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François Brunet, *The Birth of the Idea of Photography*, translated by Shane B. Lillis. Toronto: RIC Books (Ryerson Image Centre); Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2019. xx + 385 pp. Color illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780262043267.

Review by Nancy Locke, The Pennsylvania State University.

Most accounts of the invention of photography have focused on the technical. There are important differences between Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's daguerreotype, which produced a unique positive image on a silver-coated copper plate, and William Henry Fox Talbot's paper negative, or between the early paper prints (or calotypes) made by Talbot and his so-called photogenic drawings, camera-less works that were more like Anna Atkins' cyanotypes. Other innovations in the creation of different types of negatives, printing processes, and media followed in such quick succession that Joel Snyder has written that "in an important sense photography has been continually *reinvented* since its initial publication in 1839."^[1] François Brunet's *The Birth of the Idea of Photography* does not set out to be a narrative history of innovations by Nicéphore Niépce, Hippolyte Bayard, and others, nor does it concern the dream of fixing the images seen in the camera obscura or drawn with a camera lucida. It is more of an intellectual history that investigates the nature of photography as an idea.

Brunet organizes the book around two episodes: the Daguerre moment and the Kodak moment. Readers might think that there other moments that defined photography's first century--Talbot's "mousetraps" and Julia Margaret Cameron's "Glass House," Nadar's mastery of light or Frederick Scott Archer's collodion negative--or instances in which a certain artist's sense of form seemed to embody the characteristics of the new medium, like Gertrude Käsebier's gum dichromate prints, or Peter Henry Emerson's platinum prints.^[2] Although these figures all appear in *The Birth of the Idea of Photography*, Brunet does not concern himself with the significance of these artists' subjects, their sense of form, or the technical details of their various practices. The book well acknowledges that Daguerre was not the only inventor of photography just as George Eastman was far from the first person to apply industrial or commercial thinking to photography. Instead, Brunet's search for the idea of photography led him to interrogate the definition of photography, and that is where we see the reasoning behind his concentration on Daguerre and Kodak coming into focus.

Photography, for Brunet, is "art without art" (p. 87). In the work of one of the earliest inventors of photography, Niépce, the notion of reproduction is key; his work was "photographic in the sense that it intimately combines production and reproduction of the image" (p. 39). When Niépce successfully used a heliographic process to reproduce a seventeenth-century print of the Cardinal

d'Amboise on a pewter plate, his work belonged to the realm of the "*estampe*, a print from an engraved surface," writes Brunet (p. 40). The daguerreotype, by contrast, "broke with the perspective of reproduction" and "began a new logic of the image as an autonomous field of spectacle, without any relationship to the printed image, and closer to painting than to the *estampe*" (p. 40). Like a painting, the daguerreotype could capture a wing of the Louvre or the features of a portrait sitter; it was not tied to the world of the printed image. It was a "facsimile" of nature produced by the 'power of light,' writes Brunet, quoting from François Arago's 1839 address to the Academy of Sciences (p. 87). Unlike painting, however, it did not require the art of drawing with the hand.

The publication of Daguerre's work in 1839 occurred well after Daguerre and others had used various media and the properties of light to capture and fix images taken from nature. Yet this publication, this presentation of the daguerreotype to academicians and the public was pivotal for Brunet. "In France, the institutionalization of the invention of photography" resulted in "photography as a technique of exactitude and a public good" (p. 117). Was photography an invention or a discovery? The distinction is not merely a semantic one, as an invention would have been patentable, whereas a discovery was an idea. Arago's address, and the French government's attitude toward Daguerre's process, "defines this invention not as an art or an industry but as an idea, and as such non-patentable" (p. 87). Daguerre and Niépce would be compensated by the government, but the new technology would be available to all, and for Brunet, this democratic openness to development and innovation was appropriate for an art without art.

Brunet recognizes that the daguerreotype had a fairly "brief period of exclusivity in Europe, reaching its peak around 1848 only to decline rapidly after 1850 because of competition from negative/positive processes, and especially the collodion process on glass" (p. 201). Why, then, does Brunet focus on this idiosyncratic medium, considering that Talbot's paper negative became the ancestor of modern chemical photography? It has to do with the daguerreotype's dominance in the United States, which lasted until 1860. American daguerreotypes saw success at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851, and Yankee ingenuity when it came to new processes for polishing and silvering daguerreotype plates, exemplified by "galvanoplasty, a technique invented in Boston" that "came into general use towards the end of the 1840s" illustrates Brunet's thesis that the "Daguerre moment" marked photography as an idea open to refinements and innovations (p. 199).

