

**“The Mirror With a Memory”:  
The Stereograph and Art in Entertainment Capitalism**

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## **The Root of History**

### *A Summation of Photography as Entertainment*

Humanity has long been fascinated by the idea of converting the physical world into light captured on paper. For most of history, this dream could only be achieved through the creation of artwork, hand-drawn by master artists such as Brunelleschi and Alberti.<sup>1</sup> Techniques such as perspective, color theory, and chiaroscuro were all used in this attempt to capture the physical world, and the images produced from this effort entertained people for hundreds of years—and continue to do so today. As time moved on, the technology of art became more sophisticated, with inventions such as the camera obscura (popularly recorded by Leonardo da Vinci) employing mirrors; an extremely early foundation for the SLR-style camera.

Light itself was also used in these attempts to portray reality. Oliver Wendell Holmes famously gave credit to the sun for producing photographs, calling them the memorable name of “sun-pictures”.<sup>2</sup> Mo Ti, a Chinese philosopher, discovered that it was possible to create a projection with light in 400 BCE.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, noted something similar while witnessing an eclipse; he realized that it was possible to view it without damaging the eye by witnessing the projection through a small gap in the leaves of a tree—a precursor to the pinhole of the camera obscura. Given these examples, one must come to the conclusion that

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<sup>1</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>3</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

throughout human history, people have been fascinated and entertained by the mysterious ability of light to replicate the world around us.

The first successful instance of what is now called a photographic image came to be in 1826, photographed by French photographer Nicéphore Niépce.<sup>4</sup> He experimented with various tools for many years, employing materials such as glass and metal, as well as different substances such as bitumen of judea, in order to affix light-created imagery on a surface. “View from his Window at Le Gras,” 1826, (heliograph), the first known photographic image, was the seed of a massive cultural and economic revolution best demonstrated by the extraordinary popularity of a device known as the stereograph. The invention of stereoscopic imagery, as well as other forms of easily accessible photography, gave rise to a branch of capitalism in which visual entertainment could be systemically commodified—thus highlighting the stark cultural divide between financial elites and the working class.

To discuss the stereograph’s popularity, one must first discuss how photography became popular. Another French photographer, Louis Daguerre, worked closely with Niépce and was privy to his photographic breakthrough. After Niépce’s death, Daguerre continued his work, this time attempting to create a photographic image on polished silver plates coated in silver nitrate. The experiment was wildly successful, “very superior to that [process] invented by M. Niépce,”<sup>5</sup> and from it emerged the first daguerreotype, “Boulevard du Temple, Paris”, 1838.<sup>6</sup> The image

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<sup>4</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>5</sup> Daguerre, Louis. 1980. “Daguerreotype.” In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg. Sedgwick, Maine: Leete's Island Books, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

was crisp and clear, unlike Niépce's hazy heliograph. The landscape's architectural styles were clearly recognizable, and if one was familiar with the subject, one would instantly recognize it upon viewing the picture with a specificity no painting had been able to achieve. To further validate his success, Daguerre went on to produce numerous still lifes, such as "Still Life" 1838, (daguerreotype)—speaking to the artistic tradition of painting to cement that the daguerreotype was, indeed, a new major player in the visual arts.

However, it was not the individual still lifes and landscapes Daguerre produced which initially captured the minds of the public. It was the fantastic visual shows he produced prior to the daguerreotype—creations he called panoramas.<sup>7</sup> These were massive, long paintings, which could be rolled across a dimmed theater with accompanying lights and music to produce an experience akin to watching a contemporary movie. Daguerre's panoramas were extremely well-liked. Their popularity, in fact, is evidence in itself of the public's fascination with captured imagery of the real world. People wanted to see things they couldn't see in their daily life, and Daguerre's panoramas made that wish come true.

