

VISUAL LITERACY

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The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen.

—Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1936, quoted in Traub 1982, 23

Whenever a camera shutter opens and closes, recording a latent image on film, a fiction is created. Yet the image, once developed and printed in positive form, presents to the uninformed an overwhelming conviction of fact. The accuracy and fine detail of photographs are persuasive; likenesses are preserved in gelatin silver surfaces with a facility rarely ever matched in, for example, traditional pre-nineteenth-century art and naturalist drawings. When the process of photography was introduced early in the nineteenth century, photographs were called “mirrors with a memory” and “faithful witnesses.” Operators, as photographers were then called, were not considered artists; nor were photographs considered fine art. The camera obscura was interpreted by many early critics of the photographic practice as simply a tool assisting an artist or scientist in rendering proper form and perspective. The camera “machine” was a mechanical device that excluded the artist’s hand, a clear argument reducing photography to mechanical reproduction, much as we think of a Xerox machine today.

William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), scientist, mathematician, botanist, linguist, and inventor of an early photographic process, authored *The Pencil of Nature*, one of the first books to contain original photographs. Published in London in 1844, this volume consists of eighty pages in quarto format, with twenty-four mounted photographic images preceded by some remarks and a short history of the calotype (a negative process on paper, invented by Talbot). Talbot felt it was necessary to print this enjoinder: “The plates of the present work are impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist’s pencil. They are the sun-pictures themselves, and not, as some persons have imagined, engravings in imitation” (1969, 5). Although he heralded the enormous potential of the photographic process across disciplines, Talbot could not foresee its importance as a means of expression, analysis, or insight. He understood only that the photograph’s exactness made it a verifiable piece of visual evidence. He believed the photograph to be a copy of the memory of light, nothing more.

Unfortunately, this limited view of the potential of photography continues to this day. Although most social scientists, including geographers, use the photograph in some way, rarely do they rely on the metaphorical and lyrical elements within the image, instead depending on the photograph’s common denominator—the presumed accuracy of reproduced “fact.” Any viewer willing to briefly review many of the social science journals from the past decade will recognize and confirm that the

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