

## **Women Can't Drive: The Representation of Women in Robert Frank's *The Americans*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Résumé**

Malgré son statut de projet moderniste avec l'objectif de représenter la totalité du peuple américain, *Les Américains* réussit à raconter l'histoire de la femme dans la société états-unienne des années cinquante. Les moments que Frank a inclus dans le narratif révèlent une hiérarchie sociale qui est stricte à l'égard du genre et de la race. Dans un pays où la voiture est omniprésente, la femme ne prend jamais le volant. Elle reste dans des emplois subalternes ; tandis que l'homme a droit à une éducation et à des positions de pouvoir. Cependant, Robert Frank ne laisse pas sa vision de la femme devenir un cliché ; il la neutralise en employant des archétypes de la beauté et du glamour afin de subvertir la représentation traditionnelle de la femme comme objet de regard.

### **Abstract**

Despite being a Modernist project with the goal of representing the totality of the American people, *The Americans* succeeds in telling the story of women in the 1950s United States. The moments Frank chose to include in his narrative reveal the strict social hierarchy with regard to race and gender. In a country where the automobile is omnipresent, women are never seen in the driver's seat. They remain in menial jobs ; whereas men enjoy education and positions of power. However, Robert Frank does not allow his vision of American women to become clichéd ; he neutralizes it by using archetypes of beauty and glamor to subvert the traditional representation of women as objects of vision.

**Mots Clés :** Robert Frank, *Les Américains*, la femme, la nation, la photographie, la route, la méta image

**Keywords :** Robert Frank, *The Americans*, women, nation, photography, road, metapictures

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<sup>1</sup> *Les femmes ne savent pas conduire : la représentation de la femme dans Les Américains de Robert Frank.*

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## **Introduction**

The road is a place in between. It is rare to find a person today who does not have a relationship to it, whether it be someone who travels to arrive or someone who travels without purpose. The Beat Generation, with its outer poles of New York and San Francisco, was composed of road-worshippers who enjoyed the fluctuating perception of space that travel provides. They lived just as much on the road as they did in the places they were coming from and the places they were going to ; thus the road helps to drive the narratives of their works. Robert Frank, both an outsider and an insider to the Beat Generation had a working relationship with the road as he drove around the United States in the 1950s hunting for photographs.

Besides the nomadic lifestyle, the Beat Generation was an American cultural renaissance taking place in the forties, fifties and sixties, which placed moral value on social dissidence. Frank can be seen as part of the Beat Generation for his relationships with Beat writers and artists such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Alfred Leslie. Kerouac was the author of the introduction to *The Americans* as well as a collaborator on Frank's first film, *Pull My Daisy*, along with painter

and filmmaker Leslie. Social dissidence plays a role in *The Americans* considering Frank's stance against the racism of the segregation era. The Beats, many of whom were homosexual or bisexual, took a staunch position against the conformity, consumerism and materialism of American culture. Though these are not major themes in *The Americans*, images of people who live on the fringes of American society do appear in its pages. However, during the shooting of *The Americans* Frank had not yet established a link to the Beat Generation and thus was working outside of any identification with the movement. The Beat Generation falls chronologically under the umbrella of American Modernism, and indeed if we consider the words of Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School, we can see how the Beats' disdain for "the structure of commodity production" classifies it as a Modernist movement. Adorno wrote, "Modernism is art forced into mute self-contradiction; and the source of this internal impasse lies in art's contradictory material status within bourgeois society<sup>2</sup>." Frank would remain consistent with this philosophy later in his career when he took steps to destroy valuable prints and distance himself from the work which brought him so much fame<sup>3</sup>. *The Lines of My Hand*, an autobiographical book, recontextualized photographs taken throughout his career that were of a personal importance, including several iconic photographs from *The Americans*<sup>4</sup>. His goal was to transform the photographs into memories from his life.

