Riding the Subway with Bruce Davidson

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At our final workshop, I brought in a photograph by Bruce Davidson taken in the 1980s to serve as our collective text for discussion on “Jews and the City.” The photo, part of a series by Davidson on the New York City subway, views a graveyard from the window of an F train. We had decided to consider from our diverse disciplinary perspectives a midrash, “…this will be your sign, if you see a cemetery in front of you, the city is close by” (Midrash Psalms, 20:4). Davidson’s picture brought together the three themes that had been my concern during my year at the Institute: Jews, the city, and photographs. The following comments express my version of the confluence of those themes in Davidson’s photo as informed by insights from our last workshop. Looking at an image together with other scholars produces a far richer understanding than working alone. I am indebted to my fellow fellows and their generous spirit of inquiry.

Let’s begin with the city. In contemporary American parlance, “the city” often refers to New York City, specifically Manhattan. Subway construction started at the beginning of the 20th century and was initially restricted to Manhattan. As the network of trains expanded into the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens, platform signs often directed passengers heading toward Manhattan to “the city.” Davidson’s photo portrays one such train, since the F train travels from the beaches of Coney Island in Brooklyn, through the Lower East Side of Manhattan, up to midtown and then out into Queens, ending at 179th Street in Jamaica. However, we see a radically schematic map that shows the F train’s route as a straight line, though it actually resembles an inverted lamed Ṣ.
Subways proclaim “the city” because metropolitan transit systems both guided and stoked urban growth. From streetcars to elevated trains to subways, public transportation encouraged concentration of industries, allowing city residents to live in neighborhoods distant from their work. Subways related to earlier systems of public transportation as the latest innovation, and not all cities built them. Subways introduced speed exceeding any previous forms of urban transit; they became associated with modernity. The first New York City subway opened in 1905; it was the most modern, efficient, and rapid mode of travel available. It had express trains as well as locals, an innovation absent in many comparable systems (such as London’s Underground). As the system expanded to encompass 722 miles of track, transfer points connected what were initially three separate subways. Davidson’s photo indicates those transfer points on its map as well as express stops in boldface type. Reading or seeing this map is an abstract endeavor. It references submerged and contentious histories.

Photographs documented the construction of the subway, its opening ceremonies, and the life that gradually emerged underground. Although probably the most famous subway photographs are those taken between 1938 and 1941 by Walker Evans, many photographers as well as artists of the urban scene pictured subway riders. These included all classes of New Yorkers: rich and poor, black and white, immigrant and native-born, old and young. Very quickly conventions of subway behavior took hold that allowed crowds of dissimilar people to ride together over long distances. A vacant gaze, newspaper reading, animated conversation, flirtatious lovers, sleeping workers, boisterous teenagers, bedraggled bums, drunken sailors — all were portrayed in images of life underground.

When Davidson decided to photograph the subway, he was participating in a long history of documentation and interpretation. His subway series includes romantic images of women waiting for the train at elevated stations that recall the photographs of Andre Kertesz and the etchings of John Sloan. The series also captures experiences of riding inside the cars, of looking at the graffiti-covered trains from outside, of darkness and of light. Unlike Evans, however, Davidson did not hide his camera and usually asked people if he could take a photograph. A native New Yorker, Davidson had grown up in the city and never left it. He often worked on images in series, starting with his photos of a Brooklyn gang in the late 1950s, and he drew upon a rich heritage of street photography by Jews that shaped what has been called the New York School of Photography. Knowing the city well, Davidson saw how it had changed. His decision in the 1980s to picture the subway in color, when he normally worked in black-and-white, responded to public perceptions at a moment when the system was embattled, in disrepair, covered with graffiti, mired in politics, and seen as filled with dangerous criminals, juvenile delinquents, and mentally disturbed, homeless men and women. His subway series captures the humanity of the men, women, and children riding the trains. As in much of his other work, Davidson photographs against the grain of common views. At a time when newspaper headlines trumpeted the 1984 subway shooting of two teenagers by Bernard Goetz, proclaiming this act of violence as revenge, self-defense, or a new norm for subway riders, Davidson’s images invite very different reflections.

The photograph of the graveyard viewed from the F train captures an aspect of ambivalence toward the city, common among Jews in the 1980s. Davidson photographs
lineaments of indeterminacy. We cannot tell where the train is headed—toward the city or away from it. The map, which seems so helpful, is actually useless since we never paid our fare and stepped into the train. Thanks to Davidson, we have materialized in media res. We cannot know who gets on and off at each stop, nor even the time of day. The image abounds with ironies. We recognize the subway car from its sign and characteristic orange plastic seat, but we are not underground where subways are supposed to be. Yet looking out of the window, we notice how the world outside lacks color. It is gray, as if Davidson shot a black-and-white photo from within the color one of the train. Think of Dorothy looking out from grayscale Kansas at Technicolor Oz—but these inversions are merely workaday weirdness. Davidson insists on their uncanniness. The window frames a view within the frame of the photo. The apparently solitary rider, however, isn't interested. His slumping posture, head bent forward, suggests that he might be dozing. The cemetery's drabness seems almost lively in comparison. The tombstones jostle each other; they resemble a densely packed city seen from the air. In the distance we see factory buildings and on the right some attached houses, but little that suggests motion beyond a speeding car.

The image invites us to consider whether there really is a city close by, or whether all that remains are the monuments to the millions who once lived and worked in New York. For Jews in the 1980s, especially those who had moved to the suburbs, it was not clear that the city held any future as a Jewish site of history, or if it were becoming inexorably a site of memory. The F train traveled outward in two directions from the Lower East Side: to Flatbush and Coney Island in Brooklyn and Jackson Heights and Kew Gardens in Queens. Its route marked the paths that so many Jews had taken as they exchanged a poor immigrant Jewish milieu for a prosperous second-generation Jewish neighborhood. Davidson's photo questions much of what was accepted as typical about subways. It is quiet, solitary, almost peaceful. There is graffiti—a rather elegant “Chris” etched into the windowpane—but it serves less to deface than to add a layer of mystery. Our perspective toward the city is elevated; we look out across it. Yet we recognize that in the intervening years we have lost some of the photo’s relevant cues. It appears as a work of art, its juxtapositions of living and dead and somnolent suspended above the streets of an inaccessible and remote, yet present, city. The image conveys as well an enduring engagement of American Jews with picturing the city.