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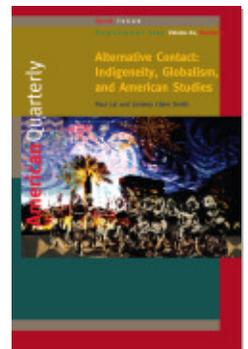
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The Critical Eye: Reading Commercial Photography

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The Critical Eye: Reading Commercial Photography

Tanya Sheehan

The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929. By Elspeth H. Brown. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. 344 pages. \$49.95 (cloth).

Thirty years ago, Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen delivered a call to action in the pages of *American Quarterly*, urging readers to reconsider the use of photographs in American studies.¹ The authors identified a lamentable tendency in the field to either neglect the social and cultural importance of photographic images or view them simply as decorations for historical writing. Photographs, they explained, contain valuable information not found in written records, information that “can only be communicated and analyzed in visual terms.”² Scholars must therefore learn to interpret the particular “grammar and syntax,” or visual rhetoric, of a photograph and then locate its creation and consumption in the history of photography as well as in America’s social and cultural history. The much-neglected genre of commercial photography is ideal for interpretation, Peters and Mergen went on to argue, given the mass-cultural importance and sheer volume of public photographs commissioned by government agencies, corporations, and other institutions. The publication in 2005 of Elspeth H. Brown’s *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929*, in the wake of vigorous scholarly activity concerning American visual culture of this period, shows us that their proposed use and method of interpreting commercial photographs has increasingly been adopted by scholars in American studies.³ It also teaches us that new questions about photography, unanticipated by proponents of visual analysis thirty years ago, are now being asked in this field.

The subject of Brown’s study is the important role that commercial photography played during America’s second industrial revolution, as corporate managers, engineers, planners, consultants, art directors, and merchandisers attempted to standardize subjectivities in the industrial workplace and marketplace. Brown shows us how this new class of professionals used the camera

to screen employees, record the movements of workers' bodies, articulate corporate-public relations, and advertise commercial products. Through their experiments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she argues, these actors articulated a utopian vision in American corporate culture, one that saw "instrumental technologies" like photography as a means of increasing the efficiency of industrial production and mass consumption.

The product of impressive archival research, *The Corporate Eye* brings together a vast and varied body of primary sources, both visual and written, from important American collections of photography and labor history, including the Hagley Museum and Library (which assisted in the publication of the book), the George Eastman House, the Getty Research Institute, and the National Museum of American History. In narrating the intersection of commercial photography and industrialization in modern American culture, Brown puts into practice the advice of Peters and Mergen, mobilizing textual evidence from professional photographic and scientific literature, corporate publications, popular home journals, and fashion magazines. These sources converse with one another in Brown's study—as they did, she argues, in the historical moment of their authorship—by reinforcing and at times challenging each others' views on the best means to rationalize American industry. As the focus of both *The Corporate Eye* and the corporate strategies it explores, commercial photographs also emerge in the book as an "important evidentiary tool" and a privileged site of knowledge about industrial labor and consumption.

In the first half of the book, Brown examines the commercial photographs produced by prominent personnel consultants and efficiency experts in the industrial workplace. She begins with a discussion of the "everyday" portraits that Dr. Katherine Blackford used to analyze workers' characters and illustrate her employee-screening methods in the 1910s and 1920s, along with the scientific photographs that industrial psychologists used to refute Blackford's physiognomic readings. Brown goes on to consider Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's efforts to capture traces of laboring bodies in still and moving images, which they produced as models for increasing worker efficiency. The second half of the book deals with examples of commercial camera work that brought together the conventions of advertising, journalistic, social documentary, fine art, and vernacular photography on the pages of corporate publications and popular magazines. Here the "work portraits" created by Lewis Hine and the photograph-based advertisements of artistic illustrator Lejaren à Hiller were instrumental, in Brown's view, in rationalizing employee and consumer subjectivities, respectively, in the years during and after World War I.

