



Tailoring Authenticity: A Media Post-Mortem of the Daguerreotype through the NFT

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This article attempts to test the ways nineteenth-century spectatorship is viewed and interpreted in contemporary artistic practices by exploring the impact of the early decades of photography in terms of ongoing developments in contemporary visual technology. The central question is: how might a contemporaneous object like the non-fungible token (NFT) allow us to think through a historical object such as the daguerreotype? The first half of the article outlines the conceptual grounds for this analysis from which a new methodology, what I term a *media post-mortem* and its supporting concept of *symptomatic plasticity*, is applied and developed. The broader aims of the article are twofold: (1) to propose a new approach to the study of art historical phenomena that is supported and justified by a rigorous and innovative engagement with new conceptual tools; and (2) to map a new direction for the study of media by way of a more intense, diagnostically acute focus on the question of materiality.



The media post-mortem

What tools, models, concepts, and methods allow for a consideration of the relation between the technological advancements of our time and nineteenth-century modes of immersive spectacle? One possibility is the nascent practice of media archaeology, defined by Erkki Huhtamo as a ‘dialogical’ approach that ‘puts different phenomena and moments in time (including the moment of writing) into contact, urging them to explain each other’.¹ As a field of study, media archaeology is part of a broad reorientation in priorities, across art history and many subfields in media studies, towards the question of materiality. In general, media archaeology is said to concern itself with how materiality conditions ‘the movement of information in all media’.² A diverse range of integrated media practices — from photography, telegraphy, and telephony to television, film, and digital media — are understood as ‘sociotechnological artifacts whose material nature influences the way they are used and actively interpreted’.³ The problem with new models like media archaeology, as Timothy Druckrey recently pointed out, is the lack of general consensus around how they should be adopted and applied.⁴ Huhtamo himself admits as much, writing that ‘there are no clear guidelines for how media archaeology could be made productive as a tool for investigating photography’ because ‘there is no shared consensus about its goals and methods’ (pp. 14, 13). It is here, I argue, that Druckrey’s somewhat offhand use of the term ‘media autopsy’ should be taken seriously and developed.⁵ Instead of bringing the material support ‘back to life’, as Huhtamo would have it, what does it mean to consider the support as something *dead*?⁶

An autopsy or post-mortem is an examination of a lifeless body that seeks to determine the cause of death. The object under analysis is viewed as an effect which precedes its cause; no ‘life’ is contained within the body, there is no deeper meaning to

¹ Erkki Huhtamo, ‘*Elephants Photographicus*: Media Archaeology and the History of Photography’, in *Photography & Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), pp. 13–33 (p. 14), doi:[10.1515/9780271082547-005](https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271082547-005). See also, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (University of California Press, 2011).

² Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale, ‘Introduction’, in *Photography & Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Leonardi and Natale, pp. 1–10 (p. 4).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3. See also, Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford University Press, 1999); and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴ Timothy Druckrey, ‘Time as Symbolic Form’, unpublished paper delivered at the online symposium, ‘Nineteenth-Century Visual Technologies in Contemporary Practices’ (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 10–11 September 2022).

⁵ Druckrey’s comments on media archaeology and his specific reference to ‘media autopsy’ came in the general discussion at the end of the symposium.

⁶ Leonardi and Natale, pp. 3, 4.

be uncovered; rather, the object is the material end point of *the life that preceded it*. This shift in thinking is structurally homologous to what in the praxis of psychoanalysis is referred to as the symptomatic approach. Slavoj Žižek describes symptoms as ‘meaningless traces’, formal manifestations that are fundamentally without sense; as such, they mark a sudden, unexpected eruption of trauma, a raw intrusion into the daily fabric of life which cannot be integrated into a given network of meaning. It is for this reason that, in psychoanalysis, the act of interpretation necessitates a radical hermeneutic procedure: the symptom must be perceived as an effect *which precedes its cause* in the sense that its meaning is not to be uncovered or ‘discovered [...] from the hidden depths of the past’ but, rather, ‘constructed retroactively’. ‘The analysis’, Žižek writes, ‘produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning.’⁷

The key feature of this interpretative model is an intense focus on materiality. Žižek calls on us to renounce our fascination with signification, with the notion of ‘hidden meaning’, a deeper realm of ‘content concealed behind the form’. Instead, he writes, we must ‘centre our attention on this form itself’, on the radically negative dimension of materiality.⁸ In short, the fetishistic attachment to the inner ‘life’ of the object is replaced by the difficult acceptance of its death. Only this renunciation can open the way for a media post-mortem: a diagnostic analysis centred on the form of the dead material body. While lifeless, the object remains meaningful at the level of surface effects; what is ‘brought to life’ by the examination are precisely these effects, the constructive capacity of the support’s radically negative quality. As in psychoanalysis, the media post-mortem aims to produce the ‘truth’ retroactively, by re-establishing a missing link in the causal chain: namely, the frame, context, or set of conditions within which the body’s form becomes meaningful; that is, the real life which preceded the work, rather than the imaginary life it is seen to contain.

