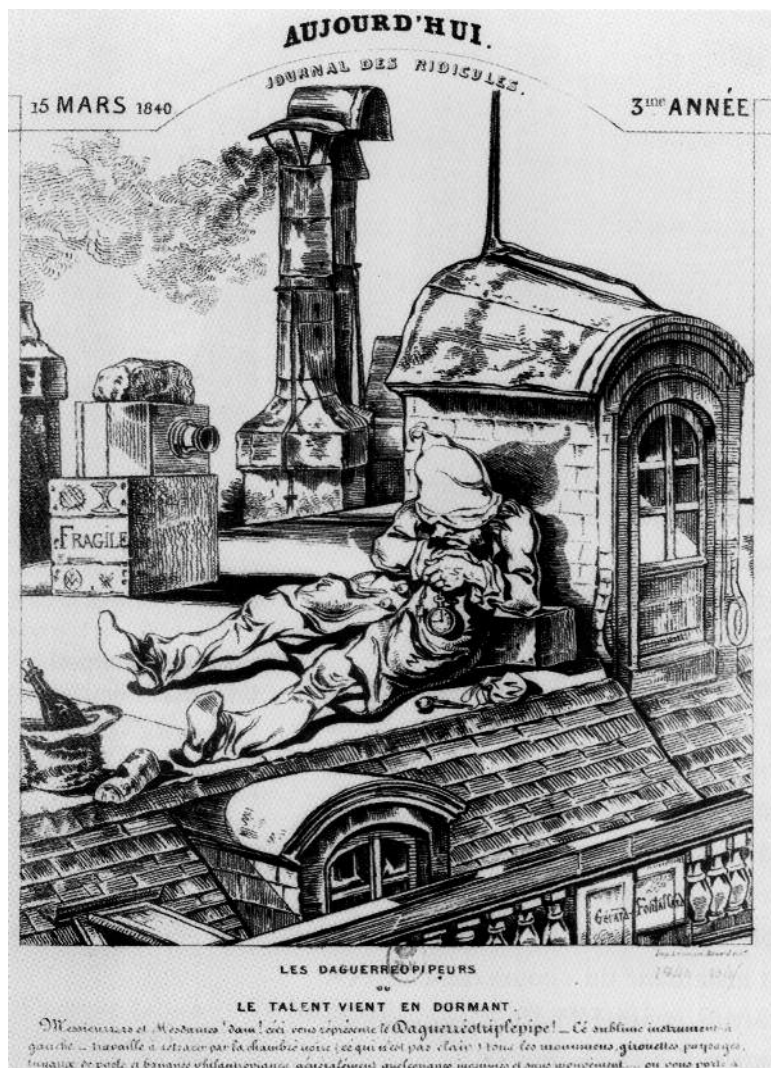




Henri-Gérard Fontallard. *Les Daguerreopieurs ou Le talent vient en dormant*, 1840. Cover of *Aujourd'hui: Journal des ridicules*, 15 March 1840.

An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures

ALLAN SEKULA

1.

The art of photography has been persistently haunted by the image of human labor. My aim here is to demonstrate that this is so in more than one sense, and that these senses are inextricably connected one to the other. This haunting is more than a nightmarish parade of ghostly signifieds, but takes hold at the level of the ontology of the photographic sign itself. First problem: photography of work. Second and more fundamental (immanent) problem: photography as work. Third problem: the confusion of the two (the imbrication of immanence and reference).

In short, the very being of photography turns on a vexing puzzle of labor and value.

