

Reception of photography



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Using a broad range of critical, satirical, and photographic texts, assess the cultural reception of photography in the mid nineteenth century.

The mid nineteenth century was a time of great technological advancement, and a more modern way of living came to be that brought with it significant cultural and social change. The industrial age was in full swing (as a consequence of the recent development of the steam engine), and photography was an exciting (but also intimidating) technology that caused incredible debate surrounds its status as an art form, and also the ethical and social issues it's conception invoked. Although Daguerre/Fox Talbots Victorian audience were generally a receptive and willing one ready to embrace new and exciting technology (Goldberg 1991), there is significant evidence that shows a mixed cultural reception in regards to the emergence of early photographic processes. Wells (2004 p. 12) states that:

" hailed as a great technological invention, photography immediately became the subject of debates concerning it's aesthetic status and social uses "

Hensch (1994 pg. 2) agrees stating " intense controversies raged concerning its status and role in society". Photography had a huge impact on the Victorian society, and in 1839 artist Paul Delaroche is said to have claimed hysterically upon first seeing a daguerreotype photograph, " from this day painting is dead". Japanese artist Renjio Shinoke also reportedly snapped his paintbrushes and become a pioneer of early Japanese photography (Eastman 1962). Whilst these examples are clearly overt exaggerations (almost to the point of satire) , they also highlight genuine fears and anxieties felt by artists

(especially portrait) and critics alike, which stimulated and engaged the Victorian society in a plethora of debates surrounding the cultural, ethical and social impact the emergence of photography raised. The majority accepted its ability to record mechanically accurate images that are 'free of discrimination', but photography's status as an art form (or a creative medium) was much less certain, and something that was fiercely contested. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), a French Poet & artist (and well known and very vocal critic of early photography) wrote:

" If photography is allowed to deputize for art, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether" (Baudelaire 1859 pg. 297)

Baudelaire suggests photography simply should not be allowed to supplant more traditional artistic methods, and to allow it do so would not only undermine, or negatively impact art, but " corrupt" it altogether. Baudelaire was not alone, as Goldberg (1991 pg. 10) declares William Wordsworth shared in Baudelaire's cynical view of photography, and in the 1840's penned a sonnet which declared the " degradation of 'mans noblest attire'", and expressed fears that a " dumb art" would lead his "'once-intellectual land back to the caves". Here Wordsworth is stipulating photography's potential to instigate the death of human intellect, and again, whilst such arguments are surely sensationalist, these declarations shows that not only was there an opposition to photography's ability to render art useless, but also a fear that it's mechanical nature would 'dumb down' society by removing a large part of the human aspect from the creative process. Both views show people believed (among what we can consider 'high artists') that photography was a genuine threat to the 'fine arts' of the time. Perhaps

artists felt threatened by the technology? Threatened by its ability to so effortlessly 'paint' reality, and ultimately achieve what they had been trying to do for long? Satirical publications in circulation in the mid nineteenth century, of which 'Punch magazine' was the most popular, produced a number of cartoons highlighting these very issues. One such untitled illustration (1860 pg. 140) portrays a fashionable photographer forbidding smoking in his studio, as he declares himself 'not a common artist'. Clearly an underhanded attack on the attitudes photographers took to their work which wasn't shared by their critics. Another satirical sketch, titled 'How the Famous Photographer Nadar Elevates Photography to the Level of Art' show the French artist and photographer Félix Nadar taking to the sky in an air balloon, clutching a camera under his arm, physically lifting photography into the realms of 'high' art. Such a picture of absurdity is surely meant to openly ridicule photography and its quest to be recognised as fine art. The latter picture serves a secondary purpose though, as Nadar was famous for his unsuccessful attempt to build a gigantic air balloon named Le Géant (or "The Giant") around the same time as his photographic exploits. These are just two examples of many cartoons published around the mid nineteenth century that served to ridicule not only photography's quest for a higher status, but also many criticized the photographic studios and the rising popularity of 'carte de visite' . In the photographic studio's defence, famous photographic studio owner Richard Beard ran a series of advertisements for his business that served as much to promote his business as they did to promote photography as an art form. Close scrutiny of one of his earliest advertisements (Beard 1843) circulated in 1843 reveals the words "

