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Borders Cuts Images

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Borders Cuts Images

edited by

Linda Bertelli and Maria Luisa Catoni



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Chronophotography as an archive

The dialogue between the physiologist and the artist in *Le Mouvement* by Étienne-Jules Marey (1894)

Linda Bertelli*

Scenes from a Marriage

Between the 19th and 20th centuries, the questions of the relationship between photography and art and, more specifically, of identifying the criteria according to which photography could be considered an art, were the focus of broad debates on the status that should be attributed to this new technology with respect to other, already recognised ones. From its very first steps, there were tensions and resistance around integrating photography into the repertoire of the arts, as the case of Daguerre strikingly exemplifies. In 1839, the inventor of photography was awarded the Legion of Honour by Louis-Philippe, but neither the French nor the English Academy (the American Academy being an exception) gave him any recognition and indeed this lack of recognition illustrates the general refusal to grant photography the status of art. However, it was in the 1850s and 1860s that the diatribe erupted in full and in various guises, perhaps the best known and most effective of which was a court case. The trial held in France in 1861-1862 involved three photographic studios, Mayer et Pierson as plaintiffs and Thiébault et Betbéder and Schwabbé as defendants. The former studio accused the latter ones of illegally copying the photographic portraits of some eminent personalities, portraits over which it claimed ownership. The Tribunal Correctionnel de la Seine ruled against the plaintiffs in the first instance, but the Cour de Paris overturned the judgment, ruling that photography was a form of art and, as such, protected by the same legal system as other arts. In the autumn of that same year, a petition, signed first by Ingres along with many other artists, was submitted to the Court in opposition to the April decision. However, the Cassation ruled against the petition, thereby confirming the previous decision (see McCauley 2008). It was thus through the courts that photography became to be recognised as an art.

As mentioned, however, the struggle to secure photography official recognition as art had been waged in the previous decade by the photographers of the Pictorialist movement. Their photographs began to be exhibited in galleries, the authors participated in competitions and contests, and specialised magazines published formal and stylistic analyses of the characteristics and compositional concepts of these images alongside articles on procedures and technologies. The use of gum bichromate printing also made it possible to produce scratched images that looked like the grain of a canvas. One of the consequences of this stream of claims was that many art critics and artists began to perceive photography as a threat, viewing it as the cause of a decline in taste. The most widespread criticism and accusation levelled against photography as an art form took on the tone and content of the criticism already formulated and directed against the pictorial current of realism in the name of safeguarding neo-classical art. For their part, the photographers, especially the pictorialists along with the critics supporting them, took action in an attempt to assert the artistic nature of photography.

From its foundation in 1854, for example, the Société française de Photographie worked toward this aim. The following year, the Society took advantage of a dispute between Gustave Courbet and the organisers of the Universal Exhibition in Paris. To protest against the exclusion of his painting *L'atelier d'artiste* from the Salon for being too “realist”, Courbet opened a personal retrospective (the well-known Pavillon du Réalisme); he had this new space specially built opposite the Exhibition’s Palais de l’Industrie. A few months later, from 1 August to 15 November 1855, the Société française de Photographie organised the first Salon of photography, a major exhibition aimed at overcoming the official Salon’s resistance to exhibiting photographic works. In 1859, the organization succeeded in having a second show authorised in the same Palais de l’Industrie. Whereas Courbet intended to stigmatise the jury’s choices, however, the exhibition organised by the Société had set itself the objective of emancipating photography from the sole function of serving as an instrument for producing realistic images.

In his review of the 1859 Salon, Charles Baudelaire reserved a scathing judgment for photography, framing its lack of spirituality the ultimate criterion for distinguishing what is art from what is not. This argument

appeared recurrently in the discourse of its photography's detractors, convinced as they were that the spiritual value of art is revealed in the artist's authorship and creativity [1] (see Baudelaire 1859 [2004], 220. See also Frizot 1983; Laforgue 2000, 108 ff.; Roubert 2000, 143 ff). As an automatic image, photography lacks these characteristics; since it even succeeds in rendering visible real elements that are not perceptible to the naked eye it constitutes, on the contrary, the highest model of a truth of representation that is identified with the exactness of the imitation of nature. The critique of realism in painting deployed this same polemical theme and even exploited the analogy with photography. According to this critique, indeed, the alleged lack of spirituality in realist painting derived from the fact that such pictorial images were constructed as analogues of photography. Photography was thus viewed with suspicion or even contempt in the critique of realist painting as well, as the material starting point of the work. On the one hand, therefore, photography attempted to position itself as an independent art in the same way as the other arts. On the other hand, its role of supporting arts with guaranteed status, such as painting and sculpture, was initially encouraged with a view to commercialising and disseminating the new photographic technique; later, however, critics of the time who took a stand even against realism in painting, blamed this role for making artists mere copyists of the photographic image or even held it up as an indication of their laziness or a true corruption of art.

