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1 Even the most European American writer of the nineteenth century, Henry Adams, did not share Baudelaire’s opinion on photography as being a threat to the religion of Art. The many photos taken by Henry Adams represent an impressive collection. In my opinion, this collection is representative of the American acceptance of photography during the nineteenth century. I would therefore like to show the huge success photography encountered in the United States and compare this success to the mixed success of photography in France in the nineteenth century. This comparison might help understanding better the extent and the originality of the American adoption of this new visual technique. Before describing America’s early and immediate faith in photography, I would like to dwell on the reaction of France toward photography and show how unconceivable this reaction would be in America.

2 In order to illustrate the reaction toward photography in France, it is customary to quote Baudelaire’s diatribe against photography in 1859. Yet Baudelaire was far from being the only French figure of the time to denigrate photography in France. As Antoine Compagnon explained in his lecture of February 24, 2012 at the Collège de France on the topic of Baudelaire and photography, Baudelaire’s reaction had become a cliché since the creation of the daguerreotype. For example, in Félix Nadar’s satirical publication, Journal amusant, there was an issue produced by Marcelin in 1856 which was bluntly entitled: “Down with photography!” Next to the lithographed caricature of a celebrity, Marcelin wrote a paragraph in which he compared the painted portrait of this celebrity with his photographed portrait. Therefore, according to Marcelin, the portrait of Alexandre Dumas painted by Giraud, as it appeared in the Musketeers in 1846, reflected “the true Dumas: adventurous like D’Artagnan, as chivalrous as Athos, as robust as Porthos and as gallant as Aramis”. Instead, the photograph of Dumas, such as Nadar’s photograph of him taken in 1855, made Dumas look like the “King of chimpanzees”. Similarly, the self-
portrait painted by Delacroix in 1837 showed a lot of “passion with his blinking and cheeky eyes, his adventurous nose, his Mephistophelian mouth, his hair looking like Romeo’s hair, a type of man usually found in Hoffmann”; in comparison, Nadar’s photograph of Delacroix made him look like “a seller of fake products”. Finally, the photograph of the painter Ingres, unlike his painted portrait, projected the image of a “constipated grocer”.

Marcelin’s conclusion in 1856 was just as uproarious and negative as Baudelaire’s reaction, three years later:

3 How can you believe in beauty and merit, after all this! From which squalid places are all of these spectra coming from? (...) Let’s imagine the future generations judging the celebrities of our time from these photographs, deeming them as authentic documents, and comparing them to the celebrities of the past whose painted portraits are still with us! In front of Giotto and Cimabue’ saints, of Holbein’s scholars, of Albrecht Dürer’s warriors, of Titian’s princes (...), the future generations will only see busy corpses in this generation of bailiffs (...), in these photographic ghosts who are wrinkled, tense, creaky, who have fake looks, the stillness of death along with the worries of life?

4 Antoine Compagnon did not limit himself to the example of this newspaper to show that this criticism of photography was already widespread. He also cited an article on photography by the well-known critic, Gustave Planche, in the Revue des deux mondes of June 15, 1857. Two years before Baudelaire’s diatribe, Planche expressed the same appreciation of photography as a scientific tool and the same dislike for the exactitude of photographies:

5 We can only [...] see in a photograph, a document worthy of consulting, a faithful document in the absolute sense of the word, since it reveals nothing imaginary, but deceives us by offering us things in an aspect that our eyes do not control. Unfortunately, photography is now accepted as an authority without appeal. We can say without exaggeration that the works of painters are estimated as a direct result of their compliance with photography, and I do not hesitate to say that the discovery of Daguerre powerfully contributed to the corruption of public taste. [...] Yet this is precisely what important people seem to ignore, they consult photography as an oracle, and then express dissatisfaction at whatever they do not find in a painting that a photograph can show. Those painters who are not opulent enough or committed enough to resist to the corrupted taste of these people propose the imitation of reality as a supreme goal; this way, they accredit the error their common sense would condemn otherwise. Thus the landscape is diverted from its legitimate purpose.

6 What is rarely mentioned when examining this hatred for photography is the fact that this denigration resulted from a strong reaction against the celebration of photographs, such as Nadar for instance, who claimed that photography had an artistic dimension. Moreover, the glorious personification of photography in 1855 by Maxime Du Camp in a poem from his collection called Modern songs, could only make things worse:

7 All the pencils, I defy them! / And my only master is the day-light! / Contours toughest / Drawings we don’t dare address / Are never disobedient, / And all I must do is look! / With you I’m going to travel / While stopping at all times / I pick up landscapes / Cities and monuments / I help the painter! / Painters who run paths, / I capture nature / And I put it in your hands!

