
*Weegee the Famous and His Heirs*

Given the extraordinary number of successful photographers of Jewish descent, it is surprising that Daniel Morris’s book is the first full-length study that attempts to make sense of this phenomenon.1 In *After Weegee: Essays on Contemporary Jewish American Photographers*, Morris profiles ten iconic figures and lesser discussed artists (Weegee, Bruce Davidson, Jim Goldberg, Mel Rosenthal, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, Allen Ginsberg, Annie Leibovitz, Tyagan Miller, and Marc Asnin), adding to our knowledge of the relationship between Jewish identity and photography. The book opens with an introduction challenging the notion that Jewish art comprises only iconography with stereotypically “Jewish” subject matter (e.g., art with Hebrew lettering, images of ritual observance). Instead, Morris argues that the complexity and multiplicity of the Jewish American experience yields a much broader picture that especially manifests a fascination with “the Other.” To that end, the photographers in his study may not be—and usually are not—making imagery with explicitly Jewish subject matter. As Morris puts it: “Jewishness in *After Weegee* is more indirect, at times dealing with echoes of a Jewish past through contemporary figures, rather than overtly Jewish images, however decontextualized” (xx).

Morris’s title case study focuses on Weegee, a poor immigrant born as Usher Fellig, now widely recognized as one of the most influential freelance journalists. Weegee’s concern for pathos and extraordinariness, evident in his celebrated crime-scene photographs, also compelled him to chronicle the life of the Other. Weegee’s attention to outsiders includes African Americans, adopted as subjects by a number of later photographers in Morris’s book. Indeed, to name but a few, Davidson, Rosenthal, and Miller offer major projects on Blacks, while Arbus and Asnin are attracted to those further on the margins of society. Weegee thus functions as an excellent introductory figure, demonstrating early Jewish interest in the Other and the deconstruction of stereotypes. Moreover, scholars acknowledge Weegee as instrumental in popularizing the text-image format—especially in his influential book *Naked City* (1945)—that impacted later generations of photojournalists. Presciently, an immodest Weegee observed in his autobiography: “I have inspired many persons to take up photography. As a matter of fact, I inspire myself…. I am married to my camera. I belong to the world.”

Following the chapter on Weegee, Morris examines documentary photography and related photographic endeavors by post-1960 artists into the twenty-first century. Chapter two ably allies the aesthetic focus and style of Davidson’s *East 100th Street* (1970) to the earlier formalist work of coreligionist and Photo League member Aaron Siskind. While demonstrating this correlation, Morris reveals one of his most profitable means for illuminating images: his ability to use the artists’ own words to make points (Morris’s personal interviews with some subjects afford valuable new material). Further, Morris parleys his literary background beneficially in this interdisciplinary study; he incorporates theory in a helpful way (e.g., Roland Barthes, Homi Bhabha) and makes reference to writers when appropriate (e.g., Herman Melville, John Steinbeck, Walt Whitman; and particularly in conjunction with the study of Allen Ginsberg, which connects his photos with literary history).

The chapter on Davidson also demonstrates Morris’s diverse approach to the book’s material and his exploration of a number of themes. More expressly, while frequently highlighting the photographers’ concern with social justice and content, Morris presents additional components of their oeuvres. Beginning in 1972, Davidson developed a remarkable relationship with Issac Bashevis Singer, who starred in a hybrid documentary and surrealistic short film by Davidson: *Isaac Singer’s Nightmare and Mrs. Pupko’s Beard* (1973). Examination of this unique collaboration leads Morris to an interesting discussion about Davidson’s Jewish identity, the aftermath of the Holocaust, and observant Jewish life on New York’s Lower East Side. Still, Morris consistently returns to social content in the