Given his background in producing panoramas, Daguerre knew there was a substantial market for an artificially produced visual experience. Working under this knowledge, he heavily advertised the daguerreotype and its process, quickly publishing a manual as to where to gather supplies and how to make a daguerreotype as a layperson. Hence, the era of the daguerreotype began. Their seemingly magical qualities captured the public eye. The mirrored surfaces which made it feel as though you could reach into the little picture and grab a subject by their hair; the intricately carved safekeeping boxes<sup>8</sup> which spoke of decadence and class; the unique nature of

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<sup>7</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>8</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

the daguerreotype, as each one was a direct-positive image and could not be reproduced. Nothing like it had existed before—no painting could boast that it used light itself to capture pure reality on a physical surface, untouched and unaltered by the human hand. Most importantly, no painting or method of visual creation had ever been so accessible. With only the purchase of a few tools and a manual, anyone could create their own picture. There was no need to apprentice under a master painter or buy expensive brushes. One didn't need to have extensive training or education to understand a daguerreotype—they need only to have lived. This, more than any other reason, is why the daguerreotype changed the cultural landscape forever. “This is just what the daguerreotype has done... The photograph has completed the triumph, by making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture.”<sup>9</sup> It equipped the general public with a hunger for photographs, setting the stage for the stereoscope.

The stereograph was invented in 1832<sup>10</sup> by Charles Wheatstone. This early version of the stereograph was unsuccessful—daguerreotypes and calotypes, the two most popular forms of photographic image-making at the time, were incompatible with the device. David Brewster, a British gentleman, later improved upon the original in 1849. He modified it so that it was compatible with printed images of the era, which in and of themselves were possible through the new innovation of the collodion process. The stereograph itself was a small handheld device shaped like an unusually clunky pair of binoculars. In order to use it, one inserted a stereo card into the front end, then looked through the two eyeholes. Stereo cards were small rectangular cards with two near-identical images printed on the left and the right. Mirrors within the device,

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<sup>9</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>10</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

acting as lenses, blended the two images together and created a 3-D effect; as if the viewer was peering into a miniature replica of the subject of the stereo card. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a “physician, man of letters, [and] amateur photographer”,<sup>11</sup> even innovated upon the stereograph later, producing a version one could adjust the lenses of to accommodate unique eye spacing and visual impairments such as nearsightedness or farsightedness. The stereograph debuted in its finished form at the Crystal Palace exhibition in London in 1851, and it instantly became one of the most influential cultural inventions of all time.

Victorian England fell in love with the stereograph. It could be used as a tool for education, for entertainment, for influence. To own a stereograph was to be fashionable and with the times. As Holmes said, it “produce[d] an appearance of reality which cheats the senses with its seeming truth.”<sup>12</sup> The stereograph allowed viewers to, however artificially, transport themselves into worlds they did not currently occupy. Queen Victoria herself was enamored with the invention. Soon, photographers were creating stereo cards with all sorts of images—everything from far-off earthquake disasters in San Francisco to ‘exotic’ locales like the Pyramids of Giza.<sup>13</sup> Although the cards were initially introduced in Britain, the subject of many popular stereo cards—the United States of America—soon found its way into this rapidly-expanding market.

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<sup>11</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>12</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>13</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

Famed photography studio E & H.T Anthony & Co., founded in New York City in 1862 and, for a time, America's top producer of photographic supplies, generated massive amounts of stereo cards. Due to the industrial mass production, they were relatively inexpensive and accessible to the public. Functioning as a precursor to the photography company giant Kodak, E & H.T Anthony & Co. heavily marketed and sold stereographs and stereo cards to a public starving for entertainment and positivity.

The popularity of the stereograph in America grew in conjunction with the rise of tragedy in the Civil War. The conflict raged from 1861 to 1865—four years of blood, death, and uncertainty as to whether the nation would survive. Many photographers worked overtime to document the carnage, such as Matthew Brady, Timothy O'Sullivan, and Alexander Gardner. For the first time, images of real, graphic corpses such as Gardner's "Bodies of Confederate Artillerymen Near Dunker Church", 1862,<sup>14</sup> were available to a public that had been primed for visual consumption of their physical reality—and photographers chose to take advantage of this hunger by selling and exhibiting their war photographs in various formats, including that of the stereo card.

