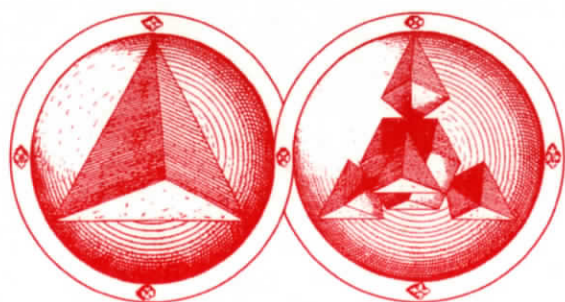


# Pluralisierung & Autorität



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## EVIDENTIA

Reichweiten visueller Wahrnehmung  
in der Frühen Neuzeit

## Evidence of the Image – A few suggestions towards a cultural history of photography

Carl Havelange, with Jeannine Paul

What is photography? It is a new technique of representation which, after a slow maturing process, suddenly appears on the public scene, when in Paris in 1839, François Arago reveals and liberally presents the world with new technical procedure which one Jacques Louis-Mandé Daguerre claims to have invented. In a very short time, photography spreads all over the world and to all cultural fields – documentation, science, the fine arts, family life: it becomes one of the most common and ritually celebrated emblems of modernity. Photography may thus be described as a process of representation, of producing a new kind of image; however, this process is one whose nature and extraordinary dispersion brought about a radical change in contemporary visual culture. For a photograph is not only a type of image, but also an instrument of vision as well as a device for reflecting on and experiencing the phenomenon of seeing, establishing and revealing new relations between the eye and the world, the self and the other, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This leads me to the working hypothesis I would like to develop in the following: in the same way as Brunelleschi's tavoletta, Leonardo's transparent pane of glass, Galileo's telescope, or Kepler's retinal image, photography is a new 'third element' which, when interposed between the eye and the world, determines and makes possible new reflections about the act of looking at the world and its cultural significance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I previously proposed this concept of the 'third element' in Havelange 1998.

What does this imply for our conference theme of *evidentia*? In the view of its first commentators, photography compels the eye because of its dazzling mimetic capacity. From the very beginning, even if it would later turn out to have limits, the photographic resemblance was conceived as something radically new – completely different from all representational techniques that had previously been known. Samuel Morse, for example, already wrote in the spring of 1839: „No painting, no engraving can approach it.“ This supposed and constantly celebrated capacity of photography to show people ‘the thing as it really is’, to depict the world ‘as it actually is’, is governed by a series of cultural factors which I would like to examine in the following. The photographic resemblance and the quality of ‘evidence’ it bears is of course a cultural construct. To illustrate this, I will consider two cultural modes of the process of constructing and interiorizing the photographic resemblance, in other words, two cultural modes of photographic ‘evidence’. The first of these modes is ‘anthropological’ and deals with the photographic technique. It indicates how photography to a certain degree disturbs the relationship between the order of nature and the order of culture. The second mode is ‘phenomenological’ and concerns the image itself, showing how the photographic phenomenon, when seen from a historical and cultural perspective, cannot be dissociated from its subjective reception that lies at the very heart of *The Society of Individuals*, to quote a well-known title by Norbert Elias.<sup>2</sup> Thus I hope to point out, although only in rough outlines, a few directions for a renewed history of photography.

### 1 A Mechanical Art: the anthropological mode of photography

What is photography? As 19<sup>th</sup>-century contemporaries constantly observe, it is a process that allows us to fix an image in the darkroom. Of course, this was seen as a great achievement and celebrated as a major invention, one of those glorious advances that attest to man’s genius. On August 19, 1829, at the famous meeting of the Academy of Sciences in Paris that marks the beginning of the history of photography, François Arago insisted on the „marvellous success“ as well as on the wonderful simplicity of the new process:

The daguerreotype does not require any single manipulation that would not be comprehensible for everyone. It does not presuppose any knowledge of drawing. It does not require any manual dexterity. When following point by point a set of very simple and very few instructions, everyone certainly must succeed just as well as Mr Daguerre would himself.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Elias 1991 (Elias, Norbert (1991) : *The Society of Individuals*. Oxford: Blackwell).

