

The Elusive Image Rising over the Horizon
“Valbelle, Myth of Fiction?”: re-contextualizing the legacy
of an eighteenth-century aristocrat

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Many transformations germinating in the cultural and scientific compost of the eighteenth century would eventually contribute to the development of so-called “modernity” in the twentieth century. I believe that a case could be made to include among them the conception of photography and the ensuing “Infocom society,” a term often used to describe this nascent twenty-first century. The purpose of this essay is to study the case of an English garden built in the south of France in the later part of the eighteenth century, a garden in which the present author sees a number of elements auguring the invention of the revolutionary pictorial medium. This unusual connection was eventually given the form of an artistic body of work in which scholarly history and creative fiction were waved into one another under the title *Valbelle, Myth of Fiction?*.

The question as to who truly invented photography has been the subject of an ongoing debate that started almost as soon as the official announcement of daguerreotype was made on the 18 August 1839.¹ The explicit date of 1800 is often given as a possible decisive marker in relation to a Wedgwood experiment in which the negative imprint of a leaf was produced, but not fixed, on a piece of leather sensitized with silver nitrate. The exact year, though, isn’t absolutely certain.² But given that Wedgwood produced a photographic imprint at the turn of the nineteenth century, it looks almost as if the magical medium that would give birth to

1. The debate sprang from the question as to what defines exactly “photography” in technical terms, a question which eventually resulted in yet another tug-of-war between England and France on who had conducted the first successful experiments on either side of the channel. For an overview of this debate refer to the chapter *The Politics of Invention* in Mary Warner Marien’s *Photography: a Cultural History*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2011), 22-23. For an in-depth study of this multi-faceted debate, refer to the proceedings of the colloquium *Les Multiples Inventions de la Photographie*, held in the château of Cerisy-la-Salle from 29 Sept to 1st October 1988. *Les Multiples Inventions de la Photographie*, (Paris: Mission du Patrimoine Photographique, Ministère de la Culture, 1989)

2. Wedgwood experiments might have started as early as 1790 and the famous decisive experiment on a piece of leather might have taken place only in 1802.

the “age of mechanical reproduction”³ had been patiently waiting for the right time to step onto the world stage and shout out loud “Modernity here I come.” It is often said that, considering the advances in chemistry and optical sciences that took place in the eighteenth century, it is a mystery why photography wasn’t invented any earlier.⁴

In the book *Burning with Desire* the American historian Geoffrey Batchen gives a comprehensive survey of the many experiments and diverse mentions of possible techniques announcing photography that can be recorded in the decades preceding the decisive year of 1839, when suddenly not just one but several different forms of photography appeared.⁵ Most of the experiments conducted with a clear photographic intention in mind actually took place in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. A number of occurrences, related to photography although less clear in their intent, can be traced all the way back into the eighteenth century.⁶ Most of the scientific experiments that eventually resulted in the fully developed photographic technique appear to have been conducted at first independently of a clear photographic concept, at least until the later part of the century, when Batchen notes the progressive apparition of what he calls “the burning desire to photograph.” While it appears that the idea to record light-made images with a technological medium is rarely mentioned prior to the late part of the eighteenth century, by the turn of the nineteenth century it had become almost a universal preoccupation. The paucity of references to the photographic concept in the eighteenth century therefore makes the visionary description given by Tiphaigne de la Roche in 1760 all the more remarkable.⁷

3. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, (1936), in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51.

4. Among others, see Geoffrey Batchen citing Helmut Gersheim in *Burning with Desire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 24-26.

5. See Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 35.

6. In 1727 Johann Heinrich Schulze noted the sensitiveness to light of the silver salts. This observation was the first of a long list of similar experiments that eventually found their culmination in Wedgwood’s.

7. See Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, 31-32.

Tiphaigne de la Roche (1722-1774) is a rather mysterious character, made even more mysterious by the fact that paradoxically there is no existing portrait of the man who appears to have been among the first to envision photography. It is not just an image of Tiphaigne that we are missing. A strange aura of uncertainty seems to float around this medical doctor by profession, writer by inclination. He was born in 1722 in Montebourg, Normandy. He spent most of his life in Valogne, a town in the heart of Normandy, often referenced to as the *Versailles of Normandy* for the wealth of its aristocratic inhabitants and the brilliance of its intellectual life. He became a doctor in 1744. He was a member of the Academies in Caen and Rouen. He wrote about half a dozen books combining scientific explanations, philosophical considerations and alchemical search, most of them published anonymously. He passed away in 1774 and that's about all we know of him.⁸ One of his books published in 1760, however, grabbed the attention of his contemporaries with visions that seemed to come from the future, so much so that it was translated into English and published in London the following year.

