Frank in his studio, New York
Photograph © Michael Ackerman

ROBERT FRANK

The Swiss-born photographer and filmmaker, who captured the essence of America in the 1950s, has the camera turned on him for a documentary that sheds new light on his lesser-known material.

Words **Andy Thomas** Images **Lisa Rinzler © Assemblage Films LLC**

"I hate these fucking interviews [...] I can't stand it, you know, to be pinned in front of a camera. Because I do that to people, I don't want it done to me." So announces Robert Frank in *Don't Blink*, a documentary film by Laura Israel. As Frank's film editor for more than 25 years, Israel has had unprecedented access to create an intimate and revealing portrait of one of the 20th century's most influential, but equally private, photographers and filmmakers.

Frank is best known for *The Americans*, his collection of black-and-white photographs shot across the United States in the mid 1950s. His camera-vérité style and photographic pursuit of truth has inspired everyone from Annie Leibovitz to William Eggleston. And you only have to look at Michael Penn's 'The Philadelphia Project' to feel his influence on contemporary street photography. But it wasn't just in still photography that Frank created his radical aesthetic. Shot in 1959 and narrated by Jack Kerouac, his first film, *Pull My Daisy*, was one of the defining documents of the Beat Generation. He is perhaps best known as a filmmaker for the controversial *Cocksucker Blues*, documenting the Rolling Stones' 1972 tour of the US.

Frank went on to make more than 30 films, many hidden in the archive until the release of a recent box set edited by Israel. Her relationship with Frank began in the late 1980s through filmmaker Michael Shamberg. "He was a friend of mine and did a lot of the New Order videos," Israel tells me over the phone from New York. "I used to edit a lot of his videos and one day he said to me, 'You are going to do one with Robert Frank.' I was so excited because I loved his work." This video was for New Order's 'Run' from 1989. "I remember the first time I worked with Robert," she says. "This was back in the days of tape and you had to fast forward and rewind and then create these selections. When we had finished I looked over to Robert and said, 'Once we've made this selection, are we going to have to go back and look at them again?' and he was like, 'No, first thought is the best thought. We always go forward, we never go back.' And I thought, that's my kind of director. That's my type of work ethic as well."

Israel bonded with the notoriously irascible photographer through a hobby they shared. "My studio was near his home on Bleecker Street [in Manhattan] and I used to run into him and his wife [the artist June Leaf, who he married in 1971] and we started to become friends. I was a postcard collector and so was he and I think that clinched it between us," says Israel. "When I got a good postcard I would write a little note on it and post it through his door as I walked by. When he'd go away he'd send me one of the postcards he'd find with a little note on and it went on like that. These postcards he used to send me were beautiful, all hand written with pen and ink. It's funny, over the years people have asked me, 'Have you got Robert Frank's email address?' And I'm like, 'Email, are you kidding me, he doesn't even write with a ballpoint pen.'"

At the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, where Israel was showing her first film *Windfall*, one of the writers there suggested she make a film on Frank. "They have a mentoring programme where you can pick from a list of people to help you," she says. "I chose Tue Steen Müller. He was interesting because he had written about people like Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard as great documentary makers. As soon as I told him I worked with Robert Frank he was like, 'Do you know how many people have tried to call him and to do a film with him?' He said, 'You have to make the film – you really have to do this.'"

By this time Israel had been working with Frank as his picture editor for 20 years. "At first I resisted the idea," she recalls. "I said that would be a really odd change of roles because I work for Robert and together with him. For me to direct him it would be too weird. So I said no at first, but Müller kept insisting." Despite her reluctance, on the plane home she started to imagine what the film could look like. "I was staring out of the window and started to visualise all these scenes we could shoot and I started to write it all down in my notebook. By the time we landed, the notebook was full. So I thought, as soon as I'm home I'll go back to Robert's house and talk to him about it."

Initially Frank was as opposed to the idea as Israel had been in Amsterdam. "I went round to his house and said, 'Hey, you don't think it would be a good idea for me to do a film about you, do you?' And he was like, 'No, that would be really weird.' So I changed the subject immediately. But I could see him looking at me out of the corner of his eye. And he said, 'You come back tomorrow and we can talk about it.' So I went round the next day and he said, 'OK, let's start next week.' Then I really started freaking out."

