A student teacher asked why I was making such a big deal about visual culture. She argued that artists have always used it, made it, talked about it, and interpreted it. And Cheryl is right. That's why I make such a big deal about it! Isn’t visual culture education good, nutritional brain food for all of our students? They may not end up being artists, but they should be able to look at a slice of visual culture and interpret it critically, not devour it whole.

De-coding and even coding images are not exclusive activities for artists. Visual culture is complex and multi-layered, and it can manipulate us or liberate us. It is subtle and explicit, intentional and accidental. It is through visual culture that we know who we are as individuals and as communities. Just how powerful it is can be understood by looking at one of the masters of encoding messages in visual culture to see what is possible with the right kinds of technical and intellectual tools. Lewis Hine, a teacher and photographer, used his visual culture skills to change the United States.

A Brief Biography: Lewis Hine (1874-1940)

Lewis Hine’s family valued education. His mother had been a teacher before her marriage, and his sister also became a teacher. After his father was killed in an accident when Lewis was 18, he went to work, saved his money, and enrolled in University of Chicago when he was 26 years old, also hoping to be a teacher. John Dewey was on the faculty at that time, and it’s likely that Hine encountered Dewey’s philosophies.

Hine followed his mentor, Frank A. Manny, from Chicago to the Ethical Culture School in New York City as an assistant teacher of nature study and geography. While teaching there, Hine became interested in the new science of photography and encouraged his students to experiment with the camera as part of
their educational experience. Hine’s students took their cameras to the streets soon after they learned to use the (then) high-tech photography equipment, including cumbersome tripod-mounted 5x7 inch view cameras with 5x7 inch glass slides, flash-pans, and gun powder.

Hine and his students began visiting Ellis Island and photographing immigrants arriving by the thousands every day. He shows us their clothes, expressions, meager possessions, and sometimes even their homes. Through his photographic images and the words he wrote to accompany the pictures, Hine allows us glimpses into new immigrants’ fears and hopes for a good life in the New World. Between 1904 and 1909, he took over 200 plates. It was while working at Ellis Island that he realized his vocation was broader than the life of a classroom teacher, and he left the Ethical Culture School to pursue work as a documentary photographer working for social justice. Hine wrote in a field note, “I was merely changing the educational efforts from the classroom to the world” (Rosenblum et al., 1977, p. 17).

The Context

The New World was changing rapidly. When Hine was born, The War Between the States was over, and there were no more slaves. But cheap workers were needed in larger and larger numbers for mass production. Millions of immigrants combined with the needs of industrialization provided the largest opportunities for exploitation since slavery.

It quickly became evident that [Hine’s] Ellis Island “Madonna,” the proud Jew, and the beaming German family were all to become cheap labor, exploited by an unfeeling and greedy system. (Rosenblum et al., 1977, p. 12)

To keep the mills, mines, factories, and canneries open, owners hired workers, old and young. Whole families worked, and yet, many parents did not earn enough to support them. Many U.S. workers at this time suffered horrible working conditions, and nothing official was being done to prevent it.

As one Fall River mill owner expressed it: “I regard my people just as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting out of them all I can. When my machines get old and useless, I reject them and get new, and these people are part of my machinery.” (Doezema, 1980, p. 36)

Social Reform

In the North especially, the gap between poor and rich, the educated and illiterate, grew with the growth of industry. This un-American, undemocratic, and seemingly hopeless situation led people like John Dewey, Herbert Spencer, and Jane Addams, among others, to respond with righteous anger and new theories in science, education, and philosophy to address issues of social justice. Many reformers worked diligently to improve the conditions of working people and to educate children. Reform was also a theme explored by many artists. In the September 1897 issue of a magazine called Brush and Pencil, one author argued: “Art must step out of the picture gallery and go into the streets” (Doezema, 1980, p. 57).

The lives of the poor and the conditions in which they lived were being illustrated, painted, and printed by visual artists such as Robert Henri and his colleagues John Sloan, William Glackens, George Luks, and Everett Shinn. Writers were also using novels, short stories, and even poetry to let the public know the downsides of industrial capitalism, including human exploitation.

Called to action by newspaper stories, impassioned speeches, and artists’ accounts of the poor, turn-of-the-century social activists labored for many good causes, but the most emotional was ending child labor. By 1900, many Americans were calling child labor “child slavery” and demanding an end to it.

