

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-subsistence wages for the manufacture of the period's most popular and sartorially 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 magistrates who routinely sent strikers to the workhouse or fined them for attacking scabs.

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 factory building that housed one of New York's largest shirtwaist businesses. Now women came 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 morgue provided testimony to the company's decision.¹

Among the many visual artifacts appearing in these news reports and in studies published since the 1911 tragedy are a small group of images produced by the Brown Brothers photo service. Historians familiar with the 1962 and 1985 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.² 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 Underwood and Underwood, the Bain Brothers, and other successful commercial photo enterprises that provided services to daily newspapers without photographic staff or supplemented the work of in-house photographers unable to cover sudden unplanned events, like the Triangle Fire.³ Armed with the more portable Graflex cameras that began to appear around 1898, and profiting from the increased use of the halftone process for reproducing photographs, in-house staff and commercial photographers together supplied the increasing numbers of photos that filled mainstream and yellow journalist papers, the stock-in-trade of Progressive Era mass-distributed journalism.⁴ By 1911 photojournalism was fully institutionalized, as fourteen New York City

1. The classic account of the fire, featuring news accounts and survivor interviews, is Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962). John F. McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), provides a useful compilation of primary documents and images, as does the Triangle Fire Web site composed of materials from the UNITE archives at the Kheel Center, Catherwood Library, the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/default.html. For a recent account of the fire in relation to the urban politics of reform, see David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003). An important historiographical essay is Paula Hyman's "Beyond Place and Ethnicity: The Uses of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, ed. Hasia R. Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 70–85.

2. Stein, *Triangle Fire*, and the first paperback, issued in 1985 by Carroll and Graf Publishers/Quick-silver Books (for which there was a second printing in 1986), used the identical sequence of eight photographs from the Brown Brothers archive. In 2001 the ILR Press/Cornell Paperbacks issued a new paperback with an introduction by William Greider. This edition featured a new selection of photographs from the UNITE Archives, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at Cornell University.

3. Eventually, many of these companies also collected historical photographs, which they rented for a fee. In 1972, to save money, Brown Brothers moved its 8 million images and negatives from midtown Manhattan to Sterling, Pennsylvania, where they can still be contacted for historical photos. On commercial photo services, see Michael L. Carlebach, *American Photojournalism Comes of Age* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 30–38; on Brown Brothers, see Alfred E. Clark, "Brown Brothers Quits Midtown for Poconos," *New York Times*, November 12, 1972; and www.brownbrothersusa.com/history.htm.

4. Carlebach, *American Photojournalism Comes of Age*, 19–24, asserts that the amateur photography craze and the popularization of the easy-to-use Kodak camera helped institutionalize the popularity of photojournalism.



Figure 1. Policeman and bystanders stand near the bodies of Triangle Fire victims on the Greene Street sidewalk. Source: Archive Photo, Brown Brothers

dailies 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 ideas for the illustration," mourned a 1911 *Harper's Weekly* editorial a few months after the fire. "Our world is simply flooded with them."⁵

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 sensationalist *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

5. Ulrich Keller, "Photojournalism around 1900: The Institutionalization of a Mass Medium," in *Shadow and Substance: Essays on the History of Photography in Honor of Heinz K. Henisch*, ed. Kathleen Collins (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Amorphous Institute, 1990), 288. *Harper's Weekly* quote originally in issue 55, July 29, 1911, 6.



Figure 2. Policeman and bystanders with bodies of Triangle Fire victims on Greene Street. Source: *New York American*

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 enacts 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 (my home discipline) to include images not intended to be or 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 many 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 (if to different ends) by scholars in both fields who use a variety of interdisciplinary models.⁶

Arguments and methods turn on assumptions about what an image *is* and what it *does* both 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 workplace activity, or a behavioral gesture. Image interpretation also requires contextualizing the image

6. For an accessible historiographical and theoretical overview of visual culture studies, see James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003). For a discussion of visual studies in relation to American art, see John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 560–61. Elkins points to a series of anthologies and texts that define the field by three areas according to methods and objects. First is contemporary transnational media consumption: Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998). Second is practices of vision and visuality: Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); and Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell, eds., *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1999). Third is the social critique of contemporary image-making practices: Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Davis also points to a category of work that studies the history of images rather than a history of art, citing Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990), even though Elkins argues that visual studies seems to avoid an older history of images. Among historians and art historians who have worked in compelling ways with the different rubrics of visual culture studies I would cite from a much longer list: Michele Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 1995); Anthony Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Paul Staiti, "Illusionism, Trompe l'Oeil, and the Perils of Viewership," in William M. Harnett, ed. Doreen Bolger, Marc Simpson, and John Wilmerding (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1992), 31–47; and David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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 historical 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 representation—in newsprint, 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 sensationalist 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 Triangle 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 undercut the potentially reformist critique embodied in an image.

Staging the News:

Image Production, Visual Display, and Viewing Practices

In the uncaptioned archival form the photograph features 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 moved to the opposite side of the street and arranged around the corner on Washington 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 curb, rests across the ankles of the woman next to him in the foreground. The policeman 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 viewers ignores the human loss to survey the smoking aftermath, the somewhat surreptitious gaze of the liminal male marks the bodies as being on display, if only for a kind of troubled or furtive looking that he engages in and that is now seen by us (as news

7. Scholars in visual studies use the term *visuality* to move beyond images to consider anything surrounding us (what we see) and the ways in which practices of seeing are socially and culturally constructed (how we see). For some discussions of *visuality*, see Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay, 1988); Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 6, 370; and Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction 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 eventual 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 stolen 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 halftone and improved printing processes increased pictorial clarity, making careful scrutiny possible. At the same time, however, other conventions contradicted and compromised such focused private looking: first, an often overblown 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 photo-journalism, 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 activist 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 1905 and 1909 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- and working-class tastes and issues and stood in direct opposition to the more genteel, graphically conservative uptown informational model of the *Times*.⁸

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 Crowded 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

8. On the story or entertainment model of the news versus the information model, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic, 1978), 88–91. Hearst, reformism, and the Triangle Fire are discussed in Von Drehle, *Triangle*, 30–32, 173–74.

trapped workers from 500 to 1,500 (in contrast to other reported and substantiated figures), and finally staged radical alterations to the Brown Brothers photograph, which stood alone, dominating the upper half of the paper (figure 2). The empty upper-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."⁹ The cropping creates intense proximity, allowing a viewer to imagine bodies extending infinitely beyond the frame, and turns the spectator into a voyeur. In this and similarly manipulated Brown Brothers photographs throughout the *American* coverage, viewers are brought closer to victims, in some cases to observe uncovered faces. Moreover, the voyeuristic quality of such viewing is exaggerated by the paper's presentation of photographs. Bordered 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 photograph 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 photo's 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 *American*, the *Herald* pairs the image of fallen bodies with a composite photo/drawing 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

9. *New York American*, March 26, 1911. For important distinctions between muckraking (a self-described reportorial literature of exposé and disclosure produced in the public interest with emphasis on fact) and yellow journalism (relying more heavily on rumor and sensationalism), see Cecelia Tichi, *Exposés and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900/2000* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 3, 69. In both the Hearst and Pulitzer papers, intentions and methods blurred boundaries between the two.



Figure 3. Policeman bent over bodies of Triangle Fire victims. "Bodies of some of the unfortunates who jumped from the windows, lying where they struck the pavement." Source: *New York Daily Tribune*

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 tag 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.¹⁰

10. *New York Herald*, March 26, 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 place in the *Herald* photo). A policeman assumes the identical pose, but his hands are empty,