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The Camera's I:

On the Liberal Invention of Photography

The new art of photography marked a “most extraordinary triumph of modern science,” as Edgar Allan Poe announced in January, 1840, a few months after its appearance. In fact, there was little that was new about the science. The physics and chemistry required to “fix” an object’s reflection were already known. Why, then, was such knowledge only now applied to photographic ends? Why did so many perceive that “the hour for the invention had come,” as Walter Benjamin observed of this signal event in the making of the world as we know it?

Historians, philosophers, cultural theorists, technologists, social critics, and photographers have all engaged this question of origins. And for good reason, for it lies at the heart of humanity’s experience of modernity and the attendant commotions. Some of the more compelling explanations refer to an “aspiration for permanence” born of the increasingly fluid nature of the times, as Geoffrey Batchen has suggested; to ascendant bourgeois values of speed and precision (and the resulting automation), as Gisèle Freund identified the source of what she also called the “idea of photography;” or to the camera’s unprecedented ability to not only represent, but to re-imagine reality in order to universalize it, and that in order to then mediate the anonymous character of human relations in mass society, as Vilém Flusser once argued.

I wholeheartedly endorse the discursive predilection of these sundry genealogies, all of which embed the technology within the social order that begat it, but I have a different origins

story to tell. It goes something like this: a few months after Louis Daguerre successfully “saved” the image projected inside a camera obscura, another Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, introduced a new category of political thought to contemporary social discourse – “individualism.” This was no random event, as I wish to argue, for each development was a function of the other. Photography, that is to say, proved to be a powerful new technology of the self, uniquely effective in naturalizing the individual’s great transformation into an “ism,” into an individualism.

Tocqueville was not, in point of fact, the first to employ this neologism. French conservatives had already referred to the phenomenon of *individualisme* in conjuring the profane, and perverse, effects of liberty and equality on the human condition, their response to democracy’s revolutionary inversion of the social order. The term remained foreign to Anglo-American conversation, however. Tocqueville’s British translator even complained of its phonetic awkwardness while nevertheless acknowledging that English offered no better means for engaging with the individual’s recent emergence as a political philosophy. The word accordingly appeared for the first time in the 1841 edition of Noah Webster’s American Dictionary, duly attributed to Tocqueville’s recently-published dissertation on democracy in America. This was surely the correct etymology, for Tocqueville upended individualism’s original meaning by emphasizing the pivotal – if implausible – success of sovereign persons in governing, both, themselves and each other.

It was a transformative event, indeed. The individual’s emergence as a social creed revolutionized politics by reconstituting civic life on the basis of personal prerogative, what had long been considered a contradiction in terms. The result was unmistakably subversive.

“Everything is ceaselessly astir,” as Tocqueville observed of a world left to its own devices, liberated from the long-established sources of transcendent order: priest, prince, and patriarch. An anxious negotiation between self and society ensued, throwing everyone’s relations with everyone else into a continuous state of flux, and rendering “common sense” a most precarious category of experience.

How was social order to be restored? How was all this restlessness to be brought under governable control without threatening the natural rights which allowed – if not obligated – citizens to pursue their own happiness? That was the defining predicament of liberal democracy, and it now gave birth to photography.

Like individualism, photography was a French invention. And again, like individualism, it became broadly identified with America. “In Daguerreotypes we beat the world,” Horace Greeley subsequently announced at the Crystal Palace in 1851, where American entries were awarded three of the Great Exhibition’s five first-class medals for photography. All praised the “remarkable ... excellence” of these images, distinguished by “a depth and harmony of tone to which those of France were totally a stranger,” as one of the English jurors exclaimed. Forty-eight portraits of “illustrious Americans” made by Mathew Brady attracted the most attention. Brady, owner of a successful daguerrean gallery on New York’s Broadway, had developed a distinctive visual style by positioning the sitter up close to the picture surface, leaving him the sole focus of our gaze, a sovereign point of reference in a space otherwise purged of extraneous props. This “American process” of daguerreotypy soon won over the continent. When another Manhattan operator, Jeremiah Gurney, opened a branch of his studio in Paris, he accordingly advertised the availability of “New-York style” portraits based on the same direct, unmediated

aesthetic. Meanwhile, London's most reputable maker of likenesses, J.J.E. Mayall, had learned the craft in his native Philadelphia, all of which prompted Humphrey's Journal to declare without too much hyperbole that "the Daguerrean art has become almost an American art exclusively."

