

## The Daguerreotype at the Crossroads of an Iconoclast Protestantism and an Iconophile Catholicism

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# The Daguerreotype at the Crossroads of an Iconoclast Protestantism and an Iconophile Catholicism

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- 1 The American attitude towards the news technics of visual representation in the Nineteenth century deserves to be compared to the French attitude because these attitudes are not only different but they also reveal distinctive features characterizing both countries. I will therefore offer a survey of these attitudes and an explanation for their difference. My analysis will show that the source of this difference comes firstly from the antic opposition between the Aristotelian *iconophilia* and the Platonic *iconophobia*; second, from the resurgence of this opposition during the famous “Querelle des Images” and later during the Reformation and Counter Reformation; third from the fact that, from the Schism to and the Nineteenth century on, this opposition became a tidal wave which never ceased to develop.
- 2 The craze for photography in America was far more important than in France. This may explain why the criticism of the new visual technics was a limited phenomenon in the US. There, only Herman Melville, who had attended the presentations of the daguerreotype made by a disciple of Daguerre, François Gouraud, in Boston, in 1840, expressed a dislike for this craze because it emanated, according to him, from a too egalitarian and anti-aristocratic America. Melville officially addressed his criticism of the new *medium* in 1852, in a novel, *Pierre or the Ambiguities*, which was, predictably, not very popular. In this novel, the hero shows a distinct preference for the exclusivity given formerly by painters to the aristocracy of geniuses through expressive paintings of their portraits. Therefore, he finds that the best way to distinguish himself from Tom, Dick and Harry is to refuse when his editor asks him to have his auto-portrait daguerreotyped. According to Kevin Hayes’s explanation (2002) in the excellent article he devotes to this topic, Melville was worried about this unjustified new cult of the ego

that the daguerreotype allowed and therefore encouraged. This deep phobia for the daguerreotype was so engrained in Melville that, several years before, he had sent a letter to his friend, Evert Duyckinck, in which he expressed the same refusal. Still according to Hayes, Melville, who was a handsome man, missed a chance to publicize his works thanks to the easy dissemination of his portrait that the daguerreotype would have allowed. Melville had in fact the accurate sense that soon, Tom, Dick and Harry would be able to become famous, not thanks to their genius, but only if they looked good in the eyes of the public. In his youth, Melville insisted on leaving to posterity only one oil canvass of his auto-portrait painted by Joseph Eaton, a portrait and landscape painter, as were most American painters in those days.

- 3 Edgar Poe's reaction towards the daguerreotype is also worth a few lines even if his criticism of the new media was brief. Thus, according to Kevin Hayes, Poe initially accepted the daguerreotype with enthusiasm in a project he had to gather in a journal that would have been called *Stylus*, the autograph, the daguerreotype and a brief biography of the greatest American writers, him included, this, because he was initially convinced that the daguerreotype had the power to reveal the soul and the genius of artists. He was nonetheless quite disappointed by the first daguerreotype of his portrait which, far from revealing his soul or his genius, made a caricature of himself. However, this disillusion did not prevent him from trying again several times this new medium but only having studying his pose so that it would reflect the idea he had of what geniuses look like. And of course, he grew a mustache in order to hide the shadow of his nose on his lip, shadow which had contributed to make him look like a caricature in the first daguerreotype of his portrait.
- 4 If we exclude Melville's absolutely negative reaction, we can conclude that the glorification of the daguerreotype in America was general and without precedent. In contrast, in France, it is a well know fact that this reception was completely different for reasons very well developed by Marc Fumaroli (2009). Exists in France, according to Fumaroli, a metaphysical feature which consists of a certain nostalgia. This feature is definitely absent in America because, from the start, America projected itself towards the future, this, in a triumphant way or in an elegiac way, but never from the point of view of the "metaphysical and poetical mourning that [the 'Old Europe'] has breathed from Homer on, and all the more so, with the catholic version of its Christianity." (Fumaroli, 156). Moreover and still according to Marc Fumaroli, when the new visual technics started flourishing in the Nineteenth century, France had inherited of the Ancient Regime system of Fine Arts with its academies in charge of defining a style corresponding to an era and its schools of artists trained to illustrate this style. The foundation of these academies, in part thanks to the French Academy in Rome, was a "pedagogy based on examples" (421). These "examples" came from those called "Phares" by the most vehement critic of the new visual technics, Baudelaire, – "Phares", that is to say the famous artists since the Counter-Reformation. As a consequence, the creation of an absolutely conform and mimetic copy of reality produced by a simple mechanical snapshot, such as with the daguerreotype, could only be generally rejected in France. This copy of reality without any dimension beyond reality was found to be going against the goal that the fines Arts had finally set for themselves, after centuries and centuries (if they did not want to be accused of being pagan), to represent, through the vision of the retina, the dimension beyond reality. This representation which therefore had a visible and invisible dimension was always "double" (495) because it reproduced both the joyous and sad mysteries of the life of

