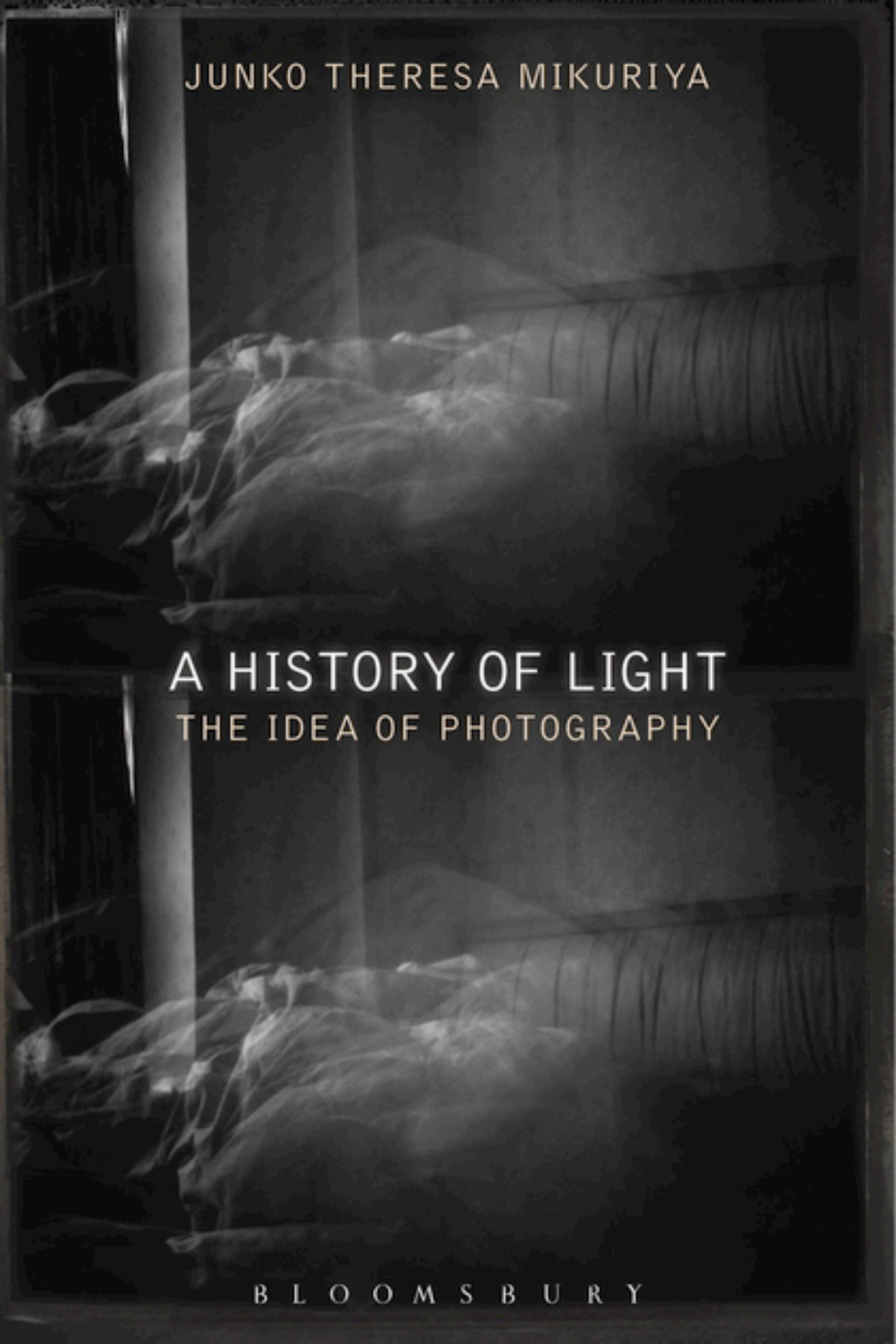
JUNKO THERESA MIKURIYA
A HISTORY OF LIGHT
THE IDEA OF PHOTOGRAPHY
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A History of Light

The Idea of Photography

Junko Theresa Mikuriya

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In memory of my mother Mary Kwok Chiu Tse
and His Holiness Grandmaster Lin Yun

Contents

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Notes on References

Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the Platonic Dialogues are drawn from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. 11th edition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. This includes *Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredinnick; *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey; *Sophist*, trans. F. M. Cornford; and *Timaeus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

In Chapter 3, DM refers to Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, trans. Emma Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 4. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

Introduction

Photography is difficult (*chalepon*). Elusive both theoretically and materially, it is often described as having no identity of its own. It is treacherous – at times it hides behind its object of depiction, other times concealing itself underneath its bedazzling technical splendour. Its apparent instability belies its generosity; its hospitality is such that its boundaries are porous and mutable, inviting the encroachment of others. Hence photography is often considered to be overly reliant upon its surroundings; attempts to define and to theorize photography would reduce it to a set of cultural, social, political or technological productions, identifying its history solely as the development of the photographic camera, or the inevitable outcome of a changing aesthetic sensibility.

