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The Perception Machine

Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI

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Conclusion: Future Sensing in the Metaverse



Figure 8.1

Joanna Zylinska, image automatically produced through the text-to-image generator known as DALL-E 2. In producing the image, the algorithm responded to the query, “What will our future look like?” Image obtained on first attempt. No modification, except for conversion to black and white. July 2022.

This book opened with some reflections on the weirdness of 2021 as a catalyst year for reimagining the future as part zombie apocalypse, part robot park. Images, especially photographically influenced images, are a key component of the imaginarium of that future—or, indeed, *any* future. Recognizing the role of photographs and their algorithmic correlates in video games, cinema, social media platforms, machine vision, and prediction technology, I have aimed throughout this volume to showcase the operations of the perception machine we are currently inhabiting while going ever deeper into it—from the environmental and the social, through the computational, all the way to the neural. I have also argued that we are increasingly seeing ourselves being seen, tracked, and touched by an ever-growing volume of cameras, scanners, and sensors, while emerging as “us” precisely through this process of machinic perception. The machinic image apparatus therefore has a predictive function: it forecasts us into the future by means of images, while playing a certain version of this future before our eyes. Its genre is an after-photographic hybrid: it is increasingly looking like an Instagram story intercut with a horror film, creepily reimaged by AI (figure 8.1).

As we have seen, the photographic medium itself has changed dramatically in its encounter with other media technologies and infrastructures. We could perhaps go so far as to say that photography is now becoming a “sensography,” a multisensory medium whose operative mode relies on sensors and various measuring and calculating instruments as much as it does on optical devices. Yet the book’s argument has not just focused on what has happened to the photographic medium, or even on what it means for us to live surrounded by image flows and machine eyes. I have also attempted to point to some possible openings within the operability and logic of the perception machine by trying to identify moments when the programmability of its system fails—and thus also, in another sense, gains something. These moments have involved individual and collective actions of shared human-machinic obstreperousness manifesting as systemic glitch, from feminist eco-eco-punk to the avant-garde of the weak. Importantly, and following Vilém Flusser’s lead, this has always been a form of opening performed *from within* the machine—rather than simply against it. “The perception machine” has thus served in this book as both a metaphor for a visual and cognitive enclosure and as a sociopolitical and affective opening.

Yet the postulation of the “perception machine” has been more than just an analytic gesture: I have also used to it convey, albeit implicitly, an ethical

injunction. This injunction is shaped by a complex set of responsibilities exerted not only by humans toward one another but also by nonhuman beings—including planet Earth as our habitation partner and life source. Responding to the dynamic of visible and invisible images, and to their infrastructures across planetary scales, my hybrid method of working in this volume, combining philosophical enquiry and artistic research, has been adopted with a view to expanding our epistemological horizon as outlined by academic convention and human cognitive practice. With this, my goal has been to allow myself and others to see, sense, and say (more) things via a variety of modes and media. Yet it has been equally important for me to keep a check on the hubris that sometimes underpins theorists' or artists' pronouncements about our work and its purported impact and influence. In the vein of my earlier work on “minimal ethics,”¹ my modest attempt to make a critical intervention in the world through a variety of media can perhaps be described as a “planetary praxis that attempts to make a small difference.” Imagining a slightly better future, while accounting for the imaging apparatus that can assist us in—yet also at times impede—this task, has been part of this attempt.

* * *

When 2021 was coming to a close and hope was emerging for the world to start coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, another form of enclosure dawned on the horizon. In October 2021 Mark Zuckerberg excitedly announced that Facebook was to become unironically known as Meta, and that the company would invest billions of dollars into building a virtual reality platform (VR) to be known as a “metaverse.” The unstable and jaggy “after-photographic” architecture of pictures and data flows, occasionally warping into image envelopes, was to become a full-blown 360-degree image sphere. The perception machine was to be both privatized and “personalized,” projecting (the fantasy of) many different worlds and many different futures for us all. Facebook had been investing in VR technology for some time already, having developed a successful Oculus headset which only made users feel a little bit nauseous. The Meta announcement signaled a clear repositioning from a “rhetorically social” platform to an all-encompassing branded loop, one in which Neil Stephenson's dystopia was to meet Dave Egger's circle² by forming a ring of virtual steel around our eyes, bodies, and brains. Zuckerberg's metaverse promised to be a universal