The book was titled after Giphantie, the name of an imaginary country, in fact an anagram of his name. In it, Tiphaigne imagined that “elementary spirits” took him to a country lying beyond the worldly realm, where they showed him astonishing things. And one can wonder if Tiphaigne had not indeed managed to achieve serious esoteric results because the book contains a puzzling description of a full meal entirely made of powdered food, the kind that would become commonplace two centuries later; the description of some technological apparatus that can now be interpreted as telephone and video; and, most of all, a clear description of the photographic concept: the idea of fixing an image of the world produced by the action of light onto a sensitized surface.

What is most fascinating in Tiphaigne's description of the process used by the elementary spirits to produce those amazing life-like images is that it follows almost step by step the procedure that ninety years later will define a golden age of photography: Frederic Artcher's collodion plate technique, invented in 1851.⁹ From

8. Jacques Marx, *Tiphaigne de la Roche, Modèle de l'Imaginaire au XVIII siècle* (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1981).

9. “I saw, out of a window, a sea which seemed to me to be about a quarter of a mile distant. The air, full of clouds, transmitted only that pale light which forebodes a storm: the ragging sea ran mountains high, and the shore was whitened with the foam of the billows which broke on the beach. [...]

the viscous substance spread over a support, to the brief exposure, to the one hour spent in a dark room to let the image fix itself, all the steps of the collodion wet plate technique are there. Bent on the idea of producing a “painting,” Tiphaigne imagines that the sensitive substance is laid over a canvas rather than a glass plate. But he does use the comparison with a mirror and the optical concept of “reflection” as well as that of “ray of light” to explain the way the image is produced. So almost everything is there ... with the exception of an actual camera, despite the widespread use of the camera obscura as a drawing device at that time.¹⁰ The absence in Tiphaigne’s text of a device fundamental to photography, even in its most recent computational forms, might be seen as a reflection of the reasons why photography wasn’t fully invented but only potentially conceived of in the eighteenth century. For photography was eventually born from the combination of different scientific and technological fields of research that took a long time to come together.¹¹ There is no

[...]That window, that vast horizon, those thick clouds, that raging sea, are all but a picture. From one astonishment I fell into another: I drew near with fresh haste; my eyes were still deceived and my hand could hardly convince me that a picture should have caused such an illusion.

The elementary spirits (continued the Prefect) are not so able painters as naturalists; You shall judge by their way of working. You know that the rays of light, reflected from different bodies, make a picture and paint the bodies upon all polished surface, on the retina of the eye, for instance, on water, on glass. The elementary spirits have studied to fix these transient images: they have composed a most subtle matter, very viscous, and proper to harden and dry, by the help of which a picture is made in a twinkle of an eye. They do over with this matter a piece of canvas and hold it before the object they have in mind to paint. The first effect of the canvas is that of a mirror; there are seen upon it all the bodies far and near, whose image the light can transmit. But what the glass cannot do, the canvas, by means of the viscous matter, retains the images. The mirror shows the objects exactly; but keeps none; our canvas shows them with the same exactness, and retains them all. This impression of the images is made the first instant they are received on the canvas, which is immediately carried away into some dark place; an hour after, the subtle matter dries, and you have a picture so much the more valuable, as it cannot be imitated by art nor damaged by time.”

Tiphaigne de La Roche, *Giphantia: or a view of what has passed, what is now passing, and during the present century, what will pass in the world*, (London: Robert Horsfield, 1761), 93-96.

10. Batchen mentions that “Tiphaigne likens a large hall to a camera obscura, the walls of which carry a painting” (*Burning with Desire*, 31) but if one refers to the original text, the room is mentioned as being on the contrary not very large and nowhere in the text is the principle of the camera obscura mentioned: “We went in; and my guide, after leading me through several dark turnings, brought me at last to the light again. He conducted me into a hall of middling size, and not much adorned, where I was struck with a sight that raised my astonishment. I saw, out of a window, a sea which seemed to me to be about a quarter of a mile distant.” (*Giphantia*, 93).

