

WEEGEE

Autopsy of the spectacle

There's still a mystery to Weegee. The American photographer's career seems to be split in two. First are his stories for the New York press from 1935-1945. Then, photo-caricatures of public personalities developed during his Hollywood period, between 1948 and 1951, which he continued to produce for the rest of his career. How can these diametrically opposed bodies of work coexist? Critics have enjoyed highlighting the opposition between the two periods, praising the former and disparaging the latter. This project seeks to reconcile the two parts of Weegee by showing that, beyond formal differences, the photographer's approach is critically coherent.

The spectacle is omnipresent in Weegee's work. In the first part of his career, coinciding with the rise of the tabloid press, he was an active participant in transforming news into *spectacle*. To show this, he often included *spectators* or other photographers in the foreground of his images. In the second half of his career, Weegee mocked the Hollywood *spectacular*: its ephemeral glory, adoring crowds, and social scenes. Some years before the Situationist International, his photography presented an incisive critique of the Society of the Spectacle.

THE NEWS SPECTACLE

"News photography is my meat." After many years as a printer for press agencies, Weegee started his own business as a photojournalist in 1935. In order to be the first to arrive at the site of a murder, fire, or traffic accident, he set up a radio in his car, tuned to the police frequency. For a decade, using a flash, he took photographs of news in New York every night.

WEEGEE, HIMSELF

"I have always been a doer and not a thinker." Weegee enjoyed putting himself in front of the camera, re-enacting circumstances he was confronted with in his daily work. In the name of pedagogy, and probably a little out of narcissism and self-advertisement, he took pictures of himself writing captions for his photographs in the back of his car, in police wagons and behind bars, never without his camera.

MURDER IS MY BUSINESS

"I used to be an expert on murder." From 1935 to 1945, Weegee spent his nights roaming the city looking for shocking images. Even after Prohibition, New Yorkers' dreams were punctuated by explosion sounds caused by rival gangs settling scores. The photographer learned to create expressive images which the booming tabloids were particularly fond of.

OFF ROAD

"Sudden death for one..., sudden shock for the other." American culture is fascinated by twisted metal. In the 19th century, a railroad company staged public collisions between locomotives destined for the junkyard. Weegee photographed many traffic accidents, introducing the "car crash" genre, later adopted by other figures, such as Andy Warhol, J. G. Ballard, David Cronenberg, etc.

THE TRAGEDY OF FIRE

"Murders and fires (my two best sellers, my bread and butter)." In the darkness of the city, like a moth to a flame, Weegee took photographs of fires. The urban landscape of New York, with its many substandard buildings, provided him with many such opportunities. The combination of fire, smoke and gushing water offered a particularly photogenic spectacle that the press adored.

ON THE SPOT

"The Parade never ceases as the 'pie' Wagons unload." When he wasn't in the field, Weegee waited at the entrance of the police station for the prison wagon to return with its load of offenders arrested in the night. At a time when it was a criminal act for a man to dress as a woman, some tried to hide their faces, while others took the opportunity to step out of the wagon as if onto a stage.

IN FLAGRANTE DELICTO

"When criminals tried to cover their faces, it was a challenge to me. I literally uncovered not only their faces, but their black souls as well." Faced with Weegee's scrutinizing lens, defendants often tried to conceal their identities. In his autobiography, the photographer recounts the many stratagems he developed to oblige them to reveal themselves. Clearly, they didn't always work.

SOCIAL DOCUMENTS

"The people in these photographs are real." Coming from a Jewish family who emigrated to the United States from Ukraine at the beginning of the 20th century, experiencing extreme poverty upon their arrival, Weegee was quite aware of standards of living among the underprivileged. He took photographs of ordinary forms of discrimination, people with small trades, and the homeless. His photographs can be seen, in his own words, as "veritable social documents."

SOCIETY OF THE SPECTATORS

"The Curious ones" is a chapter title from Weegee's best-seller: *Naked City*. The photographer takes an interest in people who, like himself, indulge unreservedly in the act of looking. He often includes them in the scenes he photographs, framing them in close-up to create veritable portraits of on-lookers. His work is a particularly striking testimony to the society of spectators developing in the United States at the time.

META PHOTO CO.

"I have no time for messages in my pictures." Yet Weegee often included other photographers in his compositions as if, through this *mise en abyme*, he was inciting people to reflect on what it meant to take a photograph. An image from 1942, published in *PM's Weekly*, is a good example. Three reporters and the words "Meta Photo Co." on a window in the background of the photograph indicate there is something to be learned here about photography itself.

THE CRITIC

'What is the best picture you ever took?' Without hesitation I answer, 'A picture I took at the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House. I consider this to be my masterpiece.'" The circumstances were contrived. Weegee went to a working-class neighborhood to pick the woman up, then brought her to the entrance of this gala. The image illustrates the widening gap between the rich and the poor under American capitalism. It also reflects the critical power of a simple look.

