



**HAL**  
open science

## The idea of photography in the United States

François Brunet

► **To cite this version:**

François Brunet. The idea of photography in the United States: The JHU (Johns Hopkins University, Humanities Center), October 5, 2004.. 2004. hal-01378233

**HAL Id: hal-01378233**

**<https://u-paris.hal.science/hal-01378233>**

Preprint submitted on 10 Oct 2016

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## 1\_ The French law of 1839 and the idea of photography.

In 1839, France supposedly "gave photography to the world". What happened was that the French Parliament passed a bill by which the first photographic process, the daguerreotype, was made public in return for a pension for its inventors, Daguerre and Niépce. This exceptional procedure dispensed with the usual patent and made the process public knowledge. It was to boost the spread of the daguerreotype around the world. Since it was viewed by some as a mere protection measure, strong justification was needed. This was provided by François Arago, secretary of the Académie des sciences and influential leader of the left wing in the Chamber of Deputies. The most powerful argument was that Daguerre's process was too simple to be eligible for a patent — that it was in fact more of the nature of an idea than of an industry. As the Interior Minister put it, no doubt at Arago's prompting :  
[QUOTE 1]

Unfortunately for the authors of this beautiful discovery, it is impossible for them to make it an object of industry, and to repay themselves for the sacrifices exacted from them by so many fruitless trials. Their invention does not admit of being secured by a patent. As soon as it becomes known, anyone can make use of it [*dès qu'elle sera connue, chacun pourra s'en servir*]. The clumsiest will make drawings as exactly as a trained artist. It is therefore necessary that this process belong to everyone, or that it remain unknown.<sup>1</sup>

This argumentation would soon be disproved. Daguerre took out a patent in England. Even in the U.S., where the daguerreotype excited the greatest enthusiasm, it was only a matter of months before it became the business of professionals, and the subject of many secondary patents. We may therefore describe the argument as ideological; but it was nonetheless embodied in a law, and this law gave credence to an idea of photography that was to be of lasting consequence. Considering the strength of this idea, its durability and its productivity, I prefer to regard it, rather than as ideology in the usual sense, as a "discursive formation" in Michel Foucault's sense, i.e. a mode of regulation of social practices by discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup>. T. DUCHATEL, in DAGUERRE, *Historique et description des procédés du Daguerreotype et du Diorama* (1839, repr. 1982), 2.

Let me spell out this idea a little bit. In 1839, the prevalent notion was not that photography would democratize visual information. Louis-Philippe's Minister of police linked the invention of photography to another prospect, even more utopian, if not incongruous: that of a democracy of picture-makers. "Chacun pourra s'en servir." Because photography was so simple, so artless, it was bound to become universal. It is this cogent link between photography and democracy, or between the aspiration to photography and the aspiration to democracy, that I call "the idea of photography" in my book, and which I dub with a slogan, "art sans art, art pour tous" — "art without art, art for all".

The legal argument, to be sure, gained its strength from the novel kind of images that this invention produced: wonderfully faithful pictures, exact to the microscopic detail. But this faith in the absolute "realism" of photographic images, hard for us to admit today, should not obscure the radicality of the argument. More than it was a thesis on representation, the Minister's argument embodied a conception of photography as *practice* and situated its significance in the *political* realm: indeed it depicted this new practice of picture-making as egalitarian by principle. The law as a whole indicated that although the novelty of photography materialized itself in the dizzying exactitude of its images, it was the "mechanical" or "natural" mode of production of these images that most concretely heralded a "revolution", as many a commentator would put it. A revolution, then, not only because more people than ever before would be able to get portraits and pictures of the world. A revolution, insofar as photography seemed to disqualify the institution of art and its hierarchies of value and labor, by giving "anyone" and even "the clumsiest" the power to "make drawings" that until then had been reserved for the very few. A revolution that, fifty years after 1789, trumpeted the people's right not only to get pictures, but to make them.

What I want to do today is to explore the career of this revolutionary idea in the United States, or at least a few moments in that career. Indeed, the idea of photography, as I have described it, has been more fervently and widely adopted in the U.S. than anywhere else. This may seem obvious, and even trite: if the democratic vocation of photography is to culminate in Kodak ads, what's the point? Yet I think there is a point. Photography's link to democracy, although born in France, remained dormant there (and in Europe) after 1839, or was regarded, at best, condescendingly. In the U.S., this link was explicitly claimed, and often brilliantly expressed by intellectuals (who conversely brought less passion than their European counterparts to the debate on the nature of photographic images). More generally, as I will suggest, the

development of this idea in the U.S. went beyond the scope of its initial formulation, and of what we normally understand by "idea". I will argue that in the U.S., the idea of photography has translated into a full-fledged political tradition, because photography has been adopted as topic of general interest, a public affair or *res publica*.