The plethora of excellent specimens to the contrary, there was, in fact, no intrinsic relationship between photography and individuality. The earliest daguerreotypes were not of persons at all but featured domestic interiors and cityscapes. And so, when contemporaries celebrated the new art's "perfect transcription of the thing itself" they referred to the remarkably detailed appearance of a gravel roadside or the intricate texture of a silk curtain. Daguerre himself was skeptical of adapting his invention to portraits obtained "from life" since, as he explained to Samuel Morse when the two met in Paris in the spring of 1839, no one can "remain immovable" for so long. "The very idea of a portrait by daguerreotype excited a repulsive feeling," it was further observed, and that because sitters were required to dust their faces with flour and pose in brilliant sunlight with their eyes shut, keeping perfectly still for up to twenty minutes. That is why a daguerreotype of hackmen asleep in their coaches outside New York's City Hall, made in August 1839, was probably the first portrait to be photographed in America.

And yet, such daunting technical obstacles proved remarkably short-lived. "Everyone" was devoted to finding "some means of shortening, as much as possible" the length of exposure necessary in producing a photographic likeness. This was achieved by a combination of chemical and optical innovations – bromine accelerators and nitric ether cleaners, redistilled mercury baths, rouge buffs, skylights pitched at 35 degrees, blue glass, and achromatic lenses

built for a short focus – that gave practical expression to Tocqueville’s description of America as a land of few inventors but home to legions of talented craftsmen. The Photographic Art Journal likewise referred to the “practical operative American mind,” a phrase it attributed to Daguerre himself, in offering a gloss on New World exceptionalism, in this instance, the singular success in adapting Daguerre’s system to personal portraiture.

Various explanations were proffered for this achievement. Some referred to the pristine climate of an unsullied continent spared the bituminous fog that shrouded English cities and which impaired the sharp resolution so characteristic of American plates. Others emphasized the high standard of American chemicals and mechanics, which included a patented steam-driven buffer that effected “excellent specimens” free of the ghostly lines that so often marred European efforts.

In addition to such technical acumen, observers also took notice of a cultural dexterity, or what might be identified as a “tradition of the new” born of American indifference to prevailing practice, and to tradition more generally, another prominent theme of Tocqueville’s treatment of democracy in America. More to the point, photography was identified with the great national experiment, constituting as it did “the true Republican style of painting,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson opined in noting how “the artist stands aside and lets you paint yourself.” This was a universal self, moreover, for “what was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all,” Frederick Douglass happily confirmed of the new technology’s social logic. And while Herman Melville sounded a petulant plaint in his novel Pierre regarding an industrial mode of portraiture that no longer immortalized great men but,

rather, patronized every Tom, Dick, and Harry hankering after a cheap likeness of himself, there was no better – no more graphic – representation of this new age of common men.

Photography was, as such, an emphatically Jacksonian event. “Who makes money in New York?” a penny rag inquired in 1842 at the depth of the country’s first economic depression. “*Beggars and the takers of likeness by daguerreotype,*” came the reply. That burgeoning trade in personal portraits proved remarkably elastic, driving a vast likeness industry that leveraged “the commercial value of the human face” into a system of mass production. Individualism thus proved to be a most effective business model. “Everything is ‘mammoth,’” an English visitor consequently declared of America’s “picture factories” and their economies of scale. “Their ‘skylights’ are mammoth. Their ‘tubes,’ or lenses, are mammoth. Their ‘boxes,’ or cameras, are mammoth; and *mammoth* is the amount of business that is done.” An estimate drawing on recent census returns – and commonly cited by historians ever since – reported in 1853 on a nation-wide production rate of three million daguerreotypes a year. When considering the large number of itinerant operators carrying “the facilities of output” in a packing trunk in searching out hinterland custom, such statistics clearly presented an egregious undercount.