Photography is indeed as grand a step in the fine arts as the steam engine

was in the mechanical arts". This isn't to say everybody had difficulty accepting photography as true art, as many did indeed lament the skill that was required of a competent photographer, and the innate talent required to turn out a successful exposure. A Victorian periodical titled 'Once a Week' published in 1862 states that " To produce a good photograph, it requires a thoroughly artistic hand". Francious Argo (1930), when asked by the French government to assess the daguerreotypes successes concluded that " M Daguerre's wonderful discovery is an immense service rendered to art". This prompted the French government to subsidise Daguerre a pension of 6, 000 francs for life, and his son 4, 000 on the understanding they could use and adapt it for their own need (Goldberg 1991). Newell states that Argo's memorandum mustn't be " taken as a reflection of the attitudes of all artists to the new discovery". It appears that it was mainly established artists that held the biggest contempt for photography, and I believe not only suggests a fear for their livelihoods, but also a fear that the status of artist, usually reserved for a chosen few, would now be available to anyone with enough money to purchase a camera. It is difficult to truly gauge just how profoundly photography affected art in these early days, but it can be certain it was definitely believed at least possible by many that photography could be a form of artistic expression. as Goldberg (1981 pg. 20) states " photography and art have always been tangled, are tangled still."

Millions of daguerreotype portrait photographs were taken in the 1840's and 1850's (to the dismay of photography's critics) as it began to supersede the more traditional painted portraiture. As Goldberg (1991 pg. 12) states:

" After 1839 people who were not wealthy enough to commission portraits by a painter like Jean-Augusta-Dominique Ingres were no longer had to do with silhouettes and stiff pink renditions of their faces turned out by itinerant painters"

Portrait painters simply couldn't supply the demand necessary, and the affordability and fast turnaround of mainly studio based daguerreotype photographers (there were also the 'travelling carts') could offer was simply impossible to match. Photographic studios were the staple of early photography, the most famous of which were the Beard chain of studios (aptly ran by Richard Beard) which began opening in London in 1843. His studios were incredibly successful and lucrative business opportunity at the time, as the deal he made with Daguerre (who held the patent to his process) ensured his studios were the only ones in the UK throughout the early years of photography. Punch magazine (1841) ran numerous satirical cartoons that highlighted what appears to be a clear distaste for the photographic studio. One cartoon named " Step in, and be done sir!" features a cat trying to lure a mouse into a photographic studio. More an echo of the society in which photography was operating, this piece could be looked at in a number of different ways. Perhaps the photographer being the cat (fat cat) and the enchanted lower/middle classes being the mice, echoing how the sitters are led into the studios under what could be considered 'false pretences' in order to have their money relieved of them. Julia F Munro (2009 pg. 167) states:

" George Dodd personified the by-then popular process of photography as the 'optical stranger', and as '[s]trange, scientific, mournful, all at once'.

<https://assignbuster.com/reception-of-photography/>

Such a figuration typifies the Victorian reaction to the uncanny qualities of the new technology."

This statement was retrieved from an article entitled 'Busy with the photograph', published on April 29th 1854, and encapsulates the mixed reactions of the Victorian public towards early photography and more importantly the photographic studio. The idea of the 'optical stranger' was one that was re-enforced by 'La Gazette de France' in 1839, as they declared the invention of photography " upsets all scientific theories of light and optics'. The whole act of having ones picture taken was seen by many as a mysterious and bizarre concept, and the resulting exposures were often cited as " too-real images" (Munro 2009 p. 168) and encouraged diverse reaction, ranging from that of excitement, to anxiety and fear, often leading to suggestions of 'magic' (the transfiguration of the common photographer to the role of a magician or illusionist). Literature from the mid nineteenth century is rife with personal accounts of visits to local daguerreotype photographers studio's and the 'wonders' of photography. A letter, published in the Times newspaper in 1852, where-by a middle aged man talks of his recent visit to a photography studio discusses how " with a fluttering heart" he approaches the " mysterious apartment". He is of course simply referring to a typical early photographic studio setup, but these anxieties were very real for the everyday person. Another letter, written by a women this time, was published in the Times newspaper in 1854 describes the photographer 'disappearing into a mysterious closet' and alludes to some 'hocus pocus' being indulged in before he returns with the exposed plate. The photos were perceived as 'taking on a life of their own' to a naive Victorian subject. The

