for physical and moral decay also found in the American literary tradition; and with Arbus this trend is reinforced by her personal history. [81]

She was born to a well-to-do Jewish family, and raised in the upper-middle-class Jewish tradition of order, integrity, class, and cleanliness. The world to her was a protected, asepticized cocoon in which she had a "sense of being immune". [82] When she finally broke out of it, she fell under the spell of the oddity and the adversity of the outside, the world at large. It was not a one-way process though but rather a dual system of attraction and repulsion: while all these places where she had never been, [83] and could never have gone without a camera, fascinated her, she was appalled and repulsed by this world so different from that in which she had grown up. She said: "I'm kind of two-faced . . . I don't mean in my private life I want to kiss you [her subjects]. But I mean that's amazingly, undeniably something." [84] "On the one hand you fascinate me but on the other, because of my whole education, I cannot accept you." We are faced in fact with a rather classic morbid fascination for the gutter, an obsession with the flaw: "You see someone on the street and essentially what you notice is the flaw." [85] The flaw takes up the whole frame, becomes everything, and cheap chic and shoddiness for ever doom the sitters' credibility. But the fault is not external. It lies in man himself who is a sinner, a lost soul, and a being who can only generate moral and physical dirt, illusion, and artifice. The best example of artificiality is contained in two picture-metaphors, the only two pure landscapes of the monograph (*A castle in Disneyland* and *A House on a hill*).

Many stylistic features are common to both pictures. They were both taken on the West Coast, in California, both in los Angeles (Anaheim and Hollywood). The dramatic night lighting of the castle, towering in its unreal glow over the mirror-like moat on which a mythical swan sails, and the low angle of *A House on a hill*, discovering a vast expanse of wild grass reaching the facade on the hilltop, cutout against a dramatically cloudy sky, heighten this ghostly feeling of immateriality. Furthermore, darkness spreads over both these pictures, blurring details, swallowing them, and enhancing the contrast between light and shadows. At last, composition itself gives a supplementary importance to what are — after all, only two fake buildings — by using upward shots (always magnifying the subject) and an upper half/lower half symetry.

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[81] Amy Goldin, "Diane Arbus, Playing with Convention", *Art in America*, March 1973, pp.72-75.
[82] *Arbus*, p.5
[83] *Arbus*, p.1
[84] *Arbus*, p.1
[85] *Arbus*, p.1

Seen in perspective with the other photographs, these two pictures tell us much about how Arbus sees the world, a place where the marvelous is always fake (the castle is that of Sleeping Beauty, and the house a movie set), where things have neither depth nor existence proper (the house is but a facade), where everything is as on a stage, the unimportant, immaterial background to man's activity. [86]

Paradise Lost

As we have seen, her stage-like designs favor our seeing all environments as backdrops. And her treatment of Nature is no exception.

Quite a few photographs taken outside — generally in Central Park or Washington Square Park — clearly blur the background of foliage, thus separating the sitters from their surroundings, and give birth to an impression of distance and alienation: *Girl with a cigar in Washington Square Park, Loser at Diaper Derby* (a parody of a traditional baby photograph), *Elderly couple on a park bench, A young man and his girlfriend with hot dogs in the park, Woman with a locket in Washington Square Park, Nudist lady with swan sunglasses, A young man and his pregnant wife in Washington Square Park, Woman on a park bench on a sunny day, Young couple on a bench, Child with toy hand grenade in Central Park, Two girls in matching bathing suits, Mother holding her child* (another parody of traditional family photographs), and the series of *Untitled*.

Sometimes, however, and in two instances in particular (*A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester* and *A flower girl at a wedding*), the landscape assumes a particularly powerful role, mysterious and disturbing.

In these two photographs there is a strange atmosphere of unstable equilibrium, of suspended storm, as if something were about to happen but were still held up. In both a wide stretch of lawn ends in a forest (or at least a bank of trees). But there is something menacing in the "sombre Gothic cast" of this greenery [87] or in the shrouded looming silhouettes of the trees. This stretch of open land which lies unprotected between people and vegetation seems to be in its still emptiness a direct menace on them. It is almost as if one were" expecting an ogre to jump out of the forest and to rush down on the unsuspecting girl or on the couple, [88] or even to see the entire forest moving forth and closing to them.

Arbus cannot see Nature as peaceful and lovable. It is either aggressive or fake, or ugly, or fouled up by men. She invariably puts in the frame a few elements that destroy whatever effect the greenery

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[86] It is possible to see in *Castle in Disneyland* a comment on the vacuity of man, and of the American man in particular, concerning history. The historical castle of Sleeping Beauty has been made into a pasteboard building in an amusement park in the youngest part of the U.S.A., in a desperate attempt to master (if not beget) history.

[87] lan Jeffrey, "Diane Arbus and the American Freaks", *Studio International*, March 1974, pp.133-134.

[88] *Arbus*, p.5.

could have, once again in a process now familiar to us. In *A family one evening in a nudist camp* the quiet feeling coming from the gentle shades of grey and the reclining attitudes of the sitters is, if not totally nullified, at least seriously undermined by the fancy wing of an automobile coming out of the right side of the picture. Similarly in *Two boys smoking in Central Park* the grass is thin and rare, the ground dry and barren, and a car is rushing past in the background. It is as if we were forever subjected to the perpetual intrusion of our own creations, of the muck we have been piling up since the Fall and which we cannot escape. [89]

The only logical exit is therefore the re-appropriation of Nature through the incorporation of some of its attributes into the system of objects, in other words its reification. This process then allows a total control (quantitative and qualitative) over its signification and distribution, while it satisfies, within the economic structure, the longing for a lost world, and thus taming a good part of the resulting frustrations.

We have already seen how this was achieved in this Levittown living-room with the bouquet of artificial flowers and the Christmas tree, tame and asepticized under its veil of decorations. The same system leads to the flowered wall paper (*Girl on her bed with her shirt off*) which is the last stage of the incorporation of Nature to the world of man-made objects. [90]

Other means are used to the same effect, for example decorating the body with attributes of nature. It can be the leopard vest of the lady bartender, or of the woman in *A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing*, or that of the queen of the Senior Citizen Dance; the flower wreath in the girl's hair in *A flower girl at a wedding*, the flower jewel on the woman's dress in *Jewish couple dancing*, the roses on the woman's dress and her mask in *Lady at a masked ball with two roses on her dress*, and the bird mask of *A woman in a bird mask*.

Ultimately the world of nature gets reconstituted bit by bit in another world, its perfect "image", but totally artificial this time, a poster on a lobby wall (*A lobby in a building*). It embodies, in a sense, the end of the road, the eventual destiny of the world. Arbus seems to say, to parody Mallarmé, [91] that the world is made to end up on a lobby wall, and, to go even further, to end up in a photograph. The criticism has come full circle by eventually reaching the ultimate act of appropriation and reification of the living reality, photography itself.

From Arbus to Frank the evolution of criticism, the shift in the angle of approach is quite clear. The study of the environment in their photographs showed how the fidelity to the thing seen was slowly fading out to get replaced by a total control of the maker on its photography, a new concept of vision which changed Documentarians into New Documentarians, or avowed critics of complacency.

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[89] We shall come back in Part 3 on an interesting parody of the Garden of Eden with *A husband and wife in the woods*.

[90] See also the country painting in *Girl in a coat lying on her bed*.

[91] "Le monde est fait pour aboutir a un beau livre" in "Réponses à des enquêtes sur l'évolution littéraire."

Let us now, in a second part, look at what constitutes the center of these photographs, people themselves, and see how we can understand the dynamic link between Frank's and Arbus's works, how a social world is transformed into a private one, and how a simple statement becomes an indictment.

People

"We hold these truths to be selfevident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
Declaration of Independence.

Both Frank and Arbus show a very sharp and critical eye for the world around them. Their acute sense of detail unveils the very personal view of an overwhelming environment. When they refer to the people themselves, and although it is, of course, somewhat artificial to separate what the photograph unites, we can see that they display the same visual ferocity and independence toward the people.

There are, however, differences between their two approaches of this field as well. But there lies the key to the understanding of the basic dichotomy, the dynamic evolution undergirding their works, the same fundamental movement we have already partially analyzed in Part 2.

In one case, with Robert Frank, we have a social world and a socially oriented explanation of this world, and in the other, with Arbus, the approach becomes personal, intimate and the system behind it metaphysical. We are thus led from the social to the personal, the public to the private, and by extension from "people-furniture" to "people-metaphors". Let us explain these two concepts.

The expression "people-furniture" does not mean that they lack importance, but rather that their importance lies in their presence in and relation with the environment instead of in a personal characterization. In other words they are, most of them at least, two-dimensional characters, defined and built in relation to their social presence (rather than function), that is relatively to what figures the social, i.e. the background. They have no personal existence as such, but one totally integrated within a system of complex relationships that can be called the social framework. They live and act together with other men, under the social law that we shall explore in a first part.

On the other side of the social law is the private law to which Arbus's people belong. Of course, they are not wholly outside the social. Nobody, indeed, can be outside the social for the social is the realm of the rule, and outside the rule (i.e. the social) anything can happen at any time; but, everything being by definition unpredictable, the "possible" is infinite and by essence impossible because of the absence of landmarks from which to act, which is the essential condition of human action. Therefore nothing happens in what can be called a state of Nature. [92]

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[92] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité*; and Yves Michaud, *Violence et Politique*: "D'un point de vue logique, les analyses de Lewis ont montre que l'état de nature est celui

There is no such state in Arbus's photographs. But what remains infra-social is the philosophy behind the pictures whose rhetoric is, itself, beyond social explanation. That is what we wanted to summarize with the expression "people-metaphors", the topic of our second paragraph. They are metaphoric first because they go beyond their own personal sagas and call forth whole human types, and then because they transform Arbus's indictment from a timely vindication against American society, or social organization, into a truly metaphysical dimension.

