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Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage

Conventional histories of photography avoid altogether the issue of pornographic and erotic production, but this is a subject of considerable interest from a number of perspectives. The entwined problematics of representation and sexuality, so prominent in current critical debate, are insistently raised by this genre. Moreover, the nature of the subject functions to elicit the investigator's own stake in an explicitly sexual visual field. Hence, there can be no reassuring illusion of neutrality, no refuge in a meta-discourse that exempts or purges the interest of the scholar or critic from the implications of his or her looking. For the feminist viewer of erotic or pornographic imagery, there can be no question of neutrality in the first place. Notwithstanding the equally lengthy tradition of homosexual erotica, in the modern world the vast majority of such images are of women made by men for the use of men. As such, they participate in a larger cultural enterprise of which the pornographic representation is only one, highly specialized example. This means that any engagement with this category of imagery inevitably circles back to the central issue—the discursive construction of “woman” as a set of meanings which, once launched into the world, circulates within it and takes on a quasi-autonomous life of its own.¹

In broaching the issue of erotic and/or pornographic photography within a historical frame, my intentions are twofold. First, to suggest that the sexual economy of looking—particularly the look directed at the woman's body—overarches the contingent and relative distinctions between culturally sanctioned and illicit forms of representation. This suggestion is premised on those feminist analyses that argue for the agency of patriarchal structures—psychic and social—which inform the act of looking. These analyses, in turn, are predicated on the assertion that the active gaze is both formed and informed by the determinations of sexual difference which *a priori* construct the subject positions designated as the masculine and the feminine. Consequently, the feminine—differentially conceived as Other to the masculine norm—takes *its* place in visual representation as object-of-the-gaze, while the position of active subject-of-the-gaze is generally the masculine prerogative. Crucial to this analysis is its anti-biologistic approach; masculine and feminine, active and passive, are understood to be subject *positions*, not biological givens. A

woman can thus look from the masculine subject position; a man can be represented in a feminine subject position (as is frequently the case in homosexual erotica, or in some recent fashion advertising).

A structural conception of this order inevitably undercuts the arguments and programs of anti-pornography lobbyists (whether feminist or not) that are founded on the conviction that there exists a crucial and objective distinction between acceptable and unacceptable images of women and that this distinction devolves on content. The logic of this position necessarily engenders a politics of censorship which would outlaw that class of images deemed violent, demeaning, or otherwise harmful. In contrast to this position, feminist analyses that concern themselves with the "deep structures" that inform both looking and representation are far less certain about the difference between "good" or "bad" images and even more doubtful about the political utility in differentiating them for censorship purposes. Fifteen years of feminist work on representation as a signifying system (much of it developed in literary and film theory) suggests that since the act of representation and its reception occurs *within* a patriarchal framework, even ostensibly innocuous or inoffensive images will be marked by its terms. Thus, whatever the elements that differentiate an art photograph of a female nude encountered in a museum from a photographic pin-up, both types of image may posit a similar—if not identical—set of subject/object relations, and induce or foster fantasies that are themselves symptoms of the unequal ordering of sexual difference. Insofar as the various mechanisms of representation function to position women as object-of-the-gaze—be it the voyeuristic gaze of mastery, imaginary knowledge, or possession, or the fetishistic gaze that simultaneously denies and commemorates sexual difference—the act of looking itself will be articulated through these psychic and social structures.

From this perspective, a recognition of the instability of the boundaries between the erotic and the pornographic, the aesthetic and the salacious, may be taken as evidence of the arbitrariness and contingency of the attempts to distinguish them. This is not, however, to claim that there are no differences. Rather, the point is that the structural determinations of the look, and the discursive strategies common to the representations themselves, indicate that the problems of oppression, subordination, and objectification do not exclusively reside in the given contents of an image. Images, in other words, do not causally produce a world of female objects and male subjects; rather, they may articulate, naturalize, and confirm an oppressive order whose roots are elsewhere. A generalized notion of "violence" as the defining characteristic of pornography, theorized and advanced by feminist pro-censorship groups, ignores the more subtle problems of what has recently been designated as the imperialism of representation—the violence that may inhere in the representational act itself.²

Photographic technologies—which would also include film and video—seem especially to conform to this diagnostic. If we are willing to allow that this activity of visual capture already comprehends relations of power and mastery (implied, among other

things, by the aggressive vocabulary of photography—to shoot, to take a picture, to aim the camera, etc.), it may well be that erotic and pornographic imagery manifests these relations with particular clarity. This is itself a compelling reason to make it a subject of feminist inquiry.

Consequently, a second reason for seriously considering the repressed history of erotic and pornographic production lies in its direct relevance for a feminist, revisionist history of the medium. Specifically, an inquiry of this sort provides some of the tools for an analysis of the particular role that photography has played in what, for lack of a better term, I would call the spectacularization of the female body, a phenomenon that is as intimately linked to the rise of commodity culture as are the development and expansion of photography itself.

That erotic and pornographic photographs were produced almost from the medium's inception should come as no surprise. That it does so is a testimonial only to the near-total elision of this fact from the standard histories in the field. Once one knows of the early existence of such production, however, hints and traces of its flourishing existence can be deduced in various ways. Let us take, for example, the well-known passage from Charles Baudelaire's famous denunciation of photography from his *Salon* of 1859:

It was not long before thousands of pairs of greedy eyes were glued to the peep-holes of the stereoscope, as though they were the skylights of the infinite. The love of obscenity, which is as vigorous a growth in the heart of natural man as self-love, could not let slip such a glorious satisfaction.³

As Gerald Needham first proposed,⁴ it may well be that the popular love of obscenity that Baudelaire invoked in his essay was literally, as well as metaphorically, intended. It is not at all unlikely that Baudelaire was referring to various types of erotic imagery which were produced in massive amounts during the July Monarchy, Second Empire, and Third Republic.⁵ Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that almost as soon as there were viable daguerreotypes, there were pornographic ones. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to calculate the actual scale of this industry, but there is reason to think it was substantial. Stephen Heath, for example, cites a report from the London *Times* of 1874 in which a police raid on a single shop seized more than 130,000 obscene photographs.⁶ If we assume that the overall scale of illicit imagery was anywhere as great as such a figure suggests, certain questions immediately propose themselves. Did photographic technologies themselves engender demand and supply, or did they rather fulfill a pre-existing demand? Insofar as the art historian Beatrice Farwell has characterized mid-nineteenth-century France as experiencing a "media explosion" exemplified in the Baudelairean cult of images, were such photographs a variant of pre-existing forms or a new form altogether?⁷ Is erotic and pornographic photography, considered in relation to older precedents, best understood as technologically different but representationally the same, or fundamentally different in both senses?

