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Absent Pictures, Present Images: How Time Reshapes the Photographic Archive

This essay aims to complicate our understanding of photographic materialities. Tracing the object biography of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, taken in 1838—one of the most prominent photographs from the medium's formative period—helps to reveal photography's character as not only reproductive but also reproducible. Variant photographic sources of the same motif can result in various histories that inform and transcribe each other. These multiple layers of meaning turn each photographic representation into a palimpsest loaded with information that is both visible and invisible, present and absent. A closer look at Daguerre's photograph unfolds a puzzling photographic ontology that deals with present images but an absent picture. This case evokes a pivotal question for the medium's historiography: Upon what traces are we basing our photographic histories?

Keywords: picture/image; materiality; temporality; original; daguerreotype; Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre

Already the earliest sources from the history of photography, which date back almost two centuries, invite us to observe the intricate interplay between presence and absence. The *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, taken by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in 1838, shows the overall presence of a street in Paris as well as subtle absences that perforate this urban landscape (fig. 1). A handwritten caption informs us that the photograph's production took place around eight o'clock in the morning. However, due to the minutes-long exposure, the depiction of the boulevard resembles an empty theater stage. The curtain has risen, and we can see the set, but the actors seem to be still missing—the performance has not yet begun. Daguerre, who worked as a stage designer and theater entrepreneur, would have liked such a comparison.[1] Yet he tried his best to avoid this state of affairs. In the lower left corner, we come across a little silhouette, allegedly the first person ever to appear in the photographic realm.

For obvious reasons, no history of photography neglects to tell the story of photography's first figure and to include a reproduction of this particular daguerreotype. Perhaps the most remarkable attempt was made by Peter Pollack in his *The Picture History of Photography*, first published in 1958 (fig. 2).[2] A spread of two pages features the famous photograph on the left-hand side almost in its original size. On the right-hand side, however, a detail, blown up to large scale, covers the entire page. Thus, we can conveniently study the man's shadowy presence—and also what is absent from this scene, namely a *décrotteur*, or a bootblack, at work. In dealing with this detail, already the earliest commentators carefully distinguished between different layers of visibility.[3] The man who is clearly vis-

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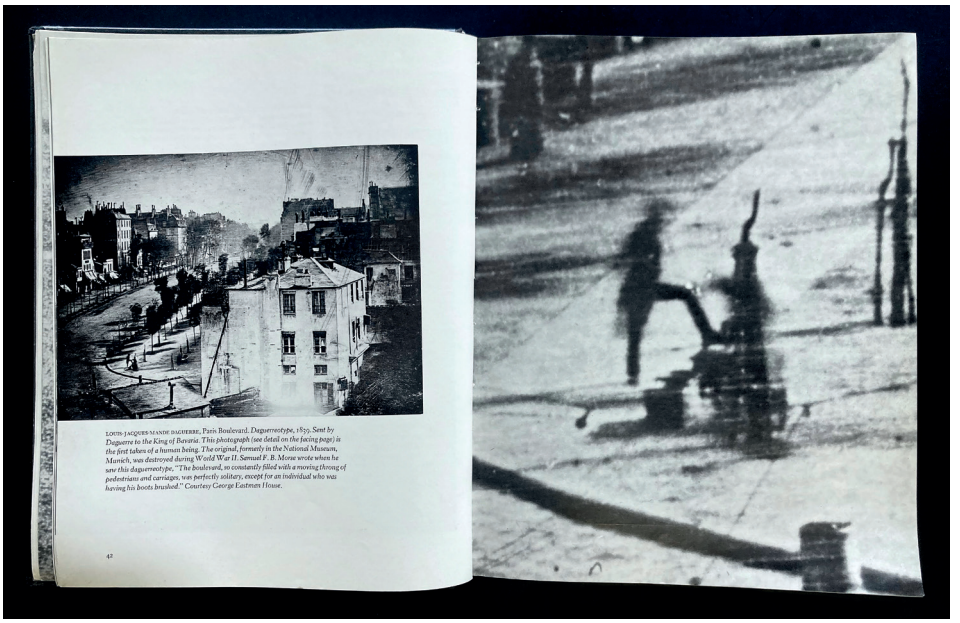
1 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *Vue du Boulevard du Temple*, undated photographic reproduction of a now lost daguerreotype, taken in 1838, as illustrated in Stephen C. Pinson, *Speculating Daguerre: Art and Enterprise in the Work of L. J. M. Daguerre*, Chicago and London 2012



2 Spread from Peter Pollack's *The Picture History of Photography: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day*, New York 1958

ible in the image remained still while having his shoes shined. Yet, we know that a working man must also have been there but, as he was continuously in motion, Daguerre's camera failed to inscribe him onto the photographic plate. We see only, as Allan Sekula has aptly put it, a "silhouette and a blur."[4] The result is a remarkably uneven representation that offers far-reaching symbolic meaning.[5]

Beyond this photograph's particular case, Daguerre's street view epitomizes the medium's visual ontology. The disparate representation of the two men—the first one visible, the other one almost invisible—reveals the logic of an apparatus in action that produces positive results and, at the same time, significant blanks.[6] It invites us to consider not just the act of successfully adopting the machine's functioning but also the possibility of escaping its method of operation. We may focus on the somewhat stunning fact that a man is visible. Yet, we must also deal with a negative space in front of this figure. In the photograph, the momentary encounter of two men on the street results in an ongoing challenge to see—and contemplate—a visual paradox. We are asked to perceive the presence of an absence. If we pay attention to it, invisibility becomes visible.

Such a paradox, however, does not exhaust the symbolic potential of this street scene. If we discuss the encounter of the two men as a negotiation between different modes of representation, we have already engaged in the photograph's logic, the pictorial organization of space and time. Yet, this photograph begs the question of far greater absences. The alluring presence of a photographic depiction may hide the conditions and circumstances of this very presence. Typically, interpretations of Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple* take an interest in the synchronic order it embodies, the 'there and then' of Paris in 1838.[7]

In contrast, I want to look at this daguerreotype from a diachronic perspective. Opening up a historical trajectory, we can embark on a different discussion of what is present and absent in photographs. We should give attention to photography as a reproductive *and* reproducible medium, adding another layer of reproduction, i.e., the photographic reproduction of photographic reproductions. On the one hand, such an observation adapts well-established practices and discourses from art historiographies.[8] On the other, however, it complicates our understanding of photographic materialities, leading to a disconcerting photographic ontology that can provide us with present images but absent pictures. Ultimately, this daguerreotype's particular case raises a general question: Upon what traces are we basing our photographic histories?