11. Photography was born from the results of scientific researches in chemistry (chemical sensitivity to light) and optics (camera obscura and lenses). These researches originally independent from one another were then merged together by technological inventors at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

doubt that research in the field of chemical and optical sciences were required for the development of photography. But one can also look at the concept of the photographic image that seems to have emerged in the eighteenth century as the real quantum leap from which a whole new form of communication and conception of the world would emerge.

A change of paradigms in the way the world was perceived and represented took place in the eighteenth century by which the world started becoming at once smaller and more “abstract,” and, in today’s context, one would almost say “virtual.” The world started becoming smaller because after centuries of expansion and of developing relations with other parts of the world, European nations had seen many exotic goods become a part of daily life. In fact, their economic dependence was about to take on a political dimension, an evolution that would make remote parts of the world an integral part of their national territories and result in colonialism. In the meantime, information of all sorts concerning these remote horizons was compiled in the European centres of learning in the form of encyclopaedias. The world was becoming a long list of things that could become topics of dissertations and put in relation to one another across time and space. Most importantly, these “things” were often the subject of illustrations complementing the text describing them. The notion of “image,” for the most part given a sacred or aristocratic connotation until then, was becoming the vehicle of worldly concerns. And the remote lands could be visited by flipping through the pages of books in the comfort of a private parlor.

Among the cultural elements defining the eighteenth century, the English garden is probably most representative of this evolution. The *Jardin à la Francaise*, the epitome of which can be found in Versailles, had marked the seventeenth century. It typified the spirit of the classical era, the prevailing taste for order and symmetry that enjoined Humankind to shape Nature into geometrical figures. By the mid eighteenth century a taste for everything Chinese became the craze. In England, where tea was fast becoming a national drink, this fashion gave birth to a concept of landscaping adapted from the Chinese garden. In the English Garden, wild bushes and meadows took over pruned flowerbeds because Humankind had to unite with nature as opposed to dominating it. Pavilions and monuments scattered across the garden emphasized the feeling of a haphazard promenade full of

surprises and the style of these pavilions reflected ideas at work in the society. Chinese pagodas conjured up images of faraway countries. Symbols drawn from antiquity such as ruined columns and Egyptian pyramids were the manifestation of fashionable esoteric movements. Useful buildings such as windmills or barns announced the birth of a rational approach to agriculture and productivity. Most importantly, these “*fabriques*” as they were called in French were meant to stand as the focus of pictorial compositions discovered along the stroll across the park, each of these scenes becoming the possible subject of a painting. The world was becoming an “image.” And as the word *fabriques* implies, these “images” were fabricated; they were simulacra. If much of what makes the English garden prefigured nineteenth century Romanticism, twentieth century Postmodernism wasn’t too far away either.¹²

We shall now move into the second part of this essay and look at the specific case of an English garden in southern France that happens to have strongly influenced my artistic imagination at a very young age. The ruins of the Valbelle castle overlooking the village of Tourves in Provence were the destination of afternoon walks in the company of my grandmother and great grandmother during my holidays spent in their company. In fact, one of the most powerful moments of artistic awe that influenced me for life was experienced there, when my grandmother took me to see a representation of the operetta the *Merry Widow* in front the castle’s neoclassical colonnade. That night, music, lights, costumes and architecture combined in the warmth of a beautiful summer night and a sense of what made life interesting and beautiful sank deep in me. From then on, these ruins and the stories found around them became the subject of a deep fascination and eventually became the topic of my master research in 2005. This research, entitled “Valbelle, Myth or Fiction?,” aimed to re-contextualise the elusive legacy of Omer de Valbelle in a postmodern perspective and put it in relation with aspects of photography theory.

Central to the history of Tourves castle and its remaining ruins is the character of Omer de Valbelle (1729-1778), Marquis de Tourves and seigneur of

12. Michel Baridon, *Le Jardin paysager anglais au XVIIIe siècle*, (Editions universitaires de Dijon, 2000).

many other estates in the region of Aix en Provence.¹³ A flamboyant figure of the eighteenth century, Omer de Valbelle is the epitome of an era that combined frivolous indulgence and the quest for knowledge. The last male member of his lineage, Omer's story and that of his family, can also be seen as encapsulating the rise and fall of absolute monarchy that marks French history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He was born in 1729 as the second son of a powerful family who liked to display a prestigious family tree going back all the way to the Merovingian in the twelfth century. The truth is that their cobbler ancestors of the fourteenth century did well enough to become prosperous pharmacists in Marseille in the sixteenth century. Honorat Valbelle (1498-1539) could then afford to buy an estate and the minor aristocratic title that went along with it. His son, a captain in the king's army during the War of Religions was raised to full nobility and became Marquis de Valbelle. The family then began making alliances with the highest strata of Provence society and by the early eighteenth century they had become one of the wealthiest clans of southern France. They controlled taxes on trade between the Alps and Marseille, owned properties all around Provence and luxurious mansions in Aix, Marseille and Paris. They occupied prestigious positions in the military, the religious hierarchy, and the judiciary. They were even part of the king and queen's immediate entourage as counsellor, chaplain and lady in waiting.

As the second son of the family, Omer however was raised as the spectator of this *mise en scene* meant to strengthen the prestige of a family partly based on a fictional grandeur.¹⁴ Because of the prevailing Right of Seniority, his brother was meant to inherit both title and fortune while he, Omer, was destined to a minor

13. Information concerning the Valbelle family and castle were mostly gathered through consultation of the *Cahiers de l'Association d'Histoire Populaire Tourvaine*, as well as Laurent Puech's Phd thesis quoted and referenced further down.

The Association d' Histoire Populaire Tourvaine is an association of keen amateur historians devoting themselves to the study and preservation of the village history and cultural artifacts. Working under the editorial direction of Claude Arnaud, members of the association have been regularly publishing articles, written with academic rigor, in a series of cahiers, usually focusing on specific themes such as the archeological finding from the Roman era, the fountains of the village, etc.

14. According to Marcel Provence in his book *Le Cours Mirabeau* (Aix en Provence: Edition du Bastidon, 1953), upon seeing their aristocratic title confirmed by Louis the XIV's administration in 1668, the family had the bronze mortar of the pharmacist ancestor melted down so as to erase any sign of their original commoner status. Quoted from *Les Valbelles et leur Château de Tourves*, Cahier de l'Association d'Histoire Populaire Tourvaine, Mars 2001, 8.

position in the king's army. As such, all attentions were directed towards his brother, as well as his two sisters who represented the potential for future prestigious alliances. Omer's position as a spectator was to be repeated when he became the lover of La Clairon in 1749. The handsome, twenty-year-old colonel met the renowned, twenty-six-year-old actress and a passionate love story followed for almost twenty years. La Clairon had many rich patrons but Omer was the real love of her life. La Clairon is famous for being the "first actress who dared to laugh in a tragedy" and her aura was so bright that prints of her portrait were sold across Europe in the way as posters of movie stars would be two centuries later.¹⁵ She was Voltaire's close friend. The philosopher trusted her with the creation of his plays on stage. The salon of La Clairon was a gathering place for the Paris elite and with her Valbelle was once more the spectator of human vanity and public image while mingling with the most prominent intellectuals and artists of the time.

But it was not Valbelle's fate to remain a spectator all his life. In 1766, his brother passed away without offspring and Omer suddenly became one of the richest men in France while having been until then something of a free spirit. He embarked on a program of wide scale renovation of the castle in Tourves to turn it into a sumptuous mansion. The residence was lavishly enriched with paintings and works of art, but it was mostly the park that showed the influence of his Parisian life. This garden was his life's labor of love, the one project in which he could express what he had learned and understood of life. Some elements of the symbolism found in the ruins of the park hint that he must have been in contact with the esoteric societies that were so much in vogue in Paris.¹⁶ Unfortunately, most of what he had built was swept away in the social storm that was about to engulf France. Valbelle suddenly passed away in 1778 and his mother oversaw the completion of the massive colonnade destined to remain as an evocation of the castle's grandeur. Less than 10 years later, the French Revolution brought an abrupt end to the aristocratic regime in France and for the castle in Tourves it was downhill all the way. Furniture and objet d'arts were sold in 1792. The building was turned into a hospital for the army of the Republic fighting in Italy and later burned down by the local population to get rid of an epidemic of

15. Edmond De Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon* (Paris: Flammarion, 1889), 1.

16. Most prominent among them are the Rosicrucian, and their theology based on ancient spiritual beliefs, which influenced many other societies among which the Free Masons.

cholera. In 1798 the property was sold for the exploitation of trees in the park. Modern times saw the train track laid across the northern park. In the 1970s a highway contoured the village by cutting across the southern park.

Among the few constructions left standing, the Vacherie or barn at the west end of the park suggests that maybe, as in Tiphaigne's case, Valbelle, too, might have had an intuition of what was to come. This building was conceived as an architectural fiction representing a Roman temple that was turned into a medieval church, and finally used as a barn during Valbelle's time. It was built accordingly with fake Roman ruins and gothic tower while being truly used as a barn in which Valbelle experimented with new agricultural techniques imported from England. It also carried an inscription telling its story to passers-by:¹⁷

Splendour too often is followed by ignominy. From temple that I was I became a church. I took too much pride in it and was turned into a barn. Passer-by, see the affront done to my glory and learn without complaining how to yield to fate.

The reading out-loud of this inscription had become some sort of a ritual during my childhood promenades with my grandmother, and the building's voice heard across centuries never failed to impress my imagination. In fact, the inscription could well be interpreted as foreseeing the fate of the castle as a whole and its imminent destruction following the revolutionary storm. By the late 20th century, with the intrusion of the modern world, the building was standing by a large cloverleaf junction. The new environment then seemed to give extra depth to the statement. It is indeed as if the inscription strangely predicted the course of events that were about to take place. Furthermore, the stone bearing the inscription was stolen in the 1980s. The building could then be interpreted as a fictitious construct that carries a lesson on human destiny, a lesson to which one has to be "initiated" in order to perceive its full significance. In short, it could be read as a myth in stone.

17. In the nineteenth century, Leon Mouttet, an employee of the town hall and amateur historian, had the insight to gather the observations he could make for himself on site, at a time when the castle wasn't yet a heap of ruins, and the souvenirs he could record from people who had seen the castle still intact at the time of its splendor. In his manuscript, he credits Valbelle himself as being the author of the inscription. *Le Château de Tourves et ses Seigneurs (manuscript fait vers 1860)*, Association d'Histoire Populaire Tourvaine, Juillet 1985, 39.

The other element that can lend itself to contextual interpretation is the majestic, if austere, colonnade. This is indeed a fine piece of neoclassical architecture highly representative of the fashion of the time and the massive stones used in the construction have kept it standing strong, facing the rising sun, aligned with an obelisk that completes the illusion of Roman antiquity. There is something very sturdy about this intriguing wall that seems to offer as many answers as it raises questions. Behind it the residence stands in ruins. In front of it, the grand esplanade spreads under the bright sun of Provence as if anytime Valbelle and his friends could appear in a swirl of colourful brocade and laughter. The colonnade stands as a threshold between the leisurely aristocratic life of the eighteenth century and the radical transformations of the nascent industrial nineteenth century, as if its completion had also marked the moment to delete what had made it. It encapsulates the story of Valbelle, the rise and fall of his family, and turns it into a mere image. In fact, it feels just like a photograph: the capture of a moment forever gone and yet forever present.

To construct this esplanade, Valbelle had razed to the ground the church in which his ancestors were buried and the medieval village around it. To make up for this sacrilegious act, he had a monument of filial piety erected in the form of an obelisk dedicated to his grand uncle. The historian Laurent Puech suggests that many aspects of Tourves' estate are "elements of novelties that bear testimony to the modernist exigencies of Valbelle."¹⁸ And when considering the specific case of that obelisk in which a simulacrum replaces the real thing, he proposes that Valbelle could well have been a man who "had understood that in a modern world, the image of power and piety would matter more than their very existence."¹⁹ The outside observer could almost be persuaded that Valbelle saw what was about to happen, even envisioning the society of images that would take shape in a distant future. He had been a spectator of the phenomenon of public image for most of his life, at first with his brother and the family genealogical fiction and then with Clairon and her theatrical universe. After all, he shared for nineteen years the intimacy of one of the very first pin-ups in history. He must have learned a thing or two about living in the shadow of a public figure whose image was circulated

18. Laurent Puech, *Portrait d'un aristocrate à la fin du XVIII siècle, le Comte de Valbelle et son château de Tourves* (Université de Provence, PhD thesis, 1984), 185.

19. *Ibid.*

around Europe. While Tiphaigne clearly had the prescience of the technical aspect of a medium waiting to be invented, today's observer can read in some aspects of Valbelle's story and legacy the intuitive perception of the society of images that would result from the invention of photography. Both seem to have envisioned a form of the elusive image rising over the horizon.

These factual and historical researches on two different topics (the invention of photography and Valbelle's English garden in Tourves) were conducted in parallel to one another with the intention to merge them in the form of an artistic body of work exploring the phenomenology of photography. From the moment the Revolution arrived in Tourves, the castle was systematically plundered of all its riches. I decided to turn back the hands of time by returning objects from the castle to their original location — in the form of photographs. As in the case of Valbelle's obelisk, the simulacra would be replacing the real thing, this time by using Tiphaigne's vision. The two were the kind of men who could well have met in the context of some Parisian esoteric club. So, what if Valbelle had invited Tiphaigne to come and visit him in Tourves in 1771? And what if Gilles Massot were there to do his artistic work in 2005? Swooping images across time and space, they would reconstitute the phantasmagoria of the castle.

The project began with a search for artefacts in the museums, public squares, offices, churches and other private homes where the castle's treasures had been scattered. Once located, I used a visual vocabulary evoking Tiphaigne's visionary method to signify the capture of their images with the photographic medium: the hand of today's Gilles Massot holding a glass plate over these objects seen in their twenty-first century context. These images were then printed in small format and symbolically handed over to the eighteenth century writer, a transfer represented by a similar composition, but showing this time the images in a golden frame held by the hand of a man dressed in eighteenth century apparel. This transfer was completed with the apparition of the seemingly real life object in the context of the castle ruins. These were in fact large size prints mounted on cardboard and placed in location. An important conceptual aspect of the whole process was that the work should be completed without using at any time the cut and paste function that nowadays so easily creates dreamlike image in digital photography. The pictorial collage moving objects across time and space had to take place in real life. The

resulting image was meant to look like a fiction, while being at the same time a purely factual photographic recording of a moment. Lastly, this body of works showing the transposition of the objects performed by the two artists, Gilles Massot and Tiphaigne de la Roche, was completed by another series of work in which the external observer can see the two men at work. The personage of Tiphaigne de la Roche being also enacted by Gilles Massot, these works were the only ones for which the cut and paste technique was used, due to the impossibility to capture the same person in two different positions in one single shot.

Portraits of ancestors, fireplace, vases and other objets d'art found their way back to where they belonged. For the park, a search in the library of Draguignan, the regional administrative center, revealed a number of volumes belonging to the famous encyclopaedia, *L'Antiquité Expliquée et Représentée en Figures* de Bernard de Montfaucon (1719-1724). They were filled with engravings of Greek, Roman and Egyptians gods and goddesses that would make a perfect evocation of the many statues that decorated the park, most of which had disappeared. The objects were often placed according to purely aesthetic choices. Based on the information available from the manuscript compiled by Leon Mouttet in the nineteenth century²⁰, some of them could be given a much more precise location. And so a bronze statue of Louis XIV now in the Draguignan museum was brought to the site of the gallery, the basin now used for baptism in the village church was placed in the entrance hall, the large urn that had become a fountain on the village square was put back to its location in the southern park, while a statue of Eros nowadays crowning a fountain in a nearby village was placed amid the remaining bushes of boxwood that marked the location of a French garden west of the castle. An antique stone known as the Pierre de Néron was taken back to the top of the stairway named after the roman emperor that linked the upper garden and the lower part of the northern park. The image of Mars was brought to the top of the stairway facing the stable where his statue stood. The manuscript also mentioned an intriguing colossal statue that overlooked the main entrance of the estate, nearby the Vacherie: that of a muscular naked man holding a child on his shoulder. The image is rather unusual in the imagery of antiquity. A twentieth century commentator interpreted it as an effigy of

20. see footnote n.17.

St. Christopher holding the child Jesus.²¹ The Christian imagery, however, didn't really fit Valbelle's profile. The man had more taste for libertinage than holiness. Yet, unexpectedly stepping out of Montfaucon's encyclopaedia, an image appeared that exactly fitted the description and Valbelle's character: it was that of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasies, as a child seated on the shoulders of Sileneus, the satyr who raised him and protected him from the wrath of Hera until he could come of age. Interestingly enough, Dionysus' myth of death, dismemberment rebirth fitted perfectly the story of the castle and my attempt at "remembering" it in the form of contemporary artworks. But it was in the nearby pyramid that the strangest thing happened, as if the reconstitution of the castle had started a fantasy that suddenly followed its own logic.

Valbelle's garden contained almost every single decorative item that was the fashion of the time: a Chinese pavilion, a wind mill, a lake, a barn and, of course, an Egyptian pyramid. After the Revolution, the pyramid lost its facade of stone, but the structure still stands covered in vegetation in a corner of the park. Most of all, it has preserved a small inner square room, decorated by an empty niche. According to Mouttet, in that niche stood the statue of a mummy of white and black marble. These few words were as precious as they were frustratingly vague. The empty niche had me dreaming a lot as a child and for most of my adult life the "mummy" remained an elusive entity. Then at an early stage of the research, I met with Christian Harmand, a local resident who collects anything and everything, concerning the castle. He showed me the most incredible thing: the copy of a photograph of the mummy, taken in the mid-nineteenth century, before it was taken away to the nearby town where it has since disappeared. Suddenly the empty niche and the short description were matched by a precise image of a real thing in the past. This incredible feast was to be followed by an even greater one. I shared with him the copy of a page of Montfaucon's encyclopaedia that I had photographed because of a beautiful image of Isis, which I thought suitable to substitute for the then still enigmatic "mummy." Looking at it more closely, Christian noticed at the bottom of the page a small effigy that looked exactly like the figure in the photograph. We had accidentally stumbled on the very image chosen by Valbelle as the model for the statue in his pyramid. We had gone back to the very source of this intriguing piece

21. E. Champsaur, *Le Château de Tourves* (Marseille: Samat et C^e, 1910), 22. The fact that Champsaur was the village priest when he wrote his booklet might explain the reason for his interpretation.

of hermetical architecture. From the physical, ruined pyramid and its empty niche, the search had moved to the historical, the nineteenth century photograph, to finally reach the mythical, the originary image from which sprang the whole story. The networking of these 3 images across time gave an interesting possible understanding of the working of Valbelle's mind and its ripples across time.

The idea of the light-made image, an image in which nature "reproduces herself,"²² had a decisive impact on the human perception of time and space once it materialized in the form of the photographic medium. As this research on Tiphaigne and Valbelle has tried to establish, this revolution and its implications can be traced back in the cultural landscape of the eighteenth century with the development of the use of simulacra in the English garden. Since 2005, the "mummy" has become my travel companion, seated in my photo bag and traveling around the world with me. As the mummy with the enigmatic smile poses in locations as diverse as Beijing or Rome, Valbelle and the message he seems to have inscribed in his English garden are becoming indeed "citizens of the world."

Other experiments have seen me go back to the very origin of the photographic image: the pinhole phenomenon. In the pinhole camera, the image is produced without the help of a lens but through a tiny hole reproducing the working of the pupil in physiological vision. For this part of the work I constructed a pinhole camera with 3 holes, the final image being the result of a sequence of three exposures, reproducing the "before-now-after" succession of events that defines the perception of a "moment." While the "mummy" explores the physical dimension of space, these images are more concerned with the dimension of time. By using three different holes for one single shot, the recording of the "before-during-after" sequence is physically inscribed in that very image. Time and space become two sides of the same coin, just as Tiphaigne and Valbelle envisioned.

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22. Daguerre's own words when describing his process. Both Talbot and Niepce were also very adamant that photography "originated in nature and was disclosed by nature" (see Warner Marien in *Photography, a Cultural History*, 23).

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