Seven years in the making, *Don't Blink* was created with cinematographers Ed Lachman and Lisa Rinzler, with additional camera work by Tom Jarmusch. "It was great working with them because they had done both narrative and documentary," says Israel. "I thought that was great because I feel that Robert is between those two worlds. And I was also thinking that the film should be between these two worlds and obviously between still photography and film."

Frank was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Zurich in 1924. There, his German father passed down his love of photography. "My father was a good photographer," says Frank in *Don't Blink*. "Photography was photography and it had nothing to do with making a living. He just liked to photograph – it made him forget the problems he had with his business. It was always talk about money [...] you are not making enough money or somebody had more money." While in Zurich, Frank became an apprentice to a commercial photographer, Hermann Segesser. As well as studying portraiture and landscape, he also learned graphic design and the art of bookbinding. In 1946

he created his first handmade book, entitled *40 Fotos*. The front cover of the book was a camera lens, which on the subsequent page opened to reveal an eye. It was Frank's eye looking out onto the world he has been surveying for 70 years now. The 40 photographs contained within the book were both beautiful and profound, and displayed the artistic and narrative genius he would become famous for. It's the stories implied around the photographs that are the most captivating. "It seems like this moment in time, but within that moment there is a beginning, middle and end and it's encapsulated in that one little frame," says Israel.

In 1947, Frank moved to the US, taking *40 Fotos* with him. Amongst the people he took the book to was Alexey Brodovitch, the Russian-born photographer, designer and art director for *Harper's Bazaar*, who saw something similar to his own aesthetic in the 23-year-old's photographs. Frank

Near his home in Mabou, Nova Scotia

Selecting images for his 1971 film, *Conversations in Vermont*, photographed by Sid Kaplan

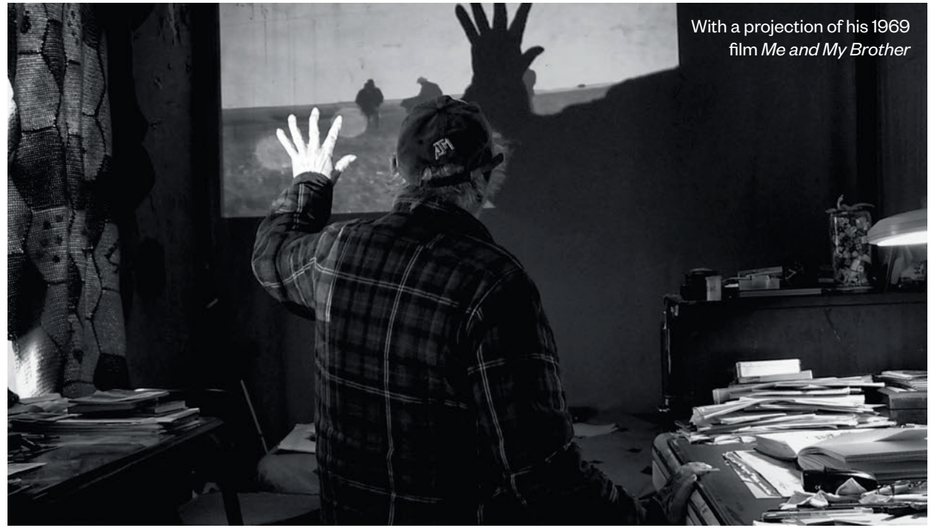
became fashion photographer at *Harper's Bazaar* in the autumn of 1947. Brodovitch was known for an experimental approach to photography; his vibrant montages of image and text revolutionised what had been a staid, lifeless fashion magazine, and Frank soon learnt that photography could respond to situations emotionally, rather than analytically.

He also began to experiment with some of his new mentor's less orthodox techniques. Brodovitch would bleach negatives or crop in radical and unexpected ways. These methods moved Frank away from simply capturing the facts of a scene and towards attempts to convey the experiences and emotions it contained.