It was within this lively framework that the work of the father of chronophotography, the French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904), was positioned. Indeed, Marey's most relevant text, entitled *Le Mouvement* (1894), explores how to represent movement in accuracy without seeking to change this division of the field because, for him, photography was a support for the figurative arts. In other words, Marey recognised photography as having a certain position and function of instrumentally employing the boundary thus defined between art and photography in relation to physiology. Marey also followed a traditional approach: the documentary value characterising the photographic image – and snapshot in particular – irretrievably distances it from the status of art form. This documentary value derives from the automaticity of the technology used to produce photographic images, a quality that in turn makes it possible to show the world without interference from the

producer. However, photography's ability to record reality transparently gives it the role of aiding the figurative arts, an argument that had been in vogue since the 1839 popularisation of the daguerreotype.

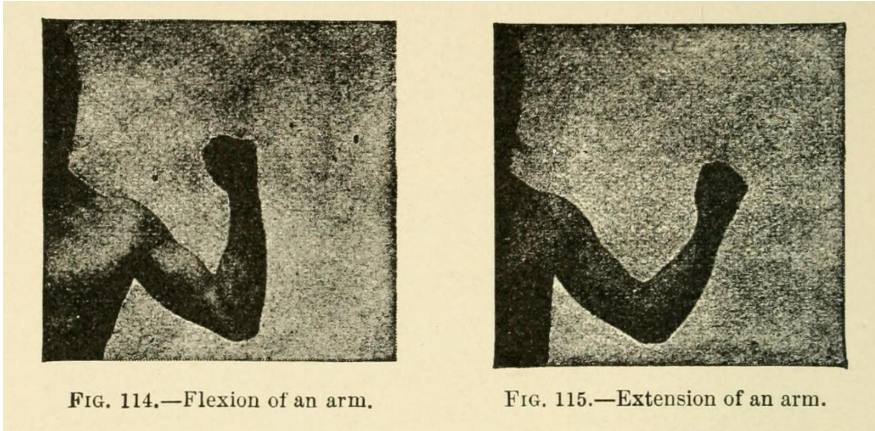
Notwithstanding the many cautions that run through Marey's work and specifically his declared refusal to deal with aesthetic themes, he does observe that the decisive impact of photography's use on painting and sculpture is clear from even a superficial analysis of the artistic practices of those years. Marey was convinced that the possibility of transferring the capacities and potentialities of another medium, i.e. photography, to traditional media such as painting and sculpture would bring about a change in style and, above all, a change in practices of artistic creation; such a shift would, he argued, contribute to the reformulation of aesthetic canons.

The technological development of photography also played a decisive role. In fact, in the years immediately following the appearance of the daguerreotype and calotype, portraiture and landscape painting were affected by the repercussions of this new type of images, as already mentioned. Photographic techniques and typologies proliferated and developed, undergoing a particular boom from the 1850s onwards, and this evolution was intertwined in an increasingly complex debate the main theme of which was photography's mimetic capacity and, therefore, how to define the status of realism. More precisely, one issue that proved particularly relevant was photography's alleged ability to represent movement in snapshots. In *Le Mouvement*, Marey explores the hypothesis that instantaneous photography could produce a mechanical optical truth that, by recording phenomena which are impossible to grasp with the naked eye, occupies a position of pre-eminence with respect to physiological optical truth. Artists should therefore make use of photography, he suggested, because it allows a degree of naturalism and image-correctness that is unattainable through sensory perception alone.

