

How can I be dead and alive at the same time?



Liquid Time ©Camille Utterback 2019

*'Gender, race or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.'*

**Cyborg Manifesto**  
**Donna Haraway**  
**1985**

*'As the twenty-first century unfolds, it is becoming more and more evident that the major problems of our time – energy, the environment, climate change, food security, financial security – cannot be understood in isolation. They are systemic problems, which means that are all interconnected and interdependent. Ultimately, these problems must be seen as different facets of one single crisis, which is largely a crisis of perception. It derives from the fact most people in our modern society, and especially large institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview, a perception of reality inadequate for dealing with our overpopulated, globally interconnected world.'*

**The Systems View of Life**  
**Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi**  
**2014**

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2150.

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## Introduction

Fred Ritchin ends *After Photography* (2009) with *A Quantum Leap*. He suggests digital media can effectively communicate 'oddities described by newer theories', by which he means quantum mechanics, 'introducing new logic (or lack of logic) to an information-age public that may be more receptive to such reflection'(177).

Why would the counter-intuitive oddities of quantum theory be relevant to photography? Can narratives found in the exceptionally difficult science of quantum physics help us understand the often-frightening transformations and chaos we see currently in the world? And is digital media capable of exploring these concepts better than analogue photography as Ritchin suggests, when as others insist, digitisation may be the source of our problems<sup>1</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> See - James Bridle, 'Despite the apparent accessibility of information, we're living in a new Dark Age.' (*New Dark Age*, Bridle, 2018)

## I am neither a cat nor dead...

'That macroscopic objects (like Schrodinger's cat) don't appear to follow quantum rules is of course widely known.' (Hollins et al, 2017) However, the strange world of quantum physics underpins and informs the nuclear age in which we live. (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad, 2007; *Pure War*, Virilio and Lotringer, 2008)

Although criticised as overstated by Kathryn Hayles in *How We Became Post Human* (1999: 114), architect/philosopher Paul Virilio's (1932-2018) thesis says the desire to make war and build cities (walls) is interrelated and leads to *all* technological advancements. Both he (34) and Hayles (14, 26) argue the instantiation and embodiment of related structural realities occur as we use everyday technology - even though we don't realise it. Physicist Karen Barad explains that the nuclear age and quantum physics are unequivocally *entangled* (2016). If Virilio's argument holds sway then the structural implications of a world underpinned by quantum mechanics (and inevitably the machines of war which cannot be separated from the machines we use everyday) are worth investigating; as is Ritchin's suggestion digital media can successfully communicate the implications or help change perception.

*Reality is Not What it Seems* (Rovelli 2014) and *The Case Against Reality* (Hoffman 2019) are just two of many contemporary books with alarming titles, perhaps rightly termed pop-physics (Haraway, 2016:12) which dismantle ideas about our perception and existence. In a world where everything seems to be shifting, the notion of a stable reality seems to have disappeared altogether. Photography (analogue and digital), its uses, and many of its projected futures play a significant role but it is a mistake to look at these in isolation; photography must be considered within the wider landscape as an interrelated entity, i.e. entangled.

Physicist Karen Barad's work has been critiqued in a paper called *(Dis)entangling Barad: Materialisms and ethics* (Hollins et al, 2017) and the trend to cite her ridiculed due to the high numbers. (1) However, the authors do (magnanimously) admit they may be suffering from envy and state:

'the influence of Barad's work continues to grow, with [...] significant year-on-year increases in citation counts. And this brings us to an important point: While Barad's project spans twenty years, it is evidently of this moment.' (3)

Although Hollins and co. suggest Barad's work is problematised when she applies notions from the quantum world to the macro (7, 8), Barad repeatedly warns against making analogies or scaling up. However, she states clearly she is interested in 'widely applicable philosophical issues' such as - and amongst others - 'the role of natural as well as cultural factors in technoscientific and other social practices, the nature of bodies and identities'. (70) These interests make her a useful reference in relation to Ritchin's comments.

