

## From the Daguerreotype to Numerical Photography

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**Looking at the mutations of photography since its origins, one realizes that contrary to what is often believed, it exalts artificiality, fiction and imagination and relies on an anti-naturalistic aesthetic. Could the 19th century be the matrix of our artistic modernity?**

Reviewed: Michel Poivert, *Brève Histoire de la photographie*, Paris, Hazan, 2015. 200 p., 28 €.

When photography (...) frees itself from physiognomic, political and scientific interest, then it becomes « creative ».

Walter Benjamin

In the same way that Walter Benjamin analysed the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the light of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in her memories, Virginia Woolf pointed out that retrospective historical writings must “include the present – at least, enough of the present to serve as a platform to stand upon”, and underlined that the past is “much affected by the present”<sup>1</sup>. Michel Poivert’s essay is driven by a similar dialectical impetus: the origins of photography are revisited in the light of contemporary numerical images, and the author traces the cultural history of the medium by proceeding backwards so as to highlight the way in which, ever since it was invented, photography has shaped the way we think and look at things.

Inspired by a distinguished critical tradition – *A Little History of the World* by Ernst Gombrich and *A Short History of photography* by Walter Benjamin – M. Poivert’s *Brève histoire de la photographie* relies both on scientific accuracy and intellectual liberty to investigate the capacity of numerical photography to debunk our conception of what a system of representation is and to reveal a part of its history that has gone unnoticed.

### Performed/Performative Image

At first sight, one would think that, with the large number of interventions they allow and with their ability to distort reality, numerical techniques challenge the natural effect of photography, i.e. the fact that it is perceived as a “natural” image, and in the process, they display their constructed aspect, their ontological anti-naturalism. Just as something is “going on behind the lens, something is going on in front of it” (p. 196); a scene, resulting from a vision or a staging, is being performed – an image is performed.

Numerical photography allows to construct a representation, a space that is both imagined and imaginary. It also allows critics to reconsider the work of marginalized and unrecognized pioneers who, since the early days of photography and all along its short history, carefully thought, staged and fabricated their images. This, in turn, accounts for the fact that “looking at a

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, « A Sketch of the Past », *Moments of Being*, New York, Harcourt, 1985, p. 75.

photograph means recognizing that it has nothing to do with natural perception” (p. 15). A photographer constructs a representation whose relationship to the real world is utterly variable.

In other words, photographic images are products of the imagination. Conceived of as “facts of consciousness”, they impose themselves as spaces of exploration, places of experimental inventiveness, which is liable to run wild. Actions, gestures, bodies and faces are staged, dramatized so that reality loses its familiarity and people begin to react. For, being reversible, the performed image becomes performative. Photography elicits a reaction involving the viewer’s sense as well as his/her sensibility: a photography is not so much a “take” than a “gift” made to the viewer.

Relying on the freedom that the images he examines offer him, Poivert completes his analysis of constructed images with a historiographical approach. “Photography never was a naturalistic art, and yet it was never understood in a different way” (p. 195). By looking at the production of those who have been left out by canonical history, the author challenges a dominant discourse on the naturalness of photography. From one chapter to the next, he contrasts and establishes a dialogue between a utilitarian and a meditative conception of photography; he highlights the tension between two different regimes: recording on the one hand and representation, with its element of falseness, on the other hand. He traces the history of a transgressive counter-culture, or even of an anti-discipline, by valorising anti-naturalistic practices and aesthetics.

### **The “poetical apparatus of the image”**

At the crossroads between art, techniques and politics, the daguerreotype was hailed by Arago as a new “social art”, available to all. As early as 1839, a new visual culture consecrated the « doctrine of utility » at the expense of the production of works of imagination. In those days, the collective imagination, which subjected art to “the evil genius of precision without creativity”, aspired to an art without technique, which was expected to show the world as it really was (p. 28-30).

As a counterpoint, Poivert claims that technique encourages people to reflect on the nature of representations; he valorises what Régis Durand calls “thinking photography”, that is “a kind of photography that gives food for thought by means of the visible”<sup>2</sup>. Evoking personal memories of precious moments when he had to wrap up fragile daguerreotypes at the *Société française de photographie*, the author brings to light the dreamy, creative and contemplative dimension of a medium that has the ability to convert its technical virtues into aesthetic means.

He meticulously examines Bayard’s theatrical creations, the aesthetics of forgery inherent to tableau vivant scenes, the *mise en scène* of appearances in some of Nadar’s portraits as well as the impurity of pictorialism in order to highlight the way in which photography keeps reinventing itself. He insists on the reflexivity of a medium which exalts deliberate artificiality, fiction and imagination, and on the pluralistic approaches which readily tackle issues like pose and costume or retouching techniques. Poivert thus claims that theatricality imposed itself as “an essential dimension of the history of photography” (p. 194). Halfway between reality and fiction, the images he explores embody the dialectic of reason versus the irrational and thereby pave the way for the advent of interpretation.