The author further explores the significance of the Daguerre moment through the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in the United States. Emerson counted photography as one of the "five miracles" of his existence, along with other manifestations of modern genius such as the steamboat, the railway, and the telegraph" (p. 215). For Emerson, the daguerreotype "is the true Republican style of painting," as he points out in a journal entry of 1841, since "the artist stands aside and lets you paint yourself" (p. 216). Brunet explicates the layers of natural and political philosophy in Emerson's writing on the daguerreotype. If there is a fault in the image, it comes not from the artist but from the sitter, who must undertake the work of reforming the self before the image can be improved. It may be a view of photography that all but eliminates the agency and creativity of the artist, but Brunet finds it well rooted in a democratic society. "In a social and political regime founded on equality, it is for the individual to provide his own representation, guaranteed by nature and regulated by the demands of the community" (p. 217).

Ralph Waldo Emerson's thinking may represent a certain congruence between photography and democratic society, but it was George Eastman whose company literally brought photography to a broader segment of that society, and the Kodak moment occupies the book's second part. "By creating and then capturing a massive amateur market," Eastman "reformulated the democratic idea associated earlier with the invention" of photography (p. 232). In the summer of 1888, Eastman marketed a lightweight camera—a box, really—that was easy to hold. It came in a kit with a preloaded roll of American Film (100 views), an instruction manual, a memo notebook, and an optional processing service. Brunet notes the initial price for the Kodak camera (\$25–\$35) was roughly equal to one month's salary for an American worker: "This kit for well-off middle-class amateurs appeared exactly fifty years after the publication of the daguerreotype" (p. 252). Very quickly, however, lower-priced Kodaks appeared, like the Pocket, the Brownie, and the Hawketta—cameras that were aimed at children, and cameras that could be emblazoned with logos and used to sell or promote other things. The company was never trying to sell cameras as much as it was positioning itself to sell "film and non-reusable materials" in addition to processing services (p. 281).

Brunet notes that the appearance of the Kodak and the flowering of the "you press the button, it does the rest" marketing of photography to a broader middle-class public coincided with the heyday of Pictorialism in artistic circles. The Pictorialist style is often seen as the last hurrah of a nineteenth-century notion of photography competing with and emulating painting. Formed by Pictorialism but making an influential shift to straight photography and other formal experiments at the turn of the twentieth century was of course Alfred Stieglitz. Brunet argued that in Stieglitz's advocacy for the advancement of photography, in his "preoccupation with institutions; the associations, groups, journals, galleries, and networks that he directed," we see an emerging separation between the "button-pressers" (ordinary users of the Kodak) and the standards for photography enshrined in the Museum of Modern Art, founded in 1929 (p. 269). It is paradoxically the vast expansion of photography to people who had no sense of the fundamentals and processes at its heart that made possible a more institutionalized recognition of serious photography.

"The Kodak moment was first of all a sociological type of transformation," proclaims Brunet (p. 255). "It was Eastman who was the first to associate the values and rites of consumption, of family and personal intimacy, and of private life and memory with what he called the 'photographic notebook'" (p. 255). There may have already existed, since the time of the "industrial madness" described by Anne McCauley, a strong association between the photographic and the intimate or familial in the nineteenth century, as can be seen in the advent of the cabinet card, the *carte de visite*, the album, and even the daguerreotype (not to mention later forms such as the tintype).^[2] What interests Brunet, however, and what makes the Kodak moment a transformative one, was the way Eastman managed to integrate photography into family life (p. 256). With the Kodak camera in hand, photography was no longer a matter of having a portrait made in a studio, or even collecting *cartes de visite*; by contrast, photography could document baby's first steps, a birthday, a trip to the beach. It is with the Kodak moment that Brunet sees the realization of photography as the art without art that had dawned at the Daguerre moment.

The original French edition, *La naissance de l'idée de photographie*, was published in 2000.^[4] Prior to his death in 2018, François Brunet wrote a new preface for this edition, translated from the French by Shane B. Lillis. The book remains densely written and theorized, with many Latinate words and academic sentence constructions that had a certain flow in French. The translation is

for the most part clear and cogent, although the reader occasionally stumbles across words that could have made a more graceful transition to English, such as “academism” (academicism [p. 104]), “ascetism” (asceticism [p. 274]), and “diaporamas” (slideshows [p. 300]), inexplicably not italicized. Readers of the book will, however, find a rich explication of the cultural significance of the idea of photography in nineteenth-century France, England, and the United States, with the photograph as discursive object at its center.

NOTES

[1] Joel Snyder, “Inventing Photography, 1839–1879,” in Sarah Greenough et al., ed., *On the Art of Fixing a Shadow: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989), p. 5.

[2] Talbot’s “mousetrap” cameras can be seen on the Victoria and Albert Museum webpage, “William Henry Fox Talbot’s Cameras” < <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/fox-talbots-cameras> > (accessed August 26, 2022). Julia Margaret Cameron’s “Glass House” was memorialized in “Annals of My Glass House,” excerpted in *Photographic Theory: An Historical Anthology*, ed. Andrew E. Hershberger (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), pp. 76–79.

[3] Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), as well as her *A. A. E. Disdéri and the Carte-de-Visite Portrait Photograph* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

[4] François Brunet, *La naissance de l’idée de photographie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000).

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