8 As Antoine Compagnon points out, the celebration of photography in newspapers started very early in the century, right after the invention of the daguerreotype. For instance,
Jules Janin, in his article of 1839 in *The Artist*, went so far as to compare Daguerre with God: “No human hand could draw like the sun (...) [can be found here] a divine perfection that offers the spontaneous portrait of living nature”.

If we compare the reception of photography in France with that of the United States, we see that such a debate on photography was unimaginable in America at the time. The reaction toward photography of the abolitionist Frederick Douglas, whose father was a Black slave, serves as a good example of the popularity photography encountered in America. What Douglas saw in photography what something no one in France could see: an excellent way to eliminate racism! This was an amazingly new perception of photography. Moreover, and contrary to Baudelaire, Douglas believed that the daguerreotype was an “art truer” than painting. This, firstly because painters had all been white men they could only impose their vision as “whites” and secondly, because the art of painting, according to him, was an art based on distortion or exaggeration. According to Douglas, the highly “democratic” art of photography allowed “the poor and the blacks in the South” who were descendants of slaves like him, to be able to see and admire themselves; from now on, having one’s portrait was everyone’s privilege and no longer the privilege of those who could afford a painter, formerly the kings and the rich. Furthermore, for him, the creation of photographic images was extraordinary because a “persona” emerged from photographs.

Douglas considered the art of photography an offshoot of human progress and excellence as well as an extremely powerful advertising tool, which would become more powerful than the creation of laws. Therefore, when an abolitionist group asked Douglas to contribute a short story in the collection entitled *Autograph for freedom*, Douglas produced the following novel which is considered today as the first African-American novel: *The Heroic Slave, a Thrilling Narrative of Adventures of the Madison Washington in Pursuit of Liberty* (1852). In this novel, the daguerreotyped portraits of the heroes become the very emblem of the fall of “social barriers and inequality”.

In his book on photography, Sean Ross Meehan (2008) goes so far as to contest the idea according to which photography is an exact copy of reality – idea which was the spearhead of the French criticism against photography. In order to show that photography is an intrinsically dual medium, Meehan starts his demonstration with the example of Robert Cornelius, a photographer who was the first one in America in 1839 to make a daguerreotype: As his daguerreotype was particularly blurry, it captured the spectrum of the subject of the photography. Then, Meehan uses the presentations on photography made by Douglas (such as “Pictures and Progress” and “The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered”) in order to show that Douglas fully believed in the “metaphysical doubleness” of photography. Here, Meeham shows how Douglas seized the example of a collection of photographs taken in 1850 (“Zealy daguerreotypes”) by the renowned Harvard professor Louis Agassiz, in order to conclude that pictures do not reproduce an exact copy of reality but rather, what the photographer wants to project: for instance, what Professor Agassiz wanted to project through his photographs of slaves in South Carolina was the idea of “race inferiority”; not only did Agassiz portray the slaves naked but he made sure that they looked in to the distance. Hence Douglas’s axiom: “Negroes can never have impartial portraits made by the hands of white artists”. According to Meehan, Douglass understood the tension between “graphical accuracy” and “potential elusiveness”. Meehan adds that the daguerreotypes of Douglas’s self-portrait in his autobiographies reflect this duality: in these self-portraits, thanks to his
majestic pose, Douglas was trying to escape the image according to which slaves are not worthy of being included in the gallery of “representative American men”.

12 Still according to Meeham, Thoreau and Whitman also recognized the spectral power of photography. In this regard, the poem of Walt Whitman, “Leaves of Grass”, is interesting because it depended on the daguerreotype: Whitman wanted to put the daguerreotype portrait of himself in his book of poetry, instead of his name, in order to establish a connection between the soul of poetry and that of the author. In his later poems, such as “My Picture-Gallery” and “Pictures”, Whitman even compared his soul to a photo gallery and to a dark room which exposed, in a way, the consciousness of the poet. The example of The House of the Seven Gables by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which is not quoted by Meeham, is also exemplary as it provides a center piece for nineteenth-century photography: Hawthorne created a character whose job was to make daguerreotypes. As ever, the photographer is a philanthropist, abolitionist, supporter of social equality, and uses the daguerreotype to represent, better than any painter, the secret and therefore the true side of the characters he photographs.

