Daguerre in the City

Ill. 1, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. View of Notre-Dame de Paris, from the Pont des Tournelles, ca. 1838–1839. Daguerreotype, 15,4 × 22,1 cm (plate). University of Texas, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

ABSTRACT

The few remaining daguerreotypes by Daguerre himself that have survived for the last 175 years can be divided into three groups: still-lifes, cityscapes, and portraits. His second series of views of Paris attracted particular interest in the photographic milieu and beyond it. In a general sense, plates like these offer a rare chance to look back into the 'capital of the 19th century', as Walter Benjamin puts it, but there is a lot more to them than that. Daguerre's few photographs of avenues in Paris encourage us to reflect upon his personal strategy of promoting and publishing his photographic process. This entailed a tightly knit web of personal contacts with powerful institutions and influential partners that was an indispensable precondition for Daguerre's success.

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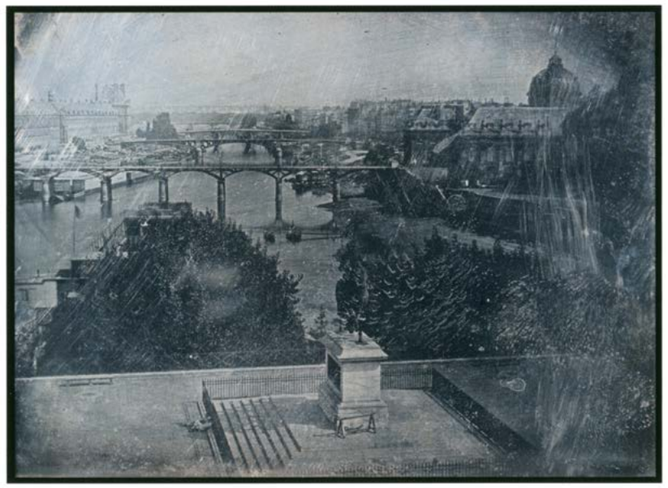
Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre was neither born in the capital of France nor did he die there. Both Cormeilles-en-Parisis and Bry-sur-Marne, the places where his life began and ended, lay far outside the suburbs of the capital city, and yet Daguerre was a Parisian through and through. Not only did he live there from the age of 16 for the longest period of his life – in all, 37 of 64 years.[1] What is more, Daguerre understood in his own day the significance of associating his name inextricably with Paris – even years before the photographic process bearing his name was made public.

Germans travelling to Paris report of their enthusiasm for the diorama,[2] the illusion machine Daguerre had operated since 1822 together with his business partner Charles-Marie Bouton at the *Boulevard du Temple*, which had brought him an oddly ambivalent fame somewhere between commerce and art as theater entrepreneur and visual artist.[3]

It is quite probable that even without the development and public announcement of the daguerreotype, we would still remember Daguerre today as an important figure shaping early 19th century visual aesthetics. From Paris, one of the most important stages of the European theater scene, the diorama played more than a marginal role in the development of a decidedly modern form of visual representation.[4]

Far more than it was true for an artist working with standard image media, Daguerre's artistic activity hinged on public attention. Just how much Daguerre, the business man, was not only aware of, but strategically pursued, this attention is made clear by his correspondence with both Nicéphore Niépce and his son, Isidore, after Nicéphore's death in 1833.

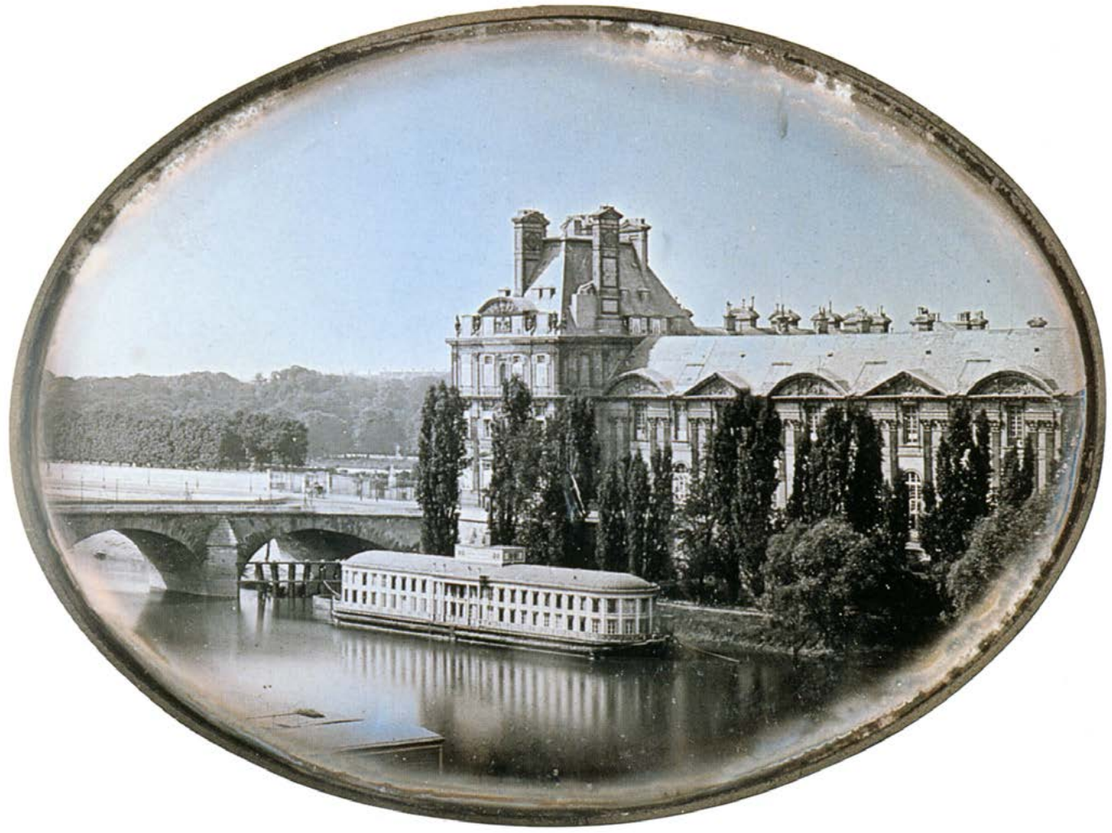
It bears more than passing mention that Daguerre almost jealously protected Paris as his domain, keeping his contractual business partners, the former since 1829 and the later since 1835, far removed from his own Paris circles. He repeatedly writes to Isidore Niépce in Chalon-sur-Saône, telling him he need not come to Paris in order to advance their mutual project.[5] Daguerre's appeals in the letters to stay away always leave unsaid that his own presence in Paris, however, was absolutely necessary.



In 1837, or 1838 at the latest, when he began in to seriously look for possibilities to position his newly developed photographic process onto the market as a gainful commercial business, it quickly became clear that without a tightly knit web of personal contacts his plan to earn money with his invention would not come to fruition. Daguerre may have had in mind the story of his now-deceased business partner, Nicéphore Niépce, who a decade earlier, despite similar efforts, miserably failed to get business started in London. In England, Niépce, not merely a Frenchman, but an inventor from the remotest provinces of France, was a complete stranger with absolutely no such network at his disposal.[6]

Indeed, the elation with which Daguerre opens his letter to Isidore Niépce on 2 January 1839, "*Enfin j'ai vu Mr. Arago*", ("Finally I've seen Mr. Arago") denotes nothing less than a breakthrough.[7] The man Daguerre refers to, Dominique François Arago, was the Director of the Paris Observatory, the Permanent Secretary of the Paris Academy of Sciences and, last but by no means least, a member of the French parliament. Simply put, a man ideally situated within a massive and influential network to promote Daguerre's invention. And, indeed,[8] Arago did not disappoint. His endorsement, his personally designed public relations campaign, and his high-level connections within so many different social spheres were most certainly one of the central factors contributing to the early success, already in 1839, of Daguerre's 'project', resulting not only in commercially remunerative life annuities from the French state for both Daguerre and Isidore Niépce, but bringing public renown to Daguerre as the inventor of a new image medium. Arago's campaign, a strategically controlled economy of public attention, left no room for a differentiated view of the far more complex history of the development of photography.[9]

For some time now, scholars have rightly called our attention to the urban context of the modern sciences as a precondition of development, wherein the city serves not merely as stage or background, but as an essential contributing factor to scientific progress.[10] Similarly, we can presume such interdependence between urbanity and mediality in the Modern era. While the cases of Niépce and Talbot may be offered as examples of the intellectual and technological development of the photographic process far beyond the reaches of metropolitan centers – that is, in Chalon-sur-Saône and Lacock Abbey, respectively – the phase of publication, involving



Ill. 2,Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. Mathurin-Joseph Fordos. View from the Pont-Neuf, ca. 1837–1839. Daguerreotype, 7,3 × 10 cm (plate). Musée des arts et métiers - Cnam, Paris

Ill. 3, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. The Pavillon de Flore and the Pont-Royal, 1839. Daguerreotype, 16,2 × 21,2 cm (plate). Musée des arts et métiers - Cnam, Paris

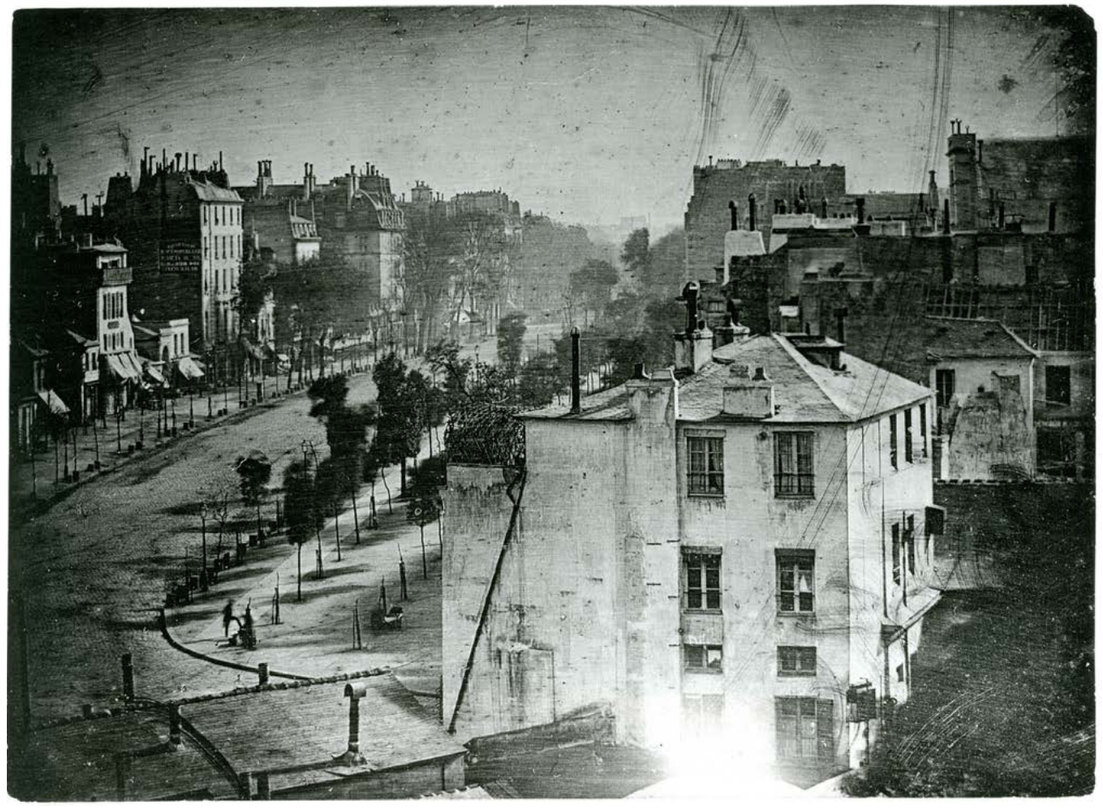
complex strategies for the introduction and penetration of these inventions into public consciousness, was dependent upon an urban infrastructure.

The public relations strategies of Daguerre in Paris and, a few weeks later, of Talbot in London, differences in detail aside, have two key factors in common to generate the necessary publicity: established scientific institutions and the press.[11] Daguerre turned to the Paris Academy of Sciences, Talbot to the Royal Institution and Royal Society; both men exploited the daily and weekly press. These photographic processes could only have been made public in the two capital cities (even if we consider a minor supporting role played by Edinburgh in Talbot's case).

Once Arago got the proverbial ball rolling, it appears to have required little effort on Daguerre's part to attract Paris' star journalists, like Jules Janin, into his atelier.

Quite the contrary, articles by Janin[12] or Samuel Morse,[13] among others, appearing in contemporary newspapers, make it clear that Daguerre organized such visits to his atelier as exclusive receptions. If we examine the various accounts in comparison, it becomes even clearer that Daguerre consistently used the same or similar wording to talk about his invention and, moreover, referred to the same set of images again and again. If we look at the few, in some cases, depending on attribution, little more than twenty existing photographic plates said to have originated from Daguerre himself,[14] we are struck by something peculiar. Although the views of Paris make up about half of the sample images produced by Daguerre, it was almost exclusively his images of the city that were shown within the scope of his interviews with the press. Journalists refer repeatedly, above all, to images of Notre-Dame (*Ill. 1*), of various bridges over the Seine (*Ill. 2*) or of the Louvre (*Ill. 3*).

Jlll. 4,Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. Still life with Verospi Jove, 1839. Daguerreotype, 12,1 × 15,5 cm (plate). Országos Müszaki Múzeum, Budapest



Daguerre's cunning is as simple as it was effective – to take advantage of the French capital as a 'resonance chamber' of innovation, while drawing the greatest possible attention to his own invention, the city itself is taken as the primary exhibit. It is not the still lifes Daguerre produced in equal number, with their peculiar iconography requiring exegesis (*Ill. 4*), but the trusted images of the familiar that become emblematic of the new way of seeing. To display views of Paris in Paris almost necessarily challenges viewers to measure the medially recorded reality of photography against the lived reality of the city itself, to provoke a comparison, in other words.

The group of images Daguerre selected for exhibit, as we know from published accounts, already contains the seeds of an idea that would later define the aesthetic of photography, namely, the exact representation of external reality. The inevitable flaws of such an undertaking were not only apparent in the images selected by Daguerre but quickly became a topic of discussion. The image of *Boulevard du Temple* (*Ill. 5*), in particular, became a subject of critique, lacking, as it did, precisely the one thing most associated with a major metropolis – the hustle and bustle of the city streets, something that remained out of reach for the daguerreotype with its long exposure times.

If we take the accounts of contemporary journalists to be true, Daguerre did not shy away from the tumult of street life with his camera but sought it out. The collection of images we have today attributed to Daguerre's

Ill. 5, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre. The Boulevard du Temple, 8 o'clock in the morning, ca. 1838 (image data lost after failed restauration). Daguerreotype, 13,1 × 16,4 cm (plate). Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, München

hand is too sparse to judge. Contemporary reports describe scenes, however, in which Daguerre takes photographs on the bridges of the Seine, entirely unnoticed. It remains doubtful, though, that Daguerre actually left the studio to capture the urban space of Paris with his camera. The likelier scenario can be seen in the views of Paris left to us characterized by their conspicuously elevated perspective, suggesting that Daguerre's images of Paris were made through open windows in various quarters of the city. His photographs of the city emerge at the intersection of inside and outside, private and public. It would prove a momentous decision, opening the studio onto urban space and, what is more, inviting the city, that is, its representatives in the form of visitors, into the studio (*Ill. 6*) and thereby giving them the opportunity to stand, perhaps, at the very windows from which the images were made and compare, at their leisure,[15] their own experience of that reality where their gazes fell, for the first time, on Paris as city and as photographic veduta.

Ill. 6, Anonymous. *Daguerréotipe. Expérience publique faite par Mr. Daguerre*, ca. 1840, Lithography

NOTES

1. Helmut Gernsheim, Alison Gernsheim: L.J.M. Daguerre. The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype, London 1956; 2nd, revised ed. New York 1968.
2. August Lewald: Ein Frühstück bei Daguerre. In: ibid.: Album aus Paris, Band, 1, Hamburg 1832, p. 273–281. Carl Gustav Carus: Das Diorama von Daguerre in Paris, gesehen am 4. September 1835. In: ibid.: Paris und die Rheingegenden. Tagebuch einer Reise im Jahr 1835, vol. 1, Leipzig 1836, p. 284–295.
3. Stephen C. Pinson: Speculating Daguerre. Art and Enterprise in the Work of L.J.M. Daguerre, Chicago, London 2012.
4. Heinz Buddemeier: Panorama, Diorama, Photographie. Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert, München 1970, p. 15–51. Werner Neite: The Cologne Diorama. In: History of Photography 3 (1979), p. 105–109. R. Derek Wood: The Diorama in Great Britain in the 1820. In: History of Photography 17 (1993), p. 284–295.
5. See for instance Daguerre's letters to Isidore Niépce from 5 October 1835, 28 April 1838 and 2 January 1839. In: Manuel Bonnet, Jean-Louis Marignier (ed.): Niépce. Correspondance et papiers, 2 vol., vol. 2, Saint Loup de Varennes 2003, p. 1072–1074, 1095–1097, 1101–1002.
6. R.C. Smith: Nicéphore Niépce in England. In: History of Photography 7 (1983), p. 43–50. Larry J. Schaaf: Niépce Abroad: Britain in 1827 & 1839 – Russia in 1839 & 1994. In: Nicéphore Niépce. Une nouvelle image. A New Image, Chalon-sur-Saône 1998, p. 100–106.
7. Bonnet, Marignier 2003 (loc. cit., footnote 5), p. 1101.
8. François Sarda: Les Arago. François et les autres, Paris 2002.
9. Anne McCauley: François Arago and the Politics of the French Invention of Photography. In: Daniel P. Younger (ed.): Multiple Views. Logan Grant Essays on Photography 1983–89, Albuquerque 1991, p. 43–69. François Brunet: La naissance de l'idée de photographie, Paris 2000, p. 57–116.
10. Sven Dierig, Jens Lachmund, J. Andrew Mendelsohn: Toward an Urban History of Science. In: Osiris, 2nd series, 18 (2003), p. 1–19.
11. Steffen Siegel (ed.): Neues Licht. Daguerre, Talbot und die Veröffentlichung der Fotografie im Jahr 1839, München 2014.
12. Jules Janin: La Daguerotype. In: L'Artiste. Journal de la littérature et des beaux-arts, 2nd series, vol. 2, No. 11, 28 January 1839, p. 145–148. Siegel 2014 (loc. cit., footnote 11), p. 67–73.
13. Samuel F.B. Morse: The Daguerrotipe. In: New-York Observer 17 (1839), No. 16, 20 April 1839, p. 62. Siegel 2014 (loc. cit., footnote 11), p. 96–98.
14. Pinson 2012 (loc. cit., footnote 3), p. 201–220. From my point of view Pinson is too generous in attributing certain plates to Daguerres, especially within his section ‚portraiture'
15. As a result of a fire on 8 March 1839, it was no longer possible to stand at the window in the building where Daguerre's diorama was located, from which the images of Boulevard du Temple were made. Shortly after the fire, Daguerre began to photograph the city from the window of his new apartment on Boulevard Saint-Martin.

CREDITS

Ill. 1: Stephen C. Pinson: Speculating Daguerre. Art and Enterprise in the Work of L.J.M. Daguerre, Chicago, London 2012, plate 29.
Ill. 2, 6: Walter Guadagnini (ed.): Photography, vol. 1, Milano 2010, p. 19, 39.
Ill. 3: Quentin Bajac, Dominique Planchon-de-Font-Réaulx (ed.): Le daguerréotype français. Un objet photographique, Paris 2003, p. 155.
Ill. 4: Maren Gröning, Monika Faber: Inkunabeln einer neuen Zeit. Pioniere der Daguerreotypie in Österreich 1839–1850, Vienna 2006, p. 10.
Ill. 5: Janet E. Buerger: French Daguerreotypes, Chicago, London 1989, p. 7.