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THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE LITERARY WORK OF THE FRENCH WRITER MAXIME DU CAMP

Diana Ligia Tudor
National University of Physical Education and Sport, Bucharest
Email: dianaligia.tudor@gmail.com

Mirel Anghel

Technical University of Constructions of Bucharest

Email: mirel.anghel@yahoo.com

Abstract:
When photography appeared, it was considered by many artists and writers as a means of reviving their art, creativity, aesthetic and authenticity as well. Such was the case of Maxime Du Camp, a 19th century French writer and pioneer in photography, who became well-known among the Parisian literary circles of his epoch after writing about his journey to the Middle East in his travel accounts, which he illustrated with his own photographs.

Keywords: photography, writing, travel accounts, Flaubert, archaeological mission, Orient.

Photography made its appearance in the 19th century and developed throughout the century; artists and writers had contradictory reactions to it. Baudelaire royally disdains it,[1] while others are aware of what it can bring to revive their art, namely creativity, aesthetics, and veracity. In 1839, by fixing an image on a plate, one obtained a daguerreotype (named after its inventor, J. Daguerre). The contribution of photography to the dissemination of personal images of writers' lives is undeniable: Zola, Hugo, Pierre Loti, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud take pleasure in having themselves immortalized in agreeable poses. Photography contributes not only to making oneself known, but also to documenting oneself; we may think of Flaubert, who gathered authentic photographic documents on the site of Carthage in order to write Salammbô, or of Zola, who made extensive use of photography for the presentation of the Three Cities (Lourdes, Rome, Paris). Thus, the appearance of photography in the 19th century seems to be a veritable miracle and a pretext for debates between its defenders and its adversaries.[1]

The possibility of travelling through time and places transforms photography into a scientific phenomenon

[1] See Schaeffer, Jean-Marie, *L'image précaire – Du dispositif photographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 150.

attributed to the domain of the marvellous. On the one hand, it goes without saying that scientific documents gain greater veracity thanks to images (let us think of the plates of Diderot's Encyclopédie); on the other hand, there are those who consider that the appearance of photography reflects the incapacity of language and imagination to express facts. Photography results in the immortalization of a place / a person, whereas literature must translate the products of imagination and the imaginary and render them real by other means.[2] In this opposition we find the struggle between the scientific domain and that of literature.[2] Those who defend photography mention another quality, thinking of the long and tedious descriptions found in books: consequently, the text should occupy a secondary place and let the image have primacy.

The supporters of photography do not fail to mention the fact that the camera can immortalize details that are so easy for it, but truly difficult for the human eye: this is the reason why the camera and photographs must have their place in the domain of discoveries.[3] Another asset of photography is its quality of capturing all the details of a place, of a person, without resorting to sometimes tedious descriptions; the camera 'has the gift of lending a hand to the eyes and to words powerless to reproduce the past and the present in detail'.[3]

To document the archaeological mission which he had requested from the Ministry of Public Instruction[44] and on which he was to be accompanied by his friend Gustave Flaubert, Maxime Du Camp decided to equip himself with a camera in order to bring back «images which would allow [him] an exact reconstitution»; he set off for Egypt equipped with a photographic chamber and 2-3 reams of paper.[5] [5]He was thus contributing to fulfilling the prediction of Louis Arago who, in August 1839, tasked with presenting Daguerre's invention to the joint Academies of Sciences and Fine Arts, had depicted the future of photography in these terms:

> To copy the millions of hieroglyphs which cover even the exterior of the great monuments of Thebes, of Memphis, of Karnak, etc., would require scores of years and legions of draughtsmen. With the daguerreotype, a single man could bring this immense task to a successful conclusion. Equip the Institute of Egypt with two or three of M. Daguerre's apparatuses, and on several of the great plates of the famous work, the fruit of our immortal expedition, vast expanses of real hieroglyphs will come to replace fictitious hieroglyphs or hieroglyphs of pure convention.[6]

The task that Du Camp had set himself seemed in reality to be more modest, but the precision, the incontestable reality of the photographic image, were among the fundamental motivations of these journeys of exploration which combine art and science, following in the footsteps of Chateaubriand and Champollion combined.

Like many others, Du Camp was a photographer only for this occasion. He had learned the technique in Paris from Gustave Le Gray (who, among other things, had photographed Du Camp just before he set off on this great adventure: the photograph, which we reproduce in the appendices, shows the future photographer well posed, legs crossed, arms also crossed over his chest, shoulders quite straight, supple, agile, slightly tense, ready to spring up

[2] Baudelaire sees in photography the refuge of failed painters. His judgment is clearly negative in this regard: «If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted and thoroughly corrupted it, thanks to the natural alliance it will find in the stupidity of the multitude», cited by G. Décote et alii, XIXe siècle, op. cit., p. 305.

[3] Van Lier, Henri, Philosophie de la photographie, Paris – Bruxelles, Les Impressions Nouvelles, 1983

[4] Du Camp, Maxime, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie, Dessins photographiques recueillis pendant les années 1849, 1850 et 1851, accompagnés d'un texte explicatif et précédés d'une introduction par Maxime Du Camp, chargé d'une mission archéologique en Orient par le ministère de l'Instruction publique*, Paris, Gide et Baudry, 1852.

[5] Pierre G. Harmant, Un écrivain paresseux: Maxime Du Camp, Paris, Seuil, May 1959, p. 17-18.

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from his stool), encountered many technical setbacks on site but was helped by Alexis de Lagrange, whom he met along the way, who also taught him another method, that of Blanquart-Évrard. All along the journey, from Alexandria to Beirut via Jerusalem, Du Camp photographed the most remarkable sites and monuments, a few examples of civil architecture, of vegetation (cedars, doum palms): in all, two hundred and fourteen calotypes (of which one hundred and twenty-five were published) produced in less than a year. These «photographic drawings», printed in the deserts, are also admired by Chateaubriand as two hundred precise «strange revelations» of regions hitherto unknown.

He is not, properly speaking, a «pilgrim of the sun» in the sense of a landscape photographer, but rather a photographer of monuments who is charged with bringing to a successful conclusion a project subsidized by the State. In a later note, he declared: «The dates are extremely important for a history of photography: the first print (Alexandria) is from November 1849; the last (Baalbek) is from 15 September 1850.»

But Flaubert gives, in a letter of October 1850 to his mother, details that the ministry probably did not know:

> Maxime has given up photography at Beirut. He handed it over to a frantic amateur: in exchange for the apparatus, we acquired enough for each of us to have a divan the likes of which kings do not possess: ten feet of wool and silk embroidered with gold. I think it will be chic![7]

In light of this «correction» by Flaubert, we cannot decide clearly and affirm whether Maxime Du Camp became a photo-reporter out of inclination or out of pure pleasure, or, on the contrary, out of fear of not being able to memorize everything, note everything, store up everything of his travel impressions.

One would hesitate to affirm that Du Camp's vision is classical, since, precisely, he is the first to constitute such a large body of images on paper. Without analysing Du Camp's photographs as a professional, we say that it is generally frontal, dry, and resolutely documentary; the only «living» element is the omnipresent small figure dressed in a white loincloth, who is there to indicate the scale. The prints made in the workshops of the Lille printer Blanquart-Évrard are of extraordinary quality: after one hundred and fifty years, their black-and-white tones are still just as strong.

Maxime Du Camp therefore has the great merit of having been the first to photograph the Sphinx; when Du Camp and Flaubert are at the top of the Sphinx, they are captivated by the magnificent panorama unfolding before their eyes. Everything is present: the time (the conquest takes place at dawn), the expanses of sand (the dark violet dunes of the desert seem to them frozen in timelessness), the hazy valley of the Nile gives them the impression of being a white sea. The photographic effect of this shot is undeniable.

In his 1959 article, Pierre G. Harmant, «Un écrivain paresseux: Maxime Du Camp», proposes to the contemporary reader and photographer to follow Maxime Du Camp faithfully on his journey, like a camera, having the same sure taste as the pioneering photographer, a taste also formed thanks to his art studies, which makes him able to recognize and capture the viewpoint on the spot:

> Who would not like to follow our "amateur" photographer as he emerges from the first cataract of the Nile... Calm in appearance, and running without making the reflections of its dreams waver, the river presents itself face on, cut into graceful meanders by hills of unequal size which come to die away in the water that surrounds them like a frame. In the distance, the Nile grows sparse, sinks, and disappears among the hillsides dominated by undulations of mountains.
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> These banks of the Nile, old witnesses of a vanished society, inspire a kind of dread: the river which is said to give fertility to the plains has ended up carrying away with it the lands to which it had once lent its silt.

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> Here and there a few riverbeds spring up, like flower vases along these dead steppes, such as the one that bears the name of Elephantine, opposite Aswan: a few clods of earth held together by reeds and drained by the roots of a grove of palm trees.
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> In Cairo, by contrast, one senses a kind of gaiety before the tomb of the Caliphs, then there is the mosque of Naser-Huçan, with its rounded arches and its pointed arches, its two domes covered in a lace of guipure, the mosque of Sultan Berk'ok, entirely of white and black marble, almost Venetian to us, as though the ancient traders of the Pearl of the Adriatic had absorbed Arab taste into their splendid fancies.
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> The mixture of slender trees, sharp minarets, square buildings, of santons with rounded domes covered in arabesques, often gives rise to delightful landscapes. One of the most fantastic, however, is the one depicting Sahonadji and the tomb of Mourad Bey. The mosque of Hou, sad and closed like a dismasted vessel, is even stranger, but less gloomy than a certain Coptic convent that stretches out at the water's edge on a rocky cliff carved by the current. One would find it hard to imagine that a civilization had managed to flourish on these shores if one did not encounter monuments in profusion there. These remains, far from animating these lands, have been so well matched by time to the colour of the soil, the cut stone has so thoroughly taken on the grain of the rocks, that these pylons, these sphinxes, these squat columns, with their lotus capitals, appear to astonished eyes as bizarre productions of a land strewn entirely with rocks.[6]

For Maxime Du Camp, text and photography know how to cohabit within the book: we repeat that he begins this pioneering mission in photography with the publication of an album of photographs in two volumes. [7]The writer finds photography the perfect modality through which he can express his thoughts on the literary plane; he even sees an interdisciplinarity between literature and science, an interdisciplinarity capable of satisfying the public, whatever their training / their store of knowledge may be. Photography also represents the means by which he renounces the past in order to be ready to steep himself in the novelty of new times. Little by little, for Maxime Du Camp, the writer becomes the very person who serves as mediator between science (its discoveries) and the world eager to know everything.

Whatever pleasure Maxime Du Camp may have taken from this journey to the Orient, the young ambitious photographer, while feeling himself a pioneer in this field, systematically exploited this photographic mission, not resting until he had found a publisher and produced around his album the necessary hype to obtain a fine society success and success of curiosity, to the great annoyance of his travelling companion, Gustave Flaubert.

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[6] For more information on Maxime Du Camp's activity as a pioneer of photography, see http://expositions.bnf.fr/veo/photographes/ssindex01.htm.

[7] See http://expositions.bnf.fr/veo/photographes/ssindex01.htm.

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