Barad stresses *entanglement* is key. For her ontology (the study of being) and epistemology (the study of knowledge) are so deeply intertwined that she chooses the neologism, *Onto-epistem-ology* (2003: 829) (2007: 185) She also uses *intra/related*<sup>2</sup> rather than *inter-related* to emphasise deep multi-layered entanglement – and I will follow her lead here.

For James Elkins, art historian and author of *What Photography Is* (2011), human ontology and photography's too seems mostly about monsters devouring other monsters; his story includes threatening-looking microbes such as 'Sun Animals' (loc 1828) and 'Water Bears' (loc 1787) which remind him 'that is not what I wish to be' (ibid); and even smaller, the split atom which grows exponentially as it explodes, designed by humans bent on destruction.

*"Instead of mouths they  
have sharp 'stylets' that  
slide through tubes in their  
heads and pierce plant  
cells, like a mosquito's  
proboscis."*



WATER BEARS.

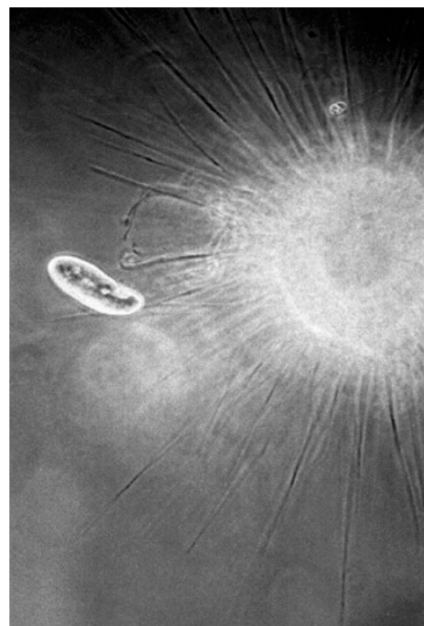


Fig. 2. Water Bears and Sun Animals, images by Elkins – 'As I watched one of these Sun Animals, another animalcule, a ciliate, swam in a little too close and was snagged by one of the spines' (2011: 1787)

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<sup>2</sup> See 3 minute video which explains the difference well  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0SnstJoEec>

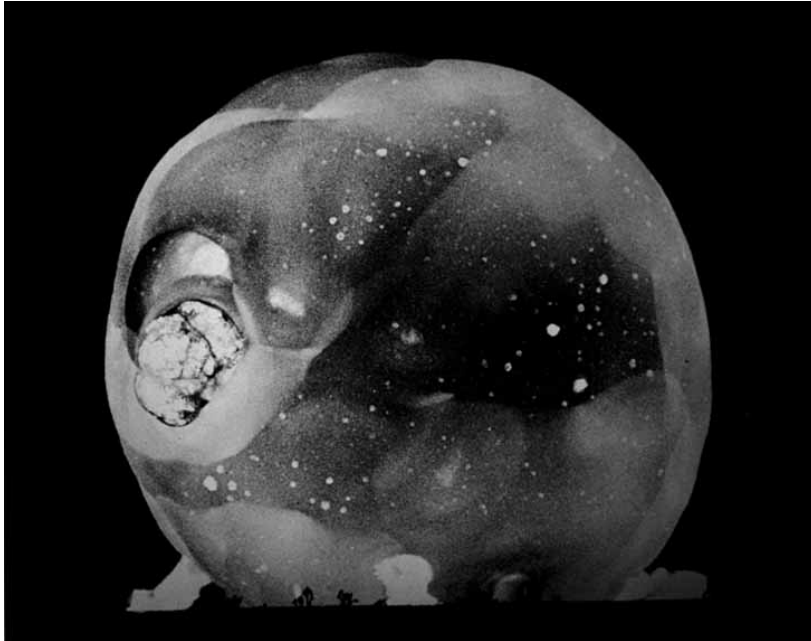


Fig. 3. Elkins' includes Harold Edgerton's Rapatronic images of atomic explosions. 'The object in this picture refused to be described in terms of things I know [...] this object will not be made into something familiar. [...] I fall into a kind visual desperation.' (loc 2108) Note the size of the tiny black trees at the bottom of the explosion. (Image from Middlebury.edu)