To achieve this objective, the media post-mortem finds further conceptual support in the work of the philosopher Catherine Malabou, who reinterprets fundamental psychoanalytic theories through the prism of neuroscience. In her 2012 work *The New Injured: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, Malabou re-engages with the psychoanalytic process using the neurological concept of plasticity. In this reading, the symptom remains a traumatizing event, an unexpected, meaningless shock that cannot be ‘hermeneutically appropriated/integrated’.⁹ Yet the concept of plasticity allows Malabou

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 2008), p. 58.

⁸ Ibid, p. 7.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Descartes and the Post-Traumatic Subject: On Catherine Malabou’s *Les Nouveaux Blessés* and Other Autistic Monsters’, *Qui Parle*, 17.2 (2009), pp. 123–47 (p. 126), doi:[10.5250/quiparle.17.2.123](https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.17.2.123).

to undertake a broader aesthetic enquiry into the destructive capacities of form, which she rethinks as a direct (material) encounter with death. Through this line of enquiry, the symptomatic approach becomes an interrogation of materiality as a process of constructive and destructive plasticity; the work, in short, assumes the ‘form of death’.¹⁰

The media post-mortem is grounded in the convergence of Žižek and Malabou’s theoretical models. This alignment gives rise to a new concept, what I term *symptomatic plasticity*, which describes both the plasticity of the symptom and the symptomatic logic of plasticity. By using symptomatic plasticity to address questions of form and materiality, the media post-mortem approaches the spatial-temporal conditions of the art object and art history in a new way. First, historical time is viewed as a *plastic* phenomenon: both a chronological process of ‘becoming’ and an event constantly unfolding in the present, as a logical ‘happening’.¹¹ In turn, the meaning of the past is understood *symptomatically*: as something that persists but is constructed retroactively from a position projected into the future.¹² Ultimately, the media post-mortem aims at a historical comparison that produces what Žižek calls ‘an impossible short-circuit of levels which, for structural reasons, cannot ever meet’.¹³ The aim of the procedure is to produce an awareness that the two levels — past and present, the nineteenth century and the contemporary age — have no shared space; the only way to grasp their relation is through a ‘constantly shifting perspective between two points’.¹⁴ This is what will be attempted in the remainder of this article. By crossing wires that do not normally touch, I will bring together a contemporary phenomenon (the NFT) with a historical object (the daguerreotype) in a manner that may surprise or even shock the reader. But this response — the product of a constantly shifting perspective — is a structural necessity: only the shock of the short-circuit can produce the electric spark that brings dead materiality back to life, shedding light in turn on our own ‘disavowed presuppositions and consequences’.¹⁵

Symptomatic plasticity in photography and the NFT

How can we understand the impact of photography in the nineteenth century on the basis of symptomatic plasticity? When it first appeared, the photograph brought

¹⁰ For a full account of how Malabou localizes plasticity in the aesthetic field, see Robert Thomas Kilroy, ‘Between the Fear and the Fall: Malabou, Art, and the Symptomatic Plasticity of AI’, *MLN*, 137.4 (2022) (French Issue), pp. 708–36, doi:[10.1353/mln.2022.0053](https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2022.0053).

¹¹ Catherine Malabou, *L’Avenir de Hegel: plasticité, temporalité, dialectique* (Vrin, 1996).

¹² Žižek, *Sublime Object*, pp. 58–59.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (Continuum, 2006), p. 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (MIT Press, 2003), foreword.

about a fundamental transformation in the experience of time, space, and event by confronting the nineteenth-century spectator with a conflicting set of spatial and temporal dimensions.¹⁶ As a mode of visual communication, it offered ‘instantaneity of transmission’ and rapidity of execution (compared to painting); and yet it also demanded lengthy production processes and long exposure times that often rendered sitters in a state of intense physical immobility.¹⁷ Natale notes that the medium made it possible ‘to visualize two places at the same time by creating the illusion of synchronicity and disembodied presence’ (p. 44). With this feeling of opening and closure, a simultaneous experience of disembodiment and delay, time accelerates and extends, space contracts and expands. For this reason, photography was often compared with parallel developments in railway travel.¹⁸ The train journey produces the visual spectacle of a landscape in rapid movement, of spatial distance obliterated; but it also brings about an intense state of immobility, an acute awareness of the body’s physical presence in space. In both instances, we recognize certain symptomatic effects, what Malabou calls the destructive and constructive effects of plasticity: a radically negative, dual experience of rupture and opening, contraction and expansion, which is rooted in form’s capacity for both reception and annihilation.

This experience sheds light on the immobilizing effects of photography in the nineteenth century. In an effort to position photography in relation to the wider landscape of contemporary media culture, Huhtamo examines how the notion of ‘human beings strapped to machines’ became interwoven into the nineteenth-century cultural imagination by way of innocuous photographic practices. ‘The practical requirement’, he writes, ‘for neck rests and other supports to keep the sitters posing for portraits in early photographers’ studio motionless’ became associated with the idea of factory assembly lines, leading gradually to ‘fantasies about mechanical photographer’s chairs as torture machines’ (p. 28). The idea of the ‘restraining machine’ subsequently became a common artistic reference point in the early twentieth century, with artists like Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, and Franz Kafka all engaging directly with the notion of the ‘bachelor machine’, a term coined by Michel Carrouges to describe ‘a new alliance between desiring machines and the organless body’.¹⁹

No single figure explored this concept more comprehensively, or gave it a more central place in his *oeuvre*, than Marcel Duchamp. In *La Mariée mise à nu par ses*

¹⁶ Simone Natale, ‘A Mirror with Wings: Photography and a New Era of Communications’, in *Photography & Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Leonardi and Natale, pp. 34–48 (p. 36).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43. I am grateful to Tina Wasserman for emphasizing this point during the online symposium.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Cited in Huhtamo, p. 29.

célibataires, même (The Bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even) (1915–23) and his posthumous installation *Étant donnés: 1 la chute d'eau; 2 le gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1 the waterfall; 2 the illuminating gas) (1946–66) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the idea of the restraining machine, now localized in the aesthetic space, becomes altogether real and unsettling. *Étant donnés* invites the museum visitor to place their eyes at two viewing holes located in a thick wooden door; from a crouched position, one peeks voyeuristically at a highly erotic, semi-pornographic scene of a faceless nude figure. With its direct reference to Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866), the work raises explicit questions about the erotic dynamics at play in the passive experience of nineteenth-century spectatorship.

In a recent rereading of *Étant donnés*, David Joselit draws an unorthodox but curious comparison between Duchamp's final work and the recent craze around the NFT. The crux of Joselit's argument is that the installation piece sets up a relation between spectatorship and materiality that both recalls and opposes the idea of non-fungibility:

Étant donnés resists reproduction absolutely. It is impossible to pretend to know it without seeing it in person in Philadelphia. And when one does, one must press one's face against a sweat-stained door and strain to see what's going on through nasty peepholes. To see this artwork, one must literally set one's body against it, making its materiality inescapable. There is consequently no fungibility here either, but rather than enabling financial speculation, this non-fungibility guarantees a face-to-face encounter with absolute singularity.²⁰

As Joselit points out, the NFT radically reverses the effect of Duchamp's other important work: the ready-made. Suspending matter between two poles (household item and work of art), the ready-made allows objects to exist freely as 'profiles of information' (text, photography, etc.). The NFT, by comparison, arrests the fungibility of information as private property in such a way that a digital file circulating online can immediately acquire a value that 'is structurally dependent upon the exclusive right to control its circulation' (p. 3). Joselit's emphasis on the inescapable materiality of Duchamp's work can be said to highlight an important and often overlooked point concerning the 'stubborn materiality' of digital media: that 'even digital media [...] move and exchange information through physical changes that possess their own materiality — although this might not be immediately evident to our senses'.²¹ Like the door in *Étant donnés*, the NFT is the product of the blockchain (a term heavily loaded with material connotations).

²⁰ David Joselit, 'NFTs, or The Readymade Reversed', *October*, 175 (2021), pp. 3–4 (p. 4), doi:[10.1162/octo_a_00419](https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00419).

²¹ Leonardi and Natale, pp. 3–4.

While you can reproduce a digital file as many times as you want, only the blockchain gives you something that cannot be reproduced: ownership of the work.

Almost paradoxically, such questions of materiality characterize recent developments taking place in the field of digital art. Refik Anadol's 'data paintings', for example, are highly immersive museum experiences produced using generative algorithms and machine intelligence in collaboration with neuroscientists and engineers (Fig. 1). By blurring the line between artist, curator, and engineer, Anadol foregrounds both the material infrastructure of the digital experience and the dematerialized aesthetic dimension governing the new regime of 'algorithmic governmentality'.²²



Fig. 1: Refik Anadol, *Quantum Memories* (2020), AI data sculpture, custom software, quantum computing data, generative algorithm with artificial intelligence (AI), real time digital animation on LED screen, 4 channel sound. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Work like this calls on us to revisit and extend Joselit's initial insight, raising the question of how a contemporaneous object (like the NFT) might allow us to think through historical objects (such as the daguerreotype). Not unlike the NFT, the daguerreotype has a non-fungible character that is a product of its material conditions.

²² Antoinette Rouvroy, 'The End(s) of Critique: Data Behaviourism versus Due Process', in *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn: The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. by Mireille Hildebrandt and Katja de Vries (Routledge, 2013), pp. 143–67 (p. 147).

Because its metal support ensures that it cannot be copied, each daguerreotype image is stamped as original and singular. Yet Joselit reminds us of the ‘perverse’ logic of the NFT: by granting ownership of digital images circulating freely and publicly online, it confronts us with the paradoxical notion of a digital file that is at once a reproduction *and an original*.

By reducing aesthetic value to a digital certificate of authenticity, the NFT provokes a reconsideration of Walter Benjamin’s notion of the aura. In the digital age, where a reproduction can both enhance and erase authenticity, one might say that Benjamin’s central argument is both confirmed and denied. As Douglas Davis argues, ‘there is no clear conceptual distinction now between original and reproduction in virtually any medium’. The aura, in this context, reveals itself to be highly ‘supple and elastic’: ‘Here in this realm, often mislabeled “virtual” (it is actually a *realer* reality, or RR), both originality and traditional truth (symbolized by the unadorned photographic “fact”) are being enhanced not, betrayed.’²³ Yet the NFT complicates this situation by simultaneously collapsing and affirming the master/copy distinction, in such a way that the two poles no longer appear in opposition. Non-fungibility relies on a system of fungibility: a pre-existing structural equivalence that renders the master and copy indistinguishable. Once non-fungibility is issued however, the conditions of fungibility are undone, leading to the perverse situation described by Joselit: the original is reinforced by the reproduction *while remaining entirely within the realm of reproduction*. With the NFT, the authenticity/reproduction dualism ceases to relate in oppositional terms; instead, it begins to follow a self-generating logic, whereby opposing poles operate as two sides of the same structural phenomenon.

