

# The Impact of Photography

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**History of Information 103**  
**Geoff Nunberg**

**March 13, 2013**



## Agenda, 3/13

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Why photograph? The birth of the "information age";  
photography and information

Photography as a technology

The photographic "truth"

Manipulating & questioning the photographic truth, then and  
now

Photography as documentation

Fixing identities

Documenting the deviant

Representing the other

How we read photographs

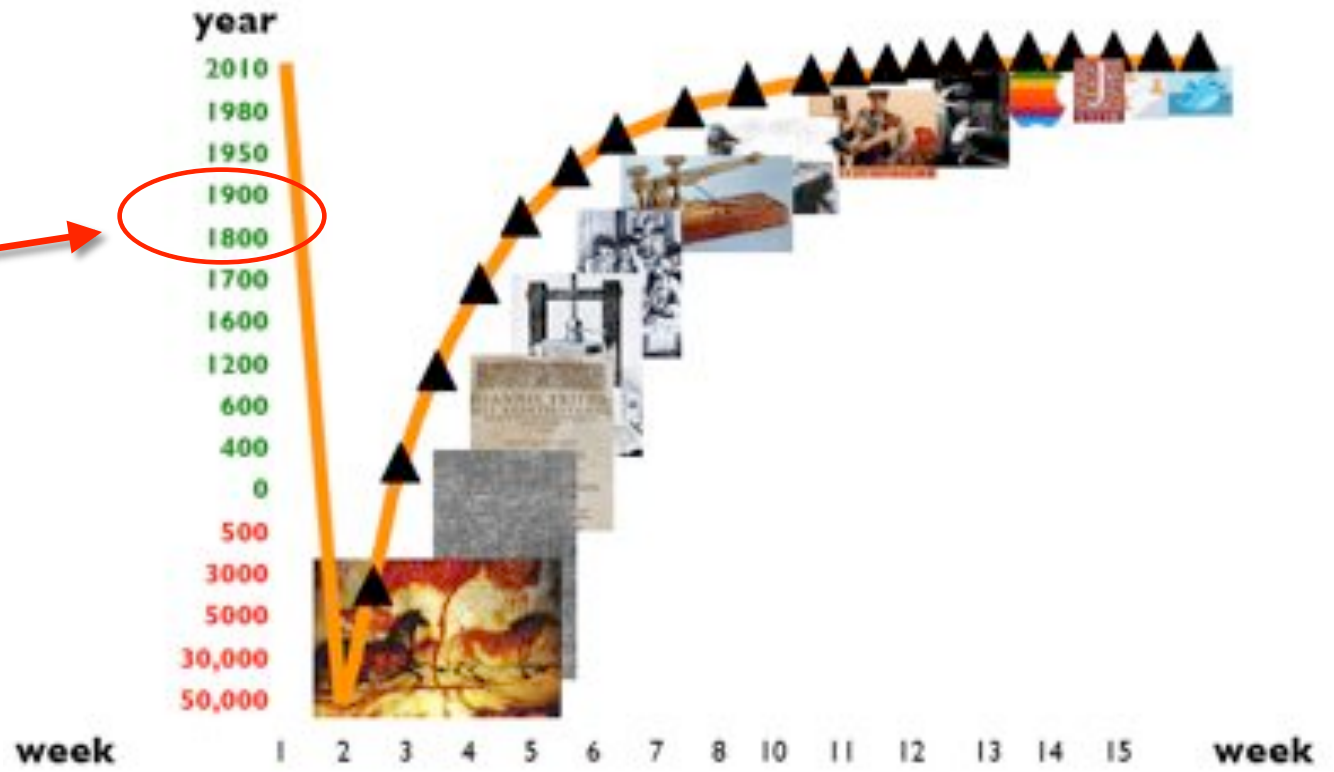
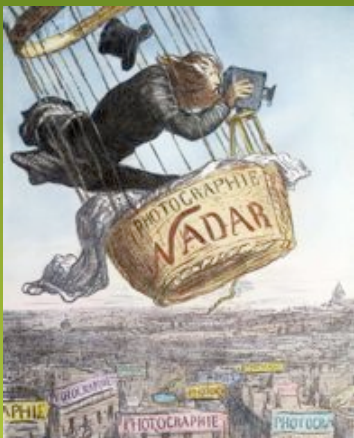
*(What's left out: photography as art, popular form, etc.)*



# Where We Are



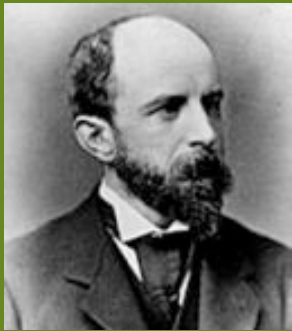
The birth of the information age





## Modern Marvels

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Henry Adams  
1838-1928

"Only on looking back, fifty years later, at his own figure in 1854, and pondering on the needs of the twentieth century, he wondered whether, on the whole, the boy of 1854 stood nearer to the thought of 1904, or to that of the year I ... Before the boy was six years old [i.e., 1844] he had seen four impossibilities made actual—the ocean-steamer, the railway, the electric telegraph, and the Daguerreotype."

--Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* [1905]



# Modern Marvels

“... the ocean-steamer, the railway, the electric telegraph, and the Daguerreotype.”

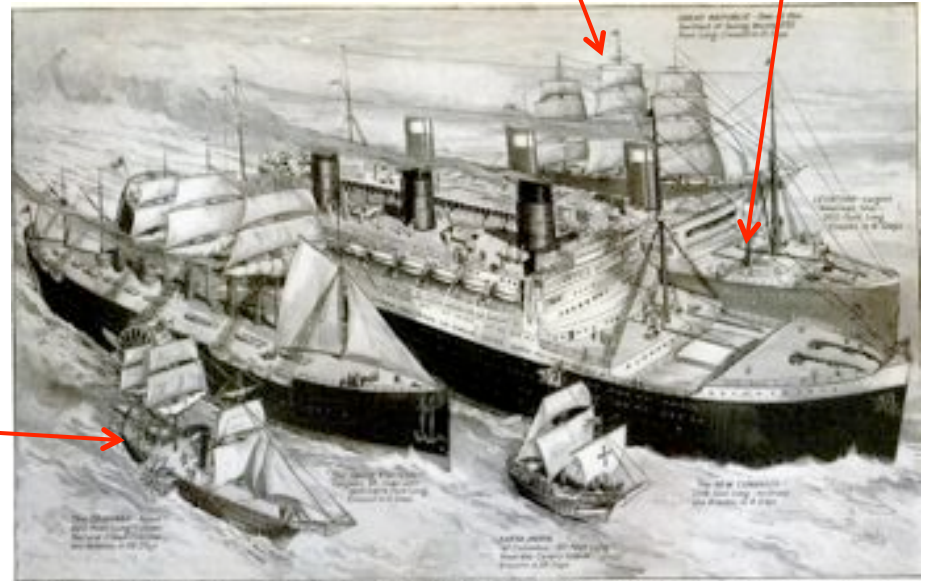


By Means of the Universal Ball System the Nation May be Promptly Organized for Unified Action in Any Great National Movement



Great Republic 1853  
13 days

Leviathan 1914  
5 days



Savannah 1818  
26 days





# The birth of "information"

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# The birth of "information"

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# The birth of "information"

Some properties of information:

**Autonomous:** "The intelligence that came from afar ... possessed an authority which gave it validity.... Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear "understandable in itself." It is indispensable for information to sound plausible. (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller")

i.e., the plausibility of information is implicit in the immediate context

**"Objective":** information gives us the world without point of view or subjective values.





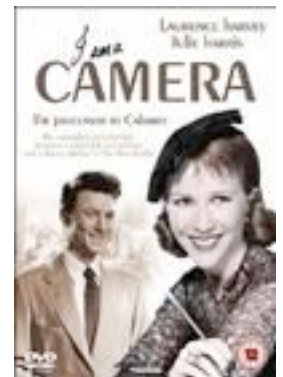


# Photography and Information

Photography influences the conception of information:

**Directly:** Seems to present the world "as it is," independent of human interpretation or intervention.

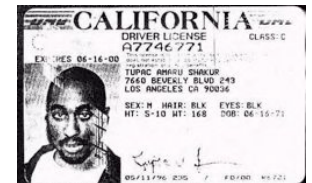
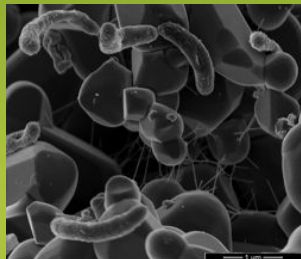
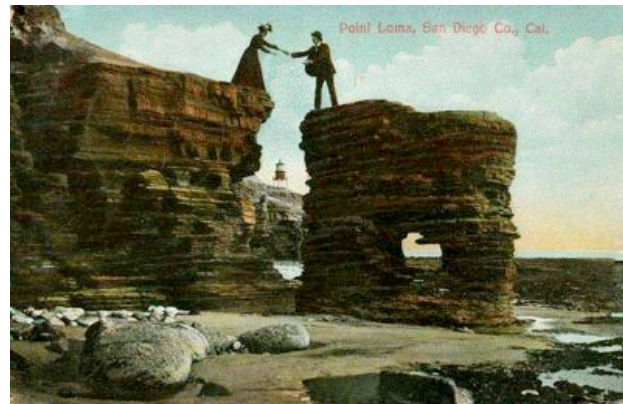
**Indirectly:** Provides a model or metaphor for "objective" representation of all sorts.