the son of God who, thanks to his incarnation, has made himself visible to men. From the Counter-Reformation on, the painter's mission was therefore to make the kingdom of God visible and also to make "the nostalgia of [His] lost kingdom" (where Christians would finally return after their death), visible.

- 5 In order to understand what this metaphysic involves, Marc Fumaroli demonstrates that it is necessary to go back to the Antiquity, that is to say to the Platonic *iconophobia* and the Aristotelian *iconophilia*, and then to the famous "Querelle des Images" during the first centuries of Christianity, and finally to the Schism with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. It is true that "the destruction of Rome in 410" demonstrating that Rome, City of Gods which had become the City of God, was not eternal, had reaffirmed the belief according to which Christians can "be fulfilled [...] only on the other side of this world, outside [the precarious] human history" (501) and its idolatrous pagan representations. The Fathers of the Church, heirs of Platon, were thus against any visual representation. Many centuries will be needed for Christianity to accept to give artists (who were generally not very pious) the license to be challenged by representations which were devotional. During the Destruction of Rome in 1527 by Charles Quint's troops, the factions continued to form according to an attitude towards images. The Counter-Reformation remained faithful to Aristotle and ended up giving painters the right to follow the Horace's precept: "But painters and poets have always shared the right to dare anything" (548). Faithful to Plato, Protestantism continued refusing religious paintings and the representation of the Virgin, Christ and the Saints but did not prevent the art of portraits or of landscapes to prosper, perhaps as a reverence to the creation of God.
- 6 This metaphysical question of visual representation which haunted Catholic France was not raised in Protestant America first, because America never had any artistic Academy or School and second, because America was open to the mechanical reproduction not only of portraits but also of any object, this within the frame of its *Pursuit of Happiness*, its *Manifest destiny* and, of course, its complete and militant obedience to the industrial revolution at the origin of Taylorism and assembly-lines. The daguerreotype and then photography, because they did not share any genealogy with the religious paintings of the Counter-Reformation, could only prosper in Protestant America and soon replace, as we will see later, the paintings of portraits and landscapes. In America where were banished not only religious paintings but also profane paintings (perverted with a Catholic sense of luxury and delectation<sup>1</sup> and therefore considered suspicious), each citizen wanted to have his portrait daguerreotyped. For the average man, having one's portrait at hand was no longer a privilege reserved to kings, illustrious people or the rich. Instead, Catholicism, which was open to paintings and therefore to the desire to quench a universal thirst for images, could only produce not only major artists during the Counter-Reformation but also the daguerreotype, this, during the bourgeois monarchy era. The daguerreotype which was a technic emanating from the bourgeois modernity would finally be capable of satisfying a more common and vulgar appetite for any images. Being a democracy, America could only wholeheartedly embrace the new medium. Therefore, if it is France who, after its revolution, created the daguerreotype, it could only be America who would create Kodak at the end of the century: Kodak, this is to say a means to make the daguerreotype more accessible to the *demos* and therefore more popular.