The pages devoted to scientific iconography – a genuine “pool of forms for the avant-garde” – are truly delightful, and so are the pages devoted to the explorations carried out by the surrealists who drew on mass-images to create their iconoclastic representations. Reuses, reappropriation and montages, associations and displacements of forms are celebrated and give rise to new forms of

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<sup>2</sup> Régis Durand, *Le Regard pensif. Lieux et objets de la photographie*, Paris, La Différence, 2002, p. 11.

aesthetics that pertain both to scientific technique and to the projection of fantasies. Whether they belonged to the avant-garde or not, late 19th-century and early 20th-century photographers used to divert images – be they academic or popular – in order to reveal their poetical dimension. Photography imposed itself as a “poetical apparatus of the image” right from the beginning (p. 44).

## **Two Historical Landmarks**

In *Brève histoire*, the medium of photography features in the larger family of images. The text is pervaded with seminal comparisons between old forms and ultra-modern ones and the author decodes the construction of a visual culture that continues to challenge us and to fuel debates in connection with aesthetics (the “androgynous” images Foucault refers to), ethics (the taboo of retouching) and politics (the ideological instrumentalisation of images).

At the junction between past and present, spanning both periods, he identifies a common taste for experimentation, adventure and audacity as well as a vivid interest in reinterpreting reality, and thus, in challenging the viewer’s perception of the world. In a very instructive way, he helpfully guides the reader through his demonstration that “the historical distance between the principles of photography and its contemporary practice is in no way irreducible” (p. 13).

The layout is neat and tasteful and the chapters follow a chronological order, beginning with the history of the origins of photography and its founding fathers (Nièpce, Daguerre, Talbot and Bayard), they proceed to bring to the fore two great historical landmarks that herald the modernity of the art of mechanical reproduction – a modernity that Poivert takes care to place in a larger historical context.

The first turning point occurred at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when avant-garde artists reappraised the language of photography and modernized its practice. Inspired by Straight Photography and by Dada’s innovations, photographers started to turn their backs on the values of Art and academism and imposed a new artistic paradigm based on “a dual value in that it documents social facts while relying on formal inventiveness” (p. 136). As it belongs both to art and to culture, as it can be considered as a work of art and as a document at the same time, photography came to embody a new historical identity that found its expression in the experiments of the surrealists who amply drew on vernacular material.

After studying the rich period spanning from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 1930s, Poivert leaves out the period of the Second World War and focuses on the emblematic figure of the photojournalist and reflects on the issues raised by photojournalism. By showing concern for aesthetics (the confusion between reality and its representations), ethics (what morals should photographers adopt when confronted with distressing sights or when reporting on conflicts?), and the institutional aspect of this art (images get recognized by the institution, which is not the case for the authors), he contributes to various on-going debates. He also points at the current propensity to turn photojournalism into aesthetic pieces conceived as museum pieces whose strikingly large formats transform news pictures into history painting and play on the reversibility of documentary and theatrical creations in order to produce “staged images” (p. 194). The wheel has come full circle.

## **The Legacy of the Nineteenth Century**

Although it is quite short, this new little history of photography is rich and accurate. It traces the history of the personal and intellectual development of its author, whose powers of perception and capacity for theoretical apprehension increased with time. Based on the author’s personal and teaching experiences, the essay reflects the subtle evolution of his thought. M. Poivert spells out

his historical approach, as if the reflexivity inherent to the medium entailed a similar reflexivity on the part of those who reflect on it.

Accordingly, in the style of Benjamin, the author carefully defines the matter he deals with. Although it is meant to be accessible to the general public, *Brève histoire de la photographie* is a demanding book that offers a stimulating synthesis and challenges its relationship to history and to historiography. The author draws on his personal experience and invites the reader to step into the “restricted perimeter of his own imagination” (p. 47). With a view to observing the creative process in the art of photography as well as their evolution, Michel Poivert brings to the fore “the fluctuation of the values in photography”:

[...] in that they ascribe various values to photography (objectivity versus untruthfulness, vernacular versus art, etc.), moments as well as places, discourses as well as tastes impart a specific rhythm to the history and the aesthetics of photography (p. 185).

Thanks to the plasticity of his reflections and through a dialogue with the latest contemporary works, the historian clearly demonstrates that we have not quite come to grips yet with the legacy of the nineteenth century, which still operates as a matrix for us.

### Further reading

Charles Baudelaire, « Le public moderne et la photographie », *Études photographiques*, mai 1999

<https://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/185>

Walter Benjamin, « Petite histoire de la photographie », *Études photographiques*, novembre 1996

<https://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/99>

Clément Chéroux, *Vernaculaires. Essais d'histoire de la photographie* (Le point du jour, 2013)

Michel Foucault, *La Peinture photogénique* (Le point du jour, 2014)

André Gunthert, « Archéologie de la "Petite histoire de la photographie" », *Images Re-vues*, 2010

<http://imagesrevues.revues.org/292>

Lori Pauli, *Acting the Part. A History of Staged Photography* (Merrell Publishers, 2006)

Michel Poivert was invited by Brigitte Patient in *Regardez voir* (France Inter)

<http://www.franceinter.fr/emission-regardez-voir-histoires-de-photographies>

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