## **2\_ Emerson's "republican style of painting"**

It has often been noted that the advent of the daguerreotype in the U.S. elicited as strong a response from American intellectuals as it did among the population at large. Examples of this enthusiastic response range from Samuel Morse describing the daguerreotype image as "Rembrandt perfected" to Edgar Allan Poe hailing the invention as "the most extraordinary triumph of modern science". Both Morse and Poe kept abreast of the technical developments that led, before the year 1840 was over, to the successful application of the daguerreotype to portraiture. This application, as is also well-known, soon became the nearly exclusive use of the new process in the U.S., and fed the growth of a business that was to be exceptionally strong and durable. Sometimes derided abroad, the American infatuation with the daguerreotype portrait and the ingenuity of its leading practitioners earned the U.S. several medals at the Crystal Palace World Fair in 1851. Horace Greeley exclaimed, "in daguerreotype we beat the world". In the same year, the spiritual and disciplinary exercise of reading the soul in the face, often associated with the American portrait tradition, became a topic for Hawthorne's romance, *The House of the Seven Gables*. This was the first significant work of fiction in the world to give a leading role to a photographer— in this case, a daguerreotypist whose deeply significant plates assisted in unmasking the evil figure of Judge Pyncheon. In 1854, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was adorned on its frontispiece with an uncaptioned portrait of its author, engraved from a daguerreotype by Mathew Brady, as if to signify that the Poet himself was henceforth defined by his public image. Brady, by this stage, was the highly successful owner of a luxurious salon on Broadway, where he offered portraits of "illustrious Americans" to the gaze of customers in search of imitable models. As Richard Rudisill, Alan Trachtenberg, and others have shown, the "mirror image" of the daguerreotype helped in the construction of a national identity, or perhaps, given the anxious mood of the 1850s, in the salvaging of a confident self-image.

American writers, then, were not the last to participate in this cult, albeit with ironic undertones. Hawthorne's and Whitman's involvements with photography, in particular, have

raised a lot of commentary. Less attention has been given, however, to the thoughts on this subject of their common intellectual hero, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Stanley Cavell has argued that Emerson's call, in "The American Scholar", for a literature that would embrace "the common... the familiar, the low", amounted to a striking prefiguration of "the obsessions of photography"<sup>2</sup> But Emerson's esthetics is highly intellectual; and in the current wave of political reinterpretation of the Emersonian corpus, esthetics as a whole has taken a back seat. More resonant with current critical trends is the interpretation of "The American Scholar" offered by Stephen J. Hartnett in a recent book on "Cultural Fictions in Antebellum America". Hartnett claims, quite convincingly, that Emerson was concerned with the survival of "the individual character [...] amid the mass-produced culture of modernity" — with the modern questions of "how the self is constructed, how the self and society interact [...] how the practices of the market threaten the promises of democracy". Yet, according to Hartnett, Emerson never addressed these questions "in a form other than the high-minded political sermon", unlike Whitman. I agree that Emerson privileged the political, but I would like to show that, as far as the daguerreotype was concerned, Emerson's questions, if perhaps "high-minded", were far from timid.

These questions, it must be granted, were mostly private. Quite strikingly, Emerson's intense interest in the daguerreotype expressed itself almost exclusively in his journals. With one or two exceptions, those passages dealing with the daguerreotype that he culled for his essays or lectures were rephrased so as to eliminate explicit references to it. The daguerreotype was clearly for him a sensitive subject, because it questioned the eminently significant border between "society" and "the self", or between the public and the private. Thus it was in the wake of one of his first visits to a daguerrian studio, in Boston in October, 1841, to have his own portrait taken, that Emerson confided to his journal the first entries on the subject, which are also the most extended and, to me, the most audacious. Bitterly disappointed by the portrait, as he was to be with almost every subsequent attempt, he described the experience as, quite literally, a small death: [QUOTE 2.A]

Were you ever Daguerrotyped, O immortal man ? And did you look with all vigor at the lens of the camera or rather by the direction of the operator at the brass peg a little below it to give the picture the full benefit of your expanded & flashing eye ? and in your zeal not to blur the image, did you keep every finger in its place with such energy that your hands became

---

<sup>2</sup> EMERSON, "The American Scholar", *Selected Essays*, Penguin Classics, p. 102. S. CAVELL, XXX

clenched as for fight or despair, & in your resolution to keep your face still, did you feel every muscle becoming every moment more rigid : the brows contracted into a Tartarean frown, and the eyes fixed as (only) they are in /a/ fit(s), in madness, or in death ; and when at last you are relieved of your dismal duties, did you find the curtain drawn perfectly, and the coat perfectly, & the hands true, clenched for combat, and the shape of the face & head ? but unhappily the total expression (had) escaped from the face and you held the portrait of a mask instead of a man. Could you not by grasping it very tight hold the stream of a river or of a small brook & prevent it from flowing <sup>3</sup>?

Crushing as it did the writer's narcissistic persona, this experience became, as it was repeated, something of a wound (as is shown by his correspondence with Thomas Carlyle). Yet not only was it never allowed to emerge in the public writings, but in the secret of the journals Emerson turned the private mishap into a clearly positive, and clearly political, interpretation of the daguerreotype. In the same month of October, 1841, we read in his journals the following two remarkable entries, which are rarely commented on: [QUOTES 2.B and 2.C]

The *Daguerrotype* is good for its authenticity. No man quarrels with his shadow, nor will he with his miniature when the sun was the painter. Here is no interference, and the distortions are not the blunders of an artist, but only those of motion, imperfect light, and the like<sup>4</sup>.