Of course, not everyone enjoyed the same purchasing power. But the commercializing economy was remarkably effective in “suiting the pockets of the most humble.” Certainly, there was little reason to pay “*three dollars*” for a portrait of no finer quality than could be got at “INSLEY’S ONE DOLLAR GALLERY.” And, indeed, when willing to forego the retail cachet of Tremont Row and Chestnut Street, fifty cent, twenty-five cent, and even twelve-and-a-half cent establishments abounded, putting out daguerreotypes that would have been deemed “very

good” just a few short years ago, as the Photographic and Fine Art Journal acknowledged of a segmenting market which allowed every Tom, Dick, and Harry to lay claim to the cultural capital contained in one’s own portrait.

This extensive buying public included millions of enslaved persons who, in fact, filled a distinct market niche. I want to devote several observations to this particular group of customers because considerable attention has been focused of late on fifteen daguerreotyped “specimens” – how appropriate a term – produced by Joseph Zealy in 1850 of seven South Carolina upcountry slaves stripped bare and photographed from the front, side, and rear. The pictures were commissioned by Louis Agassiz as part of Agassiz’s ongoing efforts to establish a (polygenetic) racial science. They have subsequently been portrayed as a “portal into the slave South.” And yet, Zealy’s daguerreotypes, implausibly ensconced within red-velvet cases featuring the artist’s embossed moniker, were the exception to the rule. Thousands of other portraits of the country’s slaves, the output of commercial galleries and itinerant studios throughout the South, including Zealy’s, feature carefully curated subjects adorned in the conventions of the day, whether white linen and tailored darts, decorative brooches and pocket watches. They present a far more complicated – a far less black-and-white – picture of slavery in America. The fact is, Southern photographers often accorded cut rates to slave customers when circumstances prohibited the latter from engaging in transactions exceeding the value of a dollar, for instance, in Georgia, which brought them out “in droves” on their free day, becoming a steady income stream for the region’s operators.

Robert Brown then took a daguerreotyped portrait of his recently-sold wife upon fleeing his Virginia plantation, a bitterly ironic example of photography’s celebrated role in keeping

distant loved ones close at hand. There was little wonder, then, that rumors regarding the arrival of a slave trader to the area drove a spike in the local volume of trade. The resulting portraits were not, however, exclusively shaped by the objectifying gaze of a master race, even if owners often kept likenesses of favored servants. Photography did not reinforce a totalizing command over one's chattel, in other words, but provided the enslaved with a unique opportunity to represent themselves. And, indeed, which image, one may ask, better reflected the entangled interactions of slave and master: the denuded objects of Agassiz's racial biology, or the self-conscious self-possession required of anyone posing before the camera, striving to fill the pictorial field while gazing out at the wider world of humanity beyond the frame?

Of course, these were not mutually exclusive terms in the paternalist dialectics of America's slave regime. Photography's display of the slave's humanity effectively humanized slavery. In so doing, it served slave and master alike, underscoring the magnanimity of one's owner while at once offering a natural defense against the denigrations of such ownership, not the least by undermining the all too commonly circulated caricatures of swollen lips, depressed foreheads, and imbecilic expressions, as Frederick Douglass claimed in embracing the liberating effects of the new technology. In fact, it was abolitionist iconography which mobilized photography in depicting the slave's abject condition, most notoriously in the widely-viewed image of "Whipped Peter." In yet another twist in this twisted narrative, photographs were also soon utilized in tracking down escapees, their "perfect transcription" of personal appearance offering a vast improvement over the woodcut stereotypes of the traditional runaway notice. They were then also adopted to advertise slave sales.

