

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

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Elizabeth K. Mix

book review of

*Doctored: the Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* by Tanya Sheehan

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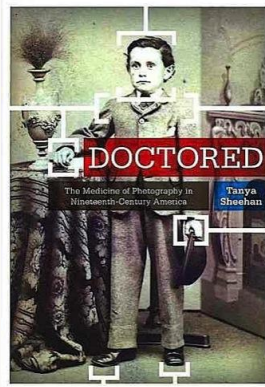
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Tanya Sheehan,  
*Doctored: the Medicine of Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*.  
University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.  
209 pp.; 46 b&w illustrations; notes; bibliography; index.  
\$74.95  
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Tanya Sheehan, formerly Assistant Professor of Art History at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, provides a unique, innovative comparative study of the development of the relationship between portrait and medical photography in Philadelphia during the nineteenth century. Sheehan studies connections between the commercial portrait studio and the medical theater, which ran parallel to each other, eventually helping to promote photography as an art form. Rather than previous studies that focus on photography in the service of medicine solely for documentation purposes, Sheehan shows how the relationship between medicine and photography was “mutually constructive” (7). Portrait photographers developed metaphorical references to themselves and their practices, which shaped not just the public’s view of the discipline, but changed the public itself. Sheehan’s interpretations of medical metaphors as a “means of structuring thought and action” (8) is inspired by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), while her primary sources are photographic trade journals founded and edited by Edward L. Wilson (1838–1903), notably the *Philadelphia Photographer*, *Photographic Mosaics*, and *Wilson’s Photographic Magazine*.[\[1\]](#)

Sheehan’s methodology is archival, but also rooted in the assertion that photography ultimately cannot be separated from cultural and technological issues. Furthermore, its significance extends beyond the nineteenth-century belief that photography could capture and preserve reality. It is important to also remember that, in the same period, the medical profession was simultaneously struggling to achieve legitimacy and that a wide variety of quack therapies competed for attention.

In chapter 1 “Educating ‘Doctors of Photography’: Medical Models and the Institutionalization of Photographic Knowledge”, the author explains how professional photographers came to

appropriate medical references into their trade materials while organizing a union. It also explains how the connection between medicine and photography was debated in 1880s Philadelphia photographic circles. Sheehan explains the formation of the National Photographic Association (NPA), a group dedicated to the professionalization of the discipline, both through the development of a code of ethics that governed the dress and behavior of sitters and through working to standardize prices for photographic work. The creation of a photography school and an insistence on education, including the study of anatomy, furthered the professionalization of photography. Just as the NPA's policies were shaped by regular references to the medical profession, so too did the photographic profession enhance the practice of medicine. Sheehan uses paintings by Thomas Eakins (*The Gross Clinic*, 1875) and Charles H. Stephens (*Anatomical Lecture by Dr. William Williams Keen*, 1879) to introduce both the scientific training of artists and artistic representations of medicine; she also productively compares a group portrait of physicians from Pennsylvania General Hospital with that of the charter members of the NPA—the visual similarities between the two show a distinctive shift in the photographers' view of themselves as professionals equivalent to medical practitioners.

In chapter 2, “Making Faces and Taking Off Heads: The Operations of Photography and Medicine”, direct comparisons are made between Civil War period medicine and photography. The use of specific equipment that seemed similar to a medical apparatus to the layperson, and the active comparisons between the photographer's studio and the dentist's office, fostered changes in the photographers' thinking about their profession as they recognized that the act of posing a sitter, and taking and then retouching a photograph, had the potential to metaphorically diagnose and cure medical conditions. But photography also captured the ravages of war, as demonstrated in a series of examples from the Army Medical Museum. Photographic retouching took surgical skill, even when aided by newly-developed machines, and the professionalization of the discipline depended on concealing the preponderance of women employed as retouchers—it was necessary for the discipline of photography to be linked to masculine science as much as possible.

