

Documentary

Wolfgang Suschitzky: Man with a Camera

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At first glance, the photograph on the opposite page may not seem like the most arresting composition. Its numerous visual elements—buses, signs, people, buildings—stake equal claim on one’s attention, while the early evening gloom flattens rather than enhances the spatial perspective. A casual reading isn’t likely to reveal much. There is no apparent center of interest, no decisive moment. Drama, whether romantic, comic, tragic or otherwise, is conspicuous by its absence.

But linger awhile, and details come to the fore: All-caps posters on double-decker buses advertise Film Weekley, Shredded Wheat and Haig Whiskey. A display case for the Astoria Theatre exhibits film stills on behalf of *The Thirteenth Chair*, starring Madge Evans and Lewis Stone. A newsstand notice boldly proclaims: London Explosion Picture.

Street poles decisively bisect the image into vertical thirds, aiding visual navigation by focusing awareness on discrete narratives: several people queue for a bus; others advance down glistening pavement toward looming buildings in the distance; a bowler-

hatted gent ponders the glossy likenesses of Lewis and Madge.

Nearly all of the pedestrians are garbed in overcoats to protect from the chill and are pictured with their backs to the camera, rendering them as a more or less homogeneous mass—with the single exception of a ghostly head poking out from behind the theater display column, stifling a yawn yet alert to the photographer’s presence. This somewhat comically dissonant figure, once located, arrests and anchors our attention. All of the photograph’s disparate elements seem to snap into focus in relation to his gaze, which seems almost conspiratorial in nature, as if its owner were sharing a secret joke or observation with the viewer.

It is this individual that animates the photograph, lending it context, humanity and existential heft. He is the conduit by which one enters not just this particular image, but the year it was made, 1937, and the place, 157 Charing Cross Road, a mere two years before England entered the Second World War against Germany. A year which saw London bus drivers and conductors go on strike, Neville Chamberlain become Prime Minister and Benjamin Britten premiere his *Variations of a Theme of Frank Bridge*. In other words, normal events unfolding during the still relatively normal pre-war era.



Wolfgang Suschitzky, 2011, photo by Gerard Malanga, Wikimedia Commons



London, 1937



Amsterdam, Prinsengracht, 1934

Suschitzky often photographed in the early morning hours when few people were about.

Embodied within this photographic tone poem is a culturally revealing and emotionally resonant sense of place and lived lives. Through a masterful control of light, film, chemistry and paper, coupled with a socially perceptive and empathetic vision, its maker has elevated and made significant a seemingly mundane tableau unfolding on the streets of England's capital on a gray day in 1937.

There are certain photographers in the history of the medium whose images are indelibly associated with historical periods and places. The Hungarian Brassai (1899–1984) will forever be known for his book *Paris by Night* (1933), a seminal portrait of the city's inhabitants and environs. Josef Sudek (1896–1976) was the undisputed poet of Prague. No one photographed the transformation of New York City in the 1930s with such discernment as Berenice Abbott (1898–1991). While Bill Brandt (1904–1983) is probably the first name

that springs to mind when it comes to great London photographers, Wolfgang Suschitzky (1912–2016), the formidable subject of this feature, deserves to be in the conversation.

In common with Brandt, whose birthplace was Hamburg, Germany, Suschitzky wasn't a native of Britain. He was born to progressive Jewish parents in Vienna in what was then Austria-Hungary, a military/diplomatic alliance that was dissolved at the end of the First World War. His father Wilhelm was a publisher and the proprietor of Vienna's first social-democratic bookstore, along with Suschitzky's mother Adele. His sister Edith was a Bauhaus-trained photographer who would have a significant career of her own. Initially drawn to the study of zoology, Suschitzky eventually followed in Edith's path when that ambition proved unattainable; he subsequently acquired basic photographic skills at Vienna's School of Design and Graphic Arts.

The rising tide of Nazism in the early 1930s would have tragic ramifications for this creatively minded family, as fascism became the prevailing ideology in Austria in 1935. Suschitzky's father was devastated by the political climate, during which he was forced to close his bookstore. He subsequently committed suicide. Suschitzky departed for London in 1934 (where Edith was now living), married a Dutch woman, then moved to Holland and opened a photo studio. The marriage and move were short-lived, however, and he was back in London the following year.

It was during this period that he took his best-known and best-loved photographs, concentrating on Charing Cross Road in Central London. Suschitzky often photographed in the early morning hours when few people were about. This lent many of his images a unique ambience in which the city's physical character registers as strongly as the people he captured making their way about the capital.

Looking back on this time, Suschitzky said, "When I first came to London, I was fascinated to see whole streets devoted to a specific trade; there was Fleet Street with its news offices and printing shops; in another street, Hatton Gardens, the jewelers had their shops. Charing Cross Road was full of bookshops. Each shop also offered books, mostly second-hand fare, outside, and there were always passersby browsing through the tomes. That gave me the idea of making a book about the



Soho Square, London, 1944



Cambridge Circus, London, 1936

A fortuitous introduction to the pioneering documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha would launch Suschitzky on a parallel career path as a cinematographer.

street and the neighboring nightlife district of Soho.”