An indication of the extreme character of the problem of *photography as work* is given by an early, 1839 cartoon lampooning photography by the French artist Gérard Fontallard. With his derisive legend/title *Talent through Sleep* accompanying a picture of a daguerreotypist snoozing through the long exposure necessary to make a rooftop view of Paris, Fontallard expressed a profound artisanal contempt for a new mechanical medium that threatened to render the work of draftsmen—like Fontallard himself—obsolete. This was an age that viewed the novel figure of the photographer as either Prometheus or Hercules, thief of fire or cleaner of stables. But here the photographer is neither rebellious nor servile but merely napping. Sleep here is the negative of work, a kind of unemployment, or loafing on the job, the unjustly waged laziness that deserves—in the bosses' view of justice—the bracing remedy of unemployment. Pictured here is the most austere and debased—and lazy and thus clever—form of the photographer's existence as *proletarian of creation*. The contemporary French legal theorist Bernard Edelman invented this apt term to describe the condition of the mid-nineteenth-century photographer as a producer of images who enjoyed no property rights—no *author's right*—to the photograph because it merely duplicated the visible features of objects that were already the property of others. For Edelman, the extension of author's rights to photography during the latter half of the century was a necessary precondition for the establishment of photography as a fine art. Fontallard's cartoon could be said to

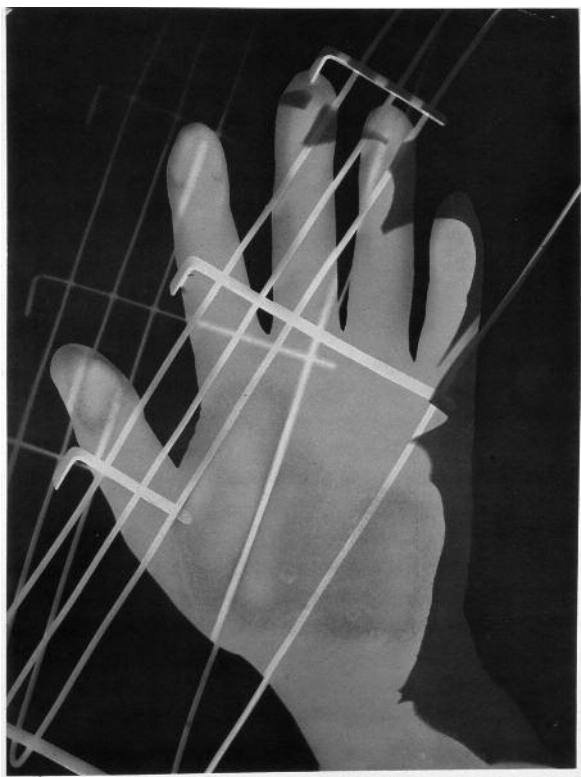
initiate a long association of photography with passivity, sedation, robotic machine-ending, propertylessness, exhaustion, twilight, and death. In this instance, sleep in its passivity coincides—as a negative embodiment—with the ghostly reactivation of the *dead labor* embedded in the camera (that was Marx’s metaphor for the already-expended labor power underpinning the seemingly autonomous productive capacities of machinery). And therein lies Fontallard’s bitter crypto-Luddite joke, his kinship with the British weavers who responded to the introduction of mechanical looms in the early nineteenth century by smashing them. Or to put it somewhat differently: photographic realism is zombie realism. The photographer is always competing with the ghost in the machine.

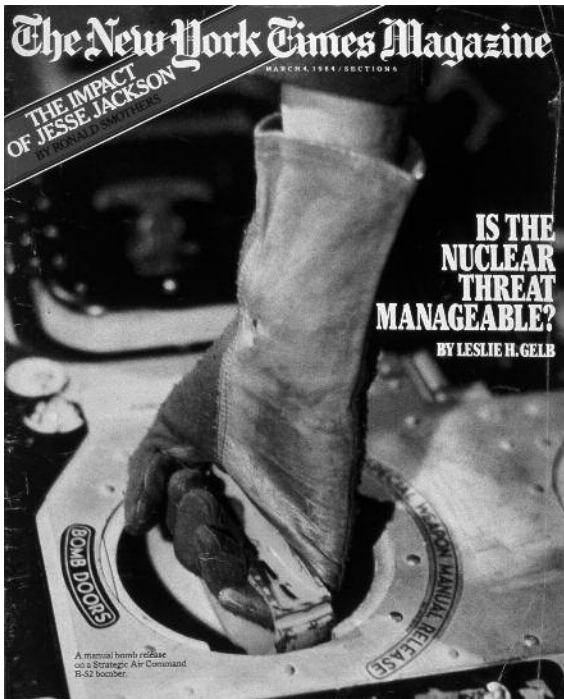
There is, then, something poignant and unwittingly reflexive about photography’s long-standing obsession with the image of the working body. It is as if photography as an institution were compelled to compensate for a primal lack, to answer a nagging doubt about its own claims to creative authenticity, and sought both disavowal and solace in the image of work. Consider, for example, the many recurrences of that great synecdoche for the working body, the hand, in early modernist photography.