By way of navigating these complex and underresearched questions, let us begin with a consideration of a single image—a readily available one—reproduced on page 31 of the fifth edition of Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography*. Newhall included this 1845 daguerreotype of a naked woman seen from the back with the understanding that it was an *académie*—that is, an academic nude study. The prototype for such an image was an artist's drawing or painting from the living model, usually depicted in a conventionalized pose considered classic or noble. Until quite late in the nineteenth century, the production of accomplished *académies* was one of the foundation stones of academic training.⁸ In its daguerreotype version, an image of this sort might have been used by an artist in lieu of the model, or possibly intended as an aesthetic object in its own right. Eugène Delacroix, for example, used such photographic *académies* in his own sketches and painting, working directly from the photographs made by his friend Eugène Durieu.⁹ If this daguerreotype indeed falls within the classification "*académie*," we could conclude certain things about it. To begin with, we would assume that it was a legal image, one that could be openly exhibited and sold (at least within the walls of the Ecole des Beaux Arts). We would further assume that it was understood by its viewers to represent its subject—the body of the woman—aesthetically, metamorphosing and sublimating the naked body into the high art category of the nude. Finally—and this follows from the previous two points—we would be able to conclude that this image is to be discursively situated within the framework of the aesthetic, a framework that is both institutional and epistemological.

But how secure is this classificatory system? This particular daguerreotype is anonymous, precluding any attempt to contextualize it more precisely in relation to a known body of work by a known individual. Practically speaking, the cropping of the figure is such as to make its utility for an artist somewhat dubious; the legs are cut off at the thigh, and the hand that is visible is half obscured. A comparison with a suite of *académies* made by Eugène Durieu, using a male model, signals at once that the highly conventionalized poses and clear frontal presentation of the body that exemplify the standard *académie* produce an effect quite different from that produced by the woman in the daguerreotype.

Admittedly, the Eastman House daguerreotype is a somewhat equivocal example of the genre, but the point could be made equally with less ambiguous ones (note, for example, the difference in effect produced by Durieu's female in contrast to his male model). Surely this difference in effect between male and female nude has to do with the way women's bodies have been coded—been made to signify—as the sexual, just as women are epistemologically designated as "the sex." Through such codings does the image of the woman come to function discursively as the sign of sexual difference itself. While men can also be eroticized by the camera (or by the brush), the image of the male body does not in and of itself conventionally connote the erotic. (I stress the term *conventionally* throughout this essay insofar as all the regimes of representation here discussed presume—and work to construct—a male, heterosexual spectator.) Photography, a medium popularly believed to directly transcribe the real, naturalizes the codes it employs to a far greater extent than do



ANONYMOUS, ACADEMY, CA. 1845, DAGUERRETYPE. INTERNATIONAL
MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE.

other forms of visual representation. In seeking, therefore, to analyze the ways in which photographs produce their meanings, it is necessary to pay close attention to the syntax, the rhetoric, the formal strategies by which their meanings are constructed and communicated.

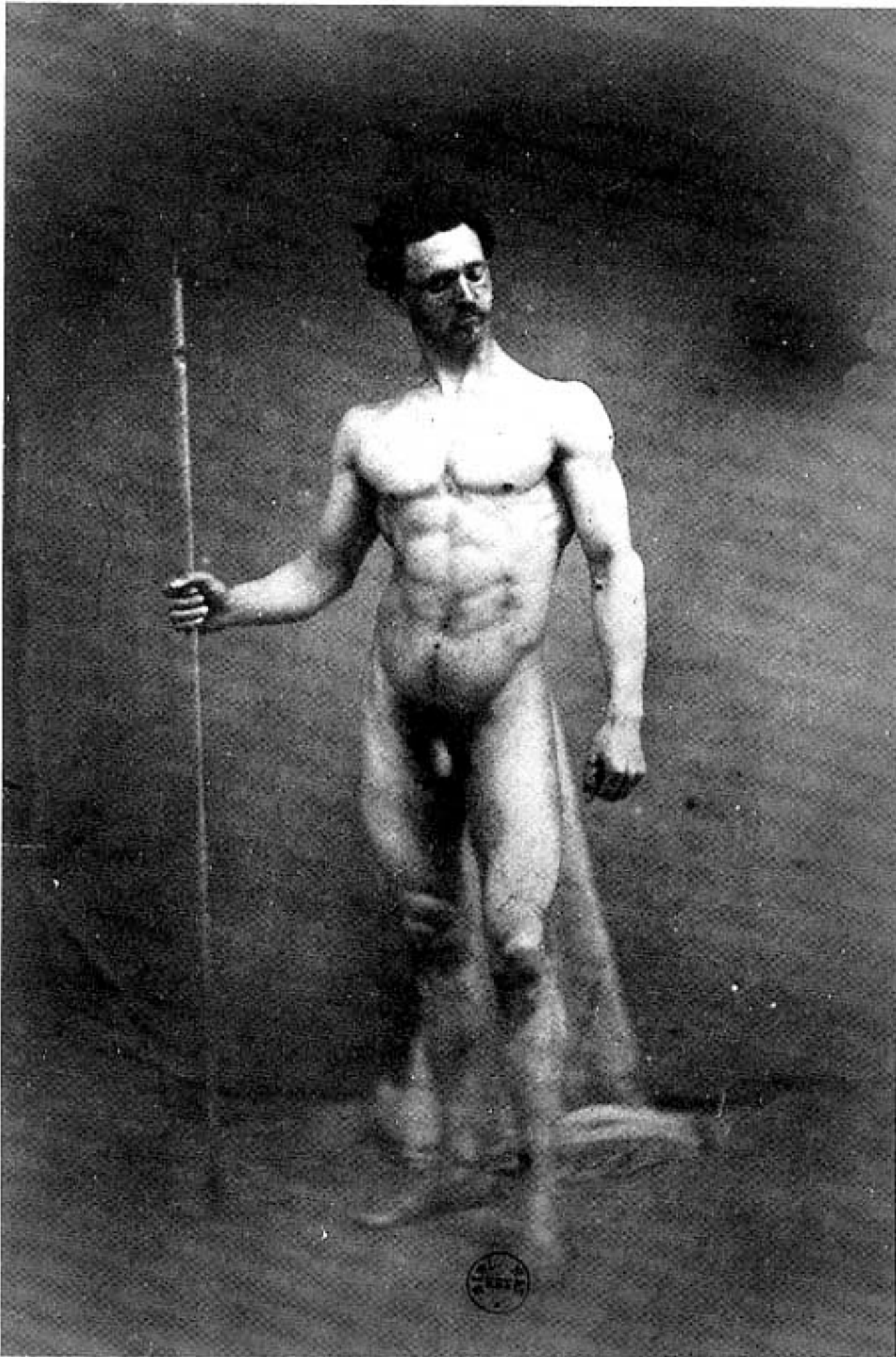
Returning to the comparison of the Newhall and Durieu nudes, we must allow for the differences that are a consequence of the different photographic technologies employed. Thus, the daguerreotype—the “mirror of nature”—is literally a mirrorlike surface. The image is, consequently, grainless and preternaturally sharp, delineating every blemish and freckle of the woman’s skin. Durieu’s pictures, on the other hand, are calotypes (paper prints from paper negatives) which have in addition suffered the ravages of time, including the fading of the prints. Although calotypes were produced that were quite sharp, the Durieu prints are especially grainy and shadowy. These formal distinctions, however, are dramatically eclipsed by more pertinent ones.

