Little History of Photography

The fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing; more obviously than in the case of the printing press, perhaps, the time was ripe for the invention, and was sensed by more than one—by men who strove independently for the same objective: to capture the images in the camera obscura, which had been known at least since Leonardo's time. When, after about five years of effort, both Niepce and Daguerre simultaneously succeeded in doing this, the state, aided by the patenting difficulties encountered by the inventors, assumed control of the enterprise and made it public, with compensation to the pioneers.[1] This paved the way for a rapid ongoing development which long precluded any backward glance. Thus it is that the historical or, if you like, philosophical questions suggested by the rise and fall of photography have gone unheeded for decades. And if they are beginning to enter into consciousness today, there is a definite reason for it. The latest writings on the subject point up the fact that the flowering of photography—the work of Hill and Cameron, Hugo and Nadar—came in its first decade.[2] But this was the decade which preceded its industrialization. Not that hucksters and charlatans did not appropriate the new techniques for gain, even in that early period; indeed, they did so en masse. But that was closer to the arts of the fairground, where photography is at home to this day, than to industry. Industry made its first real inroads with the visiting-card picture, whose first manufacturer, significantly, became a millionaire. It would not be surprising if the photographic methods which today, for the first time, are harking back to the preindustrial heyday of photography had an underground connection with the crisis of capitalist industry. But that does not

make it any easier to use the charm of old photographs, available in fine recent publications,[3] for real insights into their nature. Attempts at theoretical mastery of the subject have so far been entirely rudimentary. And no matter how extensively it may have been debated in the last century, basically the discussion never got away from the ludicrous stereotype which a chauvinistic rag, the *Leipziger Stadtanzeiger,* felt it had to offer in timely opposition to this black art from France. "To try to capture fleeting mirror images," it said, "is not just an impossible undertaking, as has been established after thorough German investigation; the very wish to do such a thing is blasphemous. Man is made in the image of God, and God's image cannot be captured by any machine of human devising. The utmost the artist may venture, borne on the wings of divine inspiration, is to reproduce man's God-given features without the help of any machine, in the moment of highest dedication, at the higher bidding of his genius." Here we have the philistine notion of "art" in all its overweening obtuseness, a stranger to all technical considerations, which feels that its end is nigh with the alarming appearance of the new technology. Nevertheless, it was this fetishistic and fundamentally antitechnological concept of art with which the theoreticians of photography sought to grapple for almost a hundred years, naturally without the smallest success. For they undertook nothing less than to legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning. Far different is the tone of the address which the physicist Arago, speaking on behalf of Daguerre's invention, gave in the Chamber of Deputies on July 3, 1839.[4] The beautiful thing about this speech is the connections it makes with all aspects of human activity. The panorama it sketches is broad enough not only to make the dubious project of authenticating photography in terms of painting—which it does anyway—seem beside the point; more important, it offers an insight into the real scope of the invention. "When inventors of a new instrument," says Arago, "apply it to the observation of nature, what they expect of it always turns out to be a trifle compared with the succession of subsequent discoveries of which the instrument was the origin." In a great arc Arago's speech spans the field of new technologies, from astrophysics to philology: alongside the prospects for photographing the stars and planets we find the idea of establishing a photographic record of the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Daguerre's photographs were iodized silver plates exposed in the camera obscura, which had to be turned this way and that until, in the proper light, a pale gray image could be discerned. They were one of a kind; in 1839 a plate cost an average of 25 gold francs. They were not infrequently kept in a case, like jewelry. In the hands of many a painter, though, they became a technical adjunct. Just as seventy years later Utrillo painted his fascinating views of Paris not from life but from picture postcards,[5] so the highly regarded English portrait painter David Octavius Hill based his fresco of

Newhaven Fishwife. Photo by David Octavius Hill.

the first general synod of the Church of Scotland in 1843 on a long series of portrait photographs. But these pictures he took himself. And it is they, unpretentious makeshifts meant for internal use, that gave his name a place in history, while as a painter he is forgotten. Admittedly a number of his studies lead even deeper into the new technology than this series of portraits—anonymous images, not posed subjects. Such figures had long been the subjects of painting. Where the painting remained in the possession of a particular family, now and then someone would ask about the person portrayed. But after two or three generations this interest fades; the pictures, if they last, do so only as testimony to the art of the painter. With photography, however, we encounter something new and strange: in Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in "art."

