Photojournalism, Visual Culture, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

Ellen Wiley Todd

Two visually spectacular events highlight the history of working-class female labor in Progressive Era America. The first of these, the great Shirtwaist Strike, lasted almost three months, officially from November 22, 1909, until February 15, 1910. It drew tens of thousands of young Jewish and Italian women out of the factories and sweatshops where they labored fifty-six hours a week, receiving below-subistence wages for the manufacture of the period’s most popular and fashionably versatile garment—the high-necked blouse called the shirtwaist. On the streets and in vast meeting halls, the women came together for spirited organizational meetings, rallies, and dances. They encountered trade union leaders, suffrage campaigners, and socialist speakers who urged them to stay with the cause of their union. And their strike gained wide publicity and support with the news accounts and cartoons showing young women physically struggling with employer-sympathetic policemen who dragged them to court. There they either received backing from well-to-do female benefactors—who often saw the strike as an extension of the suffrage campaign—or suffered condemnation from magnates who consistently overcharged the workhouse or fired them for attacking scales.

The second event, the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire, lasted only twenty-five minutes on the afternoon of March 25, 1911. Shortly before quitting time, a powerful blaze engulfed the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the loft-type building that housed one of New York’s largest shirtwaist businesses. Now women scampered to the streets again, this time plummeting to their deaths, having been denied safe exit by a locked door and an inadequate fire escape, and forced by flames to jump. In the strike of the previous year, the Triangle Company was one of the first against which workers struck, one of the first to stage a lockout against its employees, and one of the most physical in its engagement with strikers. In the end, the Triangle Company successfully thwarted workers’ attempts to organize and improve working conditions. Newspapers picturing the rows of silenced workers’ bodies at the Greene...
Street and Washington Place corner and later in the mongre provided testimony to the company's decision.

Among the many visual artists appearing in these news reports and in stud-
ies published since the 1971 tragedy was a small group of images produced by the Brown Brothers photo service. Historians familiar with the 1926 and 1938 editions of Leon Stein's classic account, *The Triangle Fire*, will recognize eight of these images, used to illustrate a chronological sequence of events after the fire. The photos were shot by one of the firm's dozen professionally employed photographers who arrived on-site shortly after the blaze broke out and documented the progression of events during the next several days. Founded in 1904, Brown Brothers resembled Under-
wood and Underwood, the Bain Brothers, and other successful commercial photo-
ences that provided services to daily newspapers without photographic staff or supple-
mented the work of in-house photographers unable to cover sudden unexplained
events, like the Triangle Fire. Armed with the more portable Graflex cameras that
began to appear around 1925, and profiting from the increased ease of the halftone
process for reproducing photographs, in-house staff and commercial photographers
together supplied the increasing numbers of photos that filled mainstream and yel-
low-journalist papers, the stock-in-trade of Progressives. Erst mass-distributed journal-
ism. By 1932, photographyjournalism was fully institutionalized, as fourteen New York.
daily featured around nine hundred pictures per week. No longer able to question the legitimacy of the pictorial press, as Ulrich Keller points out, naysayers could only lament the quantity of pictures. "We can't see the idea for the illustration," mourned a 1911 Harper's Weekly editorial a few months after the fire. "Our world is simply flooded with them."

Out of the dense photographic and cartoon coverage of the fire, I concentrate on a single Brown Brothers image (figure 1) as it appeared on the front page of William Randolph Hearst's sensationist New York American the day after the fire (figure 2). Though significantly cropped, and interpreted by captions, textual material, and surrounding imagery, the photo encapsulates the immediacy of the tragedy that is the subject of the news story. Most of the Brown Brothers' aftermath photos show distant views of bodies on the street, tangled in nets and fire hoses, and a few picture authorities and onlookers attending to victims' lifeless forms. But this most frequently

reproduced and manipulated image of the disaster has, over time, become the canonical image of the fire, appearing in textbooks, juvenile histories, on Web sites, and at "Triangle Fire anniversary commemorations. Here in the New York American, and in each subsequent appearance, an instance of photographic use both mediates and is mediated by its distinct social, cultural, political, and institutional histories. Indeed, the iconic status I claim for this photo results from a constellation of historical and visual circumstances. First, its survival in a major archive guaranteed reusability. Second, an iconography that places police adjacent to fallen women workers creates a link between the failure of the strike and the tragic fire, thereby giving the image a wider historical resonance. Third, because the photo lacks a portrayal of purposeful activity, its pictorial content remains open-ended, even ambiguous, allowing for multiple readings by ongoing groups of historical interpreters. Finally, the gender and class dynamics of production, display, and viewing I present below were central to the urban visual and social histories surrounding the fire, and the image enacted these multiple dimensions. These contexts—as this specific case shows—are manipulated according to the narrative, institutional, and ideological needs of the publication as well as through the conventions of photojournalism itself.
The methods and assumptions of this argument are grounded in visual culture studies, a field that expands the scope of art history (any horse discipline) to include images not intended to be rarely considered within the institutional boundaries of art. The field also considers relations between various forms of power and identity as they emerge from cultural studies. I would suggest that visual culture studies intersects with art history and with social and cultural history because of its stated methodological preoccupations—with image production and consumption, with shifting meanings shaped by new contexts of use and reception, and with the constructed nature of the social world through representation—have been deployed regularly to different ends by scholars in both fields who use a variety of interdisciplinary modes.