However, even in its original form *The Americans* is a personal and subjective view of America. As a Jew who grew up in Switzerland during WWII, Frank can claim outsider status, but it is necessary to remember that he is also an insider, having adopted America as his home (to this day he lives in New York City and Nova Scotia). Nevertheless, having come of age in war torn Europe gives him a dramatically different perspective than artists born in America. He once said of his artistic practice, "I'm always looking outside, trying to look inside, trying to tell something that is true." This comment speaks both to Frank's status as an immigrant, and to his manner of setting his subjects at a distance, even the most intimate ones. When *The Americans* was published it amassed a certain number of angry reviews. One critic called Frank, "a joyless man who hates the country of his adoption<sup>5</sup>." Indeed the book does contain harsh criticisms, counting among them the sins of America, racism, classism, and the artifice of ceremonies of power in higher education and politics.

A transformative era for the U.S., the 1950s was a time when people were beginning to open their eyes to the limitations of then stifling gender roles. This was the era during which Adlai Stevenson, soon to run for president of the United States for a second time, told Smith College's Class of 1955 : "I think there is much you can do about our crisis in the humble role of

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor ADORNO, quoted in Terry Eagleton, *Ideology and the Aesthetic*, Malden, Blackwell P, 1990, pp. 348-349.

<sup>3</sup> The video *Home Improvements* includes a shot of Gunther Moses drilling through a stack of Frank's iconic photographs. *Home Improvements*, Dir. Robert Frank, Eds. Michael Bianchi and Sam Edwards, Perf. Pablo Frank, Robert Frank, June Leaf and Gunther Moses, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> *The Lines of My Hand*, New York, Pantheon, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce DOWNES and John DURNIK, in "An Off-Beat View of the U.S.A.," 104. Quoted in Greenough, "Blowing Down Bleecker Street," *Looking In : Robert Frank's The Americans*, Curator Sarah Greenough, Exhibition catalog, Expanded ed. Washington, National Gallery of Art and Steidl, 2009.

housewife... I could wish you no better vocation than that<sup>6</sup>.” In pre-feminist American society the ideal roles of women were limited to housekeeping and raising children, and for the beauties, objects of vision and desire. Social change was, however, in motion due to a large number of women entering the workforce. It was rare to find women making a living through creative pursuits, or living the life of a traveler like Robert Frank. The representations of women in *The Americans* are by definition male ; Frank is in the privileged role of artist, photographer, the one who's “got eyes” as Jack Kerouac wrote in his introduction to the book. Frank is the one behind the wheel of his own narrative.

Despite this, Frank's particular brand of totality neutralizes his images of women. This is not to say that his lens sees all people evenly ; one clear dichotomy present in the book is that of power and powerlessness. If we do the math, men are more often in positions of power, both figuratively and literally in the driver's seat. However, Frank does not fall prey to the usual tropes of male artists who represent women. They are not symbols of sex or beauty and we do not find them split into two roles of surveyor and surveyed. Sex roles are certainly visible in the jobs women do and the clothes they wear, but these make up the denotation of the photograph, the unavoidable cultural material of its verisimilitude.

Though complete objectivity is impossible in any artistic expression, Frank comes awfully close in his portrayal of women. Take as an example *Rodeo –Detroit* which shows the profiles of two women and a man side by side. The man stands in a masculine posture, one arm across his body, the other resting on his chin in contemplation, a cigar perched in his mouth. They are all dressed for the occasion, the man and one of the women are wearing a cowboy hat. The man is decidedly masculine, but the women bear no marker of femininity aside from their hair, make-up and jewelry. The framing, tightly cropped below their necks, frustrates the viewer's curiosity. The profiles of the women's faces are tightly juxtaposed to the point where one mimics the formal line of the other ; however, this seems like more of a comment on conformity than femininity. We will investigate Frank's relative objectivity with regard to women in three parts. In the first part we see how the strict gender roles of the 1950s United States are visible through the representation of the automobile. Secondly we will visit Frank's use of frame to delineate power structures both political and economic. In the final part we will see how he comments upon the clichéd role of the glamorous woman in pictorial representation through the use of metapictures.