> And I ask: How did the beauty of that hair,
> those eyes, beguile our forebears?
> How did that mouth kiss, to which desire
> curls up senseless as smoke without fire?[6]

Or you turn up the picture of Dauthendey the photographer, the father of the poet, from the time of his engagement to that woman whom he found one day, shortly after the birth of her sixth child, lying in the bedroom of his Moscow house with her veins slashed. Here she can be seen with him. He seems to be holding her, but her gaze passes him by, absorbed in an ominous distance. Immerse yourself in such a picture long enough and you will realize to what extent opposites touch, here too: the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this

Karl Dauthendey (Father of the Poet), with His Fiancée.
Photo by Karl Dauthendey.

optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned—all this is, in its origins, more native to the camera than the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait. Yet at the same time, photography reveals in this material physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things—meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable. Thus, Blossfeldt with his astonishing plant photographs[7] reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle. Hill's subjects, too, were probably not far from the truth when they described "the phenomenon of photography" as still being "a great and mysterious experience"—even if, for them, this was no more than the consciousness of "standing before a device which in the briefest time could capture the visible environment in a picture that seemed as real and alive as nature itself." It has been said of Hill's camera that it kept a discreet distance. But his subjects, for their part, are no less reserved; they maintain a certain shyness before the camera, and the watchword of a later photographer from the heyday of the art, "Don't look at the camera," could be derived from their attitude. But that did not mean the "They're looking at you" of animals, people, and babies, which so distastefully implicates the buyer and to which there is no better counter than the way old Dauthendey talks about daguerreotypes: "We didn't trust ourselves at first," he reported, "to look long at the first pictures he developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see *us,* so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes."

The first people to be reproduced entered the visual space of photography with their innocence intact—or rather, without inscription. Newspapers were still a luxury item which people seldom bought, preferring to consult them in the coffeehouse; photography had not yet become a journalistic tool, and ordinary people had yet to see their names in print. The human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested. In short, the portraiture of this period owes its effect to the absence of contact between contemporary relevance and photography. Many of Hill's portraits were made in the Edinburgh Greyfriars cemetery—and nothing is more characteristic of this early period, except perhaps the way his subjects were at home there. And indeed the cemetery itself, in one of Hill's pictures, looks like an interior, a separate closed-off space where the gravestones propped against gable walls rise up from the grass, hollowed out like chimneypieces,

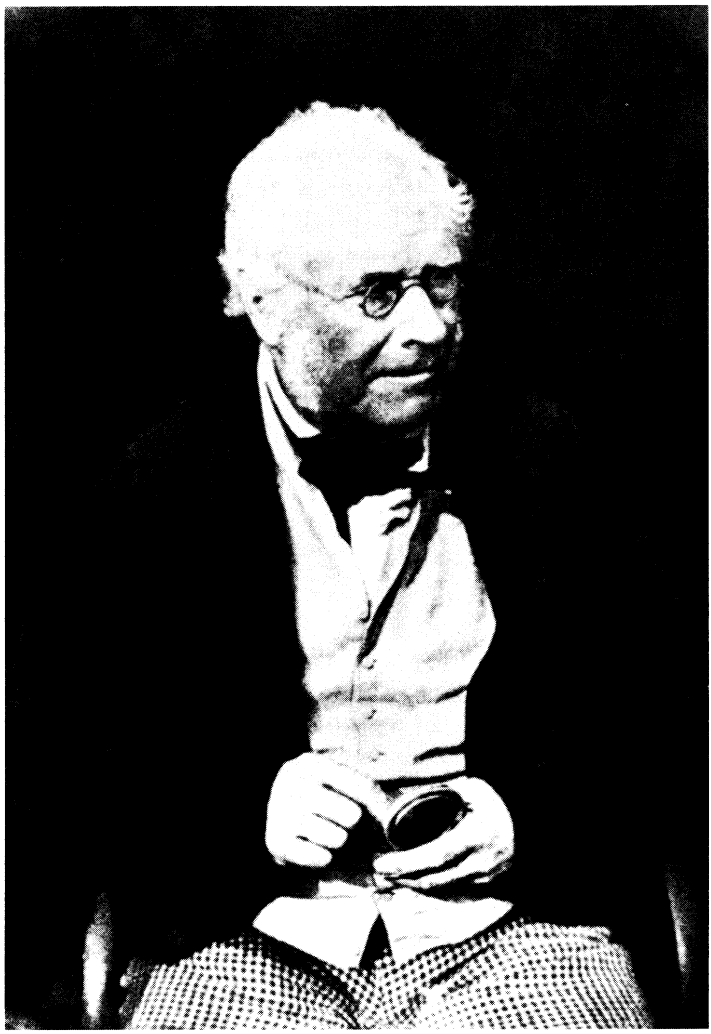
The Philosopher Schelling, ca. 1850. Photographer (German) unknown.

