

Frank's America. Clement's Copenhagen Permission to Stare

Miles Orvell

Is there a character to a place apart from the construction of that place by the perceiver? Is Frank's America America? Is Clement's Copenhagen Copenhagen? Clearly not, at least in any definitive sense. Yet seeing these versions of the place we see the place again, in the newly established version. The strong artist can establish a way of seeing a place for us, can even define that place in a way that becomes, if not definitive at least readily available for our reference; and that surely is what both Frank and Clement have done with their respective places. And each has functioned, to varying degrees, as an outsider, with a strongly individualized vision that seems magnetized by certain qualities in the place that draws the camera's attention. But to put them on the same map is to look at each with a sense of renewed possibilities and, necessarily, with a sense of mutually defined compass points: for any bicultural comparison inevitably shapes a field of force that is magnetized by the two poles in question, each characteristic answering to the other.

I first saw photographs by Krass Clement as they were pulled out from portfolios and spread on a large table in the splendid inner sanctum of The Royal Library's photography

collection. Bjørn Ochsner, with typical generosity, had offered to show me some highlights of the collection he had been building for decades, and I was eager to remedy my embarrassing condition, for I was lecturing in Copenhagen American photography and feeling uncomfortably chauvinistic, given my ignorance about the culture of my hosts. I recall that Ochsner insisted on showing me, in addition to some rare historical treasures, the work of contemporary photographers, and I was quite surprised at the variety and quality of Danish production. Ever gentle in his manner, Ochsner was pleased to be thus shattering my ignorance, and this was evidently one of those interesting moments when someone who knows absolutely nothing about a subject confronts someone who knows absolutely everything. Clement, among a few others, especially stood out in pictures that declared an unusual eye that organized the frame in fresh ways, with wit and intelligence. Later, when friends mentioned his *Byen bag regnen*, recently pulished, I was afraid I might be disappointed by pictures that would attempt to capture the city with the same banality that other beautiful and charming cities have been captured. But Clement's Copenhagen photographs



Political rally.

From Robert Frank: *The Americans*.

ketplace with oppositional force, and was decried by readers who saw in its criticism of America – by an outsider, a foreigner, a Swiss no less – a harsh indictment of a society that was becoming fiercely proud of its stature and accomplishments, including the TV codification of the fun-loving American family, with its white picket fence, white laundry, white teeth, and white skin. Frank punctures these complacencies of 1950's America with each snapping of the shutter, showing us instead an America that was riven by racism, by divisions of social class, an America where intimacies were guarded, where isolation was commonplace, and where public life was reduced to empty political rituals and the mediated faces of the television screen, where people were constantly on the move, whether on motorcycle or in the automobile.

Frank pictured this America from the outside, and it was an America of outsides: of roads, of city streets and city parks. When Frank did move indoors it was to view interior spaces that were still »public« – roadside diners, cafeterias, elevators, banks, urinals, or private spaces as seen through a car or trolley window, or looking through a barber shop door. Yet in these public spaces, Frank spied on the American, provoking in some cases hostile stares as the presence of the camera became suddenly known; and in other cases showing us candid photographs that reveal a side of American life that – however public – we would not readily publicize. For if Frank was, as Kerouac said, a poet, he was also, in the end, a satirist, and his

immediately struck me as the powerful work of an original viewpoint, although they also brought to mind a work that had performed a similar visual diagnosis of a place and people, Robert Frank's *The Americans*; I wanted to look more closely at the comparison.

Frank's *The Americans* is of course the earlier book, published first in a French edition (1958) and then, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac, in a 1959 American edition. Viewing it now, we are in the presence of a classic, a work that has been more influential on post-War American photography, perhaps, than any other; yet we remember that it entered the American mar-



Elevator, Miami Beach.
From Robert Frank: *The Americans*.

ironies cut deeply into American pretensions. He was the master of the telling gesture: the politico's gently coaxing hand, the polite tilt of the genteel head at a cocktail party, the intensity of the gambler's arm as it reaches to the chips; and

he was a master too of the unconscious ironies of everyday scenes – the window with Eisenhower portrait and tuxedo, the gasoline pumps in the desert, the office building foregrounded by a facade of popular magazines. Above all, Frank had mastered the art of implied narrative, of pictorial juxtaposition in a series of images: a cross-bearing Mississippi preacher followed by a statue of St. Francis in a Los Angeles tho-



Santa Fe, New Mexico.
From Robert Frank:
The Americans.