As a topic of enquiry, the history of photography has produced a vast corpus consisting of divergent strands. Some of these titles are recognized as classics in the field, such as *The Origins of Photography* by Helmut Gernsheim, Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography* and Georges Potonniée's *The History of the Discovery of Photography*. These works present a historical narrative of the medium through the figure of the grand photographer, the evolution of artistic and photographic movements as well as the development of various film and camera technologies. They also tend to prioritize a historical account of photography which is told through an established canon of photographers while overlooking the usage of photography in other domains. However, there are also historical studies that place a stronger emphasis on the cultural and social implications of the photographic medium, such as Michel Frizot's *The New History of Photography*, Jean-Claude Lemagny and André Rouillé's *A History of Photography* and Mary Warner Marien's *Photography: A Cultural History*. Any attempt to write a history or theory of photography would have to address the challenges presented by the ubiquity of the photographic image and the changing forms of its technological manifestations. To find productive ways to engage with the photographic medium, photo historians and theorists have drawn upon discourses in psychoanalysis, feminist theory, literary studies, art criticism, deconstruction, Foucauldian historiography, Marxism, semiotics, cultural theory and other disciplines.

What all of these works have in common is the recognition of the camera obscura as the site of origin of the photographic camera and the necessary condition for the production of the photographic image. When constructing a genealogy of photography, the camera obscura is frequently considered as the technical apparatus that gave rise to the photographic camera. This is, for example, reflected in the title of a 1955 work by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914*. As a technical process, the invention of photography is usually situated around the 1820s, with Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's heliograph *View from a Window at Gras* (c. 1827) marking the moment that an image can be captured and fixed successfully inside a camera obscura. Further chemical experimentations led to several independent inventions that emerged around the same time – in France, the daguerreotype (Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre) and *l'effet positif* or the direct positive (Hippolyte Bayard), and in England, the calotype (William Henry Fox Talbot). However, as Geoffrey Batchen has shown in *Burning with Desire*, the history of photography is much more complex; instead of a single origin, Batchen suggests that photography is the outcome of a particular set of cultural conditions and aesthetic sensibility to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century. Before we look at Batchen's work, it might be worthwhile to examine some of the problems arising from attempts to theorize or conceptualize photography.

The ubiquity of the photographic medium – how it is entrenched in every aspect of our lives – contributes to the seemingly nebulous character of the photograph. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes, describing his 'ontological desire' to search for what Photography is in 'itself', writes: '[S]uch a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a "genius" of its own.'[1] Barthes's comment reflects the anxiety that arises from attempts to conceptualize and locate photography. Thirty years on, the question of 'what photography is' still constitutes a topic of heated discussion, as seen in a round-table discussion chaired by James Elkins at University College Cork, Ireland in 2005.[2] The ubiquity of the photograph is undoubtedly a source of this problem as highlighted by Sabine Kriebel, in an essay that appears in the same volume as the edited transcript of the panel discussion in Cork. Kriebel asks what we should consider when writing about the photographic medium: is it photographic practice, the photographic object, its function or the genre of photography (such as documentary, landscape, fine art, portraiture, or snapshot)?[3]

In those early years of photography, following François Arago's declaration in 1839 to the Académie des Sciences, presenting the daguerreotype as France's gift to the world, photography was immediately incorporated into the fabric of the social structure of the time. The photographic image infiltrated portraiture (replacing miniature painting), astronomy, tourism (postcards, stereoscopic images), pornography, medicine and criminology (classification of criminal types). If the pervasive characteristic of the photograph is described as a radiating light upon its inception, literature from the nineteenth century often comparing photography to the sun, perhaps it is precisely this blinding brightness that constitutes the elusive nature of the photographic medium, making it a difficult subject to write and theorize about.

