

South African Jewish Photography: Eastern European Immigrants and the Western European Canon

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The article explores how and why Jewish photographers in South Africa, who had immigrated from Eastern Europe, used Western European art history and iconography to construct their artworks or convey the messages of their artworks. Specifically, it critically examines the legacy of two representatives of the first generation of Jewish immigrant artists in South Africa, Leon Levson (1883–1968) and Eli Weinberg (1908–1981), whose public activity and professional contribution left a strong mark on South African culture. The article assesses Levson's and Weinberg's works from a contextual and comparative perspective, revealing their genre diversity. Their works are systematised in the following categories: anthropological, studio photography, social documentary, and journalistic photography; the influence of pictorialism on their creative work is also analysed. The author argues that the Eastern European identity and political climate of the lifetime of these two selected photographers influenced their creative work much more than their Jewish roots.

KEYWORDS: South Africa, Leon Levson, Eli Weinberg, apartheid, Baltics, anthropological photography, studio photography, social documentary

Introduction

The article explores how and why Jewish photographers in South Africa, who had immigrated from Eastern Europe, used Western European art history and iconography to construct their images or convey the artwork's messages. It employs a multidisciplinary approach that is at the intersection of art history and Jewish and African studies. Specifically, it critically examines the legacy of two representatives of the first-generation Jewish immigrant artists in South Africa, Leon Levson (1883–1968) and Eli Weinberg (1908–1981) (Figs 1 and 2).

The work of these photographers was chosen as the object of research because, regardless of the difference in individual features of their art, both were at the same time typical and among the most prominent representatives of the first wave of emigration from Lithuania and Latvia (the Baltic region of the then Russian Empire), whose public activity and professional contribution left a strong mark on South African culture.

The main questions raised are: what influence (if any) the ethnic affiliation of the artist exerts on the creative process? How did the centre-periphery relationship

and hybridity manifest in the work of both Levson and Weinberg? How were their works perceived during and after the collapse of apartheid? What was their attitude towards the aesthetic quality of photography?

The research aims to reveal how and why Baltic Jewish photographers in South Africa used Western European art history and iconography to construct their artworks or convey their messages. To achieve the assessment of the works by Levson and Weinberg in the context of South African photography, they are systematised in the following categories: anthropological, studio photography, social documentary, and journalistic photography. The article also analyses the influence of pictorialism on their creative work. Most of the artworks of both photographers fall under the above-stated categories and will help to answer questions related to their artistic expression. The author argues that the Eastern European identity of these two selected photographers influenced their creative work much more than their Jewish roots.

Engaging in Colonial Practices: Pictorialism

The South African school of pictorialism¹ was heavily influenced by the British Linked Ring photographic society and the American Photo-Secession movement, the style of Western salons.

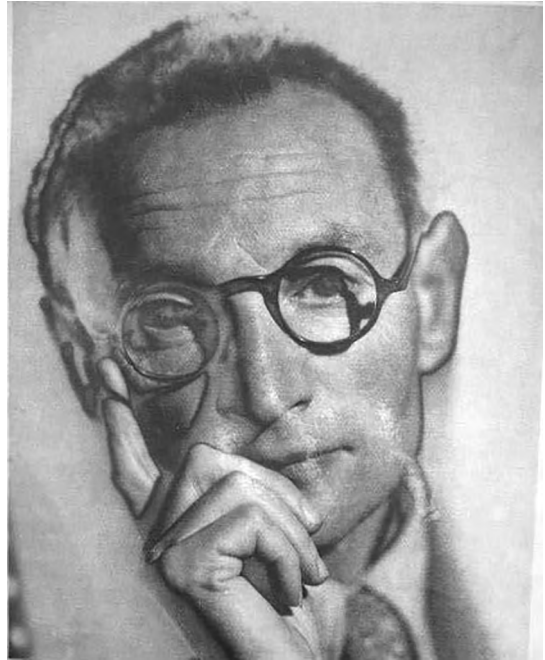


Fig. 1. Man Ray, *Leon Levson*, the 1930s. Personal archive of Jonathan Stern, Johannesburg, South Africa

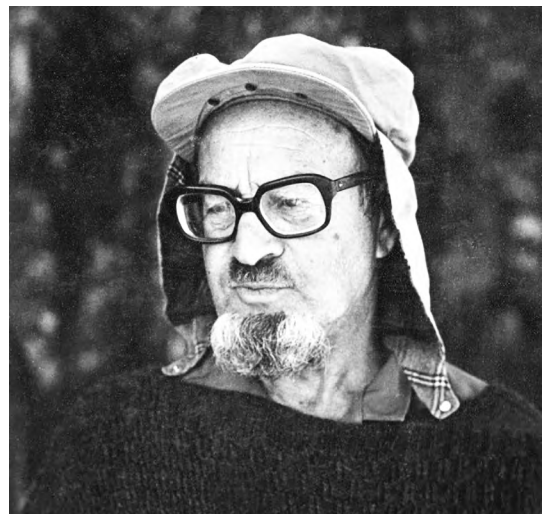


Fig. 2. Unknown author, *Eli Weinberg*, the 1940s–1950s. Personal archive of Mark Weinberg, Cape Town, South Africa

1 Grundlingh 2001: 34–49; Godby 2009.

Organised by the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain along with the London Salon of Photography and the American Photography Salon, the first South African salon opened in 1906.² In South Africa, this style was popular from the turn of the twentieth century until the end of the 1950s. As pictorialism reflected Western trends, there was little interest in the growing urbanisation of the black population. The main themes of salon works were landscapes, marinas, architecture, portraits, and ‘native studies’.

