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*Movie Premiere - Hollywood, 1955.* Robert Frank, Swiss, b. 1924

When photos from “The Americans” by Robert Frank, are first observed questions often arise. Was Mr. Frank purposely trying to make the photos look technically incorrect - grainy, out-of-focus and under or over developed? Did he hate America and therefore made his photographs look as bad as his opinion of the subject? I am not going to try to answer these questions in such a short essay. I will however, offer an opinion about the book and subject matter.

Mr. Frank was an experienced photographer when he set out to make this book in 1955. He was professionally trained in photography at a young age and prior to making this book, he worked for Harper’s Bazaar as a fashion photographer. I do not believe any photo he took was an accident, but that he had grainy, out of focus intentions. As with the photo, ‘Movie Premiere’, Mr. Frank often used Kodak Tri-X film which is a tolerant film usually used in low light situations when flash or studio lights are not desired. Robert used this film often on his America trip and most of the time it was not in low light situations. When this film is used in day light it gives it’s subject a high grain, speckled affect.

As in the photo, Movie Premiere, the details are too light in the highlight areas and the blacks are often filled in the shadows. The mid tones have way too much grain to be what “proper” photos are supposed to be. Sometimes high grain is used to have a soft, glow effect. Not with Mr. Frank. I believe he used the high grain and blown out highlights to “expose” how he felt about a conservative time in American History. As with ‘Movie Premiere’ Mr. Frank made the subject of the photo, movie star Kim Novack, look grainy and even out of focus. I believe this was because the real subject of this photo was the every day, typical American fans of Miss Novack’s and not the starlet herself. They were in focus and although the film made them grainy too, they weren’t as grainy as Kim was. Indeed, when you look at other photos in his book where he liked his subject, these photos are shot with a slower emulsion film, Plus-X, that showed little grain and had nice highlights and shadows.

I chose to write about “*Movie Premiere*” because I am drawn to things that are different. At first sight one might think this photo was taken by someone untrained in photography. Everything about this photo is “technically” wrong and yet the photo works and works well to get Mr. Frank’s emotional meaning across - money, power, class systems are bad and the underdogs in society are important, despite what the media and the art world thought. The art world hated “The Americans” at first, except for the young photographers. As with most young people, they loved the breaking of tradition and the evolving of their field in new directions. I am not young but I have never stopped admiring the “pushing of the envelope” or the people who aren’t afraid to try new things even when everyone thinks they are crazy for it.

As a press operator printing this photo, all normal rules have to be reinterpreted. Most of the time you start with a decent, well exposed photo and try to keep the shadows dark and the highlights from blowing out, or losing dots. With this photo, the highlights are already too light, with loss of image and the shadows are already too dark and filled in. My goal will be to try not to “make it look good” but to maintain the original intent of the photo.

“Good” in this case is making it look bad but true to the original. I will use a densitometer to measure the light and dark areas of the original so I know what I am shooting for - taking several readings for both light and dark. The large solid black behind the “fans” will be difficult to maintain without also filling in the too light areas of highlights. I will squeeze the blanket a little tighter, so the ink is pushed into the paper without having to use as much ink. I will have to pull more “check” sheets than normal to recheck the densitometer readings. I used three photos to represent what I mean by all of this. The photo on the left has the highlights blown out, with few dots or definition.

The photo on the far right was scanned or printed like one normally would, trying to make the shadows dark, but not lose definition in the light areas and also ridding it of as much of the grain as possible. The far right photo technically looks better than the other two but is not correct. The middle photo actually shows the true photo, fairly close to how the original is supposed to print. I will try to maintain the printing of this photo as true to Mr. Frank’s intentions as possible.

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