Especially in the cameraless photograms of Moholy-Nagy, the hand registers itself all at once as an index, without the camera, while reasserting its residual iconic significance as the organ of drawing, despite the fact that none of the lines in the picture are the product of an act of drawing. The hand here is the locus of a nostalgic organicism predicated on the ritual banishment of the camera from the productive process: a ghost hand, as dumbly inert as Fontallard’s sleeping photographer.

This nostalgic organicism of the working hand is asserted even when the machine is not suppressed but rather looms as a formidable and deadly presence, far outstripping the scale of artisanal work.

Here are two examples. First, consider a cover photograph from the *New York Times Magazine* (March 4, 1984), with the title *Is the Nuclear Threat Manageable?* The leather-gloved hand on the bomb-bay door release is, of course, a counter-apocalyptic recoding of Slim Pickens’s cowboy bombardier in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. A pessimistic variant of this mythology of artisanal control can be found in a picture by a photographer less sanguine than the *New York Times*’s about the logic of nuclear deterrence.

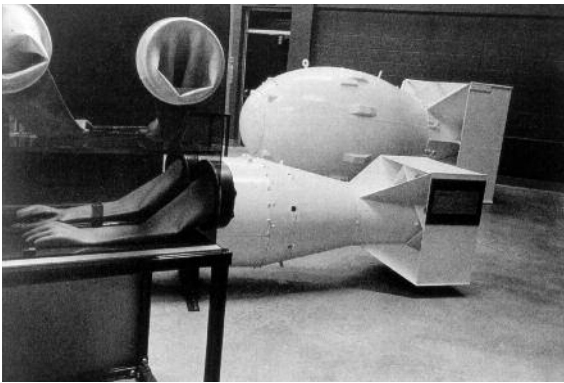




Opposite: László Moholy-Nagy. Untitled photogram, 1926.

Right: Cover of *New York Times Magazine*, 4 March 1984.

Below: Robert Del Tredici. From *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, 1987.



In his photograph aligning replicas of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the glove box used to process plutonium, Robert Del Tredici gives us the bomb that makes itself, a headless mercreature, a baby submarine. This is the crypto-surrealist attitude of an apocalyptic and gothic view of science, a spirit that combines the Cold War cartoonist Herbioc's unshaven, cigar chomping H-bombs with Max Ernst. As in the films of David Cronenberg, Del Tredici's approach demands that evil science be figured pictorially as a source of organic mutation and that the instruments of science themselves take on gothic characteristics.¹

2.

As Roland Barthes remarked in his 1964 essay on the illustrations to the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, "It is not easy to be done with a civilization of the hand."² But how and why does this difficulty persist today, in an age widely believed to be that of the *disappearance of manual labor*,

so characterized by Sebastião Salgado, the Brazilian photographer who made it his task to track this *disappearing labor* on a global scale? But I get ahead of myself with this question, to which we will return.