These uncertainties regarding photography's identity are played out in various ways. For example, John Tagg turns Barthes's ontological concern for photography's lack of identity into the basis for an examination of it as a social and cultural technology. In his work on photography's complicit relationship with the political apparatus and its role in the construction of the individual and the state, Tagg examines photography solely as a technological tool defined by a set of social and cultural practices. In *The Burden of Representation*, he writes:

> Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work … Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces. It is this field we must study, not photography as such.[4]

Looking at photography uniquely through the perspective of technological production, 'across a field of institutional spaces', is problematic and restrictive because it gives priority to photography's efficiency as a technological tool and the ways in which it is embedded within the system of its production and usage. Furthermore, Tagg's statement is indicative of a reductionist attitude towards the medium and presumes an absence of photography's being. Mary Price in *The Photograph: A Strange, Confined Space* presents another viewpoint drawing upon literary studies; she observes that 'photographs without appropriate descriptive words are deprived and weakened, but that descriptions of even invented photographs may adumbrate a richness of use that can extend the possibilities of interpreting actual photographs'.[5] For Price, the photograph is defined by its context; the subordination of the photographic image to language is such that even the description of an imaginary photograph can be more powerful than a real one if the latter is not accompanied by words.

As we have seen so far, it seems that photographic theory is unable to divorce itself from the camera as a technological apparatus. A similar viewpoint is reflected by Joel Snyder, whose debate with Rosalind Krauss on medium specificity and the notion of indexicality continues to this day. Whereas Krauss is interested in examining photography through the concept of the *index* or *trace*, in particular its link with what Barthes calls the *referent* – the thing or person photographed, for Snyder the photograph is nothing but pure construction and has no connection with the natural world; the images produced by the camera obey a specific set of rules that conform to Renaissance perspective.[6] Snyder's viewpoint echoes that of Tagg's, who rejects Barthes's reading of the photograph as 'an emanation of *past reality, a magic*, not an art'.[7] Addressing Barthes, specifically his search to find the unique being of his mother through photography, Tagg writes: 'The photograph is not a magical "emanation" but a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes.'[8]

Geoffrey Batchen's work enables us to move beyond the restrictive discourses of Snyder and Tagg by searching for the 'identity of photography in the history of its origins'.[9] In *Burning with Desire*, he proposes instead to look at the emergence of the 'desire to photograph', before the official announcement of the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. In his search for the origins of photography, he singles out the last two decades of the eighteenth century as a crucial moment, identifying a list of proto-photographers, 'those who recorded or subsequently claimed for themselves the pre-1839 onset of a desire to photograph'.[10] He links the birth of photography to the rise of modernity, marked by a crisis of representation in which new configurations of power and subject/object relations are established. The uncertainty towards nature and its representations is echoed throughout the early nineteenth century, where man is no longer seen as a passive recipient but an active agent. Alongside the inventors of photography, Batchen sees the writings of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the picturesque theorist and classical scholar Richard Payne Knight, and the Reverend William Gilpin as exemplifying the emergence of a new form of subjectivity where man is simultaneously the subject and object of his knowledge.

Burning with Desire succeeds in revealing the ambivalent nature of the origins of photography. By questioning the timing of photography's conception, the book can be seen as an attempt to rewrite photography's history. What is assumed to be of a fixed origin, the discovery of photography, in fact possesses multiple beginnings and cannot be attributed to a single individual.[11] Batchen identifies a specific period in history where certain discourses emerge which

point to a shift in the organization of the human subject – the period that directly precedes the invention of photography, noting the sudden irruption of photographic-like discourses in art, literature and science in the era preceding the 1830s: 'Clearly it was only possible to think "photography" at this specific historical conjuncture; photography as a conceptual economy thus has an identifiable historical and cultural specificity. This is why the principal question … has been not "Who invented photography?" but rather "Within which specific dynamic of cultural/social forces was it possible for photography to be thought by anybody?"'[12]

Batchen's project, although admirable in many ways, still falls into a theorization of photography that is bound up with its technological status. For his rewriting of photographic history situates the origins of photography in the late 1700s, thus identifying the medium as a product of a 'modern' sensibility, arising from a crisis of representation. He writes:

> Much more overwhelming in this regard is the vast absence, prior to this period, of talk along the lines I have described. From a virtual dearth of signs of a desire to photograph, the historical archive reveals the onset only in the last decade of the eighteenth century of a rapidly growing, widely dispersed, and increasingly urgent need for that-which-was-to-become-photography.[13]

I disagree with Batchen's argument that the thought of photography was only made possible in the last decade of the eighteenth century. For to desire photography is already to be conscious of it, or of something that is akin to it. This sudden irruption of photographic-like discourse in art, literature and science in the late 1700s is in fact the *rationalization* of photography. I argue instead that the invention of photography is only the material manifestation of that which has always existed.

Against the widespread tendency to associate the origins of photography with the nineteenth-century inventions of Niépce, Daguerre, Talbot and others, I argue that as a philosophical project, photography goes further back in time than what is generally recognized as the period of its inception, the nineteenth century. In fact, its presence can be uncovered right at the roots of Western metaphysics, within discourses of magic, mysticism and spiritual practice. Instead of locating the origin of photography at the site of the camera obscura, I will complicate the history of the medium and suggest that intimations of photography can be found in the core of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought.