with inscriptions inside instead of flames. But this setting could never have been so effective if it had not been chosen on technical grounds. The low light-sensitivity of the early plates made prolonged exposure outdoors a necessity. This in turn made it desirable to take the subject to some out-of-the-way spot where there was no obstacle to quiet concentration. "The synthetic character of the expression which was dictated by the length of time the subject had to remain still," says Orlik of early photography, "is the main reason these photographs, apart from their simplicity, resemble well-drawn or well-painted pictures and produce a more vivid and lasting impression on the beholder than more recent photographs."[8] The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot—which is appropriate to that changed environment where, as Kracauer has aptly noted, the split second of the exposure determines "whether a sportsman becomes so famous that photographers start taking his picture for the illustrated papers." Everything about these early pictures was built to last. Not only the incomparable groups in which people came together—and whose disappearance was surely one of the most precise symptoms of what was happening in society in the second half of the century—but the very creases in people's clothes have an air of permanence. Just consider Schelling's coat. It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face. In short, everything suggests that Bernard von Brentano was right in his view that "a photographer of 1850 was on a par with his instrument"—for the first time, and for a long while the last.[9]

To appreciate the full impact made by the daguerreotype in the age of its discovery, one should also bear in mind that *plein air* painting was then opening up entirely new perspectives for the most advanced painters. Conscious that in this very area photography had to take the baton from painting, even Arago, in his historical review of the early attempts of Giovanni Battista Della Porta, explicitly commented: "As regards the effect produced by the imperfect transparency of our atmosphere (which has been loosely termed 'atmospheric degradation'), not even experienced painters expect the camera obscura"—i.e., the copying of images appearing in it—"to help them to render it accurately."[10] At the moment when Daguerre succeeded in fixing the images of the camera obscura, painters parted company on this point with technicians. The real victim of photography, however, was not landscape painting but the portrait miniature. Things developed so rapidly that by 1840 most of the innumerable miniaturists had already become professional photographers, at first only as a sideline, but before long exclusively. Here the experience of their original livelihood stood them in good stead, and it is not their artistic background so much as their

training as craftsmen that we have to thank for the high level of their photographic achievement. This transitional generation disappeared very gradually; indeed, there seems to have been a kind of biblical blessing on those first photographers: the Nadars, Stelzners, Piersons, Bayards all lived well into their eighties and nineties.[11] In the end, though, businessmen invaded professional photography from every side; and when, later on, the retouched negative, which was the bad painter's revenge on photography, became ubiquitous, a sharp decline in taste set in. This was the time photograph albums came into vogue. They were most at home in the chilliest spots, on occasional tables or little stands in the drawing room—leather-bound tomes with repellent metal hasps and those gilt-edged pages as thick as your finger, where foolishly draped or corseted figures were displayed: Uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, little Trudi when she was still a baby, Papa in his first term at university . . . and finally, to make our shame complete, we ourselves—as a parlor Tyrolean, yodeling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape, or as a smartly turned-out sailor, standing rakishly with our weight on one leg, as is proper, leaning against a polished door jamb. The accessories used in these portraits, the pedestals and balustrades and little oval tables, are still reminiscent of the period when, because of the long exposure time, subjects had to be given supports so that they wouldn't move. And if at first head clamps and knee braces were felt to be sufficient, "further impedimenta were soon added, such as were to be seen in famous paintings and therefore had to be 'artistic.' First it was pillars, or curtains." The most capable started resisting this nonsense as early as the 1860s. As an English trade journal of the time put it, "in painting the pillar has some plausibility, but the way it is used in photography is absurd, since it usually stands on a carpet. But anyone can see that pillars of marble or stone are not erected on a foundation of carpeting." This was the period of those studios—with their draperies and palm trees, their tapestries and easels—which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room, and to which an early portrait of Kafka bears pathetic witness. There the boy stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child's suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape. The background is thick with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics even stuffier and more oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an inordinately large broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predestined for them.

This picture, in its infinite sadness, forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not yet look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy. There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated



Robert Bryson. Photo by David Octavius Hill.

