

# Photography extraordinary? – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

 [blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/photography-extraordinary](http://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/photography-extraordinary)

Andrew Fisher

23.03.2026

## Photography extraordinary? Von: Andrew Fisher

The assorted public controversies and alarms provoked by widely available and easy to use Generative AI imaging technologies tend to take superficial form, especially when the newer imaging technology is considered in relation to historical ideas and practices of photography.

On the one hand, there is a widespread tendency to interpret the advent of Generative AI imaging – in which depiction might appear realistic but is structurally divorced from the need to reference existing reality – as a fundamental challenge to what is desired or expected of photographic images. Such concerns may well be warranted. But they are very often unhelpfully over-simplified. A case in point is the way that journalistic debates in this context tend to rely on an overly formalised and unitary notion of the historical photograph in order to generate a sense of controversy out of its contrast to AI imaging, whether this centres on a general crisis of representation and truth, the efficacy of existing conventions of aesthetic judgement or codes of professional photographic practice.

On the other hand, stands a growing field of sophisticated critical and scholarly work on the fate of photography in the face of AI, which unsurprisingly tends towards more nuanced articulation of the challenges involved but is unfortunately not as widely read. For instance, a recent contribution to the journal *Philosophy of Photography* by German media theorist Olga Moscatova responds to a public controversy sparked by the award of a prestigious photographic prize, in 2023, to artist Boris Eldagsen for an image that was AI generated.<sup>1</sup> Problematising the stark ontological difference between AI and photography that the subsequent dispute tended to assume, Moscatova sets out to think about the relationship between the AI image and photograph according to what she sees as their “complex simultaneity”. In this light, for the moment at least, the AI image takes on the status “...of both being and not being photography”.<sup>2</sup> This complication, Moscatova argues, does not present us with a contradiction but is “...precisely what requires further exploration”.<sup>3</sup> I find this suggestion compelling and would like to explore it briefly here.

The first thing to note is that, from its inception onwards photography has tended towards hybridity and has proven markedly promiscuous in its relationships to other media, as well as being open to a vast range of different uses, ideas and fields of endeavour. As a result, if it has to be defined, it is best not to do so on the basis of a single fact, use or quality, but perhaps in light of this complexity and expansiveness. I am by no means the first to observe this. For a long time now, interesting approaches to the criticism, history and theory of photography have productively accommodated themselves to the fact of their objects’ plurality and volatility.<sup>4</sup>

One implication to be drawn is that, in order to understand what is in the process of changing in our visual milieu, it may be better not to ignore the historically changeable and expansive nature of what Susan Sontag once referred to as “...photography’s widening, ever incomplete history”.<sup>5</sup> After all, at risk of being polemical, why would one set out to pursue such a task on the basis of a hollowed-out and simplified notion of photography that stresses only its most boring aspects and hackneyed possibilities? Why not, instead, start out by contrasting that which is new with photography’s long-standing and abiding strangeness?

How to follow through on this critical and historical impulse? Instead of immediately turning to photography’s invention in 1839 and the authority of its founding fathers (William Henry Fox Talbot, Nicéphore Niepce and Louis Daguerre) as a means to ground its historical nature, and rather than simply noting the etymology of the word photography – which, in case you need reminding, combines the ancient Greek roots φωτός (*phōtós*) ‘light’ and γραφή (*graphé*) ‘drawing’ into the celebrated result: ‘writing with light’ – one might consider other more ambiguous but also productive seeming starting points to see what they offer the understanding of photography in the current context.

In this vein, it is apposite to recall the mid-1850s which, with respect to photography, was a period of rapid transformations and processes of consolidation that bear some interesting parallels to our own moment. Very briefly put, this is also the historically and geographically dispersed ‘moment’ – around the middle of the decade and at least in the European context – in which the term ‘photography’ overtook that of previously dominant terms – notably “Daguerreotype” and Fox Talbot’s “photogenic drawing” – in discursively framing the techniques, machineries, ideas and expectations associated with photographic media in public and professional usage.<sup>6</sup> This is one of multiple points at which, one might say, photography came into its own as the kind of complex and epoch making form described above.

An exemplary moment in this, for me, is a short story by Lewis Carroll called “Photography Extraordinary”, first published in 1856. Exploring this story might help to conceptualise the complex ways in which media emerge to take shape over time and in use, (which is to echo Moscatova’s aim in relation to the present). Doing this may also help in not losing sight of a certain photographic potential for strangeness that might yet speak to our present.

Carroll is very often discussed in relation to photography, largely because he was a keen practitioner who controversially produced many images of the young girl Alice Lidell (taken to be his inspiration for the fictional character of Alice). Written a year before he took up the practice, “Photography Extraordinary” remains almost wholly unremarked outside of literary studies of Carroll and research into the history of mid-19th Century English photography.<sup>7</sup> My own first encounter with it was not a result of work in these areas but, rather, when a friend sent me a copy of the 1957 magazine *Fantasy and Science Fiction* in which Carroll’s story appeared. The editor, Anthony Boucher, prefaced its inclusion by describing it as a “...little-known science-fictional sketch, in which the mathematician- creator of Wonderland uses a surprising sort of Victorian electroencephalogram to satirize the novels of his (and every) era”.<sup>8</sup>