Throughout *The Corporate Eye*, Brown rightly acknowledges the influence that previous studies of North American commercial photography have had on her project, particularly those that connect this genre and medium to corporate strategies, social reform, and advertising practices. This includes work by David Nye and Roland Marchand on the image production of big businesses such as General Electric, Maren Stange on documentary photography as a tool for social reform, Patricia Johnston on Edward Steichen's advertising photographs, and Allan Sekula on the mining photographs taken by a commercial studio in Nova Scotia.⁴ Published in the 1980s and 1990s, works by these scholars paved the way for *The Corporate Eye* in offering a powerful critique of art history, which has generally excluded American commercial photographic work from its canon. Like Brown, these authors were concerned to recover the scientific and industrial character of photographs by such "masters" as Steichen, Hine, and Timothy O'Sullivan, while acknowledging the many points of connection between aesthetic and commercial genres of photography. At the same time, they demonstrated just how much little-known commercial photographic archives have to teach us about social and economic history, including the ways in which ideologies, interests, and power gained visual expression in modern industrial societies like that of Progressive-Era America. As Nye and Sekula have argued, the questions that art historians have left to scholars of American studies to ask of photography concern not only the various kinds and uses of the medium's commercial forms (scientific, corporate, family), as Peters and Mergen anticipated, but also the crucial role they have played in the development of capitalism. Specifically, how has commercial photography contributed to "the construction of capitalist dominion over nature and human labour," as Sekula put it?⁵ How have industrial photographs in particular legitimized relations of power in the workplace? And how has photography itself historically functioned as a voice of authority in corporate and, more broadly, American culture?

Brown explores precisely these questions in *The Corporate Eye* and in relation to many of the same actors and corporate contexts noted in earlier studies. One will recall that Sekula previously examined the photographic production of Frederick Winslow Taylor, Ivy Lee, Lewis Hine, Eadweard Muybridge, and the Gilbreths in the context of the standardization of work practices, the rise of public relations departments and the field of industrial psychology, and the integration of social reform and social engineering—all of which, according to Brown, contributed to the rationalization of industrial production and consumption in the Progressive Era. What is innovative about *The Corporate*

Eye and hence of considerable value for the study of American commercial photography is therefore not Brown's choice of case studies, but rather the simultaneous breadth and depth that she brings to her research and analysis. While Sekula offered a preliminary yet highly suggestive discussion of the Gilbreths' use of the camera, Brown presents a thoroughgoing investigation of the Gilbreths' many varied efforts to standardize motion in the workplace, which she examines in relation to photographic experiments undertaken by their contemporaries. Unlike previous studies, *The Corporate Eye* accounts for the different kinds of knowledge associated with the Gilbreths' photographic techniques and subjects; these interestingly ranged from "conventional" portraits of bricklaying work to "cyclegraphs" of surgical operations that recorded action as abstract movements of light. The book further examines the methods Frank Gilbreth used to analyze these photographs, articulate their information to corporate managers, compensate for their epistemological failures, and ultimately establish their and his authority in the field of scientific management. As Brown argues most convincingly, the Gilbreths' photographic studies of workers' bodies also functioned as advertisements for their industrial consulting services; Frank's persistent denial of influences for his motion studies (notably Muybridge and Marey) was part of his carefully orchestrated effort to establish the novelty and authority of his experiments, manage his public reputation as a professional scientific expert, and thereby win consulting contracts from large corporations.

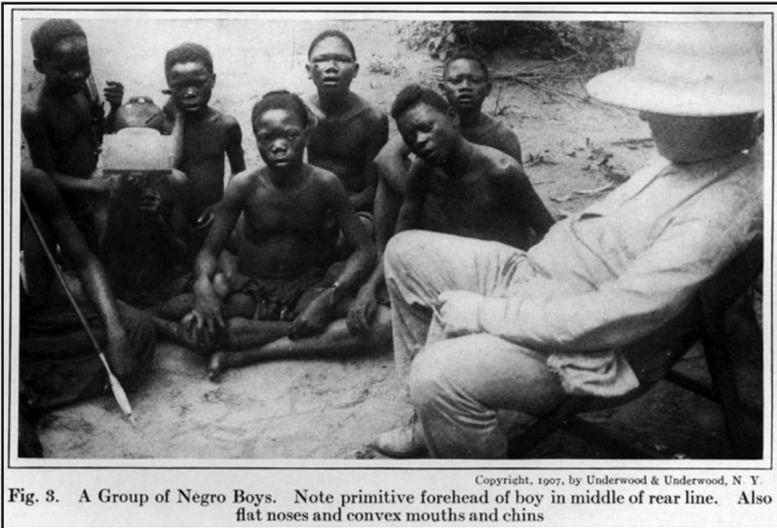
By reading the Gilbreths' experiments in this way, Brown introduces to the study of commercial photography questions developed within the field of science and technology studies, which critically examines the social construction of scientific knowledge and assumes an intimate relationship between the (constructed and performed) authority of scientists and that of their instruments, methods, and findings. Her discussion of the early pioneers of labor-motion studies also engages with questions associated with the fields of gender and popular media studies by pointing to the "crisis of masculinity" tied to the debilitation of laboring bodies in World War I on the one hand, and the similarities between labor-study subjects and early Hollywood film stars on the other. This interdisciplinary approach to the history of commercial photographs leads Brown to draw important connections between seemingly self-contained experiments commissioned by understudied American corporations and larger, well-documented historical developments in an international context. Although there are moments when Brown's interest in a broad range of questions and cultural phenomena leaves the reader asking even more questions and begging for further analysis (at times even a second book!), *The*