## Who's Driving?

How does the perspective change when one sees one's journey unwind from the passenger's seat? To drive is to have control of the vehicle and to have control over where one goes. In Robert Frank's experience of the American nation the automobile was omnipresent. He often photographed Americans in and around their cars because that is what he observed. The artist

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<sup>6</sup> Adlai E. STEVENSON, “A Purpose for Modern Women,” Commencement Address, Smith College, 1955, <[http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch32\\_04.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch32_04.htm)>.

himself was heavily dependent on his vehicle to advance the narrative of his journey. In our first part we will explore the roles of the driver and passenger in Frank's *The Americans*.

## Couples

In *Indianapolis* an African American couple backs up their motorcycle, both looking behind them in a moment of cool synchronicity. The man is driving. In fact, the man is always driving when Frank's couples are on wheels. The man is activated by his place at the helm, tongue stuck out in concentration. We can even see motion blur where his hand revs the engine. The woman, conversely, is perfectly static and clear. The endless row of male spectators looking on make her seem like an object. Both of them lower their eyes, but her face is much more passive than her partner's. Jonathan Berger's *Ways of Seeing* contains a chapter on the female nude which deals quite succinctly with the history of the representation of women in art. He writes, "Men act, and women appear. Men look at women, and women watch themselves being looked at."<sup>7</sup> The man's position as the driver places him clearly in the role of actor. The woman, on the other hand, seems to avoid her role in the dichotomy with her down-turned eyes. She engages neither the gaze of the spectators in the photograph nor the spectator of the photograph ; she thwarts the traditional view of the representation of women in art, and yet, she still does not drive.

In the photograph of an elderly couple in Detroit, Frank seems to ask why it is always the man who is driving. The frame is cropped in tight on the upper front part of the car. The window creates a frame within a frame in which the couple's perplexed expressions are on display, illustrating the pressures on men to master their whereabouts. The automobile provides the perfect metaphorical situation. Traveling the truistic road of life on foot does not necessitate that one companion takes the lead, but in an automobile there must always be a driver who ultimately decides on the route to take. This photograph begs the question: why does the responsibility to "act," to use Berger's word, fall upon the man? It is an arbitrary choice in a case such as this one when both parties are so decidedly lost.

In a photograph from Butte, Montana, the woman seems to know exactly where she is headed. She is the back-seat driver, or passenger's seat driver in this case, and her position of power is reinforced by the exclusion of the driver in the frame of the photograph. This image is doubly compelling, as it also features in Kerouac's introduction to *The Americans*. Part of this short text which can be found at the beginning of the book does not have much to do with the photographs and can be read autonomously, but other passages are ekphrastic descriptions like this one: "Haggard old frowsy dames of Los Angeles leaning peering out the right front window of Old Paw's car on a Sunday gawking and criticizing to explain Amerikay to little children in the spattered back seat<sup>8</sup>..." Despite the inconsistency between Frank's title and Kerouac's mention of Los Angeles, we can identify *Butte, Montana* as the photograph being described in this passage. He paints the old cliché of the Sunday drive into a ritual of suspicion in which the woman is the

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<sup>7</sup> John BERGER, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972.

<sup>8</sup> Jack KEROUAC, Introduction to *The Americans: Photographs by Robert Frank*, Published in Jack KEROUAC, *Good Blond & Others*, ed. Donald Allen, San Francisco, City Lights, 1993, pp. 19-23.

chief agent of scrutiny. Kerouac has assumed, as most viewers will, that the invisible driver of the car is male. The little girl in the backseat is the beneficiary of the woman's wisdom, which surely does seem to be of a judgmental nature from the squint in her eyes and the scowl on her face. The child seems an attentive pupil, her eyes also narrowed and her fist closed tightly into a ball.

Besides these three, there are other photographs without women in which men are driving, but there is not a single image showing a female driver. Perhaps this is a mindful selection on the part of the photographer, but most likely this a symbol of 1950s American gender roles expressed through the verisimilitude of photography.