'Tis certain that the Daguerrotype is the true Republican style of painting. The Artist stands aside & lets you paint yourself. If you make an ill head, not he but yourself are responsible and so people who go Daguerrotyping have a pretty solemn time. They come home confessing & lamenting their sins. A Daguerreotype Institute is as good as a national Fast<sup>5</sup>.

One reason why such texts often go unnoticed is that they seem to epitomize what is commonly described as the naive belief of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in "sun painting", i.e. in the absolute and natural truthfulness of the photographic image. The critique of this "positivist faith" has occupied so many commentators since the 1950s that it has become almost impossible, today, to treat it as anything but a myth. Thus, Carol Schloss castigates the "almost uniform failure" of 19<sup>th</sup>-century "photographers and laymen alike", "to regard the

---

<sup>3</sup>(Oct. 24, 1841, The Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 115-116)

<sup>4</sup>(october 1841, Joel Porte, *Emerson in his Journals*, HUP 1982, p. 264)

<sup>5</sup>(october-november 1841, Porte, p. 271).

photographer as an active participant, and shaper of, procedures and events"<sup>6</sup>. But what, I would ask, if this "failure" were a conscious adhesion to an attractive idea? Another "problem" with these texts is the religious interpretation of the session at the daguerreotypist (confession, sins, fasting). Emerson seems to share in the whole popular association of photography with rituals of revelation, incrimination and conviction. The American version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's naive faith in sun-painting would appear indeed "high-minded", and seriously retrograde, trapped in a "puritan" heritage or in its modern, utilitarianist, avatars. But what if Emerson were saying exactly the opposite?

I would like to examine the "republican" message of the daguerreotype, as construed by Emerson. "Republican" is an interesting adjective, especially as contrasted to "democratic". Emerson nowhere talks of "democracy" in connection with photography. In his many journal entries on the daguerreotype he never alludes to the spread of pictures through society, let alone to the utopia of a nation of photographers. (Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, in 1857, would describe the photographic brotherhood as a "kind of republic" —not Emerson.) He did not participate in the Daguerreian cult that, even after Daguerre's death in 1851, kept alive his memory as a "brother" and a generous "giver" of photography. (Though he did list Daguerre among the names of great inventors whose arts, because they were "for all", benefitted "the morals of society" and kept "aristocracy" at bay<sup>7</sup>.) Generally speaking, Emerson's whig aversion to mass rituals and to the ultra-egalitarianism of the Jacksonian era made him reluctant to embrace any popular program of cultural democracy.

In what sense, then, is the daguerreotype "the true Republican style of painting"? The word clearly does not aim at a strictly political (or Lockean) sense of "republic" as a form of government based on the principles of liberty and equality and organized by the rule of law: perhaps all have equal rights to a self-image, but this is not the main point. "Republican", here, refers rather to the broader doctrine of republicanism as civic virtue. This doctrine, based on Christian values of modesty and sobriety, permeated the political culture and the institutions of the early Republic. In the 1830s, it imbued reform campaigns for temperance, the rights of women, or the abolition of slavery. The remarkable equivalence between a "daguerreotype institute" (perhaps inspired by the ambitious venture of the Bostonian

---

<sup>6</sup> Carol SHLOSS, *In Visible Light, Photography and the American Writer: 1840-1940*, New York, Oxford UP, 1987, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Emerson, *Journals* vol. X, 1847, p. 173-174.

daguerreotypist John Plumbe) and a "national Fast" (reminiscent of civic festivals that were popular in the 1830s) points at this moral-social interpretation of republicanism. In this interpretation, the daguerreotype portrait ritual becomes an instrument of reform, a modern transposition of the cleansing of the soul that, for Emerson, could no longer be achieved in prayer and confession. In the context of Emerson's resolutely lay view of society (and of his moral perfectionism), the meaning of this transposition should not be mistaken: far from simply translating the novelty of photography in an outdated "religious" lexicon, the fiction of the "daguerreotype institute" is the figure of a successful *substitution* of modern civic virtue for the outdated religious rituals.

But again, what is it about the daguerreotype that promotes civic virtue ? This is where the texts become quite fascinating, by their forceful abstraction of photography as "republican painting", i.e. as a political protocol that echoes and enriches the French idea of photography. As we know, the republicanism of the Founding Fathers, especially John Adams, associated painting and painters with the luxury and corruption of European aristocracies. The phrase "the republican style of painting" is almost oxymoronic in this context: it defines a form of painting where the artist achieves perfect modesty by virtually disappearing. He "stands aside and lets you paint yourself", as if he were only a witness for a transaction that pits the sitter in front of the machine — a representation, as it were, that no longer needs the medium of representation. In cartoons and studio views of the period, the technical protocol of photography was depicted as a triangle —sitter, photographer and camera— with no obvious center and no single direction of circulation, which replaced the face-to-face encounter of the artist and his subject. Note the verb form Emerson uses: "people who go daguerrotyping have a pretty solemn time". The verb conflates the action of the operator and the experience of the sitter in one medial or median function. And in Emerson's daguerreotype institute, the artist, by standing aside, is relieved from all responsibility —as well as from all merit— over the picture : "the distortions are not the blunders of an artist, but only those of motion, imperfect light, and the like", says the first passage, while the second adds more pointedly, "If you make an ill head, not he but yourself are responsible". As if a daguerreotype portrait were always a self-portrait, only assisted by the camera and validated, so to speak, by the artist's presence. (See this example of a studio view where the sitter and the photographer look exactly alike.) Likewise, the "distortions" must be ascribed to the sitter—and not to the artistic concerns and limitations of a painter. Thus, the daguerreotype's truth is defined primarily not as adequation but as agreement ("no man quarrels with his shadow") between "self" and "society" (or