I want to now take a closer look at the portraits themselves, at those insistently humorless studies of the human countenance – humorless because received opinion held that the mouth was the most prone to aberration of all one’s personal features. As such, a sober expression, free of impulse and whimsy, was deemed to be best suited to presenting a properly sober self. “How plainly, in the close-shut mouth, with its encircling muscles rising into a sort of ridge, do we read firm, resolute will,” Marcus Root, one of Philadelphia’s most reputable photographers, thus pronounced. A smile might embellish an inferior visage, Root allowed, but it more often than not provoked a wary and even suspicious response, proving “more repulsive than a frown” if too regularly deployed.

Such admonitions help to explain the serial sobriety of the early photographic record. In rendering themselves “worthy of ... metallic immortality,” Americans conjured a scrupulous picture of willful seriousness, “too much combed, too much fixed up,” as Mark Twain later adjudged of the daguerreotypes which still adorned the country’s parlors later in the century. Dilettantes and agitators, politicians and professors, Unitarian ministers and penny-press editors, studious young men and aspiring fashion belles – all “looking you straight in the eyes,” Walt Whitman enthused, and all assuming a pose as invariable as the four right angles of the daguerrean plate itself. This composite portrait of a public on its best behavior testified to a growing “sense for sameness in the world,” Walter Benjamin observed, one which rendered the individual into a universal type.

Was this predilection for convention a technical effect of the exigencies of mechanical reproduction?

A standard catechism of rules was soon developed for obtaining a “proper likeness.” Roman, Grecian, Jewish, aquiline, and “turned up” noses; pointed, indented, square, double, and receding chins; thick or thin and straight or curved mouths: such a broad range of human types needed to be transcribed into a reliably flattering typology. Heavy-set visages were thus regularly photographed from below. Persons with round faces and wide mouths were presented in profile, thereby reducing their disproportions. A small mouth, particularly in relation to the nose, mandated a frontal view, which was otherwise avoided since it served to flatten the face’s features. Such protocols for conveying “the most characteristic individuality to the picture” were on clear display in the earliest known portrait of Lincoln, a daguerreotype taken in Springfield shortly before, or soon after, he was elected to Congress in 1846. The head is turned sharply to one side, putting half of the face into deep shadow, which helped to trace Lincoln’s strong jaw and elevated cheekbones while obscuring less flattering, if not “grotesque,” features, in this case, a large, protruding ear. In fact, the darker fields dominated the portrait’s whole composition in a scheme directly borrowed from painterly practice (and references to Rembrandt abounded in bolstering early photographic claims to a “fine art” status). The subject consequently emerged from the shadows, claiming a place in the world by means of his own reflection.

“We are all physiognomists in practice, if not in theory,” Marcus Root declared of a profession that was dedicated to portraying such models of repose and self-possession. At the same time, no one had to impose these conventions on the sitter, who was no less anxious to present a proper likeness. “The Artist has in reality no control over the actual expression of the subject,” Albert Southworth, the country’s most talented daguerrean portraitist, acknowledged

in advising customers to prepare for their encounter with the camera by practicing before a mirror. The goal was to become the “sole proprietor of your face,” someone else now opined, to “discipline the features ... and bring them under control.” Nathaniel Willis, America’s leading magazinist, best known for his accounts of the personal lives of public personalities, also proclaimed in his initial notice of Daguerre’s invention that the new style of portraiture would require everyone to exercise the judgment once accorded the artist in imagining their appearance into being.

Walt Whitman addressed this new style of self-expression in an unsigned review of a recently-published work of poetry entitled Leaves of Grass, by Walt Whitman. “His name is not on the frontispiece,” the anonymous critic observed, “but his portrait, half-length, is.” That likeness constituted a distinct auto-graph, and a most appropriate one as well for “the contents of the book form a daguerreotype of his inner being,” the reviewer further announced. And, indeed, this image of a dungareed, shirt-sleeved “rough” was adamantly more revealing of the poet’s sensibility than any formal moniker, portraying, as it did, “a rugged phrenology” that snubbed polite convention in favor of “what is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me.”

