

BOOK REVIEW

KEN SLOAN

Elspeth H. Brown. (2008). *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture (1884–1929)*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 334 pages.

It is not unusual to find a book on photography that demonstrates the significant impact photographs can have upon our perception of events. A photojournalist's images can focus attention and crystallize feelings in a powerful and often lasting manner. To demonstrate this, simply ask several peers of similar age to describe a few memorable photographs from magazines, newspapers, or advertisements. Or, ask if they remember some that you describe. If your results are similar to mine, most will not only remember many of the same images, but will be able to relate the thoughts and feelings those images generated at the time. The articles and essays that may have accompanied those photographs, however, are long forgotten. The power of the visual image captured through photography and widely available can have a significant impact on the developing shared attitudes.

What is unusual is to find a book that explores the emergence of photography as a visual medium and the impact that technology had in both supporting and shaping the emergence of industrial practices during the early 20th century. That is what *The Corporate Eye* does. It provides a rich and valuable context to more fully understand industrial practices as America moved into the industrial revolution ushering in product standardization, mass production, and mass consumption.

Written by Elspeth Brown, *The Corporate Eye* focuses on the period of 1884 through 1929 describing that as an era when "photography and industrialization came together" (p. 4). In the 1880s, Frederick Taylor had started his work at Philadelphia's Midvale Steel Company to identify ways to increase worker efficiency. In what came to be known as scientific management, Taylor sought to break work into its discrete components and then develop time standards and sequences that would translate to optimal efficiency. Taylor brought careful observation, measurement, and standardization to the task of improving a worker's efficiency. At the same time, the University of Pennsylvania invited a photographer named Eadweard Muybridge to undertake a multiyear project, which sought to document the human body in motion using rapid serial photographs. While Taylor's work was clearly focused on commercial applications, Muybridge operated from a platform of fine art and physiology. Brown notes that both Taylor and Muybridge sought to break down "the continuity of individual movement into component parts that could then be analyzed and then reorganized" (p. 10) and that later, similar photographic studies were adopted and applied to improving how workers executed their tasks. As I read this section, I thought of today's use of computer-aided video analysis to examine the style and techniques used by Olympic athletes.

Such analysis brings movements too subtle or rapid into the realm of analysis and assessment in order to modify movement and thus improve performance.

What *The Corporate Eye* does remarkably well is that it demonstrates not only how photographs and photography have been used as a tool, but how the very nature of photography served to shape and define organizational practices. This is clearly demonstrated as Brown examines the employment practices of the era. At the turn of the century, photographs presented an objective image of the subject, a “true portrayal.” Many seeking to rationalize employee hiring adopted these accurate, objective representations of reality. As industrial organizations grew, so did their hiring needs, and many in the applicant pool were drawn from recent immigrants who lived in the “anonymity of the metropolis” (p. 45). How then to gauge the “character” of these individuals when little objective history was available to use in the selection? Facing this challenge, many industrial employment offices embraced the use of catalogs that used photographs to illustrate physical facial features that provided evidence of otherwise invisible traits. By matching facial features to an individual’s character using these photographs, the employment manager had a ready reference to help him pick the right person. While ultimately falling from favor and discredited by psychologists, physiognomy, “the art of discerning internal ontology from external corporeal features” (p. 33), provided managers of the day with an “objective” means to gauge a candidate’s character.

While using photographs to define an applicant’s character declined, photographs were adopted and used in the areas of training and development. As mass-produced goods were increasingly available, attention was focused on ways to enhance retail sales. Thus, photographs shifted from physiognomy to pathognomy: that is, from representing fixed features as indicative of character to representing emotional expression. By accurately recognizing underlying emotion from the facial expression, one could “size up” a prospect or “manipulate the other

man’s mind” to think as you think, or feel as you feel (p. 61). The richness of Brown’s account in this section, as in many other sections of the book, comes from the numerous illustrations and period quotes that reflected the mindset of the period.

Beyond examining the uses of photographs to further industrial organizations’ goals, *The Corporate Eye* also examines how photographs were used to bring reforms to the workplace. Detailing the work of Lewis Hine, Brown takes the reader through the story of a young man from Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This young man grew from his early experiences in a series of low-wage jobs to become a progressive reformer who used workplace photographs of immigrants and children to bring widespread attention to the harsh and at times dangerous working conditions. Unlike early uses of photography, which sought accurate and objective representation of reality, Hine’s work was termed “interpretive photography.” Among the many examples included in the book, Hine’s 1908 photograph titled *Millworker* portrays a young girl in ragged dress standing dwarfed between enormous cotton mills. The photograph still conveys a powerful sense of the young girl’s plight by capturing her image within the context of her working conditions. Here photographs were not used to standardize practices, but to capture attention; not to interpret emotional expression, but to create an emotional reaction.

Interpretive photographs were influential in shaping societal views during the progressive era preceding World War I. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the more conservative period following the war, this approach was adopted and used to advance organizational goals, to influence and shape not only societal views, but the views of an internal audience—the organization’s employees. What is surprising is how it was Hine, who, shifting from progressive reformer, went to work at Western Electric in 1923 and became just as influential in the role of “selling the corporation to the workers themselves.” Just as Hine’s early work served to galvanize public sentiment against harsh and exploitive working conditions, he now

worked for businessmen who sought to “replace public suspicion of big business as the ‘soulless’ corporation with a perception of a more intimate, caring business” (p. 138).

As we near the end of the period under review, Brown shows how the relationship between photography and business moved from supporting a shared focus on capturing and representing an objective reality, to interpreting and representing sentiments and impressions, and finally to conveying “imaginative longings” and idealism. Photography began to use distortion and “trick effects” to tell a story (p. 208). Photographic techniques were now used increasingly to persuade an external audience, to develop a company’s image, or to build desire to acquire the products. Thus, along came an advertising focused on building “an interest in the mind” rather than detailing specifications or benefits (p. 218).

As Brown walks the reader through the period from 1884 to 1929, she persuasively demonstrates how photography developed parallel to the changes taking place in the country’s businesses, showing how the two realms intersected to shape and influence the other. The uses of photography moved from a desire for objective reality, to achieving desired goals, to using context and interpretation both as an agent of social change and

then corporate paternalism, and finally to creating an idealized condition. In taking us through this transformation, Brown succeeds in powerfully conveying the intertwined evolutionary path of early 20th-century industrial practices and photography.

While today we look back and see some applications as misguided and others as quaint, Brown describes events from the perspective and knowledge of the time. In this way, her work does not come across as a judgment-laden history, but as a story. Reading not just about what individuals did, but where they came from, and what they sought to do, provides one with a sense of both progressive managers and others seeking to rationalize practices, to improve effectiveness, and to move valued objectives forward. *The Corporate Eye* provides a valuable perspective for anyone seeking to increase his or her understanding of how business organizations use the technologies of the day, but are in turn shaped by those technologies, and how that continues today.

Ken Sloan obtained his Ed.D. in organization and human resource development from the George Washington University. He is currently an assistant professor of management in the School of Management at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY.