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Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900  
(review)

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Technology and Culture, Volume 41, Number 2, April 2000, pp. 382-384 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2000.0080>



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**Photography and Its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839–1900.**

By Mary Warner Marien. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.  
Pp. xvi+222; illustrations, notes/references, bibliography, index. \$59.95.

The subtitle of this book is indicative of its focus. Neither an anthology of critics' writings nor a rote history of technology, *Photography and Its Critics* examines the ways in which the idea of photography was understood and the early debates over its "contested meanings." Mary Warner Marien sorts out the bewildering tangle of allusions and undertakings associated with the crucial first decades of the history of photography, recounting the relationships among the inventors contesting for primacy. In so doing she

revises the importance of photography's worthy predecessors, Thomas Wedgwood and Humphry Davy. We are reminded that this "was the epoch of the entrepreneur, the virtuoso, the arriviste" (p. 16). François Arago, the politician-statesman who shrewdly promoted Daguerre, claimed the invention as a national achievement. Soon after, the French government hosted all manner of patriotic documentary projects.

Marien examines at length the persistence of legend in photography's "origin stories." She investigates how variably the medium was regarded, pointing out that the words "invention" and "discovery" were used interchangeably. Photography was equated with neutral vision, and claims were made for its origin in Nature; the medium allowed Nature to draw herself, it was thought. Photography's very uniqueness suggested that its inventors were magicians. One of the book's most important contributions lies in its examination of how photography was linked to Victorian notions of social reform and to misguided, classist notions of morality. The medium promised to educate the middle and lower classes by exploding the walls of the art museum, and to offer up a consumable world of wonders previously denied by distance and expense. By the 1860s the accessibility of photographs was linked to the literacy movement. More generally, the mania for photographing things was part of a wider Victorian belief that the world could be understood and controlled through collecting and cataloguing.

The inherent verisimilitude of photography was hotly contested. Some regarded it as the medium's greatest strength, promising "objective" data about natural phenomena, distant lands, and exotic cultures. Others argued that photography only fed a dreary mass appetite for realism, leveling taste and killing the imagination. Marien challenges the venerable notion that artists' livelihoods were threatened by the camera; the painter Delaroche, she notes, probably never said "from today painting is dead!" (p. 55). Staking out their own aesthetic turf, artistically inclined photographers created their own traditions and professional qualifications. Invariably, however, their works emulated paintings, and partook of the Victorian predilection for moralizing narrative imagery.

Addressing photography's apparently contradictory notions of Romantic creativity and scientific utopianism, Marien offers readers the most satisfying account yet of the eccentric physician, art photographer, and polemicist Peter Henry Emerson. Emerson's schizophrenic attitude toward the medium—first championing its claims to art, later dramatically renouncing its artworthiness by demonstrating its scientific basis—is shown to be indicative of larger debates about expressivity and scientific objectivity. Marien demonstrates how Emerson's reading of Emile Zola, Hermann Helmholtz, Charles Darwin, and positivist philosophy influenced his thinking. The scientific education of the radical aesthete Alfred Stieglitz is similarly foregrounded, thereby demonstrating the relevance of science for pictorialism. Timeless observations by cultural observers such as

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Baudelaire, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Ruskin, and Lady Eastlake lend authority to Marien's history. Said Ruskin: "The whole system and hope of modern life [is] founded on the notion that you may substitute mechanism for skill. You think you can get everything by grinding—music, literature and painting" (p. 60).

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2000  
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Marien's approach—an interdisciplinary intellectual history, engagingly and accessibly theoretical—perfectly suits her topic. The concept of photography in the nineteenth century was so pliantly multivalent as to be at once "an omnibus idea" (p. 30), an "open, socially symbolic vessel" (p. 46), and "a felicitous symbol of the ambiguously valued transition to modernity" (p. 53). Thomas Lawson's famous aphorism—"photography is the modern world"—is emblematic of the author's project. The illustrations, nearly seventy of them, are handsomely reproduced. Some are of social interest; others are monuments of the history of photography. Somewhat disconcertingly, most are linked to the text by inference alone. Even though there is some discussion of the various photographic media—the daguerreotype, *carte de visite*, stereograph, tintype, and so forth—the author sometimes minimizes their cultural differences. Still, minor grievances pale beside the realization of a brilliant cultural history of photography in the nineteenth century.

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