Arguments and methods turn on assumptions about what an image is and what it does in the social world and in the framework of scholarship, itself a context of use. At the most basic level of analysis, historical evidence resides in an image, which may document, corroborate, and reveal. The image tells us who was there and what they looked like. It supplements written evidence. Or it shows us something either so obvious or so concealed from its own historical moment that it has escaped notice elsewhere—perhaps a detail of furnishing, a workspace activity, or a behavioral gesture. Image interpretation also requires contextualizing the image.

within its own medium and genre—in painting or photography, for example. Here we read the conventions of composition, color, light, or handling against the histori-cal ways in which those conventions communicate understandable meanings. Visual studies is crucial for historians because it examines looking and seeing as social and cultural practices, whether conducted in public spaces or in multiple forms of repre-sentation—in newspapers, at the movies, or in art galleries. The study of Triangle Fire images, whose meanings can be situated in changing practices of seeing (and with historical subjects both then and now), can offer new insights into the perception and understanding of the event.7

I have no wish to claim that this or any other image took precedence over the often sensationist reporting or passionate responses to the catastrophe, especially since I have found no explicit reactions to the power of these photos or cartoons. By contextualizing images within Progressive Era practices of looking, I show that images participated in shaping contemporary and subsequent perceptions of the Tri- angle Fire. In particular I am interested in exploring a dynamic in period newspapers by which the pleasurable experiences related to the spectacle and display of urban life undergird the potentially reformist critique embodied in an image.

Staging the News: Image Production, Visual Display, and Viewing Practices

In the unchronicled archival form the photographs feature a policeman and three male bystanders on the Greene Street sidewalk across from the building; lying at their feet are the twisted bodies of four of the fire’s victims. We know that bodies began to be unoved to the opposite side of the street and arranged around the corner on Washing-ton Place just as the fire was over. The lifeless forms of a man and woman lie closest to us. The left hand of the male victim, whose bent legs and feet are adjacent to the earth, rests across the ankles of the woman next to him in the foreground. The police-man and two of the bystanders form a group looking up at the unseen fire-ravaged building. To their left and close to the edge of the photograph, the third bystander turns and stares obliquely down at the bodies. Looking is the primary activity of the subjects in the image and of its viewers.

Yet we can quickly go beyond a neutral reading of the Triangle Fire image. Given the dominant positions of the male authority figures, the photo is animated by a class- and gender-specific circuit of display and spectatorship. While one set of view-ers ignores the human loss to survey the smoking aftermath, the somewhat surrepti-tious gaze of the linear male marks the bodies as being on display, if only for a Kind of troubled or sideways looking that he engages in and that is now seen by us (as news-

7. Scholars in visual studies use the term visually to mean beyond image to consider anything sur-rounding or behind the text and the ways in which practices of seeing are socially and culturally constructed (see note 3). For some discussion of sensuality, see Hall, Poster, 52, 57; Johnn; and Gillian Rose, Visual Methodologies: An introduc-tion to the Interpretation of Visual Materials (London: Sage, 2001), 6.
readers then and historical viewers now). His gaze indicates as well that the bodies’ states result from the fire that captivates the other bystanders, and by all these means his look draws the viewer’s attention to the victims’ forms. As an eventful newspaper photo, it sanctions the more overt private looking by a reader at home than she or he might engage only stealthily in public. On Progressive Era streets, “looking”—at women, at strangers, at tragic events—was often a more furtive process, like the stole glance we see here. From its pictorial beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, the press transformed this kind of sidelong public looking into direct examination by making available to individual readers of all social classes a slower, closer, and more direct private inspection than could take place in public. Over time, the half-tone and improved printing processes increased pictorial clarity, making careful scrutinizing possible. At the same time, however, other conventions contradicted and compromised such focused private looking: fire, an often overwhelmed journalistic rhetoric, and second, pictorial devices that drew on more public forms of display and staging.

