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## **The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture**

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rary cultural theory, and with strongly held and argued beliefs. Her book could serve well in a variety of contexts for undergraduate and graduate classes. Ironically for a scholar of television, though, she is most engaging and compelling when she turns away from the screen and walks out into the world.

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### **The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture.**

By Elspeth H. Brown. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.  
Pp. viii+334. \$49.95.

This is a book whose “big picture” is fully in focus: it lays out the broad but very complex and nuanced terrain of the development of scientific management of American commerce and industry during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Embedded in this landscape, peopled with corporate managers, public relations experts, art directors, and entrepreneurs, photography emerges as part of a larger and more complex history. The excellence of Elspeth Brown’s book lies in her submergence of the functions and practices of photography within this richer context. Brown follows the story of the cultural production of photography and its uses, rather than its reception, “in consolidating corporate power and naturalizing . . . a relatively new model of economic life . . .” (p. 19). She does this by showing how photography was appropriated in the corporate “rationalizing” of the mechanization of labor and its processes, the evolving uses of applied psychology, and the promotion of consumer products.

The first chapter deals with Katherine Blackford’s system for scrutinizing potential employees based on direct character reading and photographs. Brown shows the historical precedents for Blackford’s approach and describes its demise by the 1920s with the rise of applied psychology and its emphasis on the inner rather than outer expression of the individual. Chapter 2 concentrates on the work of Lillian and Frank Gilbreth in developing motion study as a visual technology to analyze the labor process and its components for maximizing efficiency and minimizing waste. Brown skillfully unfolds Frank Gilbreth’s complex relationship with his mentor Frederick Winslow Taylor as well as his own ambitious entrepreneurial work in its expanded application in film and apparatus especially after World War I.

Chapter 3 shifts direction to focus attention on the role of the photographer—one of the iconic figures in the field, Lewis Hine. While Hine’s

early social-documentary photography is well known, Brown centers her attention on his subsequent career, during and after World War I, beginning with his work for the Red Cross under the direction of the corporate publicist Ivy Lee. This is a fascinating account of Lee's appropriation of photography's persuasive function. Lee's subsequent public relations work for corporate clients builds on the larger rationalizing strategy of stabilizing labor and fostering emotional connections between workers. Hine's new style of upbeat "worker portraits" was fitted seamlessly into this program, which found expression in the widely distributed, corporate-sponsored employee magazines produced in the 1920s. By this time, as Brown points out, there was a prevailing ethos of "corporate liberalism" that had transformed and brought together a new alliance of corporate boosters and middle-class reformers. This leaves open the issue of Hine's own complicity to the corporate appropriation of his work and how representative his situation was compared to that of other photographers working for corporate clients.

The final chapter shifts to commercial photographic advertising as told through the work of Lejaren Hiller, a leading commercial artist/photographer of the 1920s. Hiller's career in product advertising in magazine illustration is indicative of shifting styles and the development of visual techniques during a period when there was still room for individual innovation. Blending the realism of the photograph with the projected aesthetic idealism of an earlier "pictorial photography," Hiller's advertising photographs were devised to "transform emotional intensity into commodity longing" (p. 211).

While Brown has undertaken an ambitious enterprise, it is one that is finely realized and will challenge scholars. She has crafted an extremely readable text, refusing to adopt the stilted language that troubles much of the current writing on photography and its history. This is an important book that digs for the connections that help us to understand that photography was, and still is, a tool whose functions lie deeply embedded in the social fabric of our culture and are subject to manipulation for various purposes by powerful forces in our society.

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Dr. Brown is a research associate of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. She is writing a book on the displays and practices of medicine and health at international expositions in the United States, 1876–1904.