

The Painters and the Miracles: How Morse and Daguerre Created the Idea of Media

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Breakfast at the Diorama

Sometime in 1832, a German author and actor named August Lewald attended a special breakfast in the theatre district of Paris.

“We found ourselves under the eaves of a Swiss chalet...,” he wrote later.

Below us we saw a small courtyard surrounded with buildings..... On our left a goat bleated in his pen, and in the distance we heard the little bells of the herd ringing melodiously.

But further away, what a view! The valley covered with snow, surrounded by gigantic mountains! There was no longer any doubt of the scene before us; I pointed out that before us lay Chamonix, 3,174 feet above sea-level ...in the middle of the valley the majestic hump of Mont Blanc, 14,700 ft. high... Everyone was still standing filled with astonishment when another surprise succeeded the first... We looked around and saw girls in peasant costume serving a country breakfast consisting of milk, cheese, black bread and sausage, while a man-servant poured out Madeira, port and champagne into crystal glasses.

While at breakfast, we heard Alp-horns blowing a short solemn tune, after which a strong male voice down in the “valley” sang... in the dialect of the Chamonix valley. We were all greatly moved.

“That is not painting--- its magic does not go far as that!” exclaimed an English girl in the party. “Here is an extraordinary mixture of art and nature, producing the most astonishing effect, so that one cannot decide where nature ceases and art begins. That house is real, those trees are natural... Who is the artist who created all this?”

“My friend Daguerre,” I exclaimed enthusiastically. “His health!” We all clinked glasses. Daguerre approached and thanked us, obviously delighted at having been able to provide us with such a pleasant surprise in his Diorama.¹

The Daguerre of this story is the same Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre who, five years later, was to unveil the Daguerreotype to an astonished world. In 1832, he had been hard at work for a decade on the invention that gave him lasting fame. But he was already famous for his first invention: the Diorama.

Apprenticed to an architect as a teenager, Daguerre was a well-known figure in Paris by his late 20s, when his elaborate theatrical sets and spectacular stage effects began to get better reviews than the plays they were designed for.

In 1821 and 22, Daguerre devised a new spectacle. This was his Diorama--- a specialized display of gigantic paintings, over 70 feet high, made partly transparent

by special coatings that could be changed by manipulating daylight with various filters and shades².

In specially designed buildings in Paris and in Regent's Park, London, two diorama paintings were presented at a time. The entire auditorium rotated so the audience could view both without moving from their seats. Diorama paintings cycled between the two cities where they drew rave reviews and huge crowds.

"We have always considered the Diorama one of the most extraordinary and ingenious exhibitions ever presented to the public and the most strikingly correct representation of the beauties of nature and the wonders of art..." wrote a reviewer in the London *Spectator* in April 1830. Viewers of Daguerre's Diorama painting "Roslyn Chapel," the writer went on, "might think themselves transported by some magic spell to the scene itself--- so perfect is the illusion."³

Especially astonishing was Daguerre's ability to suggest, not only vast distances, light, and space but the passage of time. In "The Valley of Sarnen" clouds gather, a storm approaches, rain breaks out over a lake, and trees wave in the wind. In "A Midnight Mass at Saint-Etienne-du-Mont," daylight wanes in the church interior, candles are lit as the congregation files in, an organ plays before dawn breaks on the emptied chairs.

In "Holyrood Chapel," one of the Diorama's most popular presentations, a Gothic ruin appears in moonlight, a woman in white prays in front of a monument, while an invisible flute plays a Scottish air. Wrote one impressed observer: "[t]he stars actually scintillate in their spheres, occasionally obscured and occasionally emerging from the misty clouds, while the moon gently glides with scarcely perceptible motion... and the light reflected upon the walls and shafts and shattered architrave becomes dim or brilliant in proportion to the clearness or the obscurity of her course..."⁴

To twenty-first century observers, the similarity of the Diorama's effects to the cinema--- still three or four generations in the future-- are obvious. And this makes my first important point: the attraction of the effect of modern media existed before the invention of the media itself. Thus what we now call the media is not simply a technical innovation but the technical expression of an aesthetic ideal.

Daguerre's Diorama was a product of the Romantic Movement. The post-Revolutionary artist of Daguerre's generation was no longer the dedicated servant of the ruling class, collaborating with his patrons and assistants. He had become a solitary genius, a Promethean, even a revolutionary figure, overturning the rules of ordinary society. The Romantic artist's goal, above all, was to astonish.

Like the government-sponsored history painters of the 17th century, Daguerre created grand spectacles. But he presented them to a paying, middle class audience. And, although the elaborate effects of the Diorama required a large creative and administrative team, like the crew of a theatrical or movie production, Daguerre--- or his artist-partners--- always remained the "auteur" of a given creation. He was very much in the mold of the modern artist.

Voyage of the Sully

In the same year as Daguerre's breakfast at the Diorama, another painter returned from France to his native New York. Although he was not yet a celebrity in Europe, art historians now rank Samuel Findley Breese Morse's artistic work considerably higher than Daguerre's, considering him the greatest American portrait painter of his generation.

Born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, Morse was educated at Yale and studied with the prominent American artist, Washington Allston, in London. Like his teacher and Daguerre, Morse had a Romantic's idea of an artist's role in society.

Morse was a major figure in New York's art world, founding president of the National Academy and professor at the University of New York. But he regarded his artistic career as a financial disaster. "Strother, don't be an artist," he told one of his students. "It means beggary..."

Like Daguerre, Morse tried to exhibit his work to paying customers. But his large, elaborate history paintings did not draw large crowds. To his undying chagrin, Morse also failed to get an important official commission in Washington.

In October 1832, Morse was returning home from a long visit in Europe on the *Sully*, sailing from Le Havre. The dinner table conversation turned to electricity and the recently-discovered electro magnet. One member of the party remarked that electrical current could pass through any length of wire virtually instantaneously.

"If this be so," Morse said, "and the presence of electricity can be made visible in any desired part of the circuit, I see no reason why intelligence might not be instantaneously transmitted by electricity to any distance."⁵

Morse was not aware that the same idea had occurred to a number of others. Yet the thought inspired him to create a device to carry out his idea.

Morse's struggle to "invent" the telegraph was plagued, more than with technical problems, by rival claimants, competing telegraph systems, lawsuits, and battles with business partners until he sold off his patents decades later. But the simplicity of Morse's electromagnetic switch system with its quasi-digital Morse Code made Morse's system far simpler and faster than its more analog rivals. These elements formed the foundation of every electronic medium that followed.

The Meeting

Flash ahead to the year 1839. Morse was in Paris demonstrating his telegraph. The French capital was full of tales of another remarkable invention--- drawing with light--- which only a select few had been allowed to see.

A few days before he departed for America, Morse applied to the inventor--- Daguerre--- for a preview.

What Morse saw in Daguerre's studio astonished him. "You cannot imagine how exquisite is the fine detail portrayed," Morse wrote his brothers in New York.

No painting or engraving could ever hope to touch it. For example, when looking over a street one might notice a distant advertisement hoarding and be aware of the existence of lines or letters, without being able to read these tiny signs with the naked eye. With the help of a hand-lens, pointed at this detail, each letter became perfectly and clearly visible, and it was the same thing for the tiny cracks on the walls of buildings or the pavements of the streets.⁶

Like Morse, Daguerre had rivals. But his most serious challenger and one-time partner was conveniently dead by 1839. That was Nicéphore Niépce who made what is now considered the world's first photograph in 1826. Niépce was an impoverished aristocrat and amateur scientist. He had been experimenting with photography since the 1790s and entered into an uneasy partnership with Daguerre in 1829, which lasted until his death in 1833.

Daguerre was an expert in the camera obscura. Part of his work on photography was in perfecting the optics of the camera to achieve the sharp detail and Renaissance one-point perspective that so impressed Morse. So the Daguerreotype was not a scientific product but an artistic effect. It had the same goal as Daguerre's Diorama--- it awed the viewer with its apparently absolute faithfulness to the truth. It was more real than reality itself.

Within months of Daguerre's well-publicized, government-endorsed unveiling, photography had spread around the globe. Back home in New York, Morse became one of the first to use the new invention to create portraits. He is still known as the "father of American photography."

The Dark Horse

Morse was also impressed with the way Daguerre used publicity and lobbying to create a buzz around his invention. Using similar techniques, Morse managed to gain enough support from the United States Congress to build a telegraph line from Baltimore to Washington, DC.

In 1844, the year Morse sent the first official telegraph message, "What hath God wrought?" Morse created the first electronic media sensation. It was an election year. Both the Whig and Democratic party conventions were held in Baltimore. The Democratic convention deadlocked.

News of the convention votes rocked across the newly strung telegraph lines from Baltimore to Morse's office in the U.S. Capitol building. During the tense Democratic balloting, congressmen gathered around the window of Morse's room to hear him read the latest dispatches from the convention.

On the ninth ballot, James K. Polk was finally drafted into the Democratic nomination. He was the first “dark horse” presidential nominee in history. The response of the Democrats in Washington sped along the telegraph line to Baltimore, where it was announced on the convention floor.

“Three cheers for James K. Polk,” read the dispatch, “and three cheers for the telegraph.” Back in Baltimore, hundreds crowded around the telegraph office, begging to be allowed to be among the first to see the greatest invention of the age.

Following this first media sensation, telegraph lines quickly spread around the world. Among the first to feel the change were American newspapers. Fearing that the telegraph would destroy metropolitan newspapers, which would be beaten in getting the news to the provincial towns, a consortium of publishers forms the Associated Press to exploit Morse’s invention. Today, with its content distributed via the internet, the A.P. is world’s largest news organization.

The Invention of the Media

The photograph and the telegraph were the most sensational inventions of the century, creations so extraordinary that they rivaled the works of the creator.

Morse and Daguerre tweaked the raw ideas of many into something that had a clear, hard-edged focus and mass appeal. Presenting themselves as their inventor’s brilliant creators was just part of the program. Celebrity, publicity, and excitement were essential ingredients from the first. The creation of these two artists of the Romantic Movement is a cultural phenomenon that still rides on the wings of technology.

¹ Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *L.J.M. Daguerre: The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype*, 2nd edition, rev. (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), pp. 30-31.

² The Diorama was probably the most spectacular example of a number of 19th-century “rama” popular entertainments, including the panorama, the cyclorama, the diaphorama, the cosmorama, the pleorama, and the myriorama, to name just a few. All of them aspired to make a spectacle from the illusionistic and combined theatre and topographic painting in a way that led directly to the aesthetic of the cinema. See also Sophie Thomas, “Making Visible: The Diorama, the Double, and the (Gothic) Subject,” in *Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era* (University of Maryland, Romantic Circles, Praxis Series, ca. 2005).

³ Quoted in Gernsheim and Gernsheim, p. 25.

⁴ Quoted in Gernsheim and Gernsheim, p. 26-27.

⁵ Quoted in Carleton Mabee, *The American Leonardo: A Life of Samuel F. B. Morse*, rev. edition (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2000), p. 149.

⁶ Quoted in Michel Frizot, "Photographic Developments" in *A New History of Photography*, ed. M. Frizot (Cologne: Köneman, 1998), p. 28.