The Social Law

"I think that question of your political stand or how much politics is in your work, or what, that's sort of ridiculous because it's there, it's so clear to me, from the beginning with the photographs, . . . where I stand . . . . The Americans, . . . was very political. It really talked about that period of America — it showed that period in an unmistakable way, how I felt about it, where I stood — it's a way of life for me — how I live, that's my politics.

Robert Frank [93]

Frank's photographs were said to be social but not political. This asks for some explanation. What are indeed the limits of the political and the social?

If we have termed them not political it is because they do not immediately express an opinion on a system of government. It is even difficult to see in them a comment on the materialism of capitalist society. Of course, the artifacts of the system, from the car to the advertising poster, are present but they do not appear as such to the viewer's mind. Frank's pictures do not really preach for or against any particular political system. They are in their echo much broader, and actually tackle the basic question of society's organization, of relationship between people, of coexistence of the human species. They are therefore profoundly social, but only raise questions and do not suggest any answer.

In his journey Frank saw a number of focus points or landmarks around which American society was organized. The first of these was the car.

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de non-conformité à une régularité de comportement quelconque et un état ou personne ne peut se fonder sérieusement sur une régularité prévisible des actions d'autrui." p.10.

[93] in *Criteria*, 1977.

Motion and Freedom. The Car

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son".
Abe says, "Man, you must be putting me on".
God says, "No", Abe says, "What?"
God says, "You can do what you want, Abe,
But the next time you see me coming you better run".
Well, Abe says, "Where do you want this killing done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61".
Bob Dylan [94]

It is now commonplace to say that in the United States (and indeed in most countries nowadays) the car has become much more than a means of transportation. We do not want to retrace here the evolution of the object into something close to an icon (ie the embodiment of an idea). [95] Let it suffice to recall that it is at the same time a fairly simple icon and a heavily "loaded" one. It is useless to recall the economic power of the automobile on the North American continent. The car operates as a three-fold symbol; a status symbol (from the mere possession of an automobile sixty years ago to the ownership of the latest and most prestigious model of the line nowadays), a power symbol, and a symbol and instrument of freedom.

This importance was boosted by the economic prosperity of the second half of the fifties. In 1954-55, Detroit sold 8 million cars, that is 1 million more than the previous year; [96] in 1956, 90 per cent of the intercity passenger traffic was done by car, and in the summer of the same year, President Eisenhower started the 100 billion dollars Interstate Highway Project which was to alter even more radically the structure of the American landscape and the geography of motion, creating a new generation of shopping centers, gas stations, eating places, and billboards.

The question is indeed one of motion. It has been said that the U.S.A. was a nation on wheels, and this was particularly true of the fifties. The towns grew, the suburbs spread out, and the so far unknown phenomenon of urban exodus ("the inner-city blight") gradually developed as private means of transportation became more available, and everything slowly went this way until the car became the necessary instrument of life, the basic object to allow the exercise of one's freedom. If one wanted to live in decent surroundings, go and see friends, or even go to the countryside, one had to have a car.[97] The dependence on private means of transportation grew to the point where the car itself became a new social place on the American scene. Object, symbol, icon, the automobile (and

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[94] Highway 61 Revisited.

[95] Browne and Fischwick, *Icons of America* (Bowling Green, 1978), p.1.

[96] Manchester, T*he Glory and the Dream* (Boston, 1973), p.695.

[97] This was obviously a highly ambiguous freedom, reserved to whoever was able to afford a car.

the motorbike as well) is all that at the same time in Frank's photographs. In *Covered car* (p.79) the machine appears, identified only by its shape under a protective tarpaulin, glowing mysteriously under the setting (or rising?) sun. It is sheltered from outside impurities as an art object would be in a museum, guarded, as it were, by two palm trees. It looks mysterious and menacing, silvery as an object from outer space, promoted to the rank of archetype. We do not have in front of us *a* car but *the* car, wrapped at the same time as a statue ready to be uncovered and as a dead body in its shroud, [98] an artifact containing in itself its beginning and end at the same time.

The motorbike is, for its part, the exacerbated version of the car. It has all its prestigious attributes and functions, pushed to a limit. The motorbike does not have a shell, and therefore puts the driver closer to the world (air, space, speed, nature) and simultaneously makes him more visible, more important (and therefore more vulnerable) than the car driver. On the other hand, it embodies the purity of the machine: speed, efficiency, and appearance at a paroxysm. It is the perfect adaptation of man to machine, granting him his freedom and power. This is why these motorbikes (*Indianapolis*, p.175 and *Newburgh*, p.91) are so elaborate, so decorated, are so much pop-art works. They indeed realize all the fantasies of their owners (as the horse does for the cowboy) and thus become the ideal instrument for asserting their individuality and superiority as is clearly shown in both pictures – in *Indianapolis* by the opposition between the onlookers in the background and the couple with a scornful look in the foreground, and in *Newburgh* by the intrusion of the photographer and the suspicious look of the men.

The car represents freedom of motion, as shown by a dramatic image taken in a Detroit park, which, with its blurred background and the standing boy in the openroofed convertible, operates the transition between the extreme openness characterized by the motorbike and a tamer and more conventional instrument, the automobile. Among the great beneficiaries of this freedom were the Blacks and the growing number of teenagers.

Adolescents were becoming, in the mid-fifties, an ever-growing group in American society, one whose power was increasing very rapidly. Born during the war and immediately after, these teenagers were numerous, had not known the Depression, and were being raised under the double influence of the permanent but abstract menace of atomic destruction, and the very real benefits of material properity. By 1955, they had become a potent economic force and despite their young age were already active consumers. [99] Their financial power did a lot to free them from a certain adult

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[98] An ambiguity which is not without reminding us of Doctor Frankenstein's creature rising from the dead in a shroud, or of the Resurrection.

[99] "As the flood of war and post-war babies approached puberty, the new market expanded until there were between eighteen and twenty million of new consumers in the country. Their annual purchases rose to 10 billion dollars, then to 25 billion . . . . In one year in the 1950's, *Teen Times* found, the average American adolescent spent 555 dollars 'for goods and services, not including the necessities normally supplied by their families'." Manchester, p.887.

control, if not from social constraint. [100] Consequently, a teen-age subculture developed — fashion, slang, etc. —, centered on the automobile: "...almost every boy in the great middle class had wheels or knew someone who could get them; The Allstate Insurance Company found that nationally 75 per cent of all high-school juniors had driver's licenses and nearly 60 per cent of all had access to the family car for 'social purposes'." [101]

Of course, the car was *the* instrument of mobility for this mostly suburban class, providing them with a relative independence from the family, and opening the "great vistas of life", namely, first and foremost, "the exploring of sexual diplomacy". [102] The privileged places of encounter thus became the empty parking lots of suburban malls, the "passion pit", or drive-in, and the public park on weekend afternoons.

In *Public Park* (p.171) the cars watch over these teenagers, protective and aggressive at the same time, [103] while the youngsters turn their backs to them and recreate their own space within the larger frame of the world. But Frank shows them outside the automobile, in direct contact with nature, relegating the artifact to the background, as a simple prop.

For most Americans, however, the car was, and still is, no accessory. It is as basic as the shell is to the tortoise, and without risking this metaphor any further we might say that it is indeed a shell of steel that is basically a moving extension of man's private bit of earth, his home and castle (pp.33, 41, 167, 177). he can drift with it through space while always staying within the boundaries of an outer-skin, the limits of his own domain. With it, he can go about his necessary economic activities without having to "go out" or physically enter the open common ground. He can shop, go to the bank or a restaurant in his car, or, as in Drive-in (p.103) entertain himself. In this picture everybody is well protected in their parallel automobiles, they will never meet, and their only communication will be done through the projected image of the big screen which takes up most of the sky. [104]

However, if it reduces exchanges between people — thus acting as the opposite of a meeting place — the car drastically increases their potential of mobility across space. This is particularly striking in two photographs, *U.S. 91* (p.75) and *St. Petersburg* (p.77). In *St. Petersburg* there is a drastic opposition between the fixed element (the old people), stuck right in the middle of the picture along the vertical line formed by the bench, and the swift movement of the car (emphasized by the blur) gliding horizontally across the frame. All the elements of composition converge to reinforce the impossible meeting of the mobile and the immobile.

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[100] Of course this freedom was fairly superficial for the reins of the market were still under adult control. However, this generalized prosperity created a dynamic movement among young people which, fed back into the adult world, greatly modified it, and gave birth to a powerful and somewhat separated youth.

[101] Manchester, p.885.

[102] Manchester, p.885.

[103] See paragraph on social-basic groups.

[104] As Julian Marias writes: ". . . each spectator watches the film from his car, encased in a rolling urn of steel, chrome, rubber, and glass." *America in the Fifties and the Sixties*, p.186.

In *US. 91* we are inside the car and this time it is a movement toward the light, the glaring white windshield which literally hypnotizes the driver. He looks as if totally possessed by it and ready to fall blindly into the white pit. It is the same blind attraction of some overpowering element lying ahead which seems to be driving this old couple (*Detroit*, p.167) toward an unknown destination. [105]

Man is granted motion, but the prevailing feeling is that he goes ahead without knowing where he is heading. He walks or drives through the world attracted or pushed in one direction but he does not know where it leads.

When Frank "talks" of motion, he always does it in a particular way, always shooting perpendicularly to the movement, thus refusing its perspective, annihilating its future, and blocking it in the instantaneous present. People move, come and go, but their reality is only immediate. They are reduced to blurred images, black silhouettes fleeing from the frame, hurriedly and without looking back (*Bar*, p.97; *Elevator*, p.99; *Movie Premiere,* p.143; *Trolley*, p.47; *Canal Street,* p.49). The limited bit of the world offered to our eyes is only a transit zone. There does not seem to be any reality outside the photograph, only a never ending stretch of similar realities reduplicating themselves to infinity. We are confronted to a world passing by the photographer, perpendicularly to him, crossing his way, a world of strange and different people that he observes but does not follow. [106]

In this zone of transit formed by the American scene, signs and shapes take on fantastic connotations, as in *Los Angeles* (p.133). The downward shot reduces the man to a tiny speck, flattens him against the sidewalk, drowns him in the darkness of the street while in the upper part of the frame the lead cover of the roof prevents any escape. And, right in the middle, slashing horizontally across the photograph, the inexorable arrow-finger shows the way, insistant and unavoidable, to the man who walks briskly, head down, in the pointed direction.

