



For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights

Maurice Berger

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In 1955, shortly after Emmett Till was murdered by white supremacists in Mississippi, his grieving mother distributed to the press a gruesome photograph of his mutilated corpse. Asked why she would do this, she explained that by witnessing with their own eyes the brutality of segregation and racism, Americans would be more likely to support the cause of racial justice. “Let the world see what I’ve seen,” was her reply. The publication of the photograph inspired a generation of activists to join the civil rights movement.

Despite this extraordinary episode, the story of visual culture’s role in the modern civil rights movement is rarely included in its history. This is the first comprehensive examination of the ways images mattered in the struggle, and it investigates a broad range of media including photography, television, film, magazines, newspapers, and advertising.

These images were ever present and diverse: the startling footage of southern white aggression and black suffering that appeared night after night on television news programs; the photographs of black achievers and martyrs in Negro periodicals; the humble snapshot, no less powerful in its ability to edify and motivate. In each case, the war against racism was waged through pictures—millions of points of light, millions of potent weapons that forever changed a nation. Through vivid storytelling and incisive analysis, this powerful book allows us to see and understand the crucial role that visual culture played in forever changing a nation.

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