

Photography – Personal Study

Robert Frank believed that **“Black and white are the colours of photography”**. He created “The America’s” in the 1950’s – a book containing 83 black and white photos from his trip around America, portraying how he saw and experienced it personally during Post-War society. The Swiss American photographer is known particularly for this work, which he created after receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954, travelling for over 10 months and covering almost 26 states. He mainly used a handheld Leica IIIc 35mm camera with a Nikkor 5cm f/1.4 lens, which was ideal for this quick, on the move documentary style. Frank was originally a fashion photographer at 22 years old, but believed that this field of work was too narrow and limited, leading him down a route of documentary photography.

William Eggleston is a photographer from Memphis, Tennessee, who is known to be the **“grandfather of colour photography”**. He originally started off with black and white photography at 18, then moving to colour photography in 1964. He was particularly interested in finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, often photographing the American South where he grew up and how it changed from rural to suburban. He then found interest in the post war cultural shift in the 1950s. Unlike other photographers, he began to use a dye-transfer often saved for commercial use to make his colours pop. As his work progressed, he became more recognised through exhibitions such as the 1976 exhibition of ‘colour photographs’ in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The publication of his book ‘William Eggleston’s guide’ has also helped establish his status as a colour photographer.

I will be investigating frank’s statement that **“Black and white are the colours of photography”** by comparing his B&W shots from ‘The America’s’ to William Eggleston’s colour photos from ‘William Eggleston’s Guide’ and his belief that **“The world is in colour”**. I want to understand their meaning behind choosing black and white or colour, and how they think it helps support the meaning of their photographs.

Robert Franks Trolley – New Orleans piece has been arranged using the rule of thirds, using physical divisions to split his photo up compositionally. I think these also make contrast in this photo, linking contextually to when the photo was taken in 1955. I think this piece could be considered subtle, as the meanings behind the photograph aren’t noticeable instantly. The photo being black and white – with darker tones predominating the photo - also adds to its subtleness, there are no stark contrasts or elements of colour in the photo that would stand out for at the time it was taken, except for the white bars physically dividing the people. The other horizontal lines running across the trolley also frame the photo and create a sense of division, but also movement from left to right. All of these elements work coherently, making the photo compositionally interesting as a whole. This photo is highlighting the physical division of different minorities during the 1950s. The man at the very front is the only one behind a pane of glass, almost giving him

privilege and protection, as he looks down at the camera like his privacy is being invaded, similar to the lady in the section behind. The older child in the middle peers out of the trolley, looking confused by the camera. The man and woman behind them at the back also have similar reactions to the camera, with the man behind looking longingly and desperately into the camera, almost like a cry for help. The lady behind looks fascinated by her surroundings and the experience she is having, as she is looking around out of the trolley window. This creates a voice for political and social division between classes and races during the 1950s in America. There doesn't seem to have been any intentional editing or distortion after the photo was taken, highlighting the idea of the Decisive Moment has been used to capture America in its unedited form. This links to Franks idea that **“to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation”**. There are other less noticeable elements of the photo that exaggerate this idea, such as the wooden bar on the back of one of the seats that would have been used to indicate where people of colour could start to sit on the trolley, which could also be moved at any time. This photo was taken using a Leica camera and a tripod being set up next to a moving train. The work evokes a feeling of disappointment, as this photo serves as harsh reminder that there were extreme separation and racism in America around this time. I think Frank would have felt a similar way as a photographer coming from a different country and going to America seeing and capturing these ideas he obviously doesn't agree with. The work is quiet, but when looking into it, has a loud meaning and message that screams for change. It is also definitely a sadder piece, that may initially seem relaxing or like a typical day, but is disturbing and sharply upsetting in its context and message. Robert Frank created this piece in 1955 in New Orleans. It has a contextual purpose and highlights extreme physical division between races of people of this time. We know this through the subtle sight of the white bar that would physically divide people as well as looking at the people themselves, how they are physically separated and what their facial expressions tell us. Other examples of similar work by Frank are 'Belle Isle, Detroit' – taken in 1956, which shows a convertible car driving past with young children of colour in the back, looking intrigued at the surrounding area, also staring into the camera. It links to 'Trolley, New Orleans' with the same idea of classes and minorities of people having less opportunities than others in society.

Parade Hoboken – New Jersey has been arranged compositionally using the rule of thirds, with two windows on either end of the photo, and one lady stood looking out of each one. Both of their faces are covered – the one on the left by the darkness of the room, the one on the right by the American flag hanging on the brick wall, blowing in the wind. The two windows on either ends of the photo create framing and structure, and the brick wall in the middle of the two creates texture. This photos message alludes to the political situation of America in the 1950s, including patriotism, as well as social class, which are hinted at through the American flag covering one lady's identity. The fact that the lady covered with the flag is wearing much smarter attire than the other, alluding to the idea that the higher class are protected by American laws and politics. It was also taken at a lower vantage point and from outside looking in, creating a sense of detachment and isolation on a day that should be about celebration. This photo could be considered a vehicle for Franks beliefs and how he views America as a photographer coming from