It is not „an instrument that serves us to draw nature,“ the inventor himself writes, „but a physical and chemical process which enables nature to reproduce itself.“<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jules Janin observes in the spring of 1839: „You must be aware that the sun itself is at work here.“<sup>5</sup>

The following are some of the main features associated with the idea of photography at the very beginning. First it was considered a process whose unprecedented success emphasized man's intelligence and creative power. The entire discourse about the topic in those days attests that photography was thought to be, as it were, a cultural apex of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It was the expression, above all, of a scientific civilization living up to its promises, beyond all expectations. „It is the most extraordinary among the vast number of inventions which make of our yet unfinished century the greatest of the scientific centuries.“<sup>6</sup> Within an imaginary genealogy recounted again and again, the photographic image was considered the result of a long series of efforts since the Renaissance that were intricately associated with the development of modernity. Fixing images in the darkroom – „where indeed can a more wonderful chain of fertile creations be found?“<sup>7</sup> The invention of perspective, the magic of the *camera obscura*, Galileo's telescope, the optical revolution, the birth of the image and of the vision as forms of representation since Kepler and Descartes, in other words the modern history of the objectification of the world, seemed to be crowned by the invention of photography.

In times of great expectations one took pleasure in imagining the innumerable applications that were constantly extending the field of photography.<sup>8</sup> It would become 'the scientist's retina', it made the world visible and intelligible, showing it as it truly is and producing unexpected images, which

<sup>3</sup> „Le daguerréotype ne comporte pas une seule manipulation qui ne soit à la portée de tout le monde; il ne suppose aucune connaissance du dessin; il n'exige aucune dextérité manuelle. En se conformant de point en point à des prescriptions très-simples et très-peu nombreuses, il n'est personne qui ne doive réussir certainement et aussi bien que M. Daguerre lui-même.“ – Arago 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ce n'est pas un „instrument qui sert à dessiner la nature, mais un procédé physique et chimique qui lui donne la facilité de se reproduire elle-même.“ (Prospectus for the daguerreotype (1838), quoted by Brunet 2000, 51).

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Rouille 1989, 46.

<sup>6</sup> „[...] la plus extraordinaire dans la pléiade des inventions qui font de notre siècle interminé le plus grand des siècles scientifiques.“ Nadar [1900]/1994, 11.

<sup>7</sup> „Où trouver, en effet, un plus merveilleux enchaînement de créations fécondes?“ Figuier 1851, vol. 3, 2.

<sup>8</sup> As early as 1839 Arago established a first list of the possible applications of photography – archaeological, medical, astronomical and artistic. But he makes certain not to close his list: „Besides, whenever observers apply a new instrument to the study of nature, it turns out that what they had expected to find is not much compared to the series of further discoveries that the instrument leads to. In such cases one should expect the unexpected.“ Arago 2003, 20.

immeasurably exalted the idea of representation and opened up incredible prospects for the 'observational sciences'. As a matter of fact, photography did not only record images of what was visible; it also revealed the invisible to the human eye. The photographic eye could represent everything and penetrate all secrets: the macroscopic and the microscopic, the movement, whose single parts are not visible to the naked eye (see for example the works of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey), the insides of the human body that could be explored thanks to Röntgen's rays and even manifestations of the invisible, such as spirits, ghosts, ectoplasms, evoked by so many photographic experiments during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Photographic images were thus conceived of as 'technical' images with amazing promise. However, these images were produced by a singular technique whose extraordinary simplicity was stressed time and again, at least at the beginning. One did not have to be an artist or a scientist to make use of the new process: it „does not require any single manipulation that would not be comprehensible for everyone,“ Arago claimed. Everybody would be able to devote themselves to photography, even women and children. Such was its simplicity and its obviousness, its limitless reproducibility, that Daguerre's applying for a patent to receive his deserved revenue as an inventor was out of the question. France would see to it, rewarding the inventor and „liberally“ offering his discovery to the world – a way of monopolizing and translating into political terms the virtues of universality and transparency associated with the photographic image. The photographic image as a universal image, an image for everybody; an image whose invention was celebrated over and over again to emphasize the genius peculiar to man and the power of science – this clearly assigns photography to the cultural field. On the other hand, however, we are also dealing with an image whose perfect simplicity of production seemed to set it apart from culture. Viewed from this perspective, photography was more than a human invention: it was a 'discovery' whose power and use man only had to recognize, as Prometheus did the power and use of fire. The photographic process, whose extraordinarily sophisticated technique could have been pointed out, almost seems to disappear in contemporary discourse, making room for the pure naturality of the photographic picture, an image deeply linked to the notion of culture, yet considered as purely natural – *image acheïropoïete* ('made without man's hand') – and consequently 'non-technical'. On this point all contemporaries agree, Daguerre first of all: photography was not „an instrument that serves us to draw nature, but a physical and chemical process which enables nature to reproduce itself“. Thus, photography was a sudden intrusion of nature into the world of culture.