13 Another aspect that distinguishes French criticism from America’s avid expectations, was that photography was also very much appreciated by American women. The literary example that comes most easily to mind is, of course, Harriet Beecher Stowe, who, in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, uses the verb “daguerreotyped” to describe Uncle Tom: her use of this verb suggests that photography pairs up with social emancipation. In addition, a plethora of American women distinguished themselves as photographers. For instance, in 1898, Gertrude Käsebier wrote to William Cody (also known as Buffalo Bill), inquiring if she could take pictures of the Indians playing in his Wild West show at Madison Square Garden. Käsebier’s photo collection, which can be found today at the Smithsonian, recorded the lives of the Sioux Indians whose role, in Cody’s cynical show, was to replay what happened to them during the massive genocide of Indians. In her photos, Käsebier captured the moral strength of each of these Indians and was therefore able to reverse William Cody’s stigmatization of Indians as losers and glorification of Americans as winners. Again, photography proved to be a tool able to reveal a hidden and seemingly elusive truth. Another female photographer, Frances Benjamin Johnson, famous for capturing the “New Woman” thanks to her self-portraits, contributed to the pursuit of equality and freedom for women thanks to photography: in her self-portraits, she appears in a style similar to Renoir’s paintings (Johnson had been a student at the Julian Academy in Paris) with a cigarette in one hand and a mug of beer in the other, as well as dressed as a man with a mustache in front of a bicycle on another photo. At the exhibition of 1900, she held an exhibition of 28 female photographers. Moreover, she also became well-known thanks to her photographs of celebrities such as Mark Twain.

14 Since one of the most important American authors in the nineteenth century, Mark Twain, is mentioned here, isn’t reasonable to ask what his relationship to photography was? The large collection of photos of Mark Twain indeed proves that he liked photography. An example which distinctly conveys the American way of dealing with photography has to do with fundraising. Mark Twain had been contacted by a fundraiser in order to relieve the victims of an earthquake which had just occurred in California. A journalist, George Wharton James, was responsible for contacting celebrities and tries to get them to sign photos of themselves in order to sell them and use the funds to help the earthquake’s victims. James turned to Twain for the simple reason that Twain had lived in San Francisco and knew one of the victims. Out of all the celebrities who were contacted,
Twain was the first to accept and to send three autographed pictures of himself. Later, still in the context of this fundraiser, the journalist hired a famous American photographer to take more photos of Twain. But Twain who was a busy man refused at first. However, the journalist visited Twain at his home on Fifth Avenue in New York and eventually got him to accept to be photographed only when he reminded him that the money obtained from these photos would go to the victims of the earthquake.

15 I’d like to finish this sketch with the evocation of a character who would be inconceivable in France: the star of American stars in the nineteenth century, Phineas Taylor Barnum. 18 The verb to barnumize (to hoax, to embellish, to disseminate, to turn anything into something sensational and spectacular, to defraud, to defame) was coined by Barnum. The well-known expression used by Barnum was that “people like to be hoaxed”. Another one of his expressions was that “Nobody ever lost a dollar by underestimating the taste of the American public.” He is also said to be the author of this cynical formula: “There is a sucker born every minute”. Why Barnum? Because it seems that Barnum’s “American Museum”, which derives from the traditional cabinet de curiosités and which is at the origin of Disneyland, could never have been so prosperous without the existence of photography. This museum was indeed the most visited museum in America: Barnum was able to draw 38 million visitors in 25 years, probably because his museum fulfilled the popular visual hunger for anything spectacular, fun or interesting. This hunger could only be fulfilled thanks to photography, perhaps because photography easily provides people with the joy of seeing, looking, or gazing. Thus, new visual techniques such as daguerreotypes and photography, which had become a fashionable hobby, played an ever more important role in the museum and in Barnum’s circus: The Greatest Natural and National Curiosity in the World.

16 I will therefore conclude with the following examples, which essentially show the paradoxical dual nature of photography according to Americans in the nineteenth century. The first example demonstrates the ability to mystify of Barnum’s photographies, and the second its ability to demystify: Barnum who was quite tall made sure that he appeared on photographs on the side of Tom Thumb to publicize that Tom was a true dwarf. As a real dwarf, he belonged to the series of freaks and monsters that everyone should come and see in Barnum’s museum. In truth, Tom, who started his career with Barnum at the age of five years, was only a child on these pictures. Here is another example of this potential to mystify of photography: thanks to their picture, Barnum could announce that two dark deformed brothers who performed in his museum were from Borneo; in fact, these were retarded children from Ohio who had been covered with a dark foundation. In contrast, photography had also the power to demystify. In the following example, again thanks to photography, Barnum managed to denounce an imposture: William Mumler had started his career by making his own portrait behind which he included the picture of his dead 12 years old cousin. Photography with false apparitions was very popular at that time, and very lucrative, especially with the number of deaths caused by the Civil War. Mumler was therefore able to produce a lot of photographs in which the image of a dead person appeared in the background above the picture of the customer he photographed. To prove that Mumler was a fake, Barnum hired another photographer, Abraham Bogardus, to take a picture of him split with the ghost of Abraham Lincoln. Thanks to this fake picture, an investigation started on Mumler: it revealed that Mumler was in the habit of breaking into the houses of his customers to steal photos of their deceased family members so that he could make them
reappear in his faked photographs. Wasn’t Barnum able to prove then that, in America, everything is possible with photography?219

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NOTES

1. Henry Adams’s trips to England from 1870 à 1873 and in 1888, to Tahiti in 1891, Japan in 1886, Fiji in 1891 and in Wyoming in 1894, were documented by 423 photos which were either bought, done in the countries that he visited, taken by friends, or which belonged to his wife.