- 7 At the beginning of the Nineteenth century, America continued its separation from the European artistic world. This separation will be complete only when “New York adopted Marcel Duchamp’s practical jokes, the ready-made”<sup>2</sup> (208) and only after the glorification of Pollock and Warhol, and, of course, of Jeff Koons. If we go back to 1802, we note that the American Academy of Fine-Arts which had just been created was limited to perpetuate a certain European neoclassicism; one of its directors, a Scottish, was the mentor of the first American painter, John Vanderlyn, who had gone to France and Italy in order to study the arts. His painting of a “Naked Ariadne sleeping in Naxos” was celebrated in France but “booed in his homeland” (242) –the delectation in front of nudity being unacceptable in America. If we turn to the Academy of Fine-Arts in Pennsylvania created in 1805, we notice that it did not have anything in common with the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In 1861, it attracted Thomas Eakins, an instructor who painted with the help of photography and produced paintings which are exactly like postcards. Moreover, Eakins’s teaching method relied less on the traditional study of drawing and colors but on the “creativity and [the] expression starting from nothing” which resides in all men, creativity which will become a “dogma” (325) after the creation of photography and from Pollock on. The Academy of Pennsylvania ended up kicking out Thomas Eakins because he had shown his genitals to a female student who was frustrated because she could not reproduce this part of the male body in her paintings, male models having to wear a piece of cloth on their genitals in those days. This anecdote illustrates well, I think, the American puritanical attitude, not only in its mores but also in its arts; it also indicates the “naturalist” nature, if I may say, of its painters – a naturalism which predisposed them to photography. Still, in Philadelphia, the “son of the first American who created and opened a Museum of Fine Arts (next to an exhibition of natural science and scientific instruments), Ronald Peale, painted in 1822 a *trompe-l’œil* of *Vénus coming out of the sea* (241), which announced the visual practical jokes of Marcel Duchamp: imitating Zurbarán’s “Véronicas”, this painting represents a cloth hanging without the in-print of the Christ’s face; the naked arm of a woman appears above the cloth, and the tip of one “of her naked feet” appears below (241). This ironic imitation of “Véronicas” was to be expected in a Protestant country like America devoid of the cult of Mary and essentially *iconophobic*, as early as during the days of the *May flower* until today with Jeff Koons. This painting was a pure and simple negation of nudity, of the Christian “*vita contemplativa*”, of the “devotion” and “antique *otium*” (241). “Pragmatic and anti-erotic contrary to Medieval and Catholic Europe, America never considered as a “strength” (204) neither Venus nor Notre-Dame nor the delectation and “jubilation in front of the beautiful nature resting of a Venus or a naked Virgin, delectation and jubilation which are all the more intense as they are gratuitous” (241).
- 8 The significant difference which exists between the photography of landscapes and the painting of landscapes in America during the Nineteenth century also deserves to be examined. In effect, “the American School of landscape painters during the first decades of the Nineteenth century remained faithful to the esthetic of the sublime inherited from the Enlightenment” and from the biblical argument of the Psalms (“the skies and the creation tell the glory of the Lord”) which toned down the Second Commandment” against images(191). This school of landscape painters reaffirmed a British conception of the sublime which had originally been introduced by Joseph Addison during the Seventeenth century after his *Grand Tour* in Europe – sublime which provokes a sense of fear and terror and which has nothing to do with the

concept of beauty illustrated by the painters of the Counter-Reformation. The American landscape painters celebrated a perfect Eden which was without the presence of history from the West to the South of the New World. In their paintings, they tried to reproduce “vast and hovering panoramas which were like the effect of the moon seen from an astronomic telescope, a heavy and abstract geological cosmos from where Adam and Eve, who were too minute, had been lucky to be kicked out” (192). In contrast, when the new visual technics appeared, the function of the American landscape photographer, influenced as he was by transcendentalism and by the project of the *Pursuit of happiness*, changed. From then on it consisted of trying to seize nature as a place where men could communicate peacefully with their God, *hic et nunc*. In the Nineteenth century, this is reflected in the explosion of the American Far-West photography and its pictures full of harmonious sierras looking like cathedrals (such as the cathedral of “Milan”<sup>3</sup>s for instance). One can therefore say that, in America, the new visual technic went along with the pioneering and exploring sciences: thus, the famous geologist and explorer, Clarence King, would be accompanied by Matthew Brady’s friend, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, a photographer whose shots were meant to capture the American paradisiac nature of the West – a paradisiac nature which predestined an America exempt of sin and therefore of the Fall, to the accomplishment of its Manifest Destiny. Consequently, in the Nineteenth century, it was photography with Carleton Watkins, his shots of Yosemite park along with so many photographers such as Timothy O’Sullivan or Andrew J. Russell who continued and replaced the abundant painting of landscapes. It was this photography devoted to landscapes which launched tourism in the American West and the exploration of “scientific transcendence” (Fumaroli, 204). The fact that Carleton Watkins obtained a gold medal does not come therefore as a surprise. It can be said that “the weak vocation of America for the visual arts [revealed to be] proportional to the huge appetite of Americans for photographic images” (242) and that this appetite strongly encouraged the economic and ideologic exploitation of photography and later on of the film industry. It is not surprising then if the follower of Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams, happens to be the author of this “famous sentence: “No one trust painting, but everyone trust photographies.” This was the very argument which “drove [Baudelaire] crazy from 1859 on” (243) – Baudelaire for whom Christianity was « the most powerful fiction conceived by the human mind.”(Baudelaire, 234)

