

The History of Photography: (Re)Search Into Method

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Gustave Le Gray : photographe (1820-1884), Paris : Gallimard : BNF, 2002, (Hors-série)

- 1 Like a sign of vitality, the history of photography investigates its classics. In *La Mission héliographique*, Anne de Mondenard takes us through the slim history of the very first collective public commission in the history of photography: in 1851, the Historic Monuments Commission sent five photographers—Edouard Baldus, Hippolyte Bayard, Gustave Le Gray, Henri Le Secq and Mestral—to take photographs of France's historic buildings. From Baron Taylor's legacy of the *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France*, by way of the choice of photographs considered, to the annotated catalogue (*catalogue raisonné*) of the pictures delivered to the Commission, the survey is comprehensive and painstaking, more factual than analytical, and accompanied by a body of illustrations of a quality rarely matched in terms of black and white photographic reproductions. Over and above the detail of the itineraries of each photographer, one remains struck by the paradox of the Heliographic Mission which comes across in all its uniqueness: the images commissioned by the Historic Monuments Commission from those five photographers, a result of tremendous daring, which we only just skim here,

would never be used, and were forgotten about until their rediscovery in 1980. As an early but fleeting recognition of the documentary qualities of photography, the Heliographic Mission is the first stage in an essential episode in the history of photography, for which this book will act as a solid foundation.

- 2 This, likewise, is the purpose of the biography of the photographer Gustave Le Gray written by Sylvie Aubenas in the eponymous catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (19 March - 16 June 2002). Far from explaining the man's œuvre, the study of the famous photographer's life offers us an example, somewhere between wretchedness and splendour, of a career entirely devoted to the silvered image. After Nadar, in whose life photography was just one venture among others, Le Gray is well on the way to earning a fame that goes beyond the initiated. The slim volume, *Le Gray : l'œil d'or de la photographie*, aimed at the general public, confirms this intention. But, over and above myth, the author of the famous seascapes cuts a quintessential figure when it comes to broaching this crucial period of the early days of photography, between 1840 and 1860. And, in particular, when it comes to trying to approach the issue of art and photography.
- 3 After a brief academic training, of which he was duly proud, Le Gray would tackle every genre of photography, between commission and creation, and would solve the matter himself by calling himself a "painter-photographer". By getting rid of the "and" between his two titles, Le Gray created a new category which people would attempt to analyze in the light of biographical factors. We might nevertheless feel slightly disappointed by the speculative part of the catalogue which at times strives to draw lessons from the investigation. The life of a man such as Gustave Le Gray may be there to be demythologized, but it is also important to demythologize the relational phenomena between photograph and painting, and shed light on different subjects which invariably seem to obscure a history of photography incorporated within the history of 19th century art. For there is indeed a history of photography that endangers the history of art: witnessing an overestimation of the photographic corpus which helps its incorporation within art. So by comparing the photographic production of Gustave Le Gray with the colourist avant-garde of an artist like Delacroix, perhaps Henri Zerner sins by an excess of positivism instead of the artistically legitimizing strategies of photographers of the 1850s? This, if I may say so, should demonstrate the poor art-historical knowledge, at times, of certain essential features of the history of photography and the necessary formation of a pictorial history of 19th century photography.
- 4 "Who will one day write a history without "and"?", asked Eric Darragon in 1985 in relation to Aaron Scharf's *Art and Photography*. If the question still seems topical, one will nevertheless cast an interested eye over the investigation which Philippe Ortel devotes to the relationships between photography and literature in the 19th century: *La Littérature à l'ère de la photographie. Enquête sur une révolution invisible*. This book, which is a literary history of photography, no less, chronologically describes for us the burgeoning obsession in 19th century literature with optical devices and in particular with photography. From the Romantics to the turn of the century, Philippe Ortel demonstrates the relevance of an overall approach to literary upheavals via the filter of photography. The photograph, which is turn by turn an optical device, a scene of creation, a frame of reference and a model of interpretation, blazes a trail for itself among the different stylistic concerns which stake out the century. We thus see how literature must have reacted not in terms of opposition but through a strategy incorporating the photographic

phenomenon at every level. For here literature is joined by poetry, art criticism and painting, in a renewed vision, excavated from a literature under photographic influences. And faced with this essay in literary history, which is most instructive for the historian of photography, even if the author sometimes gives pride of place to tools hailing from semiology, not to say mediology, we may wonder if he is not hereby achieving the desire for that history without the “and”: neither photography, nor literature, but the consideration of the energy and even at times the entropy produced by the encounter between the two. A straightforward model of questions of precedence which it would be nice to see applied one day to the photography/painting pairing.