

## International Conference on Cultural Informatics, Communication & Media Studies

Vol 1, No 1 (2020)

Proceedings of The International Conference on Cultural Informatics, Communication & Media 2019-CICMS2019



### A Review of Americanism Codes in The Americans

*Salih Ocakoğlu*

doi: [10.12681/cicms.2806](https://doi.org/10.12681/cicms.2806)

## A Review of Americanism Codes in The Americans

*Ocakoglu Salih, Ege University, Turkey, [ocakoglu.salih@gmail.com](mailto:ocakoglu.salih@gmail.com)*

### Abstract

The Americans manufactured by Swiss photographer Robert Frank. The Americans has been the most popular in the social context in many of his albums. The use of methods beyond the age of both content and form in the photographs in the album has caused criticism by American citizens and photographers. While the contextual codes are criticized for being perceived as insult by American individuals, the radical changes in the formal form of the photographs in the album (some of the photos are skewed, some of the photographs are lacking and some of them lack the frame) have been tried as freaks by art critics. This is how Robert Frank created the economic infrastructure of his work by getting a scholarship from many institutions before he began to shoot. The Americans album, which requires a very large process both temporarily and spatially. In all the states of the United States, Frank tried to explain Americanism in his photographs rather than in America. In other words, he has photographed how the United States' political, social, economic and cultural structure is represented by individuals and how it is reflected in the Americanism code. In this study, photographs selected in the American Americans album, including the American sample code, are examined. These photographs are analyzed both in terms of content and form by using semiotic analysis method. After the analysis, the structure of the building is evaluated and the meaning of the codes in the photos is examined and interpreted.

### Keywords:

**Americanism, The Americans, Photo, Transformation**

### 1. The Development of Robert Frank and The Americans

Born in 1924 in Switzerland, Robert Frank left his country in 1947 and travelled to many countries. Having taken many photographs in the countries he visited, Frank recently stayed in New York and settled there. He had a purpose in settling in New York. He wanted to explain the civilization that was born there and then, spread all over the world. His aim was to photograph how American codes of civilization shaped society.

Frank made major preparations before filming the series "The American." He first collected maps and routes from the American Automobile Association. In order to realize the Frank Project, he applied for various scholarships and in 1955, he was awarded the Guggenheim scholarship. He received letters of reference from the Guggenheim Foundation and members of the press, facilitating the meeting with representatives from across the country. Walker Evans, Wayne Miller, has collected recommendations from popular photographers, such as places to visit.

Frank set some symbols to follow and catch before he went on a trip. After completing all the infrastructure work related to the trip and receiving the scholarship, he toured the 10.000 km area for 9 months. During this time, Frank used 767 films touring 30 states (Phillips, 2013, s. 37).

Frank was at the top of McChartyzm in the United States when he planned to travel to create *The Americans*. Briefly, McChartyzm shows the suspicion of betrayal or communism and the possibility of being thrown in on false charges. During his trip, Frank was also a victim of this ideology. Frank, a Jew, was arrested and imprisoned on suspicion during his trip. Frank's imprisonment for this reason was instrumental in shaping "*The Americans*" (Phillips, 2013, s. 5). When the codes formed by the photographs in the album are examined, the reflected dimension of the said ideological pressure on the society is seen in the photographs.

Frank is one of the great visionaries of American photography, according to many photo critics. Because Frank has photographed the sociocultural aspects of American society that have not been addressed before. On the other hand, it has used many new and different methods in terms of photography technique. First, it has challenged the "documentary tradition.. In Frank's time, photography was understood as simple, clear and transparent, and according to this understanding, photography was produced. However, Frank published angry, critical, and opaque photographs of his album (Cim, 2013, s. 22). Frank also challenged the "aesthetics of photography. In the 1950s, the aesthetics of photography produced well-exposed sharp photographs. Therefore, the understanding in those years was technically achieving perfection. But Frank's "*The Americans*" has been harshly criticized for making pointless blur, muddy exposures and drunken images, as critics say (Phillips, 2013, s. 21).

It is not spontaneous that Frank takes such photos. He gained radical aesthetics in his photographs while living in Switzerland. Frank's work with Alexey Brodovitch, a Russian photographer in his twenties, formed the sub-cognitive structure of his *The Americans* album and other albums. He learned to truncate radically, blur, uncertain focus, large foreground forms, bleaching negatives, which he learned from Brodovitch (Phillips, 2013, s. 15).

Frank's primary purpose in creating *The Americans* is to reveal and reveal the darker aspects of Americanism that have not been shown before. He photographed the consumer society, the distinction between rich and poor, racism in his cognitive structure with the techniques he created. However, American society did not receive this album well. American citizens saw the photos taken as an album that took the wrong pictures of the American people and humiliated society (Greenough, 2015). So Frank was accused of being a cheerful man who hated his own country in his adopted country.

## 2. Album Photo Review



Picture 1. "Trolley"

This photo, "Trolley", was taken in 1955 at the New Orleans. Frank participated in an ongoing parade in New Orleans, capturing a moving tram square. Photo taken by Trolley a few weeks before American human rights activist Rose Park refused to sit on a bus (Frank, 2018). The faces in the photo frame reflect the brutal social order of post-war America. Citizens other than infants have a completely unhappy and questioning look.

Individuals entering the photo frame are indicative of American social structure. Three of the five individuals in the photograph are white and two are black. Unlike whites, however, blacks sit in the back of the tram as well as in society. Authorities have been accused of having an anti-American structure.