that medium. And once again the technical equivalent is obvious: it consists in the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow. Here, too, we see in operation the law that new advances are prefigured in older techniques, for the earlier art of portrait painting, before its disappearance, had produced the strange flower of the mezzotint. The mezzotint process was of course a technique of reproduction, which was only later combined with the new photographic reproduction. The way light struggles out of darkness in the work of a Hill is reminiscent of mezzotint: Orlik talks about the "comprehensive illumination" brought about by the long exposure times, which "gives these early photographs their greatness."[12] And among the invention's contemporaries, Delaroche had already noted the "unprecedented and exquisite" general impression, "in which nothing disturbs the tranquillity of the composition."[13] So much for the technical determinedness of the auratic appearance. Many group photos in particular still preserve an air of animated conviviality for a brief time on the plate, before being ruined by the print. It was this breathy halo that was sometimes captured with delicacy and depth by the now old-fashioned oval frame. That is why it would be a misreading of these incunabula of photography to make too much of their "artistic perfection" or their "taste." These pictures were made in rooms where every client was confronted, in the person of the photographer, with a technician of the latest school; whereas the photographer was confronted, in the person of every client, with a member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man's frock coat or floppy cravat. For this aura was by no means the mere product of a primitive camera. Rather, in this early period subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they become incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed. For soon advances in optics made instruments available that wholly overcame darkness and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror. After 1880, though, photographers made it their business to simulate the aura which had been banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses, exactly as it was being banished from reality by the deepening degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie. They saw it as their task to simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching, and especially the so-called gum print. Thus, especially in Jugendstil [Art Nouveau], a penumbral tone, interrupted by artificial highlights, came into vogue. Notwithstanding this fashionable twilight, however, a pose was more and more clearly in evidence, whose rigidity betrayed the impotence of that generation in the face of technical progress.

And yet, what is again and again decisive for photography is the photographer's attitude to his techniques. Camille Recht has found an apt metaphor: "The violinist," he says, "must first produce the note, must seek it out, find it in an instant; the pianist strikes the key and the note rings out. The painter and the photographer both have an instrument at their disposal.

Drawing and coloring, for the painter, correspond to the violinist's production of sound; the photographer, like the pianist, has the advantage of a mechanical device that is subject to restrictive laws, while the violinist is under no such restraint. No Paderewski will ever reap the fame, ever cast the almost fabulous spell, that Paganini did."[14] There is, however—to continue the metaphor—a Busoni of photography, and that is Atget.[15] Both were virtuosos, but at the same time precursors. The combination of unparalleled absorption in their work and extreme precision is common to both. There was even a facial resemblance. Atget was an actor who, disgusted with the profession, wiped off the mask and then set about removing the makeup from reality too. He lived in Paris poor and unknown, selling his pictures for a trifle to photographic enthusiasts scarcely less eccentric than himself; he died recently, leaving behind an oeuvre of more than 4,000 pictures. Berenice Abbott from New York has gathered these together, and a selection has just appeared in an exceptionally beautiful volume published by Camille Recht.[16] The contemporary journals "knew nothing of the man, who for the most part hawked his photographs around the studios and sold them for next to nothing, often for the price of one of those picture postcards which, around 1900, showed such pretty town views, bathed in midnight blue, complete with touched-up moon. He reached the Pole of utmost mastery; but with the bitter modesty of a great craftsman who always lives in the shadows, he neglected to plant his flag there. Therefore many are able to flatter themselves that they have discovered the Pole, even though Atget was there before them." Indeed, Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of Surrealist photography—an advance party of the only really broad column Surrealism managed to set in motion. He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere—indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography. When avant-garde periodicals like *Bifur* or *Variété* publish pictures that are captioned "Westminster," "Lille," "Antwerp," or "Breslau" but that show only details, here a piece of balustrade, there a treetop whose bare branches crisscross a gas lamp, or a gable wall, or a lamppost with a life buoy bearing the name of the town—this is nothing but a literary refinement of motifs that Atget discovered. He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.—What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe

the aura of those mountains, that branch. Now, to bring things *closer* to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction. Atget almost always passed by the "great sights and so-called landmarks." What he did not pass by was a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the handcarts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away—as they exist by the hundreds of thousands at the same hour; or the brothel at No. 5, Rue ——, whose street number appears, gigantic, at four different places on the building's façade. Remarkably, however, almost all these pictures are empty. Empty is the Porte d'Arceuil by the fortifications, empty are the triumphal steps, empty are the courtyards, empty, as it should be, is the Place du Tertre. They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. It is in these achievements that Surrealist photography sets the scene for a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings. It gives free play to the politically educated eye, under whose gaze all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail.

It is obvious that this new way of seeing stands to gain least in an area where there has been the greatest self-indulgence: commercial, conventional portrait photography. On the other hand, to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations. And anyone who did not know it was taught by the best Russian films that milieu and landscape, too, reveal themselves most readily to those photographers who succeed in capturing their anonymous physiognomy, as it were presenting them at face value. Whether this is possible, however, depends very much on the subject. The generation that was not obsessed with going down to posterity in photographs, rather shyly drawing back into their private space in the face of such proceedings—the way Schopenhauer withdrew into the depths of his chair in the Frankfurt picture, taken about 1850—for this very reason allowed that space, the space in which they lived, to get onto the plate with them. That generation did not pass on its virtues. So the Russian feature film was the first opportunity in decades to put before the camera people who had no use for their photographs. And immediately the human face