*Abb. 1: L. J. M. Daguerre, Vue du boulevard du Temple, daguerreotype, Paris 1839, Munich, Stadtmuseum.*

This gives us one of the major clues to understanding the history of photography: the appearance of an image type, perceived as completely 'new', which is situated at the very borderline between the order of nature and the order of culture. This contradiction or tension, rarely pointed out nowadays, but nevertheless described over and over again in the first texts about photography, determines the first cultural approach to that new image: the 'natural' picture is the result of a technique. This means that its very naturality is possible and given to culture only through the genius of man. The photographic image is an unstable tip of the scale at the borderline between nature and culture. It is a picture of the limits. It seems to show things as they really are without the help or 'filter' of the human hand. On the other hand, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, photography derives its extraordinary prestige from the fact that it is peculiar to man, revealing his skill and inventiveness. Thus from the very beginning the history of photography is a history of numerous exchanges and ceaseless negotiations between 'nature' and 'culture'.

Photography derives its main impact from this very instability or tension, which is the source of its numerous uses: of scientific or documentary photography, of artistic photography, of the practice of studio and family photography, rapidly becoming popular, the great maelstrom of images in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, their fetishist uses and their funerary uses, their bur-

den of sadness, the extreme diffusion of the photographic gesture, its universality, its invisibility, its apparent muteness and neutrality – in other words its ‘evidence’.

It is also this point which enables us to fully understand the numerous discussions about photography up to the present time, for example, the endless debates about whether photography is an art or not, which constantly repeat the same arguments over and over again, but are nevertheless purposeful. If the photographic picture were really ‘natural’, it could not be assigned to the field of artistic creation. It would have to be confined to strictly documentary applications. If, on the other hand, the photographic picture were filtered through man’s brain or through man’s eye, from the framing to the printing, it would be destined to supplant the palette and the brushwork and to become the dominant method of present-day artistic expression. I am quite sure that most debates about the artistic value of photography are connected to the original ambiguity or inherent indeterminacy of the photographic picture. The same applies to what is called the ‘theory of photography’, and this reveals, in fact, its historicity. Debates about the status of the photographic image as an icon or an index, the idea of an ‘image without code’ or Roland Barthes’ „ça a été“, are indeed founding historical and cultural debates that nowadays indicate the very boundary situation that has characterized the history of photography since 1839.

Natural image and cultural image: photography is the technology we invented, so that nature and culture could be articulated in relation to each other. It is situated at the very heart of Western anthropology, at its pivotal point. Western man has notoriously paid the debt of a terrible solitude for his triumphant control over nature – that immeasurable gap between him and his environment, so deeply marking the advent of modernity and so closely associated with the history of our visual cultures, from the very beginning of the early modern period. We have exchanged ‘the eye inside the world’ for ‘the eye outside the world’. And from this moment on we have been developing for better or worse that strange humanity marked by critical thinking and its irreducible burden of melancholy. Therein consists the triumphant solitude of the modern subject, if I may put it thus.

Photography is the technology we invented in order to fill the gap between nature and culture, between man and the world in a new, different and more certain way. It is a technology we invented to make possible the passage from culture to nature, to nourish our hopes and to give our melancholy a meaning, to give substance to our gaze. Photography easily steps across the boundary line, sometimes here, sometimes there, enabling us to learn about the world, yet, nevertheless, always by gazing through the cultural filter of the lens. For the contemporary world, it seems to reconcile the days before

and after the division in a new synthesis of the gaze. Vision is representation, exalted by photographic mimesis and the suggestive power of its optical device. But photography is also a trace, a mark, an index, a touch 'from a distance'. Through new cultural forms, it revives not only the founding myths of the image and of representation but also ancient, pre-modern meanings of the gaze, when seeing meant 'grasping' or 'being grasped' by what is seen, 'touching' beings and things, and when vision was the expression of an almost physical connection with them. What we have gained, we have lost. Photography makes us 'touch' the world and then withdraws from it immediately.