# The Range of Photography

Things we count as “photography”....





# The Range of "Photography"

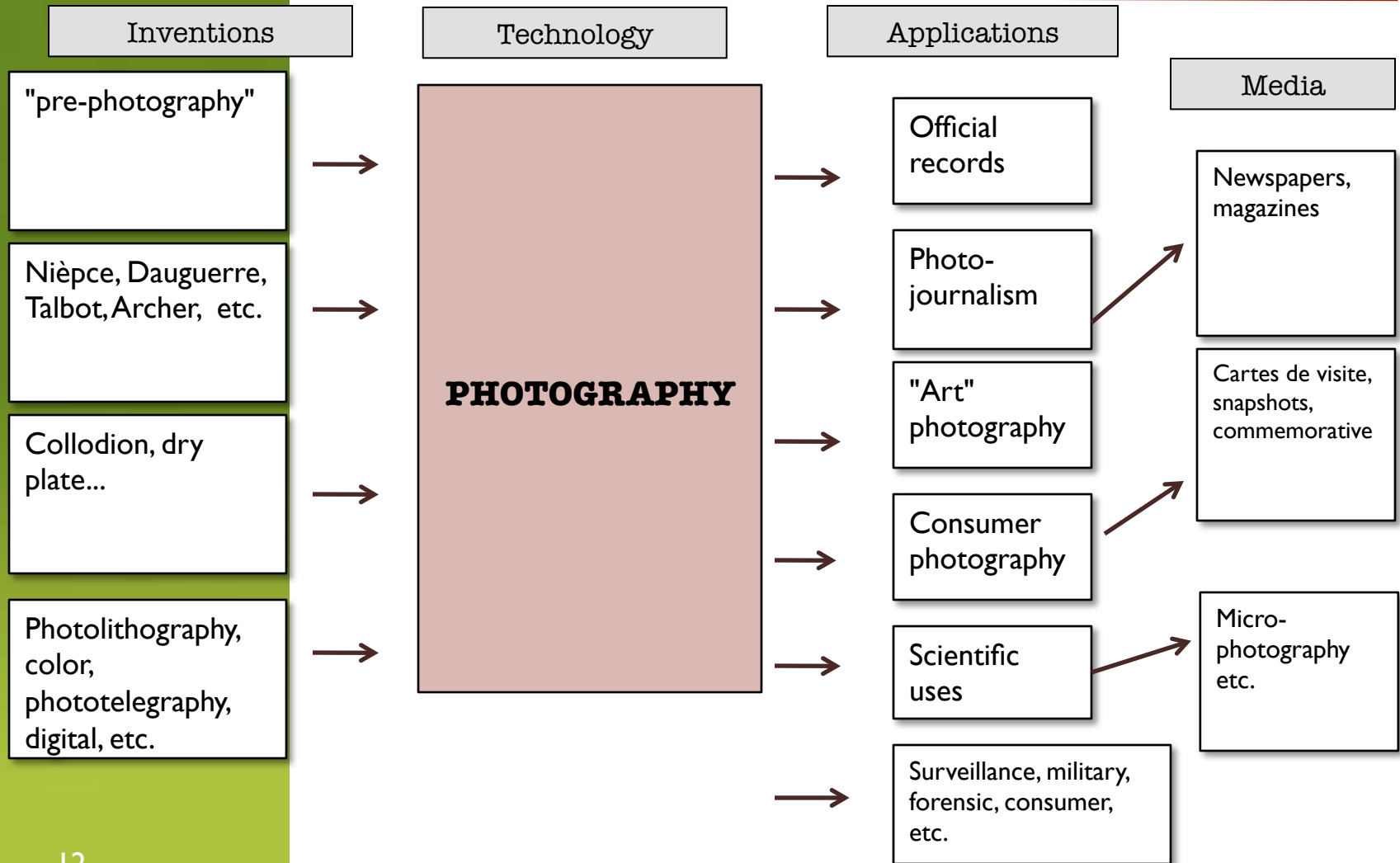
And by extension, to broadcast, cinema, x-ray, etc.

What defines a "technology"? Features of use, distribution, markets etc.



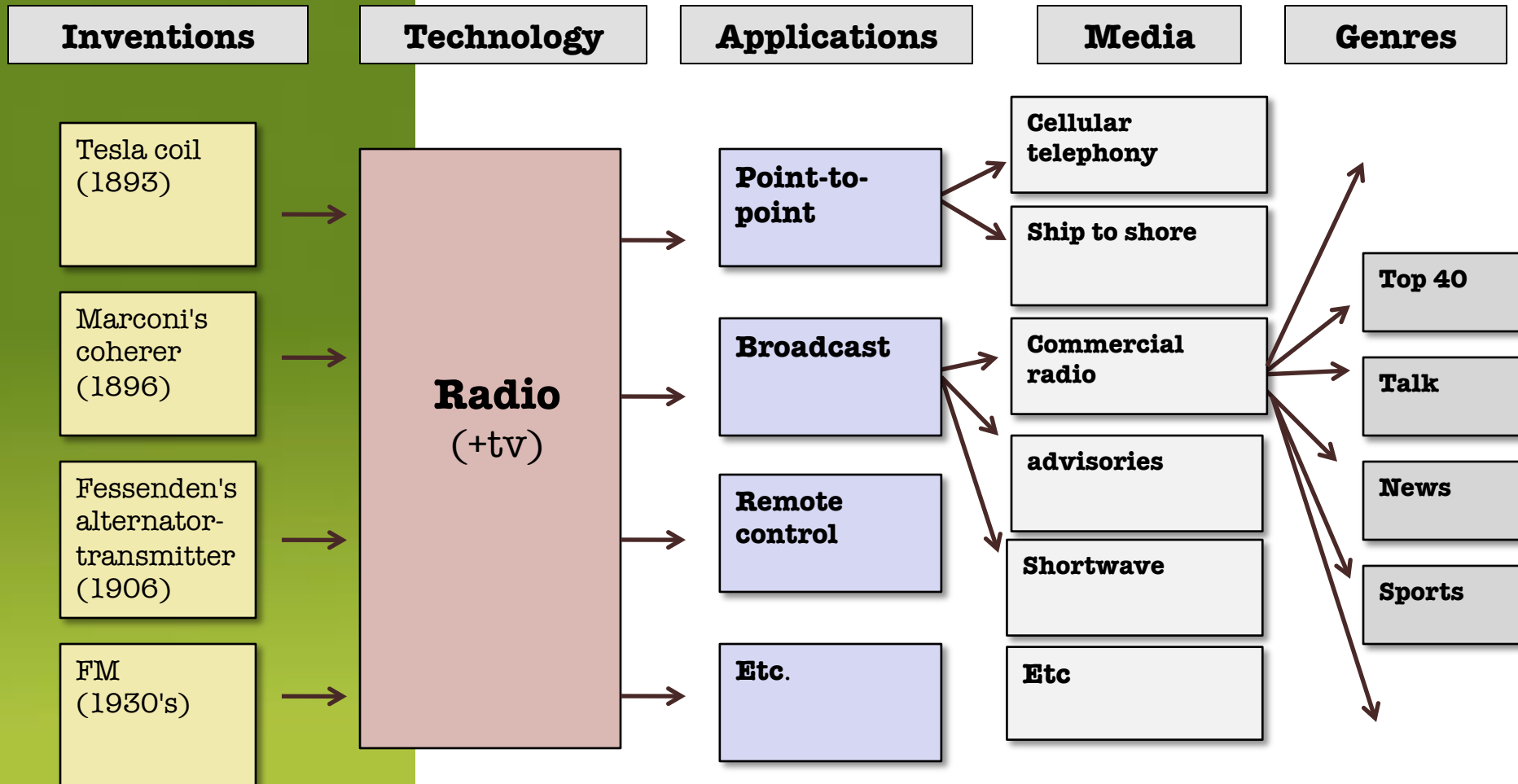


# Inventions, Technologies, Applications, Media





# Inventions, Technologies, Applications, Media, Genres





# The birth of "information"

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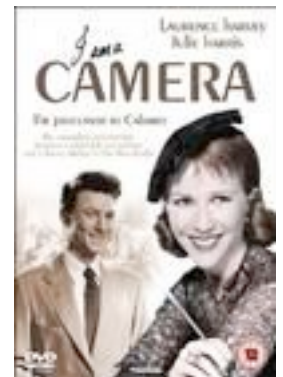


# Photography and Information

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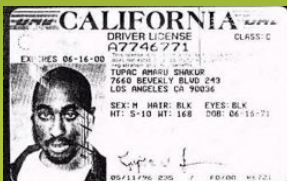






# The Range of Photography

Inventions, technologies, applications, media...





# The Range of Photography

Inventions, technologies, applications, media...

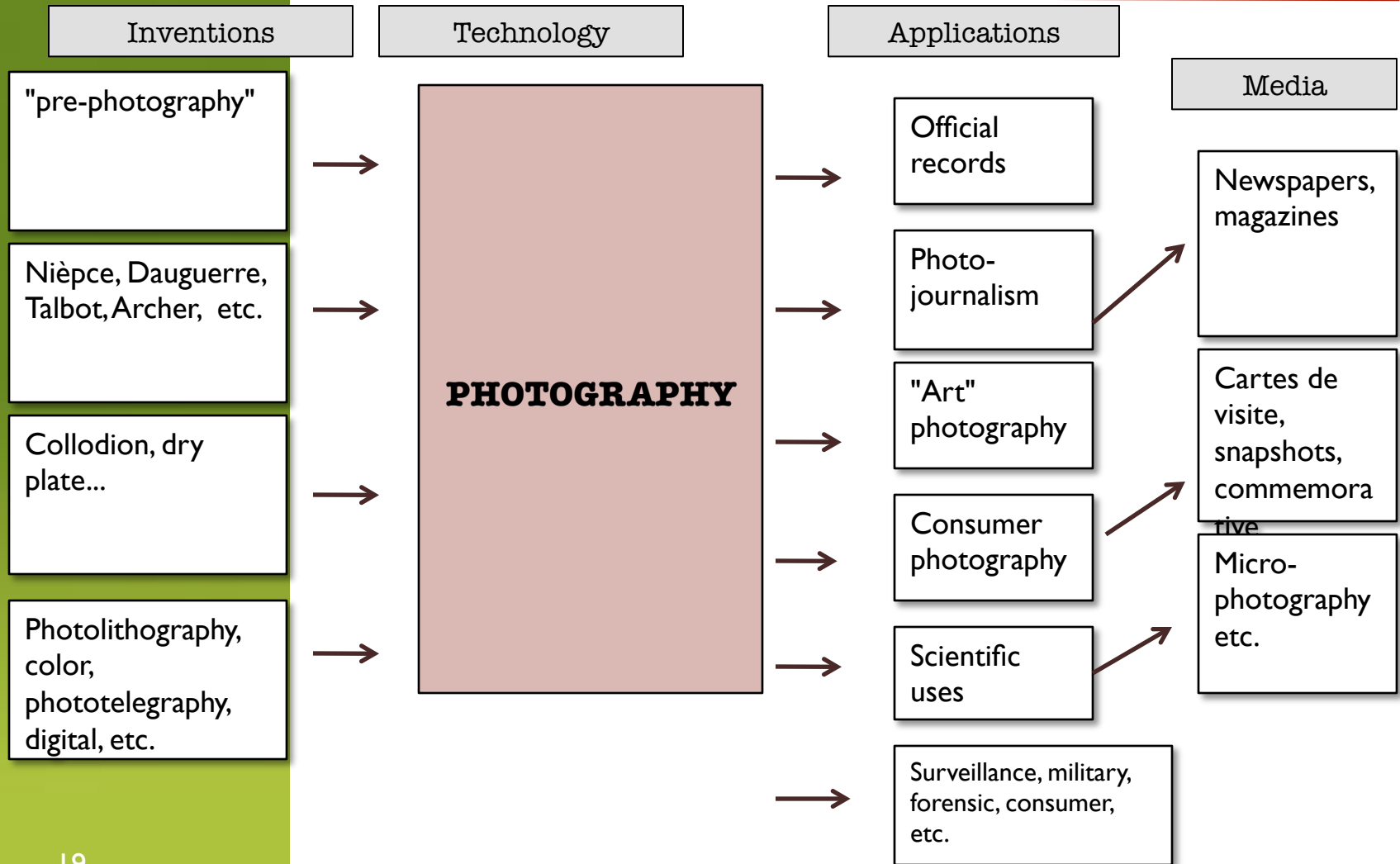
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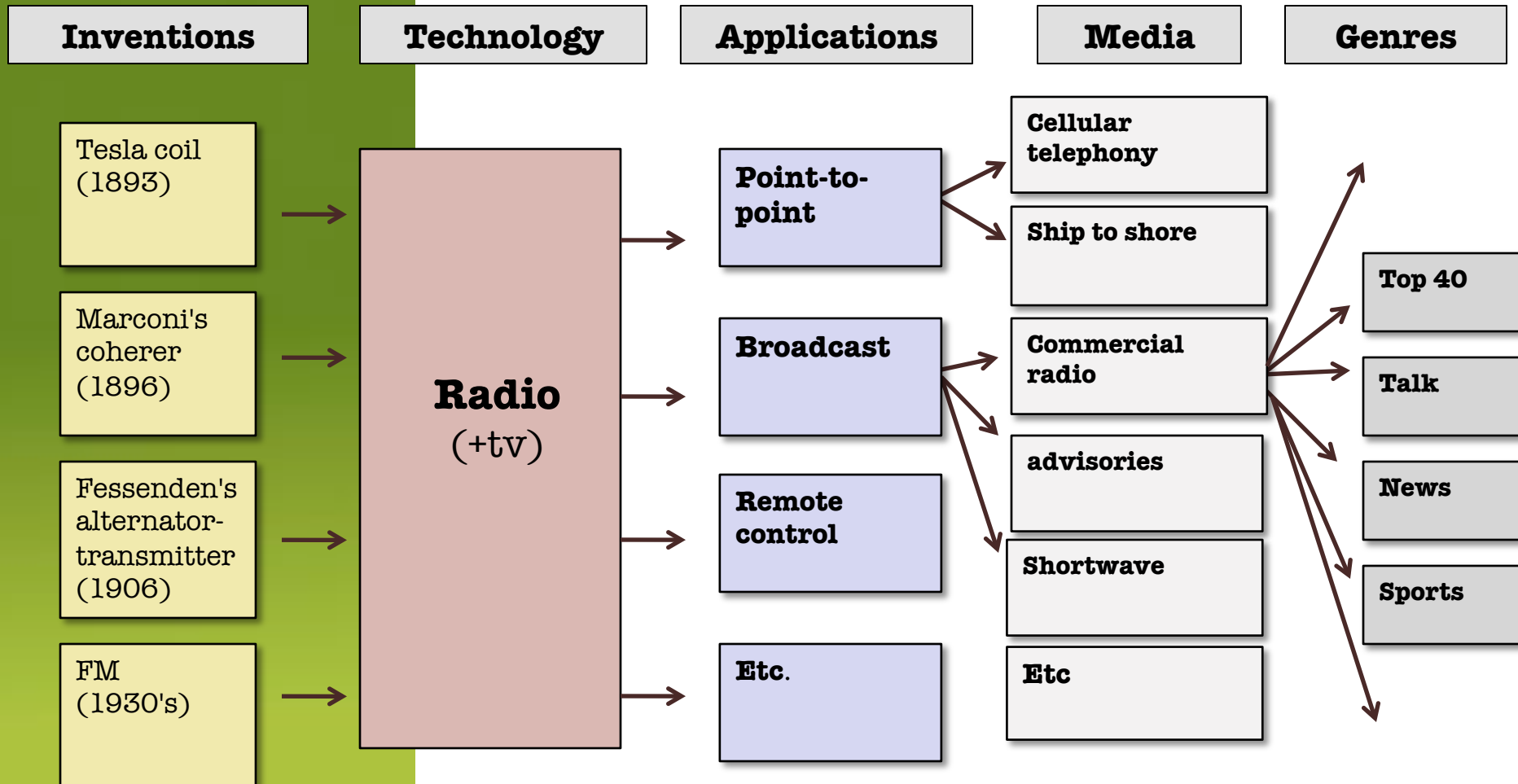


# Inventions, Technologies, Applications, Media



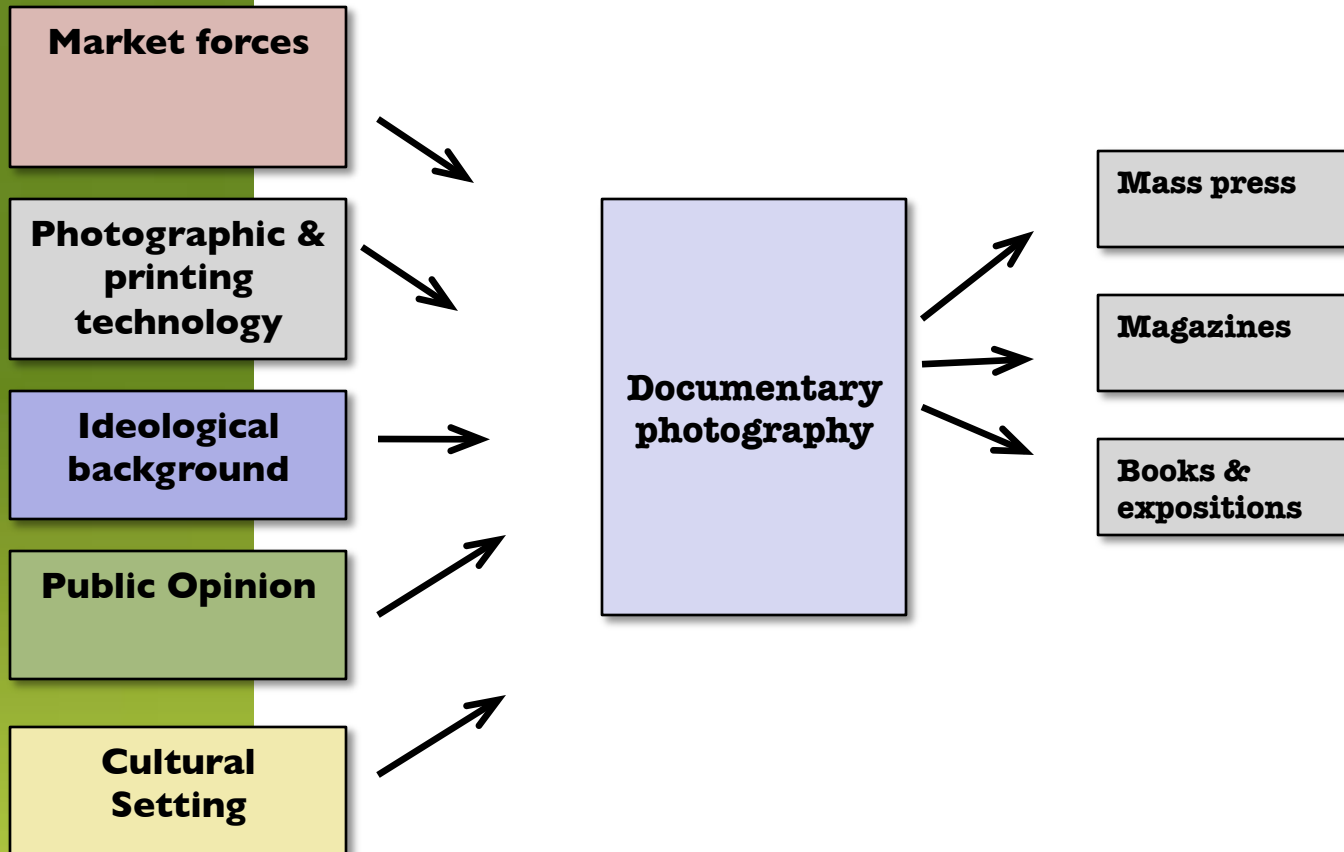


# Inventions, Technologies, Applications, Media, Genres



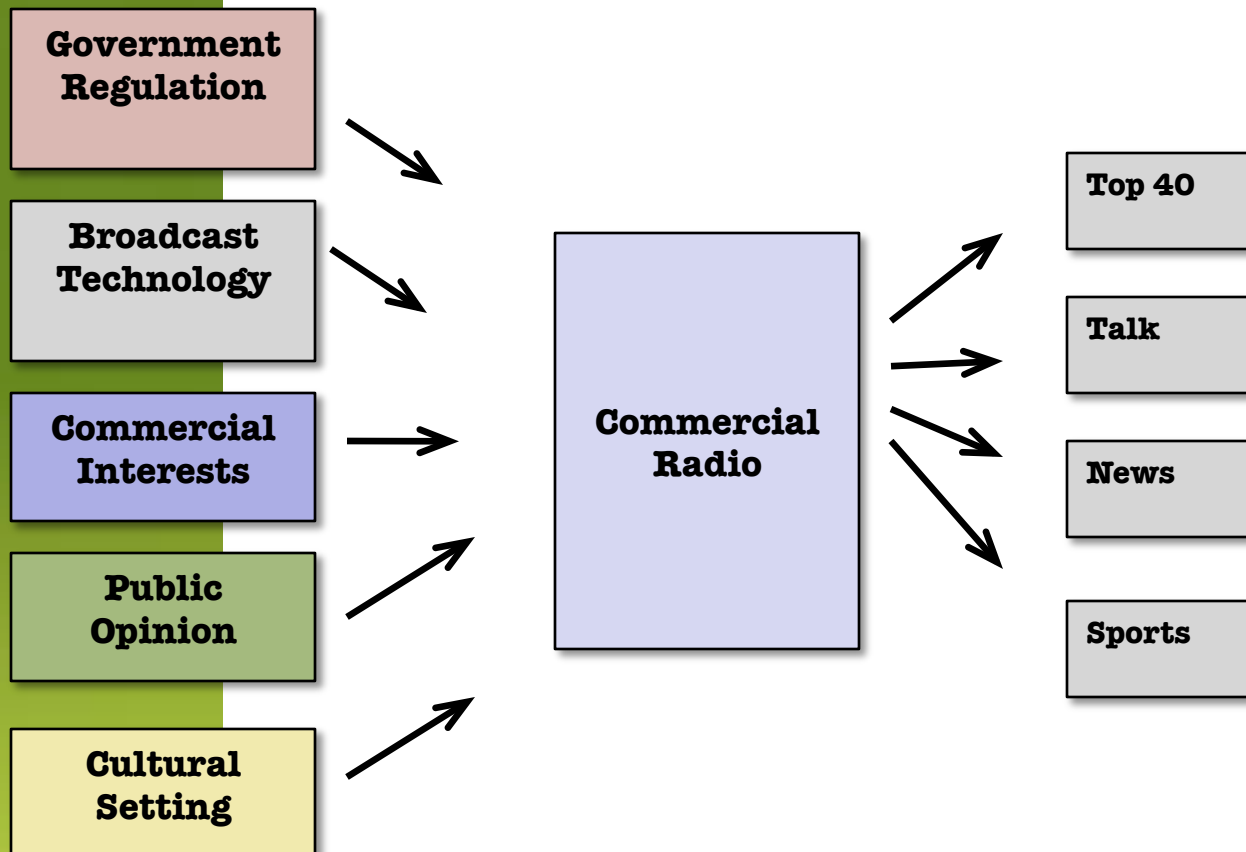


# Multiple Influences





# Multiple Influences





# Photography Before Photographs

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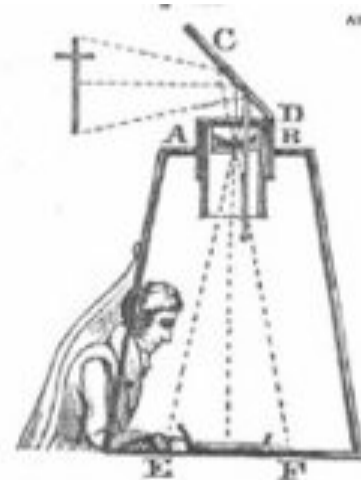
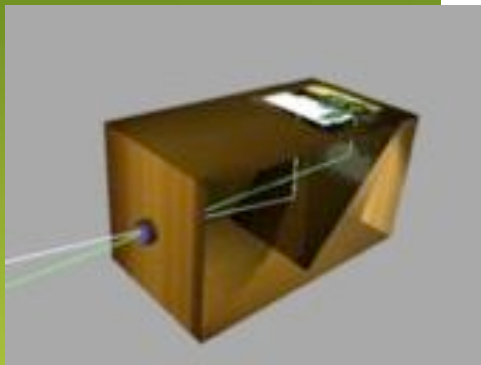


# Photography Before Photographs

The camera obscura: images from nature



Ibn al-Hatham  
965-1039







# Photography Before Photographs



The prettiest Landskip I ever saw was one drawn on the Walls of a dark Room, which stood opposite on one side to a navigable River.... Here you might discover the Waves and Fluctuations of the Water in strong and proper Colours, with a Picture of a Ship entering at one end and sailing by Degrees through the whole Piece. I must confess, the Novelty of such a Sight may be one occasion of its Pleasantness to the Imagination, but certainly the chief reason is its near resemblance to Nature. Joseph Addison, in the *Spectator*, 1712, on the camera obscura at Greenwich



Greenwich Royal  
Observatory



G. Canaletto, London  
Greenwich Hospital from the  
North Bank of the Thames,  
1753



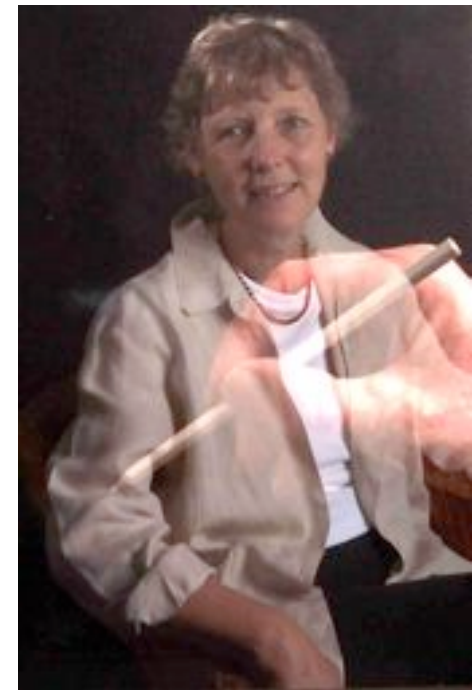
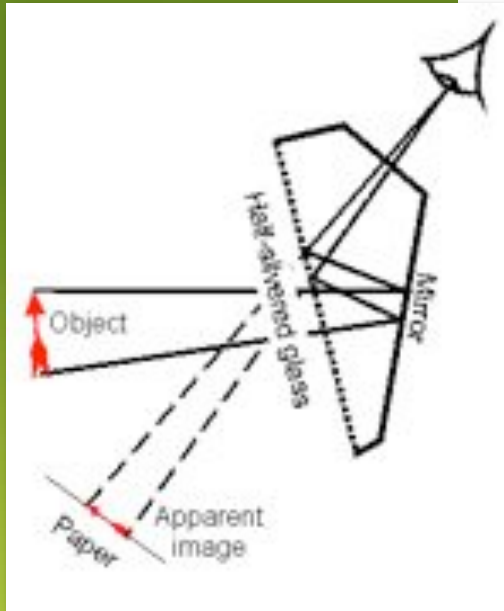
Camera obscura at Cliff House,  
Ocean Beach



