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George Kouvaros, *Awakening the Eye: Robert Frank's American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015, \$25.00). Pp. 227. ISBN 08166 95598.

A slightly and expansive account of how Robert Frank's photography, films, and videos have mutually reinforced a persistent resistance to narrative closure or shapeliness and promoted instead the inscription of an aggrieved past onto evanescent present moments, George Kouvaros's *Awakening the Eye: Robert Frank's American Cinema* is also a continuation of the questions and concerns explored in his earlier monographs. Up until now Kouvaros's interest in the intersection of photography and cinema has primarily been addressed by way of set photography, as can be seen in the discussion of *John Cassavetes: Autoportraits* (a 1992 collection of Cassavetes interviews, writings, film stills, and photographs) that opened Kouvaros's *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Break Point* (2004) and in the nuanced close readings and detailed historical recontextualizations of the set photographs that comprised the bulk of *Famous Faces yet Not Themselves: The Misfits and Icons of Postwar America* (2010). *Where Does It Happen?* used set photography to introduce that book's reflections on the collapse of the tenuous distinctions separating theatricality from the everyday, performance from preparation for performance, observation from participation, and narrative representation from documentary record in the films of Cassavetes. By contrast, *Famous Faces yet Not Themselves* approached the Magnum photos taken on the set of *The Misfits* (dir. John Huston, 1961) as evidentiary images of major postwar changes in the Hollywood studio system, film acting, and notions of privacy in American society.

In *Awakening the Eye*, the cross-media relations between photography, writing, cinema, and video undergo a more sustained investigation than offered by Kouvaros in either of those earlier monographs. Here these relations provide the occasion for evaluating Frank's self-conscious eschewal of narrative – an urge to reduce narrative to disjunctive associative leaps or to recast it as the narration of the search for a story itself animates many of his short and feature-length films – and his development of a singular mode of intermedial writing that increasingly becomes the focus of *Awakening the Eye*. For Kouvaros, “writing” is a codeword for expression and expressivity. To say that Frank's project is that of developing a singular mode of intermedial writing ends up being tantamount to saying that Frank is trying to cast photographs as personally expressive images rather than documentary artifacts and that his work in film and video is what occasions this change in his later photography, insofar as what's being expressed in the photography, films, and videos is ultimately a melancholic awareness of time's melt, of the present-as-past. Accordingly, filmmaking-as-film-writing names a demotion of the mimetic or indexical value of photography and film for Kouvaros, who draws out instead the performative dimensions of Frank's various acts of writing/filming/shooting itself. Ultimately, *Awakening the Eye* shows these works which straddle photography, film, and video to be not mirrors of the world but rather inner projections nevertheless arrived at by Frank from without.

There was a regrettable tendency in Kouvaros's earlier monographs to leave important concepts unexpressed. Though he never mentioned the word himself in *Where*

Does It Happen? – instead it pops up in two scanty quoted passages – what Kouvaros was addressing in that book was the roles played by the virtual in Cassavetes, by the ways in which the performances captured in his films really are in those films but may not actually be performances because those films are perhaps better approached instead as processual records and instigators of becoming. Similarly the conspicuously missing word or concept in *Paul Schrader* (2008) was “dialectical,” insofar as Kouvaros consistently framed Schrader’s films in that book as being reliably structured in terms of irreconcilable elements (independent and mainstream cinema, idiosyncratic and formulaic narratives, self-realization and self-destruction) that appear to advance within and across those films by means of negation. The result in those two works was prolixity and the irksome sense that much effort was being expended to arrive at sharply opposing insights – the virtual and the dialectical – that would have functioned better as clearly marked start buttons rather than needlessly occulted operating systems.

Happily, this is not a problem here, though as *Awakening the Eye* continues, the use of notable philosophical sources and touchstones (Henri Bergson on perception, Theodor Adorno on the essay form, Walter Benjamin on allegory) does tend to be unduly superficial at times, with the result that some key insights remain more suggestively gestured toward rather than propositionally stated and developed. Also, some of the initial chapters do not formulate novel claims about Frank’s early films and videos so much as they amply unpack claims that have been in circulation for a few decades now. For instance, the discussion of Frank’s ties to the New American Cinema Group, Direct Cinema, and Shirley Clarke more or less fleshes out the suggestive claims made some time ago by Amy Taubin and John Hanhardt (among others), but doesn’t offer much in the way of fresh observation.¹ To a lesser degree, the same can perhaps be said of Kouvaros’s account of Frank’s many attempts to evoke the feeling of being-present in his films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a discussion that initially doesn’t advance very far beyond the insights of Kent Jones and Stefan Grisseman, though the last two chapters and the coda certainly do offer significant insights of Kouvaros’s own into the compositional methods informing these efforts by Frank to vividly render the present-as-past in his later photography, films, and videos.² In any case, Kouvaros’s detailed readings of Frank’s works across media benefit greatly from the ways in which his argument becomes richer and richer as he returns to the same set of issues (Frank’s dissatisfaction with capturing decisive moments in still images, his generative awareness of the limits of narrative, his preoccupation with the materiality of his chosen media, his vibrant but open-ended evocation of presence, the painful persistence of the past in his works) in each chapter, such that *Awakening the Eye*’s invocation of Benjaminian

¹ Amy Taubin, “Circling: Beginnings, Continuations, Renewals: Robert Frank’s Personal New American Cinema,” in Brigitta Burger-Utzer and Stefan Grisseman, eds., *Frank Films: The Film and Video Work of Robert Frank* (Zurich: Scalo, 2003), 88–100; John Hanhardt, “The Connoisseur of Chaos: The Films and Videotapes,” in Sarah Greenough and Philip Brookman, eds., *Robert Frank* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1994), 232–37.

² Kent Jones, “Presence,” in Burger-Utzer and Grisseman, 130–38; and Stefan Grisseman, “Vérité Vaudeville: Passage through Robert Frank’s Audiovisual Work,” in Burger-Utzer and Grisseman, 22–66.

melancholy at the end appears with all the force of an eye finally woken to the sight of the whole heaped gestalt.

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