But Frank goes even beyond this disillusioned comment on a fatefully fractured reality in which the American is condemned to move in order to gain his freedom over space and structures, though ending up a blind transient going like a sleepwalker through a timeless reality. And that is, therefore, the aspect of Frank's work we are going to study in a second step, particularly how, at all levels of social organization, he sees nothing but atomization prevailing over homogenization, fracture over meltingpot.

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[105] Here as well the light comes from ahead of them and the frame on the left side reinforces the blindness of the driver.

[106] An element which could shed some light on Frank's position toward the people he photographs. He crosses their world, but his world remains different, and from the encounter the photograph is born. It is the intellectual middle-class (the "Beat Generation" for example), more conscious and aware than the multitude, meeting the mainstream of American life, right down at the lowest level, the street.

The Fracture — The Other Americans

This vision of a fractured world is first noticeable in Frank's approach of Blacks. If they are only present in 14 out of 83 photographs, their actual significance is much greater, if only because they look different — and therefore *are* different — and that our modern consciousness is relatively naturally tuned into minorities, especially minorities with "problems" (or as the modern terminology goes with "plights"). This interest has become somewhat commonplace since Frank made these photographs, but required both courage and lucidity in the mid-fifties.

Desegregation was still only a word, even if a scaring one, and the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, stipulating that Blacks should be given full citizen status, beginning in the public schools, was only a year or so old. [107] This far-reaching decision was still too fresh to have any direct effect, particularly on the conservative South (where Frank took most of his pictures of black people) which reacted very violently to the desagregation ruling. "Negroes still did not exist for mainstream America.... Black America was unnoticed by White America. 'I am an invisible man' cried the hero of Ralph Ellison's 1953 novel... 'I am invisible, understand, simply because other people refuse to see me'." [108]

America was cut in half by an opaque barrier, and that is exactly the impression one has by looking at Frank's pictures. The barrier, or fracture, is so powerful that never does one group meet the other. They live in different frames, belong to different worlds. When, by chance, they happen to be in the same frame, as in *Trolley* (p.47), *Charleston* (p.37), *Men's room* (p.115), their relation is one of ignorance or dependence.

In *Trolley*, each traveler is enclosed in the window frame, isolated; all look in the same direction (toward the photographer) and their eyes never meet. Blacks and whites just happen to share the space of a public transportation vehicle. In *Men's room*, the white man reads a newspaper while his shoes are being shined, this ignorance continues but much more tragically because there, we have an interdependence of the two groups. The attitude is even almost caricatural: the white man is sitting on a "throne" above the black shiner who goes about his job his head bent. Fortunately Frank who knows better than gross pamphleteering, steps back and puts his scene in the bleak context of a men's room which, thus, by taking on fantastic connotations relieves the main scene of some of its crudely realistic aspects. What to think indeed of this hospital-like decor, of the chromed pipes, of this strange blow dryer, and of the bizarre line of urinals whose regular rhythm is suddenly broken by a standing broom?

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[107] The Supreme Court of the United States presided by Chief Justice Earl Warren, ruled, on May 17, 1954, that: "To separate negro children from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way never to be undone . . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place."

[108] Manchester, p.899.

Charleston reaches a climax of ambiguity precisely because it looks like a militant picture, an anti-racist propaganda poster that Jack Kerouac would have liked to see "...blown up and hung in the street of Little Rock showing love under the sky... ." [109] What indeed could be sweeter (and more suitable) than a photograph of a black nurse carrying a white child in her arms? But if we study the picture carefully we can see that the nurse and the child look in different directions, that they do not seem to pay much attention to each other, and one can even discover on the baby's mouth the trace of a scornful look. What is fundamental in this picture, however, is that if they are actually close to each other, they remain forever alien, basically different, because their skins have diametrically opposed colors. And that seems to be forever the unbridgeable gap.

In the other eleven photographs a few complementary elements to the system appear, especially the generally aggressive, scornful (*San Francisco*, p.121; *Newburgh*, p.91; *Indianapolis*, p.175), indifferent (*Charleston*, p.37; *Coffee shop*, p.151), or bored (*Funeral*, p.123) look Blacks put on. Except in two cases in which they actually show their joy (*Beaufort*, p.121; *Factory*, p.137) we are faced with sad and/or aloof people. Frank, however, does not particularly dwell on poverty, does not show us harrowing scenes of misery, violence or exploitation. His Blacks do not look worse-off than his Whites, they simply look irremediably different and unconcerned, resigned to their fates, and perhaps even play it as an instrument of revenge (*Indianapolis* and *Newburgh*).

Those are the first fractures, the first signs of a society which, though looking distressingly uniform, is far from being as compact as it seems.

Groups

After the heyday of individualism characterized by the Frontier-type of settlement of the continent, the development of a more and more centralized economic structure progressively shifted social emphasis from the self-reliant and "inner-directed" [110] individual of rural and small-town America, to the member of the company team and the dweller of the metropolis or of its suburbia, an "outer-directed" member of a group. Americans were increasingly employed by bureaucracies, both private and public, [111] and the anonymity of the big corporation and the growing mobility it induced only furthered this suburban (and urban to a very little extent) "group life". It almost became a group totalitarianism where the only acceptable behavior was the one accepted by the group, and where the group felt it had a right to know everything. [112]

Frank explores the group phenomenon as he does everything else, not systematically, but through a series of hints, of flashes, which are more the products of poetic inspiration than of a sociologist's approach. It is possible, however, to distinguish three basic types of groups: the social-accidental,

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[109] Introduction to *The Americans*, p.9.

[110] As David Riesman called him.

[111] Manchester, p.953.

[112] Manchester, p.957.

the social-gathering, and the social-basic, namely the couple and the family. Three levels in the approach of the structure, three steps which, if they do not explain the entire phenomenon, give a good idea of the atomization of human relationships Frank reveals.

This atomization is perhaps least felt in the social-basic relationships, couples and families. At this level things remain personal enough to compensate for the overwhelming social framework. Despite the fact that families are often more the product of social compulsion (reproduction of models and otherwise) than of personal choices, there seems to be some hope to see man escape the weight of structures and the anonymity of the crowd through his association in couples and his founding of families. At least in most of these pictures people seem to be together, both physically and, so to speak, mentally. *City Hall* (p.172) and *Public Park* (p.171), two photographs of happy couples, are probably among Frank's most joyous and best compositions. There is something sculptural in these teenagers lying on the grass, whispering words to each other, and something profoundly human and lovable in the dynamic shot of a young man hugging his wife (?) in the Reno City Hall while she is clasping his hand. Their gesture and attitude, heads side by side and gaze lost, produce a powerful expression of communication. The same expression is still present in pictures like *Charity ball* (p.145) where a man kisses his wife, and in *Savannah* (p.23) where a couple crosses the street arm in arm.

As for the families they are not very numerous in *The Americans*, and, apart from *Georgetown* (p.57), seem again to be some kind of heterogeneous cluster of people centered on the children (*Belle-Isle*, p.157; *Butte*, p.41; *Belle-Isle*, p.165). The family is never complete with generally an absence of the father figure; strange composition and chaos of children in the car on page 164; a smiling woman on the right, a bared one on the left on page 57. This lack of unity eventually ends in perhaps one of Frank's most lonely pictures, *U.S. 90* (p.177), which happens to be also the last one of the book. What is left of the couple is a sad woman's face[113] hardly distinguishable behind the windshield of a black automobile, the prisoner of dark masses and of a glowing eye (the car light), forever on the road, beat and tired while her children cling to her for comfort and protection.

But, if the family is still shown as a protective structure, this is not the case of the social-accidental groups which, on the contrary, accentuate atomization because they do not provide this personal and reassuring atmosphere.[114] They produce an unchosen promiscuity that one has to bear, like it or not. We have already seen most of these examples in other contexts, therefore let us only recall them briefly here.

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[113] Which happens to be that of Frank's wife, in the old Ford they used in their trip across the U.S.A.

[114] It is interesting to note how in the family protection comes from the woman: in *Butte*, p.41, she is the one by the open door while the children are safely seated in the back, in *Georgetown*, they form an arch over the baby, and in *U.S. 90* as we have seen. On the other hand the man opens Nature and the air for the children (as in the open convertible in *Belle-Isle,* p.165). Of course it is possible to read it the other way: the woman stifles and the man leaves the children unprotected, exposed to all outside dangers.

It is *Factory* (p.111), *Trolley* (p.47), *Canal Street* (p.49), *St. Petersburg* (p.77), and *Drugstore* (p.149). What is common to these five pictures is that they all present a landscape of dissociation where we see space peopled by individuals who are more or less identical but have nevertheless nothing in common. They line up, undifferentiated, drinking and eating at a counter (p.149), or drift unconcerned in the human stream of the street (p.49), or sit back to back in a typically uncommunicative posture (p.77), or sit as if in little boxes, carried away by a streetcar (p.47). Gazes are parallel, never meet, glide swiftly on one another. Through indifference and the non-recognition of their fellow human beings, people in Frank's America break up the social frame and alienate themselves from their own humanity. They lose it, but do not gain anything in exchange.

In this context, voluntary social gatherings should indeed give a better image, being the result of more conscious choices. But, as we are going to see, it does not happen this way, and once again Frank is out making a point. We are confronted with the same apparent indifference toward anything happening.

Actually, most of these groups give the impression of lacking even a center.[115] They appear visually uncoordinated, entropic to extremes. Unable to find a center in themselves they often rely on artificial centers such as a gambling table (*Casino*, p.73) a movie screen (*Drive-in*, p.103), a jukebox (*Candy store*, p.31), a motorbike (*Newburgh* , p.91), or even a dead person (*Funeral*, p.123 and *Car accident*, p.81). The energy of the group is thus mediated by an object, linking its elements, giving it a purpose, but only resulting in a highly precarious intercommunication.