tone and lack of colour often provoked reactions of dismay, and many linked what were known as the 'dark mysterious chambers' to execution houses (Munro 2009). The small stiff chairs (encouraging the 'sitter' to sit upright), complete with leg clamps. Further controversy was sown by the nature of daguerreotype. Many referred the way a photograph could only be viewed in certain light, and as Munro (2009 pg. 172) puts it " seemingly wasn't to be seen one moment, only to 'burst into view' the next. Being photographed and indeed even seeing a photograph were completely new and exotic experiences. For many Victorians, photography was 'too-real', and a large part of the fear was simply a natural reaction to the 'newness' of the communicative medium, and novelty of " a strange new and exotic process" (Munro 2009 pg. 169). The quoted 'realness' of the photos could suggest a sense of fear relating to just how life like the photos were to a first time viewer, or suggest a much more deep routed fear related to magic and the unknown. It wasn't only the daguerreotype that achieved large scale success among the Victorian public. A large trade in what was known as 'carte de visite' photographs soon came about after their circulation became widespread, as highlighted in the Victorian periodical 'Once a Week'. 'Carte de visite' photographs were small paper portrait photographs which usually originated from the albumen process (which allowed for paper based prints to be made from the negative, meaning it was a simple process to produce copies). 'Once a Week' (1862 pg 135) states " Literary men have a constant sale' and their carte de visites were " bought for every album". It becomes clear that collecting these small portrait photographs of the rich and famous was a popular pastime among the middle classes. It became so popular among the middle classes that it was often referred to as 'Cardomania'

(Once a Week 1862). We can clearly see that there was a need for photography, but these needs arose after its introduction and were not in place before its conception. There was certainly something about early photography which caused an anxiety in the general public, but also fascinated them enough to endure it (even embrace it).

It is now widely accepted that photography wasn't truly 'discovered' until 1839, as it was then that Daguerre and Fox Talbot made their discoveries of early photographic processes, the 'daguerreotype' and 'calotype' respectively, and shared them with the world. Goldberg (1991) agrees that it was much earlier when people began to realise a need and take interest in using light as a way of recording images, the need to preserve a moment accurately and 'without discrimination'. Goldberg (1991 pg. 10) goes on to state that "desire was abroad to catch nature in a net", and that photography came to serve a much needed purpose, one that had been recognised much earlier than its first conception. Indeed as early as the late eighteenth century, devices such as the camera obscura (optical device used mainly to aid drawing) and 'camera lucida' (a piece of technology which allowed artists the ability to precisely record contours of landscape) were rife, and captured the eye of professional and amateur artists alike. Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), sometimes referred to as 'the Grandfather of Photography', was one of many people searching for an answer to the void that existed before the conception of photography, and was most interested in its ability to 'record nature' accurately. Talbot states in his manual 'The Pencil of Nature' (1844) that his photography should be thought of as 'photogenic drawing'. Talbot (1844) goes on to say he pursued his

development of the 'calotype' photographic process mainly as a result of his poor ability as an artist. Lewis (1996 pg. 16) states:

" The canon of images to which we are so attached reveals as much and perhaps more about the intervening century"

Talbot's photography, 'The Open Door' for instance, appears to serve very little artistic purpose, and could merely be interpreted as a 'mechanically accurate 'recording', something he was simply incapable of doing by hand. On the other it could be seen as an example of how photography could supplant the more traditional arts, an early example of the photographers ability to shape, to frame, and to manipulate reality how he saw fit. We may never know, as whilst we are able to appreciate early photographs, it is impossible to know the original context, how they were read, and indeed, what made them meaningful to the society of which they were a product. It is even more difficult to gauge the early intentions of photographic pioneers. Many widely believed that photography was going to bring a truth to society that had never been seen, its potential as a truth bearer, and an accurate recorder of history. Ernst Mach, an Austrian empiricist (ironically) stated " How tranquil politics will be!", and even the notorious critic Baudelaire (1859 pg. 297) stated photography could be considered " a handmade of the arts and sciences" although he goes on to say " a very humble handmaid". Society became increasingly aware of its benefits as a scientific tool and embraced the possibilities this afforded with open arms: A new found purpose perhaps, a commitment to relating to truth? As Goldberg (1981 pg. 16) states:

" The engine was an extension of the muscle, the telegraph a superhuman voice, and the photograph an unblinking eye with a new outlook on history and knowledge"