Picture 2. "Indianapolis"

This photograph called "Indianapolis" was taken in 1955 in the state of India. The main theme of photography is that it offers an alternative criticism point. An African and American couple take a radical stand against the ongoing racist struggle in those years (Phillips, 2013, s. 7). The photograph consists entirely of American codes, both semiotic and in terms of

apparent meaning, because photography consists of indicators reflecting the existential structure of the period. A pair of jeans dressed as Harley Davidson motorcycles are an indication of racism.



Picture 3. "American Flag"

This photograph called "American Flag" was taken in 1957 in New Jersey. This photograph depicts women who are uncomfortable with the parade and who look through the window, including a critique of American life and culture. The date of the photograph coincided with a troubled period in the US in terms of women's rights. The fact that the flag deprived women of face and sound turned the semiotic code of the American flag here into a negative meaning. It is the American flag in the plain sense that causes the situation. On the other hand, the American state itself (Writing Visual Culture, 2014).



Picture 4. "Political Rally"

This photo, "Political Rally", was taken in 1956 during a political rally in Chicago. This man, who showed radical attitudes in the conduct of propaganda by extending his arms, was photographed as a visual representation of the political propaganda of the American codes.

The moment he extends his hands is the decisive moment for meaning. The years in which the photograph was taken, America is politically polarized. Political Rally is a radical indicator of this divergence. In particular, the clenched fists and the opened arms have an inclusive but obedient side meaning.



Picture 5. "Ranch Market"

This photo, "Ranch Market", was taken in Hollywood in 1956. Photography produces indicators both technically and in content. Hot dog, merry Christmas and other paintings in the square show the religious and cultural dimensions of American codes.

When Frank shot the Ranch Market, he preserved his own aesthetic, as in his other photographs. It has made the participation of American codes in these aesthetic photographs easier. All other photos are either too bright or too dark. There is imbalance and out of focus just like in this photo. Intentionally give photos a sense of uncertainty (Phillips, 2013, s. 20). That's why Frank's photographs are technically meaningful. This imbalance in his photographs is an indication of the general structure of American society. It is an indicator of the economic, cultural and social darkness and uncertainty of American society. This album has been subjected to so much criticism by society and American critics.



Picture 6. "Del Rio"



This photo, called “Del Rio”, was taken in Texas in 1956. The first thing that comes to mind when you look at the photo, which contains semiotic codes, is that cars isolate and separate people from the environment. However, when Frank looks at the comments he made about the photograph, it is understood that the photograph is actually personalized with the society. In short, like cars, it is a photographic reflection of how it is isolated from other societies in American society and that they see their nation above other nations (Phillips, 2013, s. 17).



Picture 7. “Drugstore lunch counter”

“Drugstore lunch counter” was taken in Detroit in 1955. Frank was captivated when he saw this environment. Because this environment is very different from what Europeans are in (Phillips, 2013, s. 40). Photography is a direct indication of twentieth century American society. Complete Americanism is a sign of fast food culture. After the establishment of the division of labour, the working class, alienated from its own production, was accustomed to the fast food culture that provided both cheaper and faster satisfaction in a very short time remaining from their work. This is the photographic form of modern Americanism in the codes underlying this photograph.



Picture 8. “Windows Store Windows”

This photo, “Windows Store Windows”, was taken in Washington in 1957. The photograph is semiotically similar to the previous photograph. It is a photograph that shows how important the role of consumerism is in American society (Phillips, 2013). This is a photo of people being bombed with signs, cards, newspapers, magazines and advertisements. In the photograph, on the one hand, a suit that has been put on sale is seen, on the one hand, the candidate who will market itself in the elections is seen. Moreover, another semiotic meaning lying in the photograph is that there is no difference between the suit behind the glass and the man in front of the glass. The purpose of both is to make him like the public.



Picture 9. “Drive in movie”

This photo, “Drive in movie”, was taken in 1955 at an outdoor cinema in the Detroit suburb. According to Frank, the main theme of photography is loneliness. This is one of the main indicators of American society in solitude. Because in the past, films were watched by people saying they don't know each other in a common area. However, there are people who are isolated from each other. Therefore, this photograph is one of the best examples of American individualization.



Picture 10. “Charleston ıştır”



This photo, “Charleston ıştır”, was taken in 1955 in South Carolina. It is one of the most touching photographs of the Americans series. The photo gives an image of American social inequality order. The white doll is in the centre of the image, indicating that everything is in the centre of the white. It also captures the essence of American racism. Because the expression of cold and righteousness on the white face and the expression of calm and oppression on the black nurse show the general narrative of an entire society (Yorker, 2017, s. 3)

### **List of References**

Writing Wisual Culture. (2014). Retrieved from:

<https://ucart100.wordpress.com/2014/02/12/robert-frank/> adresinden alındı

Cim, E. (2013). tarihinde erickimphotography.com: Retrieved from:

<http://erickimphotography.com/blog/2013/01/07/timeless-lessons-street-photographers-can-learn-from-robert-franks-the-americans/> adresinden alındı

Frank, R. (2018). 100photos.time.com. Retrieved from:

<http://100photos.time.com/photos/robert-frank-trolley-new-orleans> adresinden alındı

Greenough, S. (2015). Robert Frank and The Amricans. National Galery of Art. Youtube. New York.

Phillips. (2013). www.Artsy.net. Retrieved from: <https://www.artsy.net/article/phillips-robert-frank-this-american-life> adresinden alındı

Yorker, N. (2017). Eight Photographers on Their Favorite Image from Robert Frank’s “The Americans”. www.newyorker.com: Retrieved from:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/eight-photographers-on-their-favorite-image-from-robert-franks-the-americans> adresinden alınmıştır