



## Journal of Consumer Culture

### Book Reviews

**Elspeth H. Brown**, *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 320 pp. ISBN 0-8018-8099-8

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Reviewed by Jessica Evans

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In this fascinating but theoretically unrefined book, historian Elspeth Brown examines how during the ‘second industrial revolution’, photography became central to modern corporations that were in thrall to ideas and practices of ‘rationalization’. Aiming to increase efficiency in business practice – such as in employment hiring procedures – rationalization increasingly centred on an ‘engineered’ view of the human subject, aiming to standardize and predict bodily behaviour and the emotions of employees and customers.

Explicitly following in the steps of David Nye’s (1985) and Roland Marchand’s (1997) works on photographic imagery in the modern corporation, Brown’s emphasis is likewise on the ‘production and use of visual imagery as means of consolidating corporate power and naturalizing what was a relatively new model of economic life’ (p. 19), rather than on the reception of imagery. For Brown, following Barthesian approaches to photography, the approach is essentially one of ideology-critique. Photography became important in corporate life because it emerged as an

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important evidentiary tool for workplace rationalization schemes: it held out the *promise* of rationalization (see p. 3). Accordingly, photography's indexical nature could be claimed as a scientific and impartial means of replicating the real. So her study aims to understand how photography is 'structured by the economic, while at the same time working to naturalize capitalism at the level of ideology' (p. 16) – a too general formulation to describe the concrete relationships between particular images, their particular markets and modes of production, distribution and use.

Although there is a nod to a more developed 'cultural economy' approach – Brown remarks that culture must be understood as integral to business behaviour, and that 'rational decision making is a contingent process that is legitimized and naturalized through, in part, representational practices' (p. 4) – her version of this remains wedded to the idea that the main role images play is ideological. So, although Brown presents an argument that rationalization was legitimized by representation, I was not convinced she shows sociologically how rationalization was contingent 'upon representation'. It's as if images, though important, are ultimately a means of access to something more fundamental, termed rather baldly as 'the economy' or 'capitalism', an assumption that other approaches to photography, such as the Foucauldian, have now dismantled. She could have stressed how photography had its own kinds of market and its own kinds of symbolic currency. Part of the problem is that the author explicitly embargoes claims about the 'effects' of photographic imagery. While she is clear that she is not concerned in the book with the extent to which rationalization was successful, or the extent to which images were contested or read in ways other than intended – as Allan Sekula's work on photographic archives has so subtly shown – the reader may well be left wondering if these attempts to mould human behaviour and emotion were indeed as successful and as uniform as is suggested. The snug fit between mass production and mass consumption – itself something of a sociological 'tall story', but also one desired by those corporate managers of the first decades of the 20th-century referred to by Brown – is left unquestioned.

The book comprises four main chapters. Chapter 1 centres on the work of an influential early personnel consultant, Dr Katherine Blackwood, representing the school of 'character analysts'. She used social Darwinist visual techniques such as phrenology to claim a relationship between external features and character. Thus her system of photographic analysis, a racial empiricism of the face and body, rationalized the formerly 'disorderly' process of hiring employees so as to achieve a 'fit' between worker type and job. Much of the ground covered here – on social Darwinist

physiognomic photography – will be familiar to anyone conversant with photographic history. Perhaps more interesting is the underlying argument Brown makes in this chapter and the next about the slow but sure valorization of a notion of ‘personality’ at the expense of previous ideas of ‘character’. Essential to the notion of character in the 19th-century was the idea that inner virtues could be cultivated and developed. Blackwood’s practice represented an early 20th-century attempt to delay a notion of personality that was becoming increasingly prevalent. But in her version, deeply inflected by social Darwinism, character was drained of its malleable, perfectible connotations and becomes a biologically fixed entity. As Brown shows, in the years following World War I, character analysis had a competitor in the form of the applied psychologists’ ‘mental testing’ methods. Recognizing the limitations of focusing on the body’s static, external features, photography shifted its role from providing evidence of character from physiognomy and became used as evidence for something quite different, to test the subject’s response to stimuli. Brown shows how in the new sciences of pathognomy, the facial expression of emotion, personality comes to represent a mobile rather than static self that can manipulate and be manipulated. The politics of perception of external appearance came to service the burgeoning retail sector and was integrated into its sales methods (p. 61) as increasingly consumers were regarded less as rational decision makers than emotional and impulsive buyers.

Further chapters discuss the use of photographic motion studies in the application of Taylorism to the industrial workforce and the consequent industrialization of the worker’s body; Lewis Hine’s evolution from reformist photographer at the turn of the century to his later work, privileging family harmony in corporate employee magazines, is an early example of corporate public relations. The final chapter deals with photographic illustration for print advertising in the 1910s and 1920s, centring on Lejaren à Hillier, who created pictorialist photographic tableaux that could interpolate the viewer-consumer as endlessly able to be transformed – another vindication of the new importance of ‘personality’ in modern consumer life. As Brown remarks in her conclusion, by the time art directors turned to photography, the distinction between photographic fact and the rhetoric of persuasion had become blurred – a strong message for those who in our times claim that this is a recent development.

## References

- Marchand, Roland (1997) *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Nye, David (1985) *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890–1930*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

**J. Fadlon, *Negotiating the Holistic Turn: The Domestication of Alternative Medicine*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2005. 176 pp. ISBN 0-7914-6315-X (hbk)  
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Exploration of the boundaries between biomedicine and other forms of healing is a common feature of the growing literature on complementary and alternative medicine. Fadlon's contribution to this discourse is noteworthy both for its insight into non-conventional medicine (NCM) in Israel and the presentation of her research findings on the domestication of NCM in Israel.

The first two chapters of the book outline the conceptual origins of domestication, along with the nature of health care in Israel with a particular focus on the status of NCM. Evidence-based scientific medicine has dominated Israel's health care market since the birth of the state. Fadlon contends that the convoluted legal status of NCM combined with growing public demand for NCM has led to a domesticated form of NCM. As a process, domestication is characterized by an adaptation of non-biomedical healing modalities into forms and practices that are culturally relevant. In addition, these forms and practices become re-situated into the dominating biomedical framework. In essence, that which was once exotic becomes tamed. Philosophy, ritual and practice that bear little or no relation to the approaches or philosophy of biomedicine become rationalized by (or is it casualties to) a biomedical frame of reference.

In making a case for the domestication of NCM, Fadlon's research explores NCM in three main settings: practice in an urban clinic, NCM as an educational enterprise and the portrayal of NCM in the media. Fadlon highlights early on a necessity for defining boundaries within a research programme that combines ethnography, textual analysis and surveying. What initially appears an ambitious research programme actually comprises a series of discrete research exercises presented over four chapters.

The first of these, Chapter 3, begins with an ethnographic study of a 'private' NCM clinic situated on the grounds of a hospital, where the reader gains an initial insight into the author's thesis concerning