Convention Hall, Chicago.
From Robert Frank:
The Americans.

roughfare, followed by crosses marking the highway death spot; the banker at his desk followed by the man leaning against the outside of a warehouse; the charity ball dinner table followed by the lonely meal of the man in the cafeteria, followed by the jammed lunch counter; and the two concluding series recording the sad public postures of Frank's Americans, whether sleeping against a tree, or staring through an auto windshield.

Despite the sociological consistency of Frank's vision, his thinking was emphatically visual, with a wit and elegance that was half-concealed by the rough and functional technical look of the images: glaring lights, blurred spots, impenetrable shadows, tilted frames. And these photographs that had at first shocked the eye have gradually turned themselves into a sourcebook for contemporary American photography, radiating influences in a dozen directions.

You turn the pages of Krass Clement's *Byen bag regnen* («City Behind the Rain») and you see immediately the influence of Frank in the way that public spaces and public rituals are treated with a synecdochal terseness. Moreover, the images are spontaneous and fluid, with clear evidence of the influential post-War Frank aesthetic adapted to Danish weather: the density of shadows, the glare of lights, the occasional graininess, the play of reflections on glass, the use of windows to frame views, the vapor and humidity of the atmosphere. All of this declares itself as the sign of a spontaneous art, the coded roughness of the camera as observational notebook. Yet Clement is also clearly tied to a pre-Frank tradition of modernist formality as well. In all but a few images in *Byen bag regnen*, the four edges of the frame create a space that is

strikingly ordered: verticals, horizontals, diagonals cut the picture plane with visible force, organizing the elements of the composition harmoniously. We are conscious of the way the frame *contains* the image in Clement, marking the photographer's control, in a way that we are not in Frank, whose images seem sectioned from a reality that continues on beyond the frame. But if Clement's pictures evince a more formal control, Frank's book as a whole is the more conscious artifact, with deliberate mini-narratives inscribed in the progression of its images and with an overall coherence – note the ambitious and definitive title – that adds up to a critique of post-War American culture. Clement's book, though it expresses a unified sensibility, is a deliberately, almost disarmingly, modest production; eschewing the heroism of Frank's work and eschewing narrative closure, Clement offers a more randomly composed whole.

Where Frank seems to have invented a spontaneous style to match the rough freedom of the country he was traveling through for the first time, Clement's Copenhagen is a more knowingly European work, part of a photographic culture that encompasses Bill Brandt's severe British geometries of black and white, Brassai's French night life and cafe denizens, Cartier-Bresson's accidents of the street, decisively captured, and Atget's intense meditation on Parisian streets and shopwindows. Above all, Clement has assimilated Copenhagen to a tradition of European surrealism that is absent in Frank's America: the suitcase in the window staring at us with one «eye» (p. 105); the blurred figure creeping across the public writing room (p. 33); the Mona Lisa with light bulb face (p. 119); the



model leg suspended outside the shop window (p. 134); the nocturnal landscape with car wash sign (p. 147); and – Clement’s last three images – the flattened glove on the sidewalk, the battered and bloody bed outside the hospital, the umbrella-sheltered view of the corridor of trees.

Clement, like Frank, has mastered the interplay between subject and place, so that we read these pictures as the record of character given

Seng bag Kommunehospitalet.

From Krass Clement: *Byen bag regnen*.

shape by the edges of the buildings, the frames of doorways, the surrounding artifacts of a civilization. And here – in the particulars of social pathology – the strongest differences emerge between Frank’s Americans and Clement’s Danes. Frank recorded an America in the 1950’s



Jernhandler, Nørrebro.

From Krass Clement: *Byen bag regnen.*

in which solitary people stare into a space with a kind of indolence and boredom; in which rituals of grief and joy seem alike shrouded in a kind of silence. Frank's Americans are a people in love with the flag, with celebrities, with movies and television, a people for whom the

road, with its diners and gas stations and vast empty spaces, is a natural habitat. Frank also perceived the centrality of the family to the American society: picnics with children, family gatherings, the clinging together of couples as they make a space for themselves against a background of solitary exclusions.

