Walter Benjamin

The fog surrounding the origins of photography is not quite as thick as that enveloping the beginnings of printing. In the case of the former it was perhaps more obvious that the hour of invention had arrived, for it had been apprehended by a number of people: men striving independently towards the same goal, that is, to capture images in the *camera obscura* which had certainly been known since Leonardo's time, if not before. When Niépce and Daguerre, after approximately fifty years of experiment, succeeded in doing this simultaneously, the state used the legal difficulties encountered by the inventors over patent rights to assume control of the enterprise, thereby making it public by covering its costs. In this way the conditions were established for a continuously accelerating development which for a long period foreclosed all retrospective appraisal. This is why the historical or, if you like, philosophical questions relating to the rise and fall of photography have remained unattended for decades. And if today we are becoming conscious of them, there is a precise reason for it. Recent studies start from the striking fact that the prime of photography – the work of Hill, Cameron, Hugo and Nadar – occurs in its first decade. But that is the decade which precedes its industrialisation. Not that this early period was not already full of market vendors and charlatans who had mastered the new technique for the sake of profit; indeed they did so on a mass scale. But the latter belonged to the fairground and its traditional arts, where photography has always been at home, rather than to industry. Industry conquered the field with the visiting-card snapshot, its first manufacturer characteristically becoming a millionaire. It would not be surprising if the photographic practices which today, for the first time, direct our gaze back to that pre-industrial prime, turned out to be linked subterraneously with the crisis of capitalism. But that does not allow us to pretend that the charm of the older pictures, such as have recently appeared in handsome volumes,[1] can provide real insights into the nature of photography. Attempts to master the subject theoretically have so far proved thoroughly rudimentary. And in the previous century none of the many debates on the matter could be free of that scurrilous schema, illustrated by the way in which a chauvinist rag, the *Leipzig City Advertiser*, sought to counteract the French art of the devil: 'To try to catch transient reflected images', it states, 'is not merely something that is impossible, but, as a thorough German investigation has shown, the

* *A Short History of Photography* was originally published in The Literarische Welt of 18.9., 25.9. and 2.10.1931.

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very desire to do so is blasphemy. Man is created in the image of God and God's image cannot be captured by any human machine. Only the divine artist, divinely inspired, may be allowed, in a moment of solemnity, at the higher call of his genius, to dare to reproduce the divine-human features, but never by means of a mechanical aid!, here, in all its ponderous vulgarity, treads forth the philistine notion of art, dismissive of every technical consideration, yet sensing its doom as the new technology makes its provocative entry. Nevertheless, it is this fetishistic, fundamentally anti-technical notion of *Art* with which theorists of photography have tussled for almost a century without, of course, achieving the slightest result. For they sought nothing beyond acquiring credentials for the photographer from the judgment-seat which he had already overturned. An entirely different atmosphere emanates from the exposé which the physicist Arago presented to the Chamber of Deputies on July 3, 1838 in favour of Daguerre's invention. What is attractive about this speech is how it manages to touch on all sides of human activity. It sketches a panorama large enough to render unimportant the dubious credentials which photography is prevailed upon (even here) to accept from painting and to open up instead the real possibilities of the invention. 'When inventors of a new instrument', says Arago, 'apply it to the observation of nature, the hopes that they place upon it are always insignificant compared with the number of subsequent discoveries of which the instrument was the origin'. In a single sweep this speech embraces the field of new technologies from astrophysics to philology: the prospect of stellar photography is adjoined by the idea of photographing a corpus of Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Daguerre's photographs were iodised silver plates exposed in the dark room which, by being turned about in the correct lighting, would reveal a delicate-grey picture. They were unique copies and in 1839 averaged 25 gold francs a plate. Not uncommonly they were kept in cases like jewellery. In the hands of many painters, however, they became technical aids. Just as seventy years later Utrillo painted his fascinating pictures of the Parisian suburbs not from real life, but from postcards, so the respected English portraitist, David Octavius Hill used a large number of portrait-photographs for his fresco of the first general synod of the Scottish Church in 1843. But he took these pictures himself. And it is these humble aids designed for internal use, which have given his name to its historical place, while as a painter he is forgotten. Certain of his studies actually penetrate further into the new technique than this series of portrait heads: these are anonymous pictures of people. Painting has known heads like these for a long time. Where a painting belonged to the family, one might from time to time enquire after the originals of the portraits. But within two or three generations the interest dies: the pictures, to the extent that they survive, do so only as testimony to the art of the person

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who painted them. In photography, however, one encounters a new and strange phenomenon: in that fishwife from Newhaven,* who casts her eyes down with such casual, seductive shame, there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of Hill the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into *art*.

> And I ask: how did the beauty of this hair
> and this look encircle the earlier beings:
> How did this mouth kiss to which desire
> unconsciously curls like smoke without a flame.

Or look at the picture of Dauthendey, the photographer, father of the poet, taken when he was engaged to the woman whom one day, shortly after the birth of her sixth child, he was to find lying with slashed wrists in the bedroom of his Moscow home. Here she is seen standing next to him, he appears to have his arm round her; yet her gaze reaches beyond him, absorbed into an ominous distance.† Look at such a picture long enough and you realise how much the opposites come together yet again: the most exact technique can give its products a magical value which a painted picture can no longer have for us. However skilful the photographer, however carefully he poses his model, the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it. It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously. It is possible, for example, however roughly, to describe the way somebody walks, but it is impossible to say anything about that fraction of a second when a person *starts to walk*. Photography with its various aids (lenses, enlargements) can reveal this moment. Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious. Structural qualities, cellular tissues, which form the natural business of technology and medicine are all much more closely related to the camera than to the atmospheric landscape or the expressive portrait. At the same time photography uncovers in this material physiognomic aspects of pictorial words which live in the smallest things, perceptible yet covert enough to find shelter in daydreams, but which, once enlarged and capable of formulation, show the difference between technology and magic to be entirely a matter of historical

* See plate 1, p 9
† See plate 2, p 10

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variables. Thus Blossfeldt,[2] in his astonishing plant photography,* revealed the most ancient column forms in pewter-glass, totem-poles in ten times magnified sprigs of chestnut and acorn, gothic tracery in teasel. Hence Hill's models were not all that far from the truth when they felt 'the phenomenon of photography' still to be 'a great mysterious experience', even if this feeling was no more than the consciousness of 'standing in front of an instrument which in the briefest span of time could produce a picture of the invisible surrounding world which appeared as alive and real as nature itself'. It was said of Hill's camera that it maintained a discreet reserve. But his models were no less reserved: they preserved a certain shyness before the camera and the motto of a later photographer of the heyday: 'Don't look at the camera' could well have been derived from their behaviour. But there it was not a question of the photographed animals, people or babies 'looking at you', which implicated the customer in so impure a fashion and to which no better reply can be made than the elder Dauthendey's comment on the daguerrotype: 'People were afraid at first', he reported, 'to look for any length of time at the pictures he produced. They were embarrassed by the clarity of these figures and believed that the little, tiny faces of the people in the pictures could see out at them, so amazing did the unaccustomed detail and the unaccustomed truth to nature of the first daguerrotype pictures appear to everyone'.

In the visual world of photography the first people reproduced made their appearance unblemished or rather uncaptioned. Newspapers were still luxuries which one rarely bought, but rather looked at in cafés. As yet they made no use of photography, nor did the overwhelming majority of people see their name in print. The human face was surrounded by a silence inside which the gaze was in repose. In short, all the possibilities of portraiture depended on an absence of contact between photography and actuality. Many of Hill's portraits were taken in the Greyfriars cemetery of Edinburgh† and nothing is more characteristic of this period than the extent to which his models seemed at home there. Indeed, in one of Hill's pictures the cemetery looks like an interior, a secluded, enclosed space in which the tombstones. set against partition-walls, rise up from the grass, hollowed out like chimney-pieces with inscriptions taking the place of flames. Nevertheless, this location could never have achieved its effect, had there not been good technical reasons for choosing it. The earlier plates were far less sensitive to light and this necessitated long exposures in the open. This in turn made it desirable to place the subject in as secluded a spot as possible where nothing could disturb concentration. 'The synthesis of expression brought about by the length of time that a model has to stand still', says Orlik of the early photography, 'is the main

* See plate 3, p 11
† See plate 4, p 12

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Newhaven, Elizabeth Johnstone, the beautiful fishwife: (Photo. David Octavius Hill)

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The photographer Karl Dauthendey with his betrothed Miss Friedrich, St Petersburg, 1957

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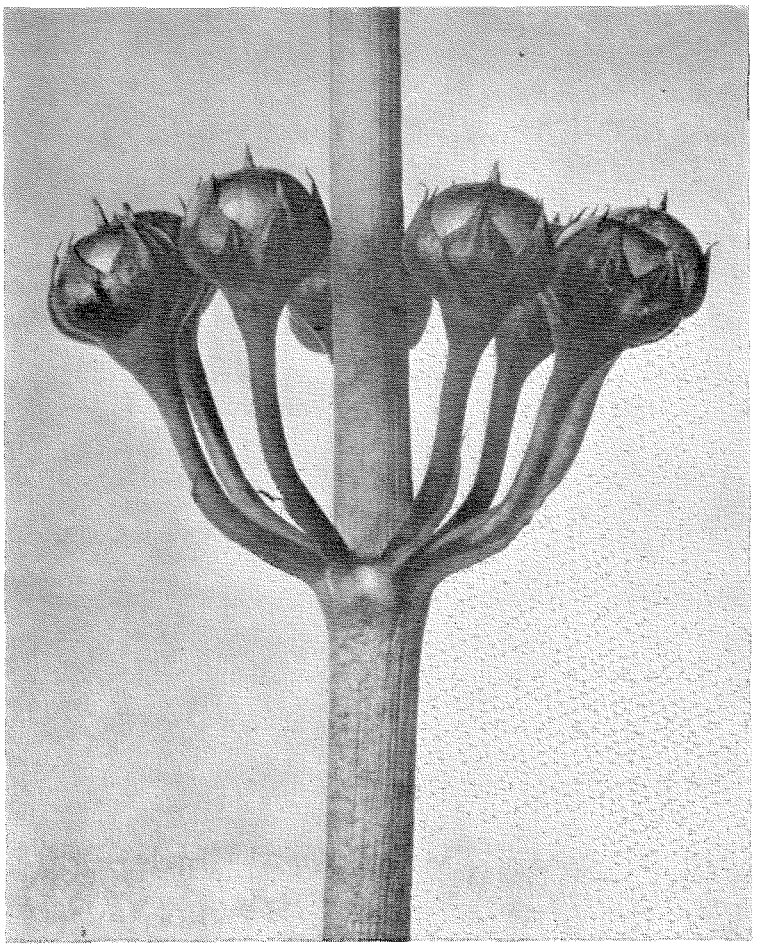

From: Karl Blossfeldt, *Wunder in der Natur* (pub. Leipzig 1942)

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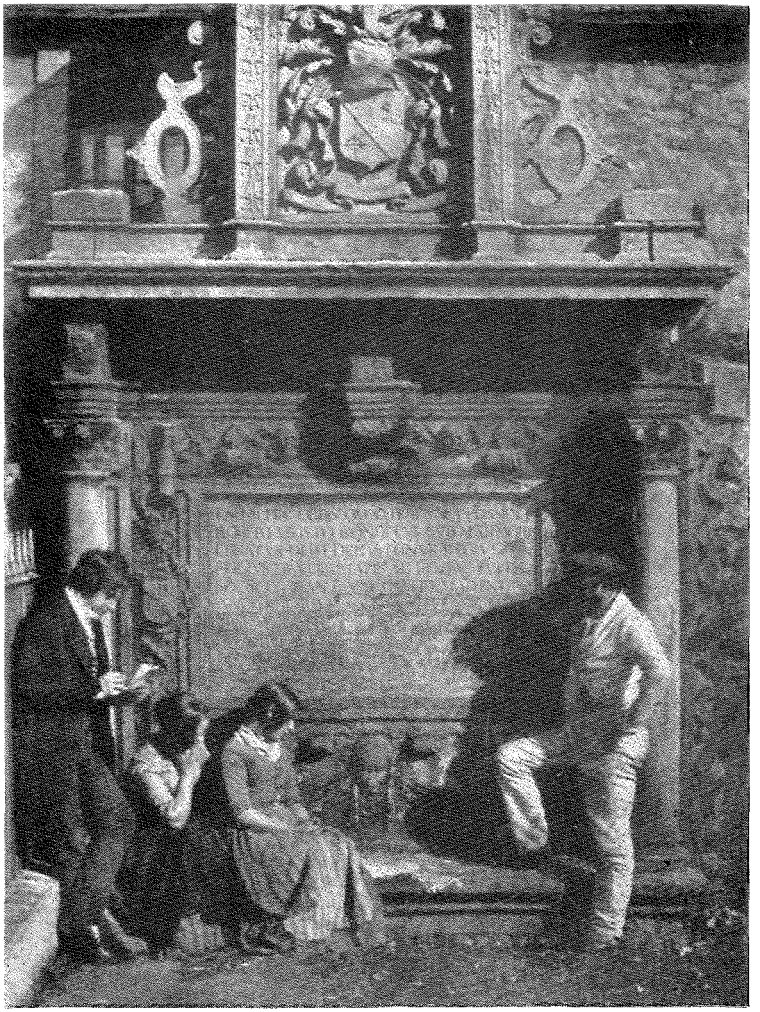

Edinburgh, Greyfriars Churchyard: (Photo. David Octavius Hill)

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Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, 1850 (by an unknown German photographer)

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Christian Rauch, sculptor, Berlin, 1847. (Photo. Hermann Biouw). Reproduced by permission of the Staatliche Landesbildstelle, Hamburg.

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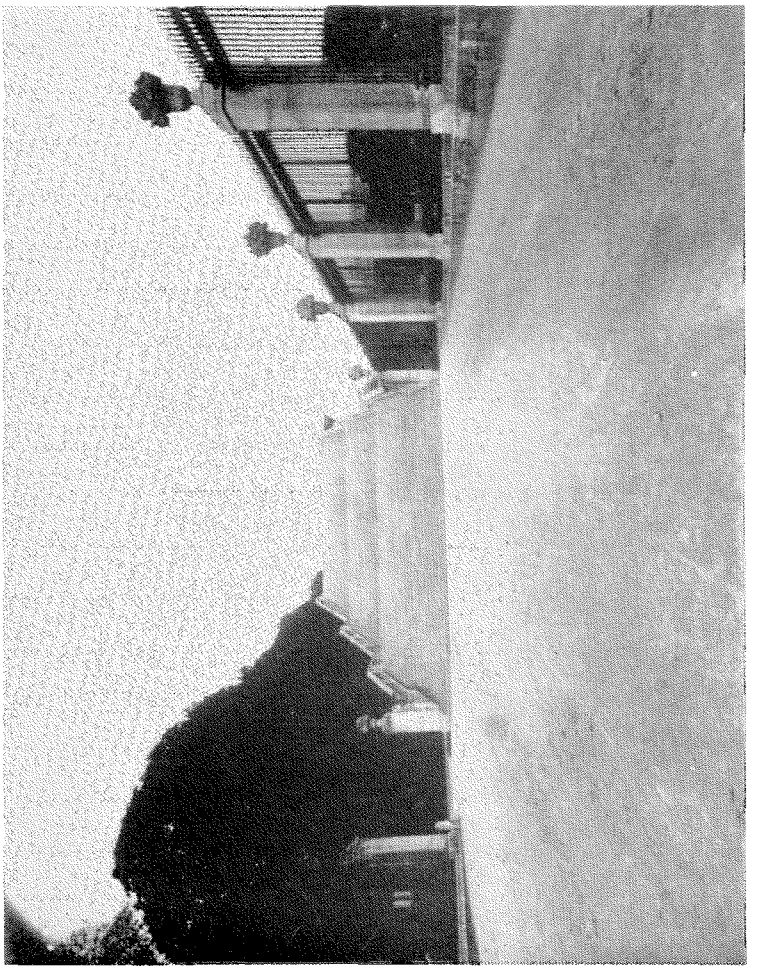

Versailles c.1910: (Photo. Eugene Atget) The Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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Peasant couple, 1931 (Photo. August Sander)

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reason why these pictures, apart from their simplicity, resemble well-drawn or painted portraits and have a more penetrating and lasting effect on the spectator than more recent photography '. The procedure itself taught the models to live inside rather than outside the moment. During the long duration of these shots they grew as it were into the picture and in this way presented an extreme opposite to the figures on a snapshot. For the latter corresponds to that transformed world where, as Kracauer aptly remarked, it is the split second of the exposure which decides 'whether a sportsman has become famous enough to deserve being photographed for the illustrated papers '. Everything in the early pictures was designed to last; not only the incomparable groupings in which the subjects came together – whose disappearance was certainly one of the most accurate symptoms of what was happening in society itself in the second half of the century – even the folds assumed by a garment in these pictures last longer. One has only to look at Schelling's coat*; its immortality, too, rests assured; the shape it assumes upon its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in the latter's face. In short, everything testifies to Bernhard von Brentano's supposition 'that a photographer of 1850 stood at the same level as his instrument' – for the first and for long, the last time.

Further, in order to appreciate the enormous effect of the daguerrotype in the age of its discovery, one must remember that at the time entirely new perspectives were being discovered in open air painting by the most advanced painters. Conscious that it was precisely here that photography should be taking over from painting, Arago, casting a historical glance at the early attempts of Giovanni Battista Porta, explicitly remarks that: 'as far as the effect that depends on the imperfect transparency of our atmosphere is concerned (and which has been characterised by the mistaken term *aerial perspective*), not even practised painters expect the *camera obscura* ' (rather, the copying of the pictures produced by it) ' to help them in reproducing the latter with precision '. it was when Daguerre succeeded in fixing the pictures of the camera obscura that the painters were left behind by the technician. However, the real victim of photography was not landscape painting, but the miniature portrait. Things developed so quickly that by 1840 most of the innumerable miniature painters had become professional photographers, at first merely as a sideline, then exclusively so. They were assisted by the experience of their original profession, but they owed their high level of photographic achievement to their technical rather than their artistic training. This transitional generation disappeared very gradually; indeed, a kind of Biblical blessing seemed to rest upon these first photographers: Nadar, Stelzner, Pierson, Bayard all lived to be ninety or a hundred. Finally, however, the ranks of the professional photographer were

* See plate 5, p 13

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invaded on all sides by businessmen, and when subsequently the practice of touching up the negative became widespread (the bad painter's revenge on photography), a sharp decline in taste set in. This was the period of the thick photograph album. Its favoured location was the most chill part of the house, on pier or pedestal tables in the drawing-room. Leatherbound, embossed with metal mounts, it sported upon its gold-rimmed, fingerthick pages absurdly draped or laced figures – uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, Trudchen when she was little, Father in his first term at university – and finally, to crown the shame, ourselves: as drawing-room Tyroleans, yodelling and waving hats against a background of painted snow peaks or as spruce sailors, leaning one leg straight, the other bent, as is proper, against a polished door-jamb. The accessories of such portraits, the pedestals, balustrades and diminutive oval tables still recall the time when, due to the long exposure, the subject required supports in order to remain still. If at the beginning one made do with *headrests* or *kneesupports*, other accessories soon followed, such as were to be found in famous paintings and which therefore had to be *artistic*. At first it was the pillar or curtain.* Already in the sixties the abler men felt moved to protest against this nonsense. So one contemporary English professional journal wrote: 'In painted pictures the pillar had the appearance of possibility, but the manner in which it is used in photography is absurd, for it usually stands on a carpet. There is no one, however, who has to be convinced that marble or stone pillars do not require a carpet as foundation.' It was the time when those studios appeared with draperies and palm-trees, tapestries and easels, looking like a cross between an execution and a representation, between a torture chamber and a throne room, and of which shattering testimony is provided by an early photograph of Kafka. A boy of about six, dressed in a tight-fitting, almost deliberately humiliating child's suit, overladen with lace, is seen standing in a kind of wintergarden landscape. The background teems with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still stickier and sultrier, the subject holds in his left hand an immoderately large hat with a broad brim of the type worn by Spaniards. He would surely disappear into the setting, were it not for his immeasurably sad eyes which dominate the landscape that has been predestined for them.

This picture in its infinite sadness forms a pendant to the early photography where the people did not, as yet, look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy. They had an aura about them, a medium which mingled with their manner of looking and gave them a plenitude and security. Once more the technical equivalent for this is very obvious; it consists in an absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow. Here, too, the law whereby new achievements are forecast in an

* See plate 6, p 14

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older technique finds confirmation; for the former portrait painting had produced the unique flowering of mezzotint engraving before its decline. The mezzotint engraving depended on a technique of reproduction which was of course only later to link up with the new photographic technique. As on mezzotint engraving plates, so the light in Hill's photography struggles painfully out of darkness. Orlik speaks of the 'coherent direction of light' produced by the long exposure, which gives 'these early photographs their greatness'. And among contemporaries of the invention Delaroche remarked on the 'unprecedented and delightful' general impression 'which in no way disturbs the repose of the masses'. So much for the technical conditioning of the auratic appearance. In particular, many group photographs still retain a sense of animated togetherness on the plate which disappears in the print (*Originalaufnahme*). This delicate articulation was sometimes caught with beauty and depth within the now old-fashioned oval frame. Hence it is wrong to emphasise the *artistic perfection* or *taste* of these incunabula of photography. These pictures were produced in premises where from the outset each customer met in his photographer a technician of the latest school and where the photographer met in every customer a member of a class on the ascendant, replete with an aura which penetrated to the very folds of his bourgeois overcoat or bow-tie. For the mere manufacture of a primitive camera does not in itself constitute an aura. Rather in these early times do object and technique correspond as clearly as they diverge in the succeeding period of decline. Soon an advanced optics would be using instruments capable of overcoming darkness completely and of registering objects with the clarity of a mirror. Nevertheless, the photographers of the post-1880 period saw it as their task to simulate with the aid of all the arts of retouching, especially the so-called rubber print, that aura which had been removed in just the same way from the picture by more powerful cameras, as it had from reality by the increasing degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie. Thus, especially in the *Jugendstil*, a shadowy tone, broken by artificial light reflections, became fashionable; yet, despite this twilight, a posturing stance emerged ever more clearly betraying by its blinkerdness the impotence of that generation in the face of technical progress.

And yet the decisive thing about photography is the relationship of the photographer to his technique. Camille Recht catches it by an attractive comparison: 'The violinist', he says, 'has first to create his note, to search for and find it with lightning speed; the pianist strikes the keys and produces a sound. Both painter and photographer use an instrument. The painter's drawing and colouring corresponds to the violinist's forming of his notes; the photographer like the pianist is given an apparatus in advance which is subject to much more restricting laws than those imposed on the violinist. A Paderewski will never earn the fame or exercise the

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near-legendary magic of a Paganini '. But, to stay with the comparison, there is a Busoni of photography, namely Atget. Both were virtuosi and at the same time forerunners. Unexampled devotion to their work coupled with the greatest precision characterised them both. Atget was an actor who, repelled by his profession, tore off his mask and then sought to strip reality of its camouflage. Poor and unknown, he lived in Paris, selling his photography for a song to amateurs scarcely less eccentric than he. He died recently, leaving behind an *oeuvre* of more than four thousand pictures. Berenice Abbot of New York has collected them together and a selection has now appeared in a very fine volume published by Camille Recht.[3] The contemporary journals ' knew nothing of the man who hawked his pictures mainly round the art studios, throwing them away for a few pence, often for no more than the price of one of those picture postcards of around 1900 which show charming views of the city bathed in midnight blue, complete with a touched-up moon. He reached the pole of perfect mastery; but with the embittered mastery of a great craftsman who always lives in the shadows, he neglected to plant his flag there. Hence many others may imagine they have discovered the pole, when Atget had been there before them '. Indeed, Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of surrealist photography; vanguard of the only really broad column which surrealism was able to set in motion. He was the first to disinfect the stuffy atmosphere spread by the conventional portrait photography of the period of decline. He cleansed this atmosphere, indeed cleared it altogether. He initiated the liberation of the object from the aura, which is the most incontestable achievement of the recent school of photography. When *Bifur* or *Variété*, magazines of the avant-garde, present the merest details under such captions as ' Westminster ', ' Lille ', ' Antwerp ', or ' Breslau ' – here a section of balustrade, there a bare treetop with branches crisscrossing over a gaslamp, or a partition-wall, or a candelabra with a safety ring bearing the name of the town – these are merely the literary pointings-up of motifs discovered by Atget. He seeks the forgotten and the forsaken, and hence such pictures are directed against the exotic, ostentatious, romantic sound of city names; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship. What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer's noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence – this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch. Today, people have as passionate an inclination to *bring things close* to themselves or even more to the masses, as to overcome uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it. Every day the need grows more urgent to possess an object in the closest proximity, through a picture or, better, a reproduction. And the

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reproduction, as the illustrated newspaper and weekly readily prove, distinguishes itself unmistakably from the picture. Uniqueness and permanence are as closely intertwined in the latter as transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. The prizing of the object from its shell, the destruction of its aura is the mark that the sense of the sameness of things in the world has grown to such an extent that by means of reproduction even the unique is made to yield up its uniqueness. Atget always passed by 'the grand views and the so-called landmarks'; what gave him pause would be a huge row of bootlasts or Parisian courtyards full of trucks drawn up in rank and file from evening to morning; or those hundreds of thousands of well-worn tables you see, the dirty dishes left standing; or brothel Rue . . . No 5 where the number five appears in giant letters at four different places on the façade. The remarkable thing about these pictures, however, is their emptiness. The Porte d'Acceuil at the fortifications is empty, so too are the triumphal steps, the courtyards, the café terraces and, as is proper, the Place du Tertre. They are not lonely, but they lack atmosphere; the city in these pictures is empty in the manner of a flat which has not yet found a new occupant. They are the achievements of surrealist photography which presages a salutary estrangement between man and his environment, thus clearing the ground for the politically-trained eye before which all intimacies serve the illumination of detail.*

It is obvious that this new way of seeing is least at home where indulgence was most common: in the remunerative, representative portrait-photograph. On the other hand, photography cannot do without people. And whoever did not know this will have been taught by the best Russian films that even milieu and landscape will only reveal themselves to a photographer who is able to transform their anonymity into a physiognomy. Yet this possibility is very much determined by the subject. It was the generation least intent on having itself photographed for posterity, seeking rather shyly to withdraw into everyday life when faced with such a prospect – like the Schopenhauer of the Frankfurt picture of 1850, digging himself well back into his armchair – which for this very reason succeeded in transmitting its everyday life on to the plate. But this generation did not pass on its virtues. It was only decades later that the feature film gave the Russians the opportunity of placing before the camera people with no interest in being photographed. At the same time the human face assumed new and infinite meaning on the film-plate. But it was no longer a portrait. What was it? A German photographer earned the distinction of having answered this question. August Sander[4] compiled a series of faces which vies with the magnificent physiognomic gallery opened up by Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and this from a scientific point of view. 'His entire opus is arranged in seven groups, corresponding

* See plate 7, p 15

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to the existing social order and is to be published in roughly forty-five albums, comprising twelve photographs each '. So far there is a selected volume with sixty reproductions which provide inexhaustible material for study. ' Sander starts with the peasant,* the earth-bound man, and takes the reader through all the strata and occupations, up to on the one hand the highest representatives of civilisation and on the other down to imbeciles '. It was not as a scholar, advised by race theorists or social researchers, that the author undertook his enormous task, but, in the publisher's words, ' as the result of immediate observation '. It is indeed unprejudiced observation, bold and at the same time delicate, very much in the spirit of Goethe's remark: ' There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes theory '. Accordingly it is quite proper that an observer like Döblin should light upon precisely the scientific aspects of this opus and point out: ' Just as there is a comparative anatomy which enables one to understand the nature and history of organs, so here the photographer has produced a comparative photography, thereby gaining a scientific standpoint which places him beyond the photographer of detail.' It would be lamentable if economic circumstances prevented the further publication of this extraordinary corpus. However, there is an even surer way of encouraging the publisher apart from this fundamental reason. Work like Sander's can assume an unsuspected actuality overnight. Shifts in power, to which we are now accustomed, make the training and sharpening of a physiognomic awareness into a vital necessity. Whether one is of the right or the left, one will have to get used to being seen in terms of one's provenance. And in turn, one will see others in this way too. Sander's work is more than a picture-book, it is an atlas of instruction.

' In our age there is no work of art which is regarded with as much attention as a photograph of oneself, one's closest relatives and friends, one's sweetheart ', wrote Lichtwark as early as 1907, thereby shifting the investigation from the sphere of aesthetic distinctions to that of social functions. Only from this standpoint can the investigation go forward again. It is indeed characteristic that the debate should have hardened most of all over the question of the aesthetics of *photography as an art,* while for example the so much less questionable social fact of *art as photography* scarcely received a glance. And yet the effect of the photographic reproduction of works of art is of much greater importance for the function of art than whether a photograph is more or less artistic in its composition; for the latter turns into *the exploiting camera (Kamerabeute).* Indeed, is not the homecoming amateur with his vast number of artistic snaps more contented than the hunter, returning laden with the game which is only of value to the trader. And indeed the time seems not far off when there will be more

* See plate 8, p 16

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illustrated papers than game and poultry shops. So much for the *snapshot*. But the accents change completely, if one turns from photography as art to art as photography. Everyone will have observed how much easier it is to get the measure of a picture, especially sculpture, not to mention architecture, in a photograph than in reality. It is indeed tempting to put this down to a decline in appreciation for art, an abdication on the part of the present generation. But that is gainsaid by the fact that the development of reproductive techniques has been more or less paralleled by a change in the appreciation of great works of art. The latter can no longer be seen as the productions of individuals; they have become collective formations of such enormous dimensions that their assimilation is dependent precisely on their diminution. The result of the mechanical methods of reproduction, ultimately, is to have provided a technique of diminution which helps men to a degree of control over works of art without whose aid they could no longer be used.

If anything characterises the relations between art and photography today, it is the unresolved tension introduced between them by the photography of works of art. Many of the photographers who determine the present-day character of this technique began as painters. They turned their back on painting after attempts to relate its means of expression to the life of today in a living and straightforward way. The keener their awareness of the nature of the times, the more problematic did their point of departure become for them. Just as eighty years previously, so now once again photography took over from painting. 'The creative possibilities of the new', remarked Moholy-Nagy, 'are usually discovered slowly in those old forms, old instruments and areas of work which owing to the appearance of the new have, in all essentials, already had their day, but which blossom euphorically under the stimulus of what is happening. Thus, for example, futurist (static) painting produced the clearly-defined problematic of simultaneity of movement, the depiction of a moment in time, which was later to destroy it and this at a time when the film was known, but not yet remotely understood. . . . In the same way one may – with caution – regard some of today's painters, who are working with methods that combine representation with the use of objects (neo-classicists and verists) as precursors of a new optical form of representation which will soon be using only mechanical and technical methods'. And Tristan Tzara, 1922: 'When everything that went by the name of art was seized with paralysis, the photographer lit his thousand-candle lamp and the sensitive paper gradually absorbed the darkness of several objects of common use. He had discovered the potential of a delicate, untouched flash of light which was more important than all the constellations given to our eyes to enjoy'. It is those photographers who have gone over from figurative art to photography, not out of opportunistic con-

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siderations, not by accident, not for convenience, who today constitute the avant-garde among their colleagues, because their development protects them, to some extent, from the greatest danger facing contemporary photography, namely the influence of artistic professionalism. 'Photography as art', says Sasha Stone, 'is a very dangerous field'.

When photography takes itself out of the contexts established by Sander, Germaine Krull or Blossfeldt and frees itself from physiognomic, political and scientific interests, then it becomes *creative*. The lens now focusses on the *ensemble;* the photographic poseur appears. 'The spirit that has mastered mechanics turns the most exact results into parables of life'. The more all-embracing the crisis of contemporary society, the more that the individual aspects of the latter confront one another in rigid opposition, so the more the creative reveals itself as the merest form of variant, with contradiction for its father and imitation as its mother; the creative has become a fetish whose features owe their life simply to the changing lights of fashion. The creative in photography is the latter's responsiveness to fashion. *The world is beautiful* – that precisely is its motto. Therein is unmasked a photography which is able to relate a tin of canned food to the universe, yet cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which that tin exists; a photography which even in its most dreamlike compositions is more concerned with eventual saleability than with understanding. Since, however, the true face of this photographic creativity is the advertisement or the association, its legitimate counterpart is exposure or construction. For, says Brecht, the situation, is 'complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple *reproduction of reality* tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or GEC yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be *constructed*, something artificial, something set up'. It is the achievement of the surrealists to have trained the pioneers of such photographic construction. A further stage in this contest between creative and constructive photography is marked by the Russian film. One cannot underline enough the fact that the great achievements of its directors were only possible in a country where photography started not from stimulus and suggestion, but from experiment and instruction. In this sense, and only in this, one can still derive meaning from the impressive welcome accorded to photography in 1855 by that crude painter of ideas, Antoine Wiertz. 'For some years it has been the glory of our century to have given birth to a machine which daily astonishes the mind and startles the eyes. Before another century is out, this machine will be the brush, palette, colours, skill, experience, patience, dexterity, accuracy, tonality, varnish, model, realisation, the extract of paint-

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ing. . . . One should not think that the daguerrotype will kill art. . . . When the daguerrotype, this giant-child has grown up, when all his skill and power has unfolded, then genius will suddenly seize him by the scruff of the neck and cry in a loud voice: Come here! Now you belong to me. We shall work together '. How sober, indeed pessimistic by contrast are the following words with which Baudelaire announced the new technique to his readers two years later in the *Salon of 1875*. Like those just quoted, they cannot be read today without a slight change of emphasis. But, by taking the opposite point of view, they retain their good sense as the most trenchant defence against all the usurpations of artistic photography. ' In these unfortunate days a new industry has appeared which has contributed not a little to confirming shallow stupidity in its belief . . . that art is and can be nothing other than the accurate reproduction of nature. . . . A vengeful god hearkened to the voice of this throng. Daguerre became its Messiah '. And again: ' If photography is allowed to complement art in some of its functions, the latter will soon be ousted and ruined by it, thanks to the natural confederacy which will have grown up between photography and the crowd. Therefore photography must return to its proper duty which consists in being a servant to the sciences and the arts '.

One thing, however, neither Wiertz nor Baudelaire grasped and that is the possibilities which lie in the very authenticity of photography. This authenticity cannot forever be circumvented by the reportage of cliché which forms only verbal associations in the reader. The camera becomes smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture transitory and secret pictures which are able to shock the associative mechanism of the observer to a standstill. At this point the caption must step in, thereby creating a photography which literarises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate. Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been compared with those of a scene of action. But is not every corner of our cities a scene of action? Is not each passerby an actor? Is it not the task of the photographer – descendant of the augurs and the haruspices – to uncover guilt and name the guilty in his pictures? ' The illiterate of the future ', it has been said, ' will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph '. But must we not also count as illiterate the photographer who cannot read his own pictures? Will not the caption become the most important component of the shot? Such are the questions released by the historical tensions of the ninety years' distance which separates us from the daguerrotype. It is in the irradiation of these sparks that the first photographs stand forth with such unapproachable beauty from out of the darkness of our grandfathers' days.

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1. Helmuth Th. Bossert and Heinrich Guttmann, *Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie 1840-1870. A Picture Volume Reproducing 200 Originals.* Frankfurt a. M., 1930.
   Heinrich Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill, der Meister der Photographie.* With 80 plates. Leipzig, 1931.
2. Karl Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst. Photographic Pictures of Plants.* Published with an Introduction by Karl Nierendorf. 120 plates. Berlin, 1931.
3. Atget *Lichtbilder.* Published by Camille Recht. Paris and Leipzig, 1931.
4. August Sander, *Das Antlitz der Zeit.* Berlin, 1930.

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