# Photography Before Photographs



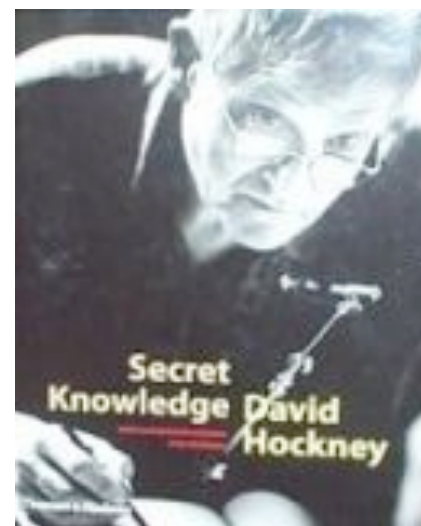
The camera lucida





# Photography Before Photographs

Lenses and mirrors -- an old masters' "cheat"?



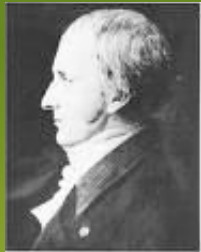
Detail from Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait, 1434



# Creating a permanent image: Invention by committee



1725: Johann Heinrich Schulze demonstrates that silver compounds are visibly changed by the action of light; makes stencil impressions on glass, but does not try to capture images from nature.



1800: Thomas Wedgwood makes images on leather impregnated with silver nitrate, but is unable to prevent progressive darkening... *or was he?*



1819: Sir John Herschel discovers that sodium hyposulfite ("hypo") will dissolve silver halides, can be used to "fix" photographic prints. Later invents the words "negative" and "positive" and "photography"



Sir John Herschel, photographed by Julia Cameron, 1867

Leaf by Fox Talbot ca. 1830?  
Or Wedgwood ca. 1790?



## The earliest photographs



1826: Nicéphore Niépce makes "heliograph" on plate from window in Gras; requires > 8 hr. exposure.

From 1829, Niépce collaborates with Louis Daguerre, who announces in 1837 a new "chemical and physical process" which "is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; it gives her the ability to reproduce herself."





# The earliest photographs

1839: William Henry Fox Talbot invents "photogenic drawing": method of printing on paper, later the calotype, which makes use of latent image, permitting 1-3 min exposures.

Permits multiple prints, less sharp than daguerrotype with "painterly" effects.

1851: Collodion process permits transparent negatives with sharp (multiple) printing on paper



Cuneiform tablet,  
Ninevah



# The brief, happy reign of the Daguerreotype



By 1840's, improved lens and increased sensitivity of plates reduce exposure time for portraits. Daguerreotype becomes "the mirror with a memory" (Oliver Wendell Holmes)





# The brief, happy reign of the Daguerreotype



The photograph as a record of personal  
existence, family continuity



modern  
daguerreotype





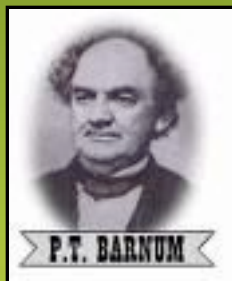
# The brief, happy reign of the Daguerreotype



In Daguerrotype, we  
beat the world.  
Horace Greeley



The Daguerrotype as an instrument of fame



1854: Phineas Barnum stages first  
modern beauty pageant, using  
Daguerrotypes for judging



Sarah Bernhardt, by Nadar



"General" Tom Thumb



## Second Thoughts



Charles  
Baudelaire

During this lamentable period, a new industry arose which contributed not a little to confirm stupidity in its faith and to ruin whatever might remain of the divine in the French mind. The idolatrous mob demanded an ideal worthy of itself and appropriate to its nature. In matters of painting and sculpture, the present-day Credo of the sophisticated, above all in France is this: “I believe that Art is, and cannot be other than, the exact reproduction of Nature. Thus an industry that could give us a result identical to Nature would be the absolute of Art.” A revengeful God has given ear to the prayers of this multitude. Daguerre was his Messiah. ... From that moment our squalid society rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gaze at its trivial image on a scrap of metal.

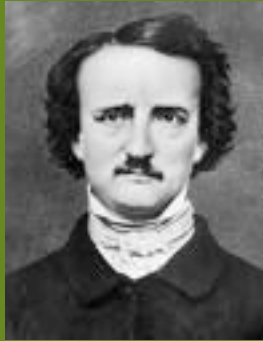


# The photographic truth

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## The truth of photographs



"[It] is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; it gives her the ability to reproduce herself." Louis Daguerre. 1837

In truth, the Daguerreotypied plate is infinitely more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear -- but the closest scrutiny of the photographic drawing discloses only a more accurate truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.

E. A. Poe, 1839



## The photographic truth

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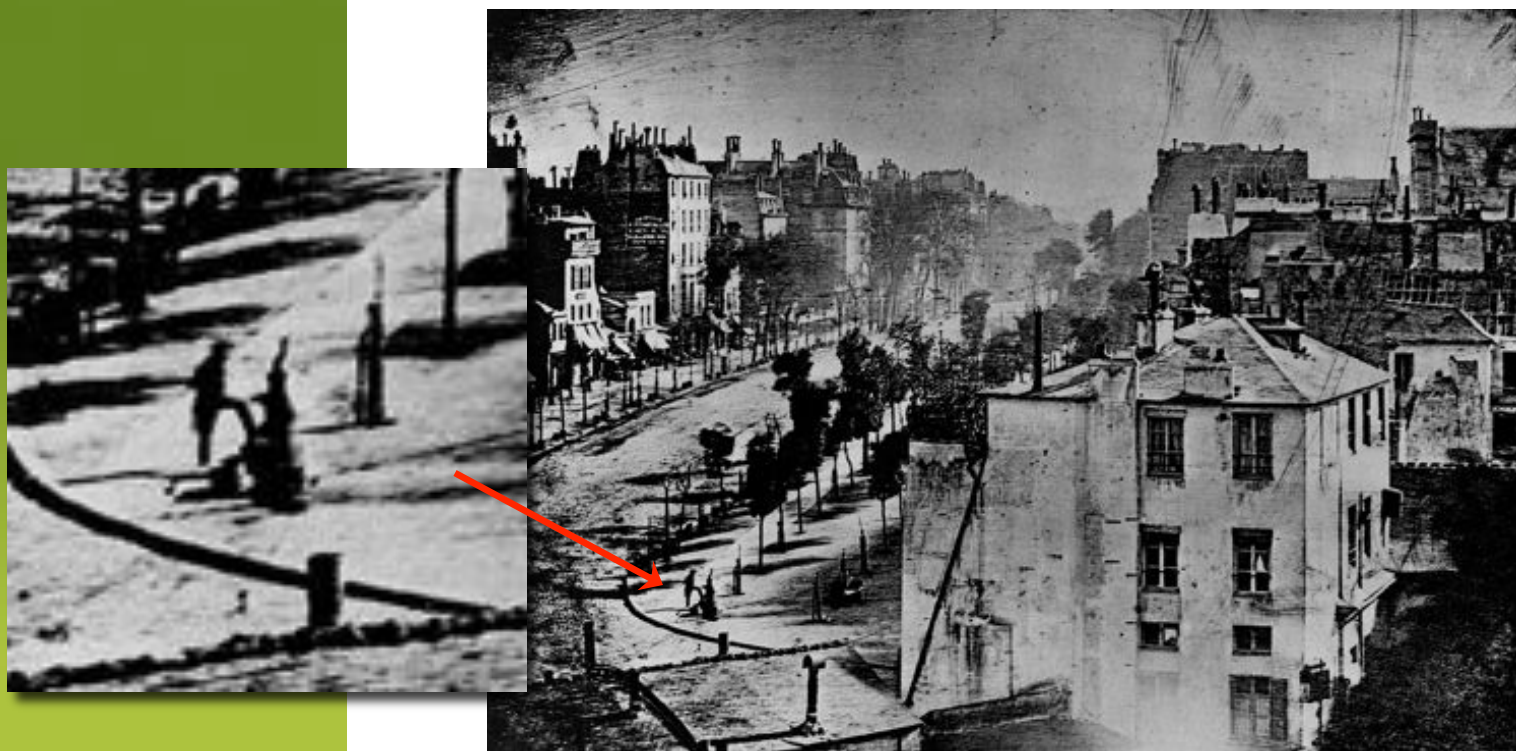
1839: In photograph of rue du Temple, Daguerre inadvertently makes first candid photograph of a person





# The photographic truth

1838: In photograph of rue du Temple, Daguerre inadvertently makes first photograph of a person





# The truth of photographs

What he [the camera] saw was faithfully reported, exact, and without blemish.