### **Family Portrait**

If this is the case, Frank's own life on the road may also be touched by stratified gender roles within the automobile. While Frank openly professed that *The Americans* was a personal account of the American people, there are two quasi self-portraits in the book which provide a direct window into his life and his role as an artist. One is a reflection of Frank pointing his camera in a screen-door in McClellanville, South Carolina. It is only thanks to the shadow cast by the photographer that we can see inside the barber shop, the chair and the shelf of elixirs. The viewer looks at what the photographer is looking at, and through self-portraiture Frank is able to comment reflexively on the notion of authorship in photography. The second self-portrait does not actually contain Frank in the image. It is the last photograph in the book and it pictures his wife Marie in the passenger's seat with his son Pablo. The driver's seat is empty ; it is Frank's place and he is not in the car at the time because he is taking the picture. In the first self-portrait it is the inclusion of Frank's image which allows the viewer to see. In the second, it is actually his absence which allows the viewer to understand the structure of the nuclear family.

This family portrait ends the book and brings the narrative back to the personal journey of the artist. Several of the photographs in the final sequence of the book also feature automobiles : a band of African American boys in the backseat of a convertible in *Belle Isle – Detroit*, the aforementioned elderly couple looking lost in *Detroit*, a Chevy with the bumper sticker “Christ died for our sins” in *Chicago*, and the amorous youths in *Public Park – Ann Arbor Michigan*. Cars represent freedom for Americans, the freedom to get from one place to another, the freedom of privacy, and the freedom of self-expression. However in this final note of stillness, Marie and Pablo just seem worn out from travel. It is important to remember that Swiss born Robert Frank is an immigrant to the United States and that he was already a seasoned traveler when he arrived in New York City. The car stopped on the side of the road implies that this is only a moment of pause, that the journey will soon resume, for the road is not a place where we stop for long. Frank's family, is not only along for the ride of the making of *The Americans*, but they are also in the process of naturalization, becoming American citizens. This photograph of Frank's family in an American car, on an American road, at the end of a narrative Frank wove about the American people avows to the immigrant's position straddling the line between outsider and insider. This photograph is also a reminder that despite Frank's sensitivity to all of his subjects, his success, his Guggenheim grant is in part due to his identity as a white man, revealing his position as

photographer, husband, father and driver.

## The Form of Power

In order to display the role of women in a society, it is also necessary to look at the men. This is why *The Americans* so deftly reveals women's positions, because it is not a book about them. They are but a part of the fabric of the narrative Frank has woven. To find their story the viewer/reader must look at the entirety of the book. As the title would suggest, *The Americans* is a quest for totality, a hope to tell a whole story ; and therein can be considered a Modernist project as American Modernists drew on the theories of Marxist thinkers who based their ideas about totality on Hegelian dialectics. We can see the structure of the book in Hegel's philosophy of absolute spirit in which he defines the absolute as “the internal interrelatedness of the totality<sup>9</sup>.” According to Hegelian scholar Quentin Laurer, “The world is the totality of reality, outside of which there is no reality to which it might be related, within which there is no reality which is not related to all other reality. To know the world, then, is to know the totality of its interrelatedness<sup>10</sup>.” To know America, Frank must combine the interrelated narratives of different American demographics. He brings these narratives together by identifying dichotomies he found during his visual exploration of the United States, and his narratives co-mingle to create Frank's impression of the American people. One of the interrelated narratives of *The Americans* is that of women, and to tell their story Frank evokes the dichotomy of the powerful and the powerless. Here we will look at the formal techniques Frank uses to pictorialize power. In the first part we will contextualize masculine domination in the circles of politics and higher education. In the second we will provide a contrast to Frank's denigration of these white men on the highest rung of the social ladder, with his lifting up of African American women, perhaps the most discriminated demographic in the United States.