### Flexible Unlearning

Elkins quotes Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, and Pierre Bourdieu as he describes how the invention of photography intruded on perception and how it became appropriated by the bourgeoisie who relied on it to convince themselves of, and reinforce their *limited (self-serving?)* view of reality. We should constantly remind ourselves of those who were excluded and why, and about who continues to be so after the embedding of these distinctions and differences. Benjamin admits, because of film and photography, 'I am unaware of the masses of things, the on and one of things, that I am permitting myself not to see'. (2011: loc 1326).

Benjamin is also quoted as saying film, 'creates a percussive shock to the consciousness by continuously changing scenes, I can no longer think what I want to think.' Or 'My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.' (*The Work of Art*, in *Illuminations*, 238) (loc 1311)

As explored and quoted in my own project, *Polar Interia* (2018), Paul Virilio echoes this when he states,

'Cinema shows us what our consciousness is. Our consciousness is an effect of montage. There is no continuous consciousness, there are only compositions of consciousness.'" (2008, 49)

Elkins says Baudelaire was 'sour and splenetic' but correct when he said, 'photography made the 'whole squalid society ...rush to gaze at its trivial image'. (2011: loc 1561) What would Baudelaire make of today's selfie-culture? Had he been alive today, intolerance for a constant state of collective inward-facing prurience might have driven him to apoplexy.

The death of the Princess of Wales in 1997 during the initial Internet bubble marks a clear turning point in the UK's recent history, from which point onwards, it has become more and more acceptable to reveal all publicly. Sylvère Lotringer's *Overexposed* (2007) explores the relationship between 'consumerism and identity' (blurb) linking the prevalence of public display, which perhaps not co-incidentally, have become greater just as our modes of exteriorising stop being on the outside. Instead, expression is embedded as code on the inside of apparatus', and form outside, and at the same time, boundaries that once separated those two domains have become blurred via our use of technology (Hayles, 1999: 160-191). However, while he says, 'Secrets aren't secrets at all. They are some kind of social secretion' (1988: 207)<sup>3</sup>, Donna Haraway lists this new openness in her *Cyborg Manifesto* (2016) as *cyborg citizenship*, rather than the binary positions between public/private (29). She also states her 'essay is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction' (7). Baudelaire who said, 'There is no way to staunch the floods of false nostalgia for people and faces' (Elkins, 2011: loc 1425) may have felt differently.

Elkins quotes Pierre Bourdieu linking photography inexorably to the middle-classes, which emerged as capitalism did. He writes, 'It is easy to agree that photography's apparent realism has been formed by the middle-class hope that the photographs give us reality itself (as Bourdieu says).' (2011: loc 762) And 'photography is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration' (Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen*, 48) (2011: loc 707). If you are born into that class and spend your time contemplating photography, you inevitably conspire and Elkins does not refrain from highlighting his complicity. 'For Bourdieu, photography is bourgeois to its bones, and it even includes its own futile anti-bourgeois gestures, like my own attraction to things that aren't family photographs.' (loc 716) Susan Sontag's comment, 'Photography has become the quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies' doesn't do much to counter that view. (2008: 69)

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<sup>3</sup> Lotringer's entire oeuvre is a criticism of capitalism in which photography plays a significant role – the title of his book quoted here, *Overexposed*, relates to the making of images and is a multi-faceted entendre about too much light, too much flesh, too much perversion, too little space, no dignity, or darkness – viewed by our society as something to avoid.