Am. Photographer James F. Ryder in 1902, recalling his first camera from the 1850's

[A photograph] cannot be disputed—it carries with it evidence which God himself gives through the unerring light of the world's greatest luminary. . . . it will tell its own story, and the sun to testify to its truth. . .

1 of 5-panel daguerreotype panorama of San Francisco, 1851





# The photograph as a model for journalistic objectivity



“The *Sun* ... will endeavour to present its daily photograph of the whole world’s doings in the most luminous and lively manner.” Charles Dana

The *New York Herald* is now the representative of American manners, of American thought. It is the daily daguerreotype of the heart and soul of the model republic. It delineates with faithfulness the American character in all its rapid changes and ever varying hues. *London Times*, 1848





# **The Photographic Document: War Photography**

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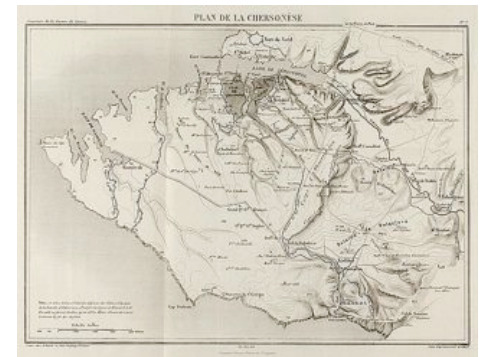


# Crimea: The First "Reported" War

Oct 25, 1854: Light Brigade charges the Russian guns at Balaclava



Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
"Forward the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!" he said.  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
Was there a man dismay'd?  
Not tho' the soldier knew  
Some one had blunder'd.  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die...  
Alfred Tennyson





# Crimea: The First Photographed War



Roger Fenton

1854-55: Wm. Howard Russell reports for *Times* from Crimea on incompetence of general staff, suffering of troops.

1855: At urging of Prince Albert, Roger Fenton sent to Crimea to take photos to counter Russell's *Times* reports



Wm. Russell





# Photographing the Civil War



Matthew Brady



Wounded Union Soldiers,  
Fredrickburg, VA



Union batteries at Fredrickburg, VA





# Photographing the Dead



"Mr Brady has brought home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war."



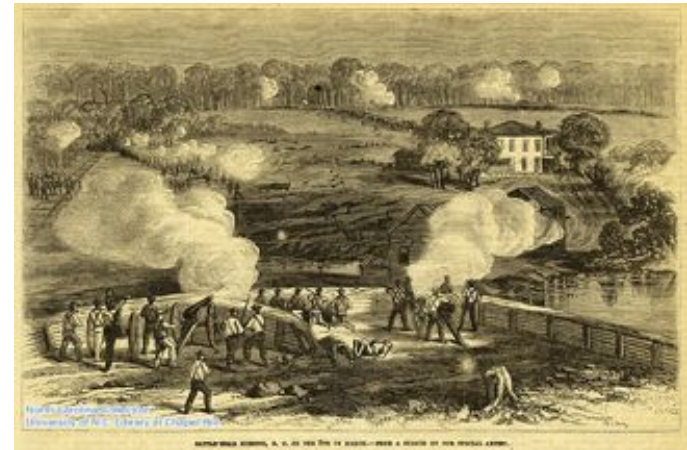
"If we could really photograph war as it is, in all its monstrous actuality, that could be a great deterrent to war."  
Edward Steichen,



# Photographing Battle



4. - Bataille de Sedan. - Un épisode du combat de La Moncelle, 1<sup>er</sup> Septembre 1870



Earliest known battle photo, Sedan, 1870



What newspaper readers saw



# The Role of Ideology

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# **Manipulating Photographic "Truth"**

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# Manipulating Photographic Truth



“[Alexander] Garner’s dead sharpshooter, his long rifle gleaming by his side, is not imagined. This man lived; this is the spot where he fell; this is how he looked in death... The camera records what is focussed upon the ground glass. If we had been there, we would have seen it so.... We have been shown again and again that this is pure illusion. Subjects can be misrepresented, distorted, faked... but this knowledge cannot shake our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record.”  
Newhall, p. 71



# Manipulating Photographic Truth

"We have been shown again and again that this is pure illusion. Subjects can be misrepresented, distorted, faked... but this knowledge cannot shake our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record."





# The Case of the (Dis?)appearing Cannonballs

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“The Valley of Death,” photographs by Roger Fenton, April 4, 1855



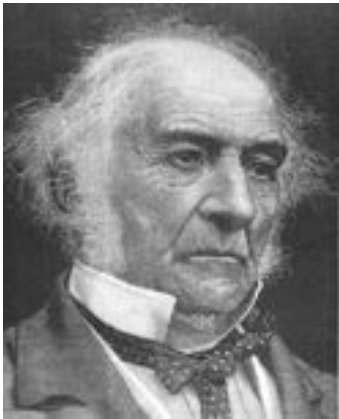
# Doctoring the Truth

1871: Paris Commune: Photographs of executions by communards are doctored to change identity of victims.





# Doctoring the Truth



W. Gladstone



**Figure 18.1** Prime Minister Gladstone shown standing outside a London pub. Combination print photograph reproduced by Messrs. Boning and Small by making two exposures. (From Jelf 1894, 520).



# Rewriting history



Mao Zedong and Bo Gu (1.), 1936

I discover my photographic death.  
Do I exist?  
I am a little black,  
I am a little white,  
I am a little shit,  
On Fidel's vest.

Carlos Franqui



# Rewriting history

## Fonda Speaks To Vietnam Veterans At Anti-War Rally



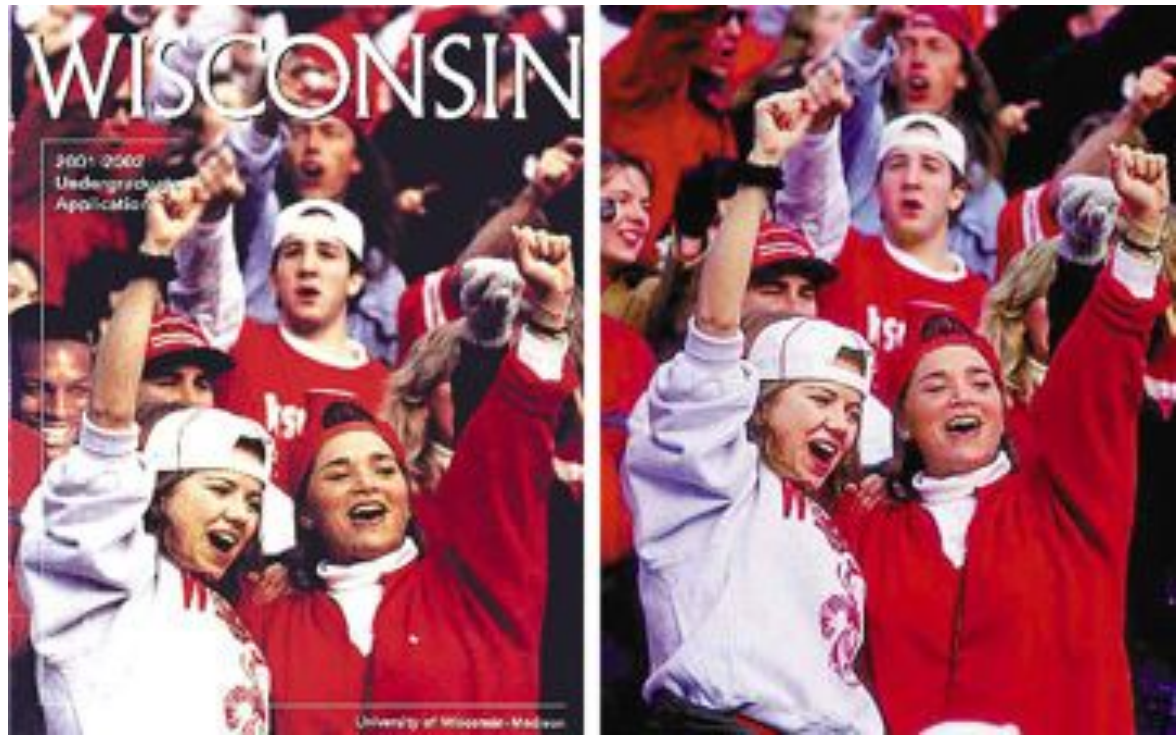
Actress And Anti-War Activist Jane Fonda Speaks to a crowd of Vietnam Veterans as Activist and former Vietnam Vet John Kerry (LIFT) listens and prepares to speak next concerning the war in Vietnam (AP Photo)





# Modern alterations: A shifting standard?

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# Modern alterations: A shifting standard?

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# Modern alterations: A shifting standard?





# Modern alterations: Coloring the truth



Photo of Beirut following Israeli raid, 8/5/6, as published by Reuters and as originally taken



# Modern alterations: Aesthetic choices?

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Pulitzer Prize winning photo by John Filo, Kent State, 1970



# Assignment

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Newhall, originally writing in 1937, and Sontag, writing in 1977, seem to make a similar point about the “reality” of photographic images:

The camera records what is focussed upon the ground glass. If we had been there, we would have seen it so.... We have been shown again and again that this is pure illusion. Subjects can be misrepresented, distorted, faked... but this knowledge cannot shake our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record.” Newhall, p. 71

A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. A picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Sontag, p. 5

Do you think this generalization still holds, in the age of Photoshop? Do people still have “an implicit faith in the truth of the photographic record”?



# Elizabeth Amato

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the digitization of images has greatly complicated the nature of photographic trust, however many people fail to consider that fact that the manipulation of images far preceded the digital age. ...When approaching modern digitally edited photographs, though we may be told that these representations are edited, we still hold an enormous amount of trust in them. Though, for example, the Ralph Lauren advertisement from "Unattainable Beauty" looks strikingly fake, we can see a huge number of celebrity photographs and advertisements that use these same techniques but do them in a way that convince us-- because, after all, doesn't society consider these people as representing beauty? In short, we still hold the photographic medium in higher realistic regard than other artistic forms of information technology because of its historical significance in depicting realism, and for this reason I believe that this trust in the photographic image still exists.



# Adam Susaneck

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In this day and age, no, simply having a photograph of something is not proof positive that it happened....The issue is, simply, that different people have different interpretations. People's prior beliefs, attitudes, and motivations color the way that they see the world.

To most observers, the pictures from the beating of Rodney King paint a pretty clear picture--police brutality. However, in the end due to the prior motivations of the jury (in this case, their racism), the obvious truth as documented in the images was interpreted differently and the officers were acquitted.

....While perhaps in the early days of the technology people had "implicit faith in the truth of photograph[y]," that is certainly not the case today. The causes of this loss of trust are many, however the primary impetus I would venture to say is the rise of propaganda, PR, and a consumer culture saturated with advertising during and after the world wars



# Emon Motamedi

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in the past, serve as infallible evidence of an event occurring. ... photographs currently have so many different means of being altered or changed entirely that their validity cannot be ensured. Of course... “A picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists... which is like what’s in the picture.”... Using “Unattainable Beauty” as an example, although certain features of the models are altered using Photoshop, a person did truly pose in front of a camera, and in that sense Sontag’s second argument holds true.

...in our modern day, society is much more aware of the potential for photographs to be distorted and does not take them to be an absolute truth. Part of the reason for this is that there are so many watchdogs in the public, ready to call a person or company out on doctoring their photographs and bring this dishonesty to the attention of the masses. This is exemplified by the three sets of images referenced in the assignment, as each involves one source calling out the deceit of others.





## Amy Frazee

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I do believe people generally retain the “implicit faith in the truth of the photographic record”. Of course, creativity and artistic authority come into play.... However, I believe, as Sontag put it, “Photographs furnish evidence.”.... As we look at certain magazine shoots or publicity photographs, we understand that they are a glamorous version of the celebrities we are viewing. For the most part, a little retouching is common and understandable: most of us in this day and age are guilty of using Photoshop on a photograph before uploading it to certain social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. ...As a fair-skinned person, if I look pale in a photo, I will add a “warming” effect to a picture before uploading. This does not mean I am not myself in the picture, or am trying to defy others belief in who I am. It is just a simple change that I think improves the portrayal of myself.



# Photography as Documentation

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# Fixing Identities

Communards, Paris 1871



Gustave Courbet





# Fixing Identities

Communards, Paris 1871



Figure 1. Anonymous, Communards, 1871. Illustration. Wikimedia Commons. Paris



# Documenting the Deviant

Creating the mug shot



Figure 2. "The Inspector's Model" from Thomas Byrnes, *Professional Criminals of America* (New York: Cassell, 1886), between 52 and 53.

# Documenting the Deviant



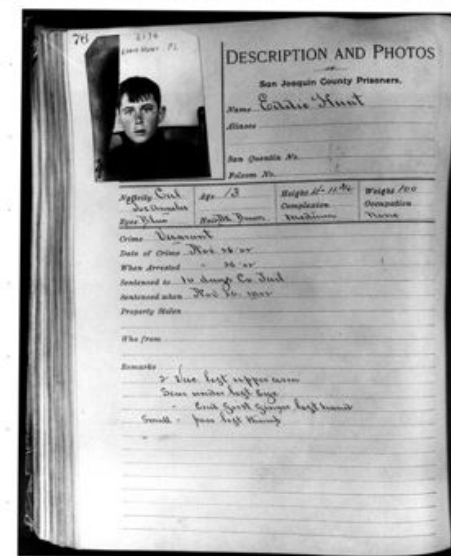
Wanted posters for Lincoln assassins, Butch Cassidy



Inmate of Bethlam Royal Hospital for the Criminally Lunatic, 1870s



"Bank book" prepared for bank clients by Pinkerton Detective Agency, ca. 1875



Entry for 13-year-old "vagrant," San Joaquin County Jail, ca. 1900



# The Sordid Details



Arthur Fellig  
("WeeGee"), 1930s

Public obsession with crime-scene photos



Murder scenes, Paris, 1890s



Police display body  
of Baby-Face  
Nelson, 1934



# Classifying Deviance: The "Criminal Type"



Cesare Lombroso

Lombroso: Hereditary criminals are identified by large jaws, handle-shaped ears, shifty eyes, etc.



The criminal is "an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals."

"Revolutionaries and political criminals  
-- the semi-insane and morally insane"



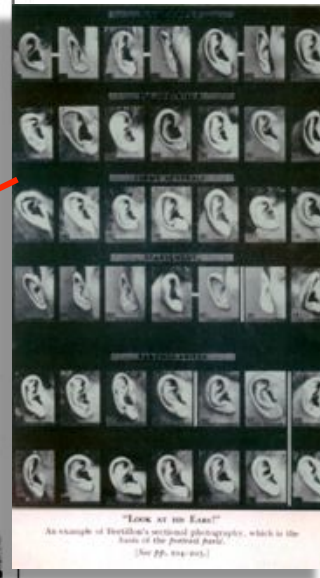


# Classifying Deviance



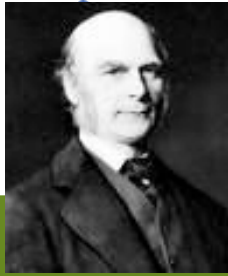
Alphonse Bertillon

1882: Bertillon presents system of criminal identification, anthropometry ("Bertillonage")



"Unchangeable in form from birth, this organ [the ear] is the immutable legacy of heredity and intrauterine life."

"Look at the Ears!"  
An example of Bertillon's vertical photographs, which is the basis of the portrait book.  
(See pp. 104-105.)

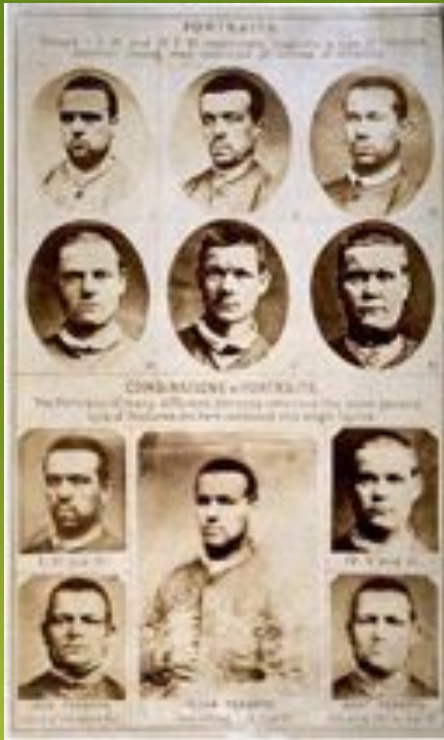


Francis Galton

# Eugenics and Photography

1870's: Darwin's cousin Francis Galton makes composite photographs, part as aid to criminology, part as effort to apply Darwinism to human differences. Coins *eugenics*, "nature vs nurture," "regression to the mean," notion of statistical correlation, pioneers questionnaires and surveys.

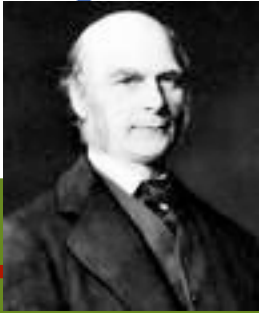
With Wm. Herschel, tries to put study of fingerprints on a scientific basis.



