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# A Hidden History of Photography For Screenshot Photographers

*Part 4: Fake and Real, Dioramas and Ruins*

By [Eron Rauch](#)





"Portrait of Louis Daguerre" 1844, Jean-Baptiste Sabatier-Blot

In part three of Hidden History we looked at how screenshots are a continuation of William Henry Fox Talbot's desire to capture the fleeting of images on a camera obscura screen. We also looked at the unlikely but useful similarities between camera-less photography like photograms and screenshots. Leaping from the flora of Talbot's English countryside to the clamoring streets of Paris, we find the other half of photography's origin: Louis Daguerre. Most of his photographs were destroyed in a fire, but that won't stop us—What we're really interested in is Daguerre's doings before the clerk signed his historic patent for his photography process. Let's just say it has a shocking similarity with the simulated and virtual landscapes we wander.



Breath of the Wild, 2017 - Nintendo

It is odd enough that photography's formal history has two competing official creators. Yet the story is even more curious because as we saw with Talbot's commonplace camera obscura, the elements that led to photography were bubbling up everywhere. Talbot and Daguerre might be given credit for photography because they had the first patents for a complete process. But inventors everywhere were working on lens and chemistry, shutters and printing technology. There was also a growing cosmopolitan desire to know about, and be transported to, other places—a desire to travel with pictures. This desire is so familiar to us that we take it for granted that we want to wander through the plains and forests of *Breath of the Wild*, but a couple hundred years ago, the world was expanding at a pace



never before seen.



"Untitled (From Views of Burma)" 1855 - Linnaeus Tripe

The 1810s and 1820s in Europe saw the world shrink as trade ships from the colonial powers increasingly circled the globe. Newspapers and other media publications were on the rise, sharing stories of events and places hitherto unknown. Steam powered railways were growing increasingly common, and more people were traveling. In this era, Daguerre first made his fame and fortune in transporting people to some of these new exotic places with his popular entertainment attraction called the Diorama.

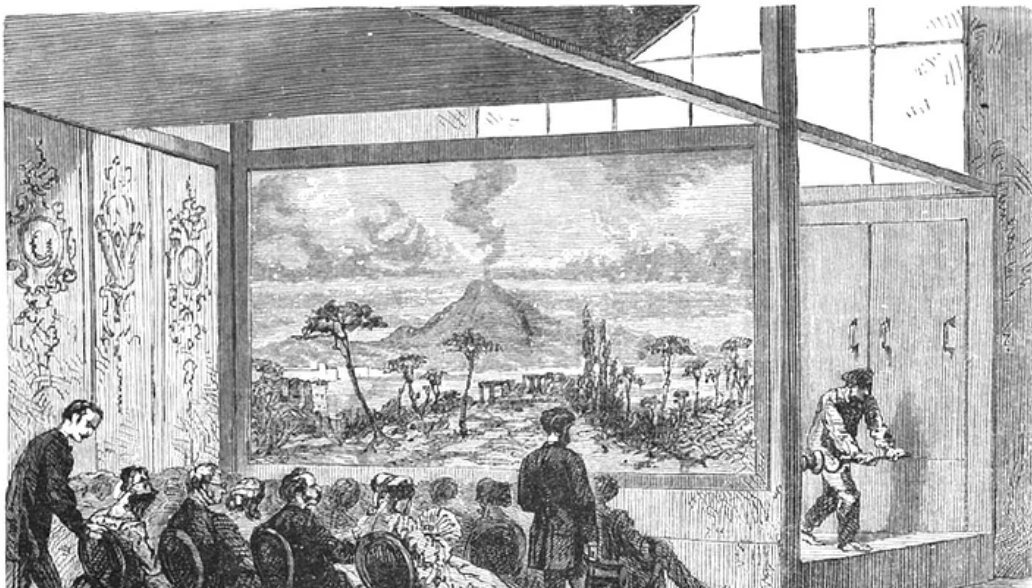




Fig. 5. — Le Diorama de Daguerre.