between an image and society's norms); more radically, between "self" and "self", i.e. between the individual's self-image and the image it naturally and freely projects to the camera. The daguerreotype is the "republican style of painting", then, in at least two senses: first, because, there being no "interference" of an artist, everyone is now responsible for his/her (public) image; second, because, having now to bear "the burden of representation", in John Tagg's phrase, he/she is liable for its defects, and bound to reform him-/ herself accordingly. Emerson's "daguerreotype institute" is the fictional home of a protocol that emulates the republican constitution in prescribing that the subject (of painting) become the citizen (of an image society), and in giving this citizen a chance to conform his/her self-image to a civic ideal.

A close approximation of this fiction in historical reality was Mathew Brady's Broadway studio, more a gallery than a studio really, where customers who went "daguerrotyping" had the opportunity to admire and to emulate the portraits of the "illustrious Americans" hanging on the walls. Brady's gallery also embodied, of course, the risks of conformity and commercialization—something like the destruction of "the self" by "the many", or, as Kierkegaard put it, the risk that, once "everyone will be able to have their portrait taken", people would "all look exactly the same—so that we shall only need one portrait."<sup>8</sup> But Emerson did not echo this fear. Instead he suggested the opposite possibility that the daguerreotype portrait might express or restore the individuality of the individual, and that the daguerreotype gallery might form the truest image of the nation, or of the times. In the same fall of 1841, another passage in his journal gives a striking formulation of photography's potential function as public revelator, or as a metaphor for the revelation that Emerson himself takes on in his speeches of the period. This passage is transcribed, in a somewhat softened version, in the first of the *Lectures on the Times* (given in December, 1841), where it is one of the rare occurrences of the daguerreotype in Emerson's public writings. I am quoting from the Journal: [QUOTE 3.A]

And why not draw for these times a portrait gallery?... A camera! A camera! cries the century, that is the only toy. Come let us paint the agitator and the dilettante and the member of Congress and the college professor, the Unitarian minister, the editor of the newspaper, the fair contemplative girl, the aspirant for fashion & opportunities, the woman of the world who has tried & knows better—let us examine how well she knows. Good fun it would be for a

master who with delicate finger in the most decisive yet in the most parliamentary & unquestionable manner should indicate all the lions by traits not to be mistaken yet so that none should dare wag his finger whilst the shadow of each well known form flitted for a moment across the wall. So should we have at last if it were done well a series of sketches which would report to the next ages the color & quality of ours.<sup>9</sup>

And here I switch to the version in the public lecture: [QUOTE 3.B]

And why not draw for these times a portrait gallery ? Let us paint the painters. Whilst the Daguerreotype professor, with camera-obscura and silver plate, begins now to traverse the land, let us set up our Camera also, and let the sun paint the people. Let us paint the agitator, and the man of the old school, and the member of Congress, and the college-professor, the formidable editor, the priest, and reformer, the contemplative girl, and the fair aspirant for fashion & opportunities, the woman of the world who has tried and knows—let us examine how well she knows. Good office it were with delicate finger in the most decisive, yet in the most parliamentary and unquestionable manner, to indicate the indicators, to indicate those who most accurately represent every good and evil tendency of the general mind, in the just order which they take on this canvass of Time; so that all witnesses should recognise a spiritual law, as each well known form flitted for a moment across the wall. So should we have, if it were rightly done, a series of sketches which would report to the next ages the color and quality of ours.<sup>10</sup>

The *indication* which the camera serves as a model for is clearly political, and its aim seems to be not only memorialization but unmasking. The prime targets for Emerson's camera are political figures (the agitator, the member of Congress, the reformer) and more generally figures of authority and social influence (the college professor, the editor, the priest, the fashionable woman, the "indicators"). Those figures, precisely the ones that Brady celebrated in his *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, are to be "reported" to the "next age"; and here we may be reminded also of Mathew Brady's ambition to become a "historian with a camera". But whereas Brady clearly intended to celebrate his illustrious Americans, Emerson's report implicitly describes its objects as so many masks born out of modern culture, which the rhetorical camera does not just record but "indicates", exposes, or even indicts.

---

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Susan SONTAG, *On Photography*, p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> Oct 21, 1841, *Porte*, p. 268-269.

<sup>10</sup> "Lectures on the Times", "Introductory Lecture", read Dec. 2, 1841, Emerson, *Collected Works*, t. 1, p. 170.