Primarily, these have to do with the conventions that inform these two presentations of the body—conventions that are themselves subject to the codes inscribing sexual difference. Everything in the presentation of Durieu’s male subject announces his identity as a professional artist’s model—his extremely articulated musculature, the staged and artificial quality of the poses, his apparent disregard of the camera or viewer’s presence. Furthermore, the point of view from which the photographs are taken diminishes any sense of the sensuous and pliant qualities of flesh, distancing the spectator from the corporeality of the body. Furthermore, the physical distance of the camera from the model works to dissolve the specificity of the body into the more abstracted realm of the type, generalizing his features and reducing any sense of an individual personality. What is intended and produced is a generic *figure*, rather than an individuated and tangible body.

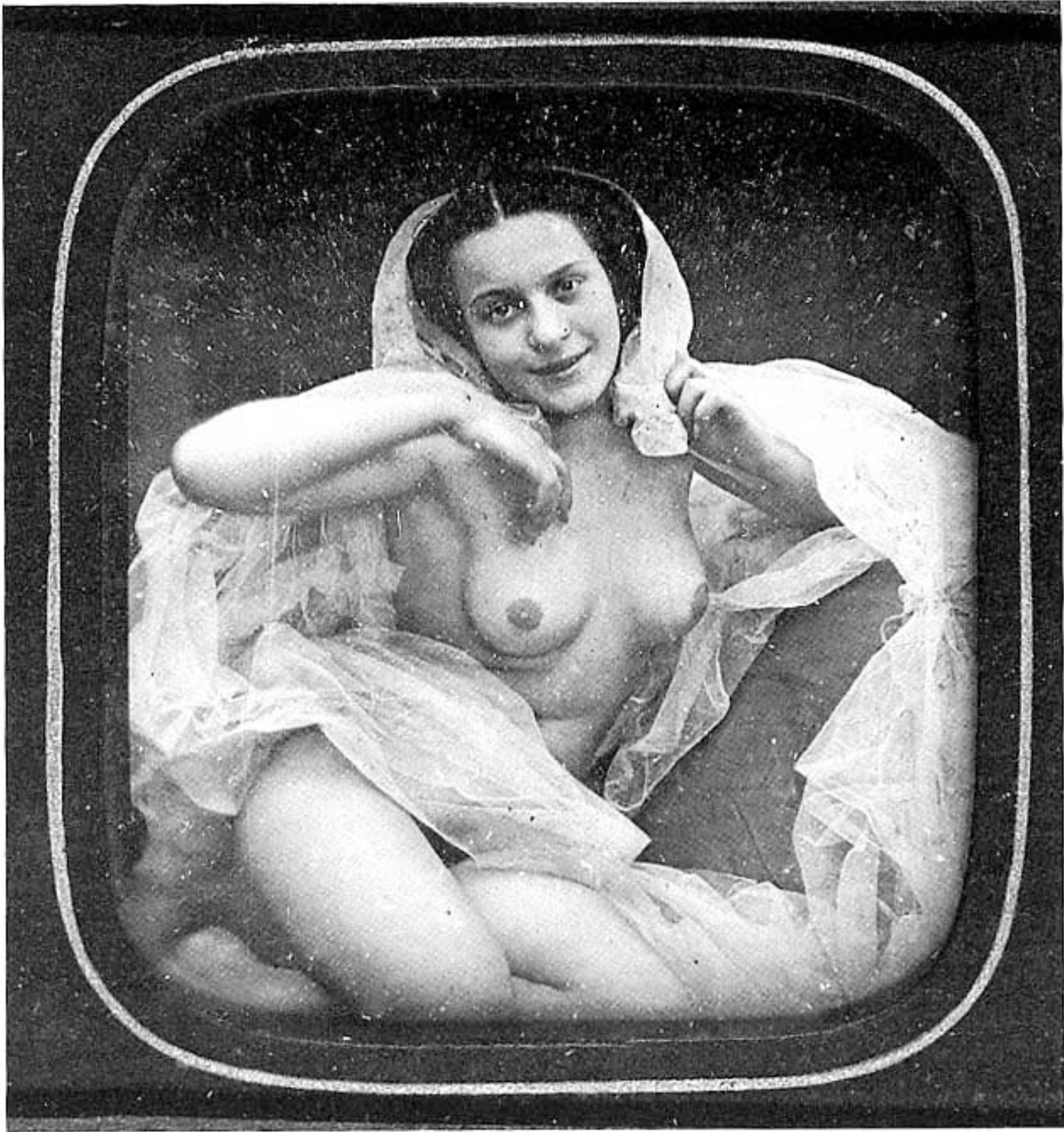
In contrast to this form of representation, the Eastman House daguerreotype presents itself as nothing so much as an offering of the flesh—a display of the woman’s body that calls attention precisely to its quality of sensual display through the use of such devices as the lace bed covering. The expanse of the lace coverlet not only “sets off” the body it partially frames, but it further heightens the illusion of tactility with its play of textures. Positioned so closely to the picture plane, the woman’s body invites an intimate rather than objective viewing relationship which is further reinforced by the smallness of the daguerrean plate. Visual intimacy is here a function not only of spatial proximity, but also of an implied psychological proximity. This effect is, in part, produced by the emphasis on a portion of the woman’s body that is itself sexually charged. Additionally, the woman’s face—even in profile—suggests her awareness of another’s gaze, although her look is directed off-camera, outside the picture frame. It is perhaps this aspect of spectatorial address that is most significant, for as Annette Kuhn has pointed out: “In offering itself as both spectacle and truth, the photograph suggests that the woman in the picture, rather than the image itself, is responsible for soliciting the spectator’s gaze.”¹⁰ This is, of course, one of the most decisive attributes of photographic, as opposed to graphic, representation.



JEAN-LOUIS MARIE EUGÈNE DURIEU (1800-74), *ACADEMY*, CA. 1853-54,
CALOTYPE, 16.5 × 11.3 CM., MODELS POSED BY EUGÈNE DELACROIX. CABINET
DES ESTAMPES, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.



JEAN-LOUIS MARIE EUGÈNE DURIEU, *ACADEMY*, CA. 1853-54, CALOTYPE, 16.5 ×
11.3 CM., MODEL POSED BY EUGÈNE DELACROIX. CABINET DES ESTAMPES,
BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.



