

H-Net Reviews

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Gregg Mitman, Kelley Wilder. *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 285 S., 27 Farb- und 40 SW-Abb. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-12911-2.

Reviewed by Sue Lurie (2M Research Associates, LLC)

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This edited volume focuses on the development and preservation of photography and films as media of international scientific documentation in Britain, Scotland, France, Austria, Germany, Australia, and the United States. Selected essays by art historians, historians of science and technology, social anthropologists, and sociologists examine the history and significance of photographic projects and archival collections, the relationship of art and science in photographs and films, and subject selection and framing in a social context. The primary focus on photography, rather than on films, emphasizes its materiality, endurance, presumed objectivity, changing interpretations, and the role of physical archives in preservation and presentation. Specific case studies analyze the economic and political goals of visual documentation, the social construction of images, cultural reconstruction and representation, social consequences of photographic surveys, and the influence of institutional archives and digitization on research. This volume will appeal to academic photographers and filmmakers, archivists, librarians, historians of photography and films, and researchers in fields such as visual anthropology, sociology of science, and communication.

In essays applying a critical perspective, basic issues of scientific objectivity and colonial and postcolonial purposes of visual documentation are shown to affect relationships between the maker, the user, the object, and the archive (Mitman and Wilder, p. 3). This Eurocentric collection (acknowledged by the editors) analyzes the epistemic influence of late nineteenth-century Western scientific communities on photography, films and archives, social and theoretical perspectives, and chang-

ing photographic techniques. An essay on the development of ethnographic methods by colonial British anthropology in *Notes and Queries*, which served as a model for the integration of cultural observations by professionals and laypersons, is complemented by a critique of the 1926 Harvard photographic survey of Liberia as an economic and political project.

The range of applications of photography—from historic identification of individuals and societies and documentation of events to scientific teams' interpretations of natural phenomena on Earth and Mars—is addressed in various essays. The social value of repurposing archived images originally designed as propaganda, such as those of Nazi victims, is clearly defined. The volume concludes with an important study of digitalization as a commercial enterprise that facilitated individual research but eventually led to the selection of photographic images for marketing and profit, decontextualized images, reduced archival and institutional relevance, and restricted public access.

This book succeeds in its aim of expanding the contemporary focus on image analysis of photographs and videos as visual texts through interdisciplinary studies of documentary photography and filmmaking; their social, cultural, and political grounding; and related technical processes. Historic photographs effectively illustrate the themes of most essays and extensive explanatory captions, references to published sources, and end notes are included. The methodology of integrating textual and photographic analysis is appropriate, and organization and presentation of the majority of articles are generally

effective. In a few essays, such as the study of cataloguing techniques used for St. Andrews's photographic collection in Scotland, major themes are obscured by overly detailed descriptions.

Broader areas that could be more fully explored are the importance of social and psychological interactions with academic and public viewers of photographs or films (see Eric Kandell, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, From Vienna 1900 to the Present*, 2012), and the increasing use of digitized images in biomedicine and medical anthropology. Studies from a non-Western perspective could be expanded, and historic shifts in cultural and visual anthropology with the decline of cultural reconstruction (as in the iconic photographs of Native Americans by Edward Curtis and films of cultures in the ethnographic present, such as African Bushmen in *The Hunters* [1957]

by John Marshall) should be assessed. An interesting comparison with contemporary visual anthropology could be made with an application of participatory techniques, such as the use of PhotoVoice software by community members to select and document priorities for social action.

Key areas for further research include the popularization of visual documentation as history, journalism in mass media, and the interactive communication among television, Internet, and social media audiences currently studied in social sciences. The contemporary need for visual representation and preservation of environmental and historic sites by digital photography and films for scholars and the public also remains an important issue, as dramatized by the recent destruction of artifacts and historic sites of global significance in Iraq and Syria.

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