- 9 Let us go to France where the reaction of the nineteenth-century French intelligentsia in front of the creation of new visual was a reaction of surprise. It is true that the intelligentsia did not wait long to express its disagreement when panoramas first appeared. For instance, very early Chateaubriand was as convinced as will be Baudelaire that the genius of Christianity lies in the fact that it puts the emphasis on images and on an aesthetic of mystery and beauty. The *iconophilia* of Chateaubriand, according to Marc Fumaroli, emanates from a “catholic layman for whom the fine arts along with Poetry remain the last worthy and authentic relic[s], that the fading Church left behind itself” (267). A passage of his memoirs translates quite well Chateaubriand’s reaction towards new visual media: after the Revolution, during his emigration to England, Chateaubriand, saw Baxter’s panoramas in London. Therefore, he was the witness of the craze of the people of his time for this new visual technic which announced photography in the sense that it relied on an accurate copy of reality. When he returned to Paris at the turn of the century with his book, *Le Génie du Christianisme*, the fashion of panoramas had reached France. In the Second Book of his memoirs, he

notes that, while rediscovering post-revolutionary Paris, he finds out, while at the Luxembourg that the community of the Capucines had, as many other Christian buildings of the capital, been destroyed by the Revolution; he adds that the interior cloister of the community was now used as a retreat for Robertson's Phantasmagoria. In other words, while walking in the Old Paris which was no more (and Old Paris that Baudelaire will remember in "Le Cygne"), Chateaubriand completely neglects the fashionable panoramas which abounded in the Luxembourg by not even mentioning them. Instead, he emphasizes the retreat of Robertson's Phantasmagoria in the half destroyed community of the Capucines. Why the Phantasmagoria? Because it was the natural heir of the antic magic lantern (a 2000 year old device) that panoramas (the ancestor of photography) had replaced from 1800 on in France. Aware that the quench for seeing images was the most ancient universal passion, Chateaubriand seems to have had the intuition that the appetite for seeing images for the sake of seeing images was a sure symptom of spiritual blindness and of symbolic misery which would become more and more frequent after the Revolution with the progress of Bourgeois monarchy, of Science, and of visual mechanical technics. The merits of his intuition were in fact verified when both Napoleon and Louis-Philippe used panoramas as a means of political propaganda.

