

JORDAN BEAR. *Disillusioned: Victorian Photography and the Discerning Subject*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015. Pp. 198. \$74.95 (cloth).  
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2017.148

Seeing, as Jordan Bear shows us in *Disillusioned: Victorian Photography and the Discerning Subject*, is emphatically not the same thing as believing. Bear's new study makes a significant contribution to the lively discussions around the evidentiary status of Victorian photography, and deepens our understanding of this debate as it was staged in Victorian times.

In exploring the history of the idea that "seeing is believing," and of the mid-nineteenth-century relationship between individuals' visual discernment and their capacity to establish position and authority within their community, Bear emphasizes the importance of historical contingency. He shows how the audiences for visual materials became rapidly more proficient in judging the reliability of their visual experiences, and demonstrates the highly significant role played in this by the evaluation of photographs and the techniques that they deployed. Of course, the idea that photographs offered some kind of direct mediation with a "real" world has already been addressed and dismantled by literary scholars, especially Daniel Novak; by a fascinating exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Faking It*; and by a range of photo historians and theorists. Bear builds on this discussion, to be sure, but his most significant intervention is to politicize the issue, locating photography firmly within our understanding of other forms of mass production within Victorian England's developing technological society and the labor conditions accompanying them. He follows the gauntlet that Geoffrey Batchen threw down in *Burning with Desire* (1997), demanding that photographic historians consider the discourses surrounding photography and the cultural and intellectual milieu in which images were produced and circulated. At the same time, however, he frequently pauses to analyze—with considerable skill—the formal and compositional elements of an image.

Bear emphasizes the work of those photographers that troubles—sometimes deliberately troubles—any assumption that a photograph "tells the truth." He does this through placing photography alongside other vernacular visual forms that play with trickery, deception, and conscious manipulation of vision. He foregrounds, for instance, the highly manipulated work of Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, often considered outliers within photographic history, showing their importance both to mid-Victorian debates about the social role of photography and to some of today's most lively emphases in photographic theory and practice, especially as regards the "staged" photography of such practitioners as Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson.

It is in writing of "combination photographs"—Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life* is his key example—that Bear makes one of his most impressive, near-intuitive intellectual leaps. Thinking around the word *combination*, he connects the phenomenon of printing from multiple negatives, and the uncertainties to which this gave rise among commentators, with workers' "combinations," or incipient union organizations. This is a stunningly original reading of a well-known image that has almost inevitably been interpreted in terms of mid-Victorian moralizing—hard work and piety juxtaposed with hedonism and partying, an interpretation based on representation and familiar narratives, and on a long-standing tradition within Western art (the flock of sheep goes to heaven, the goats go down to hell). Bear's major intervention is to take *method* into account. In combining more than thirty negatives to make one image, Bear argues, Rejlander models a form of cooperation and collaboration that could profitably stand for the communality, rather than individualism, that represents the best way forward in modern industrial society.

Rejlander is important to Bear's argument, too, in the chapter in which he examines his photographic collaboration with Julia Margaret Cameron—professional man working alongside amateur woman. In discussing the joint authorial presence of Rejlander and Cameron, Bear's analysis does not just examine their relative status, but considers broad questions of

recognizable techniques and style and the whole vexed arena of authorship and authorial agency in photography. This issue of authorship is foremost to his consideration of travel photography and the work of Francis Frith, along with the anonymous photographers who helped create the corporate style of his firm's recognizable brand. Questions surrounding photographic authorship are taken up once again in a chapter that looks at some supposed photographic relics from the eighteenth century that were shown to members of the Photographic Society in London in the 1860s. As Bear shows, debates about the authorship of images, and about the origins of photography, were central to establishing the degree of authority that a photograph held, and, indeed, to determining whether that authority ultimately rested with photographer or spectator. Ultimately—and this is something that, in his conclusion, he links with much more recent photographic practices—the more challenging a photograph, the more active and discerning must be the eye that interprets it.

Moreover, not all seeing is done with the unaided eye. In his chapter on telescopic and microscopic photography, Bear considers the consequences of photography and vision becoming untethered. This development seriously challenged earlier models of vision, especially the idea of the democracy of vision—and, indeed, the democracy of the medium of photography—and drew attention to the place of the professional in visual interpretation. He sees the role held by such specialists in reading visual material as having considerable political implications on our ideas about how society is bound together: indeed, by the later nineteenth century, as seen through the lens of the history of photography, scientific, aesthetic, and vernacular audiences may already be seen as fragmenting in particular ways.

Jordan Bear has an impressive ability to make parallels between visual and social phenomena that are not necessarily obvious. Although he does not draw in any significant way upon the theories of John Ruskin, there is at times something quasi-Ruskinian about the cultural leaps and affiliations that he sees. Like Ruskin, too, he relishes in the power, flexibility, and sound of words—on occasion, one just wants him to cut to the chase. But the imaginative connections that he brings to his writing are never at the expense of sound visual history. In this excellent book, photography is never allowed to stand separate and autonomous from the societies that produced, consumed, and discussed it. In turn, photography, and the debates surrounding it, helped shape society's developing ideas about the practice of looking.

Kate Flint  
*University of Southern California*  
[kflint@dornsife.usc.edu](mailto:kflint@dornsife.usc.edu)

LAURA BEERS. *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 568. \$29.95 (cloth).  
 doi: 10.1017/jbr.2017.149

Through astute pen portraits of Wilkinson's mentors, acquaintances, colleagues and opponents, Laura Beers crafts an enjoyable, engaging, well-researched reconstruction of Wilkinson's life. As a fellow biographer of Wilkinson, I feel a certain kinship with Beers, so it is in that spirit that I offer my principal disagreements.

Methodologically, all of Wilkinson's biographers have to compensate for the destruction of her personal papers. Beers uses oral testimony, memoirs, and even obituaries to fill much of the evidentiary void and provide the primary interpretative grounds in *Red Ellen*. Such evidence, in my view, distorts both Wilkinson's politics and personality. Acquainted through intermediaries interviewed in the 1970s, Beers affects an intimacy with "Ellen" and reads off her politics from her personality. Moreover, the appearance of Wilkinson's nicknames in Beers's narrative