If Elkins sees photography as an expression, Alan Sekula in *The Body and the Archive* (1986) understands its entanglement and constructive role as an *otherer* of the so-called "'dangerous classes'", i.e. the 'chronically unemployed sub-proletariat' (5). He tells us how both Daguerre and Talbot understood technology to be a 'silence that silences' (6) and aims to describe how photography (and in particular portraits) cannot shake itself free from the mentality of 'possessive individualism' i.e. 'a systematic defence of social relations based on private property' (7).

Possessive individualism is typical of, and dependent on a Cartesian worldview, one in which discrete objects that can be categorised exist in a void universe as opposed to an understanding of existence being relational, intra-related. Sekula's essay discusses how representations of the *dangerous classes* fed into a perception of reality. Society in time came to believe in photographic legitimacy and those beliefs were reinforced within a feedback loop. But as Barad says, faith in representation is 'simply a Cartesian habit of mind' (2007:49).

Micheal Fried's book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008) was recommended as an alternative view to Elkins' statement about photography being boring. Much has been said about the book and his essay *Art & Objecthood* (1967). Theorists and practitioners Phoebe von Held (2017) and Daniel Rubenstein (2017) dismantle Fried's use of binary terms, theatricality and anti-theatricality; however, it's Fried's dogged commitment to *representationalism* and hierarchical thinking that is of concern here.

'the salient point about Fried's thought is that, by arguing against the dualism of theatricality and for the monism of 'real' art, he is unable to move beyond the very dualism he is trying to unsettle as his thought is chained to the common-sense notion that representation is a natural, ordinary, everyday occurrence.' (2017: 52)

Barad tells us repeatedly that we need to 'question representationalism's claim that there are representations, on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation on the other.' (Barad, 2007: 49) Rubenstein ends with,

'Putting the object first will not work because the opposition between art and non-art is itself the product of an ideology that asserts that there is a real world that can be taken up and represented as an image.' (Rubenstein: 54)

## Examples in Popular Culture and Art

### *Another Life* (2019)

*Another Life* (Netflix) contains a standard narrative. The series reinforces American dominance and Western values (with all its unresolved issues) as normative, always expressing a 'manic compulsion to name the Enemy'. (Haraway, 2016: 9)

William as an exceptionally advanced *Siri* or *Alexa*, played by Samuel Anderson, but virtually indistinguishable from the non-AI characters<sup>4</sup>, except he is a component of the spaceship which also functions as a nuclear warhead capable of destroying a planet. His seems to be emergent and alters according to his performative actions within the group. The significance of his black skin<sup>5</sup> cannot be overlooked. There are deeply embedded, entangled, implications relating to the unconscious decisions of the producers and our on-going relationship with skin-colour, power and otherness. It's not that the producers could have chosen a white actor, which might have resulted in different connotations to do with the growing acceptance of posthumanism – the issue is they didn't, and so multiple layers of contextual meaning exist.

William is a representation. But if representation has for so long given us the impression that 'there are ontologically separate entities' (Barad, 2007: 49) waiting to be represented, William can be seen as evidence of the long-term move away from that perception, as well as an example of why that assumption is out-dated. He is a narrowing-of-the-gap between representation and something to be represented – and tied up within are all the troubling expressions of otherness and 'assimilation' of other. As an AI character, William's developmental forefather may have been an analogue then digital photograph, a moving image, and a hologram (non-human). In this moment his 'simulated' presence is problematic, because in addition, there is the possibility of slavery in the actor Anderson's background and certainly structural racism. Haraway who urges us to take 'pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction' (7) says:

'our time, [is] a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike another popular AI character, Janet in *The Good Place* (2016-19) who is literally split between good and bad, evoking connections to the psychological term *split* - unconsciously seeing people as either all good or all bad, an extreme way of coping with confusion, anxiety, and mixed feelings. Splitting is especially prevalent under stress (Eddy and Kreger, 2011:16)

<sup>5</sup> 'William will *always* be manipulated, he will *always* be in service of Niko. She is the vessel's captain and William is the vessel' (Laguda, 2019)

imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (2016: 7)



Fig. 4. William and his 'master' Niko in *Another Life* (2019) '*Another Life* creates William as a highly intelligent, state-of-the-art, digitally-constructed, holographic magical negro, whose wants, needs and desires will always be over-ridden by his responsibility to be a vessel for the characters he carries inside him. He is cruelly given access to the conceptualisation of autonomy but never the means to fully exercise it and there is something truly unnerving and insidious about that to me' (Laguda, 2019).