perception machine, one in which we should be able to have business meetings, go on vacation, and buy real and virtual goods without thinking twice about that old-style Cartesian dualism. The future as photographed, graphically rendered, and stitched together into a seamless whole will thus turn our current Google World (where there still exists some perceptive and cognitive distance between what you search for and the technical infrastructure that delivers it) into Goggle World. Indeed, Google itself is developing Project Iris by focusing on an AR-enhancement headset, Apple is heavily investing in VR, while Microsoft has had some successes with its “mixed reality” headset called HoloLens, which uses sensors, optics, and holography to seamlessly meld with its environment—and which is aimed at areas as diverse as entertainment, medicine, and combat. It does not therefore matter that, by 2023, media commentators were already announcing the death of the metaverse as dreamt by Zuckerberg, with Meta having burned through huge sums of money without much to show for it. The desire to enclose ever more spheres of our perception is not likely to subside. It will probably just undergo a rebranding—and a technical reboot. So this is what “photography after platform capitalism,” to paraphrase Ben Burbridge’s perceptive analysis of the current image landscape,³ will look like—although whether “we” will actually be able to see it, and whether a discrete human “we,” with its unique signal points such as consciousness and proprioception, will continue existing in this metaverse, is not quite clear as yet.

It is surely not accidental that the metaverse technology is being rolled out at a time when the horizon before our eyes is not looking all too rosy. Our planet is facing a number of problems that will only be exacerbated in the coming decades: from the climate crisis through to the automation of labor and other domains of our lives, coupled with the growing inequality and the accumulation of both capital and decision-making powers by an ever-smaller group of actors. Cyberwarfare, coupled with many localized on-the-ground conflicts and the renewed threat of nuclear annihilation, add another level of threat. This state of events, as argued in the opening pages, is turning most humans into unwitting existentialists. No matter what our social class, education, or geographical location, we increasingly need to understand and manage, in our minds and lives, various apocalyptic scenarios concerning the possible destruction of life on our planet, both in its social and organic guises—or even the destruction of the planet as such. This trend will no doubt continue. What is particularly concerning is that those apocalyptic scenarios are being rebranded by some as business

opportunities, with a secular form of solutionism, dressed up as techno-age salvation, offered to us by a whole series of digital messiahs such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, or (maybe slightly less evil but not any less narcissistic) Bill Gates. This mix of arrogance and capital, coupled with a hypermasculinist sociopathy, tends to be presented as a form of genius.

In an attempt to immerse myself in the future while continuing to hone my dubious gaming skills, I recently picked up an Oculus 2 (now rebranded as Meta 2) VR headset loaded with the *National Geographic Explore VR* app “to discover two of the most iconic locations on the planet”: Antarctica and Machu Picchu. Importantly, the app itself was not being marketed as a game but rather as an “experience.” What was of particular interest to me was that it contained a mission to capture photographs for the *National Geographic* magazine with a virtual camera, thus letting “the entire family discover the world without ever leaving home.”⁴ There were some in-game tips about photography within the narrative, training the user in the art of framing and light capture. What surprised me, in turn, was that—unlike in console games, where in-game photography is promoted by the manufacturers as a sharable activity, with an easy way to download the captured images—in its VR counterpart there was no easy way of accessing the photos, even in the game experience premised on photography. In what seemed like laboratory testing for an NFT-driven logic of digital exchange, the only way to engage with the captured photos was to display them in a picture gallery (in specially prepared frames) within the app, with no evident traces of those images in any of the storage spaces within the system.⁵ I therefore had to resort to manual screenshotting and heavy editing, including cropping and uprezzing, to take my images outside the VR “experience” (figure 8.2).

Being in the *Explore* world of Antarctica and Machu Picchu felt both very real and very photographic. The designers had used photogrammetry—the technique of taking measurements from 2D photographs to generate realistic-looking 3D renderings of spatial objects—to produce those visuals. The process involved capturing around 50,000 still images of the two locations, then stitching them together to generate a sense of an all-round experience, while correcting data errors and adding individual small elements by hand. What was more ominous perhaps was that this may be the only way to see the icebergs in years to come—not just because “the family” will not want, or be able, to travel to them but also, of course, because global sea ice is irreversibly shrinking,⁶ while indigenous cultures are continuously exposed to cultural and material expropriation.