Producing Presence

Daguerre was the first to demonstrate that photographic presence itself is a matter of laborious production. During the last weeks of 1838, he sent out invitations offering firsthand experiences. After several years of work concealed from prying eyes, the time was ripe to involve the public or, for an initial step, a few representatives. With great care, Daguerre arranged studio visits in his home in the Boulevard du Temple, enabling his prominent invitees to appraise the invention's practical usefulness and marvel at its aesthetic brilliance. Among those guests was Jules Janin, perhaps the most prominent French newspaper feature writer, who authored sparkling essays on current art affairs in Paris. Another one was the scientist and world traveler Alexander von Humboldt, who left no doubt about his enthusiasm. In a letter to the German scientist and painter Carl Gustav Carus, he deemed the daguerreotype "one of the most astonishing discoveries of recent times."[9]

The same letter vividly conveys how Daguerre choreographed such studio visits and what he treated, along the way, with particular impor-

tance.[10] Above all, he wanted his invention to be appreciated for its ability to render precise visual representations. Daguerre took care to emphasize minor details that highlighted the daguerreotype's capacity to produce a presence that is true to nature down to its finest detail. In his letter to Carus, Humboldt recounted how he could decipher small straws, a shattered windowpane, and a lightning rod on some of the presented samples.[11] In a sweeping article for the French journal *L'Artiste*, Janin was even more determined in his praise: "No drawing by the greatest of great masters has ever come close to it. If the mass is admirable, the details are infinite."[12] Janin's emphatic praise of "infinite" details resonates in another piece, written by Edgar Allan Poe. He wrote almost a year later—when daguerreotypes were beginning to circulate more widely—for the American newspaper *Alexander's Weekly Messenger*:

> [I]n truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. The variations of shade and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspective are those of truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection.[13]

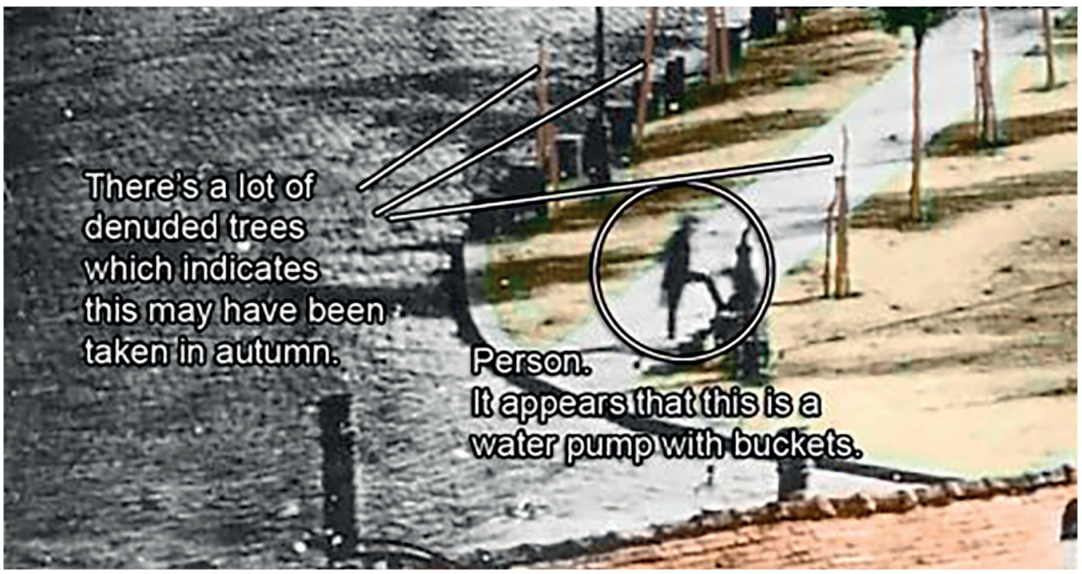
These texts are early testimonies from a discourse that helped to shape the perception of this novel kind of imagery. During this initial phase of the medium's public reception, a pattern of phrases, narratives, and comparisons emerged that remained fundamental. Subsequent discussions of photography have developed similar themes on the exactness of the medium; many have observed the photograph's mathematical correctness and visual richness. Usually centered on praise of minute details preserved on the photographic plate, the discourse itself is a process of cultural production. Undertaken as a collaborative effort over time, it helped to shape a concept of photographic representation tied to the presence of visual information. Such an emphasis established the notion of photographic realism. Over time and through a wide range of discussions, realism has become photography's signal trope, one in which the supposed "infinite" nature of its details is presumed inexhaustible.

Interest in details and the photographic production of presence has not waned. More recently, in October 2010, Charles Leo, a graphic designer from Boston, also took a closer look at Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple*. In his blog *LunarLog*, he reported that he became aware of it through an article about the bootblack scene. It challenged him to have a fresh look at Daguerre's picture:

> I had some free time tonight and came across an article regarding the first known photograph of a human by Daguerre. Curiosity got the best of me, so I decided that I'd take a look and see if I encounter anyone else in the image. As I looked, I quickly realized that I would have to clean up this image and make some further adjustments to reveal more detail. […] I didn't spend too much time refining the image – maybe a little over a [sic] hour tops. I'm certain I could spend days if I really wanted to get it just perfect, but for the purpose this suited it just fine.[14]

It may seem unusual that Leo started his closer examination by preparing the photograph as if he had encountered a specimen in the laboratory. However, the results he presents in a series of illustrations speak a clear language. In the first version, we finally see what has been so obviously missing from this daguerreotype—color (fig. 3). Such an addition may help orient our eyes as we become attentive to visual information that has so far escaped close inspection;

3 Colorized version of Daguerre's *Vue du Boulevard du Temple* by Charles Leo, published online on 28 October 2010



4 Detail from a colorized and annotated version of Daguerre's *Vue du Boulevard du Temple* by Charles Leo, published online on 1 November 2010

or, as Leo believed, the addition of color served "to reveal more detail." A second version of Daguerre's street scene, to which the blogger added numerous annotations, details his findings. Like the author of the article he mentions, Leo too became particularly interested in the encounter of the two men (fig. 4). But he also made new observations about other aspects of the photograph, such as the fact that a roof at the picture's far right is gutted. He also contemplates the possibility of a carpet hanging from a balcony and even more people walking on the street.