appeared on film with new and immeasurable significance. But it was no longer a portrait. What was it? It is the outstanding service of a German photographer to have answered this question. August Sander[17] has compiled a series of faces that is in no way inferior to the tremendous physiognomic gallery mounted by an Eisenstein or a Pudovkin, and he has done it from a scientific viewpoint.[18] "His complete work comprises seven groups which correspond to the existing social order, and is to be published in some forty-five folios containing twelve photographs each." So far we have a sample volume containing sixty reproductions, which offer inexhaustible material for study. "Sander starts off with the peasant, the earthbound man, takes the observer through every social stratum and every walk of life up to the highest representatives of civilization, and then goes back down all the way to the idiot." The photographer did not approach this enormous undertaking as a scholar, or with the advice of ethnographers and sociologists, but, as the publisher says, "from direct observation." It was assuredly a very impartial, indeed bold sort of observation, but delicate too, very much in the spirit of Goethe's remark: "There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory." So it was quite in order for an observer like Döblin to have hit on precisely the scientific aspects of this work, commenting: "Just as there is comparative anatomy, which helps us to understand the nature and history of organs, so this photographer is doing comparative photography, adopting a scientific standpoint superior to that of the photographer of detail."[19] It would be a pity if economic considerations should prevent the continuing publication of this extraordinary body of work. Apart from this basic encouragement, there is a more specific incentive one might offer the publisher. Work like Sander's could overnight assume unlooked-for topicality. Sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way. Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual.

"In our age there is no work of art that is looked at so closely as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart," wrote Lichtwark back in 1907, thereby moving the inquiry out of the realm of aesthetic distinctions into that of social functions.[20] Only from this vantage point can it be carried further. It is indeed significant that the debate has raged most fiercely around the aesthetics of photography-as-art, whereas the far less questionable social fact of art-as-photography was given scarcely a glance. And yet the impact of the photographic reproduction of artworks is of very much greater importance for the function of art than the greater or lesser artistry of a photography that regards all experience as fair game for the camera. The amateur who returns home with great piles of artistic shots is in fact no more appealing a figure than the hunter who comes back

Pastry Cook. Photo by August Sander.

Parliamentary Representative (a Democrat). Photo by August Sander.

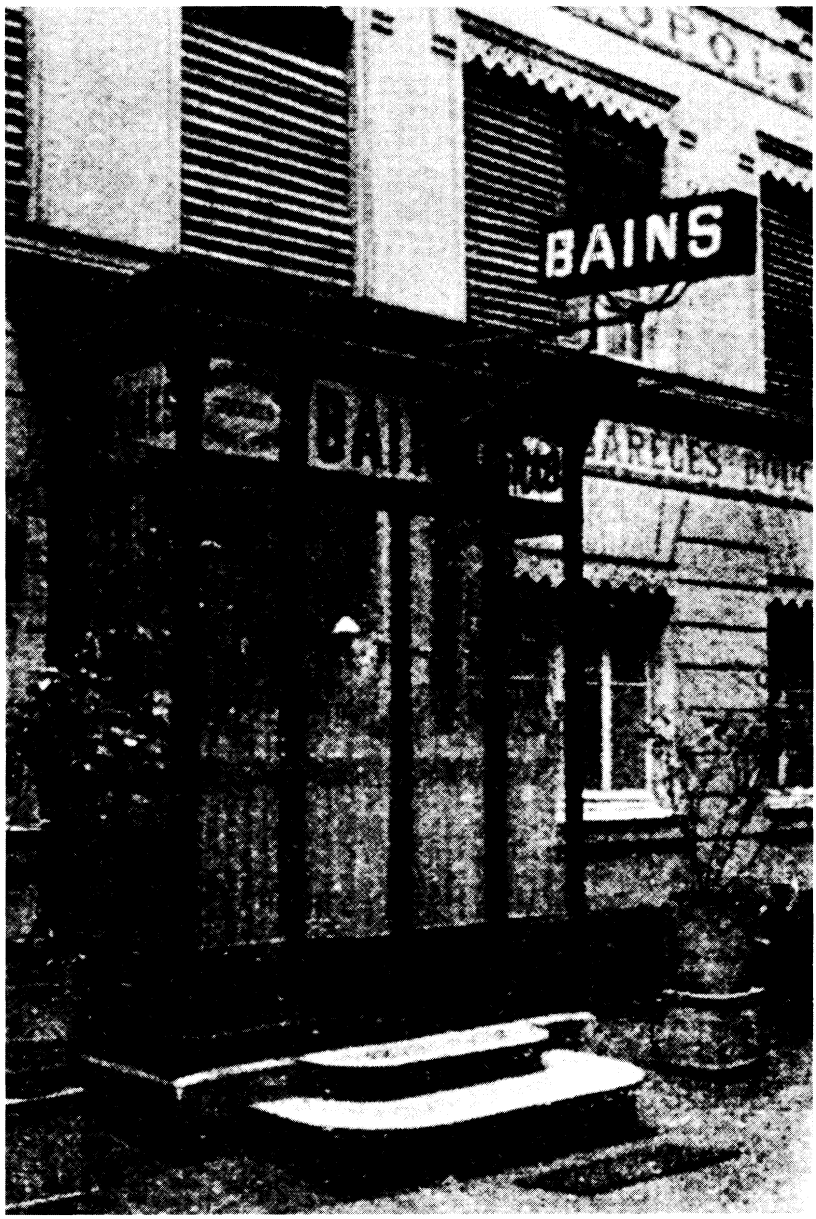
with quantities of game that is useless to anyone but the merchant. And the day does indeed seem to be at hand when there will be more illustrated magazines than game merchants. So much for the snapshot. But the emphasis changes completely if we turn from photography-as-art to art-as-photography. Everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to get hold of a painting, more particularly a sculpture, and especially architecture, in a photograph than in reality. It is all too tempting to blame this squarely on the decline of artistic appreciation, on a failure of contemporary sensibility. But one is brought up short by the way the understanding of great works was transformed at about the same time the techniques of reproduction were being developed. Such works can no longer be regarded as the products of individuals; they have become a collective creation, a corpus so vast it can be assimilated only through miniaturization. In the final analysis, mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works of art—a control without whose aid they could no longer be used.