The NFT: a media post-mortem

This reading of the NFT takes full effect when positioned in a broader history of art in which the trajectories of digital and postmodern art both align and diverge around the question of materiality. To take Joselit’s analysis further, what more can we say about the relation between Duchamp’s ready-made and the NFT? It is worth noting that the ready-mades did not attract substantial critical attention until the 1950s, when Duchamp allowed for a number of replicas of the works to be displayed and then gave permission for special editions to be produced in the years before his death. These reproductions generated renewed — and some would say excessive — interest in the original ready-mades, most notably *Fountain* which, in the forty years since its

²³ Douglas Davis, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991–1995)’, *Leonardo*, 28.5 (1995), pp. 381–86 (p. 381), emphasis in original, doi:[10.2307/1576221](https://doi.org/10.2307/1576221).

initial appearance, had been largely ignored. The physical artwork itself — a signed, upturned urinal — had long since disappeared and the only marker of its existence was a photograph which appeared in an obscure journal from 1917. The production of the replicas clearly generated a delayed effect of fascination on the part of a new generation of artists and critics, who quickly shifted their concerns to the original event. Placed under this spotlight, *Fountain* itself would remain permanently lost, an elusive state that was held in place by the dynamics of the photographic reproduction.²⁴

We can recognize here, quite clearly, the structural logic of the NFT, whereby the reproduction generates an effect of non-fungibility that exceeds it. Might such a parallel allow us to assign the NFT its proper art historical weight?²⁵ If it shares the same ‘perverse’ logic as the ready-made — an artwork that is at once reproduction and a limited edition — then it can be said to localize a precise structural paradox penetrating the field of art historical scholarship. Both the ready-made and the NFT appear to draw attention to the inconsistencies in the postmodern project — a critical urge to dematerialize and de-author that is undermined by a disavowed attachment to materiality and authorship.²⁶ It is significant that the same contradiction also runs through the history of digital art. As Claire Bishop explains, the field of the digital relies on codifying operations that produce processes of infinite reproducibility and multiplicity that are at once dematerialized and de-authored. Paradoxically, these processes go hand in hand with a new wave of contemporary art practices that are ever more robust in asserting questions of originality and authorship. ‘In actuality’, Bishop writes, ‘visual art’s assault on originality only ever goes so far: it is always underpinned by a respect for intellectual property and carefully assigned authorship.’²⁷

Bishop’s broader argument is that contemporary art exhibits a curious disavowal of the upheaval wrought by the technological revolution. ‘While many artists use digital

²⁴ For a full elaboration of this point, see Robert Kilroy, *Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’: One Hundred Years Later* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), doi:10.1007/978-3-319-69158-9.

²⁵ We can perhaps sketch here the lines of a historical connection between Duchamp’s ready-made and the NFT. In drawing out the inherent tension in the field of the digital, the NFT rehabilitates the central contradiction of postmodernism: the fact that, despite all the theoretical assertions of dematerialization based on a critique of medium specificity, the practice of postmodern criticism reasserts the essentialist tendencies of modernism, namely, a primary concern for materiality and medium specificity. The ready-made makes this paradox explicit: it is an (immaterial) gesture of conceptual art and a (material) object of conceptual art. In the ready-made, the notion is detached from its arbitrary relation to an object at the same time that it is embodied by this object.

²⁶ As Charles Harrison and Paul Wood put it, postmodern ‘moves to “dematerialize” the object, can all be read as a continuation of, rather than a movement beyond, Modernist essentialism.’ ‘Institutions and Objections: Introduction’, in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, new edn (Blackwell, 2003), pp. 813–17 (p. 814).

²⁷ Claire Bishop, ‘Digital Divide’, *Artforum*, 51.1 (2012), pp. 434–41 (p. 441).

technology', she writes, 'how many really confront the question of what it means to think, see, and filter affect through the digital? How many *thematize* this, or reflect deeply on how we experience, and are altered by, the digitization of our existence?' (p. 436, emphases in original). The type of critical engagement she is referring to involves a considered effort to isolate the tension at the heart of the materiality/immateriality dichotomy. In the work of Frances Stark and Thomas Hirshhorn, for example, she sees

the endlessly disposable, rapidly mutable ephemera of the virtual age and its impact on our consumption of relationships, images, and communication; each articulates something of the troubling oscillation between intimacy and distance that characterizes our new technological regime, and proposes an incommensurability between our doggedly physiological lives and the screens to which we are glued. (p. 436)

Bishop's precise point is that the vast majority of contemporary art practices, while not appearing to address the effects of technology directly, are nevertheless conditioned and shaped by its effects. The general tendency among contemporary artists to eschew the digital and virtual in favour of performance, social practice, and analogue film is, she argues, symptomatic of a 'repressed relationship to the digital': 'the digital is, on a deep level, the shaping condition — even the structuring paradox — that determines artistic decisions to work with certain formats and media' (p. 436). The logic at play, she claims, is one of disavowal, in which the digital is denied at the very moment it remains persistently present; it remains 'perpetually active but apparently buried' and thus comes to life in the shape of the practice itself. What defines this shape is an acute attraction to materiality: a sudden fascination with 'bulky, obsolete technology' and 'old media' in cinema and photography; an effort to underline a feeling of delayed intimacy with materials in contrast to the cold excess of information offered by the digital; a desire, in socially engaged practices, for physical 'face-to-face relations' that counter the disembodiment of the virtual (pp. 436, 437).

There are two ways of subjecting this analysis to a media post-mortem. On the one hand, we hear echoes of symptomatic plasticity: a tension between two spatial-temporal fields (embodied and virtual; new media and old) erupting as an excess of materiality (the face-to-face, the analogue). On the other, we see the residue of a process that works against symptomatic plasticity: an overtly intimate encounter with materiality is subdued and transformed into the indexical marker of an excess of authenticity (the 'authenticity' of the physical and the analogue). As a tool, the NFT allows us to isolate this almost imperceptible shift, in that it captures at once the primary state

of radical contradiction and its subsequent elision (by way of indexicality). As Bishop puts it: 'The sumptuous texture of indexical media is unquestionably seductive, but its desirability also arises from the impression that it is scarce, rare, precious.' It is not insignificant, here, that Bishop cites Rosalind Krauss's reference to Benjamin's 'belief that the utopian potential of a medium may be unleashed at the very moment of its obsolescence' (p. 437). What Benjamin may well have been indicating is a fetishization of the 'old medium' through the lens of the new.

The media post-mortem allows us to be more precise with regard to the notion of disavowal (*'I know, but all the same...'*) supporting Bishop's analysis (p. 436, emphasis in original). If it can be said, in the first instance, that the digital structures contemporary art by shaping practice in such a way that it orientates concerns towards materiality, one might consider this phenomenon as an important critical interrogation: an enlargement of the (symptomatic, plastic) conditions of the digital field in a way that exposes its effects. In the second instance, however, the disavowal is closer to what Žižek calls cynical reason: here, the logic of *'I know, but all the same...'* unfolds not as a critical gesture but as an attitude of false critical distance (from the digital). To repeat the distinction: first, the practice exerts the possibility of a properly revolutionary aesthetics; only to then, in its 'fashionable', commercial mode, perpetuate the continued dominance of the aesthetic system it purports to challenge. In short, cynicism under the guise of criticality reinforcing what it claims to critique.

This point is important as it allows us to consider more carefully what Bishop has to say about the shifting aesthetic concerns of contemporary art in the digital era. The effort to challenge authenticity and originality in an era of mechanical production, she writes, has been replaced by a process of 'meaningful recontextualization of existing artifacts':

The act of repurposing aligns with procedures of reformatting and transcoding — the perpetual modulation of preexisting files. Faced with the infinite resources of the Internet, *selection* has emerged as a key operation: we build new files from existing components, rather than creating from scratch. (p. 438, emphasis in original)

But this 'drive to gather, reconfigure, juxtapose, and display' — what Hal Foster calls the archival impulse — can be seen as a repetition of the established aesthetic formula. One need only note how such practice relies upon and sustains an attitude of cynical reason: *in a world where there is no original creation*, such art seems to declare, *we are left with only strategies of selection, arrangement, and display — the ubiquitous practice of internet archiving*. And yet this type of reflexivity provides the conditions for the

continued production of an elusive notion of originality, which is displaced back onto the physical — non-digital — object. Once again, attention to questions of artificiality secure the necessary attachment to authenticity, a truth persisting not in some real form but, rather, in a recontextualized, reconfigured, ‘raw’ state. As Bishop seems all too aware, this dynamic only obscures the structural inconsistency from which it draws its energy for so long. With time, the troubling excess erupts to the surface, puncturing the smooth texture of the digital field.

The daguerreotype through the NFT

How is this analysis of the NFT relevant to our understanding of the daguerreotype? Ultimately, the NFT problematizes the central dichotomy underpinning the historical interpretation of photography — the oscillation of the medium between questions pertaining to multiplicity/originality, reality/imagination, and document/art form. We come to recognize, in turn, how this dichotomy is inscribed in the singular, structural make-up of the daguerreotype plate. Before the daguerreotype’s material support acts as a marker of originality, it functions as both obstacle and conduit to a heightened viewing experience. First and foremost, the metal plate allows for an extreme level of detail by offering minimal visual interference: placed directly into the camera it produces a positive image mediated only by the lens. The smooth surface further reduces material disruption, allowing for a more encompassing visual immersion that seems to eliminate spatial and temporal barriers. As a result, the daguerreotype acquires the power to apparently ‘deceive time, memorizing on the plate’s surface a vision that would appear only momentarily on a mirror’.²⁸

But the support also ensured that the direct visual experience remained incomplete. The sheer physical presence of the metal plate was a constant reminder that this mirror to nature is also a reproduction of nature. What the daguerreotype could offer in terms of representational detail became a drawback at the level of mechanical reproduction. These structural properties were ultimately obscured when the support became transformed — transfigured — into a token of non-fungibility: the certificate of authenticity ensuring that each daguerreotype was celebrated as the sole issue of that image. Consider, for example, John Ruskin’s use of the daguerreotype in 1845 as a documentary tool informing his writing of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53). The new medium provided Ruskin with ‘sketches of undoubted clarity and honesty, ones that he could refer to time and again to confirm specific points and even to make fresh observations’.²⁹ The daguerreotype was clearly valued for a veracity that was based on the original observation of nature. Contrast this with the case of Noël Paymal Lerebours

²⁸ Natale, p. 41.

²⁹ *Photography: The Whole Story*, ed. by Juliet Hacking (Thames & Hudson, 2021), pp. 26–27.

who, as early as September 1839 (only a month after the daguerreotype process was announced), began commissioning travel photographers to produce daguerreotype views of Corsica and Italy and later, Algeria, Moscow, Greece, Egypt, and Palestine. With the market for visual travelogues booming and stocks limited, Lerebours began reproducing daguerreotypes as hand-engraved prints, each of which had a veracity based on the original daguerreotype plate.³⁰ We recognize here a shift in the site of non-fungibility from nature as unique experience to *the daguerreotype as unique object*. A crucial factor in this displacement is the process of reproduction: the engravings reassert the question of the (absent) support, reframing the medium's stubborn materiality as something ineffable that transcends the printed copy. Ultimately, a heightened awareness of artificiality generates a possessive attachment to what lies beyond the reproduction — the inaccessible realm of the original, the unique, the authentic.

Ayoucha: a media post-mortem

How might a media post-mortem shed light on this structural shift in the place of authenticity? At stake, on a conceptual level, is a convergence of plasticity and non-fungibility. The daguerreotype's form retains distinct destructive and constructive capacities: the metal plate collapses spatial barriers while also introducing a temporal delay that engages the body's active relation to materiality. But its inherent plasticity becomes *perverse* when the inscription of the reproduction produces a residue of authenticity exceeding the support. The early decades of photography were indeed characterized by an unquenchable thirst for a frustratingly unattainable 'truth'. Daguerre's escape from the artificial confines of the studio, for example, was propelled by a search for a more authentic depiction of life itself. The resulting images, although striking in their immediacy, are rendered incomplete by distinct distortions that, by marking the limits of the perceptual field, underline the inherent artifice of the procedure. Ghostly apparitions of figures, produced as an effect of long exposure times, serve to extend and enlarge the temporal/spatial conditions of perception, drawing attention in the process to the concrete, material conditions of reproduction. Visual immersion deepens in tandem with a more acute critical awareness that the scene itself is not real. Yet paradoxically, this leads to a more intense photographic urge to grasp authentic subject matter by way of a firmer commitment to technical artifice.

Consider here the work of Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, who was one of the first photographers to embark on daguerreotype missions after having been gifted a device by Lerebours. Generally speaking, de Prangey's work displays a conscious effort to portray a wider sweep of visual detail that was more reflective of how the eye actually views nature. In his travel daguerreotypes, this gaze was directed at an imagined

³⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

‘Orient’ whose power of fascination was fuelled by an association of authenticity with the geographically peripheral. Indeed, his early depictions of Greece, Palestine, and Egypt are said to possess an intrinsic ‘relevance and truth’, a timeless quality that stems from an ability to form close relationships with the indigenous people he photographed.³¹ Crucially, however, this feeling of proximity and intimacy relies upon a specific toolkit of methods, a more active intervention on the part of the photographer in terms of framing and curating the scene. With de Prangey, the authentic viewing experience is very much engineered — the effect *tailored* — by a series of carefully considered aesthetic strategies: the decision to split plates in half horizontally to create panoramic views, the central placement of figures which eliminates background detail; the harnessing of lighting effects to amplify the density of shadow.

These approaches are evident in many of de Prangey’s travel photographs, which today constitute the largest known collection of travel daguerreotypes. In total, he produced around one hundred plates, most of which are now held in the collections of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. One particular work, however, now resides closer in geographical proximity to its place of production. *Ayoucha*, one of five portraits taken in Cairo in 1843, is thought to be the oldest photographic representation of a veiled woman and is now part of the impressive collection of nineteenth-century travel photographs housed in the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Musée du Louvre’s flagship initiative in the Arabian Gulf (Fig. 2). This singular daguerreotype is a striking visual treatment of the Other that is at once exoticized and moving.³² Although the figure is veiled from head to toe, the work itself retains an intense feeling of intimacy and sensitivity. Weighed down by heavy garments, *Ayoucha* appears impressively stable and strong — she has a sense of physical presence that is made all the more palpable by the penetrating gaze protruding sharply from beneath a mass of layered materials. The tiny plate — measuring 13.6 × 11.2 × 0.9 cm (unframed) — seems to beat with life, offering us a powerfully direct encounter with the veiled female form. Yet, once again, we can see that the sensitivity of the subject, this somewhat overwhelming feeling of proximity and immersion, is the product of carefully performed choreography and composition: namely, the reiteration of well-known iconographic codes (the extreme frontality of the pose, the over-emphasis on the costume) that signal and reinforce — for those ‘armchair travellers’ targeted ultimately by Lerebours — a well-established idea of the ‘Oriental’ that was associated with the image of a standing Bedouin woman.³³

³¹ Dominique de Font-Réaulx, ‘Orientalism’, in *Louvre Abu Dhabi: Birth of a Museum*, ed. by Laurence des Cars (Flammarion, 2013), pp. 240–57 (p. 240).

³² See *Louvre Abu Dhabi: The Complete Guide*, ed. by Jean-François Charnier (Skira, 2018), p. 279.

³³ *Photography: The Whole Story*, ed. by Hacking, p. 29.



Fig. 2: Joseph-Philibert Girault de Prangey, *Ayoucha* (1843), daguerreotype, 22.7 × 22.7 × 3 cm (framed). Louvre Abu Dhabi. © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi/Photo APF.

These elements of artifice are underscored and highlighted by the daguerreotype's explicit material properties. At first, the overt physical presence of the plate, emphasized by highly visible marks on the support, disrupts the visual experience of immediacy and intimacy. But these obstacles to our viewing — abrasions, scratches, and marks most likely resulting from silver tarnishing, dust, chemical degradation, etc. — are overcome when the surface effects shift our attention from the photographed subject to the photographic procedure, grounding the undeniable fact of mechanical reproduction over the initial effect of visual immersion. Uneven coating lines indicate intensive tactile engagement (handling, polishing, sensitizing, developing); visible fringing possibly caused by overexposure to contrasting light further emphasizes the limitations of the plate but in a way that points to something which precedes and transcends it — the

absent hand of the artist/photographer. Through a structural displacement, the status of materiality changes and the place of authenticity shifts when the effects of plasticity are localized as the site of non-fungibility.

The distortions created by the metal support carry a destructive quality that is, in its original state, raw, unmediated. This blunt force is neutralized, however, when the radical negativity of the support takes on a constructive quality: that is, when 'the iridescent effect of the metal plate' is seen to guarantee the singular presence of the image.³⁴ A media post-mortem brings to light the broader conceptual conditions framing this process: namely, the transformation of plasticity into non-fungibility *through the lens of indexicality*. A heightened, more acute awareness of materiality produces an excess of authenticity when the smudges and stains are seen to indicate an additional layer of visual immediacy. The marks come to signal the presence of the photographer, the studio in which the photograph was staged and taken, as well as the post-studio process of developing the plate. With this, the materiality of the support is viewed from the perspective of what exceeds it. While the temporality of these traces is distinct from the marks left by the image of Ayoucha on the photographic plate, they nevertheless take on a new aura of authenticity — as points of entry into something equally unique and original (namely, a sense of an even more intense encounter with the artist). Understood indexically, the material support becomes meaningful in a new way: the overt physicality of the plate becomes the (negative) site of a series of (positive) marks left behind by the hands of the photographer.

On an aesthetic level, the precise conditions governing the shift from plasticity to non-fungibility become apparent when indexicality points to the logic of *sublimation*. When the material mark of the support is perceived as a failed, limited, incomplete representation of full artistic presence, materiality is conditioned by the 'permanent failure' of representation.³⁵ Through the lens of the 'sublime', a 'transcendental presupposition' (the artist's hand) is seen to persist 'beyond what can be represented' (the reproduction); namely, the realm of the impossible, the inaccessible, the *authentic*. The task of a media post-mortem is to combat this operation by accepting, through a heightened attention to form, that 'there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality, beyond the field of representation'.³⁶ One must break the hold of the sublime by limiting oneself to the

³⁴ de Font-Réaulx, p. 240.

³⁵ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 229. According to Žižek, Kant's achievement was to abolish, in a negative way, the gap between phenomenon and Idea in such a way that the inability or failure (to interpret) becomes mediated as a 'successful presentation by means of failure'. As in the daguerreotype, the radically negative encounter with an interpretative obstacle is transformed (reconfigured) into a negative experience of that which transcends the material limit.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 232, emphasis in original.

question of ‘dead’ materiality, ‘what is strictly immanent to the experience’.³⁷ Isolating one’s analytic gaze to the fundamental significance of form, one attempts to bring the object’s destructive and constructive capacities back to life — so that, ultimately, the negative experience of authenticity changes into authenticity as radical negativity.

The first steps of a media post-mortem of *Ayoucha* were recently suggested by historian Daniel Foliard during his discussion of the work at a public talk delivered at the Louvre Abu Dhabi.³⁸ By marking a distinction between the excess of the inscription and the reality inscribed in the support, Foliard proposed a reading of the work that fundamentally resists the lure of indexicality. The marks and smudges do not, he maintains, indicate some positively existing realm of artistic production; they are, rather, negative intrusions disrupting this process. The support thus bears witness, in Foliard’s reading, to the fact that attempts by European photographers to frame and capture an imagined vision of the Orient were consistently frustrated by events unfolding on the ground: namely, the movement and intervention of bystanders, those indigenous peoples encountering this new technology for the first time. For Foliard, the lived reality of the present moment exerts a type of ‘blowback’ effect on the photographic process — dislodging questions of truth and authenticity from the domain of subject matter and inscribing them firmly in the material make-up of the medium. De Prangey, he notes, does indeed test the limits of the apparatus but only to the point that mistakes are ultimately made and unwanted outcomes emerge. The photographer’s intention — to construct an artificial, colonial representation of the female Other in order to feed the craze for exoticized (eroticized) content in the European market — is abruptly undermined by what goes wrong on the ground.

In Foliard’s reading, which has much relevance for contemporary practices, particularly at the dawn of a new age in generative AI, photography is understood as something which escapes the creator at the very point where he attempts to control its processes. The photographer, in effect, falls into the scene he attempts to capture. In the words of Jacques Lacan, the scene ‘counts, it is counted, and the one who counts is already included in the account’.³⁹ For Malabou too, it is in the domain of the accidental, the variable, and unpredictable that the effects of plasticity become palpable. Only in such moments of seizure and annihilation — where marks and smudges appear — does form fully assume its positive and radically negative qualities: its capacity to

³⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁸ Daniel Foliard, ‘Camera and Time Outside the “West”: Reading the Louvre Abu Dhabi Photographic Collections Against the Grain’, unpublished paper delivered at the conference series ‘Louvre Abu Dhabi Talking Art 2023’ (Louvre Abu Dhabi, 17 May 2023).

³⁹ Cited in Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 60.

(symptomatically) disrupt our reception of the work in a manner that draws attention to the peculiar (plastic) temporality of the photographic process.

The media post-mortem, AI, and the museum

In this light, the NFT can be viewed as a singular form of a specific dilemma, repeating itself historically in different modes of appearance. As a phenomenon, it helps us unravel the complex logic of the digital/post-digital age, justifying in turn the urgent need for the media post-mortem. This is all the more evident in an age of AI, as chatbots continue to position themselves at the centre of our everyday digital practices. The heyday of the NFT seems to have passed; it now looks like a short-lived peculiarity, an aberration of sorts that momentarily tied the fields of art and technology together, revealing in the process their fundamental aesthetic connections. But does the dead body of the NFT not continue to mark the field of AI? Are we not faced with an even more intense form of the same paradox? Contradicting the assumption that nothing 'new' is ever really created in the post-digital age, AI presents us with a novelty made possible by the (formal) regurgitation of content that already exists. Once again, we are confronted with an original that is quite evidently a reproduction, something authentic that is by definition artificial.

The full material significance of the NFT — and of the daguerreotype — may only be now becoming clear, in an age of generative AI. As an interpretative tool, the NFT allows us to understand the threat of AI in a new way, by shedding light on its fundamental aesthetic logic. What AI actually generates is the user's reflexive acknowledgement of a certain limitation — each engagement carries with it a constant reminder that, however 'intelligent' the AI might feel, it is in fact artificial. This sense of 'critical distance' conceals a state of cynical reason that serves to continuously reproduce a structural excess, ensuring the user's attachment to an elusive notion of 'authentic' intelligence, a type of non-fungibility that is always possible but never fully attained (given the chatbot's material, artificial base). It is this dynamic that allows AI to continue its accelerated form of adaptation, tailoring more personalized experiences of authentic human intelligence while simultaneously emphasizing its own artifice, as the ground of the elusive authenticity to which the user cleaves. Hooked on the substance of 'intelligence-as-content' — and locked in a more formally advanced algorithmic field that literally manipulates brain plasticity — the user outsources subjective agency in a manner that turns the human into machine.

What is the place of the museum in this battle against AI? The necessity of a direct encounter with the 'dead' materiality of form orientates a media post-mortem towards the museum space as a central locus of operation. As Duchamp reminds us, the museum is

the site where the relation between materiality, non-fungibility, and sublimity becomes activated by the presence of the viewer's body. For this reason, it is only in the museum that a properly symptomatic experience of plasticity is possible. A close diagnostic analysis of *Ayoucha*, for example, might well be strengthened by a microscopic image of the work, revealing invisible details that would explain the sources of the material marks: the conditions of the work's preservation and display that have contributed to the deterioration of the support over time. This procedure does, however, run the risk of rehabilitating the perverse logic of the NFT: through more direct visibility of what would otherwise remain imperceptible, we gain a heightened awareness of the 'truth' of the work; this 'truth' brings with it, paradoxically, an ever more acute attention to materiality and an increased critical awareness of artificiality. Ultimately, primacy is given to a notion of the object's original state, positioning *Ayoucha* herself more firmly in the place of authenticity, non-fungibility.

A proper media post-mortem should instead seek to harness such modes of diagnostic analysis in order to stretch open (rather than reverse) the temporal process. When the temporal and spatial conditions of the work are expanded and enlarged in a symptomatic and plastic manner, what is revealed is not some original 'truth' but, rather, the different layers and levels that are inscribed into the object's support. The problem is that these possible avenues of investigation are often undone by the concrete reality of what happens *on the ground*. In practical terms, a close analysis of the work must also account for the material sensitivity of the daguerreotype and the consequences of exposing the surface of the support outside its frame. *Ayoucha*, it would seem, continues to breathe with life in the sense that her 'blowback' effect retains its initial power. To this day, she remains concealed but transparent, hidden in plain sight behind the material limit of a glass frame. Accessible but elusive, all attempts to photograph her are inevitably blocked, disrupted, distorted by a visual stain left by our own photographic intervention. And yet it is this stain itself — often the reflective mark on glass left by the screen of a smartphone — which shifts our focus from the life of the object to its necessary death, producing the shock of a short-circuit (between the surface of the smartphone, the glass, and the metal plate) that does much to indicate *Ayoucha*'s persisting relevance to our contemporary concerns.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