The unnamed narrator of the story visits a photographer's studio to witness an experiment conducted in the darkroom. The report we read is prefaced by his disclaimer that no concrete details of the experiment can be given as the protocols followed have yet to be published. We do learn that the experiment aims to demonstrate the photographer's claim that, "...the ideas of even the feeblest intellect, when once received on properly prepared paper, could be "developed" up to any required degree of intensity".<sup>9</sup> His experiment centres on an image derived from the mind of a young man who is derisively taken to represent this starting point. Unspecified machinery is positioned such that "...a mesmeric rapport" is "...established between the mind of the patient and the object glass".<sup>10</sup> And, "...after the paper had been exposed for the requisite time", it is seen to bear a visible register of the young man's thoughts. Significantly, these are rendered visible not in the form of a picture but as "faint, almost illegible characters" detailing his feelings in response to a recent romantic rejection. These first traces are described as belonging to the sentimental "milk-and-water" school of prose, which "...is, of course, utterly unsaleable in the present day".<sup>11</sup> Further unspecified darkroom processes are then manipulated to visualise these traces more clearly and on a scale of increasing intensities that correspond to the genres of sentimentality, matter of fact realism and passionate romanticism. Interestingly, the visual characteristics of the 'images' involved are not said to alter. What changes is their linguistic expression, but it does so only by means of photographic visualisation. The experimental process reaches peak intensity when the paper is given a final, Byronic, treatment that comes out "...scorched and blistered all over". The young man faints and the narrator's mind "...reels as it contemplates the stupendous addition this made to the powers of science". In conclusion he is also led, somewhat off-handedly, to speculate on what the application of these techniques to official political discourse might engender.

There is much to say about this story, which would go far beyond what is the seductive, but perhaps over-familiar, conceptual framework of latent imagery in photographic darkroom practices. For me, primarily, Carroll's story is remarkable for the balance it strikes between historically and materially informed but also inherently speculative conceptions of photography as, simultaneously, a material technology, a form of image, a kind of automatic writing with literary significance, and a spur to artistic, scientific and political imagination.

One of the reasons for dwelling on this story is the multi-faceted and unusual role of writing it grants to the photographic image. The relationship between writing and image in photography and Generative AI imaging is often said to entail a direct inversion. AI platforms follow linguistic prompts that initiate the process of synthesising an image. Photographs are often said to find discursive framing only after the fact. But if one widens the frame adopted is this strictly true? As an initial response I would say that Carroll's remarkable projection of photography as something extraordinary at that pivotal and unstable historical conjuncture in its history highlights the practically and speculatively entangled manner in which photography has always exceeded itself, appearing outside, ahead or behind of its own idea or material formation, language and apparatus. As a dynamic and speculative, material and imaginary mixture of photographic possibilities, attention to "Photography Extraordinary" might find new purchase on today's visual milieu by enriching our understanding of what photography will turn out to have been in relationship to currently emerging imaging technologies, especially

given their status as “...both being and not being photography”.<sup>12</sup> And, in as yet unanticipated ways, this might just encourage a modicum of photography’s strangeness to infect what displaces it.

## References

---

1. Olga Moscatova, “Generative re-photography: on photographic automatism of synthetic images,” *Philosophy of Photography* 16, no. 2 (2026): 263–286, here 265, [https://doi.org/10.1386/pop\\_00116\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/pop_00116_1). Moscatova cites two of Eldagsen’s Instagram posts of 2023: “REFUSAL OF THE PRIZE of the Sony World Photography Awards,” Instagram post, 13 April, [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq\\_XiGJlQlC/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq_XiGJlQlC/) and “Let’s clean up the messy terminology!...,” Instagram post, 19 April, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CrN4GSllKns/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CrN4GSllKns/?img_index=1).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. For an apposite example see Joanna Zylinska’s discussion with Alex Fletcher of the continued resonance of the term ‘photography’ in “Our photographic future: An interview with Joanna Zylinska,” *Philosophy of Photography* 16, no. 2 (2026): 157–179, especially 158–159, [https://doi.org/10.1386/pop\\_00120\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1386/pop_00120_7).
5. Susan Sontag, “On Bellocq,” in *Where the Stress Falls* (Penguin, 2001), 223–226, here 223.
6. For an interesting and approachable summary, see Rosalind Moon’s exploration of these historical and linguistic relationships in her short article, “The Language of Photography,” *Source Magazine* (2003), available at <https://www.source.ie/issues/issues2140/issue22/is22artlanpho.html>. Although they are very often not that useful, in this case it is perhaps illuminative to look at the results of a Google N-gram set to chart use of ‘photography’ compared, for instance, to ‘Daguerreotype’. From 1839 the latter dominates the discourses represented by the texts that are open to Google’s search. The graph lines charting its use decline through the early 1850s, crossing that which charts the rising use of photography around about 1855.
7. As a starting point, see Lindsay Smith’s *Lewis Carroll: Photography on the Move* (Reaktion Books, 2015) and Diane Waggoner’s *Lewis Carroll’s Photography and Modern Childhood* (Princeton University Press, 2020). For an exception to the story’s lack of wider reception, see Joe R. Christopher, “Lewis Carroll, ‘scientifictionist’”, *Mythlore* 9, no. 3 (1982): 25–28.
8. Anthony Boucher (ed.), *Fantasy and Science Fiction* 13, no. 4 (1957): 83.
9. Lewis Carroll, “Photography Extraordinary,” in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll with Illustrations by John Tenniel* (The Nonesuch Library, 1939), 1109
10. Ibid., 1100.
11. Ibid., 1111.
12. Moskatova, “Generative re-photography,” 265.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Fisher, Andrew: Photography extraordinary?, in: KWI-BLOG, <https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/photography-extraordinary/>, 23.03.2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20260323-0830>