Abb. 2: Nadar, Sarah Bernhardt, circa 1860,  
Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Such are the cultural uses of photography: it enables us to be simultaneously within and outside nature, within and outside the world; and always it implies that uncertain position *in between* nature and culture, which makes us what we are. From an anthropological point of view this is undoubtedly what distinguishes painting from photography. If we look at any photographic portrait, an old studio portrait, an old family portrait, a photo at school, or whatsoever, we certainly find it inscribed in time, in society, in culture, in history. One can pinpoint rather easily the conditions of its pose and framing, the intention behind it, the use it is destined for, the conventions it follows. What it shows, from that point of view, always seems intelligible to us. It is obviously a cultural object. Of course, it is also inscribed in the long history of the image and of representation. However, if we direct our attention to *that particular* photographic portrait, if we plunge into it, if we allow ourselves to be absorbed by the picture, we can perceive something else, which is at the root of the photographic enigma: the burning intensity of a





*Abb. 3: Ferrotyp, Belgium, circa 1860, private collection.*

necessarily vanished presence, „a singular weaving of space and time“, as Walter Benjamin expressed it so wonderfully, „a unique appearance from far-off, near though that presence is“. And finally, in any photograph, be it an image of yesterday or of today, a trivial or an artistic photo, we see that naked part of the faces and of the bodies shown there: a deep emotion, ourselves perceived as if from the other bank.

## **2 The Photographic Portrait: images of the self, images of the other**

It is this essential question about the photographic portrait itself that I would like to consider in the following. Indeed, the appearance and the early popularization of the photographic portrait seems to be a cultural event of paramount importance. In no time at all, what had been the privilege of a class – having one’s picture taken –, comes within most people’s means, a new form of ‘evidence’ generated by the practice of photography. What had previously been more or less the distinguishing mark of a happy few, was now – on the contrary – the cultural expression and physical instrument of everyone’s integration into the universal community of individuals.



*Abb. 4: Family portrait, Liège, circa 1915, private collection.*

Thus, the extraordinary spread of the photographic portrait in contemporary society is not only an epiphenomenon of social history: it deeply transforms the very idea of the image one's self and consequently the entire history of the representation. In other words, the social spread of photography is a constituent of the image itself, integrally connected with the birth of a new visual culture, of a new gaze, of a new form of specifically contemporary 'evidence'.

My starting point in examining this hypothesis will be a simple, practically self-evident text, a text which might be considered too simple, or even trivial, perhaps. Nevertheless, I would like to demonstrate its significance and its richness. This completely unknown text was written by a modest working man from the Liège area, Gaspard Marnette (1837-1903), who, throughout his life, recorded everything in note books that he could observe in his village. In all, he wrote more than two thousand pages, recently discovered, which constitute an ethno-historical document of major importance.<sup>9</sup> In the following, I will only consider a short passage from the

<sup>9</sup> Marnette's chronicle has been partially edited by Leboutte in 1991. I quote from the original manuscript, preserved in the Archives of the Bishopric of Liège.

chronicle, six pages in handwriting, which are of immediate interest to us. The events described in these pages happened in 1877. After pondering over his project for a long time, Gaspard decides to take his old parents to the city to have their photographic portrait taken. The way he records the whole event leaves us with the impression that things are taking an odd turn in a family – and in a village – to which photography is yet largely, if not totally, unfamiliar.

We left for Liège by coach; the weather was magnificent, but a rather cold north wind was blowing. People watched the coach pass from their houses; coaches do not pass that very often, and certainly not so early in the morning.<sup>10</sup>

The portraits are taken before noon „in half an hour, three quarters of an hour's time, though it was necessary to take my father's portrait three times to catch his likeness," Marnette continues. Ten days later, he brings his parents' portraits to a gilder of his acquaintance to have them framed.