Leo chose the public forum of a blog for his speculations. Thus, within a few days, he received "some very good observations and comments" that enabled him to publish a revised version of his findings.[15] The coloration has changed here and there, and the annotations on various details made in the first version have been corrected and refined. For example, there is now a hint of a cat in a window. Is it the first animal ever photographed? But more importantly, the photograph's most famous detail was reexamined and became the subject of considerable revision. "Based on a comment, I think that the person 'getting his shoes shined' is actually someone at a water pump."[16] Bootblack or water pump? Clearly, the answer to this question is far less interesting than the question itself—and with it the assumptions that incite such speculation.[17] Leo's persistent search for further details demonstrates a way of looking at photographic images that James Elkins has aptly called "rigid seeing."[18] It still privileges the concept of presence to understand the medium's ontology, even if deconstructive approaches to photographic realism have advocated—with very good reasons—for an opposite understanding of photographic information.

As meditations on the tiniest details evince, this mode of perception invests trust in photography's privileged relation to evidence.[19] More than a century and a half later, Leo's quest for "more detail" again—perhaps unconsciously—taps into the idea of an "infinite" photograph that already belonged to the medium's formative period. Notably, his way of "taking a look" mirrors the techniques of the observer and bodily gestures set into action already by the earliest viewers. Yet Leo's more recent repetition of a firsthand experience once had by Humboldt and Janin occurred under remarkably different conditions. At the beginning of his blog, he introduces Daguerre's photograph with a cursory remark that is, in fact, freighted with hidden assumptions: "here is the original black and white image." Only at the end of the blog did he feel it necessary to append an essential caveat:

> Please note that a lot of the fine noise and "blocks" in this image is due to JPEG compression. The only way to really remove the noise is to take a better look at the original JPEG (if available assuming that it hasn't changed much) or to rescan the original plate image.[20]

However, in the intricate course of the history of photography there is a little-known yet unsurmountable obstacle to such an understandable desire. It is the very presence of the *View of the Boulevard du Temple* that calls for a more nuanced narrative.

Observing Latencies

As far as we know, Daguerre took this photograph in the spring of 1838.[21] In the following year, he deployed it as one of the examples that would prove the success of his invention. After they were carefully investigated by prominent visitors—including some of the aforementioned scientists and journalists—who reported on Daguerre's invention to the public, the utility of these daguerreotypes was not exhausted. During the second half of 1839, they were used as items of diplomatic exchange. For instance, the *View of the Boulevard du Temple* became part of a lavishly framed set of pictures customized as

5 Ornamented frame housing the daguerreotypes taken by Daguerre and presented as a gift to King Ludwig I of Bavaria in August 1839. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum

a gift for King Ludwig I of Bavaria (fig. 5). Daguerre sent the set to Munich in the late summer of 1839.[22] As early as October of that year, they were accessible to the general public for a few weeks, during which time they stimulated further journalistic reports and praise.[23] Since then, the pictures in this precious frame—known as the "Munich Triptych"—have been part of the royal collections and were eventually transferred to the holdings of the Bavarian National Museum. From the 1870s on, the frame was presented in the museum's permanent exhibition without causing remarkable notice.[24]

However, an inappropriate preservation treatment during World War II led to severe damage to all three photographs, impacting them in a way that would cause partial or even total loss of visual information. The exact circumstances are unknown to us. An unidentified conservator must have attempted a restoration of the damaged plates after the war had ended.[25] Clearly something went wrong and, if some remnants of the original photographic representations survived still in 1945, they had disappeared by 1972, when another attempt to treat the daguerreotypes took place. As their current state makes clear, all these restorations failed dramatically (fig. 6). Today, we have plenty of reason to regret these improper treatments, all the more so because there is no written protocol or photographic documentation of the fatal endeavor that could shed light on just what went wrong or when. Ulrich Pohlmann and Marjen Schmidt, who tried to reconstruct the daguerreotype's unfortunate restoration history, summed up the sorry state: "One of the conservators is deceased, and the second one can no longer remember the event."[26]

Today, we are confronted with an unfortunate outcome: each of the three photographs shows little more than a few amorphous patches on its surface. In fact, an inquisitive eye could still decipher some vestiges of the initial photographic depiction. If you look carefully, you may distinguish some buildings' outlines, primarily the chimneys' thin strokes (fig. 7). Beyond that, we could address these surfaces as abstract images, if we kept modernist art in mind.[27] The images' peculiar visual noise also recalls the bottom of a

Petri dish with bacterial cultures. However, such associations cannot hide that one of the most discussed sources from photography's earliest years is now almost completely erased. Compared to the earliest witnesses' experience, the situation is reversed. In 1839, too many visible details distracted viewers from the absences in the pictures. Today, in our expectation of a visual representation close to reality, we are distracted from the presence of very few remnants by too much emptiness.[28]

