trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Was “American” Photography a European Invention?

Clara Bouveresse

This paper explores the dialogue between European and “American” photography from the end of the 1930s to the 1980s, focusing on the character of Robert Capa, a founding member of Magnum Photos, on the debates within this cooperative, and on Robert Frank’s 1958 seminal opus, The Americans.

PUBLISHED	April 15, 2022
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	English
COLLECTIONS	Americanization through the Arts
TOPICS	Visual Arts
SPACES AND PLACES	North Atlantic · Europe · North America
PERIODS	The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	photography, 20th century, journalism, cinema
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/was-american-photography-a-european-invention/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clara Bouveresse

Associate professor · Laboratoire Synergies Langues Arts et Musique (SLAM) · Evry/Paris Saclay · France

Clara Bouveresse is an associate professor at the University of Evry and a photography specialist. She published in 2017 a History of Magnum Photos, based on her PhD dissertation. In 2019, she curated the exhibition Unretouched Women. Eve Arnold, Abigail Heyman, Susan Meiselas at the Rencontres d'Arles, with an exhibition catalogue published by Actes Sud. She also published in the Photo File collection (Actes Sud, Thames and Hudson) the three volumes dedicated to women photographers.

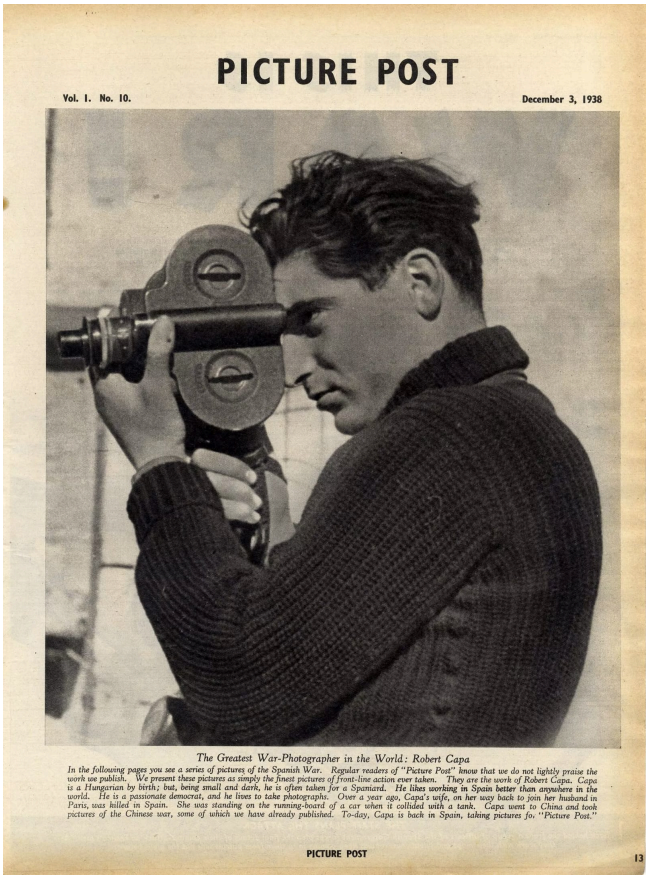
This paper [1] explores the dialogue between European and "American" [2] photography from the end of the 1930s to the 1980s, when much of the photography market revolved around illustrated magazines and before the rise of digital photography. It focuses on the character of Robert Capa, a founding member of Magnum Photos, on the debates within this cooperative, which was a hub for transatlantic exchanges as it was based simultaneously in Paris and New York, and on Robert Frank's 1958 seminal opus, *The Americans*.