As early as 1841, then, Emerson formulated photography as an organizing metaphor for the elaboration and revision of representation in a democratic society, thus programming —in purely rhetorical terms, to be sure— the future political uses of photography, or at least some of them. In the same month of December, 1841, he noted in his journal that "the French police daguerreotype all their culprits"<sup>11</sup>, showing an awareness and perhaps some excitement at the idea that photography's certifying powers could be enlisted by apparatuses of justice, police, medicine, and anthropology, as they would be in many cases in the U.S. after 1850. In the lecture version of this text, however, he placed his rhetorical camera under the aegis of the "daguerreotype professor who, with camera-obscura and silver plate, begins now to traverse the land". Though one is hard-put to pin a name or a specific enterprise on this "daguerreotype professor" in 1841, this reference suggests that, for Emerson, the association of photography to Western exploration could be a major example of such political uses. Some thirty years later, the photographs taken on a western survey by William Henry Jackson were to be cited as evidence in favor of the creation of Yellowstone National Park, and the story of how they "made the Park" would gain durable credence.

What Emerson did not foresee was that the generalization of the use of photography in public policies would be brought about, more than anything, by the wreckage of the national identity in the Civil War. It was during the Civil War that photography first became widespread as a technical instrument of field documentation, mapping, and medical archiving. It was also during the Civil War that photography became associated with journalism and visual information, in this case a message of death and destruction. You all know Alexander Gardner's and Timothy O'Sullivan's widely reproduced pictures of corpses, or George Barnard's views of devastated Southern cities. It was not the utopian prospect of Republican improvement, nor even Mathew Brady's grandiose "historical" ambition, but the collapse of the nation and the needs of the Union Army, that made photography, in the U.S., an instrument of documentation and policy, a tool for political campaigning, and a source of evidence in political debate. That the war precipitated photography's cardinal position in public debate was shown by Oliver Wendell Holmes's comments on the ambiguous pleasures of stereoscopy. "The sight of these pictures, Holmes wrote about Gardner's photographs of Confederate dead, is a commentary on civilization such as a savage might well triumph to show his missionaries." "Yet, he added, through such martyrdom must come our

---

<sup>11</sup> EMERSON, *Journals*, vol. VIII, p. 500

redemption."<sup>12</sup> The photographic exposition of the Civil War indeed inaugurated what has been perhaps the strongest and most constant political use of photography, i.e. the illustration and the denunciation of war, from Robert Capa to Don McCullin to this year's revelations in Iraq. More generally, it inaugurated what Susan Sontag would recognize as "the well-known use of photographs in America to awaken conscience"<sup>13</sup>—that is to say, the introduction of their evidence into the public debate.

Whether or not Emerson could foresee that the American photographic tradition would become essentially a political one, his parable of the Daguerreotype Institute expressed quite forcefully —if only in the private realm of the journals— the unique link, in the U.S., between photography and politics, more specifically between the art of photography and the aspiration to democracy. And his musings over the Republican artist who "stands aside and lets you paint yourself" provided a remarkable formulation of the ambivalent cultural status of operators in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, between an aura of magic omnipotence and a reputation for charlatanism and passive reception of "the sun's work". This ambivalent status, I may add, was not just a constraint of social discourse; it would seem, from looking at certain pictures by Mathew Brady himself, or Timothy O'Sullivan, that some American photographers actually enjoyed representing themselves as "standing aside", or visibly missing from the scene.

### **3. The Kodak and the index: late 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformulations of the idea of photography.**

Here I am making a leap to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but keeping in mind O'Sullivan's stagings of his shadowy persona as "operator". It was, I think, against precisely this more or less willing erasure of the "operator", more generally against the whole business ethics of professional photography, that the so-called pictorialists, and especially the Alfred Stieglitz circle, waged their battle for photography as art. Of course, there were many aspects to this battle. But one thing that seems pretty clear is that the recognition of photography as high culture went along with a conceptual shift from the old "view" esthetics of the likes of Jackson and O'Sullivan to a new, expressionistic, definition of photography as a "medium". Ultimately, what the Stieglitzian photographer aimed at doing was not to represent the world

---

<sup>12</sup> O.W. HOLMES, "Doings of the Sunbeam" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 1863), repr. in NEWHALL, *Essays and Images*.

<sup>13</sup> Susan SONTAG, *On Photography*, p. 63.

in an objective or socially acceptable fashion, but to express him- or herself in pictures, indeed to assert his or her individuality. As Fred Holland Day once put it about one of his pictures, "Behold—It is I"<sup>14</sup>. Stieglitz himself, in a famous caricature of the new symbolist credo of art photography, would spend ten years photographing clouds that he called "equivalents" — equivalents of his moods, it is usually assumed. The artist photographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was speaking in the first person—thus accomplishing a fully Emersonian self-realization as photographer, while at the same time seemingly discarding in a definitive way the old "republican" idea of photography as an artless and artist-less art.