Most of the salon participants (whites only) were amateur photographers, so Constance Stuart (1914–2000), Lithuanian-trained Leon Levson, and Anne Fischer (1914/5–1986), who studied abroad, were exceptions to the rule. According to the article ‘The Art of Mr Leon Levson: An “At Home”’, published in the South African magazine *Reflex* in 1932, salon photographers honoured Levson as a true professional, nonetheless often precluded him from participating in their competitions.³ The salons allowed photographers not only to show their work but also to compete. However, photographic societies and salon organisers set the rules and thus created a specific scenario for the photographers wishing to take part in the competition. Photographers were instructed on the appropriate subject and composition of people and objects for the salon so that the author’s creativity would be expressed most beautifully.⁴ They were also given tips on how to improve print quality, for example, creating a ‘spark’ in an image by manipulating light when shooting dark areas.⁵ Salons and other photographic institutions ‘trained’ amateur photographers who liked to see the world in a certain way or construct certain forms of visuality. There was also pressure in the salons to present photography depicting something ‘unusual’, and the competition jury often rejected the prints not because they were bad but because too often the themes were repetitive.⁶

Photography clubs were also active.⁷ The Cape Town Photographic Society is the oldest photographic club in South Africa, dating back to 1890. In 1955, its members helped to establish the Photographic Society of Southern Africa. Arthur David Bensusan (1921–2007), one of the most famous photographers of the time and a photography historian, probably became its first president. In 1966, he published the first book on the history of photography in the country and founded the South African Museum of Photography, later named after him. Bensusan was of Jewish descent, he converted to Christianity later in life. He is an example of the extent that the Jews in South Africa were involved in photography, both in art practice and business, as well

2 Hayes 2007: 143; Grundlingh 1999: 244.

3 ‘The Art of Mr Leon Levson: An “At Home”’ 1932: 11.

4 Wright 1953: 1–3; Yates 1953: 11.

5 ‘Sparkle in your Pictures’ 1953: 17.

6 Denfield 1950.

7 Godby 2009.

as in the creation of its discourse (the involvement of the Jews in photography will be discussed below).

The Western influence on South African pictorialism cannot be overlooked. Michael Godby in the article ‘BUTISITART?’⁸ provides two examples of the influence of American and European pictorialism on the development of this style in South Africa: B. C. Wickison and Karel Jan Hora. In the May 1931 issue of the Johannesburg magazine *The Reflex*, Wickison published the article ‘The ABC of Pictorial Photography’, which, he acknowledged, was paraphrased from the American magazine *Amateur Photographer and Cinematographer*.⁹ As the title suggests, the article presented very simple composition rules that the club members were advised to follow. Similar tricks were offered in the article ‘Aesthetics of Photography for Beginners’, translated from the Czech by the famous Transvaal photographer Karel Jan Hora and published in the South African magazine *The Reflex* in 1935.¹⁰ Levson did not always follow these rules: a large tree, unbalanced in any way, appeared in the centre of the frame, or the horizon was intersected directly in the middle of the photo. However, these exceptions only confirmed the rules; most of his images were ‘correctly’ composed.

The sources quoted in the South African magazine about composition in salon photography remind that the genre of pictorialism was a truly international phenomenon. Its compositional principles were well known to every art school student of the time. It is important to keep in mind that the spread of pictorialism was directly related to the relationship between the centre and the periphery, where, at the time, the West was the centre that broadcasted ideas and South Africa was the periphery that absorbed them.

On the other hand, several hybrid practices transformed those ideas and styles. An important development was the establishing and operation of Chinese amateur photography clubs, such as the Chinese Camera Club of South Africa founded by Jack Ho in Johannesburg in 1952. The most popular genre among its members was landscape photography. In their works, Chinese photographers were combining pictorialism and some features of traditional Chinese painting, often even signing photography like a watercolour.¹¹ During the apartheid, when the Chinese were humiliated as an ethnic minority, photography helped them to sustain their identity.¹² Unfortunately, in the segregated history of South African art, this ‘marginal’ photography history has not been included in official discourse for a long time.

Pictorialism also had connections with the ‘native studies’ that were popular among white photographers in the country around the 1950s. A typical example of

⁸ Godby 2009: 42.

⁹ Wickison 1931: 15.

¹⁰ Lauschmann 1935.

¹¹ Corrigan 2015: 48–57.

¹² Grundlingh 2001: 35.

‘native studies’ was the idealisation and aestheticization of African life, presenting in their photographs the reprehensible ‘destructive influence’ of Western civilization and the inevitable disappearance of ‘eternal’ ancient African cultures. The pioneer of this tradition was the Irish-born Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin (1874–1954), who worked at the world’s largest De Beers diamond mine in Kimberley. In 1928, he started publishing the monumental series of photographs *The Bantu Tribes of Southern Africa*. In Duggan-Cronin’s works, Western cultural influences are also easy to trace. Michael Godby states that Duggan-Cronin liked to create allusions to European art in his photographs, such as his *Venda Mother with Child in Sibasa* (1923), which refers to the Renaissance Madonna.¹³

Probably one of the most typical of Levson’s pictorial work is the image of the sea-coast: five fishermen are pulling (or fixing) a net, and a sailboat and two boats can be seen at some distance in the sea. Although Levson was fascinated by painting all his life, his later works created after World War II no longer have pictorial qualities. On the other hand, painting elements appear in his late works, such as in the 1961 series *Murals*. There Levson used a specific technique to partially coat enlarged black-and-white photographs with three or four layers of oil paint (‘Johannesburg man finds new pictures process’ 1961).

Godby argues that Eli Weinberg also worked pictorially at the beginning of his creative path,¹⁴ but no works survived to fully confirm this, possibly with the exception of a few landscapes with dramatic light coming through the clouds and rows of hills. However, these works do not conform to the rules of pictorial composition and stylistics.

Thus, the following conclusions could be drawn: first, in South Africa, pictorialism arose from Western colonial influences and remained so throughout its existence. On the other hand, this style was pure only among amateurs: for example, the aesthetics chosen by Chinese photography clubs reveals the hybridity inherent in this style. Second, pictorialism was closely related to ‘native studies’ and anthropology and had a strong political charge in South Africa. Third, an analysis of Levson’s and Weinberg’s works of that period reveals that there were few manifestations of pictorialism in their photography.