It argues that Magnum's European photographers "Americanized" themselves while vocally resisting "Americanization." In doing so, they defined what "Americanization" meant in their context: Hungarian-born Robert Capa invented a character dubbed "the great American photographer," European photographers contributed to the exotic genre of "Americana," and American practices such as corporate photography, color experiments or New Journalism were reinterpreted by French photographers. This form of "Americanization" was in fact a European creation, stemming from the work of immigrants settled in the United States and from the fascination mixed with aversion of European photographers for the American scene. [3]

Inventing the "Great American Photographer"

In 1936, young Hungarian photographer based in Paris Endre Ernő Friedmann (1913-1954) decided he would sell his pictures under the name of "Robert Capa." His partner at the time, German-born Gerta Pohorylle (1910-1937), was to go by the name of Gerda Taro, as she pursued her own career as a photographer until her untimely death in Spain the following year. Both were living in exile due to the rise of fascism because they were Jewish and leftists. In the context of anti-Semitic France, setting aside their Jewish-sounding names was a strategic decision. It was also a form of empowerment: creating themselves new identities, they would reclaim ownership of their destinies, moving beyond the constraints of exile.

These brand new names also served as a selling point: photographs produced by Friedmann were henceforth attributed to this mysterious Robert Capa, presented as a famous American photographer. This fashionable tag ensured their appeal on the French illustrated magazines market. American-sounding names had been popular in France since the end of the First World War, when Parisian nightclubs started using them to attract the crowds. [4]



PICTURE POST

Vol. I. No. 10. December 3, 1938

The Greatest War-Photographer in the World: Robert Capa

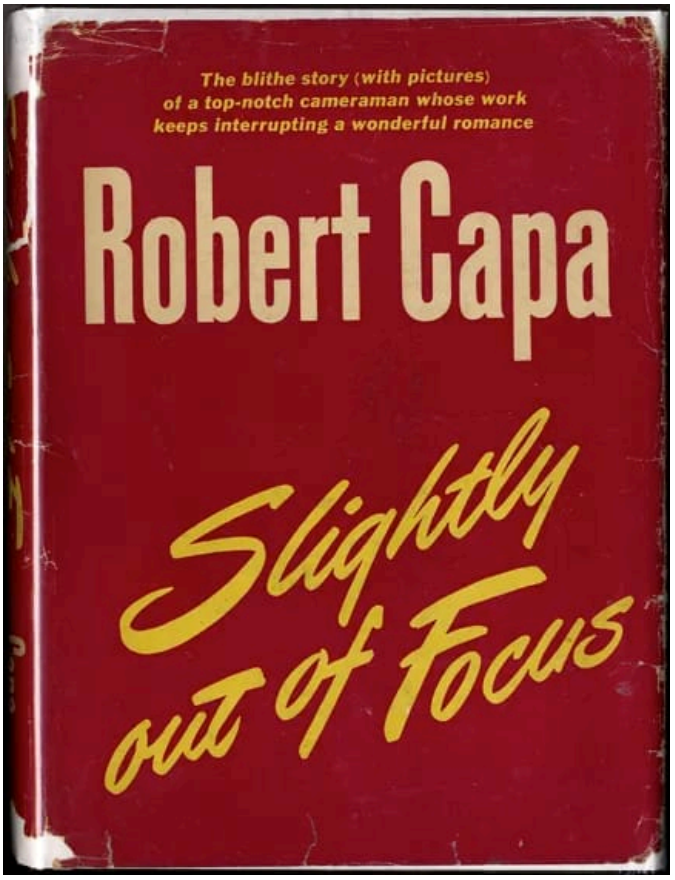
In the following pages you see a series of pictures of the Spanish War. Regular readers of "Picture Post" know that we do not lightly praise the work we publish. We present these pictures as simply the finest pictures of front-line action ever taken. They are the work of Robert Capa. Capa is a Hungarian by birth; but, being small and dark, he is often taken for a Spaniard. He likes working in Spain better than anywhere in the world. He is a passionate democrat, and he lives to take photographs. Over a year ago, Capa's wife, on her way back to join her husband in Paris, was killed in Spain. She was standing on the running-board of a car when it collided with a tank. Capa went to China and took pictures of the Chinese war, some of which we have already published. To-day, Capa is back in Spain, taking pictures fo. "Picture Post."