The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC)

The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) was founded in 1904 to eradicate child labor. The Committee believed that with enough evidence, rational Americans would make rational decisions, and they did not believe that allowing children to be worked to illness, and oftentimes death, was rational. Felix Adler was a founding member of this committee, and he spoke at their first meeting:

It should be plainly said that whatever happens in the sacrifice of adult workers, the public conscience inexorably demands that the children under twelve years of age shall not be touched; that childhood shall be sacred; that industrialism and commercialism shall not be allowed beyond this point to degrade humanity. (NCLC, 1904)

Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905.
In 1906, the NCLC hired Lewis Hine to help them in their struggle to implement laws prohibiting child labor. The idea of using his photography as a tool for social reform was a stroke of brilliance.

They were the first organization, public or private, to sponsor the production of a large quantity of social documentary photographs over a long period of time and to use the images to convey information and, most of all, to persuade. (Curtis & Mallach, 1984, p. 25)

Hine worked for the NCLC until 1918 and took more than 5,000 photographs for them. He documented multiple abuses of many children throughout the United States, and it was at least partially due to his work with the NCLC that laws protecting children were enacted. He photographed children in fisheries, factories, and farms where they were expected to act like, work like, and survive difficult conditions like adult workers in order to bring home pennies per week.

But he didn’t only take photographs. Hine also wrote short descriptions of his subjects that were displayed with the photos to ensure that there was no ambiguity about the horrors of child labor. His photo stories became part of visual culture. They were intended to persuade adult viewers to think about the frightful social conditions of child labor and to encourage them to vote for reform.

**Photography as Social Reality**

If you picked up a magazine in 1906, you would see pictures. Many artists were hired to do drawings and prints to illustrate stories and sell products. It would, however, be rare to see a photograph. Photographs had been around since the mid-1800s in the United States, but they were expensive to make, and only one image per “snap” was possible at that time. When photographs began appearing in magazines, it was amazing. Photographs gave viewers the sense that they were looking through a window into other lives. It is difficult for us to understand the power and influence photography had for Americans living a century ago. At the same time, it is sometimes difficult, even for us, to understand the manipulation that goes into a documentary photograph. We have heard that photographs show reality and pictures don’t lie, that they capture a slice of life and show a true story. But do they really? Lewis Hine explained:

> The picture is a symbol that brings one immediately into close touch with reality. It tells a story packed into the most condensed and vital form. Indeed, it is even more effective than the reality would have been because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated.” (Rosenblum et.al., 1977, p. 132)

No photograph is a simple documentation of reality. Every photographer decides, first of all, what to photograph, and beyond that, how to frame what s/he sees within the lens of a camera.

Hine took pictures of children in their workspaces to suit his reform purposes, and his photo stories were used as propaganda for a good cause. He worked hard to make his photographs appear to be reality and to be totally unbiased products of fact. He used a clear and recognizable symbolic language that his audience could understand and that would lead them to the conclusion he wished them to make. He understood that good aesthetics could make propaganda even more persuasive. He encoded visual culture.

Hine used several stylistic tricks to make his photographs compelling. They include using appealing human subjects, juxtaposing harsh environmental cues, and having the subject stare directly into the camera lens to encourage contact between the subject and the viewer. Because photography was a lengthy and cumbersome task for Lewis Hine, we know that his subjects were purposefully posed and knew they were being photographed, even if they didn’t always know why, and even when it looks to us to be a candid shot.

**Manuel (1911)**

In his most effective photographs such as that of Manuel (Figure 1), taken in 1911, Hine used all of the stylistic conventions available to him and juxtaposed text that allows us to see little Manuel as a victim of child labor. Manuel, standing in a sea of oyster shells, stares directly at us. He engages us, not with a smile that we are used to seeing in photos of young children, but with a strong face, wise beyond his years. His stare captures our attention and maintains contact with us. His empty oyster buckets and dirty, ragged apron are symbolic of the labor he and (we assume) other young children have done to create the numbers of empty shells on which he stands barefoot. By eliciting an emotional reaction from the us ("poor little child"!), Hine has achieved one of his goals. Dirty, but also cute and huggable, Manuel is alone without parents or friends to help him with his ongoing labor. This photo asks readers to protect this young child and his precious childhood from the evils of child labor. Hine does not let the photograph stand alone, however. He uses language as a redundant reinforcement of his message. Hine’s field note, which appears with the photo, reads:

> Manuel, the young shrimp-picker, five years old, and a mountain of child-labor oyster shells behind him. He worked last year. Understands not a word of English. Dunbar, Lopez, Dukate Company. (c 1911)

Hine gives this young boy a name. Manuel. By being named, he becomes a real child to the adult viewers of this document, not just “any child.” Hine tells us that the boy is only 5 years old. What are middle class children doing at age 5? Certainly they are not standing alone and barefoot on a pile of sharp shells. Furthermore, Hine tells us that the child knows no English. Manuel becomes another exploited immigrant child who needs a good education. Manuel becomes a symbol not just for child labor reform, but also for educational reform and mandated schooling.
Hine often named the owners and the names of the businesses abusing children, and clearly business owners didn’t want bad press. Therefore he often gained access to the child workers by trickery:

