Photography and Its Critics offers an original overview of nineteenth-century American and European writing about photography from such disparate fields as art theory, social reform, and physiology. The earliest criticism of the invention was informed by an ample legacy of notions about objectivity, appearances, and copying. Received ideas about neutral vision, intuitive genius, and progress in art also shaped nineteenth-century understanding of photography. In this study, Mary Warner Marien argues that photography was an important social and cultural symbol for modernity and change in several fields, such as art and social reform. Moreover, she demonstrates how photography quickly emerged as a pliant symbol for modernity and change, one that could as easily oppose progress as promote democracy.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ITS CRITICS

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND ITS CRITICS

A CULTURAL HISTORY, 1839–1900

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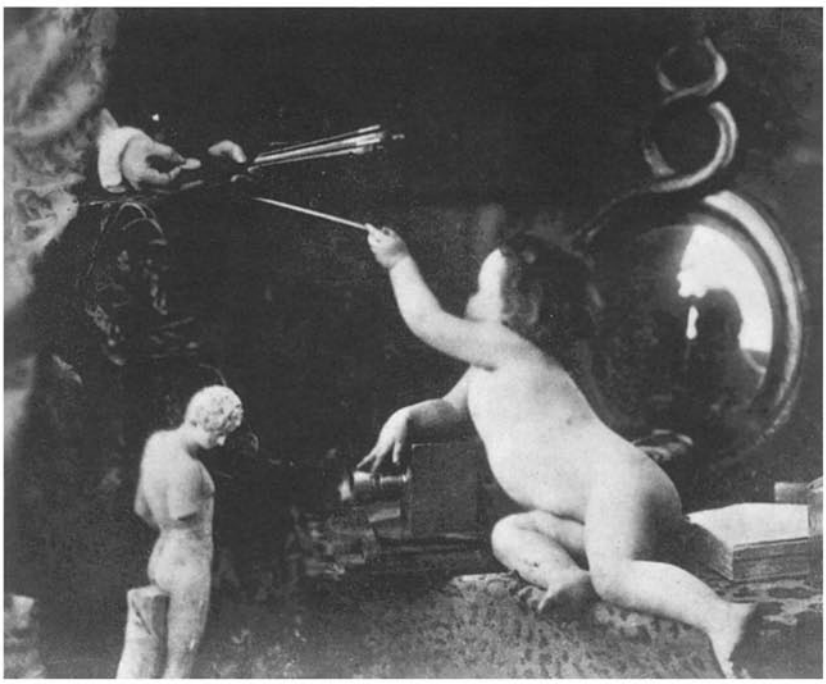

FIGURE 1

Oscar Rejlander, *Infant Photography Giving the Painter an Additional Brush*, 1856. Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

PHOTOGRAPHY *IS* THE MODERN WORLD

I have to say that the history of photography was thrust upon me. Several years ago, I was asked to teach what had been my hobby. For me, the notion of presenting the photographic record in a detached and programmatic way augured loss. My reluctance was that of an autodidact sensing ignorance's withdrawing warmth.

Indeed, the organization of a photographic history course did entail forfeiting my predilections. But even greater sacrifices loomed. Leaving art history for photographic history felt like quitting the humanities at the very moment that the field was quickening with theoretical vitality and was enlarging its purview with materials from everyday life. The expanding orbit, interdisciplinary interest, and methodological variety of the contemporary humanities seemed discouragingly distant from camera work. Which proved, if proof were needed, that I didn't know much about what was happening in photographic studies.

During the 1980s, photography was becoming the decade's vogue art. College photography courses became more common, and photographs gained in the art market and in the museums. But it was society's photographic condition, not photography per se, that emerged as a central intellectual concern. Seeing and knowing, nature and culture, reality and illusion – the big terms of Western thought – were being rearticulated with reference to the experience of mass media, especially visual media.