PICTURE POST 13

Picture Post, December 3, 1938

Source: National Museum Wales

Capa soon enjoyed a wide success with his pictures of the Spanish civil war, and was starring in *Picture Post* in 1938 as "The Greatest War Photographer in the World." According to the magazine, even though he was born in Hungary, Capa was "often taken for a Spaniard," and remained first and foremost "a passionate democrat," who "lives to take photographs." A seasoned traveler, Capa did not belong to any specific place but embodied a new, borderless profession. By that time, he had already published the well-known and controversial photograph of a falling Republican soldier during the Spanish Civil War on both sides of the Atlantic (*Vu* in September 1936, followed by *Life* in July 1937). He went on to document the allied landings on Normandy beaches in 1944, recounting his experience three years later in his autobiographic story, *Slightly out of Focus*.



Robert Capa, *Slightly out of Focus*, 1947

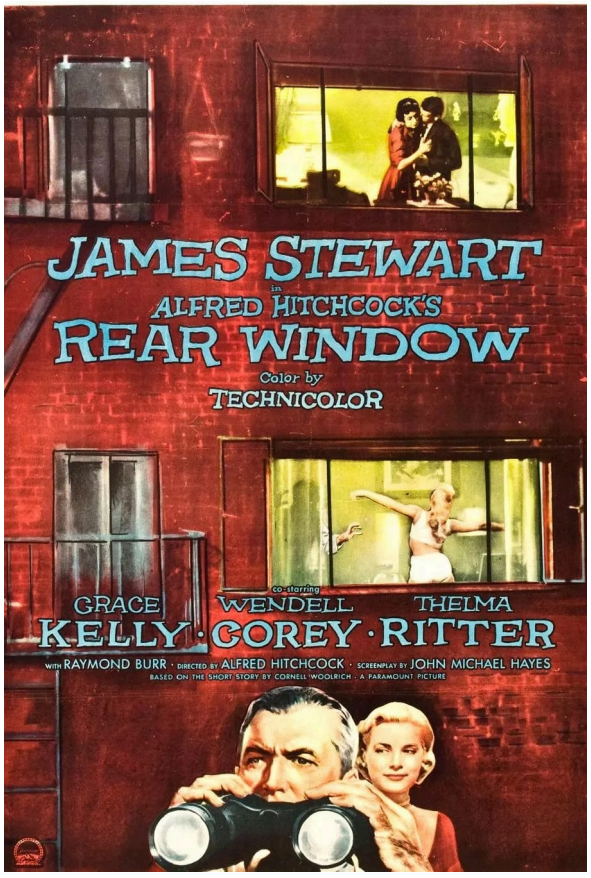
Source: Robert Capa, Slightly out of Focus (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947)

Capa was a charismatic man of the world who created his own legend, starting with his cosmopolitan and elegant name. Equipped with a strong business sense, he decided, at a time when photojournalists were not recognized as authors in their own rights, to "make a name for himself," literally, in order to better sell his pictures. He invented the character of the adventurous war reporter, a job which went beyond the shooting of photographs, as it now included their promotion. Pictures had to be sequenced and captioned to create a story, and they were attached to their famous author's brand.

In the interwar period, many illustrated magazines did not credit photographers, but some started highlighting the signature of their star-reporters, giving them a new status. In 1947, Capa and fellow European photojournalists David Seymour (born in Poland), Henri Cartier-Bresson (France) and George Rodger (United-Kingdom) went on to create a photographers' cooperative, Magnum Photos. Only two of the founding members were living in the United States: William Vandivert, a staff photographer for *Life* since 1938, and his wife Rita, head of the New York office and first president of the group. Italian-born Maria Eisner was in charge of the Paris office.

The agency's business model was based on the claim of authorship. The idea was that photographers could sell their pictures to many different clients over the years, retaining their copyright, instead of letting magazines keep their negatives and reprint them. Magnum participated in the defense and promotion of photojournalism as a profession, and became an elitist club gathering some of the great names of the trade.