Jewish Photographers and the Legacy of Anthropological Photography

As scholars such as Patricia Hayes have argued, photography in South Africa can only be understood in relation to ‘the history of African exploration, colonisation, knowledge creation, and captivity’.¹⁵ Photography was part of the arsenal of European

¹³ Godby 2010: 63.

¹⁴ Godby 2009.

¹⁵ Hayes 2007: 141.

imperial technological progress, and as such, it symbolised both the power disbalance between the centre/metropolis and the periphery/colony and portrayed the space of the 'Other'. Colonial anthropological photography reinforced social and cultural stereotypes, which in turn corresponded to and affirmed the discriminatory relationship between the local population and the colonial administration.

The British administration also tried to remove any traces of modern life and the presence of the whites from the photographs, even though the whites themselves created those photographs.¹⁶ Thus, it is almost impossible to analyse African photography of any period without considering the influence of Western anthropology in constructing the history of African visual codes. Both anthropology and pictorialism emerged because of colonialism and Western culture and were closely related. It should be noted that the ethnographic nature of photography is largely determined by discourse, so the disclosure of colonial discourse is one of the fundamental principles in the analysis of photography created in the African continent.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a large collection of 'native' photographic images already existed in the world. This genre also includes photographs of the blacks in South Africa where photography was used repressively and assisted the scientific needs of Western anthropologists and ethnographers. They ranged from humiliating 'criminal photos' (close-up and profile, like police criminal records) and staged 'rural scenes' to romanticised or eroticised photographs of nude women taken in studios. South African ethnographic photography was far from homogeneous. What connects these groups of photographs, however, is that they all visualise European 'fantasies' about 'native life' rather than objectively capture reality (as far as photography can do it). Analysing the impact of photography, the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera aptly notes that photography in Africa was an instrument of pain: 'In Africa, as in many parts of the captured world, the camera emerged as part of colonial paraphernalia along with the gun and the Bible, [...] cataloguing the baptized and the hung'.¹⁷

Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, Joseph Denfield, and Constance Stuart Larrabee were the most prominent representatives of anthropological photography in South Africa during the period under study. In this context, Anne Fischer's (1915–1986) case is also worth analysing. Her creative path developed in a similar way to that of Levson. Fischer was a German Jewish immigrant and a successful studio photographer, and only much later in life she started photographing in rural areas of Basutoland and Transkei. Her photographs often reflect the tension between the documentary approach and romanticised 'native studies', but the images are usually very dramatic and influenced by the German avant-garde photography and expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁸

16 Hight & Sampson 2002; Appadurai 1997: 4–7; Poole 2005: 159–179; Edwards 1992.

17 Vera 1999: 3.

18 Warne 2012.

Given the photographic context described above, it is no surprise that Levson also began photographing the Africans. From the visit of the famous British photographer Benjamin Stone (1838–1914) in 1894, the depiction of ‘native life’ was already well-established in pictorialism and ethnography and recognised by photography enthusiasts. Given Levson’s deep knowledge of photography and membership in various organisations, such as the Johannesburg Photographic Society, he was no doubt familiar with the depiction of ‘native life’. In exhibitions in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town, he certainly saw Constance Stuart Larrabee’s effective photographs of various South African ethnic groups, which had become one of the most significant works of the genre of the period. While living in South Africa, Levson frequently visited the United Kingdom, France, and the USA and partially identified with Western culture, so it is not surprising that he quickly adopted the anthropological tradition of depicting Africans. Levson brought European modernist art to exhibit in South Africa but did not take African masks for sale to Europe, which would have been very logical given the situation at the time. As soon as World War II ended, he started travelling around the country and the neighbouring areas and photographing black Africans. These visits to the countryside were most probably driven more by the artist’s curiosity rather than by a political idea.

In 1947, under the auspices of the UK Royal African Society, Levson opened his largest exhibition on the lives of the blacks in South Africa, *Meet the Bantu: A Story in Changing Cultures* at Foyle’s London Art Gallery. Renamed differently each time, this exhibition made three tours of South African galleries (Johannesburg, Kimberly). The introduction to the exhibition catalogue states that the photographs provide ‘an introduction to the Bantu peoples of South Africa at this critical time in their development, as they strive to pass from their old primitive way of life into the stream of the Western world.’¹⁹ All the photos were grouped into nine sections, offering a narrative movement from the traditional African way of life to ‘westernised’ urban life, along with the concomitant problems of poverty and hardship, and concluding with an imagining of the future in the final chapter. Although it was argued that the exhibition did not seek ‘to recall the picturesque and dying past, but rather to capture some of the kaleidoscopic, living present’, Levson’s photographs ranged from depicting romantic ‘traditional’ lifestyles (Fig. 3), contacts with Western culture, to images of urban jobs and housing.²⁰

The numerous exhibition reviews written under the guise of universal humanism reflect the colonial ideas of the time, saying that ‘Mr Levson presents the Bantu people exactly as he sees them in their daily lives [...] so that we can understand that in South Africa, under our care and supervision, are these interesting and vital

¹⁹ Odendaal 1990: 75.

²⁰ Ibid.



Fig. 3. Leon Levson, *Three Herero Women in the Countryside*, 1947. The DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center, Chicago, USA

types of human beings, simpler than ourselves but no less belonging to the earth out of which we came and into which we shall all return.²¹ In one particularly Eurocentric review, the author is even surprised that Levson photographed the blacks not dressed in feathers and not painted in war colours, thus congratulating the photographer as being very modern.²²

Eli Weinberg also created several anthropological photographs, although he later distanced himself from them. As Darren Newbury rightly pointed out, ‘although Weinberg’s legacy is completely different from Levson’s, they seem to overlap more than is generally acknowledged. [...] it seems that even Weinberg, so passionately committed to the fight against apartheid, portrayed Africans in rural areas in a traditional setting, and for him, it did not contradict the political commitment to defend the rights of black South Africans.’²³ An example of such work could be a black boy depicted against a background of mountains and animals with a stick (or musical instrument) held with both hands and pressed to his lips (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Eli Weinberg, *Lesotho*, the 1950s. UWC-Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Archives, Cape Town, South Africa

²¹ Odendaal 1990: 102.