Yet there is ample evidence that this old "republican" idea did not just die then and there. The Stieglitzian revolution was contemporary with, and in some ways contingent on, the popularization of photography, largely induced by George Eastman and his Kodak. In Daniel J. Boorstin's somewhat overly enthusiastic account of this transformation, photography went, with the Kodak, from a professional and "esoteric" status to that of popular pastime and "democratic art". The popularization of photography, in fact, was a slower and more diverse process than is sometimes assumed, and there was nothing intrinsically democratic about it. But it was nonetheless a major cultural phenomenon, which was preceded by an aspiration to the amateur practice of photography. George Eastman's marketing strategies, from the launching of the first Kodak in 1888, exploited as well as nourished this aspiration. Eastman never made a mystery of the fact that his goal was industrial supremacy; as he put it, "the manifest destiny of the Eastman Kodak Company is to be the largest manufacturer of photographic materials in the world or else to go to pot"<sup>15</sup>. Yet in a manner that was typical of the "Corporate Revolution" of the 1890s, he clothed this imperial ambition in democratic or rather populist language. His commercial concept, the Kodak, was presented as simple, friendly, untaxing for the intellect, and universal: it included the camera (a simple box with its film ready to be exposed and then developed by the firm's labs), the name (Kodak, which was supposed to be easily pronounced in every language) and the slogan ("you press the button, we do the rest") and its variants ("no knowledge required", etc.). In his assertive style, the Kodak's creator explained that he meant "to make Kodakers of every school boy and girl, and every wage-earning man and woman the world over"<sup>16</sup>. The insistent appeal to children, to workers, and, above all, to women as the chosen bearers of the Kodak flag was especially

---

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Sarah GREENOUGH, in SANDWEISS, p. 267.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by JENKINS, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by William WELLING, p. 394. See also TAFT, p. 388, and JENKINS, p.112.

revealing of the fact that "kodakery", as it came to be called by its critics, advertised itself as a new power, a new freedom, a new kind of fun, if not a new republic. This populist discourse worked quite well; the Kodak and its slogan became a fetish of the new spirit of consumerism and mass entertainment. (The same populist discourse was extended to the whole management of Eastman's industrial empire, and made the name Kodak synonymous with a corporate paternalism that was supposed to palliate the deficiencies of government.)

What happened with the Kodak revolution, then, was the industrial realization, and at the same time the commodification, of the photographic utopia that had been proclaimed in France in 1839 ("chacun pourra s'en servir"). Eastman's concept was very close to Daguerre's and Arago's, only more explicitly commercial. By an ironic twist of economic history, it was precisely at the time of photography's elevation to fine art status that its popularization and commodification gave a whole new and vastly expanded career to the idea of photography, now more cultural than political. Once again, as in 1839, photography was presented as the simplest thing in the world, and once again everyone could make pictures "as well as a trained artist". This was popular photography as we know it, and as Pierre Bourdieu described it in his 1965 book *Un art moyen*, a book that actually was the offshoot of a commission by Eastman's French subsidiary Kodak-Pathé: photography as a "median" or "average" art, socially defined as accessible to everyone, fun and ritual at the same time, outside of tradition and education.

Stieglitz, of course, loathed the credo of kodakery, and reveled in biting sarcasm against "button-pressing". But I would argue that the prime target of his war for photography as art was not so much the new population of amateurs as the old cast of professionals (who were also, for that matter, Eastman's direct enemies). Stieglitz often used Eastman Kodak equipment, and in the 1900s he was not bothered by Eastman Kodak being the biggest advertiser in the pages of his avant-garde magazine *Camera Work*. It was with a hand camera, if not a Kodak, that he took his famous street views of New York in the 1890s and 1900s. These views, by the way, were far from the high symbolist style that the Photo-Secession would be associated with, and confirmed a taste for ordinary subjects that echoed the Emersonian call for a literature of "the low", and that would be admired by critics such as Lewis Mumford or William Carlos Williams. Many of Stieglitz's fellow artist photographers of the period also used Kodaks and similar equipment. In sum, the whole evolution of photography into a fine art, which the Modernist historiography described as a momentous

self-definition of the "medium", cannot be separated, in my view, from its broader context: that is, from the larger transformation of photography from a cumbersome craftsmanship of picture-making into a perceptive, reportorial and ritualistic activity of picture-taking. One crucial theme of Eastman's propaganda, that photography was a new freedom, was more than echoed in Stieglitz's libertarian claim that the world was there for everyone to photograph it according to his or her fancy. Eastman and Stieglitz jointly redefined photography as a free activity, if not a game, of the eye and hand, as opposed to a practice and a business involving the body and the machine; and thereby they both contributed to its popularization, as well as to its dematerialization and further idealization.

There was also an intellectual side to this transformation, which is not enough acknowledged. It was in the period of the popularization of photography, and —I would argue— in direct connection with it, that photography became a philosophical object. Examples of this trend include, in Europe, Freud and Bergson, who both used photographic metaphors in their reconceptions of psychology. Clearly, in both cases, it was the new spread of photographic images and cameras in society that allowed, indeed that prescribed, the recourse to this metaphor as a pedagogical tool, as well as the critical need to denounce its limitations. The most profound instance of this trend occurred in the U.S., specifically in Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs. Peirce, of course, is known as the founder of modern semiotics, and especially as the inventor of the distinction of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. Since the 1970s, as is also known, that distinction has often been used to stress the "indexical" nature of photographs, i.e. the fact, noted by Peirce, that photographs refer to their objects not just by resemblance but by a causal connection. Despite much critical opinion in favor of this "indexical theory of photography", I find other aspects of Peirce's thought on the matter even more compelling. The mere recognition of photographs as signs, and as components of images rather than full-fledged images or representations, was in itself quite a departure from common 19<sup>th</sup>-century opinion. So was Peirce's thoroughly pragmatic definition of signs in terms of their uses, as when he defined the icon by giving the example, "by means of two photographs a map can be drawn." But I mostly want to emphasize the context and the particular form of these observations.