An entrepreneur and mythmaker, Capa was fascinated by the movie culture and in particular American films. His name was probably inspired by that of filmmaker Frank Capra, while "Gerda Taro" was presumably a reference to Greta Garbo. Capa considered being an actor at various points in his career, and he was indeed transformed into a movie character, though unwillingly, by none other than Alfred Hitchcock in his 1954 film *Rear Window*. Originally based on a short story from 1942 by Cornell Woolrich, *It Had to Be Murder*, its plot was also, according to Hitchcock's biographer Donald Spoto, inspired by the romance between Robert Capa and Ingrid Bergman. The two had met in Paris in 1945. When the actress returned to the United States for the shooting of Hitchcock's *Notorious*, Capa accompanied her and took pictures of the set for *Life* magazine. Capa's personal life was as cosmopolitan as his career, and crossed the path of other expatriates who contributed to shape American mass culture in the middle of the 20th century.



Alfred Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, 1954

Source: IMDb

Spoto argues that the British-born film director was then obsessed with Bergman and could not fail to notice her fascination with Capa, whom she wanted to marry. Hitchcock could not understand how Capa could refuse her, and he decided to recreate their story in *Rear Window*. Like Capa, the main character, L. B. Jefferies, is a photojournalist working for *Life* magazine who lives in Greenwich village. Jefferies' left leg is in a cast, mirroring Capa's unfortunate situation in 1947, when he had to delay a trip to Russia with writer John Steinbeck after the latter broke his kneecap. The film was completed at the beginning of 1954 and released in the summer, after Capa's death on a landmine in Vietnam.

Hitchcock liked to include inside jokes or biographical allusions in his films, yet he never referred to the Bergman-Capa story when discussing *Rear Window*. Most importantly, the movie questions voyeurism and the ethics of photojournalism. The main character cannot help spying on his neighbors, at the risk of

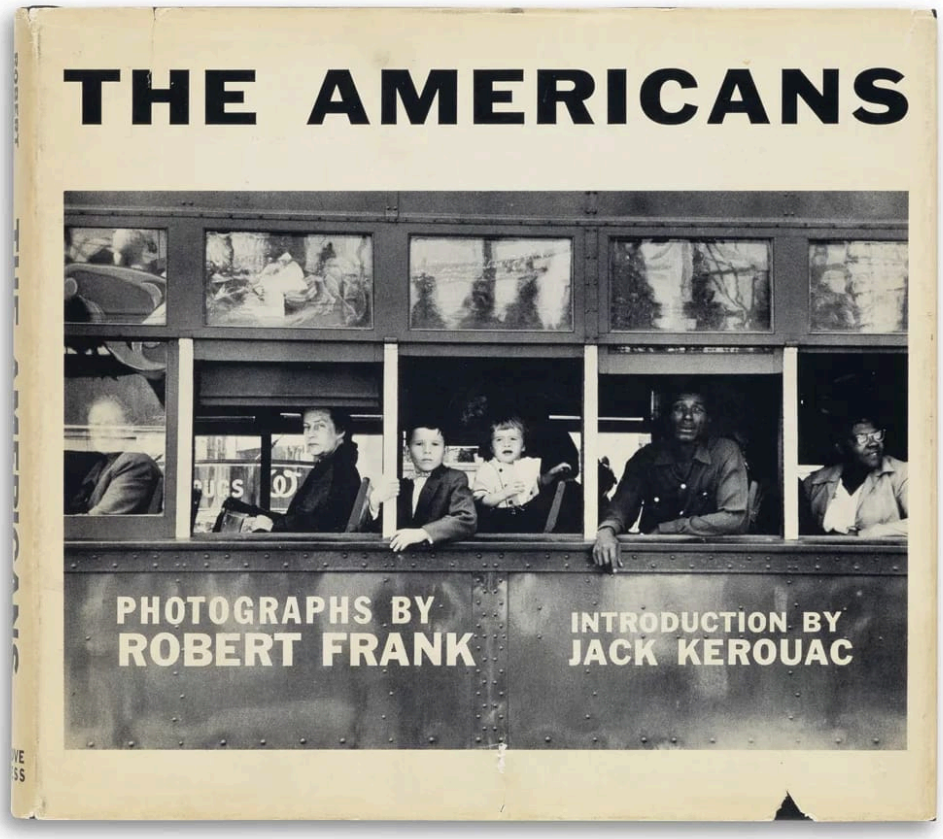
his life. The photojournalist is now transformed into a full-fledged, yet ambiguous hero of fiction. *Rear Window* suggests that the profession had gained visibility, as Capa became a glamorous figure, inspiring generations of young photographers who would step into the shoes of their pioneering model.