He started to shoot at night, taking deliberately blurry and unfocused images on grainy film. Often he would develop frames over each other. These images captured America as seen by an alien – a country that could be cold and hostile. Alongside his street photography peer and great friend Louis Faurer, he started to develop his own style built around what he calls "spontaneous intuition".

Frank worked at *Harper's Bazaar* until 1952, during which time he married his first wife, artist Mary Lockspeiser, whom he appeared with in the group show *51 American Photographers*, at New York's Museum of Modern Art. He visited Europe as well as Central and South America taking portraits of everyday life. His Peru travels resulted in two handmade books which he sent home to his mother, each featuring the same 39 photographs but arranged differently. As with *40 Fotos*, they saw him develop the style and image sequencing he became known for. "I was very free with the camera. I didn't think of what would be the correct thing to do; I did what I felt good doing. I was like an action painter," he recalled of the faces and landscapes he took with his hand-held 35mm Leica camera. As you can see from his collection of photographs in the books *Paris* and *London/Wales*, which along with the Peru books are also now available, Frank was bursting with invention and ideas as he looked to set out on his own. "I think as a photographer you have a certain time when it's good for you and you're possessed by doing that work and seeing it develop," he says in *Don't Blink*. "Little by little I knew what I had to try and get. Pictures that talked about the character of the people." It was on a trip across his adopted country that Frank would really make his mark on 20th-century photography, with *The Americans*.

Disillusioned with what he saw as the romantic reportage of *Life* magazine, in 1955 – with the help of a Guggenheim Fellowship and guidance from Walker Evans – he set out on a road trip to reveal the real USA. "At the time, the pictures, which cast a candid eye on racism, alienation and class division, were criticised for their challenge to the official optimism of the postwar consensus. Before long, they took their rightful place in the photographic canon, alongside the works of Walker Evans," wrote Kenneth Turan in the *New York Times* in 2016. "I was tired of romanticism," Frank told photography critic Sean O'Hagan in *The Guardian*, 2004. "I wanted to present what I saw, pure and simple." As his friend and collaborator Jack Kerouac put it in the introduction to the first edition of *The Americans*, Frank "sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film, taking rank among the tragic poets of the world".



With a projection of his 1969 film *Me and My Brother*

Recalling the year 1955 in the Thames & Hudson book *Robert Frank*, first published in 1983, the photographer said: "I cross the States. For a year. 550 rollls of film. I go into post offices. Woolworths, 10-cent shops, bus stations. I sleep in cheap hotels. Around 7 in the morning I go to a nearby bar. I work all the time. I don't speak much. I try not to be seen. One day in Arkansas, the police stop me. 'What are you doing here?' 'I have a Guggenheim scholarship.' 'What's a Guggenheim?' I spent three days in prison."

In *Don't Blink* we get a rare insight from Frank into his most famous work. "You find out the most interesting things in all of these people," he says. "Yeah, I was a hunter and you hunt for a good picture [...] I was interested in the picture, I tried not to talk to them and didn't want them to talk to me." Like the Depression-era photographs of the Deep South by Walker Evans, *The Americans* revolutionised the documentary tradition. "Edgy, critical, and often opaque at a time when photography was generally understood to be wholesome, simplistic, and patently transparent, the photographs disconcerted editors even before the book was published," wrote curator Sarah Greenough in *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans*, a book to accompany a 2010 exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"What *The Americans* did was to free other photographers up to do things they didn't feel like they had permission to do, in a way," says Israel. "To have it be dark or let it go grainier; or to let the composition go off kilter. And that really excited people. He really liberated photography."

For Israel it's not just the individual photographs that are so inspirational. "As an editor I also find the sequencing of his books so exciting," she says. "In *The Americans*, when you flip the pages you can really feel that movement. You can almost do it like a flipbook in a way, so it's really got that filmic quality. Some photographers, when you go to their show or see their

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Working on an early version of his 2013 book, *Household Inventory Record*

book, it's just like a collection of their best photographs. With Robert it really seems like the sequencing is the important thing, and what makes the story move." In *Don't Blink* we hear Frank talk about this process in making *The Americans*, where he had to edit the 27,000 images he had taken. "It's a very important part of a photographer's work, to choose the pictures," he says. "When I chose them in the beginning I made big prints and pinned them up on the wall... You had to somehow organise it and to narrow it down. And when I chose the 83 photographs for the book, I really thought they got the essence."

