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Making Photography Matter: A Viewer's History From The Civil War To The Great Depression



Synopsis

Photography became a dominant medium in cultural life starting in the late nineteenth century. As it happened, viewers increasingly used their reactions to photographs to comment on and debate public issues as vital as war, national identity, and citizenship. Cara A. Finnegan analyzes a wealth of newspaper and magazine articles, letters to the editor, trial testimony, books, and speeches produced by viewers in response to specific photos they encountered in public. From the portrait of a young Lincoln to images of child laborers and Depression-era hardship, Finnegan treats the photograph as a locus for viewer engagement and constructs a history of photography's viewers that shows how Americans used words about images to participate in the politics of their day. As she shows, encounters with photography helped viewers negotiate the emergent anxieties and crises of U.S. public life through not only persuasion but action, as well.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: University of Illinois Press; Reprint edition (July 30, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0252083121

ISBN-13: 978-0252083129

Product Dimensions: 0.5 x 6 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #420,186 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #124 in Books > Arts & Photography > Photography & Video > Criticism & Essays #698 in Books > Arts & Photography > Photography & Video > History #3144 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Communication & Media Studies

Customer Reviews

"Elegantly written and effectively illustrated, this volume makes an important contribution to the history of photography, showing how viewers have been overlooked in previous studies and how their presence, like photography, matters."--Journal of American History "The author uses plain language and homey metaphors to excellent effect. A solid and enticing piece of scholarly writing."

--David M. Lubin, author of *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*"Finnegan digs into an important and under-examined aspect of the 'invasion' of photographic representation into public and private life. Recommended."--Choice "What historical viewers made of photographs

publicly displayed -- how they interpreted and then assimilated them to their own experiences and belief systems -- is the daunting topic explored by Cara Finnegan in *Making Photography Matter* | Her training in rhetorical theory made her ideal for the task. Her nuanced analysis reveals how viewers interpreted what they had seen and "insert[ed] themselves as active agents in the stories the photographs had to tell." -- *The Annals of Iowa* | "Finnegan's work offers an important addition to a growing body of scholarship on the impact of reading photography as a means of understanding the state of the nation." -- *American Historical Review* "Finnegan's work reminds scholars not only that viewing experiences are contingent and contextual but also that they reveal viewers' agency and interiority" | Finnegan's well-written and tightly argued book is of great use to scholars in many disciplines." -- *The Journal of Southern History* |

How Americans grew to understand a new kind of visual experience

Finnegan offers a coming-of-age story for an entire medium, as she looks at how America's relationship with photos developed in the early years (roughly from the Civil War until the end of the Great Depression). But this is not about how photography developed. Instead, she focuses on how we began to respond to (and be shaped by) photographs. With examples from the battle of Antietam, and the myth-making surrounding Abraham Lincoln, and the debate of child labor in the early 20th Century (among other examples), Finnegan argues that photographs changed the dialogue and the communication, in ways that engravings (and drawings and text) could not. Quick paced, thoughtful, and well-written. A very good study of how our communications are shaped by our tools. Delightful.

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