They had turned out wonderfully well; my mother's in particular was a striking likeness, with her cornet or bonnet and a silk handkerchief on her head framing her face. My father, who was colder and more sluggish by nature, had a duller and more melancholy face. We asked a few neighbours to come and see the portraits. Oh, how like him it was! This was indeed the portrait of Gaspard and of Marie Bastin! There was joy in the house, we were even moved to tears.<sup>11</sup>

It is above all the „likeness“ that moves Marnette in these days when the realization of a photographic portrait was still an exceptional event, particularly among people of humble origin. A likeness whose closeness is again and again put to the test by the scrutinizing gaze of the children of the family, as if they wanted to authenticate the picture:

My little niece Marie, who was four and a half, comes in. We show her the portrait of my mother and ask her who it is [...]. The little naive and innocent girl looks at it and says to her grandmother, looking at her: „That's a woman like you!“ – Come on, my brother-in-law says to the same little Marie, his daughter, just tell us who that woman is, showing

<sup>10</sup> „Nous partîmes pour Liège en voiture; le temps était magnifique, mais il soufflait une bise qui n'était pas trop chaude. De toutes les maisons on regardait passer la voiture, il n'en passe pas si souvent et surtout si matin.“

<sup>11</sup> „Ils étaient admirablement bien réussis; ma mère surtout était frappante de ressemblance, avec sa cornette ou bonnet et son mouchoir de soie sur la tête encadrant son visage. Mon père lui, d'un tempérament plus froid, plus lymphatique, avait le visage plus éteint, plus morne. On appelle une voisine ou deux pour leur montrer les portraits. O, c'était bien cela! C'était bien le portrait de Gaspard et de Marie Bastin. C'était une joie dans la maison, une émotion jusqu'aux larmes.“

her my father's portrait. 'That's my granddad', she answers immediately, looking at the portrait.<sup>12</sup>

Later Marnette adds in the margin of his text, as if he wanted to insist once more on the constantly renewed magic of the resemblance:

Those portraits were so very like my father and my mother that Jean-Louis Fraikin, my nephew, who was one year and four months old, pointed at them with his finger and kept repeating 'Pépete' or 'Mèmet', depending on whether he was pointing at the portrait of my father or of my mother.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Marnette and his relatives for the first time seem to experience resemblance, that extraordinary quality of 'the photographic evidence', in a profoundly moving *face-à-face* confrontation. What strikes me most, however, is the fact that this resemblance is immediately constructed by Marnette in terms of strong inter-subjective relations. It is this which allows him to recognize and label in the portraits of his parents the character traits which so strongly distinguish them in his view. It is highly significant that he is able for the first time to express his feelings about his parents in such an explicit way. A silk handkerchief is sufficient to evoke the 'resemblance' of his mother, a resemblance that Marnette contrasts with what he considers the duller representation of a father whose temperament is cold and sullen. Is the likeness of the photo really less precise or does Marnette feel emotionally so much closer to his mother that he judges the portrait of his father inferior? Whatever the case, his father's physiognomy seems to resist that idealized form of resemblance in which Marnette delights. Were not three attempts necessary to catch the correct likeness of his father? His mother's resemblance is superior because her image is situated on the borderline where the son's intensive ardor is focussed. The last section of Marnette's text, based on that pristine experience of the photographic resemblance, explores the different dispositions of his mother and his father. As never before in twenty years of writing, Marnette lingers over the biography of his parents, describing at length the sweetness and devotion of his mother, literally sanctifying her image, while on the other hand darkening his father's image through an almost condescending description of his weaknesses. My point here is that

<sup>12</sup> „Ma petite nièce Marie qui avait 4 1/2 ans rentre. On lui montre le portrait de ma mère en lui demandant qui c'est [...] La petite naïve et innocente regarde et dit à sa grand-mère en la regardant: 'c'est une femme comme vous!' Allons, dit mon beau-frère à la même petite Marie sa fille, dites-nous un peu qui c'est cette femme-là, en lui montrant le portrait de mon Père. 'C'est m'pépère', répond-elle aussitôt en jetant ses yeux dessus.“

<sup>13</sup> „Ces portraits étaient si ressemblants aux traits de mon père et de ma mère que Jean-Louis Fraikin, mon neveu, à l'âge de un an et quatre mois les désignait du doigt en disant: Pépete ou Mèmet, selon qu'il montrait le portrait de mon père ou celui de ma mère.“

the photographic experience opens up to Marnette a new way of expressing his individual self, of constructing a new form of individual memory, and establishing a sort of intimate contact with his own subjective character, which gazing at his parents' portrait actually makes possible.