One of the aims of this book is to question the all-too-ready dismissal of photography by historians and critics as a medium with no inherent qualities,

the assumption of it being nothing more than a technological system of visual representation based upon Renaissance perspective. To address the often-reductive discourses on photography, I propose a different way of thinking about photography in terms of *photagogia* or the 'evoking of light'. As I have said, while Tagg, Price and others have all engaged with photography in diverse and productive ways, reflecting upon the various problematics of photography, they often take the conditions that produced the object of their critique as a given, thus omitting to examine the underlying reasons behind, for example, photography's apparent lack of identity, which, I argue, can be considered as something other than the weakness of the medium but an outcome of that which is much more complex. As a consequence, instead of delving into the reasons underlying photography's mutability, the volatility of the photograph is often accepted as an *a priori* and one of the failings of the medium. I suggest that the uncertainty experienced when confronting the medium can be conveyed by the Greek word *chalepon* (χαλεπόν), a word which frequently appears in the Platonic dialogues. I am inspired by John Sallis's use of the word in his reading of Plato. In *The Verge of Philosophy* he writes: 'How, then, is it possible to read Platonic dialogues together in a way that is both critical and productive? What needs, above all, to be stressed can perhaps best be expressed by a word found often in these texts, the word χαλεπόν'.[14]

This book attempts to explore that which lies behind photography's difficultness (χαλεπότης), by examining how photography is already implicated in Western thought, before the arrival of its technical regeneration as the photography with which we are all familiar. By showing how photography has always been parasitic upon the history of philosophy and by uncovering the dreams of *photographein* concealed within theurgy and mysticism, I hope to open up new possibilities in reading photography, which in turn will shed light on the ways in which we reflect upon the history of Western philosophy. Both Barthes and Benjamin have alluded to the presence of magic in their encounters with photography; these observations have curiously gone unnoticed or perhaps even been deliberately overlooked by subsequent thinkers.[15] As we have seen earlier, Barthes describes the photograph as 'an emanation of *past reality*: a *magic*, not an art'.[16] Benjamin, in his essay 'Little History of Photography', notes the 'magical value' of the photograph, which painting cannot produce.[17] It is interesting that indexicality, the trace or imprint, seemingly the basis for the realist perspectives so often associated with photography, also seems to evoke this sense of magic for these thinkers. What is this wonderment of photography? Is it driven by the

longing (*ephesis*) for the divine; does it coincide with the Neoplatonic dream of achieving *homoiōsis theō*?

I argue that the history of Western philosophy can be read as the movement of *photagogia* (φωταγωγία) or the 'evoking of light', a term used by the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus. The history of philosophy is an appropriate host for the *photagogic*, since light occupies a privileged place in its figures of transcendence. The presence of light pervades philosophy's own origin myths, from the sunlight in Plato's cave allegory, the oscillation between light and night in Parmenides's poem 'On Nature', to the light of creation in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, not to mention philosophy's historical obsession with representation and reflection.[18]

The writing of photographic history is inseparable from the writing of a history of light. *Photographein* brings out the strange traces of the absolute contained within the wider practice of *photagogia*. As I looked into the early writings on light, I noticed something that began to reveal itself – the constant presence of divine light (a *photophania* that is also a *theophania* and *agathophania*).[19] In the *Republic*, Plato refers to light as a *third kind* (*triton genos*) that constitutes the conditions of seeing. Socrates says: 'Though vision may be in the eyes and its possessor may try to use it, and though color be present, yet without the presence of a third thing specifically and naturally adapted to this purpose, you are aware that vision will see nothing and the colors will remain invisible' (507e). Another figure which frequently makes its appearance in this book is the sun – the sun as representative of the transcendental Good in the sensible world, as manifestation of the Divine and as the residing place of the hidden primordial light. As Derrida remarks in his essay 'Demeure, Athènes': 'Toute photographie est du soleil.' ('Every photograph is of the sun.')[20]

In the following chapters, I will attempt to reconstruct a genealogy of *photagogia* of which photography, now a dominant way of collecting light, is an example. I hope to show that photography, understood as a mode and practice of *photagogia*, has always existed prior to its 'invention', deeply embedded within the roots of Western metaphysics, in practices of mysticism and magic, waiting to surface and to be revealed. This book offers a history of photography that departs from the more conventional, technologically oriented accounts of the medium. My aim is not to replace these other narratives but, instead, to suggest ways of rethinking photography's ontological instability in a manner that is not reductive to the medium, to move away from the critical studies that tend to overlook, suppress, or deny photography its ontology. Perhaps there is something of the *chora* in this book's uneasy relationship to conventional discourses on photography, for it is part of the nature of this project