That book wouldn't appear until 1989. In the meantime, Suschitzky had to make a living. He assisted Edith on some of her photographic assignments and, with his favored Rolleiflex, took portraits for *Illustrated* and other picture magazines. He also showed his pictures to Stefan Lorant, editor of the photojournalism magazine *Picture Post*. Lorant said they were beautiful, but didn't qualify as photojournalistic. Suschitzky later conceded that he thought in terms of single images rather than conceptually tidy photo essays. Yet each of his photographs told its own eloquent and detailed narrative.

A fortuitous introduction to the pioneering documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha would launch Suschitzky on a parallel career path as a cinematographer. Rotha was impressed by the visual sophistication and social empathy of Suschitzky's photographs, and arranged for him to become assistant on a series of documentary films on zoos. This was right up the

alley of the former zoology student.

He quickly began photographing short films, many of them with a socially aware perspective (Suschitzky retained a lifelong leftist political orientation). Notable among these were *Children of the City* (1944), a study of child delinquency in Scotland; and *Education of the Deaf* (1946), which focused on the challenge of preparing deaf children to join mainstream society.

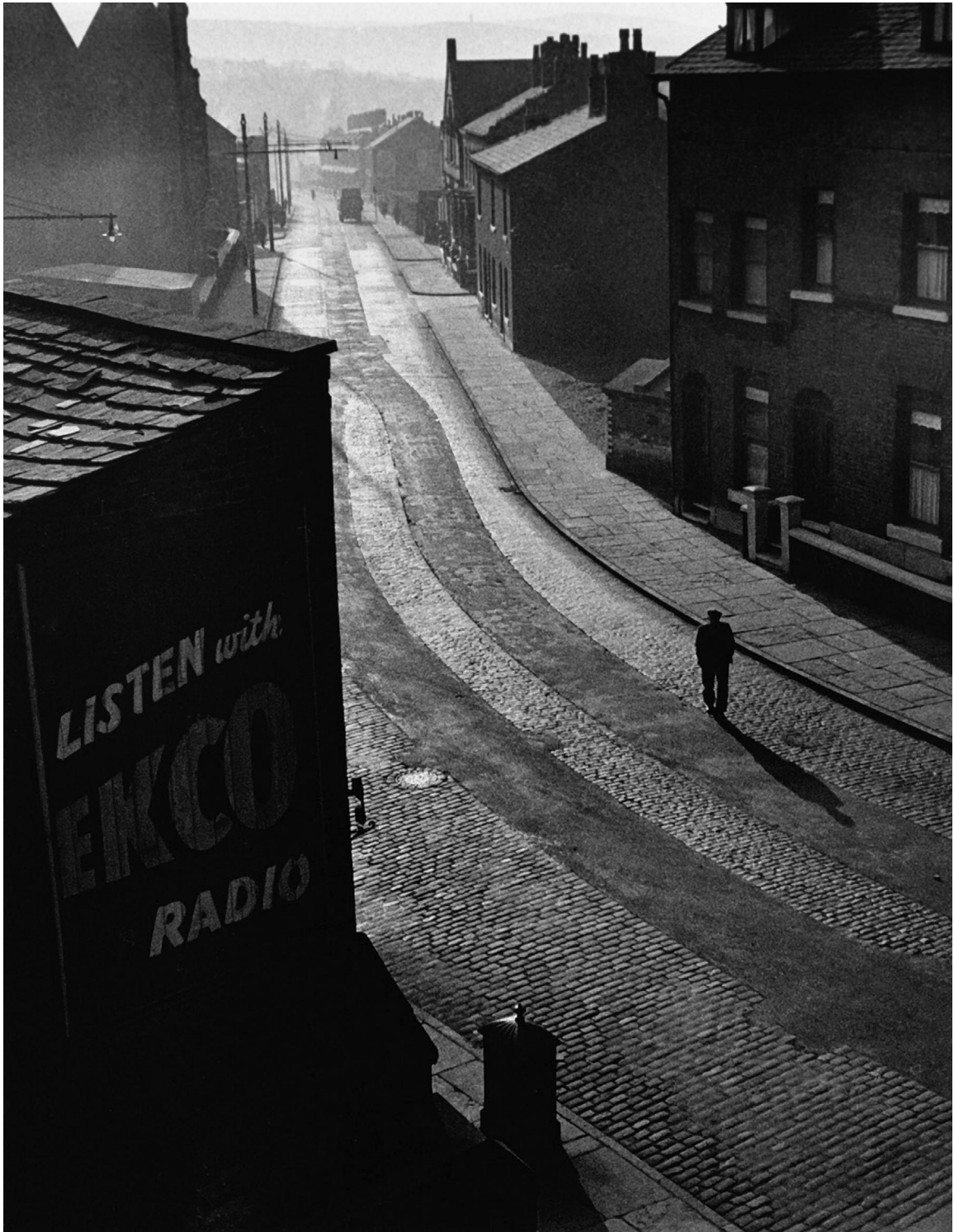
Suschitzky continued to pursue still photography between film assignments, which often took him outside Britain to India, Ethiopia, Yemen and many other countries. Two subjects close to his heart were animals and children. His first exhibition, in 1940, showcased images of the former; his first book, published the same year, featured insightful and sensitive pictures of children. His work frequently appeared in photography annuals throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Suschitzky's skills as both photographer and cinematographer shared much in common—a mobile, expressive camera; equal facility shooting exteriors and interiors; a concern with documentary verisimilitude; a gift for capturing and conjuring poetic atmosphere.