Chronophotography as a catalogue of images

Marey's position on the question of the art-photography relationship is thus clear, especially if we read it in the context of the general debate – only barely sketched out, above – the elements of which had all already emerged and been settled in the central years of Marey's activity, between the mid-1880s and the 1890s (see Bertelli 2019; Braun 1992). Some of the most recurrent arguments were therefore reworked by Marey in the book that constitutes a summary of all the research he had conducted to date, *Le Mouvement*, and the book in turn provides a sounding board for those same arguments, given that in the meantime the scientist had risen to a position of cultural prominence. *Le Mouvement* states that the usefulness of the chronophotographic technique lies in the way it generates a repertoire of images from among which artists can choose the most appropriate one for the movement they intend to represent. According to Marey, both types of chronophotography (fixed-plate and moving-plate) lend themselves to this purpose, although for different reasons: while fixed-plate pictures more precisely represent moments of transition from one pose to another, moving-plate pictures offer a greater variety in the representation of poses (see Marey 1894, 181) [2].

On the one hand, therefore, Marey believed that the photographic image, given what he saw as its unquestionable adherence to the object, could act as an inescapable check on the degree of naturalism of the painting or sculpture (naturalism which Marey evidently considered to be the objective of art); on the other hand, however, he recognised artists as having the active, creative role of selecting the material without which the work, as a work of art, could not be produced. With this method – Marey observed – the laws of aesthetics would be respected and, at the same time, artists will would have at their disposal a wider variety of poses on which to draw for their representational choices.



1 | Movement (1895) by E.J. Marey; translated by Eric Pritchard, p. 174 (Courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library).

In other words, Marey believed the photographic image was capable of faithfully recording the action of the muscles the different contours of which, visible under the skin, express muscular contraction or relaxation. Contraction and relaxation (i.e. the qualities that cause muscles to take on different appearances according to the gesture that is being performed) are linked by relations that are necessary for each phase of movement: when moving, Marey suggested, the muscles of the body have specific expressions exactly analogous to those produced by the muscles of the face, expressions to which we are accustomed to assign particular and precise meanings (see Marey 1894, 169) [3].

If analysed in detail, the specific form of the different muscles in action that make up a pose or gesture also constitutes the model or scheme for artists' representation of movement: this aspect not only translates the single gesture to which it corresponds, as we shall see, but also allows us to understand the movement, the action, in its entirety. Marey referred here to the work of Georges Demeny, who was also his assistant at the Station Physiologique for the chronophotographic study of the movements of fencers and boxers (see Demeny 1890; Demeny 1891b; Demeny 1891c), and gives, among others, the example of two images both depicting an arm bent in the same position [Fig. 1]. On closer scrutiny (which is relatively easy to do with photography, according to Marey), however, it is possible to see a different relationship between contraction

and relaxation in the two pictures. These are, therefore, two distinct muscular physiognomies to which two different movements necessarily correspond:

[...] l'expression des reliefs musculaires pour une même attitude est différente suivant la nature de l'acte qui l'a produite. Ainsi les figures 119 e 120 [Fig. 1, where the nr. of the figures corresponds to the English edition] représentent toutes deux un bras demi-fléchi, mais sur la première le relief du biceps (muscle fléchisseur) montre que c'est la flexion qui est en train de s'opérer. Sur la seconde c'est le triceps (extenseur) qui a le plus de relief, tandis que le biceps est affaissé: l'attitude représentée correspond donc à une phase de l'extension du membre (Marey 1894, 169-170).

[...] the expression of the muscular contours for the same attitude varies according to the nature of the act which produced it. Thus Figs. 114 and 115 both represent a semi-flexed arm, but in the first the contour of the biceps (flexor muscle) shows that a movement of flexion is in the process of being produced. In the second, it is the triceps (extensor muscle) which stands out most markedly, while the biceps is flattened: the attitude here represented corresponds to a phase in the extension of the limb (Marey 1895, 173-174. Slightly modified translation). [4]

The gesture thus possesses its own morphology. If through photography and the gaze of the scientist who must necessarily rest on it in order to understand it these specific traits can be recognised, moreover, it is also possible, as well as desirable, for artists to learn to integrate the specific traits (and those traits alone) of the gesture they intend to represent into their works, so as to render it adequately.

However, the excerpt of Marey's argument quoted just above also contains a further element: the movement of the limb, if correctly analysed (and such analytical correctness depends on chronophotographic technology), corresponds to a precise series of signs. On the basis of an analysis of these signs, i.e. the stable characteristics of the muscular forms, an observer can recognise and refer to only one specific action. The form of the individual muscles, their function in the articulation of the gesture and their use within the action are not, for Marey, separate elements; they necessarily refer to each other.