In three pictures only do we have a group actually functioning by itself and for itself, people gathered to talk and exchange, and, very meaningfully, each one of them is located in one of the three dimensions of the American space: the rural small-town community in *Courthouse Square* (p.161), the middle-class urban milieu in *Cocktail Party* (p.117), and the group on the move in *Club car* (p.27). They seem for once relatively happy — even if the attitudes of the New York socialites look a little phoney —, smiling and friendly to one another. They show an interesting contrast with the dull lessons of the other groups, a rift in the monotonous clouds which cover Frank's universe. At least, they seem to say that, if there is a fracture in social intercourses, if men are alienated from one another, it is because they have lost the art of conviviality as practised for instance by these two men meeting at the foot of a tree to chat and spend time together (*Courthouse Square*). Instead they have entered the realm of images, or that of pseudo-communication.

What is left after such a demonstration? A land of "prefabricated things and pleasures . . . where T.V. sets and jukeboxes have replaced humans as the center of energy in the room"[116], a land where politics, religion, and interhuman communication are but a traffic of images, leaving a dissociated world of individuals, alienated from the group, incoherent, and engaged in meaningless activities.

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[115] Rodeo, p.21; Motorama, p.33; 4th of July, p.45; Funeral, p.19; Founding Fathers, p.15; Yum Kippur, p.43; Convention, p.113; New York City, p.35; Bar, p.69; Yale Commencement, p.53.

[116] William Scott, "Walker Evans, Robert Frank and the Landscape of Dissociation," *Arts Canada*, December 1974, pp.83-89.

From Pseudo-Communication To Image-Politics and Image-Religion

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon God they made,
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming.
And the sign said:
"The words of the prophets are written
on the subway walls and tenement halls" And whispered in the sounds of silence.
Paul Simon.

The mediation operated by television, the movies, and posters has often come to replace in Frank's America the direct contact between parties. Experience, which used to be the product of social intercourse has been partly shifted from the actual to the mediated, to images more precisely.

But what is important is that these images hardly ever function on the same social level; in other words they are distributed through what is called the "media", to the masses, but are produced by a limited body of people having a total power on the elaboration and diffusion of this conglomerate of signs, used by their consumers as a focusing pole for their energies.

This is the function of all of the "images within images" present in *The Americans*, either the Santa Claus poster in the ranch market (p.39), or the movie in the drive-in (p.103), or the television sets in the bar (p.101) or the studio (p.131) or even the effigies of Eisenhower (p.129) or of Lincoln and Washington (p.85) or of the local election candidates (p.93).

It is quite remarkable that except for the television studio on page 131 all the "images within images" are placed higher than the level of the photographer, and overlooking the actual people. The other important stylistic feature is that, in all cases, the real center of the photograph is the inscribed image itself. However the picture is composed, and even when strong human elements are present, the "image within the image" attracts the whole attention of the viewer, who reads the rest in relation to it. [117]

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[117] Quite a few critics have argued that the only people who smile in *The Americans* are the ones on screens and posters, while the actual people are steadily showing sad and bored faces. We shall have to come back to this very pervasive motif of sadness and boredom, but let it be said now that unfortunately this assertion does not hold true. Indeed, if we compare the actual number of photographs in which people smile to the number of photographs in which people-image do, the balance is clear: eight (*New York City*, p.35; *Georgetown*, p.57; *Hotel Lobby*, p.61; *Cocktail Party*, p.117; *Beaufort*, p.121; *Factory*, p.137; *Movie Premiere*, p.143; *City Hall*, p.173) against four (*Ranch market*, p.39; *Store window*, p.129; *Television studio*, p.131; and to some extent *Luncheonette*, p.93).

Daily communication is thus shifted to image-communication (a communication *through* images and an image *of* communication) and all forms of communication are transformed into some image game. The greeting smile which should have been the girl's in *Ranch market* is taken over by the standardized effigy of the company's Santa Claus, smiles come from television sets, and models are to be learned in movies. Even politics, the communal activity by excellence, gets tranformed into a traffic of images or icons.

It all becomes a great show, substituting one-way communication for two-way communication, speech for dialogue: it is these *City Fathers* (p.15), all alike in their grey and black suits, waiting on the stands for a parade which could as well be a horse race, sullen and bored; or even this other *Political rally* (p.127) reduced to a tuba being played underneath a flag, two half-people, a granite wall, and a name tag reading "Adlai".[118]

Going even further, politics gets reduced from theater show to still photographs or posters, thus loosing its last human dimension. Now, as in *Luncheonette* (p.93) politics comes down to a line of strange effigies surrounded by even stranger names in thick typeface. In this picture Frank's composition is particularly powerful. There is clearly a front/back opposition, a gap with us on one side, them on the other, and, in between so as to emphasize the idea, a pool table on which the game is going to be played, a picture that is "an editorial page in itself."[119]

Eventually some well-known faces are transformed into icons and thus become self-sufficient. They have gone over the political to enter the mythological, and, as the portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln (*Bar*, p.85), watch over America as the crucifix does in some countries.[120] These men have left the realm of the real to enter that of myth, they have met the transcendental, the religious, and become substitutes for father and God.

This process is particularly well exemplified in the emotional potential contained in the flag for an American. It is, like a Washington or a Lincoln portrait, the everpresent symbol of the forefathers' beliefs, deeds, and achievements, as well as that of the unity of the nation. It is the ideal mediation of the entire people to itself, the icon for which one lives and dies, transcendence in a piece of cloth.

Perhaps Frank editorializes a little more than usual on the American flag. It is true that a young nation in which unity is vital and constantly threatened by the variety of the peoples, their backgrounds and environments, and the continent-size of the country, the flag, a common object in which everybody can recognize themselves (the fifty identical stars), assumes a tremendous importance. One only has to notice the omnipresence of the flag in the American landscape — in homes, shops, on buildings, cars, schools, conference halls — and the actual veneration Americans

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[118] This rally was probably held for Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential candidate in the 1956 election against Dwight Eisenhower.

[119] Jack Kerouac, introduction to *The Americans*, p.8.

[120] See also Eisenhower's portrait in the empty window by night, p.129.

have for it.[121] Frank, as the good European and iconoclast he was, could probably not function in this system. His pictures of flags all bear some visual pun or "wink" in them. It is never shown in full, it cuts off people's heads (*Parade*, p.13), hangs over an empty desk on which two feet are resting (*Navy recruiting station*, p.25), unless it is blurred and crumpled (*Bar*, p.85), or all patched up (*4th of July*, p.45). He goes even as far as suggesting that the striped tarpolin that the old man in the overgrown backyard (p.89) uses as a canopy could be a flag, reduced to the vile rank of practical object.[122]

Another domain in which the transformation process of real to "pseudo" is especially eloquent is the realm of religion. Parallel to the trip from live politics to image politics, there is a transfer from live religion to image religion. At the beginning we have basic worshipping, the community gathering to celebrate (*Yum Kippur*, p.43), or the "intermediary mystery [of] . . . the Negro priest squatting underneath the bright liquid belly mer of the Mississippi at Baton Rouge . . . with a white snowy cross and secret incantations never known outside the bayou.[123] But, soon, and in the dynamics of this strange apparition (a black priest running toward the Mississippi) we are subtly driven to the black silhouette of a statue of St. Francis brandishing his cross as a sword against the grey mass of the Los Angeles City Hall. Religion has been frozen into an iconic representation, handed over by the human to the inanimate.

In the same vein, religious convictions become propaganda posters stuck on a car — already an icon itself — (*Chicago*, p.169) or the word "Awake" thrown by a sad and sleepy Jehovah's witness to the bypassers' faces (p.67). When, eventually, the iconization is complete it is taken over by television (p.101), and the preacher's voice falls now from the tube onto a world from which men have been obliterated for they do not belong there anymore. The sun plays on the wooden table, but there is nobody to listen to the sermon.

Similarly, as many commentators have noticed,[124] the glowing and fantastic jukebox (*Bar*, p.97; *Candy store*, p.31) attracts all the energy of the room, and becomes a new shrine along with the television set. As all spiritual slots have been invested, the remaining world is but a dissociated space of broken individuals, such as this man, sad and tired, looking at the passing gowned procession (*Yale Commencement*, p.53)[125] or this cowboy "rolling butt outside Madison Square

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[121] It must not stay outside overnight unless lit, it must not touch the ground, and the pledge of allegiance is done "to the flag of the United States, the republic for which it stands . . ."

[122] This is not without reminding us of the fate of quite a few flags which were printed between the admission to statehood of Alaska and Hawaii, and bearing only 49 stars. Immediately obsolete, they were sold as rags until an act from Congress prohibited the use of a flag for anything but its original purpose. Although this is only an anecdote, it is highly revealing.

[123] Jack Kerouac, p.5.

[124] William Scott, and particularly Jack Kerouac: "After seeing these pictures you end up finally not knowing anymore whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin." p.5.

[125] Notice the contrasts old/young, grey/black, sitting/standing.

Garden...",[126] anachronic and displaced in an urban environment of concrete; or these people steadily looking outside the frame, or half hidden (*Parade*, p.13), feet without body (*Navy recruiting station*, p.24) and severed heads (*Rooming house*, p.51; *Political rally*, p.127; *Store window*, p.129; *N.Y. studio*, p.131).

Frank's world has then reached its complete dislocation for lack of centripetal communication, it has become a landscape of social entropy, a notion which is not without breaking quite a few traditional representation of the period. Of course, he asserts, as the traditional critics do that the artificiality and anonimity of the urban world are to blame. But, he also denies the Americans even their conventional image of material happiness, harmony, and success. Furthermore, and that is where he reaches a true level of originality — and for a society which was slowly discovering the notion of ecology it was quite revolutionary — he directly links technical progress to the reification of human life, and to the atomization of the social frame, leaving individuals who cannot "get themselves together."