Chapter 3 explores “Panes Curing Panes': Light as Medicine in the Photographic Studio.” It examines the cultural belief that blue light and sunlight had the ability to heal a wide variety of conditions, and this belief was translated easily to the portrait because of the popular use of blue-tinted skylights in photographer's studios and the eventual development of “glass houses” for photography. The public also sought light as a remedy capable of “whitening” society. The cost of photography, and its use as historical documentation, shifted perceptions towards the wealthy and white members of society, but photographs were also capable of being manipulated to make African-American sitters appear to have lighter skin. Sheehan deftly uses photographic trade literature, as well as satirical literature and caricatures, to show the depths of racial anxiety underlying photographs of the period, including those that show white children with black nannies.

In chapter 4, “A Matter of Public Health: Photographic Chemistry and the (Re)production of Healthy Bodies”, Sheehan turns the focus to the spaces in which medical and photographic procedures took place. A post-Civil war effort to cure disease, notably yellow fever, was enacted through improved sanitary practices, including the use of chemicals thought to purify surfaces and even the air circulating in the city. Particularly concerning were spaces packed with bodies—railcars and military camps, for instance. Photographers who dealt with deadly chemicals

learned the necessity of airing out their studios regularly and developed methods of ventilation to facilitate the dilution of toxic elements. Operating rooms were sparse and sterile while photography studios resembled domestic spaces, but the chemicals used to develop photographs posed a serious health threat to both the photographers and the sitters, who were sometimes stained dark by silver nitrate (not only a health concern, but also a social one, given the racial instability discussed in the previous chapter). Photographers needed some medical knowledge to manage accidental exposure to these chemicals, but these potions, which were capable of coaxing an image from what appeared to be nothing, served to further the cultural vision of the photographer as potential healer of the sick.

Sheehan shows that the metaphors developed for analogue photographic processes have digital equivalents in the contemporary period in chapter 5, “Photo Doctors and Pixel Surgeons: The Medicine of Photography in the Digital Age”. The notion of “doctoring” a photograph is ubiquitous, and photographs are no longer presumed to show the truth; rather, they more often show quite the opposite. Software gives potential plastic surgery patients a predictive vision of their post-surgery appearance. Photos are routinely retouched for magazines; the technicians that create changes imperceptible to the naked eye are called “pixel surgeons”; manuals to help the layperson preserve and improve their own photographs carry titles like *Digital Photo Doctor: Simple Steps to Diagnose, Rescue and Enhance Your Images* and *Photoshop Cosmetic Surgery: A Comprehensive Guide to Portrait Retouching and Body Transforming*.<sup>[2]</sup> Sheehan also provides an example of contemporary photo professionals who wear doctor’s garb (e.g., Allen Showalter, the “Photo Doctor” of Harrisonburg, Virginia) and uses an episode of the television show *Nip/Tuck* featuring Joan Rivers as an example of pervasive “makeover culture” that continues to blend surgical and photographic practices to “cure” inferiority complexes that are contributed to—if not caused by—media’s fetishization and fabrication of seemingly perfect bodies—both a parallel and a development upon material covered earlier in the book. Similarly Michael Jackson’s lightening of his skin and the surgical modification of his nose, signaling his desire to shift his heritage towards whiteness, provides a contemporary parallel to the racial anxieties in postbellum Philadelphia that photography was thought alternately to cure or conceal.

Sheehan made rich use of source material. Among the archival sources utilized were the collections of the George Eastman House, the Mütter Museum, and the Otis Historical Archives. Stored in an appendix is a chronological list of Philadelphia photographic periodicals containing both artistic and medical photography from 1864–90. Each entry is accompanied by a historical account or narrative as well as descriptions of the typical content of each issue. Included in the study are photographs from periodicals, *cartes de visite*, caricatures and journal illustrations demonstrating the use of photographic equipment in medical capacities. All of this provides a unique examination of the ways photographs were altered during different historical periods. Since the parallels with contemporary digital photography are well advanced, Sheehan effectively demonstrates how the past has strongly influenced the present, richly contextualizing the “doctoring” of photographs.

Elizabeth K. Mix  
Associate Professor of Art History, Butler University  
emix[at]butler.edu

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## Notes

[1] George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[2] Tim Daly and David Asch, *Digital Photo Doctor: Simple Steps to Diagnose, Rescue and Enhance Your Images* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 2006); Barry Jackson, *Photoshop Cosmetic Surgery: A Comprehensive Guide to Portrait Retouching and Body Transforming* (New York: Lark Books, 2006).