The character of the "Great American photographer" owes its appeal to the creation of a mythology surrounding the profession, stemming from Capa's and his colleagues' efforts, the magazines' self-promotion strategies and the interest of the film industry in the fictional potential of these adventurous lives. This character is "American" in so far as he is famous enough to appear in Hollywood movies, which were already a major vehicle of the United States' culture.

Robert Frank's Americana

In France, photographers admired the model set on the other side of the Atlantic, even though many authors based there came from Europe, just like Capa. Publishing in *Life* was their dream as the prestigious magazine gave pride of place to photographs. This fascination gave birth, in 1949, to the French weekly *Paris-Match*, directly inspired by *Life*, which had itself been based on the model of European interwar illustrated magazines.

The appeal of the American publishing scene was such that many Europeans took initiatory trips there, reminiscent of Jack Kerouac's travels in his 1957 book *On the Road*. A year after Kerouac's book was published to notoriety and acclaim, Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank (1924-2019) published the influential photobook *The Americans*, with accompanying text by none other than Kerouac himself. French publisher Robert Delpire first released this seminal opus in 1958, before Grove Press printed it in New York in 1959.



Robert Frank, *The Americans*, Grove Press, 1959

Source: National Gallery of Art

Frank's bleak portrayal of the country sanctioned the popular genre of "Americana" in photography, which has inspired countless practitioners ever since, many of them foreigners in search of exotic views. In his application to a Guggenheim grant, Frank outlined a list of potential subjects: "a town at night, a parking lot, a supermarket, a highway [...], the dictation of taste, the dream of grandeur, advertising, neon lights." Since then, open roads, motels, gas stations, diners, water tanks and the like have turned into visual tropes, evoking paintings by Edward Hopper as well as landscape photographs by Stephen Shore. The term "Americana" is better-known, since the 1990s, in relation to folk music, and it was even reinterpreted, fittingly, by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in her 2013 novel *Americanah*, which evokes the outlook of Nigerian immigrants on the country. In Nigeria, the word refers to "people who pretend to be Americanized or have been Americanized." "Americana" as a genre describes, in many ways, the relationship of foreigners within the United States and their insight into its cultural specificities. As Frank wrote, "it is fair to assume that when an observant American travels abroad his eye will see freshly; and that the reverse may be true when a European eye looks at the United States."

The Americans reinterprets an exploratory method which is characteristic of American photography, an "archival impulse" combining the need for taxonomic detail and the visual construction of a nation, "from the early explorations, to the more ethnographic and sociological surveys of the 1930s and 40s; to the systematic and abstract inventories of the New Topographics in the 1970s." [5] The New Deal's Farm Security Administration photographic campaign was the classic example of such ventures, as it went beyond its initial goal of documenting the country's rural problems and the government's initiatives to

solve them. FSA director Roy Stryker, "driven by his nostalgia for his youth and love of all things American", sought out to create a "pictorial sourcebook of America," devising a careful and comprehensive editing system for the archive. [6]

Robert Frank's own project was "to photograph freely [and make] a broad voluminous picture record of things American," showing "what one naturalized American finds to see in the United States that signifies the kind of civilization born here and spreading elsewhere." The resulting book was a highly personal—and influential—variation on Stryker's sentimental archive. In the catalogue for his landmark MoMA exhibit *Mirrors and Windows* (1978), John Szarkowski wrote that Robert Frank, along with *Aperture* magazine founder Minor White, were "if not the best, surely the exemplary American photographers of the fifties." [7] Frank was thus "hypercanonized" as he epitomized the link between national identity and photography as its quintessential medium: his book was seen as "a moment of special intensity in the photographic revelation of 'the truth' about the American nation." [8]

Americanizing European Photography

As European photographers "Americanized" the United-States, conversely, American photographers were eager to pursue "French" topics and participated in the circulation of a romantic image of Paris, which was a popular place for tourists after the war, as can be seen in various movies such as *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) and *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957). Humanist photography, associated with the fame of Robert Doisneau, Willy Ronis and Edouard Boubat, inspired American travelers when they visited Paris: Bruce Davidson, for one, created a series of portraits of the widow of an impressionist painter, who knew Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin, in her attic in Montmartre, with the Moulin Rouge in the background (1956). Dennis Stock encapsulated the myth of Paris, city of love, in his depiction of a waiter who does not dare to interrupt two lovers kissing at the café de Flore.