## Circles of Power

Frank's photographs of politicians are clearly the most scathing condemnations of the American nation. In a letter to his parents, he wrote “America is an interesting country, but there is a lot here that I do not like and that I would never accept. I am also trying to show this in my photos.” Frank's politicians reveal the strict social hierarchy of the American government. In *City fathers—Hoboken, New Jersey* a line-up of somber looking men in hats stand in identically hunched positions with identical grimaces on their faces, with the exception of the clown-like man pursing his lips to blow a kiss. The pursed lips are an odd detail ; the man is nothing if not smug, self-deserving of his place on the podium. This photograph comments upon the homogeneity of people in power, but it is also about exclusion and the people we do not see represented. The same can be said of *Yale Commencement—New Haven, Connecticut*. A stream of graduation gowns flows from left to right below a stream of white male faces. The black of the

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<sup>9</sup> Quentin LAURER, Introduction, *Essays in Hegelian Dialectic*, New York, Fordham U. P., 1977, pp. 1-16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

gowns overtakes the photograph, setting off the anxious looking older man seated on a bench in the lower right-hand corner of the frame. In both photographs the uniform unifies the masses of men in a sea of privilege. In the next photograph *Political rally—Chicago*, a man stands upon the ledge of a building crying out slogans no doubt, cut off at the knees, his arms outstretched like King Kong. The symmetry of the photograph and the face carved ornately in stone, implies permanence. His gesture is emphatic and triumphant, but the strength of his pose is betrayed by his shortened legs and the bib-like political poster around his neck, rendering him a querulous child.

More sinister than the previous photographs, *Club car* and *Convention hall—Chicago* are both taken from a claustrophobic perspective. In *Club car*, Frank has taken the picture from between the hunched shoulders of two men in tweed suits. A third man is framed by the wall created by their backs. With its triangular perspective this photograph exaggerates the already close quarters to make a point about how deals are made by powerful people behind closed doors. *Convention hall—Chicago* functions in a similar way, but instead of the confined space of a club car in the background behind the powerful men, we see a crowd of spectators. The gesture of the hand holding a cigar and the blurry hand resting on a man's back creates a closed circle. The shallow depth of field also lets the crowd fall out of focus, creating a formless mass of heads. This photograph illustrates the illusion of democracy by revealing the inequality in number between the policy makers and those deprived of power.

### **The Cage Renders You Powerless**

Within the voiceless throng of the crowd, black women have been dealt the worst hand in the hierarchy of the American nation and we see them repeatedly in service positions. A photograph of a woman in a coffee shop at the railway station in Indianapolis is uniformly grainy and out of focus. Any other photographer at the time would not have published it for its technical inexactitude, but Frank saw something in it he liked. She seems to be a part of her surroundings. Her face and white shirt reflect the light of the overpowering overhead fluorescents which are also reflected on the metal walls and counter tops. Her dark hair nearly disappears into the dark background behind her. She is just as much a part of the diner as the salt and pepper. Moreover, the countertop in front of her and the wall behind her creates the impression of cage from which she cannot break free. However, she steps out of the image through her gaze, confronting the viewer. This look captures the violence of a country which puts limitations on its people based on race and gender, something Frank was struck by during his travels in the 1950s. "I felt it was a powerful country, but a very hypocritical country. I felt it was brutal, the people mostly. And there was a lot of violence that I had not known in Europe." This feeling of despair comes through in the expressions of listlessness and anger of Frank's subjects.

Frank's photographs of African Americans are not prescriptive. Some of them reveal the severe racism of 1950s America in an explicit way; others take a more lyrical approach. His subjects are not homogeneously miserable, but instead are captured in lived moments which reveal truths about their existence. The result is a critique of a nation in the throws of a humanitarian crisis



with a personal attention to the individuals battling for equality. A photograph from Beaufort, South Carolina shows a laughing African American woman seated on a chair in a field. Placed about two thirds into the book, this quiet image is one of stillness which serves as a moment of pause in Frank's narrative structure. Despite the great empty space, the photograph boasts an active frame which disturbs the illusion of a cross in the background next to the faint, haloed white spot of the sun. There are power lines in the top right-hand corner of the frame. The sky is washed out where the power lines would normally join the cross-shaped pole, but Frank has purposefully burnt in the upper corners, a process of exposure which allows the photographer to darken selected areas of a photograph. This intentional technique is not so exaggerated in other photographs with similarly white skies. Perhaps Frank wished to make doubly certain the viewer would perceive this element of the photograph which reveals the true nature of the cross. This has an ambiguous effect: whether there are power lines or not, it does not alter our reading of the post as a cross. It does add other layers of meaning and illusion: of modernity, and of literal and figurative power. The cross remains the dominant symbol, though. Through the illusion of space created by the photograph, the woman seems to be looking at it, laughing at it. She is joyful despite her burden. With his photographs of African American women, Frank has documented an American demographic that had been largely ignored in American photography.