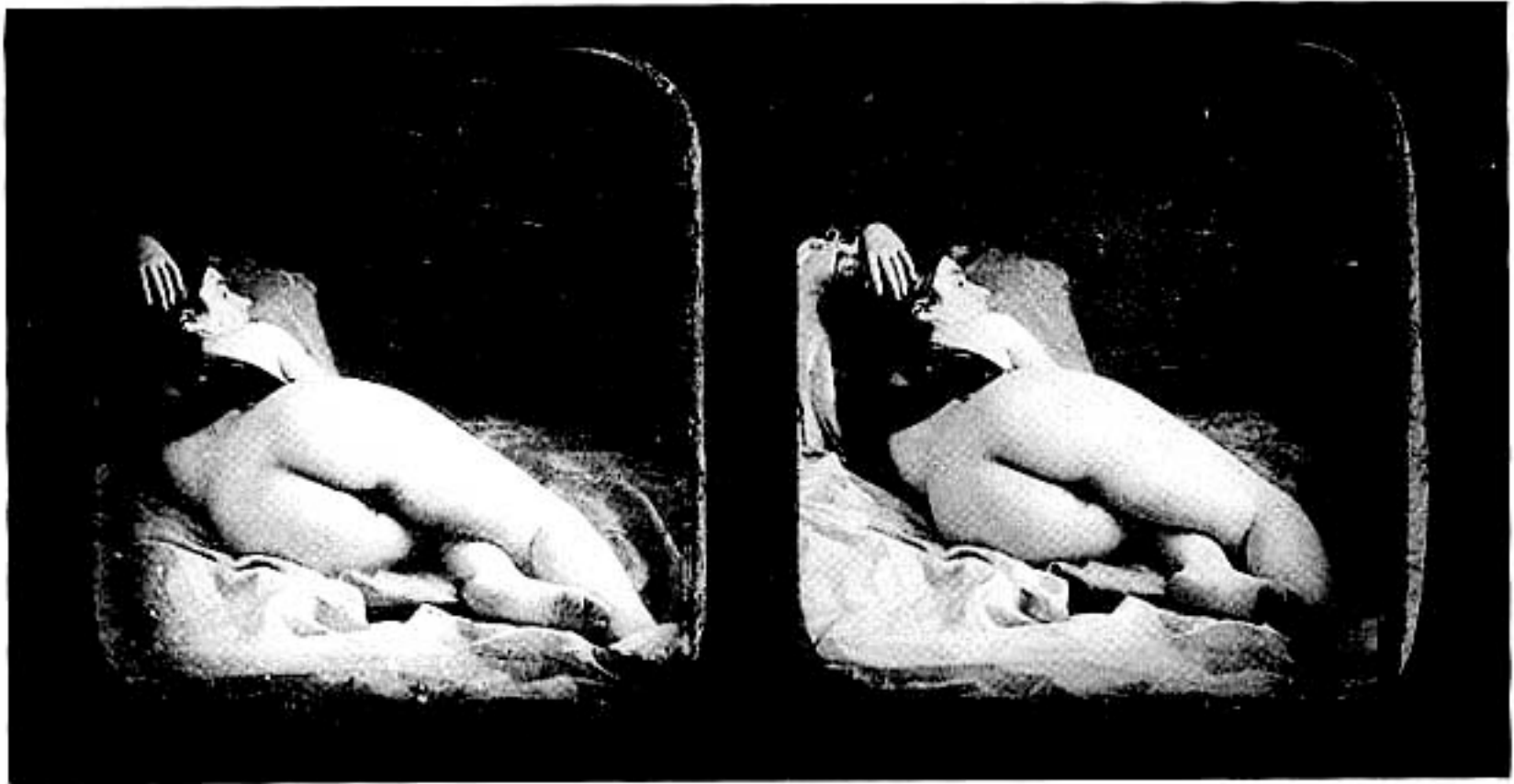
ANONYMOUS, NUDE, CA. 1848, DAGUERRETYPE. MUSÉE D'ORSAY.

For while the solicitous gaze is a staple in pre-photographic erotica as well, the status of the photograph as trace of the real heightens the illusion of personalized address. In sum, all the elements of the daguerreotype—on both denotative and connotative levels—function to encourage an investment in the sight of the woman that exceeds the formal/aesthetic category that is signified by the term *académie*.

Whether this image was thus categorized by the photographer who made it in order to foil official censors, or whether it was so classified by collectors or curators is less important for my purposes here than my wish to demonstrate the uncertainty of the classification in the first place. In many respects, the Eastman House daguerreotype closely resembles a number of others from the collection of Gabriel Cromer, which are now part of the Eastman House Collection. These include stereoscopic daguerreotypes—exquisitely hand-colored—of naked or partially clothed women which were emphatically not intended as *académies* but instead occupy that uncertain and shifting ground between the erotic and the pornographic. While there is no gainsaying the *art*—or at least the artfulness—of these photographic luxury objects, the erotics of looking are in every way emphasized. Voyeuristic components of the look, for example, are immeasurably heightened by the stereopticon apparatus, which masks out everything but the image. The act of viewing becomes, or is in any case experienced as, a private activity. The fabulous illusionism of the stereo daguerreotype, particularly when the image is colored, is manifest not only in an intense effect of three-dimensionality, but in the way the image entirely fills the viewer's visual field. Baudelaire's reference to the "pairs of greedy eyes . . . glued to the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were skylights of the infinite" takes on special meaning if one has viewed stereoscopic daguerreotypes.

The instability of classificatory distinctions may be further demonstrated by comparing another back view—this one a stereoscopic daguerreotype—with the Eastman House nude. The former (hand-colored in the original) will doubtless strike the viewer as more explicitly erotic in effect than the Newhall example, but on the basis of what conceptual schema can this be argued? We might say that the placement of the woman's body elicits a fantasy of sexual penetration, but why should the relatively minor physical shift from a reclining to a supine position so radically alter the erotic implication of the image? Under what definition and under what terms can Newhall's *académie* be detached from this other image world of women's bodies? It is precisely in light of these difficult distinctions that we need attend to the erotics of looking rather than attempting to empirically locate the erotics in the contents of the image and leaving it at that. For notwithstanding a careful analysis of the construction of any given image, in the final instance its meaning will be determined by the viewer's reading of it, a reading as much determined by the viewer's subjectivity as by the manifest and latent contents of the image.