Frank the iconoclast grinds the American dream to dust, and he does it by breaking the traditional image of a uniform reality into an unmatchable puzzle.[127] This is perhaps why *The Americans* was so influential in the way the educated Americans saw their country. Together with the social-literary Beat movement, Frank transformed "destiny into awareness",[128] produced a new image of society, handing out new and timely keys for the understanding of the United States. But, probably limited by his style, an image of dissociation by itself, his analysis could not be quite operational for the sixties where the question was precisely one that was calling for structural answers (see the Marxist-inspired movements) or metaphysical ones (surge in mysticism and religiosity). He was then on condemned to "take snapshots of friends gone forever" and Polaroids of a barren Nova Scotia beach in winter.[129]

For Arbus, on the other hand the puzzle is clearly unmatchable. Her people are mourning the Golden Age, the age of innocence, unity and balance, but they will never recover it. Would the problem then lie deeper than in the mere passage from a pre-social state to society? Would the evil agent lie outside the social itself?

The Private Law

"I want to photograph what is evil."

Diane Arbus

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[126] Jack Kerouac, p.5.

[127] Which is not without reminding us of the theories on schizophrenia.

[128] André Malraux quoted by Robert Frank, "A Statement," *U.S. Camera*.

[129] *Annual 1958*, p.115. William Scott, *ibid.*

While Frank remains at the structural level, the whole Arbus system refers to infra-social elements to describe, and maybe explain the world. Her reading of the social is metaphysical, or transcendental instead of functionalist.

It is probably possible to trace her approach to her uppermiddle-class Jewish background, which was, if we believe her, capital in the formation of her photographic style. She was raised in what Susan Sontag qualifies "a verbally skilled, compulsively health-minded, indignation-prone, well-to-do Jewish family, for whom minority sexual tastes lived way below the threshold of awareness, and risk-taking was despised as another goyish craziness."[130] It meant that she was from the beginnings cut off from everything outside her own sheltered milieu. She grew up well looked after and excessively protected: "One of the things I felt I suffered as a kid was that I never felt adversity"[131] , in the unreality of a world perceived as such: "I was confirmed in a sense of unreality that I could only feel as unreality."[132] Definitely outside the family cocoon was the world, the "real" one, real at least because present in its multifarious complexity and numerous contradictions. But the outside was also a place where adversity, that she had never learned how to cope with, was ruling, and, when she "opened the door", the draught was too strong. She saw a world of chaos, a helter-skelter, which positively could not make any sense.

Her background, however, had not prepared her to interpret it in a social perspective. If things were so rotten, it was not the fault of a particular system in a given country, but it was in man himself that lay the flaw that was "mucking it all up." The Pall from Grace was man's sole responsibility, his original sin that he kept perpetrating, alienating himself from God a little more everyday, and thus becoming a little uglier. "You don't believe? So look around you and see for yourselves", she seems to be telling us. And "you see someone on the street and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw. It's just extraordinary that we should have been given these peculiarities. And, not content with what we have we create a whole other set."[133]

As her vision is even more personal than Frank's,[134] she does not even play the "field of subject matter," and in that sense she is much more of an author than Frank.[135] Her photography is more focused, her system more coherent and more closely knit, and each element is more efficiently used in the whole frame.

Furthermore, as she dismisses the structural explanation and chooses a fundamentalist and transcendental one, her system becomes simpler, less encumbered with idiosyncrasies than Frank's. Because her scope is more restricted, because she zeroes in on fewer issues, because her style is more

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[130] Sontag, p.43

[131] *Arbus*, p.5.

[132] *Arbus*, *ibid.*

[133] *Arbus*, p.1.

[134] There are of course some preconceived ideas in Frank, as we have already seen, but he let himself be guided, at least partially, by the outside when Arbus does not.

[135] Susan Sontag even says "in the most limiting sense", p.46.

fully controlled, she is eventually more efficient, retraining only the elements she needs, and creating powerful motifs on which she fully plays.

Hers is a world in which individuals just float around, drift; where young people are old, women are transexuals, and, as we might say, odd-looking characters keep doing strange things. Por the middle-class consciousness of her public, the world has gone insane. We are facing a gigantic schizophrenia in which everybody is groping for his own sanity, and where the only unity left in this world of disunity is fatality.

0 Ye Fateful !

Fatality rules over everyone and everything as a black providence submitting humanity to its harsh, unpredictable, and degrading rule. In other words, and not very differently from what modern biochemistry tells us, Arbus says that, beyond freedom and dignity, there is an uncontrollable world of "chemical" reactions that govern every single one of us, and make us what we are.

Hence the perpetual equivalence she makes between relatively "normal" people (i.e. not showing any disproportionate signs of freakishness or difference) and actually extraordinary people (midgets, giants, hermaphrodites, transexuals, or even twins). In a world where no one can escape or control his destiny, Arbus operates a great leveling down. "Her viewfinder removed the thin line between the pitiable and the laughable, the awsome and the awful, the winners and the losers in life's lottery."[136] Everything becomes ugly, wicked, sad or dirty.

Everybody is a potential freak, carries in him this unavoidable difference which, selected and filtered by her lens makes him a part of this community (which by definition is not a community for everyone is different from everyone else), a "community" identified by Susan Sontag as "the idiot village" of America.[137] As it is basically "impossible to get out of your skin into somebody else's", [138] our world gets atomized into horror,[139] the horror of being alone without the possibility of redemption, to be forever excluded from Paradise, the Garden of Eden, or the Golden Age, whatever one chooses to call the place where unity and equality ruled.

In order to get closer to the organization of Arbus's world we can divide it into two groups, two groups whose dividing line is as thin as that between normality and abnormality, or between sanity and madness, a thin enough line that she is only too happy to blur even more. What actually separates these two groups is not so much that one is composed of "normal" people and the other of "freaks", but that one group is basically unconscious while the other is, on the contrary, highly conscious.

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[136] Margaret Weiss, "Eyeviews," *Art News*, December 1972, pp.75-76.
[137] Sontag, p.47.
[138] *Arbus*, p.2.
[139] Sontag, p.33.

The Way of All Flesh. Unconsciousness

"Entre le pathologique et le normal, la différence est, comme toujours, de degré dans l'aliénation."

Edgar Morin [140]

The only way to characterize these "unconscious" men and women is, in fact, negatively. They were not born with any kind of distinctive sign, and they do not live in any particular social minority. It could be anyone of us and Arbus wants us to feel that it is anyone of us. These people do not know their own alienation, but, as opposed to the congenitally ill (*Untitled series*), their ignorance does not make them happy but only further alienated.

If all Arbus's people generally look grotesque in our eyes, because they shock us on very basic grounds on which we do not feel comfortable (beauty, self-image, sex, etc.), these are particularly grotesque and pathetic mainly because they do not have the conscience of being alienated. In other words, they candidly surrender to a camera which transforms them into laughable and pitiful puppets. They appear vain in their conceit and their mystification, and the harder they try to look likable, the more pitiful they seem.[141] They are totally unaware of the image they project, and are the victims of what Arbus herself called the gap between intention and effect. As she defines it: "...there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you."[142]

In this narrow space between reality and the mask, she builds a world in between worlds, born of a perpetual dissociation not of bits of puzzles unable to find their match as is the case with Frank, but of split individuals whose "beings" are unable to find their "seemings" (or outer public image), and eventually end up in nothingness.

Let us see a little more closely how this is achieved. It is, after all, a story of masks, of constant delusion, of perpetual brandishing of screens to escape reality. These masks can be varied in nature, but the most obvious form of protective screen is the actual disguise, or "social disguise", one puts on for a very revealing occupation, ceremonies. Arbus was highly interested in these moments when more than ever the self gets delineated, split into concurrent selves. Of them she said: "I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of the present . . . ceremonial places (the beauty parlor,

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[140] *Le Cinéma ou l'Homme imaginaire*, p.33.

[141] A collection of grotesque figures which is not without reminding us of the subtitle of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio, The Book of the Grotesque*: "It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood." The Viking Press, 1964, p.25.

[142] *Arbus*, p.2.

even people's parlors), ceremonies of competition (contests and sports events), ceremonies of celebration (conventions and pageants)."[143]

"They all stand at some ritual moment" says Marvin Israel of Arbus's people.[144] And indeed the first ceremony is that of the picture-taking. Making a portrait, sitting for one's portrait, is already participating in some formal ceremony in which one tries to conjure up a character which will be the product of one's perception of oneself and of one's fantasies. Time is suspended, and one faces the future with gravity and solemnity. One enters history, ceases to be human, slowly to become an object, a concept, a metaphor.

She only approaches political ceremonies in three instances (*Boy with a straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade*; *Patriotic young man with a flag*; and *Man at parade on fifth avenue*) but the blow she deals there is particularly powerful. Everything in these three photographs concurs to ridicule popular icons, especially the flag. Clothes do not fit,[145] are shabby (*Man at parade*), and people look haggard and stupid, too young for their roles (*Boy with a straw hat*), or else ugly, with wide ears or a skin devastated by acne, standing as if posing for a mug shot (*Patriotic young man*). How, in such conditions, can we take the flag seriously, how can we believe in the slogans inscribed on the buttons ("I'm proud"; "Bomb Hanoi"; "God bless America"; "Support our boys in Vietnam") or in the respectful attitude of the man watching the parade on fifth avenue, his hand over his heart. Slogans become meaningless and obscenely out of place, while powerful symbols become valueless in a world where all semblance of credibility has been absorbed by debility and ugliness.[146]

The same vacuity is also found in her photographs of social gatherings (Four people at a gallery opening) and contests (The Junior Interstate Ballroom Dance champions; The King and Queen of a Senior Citizens Dance; and Muscle man contestant) but tackled under a slightly different angle and thus achieving a different effect. The four people at the gallery opening have put on their best and are caught in the middle of social intercourse by an aggressive flash. The result looks like wax figurines starched in their impeccable dresses, standing against a bare wall between two electric sockets in what seems more of an empty apartment than a cultural center. They are turned into prototypes of the New York socialites, shown here amidst their favorite upper-class environment: a desert. As for the muscle man contestant whose shiny hairless body is more repulsive than sensual, he is caught with an uninspired face, rolling white eyes toward a lamp above him, while a bored crowd looks at him. Dehumanized instead of glorified, he is number 23 (as shown by the cardboard

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[143] Application to the Guggenheim Fellowship selection committee.