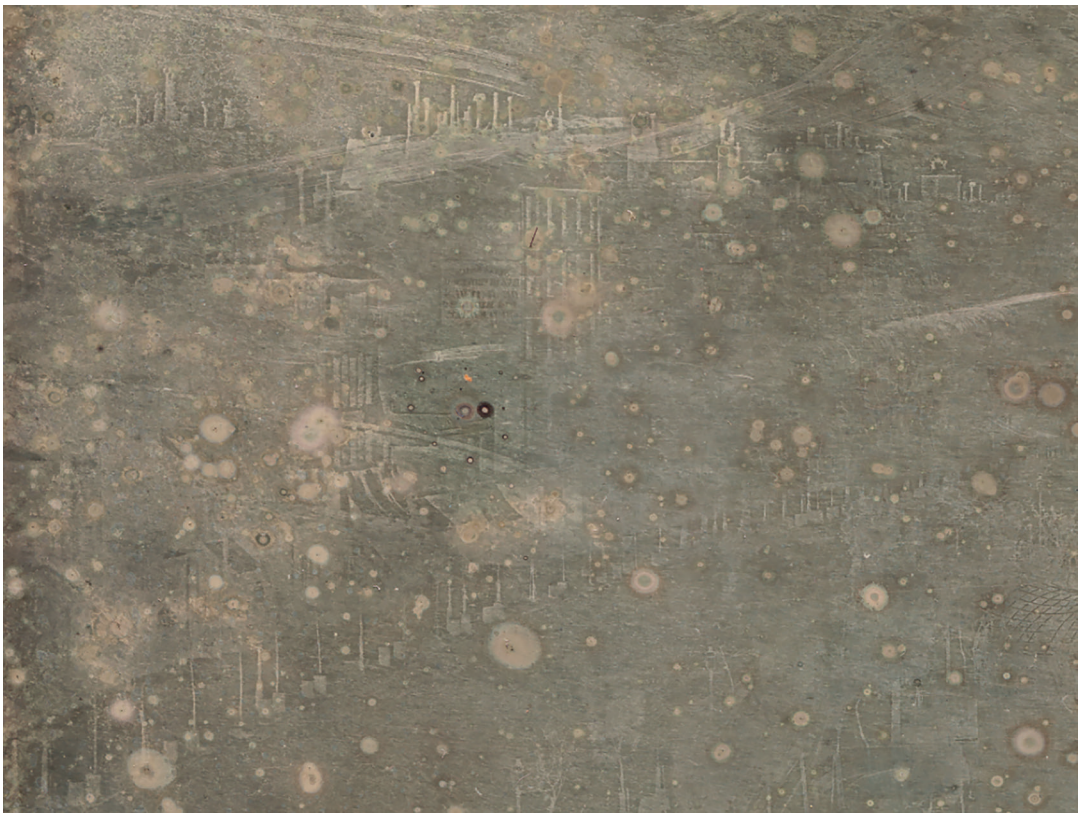
Despite the many reasons for regretting the near destruction of this iconic photograph, it still has much to tell us. It outlines a story far beyond its particular case. On a symbolic level, it questions a narrative that—next to the story of photography's inalienable reproduction of what is present—is one of the oldest and most powerful concepts in the history of photography. When the physicist and astronomer Dominique François Arago gave his short lecture at the Paris Academy of Sciences in January 1839, he exhibited the key word—"fixation"—already in the title of his speech.[29] In the following remarks, he took the camera obscura as a vivid model to explain the translational processes that shape the logic of photographic production. The projection, rendered visible on the apparatus' screen, is a transitory occurrence in time and difficult to behold. Photography answers the desire to study the fugitive image by fixing the transient moment and keeping a durable record of what is usually embedded in an ongoing temporal flux. Arago's explanation has become textbook knowledge: Photographs capture fleeting visual appearances and arrest them, thus making them permanently visible.

Photographic production, however, deals not just with time and the fleeting experiences it entails. The photographic image produced by this arresting action is itself subject to temporality. Slow-moving chemical reactions, vanishing processes, and incidents of damage or loss belie the well-established narrative of making something permanently visible by taking a photograph. The other side of the coin of "fixation" is the sheer fact of instability—of the photographic material and, ultimately, of the information it keeps available. "It is," as Kate Palmer Albers aptly put it, "a simple truth that photographs do exist in a durational range. It is just our understanding that is limited."[30] The pre-digital process of photographic picture-making can provide a model for the durational qualities of the medium: As much as the latent image—still invisible to the eye—had to be developed to become perceivable information, it will eventually become invisible again, thus leaving "its visible phase"[31] and producing a novel kind of photographic latency. We need to think of photographs as transient pictures.

6 Present state of Daguerre's *Vue du Boulevard du Temple*, digital reproduction by Bastian Krack. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum

Building Archives

Shortly before Daguerre issued invitations to distinguished social opinion leaders such as Humboldt or Janin, he had tried to market his invention through subscription. In order to drum up business, he composed a small prospectus explaining the daguerreotype's most essential aspects. According to the inventor, this machine



7 Detail from the upper left corner of fig. 6, showing some traces of the original photographic information in Daguerre's *Vue du Boulevard du Temple*

will enable users to "create collections of every genre."[32] Thus, photography will manifest as a tool to compose repositories filled with positive data, establishing a picture-based presence that will complement the reality of the visible world. It opens up a way of cataloguing the world photographically.[33] More recently, Allan Sekula referred to such an observation: "We might even argue that archival ambitions and procedures are intrinsic to photographic practices."[34] For archives, the medium's fundamental instability comprises more than the apparent problems of conserving and preserving photographic materials. If we take photographs as transient technical products seriously, we should discuss them as a challenge to the historiography of photography.

For Daguerre's photographic production, the process of archive building began already in 1839. While the French parliament discussed buying the rights to the daguerreotype process and, in exchange, granting an annuity to the inventor, another political step was in preparation. During the same summer, Daguerre ordered a set of frames to house his pictures—and to emphasize their value. Precious materials and especially the artful embellishment certainly contributed to such a valorization. Yet, the apparent value did not stem from the picture and its frame alone. Daguerre used the mount, made of cardboard, to place handwritten dedications to his addressees. Despite the bad condition of the "Munich Triptych," the inscription, running right under

8 Národní technické muzeum, Prague, permanent exhibition on the history of photography with the presentation of a still life by Daguerre. Exhibition view taken in January 2023

the three photographs, is still clearly legible: "Epreuve ayant servi à constater la découverte du Daguerréotype, offerte à sa Majesté le Roi de Bavière par son très humble et très obéissant serviteur, Daguerre."[35]

Such a line is more than submissive, somewhat old-fashioned language for dedicating a present. After Daguerre took the photographs in the spring of 1838 and showed them to select guests during the early months of 1839, his wording opened up a third phase for producing originals. By way of a speech act, it declares these daguerreotypes as "épreuves," or proofs, that offer not just the presence of visual traces, showing a street scene or a still life. As original samples, the pictures substantiated the fact that the invention took place and was officially approved through a multilayered publication process. Daguerre could have chosen the alternative option of patenting his invention. In that case, these plates might have ended up in the patent office archives. Yet, after passing the process in the parliament, the photographic proofs located at the center of these events were available for further use.