- 10 As far as he is concerned, Balzac was paradoxically convinced that the daguerreotype did not reproduce the visible world but captured a spectral reality instead; in this new visual technic, he saw "a confirmation of the reality of immaterial things" (Illouz, 86). In this, Balzac was faithful to his century and its belief that an accurate copy reproducing the perception of the retina could only be pure tautology and pleonasm, and by no means an artistic form. Balzac never stopped considering that a "mediocre painter" (Fumaroli, 120) is a painter who (exactly like photographers according to Baudelaire) produces accurate reproductions of reality. Balzac wrote two novels which perfectly capture the emotions felt in the artistic world in France when the possibility of a mechanical reproduction of images became a reality with the daguerreotype. One of these novels, *Pierre Grassou*, was written in 1839; it deals with a painter who, instead of creating, knows only how to slavishly copy the paintings of Masters. His own paintings start becoming famous only when one of them "The Dressing of a Chouan Condemned to Death" in 1801 (Balzac, 69) is noticed by the royal family: Charles X stops in front of this painting and the Duke of Orleans (who will be the usurper of the legitimate power and the propagator of Bourgeois monarchy), "trie[s] to bargain" (70) Grassou's painting. Balzac adds that Grassou "had simply been inspired by Gerard Dow's masterpiece" [the hydropic woman of 1663]. Balzac continues thusly: "On a lousy little table was a meal no one had touched", Grassou [...] "replaced the dying woman [of Gerard Dow] by the condemned man: same pale face, same look, same prayer to God. Instead of the Flemish doctor, he had painted the cold and official<sup>4</sup> face of the registrar dressed in black; but he had added an old lady next to Gerard Dow's young girl. Finally the cruelly meek face of the executioner was central. This example of plagiarism which was very well disguised was not recognized at all [...] Although mediocre, this painting obtained an immense success" (69), a success identical to the success that photography will encounter. A bad painter, Grassou has nonetheless a redeeming European quality: he loves beauty and "*l'otium cum dignitate*" (72). In another novel written in 1831, *Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu*, Balzac even generates the myth of the "suicide of the arts" feared by Baudelaire (Fumaroli, 105). The "subjective Prometheism" (358) of the character Frenhofer leads Frenhofer to go further than the retinal perception and play with fire,

that is to say that he risks to fall down into the absurdity of complete incoherence. According to Marc Fumaroli, this myth created by Balzac exactly when the daguerreotype was invented came right on time because a deadly fight had begun between painting and photography. With his two novels, Balzac had also created the Baudelairian conception according to which the accurate representation of nature or its mechanical representation contributes to a considerable impoverishment of the arts.

- 11 Flaubert and Maupassant's photophobia towards their photographic portraits have been quite well documented by Yvan Leclerc (1999) and are part of this negative vision of photography in France. I will only insist here on Baudelaire's implacable hatred for photography. As both Jean-Nicolas Illouz and Jérôme Thélot demonstrate it, Baudelaire's hatred perspires in the daguerreotypes of his portraits and in the frowning face he left to posterity.<sup>5</sup> Baudelaire's portrait by Nadar in 1856 is famous because Baudelaire moved. As Jérôme Thélot contends, the "vagueness" of the photo could very well show that the poet tried to escape from the camera: his metaphysics of the imagination, his "cult for the fine arts" and for a "mimesis" as "soteriology" could only refuse any acceptance of modern barbarity (realism, narcissism of the crowd, the empire of copies, and voyeurism) (Thélot 1). According to Thélot, the only poem that Baudelaire devoted to photography, "Le Rêve d'un curieux", shows that Baudelaire's encounter with photography is an encounter where the genius refuses to bow in front of "the engineer, the creator in front of the producer, the work of art in front of the product". The revelation which takes place in front the curious dreamer is entirely physical and therefore disappointing because it has no religious value. The hourglass and the curtain do not correspond to a vanity, a *melancholia* or the veil of the temple; they correspond to the instruments which are necessary to the photograph when he tries to capture a cold truth devoid of intimacy and therefore devoid of any hope for salvation.
- 12 One understand now Baudelaire's immense joy in front of the representation thanks to drawings of the *Bataille de Sébastopol* by one of the "Phares" of the century, according to him, Constantin Guys. If Baudelaire is so ecstatic in front of Constantin Guys's drawings, it is because Guy's representations of the war are faithful to the Christian painting tradition: they translate not only the death but also the soldier's everyday life with his joys and little pleasures (Fumaroli, 288). This representation of the war with drawings has nothing to do with the representation of the Civil War in America by Matthew Brady, a photograph who died completely forgotten by his fellow citizens and who is at the origin of photo-journalism. Concerning Brady's multiple photographic reproductions of dead bodies, Marc Fumaroli quotes Susan Sontag's words on the every day acceptance of death and of war introduced by photography. The photography of wars reduces its pictures to a sad "hôpital" (288) where men can be replaced, this, because men are represented as "rags of flesh" without the divine dimension that only painting was able to render. It is true that, contrary to Brady's mechanical representation of death, painters in Catholic paintings had the freedom to imitate nature but only if they gave this imitation a closer and more emotional presence. If the painter showed a scar or blood, it was because he wanted to make the agony of death visible but only as a sacrifice. Without this metaphor of the redemption, what is left is only the agony and the corpse, this, exactly like in Holbein's painting of the Christ whose "medical naturalism" is striking: Holbein's painting corresponds to some sort of "incunable" of photography and of the "anti-icônes" of Modern Art, *body art* in

particular (448). In conclusion, if photography was in the wrong in France it was because it could not, contrary to painting, “Xray what’s divine” (290).