²² Odendaal 1990: 103.

²³ Newbury 2009: 221–222.

On the other hand, a detailed examination of the existing examples of Weinberg's anthropological photography reveals that they were all created during his trips to Lesotho, thus it is typical travel photography, albeit made by a white tourist. Weinberg loved being outdoors and often went on mountain hikes. He easily spoke to the locals in the Sotho language, formed instant connections, and they willingly posed for him. Weinberg's photographs differ from Levson's works, in which the connection between the photographer and the subject is very cold and formal. Weinberg used such photographs to illustrate his bachelor's thesis on Sotho literature. However, since those photographs from Lesotho did not have explicit political objectives, they were not intended for wider use: even in the book *Portrait of the People*, there is only one such image, of a mother with a child in her arms. Although anthropological, it is included in the chapter on the role of women in the anti-apartheid struggle (among women political figures, street protests of women, and women being detained), where it also acquires a political connotation.

Although both photographers created anthropological photography at some point in their artistic careers, there are a couple of significant differences between them: (1) Levson acted in colonial discourse, while Weinberg's anthropological work due to his political activism is often treated in anti-apartheid discourse, and (2) there were breaks in Levson's anthropological photography, most likely due to his artistic curiosity, and Weinberg's anthropological research often merged with his travel photography.

The Tradition of South African Studio Photography

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were already over 400 photography studios in South Africa,²⁴ most of them owned by the whites. The activities of black photo studios in townships also began long before the introduction of apartheid.²⁵ Early twentieth-century studio portraits of the 'civilised' locals dressed in European clothes were photographed using props and painted backgrounds depicting the Victorian world. However, the situation changed with the advent of photo studios in townships, and more elements of modern urban culture were introduced. Instead of the bourgeois environment, photographers used a collage of corrugated sheets, posters, and plastic curtains. In the absence of good lighting, clients often posed outdoors near studios or in the courtyards of their own homes.

As the regime gained momentum, various ways to continue working were sought. For example, a way to get around the strict rules was to hide the studio in the store yard: 'It was unheard of for [the blacks] to have a studio [...] You could call it 'shoe fixing' and then somewhere in the corner behind it you could do those

²⁴ Campbell 2013.

²⁵ ed. Morton & Newbury 2015: 115.

other things²⁶. Many photos taken in the informal studios had a stamp indicating the various activities in one place: ‘ABC Dry Cleaner / Photo Studio’ or ‘Magani Watchmaker / Photographer’. Due to their privileged status, the white photographers were certainly able to use better photography equipment, studio premises and locations in the city, employ assistants, and set higher prices. The studio clients were either exclusively white (Levson’s case) or racially mixed (Weinberg’s case).

The situation of Jewish photo studios has not yet been sufficiently studied. According to information from the Iziko Museum in South Africa, Tiberias Benjamin Kisch was the first Jewish photographer in Cape Town. Many authors mention in passing that there were many Jewish studios in the country, which was supported by the photographers David Goldblatt and Paul Weinberg in personal interviews; however, the historical sources confirming this are very scarce. One such studio was of Jane Plotz Finn, a Jew of Lithuanian origin, who had been operating in Johannesburg since the 1930s, where she also photographed four-year-old Goldblatt. Dalia Kliukienė mentions Mordechai and Bela German from Rokiškis, also from Lithuania, who emigrated to South Africa in 1935 and continued their work in a photography studio there, but later opened a dry-cleaner’s.²⁷ The Jewish community in South Africa played an important role in the spread of black photography. The shops near the mines were mostly owned by Jews and offered photographic services to workers.²⁸

Levson and Weinberg mostly used classical Western techniques and trends for constructing studio portraits. The backgrounds of their photographs were always neutral, and the outfits were also simple and unobtrusive, except for Levson’s early portraits, in which women were dressed up. They did not use any props, except when the subjects were sitting, in which case the back or armrest of the chair was visible.

Apparently due to a lack of technical skills, which is noticeable in many of his photos, Weinberg was not always able to properly light the face of the model, and sometimes part of the face remained in deep shadow. Meanwhile, Levson was well versed in both the soft and the rather dramatic play of light and shadow. Weinberg cropped heavily the portraits for his book, and in many cases only the face remained in them. Levson used more intricate ways of (not) looking into the camera (twisted, over the shoulder, looking down, etc.). When working for the famous Duffus brothers, Levson gained a reputation as a ‘fine, sensitive, and original portraitist’ and soon many famous people posed for him: diplomats, government officials, businessmen, South Africans and visitors alike.²⁹

26 Bonner & Segal 1998: 34.

27 Kliukienė 2017.

28 Feyder 2009: 46.

29 Odendaal 1994: 37.



Fig. 5. Leon Levson, *Actor Ron Arden*, first half of the 20th century. Personal archive of Dennis Arden, Johannesburg, South Africa

The portrait of the actor Ron Arden (around 1950) is a typical example of Levson's studio portraiture (Fig. 5). It is frontal, neatly retouched, without distracting background or clothing details. Almost everything in the frame was under the photographer's control: the composition, the viewing point, the depth of focus, and retouching almost allowed to achieve the quality of a drawing. However, as the photograph was taken during apartheid, Arden's portrait raises a question, one of the most typical and relevant during a racial regime: which racial group did the portrayed person belong to? A penetrating gaze of the adept of racial purity could notice the man's curly hair, dark eyes, and full lips. Unfortunately, he would have to be disappointed for two reasons. First, Levson never photographed the blacks or coloureds in his studio. Second, Ron Arden was the brother of Dennis Arden, Levson's Jewish

student. Thus, the interpretation of this photograph would vary greatly depending on the political and ideological context.