Robert Capa's cooperative, Magnum Photos, was a hub for such exchanges as it had been settled ever since its creation in two offices, one in New York and one in Paris. Stock and Davidson, both Magnum members (joining in 1951 and 1958, respectively), were measuring themselves against their European colleagues, starting with founding member Henri Cartier-Bresson, who nicknamed himself the "Queen Mother" [9] of the group.

Even though European photographers were attracted by the American scene, which offered venues to showcase and publish their work, and sometimes owed it part of their success—Henri Cartier-Bresson, for one, had been exhibited in New York as early as in 1935—, they also despised some American practices. The two offices entertained a "love-hatred" relationship fueled by biases, even though many members went back and forth or were born on one side of the Atlantic while working on the other. In 1963, German-born Erich Hartmann, based in New York, wrote that "business methods in France are ever so much more murderous and equivocal than in New York." [10] He had to deal with "illogical Frenchmen (...) shouting internationalism on one hand [while] they fear—genuinely—American 'domination' of Magnum/Paris." [11] French photographers indeed sought to defend their "cultural exception" and fought against their colleagues' perceived mercantilism. Magnum's New York office had developed the field of "corporate photography," taking commissions to illustrate the activities of a company, often to be printed in annual reports. This lucrative business was met with skepticism by their European counterparts and tarnished the image of the American market, even though many would end up taking such contracts, including Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Cartier-Bresson was nonetheless at the forefront of these debates as he stood for Magnum's ethics and founding principles, issuing ranting declarations predicting the demise of the agency. He also criticized the interest of the American art market in vintage prints, which amounted to an absurd fetishism, as well as the use of color photography: "an emasculated vision, color photography only appeals to magazine sellers." [12]

Color was frowned upon as it was associated with advertising and sensationalism. Yet American photographers started experimenting with its artistic potential, and were soon followed by a new generation of Europeans, for whom it was an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their elders. At Magnum, Paris-based photographers were also interested in the rise of "New Journalism" and the example set by *Rolling Stone* magazine: departing from the universalist and humanist spirit of their predecessors, now equated with the Western gaze, they sought subjective approaches, asserting their personal viewpoints.

In the Summer of 1981, *Libération* published daily reports of Raymond Depardon's exploration of New York City, associating words and pictures, leading to the publication of *Correspondance new-yorkaise*. In New York, Depardon developed a meditative approach which would become his trademark, just like Henri Cartier-Bresson first outlined a selection of his best pictures for his exhibitions at Julien Levy's gallery (1935) and at the Museum of Modern Art (1947), which was then shaping its role as the "judgment seat of photography," along modernist aesthetic principles that were in turn largely influenced by European art. These two founding figures of French photography thus established defining features of their practices on the other side of the Atlantic, reinterpreting American contributions to advance their own art.

Conclusion

"Americanization" seems to have little to do with the identity or cultural specificities of the United States. It reveals, in fact, how European photographers fantasize "America": Robert Capa built on the fascination for American movies to market his own persona; exotic clichés and Robert Frank's work shaped the genre of 'Americana'; and practices developed on the US market, such as corporate commissions, the artistic use of color and the assertion of subjective viewpoints in the context of New Journalism were rejected or reclaimed by European photographers. "Americanization" applies to discourses, business practices, artistic experiments, ways of behaving and being; it can be a selling point or a point of non-return. It was shaped by European-born photographers, who emphasized and theorized the cultural differences on both sides of the Atlantic. The reverse was also true, as many Americans contributed to the definition of "French" topics, as early collectors of classic figures such as Eugene Atget or as visitors in search of humanist clichés.