Composite:  
Violent  
Criminals



Composite: Jews



Francis Galton

# Composite Types & "Objectivity"

"... the imaginative power even of the highest artists is far from precise, and... no two artists agree in any of their typical forms. The merit of the photographic composite is its mechanical precision, being subject to no errors beyond those incidental to all photographic productions." Francis Galton



Composite:  
Violent  
Criminals

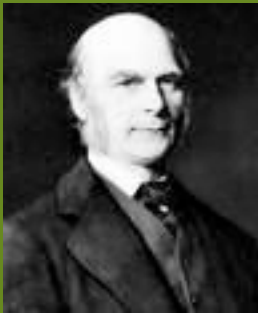


Composite Jews



# Eugenics and Photography

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Francis Galton

"My general object has been to take note of the varied hereditary faculties of different men, and of the great differences in families and races, to learn how far history may have shown the practicability of supplanting the human stock by better strains, and to consider whether it might not be our duty to do so by such efforts as may be reasonable, thus exerting ourselves to further the ends of evolution more rapidly and with less distress than if events were left to their own course."



# Documenting the Other

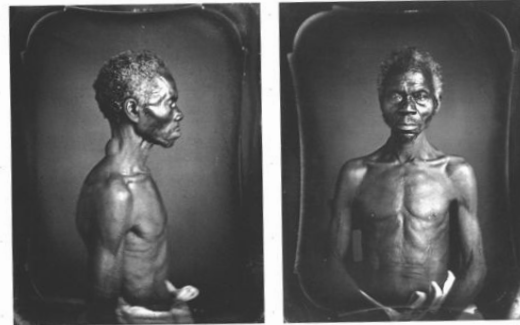


Photos of Downieville CA Chinese Prepared by Justice of the Peace, ca. 1890



Photographs of Modoc Indians made by gov't following 1874 war.

Photography as an instrument of social control



Auschwitz documentary photo

One of a set of images prepared for Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz to support thesis that human races were different species. *Truth before all. The more pity I felt at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, the more impossible it becomes for me to repress the feeling that they are not of the same blood as we are.* 1846



## Documenting the other, 2



Jacob Riis:  
*How the Other Half Lives*



Photography and the awakening of social conscience



AN ALL-NIGHT TWO-CENT RESTAURANT IN "THE BEND"

Lithograph prepared  
from Riis photo



## Documenting the Other

Lewis Hine, Carolina Cotton Mill, 1909



The golf links lie so near the mill  
That almost every day  
The laboring children can look out  
And see the men at play.

– Sarah Norcliffe Cleghorn, 1916



"Some boys and girls were so small they had to climb up on to the spinning frame to mend broken threads and to put back the empty bobbins. Bibb Mill No. 1. Macon, Ga."



# Documenting the Other



Walker Evans



"Let Us Now  
Praise Famous  
Men"

Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, Farm Security Administration,  
mid-1930s



Lange, photos of Dust Bowl and Japanese relocation in  
WWII





# Photography in Science

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# Photography in Science

## Scientific Atlases: The tension between the typical and the characteristic



From Bernhard Albinus' *Table of the Skeleton and Muscles of the Human Body*, 1749

As skeletons differ from one another, not only as to the age, sex, stature and perfection of the bones, but likewise in the marks of strength, beauty and make of the whole... As therefore painters, when they draw a handsome face, if there happens to be any blemish in it mend it in the picture, thereby to render the likeness the more beautiful; so those things which were less perfect, were mended in the figure, and were done in such a manner as to exhibit more perfect patterns..." Albinus



Rhododendron  
argenteum, Joseph  
Hooker, 1849



# Photography in Science

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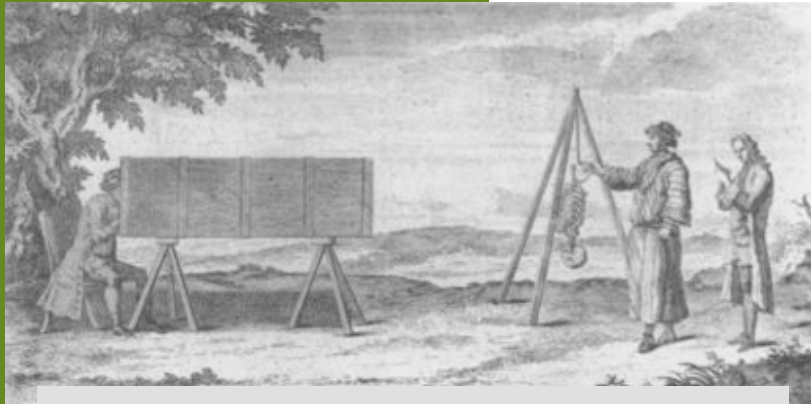
## The virtues of the typical

...an anatomical archetype [*Typus*] will be suggested here, a general picture containing the forms of all animals as potential, one which will guide us to an orderly description of each animal. . . . The mere idea of an archetype in general implies that no particular animal can be used as our point of comparison; the particular can never serve as a pattern [*Muster*]for the whole.' Goethe

But rendering the typical leaves too much discretion to "subjective" judgment...



# Photography in Science



Cheselden preparing an anatomical atlas, 1733

Portraying the particular:

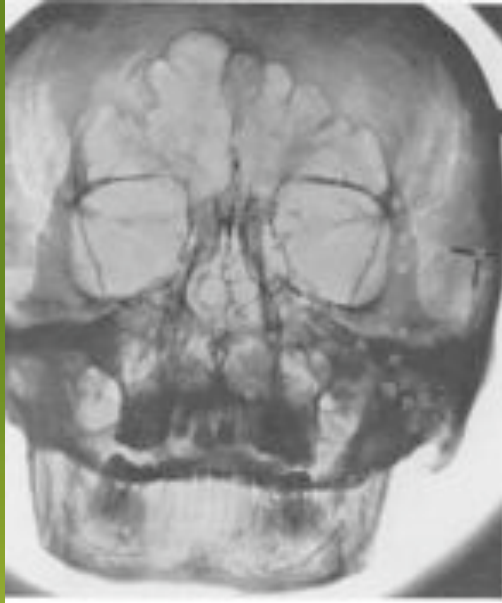
We have no Lionardo [sic] de Vinci, Calcar, Fialetti, or Berrettini, but the modern draughtsman makes up in comprehension of the needs of science all that he lacks in artistic genius... we are able to employ new processes that reproduce the drawings of the original object *without error of interpretation*, and others that give us very useful effects of colour at small expense.  
Wm Anderson, 1885



# Photographic exhibits: The debate over interpretation

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The limits of X-rays to display micro-anatomy, the temptation to "clarify" images:



"I have vigorously avoided artistic aids; in those few cases where, because of the uneven covering of the emulsion [*Deckung*] on the negative, a few visible contours had to be added afterwards, I have explicitly so indicated." Rudolph Grashey, 1905



# The Specificity of the Photograph

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# The Specificity of the Photograph



Photographs by August Sander,  
"Man in the Twentieth Century" 1929



# Photographing Types



From Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" paintings, 1941





# Photos of Concepts

Can a photo illustrate a concept?

"Photographs are necessarily of unidealized individual things, whether zebras, geese, or medieval churches [whereas] drawings may represent a composite distillation." Sydney Landau



Merriam-Webster illustrations for *rampant*, *skunk*, *skeleton*, etc.



American Heritage illustrations for *brioche*, *brocade*, *espadrille*.



## Fictionalizing Photos

Cf Victorian uses of photographs in illustrations,

"Any dodge, trick and conjuration of any kind is open to the photographer's use.... It is his imperative duty to avoid the mean, the base and the ugly, and to aim to elevate his subject.... and to correct the unpicturesque....." Henry Peach Robinson



Julia Cameron,  
Lancelot and  
Guinevere, 1875



Henry Peach Robinson, "Fading Away," 1858



## Fictionalizing Photos



Henry Peach Robinson  
The Lady of Shalott



Illustration to Henry James'  
The Golden Bowl, 1904



# Modern Photographic Fictions



fotonovelas



Tina Barney



Sam Taylor-Wood

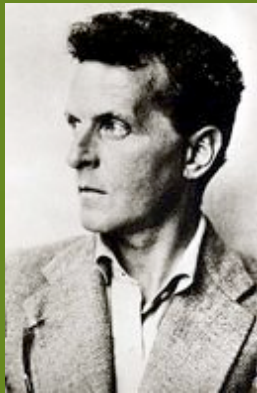


Paul Outerbridge, The Coffee Drinkers, 1939



# The arbitrariness of photographic "truth"

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We regard the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so on) depicted there.

This need not have been so. We could easily imagine people who did not have this relation to such pictures. Who, for example, would be repelled by photographs, because a face without color and even perhaps a face in reduced proportions struck them as inhuman.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, IIxi



## For Thursday, 3/15

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Marlin, Randall, 2002. "History of Propaganda," pp. 62-94 in *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, Toronto: Broadview Press.

Recommended:

Watch the first 10-minute segment of "Divide and Conquer," one of the "Why We Fight" films that Frank Capra made for the Office of War Information in WWII.

Watch the first 7-10 minutes of Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will," and browse the rest to get the flavor of the rallies — it's pretty repetitive.