Army officers constituted a significant number of Levson's studio clients during World War I. They came to have their picture taken before leaving for the front. One such surviving portrait is of Eugene Fitz Patrick, a South African heavy artillery major. He joined the South-West Africa campaign in August 1914, when, acting on behalf of the British imperial government, the Union of South Africa invaded and conquered the German colony of South West Africa (now Namibia). As the war continued, the major was sent to Europe and was killed in December 1917 at the Battle of Cambrai in northern France. The photo shows a young handsome white man, clean-shaven, neatly combed, and dressed in uniform. This is a perfect example of Levson's pictorial studio portrait, heavily retouched, with a faded background and accented brush-like strokes. At the turn of the twentieth century, Levson's teacher Icik Serebrin used the same techniques in his photography studio in Vilnius. In 1914, Levson also made a portrait of the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa, General Louis Botha – the man who sent the aforementioned young artillery major to the war. Subsequently, Botha commissioned studio portraits only from Levson and even invited him to stay on his farm.³⁰

³⁰ Odendaal 1994: 38.

Weinberg was active as a professional of studio photography. When necessary, his entire house in Johannesburg could become a place for taking photographs. Weinberg was often invited as a photographer to the weddings of black Africans; he even photographed the wedding of Nelson Mandela and Winnie Madikizela in 1958.³¹ Barbara Harmel thus describes Weinberg's wedding photography: 'Weinberg, a white Jewish communist who was at that time already barred from participating in trade unions' activities, [...] was trying to make a living by photographing African weddings. There was also a photo studio in his house, so there were always cars waiting at the door to bring African wedding participants.'³² Normally, black weddings were photographed by black photographers. Black families did not invite white photographers to such events.

Weinberg created several portraits of Nelson Mandela. The most famous and iconic is the 1961 portrait of young Mandela, adorned with a necklace of dark and light beads, clad in light material, and sitting on a wooden chair (Fig. 6). However, according to Anitra Nettleton, Mandela's bead jewellery raises questions about its 'African' authenticity. She claims that the jewellery of this design does not belong to any specific 'ethnic' group in the Eastern Cape province. She believes the jewellery originated from Western lace collars, which eventually became bigger and more sophisticated until finally they became 'traditional' jewellery of the Western Cape. Thus, the 'national' garment worn by Mandela, emphasising his connection with the land of the ancestors and at the same time a symbol of resistance, was, in fact, another adaptation and use of the imported form, in other words, a hybrid product.³³

The baggage of historical, cultural, and aesthetic knowledge that Weinberg brought from Europe determined precisely this composition of Mandela's portrait. Travellers from Europe enjoyed comparing local men and women with antique statues. It is likely that Weinberg consciously arranged Mandela's photograph using the European art history and ancient iconography known to him at that time. Although it was

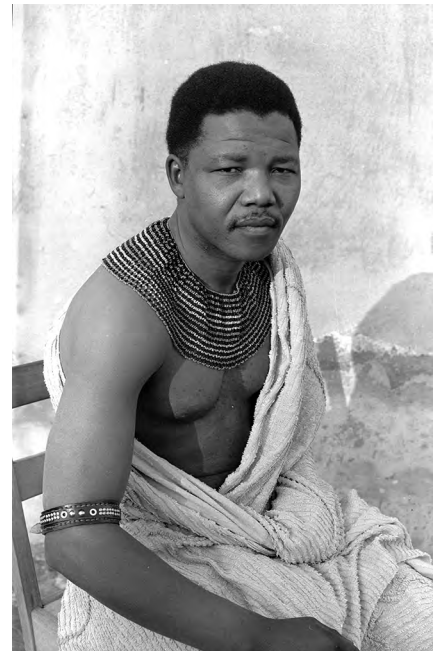


Fig. 6. Eli Weinberg, *Nelson Mandela*, 1961. Sparnestad Collection of the National Archive in The Hague, Netherlands

31 Smith 2010.

32 Smith 2010: 143–144.

33 Nettleton 2013: 44.

Mandela's decision not to wear the conventional suit, it was Weinberg's aesthetic decision to reveal the chest and arm muscles thus creating an allusion to the togas of the senators of the Roman Republic and reminiscent of the heroes of Greek and Roman myths. At that time, no other influential member of the African National Congress (ANC), except Chief Albert Luthuli celebrating his Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, was captured in 'traditional' costumes; usually, all party officials in the photos of that time were wearing suits. Thus, in this case, Weinberg's Jewish heritage overlapped with his European one. The European mentality manifested itself symbolically – using associations with democratic laws of Rome.³⁴ This photography reveals Western influences in Weinberg's work as well as the hybridity of his photographic practices.

In the practice of studio photography, one can trace the strong Western European cultural influences that emerged through the centre/periphery relationship and manifested in the works of both Levson and Weinberg, as well as manifestations of hybridity and interpretations of national heroes (e.g., Weinberg's portrait of Nelson Mandela).

The Status of the Social Documentary

In the context of South African apartheid, the social documentary is often treated as a counter-discourse to the colonial anthropological legacy and is most fully described through the relationship with apartheid and the struggle against it. It is important to understand the artistic strategies of Levson and Weinberg in this context.

Some authors believe that the rise of South African documentary photography was most influenced by the US documentary photography movement, particularly the Farm Security Administration programme, for which many prominent US photographers, such as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, had extensively documented the Great Depression. However, the extent of the circulation of these photographs in South Africa is still unclear. For example, James Agee's famous work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published only in 1941.³⁵ Until 1944, however, subscribers to the *Libertas* magazine may have become familiar with the images depicting, separately, the poverty of the blacks and the whites.³⁶ The shock of the Holocaust and the success of American documentary photographers among South Africans increased the demand for and supply of images, while also affecting struggle photography. Thus, as Marijke du Toit argues, an independent genre of the social documentary emerged in South African photography only after World War II.³⁷

³⁴ Simonson 2014: 55–67.