First, it is significant that Peirce only started to mention photographs and cameras in his theoretical writings in the 1890s, whereas he had been professionally familiar with photography, its technology, and its semiotic complexities since the 1860s. This late date, as

well as the fact that he used the photograph primarily as an example for the distinction between icon and index, suggest that his appeal to photography was pedagogical, and motivated by its rapid spread in society after 1890. Second, and more significant, Peirce regularly formulated his observations on the semiotic nature of photographs on the basis of an appeal to common knowledge, as in this remarkable text from 1895: [QUOTE 4]

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection. The case is different if I surmise that zebras are likely to be obstinate, or otherwise disagreeable animals, because they seem to have a general resemblance to donkeys, and donkeys are self-willed. Here the donkey serves precisely as a probable likeness of the zebra. It is true we suppose that resemblance has a physical cause in heredity; but then, this hereditary affinity is itself only an inference from the likeness between the two animals, and we have not (as in the case of the photograph) any independent knowledge of the circumstances of the production of the two species. [...]<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, when discussing the syntax of signs in 1903, Peirce exemplified the category he called "Dicent Sinsign", that is of the discursive index, by a weathercock and a photograph, and added: "the fact that the latter is known to be the effect of the radiations renders it an index and highly informative".<sup>18</sup> It is true that Peirce's recourse to what he often called "collateral knowledge" was a growing trend in his writings on signs after 1900 (almost to the point of contradicting his basic doctrine that all knowledge is created and communicated by signs). But, in the case of photography, it resulted in a remarkable —if incidental — displacement of the accepted view. Basically, to say that the reading of a photograph as a photograph was based not on some immanent evidence, but instead on "independent knowledge of its production", amounted to saying that the experience of photography was regulated by the idea of photography. It was like saying that the uses of photography as evidence (which Peirce was perhaps the first to formulate quite so forcefully) originated from and belonged in a kind of consensus or social contract, rather than the laws of physics; that the power of authentication commonly attributed to the nature of the photograph was a matter of "knowledge", use, practice, if not convention. This was a radical displacement indeed, the

---

<sup>17</sup> C.S. PEIRCE, *Collected Papers*, 2.281 (1895), in BUCHLER, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, p. 106.



philosophical strength of which has not been recognized enough. This displacement, I think, was made possible by the "independent knowledge" that was diffused, around 1900, by the popularization of photography, not just as image but as social practice. And it situated Peirce in a distinct American tradition of thinking on photography, represented especially by his fellow Bostonians Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes, which constantly privileged the logic of social uses over the metaphysical elucidation of photography's essence. Pushing this connection beyond what Peirce wrote explicitly, I would argue that for him, as for Emerson, the idea of photography was less a function of science than the reflection of a social contract, by which people accepted (but could theoretically denounce) photographic representation as a norm of truth.

#### **4\_ Closing remarks: the permanence of the political idea of photography in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

I wish I had the time and means to pursue this history down to the present day. To be quite frank, it is a project that I am still working on, and it is a difficult task, because since the Kodak-Stieglitz moment, photography has become so diversified that it is difficult to identify a common idea behind so many trends. I do believe, however, that what I have described as the political idea of photography has remained relevant in the U.S. up until today. I would even argue that in the U.S., the whole field of (public) photographic practices — making photographs as well as looking, showing, commenting, and using them — has increasingly shaped itself as a political field. I will limit myself to a few fragmentary remarks, and hope that our discussion may perhaps help me fill in the holes.

One fact which hardly needs stressing is that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photography and photographers have been regularly associated with reform campaigns and often with policy decisions. From Lewis Hine's work with the Pittsburgh Survey and on child labor to Ansel Adams's official showings of his photographs to promote the conservationist ideal, American photographers have often been quite involved with politics and policies—more so, I think, than any other photographic nation. Conversely, it is only in the U.S. that photography's demystifying potential could become a public issue and even a burning one, as it did in the 1950s. Then, in the face of the celebration of mankind presented at the MOMA with *The*

---

<sup>18</sup> *Collected Papers*, 2.265 (1903), In BUCHLER, p. 119.

*Family of Man*, William Klein and Robert Frank caused scandal when they offered their devastating views of New York and Americans (both of which, of course, were published in France). But the most spectacular example of political photography, of course, was the F.S.A.'s photographic campaigns. Beyond the sheer extent of Roy Stryker's operation, what would need stressing here is the fact that photography became a model for the whole "documentary" purpose. In Walker Evans and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, this purpose was remarkably close to the utopia of an art without art, perfectly transparent and perfectly unquestionable. As Agee put it vibrantly: [QUOTE 5]

Calling for a moment everything except art Nature, I would insist that everything in Nature, every most casual thing, has an inevitability and perfection which art as such can only approach, and shares in fact, not as art, but as the part of Nature that it is; so that, for instance, a contour map is at least as considerably an image of absolute 'beauty' as the counterpoints of Bach which it happens to resemble. I would further insist that it would do human beings, including artists, no harm to recognize this fact, and to bear it in mind in their seining of experience, and to come as closely as they may be able, to recording and reproducing it for its own, not for art's sake.

