



Vanessa Meikle Schulman. *Work Sights: The Visual Culture of Industry in Nineteenth-Century America*

Vanessa Meikle Schulman. *Work Sights: The Visual Culture of Industry in Nineteenth-Century America*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. xi, 278p., ill. ISBN 9781625341952. US \$29.95 (paperback).

With strong opinions of belonging and citizenship motivating current debates on immigration reform and global economics, Vanessa Schulman's *Work Sights: The Visual Culture of Industry in Nineteenth-Century America* proves timely, providing useful historical context through which we can understand the ways that these concepts were shaped and circulated in nineteenth-century America. The "Work Sights" of the title suggests the "sights" of labor to which Americans were exposed, as well as the ways that Americans perceived that work. By examining the portrayals of technology and labor in both fine art and periodical illustrations produced between 1857 and 1887, Schulman demonstrates that these visual representations fostered divergent, yet interrelated notions of American nationalism and its correlation with labor and technology.

Schulman points to two related phenomena in the 1850s that accelerated changes in Americans' lived experiences during the time period 1857-1887. The advent of illustrated periodicals such as *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1855 and *Harper's Weekly* in 1857, along with the first attempts to lay a suboceanic transatlantic telegraph cable, "combined to create a world more saturated with inexpensive and readily available information and images" (4). While acknowledging that Americans reacted to this networked world with ambivalence, Schulman sets out to study the tensions that emerged as a result: a celebration of an orderly, standardized world that technological innovation promised, alongside a fear of the disastrous potential of new technologies. Schulman analyzes a range of images produced during these three decades that embody and create those tensions while also discussing the interpretive decisions made by artists and illustrators in depicting the sights and sites of work in the mid-nineteenth century.

Close reading both factual and imaginative visual representations of technology - often within a single image - Schulman provides a compelling historical account of the time period under consideration through a formalist art historical approach. Looking at John Ferguson Weir's oil paintings, *The Gun Foundry* and *Forging the Shaft*, for instance, Schulman coins the



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term “alchemical sublime” to describe the ways that depictions of industrial interiors create a unique brand of the American technological sublime to evoke feelings of uncertainty, fear, and awe. On the other hand, popular press illustrators under pressure to produce celebratory, pro-business images portrayed what Schulman terms “technological systems” in ways that reinforced the virtues of hard work and industry, whether it be a map of Georgia’s post-Civil War rail lines or a woodcut engraving of prison inmates in an orderly line.

Concluding with a consideration of the shift from wood engraving to the halftone process in the 1890s, Schulman demonstrates that the technology of visual representation informed Americans’ interpretations of technology itself. While nineteenth-century illustrators never imagined themselves to be rendering statements of fact through their wood engravings of work sights, halftone technology represented a demand for truthfulness in representation. For instance, the wood engravings that Schulman characterizes as “the managerial eye” did not aim to present a literal view of industrial production, but rather represent the orderly expertise required of a manager. And while halftone photographic representations were inferior in quality, their indexical quality was more appealing to late nineteenth-century audiences.

Despite little attention to these nineteenth-century images among art historians today, *Work Sights* reveals the “visual vocabulary that stressed the centrality of labor as a core American value and a prerequisite for proper citizenship” (194). This visual rhetoric, as Schulman’s study indicates, has powerfully influenced enduring notions of technology and its centrality to American national identity.

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