Consider first a moment in which labor was not yet widely thought to be hovering on the edge of cybernetic extinction. Barthes's 1956 essay on *The Family of Man* concludes with a meditation on the theme of work:

And what can be said about work, which the Exhibition places among great universal facts, putting it on the same plane as birth and death, as if it was quite evident that it belongs to the same order of fate? That work is an age-old fact does not in the least prevent it from remaining a perfectly historical fact. Firstly, and evidently, because its modes, its motivations, its ends and its benefits, which matter to such an extent that it will never be fair to confuse in a purely gestural identity the colonial and the Western worker (let us also ask the North African workers of the Goutte d'Or district in Paris what they think of *The Great Family of Man*). Secondly, because of the very differences in its

inevitability: we know very well that work is “natural” just as long as it is “profitable,” and that in modifying the inevitability of the profit we shall perhaps one day modify the inevitability of labour. It is this entirely historified work which we should be told about, instead of an eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures.³

We can see clearly how this *eternal aesthetics* operates in a two-page spread from the book version of *The Family of Man*.⁴

This instance of the mythic dehistoricization and naturalization of work actually functions through two devices: first, through the personification of abstract labor; and second, through the shifting of economic history into reverse. On the left page we see a photograph made for *Fortune* magazine by Gjon Mili, a glamorized quotation of commonplace motion study pictures made by Taylorist industrial efficiency experts, versions of which can be found in the scientific management handbooks of the late 1940s and early 1950s. On the right, a picture made for the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s by Russell Lee, depicting the hands of a woman described elsewhere as the “wife of an Iowa homesteader.” Below this picture runs a quotation from Deuteronomy: “Bless thee in all the work of thy hand which thou doest.” This theistic overcoding of the conjoined pictures serves to generate a biographical vector, leading from the zest of youthful labor to the blessed rest of old age. This narrative reverses the more general historical truth of the two pictures, the Depression-driven descent of the yeoman farmer of the American frontier follows the Fordist factory worker. The perversity of this arrangement is all the more evident when one considers that the 1950s marked the beginning of the end of small farming in the United States, brought about by the rise of monopoly agribusiness. Furthermore, the mythic biographical time registered here harmonizes two incommensurate temporalities, one (on the right) governed by the older extensive exploitation of human energies through the lengthening of the working day, and the other (on the left) governed by a newer intensive exploitation based on increased production within a fixed time interval. Historically, late modernity has entailed the increasingly global submission of the lifeworld pictured on the right to the temporal demands of the accelerated lifeworld pictured on the left. We could today, right now, ask French or Indian farmers or Breton fishermen or Mayan peasants from Chiapas (or, to be even more precise, African-American chicken-processing workers suffering from repetitive-motion injury to their wrists and forearms) what they think of these two pages from *The Family of Man*.

Nonetheless, from the standpoint of the present, Barthes’s concluding remarks seem rather quaint, suffused with a *paleo-Marxist* optimism not at



U.S.A. Apple 1961 "The Worker's Hand"



U.S.A. Apple 1961 "The Worker's Hand"

Bless thee in all the work of thy hand which thou doest.

Domesticity 18.29

all compatible with the melancholic and even morbid Barthes so central to contemporary cultural theory. Who today still speaks, even coyly, about “modifying the inevitability of profit”? For that matter, who, even on the left, still carries a brief for the labor theory of value? We get a sense of the conceptual slippage/shift in a recent essay by Laura Mulvey:

As industrial capitalism shows symptoms of decline, finance capitalism flourishes, and the advanced capitalist world shows signs of re-forming into economies that can create money out of money and produce surplus value outside the value produced by the labor power of the working class.⁵