Corporate Eye will certainly encourage the interests of scholars and students in many disciplinary pockets of American studies.

But let's return to the photographs in the book, since it is as a model for analyzing images that *The Corporate Eye* makes one of its greatest contributions to the field. In her introduction and again in a section at the end of the book titled "Using Photographs for Historical Analysis," Brown articulates a commitment to reading photographic evidence with a critical eye. As Peters and Mergen had earlier proposed, this involves first understanding how the photograph conveys its message in formal terms, considering its subject matter, technical process, and format, along with its composition, the pose of the sitter(s), the arrangement of objects in the picture, and their iconographic significance. Historians should then consider the larger context in which the image was produced, consumed, circulated, and collected or archived. That context contributes to the production of photographic meaning. Brown's analyses of photographs in *The Corporate Eye* demonstrate the benefits that this approach can have for historical writing while also revealing its potential challenges.

Consider, for example, her reading of a fascinating photograph published by Underwood and Underwood, a leading American stereographic firm, and later reprinted by Dr. Katherine Blackford in one of her treatises on employee character analysis (fig. 1). As Brown tells us, the image depicts a group of black African children sitting at the feet of a white colonist. Her strategy in reading this picture involves reprinting Blackford's caption for the photograph, which instructs the (white) reader to note the "primitive" physiognomic features of the "Negro Boys," and connecting the image and text to discourses of scientific racism. Brown also lingers on the details of the photograph, reading the dominance of the white West over black Africa—expressed through the gazes, clothing, and poses of the bodies in the picture—as well as the role that technology plays in establishing those power relations. The children, she explains, have put down their spears and picked up a stereoscope, a device used in the West to view a photographic stereocard like the one in which the boys are depicted. The picture thus becomes, through Brown's reading, much more than "documentary evidence for [Blackford's] racist physiognomy" (30); it comments on the power of looking, which structures photographic representation and legitimizes Blackford's methodologies.

Inspired by Brown's line of questioning, the reader is nevertheless left to wonder: what might it mean for these black children to pick up the very instrument through which their objectification is experienced by white, middle-class viewers? What do they see (and perhaps even control) in that stereoviewer other than a representation of their own subjection, a spectacle intended for



Copyright, 1907, by Underwood & Underwood, N. Y.
Fig. 3. A Group of Negro Boys. Note primitive forehead of boy in middle of rear line. Also flat noses and convex mouths and chins

Figure 1.
 “A Group of Negro Boys.” From
*The Corporate Eye: Photography
 and the Rationalization of
 American Commercial Culture,
 1884-1929*, by Elspeth H.
 Brown (Baltimore: The Johns
 Hopkins University Press,
 2005).