Put another way, it looked as though photography, which had been trying perennially to free itself from being an index of the obvious, had finally become socially symbolic. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, photography has come to stand for not simply the mass media but the experience of mediated reality. The photographic condition signaled a deterioration of the human condition: Edenic natural perception had been eroded by photographic, that is, mediated, perception. The impact of mass media on individuals and on society has become nearly synonymous with postmodernity. The sense of termi-

nal rupture with the past has brought apocalyptic joy and nostalgia. In his seminal 1981 essay "Last Exit: Painting," the artist and critic Thomas Lawson argued that

> To an unprecedented degree the perception of the "natural" is mediated these days. We know real life as it is represented on film or tape. We are all implicated in an unfolding spectacle of fulfillment, rendered passive by inordinate display and multiplicity of choice, made numb with variety; a spectacle that provides the illusion of contentment while slowly creating a debilitating sense of alienation. The camera, in all its manifestations, is our god, dispensing what we mistakenly take to be truth. The photograph *is* the modern world.[1]

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written decades earlier by the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, was revived in the 1980s and designated the touchstone of urgent contemporary ideas. The essay proclaimed a new era of human history, inaugurated by mass media, and a culture of uninhibited representation that ultimately vanquished older formulations of originality.

Despite inconsistencies, a nexus of concepts and attitudes coalesced into the notion of the photographic condition, whose visible signs were the photograph, the still photographer, and the camera. Throughout the 1980s, photography became so detached from its particularity that a painting or sculpture making visual reference to photography would be understood to be about television or advertising. In other words, photography seemed loosed from any particular practice or genealogy, and it emerged as a complex concept.

As photography became an idea, photographic history became, for me, the history of *the idea* of photography. Photographic history thrust itself upon me again not in the familiar fondness for specific images, but as a component of humanistic study. I realized that the idea of photography had not developed recently, but had been a potent axis of Western cultural thought – even before the invention of the medium! By viewing the history of photography as the history of the idea of photography, I was able to discern repeated tendencies in the writing of the medium's history.

As the intricate, unstated assumptions of writings on photographic history became the focus of my study, my old perplexities became instructive. I had long wondered about the defensiveness of photographic texts, which I superficially interpreted to be a defense of the medium itself. Rereading early histories of photography as histories of the idea of photography, I realized that photography had been involved in a contest of meaning. The defensiveness permeating its history was not merely a justification of the medium as art or information, but an effort to govern and direct the social meanings of photography.

I began to examine the schemata of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts for patterns of meaning, signifying strategies, implied absences, contradictions, elisions, conflations, and just plain crot-chets. I would like to say that the debates in contemporary cultural history guided my exploration of photographic history, but just the opposite

is true. When I observed that the historical definitions of the medium were inconsistent, I returned to the recent debates in French historiography that took up the issue of conceptual meldings. I would like to say that dawn broke over my work while I was rereading Michel Foucault, but that would not be accurate either. Foucault's attention to the symbiotic discourse of power and knowledge prompted my study of cross-currents such as the association between nineteenth-century literacy movements and photography, but it has been to the theoretical and historical writings of Roger Chartier that I return again and again.[2]

The present study retraces some of the steps that convinced me to situate photographic history in the humanities. It aims to demonstrate the variety of meanings that were part of photographic discourse from its disclosure in 1839 to the beginning of the twentieth century. It presents photography as an idea, shaped by social concerns and inherited concepts, and as a burgeoning visual practice. When photography is viewed as a multifaceted social idea, vested in the practice of but not limited to image making, the oft-made distinction between photographic document and photographic art can be transcended. In our time, the art of art photography, so much a part of nineteenth-century dispute, has been recognized by museums and universities. But the intellectual history of photography, including art photography, has been less well served. Photographic studies require what the historian Erwin Panofsky called an iconology, an inquiry into "*cultural symptoms* or '*symbols*' in general," so as to gain "insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, *essential tendencies of the human mind* were expressed by specific *themes* and *concepts.*"[3] One of the key tasks of photographic studies is to analyze the notion of photography itself, at a level of generalization indicating its connections to cultural concepts and historical settings. Photography may be an art, but photographic history is not art history. It is a comprehensive field of inquiry encompassing many disciplines.