Zurich, Switzerland. I think there may have been deliberate exaggeration of this photo, for example, the use of the Decisive Moment to highlight these ideas at the perfect time when the flag symbolically blows in front of the woman's face and the other lady's face was blurred into darkness. Rule of thirds being used also creates a feeling of entrapment and lack of identity. This photo creates a feeling of disappointment about the physical division of America in the 1950s. Frank was also thinking similarly when he took the photo, as he has described the photo as **"threatening"**, also describing the two women to be **"hiding"**. This indicates that Frank is trying to show us what we should be afraid of as an audience. It is a noisier photo in terms of how easily it brings its political message across, as it is much easier to read and understand from the start. Another quality of the piece as well as the flag is the overall darkness and gloominess of the piece, as overall the tones are very dark with grey undertones. This gelatin silver photograph was captured using a Leica camera in 1955 during a centennial celebration in the city of Hoboken. It was taken and made as the first photo of his book "The Americans", consisting of 83 photos which took him just under 3 years to create, thanks to his Guggenheim Fellowship which allowed him the time to travel as an artist and focus on his work, capturing the social aspects of America. Other examples of work in his book that are similar include City fathers – Hoboken, New Jersey and Political rally – Chicago, which intends to link to American politics and its alienation of its civilians.

This photo has been compositionally arranged with the 'box boy' covering the middle and third frame of the piece, alluding to the rule of thirds as well as central composition. A very vivid colour scheme has been used, as the photo was taken during the golden hour, with warm oranges dominating the piece as they cover his skin. I think this is harmonious with the rest of the piece as there are also warm shadows on the side of the building wall and the lady in the background, but also there are cool tones in the shadows and the ground stretching further beyond behind that could be argued to contrast with the warm oranges, as we know that Eggleston often made colours in the foreground and background contrast. The colours could also be argued to have equal significance in this photo and a sense of harmony, as the photo holds itself together well as a whole. This photo focuses on a 'box boy' pushing supermarket trolleys back together. This highlights the idea of Eggleston's work – to create extraordinary and significance in the everyday. It was crafted intentionally, to highlight this idea, hence the golden light flooding his frame and features, and his shadow repeating his silhouette onto the wall. This may not be instantly recognisable but is deliberate and was shot with this intention, especially considering the slightly higher vantage point that he may have used to make sure the shadows were fully visible further behind. This vantage point may have also been used to allude to the idea that the person working is in fact still a boy with a future and aspirations. It was executed rapidly, as Eggleston said he noticed it whilst walking by a supermarket and decided upon that moment to take the image, linking to Eggleston's influence he has taken from Henri-Cartier Bresson's "Decisive Moment". He has also said **"I took it very rapidly and we didn't speak"**. Eggleston also only ever takes one photo of his subject or idea, proving how he thought quickly to help truly capture the essence of normality in daily life and how the photo is able to speak for itself. He then developed his photo by using dye transfer, an expensive method often used commercially, that helps his colours pop. The piece creates a sense of warmth and comfort almost; in something we have all seen at some point in our lives but never thought about for more than a split second. The perspective in this piece seems to allude to the boy's life; how long has he been working for? Is he working towards a bigger goal? What are his aspirations in life? It creates an idea of Eggleston trying to make us question deeper than just what is happening in the photo. Eggleston's feelings may have been similar, especially since his intentions are to convey the idea that there is extraordinary in the

ordinary. It seems to be more of a soothing piece of photography, as the colours are saturated, but still warm, soft and relaxing from the golden hour. This piece was created by William Eggleston in 1965 in Memphis, Tennessee. The date it was taken can be suggested through the boy's hairstyle and uniform. It was taken just as he started to experiment with colour photography and became his first successful colour negative. Similar pieces by Eggleston in this time include 'Memphis tricycle' being estimated to have been taken between 1969-1972. It was taken at a lower vantage point, alluding to the perspective of a small child with the tricycle, juxtaposing the idea of the higher vantage point for the young man working at the supermarket.

In conclusion, although both Frank and Eggleston used photography to capture American life, Frank focused more on social and political ideas metaphorically in his work using black and white to create a more tense and gloomy atmosphere in his photos. On the other hand, Eggleston's colour photography highlights the ordinary sights of America as it begins to grow post-war, focusing on the beauty in the ordinary. Frank's work feels analytical and like a documentation of his journey through America over a shorter period of time, whereas Eggleston's feels relaxed and observational, often being in the same place, it has a sense of timelessness. They use photography as their own language for representing how they see the country in two opposite ways. Eggleston is also the only photographer not to use colour photography, but to turn it into a well-practised art medium. He also still uses this method, even though it is considered now to be outdated, highlighting the idea of the simplicity of his craft that is reproduced in his photos. Overall, both Frank and Eggleston have completely changed how America is represented, with both artists working at a similar time, they have managed to represent America as two completely different worlds through their decisions to use black and white or colour photography.

Jack Kerouac, writer of the introduction of 'The Americas' describes Robert Frank as: "Swiss, unobstructive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand he sucked a sad poem right off America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world"

William Eggleston described his red ceiling photo as: "So powerful, I've never seen it reproduced on the page to my satisfaction. When you look at a dye-transfer print it's like it's red blood that is wet on the wall"

Rosa Eggleston, William's wife said: "We are surrounded everywhere by a plethora of shopping centers and ugly stuff. And that is really initially what he started photographing"