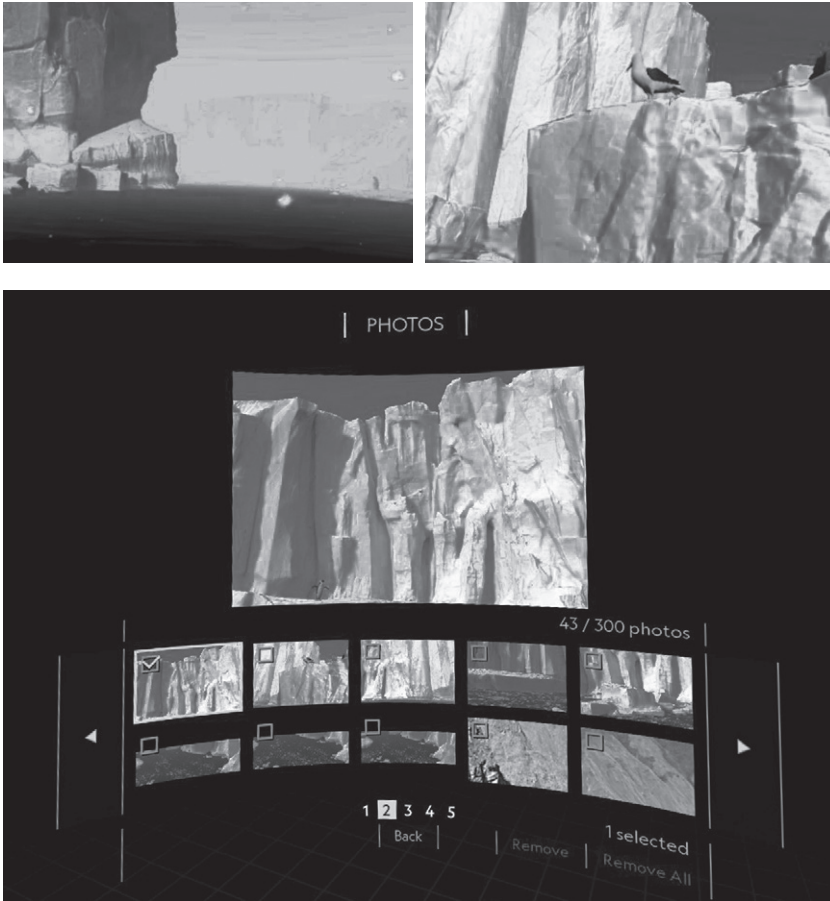


Figure 8.2

Joanna Zylinska, screenshots from *National Geographic Explore VR*, Oculus 2, 2022.

Naturally, things do not have to be this way. After-photographic VR does not just have to serve as an anesthetic replacement for the world gone by. Zuckerberg and his ilk do not own the concept of the metaverse and were not even the first to announce it. Other incarnations of it exist, where the perception machine enables some other forms of aesthetic and ethical experience, rather than serving primarily as a supermarket of data points rendered as photorealistic images, moving or still. Serpentine Galleries' polyvocal second volume of *Future Art Ecosystems*, titled *Art x Metaverse* and published several months before Facebook's announcement, offers

guidance “for the construction of 21st-century cultural infrastructure”⁷ as an alternative to the narrative about platform- and world-building shaped by large corporations. Recognizing the planetary scale of the metaverse project, the authors advocate for the construction of an open and accountable system that builds on the expertise of public interest organizations, while serving public interests.⁸ Importantly, it is not just in the domain of art that they seek spaces for metaverse experiences, pointing to “art-adjacent” fields such as gaming, blockchain, film, video, and architecture. Photography is notably absent from their list of references, yet my argument would be—indeed, has been in this book—that our current cultural and visual experience and technology are significantly shaped, or even haunted, by photography. While current visual technology, in its computational, gaming, or metaversal guise, is intent on rendering the photographic legacy invisible, we absolutely must not forget (about) photography. Because what is at stake here is not really the future of a particular medium, be it as an art historical artifact or financial investment (a future trajectory about which, similarly to Andrew Dewdney in *Forget Photography*, I could not care less), but rather *the future of all of us*. We should thus do our best to try to grasp how the after-photographic images have been stitched into a seamless Circa-Vision 2.0.

Amanda Lagerkvist poignantly observes that “existential media . . . may furnish a foundation for us; they may also throw us. They may remind us of our frailty, our desires to (dis)connect, and our need to ethically contain the technologies we live and die by.”⁹ In spite of the serious or even perhaps ominous tenor of its conclusion, this book’s study of the existential aspects not just of photography but also of after-photographic temporality has also been intended as a celebration. The book celebrates both this after-photographic moment, when the exuberance of the imagistic life is creating new ways of seeing and experiencing ourselves and the world, and ourselves as media subjects coevolving with our machines. But *The Perception Machine* is also, of course, a warning. More importantly, it is intended as an invitation to a shared conversation and practice, extended to designers, programmers, photographers, artists, writers, thinkers, activists, white hats, and all sorts of eco-bio-feminist-queer-trans punks, to experiment with, retune, or hack the perception machine. While we still can. While we can still see and feel its edges and limits. While we can still see and feel *anything* . . .

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