LOOKING AT DEATH

"I stepped back far enough to take in the whole scene: the puzzled detectives examining the body, the people on the fire escape, watching... it was like a stage setting."
Balcony seat at a murder: by including spectators in many of his images, Weegee imagines crime scenes as theatrical scenes, underscoring how American society transforms news into spectacle.

SPECTATORS

"When I take a picture of a fire, I forget all about the burning building and I go out to the human element." After years of tirelessly documenting events of the New York night, Weegee began taking photographs of the individuals who witnessed them. He was thus able to take portraits of groups expressing the full range of human reactions to tragedy, from surprise and tears to nervous laughter.

OUT OF FRAME

"The curious [...] ones always rushing by [...] but always finding time to stop and look at." On July 28, 1945, at 9:40 a.m., as a thick fog enveloped New York, a small plane crashed into the 79th floor of the Empire State Building. Weegee photographed spectators trying to catch a glimpse of it. People discovering his photographs in newspapers found themselves in the same position as these observers, a voyeuristic one.

SEEING IN THE DARK

"It's hard to photograph people and get natural expressions. The minute they see the camera, they 'freeze' up on you." Weegee was especially interested in depicting emotions on the faces of observers. Concerned that his presence would change their reaction, he had the ingenious idea of taking their photographs in the darkness of a theater using infrared film. The result is a series of stunning portraits of wide-eyed spectators.

SHE GESTURES OF ART

"I used the same technique [...] whether it was a murder, a pickpocket, or a society ball." Following the success of his book *Naked City*, Weegee was routinely invited to high society events in New York, which he took pleasure in photographing as news items. In October 1945, at the opening of an exhibition by painter Stuart Davis at the MoMA, he captured the strange gestures of the art world.

THE THEATER OF THE SPECTACULAR

"Spectacle is Capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image," explained Guy Debord in 1967. Weegee understood this well. He took photographs of all that was visually uncommon: crowds at Coney Island, fairground attractions, stars, acrobats, clowns... and finally, himself. A few years before the Situationist International, he pioneered a visual form of critique of the Society of the Spectacle.

IN THE COMPANY OF CROWDS

"And this is Coney Island on a quiet Sunday afternoon [...]. A crowd of over a MILLION is usual and attracts no attention." On a Brooklyn beach, in Times Square or in Chinatown celebrating victory over Nazi power, Weegee never missed the opportunity to photograph crowds. Beyond "mass ornament," theorized a few years earlier by Siegfried Kracauer, he was fascinated by the ways in which the people constitute themselves as images.

THE CANNONBALL WOMAN

"Punch in Pictures." That's how one magazine described an article on Weegee. The scoop-hunter knows better than anyone else how to produce hard-hitting images. In 1943, Weegee photographed circus performer Egle Zacchini, nicknamed *Miss Victory*, or *The Cannonball Woman*, shot out of a cannon at 360 feet per second. As war was raging in Europe, it was a strange metaphor for the role of women in the conflict.

A CIRCUS COMMUNITY

"Someday they, too, will be stars." Weegee especially enjoyed hanging around behind the scenes of fairgrounds in the suburbs. He photographed the way a performer at Sammy's Bar placed her money in her stocking. Elsewhere, a dwarf with a forced smile, a melancholy clown slumped in his dressing room, what remains of the parade after the crowd passes by. Many of his photographs display the ambiance of a sad party.

PHOTO-CARICATURES

"I was tired of gangsters lying dead with their guts spewed in the gutter, of women crying at tenement-house fires, of automobile accidents [...]. I was off to Hollywood." In the City of Angels, Weegee not only photographs the celebrities he meets, he delights in making caricatures of them with what he calls his "elastic lens," now mocking the *star system*.

THE SPYGLASS

"I have used the camera to provoke good old-fashioned belly laughs." In 1963, Weegee was invited to the set of Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*. The director was a great fan of Weegee, and had begun his own career as a press photographer. On set, Weegee applied a new technique for the tubular distortion of faces, as if one were looking through the small end of a spyglass.

TRICK INVENTORY

"Their originality was such that they sold like hot cakes." This is how Weegee described his photo-caricatures, the first of which appeared in papers in 1947. For 20 years and up until his death in 1968, he would regularly publish these works. Around fifty of the publications are known today. There are most likely many more. In his daily work, the photo-caricature came to definitively replace the news item.

WEEGEE, OUIJA

"I'm called Weegee which comes from *Ouija*." The pseudonym Weegee refers to the name of a board used in seances to decipher messages from the beyond. Weegee liked to describe himself as a "psychic photographer", able to predict in advance where a story will take place. On the scene, he said he photographed using his "third eye." Whether clairvoyant or voyeur, Weegee was able to see, better than anyone else, transformations in American society.