

Book Reviews

David E. Nye, *Image Worlds. Corporate Identities at General Electric. 1890–1930*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985. xii + 188 pp.

For many decades it was assumed, erroneously, that photography, in comparison with other artistic expressions, was mostly descriptive and documentary in character. Since the early 1960s – or maybe from the publication of Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959) – photographers and critics have become much more conscious of the photograph as a personal commentary. The photographer Duane Michals has stated that "photography to me is a matter of thinking rather than looking. It's revelation, not description." The critic John Szarkowski, whose *The Photographer's Eye* (1966) was influential in changing the view of photography, has pointed out that a large portion of the public has come to regard photographs as "repositories not only of dumb facts but of personal visions." To our poststructuralist age it is obvious that photography always has been, and necessarily must be, the individualistic expression of the photographer's ideology.

In his excellent study, *Image Worlds. Corporate Identities at General Electric. 1890–1930*, David E. Nye devotes his considerable analytical talent not to the personal vision of the artistic photographer but to the corporate ideology expressed in the industrial photography of a large corporation. In his introduction, Nye tells of his search for an approach to American culture that could combine the best of the myth-and-symbol school, its ability to present a synthesis of complex cultural phenomena, with the best of the detailed studies of the new social history. In his search for a more holistic view of the period 1890–1930, Nye stumbled on the General Electric archives in Schenectady, a collection of over one million pictures largely forgotten until Nye "rediscovered" it. He realized that in these photographic images would be found the focal point he had been looking for, which would enable him to study not only the structure and growth of a corporation and its relationship between employer and employee, but also its public relations machinery and, above all, its underlying ideology.

According to Nye, through its pictures General Electric addressed four different audiences – engineers, workers, managers, and consumers – with four different messages in four different types of magazines. *General Electric Review*, being directed specifically to G.E.'s engineers, imitated, in content as well as format, the best scholarly journals. It downplayed the fact that it was an in-house magazine and assumed an air of being an objective educational periodical. The pictures it published wanted to give the same impression of scientific professionalism.

When General Electric in 1917 established its magazine for workers, *Works News*, it made it look like a labor magazine. All G.E. plants had different versions of *Works News* to prevent workers from uniting into larger groups. The photos of this workers' magazine did not depict the worker at work but in communal activities or at play. They tried to distract the worker from more serious questions and to strengthen in him a sense of community; they were, as Nye says, a series of "visual proofs of the actuality of welfare capitalism."

General Electric's organ to control the managers was *The Monogram*. Its task was to unify a heterogeneous group with widely different background and education, to supply this group with the correct vision of the corporation and to inculcate in it both a sense of loyalty and a competitive spirit. The photos in *The*

Monogram consequently emphasized individualism, complex processes, and the hierarchical structure of the company.

The pictures used by G.E. to reach the consumers in mass advertising were widely different from the ones used in in-house magazines. Technological know-how was downplayed and lamps and household appliances were rather sold through pictures with exotic and sophisticated settings and atmosphere. The advertising picture became part of a deliberate argument to sell a product and lost its function of pretending to mirror reality.

David E. Nye skillfully analyzes the differences between the four categories of photos and their receivers. He convincingly reveals the shifting ideologies used by General Electric to achieve its goals. If this study had done no more than this it would have been a valuable contribution to the study of art and ideology in America. But Nye manages to do so much more. He succeeds in his professed aim, to find a focal point which will enable him to give a synthesis of the period around the turn of the century. Nye puts industrial photography into a broad cultural context. He gives, for instance, the historical background to the growth of industry and business and to the evolution of commercial photography and advertising. He puts the photographic activities at G.E. in relation to other attempts, within welfare capitalism, to control the lives of workers and in relation to other forms of manipulating managers, such as G.E.'s famous summer camps for executives, later satirized by Vonnegut in *Player Piano*. We also get an interesting insight into how, in the 1920s, the National Electric Light Association (NELA), supported financially by General Electric, covertly ran a public relations campaign against government ownership of utilities. David Nye thus manages through a rather limited subject – the commercial photography at one American company – to shed light on the culture of an entire historical period. No small achievement indeed.

Whatever reservations one has to Nye's study, they are of marginal significance. Personally, I would have welcomed a more detailed description of the G.E. archives, how they were organized, whether Nye's division of the photographs into four categories also characterized the archives, whether one could see a progression in technique and choice of motif. Nye deals only with the pictures that were published in various magazines. But how many of the one million photos were published and which ones were not and why?

Nye's book has no bibliography which causes unnecessary problems for the reader. To take just one example, Chapter 8, n. 15 says "Alan Raucher, op. cit., 75–93." To find Nye's only other reference to this work the reader must trace his way back to Chapter 2, n. 24, where he finds that the work referred to is Raucher's *Public Relations and Business, 1900–1929*.

This absence of a bibliography also makes it difficult to assess the material on which Nye's study has been based. Nye speaks with the authority of a scholar who knows his material thoroughly, and I am convinced he has taken no shortcuts, but it is still frustrating not to be able to judge whether he has taken into account particular works dealing with issues related to his study. Having gone through the footnotes several times, I can still find no references to works like Louis Galambos, *The Public Image of Big Business in America 1880–1940* or Morrell Heald, *The Social Responsibilities of Business. Company and Community, 1900–1960* or Wayne Hodges, *Company and Community* (which devotes many pages to the community relations of General Electric). I have no doubt that Nye is aware of these books, but I have no way of knowing. The book also suffers from a few mistakes caused by carelessness. For instance, Robert H. Wiebe, the well-known revisionist historian and author of *The Search for Order, 1877–1920*, is called Weibe throughout. But such nit-picking

objections will not obscure the fact that Nye has written a fascinating book which approaches a much-studied period from a fresh angle.

Nye draws the conclusion that the pictures he has studied are visualizations of corporate ideology and that industrial photography is only one of many agents in the creation of such an ideology. He denies, however, that the produced pictures are part of a "conspiracy or self-conscious program of domination." The material he has studied, he claims, shows that this corporation did not consciously intend to use photography as ideology, and as proof he presents the fact that G.E. presented itself in different ways to the four different groups of addressees, i.e. that four contradictory, "unconscious" ideologies lay behind its photographic output. Even though Nye is right that one should be careful not to see conspiracy in every industrial activity, it seems to me that Nye is a bit too careful here. To me Nye's own book gives evidence that G.E. deliberately presented itself in different light to different groups in order to manipulate them, to make its engineers more efficient, to distract its workers, to unify its managers, and to persuade its consumers. Even though Nye denies it, there must have been "a hegemonic ideology" behind all this activity, namely a profit-seeking ideology which aimed at making General Electric dominate the market to an ever increasing extent.

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