Even if one accepts that photography was unprecedented, it does not follow that the medium penetrated society without reference to existing ideas and mental habits. The first section of this book details how early understanding of photography was fashioned through prior notions of nature, originality, and imitation, some of which evoked the continuing authority of Greek concepts in Western culture. Whereas photography's first definitions were drawn in relation to its origins, the emergent photographic discourse was imbued with a spectrum of ideas about the role of images in society. The creation of the concept of photography was not a process simply of borrowing, but of effecting new meanings through earlier ones. As Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote in *The House of the Seven Gables,* a novel that used photography as a symbol of modernity, the discourse of photography grew from the past, "gradually renewing . . . by patchwork."[4]

Though extensive, photographic discourse has not been consistent. Perhaps the outstanding characteristic of early notions of photography was the durability of the contradictions they accommodated. As photography's prehistory was articulated, the idea of

photography proved to be impressively elastic. The medium could be seen as both old and modern, as natural and cultural, as invented and discovered, as art, as magic, and as science.

The notion of photography, conjoined to practice, developed as a symbol of social change for audiences ranging from American farmers to Parisian art critics. Apocryphal stories about photography's origins, which arose in the 1840s and the 1850s, invested the daguerreotype and the photographer with magical powers. Mythic tales about mysterious inventors of photography emerged and were quickly subsumed into early histories of photography available in books and journals for lay readers. At the same time, the art and photographic literature read by cognoscenti, amateurs, and practitioners uncritically absorbed and proclaimed as accurate utterances by the painters J. M. W. Turner and Paul Delaroche about the lethal effect photography would have on painting. These parallel stories and their social significance are highlighted. The vigor of legend in photography underscores the extent to which photography as an idea embodied anxieties about cultural transformations for people of differing rank and experience. The prominent arguments for and against photography must be seen in the larger frame of societal change.

Often isolated from social analysis, the art world's debate about photography's aesthetics can be read as a surrogate for several larger issues. Photography's art potential became a topic that engaged judgments about the repercussions of industrialization, urbanization, and class relations. Practices like landscape, amateur, and High Art photography enunciated understandings of personal expression, social betterment, and morality in modern society.

The ways in which the promise of a democratized image permeated cultural notions of photography are discernible in the public dialogue about verbal and visual literacy that took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The pedagogic value of art, especially of art broadcast through photographic reproduction, became part of the rhetoric of modernization. The idea of a museum without walls, dependent on photographic facsimile, matured at the same time as two other new cultural spaces, the public museum and the department store. As concepts and institutions, the gallery and the department store suggested an abundant economic and social access to culture and commodities that did not exist. In the rhetoric of verbal and visual literacy, as well as that of the museum and department store, freedom stemmed from individual choice among a vast array of items, be they cultural or commercial. Crime and poverty too were construed as choices, that is, as the results of personal will, rather than as faults in the social system.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, art photography proclaimed its freedom from commercial photographic practice. That putative autonomy has been a commonplace of photographic history – a declaration of independence that eventually led to the establishment of photography departments in museums and galleries. Certainly the art theory written at the end of the nineteenth century seldom touched on the ordinary experience of photography. Nevertheless,

photography's attempts to create aesthetic sovereignty transpired in the context of larger social debates about the role of science and its relation to cultural achievement.

The alignment of photography and notions of modernity inform this text. With the passing of time, photography continued to connote the modern, but the notion of modernity changed. That transition is conspicuous in the writings of the photographer and theorist Peter Henry Emerson. The variety of issues that Emerson addressed in his books and articles on photography, written in the late 1880s and early 1890s, differed greatly from those articulated a half-century earlier. Emerson found it necessary to calibrate photography's relation to the weighty accumulation of scientific knowledge, as well as to specific theories, such as evolution. His jerry-built balance between the claims of culture and the claims of science on photography reveals the way in which the idea of photography remained a vital social reference at century's end. Once a mirror of the external world, photography was reestablished as modernism's shadow. It outlined the elegiac premonition that modernism was faltering as well as the perception that the future would be increasingly dependent on science and technology rather than on fundamental political change.