Mulvey’s essay is an urgent call for a reintegrated approach to the theory of fetishism in the face of an increasingly irrational capitalist spectacle culture. Nonetheless, Mulvey’s economic argument constitutes a surrender to fetishized categories, to what the French regulation-school economist Alain Lipietz—rereading Marx in the context of the current world economy—has termed the “enchanted world” of the “exoteric economy.” As Lipietz asserts, the enchanted world is a “representational space,” a space of “apparent movement,” and “it is only contemporary capitalism which has actually asserted the autonomy of the exoteric, particularly in the current crisis.” This is the world that conforms to Mulvey’s characterization, a world that seems to *create money out of money*. But underlying the exoteric economy is a more hidden level of economic movement, that of the *esoteric economy*. Within the representational space of the exoteric economy, “profit is a margin added to the cost of commodities.”⁶ But within the esoteric economy, profit is derived from the value added to the commodity by labor power. Lipietz’s argument is a sophisticated defense of the labor theory of value, directed at once against mainstream bourgeois economists, “intellectuals with a smattering of Marxism,” and philosopher-militants such as Antonio Negri, who argued that “as far as our struggles are concerned the labor theory of value is totally threadbare.”⁷

If the Barthes/Lipietz idea of a linkage between the *inevitability* of profit

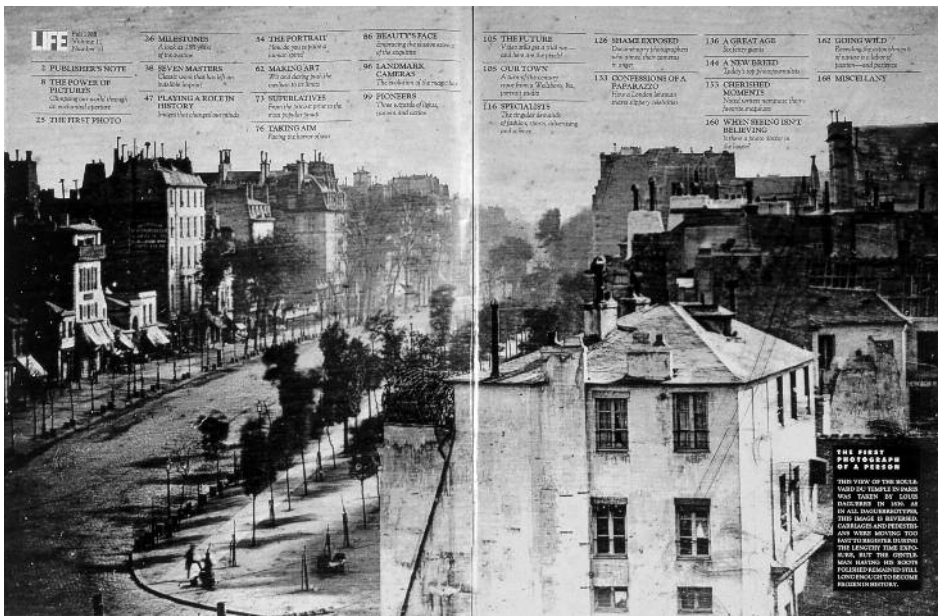


and that of labor is correct, then something substantial is contested in the representation of work. If Mulvey is correct, our attention might as well fall elsewhere, somewhere *outside*.

In all the photographic examples I've discussed thus far, work is given a positive iconic presence; only in the Fontallard cartoon is work, in this case the work of photography, figured negatively, as an absence. Fontallard gives us a dismal counter-myth of the origins of photography. Suppose we consider a more optimistic, upbeat, and contemporary example, a full-blown myth in the Barthesian sense.