³⁵ du Toit 2003.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

South African photography during the period under study was undoubtedly closely linked to the country's history and politics. When analysing the social documentary, the main landmarks become political events (rather than styles or trends). South African society underwent complex social changes. Urbanisation had been growing rapidly for several decades before apartheid came into being. Between 1936 and 1948, the black population in Johannesburg almost doubled. Urban poverty, the growth of informal squatting settlements, and the hard work of social workers became the main topics of the social documentary, and so did black urban culture, illegal alcohol production, gang subculture, and various emerging musicians, politicians, and athletes. The photographic repertoire of the social documentary coexisted with the dominant paradigm of 'native studies', which until then accounted for most of the existing black African photographs. The photographers were exclusively white, liberal, and patronising.

Another important factor for the spread of the social documentary was the huge impact of the famous exhibition *The Family of Man* curated by Edward Steichen, which arrived in South Africa in 1958. Using it as an example, Bensusan organised the exhibition *Life of Our Nation – Ons Volk, Ons Land* in Bloemfontein in 1960; however, Godby believes that he adopted the liberal American universalism to celebrate the narrow form of the nationalist ideal.³⁸

While it is important to recognise foreign influences, far from all South African documentary photography drew its inspiration from abroad. The use of the camera as a weapon was considered a natural phenomenon in the apartheid society. It was not until a conference in Botswana in 1979 that David Goldblatt publicly disagreed with the reduction of art to an anti-regime instrument. Okechukwu C. Nwafor, on the other hand, argues that all South African documentary photography suffered from institutional discourse.³⁹ He emphasises that South Africa is a great example of this, as the power of the state was used to determine the parameters of documentary photography.⁴⁰ The fact that the apartheid regime supported Levson's photography exhibition *Meet the Bantu*, which travelled to the UK in 1948, shows that photography was used to achieve the goals of the dominant ruling class. Thus, although photographers actively or passively used documentary photography as a weapon in an ideological struggle, apartheid also gave clear instructions to artists.

Many critics describe Levson as a pioneer of the South African social documentary. However, it is useful to look at their arguments through the prism of the photographer's social status. The critics are interested in whether Levson's work is a social documentary, while the focus of the author of this article is on what it means for the interpretations of his photography and what it says about Levson's social status and his place in South African art history, as well as about possible influence of his

³⁸ Godby 2009.

³⁹ Rosler 1997: 64.

⁴⁰ Nwafor 2015: 5.

Jewish roots on his work. Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool were among the first to start this discussion.⁴¹ Based on the analysis of Levson's exhibitions curated by Gordon Metz, they title Levson the pioneer of the social documentary in South Africa.

However, when they finally see Levson's entire collection at the Mayibuye archives (from which Metz's exhibitions were put together, although the collection is not complete), they also notice three gaps in their previous interpretations. First, their impressions of the photographs in the exhibitions were selective, taken out

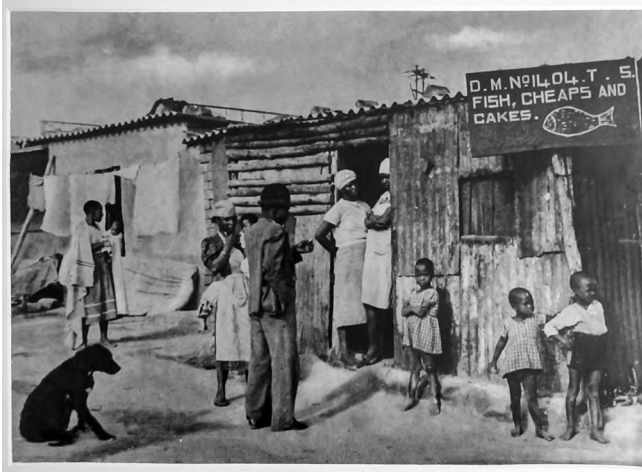


Fig. 7. Leon Levson, *Fish&Chips, Orlando*, 1946. The DuSable Black History Museum and Education Center, Chicago, USA

of context, and contradicted with the collection as a whole seen later.⁴² Second, in their view, Levson photographed the blacks, almost exclusively, and this alone allowed him to be described as a representative of the social documentary (Fig. 7).⁴³ Third, it was Levson's 'unusual, 'uncharacteristic' photographs that gave him 'a position as one of the founders of a social documentary photographic tradition in South Africa'.⁴⁴

It is important to make a few remarks related to the view expressed by Minkley and Rassool about Levson as a pioneer of the social documentary. First, they rely solely on Levson's works kept in the Mayibuye Archives, which is not a complete collection of his work, as he certainly created many photographs of the whites. Secondly, they do not emphasise his pro-regime activity, it does not seem important to them to consider how this may have affected the perception of Levson's work and his position towards the black subjects. The third observation relates to the authors' treatment of Levson's images as a 'bottom-up' social documentary⁴⁵ representing the 'black experience',⁴⁶ which seems at least unconvincing because Levson was a wealthy privileged white man.

41 Minkley & Rassool 2005.

42 Minkley & Rassool 2005: 207.

43 Minkley & Rassool 2005: 208.

44 Ibid.

45 Minkley & Rassool 2005: 189.

46 Minkley & Rassool 2005: 192.

Levson's photography collection turned the Mayibuye Archives into the most important archive in South Africa storing historical images of the blacks in the 1940s–1950s. For the opening of this archive at the University of Western Cape in 1990, a postcard invitation was issued featuring just two photographs, and they were Levson's and Weinberg's. On the one hand, this fact points to the importance of their photographic collection in the overall context of the archive. On the other hand, it says that they are still seen as resistance photographers, although such an assessment is based on only a small part of their work and without considering the whole legacy. Undoubtedly, this was also influenced by the South African art discourse.

