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The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884-1929 by Elspeth H. Brown

Review by: Michael Kammen

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The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929. By Elspeth H. Brown. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. viii + 334 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-801-88099-8.

Reviewed by Michael Kammen

Elspeth Brown, an assistant professor of history at the University of Toronto, has written an admirable book about the way corporate America began to utilize and refine photographic techniques and images in order not only to enhance consumerism in the United States but also to manage (indeed control) the working class more effectively as industrial capitalism rolled into high gear between 1884 and 1929. She closes where she does, not so much because of the Great Crash but because, as she persuasively observes, by 1929 “advertising photography had come of age, with established figures such as Victor Keppler, Edward Steichen, and Nickolas Murray producing sophisticated photographic imagery for a fully developed Madison Avenue advertising industry” (p. 214). She acknowledges in her introduction that her research highlights the producers of visual texts, rather than the consumers. Some readers will want to know more about the reception and impact of the diverse images created during this generation, but that will have to await another, different project. This one is packed with highly original research that carefully builds on four biographical case studies that are meticulously contextualized. Nothing goes unexplained, and everything that is unfamiliar to most readers is meaningfully situated within a larger historical frame of reference.

Readers who know the period will not be surprised that the symptomatic glossary of that era in terms of corporate management pervades Brown’s study: *rationalization, standardization, efficiency, system, systematic management, time-study, motion study, kineticism, and order* become inevitable buzzwords, because the adaptation of visual culture to increased productivity, selection, and “handling” of the workforce, along with accelerating consumer desire, were crucial phenomena that called for careful and innovative attention. Brown’s cast of characters, both leading and supporting, were the superstars in that effort. As she explains at the outset, “the use of photographic technologies in industrializing the working body as part of a larger project of economic rationalization has been explored in the European context, most compellingly by [Marta] Braun and [Anson] Rabinbach, but it has yet to be fully explored in the United States, the birthplace of Taylorism and scientific management” (p. 14). Near the close of her introduction, the author declares that her subject “is the cultural history of those photogra-

phers and corporate managers who sought to produce industrial and consumption communities through strategies of visual representation structured by gendered, racialized, and class-based ways of seeing. I am interested, therefore, in cultural production rather than reception, power rather than resistance" (p. 19). Actually, despite excessive invocations of the clichéd mantra of gender, race, and class, this book has much more to say about class than gender, and it has almost nothing to say about race (because of the composition of the industrial workforce and the consumers these companies wanted to target).

Chapter one on photography and employee rationalization (who gets hired, retained, and controlled) highlights the fascinating conflict and eventual transition between those who sought character analysis (such as Dr. Katherine Blackford) and industrial psychologists who sought to identify mental qualities that signified suitability for employment. The shift occurred immediately following World War I, when the biological determinism that underlay Blackford's nineteenth-century assumptions about physiognomy (what might be called *facial profiling*) gave way in popular as well as scientific circles to "new models of human behavior that emphasized individual adaptability and environmental influence during one's own lifetime" (p. 56).

Chapter two, the most technical, emphasizes the work with micro-motion studies by Frank Bunker Gilbreth, whose filming breakthrough occurred in 1912–13. As Brown lucidly explains, his introduction of moving pictures and photography to enhance industrial efficiency became a public-relations coup. His addition of visual studies to Taylorism via motion studies (for which he is indebted to Eadweard Muybridge) achieved much success and gained considerable influence for Gilbreth. Chapter three traces the transformation of Lewis Hine's work from photography in service to social reform in the Progressive Era to photography in service to corporate America after World War I by making the industrial workers feel good about their "artisanal" role in the booming economy. Brown sees and argues for a line of consistency in Hine's work as a socially minded member of the progressive social reform movement; yet her own choice quotations undermine that emphasis. As Hine declared in 1919, "I thought I had done my share of *negative documentation*. I wanted to do something *positive*" (p. 134). In an interview seven years later, Hine explained that "the great problem of industry is to go a step beyond having the employer and the employee 'get along.' The employee must be induced to feel a pride in his work" (p. 136). So many of Hine's famous images of strong and proud workers first appeared in company (in-house) magazines whose aim was to make the working class remain content with their lot. Whether or not readers agree with Brown's insistence upon Hine's consistency

as a progressive, they should be intrigued by this chapter. It provides an entirely new perspective on the career and goals of an iconic American photographer.

The final chapter follows the extraordinary path and production of a much less familiar image-maker, an American from Milwaukee named Lejaren à Hiller, who recognized the potential for “pictorialism” (artistic photography indebted to late-nineteenth-century English work and the Arts and Crafts Movement) as an effective tool for enhancing desire and the sale of all sorts of products. Having become one of the most accomplished commercial photographers prior to the World War I, he enjoyed immense success and influence during the two decades following. As Brown indicates fully and clearly, Hiller drew upon his formal training in fine art, and his sensitivity to symbolist and pictorialist aesthetics enabled him to represent, photographically, “the subjective and the ideal, exactly the aspects of the self being charted by applied psychologists and advertisers. Hiller’s aesthetic solutions to the problems of photographic realism dovetailed with advertisers’ shift to the subjective as the mainspring of consumerism in the twentieth century” (pp. 215–16).

Despite some needless repetition, infrequent lapses into jargon (such as “naturalizing,” “indexical,” and “indexicality”), and hackneyed abuse of the phrase “race, class, and gender hierarchies” (used three times in the introduction alone), Brown has supplied in-depth research, thick description, crystal-clear conceptualization and organization. Her book is a highly welcome contribution to the field of business history as well as American visual culture.

Michael Kammen is Newton C. Farr Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell, and visiting professor of history at Yale in 2005–2006. A Time to Every Purpose: The Four Seasons in American Culture appeared in 2004, and his forthcoming book is Visual Shock: Controversial Art and American Culture (2006).

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Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century. *By Lisa Jacobson.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xiii + 299 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-231-11388-9.

Reviewed by Daniel Thomas Cook

In an increasingly populated research area, *Raising Consumers* generally succeeds in shedding new light on the history of children as con-