

Photography Remoulded

Joanna Zylińska, *Nonhuman Photography*, Cambridge MA., Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2017, 257pp, £21.55

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Nonhuman Photography is an invigorating and passionate call to reclaim photography's essence and to rethink its ontology and is a much needed addition to critical thinking about photography. At a time when the practices of what we still continue to designate under the term photography are folding into new and emergent forms of computational hypermedia, Zylińska offers a way of refocusing on what is specifically photographic. In the context of the convergence of art, media and technology, the book is a riposte to the arguments of post-photography, a contentious rejection of the value of continuing to think of the digital as the currently defining condition of images, as well as a critique of the limits of the humanist tradition of photographic history, theory and teaching.

The book is put together as a combination of theoretical arguments and practical examples of the author's own work and discussion of other artist's projects. The organisation of the book has something of the manifesto about it, demonstrating new possibilities in the thinking and making of media. By its own definition the book is intended primarily as an intervention into the field of photographic history, theory and education, although it has a wider ambition to speak within the context of media studies and contemporary art practice and an intellectual ambition to offer photography as philosophy.

The book adopts a Deleuzian outlook in Zylińska's determination to think/act differently as writer, artist and philosopher, one who demands that we assemble a different genealogy for photography based upon the coupling of new natures, machines and the posthuman turn in her attempt to break out of historical time and consider deep time and the times of extinction. Nonhuman photography is proposed as a way of doing/thinking photography which decentres the local humancentric and regards photography not as a representation of life, but in a Bergsonian sense, as life itself. The title of the book is provocative and counter-intuitive, since it is very much about the human in a human photography.

Since its emergence in the mid-19th century, assigning a singular identity to photography and maintaining its distinctiveness has involved a fractious panoply of specialist organisations, social groups and a wide variety of individual practitioners. In the widest possible sense photographically (re)produced images have been continuously expanding in the life of

humans since its early imperialist reach and subsequent commodification by Kodak in the 1890s to the point of our current image-saturated visual culture. More narrowly, as a medium, photography has been used by artists, photojournalists, commercial and amateur photographers, collectors, dealers, curators, critics, historians, teachers and philosophers. In the 20th century, this united front of the photographic has agreed upon the singularity of photography but little else, and collectively never achieved a unified theory that would explain its meaning and value. In the 21st century we would be more likely to reject the very idea of a grand theory of photography, choosing instead to see its imbrication and many entanglements in world building practices, which is where Zylinska takes up the story, but paradoxically it would seem precisely in order to shore up the very ontologically distinct category of photography.

To understand this problem we need to recognise the legacy of a critical tradition of materialist thinking which sought to understand photography not in its singularity but as multiple technical, legal and informational elements of a more general system of [capitalist] reproduction. In this way of thinking, photography does not have a single identity but rather is considered as so many parts of techno-social reproductive apparatuses, which can only be fully understood through the ways in which they are enlisted in reproduction and in their context of use. In this albeit uneven tradition the technical apparatuses that produce and reproduce images are recognised to have agency apart the human, whereas, Zylinska creates a new category of the nonhuman in photography, by uniting images which do not include the human subject, nor intended for direct human viewing and in machine vision not intended for direct human inspection. However, the longer cultural materialist tradition also recognised the non-human of the mode of image production and the constructed nature of the human in photography. The limits of indexical objectivity were accounted for in terms of technical and ideological mediation. What has also been established for photography was abstraction, evidenced by the revolutionary nature of some practices of the Modernist avant-garde. It seems important therefore to recognise the distinction between Zylinska's nonhuman category and the non-human in the apparatuses of reproduction. But it is also true to say that the materialist tradition floundered on the grounds of positing reality upon the negative dialectic and continues to struggle with the material/immaterial nature of the algorithmically produced image. This is where nonhuman photography aims to break new ground in a new materialism drawing upon philosophic ideas of the posthuman.

The critical materialist tradition is not new to Zylinska, who as a media scholar knows only too well that photography is employed as a socio-technical medium of optical registration and transmission, enlisted both in everyday life and in highly technical situations. Here the book

rightfully stands against an institutionally dominant Humanist and ‘human-centric’ notion of photography, driving instead for an expanded definition of photography, which she claims can be done precisely by distinguishing photography’s nonhuman characteristics and agency. But there is a puzzle here in wanting to argue that it is only through the recognition of the nonhuman in photography that we will recognise a new human photography. As Zylinska says, the story she tells about the nonhuman and machinic of photography is the counterpart to the argument for insisting on the embodiment of vision. This is certainly a corrective to the typical orientation of photographic theory towards the transparency of the photographic image, its essential indexicality and social representation located in the preservation of memory traces. It is also a good answer to the reductive version of the digital image as the final break with indexicality and materiality.

The book is constructed around the central tenet that the authorial voice of historical and scientific objectivity derived from the European Enlightenment and patriarchy is no longer tenable in a world faced with possible extinction. In the place of a singular, masculine authority, Zylinska places herself as interlocutor – as artist, academic and philosopher – in setting out what is at stake, which on many counts is life itself. Zylinska points to the unravelling of the modernist certainty of scientific and technological progress, which have led to intellectual uncertainty, whilst global neo-liberalism and global warming have led to a general condition of insecurity. In the face of such a situation the book reassembles photography through the prism of the non human of nonhuman photography, which is defined by identifying three categories of images. Uncanny photographic images in which people do not appear, so images not of humans; images which have been formed by automated processes, for example traffic cameras, Google street view and microphotography, defined as images not by humans; and thirdly images not for humans, i.e. algorithmic modes of machine communication which rely on computational photographic technology.

Taking up examples of nonhuman mediations and images the book sets out an argument along the lines of the creative power of nonhuman photography. The most programmatic aspect of the book’s politics, unfolds from bringing together the posthuman critique of Enlightenment epistemology, with the arguments and evidence of the Anthropocene as a new geological age in which nature and humanness are inseparable. The coupling of these arguments allows Zylinska to connect the photographic image with the force of the sun and fossilisation, and hence with geological deep time. This also leads to the posthuman perspective on extinction, past present and future, and from this to insist upon an ethics of vision and practice.

While readers will be able to locate the critique of representation and its basis in a now contested view of Enlightenment and Modernist thinking, it is a much harder job to detect a fully theorised account of the alternative/different non-representational practices which go beyond the subject-object dichotomy. The revised account of the machinic in photography as part of the ontology of geological fossilisation and the actions of geological time remains problematic in that it leads to a premature rejection of the analogue/digital distinction as important in understanding machine vision, or the non human in photography. The argument that we have always been digital, or that photography was ‘always already digital’ (p176) is made by calling upon Batchen’s view that from the outset analogue photography shared the binary, on/off quality of the digital in the absence and presence of light. Zylinska argues that by looking at the affect of nonhuman photography it becomes possible to move beyond the analogue/digital break, with its feelings of mourning and loss, and detect a deeper algorithmic logic at work in image making, a logic subsequently embraced by code writers. Thus the book apparently saves photography from its dissolution by the digital of computational hypermedia. But the embrace of an expanded definition of photography rather than a post photographic moment, ignores the more fundamental difference that the digital image is a computational code in which values, not only of light, but of social power are abstracted and transposed through algorithms. Computational code creates a visual graphology closer to animation than to analogue photography. Moreover, the non human of the fluid and malleable image is entailed in new socio-technical apparatuses of reproduction, with effects as well as affects that demand critical attention in our understanding of the politics of media. But nonhuman photography is ultimately not concerned with a politics of the critical analysis of image economies, but with a politics of image practices in the context of art and academia.

Finally, this returns us to the organisation of the book and what the examples of Zylinska’s own photographic projects demonstrate. The projects were carried out by the author over a number of years as a series of photographic enquiries and focused upon what the apparatuses of photography are and do, which is very much reflected in the titles such as: *The Vanishing Object of Technology*, 2012; *Actual Perceptual Systems*, 2014; and *IEarth*, 2014. It should be said straightaway that because the economy of academic publishing allows only for poor quality black and white illustrations, Zylinska has created a companion website, www.nonhuman.photography, in which the projects are illustrated in colour and higher resolution. But what purpose do the projects serve in the interests of the book’s arguments? A key to understanding their purpose is in answering Zylinska’s question of how to continue to be a photographic artist without becoming ‘paralysed by the anxieties brought about by the digital age’ (p180).

Zylinska's photographic practice is firmly embedded in an academic discourse of what in the UK has been shaped as *research as practice* for the purposes of the assessment of the quality and funding of university research. Such a practice initially developed within the media and cultural studies discipline as a companion to and demonstration of academic analysis. Over the last decade or so, and especially with the final merger of the art school into the university, the practice of the artist teacher has also been formulated for assessment purposes as *practice as research*. Zylinska's practice is a hybrid of the merger of both approaches as media practices have become more sophisticated and extensive. What significance beyond the academy do such projects hold and in what contexts are they intended to be received? Methodologically Zylinska draws upon the work of Flusser in framing her project within the liberatory role of the artist as creator, arguing for her role as an envisioner in which entry into nonhuman technicality of the photographic medium can produce the radical cut, the moment of revelation, the unexpected.

In redrawing the boundaries of a 21st-century photography around the distinction and coupling of the terms non/human/photography, the book makes an important and welcome contribution to furthering academic understanding of the crisis of representation and the automation of vision. But there is an unexplored gap between the strong theoretical arguments for photography's new ontology and the status of the practical projects which are somehow illustrative of theory and remain within forms and images of representational photography. It might seem unjust to demand that Zylinska's practical photographic investigations solve, or resolve the larger problems the book so forcefully exposes. Nevertheless the problem of what the progressive academic community does about the designation and reception of its own knowledge production in the commodified informational world needs answers.