Later in 1839, these daguerreotypes traveled to several European capitals, always bearing versions of the same handwritten dedication. Besides Munich, such presents also arrived, for instance, in Brussels, Vienna, Berlin, and Saint Petersburg. The addressees were the Belgian king, the Austrian emperor, the king of Prussia, and the Russian tsar. The queen of England was

also on that list of prominent recipients, but she refused the offer from a foreigner.[36] Daguerre may have speculated that he would receive some precious gifts in return, and he was not wrong. But, for the history of media, what matters most is that, with these gifts, Daguerre built up a virtual archive for his invention, leaving a legacy through original examples, which were accessible in multiple metropolises across Europe. Thus, if we want to study such original plates made by Daguerre, we have to retrace the trips made by his pictures in some fashion. Today, such a dispersed archive spans ten institutions—comprising museums, libraries, and archives—in six countries and on two continents (France, Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the United States of America).[37]

Yet, there is currently only one institution where such a visit could happen without a special appointment, the Národní technické muzeum, the National Technical Museum in Prague. Visitors to the permanent exhibition there encounter a peculiar box mounted to the wall deep among the galleries (fig. 8). It is attached to the wall and covered with a thick blanket. An inscription in Czech above it makes apparent what the black fabric hides: a "national cultural landmark." We are invited to lift the covering and push a button on the right side that illuminates the showcase's interior. Here, the original and richly embellished frame holds a still life taken by Daguerre in his studio. The curators at Prague's Technical Museum took great care to present the picture in a manner that protects it from light. A wall label discloses further safety measures for its contents. The box, almost floating at eye level, contains 99.6 % nitrogen, providing a permanently controlled atmosphere for this photographic treasure. The grim fate of the three plates from Munich—most likely caused by air moisture—may justify such a precaution.

Yet, when daguerreotypes are covered in their cases, they are rather insensitive to environmental conditions. A leaking case, however, sets off a fatal oxidation process that would, over time, entirely consume the image.[38] Compared to other photographic techniques, old and new, daguerreotypes are relatively stable and easy to handle. Hence the extravagant showcase from Prague may overdo necessary measures. However, it typifies an awareness of the transient character not just of the daguerreotype but of all photographic media. Paper-based processes such as photogenic drawings or calotypes, for instance, are subject to fading. An unfortunate example is William Henry Fox Talbot's initiative to advertise his invention in 1846 in the British journal *The Art-Union*.[39] Unfortunately, it failed dramatically: Talbot illustrated his short article on "Sun Pictures" with original calotypes. Yet, the production of the positives seemed to have taken place under inappropriate circumstances, leading to rapid fading. First, the readers may have marveled at the calotypes' visual presence. But at some point, they must have been skeptical because of the swift disappearance of visual information.

Such incidents neither belong exclusively to photography's first decades nor do they represent exceptional accidents. Instead, they expose the medium's general case. Recently, Kate Palmer Albers showed how photographic disappearances can even enrich the repertoire of contemporary art practices.[40] Yet, as the notable example of color shifts in various photographic techniques evidences, these processes form an inevitable but usually unwelcome part of photography's ontology. Individual or institutional collectors, in particular, have plenty of reason to lament such a fact. On a more general level of picture-making, the art historian Rudolf Arnheim discussed such alterations or losses "by all sorts of natural violence, by crumbling and rusting, erosion or friction." Turning to the vocabulary of biology, he called it a "catabolic effect" that will, in the end, "grind things to pieces."[41] As Arnheim put it, a discussion of visual ontology must reflect processes' entropy—disorder,

disintegration, decay—as a mandatory parameter for such an interest in man-made objects.

Meditating over the rusty surface of a once brilliantly shining daguerreotype or the pale tones of a calotype that used to convey its objects with high contrast and crisp details, we may feel melancholic. Perhaps we agree with Carolyn Steedman, who provocatively asked for a discipline of "Dust Studies."[42] In her view, the business of historiography literally is "to deal with dust indeed."[43] Reading the past through material vestiges, we obtain nothing but a fragmentary picture, one that balances a shifting interplay of presences and absences. Regarding the case of visual history, and the history of photography in particular, we can even comprehend and behold these fragments in the literal sense of the word. Yet, Steedman also reminds us that 'dust' still claims presence: "It is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone, nothing *can be* destroyed. […] Nothing goes away."[44] Beholding the rusty and, at least on a metaphorical level, dusty presence of Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, we may wonder: what is left?

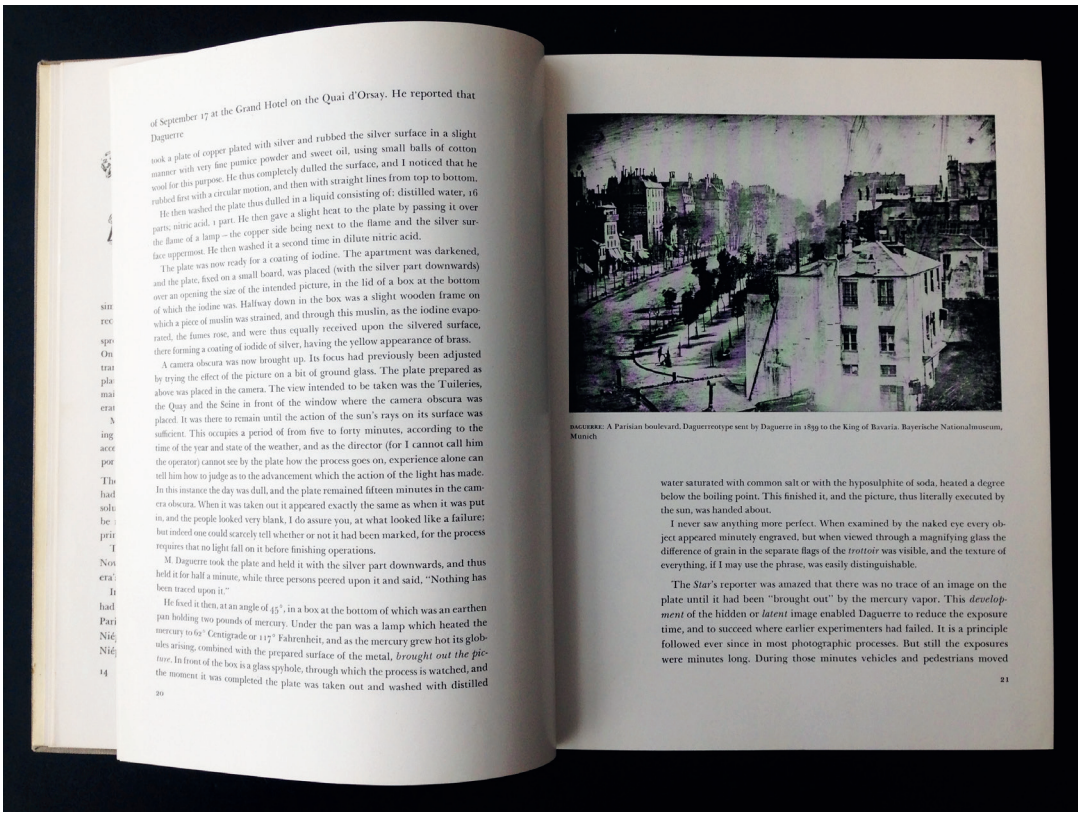
Reproducing Reproductions

The visual information of Daguerre's photographic plate has been absent for many decades. Nobody living today can claim to have seen the street scene in a state from before World War II. Nevertheless, the *View of the Boulevard du Temple* forms part of the culture. In textbooks and other studies on the history of photography, the famous street scene remains one of the most reproduced. Recently it even formed the background of a website advertising the play *Rembrandt Perfected*.[45] As its title indicates, it employs Daguerre's famous photograph: These were the words Samuel Morse, praising the daguerreotype's inimitable qualities, made use of when favorably comparing photographic representations to works by the Dutch painter.[46] The play's storyline seems to justify the prominent use of the daguerreotype's reproduction. A short teaser, put on the website, tells us more about the plot:

