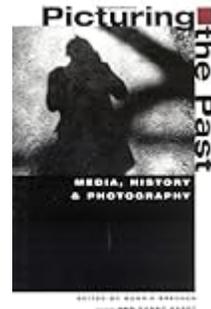


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bonnie Brennen, Hanno Hardt, eds. *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999. 263 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06769-3.



Reviewed by Frank Oglesbee (Eastern Illinois University)

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The editors use ten essays to focus on two issues raised by the use of photographs in nineteenth and twentieth-century journalism: “the difference photographs have made in the construction of a collective memory” and the “potential of photographs as contemporary journalistic documentation and historical evidence” (2). Topics of these essays include: the editors’ deepreading of a photo of a 1930s newsroom; the rise of visuals in journalism and advertising; Holocaust photography “then and now” (98); war photography; yet another consideration of the Family of Man Exhibition, and a circle-closing look at photos from the archives of the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*.

My immediate and consistent complaint is the somewhat soft focus of the book’s photos, and especially the small size of the one which is, after all, the basis for the analysis in the editors’ essay, “Newswork, History, and Photographic Evidence: A Visual Analysis of a 1930s Newsroom” (11-35). The picture (27) covers 5x3.25” on a 5.5x9” page. The essay on the photo is excellent, explaining how it exemplifies the “nature of urban journalism in the 1920s and 1930s” (26). Rober L. Craig takes a historical view on “the rise of the visual” (36), which allows those with power to “saturate culture with images that reiterate ideologies favorable to elite groups” (38). Lenin would agree—and approve, as long as he was in the elite.

Craig disapproves, arguing that ad imagery undermines the Enlightenment ideal of “rationally building a new society” (53). Kevin G. Barnhurst and John C. Nerone examines coverage of Presidential deaths, from which they derive the concept that reportage’s authority rests on “expertise, explaining a chain of events,” while photography’s rests on “immediacy ... nothing intervenes between a reader and a scene” (90). Michael Griffin describes how advances in photo technology itself resulted in difference in war photos. The cumbersome equipment and slow film of the 1860s influenced the “pastoral aesthetic” (135) of Civil War pictures, while smaller cameras and 35mm roll film allowed such images as Capa’s famous (and controversial) Spanish Civil War photo “Death of a Militiaman” (detailed on 137-139). Griffin also reflects on the use of photography to build myth, sometimes by staging photos, as many American Civil War photographers did, and as was also done for the picture of the Marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima in World War II. (In the latter, the photographer had snapped a shot of the actual event, but had the Marines repeat it to get a better quality picture).

For the sake of brevity (though hoping to avoid Horace’s lament, “I struggle to be brief and become obscure”), I jump to the last essay, which, like the first, concentrates on photos of journalism itself. Hanno Hardt

chooses four pictures of journalists to illustrate the claim “the history of American photography reflects the social struggle for place and identity in U. S. society” (242). She suggests expanding the exercise, using picture from several archives to make a “portrait of urban newswork in America” (245). This seems a good idea to me, but I wouldn’t limit it to newswork. One of the photos shows the paper’s editorial staff in 1949 – all white males in white shirts. When I started graduate school, a picture of the graduate assistants’ group office would show a similar staff, similarly clothed. Where I teach now, the equivalent room is occupied mostly, sometimes entirely, by fe-

males, racially, culturally, and sartorially diverse.

This book offers plenty of provocation for discussion and research topics in popular culture, and also shows that one picture may not so much be worth a thousand words, as require a thousand or more to explain fully. (263 pp., notes, index)

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