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Afterword

Media History and History of Photography in Parallel Lines

Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale (Questions and editing)

Geoffrey Batchen and Lisa Gitelman (Responses)

Written from a cross-disciplinary perspective, and having as its main subject the relationship between photography and other media, this book challenges established boundaries within which the history of photography is usually approached and disseminated. In this afterword, historian of photography Geoffrey Batchen and media historian Lisa Gitelman enter in dialogue to address the following questions: How can the study of photography contribute to an integrated history of media? And how can media history, a discipline that programmatically employs an integrated approach to different media, contribute to a better understanding of the history of photographic practices?

Batchen: There is a history to the history of photography, and therefore a story to be told about how that history came to be an autonomous one bounded by medium specificity. This is a story about artistic aspirations, and the struggle photographers once had in being taken seriously by the art establishment, and then about a few influential American photographers, like Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, who were advocates of an unmanipulated, ‘straight’ photography and pushed to have that approach adopted as an historical method by Beaumont Newhall, who published the first art history of the medium in the 1930s. The approach has been consolidated by art museums, who eventually created photography collections and departments, and therefore instituted a compartmentalization of the medium, hiring curators who specialized

in the study of photographs, and publishing books and catalogues that again looked at photography in isolation from a broader history (even from a broader art history). This situation is now changing, on a number of levels. Some museums are rethinking their departmental structures, recognizing that quite a few artists have in fact worked across different media (from Louis Daguerre to Man Ray to Christian Marclay) and are therefore not being well served by the current set-up. The study of photography as an academic discipline has also shifted, from an almost exclusively art historical discourse to one scattered across many disciplines, including history, American studies, women's studies, race studies, anthropology, and so on. Scholars from these other disciplines have no interest in medium specificity, being engaged in the study of visual culture as a whole. In their work, photographs are often just one element of a thematic analysis that might also encompass literature, music, mass media and a range of imagery of all sorts.

The gradual disintegration of an art historical bias in the study of photography has also allowed for more in-depth studies of practitioners for too long trapped in a photographic ghetto. A recent book by Stephen Pinson about the career of Daguerre, to take but one example, looked at length at Daguerre's work as a painter and designer, arguing that his experiments towards a daguerreotype process can only be understood in this context. My own research has looked at the first two commercial studios to open in London, established by Richard Beard and Antoine Claudet in 1841. These studios mostly made daguerreotype portraits for relatively wealthy patrons, but they also sold their photographs to journals like the *Illustrated London News* to be published there as wood engravings or they issued them as lithographs or engravings themselves. One daguerreotype portrait of the Duke of Wellington, taken by the Claudet studio on May 1, 1844, subsequently reappeared as a painting, steel engraving, stereo-daguerreotype, copy

daguerreotype, stipple engraving, aquatint, hand-colored steel engraving and carte-de-visite albumen print. Each reproduction its own distinctive pictorial qualities, but each is also haunted by the first daguerreotype image that gives that reproduction its presumed authenticity.

Photographers like these were well aware that they traded in photographic images, not just in photographs, a distinction recognized in law when copyright legislation was passed in the British parliament in August 1862 that covered the work of photographers. In this sense, photographers entered an economy of reproductions already established by print makers and painters, and were often served by the same print and book sellers who carried other kinds of imagery. For all these reasons, if they want to do justice to their subject, future histories of photography are going to have to embed their accounts in a wider media history and indeed in a larger history of industrial and consumer capitalism.

Having said all that, an argument still needs to be made for the specificity of both photography's history and its nature as a medium of representation. Despite many overlaps with other media, and a common social, cultural, and economic context, photography does have some distinctive elements. Analog photographs are printed from a matrix, like engravings, but they can be printed at a variety of sizes and sometimes in different media (as either a salt print or an albumen print, for example). Photographs, as Roland Barthes and many others have discussed, have a peculiar relationship with their referents, and thus to referencing in general, due to the indexical means of their generation. This peculiarity matters, psychologically as well as pictorially. Photography eventually became a popular domestic craft, rather than just a professional practice, and this too has distinguished its history from that of most other media forms. All these things are important to an understanding of photography's role in the development of modernity, and of our relationship to photographic images. And all these things,

and more, would need to be recognized in any media history that also included photography. So such a history has a complex task; to embed photography in a broader media context even while acknowledging its exceptionalism.