> Paris, 1839. American artist and telegraph inventor Samuel Morse and scenic artist Louis Daguerre—whose daguerreotype would usher in the new world of photography—meet for the first time at Daguerre's studio in Paris. While demonstrating their inventions to one another, they notice a silhouetted figure in one of Daguerre's pictures—the first human ever depicted in a photographic image—and devise an outlandish scheme to exploit the individual as part of an ill-conceived publicity stunt to save a failing theatre. But first, they must find him.[47]

Returning to Daguerre's original plate, the fate of that "silhouetted figure" might be regrettable. At last, put in the center of a play, this man entered the stage of popular culture, which is detached from all theoretical considerations that scholars dealing with the history of photography might bring up. The very same silhouette has appeared only recently on the cover of a book, compiling the essays of one of the most rigorous thinkers of photography, Allan Sekula.[48] The *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, and especially its best-known detail of an encounter between two men, has become a cultural token that triggers curiosity for the medium's formative period and helps to initiate discussions for a more complex understanding of photography's ontological status in general.

If one were interested in studying the initial photographic representation once provided on the silvery surface of Daguerre's plate, it would have been useless for many decades to travel to Munich. Yet, such travel has been unnecessary because of so many photographic representations of the photographic representation. The library and, more recently, the internet have


of September 17 at the Grand Hotel on the Quai d'Orsay. He reported that Daguerre

took a plate of copper plated with silver and rubbed the silver surface in a slight manner with very fine pumice powder and sweet oil, using small balls of cotton wool for this purpose. He thus completely dulled the surface, and I noticed that he rubbed first with a circular motion, and then with straight lines from top to bottom.

He then washed the plate thus dulled in a liquid consisting of: distilled water, 16 parts; nitric acid, 1 part. He then gave a slight heat to the plate by passing it over the flame of a lamp – the copper side being next to the flame and the silver surface uppermost. He then washed it a second time in dilute nitric acid.

The plate was now ready for a coating of iodine. The apartment was darkened, and the plate, fixed on a small board, was placed (with the silver part downwards) over an opening the size of the intended picture, in the lid of a box at the bottom of which the iodine was. Halfway down in the box was a slight wooden frame on which a piece of muslin was strained, and through this muslin, as the iodine evaporated, the fumes rose, and were thus equally received upon the silvered surface, there forming a coating of iodide of silver, having the yellow appearance of brass.

A camera obscura was now brought up. Its focus had previously been adjusted by trying the effect of the picture on a bit of ground glass. The plate prepared as above was placed in the camera. The view intended to be taken was the Tuileries, the Quay and the Seine in front of the window where the camera obscura was placed. It was there to remain until the action of the sun's rays on its surface was sufficient. This occupies a period of from five to forty minutes, according to the time of the year and state of the weather, and as the director (for I cannot call him the operator) cannot see by the plate how the process goes on, experience alone can tell him how to judge as to the advancement which the action of the light has made. In this instance the day was dull, and the plate remained fifteen minutes in the camera obscura. When it was taken out it appeared exactly the same as when it was put in, and the people looked very blank, I do assure you, at what looked like a failure; but indeed one could scarcely tell whether or not it had been marked, for the process requires that no light fall on it before finishing operations.

M. Daguerre took the plate and held it with the silver part downwards, and thus held it for half a minute, while three persons peered upon it and said, "Nothing has been traced upon it."

He fixed it then, at an angle of 45°, in a box at the bottom of which was an earthen pan holding two pounds of mercury. Under the pan was a lamp which heated the mercury to 62° Centigrade or 117° Fahrenheit, and as the mercury grew hot its globules arising, combined with the prepared surface of the metal, *brought out the picture*. In front of the box is a glass spyhole, through which the process is watched, and the moment it was completed the plate was taken out and washed with distilled

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DAGUERRE: A Parisian boulevard. Daguerreotype sent by Daguerre in 1839 to the King of Bavaria. Bayerische Nationalmuseum, Munich

water saturated with common salt or with the hyposulphite of soda, heated a degree below the boiling point. This finished it, and the picture, thus literally executed by the sun, was handed about.

I never saw anything more perfect. When examined by the naked eye every object appeared minutely engraved, but when viewed through a magnifying glass the difference of grain in the separate flags of the *trottoir* was visible, and the texture of everything, if I may use the phrase, was easily distinguishable.

The *Star*'s reporter was amazed that there was no trace of an image on the plate until it had been "brought out" by the mercury vapor. This *development* of the hidden or *latent* image enabled Daguerre to reduce the exposure time, and to succeed where earlier experimenters had failed. It is a principle followed ever since in most photographic processes. But still the exposures were minutes long. During those minutes vehicles and pedestrians moved

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9 Spread from Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, New York 1949

supplemented, and often supplanted, the museum and the archive. This replacement involves far-reaching consequences for common research practices.[49] The English language provides a valuable opportunity to give more nuance on the level of words: Only in exceptional cases is our knowledge of the medium's history directly related to photographic material that we could address as an original picture.[50] Instead, we often address—we can and must address—the representation of the representation, or a picture's image. For the practice of writing the histories of photography, the presence and absence of the photographic trace becomes a question of historiographic source criticism.[51]

In that regard, the more recent circumstances of Daguerre's "Munich Triptych" are meaningful. After all three daguerreotypes were lost, the original plates went to the archive. Since then, they have been absent from any exhibition, remaining hidden from the general public. Yet, the artful frame together with the handwritten dedication were still on display for many decades—together with well-known photographs. Without explicitly revealing it to the public, the frame now hosted three photographic reproductions of the then-lost reproductions, masquerading as the original plates once made by Daguerre. Thus, reproduced images instead of original pictures: Was it a questionable curatorial decision? Or, to put it less mildly, was it a betrayal of the good faith of visitors who expected to behold originals and were silently presented with replicas?[52] However, there are good reasons to be less criti-

10 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *Boulevard Saint-Martin*, 1839, daguerreotype, digital reproduction by Pascale Marchesan, 2022. Perpignan, Musée d'Art Hyacinthe Rigaud

cal regarding the stand-in images, which, after all, disguised a regrettable loss and the absence of the historical photographs.