2. Mémoire-de-la-littérature is a website offering comments on Antoine Compagnon’s lecture. These comments include extremely precious information for readers who are not always specialized in the field: http://compaproust.canalblog.com/archives/2012/02/24/23600373.html

3. Mémoire-de-la-littérature presents both André Rouillé’s book (La Photographie en France, ed. Macula, 1989, p. 255-266) which provides a reproduction of Marcelin’s article and two websites, one with the reproduction of the front page of “Journal amusant” (http://www.flickr.com/photos/gunther/4470415246/) and the other one with the reproduction of Marcelin’s arguments in favor of painting and against photography. (http://culturevisuelle.org/icone/495). I used both sites in the paragraphs which follow.

4. Let’s not forget that lithography is a nineteenth-century invention and that it was celebrated by Baudelaire perhaps because it was not as mechanical as photography: it reproduced in fact the artist’s drawings. In Marcelin’s article, the lithographed portrait of a celebrity is obviously superior to his photograph.


6. Ibid.


8. Ibid

9. Du Camp’s photographs of Flaubert’s trip to Egypt in 1849 are a good example of his complete confidence in photography.

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid., p. 76.

13. Let’s note here that Douglas changes the formula of the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1876 when he writes “Pursuit of Freedom”: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” For a slave’s son like Douglas, the “Pursuit of Freedom” was the conditio sine qua non of the “Pursuit of Happiness”.


16. Here, I consulted the article in # 105 of volume 29 of Romantisme (1999) written by François Brunet (Le romance daguerrien de Hawthorne) because this article shows that the “romance” is similar to photography because it deploys illusions.

17. http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1819876_1733003,00.html

18. In France, Barnum is much less known than in the USA. Nonetheless, his book, Ancient and Modern Humbugs of the World (1864-65) was published by Achille Faure in Paris in 1866 and entitled Les Blagues de l’univers. Barnum appears also as an American symbol in a novel published in 1874 and re-published 13 times. It is entitled Souvenirs d’une Cosaque, and is written by a Polish woman, Olga de Janina: in this autobiography, Olga de Janina, who is a famous pianist, tells the story of her unhappy passion with Franz Liszt for whom she became bankrupt. In order to recover the money she lost with him, she sends her photography in America in order to prepare her arrival there: a certain Barnum, as she calls him, has no taste for music but wants
nonetheless to be in charge of her musical career. For him, *time is money*, as Janina puts it. After meeting with her 2 minutes, he asks her to sleep with him in order to speak about her career. Her talents as a musician are not a consideration for this Barnum; the only thing which interested him before meeting her was her picture. Actually, a similar situation occurred between the real Barnum and Jenny Lind, a Swedish opera singer, hired by Barnum in America on the basis of her good looks.


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**ABSTRACTS**

This article details the nineteenth-century French and American reactions toward photography. It demonstrates that the French backlash against photography was already a *cliché* when Baudelaire wrote his famous diatribe in 1859. The argument according to which photography was an exact copy of reality devoid of any artistic potential started in fact to be invoked soon after the invention of the daguerreotype, perhaps as a reaction against those who supported photography in France. In comparison, the American conception of photography was diametrically opposed. Americans immediately saw in photography a very rich means of expression because of its intrinsic duality: it could represent both the appearance of things and their essence; it could be a harmless hobby as well as a powerful instrument of political freedom, which could be used to support the poor, the black population, women as well as poets; it could also be used as a tool to mystify as well as a tool to demystify, as a way to greedily earn money as well as a way to generously redistribute money.

Cet article compare les réactions françaises et américaines (USA) face à la photographie, au dix-neuvième siècle. Il démontre que l’opposition à la photographie était déjà un cliché quand Baudelaire rédigea sa célèbre diatribe en 1859. L’argument selon lequel la photographie serait une copie exacte de la réalité dénuée de tout potentiel artistique commence à être invoqué juste après l’invention du daguerréotype, peut-être contre ceux qui soutenaient, en France, la photographie. La réception américaine de la photographie était diamétralement opposée. Les américains ont immédiatement perçu les riches moyens d’expression contenus dans la photographie: elle pouvait simultanément rendre la réalité des choses et leur essence; elle pouvait également devenir un inoffensif passe-temps autant qu’un puissant instrument politique pour la liberté, pour soutenir les pauvres, les noirs, les femmes et les poètes ; elle pouvait aussi devenir un instrument de mystification autant que de démystification, ainsi qu’un moyen de gagner de l’argent autant qu’un généreux moyen de redistribution.

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John McCarthy is a student at the University of Lyon III, France. He is passionate about photography and American literature. He is currently focusing on the global history of anarchism. He has experience living both in France and the United States.