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**Is There Yiddish Photography?**

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## IS THERE YIDDISH PHOTOGRAPHY?

Samuel Spinner



Is there Yiddish photography? This may seem like a simple question, but it will become knotted as I attempt to untangle its strands. The question is about the meaning of Yiddish, and specifically the methodological possibility—or advisability—of categorizing as “Yiddish” things that are not obviously so. After all, Yiddish is a language. So, can non-linguistic things—i.e. photography—be Yiddish? But here my one

simple question becomes two complicated questions. First: why ask about the “Yiddishness” of photography as opposed to its “Jewishness”? And second: why ask about photography, and not also painting, or architecture, or music?

Let’s look at a picture before I begin to answer my question, which has now become two. The image reproduced here is a two-page spread from Moyshe Vorobeichic’s 1931 photo book, *Yidishe gas in Vilne* (The Jewish Street/Neighborhood in Vilna).<sup>1</sup> Vorobeichic took the pictures in his native Vilna as part of his final project at the [Bauhaus](#), where he studied photography under [László Moholy-Nagy](#).<sup>2</sup> They were published by the Swiss *Orell Füssli Verlag* as part of their popular *Schaubücher* (“look-books”) series. This spread is exemplary of the entire book, which contains a total of sixty-five images: a complex interplay between word and image, and between manipulated and “straight” photos.

So why Yiddish rather than Jewish? The question of the Jewishness of photography—or, in fact, any cultural product—has been often asked. The answers are by and large unsatisfactory, because they inevitably rely on one or another form of essentialism, whether ethnic, religious, or thematic.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the dangerous ends to which the search for the connection between Jewishness and art has been put is never far from mind. One thinks, for example, of Wagner’s essay “*Das Judentum in der Musik*” (“Judaism in Music”).

Additionally, we talk about German and not “Lutheran” photography, so why not Yiddish, instead of Jewish? The problem is that when we talk about German (or French, or Spanish) art, say, we are talking about much more than the language. The strange alchemy of identity going back to Herder is a fusion of language, *Volk* (people), *Geist* (spirit), and eventually culture, and nation or body politic. In the context of a continental European nation/culture/*Volk*/language, it’s easy to avoid the problematic aspects of this discursive network, because you can simply lay the weight here or there

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<sup>1</sup> The book actually has four titles corresponding to the four languages in which it appeared, in three bilingual editions: one in Hebrew/German, one in Yiddish/German, one in English/Hebrew. The titles in the four languages are: *Yidishe gas in Vilne*; *Ein Ghetto im Osten – Wilna*; *Rehov ha-Yehudim be-Vilna*; *A Ghetto Lane in Vilna*.

<sup>2</sup> Vorobeichic is best known—under the name Moï Ver—for his seminal photo book *Paris*, also published in 1931. They both employ the same striking avant-garde visual idiom—vertiginous angles, various techniques of manipulation of negatives and prints—but address very different cities, with very different questions raised in their conjunction of metropole and modernity. For more on Vorobeichic and his Vilna photobook, see my forthcoming article “Avant-garde Authenticity: Moï Ver’s Photographic Modernism and the East European Jew” in Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran, eds., *Paradoxes of Jewish Ethnography*, Indiana University Press, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the conclusion to their history of modern Jewish art, Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver identify three models of Jewishness in “Jewish” art: “the diasporic condition”, typically manifested in a work’s subject (e.g. the Wandering Jew); “the biblical covenant”, referring again to a given work’s subject, this time Biblical; and “*tikkun olam*”, the engagement of a work or oeuvre with the purportedly Jewish agenda of social activism. See their *Jewish Art: A Modern History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). Baskind and Silver are not the only to address this question, which has a lengthy literature. For an overview, see their article “Looking Jewish: The State of Research on Modern Jewish Art,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101, no. 4 (2011): 631–52. Baskind has also considered the specific question of Jewishness and photography in “Weegee’s Jewishness,” *History of Photography* 34, no. 1 (12 February 2010): 60–78.

as needed—a form of strategic essentialism, if you will. Entering the category “Yiddish” problematizes things considerably. There never was a Yiddish nation, or *Volk*, or state. The very idea of such Yiddish things is an artifact of century-old discourses and ideologies. Moreover this brand of Yiddish identity is uncomfortably close to equivalent notions of Jewishness: the logical outcome of Wagner’s indictment of Jewishness and culture in “*Das Judenthum in der Musik*” was the Nazis’ infamous *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition, which featured a wall caption that read “*deutsche Bauern—jiddisch gesehen*” (German peasants seen Yiddishly). Here the pretense of a distinction between Yiddish (*jiddisch*) and Jewish (*jüdisch*) is gone—they are ciphers of each other.

With Yiddish, the one handhold that offers any stable purchase is the obvious and axiomatic essentialism, namely its root status as a language.<sup>4</sup> No one would contest that. But here it is even clearer that we can’t say “Yiddish photography” the way we say “German photography”: when we say “German” photography, we don’t mean that its verb comes in second position or that it has prepositions that take both the dative and the accusative. So if Yiddish is nothing more than a language, how can its linguistic features appear in a photograph?