the pleasure of white eyes? How does the appearance and meaning of this (now significantly cropped) stereocard radically shift, as it moves from its “home” in the middle-class drawing room to the pages of Blackford’s text and ultimately *The Corporate Eye*? Such questions show us that “context” and “power” in this example—as, I would argue, in any visual text—prove to be multifarious and mighty slippery

things. They demonstrate, moreover, that all photographs contain the seeds of their own instability and even their own failure to “mean.” While Brown critically examines attempts by her historical subjects to overcome that failure, her own method of visual analysis at times suppresses the instability of photographic meaning, which allows her to isolate interesting areas for exploration yet closes off others. There is no doubt, however, that Brown’s work fulfills Peters and Mergen’s desire for “a satisfactory model for analyzing photography” in American studies by showing us how and what commercial photographs can *mean* at the intersection of form and context. Other scholars in the field have likewise recognized the importance of this contribution; an expanded version of Brown’s method for reading photographs was recently published in an anthology on the importance of the “visual” in constructing American identities, where it supplements essays by Ardis Cameron, Shawn Michelle Smith, Laura Wexler, and other pioneers of American visual studies.⁶

Although these scholars have collectively revolutionized what it means to read commercial photographs, the notion that photography “cannot offer unmediated access to the material world” (5), as Brown plainly puts it, has yet to be fully internalized by American academics and the public alike. In 2005 *The Corporate Eye* still has to remind us that photographs are re-presentations whose meanings are determined by both history and interpretation—an idea that was promoted in the twentieth century by social historians of the medium, from Robert Taft to Alan Trachtenberg. Brown also relies on the idea, well-rehearsed in media studies, that photographs are perceived to have a unique relationship to the real; as iconic and indexical signs, they are understood as replicating the appearance and indeed the presence of objects placed before the camera. Throughout the book, she shows us that it was this epistemological character of photography—with its connotations of truth and scientific objectivity—that led corporate scientists, consultants, and advertisers to employ the medium as a tool for rationalizing American capitalism, standardizing subjectivities, and asserting their authority to do so. Such a claim is certainly important, in that it offers a reason *why* photography became instrumental in corporate culture. That said, Brown often presents the epistemology of the photograph as a premise, even a fixed constant, for both her argument and the historical period she studies. Although she portrays photography as an instrument shaped by its users to serve their particular interests, she always assumes (as she claims her subjects did) that photography’s power to rationalize ways of knowing is the result of its inherent indexical qualities and immediacy. In asserting that corporate managers drew upon photography’s “perceived privileged relationship to the real” (20) to legitimize their corporate aims, moreover, Brown does not explore in depth the mechanisms by which the medium’s realism and public perceptions thereof were continuously (re)produced.

The big question that *The Corporate Eye* leaves for future work in American visual studies is, therefore: Who/what rationalizes and authorizes *photography* in commercial culture? To put it another way, how have the medium’s seemingly self-evident epistemological character and instrumentality been socially constructed? This question assumes that the contingent concept that continues to be legitimized and naturalized in corporate practices is not only the “rational,” as Brown so convincingly demonstrates, but also “photography” itself. Building upon the work of John Tagg and Allan Sekula, she does offer us avenues for exploring these ideas by situating corporate photography among economic, artistic, and scientific discourses, while also insisting that photographic meaning is always “predicated on a politics of interpretation” (5). Nevertheless, “what

structures photography” receives less attention in Brown’s study than “what photography structures”—and understandably so, given that her book establishes the latter relation as its primary focus. Alongside the many contributions that *The Corporate Eye* makes to the fields of business and economic history, for which it was recently honored by the Association of American Publishers, the book thus poses a challenge to scholars in American visual studies to take the former relation as a starting point for critical inquiry. With the dexterity that Brown demonstrates in analyzing visual and written texts, we may now seek to write interdisciplinary, critical histories of commercial photography’s own rationalization—studies that will converse with the history of photography’s rationalizing powers so beautifully constructed in *The Corporate Eye*.

Notes

1. Marsha Peters and Bernard Mergen, “‘Doing the Rest’: The Uses of Photographs in American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 29: 3 (1977), 280–303.
2. *Ibid.*, 280.
3. On the development of visual analysis in twentieth-century scholarship on American history and culture, see Katherine Martinez, “Imaging the Past: Historians, Visual Images, and the Contested Definition of History,” *Visual Resources* 11: 1 (1995): 21–45.
4. David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890–1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Patricia Johnston, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen’s Advertising Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Allan Sekula, “Photography between Labour and Capital,” in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedd Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 193–268.
5. Sekula, “Photography between Labour and Capital,” 203.
6. See Elspeth H. Brown, “Reading the Visual Record,” in *Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People*, ed. Ardis Cameron (Malden, U.K.: Blackwell, 2005), 362–70.