Baudelaire (1859) also suggests photography was merely 'a sign of the times', showing that links were made between the mechanical nature of photography and societies rising industrial prowess and reliance on machines. The 'unstoppable rise of industry' so to speak. Wells (2004) states a society will also invest and put time into developing new technologies in order to help satisfy previously unseen social needs, and goes on to summarise (2004 pg. 12) that photography was a " consequence, and not a cause of culture". I believe that photography was not a cause of change, but an answer to an unforeseen social need brought about by the emerging modern metropolitan lifestyle. It has become clear to me that there certainly was a 'need' for photography, and the Victorians were fascinated with it, whether they loved it or hated it. As Bede (1855) begins his satirical book 'Photographic Pleasure' with a metaphor comparing men and women's intrigue with photography to the same intrigue they hold for a human child:

" The ladies are enamoured of him: The gentlemen evince their affection by suggestions for his improvement, and by general attention to his welfare. All are fond of him: everyone is declaring that he is the most beautiful baby yet born to Science."

It is entirely feasible that the reason it raised such widespread controversy, why it was so widely debated, and ultimately why it was so popular as an amateur hobby or leisure pursuit was simply because the technology was

still in its infancy. It was still new, and fresh. Artists were fearful of photography, not only because their jobs were endangered, but also their status as artists. A profession usually only available to a truly gifted few now had the potential to be available to anyone. These critics only served to fuel the anxieties that were common place among the general public, but, despite this, the public did allow photography room to grow (albeit carefully, and with great caution and concern). It was a new technology which people needed time to come to terms with, time to understand, and time to flourish and co-exist peacefully with other more established art forms in the new, fast paced, and modern Victorian metropolitan lifestyle.

Bibliography

- WELLZ, L. 2004. Photography: A critical introduction. Oxford: Routledge.
- CLARKE, G. 1997. The Photograph. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BAUDELAIRE, C. 1859. The Salon of 1859. Unknown.
- BRIGGS, A. 1998. A Victorian Portrait. London: Cassell Publishers Limited.
- GOLDBERG, V. 1991. The Power of Photography: How photographs changed our lives. New York: Abbeville Publishing Group.
- BEARD, R. 1843. Advertisement [Accessed 2nd December 2009]. Available from: <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/73604552/Hulton-Archive>
- GOLDBERG, V. 1981. Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the present. New York: University of New Mexico Press

- GREEN-LEWIS, J. 1996. Framing the Victorians. New York: Cornell University Press.
- HEINZ, K. 1994. The Photographic Experience 1839-1914. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- MARIEN, M. 1997. Photography and its Critics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MUNRO, J. F. July 2009 The Optical Stranger: Photographic anxieties in British periodical literature of the 1840's and 1850's. Journal of early popular visual culture 7(2) pp167-183.
- UNKNOWN. 1860 Punch magazine October 6th. p. 140
- UNKNOWN. 1861 Punch magazine June 1st pg. 221
- ARGO, F. 1930 Bulletin de la Société Française de Photographie
- NEWELL, B., and R. DOTY. 1962. The value of photography to the artist, 1839. The Bulletin of the George Eastman House of Photography [online]. 11 (6), [Accessed December 2nd 2009], pp. 25-40. Available From: http://image.eastmanhouse.org/files/GEH_1962_11_06.pdf
- Daumier, H. 1862. How the Famous Photographer Nadar Elevates Photography to the Level of Art [Accessed 3rd December 2009]. Available from: <http://www.superstock.com/stock-photos-images/463-5227>
- BEDE, C. 1855. Photographic Pleasures. London: T Mc'Lean.
- UNKNOWN. 1862 Once a Week. Unknown
- TALBOT, H. F. 1844. 'The Open Door' [Accessed 4th December 2009]. Available from: http://cai.ucdavis.edu/waters-sites/aesthetic_movement/opendoorphoto.jpg

- BEARD, R. 1843. Advertisement [Accessed 2rd December 2009].
Available from: <http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/73604552/Hulton-Archive>
- Daumier, H. 1862. How the Famous Photographer Nadar Elevates Photography to the Level of Art [Accessed 3rd December 2009].
Available from: <http://www.superstock.com/stock-photos-images/463-5227>
- TALBOT, H. F. 1844. 'The Open Door' [Accessed 4th December 2009].
Available from: http://cai.ucdavis.edu/waters-sites/aesthetic_movement/opendoorphoto.jpg