

Fifty Shades

Good Pictures: A History of Popular Photography by Kim Beil (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020)

Beneath a handsome square cover, styled in Kodak's characteristic yellow, black and red, Kim Beil's richly illustrated new history of photography unfolds in fifty chapters. Taking as its premise that the changing advice about what constitutes a 'good' photograph provides a new perspective on the subject, she aims to 'denaturalise the dogma' around these changing rules from 1839 to 2019, with a particular focus on American photography. To do this she examines instructional guides that outline norms and advise against errors. This vast body of literature, rarely taken seriously or approached as a corpus, provides the frame for the study; examples include the little-examined texts, *Make Your Pictures Sing* (1946) and the intriguingly-titled *Why My Photographs are So Bad* (1902). Technical and aesthetic guidance dates quickly in photography and these kinds of books are often found, unloved, in the second-hand market where their utility can seem as redundant as travel and restaurant guides from another era. Yet, as historical sources, as Beil so abundantly displays, didactic texts can be read for their attempts to define and shape photographic taste and technique, both in their prescriptions and, indeed, in relation to gender and ethnicity, in their omissions.

Good Pictures is cleverly constructed. Approached chronologically, after a contextual introduction, each of its thematic chapters is only about 1000 words long. These digestible sections introduce a range of singular styles, materials, technologies and trends from vignetting and hand-painting in the earliest days of photography to ruin porn and desaturation in more recent times. Each chapter, although short, presents deep historical and technical knowledge, always worn lightly. Beil has a talent for identifying the fascinating fact and the distinctive tone of voice in her selected quotations; these make the book entertaining as well as edifying. In the chapter on cabinet cards, for example, I was intrigued to know that 'skin-spots, freckles, warts and moles' became urgent subjects of photographic discussion in the 1870s as the expanded scale of the form enabled blemishes to be viewed in their full glory; from the study of flash I learned that Jacob Riis set fire to a building during his late nineteenth century social reform photography project. Photographic magazines, with their focus on practicalities, can sometimes be hilariously withering about aesthetic trends, particularly those seen to be avant-garde. The dismissal, for example, of 'modernistic' practice in *Pictorial Photography in America* (1929) reduces it, amusingly, to little more than geometric rows of shoes, cups and eggs. Elsewhere, amateur photographers receive tips from professionals. Greta Garbo's photographer, Clarence Sinclair Bull, for example, provided make-do-and-mend tuition on building a reflector from collected tin foil and a cardboard box for those seeking Hollywood glamour at home.

Strictly speaking, the 'popular photography' of the title only really kicks in about a third of the way through the book once cheap cameras come on the scene. As photographic practice expanded at the end of the nineteenth century, rule books flourished to tame and train the new unruly and uneducated masses. This is when advice guides proliferate and where a distinctive culture of publications aimed at amateurs outlined and defined patterns in practice. Through her close reading of these sources, Beil uses popular photography literature as a means to locate micro-trends, including those now forgotten. A chapter on 'television photographs', for example, observes how the emergence of this domestic home entertainment form was seen as fresh subject matter for photographers: 'Sitting comfortably before a television set, you can snap photos of celebrities,

sports events, and pin-up girls', a hobby periodical noted in 1950. Photographic styles are also used as an index of broader cultural sensibilities. The preference for blur in the early 1960s, for example, instead of being viewed as a photographic error, as it had been formerly, was instead perceived by photographic magazines to capture the new 'relaxed' viewpoint of the period.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the way that stylistic trends are mapped against one another; one era's bad photography, Beil argues, is another's good. These cycles and inversions enable the chapters to do more than straight chronological work. Now familiar forms of food photography and selfies are included in the latter section of the book, but by linking these to longer histories, Beil avoids the most obvious interpretations. While the chapter sequencing usefully illustrates where enduring norms begin and where familiar terms are coined (the candid photograph is historicised, for example, as is cropping), chapters also cut across periods to show how stylistic rebellions occur. The rules to break are often voiced in guidance on what not to do. A page from a 1957 manual, *How to Take Better Pictures*, shows 'The 12 Most Common Camera Errors'. Each mistake, from tilted angles and too-tight framing to light flare, has now become the standard photographic parlance of Instagram stand-ins for spontaneity, intimacy and authenticity.

Good Pictures identifies emerging styles, from drone photography to 'boke' (shallow depth of field), as well as mapping the changing meanings of the more enduring, from sepia tints to Rembrandt-style lighting. One could quibble that the fifty areas chosen are not equivalents; they cut across styles, technologies, genres and formats. Nonetheless, the book's approach is accessible and there are new perspectives offered on even well-worn territories. Amateur photography has few excellent scholars and advice manuals for amateurs had even fewer, until now. I particularly value Beil's understanding of the production of similarity in mass photographic practice; she conceptualises it not as a means to dismiss a sheep-like 'mass' but as an important channel for photographic communication and legibility. *Good Pictures* shows how photographic rules are constructed and broken, superseded and revived. Ultimately, Beil observes, 'how to make good pictures' – as the title of Kodak's long-running guidance manual, pictured as the very first image of the book – is a question rather than a statement, and one that has no fixed answer when examined over time.