The recent *birthday* of photography, the noisy celebration, in 1989, of the 150th anniversary of the public announcement before the French Chamber of Deputies of the invention of the daguerreotype, provides a clear case in point. The very idea of the *birthday* of a technical process is puzzling, but consistent with popular romanticism. We know from Raymond Williams's reading of English romanticism—the romanticism at the source of our contemporary popular romanticism, the romanticism of the mass media—how strongly the early nineteenth century opposed notions of vegetative, organic fecundity to notions of imitative, mechanical production. The roots of this idea can be traced further back through Schiller to Kant's distinction between *aesthetical* and *mechanical* art. And yet the romanticism that continues to thrive within mass culture seeks to elide this opposition, to collapse it. Thus we celebrate (or lament) the birthdays of machines: the steam engine, the locomotive, the powered airplane, the atomic bomb. These celebrations or lamentations turn on the recognition of specialized instances of technical genius, often isolating the figure of the inventor: Watt, Stephenson, the Wright brothers, Oppenheimer. But this subjectivism fails to sustain itself, especially as science becomes more institutionalized and bureaucratic. The machinery being remembered begins to seem autonomous, self-developing, while events in general are anthropomorphized and familialized. The mass media give us history as a succession of birthday parties, a grotesque and endless family romance in which abstract, world-historic forces are brought into a mendacious everyday proximity and intimacy.

Above and opposite:
"150 Years of Photography:
Pictures That Made a
Difference," *Life*, Fall 1988.

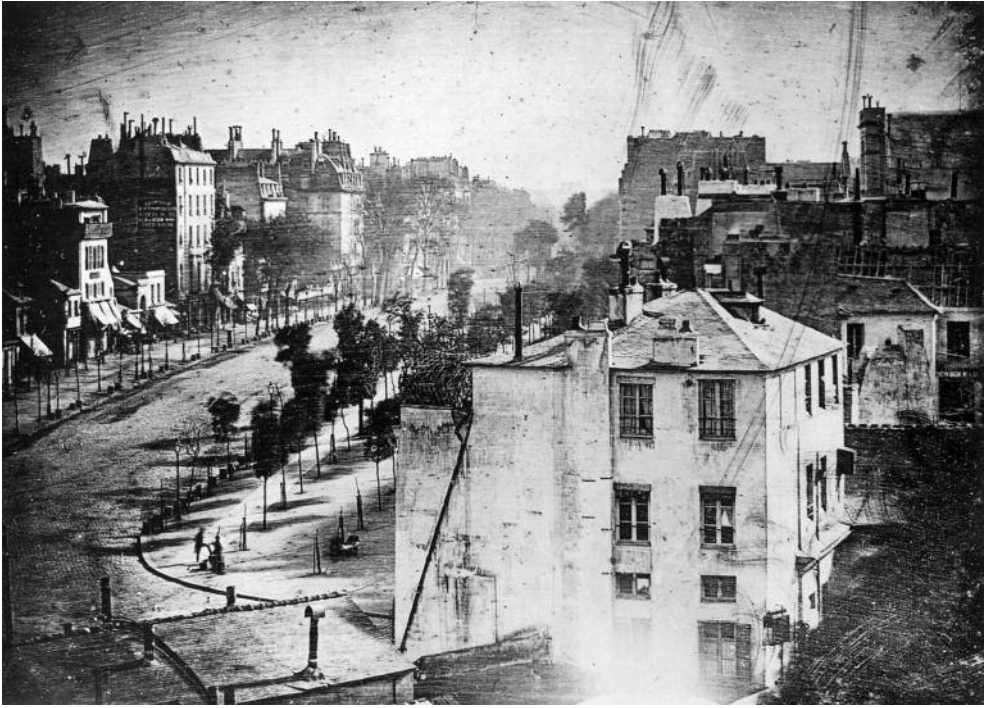


Photography plays no small part in this process, so it is no surprise that photography itself, as a privileged and insidious signifying institution, should be subjected to the same treatment, allowed to stage its own party.

But photography occupies a curious position in the gallery of mechanical achievements, as Fontallard's figure of the sleeping daguerreotypist seems to suggest. If, following Marx, we argue that the human use of tools and machines—the working of resistant matter—produces a second nature, what is the second nature produced by photography? Is it anything more than a thin, insubstantial trace, a useful but reduced testimonial to a prior first nature? Isn't photography's affiliation with technical progress most clearly announced when it abandons first nature altogether and generates images of an already manufactured second nature, as in the many photographs of machines made for industrialists during the mid-nineteenth century? But the key to the invention of photography as a transformative *fine art* turns on the iconography of the human body, as I've already suggested with the image of the hand. The represented body, within the frame, conjures up a recognition of the presence of two other bodies, that of the photographer and that of the spectator. The phenomenological basis of photography as an art, as an autonomous *gay science* rather than the miserable servant of the *dismal science*, is grounded in the imaginary plenitude of this triangulated circuit of bodies, this roll call from which no one is missing.

