

No Day at the Beach

Since the dawn of time, human beings have sought protection and comfort in times of loss. Robert Frank's poignant black-and-white photograph, "Provincetown," shows one such time, humorously relating the decay of American culture to the death of one of its icons, Marilyn Monroe.

In the photograph, which is surrounded by a black border, a boy sits in a chair on a beach, facing away from the camera and reading a newspaper whose headline reads "Marilyn Dead." Draped over the back of the chair and hiding much of the boy's body is a large American flag, which trails in a crumpled heap behind the chair, extending nearly to the bottom of the frame of the photograph. The crumpled flag spreads limply in the sand, suggesting a kind of tail and a deflation or defeat of the culture for which it stands. Likewise, the headline announces the death of a famous American personality, Marilyn Monroe, who practically stands for American culture in general. It is as though the boy has decay and sadness both in front of and behind him.

Moreover, the sand is marked by numerous footprints that indicate that formerly the beach was heavily populated but it is now vast and empty, stretched out in front of the reading boy like a blank and pock-marked canvas. Again, the lack of human presence leaves the boy alone with his sad news and flaccid flag, reinforcing the emptiness and loss at the core of this image.

Another way in which the photograph attests to the boy's solitude is that, unlike in many photographs, in "Provincetown" the subject of the photograph is looking away from the camera, almost in the opposite direction. It is as though the boy inhabits his own world of sadness, a world in which the gaze of other people cannot reach him to offer any comfort. The boy's head forms the tip of a triangle, with the flag as the three sides, and this

triangle is mirrored in the lines in the sand at the top of the frame. Perhaps Robert Frank was saying that outside the frame is another solitary figure, that we are each alone with our sadness as a result of the decay of American culture.

In conclusion, Frank's image connects the decline of American culture to the death of one of its icons, using a solitary boy as the pivot between these facts. It is a perfect example of the way in which photography can use individual moments to make sweeping social critiques.