Notwithstanding his defiance of daguerrean politesse, Whitman enthusiastically embraced the remarkable opportunity offered by the camera in becoming one’s sole proprietor. So did Frederick Douglass, who, in the same year that Leaves of Grass appeared, published a (second) autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, whose frontispiece similarly featured the author’s daguerreotyped countenance. In this case, the portrait did not stand in for the author’s name, which carried considerable symbolic value for Douglass the former slave. The image also offered a studied contrast to Whitman’s plebian performance.

Douglass's strenuously-arranged cravat and neatly tailored jacket, fashionably buttoned at the waist, presented a fastidious display of bourgeois conformity. And while Whitman engaged humanity by becoming "as spontaneous as you are, as I am, this instant," there was nothing spontaneous about Douglass's demeanor, and certainly no hint of the rough. Nevertheless, despite the pointed differences in manner and mode, I want to suggest that Whitman and Douglass produced remarkably similar portraits, devoted as both were to a strenuously reflexive representation of themselves, as well as to the camera's essential role in making such a spectacle possible. Daguerrean conceits about capturing a person's "inner being" were no empty slogan, in other words, nor were Emerson's claims about painting oneself. Certainly, there was no more apt method of rendering the individual's new sovereign status than what was now inscribed onto the plate by the individual's own conscious efforts. Emerson, the house philosopher of American selfhood, continued: "Were you ever daguerreotyped, O immortal man? And did you look with all vigor at the lens of the camera ... to give the picture the full benefit of your expanded and flashing eye?"

Posing for one's portrait thus acquired an existential aura, underscored by the popular perception of photography as a mechanical process with no identity of its own, and so an ideal medium for shaping one's own identity. That is why these millions of daguerreotypes should also all be considered self-portraits, that is, portraits of the self, as realized by the self. In giving the picture the full benefit of their expanded and flashing eye without the wide repertoire of visual clues – the rolling acres of one's plantation, velvet dressings, a riding crop, or elegant walking stick – that adorned the traditional portrait, each individual became the exclusive source of meaning. This was the process by which the subject assumed "objective form,"

Frederick Douglass declared of the obligation of sovereign selves in examining the course of their own lives, that which constituted “the highest attribute of man’s nature.” Self-reflection, in other words, was no metaphor. Like individuality, furthermore, there was nothing spontaneous or incidental about these pictures. As it is, the photographic apparatus was too elaborate to catch anyone unawares (Kodak’s instamatic revolution was still half a century away), but that was emblematic of the more basic fact that the subjects themselves had consciously initiated this event to begin with.

The pose became, as such, the acme of selfhood, which found further expression when a certain Mrs. French went one day to have her portrait made. The result featured “a squint about the eyes not natural to her,” requiring Mrs. French to return to the studio until the image came out right, return to the studio, that is, in a conscious effort to look like herself. Roland Barthes referred to this “strange” act of “imitating myself” as endemic to photography. In fact, there was nothing strange about it in an age populated by self-making individuals assigned sovereign responsibility for their own lives. And so, the pose did not clash with an otherwise authentic self. What could be more authentic than displaying one’s vision of oneself? What could be more faithful to one’s individuality – or subjectivity – than revealing the personal effort required in conjuring oneself into being – of the individual effort entailed in establishing one’s individuality – promoting the photograph into a credible true-to-life portrait, not necessarily of who one is, but of who one aspired to be. This is what self-consciousness looked like, in other words, revealing a willfulness which was the true subject of the portrait, rehearsed each time someone gazed at their own daguerretyped portrait, whose highly-buffed, silver-

coated surface shone like a mirror and consequently allowed one to watch oneself watch oneself. Surely, there was no better portrait of individualism.