In the current study, the interactions between diverse photographic practices and the evolving cultural notion of photography are examined. Photography was simultaneously a transformational technology and a convenient metaphor for beneficial *and* harmful change on the planes of personal and societal experience. As both an idea and a social fact, photography unceasingly redrew the apparent line between nature and culture. Compounding issues as disparate as public morality, the effects of industrialization, and the value of cultural accomplishment, photographic discourse provided a new way to explain transitions and to articulate anxiety about personal change as well as societal directions.

It has been my good fortune to work with many gracious people and organizations during the writing of this book. Among those at Syracuse University, Professor David Tatham must be noted as the person who managed to convince me to teach what had been my hobby. Without Professor Frank Macomber, the book would not compute. Randall Bond and his staff in the Art Library have been steadily resourceful and encouraging.

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ropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Julian Cox at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California, Lori Pauli at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and, especially, Sandra Stelts at the Pennsylvania State University Library, who affirmed my belief in the kindness of strangers. Dr. Jeffrey Horrell, art librarian at Harvard's Fogg Museum, and Amy Rule at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson provided needed assistance with image resources and information.

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For his continual intellectual inspiration, generosity, and joie de vivre, this book is affectionately dedicated to Professor William Fleming, teacher, mentor, and friend.

A NOTE ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Some of the images reproduced in this book refer to specific photographs discussed in the text. For the most part, though, they typify the dimensions of nineteenth-century popular and artistic photographic practice.

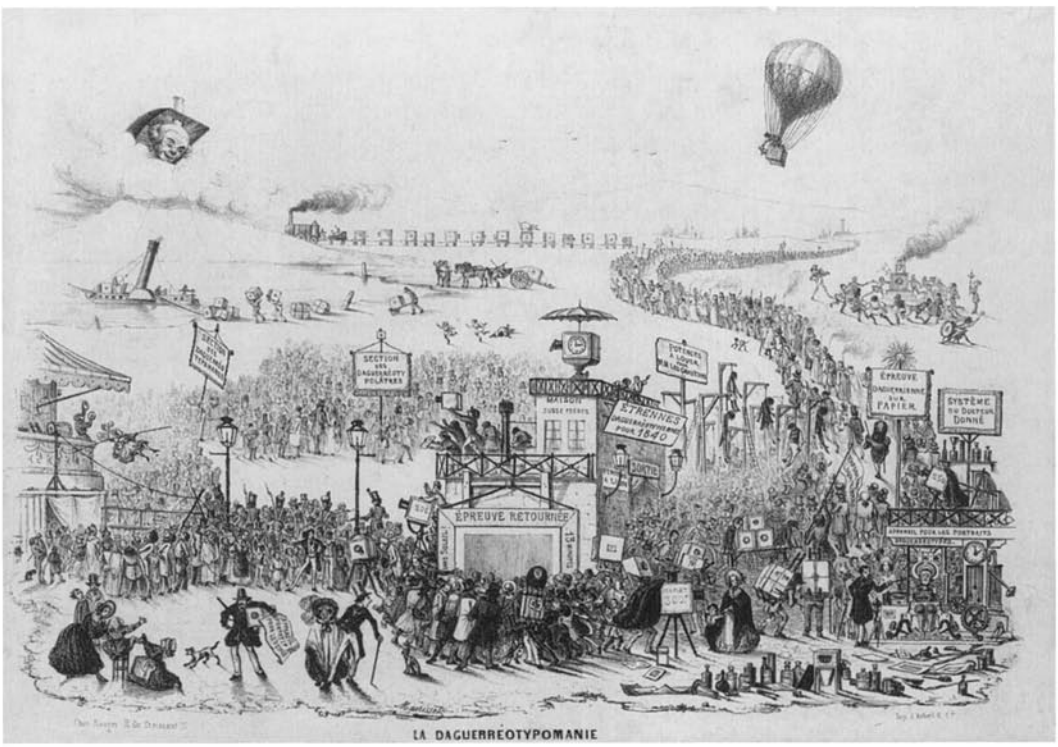

FIGURE 2

Théodore Maurisset, *La Daguerreotypomanie,* lithograph, 1840. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.