[144] Marvin Israel, "Diane Arbus", *Creative Camera*, May 1974, pp.164-173.

[145] In *Boy with a straw hat*, lan Jeffrey sees a disjunction between clothes and slogans: "His dress is decorous and genteel, at odds with the stridency of his slogans." "Diane Arbus and the American Grotesque, " *The Photographic Journal*, May 1974, pp.224-229.

[146] John Szarkowski sees in *Boy with a straw hat* perhaps the best picture ever done on the Vietnam war, at least one which gets very close to an explanation of the ultimate causes of the event, of a real ethical knowledge that often photography is powerless to provide. Introduction to *Mirrors and Windows*.

stapled on his bathing suit), pathetic, and ridiculous in the uncongruous exposure of his body, competing for what seemed to Arbus such an odd, meaningless achievement (even if she was probably fascinated by it).

Essentially in the same vein, although this time really on the pathetic side, are two photographs that have to be seen together as a sort of complement and echo, *Ballroom Dance champions*, and *King and Queen of a Senior Citizens Dance*. Their pathos, once again, is the product of incongruity and of the juxtaposition of jarring elements. This boy and this girl, disguised for the occasion in adult outfits, stand in proud and contrived postures which do not belong to their age but to the regulated world of adult pageantry. We sense them forced, and this is pathetic. Similarly, these two senior citizens are, over their street clothes, dressed as king and queen with crowns and scepters, in what belongs this time to children games. Pitiful sovereigns of a day, playing a game not of their age and staring blankly at the camera as halfwit monarchs, against a blank wall as empty and lifeless as the deserted ballroom.[147]

But what seems to us much farther-reaching is the ellipsis contained in these two photographs. They cover all the vacuity, uselessness, and sadness of these people's lives from the first tango to the Saturday afternoon Senior Citizen get-together. From early adolescence to old age not a thing has changed, only faces have grown wrinkled, bodies thicker. Nothing has been achieved, no wisdom or intelligence acquired. They (we?) are endlessly playing a meaningless, anachronistic game. And those are the limits of human life.[148]

But what does age mean in this world? Arbus's visual "bulldozer" creates a world of old people. They were born old, and even in the infant stage already behave as adults. They seem to have skipped youth. Gone is the traditional image of the freshness of young people. We are faced with withered, scared, or sad faces (*A child crying, Loser at a Diaper Derby*), thrust forward ruthlessly by adults (*Mother holding her child*), an aggressive young boy whose face reminds us more of a death's head than of a child's (*Child with toy hand grenade in Central Park*), twins and triplets with already grave adult faces, clad in their stern, symmetrical clothes, and teen-agers aping adults, particularly in couples as if the gravity of a relationship was weighing too much on their shoulders (*Young man and his girlfriend with hot dogs, Young man and his pregnant wife, Young couple on a bench, Two*

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[147] The purse that the "Queen" keeps at her side is once again a mark of Arbus's love for the grating detail.

[148] The other photograph which achieves much of the same effect is *Teenage couple on Hudson street*. In this very striking composition Arbus managed to create a chameleon-like picture which, depending on how, under what angle, and how long you look at it, alternates between the image of a young couple and that of an old one. They become ageless metaphors, and despite that, there is always something wrong about them. They remain kids dressed up for a part they seem to be too young to play.

friends at home), and perhaps most striking of all because visually highly ambiguous, the ageless couple on Hudson street.[149]

And that is precisely why everybody tries to pretend so much. In fact these men and women do not literally pretend, because they are unconscious of their real situation, and a little in the position of Dorian Gray: they have an image of themselves forever stuck at the prenatal stage that they think they can maintain, the Dorian Gray who never ages; but for us, outsiders, the camera reveals the sad vistas of decaying minds and bodies, of pretense and conceit, the being or the aging face of Dorian Gray on the canvas.

The disjunction is particularly clear when we embrace the whole ensemble of faces Arbus offers. In their theatrality, sometimes rather on the caricatural side,[150] the mask slowly falls off. We suddenly discover strange concordances between groups which seemed utterly different at first. The contours of normality get blurred, and the closer to "normal" life these people are, the more disturbed they appear.[151] Some sitters look like simpletons with often an empty gaze such as this young man and his girlfriend holding incongruous hotdogs as some precious relics, the *Boy with straw hat,* the *Woman with a locket,* the *Young man with a flag,* or *the Girl with a cigar*; or look totally demented as the *Girl in a shiny dress*.

When they do not seem to be halfwits, they look at the camera with a strange, ambiguous grin (Woman on a park bench on a sunny day) or with a mean or glum look (Woman with a fur collar on the street, Woman with pearl necklace and earrings, Puerto Rican woman with a beauty mark).[152]

Another area in which Arbus develops this disjunction with special virulence and eagerness is in her parodies, which of course are not labelled as such. In two parodies of party photographs, she transforms the man (in *Jewish couple dancing*) into a laughing devil with sparkling eyes and glittering malformed teeth, reduces his wife to a fat arm and a "craggy elbow",[153] and (in *Man dancing with a large woman*) in an almost Fellinnian touch changes the large woman into a half monster whose huge freckled back invades the picture, and who literally obliterates her partner who is reduced to an ear and a hand.[154]

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[149] In two other instances children are portrayed as fantastic apparitions. In the fairy line is the *Flower girl at a wedding* of whom we have already talked. She looks as if she had just escaped from *Alice in Wonderland*. In the grotesque line is the retarded boy and the infant in *A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing*.

[150] Max Kozloff, "The Uncanny Portrait", *Artforum*, June 1973, pp.58-66.

[151] Ian Jeffrey, "Diane Arbus and the American Freaks", *Studio International*, March 1974, pp.133-134.

[152] The only notable exception is *Woman with a veil on fifth avenue* who is clearly smiling. But she is not directly exposed to the camera, and somewhat shielded from it by a veil playing the role of a mask. About it see paragraphs on the mask in "Of Human Bondage".

[153] lan Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

[154] There is in this picture an interesting interplay of light and dark surfaces, and horizontal and vertical lines.

In the same way, she gives, in Puerto Rican housewife, a parody of the traditional portrait photograph. [155] The woman, whose legs are posed in a way contrary to all classical rules of portraiture, looks like a feline or a bird of prey ready to leap, a feeling only reinforced by her dropping shoulders, the way her dress is set, and her straggling hair.

Eventually it is probably in *Woman with her baby monkey* that she makes her cruellest and harshest point. It is almost a perfect parody of an amateur mother-and-child photograph, and in itself does not look any different from any other shot. But it is precisely in what it doest not show that the picture is almost terrifying. When you look at it you cannot help expecting to see a baby on the woman's lap, but what you actually see is a furry thing disguised as an old-fashioned baby. It seems as if the world had indeed gone berserk, and that it were the loneliest of places.

Difference, one of her favorite obsessions, instead of breeding a creative individuality, only produces terrible alienation and loneliness. In other words, however hard they may try, every couple remains an odd couple. To produce such an effect, Arbus particularly relies on composition and thematic opposition.

The square format lends itself to powerful left/right contrasts. The frame is divided into two halves, and its reading consists in a back and forth movement of comparison between the two. So Arbus places for instance the man on one side, the woman on the other, and what is originally meant to be one couple (that is a single entity) then becomes in fact two individuals that she plays one against the other.[156] And they are different. Sometimes this is even reinforced by differences in attitudes (*Ballroom Dance champions, A family on their lawn one Sunday*), in directions of looks (*Elderly couple on a park bench, Young couple on a bench*), or differences of color (*Young man and his pregnant wife*),[157] of size (*Man dancing with a large woman, Two friends at home*), or of attire (*A Young Brooklyn family* where he looks like a working class James Dean, and she seems just escaped from the set of Ben Hur or Caesar and Cleopatra).[158]

As for the thematic opposition, she realizes it with "couples" who deliberately attempt to look identical by wearing identical garments or who are born identical (twins and triplets), and the effect resulting from this juxtaposition is quite striking. Indeed when some elements in the picture are identical they immediately initiate a comparison of the remaining elements as we are looking for a generalization of the identity, due to the fact that our perception works on a system of expectations triggered by any logical relation we can discern. But, even if the garments worn by these "couples"

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[155] The honesty of her approach in this particular case could be discussed with more elements of information. It is perhaps one of her pictures in which her destroying influence is the most obvious, and where an innocent (and honest) portrait is turned into a photograph of madness.

[156] An opposition present in the captions as well. They sometimes read "couple" and sometimes "A young man and his wife/girlfriend".

[157] The man being the only black of the whole book.

[158] Of course in some couples mimetism tends to draw the two partners together as in *Young man with his girlfriend with hot dogs, Jewish couple dancing, Teenage couple*, and *King and Queen of a Senior Citizens Dance*. But even there telltale signs and little differences break the unity perceived at first glance.

are indeed identical, the people themselves are not, and by virtue of a sort of reciprocity effect they appear all the more different.[159]

This is the case with *Two girls in identical raincoats* and of *Two girls in matching bathing suits* especially. In this picture the opposition goes indeed very far. While the girl on the left has bobbing hair, smooth arms, a smile on her face, and her head is tilted in an inviting pose, the one on the right has much coarser traits, apparent veins on her hands, her hair is uncombed and dropping, and she puts on a grin on her face. In short, and without pushing the analogy too far, one could be seen as representing the male system and the other the female.