When, at the end of 1988, a special issue of *Life* magazine was devoted to the anniversary of photography's official invention, the editors needed to mark two birthdays, offering up an insufficient prior image followed by a fully *embodied* image. We were invited to celebrate a protracted delivery in which the weaker of two fraternal twins was born first.

Niepce's heliograph of 1826 constitutes the first origin, inert and empty, notable only for its novelty. As it happens, this inert *first photograph* is paired with a credit card advertisement depicting two Olympic swimmers jumping with the sheer blissful joy of consumers spending beyond their means.⁸ Something more is needed if these swimmers are ever to be shown thus, leaping upward like happy, carefree salmon, if *Life* is to capture life



and fulfill the vitalist promise of its name. Aren't they jumping so energetically there on the left-hand page to compensate for the lack so evident in the monument to their right? We turn the page and a second ancestor comes to their assistance, giving them a boost.

The second origin comes later, in 1839, not with Daguerre's first photograph but rather with the first photograph in which human movement was arrested, a view made from Daguerre's studio window overlooking the Boulevard du Temple. This is, according to *Life*, "the first photograph of a person."⁹ With this example, one realizes that this is more than a protracted nativity, it is a voyage of discovery of astronomical proportions: first we set foot on a lifeless planet, then thirteen years later we discover intelligent life, beings like ourselves.

Again, the origin of photography needs to be embodied, given the grey flesh that promises a rosy, animated future. But *Life's* editors were rehearsing a commemorative double take that had already been scripted in Peter Pollack's *The Picture History of Photography*, where the arrested body is virtually dredged up out of the scene, in an extreme full-page enlargement.

Pollack quotes a contemporary description of Daguerre's picture by Samuel Morse, the American portrait painter and inventor of the telegraph, who brought the daguerreotype process to the United States: "The boulevard, so constantly filled with a moving throng of pedestrians and carriages, was perfectly solitary, except for an individual who was having his boots brushed."¹⁰

The time exposure erases the *throng* and produces an *individual*, in effect initiating the main commercial application of the daguerreotype process: portrait photography. Grammatically, the predicate is swallowed into the subject through the operation of the gerund form of the verb denoting possession: "having his boots brushed." The class character of the social transaction is more marked in the description offered by *Life*: "a Gentleman



Opposite and right:
Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre.
View of the Boulevard du
Temple, ca. 1838. Bayerisches
Nationalmuseum.

having his boots polished remained still long enough to become frozen in history.”¹¹ Now a dandy is sketched, or at the very least a bourgeois with the leisure to be “frozen.” With this note of fashion, the polishing of the boots (a refined step up from brushing) now echoes the polishing of the daguerreotype plate, the invisible production of a mirror-like, fashionable surface, to which “a squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man,” as Baudelaire put it so sardonically.¹²

The simplest metropolitan gesture of servitude now introduces an order of realism and consumerism. *Life’s* “Gentleman” is the flattering prefiguration of its ideal reader.