Debora Lupton, author of *Data Selves* (we can imagine data would make up a good percentage of William's being, along with his fleshy-looking hardware) writes,

'While digital data assemblages are often conceptualised as immaterial, invisible and intangible, I contend that they are things that are generated in and through material devices (smartphones, computers, sensors), stored in material archives (data repositories), materialised in a range of formats that invite human sensory responses and have material effects on human bodies (documenting and having recursive effects on human flesh).' (19: 2019)

William could be the long-term view of Lupton's premise - her work follows on from Kathryn Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999). But in the context of now, he reinforces old boundary lines (based on race) when his existence could have done the opposite. William's character is interesting, because while there are many popular narratives which describe AI as potentially dangerous, he isn't split but relatively rounded, fallible, and could function as an example of our evolving attitude towards posthumanism. That might suggest we are coming to terms with a new cyborg reality pertaining to everyone. But he might also be example of how Western patriarchy, colonisation and racism have colonised and triumphed over notions of the other, depending on your view.

## 45 Years (2015)

*Another Life* (2019) is one of many, many examples of contemporary texts exploring nebulous boundaries. While *Another Life* is teeming with terms and references to quantum science such as dark matter, particle accelerators and multiple worlds, Andrew Haigh's *45 Years* (Artificial Eye) falls within the margins of realism rather than science fiction. But it too is concerned with boundaries, referencing photography's ability to breach them in a setting many of us might relate to. (Bracketed, greyed-out words point to quantum philosophical terms.)



Fig. 5 Kate (Charlotte Rampling) looks at images of her husband's late girlfriend in *45 Years* (2015).

Mark Kermode describes *45 Years* as "A subtle examination of the persistence of the past and the fragile instability of the present". (2015) (*Indeterminacy*) The film's action takes place over just a few days, however, its narrative spans 50 years. (*Disrupting our perception of linear time – human construction of it.*) Kermode tells us:

'an ageing married man [Geoff] receives a letter telling him that the body of his previous girlfriend has been found, perfectly preserved in the ice of the Alps where she fell 50 years ago. This news gets a chilly reception from his wife [Kate], who is alarmed by the frozen spectre of a former love.' (2015)

As the film unfolds, it becomes clear that Geoff used to take photographs although they own few. Kate says, 'It's a shame not to have more photographs round the house. I guess we didn't see the point of taking pictures of ourselves'. Geoff does have a camera but it's as impotent as him, which we discover in a touching and

realistic sex scene. He stores the camera and boxes of old images of his recently discovered late girlfriend in the loft.

Towards the end of the film Kate ventures up rickety steps into the roof (Jungian synchronicity representing Geoff's head and emotional life) and looks at the images. Director Haigh opted for slides rather than prints so Kate effectively creates her own inverted Plato's Cave when she looks at them. *(Both Kate and the girlfriend, as well as the actors playing them exist in superposition. i.e. in more than one place at once – the dead girlfriend exists in the present on the wall of Kate's attic as well as in the past, and Kate travels to the past as she looks at the slides while existing in the present) (Multiple states).*

Although the film never once mentions quantum physics there is a fluidity in relation to boundaries that feels non-Cartesian. Moral absolutes are as unfixed as time and space. Complexity and entanglement are embraced.

### *Camille Utterback's Liquid Time Series (2000-2002)*

Finally, Utterback is referenced by Barad when explaining the intra-relatedness of time and us.