If one thing typifies present-day relations between art and photography, it is the unresolved tension between the two introduced by the photography of works of art. Many of those who, as photographers, determine the current face of this technology started out as painters. They turned their back on painting after attempts to bring its expressive resources into a living and unequivocal relationship with modern life. The keener their feel for the temper of the times, the more problematic their starting point became for them. For once again, as eighty years before, photography has taken the baton from painting. As Moholy-Nagy has said:

> The creative potential of the new is for the most part slowly revealed through old forms, old instruments and areas of design which in their essence have already been superseded by the new, but which under pressure from the new as it takes shape are driven to a euphoric efflorescence. Thus, for example, futurist (structural) painting brought forth the clearly defined problematic of the simultaneity of motion, the representation of the instant, which was later to destroy it—and this at a time when film was already known but far from being understood . . . Similarly, some of the painters (neoclassicists and verists) today using representational-objective methods can be regarded—with caution—as forerunners of a new representational optical form which will soon be making use only of mechanical, technical methods.[21]

And Tristan Tzara, 1922: "When everything that called itself art was stricken with palsy, the photographer switched on his thousand-candle-power lamp and gradually the light-sensitive paper absorbed the darkness of a few everyday objects. He had discovered what could be done by a pure and sensitive flash of light—a light that was more important than all the constellations arranged for the eye's pleasure."[22] The photographers who

Display Window. Photo by Germaine Krull.



Storefront. Photo by Germaine Krull.

went over from figurative art to photography not on opportunistic grounds, not by chance, not out of sheer laziness, today constitute the avant-garde among their colleagues, because they are to some extent protected by their background against the greatest danger facing photography today: the touch of the commercial artist. "Photography-as-art," says Sascha Stone, "is a very dangerous field."[23]

When photography takes itself out of context, severing the connections illustrated by Sander, Blossfeldt, or Germaine Krull, when it frees itself from physiognomic, political, and scientific interest, it becomes *creative.*[24] The lens now looks for interesting juxtapositions; photography turns into a sort of arty journalism. "The spirit that overcomes mechanics translates exact findings into parables of life." The more far-reaching the crisis of the present social order, and the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more the creative—in its deepest essence a variant (contradiction its father, imitation its mother)—becomes a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion. The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. *The world is beautiful*—that is its watchword.[25] In it is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists, even when this photography's most dream-laden subjects are a forerunner more of its salability than of any knowledge it might produce. But because the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association, its logical counterpart is the act of unmasking or construction. As Brecht says: "The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG tells us next to nothing about these institutions.[26] Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up,* something artificial, posed." We must credit the Surrealists with having trained the pioneers of such photographic construction. A further stage in this contest between creative and constructive photography is typified by Russian film. It is not too much to say that the great achievements of Russian directors were possible only in a country where photography sets out not to charm or persuade, but to experiment and instruct. In this sense, and in this only, there is still some meaning in the grandiloquent salute offered to photography in 1855 by that uncouth painter of ideas Antoine Wiertz.[27]

> For some years now the glory of our age has been a machine which daily amazes the mind and startles the eye. Before another century is out, this machine will be the brush, the palette, the colors, the craft, the experience, the patience, the

> dexterity, the sureness of touch, the atmosphere, the luster, the exemplar, the perfection, the very essence of painting . . . Let no one suppose that daguerreotype photography will be the death of art . . . When the daguerreotype, that infant prodigy, has grown to its full stature, when all its art and strength have been revealed, then will Genius seize it by the scruff of the neck and shout: "Come with me—you are mine now! We shall work together!"