Suschitzky made his first feature film as a Director of Photography in 1951. Directed by Rotha, *No Resting Place* is a drama about an Irish tinker on the from police for murder. It was shot entirely on location in Wicklow, Ireland, and earned favorable notice; Winston Churchill is said to have called it the best film he'd ever seen. Other notable features Suschitzky photographed include *The Bespoke Overcoat* (1956) and *Cat and Mouse* (1958).

But his career as a cinematographer will forever be defined by two iconic British crime films: *The Small World of Sammy Lee* (1962), about a small-time hustler (played by Anthony Newley) in debt to underworld heavies, is an indelible portrait of a once-sleazy, often dangerous Soho, thanks in large measure to Suschitzky's expressively stylish and gritty monochrome; while *Get Carter* (1971), with a feral Michael Caine as a London gangster returned to his hometown to avenge his brother's murder, is acknowledged the greatest-ever British crime film. It also proved Suschitzky's mastery of color, with which he evoked atmosphere every bit as brooding and menacing as if he'd photographed in black and white. All told, his film credits as a DP total



King's Cross Station, c. 1940s



Oldham, 1946

Suschitzky was fully attuned to the rhythms of the street—its moods and textures, its dramas and secrets.



Charing Cross Road (puddle jumper), 1937

more than 100 features, documentaries, industrial and commercial films.

Despite the depth and breadth of his work in both mediums, Suschitzky's Charing Cross photographs arguably remain the essential touchstones of his visual creativity. As a street photographer, he was a firm believer in letting the image come to him. "I'm one of those photographers who like to wait for an opportunity for a picture to present itself, rather than create it by careful posing," he explained. "Remember, the first rule of photography is patience. If you wait for the right expression or the right position it will come. It is far less likely to come if you try to force it."

Suschitzky was fully attuned to the rhythms of the street—its moods and textures, its dramas and secrets. Body language, gesture, expression are captured so indelibly that one can almost divine what the people in his photographs are feeling or thinking. And Suschitzky's timing was second to none. Witness the decisive moment in which a young woman nimbly jumps across a puddle on a rainy Charing Cross Road in 1937, something of a mirror image to Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Place de L'Europe Gare Saint Lazare, 1932*.

Other photographs, like *Kings Cross Station, London, c. 1940s* and *Oldham, 1946*, are master class examples of how to arrange line, form, scale and depth.

Suschitzky segued from such muted street scenes to more animated communal gatherings as depicted in *Stepney, London, 1934* and *Durham, Miner's Gala, 1952*. In the former, a street in London's East End teems with rambunctious kids playing around—and playing up to—the camera. Most photographers would likely plunge into the midst of the action in order to capture the Dickensian dynamism of the moment. Suschitzky's perspective has something else in mind: He shoots the scene from a short distance, allowing him to draw a contrast between the closely packed group of swaggering juveniles and the solitary child in the lower-right corner of the frame, lending complexity to the mood and narrative. His viewpoint also takes in the brick tenements that hem in the street, their converging lines visually underscoring the narrow options for the residents—the city's East End in the 1930s was a locus of poverty, violence and political unrest.

A boisterous atmosphere also pervades the photograph of a miner's gala. Suschitzky has captured what could be called a cinematic moment in time: one miner riding atop another's shoulders (the latter wearing a beatific smile), both men with arms outstretched as if embracing the sheer spectacle and emotion of the moment, as well as symbolically reaching out to their collective brethren. The sense of communal celebration and solidarity is evoked with unusual power and resonance.

Suschitzky took pride in his work, but without a trace of ego. He invariably proclaimed himself a craftsman, not an artist. "I'm not aware that I have a certain style or variety of styles," he told his grandson Adam during a 2015 BAFTA interview. "I never think of that. I just take pictures as I come across them."

Addendum

*Photographs courtesy Peter Fetterman Gallery. Visit wolfsuschitzkyphotos.com to learn more about his remarkable life and work. Suschitzky's books include *An Exile's Eye* (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 2002), *Seven Decades of Photography* (SYNEMA Publications, 2014) and *Charing Cross Road in the Thirties* (Dirk Nishen Publishing, 1989).*



Stepney, London, 1934



Durham, Miners' Gala, 1952



London, Trafalgar Square, 1951



London, Charing Cross Road, 1934