Only one description of this photograph has acknowledged the agent, rather than the recipient, of this brushing and polishing.¹³ Eugenia Parry Janis, like Morse and Pollack before her, gives pride of place to the “man caught having his boots brushed,” who is, in her final analysis, a virtual double of the spectator: “Our bond with the dandy on the boulevard is real. He is a reference point, a marginal speck against the invisible flow of history.”¹⁴ Despite her precise attention to the Boulevard du Temple as a space of modernity and flux, her description of the bootblack evokes an anachronistic space, that of the court: “Hatless, haphazard dandy, poised on one leg, he raises the other toward a confused shadow that somewhere houses the lackey at his service.”¹⁵ This is consistent with a general tendency in Janis’s work, especially her work on the French calotype: the tendency to construct a fantasy of the photographic moment as a suspended precapitalist reverie within modernity. If this is capitalist space, then the bootblack melts into the invisible crowd, into the abstract flux of buyers and sellers of labor power. But if this is, however briefly, a precapitalist, courtly encounter, he must be named a servant, according to the customs of an earlier epoch that, in the words of Agnes Heller, “did not distinguish reified and non-reified forms of objectification.”

In restarting the history of photography with the stopping of a bourgeois body in the act of consumption, *Life* both adumbrates and obscures its own vitalist myth, its commitment to the capturing of *life* on the run. What is celebrated? The static moment of consumption, the fashionable pose. What is obscured, denied, disavowed? The productive moment, the energetic blur of that other body, unacknowledged, the working body, the invisible shoe-black. A silhouette and a blur. The former is enough to give us a fictitious identity, replete with style. The latter gives us only this: an instance of *average labor*, eminently replaceable, eminently forgettable, vaporizing in the flux of the *moving throng*. This refiguration of a specifically bourgeois sub-

jectivity at the origins of photography occurred at the end of a decade of unbridled upper-class consumerism in the United States, a decade in which the exoteric economy indeed seemed to *create money out of money*. The gentleman, “frozen in history,” having his boots polished to a highly reflective shine, is really a historicist prefiguration of a specifically postmodern urban-bourgeois subjectivity, an enlightened shopper. And the vaporized shoeblack is the complementary, negative prefiguration of the contemporary transnational elite’s geo-economic restlessness in scouring the globe for newer, cheaper, post-Fordist labor markets. This may seem like an exaggerated and crude economic allegory, but I think it appropriate for the *upscale* sensibility addressed by the new *Life* magazine. Janis’s bracketed Pre-Raphaelite refusal of modernity is, of course, entirely compatible with the consumerist side of this sensibility, with Ralph Lauren, for example. Paternalist reveries of a smaller and simpler world of *dandies* and *lackeys* do nothing to challenge, and are not incompatible with, a neo-Malthusian brutalism, a brutalism that blames the poor for the mud on the boots of the rich.

Notes

Originally published in *Portrait d'un malentendu: Chroniques photographiques récentes* (Montreal: Dazibao, 1996), 27–36.

1. Robert Del Tredici, *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 133.
2. [Roland Barthes, “The Plates of the *Encyclopedia*,” in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 29.—Ed.]
3. Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 102.
4. Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 78–79.
5. Laura Mulvey, “Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture,” *October* 65 (Summer 1993): 4.
6. Alain Lipietz, *The Enchanted World: Inflation, Credit, and the World Crisis*, trans. Ian Patterson (London: Verso, 1985), 11–13.
7. Lipietz, 139–140. For a lonely argument from within the discipline of *cultural studies* for the continued relevance of the labor theory of value, especially in the context of the internationalization of the division of labor, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 154–175.
8. [“150 Years of Photography: Pictures That Made a Difference,” *Life*, Fall 1988, 24–25.—Ed.]
9. [“150 Years of Photography,” 7.—Ed.]
10. Morse quoted in Peter Pollack, *The Picture History of Photography* (New York: Abrams, 1958), 42.
11. “150 Years of Photography,” 7.
12. [Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1859,” in *The Mirror of Art*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 230.—Ed.]
13. [After Sekula’s text was published other descriptions that acknowledge the agent have since appeared. See, for example, Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 136.—Ed.]
14. Eugenia Parry Janis, “The Bug in Amber and the Dance of Life,” in *Vanishing Presence* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1989), 12.
15. Janis, “The Bug in Amber,” 12.