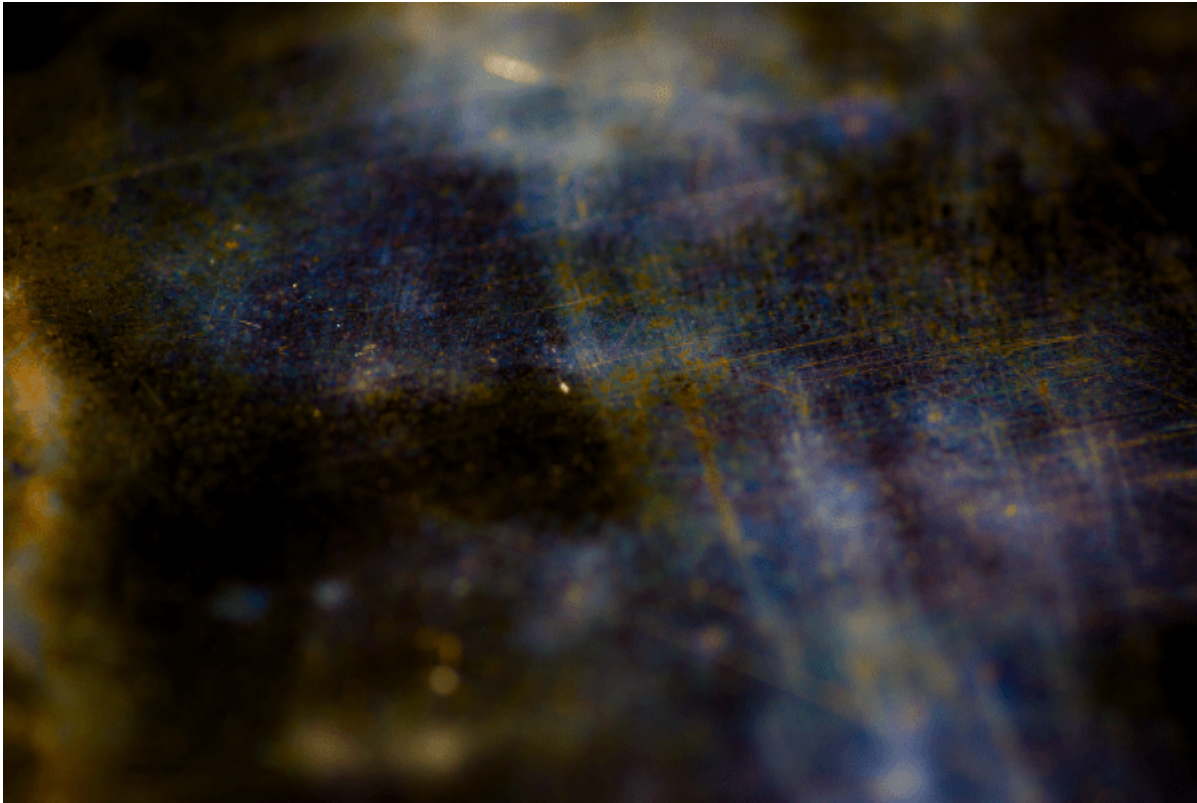


GHOST IN THE MIRROR



media archaeology

More than twenty years ago I discovered the daguerreotype – one of the earliest of photographic media. Images are formed in a camera on polished light sensitive silver-plated copper-on mirrors. These are not just simply early photographs. They are unique one-off images, and positive-negative—you have to catch the mirrored surface at the right angle, reflecting a dark background, for the image to appear. The process was made available to the public in 1839 and millions were produced until the late 1850s when the process was eclipsed by the likes of ambrotypes and tintypes that are much more easily viewed. Most were posed portraits. Most of the names of the people in the relatively few daguerreotypes that survive have been forgotten.

Daguerreotypes are delicate, scratch easily, oxidize, corrode, and fade. My archaeological sensibilities draw me to those that are damaged, discarded, neglected. A few years ago I gathered a collection of about fifty. All have lost their protective cases. Many appear blank at first glance. These degraded images are hard to find, even on eBay, because no one wants them, but then they are cheap

when you do find them. All mine are the small standard sixth plate size—2 3/4 by 3 1/4 inches.

I wanted to share the experience of looking at these quite extraordinary things, though there is no substitute for holding them in the palm of your hand. I couldn't at first capture well with a camera or lighting technique the images left in the tainted mirrored surfaces. But then I discovered that my scanner picked up what you couldn't or could hardly see by just looking at the plate. Later I managed to get the lighting right and could catch the portraits in high magnification with a camera – and daguerreotypes are well known for their extraordinarily high resolution.