“Le Diorama De Daguerre” Unknown - Anonymous Postcard

We now use the word diorama in a generic way to describe a model of an environment, but it was Daguerre and his partner who combined their love of perspective-based landscape painting, theatrical lighting and stage effects, and exotic places into the first public spectacle to bear the name. Visitors would pay to be ushered into a room that held an intricate combination of stage sets, painting, and lights that would transport them momentarily to famous and majestic places that seemed almost real, all without leaving Paris. Talking about the recent restoration of a rare surviving set from the Diorama, Melissa Abraham tied it directly to video games, observing *“These works of art appeared to move and change in such a realistic manner that they were sometimes referred to as performances of realistic illusion, and were arguably the precursors to cinema and 3D imagery.”*



“The Ruins of Holyrood Chapel” 1824 - Louis Daguerre

This is all so important because when you look at the Daguerre’s landscape paintings, what he was trying to do with the Diorama, and his simultaneous work on photography, you can see just how deep the impulse to explore fantastical and fictional places runs across art forms, including photography. In one telling anecdote about the complex relationship between real and fake, it is said Daguerre used his Diorama, itself made using camera obscura techniques, to simulate the lighting he wanted for his famous painting of the ruins of Holyrood Chapel.



obscura techniques, to simulate the lighting he wanted for his famous painting of the famous Scottish church ruins of Holyrood Chapel. What is even more fascinating, given how often we photograph imagined worlds filled with ruins, is that despite both building the simulation and making the painting, Daguerre had never even been to Holyrood himself!



"Untitled (Dark Souls Test Shoot)" 2018 - Eron Rauch

What, then, is a photo mode but a diorama where we can explore, change, and photograph to make images like Daguerre's Holyrood? Photography or brush, simulated or real, it is about combining effects to make compelling images. The odd tension implicit in images of fictional or simulated places is wonderfully explained leading video games and architecture scholar Gareth Damien Martin. Weighing in on the HD remake of *Shadow of the Colossus*, he says:

*"While games may be the bastard child of art and architecture combined, it's worth remembering that their pre-digital history is one that connects to the history of images, and images of spaces, before it does to the history of architecture or spaces themselves."*

I love this statement because it disrupts our (natural) fixation on defining photography in terms of its relationship to 'real' places and things. Forgetting photography's relationship to the history of other images—forgetting that a photo of Holyrood Chapel would have more in common with a painting of Holyrood Abbey than it would have in common with the actual 3D building—obscures just how much of photographic history is obsessed with constructing places to make compelling images.





"On the Set of 2001: A Space Odyssey" 1965-1968 - Dmitiri Kessel

One example that is so obvious that we tend to forget about it is movies. Cinematography might be a near cousin to photography, but even more relevant is the role of the set photographer. These are the photographers who wander movie and television sets to make still photographs during production. Set photography images can range from doubling the cinematography for epic promotion posters, to recording of the placement of objects on sets between takes. Other images might document the interaction of the actors, the struggles of the director, the crew assembling a town, and all sorts of other images that can help share the details of these fictional worlds with fans.



"Untitled (From Artificial Nature)" 2002 - John Divola

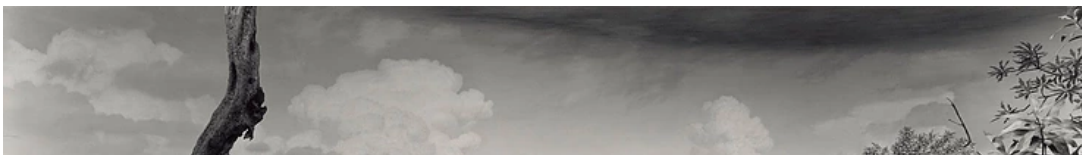


If you imagine standing with a stills camera in the elaborate space station sets of *2001: A Space Odyssey* or Morodor from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it seems like a very near neighbor to what we do as screenshot photographers. In some ways, we're just rogue set photographers rummaging through fantastical CG worlds. One artist who has explicitly explored this nebulous space of the film set is John Divola, who has a conceptual photography project called "Artificial Nature" where he shows collections of vintage photographs of Hollywood sound stage sets.



"No More Stars (Star Wars) #15" 2010 - Ra Di Martino

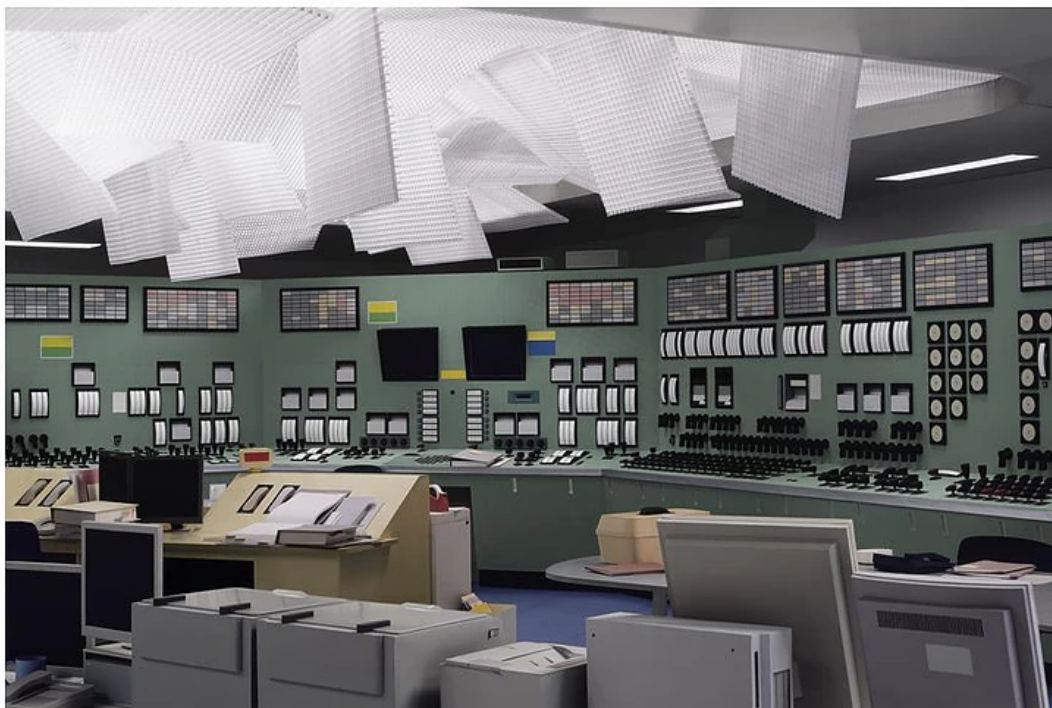
Sets exist in a strange place between fictional and real, and one of my favorite projects that expands on photography's relationship to sets is called *No More Stars*. Photographer Ra Di Martino went back to the sets of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, now rotting and buried in the desert to photograph their ruins like a space opera Holyrood. I quit playing *World of Warcraft* before the *Cataclysm* expansion that changed some of the original landscape, but when I watched a friend navigate the new Badlands, I immediately thought of Martino's work. Similarly, I feel like this work helps us develop an understanding of screenshots that can include images of the lo-fi digital ruins of older game worlds—places with equally slumping and shoddy looking buildings, but instead of the harsh desert winds, their mythic allure has been battered by the equally abrasive march of technology that leaves their low-poly, low-pixel textures laid bare.





“White Rhinoceros” 1980 - Hiroshi Sugimoto

Hiroshi Sugimoto is an artist who has made photography's tricky relationship to real fakes and fake reals his core theme. His “Diorama” series is made up of large format, sumptuously printed, pictures of those hokey historical dioramas you’ve seen at museums on school trips. This work directly asks what does it mean to make beautiful, luminescent, photographs of things that are dubiously real. Neanderthal camps, sabertooth tigers, African vistas, all obviously, and often awkwardly, constructed from taxidermy, plaster, and paint. These are images that hover in-between our expectations for realism in photography, and are intimately related to our screenshot journeys standing under a sunrise with a herd of kodo wandering alongside.



“Kontrollraum / Control Room” 2011 - Thomas Demand

But what happens when you photograph a subject, a place, that is fake in a way that isn't trying to even pretend to pass as real? Thomas Demand jumps headlong into this question



by making very large photographs of paper models of real places. As you'd expect, this means that there is a weird lack of detail, an abstraction of a place, that is confusing to look at, even though it is seemingly related to somewhere with intense meaning (in this case, the control room of Fukushima Daichi power plant damaged by the 2001 tsunami). But it is confusion that anyone who has spent 5 minutes in *Grand Theft Auto's* Los Santos, will instantly recognize. As art critic Barry Shabowski observes, "What his work asks is, among other things whether and how photographs can be about things they are not of." And what are screenshots but photographs about things they are not?



"Untitled (Barragan House, #19)" 2005 - Luisa Lambri

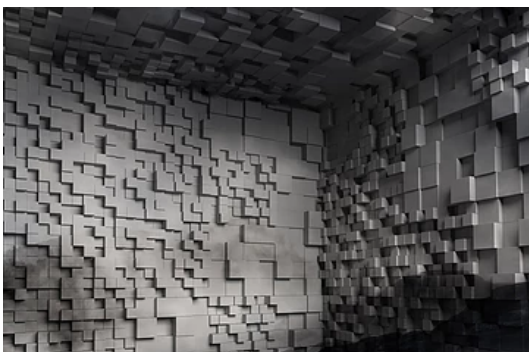
Luisa Lambri dives headlong into the question of realism, images, and spaces in her architectural photography. Demand and Sugimoto's work deals with fictional spaces, but Lambri's use of lighting and cropping in extreme and unique ways transforms supposedly "real" spaces into something unsettlingly unreal. The final images often look more like the geometric planes and blooming 3D lighting effects of CG than what you'd expect from photographs of famous buildings. Her work is so interesting to me because it takes something we considered fixed, a building, and transforms into a stunningly austere image, filled with mystery. Which isn't terribly different than what happens with the aforementioned *LotR* movies when they reuse pieces of the gorgeous New Zealand landscape to stand in for Middle Earth.



"#83.016417 Detroit, MI (2009)" 2010 - Doug Rickard

Indeed, we live in a time where photographs of "things they are not of" are exploding in number with overlays on maps, apps that transform your face into an anime character, user icons, snapchat filters, and the like. One of the more curious projects that ties together the history of photographing screens and Daguerre's lineage of immersive images of places is the *A New American Picture* project of Doug Rickard. He uses Google Street view to digitally simulate wandering around as a street photographer, but sitting at his computer through a remapped world. I'm not sure exactly what I think of these photographs, which are large prints of a place filled with pixelation and blurred faces from some of the more neglected areas of America, but the works ask a lot of hard questions about how we now use images to know the world—how we use images to define what is real—and our role as photographers in an era where everyone has their own personal 24/7 Diorama that can allegedly take them anywhere they want.

Especially with the addition of digital editing, machine learning fakes, and ever more sophisticated 3D modeling (and now printing!) becoming commonplace, the gap between the digital worlds of video games and the imagined places created by photographers to make their images has grown closer. We also spend more and more time in hybrids of images and places.







"Interzone 8" 2013 - Sonya Payes / "Untitled (Nier: Automata)" 2017 - Eron Rauch

Stumbling through the deconstructed underworld of the incredibly visually potent *Nier: Automata*, I was amazed to see a profound echo of imagery with a series of photographs I had enthralled me couple years back. Sonya Payes had made photographs of liminal caves built of blocky shapes that seemed to speak to the kind of magical but crude fictional places we so often encounter from *Mario* to *Minecraft*. Given the sea change in our relationships to images and places, it should be no surprise that both contemporary photographers and video games are wrestling with some of the same visual strategies, symbols, and metaphors. We need our images to help us understand the constructed worlds we increasingly inhabit, and what makes me so excited about screenshot photography, is that it is in the perfect place to continue Daguerre's complex relationship between real and fictional, between simulation and artistic image.

*In the fifth installment of Hidden Histories, we'll look at how photography has had a deep love of making images of fictional characters, and what we screenshot photographers can learn from one of the most famous photographers from the early history of photography, Julia Margarette Cameron.*

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