The evolutionary model of technological advancement, present in many photo-histories, is liable to deny or repress aspects of multiplicity, and thereby construct a pure lineage for photography. This explains why recent theoretical and literary accounts of photography have tended to treat the ‘medium’ as if it were a single entity. As this chapter will argue, many photo-histories have underplayed photographic multiplicity in favour of an essentialist and teleological framework derived from concepts of evolution. Recognising the pervasive nature of the evolutionary model will, I suggest, move us closer to recognising the potential usefulness of ‘photographies’. After discussing the effect of a belief in photographic unity upon concepts of photographic realism, I will provide a brief history of technological multiplicity. This will provide a basis for the re-examination of photographic difference in the chapters that follow.

In his tellingly titled *The Evolution of Photography* (1890), the early photographic historian John Werge advances a ‘strict chronological arrangement’ of photo-history.¹ His narrative progresses steadily between technologies, refusing to acknowledge either simultaneity or multiplicity.² He underplays the importance of processes that would disturb his teleology: idealising, for instance, William Henry Fox Talbot’s calotype over the daguerreotype. The latter, Werge says, was not actually an invention but merely a ‘discovery’ of ‘the lowest order’, while Daguerre himself was a ‘lunatic’ whose work was ‘bungling’, if ‘fortunate’.³

This evolutionary framework continued into the twentieth century with the work of Beaumont Newhall, the director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Newhall’s influential *The History of Photography* departed from Werge’s concentration on technique, instead concerning
itself with photography as art history. The book’s narrative is that of a struggle in which older artistic forms are supplanted by their rivals, which are also in time displaced. For example, according to Newhall, a feeling that mid-nineteenth-century ‘Art photography’ was stale and anachronistic led Peter Henry Emerson (a cousin of Ralph Waldo) to produce images based on a more ‘objective’, scientific approach. This progressive view sat comfortably with earlier notions of photographic evolution, albeit from a less technical perspective. Most subsequent histories have continued Newhall’s project, not least because of the need to turn photography into a commodity for museums and the art market.

The long-standing use of an evolutionary model by historians has maintained the fiction of photographic unity. This would have pleased Werge, whose stated intention was to ‘unite the history of this wonderful discovery’ [my italics]. For example, many histories state that the calotype was the ultimate victor in a perceived battle with the daguerreotype, since its positive-negative method gave photography the potential to become a mass medium. Such histories underemphasise the daguerreotype on the grounds that it failed to obey the first principle of evolution: to reproduce. As Hans Rooseboom has noted, ‘Talbot, in spite of his initial lack of success, garners greater attention and sympathy in modern photohistoric literature than his main rival’. Typical examples of such bias include Helmut Gernsheim’s comment in 1982 that ‘the [daguerreotype] process must be regarded as a cul-de-sac’ [Italics in original]. Since Gernsheim wrote these words, the cul-de-sac has swollen to the size of a universe. In a twenty-first-century world of direct-positive digital photography, evolutionist assumptions must be rethought – not to produce an alternative teleology based on previously obscured technologies, but to argue against the notion of photographic unity.

The most significant revisionist survey of recent years is A New History of Photography (1994; 1998), edited by Michel Frizot. In this text, Frizot attempts to avoid the traditional art history methodology of Newhall, Gernsheim and others, aiming instead to provide a ‘history of functions’ and ‘of the meaning of photographs each time its function was renewed’. Produced by 33 authors, the book concentrates on the techniques through which a photographic image was made, and the social conditions under which it was viewed. Although there is much value in approaching photographic history in terms of social context, use, and technology, A New History of Photography avoids neither the problem of evolutionary bias nor the more modernist penchant for medium specificity. Frizot describes collodion photography on glass, for example, as giving ‘photography its independence and its own identity. It affirmed