

1.6

Interview of Chevreul, France, 1886*

Thierry Gervais

In the 1880s, the German Georg Meisenbach, the American Frederic Ives, and the Frenchmen Charles-Guillaume Petit and Stanislas Krakow all developed photomechanical printing processes that allowed photographs to be reproduced in the press without the intermediary of an engraver.¹ Although still very hands-on, these methods meant the photograph's grayscale could be accurately reproduced, as seen in Nadar's photographic interview with the scientist Eugène Chevreul, published in *Le Journal illustré* on 5 September 1886.² For this feature, which was intended to mark Chevreul's hundredth birthday, Nadar developed a unique strategy: a carefully orchestrated combination of photography and words, with the latter appearing as a direct transcription of the scientist's words as obtained during the interview process. "For the first time," Nadar said, "the reader is going to be the spectator, as if he were actually present."³ An analysis of the interview reveals not only Nadar's illustrative methods, but also the venture's experimental character.

In 1880s France, the interview was coming to be seen as a means of conveying news to the reader in a more direct way.⁴ Nadar added photography to this journalistic approach. With the photographic recordings being carried out by renowned scientists, such as Jules Janssen and Étienne-Jules Marey, attracting attention in France,⁵ photography appeared to Nadar as a legitimate investigative tool. The photographic image was thought to offer direct access to events: "with the Nadar system there is no interpretation: this is exact reproduction . . . One has a document that is absolutely exact."⁶

This photographic interview is the result of meticulous efforts on the part of Nadar. He began by selecting thirteen photographs from among the extant fifty-eight, and of Chevreul's remarks chose only those that interested him, such as the scientist's views on aerial navigation. Last and most important, he was quite flexible in the way he associated image and speech. Historian Geneviève Reynes tried to match the transcripts of Nadar's three interviews with Chevreul with Nadar's photographs but found that this was impossible: "The captions for these photos were allotted at random: Chevreul says something in one photo, but in the following one we find words spoken on a different day about a different subject . . . Worse still, several prints of the same photo do not have the same caption or, conversely, the same sentence is attributed to two different photos. And sometimes the extract appended to a photograph cannot be found in the full text of the interviews."⁷

Despite his claim to an "exact reproduction," Nadar took a narrative approach unencumbered by any objective transcription. He numbered the images and re-wrote and ordered his subject's words as he



Figure 1.6 *Le Journal illustré*, vol. 23, no. 36, 5 September 1866, cover (right) and p. 288 (left). Private collection.

saw fit, constructing a coherent story for the reader that nonetheless had little to do with how the interviews actually unfolded. By way of an introduction, the first photograph shows Chevreul looking quizzically at Nadar's guestbook; the caption reads "and what would you like me to write here?" In the second, Chevreul's pose, less overtly expressive and so more manipulatable, allows Nadar to insert his subject's opinion of the work of Louis Pasteur. In the third, a pensive Chevreul is seen pen in hand and, according to the caption, about to write down his guiding principle—which he is doing in the fourth photograph, bent over the guestbook. The words he is writing are used as the caption: "One must strive for infallibility without laying claim to it. Chevreul." The narrative then continues with the other images, covering the everyday philosophy of this scientist "who drinks nothing but water" and declares himself willing to believe only what he sees. The thirteenth image concludes the interview: mouth open and hand outstretched emphatically, Chevreul is made to say, "I haven't told you everything. But telling is not enough, one has to prove, one has to *show!* I have to *make you see!* You have to *see!* I want to show, because it's when I see that I believe!!!" A fine ending, since it sums up Chevreul's scientific method and justifies Nadar's journalistic method, his joining of images and words in the illustrated weekly. Scientist and journalist are depicted as working together, pursuing the same goal: to provide his audience with visual evidence—the only kind that they, and we, will believe.

Nadar's photographic interview indicates a change in journalistic methodology, from one modeled on the art of literature to one modeled on the art of science. As a journalist, Nadar wished to align himself with Chevreul and be recognized as a man who, like his interview subject, was engaged in rigorous

investigation. But although photography was already playing a decisive role in journalism at the time, neither photographers, printers, nor even readers would accept it as a valid journalistic approach until the late nineteenth century, when the first magazines foregrounding photography appeared.⁸ Nadar's reportage also reveals the adjustments that were necessary to the effective communication of news through photographs. His use of a recording method influenced by scientific protocol and a reproduction process—halftone—that captured the grayscale of photographs produced a story more realistic than any that had come before. But the mechanical precision of both the production and reproduction of the photographs were not enough; the photographs still had to be sequenced, numbered, captioned, and arranged on the page in order to create the image of Chevreul that Nadar wanted. Only then did they show the scientist as an erudite centenarian up to speed with the latest research methods common to both science and journalism.

Notes

* This chapter translated from the French by James Gussen.

- 1 Thierry Gervais, "La Similigravure: le récit d'une invention (1878–1893)," *Nouvelles de l'Estampe*, 229 (March–April), 2010: 2–29.
- 2 "L'art de vivre cent ans," *Le Journal illustré*, 23.36, 5 September 1886: 281–8.
- 3 Nadar, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Mss, N.a.f, fol. 55.
- 4 Christian Delporte, "Information et reportage: début du règne," in *Les Journalistes en France, 1880–1950. Naissance et construction d'une profession* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1999): 60–4; and Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998): 40–2.
- 5 Marta Braun, "Aux Limites du Savoir. La photographie et les sciences de l'observation," in André Gunthert and Michel Poivert, eds., *L'Art de la photographie des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Citadelles-Mazenod, 2007): 140–77.
- 6 Thomas Grimm, "L'art de vivre cent ans," *Le Petit Journal*, 8649, 31 August 1886: 1.
- 7 Geneviève Reynes, "Chevreul interviewé par Nadar, premier document audiovisuel (1886)," *Gazette des beaux-arts* (November 1981): 154–84.
- 8 Only *Le Figaro* attempted the exercise, three years later: "Entrevue photographique," *Le Figaro*, "Supplément littéraire," 47, 23 November 1889: 1–3.