Similarly with twins and triplets Arbus manages to show them with identical clothes and in identical poses, and so to make us realize that they are not identical. Then, differences become obvious: one smiles, the other does not (*Identical twins*), or one has a rounder face, one more regular features, one a sterner or milder character (*Triplets in their bedroom*). In other words, after looking at them through Arbus's eyes, the only thing we are able to see anymore is their difference, that, however close you might be or try to be to somebody, you will never succeed in being identical. As Leslie Fiedler writes:

> *Like Chang and Eng [the original Siamese twins], such pairs [parents and children, lovers, husbands and wives] however equal in theory are never equal in fact, since one of them inevitably leans a little harder, clings a little longer, demands a little more. And both live always with the threat of that ultimate disparity which will occur when,one begins to die, and finally — the other still living — is dead. "* [160]

These "couples" challenge our notion of self and other. Of course each one of us is profoundly original, but, as Arbus formulates the equivalence: different bodies ⇔ different minds, she actually tells us that there is nobody who can really understand who we are.[161] And so we remain prisoners of our own bodies, trapped within the last envelope wa cannot cast off, ie our skin.[162]

Skin and flesh are particularly important in her photographs. Her very inquisitive lighting details each square inch of the person's face, pores, hair, texture, nothing is omitted, to such a point that V.S. Naipaul could write that "her subjects are all flesh."[163]

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[159] This is a system of reinforcement of oppositions developed by Gestalt theory.

[160] Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks* (New York, 1978), p.218.

[161] As Flaubert wrote: ". . . personne, jamais, ne peut donner l'exacte mesure de ses besoins, ni de ses conceptions, ni de ses douleurs . . . ." *Madame Bovary* (Gallimard, Folio), p.254.

[162] This fact is to be compared with the physiological role of the skin which is indeed a barrier, a frontier, and a protection. The best illustration of this phenomenon is that when the skin disappears, as in very important burns, death is inevitable.

[163] *The Sunday Times Magazine* (London), March 17, 1974, pp.68-75.

Seen from close up the skin is imperfect, sometimes repulsive under her clinical eye, and the flesh sagging, sweaty, dirty, and sad. *Blonde girl with shiny lipstick* is a good case in point It is done as a comment on reality, as a message inviting us to probe beneath the surface, to beware of delusive lighting and to look for darkness instead.[164] The right side of the girl's face, strongly lit, shaded from the light, shows "a pitted skin texture,"[165] coarse, greasy, and not unlike the surface of the moon. Similarly, in *Woman in her negligee*, the clean, fashionable decor and the intimate atmosphere sharply contrast with the hairy legs and the dilapidated flesh.[166]

These men and women — mostly women actually — that we could at first glance label "normal" are in fact the unconscious and unhappy victims of the alienation of being alive. They are what we could call the "invisible poor", submitted to the most insidious misery. They are those who have not made any choice. In a second part, let us turn toward those who have made decisions about their lives, who know where they stand, and who try to assume their alienation to the best of their abilities.

Of Human Bondage - Consciousness

"These are six singular people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be."

Diane Arbus [167]

These "freaks" have various degrees of freakishness but their common point is that they know their "flaw", they know they are different, or more simply they know they are stuck in their oppressing condition. It is obvious to them, and they do not need photography to discover it. They suffer too, in fact they have much of the same problems as the so-called unconscious, but with them there is no gap between intention and effect. Whatever we think, fundamentally they do not care. They assume their choices and their conditions with the stern dignity and calmness of those who know they are doomed.[168] As Leslie Fiedler writes in *Freaks*, they deeply challenge all our landmarks, all our

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[164] "Lately I've been struck with how I really love what you can't see in a photograph. An actual physical darkness. And it's very thrilling for me to see darkness again." *Arbus*, p.9.

[165] Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

[166] Jeffrey, *op. cit.*

[167] Text accompanying her 1962 Portfolio.

[168] They seem to tell us as Donald Kuspit: "There is no point in being appaled because our emotions won't change a thing." *Art in America*, July 1977, p.95.

established notions about ourselves, about our size, sex, etc. Each of them in his/her particular domain is a perpetual question to our very existence.

In Arbus's photographs there are two sorts of "freaks", the ones born with their traumas or difformities, and the ones who deliberately become outcasts, in a desperate attempt to get out of their skins, to find unity.

The first group of "outcasts" is the performers. They are, in a way, professional exhibitionists, who show a perfect ease with their bodies and face us without flinching (*Tatooed man at carnival, Burlesque comedienne in her dressing room*). There is something pathetic, however, in our judgement. The burlesque comedienne tries to look younger and more attractive than her fat and aging body and her shabby surroundings allow her to be; the topless dancer is a mindless doll posing in a grotesque position; and the *Girl in her circus costume* shows her fat, graceless body in rather unaesthetic attire. But they all calmly accept this fake and this ugliness, and, as far as their faces can tell, they are, if not happy, at least content with their lots.

The other group is the nudists. They have chosen to undress themselves in order to get closer to Nature. They too are conscious of their roles, and are clearly proud of them. Most of them face the camera smiling. *One Nudist lady with swan sunglasses* even poses, knee forward, in a parody of a glamour photograph. *The Girl sitting on her bed with her shirt off*, arms folded, seems to tell us, the viewers: "OK, here I am. I've got my shirt off, so what?" In fact Arbus in her typical way turns their nudity into nakedness,[169] changes the powerful presence of a naked body into an absence, a void.
Once again flesh plays an important role in the process, and what we remember after looking at all these shots are these flat, aging bodies whose nakedness looks so incongruous in their surroundings, so out-of-place that we want to ask them "What do you do that for?" We are not, however, too sure about what to think, "It's a little bit like walking into an hallucination without being quite sure whose it is."[170] They try to recreate some kind of social form which would be an image of the world before the Fall, as it should have been had there been no original sin[171] What they do not seem to understand, Arbus tells us, is that the original sin did not have anything to do with morals, but was the unavoidable fate of mankind, the price he had to pay for his compulsive need for organization, rules and society, for his graduation from innocence.

The nudist experiment is also doomed to failure from the beginning because it is based on the wrong analyses. This is perfectly well expressed in *A husband and wife in the woods at a nudist camp*.This couple stands, as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in the woods, but in the place of the Garden there is a very grey flat decor, and a dirty, sooty underwood. Almost as a commentary on this photograph Arbus comments on her philosophy of man, of society, and of evolution:

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[169] Judith Goldman, "Diane Arbus: The Gap Between Intention and Effect", *Art Journal,* Fall 1974, pp.30-35.

[170] *Arbus* , p.4.

[171] They can never, however, totally reject the imprint of society. See the T.V. set in *Retired man and his wife*, the car in *A family one evening in a nudist camp*, or the towel, the sunglasses, the wig and jewelry in *Nudist lady with swan sunglasses*.

> *After a while in a nudist camp you begin to wonder. I mean there'll be an empty pop bottle or a rusty bobby pin underfoot, the lake bottom oozes in a particular nasty way, the outhouse smells, the woods look mangy. It gets to seem if way back in the Garden of Eden after the Fall, Adam and Eire had begged the Lord to forgive them and He, in his boundless exasperation had said: "All right, then. Stay. Stay in the Garden. Get civilized. Procreate. Muck it up." And they did.* [172]

Here once more appears the religious and more specifically biblical influences of her education and background on her explanation of the world and of civilization, as well as her traditional obsession with the hidden reality of things, the seedy side of the dream. Civilization and procreation have, according to her, "mucked up" the world. Procreation was in the nature of the flesh, the animal side of man, and civilization was only the imperfect attempt to replace the broken covenant with God by the adoption not of another transcendental contract but of a social one, an attempt that she sees as doomed to end up in mange and oozing black mud.

On the other hand, there are those who, instead of throwing off their clothes and attempting to go back to Eden by recreating external conditions (vine leaves and woods) put on yet another mask and try to alter what they are by covering themselves up, by changing the role imposed by their bodies and genders.

The first and most obvious covering is the mask itself. We have already talked about it, and it is indeed a very ambiguous category which can belong as much to "Unconsciousness" as well as to this one. However, two elements made us classify it here. First of all, contrary to most of the sitters falling under the "Unconscious" label, the mask people always smile. Secondly, the mask alters the face enough to make it either unrecognizable or different (as carnival masks do), and is the product of a conscious act of the sitter. He knows he is different and that he is pretending.

The mask creates a distance between the real face and the object which at the same time protects the sitter and gives him a greater dimension. As Jean Grenier writes: "Le sortilège du masque n'est pas dans le masque, il est dans cette imperceptible distance qui le sépare du visage et qui sauve celui-ci du quotidien (la vie réduite à elle-même n'est plus qu'une anecdote)."[173]

Even very little disguise is enough to create this propitious distance as in *Man with an Indian headress* (sic) and *Woman with a veil on fifth avenue*. When the mask is more developed, it becomes the instrument of a mystery, forever hiding the real identity of the person, substituting another, and creating the illusion of getting out of one's skin (*Lady at masked ball with two roses on her dress, Masked man at a ball, Masked woman in a wheel-chair, Woman with her bird mask*).

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[172] *Arbus*, p.5.

[173] *Essai sur la peinture contemporaine*, pp.178-179.

Carried to an extreme, the mask becomes a transgression of appearance, and produces transsexuals and transvestites, who use their disguise not to hide but to alter their destinies, specifically their sex.

Short of the *real* freaks (those with physical deformities), they are perhaps the most challenging group for the spectator's psyche. With incredible ease, they blur a boundary basic to our existence. Genders impose roles that are stronger than class, religion, or race. We are male or female before all, and those who transgress the rule or were born in between — neither male nor female — scare us because we cannot really position ourselves in relation to them, even linguistically.[174] Their changing sexual roles represent on their part an attempt to escape their own alienation. However, it turns out to be a failure as well, just as the nudists' or the performers' experiments.

Although she was certainly fascinated by them, Arbus is not uncritical towards this sexual underground, despite the legend that she did not judge her sitters. Here perhaps even more strongly than toward the nudists, she expresses her almost pathological disgust for flesh and everything that surrounds sex. In these photographs there is a powerful accumulation of details, a stifling atmosphere of cheap makeup and clothes, and proletarian surroundings. Bodies are fat and ugly, stockings torn, hair stragging and greasy, and these would-be women are only pitiful parodies of women, who, when they have crossed the barrier, find themselves monsters by *excès*,[175] covering themselves with an excess of feminine attributes and eventually falling into the double alienation of acting out as women without ever being quite women. The result is a bad and pretentious parody of freedom. If they face the camera without flinching, they do not look happy, simply stern, resigned, sad without a twinge of anger, knowing that what must be must be, and not harboring too much illusion as to a possible salvation. Once more man finds himself at the end of the road with only the meager consolation of awareness.