Writing of a Giacometti sculpture, the French critic Jean Clair has this to say: "Vision is not only a passive, feminine receptacle where the real gets photographed, but it is also a phallic organ able to unfold and erect itself out of its cavity and point towards the visible. The gaze is the erection of the eye."¹¹

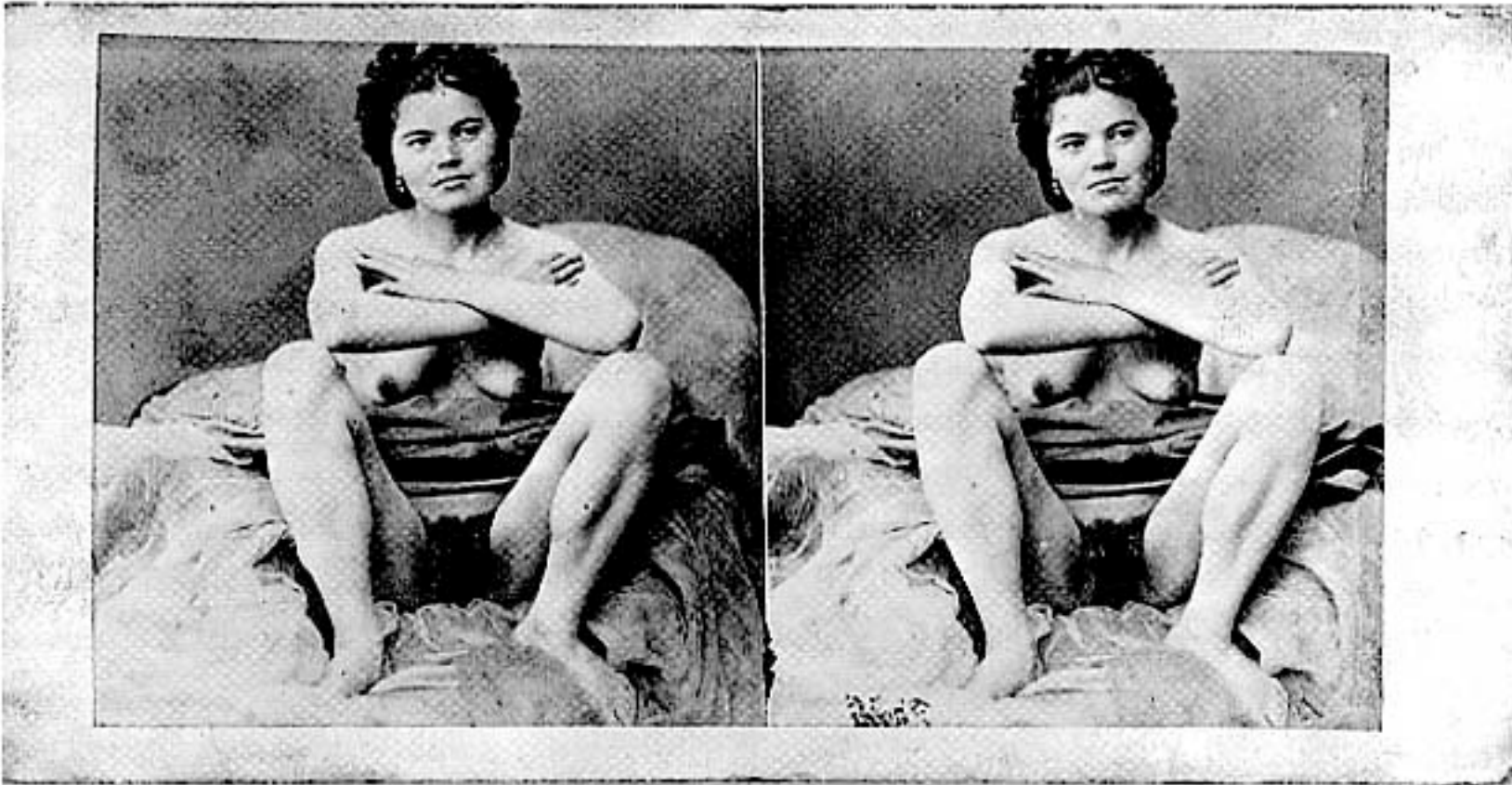


ANONYMOUS, NUDE, CA. 1852-53, HAND-COLORED STEREOSCOPIC

DAGUERREOTYPE. COLLECTION UWE SCHEID.

“The gaze is the erection of the eye.” Clair’s statement emphasizes the phallicism of the look, “this phalloid organ” that seeks to penetrate the hidden recesses of the feminine. Surely the strategic positioning of the woman’s buttocks in the stereo daguerreotype invites this visual penetration even as it works to conjure up the imaginary, projected act of anal penetration. Clair’s characterization of the gaze as visual erection is particularly apt in relation to photographs that are effectively *about* the revelation of the woman’s genitals. Conventionally, male genitals are deemed an explicitly sexual sight only in a state of arousal. Female genitals are not only more hidden (and arguably more forbidden), but can be seen only from vantage points that generally require an elaborate positioning and display of the body—legs splayed, supine or reclining position, etc. Reinforcing the spectator’s fantasy that it is the real woman, rather than the photograph of her, that provokes the gaze, so too does this exposure of her genitals invest her with both guilt and complicity.

Whether the model is clothed or naked, expressive or impassive, the purpose of the photograph—its instrumentality—lies in its tantalizing display of what can be penetrated only in imagination. However, this is one of the paradoxes of explicitly sexual photographs of women. In offering this forbidden sight to (masculine) scrutiny and investigation, the image appears to produce knowledge: this is what it looks like. But simultaneously it thwarts the more profound question—the riddle (or threat) of femininity itself—which is neither answerable nor representable. Furthermore, the visual presence of the woman’s body is inseparable from her literal absence. “A photograph, however much



ANONYMOUS, STEREOSCOPIC PHOTOGRAPH, CA. 1855. CABINET DES
ESTAMPES, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE.

it may pretend to authenticity, must always in the final instance admit that this is not real, in the sense that what is in the picture is not here, but elsewhere. This very quality of absence may augment the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectator's look. On another level, though, the artifice of the photograph will ensure that his desire remains ungratified. Since he knows it is artifice, how can he be sure after all that it really is telling him anything about femininity, about women's pleasure? The question remains unanswered: he is condemned to endless investigation."¹² In a certain sense, the erotic or pornographic image always fails to deliver the goods. Akin to the desire produced by the commodity fetish, the image will ceaselessly provoke desire in the consumer but will perpetually defer closure, resolution, satiety.

Nineteenth-century photographs that display women's genitals are obviously less ambiguous in terms of classification than images that don't. But even here, there are distinctions to be drawn, as in the case of female *académies*. What permits the recognition of the erotic or the pornographic in any given historical moment would seem to reside in a mode of address, a syntax, a rhetoric of the image. Nonetheless, a consideration of the structure of the look and the desire for closure and knowledge are no less germane to those images one would never categorize as pornographic. This is why arguments that attempt to distinguish between the acceptably — indeed, the valorized — erotic (the erotic thus conceived as a derivation of *eros* — love) and the unacceptably pornographic (the word's linguistic derivation signifying the writing or speech of prostitutes — hence, venal sexuality)

perpetually founder. Similarly, attempts such as John Berger's to argue that certain representations of nude women (Rubens's *The Little Fur* or Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, for example) produce a different kind of spectator because the real women who posed for the paintings were loved by the artists, are profoundly unconvincing.¹³

These difficulties suggest that a sliding scale of concepts such as the aesthetic/erotic, the erotic proper, or the pornographic (as well as distinctions within these categories such as soft-core, hard-core, etc.) can never be wholly reduced to a question of *content*, i.e., the representation of what is normally forbidden to be represented. As Beverly Brown has argued, a reduction of the problem to one of representing the forbidden or transgressive does little to clarify the issue: "There are . . . problems with the idea of a scale of increasingly explicit representations of the body, where representation is [conceived] essentially as a transparent medium giving more or less access to the object. This might seem unexceptionable insofar as we can all recognise pornography 'on sight'. But let us not mistake recognisability for a simple givenness of content. Recognisability does not depend just upon what and how much is shown—otherwise we would not be able to distinguish between pornographic, artistic, medical representations of sexual acts and naked bodies."¹⁴ Although I am in fact suggesting here that recognizability is itself a problematic, I am in total agreement with Brown's assertion that it is not content as such that is the determining factor. As Brown, Cowie, Kuhn, and others have argued, erotic and pornographic modes of representation are profoundly implicated with the structures of fantasy and thus involve a more or less elaborate *staging* of desire. This may be accomplished with elaborate strategies of *mise en scène*—tableau, narrative, props, or more simply by recourse to certain forms of gesture, pose, expression, or use of detail.

It goes without saying that these images are the product of *male* desire and fantasy. And insofar as I am arguing for a structural homology between licit and illicit representations of the female body, I am particularly concerned with their shared status as *photographic* representations. Consequently, it is important to distinguish erotic and pornographic photography from its precedents, including its immediate ones in lithography. Here I would insist that the invention of pornographic or erotic photography cannot be adequately considered merely as an extension of a pre-existing genre by a new medium, any more than photography can be adequately considered as simply one of the many nineteenth-century advances in printmaking technologies and mechanical reproduction. On the contrary, all discussion must proceed from the recognition that photography produces a wholly different visual paradigm from that of the older graphic arts, and it is precisely the differences in this paradigm that we need to acknowledge in any discussion of the medium and its uses.

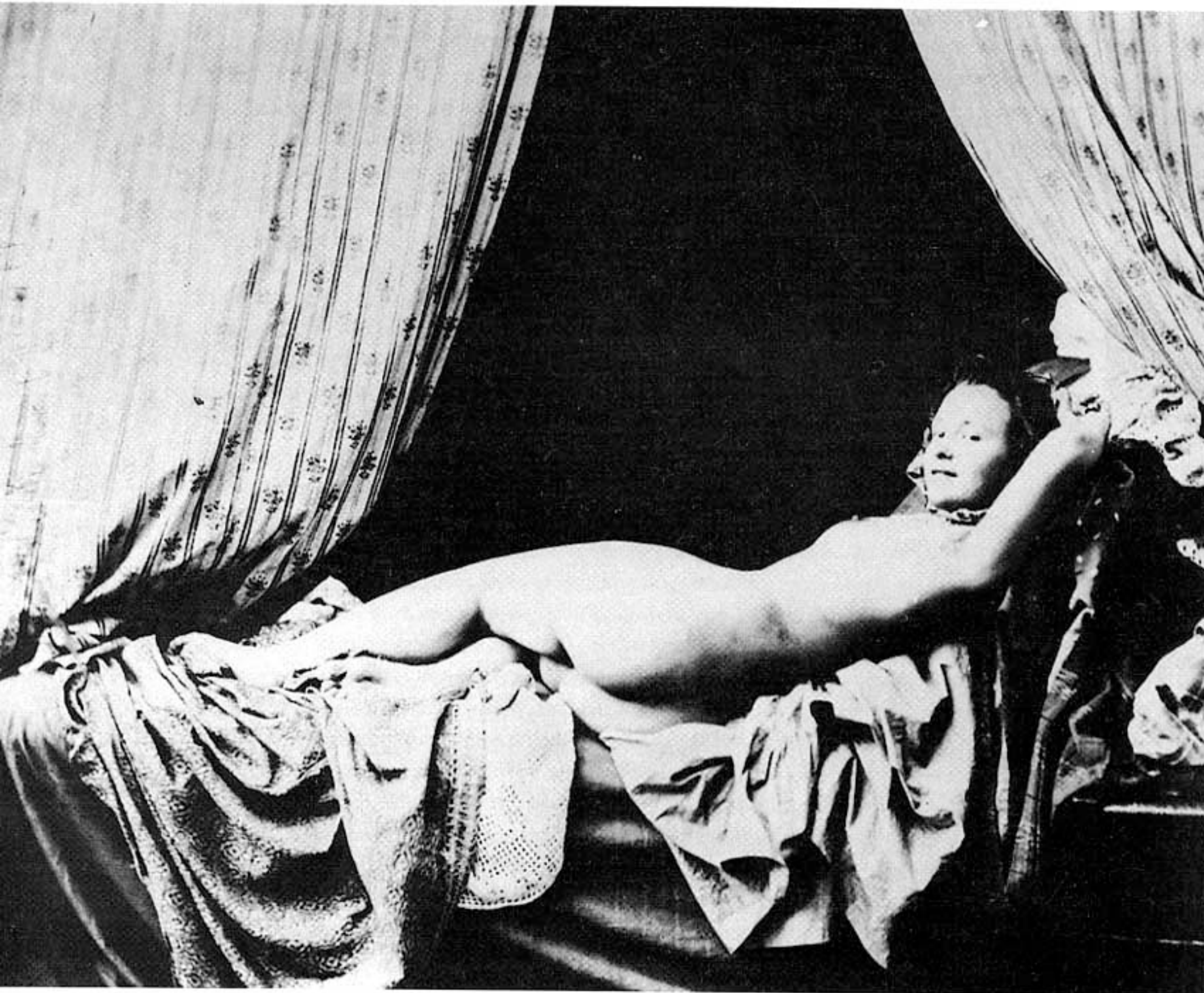
Obviously and importantly, the crux of the difference lies in photography's semiotic status as index, or motivated sign. (Footprints and fossils are typically given as examples of indexical signs.) In other words, the photograph's direct and causal linkage to its referent determines its ontological difference from other iconic systems. Insofar as the pho-

tographic picture is the trace of a once-present person or object, the spectator is inevitably situated in a certain—however ambiguous—relation to the real. The traditional pornographic representation, whether from the frescoed walls of Pompeii, or the individual image from the lithographic press, has no such purchase on the real. However potent or arousing to the viewer, the hand-made image offers evidence of its own mediation, whereas it is in the nature of photographic representation to normally efface it.

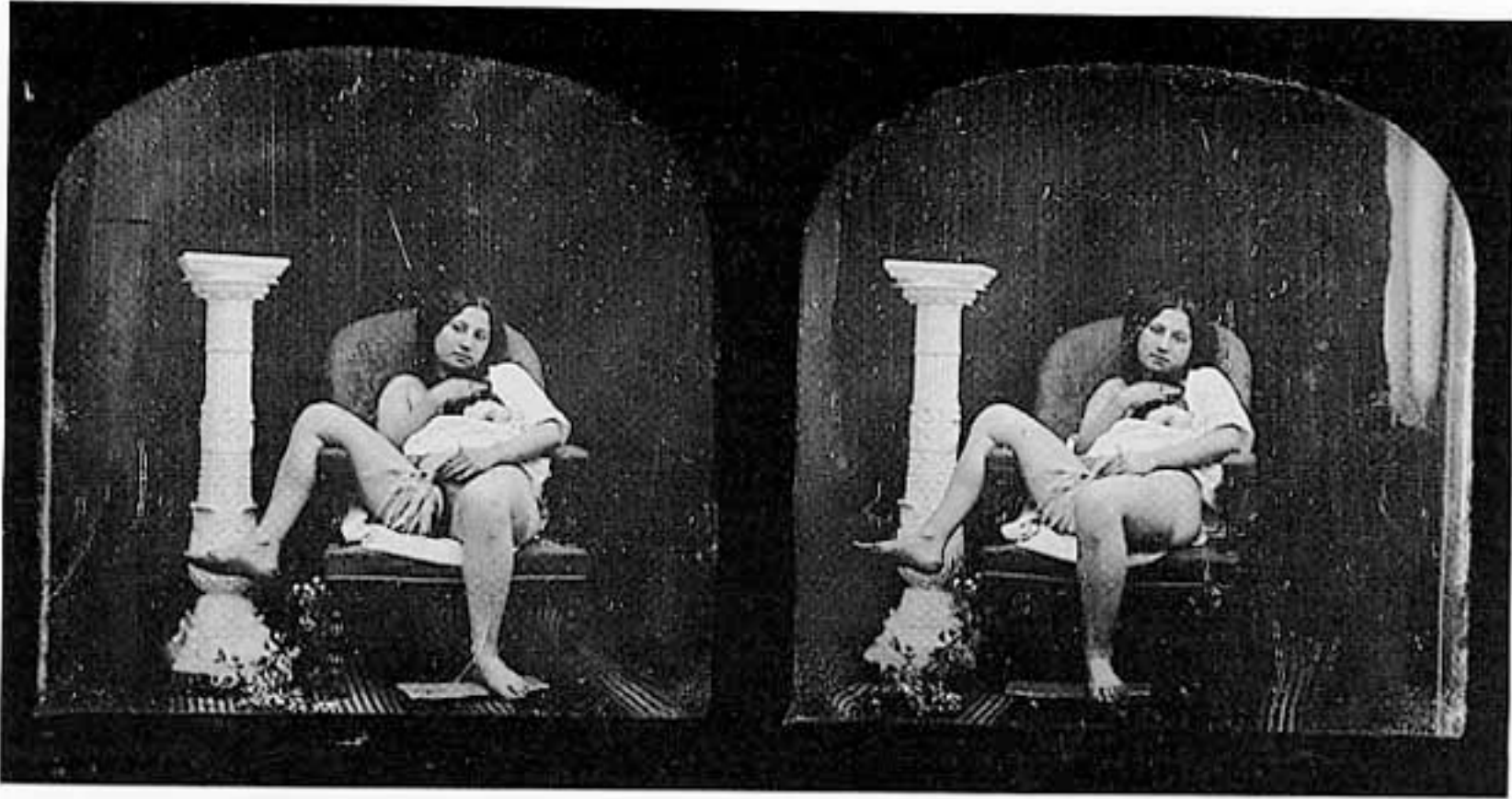
Hence, it is the ramifications of the dual nature of photographic imagery—indexical and iconic—that historically underwrite all debates in and around the medium: its status as art, its status in law, its claims to science, its utility to power, its range of instrumentalities. Most important for a discussion of “transgressive” photography, this double identity as index and icon needs to be reckoned with as part of a comprehensive historical understanding of the effects of such imagery and, even more urgently, for the contemporary project of understanding the politics of representation, an enterprise of great import for feminism.

That the subject of the erotic or pornographic image was a real person, posing or performing in front of the lens, undoubtedly altered the viewer’s experience of it. But equally, this indexical property of the photograph was also a problem for any aesthetic approach to the naked body. Insofar as the category “nude” presupposed an elaborate and highly stylized set of mediations, how was photography to manage them? Bearing in mind the fact that the female nude was governed by rigid codes pertaining to the representation of sexual difference (most tellingly, the elimination of body hair and the suppression of the vagina), it is not surprising that there was some controversy about whether the photographic nude was, by definition, oxymoronic. In the early years of the Second Empire, the propriety of the photographic nude was actively debated, the result being that the prestigious Société Française de Photographie banned them from their own exhibitions. Needless to say, solutions were found; backviews and strategic bits of drapery are the tropes of the photographic nude until well into the twentieth century.

In this photographic sphere, as in others, one approach was developed with reference to pre-photographic models from the graphic arts, while another seems to have been very much an invention of photography itself. Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of Second Empire photographic erotica is that all the conventions of pose and body display we are familiar with from contemporary imagery—the beaver shot, the masturbating woman—appear fully formed, as it were, in its earliest incarnations. It is as if these ritual displays are invented *for* the camera, in relation to its technical abilities and technical deficiencies. As with all other aspects of photographic history, we are thus obliged to consider what forms of representation photography expanded upon, elaborated, or altered, and what forms it may have inaugurated. Within the realm of sexually coded imagery, there is reason to think that erotic representation demonstrates a shift from a conception of the sexual as an activity to a new emphasis on specularly—the sexual constituted as a visual field rather than an activity as such. This would suggest links to other cultural devel-



F. JACQUES MOULIN OR ACHILLE QUINET, NUDE, CA. 1856. SAM WAGSTAFF
COLLECTION, THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM.

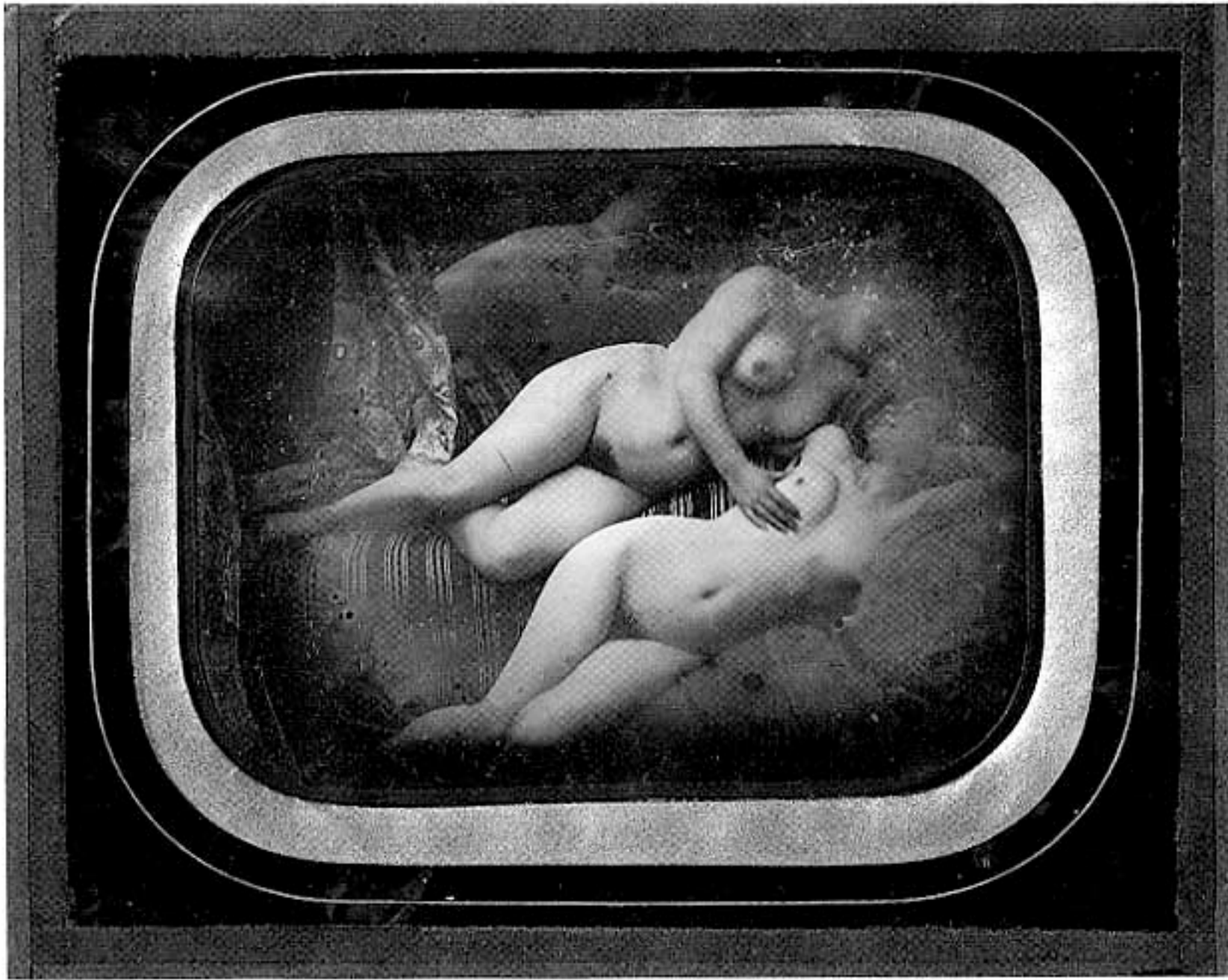


ANONYMOUS, CA. 1855, HAND-COLORED STEREOSCOPIC DAGUERREOTYPE.

COLLECTION GÉRARD LEVY.

opments in the nineteenth century: the invention of department stores with their open and extravagant display of goods and sophisticated window dressing, the popularity of illusionistic spectacles ranging from the diorama to magic-lantern shows, and so forth. Moreover, from its earliest years, photographic activity was itself intuitively perceived as sexually charged. Popular plays that cast the photographer as seducer (Meilhac and Halévy's 1865 *Le Photographe*, for example), as well as satirical drawings and cartoons that played upon the erotics of the camera eye, all attest to an accrual of sexual meaning to photography.¹⁵

In some instances, these two modes—activity and spectacle—would appear to converge, for example, in the depiction of either masturbation or “lesbian” sex. In these images, what is promised to the spectator is a hidden/forbidden knowledge: this is what women do alone, this is what women do together. But what appears to be an activity is, in fact, another version of spectacle, not simply because the image is patently simulated or static or non-narrative, but because of the imperatives of spectatorial address which dictate that this be staged as a sight. Women together, for example, are typically posed in ways that provide the viewer with maximum visual access to their bodies, which is sometimes augmented by the use of mirrors. The implicit requirement that the women be *for* the presumed male viewer, rather than for each other, belies the claim that such images illustrate lesbian sexuality. Instead they produce yet another variant of the feminine as spectacle, as erotic display.



ANONYMOUS, CA. 1850, HAND-COLORED DAGUERRETYPE.

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM.

If photography fosters and facilitates a conception of the erotic as a sight, I would suggest that it also constructs an erotics of the fragment, the body part. Indeed, images of the fragmented body—notably, those that isolate the genitals or sexually coded parts of the body—are an important subgenre of pornographic photography. It is, of course, a commonplace of photographic criticism to acknowledge the fragmenting operations of the medium, even to the extent of characterizing this feature as one of photography's cardinal norms. But to analyze the implications of these operations in relation to the image of the female body is to open the discussion to considerations that are absent from more purely formal considerations of photographic effect. The question then becomes something like this: how and in what ways does the isolation of parts of the female body intersect with other structures (of vision, of meaning, of psychic projection) to further establish and secure the object status of women in representation? Consistent with the

arguments I have presented throughout this essay, this would suggest that theoretical analyses should be oriented more toward a consideration of similarities in different genres of photography rather than with their differences. Consequently, mainstream mass-market stereos and *cartes-de-visite* depicting actresses, dancers, entertainers, and demi-mondaines, framed and matted art photographs of female nudes, and the covert production of erotic and pornographic images could well be perceived as existing on a generalized continuum which collectively produces the category "woman."¹⁶ As an ideological operation, this production in turn intersects with and is assimilated to other discourses, other forms of knowledge—another reason for the necessity of broadly contextualizing work on photographic meaning.

Last, a historical retrieval of the kind this essay proposes is a necessary component for understanding the development of commodity culture. For it is surely through an investigation of the mass-media incarnation of woman-as-spectacle that we may be enabled to theorize the possible links between the emergence of consumer culture, the fetishism of commodities, and the role that more or less sexualized images of women play in the evolution of both. The historical period that produces the media explosion exemplified by the invention of photography itself is one in which the heightened fetishism of the woman's body, accompanied by fantasies of possession and imaginary knowledge, comes to be attached to the commodity. It is hardly necessary to underscore the fact that the conscription of images of women to and for the purveyal of commodities has been a cultural development of enormous significance and one in which photography has been a crucial agent. The eroticizing of the commodity and the commodification of women are cultural phenomena that cannot be studied apart from each other.¹⁷ Historically, this erotic lure became absolutely literalized with the advent of advertising that unambiguously conflated the image of the woman with the commodity, uniting both within the sign of (unfulfillable) desire. Finally, the covert circulation of erotic and pornographic images cannot be understood to occupy a space apart from mainstream imagery. Rather, it must be thought of as a visual subculture that subtly infiltrates mainstream, acceptable forms of representation. The legacy of this infiltration process is now everywhere to be seen, having permeated almost all aspects of our visual environment. To identify the problem of women's oppression or violence against women with the pornographic modes we can recognize "on sight" is to greatly oversimplify the matter. On the contrary, it may well be that the most insidious and instrumental forms of domination, subjugation, and objectification are produced by mainstream images of women rather than by juridically criminal or obscene ones. In arguing, therefore, for a historical retrieval and examination of illicit imagery, while shifting the terms of the discussion around licit ones, I am emphasizing the *systemic* quality of objectification and fetishism in the representation of women. The pressing need, it seems to me, is not to locate and censor a "worse offender" class of images, but rather to better understand—in order to effectively combat—the complex network of relations that meshes power, patriarchy, and representation.