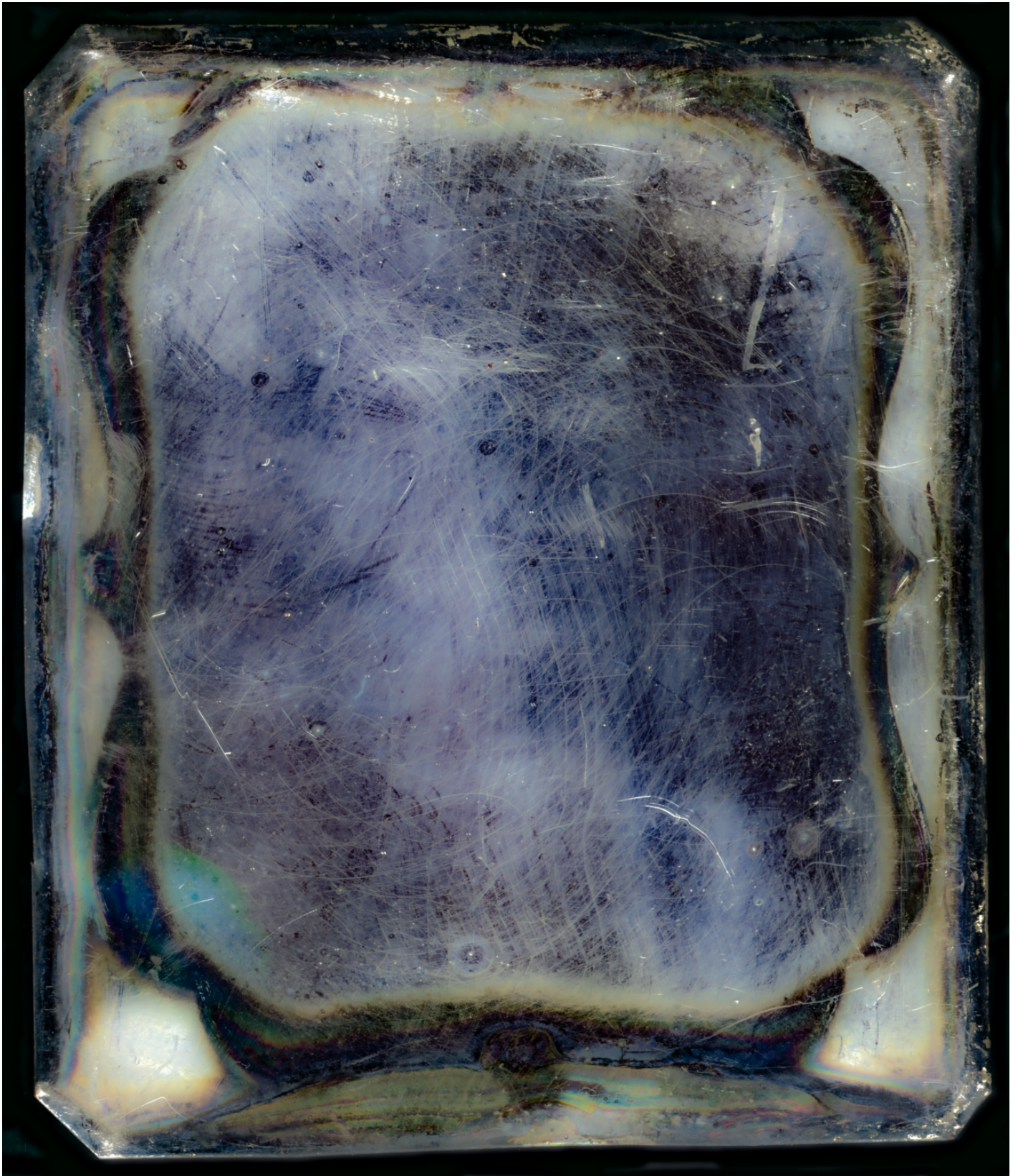
These are uncanny images [Link]. The people in the mirrored surface come alive again, portraits reincarnated through re-mediation, re-photography. If we consider that archaeology is work done upon the remains of the past, then these images are a kind of media archaeology.

I called the project ghosts in the mirror – [Link]

Today I was organizing the project archive and noticed something new about one of the plates. I have never been able to find anything in its surface. The traces of the mount indicate there was a portrait there originally, but it's hard to make anything now in the scratches and blurs.



Here it is in a different light.



Here is a detail of an oblique close up.



There's nothing there.

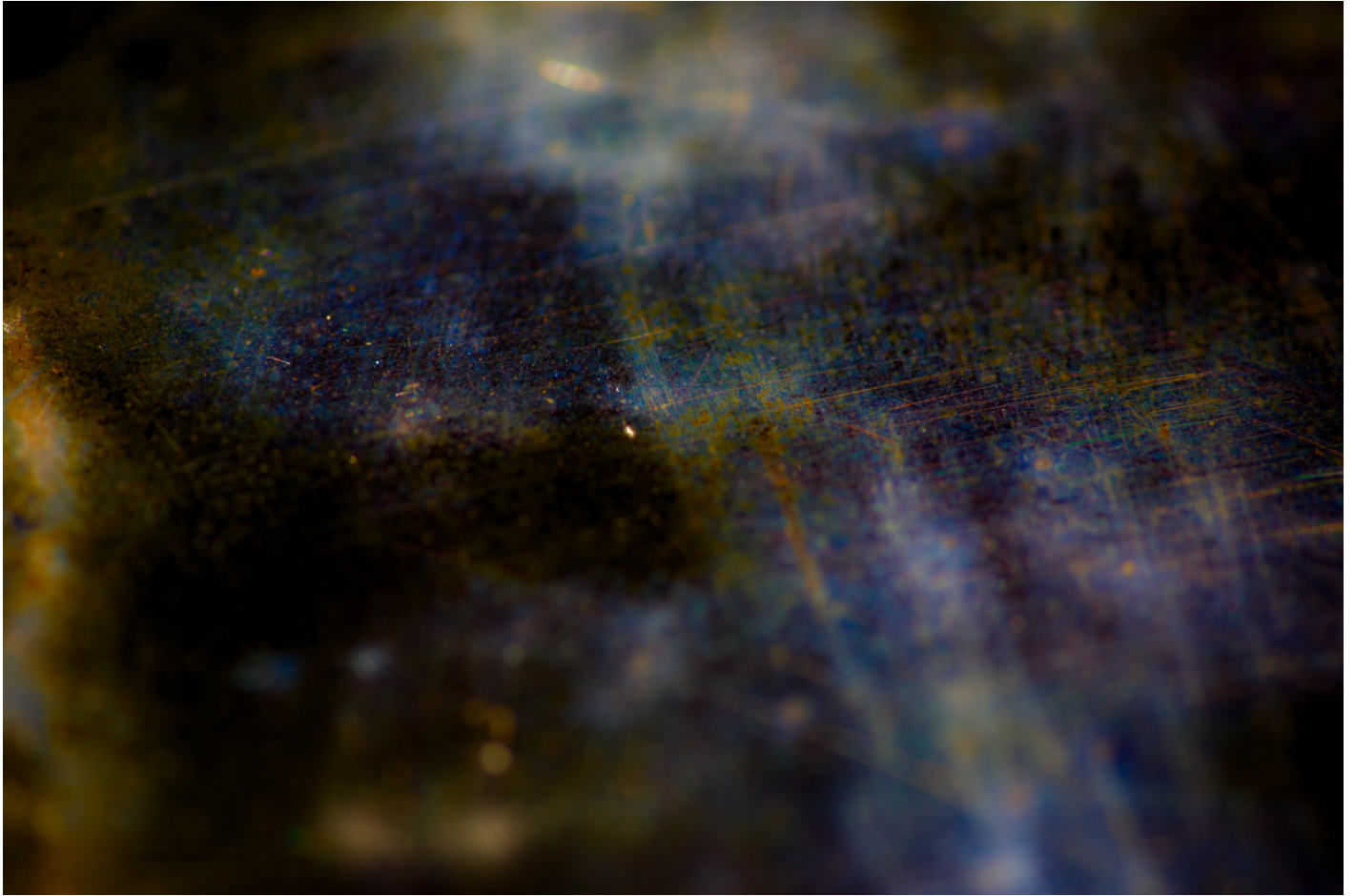
Then the thumbnail caught my eye.



There seems to be a face. And its just where a face should be.

Here is a re-edit of that view. A shadow in the fog.

Or am I deceived in pareidolia? Does that even matter when we are constantly seeking to distinguish signal from noise [Link].



Fascinating that a low resolution image might let us see into things more clearly, taking in a gestalt. Compressing noise.

Overall the daguerreotypes I collected are so degraded, ruined, yet present, and even with the medium so conspicuously apparent, overwhelming – an image in the shadows and behind a veil of decay.

I am reminded intensely of Adorno's aphorism—"the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye".

We sometimes think that the way to reproduce presence, a sense of of "being here", is through rich immersive media. To the contrary, these tiny, almost opaque windows, or rather tainted mirrors on the past, bridge the temporal gap between then and now through the faintest of traces.

Here is a slideshow of some of the collection

<https://www.archaeographer.com/Ghosts-in-the-mirror>

A book is available here – [Link]

ADDENDUM – media ecology as allegory

The operation here of this archaeological sensibility, with specific topics of gestalt, signal and noise, of pattern recognition, of figuration, hauntings and returns, traces and phantasms, is allegorical. How often does one find oneself wondering about the security and authenticity of our hold on “reality”? Are we merely finding what we seek in halls of mirrors and echo chambers?

A film diptych: Francis Ford Coppola *The Conversation* 1974; Orson Welles *The Lady from Shanghai* 1947.