How sober—indeed, pessimistic—by contrast are the words in which Baudelaire announced the new technology to his readers, two years later, in his *Salon of 1857*. Like the preceding quotation, they can be read today only with a subtle shift of emphasis. But as a counterpart to the above, they still make sense as a violent reaction to the encroachments of artistic photography. "In these sorry days, a new industry has arisen that has done not a little to strengthen the asinine belief . . . that art is and can be nothing other than the accurate reflection of nature . . . A vengeful god has hearkened to the voice of this multitude. Daguerre is his messiah." And: "If photography is permitted to supplement some of art's functions, they will forthwith be usurped and corrupted by it, thanks to photography's natural alliance with the mob. It must therefore revert to its proper duty, which is to serve as the handmaiden of science and the arts."

One thing, however, both Wiertz and Baudelaire failed to grasp: the lessons inherent in the authenticity of the photograph. These cannot be forever circumvented by a commentary whose clichés merely establish verbal associations in the viewer. The camera is getting smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder. This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate. It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn't it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? "The illiteracy of the future," someone has said, "will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography." But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph? Such are the questions in which the interval of ninety years that separate us from the age of the daguerreotype discharges its historical tension. It is in the illumination of these sparks that the first photographs emerge, beautiful and unapproachable, from the darkness of our grandfathers' day.

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Notes

1. Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce (1765–1833), French inventor, succeeded in making the first permanent photographic image. In 1826–1827, he used a camera to produce a view from his studio that was captured on a pewter plate. His death cut off his collaboration with Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), French painter and physicist, who went on to refine Niepce's work. Daguerre reduced the exposure time from Niepce's eight hours to twenty minutes and invented a process that was widely applicable.
2. David Octavius Hill (1802–1870), Scottish painter and photographer, collaborated with the chemist Robert Adamson on a series of remarkable portraits. Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), English photographer, was, unlike many of the most important early photographers, an amateur. She is considered one of the greatest portrait photographers of the nineteenth century. Victor Hugo (1802–1885), poet, novelist, and dramatist, was the most important of the French Romantic writers. Hugo and indeed his entire family were enthusiastic amateur photographers and produced a sizable body of work. Nadar (pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon; 1820–1910), French writer, caricaturist, and photographer, emerged from a large group of Parisian studio portraitists as one of the great portraitists of the century. Among his many innovations are his natural posing of his subjects, a patent on the use of photographs in mapmaking and surveying, the first aerial photograph (from a balloon), and the first photographic interview: twenty-one images of the scientist Eugène Chevreul, accompanied by text.
3. Helmut Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann, *Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie, 1840–1870: Ein Bildbuch nach 200 Originalen* (Frankfurt: Societäts Verlag, 1930). Heinrich Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill: Der Meister der Photographie* (Leipzig: Insel, 1931), with 80 plates. [Benjamin's note]
4. Dominique François Jean Arago (1786–1853), French physicist, was active in the study of light. He devised an experiment that proved the wave theory of light and contributed to the discovery of the laws of light polarization.
5. Maurice Utrillo (1883–1955), French painter, was known for his Montmartre street scenes.
6. Stefan George, *Der Teppich des Lebens und die Lieder von Traum und Tod* (The Carpet of Life and the Songs of Dream and Death), "Standbilder, das Sechste," verses 13–16.
7. Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder,* edited and with an introduction by Karl Nierendorf (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1928), with 120 plates. [Benjamin's note. Blossfeldt, a professor of drawing and painting in Berlin, created a sensation in the 1920s with the publication of his magnified photos of plant parts; see "News about Flowers" (1928), in this volume.—*Trans.*]