Indeed, such a combination of image and dramatic headline stunned New Yorkers as they opened the mass circulation newspapers on the Sunday and Monday after the fire. Alongside reports, survivor accounts, and demands for accountability, New York’s pictorial journalism offered a hybrid mix of image types including photojournalism, narrative sketches, diagrams, and editorial cartoons. In different layouts, texts and images worked with and against one another to emphasize different kinds of information and to shape distinctive responses depending on the individual paper’s editorial stance and politics. In covering the fire, newspapers across the political spectrum deployed different kinds of images and narrative rhetorics. The New York Times opened with discreet property-oriented damage photographs and a literary tone; the socialist New York Call took an active stance with John Sloan’s harsh political graphic of a burned worker felled by corrupt capitalist forces. In marked contrast, the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst’s New York American (like Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World) combined photographs, captions, and headlines that worked the boundaries between reformist zeal and sensationalism. Styling his newspaper’s mode of address as urban populism, the 1895 and 1899 mayoral candidate Hearst had jumped on the reformist bandwagon as a means to political success. Hearst’s paper used a story and entertainment model of journalism, which appealed to lower-middle-class tastes and issues and stood in direct opposition to the more genteel, graphically conservative uptown informational model of the Times.3

In the American, Triangle Fire coverage delivered its muckraking tone with headlines claiming to know the “Facts of Official Incompetence or Scoundrelly Neglect of Protection for Working Girls Crooked Into [the] Factory.” This claim of factual “truth” was made even as the blaring front page deployed the yellow journalistic tactic of overstatement, elevating the number of dead to 175, the number of

trapped workers from 500 to 1,300 (in contrast to other reported and substantiated figures), and finally staged radical alterations to the Brown Brothers photographs, which stood alone, dominating the upper half of the paper (figure 2). The proximity of the right-hand quadrant of the photo has been replaced with headlines and text, and the photo is cropped along the bottom, with an additional body wrapped in checked cloth inserted to fill the remaining space at the lower right. These devices work in tandem with the paper’s claims of the elevated body count including the small caption, which identifies Washington Place as a human trash heap, “littered with broken bodies.” The cropping creates intense proximity, allowing a viewer to imagine bodies extending infinitely beyond the frame, and turns the spectator into a voyer. In this and similarly manipulated Brown Brothers photographs throughout the American coverage, viewers are brought closer to victims, in some cases to observe uncowed faces. Moreover, the voyeuristic quality of such viewing is exaggerated by the paper’s presentation of photographs. Layered in dark frames embellished with decorative finials, they foreground the actual social practice of looking through a frame and “enjoying” a picture.

In fact, composition and presentation of these figures seem to have been part of an initial on-site production process for several other news photos. The Brown Brothers photographs can be read as the first in a sequence of four images that appeared in five different New York newspapers. The New York Daily Tribune (figure 3) and the New York Herald (figure 4) used slightly different versions of a policeman bent over the same two bodies in their coverage. A final image (figure 5) appeared on both page 5 of the Times and page 3 of the World, showing additional figures interacting over the bodies. Together these images show that this sidewalk location and the two foreground bodies constituted a staging area for the manufacture of newsworthy photos documenting the process of identifying and tagging bodies prior to removal to the morgue. Evidence for the Brown Brothers photographs’ initial location in the sequence resides in the figure of the male victim whose awkwardly twisted right leg has been straightened in later photos, and in the subsequent activity of numbering bodies with tags that occurs in these later photos.

Overall, the pictorial and textual contexts of newspaper presentation changed from paper to paper. On its third page, and in contrast to the Tribune, the Herald and the Times was the image of fallen bodies with a composite photo/another of the burning building to imply a cause and effect relationship. This dual selection corresponds to a lengthy headline, “Women and Girls, Trapped in Ten Story Building, Lost in Flames or Hurl Themselves to Death,” as well as to the simple photo caption, “Identifying Bodies of those Who Jumped to the Sidewalk.” Identity requires scrutiny, but

it is the scrutiny of the viewer that matters here, and compositionally everything has been orchestrated to focus attention on the dead. A policeman bends over the bodies, possibly looking at the face of a victim, and he holds a rag or a paper. The photographer has moved close to the bodies so that we are almost directly opposite the top of the policeman’s hat; the viewer lowers her gaze to match his own. Either the photographer or the editors have cropped out all the heads of adjacent bystanders, one of which, to judge from the pose, appears to be the policeman from the Brown Brothers photo. The other, a man with a briefcase, is now stationed at the feet of the male victim on the left. The intense proximity to these figures coupled with the cropped heads instigates the contradictory imperative of “look closely, don’t look” that is part of the dynamic of horrified viewing. At the same time, poses of two male figures, hands thrust in pockets, suggest casual, more long-term looking, undermining the multiple interplay of effects in the image.19

19. New York Herald, March 27, 1911. The New York Daily Tribune image directly precedes in time the photo in the Herald. It shows the man with the bag blocking the female victim’s legs as he moves left (his eventual face in the Herald photo). A policeman assumes the identical pose, but his hands are empty.