Certainly, one might object that Marnette's emotional experience and that of his relatives is less linked to the photographic experience as such than to the portrait and to self-representation in general. Perhaps, one might argue, Marnette would have been just as emotionally upset, if he had brought back the painted portraits of his parents rather than their photographic portraits. Possibly! But this was not the case – and it would have been, as a matter of fact, totally unthinkable in Marnette's society. We must therefore admit that the photographic portrait is the very medium which enables Marnette to look at himself, to represent himself, and to experience himself as a subject in such a significant way. Thanks to photography, Marnette really speaks about himself and about his own story for the first time. It seems, as if until that moment his gaze had been exclusively directed to things outside himself, as if it had until that time been entirely occupied by the faces and actions of the village community he belonged to. And as if, all of a sudden, his gaze had turned upon himself. I am absolutely sure that, thanks to photography, this aptitude for self-questioning will continue to develop intensively in more and more strata of contemporary society.

But let us return to our text, in order to further question its various meanings. Marnette examines himself, as it were, by gazing at the photographic pictures of his parents. He examines himself, but he also examines his relatives as subjects, no longer merely as members of a community. In one and the same instant, as if he wanted to demonstrate what is essential in photography, he also locates his experience in the depths of times past. Indeed, to convince his mother, who is at first unwilling, to submit herself to the photographic ritual, he immediately evokes the commemorative function of the image:

I was obliged to ask her if she would not be happy to have the portrait of her mother, whom she had so tenderly loved. She answered me tearfully, 'Oh yes, I would!' – Well, I said, it's just the same for me, so don't deny me this!<sup>14</sup>

Further on in the text, let us listen to the wonderful passage in which Marnette's emotion seems to be at its height:

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<sup>14</sup> „Il me fallut lui demander si elle ne serait pas bien contente de posséder le portrait de sa mère qu'elle avait tant aimée. Elle me répondit avec larmes: O, si! – Eh bien, dis-je, moi c'est pareil, ne me refusez pas cela.“

The next day I call my sister Elisabeth to my room, where I had temporarily hung up my portraits, in order to show her once more the faces, so well reproduced, of my father and of my mother. I uncover that of my father. We cry out in admiration: 'How well it is done! It is really him!' 'And look at that one, now!' I say to my sister, uncovering the picture of my mother, whom we both loved so tenderly. Seeing the traits of my mother, so perfectly reproduced, the emotion overwhelms my sister, who bursts into tears of joy and sadness. So do I. 'Wouldn't we be quite sad to see them getting old?', my sister says to me. And we were standing there in ecstasy before the portraits of our ageing parents, who were still living a stone's throw from us and whom we loved so much.<sup>15</sup>

We can see the tears rise in the eyes of the two spectators, owing, of course, to the extraordinary novelty of a deeply moving experience. The artificial presence of their parents is at the same time the anticipated image of their absence. In their simplicity and transparency, Marnette's words define photography as a kind of anticipated funeral rite. And Elisabeth Marnette's tears of joy and sadness, in their duality, translate into words the inextricably intermingled figures of presence and of absence at the very heart of photography, which a number of theorists will later attempt to describe.

Marnette individually and clearly experiences the singular resemblance or 'evidence' of photography. It is an experience of presence and absence, but also an experience of identity; an experience of the self and of the other, of temporality, of the irretrievable, of being connected with the world and disconnected from it. Such is the complex experience that the photographic representation elicits and illustrates at the same time. Each photograph, when observed seriously, is a 'melancholy museum' strangely confronting our lives with sadness and joy. This experience of photography has become so familiar that we are no longer able to perceive its intensity and its peculiarities. This is a common feature of all the processes of cultural institutionalization: the more a cultural institution spreads, the more it takes root in a specific social universe; the more it is in keeping with the nature of things, the more natural it appears – and the more evident. The cultural naturalization of the photographic image in contemporary society tends to make evident, as it were, the very 'evidence' of photography; in other words, it tends

<sup>15</sup> „Le lendemain, j'appelle dans ma chambre, où j'avais appendu provisoirement mes portraits, ma sœur Elisabeth pour lui faire voir encore les visages si bien reproduits de mon père et de ma mère. Je découvre celui de mon père. Nous l'admirons et nous nous exclamons: 'que c'est bien fait! comme c'est bien lui!' 'Et celui-là donc?', dis-je à ma sœur en découvrant celui de ma mère que nous aimions si tendrement. L'émotion à la vue des traits si bien faits de ma mère gagne ma sœur qui se met à fondre en larmes de joie et de tristesse; je fais de même. 'Ne serions-nous pas bien tristes de les voir devenir vieux?' me dit ma sœur. Et nous étions là en extase devant les portraits de nos vieux parents, vivant encore à quelques pas de nous et que nous aimions tant.“

to make it invisible. Hence, of course, the exceptional significance of a witness like Marnette. His text reveals, as if it were a myth, some of the modes of inscription of the photographic phenomenon into the contemporary world, at the very beginning of the process of cultural interiorization and before any intellectual construction occurred.