8. Emil Orlik, *Kleine Aufsätze* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1924), pp. 38ff. Orlik (1870–1932) was a German graphic artist and painter whose work was influenced by Jugendstil (Art Nouveau).
9. Bernard von Brentano (1901–1964), leftist novelist and journalist, wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*. He is perhaps best-known for the historical novel *Theodor Chindler,* which depicts the transition from the empire to the Weimar Republic.
10. Giovanni Battista (Giambattista) Della Porta (1535–1615) was an Italian physicist and dramatist whose works contain descriptions of the camera obscura, as well as of a special lens he developed for it.
11. Carl Ferdinand Stelzner (ca. 1805–1895) was a German painter and photographer who, like many miniaturist painters, turned to daguerreotypy; together with Hermann Biow, he shot some of the earliest news photographs. Pierre-Louis Pierson (1822–1913) was a prominent French studio portraitist; his firm, Mayer and Pierson, catered to high society and the court. In 1862 Pierson and his partners, the brothers Léopold Ernest Mayer and Louis Frédéric Mayer, were named official photographers to Napoleon III. Hippolyte Bayard (1801–1887), French photographer, was active as an inventor in the earliest days of photography. He is widely regarded as one of photography's first significant artists, and held the first known photographic exhibition, displaying thirty of his own works.
12. Orlik, *Kleine Aufsätze,* p. 38.
13. Paul Delaroche, cited in Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill,* p. 39. Delaroche (1757–1859) was a French academic painter who specialized in historical subjects.
14. Eugène Atget, *Lichtbilder,* with an introduction by Camille Recht (Paris and Leipzig, 1930), p. 10. [Benjamin's note]
15. Eugène Atget (1857–1927), French photographer, spent his career in obscurity making pictures of Paris and its environs. He is widely recognized as one of the leading photographers of the twentieth century.
16. Berenice Abbott (1898–1991), American photographer, preserved Atget's work and oversaw its earliest publication. She undertook, very much in the spirit of Atget, a photographic documentation of New York City in the 1930s and 1940s.
17. August Sander, *Das Antlitz der Zeit: Sechzig Aufnahmen deutscher Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts,* with an introduction by Alfred Döblin (Munich, 1929). [Benjamin's note. Sander (1876–1964), a German photographer, sought to compile a photographic portrait of the German people; *Das Antlitz der Zeit* (The Face of Our Time) was the first precipitate of this sociologically oriented project, which included portraits of peasants, workers, artisans, capitalists, and artists, among many others.—*Trans.*]
18. Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein (1898–1948), Soviet film director and theorist, produced a large body of work. His best-known films include *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (released in two parts, 1944 and 1958). Vsevolod Illarionovich Pudovkin (1893–1953) was a Soviet film director and theorist whose work often focused on heroic figures caught in violent historical change. His films include *Mat* (Mother; 1926), based on Gorky's novel; *Konets Sankt-Peterburga* (The End of St. Petersburg; 1927);

Potomok Chingis-Khan (Heir to Genghis Khan, or Storm over Asia; 1928); and the sound films *Dezertir* (Deserter; 1933), *Suvorov* (General Suvorov; 1941), and *Admiral Nakhimov* (1946–1947).

19. Alfred Döblin, introduction to Sander, *Antlitz der Zeit,* p. vi.
20. Alfred Lichtwark, introduction to Fritz Matthies-Masuren, *Künstlerische Photographie: Entwicklung und Einfluss in Deutschland* [Artistic Photography: Development and Influence in Germany] (Berlin: Marrquardt, 1907), p. 16.
21. László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei Fotographie Film* (Munich: Langen, 1925). Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), Hungarian painter, photographer, and art teacher, emerged as a dominant figure at the Bauhaus, where he was responsible for the famous Preliminary Course. As a photographer, he moved freely between the abstract photogram and representational photography. He is arguably the most influential photographer of the 1920s in Europe.
22. Tristan Tzara, "La photographie à l'envers" (Photography from the Verso), translated by Benjamin as "Die Photographie von der Kehrseite," in *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung,* July 1924, p. 30. Tzara (1896–1963), Romanian-born French poet and essayist, was one of the founders of Dada in Zurich. He carried Dada ideas to Paris after World War I.
23. Sascha Stone (pseudonym of Alexander Sergei Steinsapir; 1895–1940), German-Jewish photographer, worked as a professional photographer in Berlin, primarily for the illustrated magazines published by Ullstein Verlag. Stone was active at the borders of the group around the journal *G,* which included Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe, Hans Richter, El Lissitsky, and Benjamin. He created the photomontage for the book jacket of Benjamin's *One-Way Street* (see Volume 1 of this edition).
24. Germaine Krull (1897–1985), German photographer, emigrated to Paris in 1924, where she became known for her work in portraiture, as well as in architectural, industrial, and fashion photography.
25. *Die Welt ist schön* (The World Is Beautiful) is the title of a photo volume by Albert Renger-Patzsch; it became the most influential of all of the photo essays published in the Weimar Republic. Benjamin was involved in a long-standing polemic against Renger-Patzsch's work. See especially "The Author as Producer" (1934), in this volume.
26. The Krupp works at Essen was the original plant in the Krupp steel, armaments, and shipbuilding empire, which had been founded in 1811 by Friedrich Krupp. The AEG is the Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft, or General Electric Company, founded in Berlin in 1833 by the industrialist Emil Rathenau; it was largely responsible for building the electrical infrastructure of modern Germany.
27. Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865), Belgian painter, was known for his large, frequently grotesque paintings. Wiertz plays an important role in Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (Arcades Project).

Walter Benjamin

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