- 13 At the end of the Nineteenth century in France, photography will continue to be criticized because it will still be accused of being a non-artistic documentation: hence the criticism of the Nillson/Per Lamm et Offenstadt Brothers’ editions when they produced between 1897 and 1907 more than 60 “pink” novels illustrated by photographies. Moreover, even a photographer such as Émile Zola will not glorify photography in his novels: there are only two references to photography in Zola’s novels; in *Le Ventre de Paris* (where the main emphasis is actually on Lantier’s painting), the heros who own a delicatessen store have their auto-portrait painted in their bedroom whereas their clerks can only afford a photograph of their portraits in their room; in *L’Argent*, a rich courtesan uses the photographies of her female rivals to check whether they show signs of an aptitude for erotic prowesses. Still at the end of the century, when Eugène Atget photographed the districts of Paris which were going to be destructed, he insisted on the fact that his intentions were strictly utilitarian and not artistic. Consequently, couldn’t we conclude like Marc Fumaroli that, by giving a hard time to photographs, Baudelaire’s criticism was beneficial because it urged photographers to turn photography into an emblematic art finally disengaged from a tautologic reproduction of reality, this, as prove photographers such as Doisneau or Cartier-Bresson? Nonetheless, before turning this page, let’s remember that Doisneau was first an engraver and a lithograph who had studied graphical arts and that Cartier-Bresson had studied painting. The latter was a good friend of the Surrealists who, in turn, where the ones who discovered the artistic dimension of Eugène Atget’s pictures, perhaps, because his pictures resurrected an Old Paris which is no more, alas!

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## NOTES

1. Marc Fumaroli quotes the exemple of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Marble Faun* (1869) which reveals "a lot on the natural reaction of Americans in the Nineteenth century, even of educated men or women, or artists, who were fascinated by Italy, towards the erotic and passionate background of Catholicism," p. 190.
2. The ready-made will allow America "to abolish the mute criticism that the European art still raised against the serial products of American industry and the noise of its publicity," p. 208.
3. [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/peopleevents/e\\_wildness.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/ansel/peopleevents/e_wildness.html).
4. Phtographic?
5. It seems to be the same frowning face that the very Baudelairien modern author, Michel Houellebecq, tries to perpetuate in his photographic auto-portraits. Houellebecq seems to have inherited this old metaphysic rejection of photography which characterizes France.

## ABSTRACTS

The American attitude towards the news technics of visual representation in the Nineteenth century deserves to be compared to the French attitude because these attitudes are not only different but they also reveal the distinctive features which characterize both countries. I will therefore offer a survey of these attitudes and an explanation for their difference. My analysis will show that the source of this difference may come (1) from the antic opposition between the Aristotelian iconophilia and the Platonic iconophobia; (2) from the resurgence of this opposition during the famous "Querelle des Images" and later during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; (3) from the fact that, from the Schism to the Nineteenth century on, this opposition became a tidal wave which never stopped to develop.

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**Mots-clés:** photography, painting, Catholic, protestant, religion

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Marie-Christine Garneau de l'Isle-Adam is a Professor of Nineteenth-century French Literature at the University of Hawaii in the USA. She has served as Contributing Review Editor for *Biography*, an interdisciplinary quarterly review published by University of Hawaii Press for the Biographical Research Center. She was recently in charge of the review of Chateaubriand: *Correspondance Générale*, Gallimard (2010) and of *Œuvres complètes de Chateaubriand (Vols I-II-VI-VII)*, Champion (2009). Two of her latest articles, one published by Champion on Houellebecq and another one on Sand and Daniel Stern, by Classiques Garnier, are in press right now.