The corporate eye: photography and the rationalization of American commercial culture, 1884–1929

Stefan Schwarzkopf [a]

[a] Queen Mary University of London,

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The detailed empirical analysis of Danke's business network, and its importance in shaping Danke's specialisation and internationalisation, is a significant contribution to this literature. However, it would have been interesting to place this case in its national and sectoral context. In addition, the subsidiary, its business network and HQ are analysed in isolation in Parts 1 and 2 of the book, whereas in Part 3 these disappear in a dataset of anonymous subsidiaries. There are obvious advantages in moving to a sample-based analysis, particularly in terms of representiveness; however, an analysis of the extent of Danke's independence from its HQ and principal–agency dynamics between the two would have been very interesting and would have complemented the topics addressed in the first two parts of the monograph. Moreover, Parts 1 and 2 would have benefited from a discussion of possible differences between networks internal and external to the MNC, whether these affect the subsidiary's strategic decisions in different ways and whether clashes might arise from possibly opposite influences exercised by the two networks.

This monograph is based on an extensive dataset and a very well documented case study. Such a wealth of empirical material provides an ideal ground to test theories and enables the authors to elaborate interesting conceptualisations of some specific aspects of the broader network approach, particularly concerning the internationalisation of business networks. The interplay between theories and the case study makes this book a valuable teaching material, particularly suitable as a basis for discussion with advanced students.

Anna Spadavecchia
University of Reading
a.spadavecchia@henley.reading.ac.uk
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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., 75 illus., £33.50/US$52.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8018-8099-5

Elspeth Brown's study of the many uses of photography in turn-of-the-century American corporate culture has won her praise, amongst others from the Association of American Publishers, which awarded her the prize for the best book in the category of Business, Management and Accounting. Brown's study has been hailed as 'American studies and interdisciplinary cultural history at its best' by the *Journal of American History* (2006, *93*(2), p. 565). Brown indeed deserves praise for her very perceptive, highly readable and well-researched study that is based on a crucial intersection of business and cultural history. Her argument is both clear and compelling: the move towards rationalisation in American production, marketing and corporate welfare regimes during the progressive era was both informed and promoted by a new technique of creating, representing and investigating social reality, i.e. by photography. While throughout her book Brown focuses much on how photography emerged as an evidentiary tool for workplace rationalisation schemes, the wider picture of American social and cultural transition is kept in sight. In her studies of how

photography was being appropriated into corporate concerns with efficiency on the shop floor, with clerical work processes and management structures, with advertising and selling, and finally with occupational psychology, Brown seeks to understand how corporate managers used photography in order to produce a new, standardised, 'modern' American subject. She argues that by the early 1920s the corporate use of photography had not only become an important element in managerial strategies to build employee loyalty, reduce labour turnover, and manage public opinion and consumer desire, but also a technique that helped naturalise racial and class hierarchies. While the application of photographic techniques in Taylorite motion studies has already attracted scholarly interest, Brown widens this to include formerly disjointed discourses and stories to create a wider picture within which the work of Eadweard Muybridge, Lewis Hine and the advertising photographer Lejaren à Hiller is given fuller attention.

The book is broadly organised into four areas of investigation. The first part deals with the uses of photography in the rationalisation of employee selection. Here, Brown shows how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American neo-physiognomists like the industrial consultant Katherine Blackford attempted to utilise photography as a means of selecting appropriate employees for a variety of vocations. Blackford saw in still photography a vital tool for the 'scientific' study of character traits in potential employees. This type of physiognomy was later superseded by the rise of standardised systems of mental testing as pioneered by Hugo Münsterberg, James McKeen Cattell and Harry Hollingworth. Brown connects this transition to the wider changes in American cultures of subjectivity from notions of 'character' to notions of 'personality'. The second part of the book focuses on photographic motion studies and the attempts by the newly-created league of self-styled management 'experts' to standardise motion, i.e. labour processes on the shop floor, the building site, in offices and canteens. In this part, Brown studies in more detail the work of the industrial consultants Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, who photographed and filmed workers in order to isolate individual movements, which could then be reconfigured to identify the most efficient and fastest way of performing a given task. The uses of photography in this kind of motion studies, according to Brown, attempted to rationalise and industrialise the working body itself.

