

Exploring the Work of Lewis Wicke Hine: Capturing Child Labour for Social Reform

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There is the saying that a photograph can speak a thousand words. That is arguably true. A photograph is completely open to interpretation so viewers from all kinds of demographics may see something completely different. Photographs tell stories that go beyond language, across borders and cultures, and resonate with all types of people. That being said, photos are great tools of communication. We use them for advertising media, to create art, and to document moments in time. There are many cases where photographs are used to bring awareness to social issues and create change. The infamous photo of the Syrian refugee boy Alan Kurdi, photographed by Nilüfer Demir laying lifeless washed ashore with his running shoes still on, took the world by storm. It caused international outrage and called world leaders to take a stand and make efforts to help the unrest in Syria. Similarly, Dorothea Lange's photographs from the Great Depression are icons of the era. She brought attention to the forgotten families of migrant workers, farmers and sharecroppers and with the exposure from the Resettlement Administration, brought justice for many. From this canon of influential documentary photography, Lewis Wicke Hine is often forgotten. He stands in the shadows of other great photographers, but his work was just as important.

Lewis Wicke Hine was an American documentary photographer whose works served as documentation of the need for social and labour reform in "American factories, mines, mills and other industries" (Leaper p. 510). He studied sociology at the University of Chicago, Columbia University and New York University and later became a teacher (Leaper p. 510). At the Ethical Culture School in New York he used the camera as a learning tool to counteract the negative ideas among many American against immigrants (Rosenblum p. 377). After taking his students on many trips to Ellis Island to photograph immigrants coming to the United States he decided to make photography a part of his everyday life. In 1907 he convinced a group of social welfare agencies that photographs would provide incontrovertible evidence for their reform campaigns and Hine was invited to participate in the *Pittsburgh*

Survey. The *Pittsburgh Survey* was an investigation of working and living conditions in the nation's most industrial city (Leaper 510). His work with the organization pushed him to become a professional "social photographer" (Rosenblum 378). From 1907 to 1917 Hine was employed by the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) to photograph the harsh conditions of children in mines, mills, canneries, fields, and working on the streets in order to provide proof that no one could contradict the truth. The NCLC used his images in "pamphlets, books, lectures and travelling exhibits," which according to Art Historian, Laura Leaper, arguably lead to the success of passing social legislation prohibiting child labour in 1916 (p. 510).

Lewis Wickes Hine uses an 11.8 x 16.8 cm gelatin silver print to create the captivatingly detailed photograph of *Little Spinner in Mill, Augusta, Georgia* (1909). A part of Hine's work for the NCLC, it is currently held with renowned pride at the George Eastman House (an international museum of Photography and Film) in Rochester, New York. Hine wanted to illustrate the harshness of children's contribution to the nation's fast paced industrial growth. He creates a realistic representation of what this child was experiencing, giving her a voice often marginalized in society. Hine often included inscriptions about the child labourers he photographed, and for this young girl he inscribed, "Overseer said she was regularly employed" (George Eastman House). This inscription suggests that the overseer saw her regular employment as beneficial, however the image (and many others Hine captured) juxtaposes this point by capturing the harsh and poor conditions of this impoverished child labourer.

Little Spinner in Mill, Augusta, Georgia is compositionally well thought out and executed. The use of gelatin silver print (popularized in the 1890s) creates deep rich blacks and crisp whites which juxtapose the white spun cotton with the little spinner, her darkly stained uniform, and the cluttered ground. For a gelatin silver print, which uses paper covered in a silver salt emulsion and is exposed under a negative plate, there is much gray colouring that suggests a shorter exposure time (Rosenblum p. 380). This documentary photograph captures a young impecunious girl and her strident work conditions at a cotton-spinning mill. She is surrounded by what appears to be never ending rows of spinning machines

(spinners). She stands numbly looking at the camera exhausted with her hands dragging down at her sides. Her hair is disheveled; her clothing seems uniformed, with a light cotton skirt and a long sleeve darker cotton top almost completely stained with an even darker mark that looks as if it could be oil from the machines. Her stockings are a dark black making her legs almost unnoticeable as she floats ghost like at the center. The dark ground is covered in cotton and dirt, which emphasizes the girl's bleak working condition. The photograph appears to be almost three dimensional with Hine's choice of vantage point and depth of field. In the immediate foreground the space between the rows of out of focus spinners is wide but quickly narrows in diagonally from either side drawing the viewer's attention to the main subject, the girl. She stands in the centre middle ground, the blurred lines crisp white cotton bringing the viewer to the center of focus. The machines gradually come into focus as they close in around her revealing where the photograph has been taken. In the background the spinners again are in a softer focus creating the appearance of a never-ending space. Wire and rope hang from the out of focus vaulted ceiling supporting the spinners as they overcrowd the isolated young worker. A shadow appears in the background, suggesting the presence of other workers, or an overseer approaching. The greyness of the photograph suggests that there is no immediate light source. The bright white of the cotton creates the illusion of it as the only source of light, perhaps a metaphor for the child's reliance on the millwork to survive. Hine takes the photograph from a low point of view to capture the image slightly below the girl's level, creating the three dimensional effect from the angled spinners. This vantage point enlarges the girl to an extent, but she is still overpowered by the spinners.

During his work with the NCLC, the Keating- Owen Act became the first statute to impose strict restrictions on child labor. Under the act:

“the products of mines that employed children under age sixteen and factories employing children under age fourteen could not be transported by means of interstate commerce. The law also prohibited interstate shipment of products from factories that employed children under age

sixteen for more than eight hours a day, for more than six days any week, or at night. Violation of the law constituted a criminal misdemeanor for which factories could be fined” (Ross p. 1).

Of course this act was faced with many constitutional issues as oppositional textile factory’s from the Southern United States argued for the sake of their businesses. It was concluded that this was not a federal issue and that states should create restrictions independently. However, that is not to say that Hine and the NCLC did not make a difference. It was their work that spearheaded the first act against child labour and acted as a precedent for Fair Labors Standard of 1938 (Ross p. 1).

Through works like *Little Spinner in Mill, Augusta, Georgia* and works from the *Pittsburgh Survey* and those commissioned by the NCLC, Lewis Wicke Hine comments on American society at the turn of the 20th century. By photographing child labourers in their work environment, he brought to life issues unseen by many. He comments on the Industrial Revolution by contrasting the man made and the natural and vulnerable human body. The composition of *Little Spinner in Mill, Augusta, Georgia* is eerily beautiful, as the viewer is both captivated and haunted by the realities of this young child. At the time, works like these were uncommon and had a great impact on society. Not only a great photographer, but a social reformer Hine helped to change the way factories and industries operated, perhaps saving the lives of many young workers to small to endure such physical labour.

Reference List

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