This was an intensely personal display, but also an insistently public one. “The truth of the picture exists principally in the eyes staring the beholder full in the face,” as Samuel Humphrey declared in his American Hand Book of the Daguerreotype. In directing his gaze at a mark on the camera stand, the sitter was, as such, looking “full in the face” at those who would be looking at him. He only seemed to be alone in the frame; in fact, the whole of humanity was present in the daguerrean studio when the lens cover was removed. And just as the sitter’s truth was found in the eyes of the beholder, the same was true of the latter, for he recognized himself in the sitter, recognized, that is, the same concerted effort devoted to realizing a credible version of himself. “There, with our head lying in the same rest ... where tens of thousands of the gifted, celebrated, beautiful, rich, poor, honest, ugly, rascally have sat” a new form of public experience came into being. “My view of myself and the other’s of himself ... my view of others and theirs of me,” in quoting from Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, generated a personal point of view shared at once by one and all, a view uniquely mediated by the camera.

There was no better corroboration of individualism’s universal claims, of that “singularity which consists in no singularity,” as Walt Whitman contended in his anonymous review of Leaves of Grass, and of Alexis de Tocqueville’s most important insight regarding modern democracy, namely, that what individuals have in common – what allows them to create a social order founded on personal prerogative – is their very individuality. There was a most visceral quality in this meeting of the eyes – and I’s – since it required each person to

draw the palm-sized daguerreotype up close in order to examine its remarkable detail (in an age when staring was otherwise rebuked as an anti-social habit). It was an anonymous and intimate encounter, generating a sense of familiarity in a society filling up with those who were, as contemporaries acknowledged, “all strangers alike to each other.”

“The work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin famously declared of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. What was, in fact, being made for reproduction was the self, by the self, in an effort to realize one’s most characteristic individuality and to be recognized for doing so. This then realized the dual significance of “identity” as that which renders us both unique and alike, revealing, in turn, just how much the particular and the universal – the twin tenets of liberal civilization – complement rather than contradict each other. “Likeness,” meanwhile, acquired an additional meaning, namely, mutual recognition, even – or, perhaps, especially – in conditions of anonymity. At the same time, the confirmation of one’s individuality in the eyes of others is what crucially distinguished the camera from a mirror, keeping Narcissus at bay.

It was a development of Promethean scope, if we are to continue with references to foundation myths, one of the “most audacious ... discoveries man has made,” as Oliver Wendell Holmes pronounced in the Atlantic Monthly in 1863. In this case, humanity absconded, not with the fire of the gods, but with the light that allowed men to make themselves in their own rather than His image, all of which emphasizes the profane nature of enlightenment, and the radical character of a politics organized around the personal ambitions of sovereign individuals. Here, again, the camera made a critical contribution to the liberal order, for it re-established absolute truth for such a post-absolutist, even Godless, age by promoting a “universal

language” accessible “to all who possess vision [whether] in the courts of civilization or the hut of the savage.” Photography became a new source of common sense. Daguerre thus spoke of the “spontaneous reproduction of the images of nature,” while Fox Talbot, the inventor of a photographic process for imprinting negative images on a paper surface, wrote of “the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves.” Seeing, as such, was believing for the photograph necessarily presented an objective picture of reality, turning the studio itself into a “palace of truth.” And was it not the case that “a lady never knows how young she looks until she has had her portrait painted, nor how old, till she has had her daguerreotype taken?” In providing epistemological solace within the tumult of a (democratic) polity and (market) economy both founded on motions and relations, the photograph constituted a caesura amidst this “age of ... impatiences in which the “present [is] flitting away from us” (quoting from Hawthorne in The House of the Seven Gables, whose hero has taken up daguerreotypy). And so, the camera served as a machine for ameliorating the ills of the machine age, checking the era’s perpetuum mobile, significantly enough, by means of its instantaneous operations. A moment’s reflection would now “last as long as time” as speed proved to be the source of permanence. Modernity could have its cake and eat it too.

Photography’s association with objective truth was revealing of the affinity of this spontaneous reproduction of nature to another new technology, another new source of certainty in an uncertain world, and another self-styled universal language, namely, statistics. The camera’s ability to “delineate objects which the visual organs of man would overlook, or might not be able to perceive” was equally characteristic of this novel sociology, or science of counting, Archibald Russell explained in the Principles of Statistical Inquiry, the first theoretical

work on the subject to be published in America, in the same year that Daguerre announced his invention to the world, and the same year that the American Statistical Association was founded.