Gitelman: Yes, I agree, and Geoff is gesturing as well toward the importance of media to historical epistemology, the history—that is—of ways of knowing, how they develop and change. Photography, like language, has been an incredibly important *figure* in the history of knowing, part of the way we have grappled and continue to grapple with referencing and indexicality.

On media history more generally, it is difficult to pinpoint just how it happened that history came to be understood (and taught) as a parade of technological forms, even a sequence of revolutions or the triumphal successions of Western modernity: the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, and onward to the networked PC and smartphone. Whatever the origins of this pattern, though, it is now the object of welcome and the source of sustained critique. The easiest of the criticisms being leveled, I suppose, is that different forms of media cannot be studied—or indeed apprehended—in isolation from one another, but must instead be tackled synchronically, as mutual and interdependent forms. I call this “the easiest” of criticisms (though it is by no means easy) because it can paradoxically prop up the formalist sensibility it also seeks to undermine: media forms cannot be understood separately, and yet they must be separable in order to explore the ways their histories tangle and conjoin. The parade of forms one-by-one becomes a parade abreast, and every entrant in the parade is plural and shape-shifting. The present volume on “Photography and Other Media” signals this same formalist sensibility in its title, and yet the essays it gathers offer together a helpful redress. Photography—like any medium—is not one thing but instead many. Not only has photography as such included an

enormous variety of technical features and framing conditions, its meanings (its uses?) have been many and multiform, culturally specific, politically mobile, historically dynamic, radically indeterminate.

If the histories of photography have tended to receive slender attention within media studies to date—a nod to Daguerre, an anecdote about long exposure times, and passing mention of Kodak—it is likely for two reasons, or for two versions of the same reason. First, there is the age-old contest between word and image in which language seems forever to have gained the upper hand. Second, contemporary preoccupations with digital networks and information processing have helped to direct attention selectively toward the most obvious precursors, so telegraphy becomes the Victorian Internet, for instance. Both of these points are obvious, even banal, yet they help to suggest the enormous potential that the histories of photography still have to contribute to our understanding of media. Adding photography in all its complexity into media historical inquiry should earn us a better, more nuanced understanding of the sociotechnical conditions of communication as well as the varied and trenchant power of images amid the prosperity of words and information.

One way the histories of photography and media history have started to work on parallel lines has to do with the issue of materiality. If recent historiographies of photography have considered photographs not merely as visual phenomena, but also as material objects with their own agency and social life, works in media studies have likewise pointed to definitions of media as objects and artifacts whose materiality literally matters, making a difference to the work they do. These approaches reflect a renewed interest in the social life of things generally, but also a related interest in what Kirschenbaum calls the “forensic materiality” of digital media: in other words, the discovery that even today’s digital media, notwithstanding the virtuality they conjure,

possess an inescapable materiality. In this context, the turn to consider nineteenth-century photographs more concertedly as things and not only as images has been enormously productive, leading to a more nuanced understanding of nineteenth-century photographic media. Certainly the page and the screen both have a limited utility when it comes to the re-presentation of nineteenth-century photographs, so that seeing and even holding nineteenth-century examples is key, while dabbling with nineteenth-century photographic processes can also be instructive, not to say fun. We're stuck with the page and the screen, of course, so mobilizing them as the impoverished vehicles they are elicits a comparative sensibility, an exactingly precise vocabulary, even a forensic eye. And isn't it nice for just a moment to think about the poverty of pages and screens, since both have been the engines of proliferation, devaluing the image by supporting its ubiquity?

Batchen: As Lisa suggests, the perception of nineteenth-century photographs often involves touch as well as sight, and even, on occasions, smell, sound and taste (sometimes literally, sometimes only in a conjured, virtual sense). The acknowledgement of the multisensory nature of the photographic experience has required a certain honesty on the part of scholars; it has required photographic historians to look beyond the image as an apparition (as a mere reproduction on a page or screen) and to instead engage with the photograph as an object, as a thing in the world. They have had to describe photographs as they actually are, complete with cases, frames, mats, pads, creases, textures, volumes, imperfections, inscriptions and additions. But it has also meant having to extend that honesty of regard to other aspects of the photograph. For, if photographs are objects, they are also commodities and keepsakes, talismans and documents. To describe the materiality of a photograph is to engage equally with that photograph's motivation, function, and social and financial value. The act of writing such a

description forces you to account for how the photograph has been made, circulated, stored, viewed and handled. Suddenly the study of photography is exponentially broadened, offering many more elements able to be compared with, or differentiated from, those pertaining to objects made using other media. Most importantly, it allows for a study of media forms that simultaneously locates them in the immaterial realm of a particular political economy and in the harsh world of materiality that attends actual objects, with attributes that are both specific and generic. All of this can only enrich our understanding and appreciation of all nineteenth-century media.