Way ahead of its time, *The Americans* was unfairly panned by many critics when it was published in 1958. "They are images of an America seen by a joyless man who hates the country of his adoption" and "Meaningless, blur, grain, muddy exposure, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness" were just two of the press reviews in *Popular Photography* in 1960. But as with Evans before him, Frank went on to be lauded by critics and photographers alike. And like his great contemporaries Louis Faurer, William Klein and Weegee, it's hard to imagine the world of street photography without him.

For Frank, the science of photography was just as important as the art. In *Don't Blink*, while shopping for one of his throwaway cameras he bumps into Sid Kaplan, his old darkroom man. "Before he became famous he spent a hell of a lot of time in the darkroom," says Kaplan, back in his own darkroom. "Robert would look at the print and say, 'How much time did you give it?' And I would say, '22 seconds.' 'Make it 24' [...] Sometimes he would scratch on the negative, other times he would write on a piece of glass and put the glass on top of the

print and print it through. We did a lot of experimenting, no two techniques were ever the same."

I am curious to know what Frank, who created his most famous work with a screw-mount Leica IIIc with 35mm and 50mm lenses, thinks about digital photography. "Robert likes mistakes and I guess it's harder to make mistakes with digital," says Israel. "He also loves all the throwaway cameras. He said to me he finds them interesting because they are rudimentary and he has to actually think and change himself to take a picture. And that makes him take a different one." As we see throughout *Don't Blink*, as Israel travels with Frank across New York, he is still never without a camera. "It was funny, he went to go to back home to Nova Scotia last summer and I said to him, 'Are you going to take cameras, do you want me to get anything?'" says Israel. "And he said, 'No, I hardly take anything when I travel any more.' And he had his suitcase open and it was all cameras and all film."

Although he is best known for his 70 years of photography, his work with the moving image has been just as revolutionary. "If Robert Frank wasn't so acclaimed as one of the most influential photographers of all time, he'd have a much larger profile as an American indie filmmaking icon," Richard Linklater told Nicholas Dawidoff from the *New York Times* in 2015. For Israel, Frank's transition from photography to film in the late 1950s was only natural. "I've always thought that if you look at his photographs, it almost all looks like film. And I actually think his move from photography to film was the most exciting moment about him," she says. "When I started out I thought I would do my documentary about Robert as a filmmaker rather than a photographer. I felt that was less known and so it would be more interesting for everyone. But what happened was, when we sat down to talk to him he talked about photography and film as interchangeable. So then I realised it was going to be a bigger thing than I anticipated. Because he uses photographs in film and film in photographs, that is what my film had to do. It had to be all about imagery."

Frank's studio

> **Yeah, I was a hunter, and you hunt for a good picture. I was interested in the picture, I tried not to talk to them, and I didn't want them to talk to me.**

Photographing the documentary crew during the filming of *Don't Blink*

Written and narrated by Jack Kerouac and starring other friends from the New York underground, Frank's Beat Generation film *Pull My Daisy* was shot in 1959 with co-director Alfred Leslie. "This was a good period because of these people like [Gregory] Corso, [Allen] Ginsberg, or Kerouac, maybe they didn't know where they were going but they were moving forward all the time or moving into whatever direction they chose to move. Just let it roll and go and do it," says Frank in *Don't Blink*. "That was very important in my development as an artist. That kind of desire to express something new, to move in a different direction, believing that you could find your own way and create your own rules […] It was so different to being in Switzerland, where you had to do what your father did or what was in the instruction book."

The spontaneous, improvised narrative (later revealed as planned and directed by Frank and Alfred Leslie) and naturalistic style made *Pull My Daisy* a landmark in the American New Wave alongside works such as John Cassavetes' *Shadows* and Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*. Frank would return to the subject of the Beat Generation in 1968 with *Me and My Brother*. Co-written with and featuring Allen Ginsberg alongside his partner Peter Orlovsky, the film deals with Orlovsky's brother Julius's mental illness. The improvised collage style of Frank's first full-length feature film echoed the work of the Beats. "It was always hard for me to follow a script. A lot of that stuff is really spontaneous – that's the good part of it," says Frank as he watches the film again in *Don't Blink*.