One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this. So far as it goes (which is, in its own realm, as absolute anyhow as the traveling distance of words or sound), and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth.<sup>19</sup>

Here, of course, the political idea was given a strong esthetic twist, photography becoming the matrix for a whole neo-realist, if not minimalist, style of literature. The "clean and literal" handling that Agee advocated, reminiscent in some ways of 19<sup>th</sup> century view-making, would aptly qualify Ernest Hemingway as well as Walker Evans (though perhaps not Agee himself...). More generally it came to characterize a whole tradition of documentary photography. The example provided by the F.S.A.'s photographic campaigns would not only influence later American undertakings (such as that of the Office of Economic Opportunity under JFK), but serve as a major stylistic model, in Socialist France of the 1980s, for a government-sponsored survey of the post-modern French landscape. For Agee, though, it was perfectly clear that photography was inherently political—that the usefulness of this "ice-

---

<sup>19</sup> James AGEЕ, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin/Mariner, 2001, p. 206.

cold... eye" was, as he put it in the Preface, at the service of "individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness" (Preface, p. x), in an attempt to vindicate "certain normal predicaments of human divinity". I would argue that a similar merging of esthetic and political concerns, the vindication of the ordinary and the self-conscious effacement of the photographer, can be traced through the eminently American tradition of street photography, and in later conceptual gestures of "de-authoring".

No less significant, finally, is the fact that the precocious elevation of photography to museum dignity in at least some leading institutions, chiefly the MOMA, was accompanied, from the 1930s to the 1970s and beyond, by repeated counter-efforts at foregrounding its social, economic and political uses. In 1938, the same year that saw the publication of the first version of Beaumont Newhall's *History of Photography*, a chemist at the University of Kansas named Robert Taft published his monumental *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History 1839-1889*. Taft's history was, in many ways, a reflection of his era's passion for making sense and making use of America's popular past. Though he refrained from directly contesting the Modernist narrative of photography as a medium, Taft made it clear that the history of American photography, at least, could not be seriously treated without taking into account its "effects... upon the social history of America": [QUOTE 6]

No less a historian than John Richard Green has called photography the greatest boon ever conferred on the common man in recent times. Green cannot be far wrong. Photography affects the lives of modern individuals so extensively that it is difficult to enumerate all of its uses. In addition to preserving for us the portraits of loved ones, it illustrates our newspapers, our magazines, our books. [...] Crime has been detected through its agency as readily as have flaws in metal structures. It has recorded the past, educated our youth, and last, but not least, it has given us the most popular form of amusement ever devised.

It is indeed strange that, with all these important contacts with mankind, its history in this country has never previously been traced, despite the fact that photography has been practiced in this country for nearly a century. This seems all the more remarkable when one reflects that photography is the most universally produced of all arts and crafts.<sup>20</sup>

Appropriately, Taft's social history was bounded by 1839, the advent of the daguerreotype, and 1889, the advent of the Kodak, a name and a product "known in every home of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert TAFT, *Photography and the American Scene* (1938), Dover, 1964, p. vii.

civilized world" (p. 403). It highlighted, for the first time in American historical writing, precisely those social, economic and political functions of photography that the more esthetically-minded history of Beaumont Newhall tended to downplay, stressing those photographs that had "made history": Brady's portrait of Lincoln, Jackson's photographs of Yellowstone, etc. Though his concept of society and his mechanistic notion of "impact" seem naive today, Robert Taft thus inaugurated an important trend in historical and critical writing on pictures. In the 1970s, Susan Sontag, in her famous essays, gave a nostalgic deploration of photography's lost democratic ideals that ignored the growing art-historical scholarship on photography. (Here Sontag echoed Daniel Boorstin's complaint of the "dilution of experience" by pictures in his 1961 book *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream*.) At the same time, the Marxist critic Alan Sekula launched a fierce attack on the museum- and market-governed commodification of photography, calling it a "traffic" of meaning and value.

This debate, of course, is still going on in full force today, as photography has joined the growing field of visual culture and its ever-more refined deconstructions of the political meanings of representation. It is certainly striking, in this context, that Susan Sontag, in her most recent book on the photography of war and suffering, is still able to claim a lay point of view and an average, "human", ethics of looking at photographs. This would suggest that the old Emersonian fiction of the daguerreotype institute as a metaphor for civic virtue is not completely extinct. Meanwhile, the obscene pictures that keep coming from Iraq remind us that photography, even in the digital age, is accessible to everyone and anyone, for better or for worse. We may, according to an old American tradition, "indicate the indicators", and reform the evils that pictures make manifest. But as Charles S. Peirce knew better than anyone, only ourselves can be held accountable for the errors induced by our belief that photographs are photographs.

Thank you.