Brady's "The Dead of Antietam" exhibition was a huge success,<sup>15</sup> with hundreds of photos marketed and sold. People could pay a fee, enter the gallery, and attempt to recognize the faces of dead loved ones in the photographs—and people were gladly paying that fee by the hundreds. The public grew more and more desensitized to the carnage, with popular magazine Harper's Weekly even publishing woodcut prints of Brady's Antietam photographs; a

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<sup>14</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>15</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022



collaborative effort which no doubt resulted in monetary profit for both bodies. All of this morbid fascination, however, is encapsulated by the stereoscope images which resulted from the war. Gardner's "Federal Buried, Confederate Unburied, Where They Fell", 1862, (stereo card)<sup>16</sup> allowed the civilian public to insert the war right into their stereographs and transfer themselves to the front lines. Some other stereoscopic images of the war were even hand painted with red and green, to emphasize blood which was splattered against foliage. Real destruction was transformed into parlor entertainment through the lens of the stereograph. This experience, of course, came at a price—the market price of the stereo card.

The macabre profits of the stereograph continued to be reaped post-war. In the aftermath of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, the conspirators who killed him were publicly executed on July 7, 1865. This massive historical event was, of course, attended by photographers. Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan, who had formed a photographic practice together in the midst of the war, took a series of photographs entitled "The Execution of Lincoln's Conspirators."<sup>17</sup> They recorded the moments immediately prior to the hanging, the hanging itself, and the moments immediately post-execution. And if one didn't have the good fortune to attend this event, any member of the public could purchase their stereo card series of the execution! This is significant because it was one of the first times a *series* of stereo recordings was produced; one of the first times one could witness an event in their stereograph over multiple stages. To our modern eyes, we can see the harbingers of film—an incredibly mass-market, entertainment-focused artistic medium—in this form of stereographic use; the experience of an event over time, understood as real light on surfaces.

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<sup>16</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

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This fascination with death continued post-war, with spirit stereograph cards. Spirit photography became hugely popular in the latter half of the 19th century, created through the practice of using double exposure (neglecting to clean an exposure plate, and therefore retaining the ghostly image of the previous exposure in the new picture) to create images of ‘spirits’. These were then sold en masse to the public, further feeding a nation’s hungry grief. One such stereo card is “The Ghost of Milton”,<sup>18</sup> with an unknown photographer and date. The title in and of itself belies the purpose of entertainment inherent to the stereograph; Milton was a hugely influential author, and prior to the proliferation of photography in the popular consciousness, literature was one of the few widespread forms of entertainment.

Later on in the post-war era, after paying handsomely for interactive experiences with death, the general public was searching for something more uplifting. As an initiative to heal the nation, the government sent expeditions of scientists and photographers (largely headed by geologist Clarence King) out West to create a sense of unity in the conquering of a ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’ section of the country. As the westward expansion captured the minds of the public, so did the need to see it happening—and thus, stereo cards containing pictures of Western landscapes were produced, such as William Jackson’s “Yellowstone”, 1871 stereo card.<sup>19</sup> (He also sold postcards of his Yosemite images, yet another way of commodifying and selling the experience to an insatiable audience).

But not everyone had access to a stereoscope. What was one to do without one? How could you enjoy photographs? Luckily, the photograph could be further purchased and consumed

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<sup>18</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>19</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

in the form of tintypes. The process was invented by Hamilton Smith in 1856.<sup>20</sup> These were small, enameled metal plates about the size of a credit card which produced direct-positive images and could be sold for mere pennies. Due to their size and cost-effective production, however, it was still possible to make a profit off of them, and traveling tintype studios were created, as well as cheaper versions of the earlier daguerreotype portrait studios. One such studio can be seen in the tintype “Two girls in front of Cliff House in San Francisco,”<sup>21</sup> c. 1900. Tintypes continued to be popular through the mid-1900s. They, along with postcards, other forms of photographic imagery, and the stereograph itself, serve as chief examples of the proliferation and popularity of photography as mass entertainment.

### **What Have We Become?**

#### *An Examination of Photography’s Relationship with Cultural Entertainment, Art, and Capitalism*

The impact photography has had on the collective cultural concept of entertainment cannot be overstated. Wendell Holmes put it best when he declared “We are looking into stereoscopes as pretty toys, and wondering over the photograph as a charming novelty; but before another generation has passed away, it will be recognized that a new epoch in the history of human progress dates from the time when he who—*never but in uncreated light/Dwelt from eternity*—took a pencil of fire from the hand of the ‘angel standing in the sun’ and placed it in the hands of a mortal.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>21</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

<sup>22</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

Indeed, a new epoch was born of the stereoscope (and photography as a whole). People, rather than being arrested by paintings, books, or plays, became obsessed with “this other invention of the mirror with a memory”,<sup>23</sup> and found themselves treating it as a “pretty toy” and “charming novelty”. But the ramifications of the stereoscope’s popularity were not merely confined to parlor rooms and parties. There were great concerns about its impact on art as a whole, and how the commonality and cheapness of the stereograph could possibly, in time, depreciate the value of art.

Voices of this concern can be heard in Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, where he posits that “the situations into which the mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated.”<sup>24</sup> Meaning, even though the original subject of the photograph is left physically unharmed, looking at a mere image of the subject and not the subject itself eliminates the inherent “aura” which possesses a work of non-photographic art. As we can see, the fear was that these reproductions, so accessible and so common, would undermine the value of original subjects in favor of their reproducible, photographic counterparts.

But how does this play into capitalism?

Photography was born roughly 30 years before a period known as the Gilded Age, which lasted from about 1870-1900. This period of history was characterized by the dominance of capitalism in America—resulting in an extremely consumption-focused culture heavily delineated by class lines. Given the new American bourgeois and petit-bourgeois, conditions

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<sup>23</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, Walter. 1936. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Edited by Hannah Arendt. Edited by Vicki Goldberg.

were ripe for the stereoscope to explode in popularity; as an increasing number of people had leisure time and pocket money to spend. Hence, the stereoscope became a household object—one that Wendell Holmes could be reasonably certain was “common enough to be in the hands of many of our readers.”

Both lower classes and upper classes alike could afford to own a stereoscope. This contrasts heavily with the financial audience of what had previously been the primary form of 2-D visual entertainment—painting. Paintings were precious, unique objects generally commissioned by the wealthy, as their creation involved skilled labor and expensive, occasionally rare materials. For the first time in history, there was a form of 2-D entertainment that was easily accessible to both the upper and lower classes. And in the Gilded Age’s culture of extreme class delineation, this ease of accessibility was unprecedented. Beyond even its accessibility, people were enraptured by the newness of the stereoscope, as “the first effect of looking at a good photograph through the stereoscope is a surprise such as no painting ever produced,”<sup>25</sup> and it held “infinite charm” in its ability to perfectly replicate the details of reality that no human hand could hope to achieve. Therefore, the culture was left with what appeared to be a languishing old art, accessible only to the wealthy, and a new incandescent art, one everyone could experience. Louis Daguerre, in his essay *Daguerreotype*, also indicated the universality of the technology: “Everyone, with the aid of the daguerreotype, will make a view of his castle or country-house: people will form collections of all kinds, which will be the more precious because art cannot imitate their accuracy and perfection of detail...”<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting,

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<sup>25</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>26</sup> Daguerre, Louis. 1980. “Daguerreotype.” In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg. Sedgwick, Maine: Leete's Island Books, Inc.

however, that in this quote he is specifically catering to “the leisured class”, as seen in his reference to “castles [and] country-house[s]”—a sign that, despite the accessibility of photography, classist social structures intertwined with capitalism were still casting great restraints on the minds of the people.

This radical accessibility of the stereoscope and photography, this radical equality of entertainment, can be said to have shifted the very foundations of the treatment of art in the financial marketplace. Art had been left untouched by capitalist markets for hundreds of years. Artistic clichés prior to the steep rise of capitalism were different as well. Most works of art were either created to give glory to God or give glory to the ruling class; one can observe these purposes in the numerous works of art produced for the Church, such as Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (c. 1495) or Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770).<sup>27</sup> The concept of creating art for the masses was unheard of. The introduction of photography, in its infinitely reproducible and secular glory, upset this fine balance because it was perfect for the capitalist machine. Capitalism functions in that it needs a market—supply and demand. There must be a market primed for consumption, a good to be bought, and a laborer who produces the good.

In the microcosm of the stereoscope, we are presented with the perfect capitalist storm. The history of photography, as we have discussed, created the perfect consumer: a mass public, millions of people, eager to see new wonders of the world using novel technology. By buying this new technology and new art, they could broadcast to their peers that they were with the times, fashionable, and hip. This leads to the second point—the good being produced. By being both an artistic object and a new object, the stereoscope/stereo card was both fashionable and functional; giving it an edge over products which were merely one or the other (such as a

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<sup>27</sup> Hazard, Maggie. Lectures presented at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s MacLean Center, Chicago, IL, September—November 2022

painting, or a chair). Finally, we find ourselves discussing the laborer producing the object itself—the photographer. As previously mentioned, by this point in time photography was relatively cheap and easy. Anyone could do it. By virtue of the camera being both a tool of artistic creation and a well-known, easy-to-use popular object, photography as a profession attracted both artists and casual workmen alike. On top of this large pool of potential laborers, once created, a single photograph could theoretically be printed infinite times for very little cost.

Therefore, capitalism found itself gifted with a product which enjoyed the entertainment status of art; an audience eager for more; and a large labor force which could produce the object for very little cost itself—generating a greater profit. So, capitalism flourished in tandem with the stereograph. This brings us to our discussion of art, and how art can operate while under the influence of a capitalist system.

Clearly, many people perceived stereo cards to be works of art; Wendell Holmes described his collection as “infinite volumes of poetry” which he “treasured” in his “small library of glass and pasteboard.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, he went on to imagine a future in which governments the world over constructed specialized libraries purely for the stereo card; an honor granted nowadays to film and video—mostly with private companies such as Criterion. In this analogue with film, one can examine a micro-conflict which characterizes the larger conflict of the stereograph in regards to capitalism: Contemporary film is, on one hand, generally considered a fine art; a medium populated with auteurs; something which combines the powers of music, visual art, acting, and writing into one powerhouse creation. On the other hand, it is seen by the existing capitalist system as a *product*, not an artwork. Films are, in the popular consciousness,

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<sup>28</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

ranked in quality by how much money they made at the box office. Studios decide whether to greenlight a sequel or not based on viewing numbers and profit. Executives are given carte-blanche to interfere on creative decisions in order to maximize profits. These issues are not obscure—they populate virtually every article about the state of the film industry—and even in that phrase, ‘film industry’, we see how the medium of photography has been commodified. For example, an article from the *Rolling Stone* complained that “Even the most relatively auteur-driven entries in the MCU bear clear signs of compromise, their more idiosyncratic qualities at war with the franchise boilerplate.”<sup>29</sup>

Now, it is possible to argue that in fact, art has always been under the yoke of a market, and photography’s explosion in the Gilded Age added nothing new. Yes, in past days paintings were commissioned by individual, wealthy buyers and not a mass market, such as the Catholic Church commissioning Michaelangelo’s services for the Sistine Chapel; but it was still a work of art being bought, paid for, and dictated by the individual consumer. One needs only to look at the news headlines of today to see that capitalism has affected painting as it has affected photography: All one ever sees is discussions about how much this painting was sold for, and isn’t that a ludicrous amount of money, dear readers?<sup>30</sup>

The stereograph (and early photography as a whole) essentially, by virtue of its popularity and mass proliferation, gave permission for the financial market to treat art of all kinds as an infinitely reproducible and/or marketable thing. In the words of Walter Benjamin, “But the

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<sup>29</sup> Dowd, AA. 2022. “The ‘Doctor Strange’ Sequel Proves Marvel Has a Problem With Directors.” *Rolling Stone*.  
<https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/doctor-strange-in-the-multiverse-of-madness-marvel-sam-raimi-1349286/>.

<sup>30</sup> Holland, Oscar, and Thomas Page. 2020. “Francis Bacon painting sells for \$84M at first-of-its-kind virtual auction.” *CNN*.  
<https://www.cnn.com/style/article/francis-bacon-sothebys-hybrid-auction/index.html>.



instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.”<sup>31</sup> Let us consider “politics” in this context as economics—as economics, like politics, is a man-made social machine. Following Benjamin’s logic, economics eliminates the “criterion of authenticity” from art itself.

It had never been physically possible before photography’s invention, but the stereograph’s mass mania revealed that the potential for art, film, and other mediums of imagery to become a pure entertainment product which could generate profits was always there. In this sense, photography’s relationship with capitalism is almost analogous to a pimple. When the proverbial pimple was popped by the popularity of the stereo card, it gave way to a gushing river of photographic and artistic ‘products’ which could be profited off of by businessmen.

Such is the conflict of the stereograph. It was perceived simultaneously as a “poem”<sup>32</sup> and an object which facilitated the “[destruction]” of an object’s “aura”<sup>33</sup> by allowing for an infinite number of images of an object to permeate society. The stereograph uniquely holds these disparate qualities, as for however full our contemporary world is of photographic and visual media, it was the first one designed for entertainment, and the first one to take the world by storm.

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, Walter. 1936. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Edited by Hannah Arendt. Edited by Vicki Goldberg

<sup>32</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, Walter. 1936. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Edited by Hannah Arendt. Edited by Vicki Goldberg

When considering these many threads and facets of the stereograph's creation—its reception, along with its wider impact on society as a whole, both from its initial popularity to the mere shades of it in contemporary art—one is left with the distinct impression of contradiction. The ability to capture light on a surface was an achievement that had been lusted after for centuries; and after mere decades of success in this endeavor, it became commonplace and regular. “It has become such an everyday matter with us, that we forget its miraculous nature, as we forget that of the sun itself, to which we owe the creations of our new art.”<sup>34</sup> The photograph heralded a new age of art, yet it was shouted down upon by the likes of Charles Baudelaire—a bourgeois French gentleman who “[lived] lavishly on an inheritance from his father”<sup>35</sup>—who considered it a mere “handmaid” to the greater visual arts of painting and drawing. The stereo card, much as the daguerreotype, was thought to last forever, to preserve an image in time indefinitely—yet both mediums were bolstered and supplanted by the collodion process and, later, film. Even film itself is slowly being eroded by the digital, mirrorless camera. It is doubtful that any photographic medium will disappear entirely; artists will pick and choose the medium which speaks to them. However, it is certain that the older the medium, the more difficult it will be to obtain the materials necessary to create art with that medium. But such is the nature of ‘progress’ in a capitalist society—if something cannot be new quickly enough, if it cannot be fashionable enough or artistic enough or fun enough, it will be forgotten. And so we are left reading dusty old texts and writing dusty old papers about a technology which was once envisioned to live forever.

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<sup>34</sup> Holmes, Oliver W. 1859. “The Stereoscope and Stereograph.” *The Atlantic*, June, 1859. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.

<sup>35</sup> Baudelaire, Charles. 1980. “The Modern Public and Photography.” In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg. Sedgwick, Maine: Leete's Island Books, Inc.

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