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photographers’ work, and understandably so considering the prevalence of such themes.³ It is notable how many of the artists are personally involved with their subjects, some of whom participated in long-term projects. Evidence of the artists’ subjective involvement is made apparent by the number of revealing self-portraits in the photobooks. For example, Davidson offers commentary on how his association with Singer and the observant Jewish community of New York affected him by showing himself wearing a kippah at the end of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Lower East Side (2004), in contrast to an earlier, secular self-portrait. Jim Goldberg’s 1985 intertextual photobook Rich and Poor—which took him eight years to complete—similarly incorporates two divergent self-portraits to conflicting ends, one casting him as a bearded bohemian Other and the second portraying the photographer as a clean-cut, elegant man. A number of Friedlander’s photos also include the artist. Indeed, Friedlander’s first book, Self-Portrait (1970), presents forty-three pictures (including the cover) taken over ten years, in which he allowed his shadow or reflection to become part of the larger subject of his photographs. By doing so, Friedlander concedes the artist’s position as a maker of an image that is not an objective, mechanical representation—echoing the theme of subjectivity that pervades After Weegee. Morris poetically contends that this approach acknowledges Friedlander’s position as “a wandering Jew: nomadic, isolated, and spectral” (173). Rosenthal provides a self-portrait in In the South Bronx of America (2000), which chronicles the varied inhabitants over thirteen years who lived in his gutted childhood neighborhood. Poignantly, Rosenthal depicts himself in the burned, empty shell of his Bronx childhood bedroom. More obliquely, Annie Leibovitz juxtaposes celebrity portraits with family portraits and journalistic imagery in the autobiographical A Photographer’s Life, 1990–2005, a book that Morris dubs “a displaced self-portrait” (196).

Morris tenaciously works with the images, fleshing out the meaning(s) of the visual elements. For example, Morris supplies an extended visual analysis of Diane Arbus’s photographs of the so-called Jewish giant, Eddie Carmel. Linking Arbus’s privileged, yet Jewishly bereft upbringing with Carmel’s obvious physical, along with sociocultural, issues of difference from his Jewish, Orthodox, and normal-sized parents, Morris adeptly argues that these vital images relate to Arbus’s own Jewish identity, specifically the tensions between generations. Unfortunately, none of the photographs are reproduced, and overall the book does suffer from a dearth of images. In the case of Arbus’s pictures, neither Morris nor his publisher can be faulted for their omission, as the Arbus Estate inexplicably refuses permission to reproduce her work on most occasions (Morris’s workaround is to reproduce a portrait of her by Saul Leiter with a few of Arbus’s photographs in the background). Further, exorbitant fees are levied on scholars seeking to reproduce photography. Nonetheless, when considering art without the visual artifact, without the material of study to engage with, readers blindly grope in the dark.

Throughout, Morris connects past and present photographers and figures in the book. Namely, the artists are cross-referenced, creating cohesion among the chapters and providing relevant and insightful comparisons, both foreshadowing future case studies and referring backward to previously made observations. It is also important to note that Morris investigates a number of themes, but, wisely, does not push the Jewish correlations; he does not take a single-minded approach to the material nor does he claim a new theory of Jewish American art/photography. The book’s introduction only briefly addresses this matter to set the stage for the reader and the afterword offers a coda on the subject. Here Morris’s most cogent point comes from the example of Mary Ellen Mark, who has been described in past scholarship on several occasions as a Jewish photographer. It remains ambiguous, however, as to whether Mark is, in fact, Jewish, because she neither confirms nor denies this heritage. Mark, thus, illustrates the difficulty of defining a Jewish American photographer: Mark’s socially conscious subject matter and bent for photoessays is akin to those of the artists in After Weegee, perhaps influencing her sometime designation as a Jew. And so Morris wonders if the classification “Jewish American photographer,” “stems from familial background or Jewish observance or is [at] something more enigmatic, a quality of performativity.

³ Along the lines of Morris’s theme of Jewish photographers and social activism, Alan Trachtenberg hypothesizes that Yiddishkeit “probably does come into play in the work of many photographers connected with that culture, especially its secular humanism, its liberal and socialist proclivities.” Alan Trachtenberg, “The Claim of a Jewish Eye,” Paki Treger 41 (Spring 2003): 20–25. William Meyers suggests that the representational nature of photography, which allows the artist to comment on society, an inherent part of the Jewish tradition as a religion strongly rooted in social action, influenced Jews to take up the medium. William Meyers, “Jews and Photography,” Commentary 115, no. 1 (January 2003): 47.