## **Pictures About Pictures About Women**

Besides closing the gaps in the catalog of American visual representation by photographing the unphotographed, Frank comments upon images of fame and glamor which have been made into types by the American media. W.J.T. Mitchell defines metapictures as “pictures about pictures – that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is<sup>11</sup>.” Though the term metapicture first arose in the Postmodern era, self-reference in visual imagery has existed long before the publication of Mitchell's *Picture Theory* in 1994. Indeed the earliest references in the chapter entitled *Metapictures*, Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* and Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, date from the seventeenth century. The former is used to illustrate the roles of a metapicture as “a scene of interpretation,” a picture which demonstrates an idea, or in this case a text, “I was (or am) in Arcadia.” The latter is “the metapicture which summarizes all [the] features of the genre most fully,” both “strict” and “generic” self-reference : strict because it refers back to the painter and his canvas that are included in the universe of the painting itself, and generic because it comments upon the process of painting and the “interplay between the beholder, the producer and the object or model of representation as a complex cycle of exchanges and substitutions<sup>12</sup>.” Frank's metapictures function more like *Las Meninas* than *Et in Arcadia Ego* in that they refer back to photography, to a particular class of photograph, or to the process of image making.

The only times in which clichéd representations of women are employed in *The Americans*, it is

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<sup>11</sup> W.J.T. MITCHELL, “Metapictures,” *Picture Theory*, Chicago, U. of Chicago P., 1994, pp. 35-81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

to subvert them. Frank uses meta-images to comment upon the way we make pictures of women. To illustrate this, we can again refer to Berger's notion that men are the actors and women are appearances, the self-aware objects of male vision. Perhaps the only photograph in the *Americans* which could be accused of embodying this function is not a meta-image. In *Movie premiere – Hollywood* a pretty young, extravagantly dressed woman stands in a regal setting, head turned away from the camera. Her perfect posture and slight upward tilt of the chin makes her seem self-consciously aware of the viewer's gaze, as if she felt the photographer's presence. Berger writes of the woman represented in a work of art, "Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another." However, this photograph is not a simple admiration of beauty. The woman's posture and way of being seems innate to her social standing. She exudes an air of self-entitlement reserved for the elite, making this less a photograph about the traditional way of seeing women than a photograph about the prideful conduct of the privileged upper-class.

### **The Starlet**

Unlike the picture of the glamorous woman at a movie premiere, the metapictures from *The Americans* provide two modes of interpretation; they concurrently stage a drama within the singular universe of the photograph and reflexively comment on the process of picture-making. The photograph of the starlet in *Movie premiere – Hollywood* belongs the genre of red carpet portraits. The star is in the forefront as the adoring fans look on. However, Frank's photograph differs from the typical paparazzi picture in its use of focus. Frank used the conventional portrait technique of shallow depth of field. In lieu of focusing on the starlet as any other photographer would have done, Frank focused his camera on the faces of the onlookers behind her. Instead of being a photograph of a celebrity, this is a photograph about photographs of celebrities. The out of focus representation of the actress is clear enough to know that she is beautiful, blond and elegant. The movie star beauty is seen as banal and generic. She is flat, and her eyes are in shadow, providing for a strange effect. In a portrait, the one thing which ensures the illusion of life is the light in the eyes. That missing, the starlet appears lifeless, and the photograph seems to question whether or not she is real. This photograph also shows the power that such beauty holds over people. The focus is on her fans who, in a conventional portrait, would be blurred beyond recognition. There are two women smiling, another is biting her nails in anticipation. The man whose head is cut in half by the left side of the frame is craning his neck to see. Their interested faces show how fame creates an "aura" around those it touches, to use Walter Benjamin's word. For those affected by this aura, the famous are invested with a captivating magic the rest of us do not possess, but Frank maintains a critical distance from such follies allowing him to reveal the way in which the red carpet photo works on the psyche and to call it into question.