If the Americans are generally staring into

space, or else at the mediated images of television or movies, Clement's Danes are most commonly shown staring at one another, or talking at (or with) one another or otherwise engaged in some act of social communication. Danes looking at other Danes is in fact one of the major themes of this volume (how different from Frank): the intimacy of conversation (p. 45); a couple dancing at a street party, while others watch (p. 70); pedestrians observing someone sitting on steps or fiddling with a bicycle (p. 72, p. 85); a woman staring at a friend with thoughtful concern (p. 96); a tiny man looking up at two teenagers as they talk on a street (p. 98); an elderly woman staring with irritation at a bored child who is banging on a bus stop pole (p. 113); two men staring at their friend who is sitting on a table before them (p. 118). And many more. These are all pictures that contain stories we shall never know in their entirety, yet Clement, like a photojournalist-manque, tantalizes us with significant clues. Other pictures show subjects looking not at other persons, but at windows, posters, objects, scenes of indecipherable meaning (pp. 31, 32, 130, 149). We are fascinated by all this looking, as we ourselves look, assiduously piecing together the enigmas before us. The social glance that Clement analyzes with such nuances is the index of a society that is intimately keyed to behaviors, that responds with curiosity and skepticism to its members.

The act of looking is inscribed here in yet another way, more explicitly connected with the photographic gaze. Frank drew an occasional hostile or curious stare from his subjects, but Clement has given us a series of portraits in which his subjects stare at the photographer

with directness and frankness, whether children at play (pp. 18, 25), or women in a tavern (pp. 47, 140) or behind a store window (p. 64), or whether his subject is at home (p. 64) or on the street (pp. 74, 135); in one unusual image, taken at a May Day celebration, Clement receives a mockingly hostile stare, a stare that itself elicits some disapproving stares from several bystanders (p. 82). If the subject stares back it is because the camera is itself staring at the subject, and in one complex instant Clement integrates several lines of vision: a man stares at another man whose dog is relieving himself on the street (under the watchful stare of his master) while the photographer's shadow marks his own presence, staring at the scene as a whole (p. 112).

Clement's consciousness of the way photography interposes itself between subject and photographer is revealed at such moments, but we are even more aware of the conscious ironizing of vision in certain other images, where Clement's humor (a rather mordant humor, one should say) makes itself visible: dentist's office, with the patient's open mouth matched by the gaping window looking toward the street (p. 26); the strands of hair carefully arranged on a bald pate (p. 97); the tuxedoed man holding forth in an elegant dining room (p. 19); the sensationally lurid kiss (p. 123); the crude fondling of a woman's nipple in a parody of infantile fascination with the breast (p. 103). Although Clement marks himself as a marginal man here, a voyeur, these are images that derive from an intimate knowledge of the society, in a way that was unavailable to the outsider Robert Frank.

Clement's emphasis is on the human subject,



St. Petersburg, Florida.
From Robert Frank: *The Americans*.

but one must return in the end to the city itself, the place that shapes character. Just as Frank had revealed a landscape of open spaces or of parks as the backdrop for his view of the Americans, so Clement shows us a quite opposite environment of enclosure – of walls, streets, doorways, windows; where we do see, on occa-

sion, an open sky, it is framed by an urban landscape. And while there are a few daylight shots in *Byen bag regnen*, the overall atmosphere of the book is nocturnal, or twilight. It is too early to know whether Clement will have created a stable reference point for Denmark's self-image in the way that Frank's vision of America endures as a perennially significant one for Americans, especially college students. In any case, I find myself reading the images in *Byen bag reg-*



Reaktion på racistisk tilr b.
From Krass Clement: *Byen bag regnen*.

nen even as I end this essay, going back to them yet again with fascination, looking at them the way the man on the street (p. 69) is looking at some photographs he has just pulled from an envelope, reading them as he walks.



Forårsdag i Classensgade.
From Krass Clement:
Byen bag regnen.



Café Det runde Hjørne,
Hedebygade.
From Krass Clement:
Byen bag regnen.