

Transcription of British Library podcast

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/whatson/downloads/files/btrmoiver.mp3>

Curator Carole Holden talks about the photo-book by Moï Ver, *Paris*

Part of the Breaking the Rules Exhibition at the British Library, 9 Nov 2007-30 Mar 2008

For details see <http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules>

I'm Carole Holden and I'm head of American Collections at the Library. For the Avant Garde exhibition I've been curating the film and photography aspects and the photobooks, and I've chosen as my favourite item Moï Ver's photo-book *Paris*.

There are some wonderful photo-books in the exhibition, and they're all very different, so it's difficult to choose just one of them, but I guess for me it has to be Moï Ver's *Paris*.

It's impossible to display any photo-book in a glass case, because you have to pick just one or two images, which is really frustrating when a book is packed with great photographs, and you also lose any sense of how important the sequencing of images can be, to convey either a story, or an ideology, or in instance of this particular book, the fast pace of a modern city.

We're showing just the cover of the book, and although I think it does give a flavour of what's inside, what you miss is the cinematic quality of the book – it's really a sort of film trapped between two covers.

But perhaps I should say something about Moï Ver to begin with. His real name was Moses Vorobeichic and he was born in what is now Lithuania in 1904 and he studied painting in Vilnius. But in 1927 he went to the Bauhaus (this was the period it was located in Dessau), and he studied there with artists like Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Joseph Albers – and also Moholy-Nagy.

Moholy features quite a lot in the exhibition in a variety of guises. Many artists at that time were experimenting with both film and photography, as well as working in the more traditional mediums of painting or sculpture. Moholy's book *Painting, Photography, Film* came out in the Bauhaus Bucher series in 1925 and was very influential. He advocated a New Vision through photography – that is, he saw the camera as a means to help the viewer see what the human eye couldn't see on its own.

Remember this is the period when portable cameras were becoming available, and the convention of having a static camera pointed straight at an object just went out the window. Moholy (and others) experimented with disorienting and dizzying viewpoints – all those bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, and close-ups, as well as techniques like the photogram, negative printing, microscopy and X-ray.

The aim was to make the familiar unfamiliar, and everyday objects appear strange. The world could be transformed; it could be seen differently.

Moï Ver was very influenced by Moholy's work so he started experimenting with photography too. And in 1928, the year Moholy-Nagy left the Bauhaus, Moï Ver moved to Paris to study at the École Technique de Photographie et de Cinematographie.

In 1931 he had two books published, in fact: *A ghetto in the East, Vilnius*, and the *Paris Photobook*. For the Vilnius book, which is also in the exhibition, he used his own name, Vorobeichic. It's more restrained than *Paris*, perhaps because he wanted to show a certain respect for his subject, but although he's essentially making a documentary record of everyday life in the Jewish ghetto, he still managed to incorporate a variety of those New Vision techniques to add interest – he took photos from high up looking down on the streets,

he used oblique angles and various montage techniques and so on. It's difficult to look at the book knowing what was to happen in the ghetto just a few years later when the Nazis arrived in Vilnius, but that makes his record even more important.

For the *Paris Photobook*, he used the name Moï Ver, and he really lets go. You can tell that he knows about both film and photography – he experiments with cinematic montage techniques but he combines them with photographic multiple exposures.

The result is an extraordinary evocation of the modern city in motion. There are photos of the streets, the people, and buildings but it's as if you're looking at Paris through a kaleidoscope – the images are layered on top of one another, sandwiched together, repeated, printed upside down, you name it. Often you end up with multiple fragmented images.

I remember reading, I think it's in Andrew Roth's *Book of 101 Books*, Vince Aletti's description where he talks about 'image fragments ricocheting within the frame like reflections in several mirrors at once,' which I think is a perfect description, and wish I'd come up with it!

But as you turn the pages of the book, it's almost like setting the frames of a film in motion, with one shot dissolving into another, and the sequencing helps to build up a sense of rhythm and pace.

There are men pulling handcarts overlaid with cars, giving an impression that they're almost being mown down by progress. He does that juxtaposition of new and old quite often: on the cover, for example, you get factory chimneys superimposed on a classic stone colonnade.

It's also a mingling of art with the industrial. There's so much going on in the book: images of people at work, play, sleeping rough, there are bill boards, neon lights, surface textures, the river, cobblestones (lots of cobblestones!), grainy and blurred shots, and so on. You just can't take it all in, so you can discover something new every time you look at it.

And somehow, he manages to convey the sense of past, present and future all at once, with that tension between optimism for what's to come and maybe a sort of mourning for what's been lost.

There are many great photo-books on Paris. Brassai's is often the first that comes to mind, and that's a truly beautiful book (it's also in the exhibition). But with Brassai, each image is pleasurable, whereas you really need to take Moï Ver's book as a whole to appreciate what he's doing. It's not like there are a lot of images that stand out on their own, although I think in reviews of the book that's been a bit overstated: there are some individual pages that I really like and would be happy to have on my wall.

But when you do look at the book as a whole, then I don't think anyone can beat his vision of Paris as a modern city that's hurling itself full tilt into the brave new world. It's quite wonderful!

I don't know very much about what happened to Moï Ver after that. He apparently worked on several other book projects which were never realised, and I think he worked for a time as a reporter as well. But in 1934, a time when all the avant-garde optimism had gone, he left Europe for what was then Palestine, and he also changed his name again, to Moshé Raviv-Vorobeichic.

As far as I can gather, he stayed in Israel for the rest of his life (he died in 1995), and went back to painting. He doesn't seem to have published any more books, which seems a very great shame.