Yet, again, it might perhaps be objected that this is not necessarily a process peculiar to photography, but one that concerns the history of representation in general. Do not the founding myths of painting inscribe the dialectics of presence and absence, of desire and melancholy, of possession and loss into any representation, into any painting, into any portrait? Such is the case, for example, with the daughter of Ditulabe, the potter, about whom Pliny writes in his *Natural History* (XXXV, 151-152) that she invented painting when drawing the shape of the shadow of her lover, who was about to leave for a long trip. Indeed. Yet far be it from me to deny the close relationship between photography and the representational arts that preceded it. Rather, this is precisely my point. The photographic process, as it was immediately interiorized by 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture, achieves representation through an increased level of 'truth', of presence, materiality and authenticity, which are its distinctive features. The evidence of photography results from its power of attestation, from that indisputable witness of a presence whose trace the image retains. The photographic image is perceived, at the same time, as a representation *and* as a trace or emanation. And, of course, photographic *resemblance* is thoroughly imbued with this double function. It is precisely this that is revealed so palpably in Gaspard Marnette's text. And it is this, too, that somehow was already expressed by the majority of early commentators on the photographic image.

Thus, twenty years before Marnette, one of the first and most important critics of photographic images, Ernest Lacan, had already commented, from the same 'biographical' perspective, on a portrait of Marshal de Saint-Arnaud, presented at the World Exposition in 1855. The recent death of Saint-Arnaud, who had returned from the Crimea, gives to the critic's comment a rather singular tone:

Where could one find today, better than in this print, the features, the look, the attitude of this man who is now resting in the tomb. [...] This portrait is [...] at the same time a biography and a funeral oration. What precious documents these images are to the historian, and how many similar ones can we find in the albums of portrait photographers! They are historical galleries in which all the great names of our time can be found: politicians, generals, poets, artists, scientists, all those who will have their place in history are there, present and alive, in the flash of light which drew them.<sup>16</sup>

This statement summarizes all the characteristics of the photographic image:



*Abb. 5: Portrait at school, Belgium, 2000, Private collection.*

its perfection and disturbing likeness of representation; the physical character of its trace; its dialectics of presence and of absence; its memory and reflexivity. Yet Lacan had, of course, no idea about the immense democratization of the photographic portrait that was yet to come, nor could he have imagined its extraordinary cultural importance. The photographic pantheon he dreams of, in which celebrity and good taste are inextricably joined together, was to serve as a collective history exalting the values of the Nation. Soon after, the development of photographic mass production would be considered, by Baudelaire and many others, as a decline in the true art of portraiture. It is, however, that very decline which constitutes one of the most remarkable and interesting aspects of the history of photography. Most important, from the point of view of cultural history, is indeed the relative analogy between the gaze fixed by Marnette on the photo of his parents and

<sup>16</sup> „Où retrouver aujourd'hui, mieux que dans cette épreuve, les traits, le regard, l'attitude de celui qui repose maintenant dans la tombe? [...] Ce portrait [...] est à la fois une biographie et une oraison funèbre. Quels documents précieux pour l'historien, et combien on en peut trouver de semblables dans les albums des portraitistes photographes! Ce sont des galeries historiques où l'on retrouve tous les grands noms de notre époque: hommes politiques, généraux, poètes, artistes, savants, tous ceux qui auront leur place dans l'histoire sont là vivants, dans le rayon de lumière qui les a dessinés.“ Lacan 1856, 42 f.



that of Lacan on the photo of Saint-Arnaud. This analogy reveals the importance of the standardizing processes at work in contemporary society – standardizing processes for which the photographic portrait is perhaps one of the most powerful vehicles. It is at the beginning of such standardizing processes that Western cultures succeed in inscribing the category of the individual into their very functional modes.

And it is indeed on the horizon of that new constellation of the social structure that the subject must find, by himself, the paths towards a commonly shared interiority. Memory of the self, memory of the other, interiority, identity and difference – Marnette, when gazing at his parents' portrait, enters the contemporary world, thus resembling us closely – almost like a brother.

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