Darren Newbury examines Levson's work from the perspective of the social documentary. He is interested in how Levson's photography was labelled as an antiapartheid work and later even presented as a historical predecessor of struggle and resistance photography.⁴⁷ Newbury argues that Levson's work is even more closely related the political activity of the opposition than was argued by Minkley and Rassool.⁴⁸ Newbury, however, like Minkley and Rassool, does not comment on the rest of Levson's photography; he only discusses that part of the Mayibuye collection which fits his argument.

When analysing Levson's work,⁴⁹ Godby acknowledges his shifting identity and the wide range of his work, and therefore confines himself to stating that it is difficult to unambiguously evaluate Levson's all creative legacies. Unlike other critics, Godby does not talk at all about the relationship between the photographer's work and the Mayibuye Archives. It should be added that the location of Levson's collection of 178 works at the DuSable African American Museum in Chicago also shows his position as a highly regarded observer of black life. According to museum curators, his work was chosen to represent African life.

In addition to the above-mentioned portraits of Jan Smuts, the prime minister of the Union of South Africa Sydney Charles Buxton, Governor of the Union of South Africa, and some Afrikaner events, Levson had three exhibitions dedicated to gold and copper mines, and for some reason, none of the critics even mentioned them, although those exhibitions show how pro-regime Levson was.

Thus, none of the critics paid attention to Levson's pro-regime photography, such as official portraits of Botha and Smuts or images of Afrikaner nationalist events, such as the Great Trek celebration in Pretoria in 1938. As a result, linking his work to the political activities of the opposition is the result of interpretations rather than facts. Those interpretations were determined by Levson's status as a white Jewish man and by the discourse that dominated the country at the time. Moreover, it is highly doubtful that a wealthy white man could be considered a representative of the social documentary, especially its pioneer, in the postcolonial context.

⁴⁷ Newbury 2009: 46.

⁴⁸ Newbury 2009: 47.

⁴⁹ In 'The Rise and Fall of Apartheid' 2013.

Photojournalism Strategies

As a separate genre of photography, photojournalism emerged in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. It is a way of photographing to respond immediately to current events and was much facilitated by the emergence of small hand-held cameras, such as the Ermanox and Leica, which allowed photographers to capture fast-paced events and emotions while remaining unnoticed. Political turmoils in the world and the growth of mass news circulation led to a huge demand for illustrated magazines: *Picture Post*, *Life*, and *Vu* were founded during this period.

One of the most significant steps in South African photojournalism was the emergence of the first illustrated magazine *Drum* (1951) for the blacks. Another milestone was the 1960 Sharpeville massacre recorded by Ian Berry, while perhaps the most famous photograph is the image of the 12-year-old boy Hector Pieterse, one of the first victims of the 1976 Soweto uprising. Those photographs marked the beginning of the South African language of photojournalism, with images of the violent struggle taking hold for decades.

Weinberg documented most of the country's major political events, such as forced evictions of the blacks, protests against the apartheid rule, bus boycotts, burning of passbooks, ANC meetings, and many more. In 1956, Weinberg photographed another important political event, the Treason Trial, in which 156 people, Nelson Mandela among them, were accused of treason (Fig. 8). In Johannesburg, Weinberg recorded street protests near the court where the trial took place, clashes



Fig. 8. Eli Weinberg, *Crowd near the Drill Hall on the Opening Day of the Treason Trial, 1956.* The Bensusan Museum of Photography, Johannesburg, South Africa

with police, the attending lawyers, the restaurant where the defendants had lunch during the trial, and crowds with supporting posters. He also created a collective photograph of the accused: he photographed people in several groups and put them together into a collage. Weinberg became a witness to racism when the Superintendent of Joubert Park prevented him from photographing the blacks and the whites sitting together.

Weinberg's documentary style was also reflected in his portraits, especially evident when compared to those made by Levson. A good example of different aesthetics would be the portrait of political activist Ruth First. Weinberg captured the moment during another anti-apartheid protest, a front-facing, contrasting face of 'comrade' Ruth. Levson's photograph offers a different view of First – a beautiful, even 'glamorous' woman who could have been an actress. Both the chosen angle and the position of the woman's head are interesting – her head is tilted slightly forward and embraced with both hands, highlighting the regular features and a strict facial expression.

Weinberg's photography of South African protests and resistance emerged in the appropriate context of political photography. In the US, it was Marc Riboud and his photograph *The Ultimate Confrontation: The Flower and the Bayonet* (1967), taken during the protest in Washington against the war in Vietnam, Gordon Parks's 1960s protest photos, photo-essay by Leonard Freed *Black in White America* capturing the explosive period of 1963–1965, Bruce Davidson's exploration into the heart of the civil rights movement. In Europe, Josef Koudelka captured the Prague Spring (1968), and others.

The question of the poor visual quality of Weinberg's photojournalistic works and its relationship with the rules of the genre (timeliness, objectivity, narrative) and pictorialism should be also raised. Writing on this subject, Godby argues that Weinberg, who previously sometimes worked pictorially, began to avoid discussing the 'art' of photography, seeing it as a distraction from the seriousness of his goals, at the time when he started to be actively engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle.⁵⁰ As Weinberg advertised in his studio flyer: 'My work as a photographer is distinguished by two important qualities: technical competence and efficient service. If you need such a photographer, please contact me.'⁵¹

Newbury, on the other hand, believes that even the surviving works can be judged on his focus on photographic techniques and aesthetics.⁵² As an example, he presents Weinberg's photographs of a thunderstorm and a photograph of the Sotho women in the Lesotho mountains which won him a silver medal at the New York World's Fair in 1964. That work was one of 150,000 entries from 58 countries around the world. Weinberg was banned from travelling at the time, so he could not attend

⁵⁰ Godby 2009: 42.

⁵¹ Eli Weinberg's studio advertisement (1970).

⁵² Newbury 2009: 221, 267.

the award ceremony. Weinberg's grandson Mark keeps the grandfather's medal, but unfortunately, neither the winning photograph nor any images of it have survived.