It is because of this invariance in the muscular expression of each gesture, visible thanks to the chronophotographic technique, that a taxonomy and atlas of gestures can be constructed in order to correctly represent each action. Each gesture therefore also has a physiognomy (a form that the expert gaze perceives as an ordered set of signs): while it is true that this form is not the reflection of an inner quality (as asserted in the classic example of physiognomic theories about the relationship between facial expression and emotion), it nevertheless refers to an invisible element, i.e. the complete action, that is virtually contained in the gesture.

If each and any attitude expressed by specific muscular contours can only correspond to the phase of a specific action, therefore, accounting for such differences, even minimal ones, in muscular morphology would be equivalent, for artists, to the opportunity to represent, in a single gesture reproduced in its “physiological exactness” (Marey 1894, 173), not only position but also direction and, therefore, the action as a whole. It is also by virtue of this relationship between muscular contours and the phase of the action that observers may imagine the completion of the action (and thus understand its intention) despite the fact that only a single gesture is being represented. Although not explicitly expressed, it is clear from this passage of Marey’s work that sight constitutes the dominant supporting sense of anatomical knowledge. At the same time, the idea of the pre-eminence of the camera’s mechanical perception over human vision also comes to the fore, thereby fulfilling the dream hatched by physiologists at the beginning of the century (and simultaneously leaving them high and dry): to make the invisible visible. The photographic plate and the images that could be achieved with chronophotographic technology are presented as the materialisation of the description of the anatomical gaze with which François Xavier Bichat inaugurated, almost a hundred years earlier, a century of research into the visible signs of that which inevitably escapes perception:

Pour eux – Bichat is referring here to the ‘new’ surgeons – tout est presque considération de forme, de grandeur, de position, de direction. C’est une image qu’ils se peignent, plutôt que des choses qu’ils apprennent. Ils doivent plus voir que méditer, pénétrer la profondeur moins que s’arrêter aux surfaces; et leur but est atteint, lorsque les opaques enveloppes qui couvrent nos parties, ne font plus à leurs yeux exercés, qu’un voile

transparent qui en laisse à découvert l'ensemble et les rapports (Bichat 1798, 101-112. See also Foucault 1963).

For them – Bichat is referring here to the ‘new’ surgeons – everything is almost a consideration of form, size, position, direction. It is an image they paint for themselves, rather than things they learn. They must see more than meditate, penetrate the depths less than stop at the surfaces; and their goal is attained when the opaque envelopes that cover our parts is, in their trained eyes, nothing but a transparent veil that leaves the whole and the relationships revealed.

The most effective portrayal of movement as a whole, in its entirety, is achieved through the use of a single instant pose, the result of an analytical method and the new photographic technology; it does not, for example, lie in the out-of-focus style of certain Impressionist paintings, such as Monet's *Boulevard des Capucines*, that was becoming more common in that period. It is precisely this recourse to the instantaneous pose as an auxiliary element of art that allows us to recognise an affinity between Eadweard Muybridge's research (see Muybridge 1899. See also Braun 2010) and that of Marey and Demeny. Their work can be seen as proximate even though the former dedicated himself to analysing movement through images of single positions which, viewed as a whole, could be used to synthetically reconstruct the continuity of movement, and the latter ones attempted to do the exact opposite, that is, to produce an analysis of movement within a single image, each segment of which can be taken separately as an aid for the artistic process.



2 | André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri (French, 1819-1889), *Les Jambes de l'opéra*, about 1862; Albumen silver; object No. 84.XD.428.12 from Getty Images.

The revisitation of Marey's work by the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, as well as the reference to his research that appeared, a few years earlier, in the texts of Paul Souriau (see Souriau 1889; Souriau 1893), instead overturn its intended influence on artistic production. As can easily be seen in works such as Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier n. 2* (1912), Marey's representational mode was borrowed in its entirety, as these artists saw the sequence as an innovative form of expression of the body's movement in space. This literal interpretation of Marey's iconography, specifically the importance attributed to the image as a whole (and not to the representation of the sections of movement) actually runs counter to his own aims, therefore, and in so doing chronophotography was relocated out of its primary scientific field completely.

Certainly, this subversion of the use of the image derives from an aesthetic dimension of Marey's images and, at the same time, enables viewers to recognise this dimension [5].

