O’Mahony, Mike. *Photography and Sport.* London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 197 pp.

Reviewed by Jack Ryan

Writing in the academic journal, *Historical Social Research*, Mike O’Mahony, Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of Bristol, observes, “Sport, as a cultural manifestation, might be regarded as primarily a visual experience…. Yet, whilst the material legacy of sport’s visual culture provides an extensive and highly valuable resource for research, this has to date been largely untapped” (28).  O’Mahony’s new book, *Photography and Sport*, an *Exposures* monograph published by Reaktion Books, taps that resource. *Exposures* has published twenty-two editions to date that explore photography from thematic perspectives. O’Mahony makes a strong case for sport as a visual experience, from the beginning of photography to the digital age.

     O'Mahony recognizes 1839 as "a propitious one for sport" (7). In the United Kingdom, horseracing, boating, rugby, and the discovery of rubber, which would contribute to the global growth of baseball, basketball, golf, and tennis, combined to usher in decades of sports evolution at all levels: recreational, amateur, collegiate, and professional. It was also the year that artist and physicist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre “announced a new image-making process, which he called the daguerreotype” (8). O’Mahony sees this invention as almost more important than the early growth of sports. Together, though, sport as a significant social activity and photography as art have been twinned ever since, which O’Mahony celebrates and chronicles in this fascinating book. O’Mahony complicates the traditional approach to photograph study—observing and understanding the work of a photographer or a school of photography—by focusing on sports in all forms and how sports reveal the development of photography. He uses theoretical approaches in this pursuit, including academic thinkers like E.P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams, because they transformed attitudes toward sport as “an integral element within culture and thus a subject worthy of serious study” (9). O’Mahony’s own thesis is straightforward: his book explores the broad relationship between sport and photography, and it recognizes “the centrality of sport as a form of global culture within the modern world” (11). He also grants that mediated visual representations help to challenge and refine the definition of sports.

    Beyond his foundational introduction, O’Mahony presents seven chapters, each packed with worthwhile information, solid analysis, and important suggestions for further study. He moves from early images of Scottish athletes into motion and movement, the illustrated press, commodification, masculinity, fans and cultural space, and concludes with the ubiquity of modern sport. This outline suggests a historical spine; however, O’Mahony’s lively academic style and his insightful deconstructions of a wide variety of images turn this book into a cultural study, rather than a historical analysis that offers period specific appraisal of sports photography.

He opens with Scottish sport and photography due to the fact that since the birth of photography up to the early 1880s “it was thus predominately Scottish photographers who played the major role in the representation of sport” (36). While the chapter primarily centers on the staged images of tennis players and golfers, O’Mahony expands the chapter by suggesting how early work still influences contemporary art, such as Rigo 23’s monument to Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the campus of San José State University and Peter Hodgkinson’s *The Splash*, found at Preston North End FC’s grounds. Every chapter of this wonderfully illustrated text contains surprises like these. O’Mahony’s voice is not pedantic and his logical, analytic approach seems flawless. Chapter Four, “Sport Sells,” is particularly compelling. O’Mahony opens his examination with two images of Frank Gifford, one a monochrome action photograph of Gifford from 1957 as a New York football Giant, and the other an image from 1962 showing a reflexed Gifford with a book on his knee and a cigarette in his right hand. Bridging these two images is a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes and a headline declaring, “Get Lucky: the taste to start with…the taste to stay with.” As O’Mahony writes, “To modern sensibilities, this image of a popular sporting celebrity not only smoking, but explicitly promoting the practice, perhaps seems jarring” (91). Briefly, he coverers the early stages of famous sportsmen and advertisements both in the United States and the United Kingdom in order to place a “spotlight on the intrinsic relationship between sport as a social practice and its wider exploitation within the field of commerce and advertising” (92). One of the most intriguing aspects of this chapter is the line that O’Mahony draws between Greek conceptions of the athlete and our contemporary modes of visual representation of athletes.  With a sharp critical cultural eye, O’Mahony concludes the chapter by inviting others to explore the implications of these mostly male images: “That sportsmen should so explicitly be deployed to this end perhaps also reflects a greater concern that still needs to be addressed, namely the anxieties concerning the continuing presence of homophobic attitudes that inhabit the wider culture of sport” (108).

    Ben Shahan’s famous photograph of two men peering through cracks in a wooden fence, which is simply captioned *Untitled*, provides no clues as to what is happening. Intuitively, it seems as if these depression-era men cannot pay to see whatever it is beyond the plank fence. Other photographs made at the same time are more helpful, including an image titled *Watching a Football Game, Star City, West Virginia*, which O’Mahony provides, for it contains all the information needed to understand what these men are doing. As O’Mahony asserts, “Shahan’s photograph can thus be conceived as operating within a genre that had come into being virtually as soon as cameras were first brought to sporting events; namely the imaging of the sports spectator” (133). O’Mahony frames his discussion of “fan culture and the spaces of sport” by deploying Émile Durkheim’s theory of “collective effervescence,” originally used to define religious practices. He complicates things by inviting Benedict Anderson's theory of an idealized "imagined community" into his analysis. For example, in the United States, since the 1920s, sports spectatorship marked a new behavior that attempted to knit the nation together into a mass society, which never worked at a universal level for a variety of reasons. Of course, these idealized theories reach a low point in the period covering the mid-1960s to the late 1980s in Britain with the growth of football hooliganism. O’Mahony skillfully debunks some of the claims made about a notorious image taken after Scotland defeated England in 1977 at Wembley Stadium. While acknowledging the antisocial behavior on display, he also points out how the English press went overboard in its assessment of this photograph. Wembley’s home turf was damaged, but no one was injured, just the collective psyche of English football fans. O’Mahony closes this chapter by discussing advances in digital and screen technology, and he includes a kiss-cam image of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama kissing at a Men’s Olympic basketball game in Washington, D.C.  The fan, according to O’Mahony, deserves more attention.

    At once scholarly and clear, *Photography and Sport* adds a visual dimension to the study of sports culture that is compelling, challenging, and competent. O’Mahony celebrates athletes, fans, and photography in a narrative that “demonstrates the power of sport to act as a transnational communicator, crossing both geopolitical and linguistic borders” (174). He concludes his marvelous book by expressing his hope that sport and photographs of sport might offer a sliver of hope for a brighter future—that “imagined community.” No matter what, O’Mahony lays out a solid appraisal of why sport photography requires greater study and appreciation.