Apart from his 1988 feature *Candy Mountain*, Frank's other best-known film was one that never received a commercial release. He had first worked with the Rolling Stones for the cover of their LP *Exile on Main Street*. Documenting the group's 1972 tour of the US, *Cocksucker Blues* can still only be legally screened when Frank is in attendance. "It's a fucking good film, Robert – but if it's shown in America we'll never be allowed in the country again," said Mick Jagger of the film.

Frank made more than 30 films over a 50-year period. Reflecting on *Conversations in Vermont*, his 1969 film that examines his difficult relationship with his children, Pablo and Andrea, from his first marriage, Frank says: "It's nice how film survives [from] many years ago and they come back, and they move and talk […] It brings back the real thing. It's not the way photographs are, it's still alive. A photograph is just a memory put away." Even more personal was *Life Dances On*, dedicated to Andrea, who died in a plane crash at Christmas time in 1974, and *Home Improvements*, which studies the artist's relationship with his family, including his schizophrenic son Pablo, who died in 1994. Many of these little known films were hidden away in the archive until Israel found and remastered 28 of them for a box set that the German publisher Steidl released in 2008.

Which of the many little-known films Frank made were the most important to Israel? "The films are like little time capsules and tell the stories of places and times in people's lives. So it would be hard to pick out which are the most important," she says. "The ones I feel most fond of are the ones that are New York as I remember it – the New York where I had so much fun. But of all the films, *One Hour* from 1990 might be my favourite, where he just gets in a car and drives around the East Village for an hour, all shot in a single take. And personally, of the ones I worked on, *Paper Route* means the most to me. It's just Robert getting into a driver's delivery van through the snow in Nova Scotia, very simple but beautiful. Robert came and gave me the footage to edit right after 9/11. Everyone was so down at the time and that film just took me to a different place. It showed such a simple way of being, driving around in the morning as it gets light and you have a coffee with the radio on. It's just such a happy, simple film, it really helped me."

In *Don't Blink*, Israel has created an intimate portrait of an elusive artist who could only be reached by someone who knew him well. "The whole thing about Robert and his wife June is they just don't do anything they don't feel like doing. If one day they are not in the mood to do something they don't do it. And I think that is great," says Israel. "What would happen was, we would go around to interview him and he'd say, 'Shall we just drink some tea today?' So we would sit around and talk about our lives or something we'd just heard about. I remember one day asking him if he'd ever thought about putting all his stuff in storage and just disappearing – so we would have an hour-long conversation out of that instead."


Jersey City

Collection of vintage cameras in his studio

Don't Blink is assembled using fragments of Frank's life and works mixed with the director's footage of him in New York and Nova Scotia, where he and June converted an old fisherman's shack in 1971. Frank also talks about some of the friends he met and filmed along the way, such as avant-garde icon Harry Smith and inventor Robert Golka – the subject of Frank's 1981 film *Energy and How to Get it* featuring William Burroughs. "These are good people, marginal people who live at the edge, that always interest me," says Frank in *Don't Blink*. "I prefer to walk on the edge rather than the middle of the road."

The end result is a collage-like documentary that is as brilliantly unorthodox, raw and surprising as Frank's own work. And like his work, it straddles the world of photography and cinema as well as reportage and narrative. "We have noticed that when we show the film to people they start to see the narrative really quickly and start rolling along with it as if they are watching a film rather than a documentary," says Israel. "It really starts to take off and they are wrapped up in the story. And that is what I wanted. I didn't want to do that thing when someone talks over the photographs and do those slow moves in. I wanted to do something different. But I think the best thing about the film is what someone said to me: 'It's Robert and his friends,' and I guess that's what it is. And that's the kind of film I'd like to see about somebody. You just step in as if you are one his other friends. If anything, Robert would want to break down the idea that he is a legend."

Don't Blink, *the documentary film on Robert Frank, is out in early 2017*
grasshopperfilm.com
dontblinkrobertfrank.com