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**Thomas Fougeirol, or “to make a *thing* out of *nothing*”**

Barely a dozen years separate *View from the Window at Le Gras*, the first stable and permanent image in the entire history of photography made by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce using his heliography process – taken at the summer solstice in 1827 in his house at Saint-Loup-de-Varennes, near Châlon-sur-Saône, in Burgundy – and François Arago’s announcement on January 7th 1839 at the Académie des Sciences in Paris that the process developed by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre following on from the work of Niépce – the daguerreotype – marked the invention of photography. And yet this short period was one of fascinations, fears and controversies that have marked the history of the medium and which continue to do so today.

The position of the author Honoré de Balzac was, at the time, highly ambiguous. In a letter to Mme Hanska, he declared: “*I have just come back from the daguerreotypist [the Bisson brothers] and I was dumbfounded by the perfection of the workings of light. Do you remember in 1835, when five years prior to this invention, I published Louis Lambert, the phrases that I included at the end in his musings? Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire also foresaw it. The accuracy and the precision are truly admirable!*” Balzac was referring to the following paragraph: “*Everything of which the form comes within the cognizance of the one sense of sight may be reduced to certain simple bodies of which the elements exist in the air, the light, or in the elements of air and light. [...] hence the four aspects of Matter with regard to Man – sound, colour, smell, and shape – have the same origin, for the day is not far off when the relationship of the phenomena of air and light will be made clear.*”

For the author, who takes Niépce’s name for his process – heliography (in other words “the sun’s writing”) – in the strictest sense of the term, photography is no more than the way in which light materialises on a tangible and yet almost impalpable surface and yet with unparalleled descriptive precision and at the same time in a totally mysterious manner. However in his memoirs, Nadar mentions a much more surprising and worrying conversation with Honoré de Balzac that some people have called *the Theory of Spectres*: “*According to Balzac, each body in nature is composed of a series of spectres, in infinitely superimposed layers, foliated into infinitesimal pellicules, in all directions in which the optic perceives the body. Since man is unable to create – that is, to constitute from an apparition, from the impalpable, a solid thing, or to make a thing out of nothing – every Daguerreian operation, would catch, detach, and retain, by fixing onto itself one of the layers of the photographed body. It follows that for that body, and with every repeated operation, there was an evident loss of one of its spectres, which is to say, of a part of its constitutive essence.*” And so, as a result of being photographed, we seemingly wander for eternity like spectres, with neither appearance, nor substance and without a constitutive essence, whereas our photographic representations remain as solid as ever. This is confirmed by several sentences taken from *Cousin Pons*: “*If any man had come to Napoleon to tell him that a building or a figure is at all times and in all places represented by an image in the atmosphere, that every existing object has a spectral intangible double which may become visible, the Emperor would have sent his informant to Charenton [...] Yet Daguerre’s discovery amounts to nothing more nor less than this.*”

And so the arrival of photography, and more precisely the daguerreotype, persuaded Honoré de Balzac to consider the world differently, to see the world “from a photographic standpoint”; the invention had not only disrupted people’s relationship with the visible and the invisible world, with light and matter, but above all each person’s relationship with the world and their own image. Is it still possible today to consider that all the arts – and first and foremost painting – are still in a state of upheaval? When considering this question, we should bear in mind that Daguerre was originally a painter and stage designer. Photography has not just called into question the descriptive power and precision that painting previously possessed, it has also opened out a field of possibilities for painting in which it can compete with photography by revealing the constitutive essence of things and make visible the infinitely superimposed layers that each body in nature possesses. By capturing these invisible spectres, the daguerreotype reduces by the form, bringing these elemental bodies into the visible world. Thomas Fougeirol’s body of work – and in particular his series *Collapsing Fields* – provides the perfect illustration. Each painting seems to catch, detach and retain a spectral layer within itself, all the better to transform it into a perceptible and comprehensible event.

But let’s move ahead and follow once more the thread of Louis Lambert’s thoughts according to Balzac:

*“I. Everything on earth exists solely by motion and number.  
II. Motion is, so to speak, number in action.  
III. Motion is the product of a force generated by the Word and by Resistance, which is Matter. But for Resistance, Motion would have had no results; its action would have been infinite.  
IV. Motion, acting in proportion to Resistance, produces a result which is Life [...]”*

In the work of Thomas Fougeirol, painting can be perfectly defined according to this combination between the force to which the artist’s words, his gestures and founding movement give rise and the resistance of the pictorial matter itself. Except that in his work, Thomas Fougeirol joins the two parts of the text: the actual pictorial matter is not considered as a mass, but rather as a series of successive layers, which are as supple and elastic as skin, as dense and veined as the epidermis, as well as being resistant to movement, to the painter’s force. Consequently each of the artist’s paintings, which are based both on heliography and dermography, are an endlessly renewed (and infinitely repeated) manifestation of light, life, space and time. It is up to us, like Balzac at the daguerreotypist, to see what is “*admirable*”, to be “*dumbfounded by the perfection of the workings of light*”, as well as “*the four aspects of Matter with regard to Man – sound, colour, smell, and shape*”. In other words the very expression of “*painting based on photography*”.

— Marc Donnadiou  
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