

Extractive Imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

A review of Siobhan Angus's 2024 book, *Camera Geologica*.

What if, instead of viewing photography as a medium of light (of immateriality and revelation), we were to view it from the perspective of the mine—darkness, avisibility, geology? In *Camera Geologica: An Elemental History of Photography*, Siobhan Angus does just that, highlighting the centrality of extraction for historicizing and theorizing the photographic image. As Angus succinctly writes: “the mine is a necessary precondition for photography as a medium.”¹ By turning to various minerals—bitumen, silver, platinum, iron, uranium, and rare earth elements—involved in the production of photographic films and prints, Angus revises popular understandings of photography that take the photograph to promise “an unmediated lens onto the world. A lightness, a pure vision, unchained from the earthly work of production and reproduction.”² *Camera Geologica* situates photography precisely within this realm of “earthly work,” foregrounding the unseen and underground histories of labor and environment that have materially underwritten the photographic medium. Angus further illustrates how these histories have influenced—sometimes implicitly, though often explicitly—numerous photographers, including Nicéphore Niépce, Anna Atkins, Timothy O’Sullivan, David Goldblatt, Allan Sekula, Edward Burtynsky, Susanne Kriemann, and Warren Cariou. Taken together, the book’s six chapters provide a comprehensive and global portrait of the supply chains, labor processes, and environmental despoliations that are formally and materially refracted through the works of these photographers. In so doing, *Camera Geologica* redefines what photography might mean in the time of the Anthropocene.

Like numerous other scholars working at the intersection of visual studies and the environmental humanities, Angus adopts a materialist approach to images.³ She writes: “A shift from the photograph as a pure representation to the photograph as a material object . . . has implications for photography . . . but also for broader habits of seeing.”⁴ At the most general level, *Camera Geologica* invites the reader to see every photograph as materially constituted, whether through the petroleum of Niépce’s bitumen prints (his *heliographs*), the silver mined for Timothy O’Sullivan’s wet-plate photographs, or the rare earth minerals extracted for various digital technologies. But further, this materialist “reorientation of vision” has itself been taken up by numerous contemporary photographers, whose work reflects on photography’s contradictory role as a medium of extraction. Warren Cariou’s *Syncrude Plant and Tailings Pond Reflection* (2015) adopts the petroleum-based materials used previously by Niépce for his *heliographs* to photograph a bitumen processing plant

in Canada. Cariou notably refers to his photographic process as a *petrograph*, shifting “attention from the role of light to the role of fossil fuel.”⁵ Such visual reorientations are not just reminders that the photograph is a material object. More profoundly, they index a fundamental change in the aesthetics of the image—its social role, its style, as well as the ethical positions it might propose.

Central to Angus’s analysis of photography and its ongoing social significance is that of labor and, further, the problem of visualizing capitalism. Throughout the history of photography, there is an “unresolved tension . . . between the world of surface and the labor that makes that world, labor that is often underground and out of sight.”⁶ However, this is not merely an issue of representation, more so an issue of mapping and of scale. Quite simply: can a photograph express the global and diffuse networks of exploitation and despoilation necessary for the perpetuation of capitalism—a process which, by its very nature, exceeds the visual? By adopting a habit of seeing and of reading that understands both the photograph and its subject matter as materially embedded, Angus’s interpretations of photographs paradoxically draw upon such excess, upon that which exceeds yet is part and parcel of the image. Though Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs of the Comstock Lode do not themselves represent the global supply chains involved in the extraction and distribution of silver, the material history of these photographs, when considered alongside their subject matter of laborers and mines, reveals this seemingly invisible process. Angus’s capacious account of photography discovers meanings immanent to the materiality of images, bringing this materiality to bear on questions of both form and content.

Such an approach outlines an ecologically grounded ethics of the photographic image. This is because Angus’s methodology and the materials she discusses home in on the broader environmental and social processes upon which photography rests. In analyzing the materiality of iron-based cyanotype prints, Angus illustrates “the material intimacies between human and extrahuman worlds.”⁷ Used in the 19th century by Anna Atkins and to create blue-tinted photograms of aquatic and terrestrial plants, the cyanotype has since been adopted by LaToya Ruby Frazier to reflect on the histories of labor and environment contained in these images. Recalling the working clothes of steel mill laborers, Frazier dressed in blue denim for a series of cyanotype self-portraits, indexing “the porous boundaries between bodies, industry, and elements.”⁸ That is, Frazier’s photographs crystallize a series of interconnections—between the iron blue of the image, the iron extracted by laborers to produce steel, the iron minerals essential to human life, as well as the pollutants generated by steel mills, which are ultimately detrimental to such a life. However, even as Frazier discloses a caustic entanglement of human and nonhuman processes, her iron-based photographs also refer the observer to the fundamental interrelationships that sustain (though might also threaten) human life. As Angus writes: “If capitalist manners of viewing the world reinforce dualisms such as nature and culture, these messy mixings—of ecosystems, of human and nonhuman activity, of nature and culture—can point to new ways of living and relating.”⁹ For Angus, such critically engaged and materially grounded photographic practices (as well as historical methodologies) gesture towards the possibility of an anti-extractive and post-capitalist future.

But what might such a future look like? And what form might photography take, which in the age of its digitization (its apparent de-materialization) continues to decimate ecological and social worlds through the extraction of conflict minerals and the production of mass quantities of toxic e-waste? Angus writes from “a commitment to ecosocialism and environmental justice.”¹⁰ In contrast to the blind technophilia that animates so much contemporary discourse, she recognizes that, “[w]ithout shifting larger patterns of consumption and ways of relating to the natural world,

technological solutions will only finesse our march toward collective climate disaster.”¹¹ As an alternative, this book gestures towards what other scholars have referred to as a politics of degrowth, or of the reconciliation of environmentalism and socialism.¹² Yet *Camera Geologica* ultimately leaves the reader in the midst of “the compromised ethics of our present,” understanding photography as, following Donna Haraway, a means of “staying with the trouble,” or of negotiating the lived and ongoing realities of extraction.¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ Siobhan Angus, *Camera Geologica: An Elemental History of Photography* (Duke University Press, 2024), 4.

² Angus, 6.

³ See: Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications for Digital Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2017); Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (Rutgers University Press, 2011); Brian Jacobson, *The Cinema of Extractions: Film Materials and Their Forms* (Columbia University Press, 2025).

⁴ Angus, 53.

⁵ Angus, 32.

⁶ Angus, 104.

⁷ Angus, 135.

⁸ Angus, 156.

⁹ Angus, 163.

¹⁰ Angus, 29.

¹¹ Angus, 221.

¹² See: Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

¹³ Angus, 229.

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AUTHOR BIO

John Winn is a filmmaker, writer, and curator. He is currently completing his dissertation, titled “Excavating an Image: Cinema and the American West,” at Duke University in the Program in Literature. John draws on a variety of disciplines, centering American cinema in its relationship to visuality, modernity, and the environment. His work has been published in *Media Fields Journal*, *Film International*, *four by three magazine*, and *New Review for Film and Television Studies*.