

Approaches to History

Thierry Gervais



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Propriété intellectuelle

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- 1 There are some photographic corpora that are difficult for the historian to grasp. In 2008, in his article on family photography, Geoffrey Batchen noted how the sheer volume of this type of production, which every second increases by 550 images in the United States alone, overwhelms the research methods developed for more finite collections. He also explained that the historian's quandary is only compounded by the poor aesthetic quality of these images, which he deemed 'repetitively uncreative as pictures.'¹ Elizabeth Edwards concludes the preface to her latest book, *The Camera as Historian*, which is devoted to the fifty-five thousand images produced by seventy-seven photographic missions conducted by English amateur photographers at the end of the nineteenth century, on a similar note: 'Many of the photographs are not particularly good by any standard, technical or aesthetic. Some are downright dreadful. Some are truly glorious.'² These corpora not only contain a great many (too many?) images; they are also visually uneven, if not simply banal, two characteristics that may explain the lack of interest in them. And yet these amateur photographs are an essential part of our collections, both public and private. The Société Française de Photographie has ten thousand prints and over fifty thousand negative and positive plates in its collections, most of them produced by amateur photographers as members of associations.
- 2 On the basis of a representative corpus containing both 'glorious' and 'dreadful' photographs, Edwards examines the ambitions and results of these photographic missions in an effort to grasp the 'historical imagination'³ to which they testify. Using ethnographic and anthropological methods, she analyzes the idea of 'useful leisure' that drove and justified the activity of these circles of amateur photographers, the discussions of the photograph's value as evidentiary proof and of the creation of visual archives, the role and interaction of local and national policies in such missions, as well as the public exchange of the images,⁴ in order to explain the conception of history then taking shape. It was a visual and positivist history, but also one that 'was not necessarily premised on the grand narrative of state and aristocracy, but was a history of the everyday.'⁵ This elevation of daily life to the status of historical object is probably a third reason why these corpora are absent from the analyses of photographic historians.

- 3 This issue of *Études photographiques* does not purport to fill this historiographic void, but it does provide a glimpse of the avenues available to researchers. In his comparison of the first two great histories of American photography, by Robert Taft and Beaumont Newhall, François Brunet analyzes how the photographic aesthetic defined and championed by Newhall oriented Taft toward photography's historical value and toward documentary photographs, especially those depicting 'ordinary life.' Industrial photographic production is another overlooked area, which Marie-Ève Bouillon confronts by analyzing the tourist photographs of Mont- Saint-Michel produced by Neurdein Frères in the late nineteenth century. In this other sector of the image economy, standardization, diversification of media, and stereotypes help to define the touristic identity of a monument. Photography is a multifaceted object whose uses historians have not yet fully explored. It is up to them to ask the right questions.
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NOTES

1. Geoffrey BATCHEN, "Les Snapshots. L'histoire de l'art et le tournant ethnographique", *Études photographiques*, n° 22, septembre 2008, p. 6.
2. Elizabeth EDWARDS, *The Camera as Historian. Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918*, Durham / Londres, Duke University Press, 2012, p. xii.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. Sur ces sujets, voir également Luce LEBART, "Archiver les photographies fixes et animées : Matuszewski et l'Internationale documentaire", in Magdalena Mazaraki (dir.), *Boleslas Matuszewski. Écrits cinématographiques*, Paris, Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma / Cinémathèque française, 2006, p. 57 ; Christian JOSCHKE, "La photographie, la ville et ses notables, Hambourg, 1893", *Études photographiques*, n° 17, novembre 2005, p. 136-157.
5. E. EDWARDS, *The Camera as Historian...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.