The situation is slightly different for the (little number of) actual freaks. They, on the other hand, were born with their trauma and have lived with it since they can remember. Their whole vision of the world is relative to their difference. Theirs is not an acquired difference, a choice, but an imposed freakishness. Their real choice comes later, in the transcendence of their own trauma.[176]

A particularly interesting case is that of the *Hermaphrodite and a dog in a carnival trailer*. S/he is a sexual freak, but s/he is more than that. His/her portrait is more disturbing than that of any of the transvestites. One of the reasons is that s/he is not a male impersonating a female, but s/he is actually both male and female while being neither completely one nor the other. Legends about hermaphrodites go back to the oldest antiquity — to Greek and Roman mythologies particularly — and are no doubt deeply anchored in our unconscious histories.[177] This puts them not in the realm of

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[174] Leslie Fiedler in *Freaks* (pp.178-196) develops from a study of hermaphrodites and the challenge they represent to social and biological assigned roles, as well as their particular threat on social heterosexual rules (based on a clear differentiation of sexes) .

[175] The phrase is Fiedler's.

[176] Very curiously they are apt to arouse pity when they do not want any, contrary to voluntary freaks who rather create opprobrium or repulsion.

[177] Leslie Fiedler, pp.178-196.

humans but indeed in that of monsters and wonders of our imagination, and by ascribing them to mythology we thus remove them from our daily lot.

Similarly the Russian midgets (Russian midget friends in a living-room on 100th street), the Mexican dwarf (Mexican dwarf in his hotel room) and the Jewish, giant (A Jewish giant at home with his parents in the Bronx) do not quite belong to the real world. They are "somewhere further out" than we, almost "invented by belief".[178]

They pose a double challenge. They challenge our notion of size and therefore of normality (the Jewish giant makes his parents look like midgets and their apartment like a doll's house), and challenge our looking at them as monsters. Paradoxically, in these photographs they seem to ascertain their existence as fantastic figures (mythological but not monstrous) at the same time as full human beings. They have friends, parents, they smile, live in apartments looking strangely like ours, drink liquor, grow mustaches, and age. And yet they are radically different. In fact, by a long and odd detour we are brought back to the beginning through the utmost contradiction. We see them as dwarfs, but they see us, and turn us into giants and vice-versa. Who then is the freak?

Arbus said that "Freaks... [have] already passed their test in life. They are aristocrats."[179] After all they have very little to lose, and thus they can afford to bring confusion in our neatly ordered minds, and even to do it with a smile. Are they the more aristocratic for it? Hardly it seems. Their world does not look any happier, and freaks by birth or outcasts by choice, they are constantly brought back to the same alienation, the same world — our common world — and seem to show that alterations of sex or body will not change a thing.[180]

The fault lies in being born, and being born with a mind. And it is to that statement that the whole of Arbus's carefully planned photographs lead. This accumulation of convergent details, this exploration of the possible, this pathetic groping for salvation are all resolved in the last photographs she made before her death, of mentally ill patients.

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[178] See note 76.

[179] *Arbus*, p.3. See also Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (Cassell, London, 1966): "Swaggering Pete loomed like a golden sun to Maggie. He took her to a dime museum, where rows of meek freaks astonished her. She contemplated their deformities with awe, and thought them as sort of chosen tribe." p.33, chapter 8.

[180] It is precisely in this assertion that Arbus is metaphysical and not sociological, in that, as Sontag says, she rules out history by cutting out "historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts." p.33.

Over the Rainbow

"When you get there, there isn't any there there."

Gertrude Stein[181]

There are only seven of them, but they are particularly striking, and yet there is very little to say about them. They are disturbingly meaningless, out of context, but, put side by side with the others, they suddenly make sense. They are so powerful that they do not even need captions. They are just "Untitled".

Laughter, masks, empty hallucinated eyes so deep they seem bottomless, incomprehensible parades or games of men and women who do not belong to this world. They are outside and beyond. These strange compelling photographs stand on the fringe of this land, peep into it, and discover there what we thought was lost: the Garden.

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" [182] says the Bible. And there seems to lie the key to Arbus's final vision. What has excluded man from the community of the blessed, from unity, was his very mind which caused him to lose his innocence. Indeed you cannot know you are innocent for knowing it is ceasing to be innocent. Therefore as soon as intelligence gives man the tool to perceive it, it gets destroyed, and that is waht we call the Fall. Only saved from it are those who can precisely stay in innocence, the weak in spirit — mentally ill people — or those who have passed away. Therefore the fundamental question is not "is there life after death?", but "is there at last innocence after death for those of us who were not blessed to be born with it?" Arbus told us, in her life and photographs, that there indeed could be, and she chose this path.

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[181] Quoted by J. Boorstin, *The Americans*, p.1.

[182] Matt. 5:3.

By way of conclusion

Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all. Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close; And let us all to meditation.

King Henry VI

As we are departing after this trip across two decades of American history, quite a few pictures, and many contradictions, ambiguities, and uncertainties, we merely want to make two comments as a way of opening this modest work to even more fruitful approaches.

The first remark is that if photographers — and particularly Robert Frank and Diane Arbus — show originality in a medium which is already "original" in itself, they are, in many more than one way, closely linked to the intellectual and artistic lives of their times and countries. We discovered here the same idiosyncrasies, the same gropings, and on the whole the same approaches as in other media. And, among the points of convergence is a typically "American attitude" that photography does not escape. This typical attitude consists for Americans themselves in considering American life as either perfect or abominable, and neither Frank nor Arbus escapes this trend. America has indeed not yet abandonned its messianic vocation. As a consequence, there is a perpetual temptation to read Europe's future in America's present — an idea also suggested by Gene Thornton. From Crevecoeur to Tocqueville and Frank, generations of historians, sociologists, writers, or artists have dissected the American scene in the secret hope of discovering some clues as to where the world was bound. By extension — and we saw it clearly illustrated by Arbus — America becomes the microcosm, the crystal ball which surrenders to the trained eyes the great messages about western man's destiny. Thus photographers may still have, as other artists, to free themselves from the "American temptation".

The second comment is a development of the first one. Many comparisons can indeed be established between American photography and American literature, particularly on the thematic and stylistic levels. Arbus's and Frank's photographs are very much in the tradition of American style in literature: simple, direct, efficient, vernacular, not quite "literary" in fact. One writes as one feels, and nuances are often overlooked for a more direct and more efficient communication. Convergences can also be found, more specifically, between Arbus's photographs and the best of Southern literature which also abounds in bizarre characters, met in the strangely addicting stories or novels of Wiilima Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, or Carson Mc Cullers to name only a few, these "aliens in our world, hangovers from a mammoth drunk involving all the people of the world." (Barry Ulanov, *The Two Worlds of American Art*).

And those are but a few examples. Many more could be found in other media, showing that, in fact, photography is not a "freak" in the cultural history of western society, but one more link in the chain

of humanity. It is just one more instrument in the panoply, perhaps one which is even more powerful than more "conventional" means, perhaps more emotional as well, certainly less accepted as yet. May this study have shown that it is full-size medium whose best productions are definitely to be put alongside the immortal works of the arts and literatures of the world.

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This bibliography has been arranged by subjects to make it easier to use when looking for a reference.

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Biographical notes

Robert Frank

Born Zurich, Switzerland, 1924.

1942, Begins photography. Apprenticeship with Hermann Eidenbenz in Basel and Michael Wolgansinger in Zurich. Still photographer for a Motion picture company in Zurich.

1947, Emigrates to the United States. Fashion photographs for *Harper's Bazaar*. Encouraged by Alexey Brodovitch.

Late 1948, To South America for six months. Peru and Bolivia. , In New York, free-lance reportage. Photographs for *Fortune, Junior Bazaar, Life, Me Calls, Look*. 1949, To England, Wales, France, Spain.

1951, Returns to New York. Free-lancing with some advertising photographs, particularly for *The New York Times*.

1953? Meets Edward Steichen and accompanies him to Europe for a collecting trip leading to the exhibition "Post-War European Photographers." 1955} First European photographer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship.1955-1956, Photographs throughout the U.S.A. for his book *The Americans*. 1958, Publication of the French edition of *Les Américains*. Begins film-making.

1959, Subsequent publication of the English version of the book. Movie: *Pull My Daisy*, narrated by Jack Kerouac. 1971, Publishes *The Lines of My Hand*. 1976, *Robert Frank*, Aperture, Hew York.

(Sources: Hathan Lyons, ed., *Photographers on Photography*, Prentice-Hall, 1966.)

Diane Arbus

Born in New York City, March 14, 1923, daughter of David Nemerov and Gertrude Eussek.

Attends Ethical Culture and Fieldston Schools. Graduates from high school.

Married to Allan Arbus, April 10, 1941.

Commercial photography with her husband for her father's department store (Eussek's), and fashion work for several magazines. 1959, Studies with Lisette Model.

1962. First Potfolio.

1963. First Guggenheim Fellowship.

1965, Group show at the Museum of Modern Art.

1965-1966, Teacher at Parsons School of Design.

1966. Second Guggenheim Fellowship.

1967. "New Documents" at MOMA.

1968-1969, Teacher at Cooper Union.

1971, July 26, She commits suicide in her apartment.

1971. November 7 to January 21, 1972, Eetrospective at MOMA which attracts 70,000 people in the first 20 days. The exhibit will tour the world. Publication of the Aperture Monograph.

1972. First photographer to be exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

(Sources: *Who's Who in America*, *Diane Arbus* (Aperture), Doon Arbus, "Diane Arbus," *Ms Magazine*.)