Gitelman: Another point of intersection for our disciplines is the dialectic between continuity and rupture in media change. Within media history, this has kindled a lively and long-standing debate on the relationships between “old” and “new” media. The question in this context is how the introduction of new technologies—such as photography, but also the electric telegraph, in the middle decades of the nineteenth century—involved both continuity *and* rupture. Geoffrey is the best one to address this question with regard to photography, and I never tire of recommending his *Burning with Desire* to students and colleagues. I also try to maintain a pocket collection of examples I’ve stumbled upon since my first reading of his book that either imagine photography before the fact or that somehow qualify its later existence. I’m thinking for example of a passage in Robert Montgomery Bird’s “lost” novel of 1836, *Sheppard Lee, Written By Himself*. Bird (who later became an accomplished photographer) has one of his characters imagine a reflection trapped forever on the surface of a mirror. Then there’s the “Statement of a Photographic Man” in the 3rd volume of Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and London Poor*, originally published in 1851: he saves, he borrows, he sends his wife out to work two jobs until he can afford a photographic outfit. Then even before he knows how to use his new outfit he has a customer.

Loath to let opportunity pass him by, he takes a photograph, but it comes out all black. So he tells his customer that it will come out bright once it dries, and the customer heads off “quite delighted.” With practice the photographic man becomes even more adept at hoaxing. Examples like these help to add amplitude to any description of photography as “new media” of the past, and they can help us to encounter, well, the always-already newness of photography.

I suppose I persist in thinking that tackling the newness of old media is an interesting and productive way to do the work of media history. It is not the only way by any means, yet attention to the dialectic between rupture and continuity certainly seems necessary to any nuanced account. That said, the work of David Edgerton (*The Shock of the Old*) and others is a good reminder that focusing on innovation as a way to understand technology is something of a trap. The play of rupture and continuity leaves little room for maintenance, repair, reuse, decay, and disposal, and thus tends to occlude the afterlives of media technology, occluding in the process the experiences of many non-Western users as well as the toll that Western modernity has taken and continues to take on the environment.

Batchen: Having written a book about the origins of photography, it is difficult for me to step outside that text and offer any new insights. In the late 1980s, when *Burning with Desire* was conceived, the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida seemed to offer a means of engaging in a productive way with this question of origins, especially when their work was read together. That work also engages critically with all binary oppositions, including those that would divide continuity from discontinuity, and new from old. As I suggest in *Burning*, “a Foucauldian history of photography does not so much replace the idea of continuity with that of discontinuity as problematize the assumed distinction between the two. At the heart of both Foucault’s method and photography’s historical identity is once again this tantalizing

undecidability, this play of a difference that is always differing from itself' (186). The challenge is to turn this undecidability into a viable historical method that can illuminate, rather than obfuscate, photography's place within a range of competing media forms. For reasons already outlined, photography was both new and traditional when first introduced into European culture. Certainly, its pictures were described in ways that sought to render them familiar (by, for example, comparing their tonal variations to those produced by existing engraving techniques) and the circulation of these pictures depended on established models of commerce. And yet there were also several distinctive aspects of photography that made it a peculiarly modern medium, a modernity that resulted in philosophical meditations in the twentieth century by such luminaries as Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes of a sort not accorded to other print media. It is striking that those meditations again adopt a deconstructive mode that continually undercuts the very infrastructure established by their own narratives (as in the impossible distinction Barthes pretends to establish between *studium* and *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*). For this reason, I continue to believe that these kinds of texts offer useful models for future photographic discourse.

Gitelman: There is no question that contemporary experiences of the pace and character of technological change have helped to make the history of technology more interesting and important as a field of study. So the history of "the book" prospers—thank goodness—amid the long shadows of its supposed demise, while we are also productively reaching the so-called end of media generally, as anything and everything gets reduced to data digitally encoded. The pitfalls of teleology are real—we risk seeing the past narrowly in terms of the present—but easily avoided. The past may suddenly seem filled with network protocols and interfaces, but any exacting account that is respectful of the historical record cannot mistake the nineteenth-century

for the twenty-first. Contrast is key. Nineteenth-century media interest me because they make the contingency of knowing and meaning so obvious, especially in contrast to the present day.