The third part of Brown's book is concerned with the question how and why the radicalism of American social reform photography, which documented the exploitation, frustration and deprivation of the lives of the American working poor of the beginning of the last century, ended up supporting corporate public relations and the machinery of capitalist spin. In this part, Brown studies in detail the photographic work of Lewis W. Hine, who during the 1930s shifted his attention from a critique of workers' lives under industrial capitalism to individual portraits of 'heroic' artisan-workers in various industries. These kinds of images became increasingly interesting for corporate PR managers who began to use Hine's photographic work in employee magazines. The corporate paternalism espoused in these magazines utilised work portraits to visually privilege ideas of industrial togetherness and corporate family harmony over independent union organising amongst workers. In the final part of her book, Brown brings in Mr and Mrs Consumer. Focusing on the advertising photography of Edward Steichen and, more importantly, of Lejaren à Hiller, Brown argues that the studio realism and pictorialism of early twentieth-century

advertising photography 'disciplined' the eyes of magazine readers and consumers and thus helped to some extent to standardise the communication between advertised product and consumer. Here again, Brown notes a marked shift during the 1920s and 1930s from 'rational man' to the irrational and emotional side of people's behaviour. Curiously, it was mainly for the emotional needs of supposedly rational consumers that advertising photographers created social tableaux: 'through the rational design and planning of the viewer's emotional response, photographic advertising illustration promised the rationalization of American consumption' (p. 216). Brown argues that both Hine's and Hiller's photographic work represent a new emphasis in American commercial culture on the subjective and the emotional as a key element of rationalisation.

Brown excels at bringing together historical approaches and discourses that are too often kept separate. She writes a business history that readily and fruitfully transgresses the boundaries of the study of industrial and commercial culture and reconnects to the history of psychology, the cultural history of advertising, and the history of art and design. In that, her work is reminiscent of the seminal studies on corporate visual culture by Roland Marchand, David Nye and Nancy M. West. Yet Brown goes beyond these when she brings in the crucial concept of time. Standardisation and objectification as exemplified and facilitated by the mass technology of photography went hand in hand with the standardisation and fragmentation of time. In turn, time-and-motion studies were themselves made possible by photography, which became a critical element in 'objectively defining the time it took to perform discrete tasks within the factory' (p. 7). The stopwatch needed the camera in order to break up the continuum of the work process as well as the processes of employee selection and marketing in order to reassemble the worker, the typist, and the consumer around the needs of management. This finding alerts us to the immense role played by notions of scientific positivism, realism and ideas of 'objective truth' in the making of American capitalism. It also underlines the importance of visual and cultural techniques (e.g. industrial photography) in defeating trade unions. By erasing the workers' voices from industrial representation, big business inserted the planner, the 'efficiency expert', the industrial consultant and the middle-class manager as the new 'visible hand' of corporate capitalism.

Brown's book suffers from only minor drawbacks. A more careful proof-reading would have avoided the misspelling of German terms and names (Siegfried Kracauer, Rationalisierung), for example. More importantly, Brown at times overstates the reach of her sources. She frequently claims to study how the modern subject itself became redesigned through the process of being photographed at work or being exposed to photographs in commercial communication. Yet at the same time she admits not to have looked at the reception of these new techniques and their social and – perhaps – psychological impact among workers and consumers. Neither did she look at the modes of resistance towards photography and rationalisation in the work environment. In Europe at the same time, for example, there was a widespread movement to appropriate photography and film for the purposes of proletarian class struggle. Willi Muenzenberg's Association of Worker Photographers called on workers to use the camera in order to record what the capitalist press could not or would not see. Muenzenberg's 1925 book *Conquer the film!* argued the same for the case of movies. It would have been very interesting indeed to see whether there emerged any comparable tendencies in North America during this

period. There are, therefore, a few patches in Brown's otherwise excellent story that are worth covering from a more varied set of sources.

Reference

Münzenberg, W. (1925). *Erobert den film! [Conquer the film!]* Winke aus der Praxis für die Praxis proletarischer Filmpropaganda. Berlin: Neuer Deutscher Verlag.

Stefan Schwarzkopf
Queen Mary University of London
s.schwarzkopf@qmul.ac.uk
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