This, in fact, is where the specificity of photography as opposed to any other cultural medium or technology might be of help. It is by now an accepted feature of the study of photography that the particular ways in which photography makes meaning—its semiotic functioning, or even its “grammatology”—bring it closer to language than perhaps any other medium of cultural production, and thus closer to the root—or only—meaning of Yiddish. But while the scholarship has explicated at great length the meaning and functioning of the photograph as text, of the semiosis of the image,<sup>5</sup> it has not, to my knowledge, addressed this matter regarding a *specific* language. If photography is textual, can it be a text in a given language? What might a Yiddish photograph look like? Might it look like Vorobeichic’s pair of images from the *Yidishe gas in Vilne*? The textuality of the images is clear: the page on the left consists of a photograph cut out in the shape of an exclamation mark—a sign bridging the oral and the written. But, even considering that punctuation is not a linguistic feature, exclamation points are not particularly Yiddish. Yet this one does, in fact, signify Yiddish, a Yiddish phrase to be precise—*dos pintele yid*. This phrase literally means “the point/dot of a Jew” and idiomatically refers to the essence of Jewish identity.<sup>6</sup> The Jew

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<sup>4</sup> In an article on Jewishness and photography, Alan Trachtenberg suggested that the term “Yiddishkeit” is a useful catch-all for a “Jewish sensibility.” Samantha Baskind borrows this usage and applies it to Weegee. For Trachtenberg and Baskind “Yiddishkeit” is a synonym for Ashkenazic Jewishness (which is, after all, close to its Yiddish meaning), rather than an index of Yiddish itself, whatever it may be. See Trachtenberg, “The Claim of a Jewish Eye,” *Pakn Treger* 41 (Spring 2003): 24 and Baskind, “Weegee’s Jewishness.”

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the following classics: Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” *October* 19 (December 1, 1981): 3–34; Geoffrey Batchen, “Photogrammatology: Writing/Photography,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 3–6; Victor Burgin, “Looking at Photographs,” *Screen Education* 24 (1977): 17–24; Roland Barthes, “The Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1978), 32–51.

<sup>6</sup> The origins of this phrase are not clear. Some speculate that it is a pun alluding to the scribal practice of placing a dot above the letter *yud*—in some Yiddish dialects, the word *yud* is pronounced *yid*. Or it is

pictured in the image on the right-hand side is stooped by the vertiginous camera angle, and perhaps also by poverty. On the facing page the same image is scaled down and cut out to form the point of the exclamation mark: the *pintele yid*—stooped, standing in a puddle in the middle of *goles* (exile)—becomes the *pintele* exclamation.<sup>7</sup>

The problem, it seems to me, is that one could do this for any language. It happens to refer to a Yiddish idiom, but if the idiom were German or Hebrew it would still work. With that, we have run out of options. So we have an answer to the question with which I opened: there is no such thing as Yiddish photography, just as there is no German or French photography. But although such a category of photography does not exist for the purposes of scholarly work, we must recognize that it did exist (and perhaps still does) for many photographers, perhaps even including Moyshe Vorobeichic. Although comprehension of Vorobeichic's work is not restricted to speakers of Yiddish, one layer of its interpretation is directed at them.<sup>8</sup> And although Vorobeichic's image shows a man who might or might not be a Jew and develops its joke by means of a non-Yiddish punctuation mark, the tropes it engages (e.g. the suffering of *goles*) and the language inhabiting it (the idiom *dos pintele yid*) are associated with Yiddish, the language and its speakers. And it is here, if anywhere, that Yiddish photography (or culture in general) might emerge as a viable category: not in any work of art, but in the people who produced it, read it, viewed it, bought it, sold it, exhibited it, and so on. It may be difficult (if not impossible) to identify any core characteristic of such people, except that many of them spoke Yiddish, or thought about what Yiddish is or might be, or were otherwise caught in the web surrounding the question of what is Yiddish. So what is Yiddish photography? It is photography that asks the question: What is Yiddish?

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perhaps derived from the fact that the letter *yud* is the smallest in the Hebrew alphabet, but no less significant than any other. Whatever its source, the phrase is an item of popular theology: see Mendel Piekartz, *Hasidut Polin: megamot ra'ayoniyot ben shete ha-milhamot uvi-gezerot 700<N>705 ("ha-sho'ah")* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> This mode of signification recalls Chagall's visual puns, which depict scenes that correspond literally to Yiddish idioms. Vorobeichic's technique, which he used in this image only, is more complicated: the metonymic chain is tripartite, from content (a thematic depiction of the idiomatic object) to sign (which forms the pun with the idiom) to the signified phrase. Chagall's visual puns typically only depict their object literally and not thematically, and do not contain an extra level of mediation.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to Chagall, Seth Wolitz called this kind of dual legibility Marranism. See his "Vitebsk versus Bezalel: A Jewish 'Kulturkampf' in the Plastic Arts," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*, ed. Zvi Y. Gitelman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 172.