Hine devised an ingenious bag of tricks to elude the barriers. He sometimes pretended he was after pictures of machines, not children, or he passed himself off as a salesman. Often, one hand in his pocket made notes on ages and sizes while the other worked the camera. The buttons on his coat serving as a measure of height. (Rosenblum et al., 1977, p. 129)

**Little Fanny (1910)**

Little Fanny works in one of these mills. Unlike Manuel, Fanny is not alone in the picture. She stands beside an adult woman but the identity of the woman or what her relationship is with the child is not clear. Hine has opted for this ambiguity by cropping his picture in such a way as to eliminate the woman’s head. He shows the viewer the woman’s back, thus aesthetically indicating that she is not important to this scene.

Little Fanny is center stage amid evidence of a busy, working textile mill all around her. The machinery and the woman make her look very small. She doesn’t seem to belong in this environment, but she holds working materials in her hands. Like Manuel, she does not smile, nor does she give us any sense that she is enjoying her childhood.

Hine could have used a flash in this shot, but in this photograph, as in many of this others, he chooses to aesthetically situate his subjects in dark and cluttered working spaces. The general darkness of Little Fanny’s surroundings and her tired facial expressions hint at a dark mood and dark working conditions.

We know how small Little Fanny is by looking at her in relation to the large woman. Little Fanny’s head barely reaches the woman’s belt. There is nothing of sentimental child worship here. To middle class observers of this scene, the threat and evidence of Little Fanny’s premature adulthood must have been powerfully moving.

![Manuel, the young shrimp picker, 5 years old, and a mountain of child labor oyster shells behind him. He worked last year. Understands not a word of English. Biloxi, Mississippi, Feb. 20, 1911.](image)

His notes read:

Little Fanny, 7 years old, 48” high, helps sister in Elk Mills. Her sister (in photo) said, “Yes, she he’ps me right smart. Not all day but all she can. Yes, she started with me at six this mornin’.” These two belong to a family of 19 children. (c. 1910)

**Hiding Behind the Work Certificate**

Hine was one of the first photographers to experiment with photomontage. This is a process of juxtaposing images, or several images, with text. In *Hiding Behind the Work Certificate*, Hine juxtaposes the work certificate document, shown larger than the children in the picture. The small children are victims of this bureaucratic document. This juxtaposition makes it very difficult for viewers to reconcile the dissonant images. The large certificate overpowers the small children, a visual metaphor for labor overpowering small children. The children stare directly at us accusingly. Hine’s ambiguous caption, “Hiding Behind the Work Certificate,” makes the viewer wonder if he is referring to the three boys behind the large certificate or if he is pointing a metaphorical finger at larger prey—the industrialists who hide behind the certificate to hire small children for inappropriate work.

Hine explained that the words he used to explain the images enhanced the pictures and vice versa in order to make a compelling document in service to cultural change. He said,

With several hundred photos like those which I have shown, backed with records of observations, conversations, names and addresses, are we not better able to expose those who, either optimistically or hypocritically, spread the news that there is not child labor?” (Rosenblum et al., 1977, p. 133).
Conclusion

Hine created visual culture to reform child labor and championed the rights of children to be children during the industrial age in the United States. His photo stories remain powerful images that describe and document child labor, and without them communicating so effectively to the emotions and consciences of their audience, the NCLC’s goal of child labor reform may have been much harder to attain.

While Hine’s photo stories were (and are) excellent documentation of child labor in the United States, they can also be seen as evidence of the sophisticated seduction and manipulation inherent in visual culture. Propaganda. We see how skillfully Hine wove his, and the NCLC’s motives to manipulate the “readings” of these images.

However, all visual culture is by its nature site and group-specific, and as time has passed, the ways Hines photo stories can be used also change.

Ironically, the funds gained on the sale of these “old photos” which had served to keep young children from working in the early decades of the century were used in the 1970s to help young adults find jobs. (Witkin, 1979, p. 60)

Final Questions

One hundred years after Hine started photographing immigrants at Ellis Island, it may be time to reconsider his work as pioneering issues-based visual culture education. Is it desirable to take our students into the world and teach as Hine did at the Ethical Culture School so many years ago? Can propaganda be desirable? Is experiential learning still a viable tool? Is social justice part of our pedagogy? And should we teach our students to decode and encode visual culture? There are still plenty of reforms to think about and act on. And our students have a good role model in Lewis Hine.

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Figure 3. Time Exposures feature published in The Survey (1914 and 1915). (Hiding Behind the Work Certificate).