Yet, as the presence of the placeholders makes evident, the concept of originality may elicit more theoretical problems than it solves. Generally speaking, photography has the capacity to be self-similar and establish imitations that are more or less indistinguishable from the original. After all, the option of replicating things was a prominent reason for inventing such reproductive media in the first place.[53] Given the initial uniqueness of the product, only photographic media such as the daguerreotype or, much later, the Polaroid may justify the notion of the original to a certain degree. It is harder to adhere to such a concept regarding the more common reproduction techniques resulting in coequal pictures, the calotype being only the first of many more applications.

For the publishing world, Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple* became a matter of interest only relatively recently. The first printed version of it appeared in 1949, more than a century after its making. But, when it appeared, it was in a distinguished venue: Beaumont Newhall's seminal *History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (fig. 9).[54] After 1949, the printed version of the daguerreotype began an incredible career that has not ended yet. Today, book pages and websites are—and must be—a standard case for encountering this particular motif. Strangely, it is an uprooted presence. In most cases, the *View* is credited to the museum in Munich. But who made the reproductions,

11 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, *Boulevard Saint-Martin*, undated reproduction of the daguerreotype as illustrated in Stephen C. Pinson, *Speculating Daguerre: Art and Enterprise in the Work of L. J. M. Daguerre*, Chicago and London 2012

and when? It remains astonishing that no record is available that makes clear the source. We can only assume that Newhall ordered reproductions from the two street scenes by the end of the 1930s.[55] A more detailed trajectory that would bridge the now lost presence of the daguerreotypes' visual information and the images we are currently working with is missing.

Furthermore, Newhall ordered reproductions only for two of the three plates. Written sources inform us that the daguerreotype in the center of the "Triptych" showed a still life. Yet, as such texts also reveal, it was not the same picture that was on display more recently as a reproduction. Since there was no information available regarding the original subject, the curators in Munich decided after the failed restoration to use a still life from another collection. A reproduction taken from the collections of the Musée Hyacinthe Rigaud in Perpignan completed the Bavarian set of reproductions. Hence, the solution to this absence was a somewhat misleading presence. But it is also possible to understand it as a symbolic shift of historical representations. When it comes to photography, the history of pictures—which are part of the cultural biography of things, as Igor Kopytoff put it—is always related to a history of reproductions and, in the end, to a history of variant images.[56] These histories inform and transcribe each other and refine multiple layers of meaning. They turn the photographic representation into a palimpsest, loaded with information that is both visible and invisible, present and absent.

When we study Daguerre's *View of the Boulevard du Temple* today, we probably do not even notice these absences. The reproduction that is still available may not share all of the material qualities of the original picture. The visual information that we get from this image, however, is substantial enough that we may consider it sufficient for our needs. As further examples from Daguerre's photographic production expose, the gap between a lost original and its circulating reproductions can be vast (figs. 10 – 11). In these cases, these reproductions are in fact reproductions of reproductions, and the visual information they offer is relatively poor and insufficient. They leave us with an unsatisfied desire for a deeper look into the past. Yet, such gaps can substantiate a more general model for our understanding of photography's ontology. We should take each photographic print as a reproduction that is distinct from all others. It shares the traits of graphic media in general: Like copper engraving or etching, the work occurs over time in several stages. The particular presence of a picture manifests through variations belonging to the same image family.[57] An interest in the ontology of the photograph, brought forward by presences and absences, will result in multiple answers. Taken together, they define and, over time, reshape the photographic archive.

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1 Georges Potonniée, *Daguerre: Peintre et décorateur*, Paris 1935, photomechanically reprinted in: Robert Sobieszek (ed.), *The Prehistory of Photography: Five Texts*, New York 1979. See also Stephen C. Pinson, *Speculating Daguerre: Art and Enterprise in the Work of L. J. M. Daguerre*, Chicago and London 2012.

2 Peter Pollack, *The Picture History of Photography: From the Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day*, New York 1958, 42 – 43.

3 Foreign Correspondence (*The Athenæum: Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 26 January 1839), in: Steffen Siegel (ed.), *First Exposures: Writings from the Beginning of Photography*, Los Angeles 2017, 56 – 58; Self-Operating Processes of Fine Art: The Daguerotype (*The Spectator: A Weekly Journal of News, Politics, Literature, and Science*, 2 February 1839), in: ibid., 65 – 68; John Robison, Notes on Daguerre's Photography (*Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal*, 1 June 1839), in: ibid., 178 – 179; Our Weekly Gossip, with a Letter by John Robison (*The Athenæum: Journal of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts*, 8 June 1839), in: ibid., 175 – 177. See also Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MA and London 1997, 133 – 136; Timm Starl, Schuhputzer, in: id., *Kritik der Fotografie*, Marburg 2012, 251 – 260.

4 Allan Sekula, An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures, in: *Grey Room* 55, 2014, 16 – 27, here 25. Eugenia Parry Janis aptly referred to the man as a "bug in amber": Eugenia Parry Janis, The Bug in Amber and the Dance of Life, in: *Vanishing Presence* (exh. cat. Minneapolis, Walker Art Center), Minneapolis 1989, 8 – 29, here 9.

5 Another prominent visitor to Daguerre's studio, Samuel F. B. Morse, was among the first to put this Parisian street scene under a magnifying glass—in the literal sense of the word. A few weeks later, the *New-York Observer* printed a detailed account of his visit. Interestingly, Morse differentiated between presence and absence in a different way: "Objects moving are not impressed. The Boulevard, so constantly filled with a moving throng of pedestrians and carriages, was perfectly solitary, except an individual who was having his boots brushed. His feet were compelled, of course, to be stationary for some time, one being on the box of the boot-black, and the other on the ground. Consequently, his boots and legs are well defined, but he is without body or head because these were in motion." Samuel F. B. Morse, The Daguerrotipe (*New-York Observer*, 20 April 1839), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 85 – 87, here 86.

6 David Bate has discussed it as a form of photographic abstractionism: David Bate, Daguerre's Abstraction, in: *Photographies* 9, 2016, 135 – 146.

