

REVIEW
NONHUMAN PHOTOGRAPHY
Joanna Zylińska, MIT Press (2017)

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In *Nonhuman Photography* Joanna Zylińska examines a vast corpus of theoretical texts and artistic examples through the melting pot of “posthuman media theory”, thereby combining insights from media, communication, and cultural studies with those of philosophy, anthropology, biology, and ecology, so as to situate photography at the heart of what has come to be known as “the nonhuman turn”. And she does this onerous task with a distinctive scholarly force throughout the entire book. The main argument of *Nonhuman Photography* is that, since the advent of photography until its current (post)digital and intermedial present, an unabated anthropocentric obsession has been occluding our attention to the nonhuman side of the medium, what was declared by André Bazin as early as 1958. In order to retrieve the nonhuman side of photography, Zylińska invites the reader to look into three specific types of photographs: those that are not “of” the human (e.g., landscape and ruin photos); those that are not made “by” the human (e.g., micro/macro and CCTV images); and those that are not “for” the human (e.g., photos based on algorithmic models made for machine communication) (p. 5). Crusading against several theoreticians who have been creating a doom-laden image of photographic developments, such as John Tag who saw the rise of CCTV cameras merely as the subjugation of the visible populace to the State, Zylińska unpacks and embraces the life-enhancing dimension of nonhumans by bringing several posthuman scholars into the debate.

Unlike what photography is capable of (i.e., creating life), our age-old anxiety about photography’s technological advancements has led to what Zylińska

calls a “paranoid scholarship” that ignores the co-evolution of humans *with* machines (p. 26). Instead of giving in to this so called “noir theory”, she embraces Donna Haraway’s understanding of vision as a force of “becoming-with” the machine and Vilém Flusser’s invitation of becoming “envisioners” who yearn to work with apparatuses instead of against them (pp. 20-33). This strategy allows Zylinska to postulate “nonhuman vision” as a reclamation of “vision’s embeddedness and embodiment”, the fact that our seeing through the photographic camera is as much haptic as it is optic, that our perception is as much phenomenological as it is technological (p. 40). To make this kinship palpable, one needs to recall the degree to which our vision was teemed with corporeal activities when looking through stereoscopes in the past, or resort to physiology of the act of perception, as does Zylinska through Bruce Goldstein and James Gibson in the first chapter of her book.

In the second chapter of the book, titled “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography”, Zylinska consolidates her embrace of nonhumans by surveying several instances in which nonhuman vision has allowed us to see the unapproachable and the invisible. For example, while NASA’s *Earthrise* or *The Blue Marble* images of the Earth made us “see” ourselves from outside, thus decentralizing the human as the proprietor of vision, images of climate change have made intelligible what we could not have seen otherwise: the electromagnetic radiations caused by environmental damages to the Earth (pp. 52-56). For Zylinska, these blatant examples, among numerous others, are evidences to the agency of the photographic instrument, that it can act upon us, shape our life, and in turn disclose our dependence on the nonhuman nature of perception. In the third chapter, Zylinska shows what nonhuman vision can teach us about our own extinction through envisaging how life goes on after humans, illustrated by photographs of urban ruins across the globe. “The posthuman gaze” of urban ruins can testify that, despite our rapid production and accelerating consumption of objects in a post-capitalist world, our purchased objects will in many instances far outlive us and the functionality we have assigned to them (p. 90). By freeing us

from the human scale of time, not only has photography enabled us to envisage life after humans, but also has given us the power of “de-extinction”, as in the case of bizarrely realistic photographs of extinct mammoth taken by American photographer Wilkes (p. 98). Zylinska’s understanding of nonhuman vision thus shows how photography functions as a means of a “temporary stabilization” of deep time, as a perceptual and cognitive “cut” into the temporal scale to which human perception exposes its frailty (p. 7).

Following this line of thinking, in the fourth chapter Zylinska looks at photography as a vehicle of “fossilization of time”, since for her photography and geology are both sustained by similar components; that is, light, energy and the sun (p. 108). Regardless of its analogue or digital manifestation, she views photographic process as a fossilization of the temporal flow of time, because, as she asserts: «photography as an embalmer and carrier of imprints testifies to the continued existence of solar energy and to its photosynthesis-enabling capabilities» (p. 127). This is how Zylinska manages to operationalize the ecological, historical, and political implications of photography without succumbing to the tiresome debates around indexicality; that is, by reading photography ecologically. By building up on the term “ecomedia” coined by English media theorist Sean Cubitt, in the fifth chapter of the book Zylinska examines the rise and fall of diverse photographic apparatuses over the last decade, to make clear that photography has never ceased to exist, but has been evolving, morphologically and technologically. By narrating her own visit to the National Media Museum in England and showing the photos she has taken during this trip, she shows how such an institution has attempted to render photography as something obsolete and belonging to a bygone past, whereas photography has never been as exuberant as it has become in our era. To comprehend Zylinska’s claim, one needs to simply browse through the contemporary uses of photography, such as: social networks, CCTV imagery, drone photography, medical body scans, satellite images, etc. This list that can surely be extended immensely when one looks at, for instance, *Photography Changes Everything*

edited by Marvin Heiferman (2012), another book that in fact can function as a fitting illustrative corroboration of Zylinska's *Nonhuman Photography*.

Following sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's formulation of "liquid modernity", in the sixth chapter of the book Zylinska casts doubts on ontological stability of photography by interpolating the concept of liquidity into the fabric of photography. Being a cultural product, photography has always been liquefying, modulating and reshaping itself, thus becoming an inherently "unfixable" medium (p. 170). To clarify this augment, she reviews several archival projects, such as Tacita Dean's art book called *Floh* and her own art project called *Photomediations*, in order to radically transform our putative understanding of the archive as something localized in time and space. Instead, she invites us to embrace an "anarchival impulse", a term she borrows from Flusser, so as to manifest the everchanging ontology of photography (p. 188). These provocative archival examples, among many others thought provoking cases, allows Zylinska to see photography as a "practice of cutting through the flow of mediation", a cut that is as much spatiotemporal as is perceptual, material, technical and conceptual (p. 191).

Nonhuman Photography not only skillfully incorporates material, posthuman and ecological discourses into the architecture of photography, but it also provides theoretical and practical bases for academics and artists to apperceive the life-giving side of photography. It is therefore an invaluable source for graduates, undergraduates, and researchers of photography, as well as for photographers and critics. This is the highest merit of the book, that it fleshes out the nonhuman substance of photography for both practitioners and theoreticians, something that a thinker/artist like Zylinska has managed to pull off with an exceptional vigor and novelty.

SOURCES:

Zylinska, Joanna. (2017). *Nonhuman Photography*. The MIT Press.

Heiferman, Mervin (ed). (2012). *Photography Changes Everything*. Aperture Foundation.