### **The Television Host**

Not only did Frank address the silver screen in Hollywood, he also photographed in a television studio in Burbank California. The photograph he produced there self-analytically speaks to the relationship between women and the screen. Similar to *Las Meninas* all of the elements integral

to the production of the television show are present in the image. A female television host sits on the set smiling for the camera. A studio light cuts into the top of the frame. The dark silhouette of the cameraman leans out of the left side. Massive coils of cables lie like a snake in the center. Off to the right of the frame there is a television set which shows the simultaneous image of the woman being filmed. Unlike *Las Meninas* which is a painting about painting, the medium of representation in *Television Studio* shifts from television to photography. Television in 1956 had certainly not advanced far enough in its praxis to reflexively comment upon itself. Still photography was the tool which permitted Frank to “[try] to look inside” and reveal the artifice of the world created by television. The television set is the punctum, creating a copy of the woman and a picture within a picture, masking her reality. The television host is a cliché of 1950s American conformity. Her hair, make-up and smile are generic. Her eyes glance to the right towards her own image on the screen as if she is painfully aware of her reproduction. She is literally split into two, into surveyor and surveyed. As Berger writes, “She becomes an object of sight – a vision.” The perspective of the image on the screen is slightly different from that of the woman on the set due to Frank's position to the right of the cameraman. This difference in unsettling, revealing the perfidious nature of both images.

The image of the starlet belongs to a class of metapictures which Mitchell defines as “the picture that represents *itself*, creating a referential circle or *mise en abîme*.” It belongs to the genre of movie star photographs, yet at the same time remains apart, criticizing and poking holes. *Television Studio* is Frank's *Las Meninas*, though his canvas is no mystery. It boldly faces the spectator, revealing television as a simulacra in our lives, replacing reality with image. These two metapictures are pictures about themselves, but “that doesn't prevent [them] from being about a great many other things,” says Mitchell<sup>13</sup>. They are also two examples of the representation of the representation of women, analyses of how images are used to disseminate ideals of beauty and messages of conformity to women.

## Conclusion

Even though they sit on the passenger's side of the vehicle, Frank's women are much more multifaceted than the representations of women most white male artists were producing during the 1950s. In the world of the novel, for example, Jack Kerouac was producing flat, under-developed and over-sexualized images of women. That Frank's women are often seen in submissive roles is a sign of the times, but he was careful to avoid clichés and stereotypes when he was not subverting them. In the narrative of Frank's women, the photographs act on the viewer in two ways. First they report on the demographic conditions of American society at the time and as a result the viewer can glean information about American women's status in relation to American men, the kinds of jobs they hold and the way they dress. They also provide a window into the psychological state of the subject at the time the photograph was taken. Not having the necessary tools to understand these private moments of contemplation, joy, scrutiny, or whatever

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

else, we take the photographs out of the context of the subject's life and place them into the larger national context, a process which culminates in a mysterious inquiry into women as both individuals and citizens. While this opaqueness could be construed as true of any portrait, Frank's photographs of people are particularly unreadable due to the distance he takes from his subjects. As Frank wrote in his personal notes, he never formed relationships with his subjects, unless he was photographing a friend or loved one. He tried to pass through people's lives as an unseen observer. Consequently, in the majority of his photographs the subject does not meet the gaze of the photographer. In *Elevator – Miami Beach* Frank deliberately chose a shot where the girl is gazing dreamily off-frame to create the fiction of loneliness. In Barthes' discussion of "the look," he makes the distinction between photography and film because "in film, no one ever looks at me: it is forbidden – by the Fiction."<sup>14</sup> But the same could be said for a photograph like *Elevator* in which fiction plays an indispensable role. The moment the photograph was taken, it became a fiction allowing the human subject to achieve universality. The women in Frank's photographs become symbols. They are tools used to arrive at a certain truth, even the photograph of his wife Marie. It is Frank's impersonal process and the mastery of the techniques he used that allowed him to attain universality and to democratize his representation of American women.

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