According to Marey, photography in its range of varying poses and actions for representing bodies offers an alternative to the forms and models established by the classical tradition. In making this argument Marey cites the way artists, and painters in particular, from the 1860s onwards, used the *carte-de-visite* photography patented by André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri in 1854 as a repertoire for their works. In many cases, in fact, these images were produced as series in which the same figure or type of subject was depicted in a wide range of poses, sometimes cropped as a single pose and at other times assembled together (see, for example, E. Disdèri, *Les Jambes de l'Opéra* [Fig. 2]).

Choosing the photographic image as a reference thus allows artists to avoid repetitiveness and monotony in their representations, i.e. to prevent a “*canon des attitudes*” (“*canon of attitudes*”) being added “à celui des proportions du corps” (“*to that of the anatomical proportions*”) (Marey 1894, 174; Marey 1895, 179. Modified translation). This passage of Marey’s argument certainly deserves a more in-depth analysis. Indeed it forms part of the history, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, of the accusation levelled by some art critics since the 1860s blaming photography for leading artists to a homogeneity of style that was absolutely ruinous for their individual creativity. Marey was opposed to this perspective.

In his hypothesis, photography has the advantage of being able to show every minute detail of the depicted object, every inevitable prosaicity of real life complete with its apparently defective proportions and gross defects and, therefore, of potentially multiplying the possibilities of representation, since “[l]e laid ne sarait-il que l’inconnu” (“*the ugly is only the unknown*”) (Marey 1894, 179; Marey 1895, 183). The tendency to converge on specific representations was apparently unlikely (a judgement with which, moreover, Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic images of the equine gallop presented a few years earlier were also accepted) and depends only on the “*éducation de l’oeil*” (“*education of the eye*”) (Marey 1894, 179; Marey 1895, 183), that is, the possibility of integrating specific representations into our familiar visual economy over time. Marey’s images are thus twofold: on the one hand they are integrated elements of experimental demonstration, and on the other they serve as aids for the communication and transmission of that same experimental knowledge. It is interesting to note that this education was understood as general and common, concerning not only the scientist’s gaze (on which the model of correct observation is built), but also that of the artist and the spectator.

*I would like to thank Angelina Zontine for the accurate proofreading.

Notes

[1] For Baudelaire, the attack on photography served to denounce the blind trust that the Salon public placed in nature and the consequent belief that the imitation of nature constituted the ultimate goal of art. Baudelaire defended the role of

imagination, a central element to his philosophy of art, in open contrast to the idea of art as an imitation of nature. The bibliography on this subject is now extremely copious.

[2] For a detailed analysis of the different photographic and chronophotographic techniques used by Marey, see Braun 1992.

[3] While it is true that Marey was interested in chronophotographic representations of facial expressions in order to understand the physiognomic characteristics correlated with different emotions (following a path already traced by the experiments of Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne de Boulogne, although he does not mention Boulogne's work), the most relevant aspect for his research in this field was the study of facial movements accompanying the articulation of language, a study that was also used for language learning by deaf-mute people (see Demeny 1891a, 216 ff.; Marey 1894, 177; Marey 1898).

[4] It is quite banal to note that Marey only takes into account the appearance of a specific muscular-skeletal and skin type, claiming to analyse the fundamental expressions that appear in every case regardless of the specific experimental subject performing a given gesture. Marey's standardization of the human deserves an essay all its own.

[5] However, as Manuel Chemineau has also observed, the search for aesthetic value is not entirely extraneous to the original conditions and context in which these chronophotographs were produced, namely that of scientific research (see Chemineau 2012). Some references to the finding of this constitutive aesthetic dimension can be found in Marey's own text: see, for example, Marey 1894, 176 and Table I and Marey 1894, 181.

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English abstract

The paper focuses on the in-depth analysis and historical contextualization of a chapter from Etienne-Jules Marey's *Le Mouvement* (1894). The part of the book under scrutiny is devoted to the potential function of chronophotography – a photographic method born and developed for scientifically representing motion – as an aid for figurative artists.

keywords | photography; physiology; art; motion.

*La Redazione di Engramma è grata ai colleghi – amici e studiosi – che, seguendo la procedura peer review a doppio cieco, hanno sottoposto a lettura, revisione e giudizio questo saggio.
(v. Albo dei referee di Engramma)*



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