7 *Paris et le daguerréotype* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée Carnavalet), ed. by Françoise Reynaud, Paris 1989; Shelley Rice, *Parisian Views*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1997. For a more detailed discussion of the boulevard's historical topography, see Yoann Brault, Une régénération de la promenade au milieu du XVIII^{e} siècle? Évolution et influence du boulevard du Temple à Paris, in: Christophe Loir and Laurent Turcot (eds.), *La promenade au tournant des XVIII^{e} et XIX^{e} siècles (Belgique, France, Angleterre)*, Brussels 2011, 23 – 39.

8 Helene E. Roberts (ed.), *Art History Through the Camera's Lens*, Amsterdam 1995; Costanza Caraffa (ed.), *Fotografie als Instrument und Medium der Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin and Munich 2009; Hubert Locher and Maria Männig (eds.), *Lehrmedien der Kunstgeschichte: Geschichte und Perspektiven kunsthistorischer Medienpraxis*, Berlin and Munich 2022.

9 Alexander von Humboldt, letter to Carl Gustav Carus (25 February 1839), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 75 – 77, here 75.

10 Steffen Siegel, No Room for Doubt? Daguerre and His First Critics, in: Sabine T. Kriebel and Andrés Mario Zervigón (eds.), *Photography and Doubt*, London and New York 2017, 29 – 43.

11 Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 75 – 76.

12 Jules Janin, The Daguerotype (*L'Artiste: Journal de la littérature et des beaux-arts*, 28 January 1839), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 58 – 64, here 61. On Janin's role as a pioneer for disseminating information on the daguerreotype, see Paul-Louis Roubert, Jules Janin et le daguerréotype: Entre l'histoire et la réalité, in: Danièle Méaux (ed.), *Photographie et romanesque*, Caen 2006, 25 – 37.

13 Edgar Allan Poe, The Daguerreotype (*Alexander's Weekly Messenger*, 15 January 1840), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 327 – 328, here 327 (emphasis in the original).

14 Charles Leo: Colorized Boulevard du Temple by Daguerre, 28 October 2010, URL: https://www.lunarlog.com/colorized-boulevard-du-temple-daguerre/ (last accessed 25 April 2025).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Steffen Siegel, Cat in the Window? A Closer Look at How People Try to Have a Closer Look, in: Amos Morris Reich and Margaret Olin (eds.), *Photography and Imagination*, London and New York 2020, 3 – 14.

18 James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, New York 2011, 208.

19 The long-lasting impact of such a concept is discussed in Diane Dufour (ed.), *Images of Conviction: The Construction of Visual Evidence*, Paris 2015.

20 Leo 2010 (as in note 14).

21 Peter von Waldthausen, Daguerre bevorzugte die Senkrechten: Analyse einer Aufnahme aus der Frühzeit der Photographie, in: *Photographie* 7, 1983, no. 10, 102 – 105.

22 Erich Stenger, *Die Photographie in München 1839 – 1860*, Berlin 1939, 25 – 26; *Le daguerréotype français: Un objet photographique* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée d'Orsay; New York, The Metropolitan Museum), ed. by Quentin Bajac and Dominique Planchon-de-Font-Réaulx, Paris 2003, 149 – 151; Pinson 2012 (as in note 1), 202 – 203.

23 Daguerre's Light Drawings (*Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 October 1839), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 308 – 309.

24 Stenger 1939 (as in note 22), 27 – 28.

25 Ulrich Pohlmann and Marjen Schmidt, Das Münchner Daguerre-Triptychon: Ein Protokoll zur Geschichte seiner Präsentation, Aufbewahrung und Restaurierung, in: *Fotogeschichte* 14, 1994, no. 52, 3 – 13.

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31 Ibid., 4.

32 Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, Daguerréotype (1838), in: Siegel 2017 (as in note 3), 34 – 37, here 35.

33 Joan M. Schwartz, "Records of Simple Truth and Precision": Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control, in: *Archivaria* 50, 2000, no. 2, 1 – 40; John Tagg, The Archiving Machine; or, The Camera and the Filing Cabinet, in: *Grey Room* 47, 2012, 24 – 37;

Kelley Wilder, Photographic Cataloguing, in: Gregg Mitman and Kelley Wilder (eds.), *Documenting the World: Film, Photography, and the Scientific Record*, Chicago and London 2016, 200 – 223.

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38 M. Susan Barger and William B. White, *The Daguerreotype: Nineteenth-Century Technology and Modern Science*, Baltimore and London 2000, 117 – 215; Debra Hess Norris and Jennifer Jae Gutierrez (eds.), *Issues in the Conservation of Photographs*, Los Angeles 2010, 236 – 291.

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41 Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1971, 15.

42 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, Manchester 2001, 157.

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45 *Rembrandt Perfected*, a play by Braddon Mendelson which premiered in January 2023 in Newhall, California. URL: https://rembrandtperfected.com/ (last accessed 25 April 2025).

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50 W.J.T. Mitchell, What Is an Image?, in: id., *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago and London 1986, 7 – 46.

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52 Sylvia Ballhause, Echte Täuschung? Original und Duplikat des Münchner Daguerre-Triptychons, in: *Fotogeschichte* 31, 2011, no. 121, 37 – 44.

53 Stephen Bann, *Parallel Lines: Printmakers, Painters and Photographers in Nineteenth-Century France*, New Haven and London 2001; Joel Snyder, Making Photographs Public, in: Thierry Gervais (ed.), *The "Public" Life of Photographs*, Cambridge, MA and London 2016, 17 – 37; Steffen Siegel, Nicéphore Niépce and the Industry of Photographic Replication, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 163, 2021, 1112 – 1119.

54 Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day*, New York 1949, 21. Surprisingly, Erich Stenger, who authored an entire monograph on the history of photography in Munich, discussed the "Triptych" at some length but missed showing it. See Stenger 1939 (as in note 22), 25 – 28. Interestingly, Newhall also did not incorporate it in earlier versions of his textbook on the history of photography.

55 Beaumont Newhall, *Focus: Memoirs of a Life in Photography*, Boston 1993, 43 – 53.

56 Igor Kopytoff, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986, 64 – 91.

57 This term has been in use for photographic media regarding its material logic, for instance the distinction between a negative and its possible positives. See Victor Flores, Carlos Relvas's Stereoscopic Photography: The Digital Reunion of Negatives and Prints, in: *History of Photography* 44, 2020, 231 – 248.

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