



DOI: 10.1515/abcsj-2016-0025

Nemerov, Alexander. *Soulmaker: The Times of Lewis Hine*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. £34.95 Hd. 191 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-17017-6)

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. What then is the worth of a single authentic picture, one destined to illuminate the ‘window of a soul’ from within? In answer to the metaphysical question, art historian Alexander Nemerov sets off on a revealing journey of craft and unadulterated emotion, digging deep into the archive of Lewis Hine’s memorable collection of child labour photographs. It is an assiduous, arduous task involving painstaking research, meticulous analysis, infinite care and attention to fine detail. A pioneering figure in documentary photography. Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940) was a committed social egalitarian thinker, who deeply believed in the power of photography as a moral and an educational medium, devoting his life to photographing child labour. Through WWI and the Great Depression, Hine documented the precarious, inhuman conditions of child labours in textile mills, coal mines and factories. His pictures that appeared in numerous sociological publications such as *The Survey* are impressive work portraits that capture the very quintessence of exploitative cheap labour. Working to the point of exhaustion, in often dangerous settings, to ensure optimal light and angles, Hine took risks and went to great lengths to immortalise steel and glass labourers, spinners and cotton mills child workers, the anaesthetised faces of the child workers he portrayed sending a disquieting message about the dehumanising effect of poverty. Endowed with a unique eye for rendering vulnerability and mutability, Hine went beyond the factual representation featuring in photojournalism. Whether what he portrayed was scenes of the relief work of the American Red Cross, or of the site of the Empire State Building at the moment of erecting its antenna spire, Hine went beyond the mere creation of vivid testimonials, eliciting the powerful story behind the image. A whole universe of anguish and misery thus opens up to the viewer, who partakes of the experience of the remarkable encounter between photographer and subject. Commending the poignant tales constitutive of Hine’s art, Nemerov retraces with eloquence and religious systematicity Hine’s work as staff photographer

at the Russell Sage Foundation of New York, and for the National Child Labour Committee. The author conveys a convincing and insightful sense of the extraordinary value of Hine's legacy. Had it not been for Hine's dedication and protestant ethic, Nemerov aptly illustrates, memorable records – forming an integral part of US cultural history – would be lost. And so would the now iconic image of that poster child Addie Card, leaning on her spinning frame. Emanating a mix of resignation, stare and silence, Addie Card was to become a symbol of the stark reality of the American dream, her portrait appearing on postage stamps, documenting a mystical moment in time:

But this naturalist detailing is only a baseline in Hine's photograph. It is not the kind of time he most wants to show. Factory time is the machinery that gets the photograph into operation – the power of thrumming naturalist storytelling (victimized worker, nefarious machinery, endless hours, pointless labour) – but all of this is only a grease works allowing a more important time to emerge as a puff of inexplicable steam. Who knows but that the catatonic dreariness, the loud noise of the spindles, is even a requirement for the school-less child to be sufficiently instructed in weariness, sufficiently lost or disoriented, to allow some other and more mystical time to flitter into the scene. (Nemerov 4-5)

Highly perceptive, Nemerov does a fine job interpreting for the reader the profoundly mystical quality of Hine's art, the ineffable in the gaze of a nameless little girl, a Cinderella 'once upon a time'. Indeed a gaze worth a thousand words. It is this naked, "nameless affect" (11) manifest in "an empty sea of time" (4) that interests Nemerov in his reading of Hine, photography as the ultimate expression of "the liberation of the soul" (Spargo qtd. in Nemerov 1) in a timeless time one associates with artistic immortality. Nemerov combines accurate, minute descriptions with passionate technical analyses, shedding new, meaningful light on Hine's work as an organic, unitary project of historical significance. While doing justice to the exemplary manner in which Hine succeeds in portraying social injustice, struggle, illiteracy, inequality, Nemerov concentrates on the spiritual dimension of Hine's legacy. And it is an approach of great merit. For above all, *Soulmaker* is not about a genre or mode of photography; nor about a legendary documentarist. It is a timely reminder of the enduring depth and breadth of visual

representation, one that is particularly telling in the day and age of the selfie.

Alexander Nemerov is Carl and Marilynn Thoma Provostial Professor in the Arts and Humanities at Stanford University.

ADRIANA NEAGU,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca