# The vital matter of photography

*Nonhuman Photography*, Joanna Zylinska, 2017,
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Reviewed by Sara Oscar, University of Technology Sydney

Photography, as a medium that fuses time, light and space, is often associated with the human experience of temporality and death. Roland Barthes speaks of photography's distinct ability to capture a future anterior, because all photographs collapse the dual temporalities of 'this will be' and 'this has been' into the same frame. For Barthes, 'every photograph is this catastrophe' (Barthes: 1981, 96). Similarly, Derrida is triggered to repeat the sentence 'we owe ourselves *to* death' throughout his meditation on the photographs of Jean François Bonhomme (Derrida: 2010). Susan Sontag also observes, 'to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality' (Sontag: 1973), while Geoffrey Batchen has spoken at length of photography's historical associations with death (Batchen: 1999, 208). Necromancy appears to have a longstanding affiliation with photography. But in her recent book, *Nonhuman Photography*, Joanna Zylinska proposes an alternative way of considering photography outside of the death discourse, by looking at the medium in the light of the Anthropocene, the geological era that marks human impact on the earth dating from industrialisation. Zylinska argues that photography's longstanding relationship to death limits the medium to a humanist struggle against mortality, and she suggests we look outside of this anthropocentric view to consider photography in the ecological framework of the Earth and its own cycles. Zylinska sees the medium of photography as a vital entity in its own right, one aligned with processes of fossilization and deep time. Nonhuman photography forms the starting point for Zylinska's book, and she argues that a recognition of the mediated entanglements between human and nonhuman agents can facilitate more ethical and connected ways of seeing, and being in the world.

*Nonhuman Photography* offers readers an alternative history of the photographic medium as a nonhuman, zoetic force with its own trajectory. There are multiple disciplinary frameworks that come together in this book, such as posthumanist and vitalist philosophy, and photographic and media theory. The posthumanist philosophy of thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Karen Barad and Claire Colebrook are at the centre of Zylinska's critique and this scholarship is brought to bear on humanist schools of photographic theory. Posthumanism considers the ethical value of other, 'nonhuman ways of being in the world' and acknowledges the extent to which the human is mediated by tools, languages and technologies and other nonhuman agents (Wolfe: 2018, 358). To the extent that humans who are mediated by technologies, there is a strong suggestion that matter is vital, and this provocatively means seeing matter as an agential force with trajectories of its own. Political theorist, Jane Bennett argues for the vitality of matter on the basis that 'the figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the

emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption' (Bennett: 2010, 10). Zylinska argues that human responsibility to the ecological world first involves seeing ourselves as humans entangled amongst other nonhuman factors and agents, particularly light. To make this claim, Zylinska mobilises nonhuman photography, a mechanical form of capture where humans are neither the subject, agent, or addressee of the photographs (Zylisnka: 2017, 5). The increasing employment of nonhuman photography with satellite and drone technology can be seen as the severing of the human from the mechanical apparatus, and Zylinska sees this as an exciting proposition for a posthuman theory of photography because it decentres the human as the pivot of the world. This facilitates a realignment of the human as a connected entity, with an 'embodied, immersive, and entangled form of image and world formation' (17).

In the first two chapters of the book, Zylinksa reconsiders traditional models of human vision. The first chapter, 'Nonhuman Vision' offers a model of perception which has its origins in the thought of Donna Haraway and Villem Flusser. Here Zylinska advocates for an embodied, nonlinear, connected model of perception that challenges the traditional, dominant white masculinist 'view from nowhere' and creates a sense of human mastery over the world. By using a model of nonhuman vision, Zylinska sees the potential to revolutionise traditional forms of seeing and this is illustrated through creative examples such as Richard Whitlock's 'The Street' (2012), Bonamy Devas's 'Photographic Tai Chi' (2015) as well as her own creative research such as, 'Active Perceptual Systems'. These creative works, Zylinska argues, function to circuit break traditional Albertian models of single point perspective that privilege the 'view from nowhere' and offer other models of perspective outside of human vision that are reminiscent of the early twentieth century photography of Alexander Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy Nagy.

Having argued for a nonhuman, connected model of perception, Zylinska explains that creative image-making practices are a way of philosophizing and simultaneously, a way of practicing philosophy through image-making. Bergson's thoughts on duration are embedded in Zylinska's discussion of photographing as a creative, zoetic force. Zylinska employs the term 'the cut' which she considers in an earlier co-authored book with Sarah Kember, *Life After New Media*: *Mediation as a Vital Process* (Kember & Zylinska: 2012, 79). The cut is both a physical and technological means of capture that can be applied to farming, painting, film making or photography. She says, it "is what we do to stabilize matter from the flow of duration, and to this end the cut is vital and still 'bears a trace of life'" (53). Zylinska speaks of cuts rather than photographs as being 'frozen and ultimately deadly mementoes of the past' associated with photographic discourses of death, because they are part of a process of managing the duration of the world (73). While Zylinska distinguishes between the temporary stabilization of matter and the deadly memento, this tenuous distinction needs to be developed further in the chapter. There is considerable difficulty in differentiating between the vital cut and the morbid click, which hinges on a subjective logic and represses the medium's entanglement with the dual forces of life and death.

In the second half of the book, Zylinska speaks of photography as a nonhuman, light induced process of fossilization that symbolises deep, ancient time outside of the relatively short time of the human. By Zylinska's account, the connection to deep time makes photographs ideal agents for reimagining the 'eco-eco disaster' as the medium has the capacity to 'scale down the deep-time of nonhuman history to the human measure of duration and perception' (95). Zylinksa's effort to think photography outside of the tradition of humanism is achieved by looking to the photograph as a fossil, and reconsidering the history of photography in light of the geological process of impressioning from Nièpce, to Daguerre to William Jerome Harrison. Zylinska states "photography is not a new process but, instead a 'modern mediated extension' of the ancient-long impressioning activity enabled by light, soil and various minerals" (111). As a symbol of deep time, the fossil can be mobilised to imagine a species after extinction and open up the gap between experience and witnessing. Zylinska argues fossils are ethical injunctions that ask us to reach out to life as active grieving for the world rather than a form of memento mori (127). With light as an enabler and enforcer of the passage of time, photography may offer a different perspective on ecological problems, she argues. By seeing fossils as a material record of life rather than a kind of melancholy death mask or trace of the referent, Zylinska wants to establish a greater connection between the fossil and the sun that fosters life on the planet.

In the final chapter, Zylinska makes the provocative, but well supported claim that we have always been digital. With Geoffrey Batchen's insight, Zylinska regards the shift to digital technologies to be an embodiment of the idea of photography within 'a persistent economy of photographic desires and concepts' rather than a material difference (169), which is to say that photography's social and relational function still remains intact, even though it has changed material form. Photography's transition from analogue film to digital code is a symptom of the inherent liquidity of all culture and its technological artefacts in modernity (169). The need to argue for the unfixable photographic object, is prompted by Zylinska's desire to move beyond the ontological concerns of what a photograph is to its 'acts, affects and temporal effects' in the context of memory and archiving (170). What consequences, Zylinska asks, are there for the liquidation and digitisation of photography in general? This question is posed in consideration of photography's relationship to the archive in the age of the digital. Generally understood as a repository of knowledge and memory, the archive as Derrida reminds us is subjected to the dual forces of remembrance and forgetting, and Zylinska acknowledges photography is but one of the many places where such a compulsion is enacted.

In sum, Zylinska's wide-ranging scholarship takes nonhuman photography in many different directions across the chapters, from the creative and life-giving potential of nonhuman photography to extinction, obsolescence and fossilization, to the binary code of the digital and the inherent liquidity of culture. The scope of these ideas and the philosophies that guide them make for diverse readings of nonhuman photography and its ethical, political implications. The book offers new perspectives on humanist discussions of photography with posthuman and vitalist theory. This is immensely important to photographic epistemology and ethics, memory studies and documentary photography, as well bringing light to how photographic obsolescence

is managed in a more ecological and connected way. Zylinska's reading of nonhuman photography makes a valuable contribution to a neglected area of the medium's human-centric discourse. At times, the breadth of scholarship in the book makes it difficult to rearticulate Zylinska's reading of photography as a form of life outside of the time of the human, and the arguments sometimes are limited by the material supports that struggle to capture the significance of photography's connection to deep time. To see photography within the ecological framework of the Earth and life, and outside of the discourse of human death was never going to be an easy exercise in the light of climate change. Perhaps the discourse of vitality does not need to negate the photographic discourse of death, because these arguments are deeply entangled. It feels paradoxical to raise the question of whether a posthuman view of photography as a formative practice of life can make us more connected to things, especially light, since the only hope of grasping such a shift is with our all too human eyes.

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