It is important to consider one more argument. In his letters of 1929 to Esther Lurie, Weinberg argued that the cultural, scientific, and intellectual level of development of a country depends on the development of the proletariat.⁵³ He considered the art of Kathe Kollwitz, Georg Grosz, and other German Expressionists to be examples of 'correct' art. It is possible that he devoted his entire life to such art – not embellished, ideologically meaningful, reflecting the country's political turmoil. On the other hand, the previously practiced pictorialism and visual aesthetics in the context of new political realities became no longer relevant.

Although Levson himself did not work as a photojournalist, he was the contact person for some foreign photographers visiting South Africa. Richard Cutler, who worked at Levson's studio, recalls that shortly after Constance Stuart Larrabee left South Africa, *Life* magazine asked Levson to send photos depicting the racial situation in the country.⁵⁴ Although there is no indication that those photographs were ever published, it is likely that, along with other images, they became a visual model for the works of the American photographer Margaret Bourke-White, who came to the country shortly after to create her photo story about the country.⁵⁵

Although Levson and Weinberg lived in Johannesburg for several decades, very little is known about their perceptions of each other's works: none of Levson's references and only two of Weinberg's survived. One is a 1954 review of Levson's exhibition *60 Photographs of Italy* in *Jewish Affairs*.⁵⁶ Weinberg emphasises Levson's talent but argues that the photographer showed only Italy's past and present, but not the country's struggle for a better future. These words reflected their ideological differences. The other is Weinberg's 1957 text *Photography with a Difference*, which also appeared in *Jewish Affairs*.⁵⁷ Here he raises the question of whether photography is art, presenting Levson's works as proof to the affirmative answer. These abstract considerations of the nature of photography prove that visual quality was still important to Weinberg at the time, which faded into the background later, as he began to be heavily involved in anti-apartheid activities.

Conclusions

In examining Leon Levson's and Eli Weinberg's creative legacy, questions of origin, expression, political and racial stance, and artistic influences were addressed.

⁵³ Weinberg 1930.

⁵⁴ Newbury 2009: 78.

⁵⁵ Mason 2012.

⁵⁶ Weinberg 1954.

⁵⁷ Weinberg 1957.

The article strives to promote a rethinking of the aesthetic and political functions of photography in the twentieth century and highlights the not always conscious (or only retrospectively perceived) bias of aesthetic attitudes.

Both artists used several genres in their work, sometimes in chronological order, although more often at the same time. The boundaries of these genres were often quite blurred and overlapped. Levson used the experience of studio photography in outdoor photography, while Weinberg adapted anthropological and studio photography to the ideological needs of photojournalism. It is important to note the (partial) hybridity inherent in South African photography at the time. It is noticeable both in the history of photography in general (e.g., the activities of Chinese photography clubs) and in the specific works of the photographers (e.g., the portrait of Nelson Mandela by Weinberg). It can be argued that the application of postcolonial theory in the analysis of South African photography between the 1930s and the 1970s is useful. Strong Western cultural influences resulting from the centre/periphery relationship and manifested in the work of both Levson and Weinberg, as well as manifestations of hybridity, can be traced in the photography of this period. The aspect of different perceptions of the works of these authors during their creation, functioning, and in current research is also important.

An analysis of the various photographic practices of Levson and Weinberg reveals differences in their attitudes towards the relation between content and form. For Levson, the aesthetic quality of photography was paramount, the message to be conveyed depended more on the context in which the works were used and on the existing discourse. Many of Weinberg's works show the opposite: the most important thing for the photographer was to capture and convey a political-ideological message, and the visual means to achieve this went into the background.

Eastern European Jewish artists brought the Western European cultural canon with them as their baggage to South Africa. This complex of visual aesthetics, cultural norms, and education would not have become exposed so vividly if they had not emigrated. Besides that, Levson and Weinberg adapted well to local cultural traditions. On the other hand, South Africa was heavily influenced by a colonial and racial discourse, which only strengthened their status.

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Karina Simonson

Pietų Afrikos žydų fotografija: imigrantai iš Rytų Europos ir Vakarų Europos kanonas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip ir kodėl Pietų Afrikos fotografai žydai, imigravę iš Rytų Europos, rėmėsi Vakarų Europos meno istorija ir ikonografija, kurdami savo vaizdinius ar perteikdami savo darbai tam tikrą žinią. Pasisitelkiant tarpdisciplininį požiūrį, jungiantį meno istorijos, žydų ir Afrikos studijas, kritiškai nagrinėjamas dviejų pirmosios kartos žydų imigrantų Pietų Afrikoje Leono Levsono (1883–1968) ir Eli Weinbergo (1908–1981) kūrybinis palikimas.

Nepaisant individualių bruožų skirtumų, abu fotografai buvo tipiški ir vieni ryškiausių pirmosios emigracijos bangos išėivių iš Lietuvos ir Latvijos; jų visuomeninė veikla ir profesinis indėlis paliko stiprų pėdsaką Pietų Afrikos kultūroje.

Pagrindiniai straipsnyje keliami klausimai: kokią įtaką menininko etninė priklausomybė turi kūrybos procesui? Kaip centro ir periferijos santykis bei hibridiškumas pasireiškė L. Levsono ir E. Weinbergo darbuose? Kaip buvo vertinami jų darbai žlugus apartheidui ir po jo? Koks buvo jų požiūris į estetinę fotografijos kokybę? Straipsnyje L. Levsono ir E. Weinbergo darbai vertinami Pietų Afrikos fotografijos kontekste, susisteminant juos pagal šias kategorijas – antropologinę, studijinę fotografiją, socialinę dokumentiką ir publicistinę fotografiją, taip pat analizuojama piktorializmo įtaka jų kūrybai. Autorės teigimu, šių dviejų fotografų Rytų europietiškas identitetas turėjo kur kas daugiau įtakos jų kūrybai nei jų žydiškos šaknys.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Pietų Afrika, Leon Levson, Eli Weinberg, apartheidas, Baltijos šalys, antropologinė fotografija, studijinė fotografija, socialinė dokumentika