But in the end, were those differences so acute? They were staged in discourses and belonged to a broader context of soft power competition, in the context of France's emerging attempts at protecting what came to be defined as a form of "cultural exception." Yet the photography market was, after the war, globalizing, especially at Magnum, and photographers did not "belong" to one specific place. Many were cosmopolitan and had no permanent home, just like Capa, who "Americanized" himself but kept traveling back and forth, just like his colleagues. These numerous exchanges speak for a reduction of cultural specificities at a time when they became increasingly emphasized in certain discourses, which almost ring like a swan song.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kozloff, Max. “Photography: The Coming to Age of Color.” In *Art Forum*, 32, 1975.

Szarkowski, John. *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978.

Spoto, Donald. *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999.

Phillips, Christopher. "The Judgment Seat of Photography." *October* 22 (1982): 27–63. https://doi.org/10.2307/778362.

Mitchell, W. J. T. "The Ends of American Photography. Robert Frank as National Medium." In *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, 272–93. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Whelan, Richard. *Robert Capa*. New York: Knopf, 1985.

Tournès, Ludovic. *Américanisation. Une Histoire mondiale (XVIIIe-XXIe siècles)*. Paris: Fayard, 2020.

Smith, C. Zoe. "The History of Black Star Picture Agency: Life's European Connection." Gainesville, Florida: The U.S. Department of Education, 1984. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED244286.pdf.

Glissant, Edouard. "Poetics of Relation." In *Participation*, by Claire Bishop. London: Whitechapel, 2006.

Bravo, Monica, and Emily Voelker. "Re-Reading American Photographs." *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (2020). https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/11/Bravo-and-Voelker-Re-Reading-American-Photographs.pdf.

Bouveresse, Clara. *Histoire de l'agence Magnum. L'art d'être photographe*. Paris: Flammarion, 2017.

Appel, Mary Jane. "The Duplicate File: New Insights into the FSA." *Archives of American Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (2015): 4–27.

Greenough, Sarah, ed. *Looking In: Robert Frank's "The Americans."* Washington, Göttingen: National Gallery of Art, Steidl, 2009.

Durand, Régis. "The Archive and the Dream." *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, no. 39 (1989): 7–11. https://doi.org/10.3406/rfea.1989.1347.

Campany, David. *The Open Road*. New York: Aperture, 2014.

Belton, John. *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Baumont-Maillet, Laure. "Cette photographie qu'on appelle humaniste." In *La photographie humaniste 1945-1968*, edited by Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Françoise Denoyelle, and Dominique Versavel. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2006.

Wolfe, Tom. *The New Journalism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

NOTES

1 Special thanks are due to Didier Aubert for his editing, expertise and knowledge of Robert Frank's project, and to Natalie Zelt for her thoughtful comments.

2 "American" is henceforth used to refer to the United-States and not the two continents, reflecting standard practices and the cultural influence of this country.

3 This process may be connected to the "relation identities" defined by Edouard Glissant as opposed to "root identities," as well as the global inclusion of newcomers who add to the nation's "unlimited community" of immigrants, as Ludovic Tournès pointed out.

4 Famous "dancings" included the Pigall's bar, the Camil's Bar, the Duque's Dancing and the Savoy Dancing-Club.

5 Régis Durand, "The Archive and the Dream," *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines* 39 (1989): 9.

6 Mary Jane Appel, "The Duplicate File: New Insights into the FSA," *Archives of American Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (2015): 6.

7 John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 18.

8 W.J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want—The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 276.

9 Letter from Henri Cartier-Bresson to George and Jinx Rodger, 28 January 1957, Jinx Rodger's private archives.

10 Letter from Erich Hartmann to Wayne Miller, 29 July 1963, Magnum Foundation archives, New York, MF010-004-003.

11 Letter from Erich Hartmann to Gedeon de Margitay, 26 August 1963, Magnum Foundation archives, New York, MF010-004-003.

12 Interview of Henri Cartier-Bresson by Yves Bourde, *Le Monde*, September 5, 1974, 13.