Like the camera, statistics was an inanimate apparatus that operated independently of personal perspective or prejudice, marrying form and function. Both were explicitly neutral media with no identity of their own save for a purely technical capacity to “fix an image of visible objects by employing the very light those objects reflect.” In that respect, photography and statistics authenticated themselves. Their powerful claim to objective status also rested on a nonpareil ability to make vast quantities of knowledge highly visible, transparently spread over the surface of a daguerrean plate or a table’s data fields, exhibiting all there was to see without extraneous rhetoric or annotation. The great facility by which statistical numbers circulated was comparable, furthermore, to photography’s success in reproducing the same image over and over again without altering its content. That very replicability at once enhanced the information’s mobility while underlining its immutability, or autonomy.

“What the country now most requires ... is that its condition should be faithfully photographed in the returns to each federal census,” Archibald Russell accordingly proclaimed in lobbying for an expansion of the upcoming remuneration of 1840. The subsequent returns “generally speak to the eye, and convey their own lessons of instruction,” Lemuel Shattuck also noted of the tables generated by Boston’s population census in 1845, which marked a watershed in the history of American individualism by assigning every man, woman, and child their own discrete row in the census forms for the first time. For Shattuck, then, the statistical

table constituted an optical event, or a “perfect likeness” of the social order, exemplifying the central role of sight in constructing that order.

This commitment to objective truth is also closely tied to photography’s widely-remarked “adoration of the real,” that which informed an emerging aesthetic sensibility that became known as “realism.” Realism focused humanity’s gaze on the quotidian, even banal appearance of a world purged of grand gesture, liberated from sentiment and excess in favor of the materiality of existence. Facts were to speak for themselves in the realist rendition of experience, which opened up new possibilities for representation, to be contrasted to painting’s traditional reliance on chiaroscuro, sfumato, and modeling, among other techniques for creating the appearance of three dimensional space. This illusory essence required viewers to embrace the canvas’s optical illusions, undermining any claims the picture might have to factual status. Painting, rather, was the site of contrived mimicry.

Realism worked on the opposite terms. It did not disguise its techniques of depiction, nor ask us to suspend our own critical perception. Indeed, it insisted on them. Realism made no pretenses, and so declared that we were viewing nothing other than a representation, realized by a suitably artificial means. What could be more real than that? And so, realist painting turned the paint into a subject in its own right, signaling the eventual path to abstraction. The photograph, in contrast to painting, did not have to sacrifice the figure in order to remain faithful to the real. That is because the photograph reproduced the mechanics of its production in the picture. The result was flagrantly artificial, an undisguised construction of reality that was, as such, most true to it.

Allow me to now bring this political history of photography up to the neo-liberal present by devoting a few final observations regarding the portrait's latest incarnation, the "selfie." The selfie constitutes a distinct chapter in the individual's ongoing relationship with the photograph, a new stage in the history of personal sovereignty, not to mention "identity." On one hand, digital iterations of the self seem to subvert photography's original contribution to the social order for they invite us to practice a heretofore unknown plasticity that was technically impossible, and politically intolerable, during the bourgeois age of the daguerreotype and its successor, the carte-de-visite. And yet, the close affinity between self-making individuals and their portraits remains unchanged. The camera continues to function as an essential tool for identifying the self and documenting selfhood. Today's facial recognition technologies – like yesterday's – still reflect, and serve, the prevailing order.

Of course, posing for a picture has acquired a different character in our current age of "liquid modernity." Questions arise: Can individuality still serve as the source of common sense? Or has liberalism reached an eschatological moment in which the interrelationship between public and private – and universal and particular – is dissolved, leaving everyone on their own to face a meta-verse of pixels whose virtual reality mocks older notions of transparency? What will be the fate of objectivity, or "realism," in such a digitally-rendered metaphysic? And the fate of the self in a "post-human," or techno-genetic, future? These are fateful and increasingly relevant questions, prompted, as in the past, by our experience of posing before the camera.