Meanwhile the plenitude of digital networks is making the past more accessible and its access more curious. The web is a vast and wonderful archive, forever prompting new questions of archive-ability and archive-ishness. Benjamin's angel of history rushes forward and faces back: in which direction should we look for sepia-filtered Instagrams or digitized daguerreotypes?

Batchen: I would certainly agree that all history is about the present, whether we like it or not. The recent changes in the materiality of the photograph have of course informed our historical perspectives, prompting scholars to, for example, recognize that photographic culture has always been global and that a disconcerting play between materiality and immateriality was always already a central feature of photography's identity. These recognitions can lead to all sorts of new reflections on aspects of photography that perhaps we thought we already knew. I have myself been prompted, for example, to look again at the history of photography in Australia, my own country of origin.

A familiar figure in that history is John William Newland, a man who opened a studio at the corner of King and George Streets in Sydney in March 1848, having arrived there from New Orleans in the United States (where he advertised his photographic skills as early as May 1845). At least one portrait made in Sydney by Newland has survived, along with a view of Murray Street in Hobart taken from his studio window in 1848, the earliest Australian view daguerreotype yet located. In both Sydney and Hobart the English-born Newland apparently exhibited hundreds of daguerreotypes he had brought with him, taken in Europe, South America and the Pacific (representing, he claimed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "the principal inhabitants of two thirds of the Globe" and including "the only correct likenesses ever taken of Pomare, Queen of Otaheite, the King, the Royal Family, Chiefs, and several other Natives, Beautiful specimens of the New Zealanders, Feejeans [sic],

Peruvians, Chilenos, Grenadians and panoramic views of the City of Arequipa, Peru etc.” He also offered displays of projected images (using an oxyhydrogen microscope and lantern, a chromatrope and a diorama), presumably of a similarly international scope, images that of course were consumed as apparitions composed of nothing but light. By 1850 Newland was working in India, establishing a studio in Calcutta between 1852-1854. So here we have a figure whose itinerancy considerably complicates any history of Australian photography based on national boundaries or essential cultural attributes. But he similarly complicates any history of photography based only on photographs (very few of his have survived, and none from his global pantheon, and a large part of his business was based on the exhibition or projection of photographic images, rather than on the selling of actual photographs). What kind of historical understanding of photography do we need to invent to encompass this kind of figure and this kind of proto-digital practice?

At the least, we would need to extend an argument put by the American cultural commentator Oliver Wendell Holmes in an essay he published back in 1859. In that essay he described photography as “the divorce of form and substance”. As a consequence of photography, Holmes said:

“Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please.... Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable.... Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us.... The consequence of this will soon be such an enormous collection of forms that they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now.”

Holmes's commentary acknowledges that photography involves the separation of the image from its referent, making "form," among other things, cheaper than "matter" and therefore more easily turned into a commodity. But he also stresses the centrality of the photographic *image* to the history of photography, a stress very much in accord with today's digital economy. A study of figures like Newland and Holmes (and Beard and Claudet) might allow us to see photography as a continual process of such separations, first of form from matter and then of form from form, with the latter separation-- of the photographic image from the photograph--driven above all by the demands of consumer capitalism. Doubly displaced from its origins (which it nevertheless haunts as a ubiquitous presence), crossing borders without restraint, rejected or ignored by our culture's authority figures (including, until recently, by photography's historians)—this virtual entity, the photographic image, is, in every sense, photography's *refugee*. We now need a refugee history to match it.

No longer confined to precious commodities or specific technologies, this would be a history able to address itself to the full implications of photography's *mobility*—that is, to an accounting of dynamic relationships, not just to static objects, and to a tracing of dispersals rather than a celebration of origins. Breaking with the self-imposed ghetto of medium purity, photography's history would at last engage the photographic image in all its various manifestations, wherever and in whatever form they have appeared. As a consequence, the dissemination of the photograph, rather than its production, would become this history's primary focus and guiding logic. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this new kind of history is its necessarily critical engagement with the identity of its purported subjects. For, as Derrida has discussed at length, dissemination both divides and multiplies whatever it conveys, complicating, for example, our grasp of both

‘photography’ and ‘history.’ At every level, then, there are exciting times ahead for the creative practice of photographic history.

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