Fig. 6 *Liquid Time* ©Camille Utterback 2019

At: <http://camilleutterback.com/projects/liquid-time-series/>  
(Accessed 25/11/2019)

Utterback writes:

'In the *Liquid Time Series* installation, a participant's physical motion in the installation space fragments time in a pre-recorded video clip. As the participant moves closer to the projection screen they push deeper into time—but only in the area of the screen directly in front of them. Beautiful and startling disruptions are created as people move through the installation space. As viewers move away, the fragmented image heals in their wake—like a pond returning to stillness. The interface of one's body—which can only exist in one place, at one time—becomes the means to create a space in which multiple times and perspectives coexist.' (2019)

Utterback may have used Processing or similar, with coded data instructions, apparatuses (computer and camera) and viewer/participants all becoming an assemblage as the emergent output, which is the installation. This work could not have been made with an analogue camera – and had it been, it would have different connotations - nor does it convey concerns about perception that affected Victorians or people living in the fifties. It is a blend of material objects and discursive practice of its time.

## Conclusion

Fred Ritchin writes:

'within a Newtonian world view, the famed photographer Cartier-Bresson photograph of a man jumping a puddle leaves the reader confident he will land on the other side: in a subatomic quantum universe it remains a matter of probabilities'. (181)

The cultural texts referenced in this essay have all been moving image rather than still photography, but both digital and analogue may have been used. Is this because *still* photography's anatomy, regardless of whether its technology was invented a hundred and fifty years ago or forty, best expresses a dying Cartesian ideology and it will eventually serve little purpose other than archaic curiosity in a future world? Would Elkins' argument be better served with the words *increasingly irrelevant* rather than *boring*?

Ritchin ends his book by telling us that:

'the older mechanical photography will, to a certain extent, falter. It will be valued as historical documentation and for its singularity as object that will more and more resemble that of painting. But its singularity may also be seen as a drawback: and the digital may appear, almost paradoxically as more holistic.' (182)

Karen Barad's endeavour to explore the philosophy of quantum sciences in relation to other disciplines is motivated by wanting us to see it is possible to live with a different reality, one where we are all part of the world, not separate from it, not standing back. The flexibility and possibility for intra-relatedness using digital media, which emerges from code may serve us well in this regard.

This literature review ends with that in mind and investigating these ideas further will be the topic of the extended essay.

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## Images

1	Liquid Time (2000-02) ©Camille Utterback 2019	Downloaded from Camille Utterback's website At: <a href="http://camilleutterback.com/projects/liquid-time-series/">http://camilleutterback.com/projects/liquid-time-series/</a> Accessed 25/11/2019	Cover and 14
2	Water Bears and Sun Animals	Screenshots taken from Elkins, J. (2011) <i>What photography is</i> . [Kindle] New York: Routledge.	6
3	Atomic Test Explosion 1952	Edgerton, Harold (1952) [Photograph] At: <a href="https://sites.middlebury.edu/landandlens/2016/10/16/harold-edgerton-atomic-bomb-explosion-1952/">https://sites.middlebury.edu/landandlens/2016/10/16/harold-edgerton-atomic-bomb-explosion-1952/</a> (Accessed 19/10/2019)	7
4	Another Life (Netflix) 2019	William (Samuel Anderson) and Niko (Katee Sackhoff) publicity image. Black Youth Project [online] At: <a href="http://blackyouthproject.com/the-white-writers-misimagination-of-black-characters-in-science-fiction/">http://blackyouthproject.com/the-white-writers-misimagination-of-black-characters-in-science-fiction/</a> Accessed: 25/11/2019	10
5	45 Years (Artificial Eye) 2015	Kate (Charlotte Rampling) At: <a href="http://www.dvdcompare.net/review.php?id=4311">http://www.dvdcompare.net/review.php?id=4311</a> Accessed 25/11/2019	12