

Intermedial Reflections on Analogue Photography and Digital Visuality in *Moxyland*

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Abstract

This article re-reads Lauren Beukes's debut novel *Moxyland* (2008) through an intermedial lens, focusing on the text's multiple "nested" references to images, as well as techniques of "braiding" where visual effects are woven into the prose itself. The ubiquitous presence of photography in the novel suggests a pervasive thematic and stylistic visuality, which at times mimics ways of seeing through a camera lens. A key structuring binary in the novel concerns the opposition between two fundamentally different forms of image technologies, namely classical analogue photography and digital imagery. These two different visual modes are keyed to two of the main characters, but are also freighted with aesthetic, ethical, and political consequences. Photographs have classically authenticated the existence of the real world in front of the lens, but in a digital world, the direct connection between image and reality is increasingly tenuous, arbitrary and random, opening up the spectre of totalitarian information control, fake news, and media manipulation, a world in which citizens no longer have any access to truth and pictures no longer tell us what really has happened. Beukes's novel, read through this opposition between analogue photography and digital visuality, is a cautionary tale about a future of images and digital technology, and of the consequences that these shifts in visual media may have on society.

Keywords: visuality; intermedial; photography; digital; image; Lauren Beukes; *Moxyland*



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Introduction

Lauren Beukes's debut novel, *Moxyland* (2008), a cyberpunk science fiction (SF) tale set in a dystopian Cape Town, attracted a considerable volume of positive critical attention after publication (for example, Bethlehem 2014; Byrne and Levey 2015; Stobie 2012). The novel's assured use of the SF genre has had few precedents in South African literature, and much criticism has lauded the text as an exemplary instance of the expanded range of literary fiction that is possible in the post-apartheid period. In our reading of the novel, we wish to focus attention more closely on aspects not given much attention by critics to date, and read it as a prime exemplar, at least in South African fiction, of a more general "visual turn" in contemporary culture (Bal 2006; Mitchell 1992; Mirzoeff 2006; Rose 2001).

Moxyland is a text that foregrounds its visuality conspicuously and self-reflectively, not just through the occupations and obsessions of its key characters (Kendra is a photographer, and Toby is a digital image creator), but also through a larger thematic focus on photography, artworks, streamed images, installations, online game-worlds, advertising billboards, graffiti and futuristic glowing tattoos displayed on people's skins. Besides Kendra and Toby, the novel also features the focalised narratives of Tendeka, an activist, and Lerato, an AIDS orphan who works as a computer programmer for the corporation. Our analysis will however focus on the former two narrators as they allow us to explore the visual aspects of Beukes's writing most clearly.

Images are of course not physically present in the novel as actual pictorial or illustrative elements, but are represented, referred to and embedded textually. The novel therefore rewards a form of reading that is grounded in intermedial approaches to literature. Irina Rajewsky defines intermediality as a "generic term for all those phenomena that ... in some way take place *between* media" (2005, 46). In other words, the idea of intermediality explores the complex interactions between literary texts and other medial forms such as photography, film, visual art and digitality. The concept of intermediality allows us to understand the presence of images in literary texts, not just in terms of verbal reference or description, as in the classical concept of ekphrasis which James A. W. Heffernan defines as the "verbal representation of graphic representation" (1991, 299), but as a more complex, interwoven thematic and stylistic presence where writing can emulate filmic styles, mimic photographic ways of seeing, or simulate the flickering pixelation of digital imagery. Beukes not only places images into her narrative as surfaces which are then rendered "visible" through ekphrastic description, but also simulates camera techniques and visual effects in her narrative. The prose is moreover also sometimes able to edit and zoom imagery virtually. An intermedial approach to Beukes's text can allow us to recognise a more deeply interwoven visuality in the novel, as is evident through the use of reflective surfaces, light effects and motion techniques, opening up ways of reading the simulated visual effects that emerge from the printed letters on the page. As Jacques Rancière argues, in his discussion of visuality in *The Future of the Image*, "the image is not exclusive to the visible and there are images

which consist wholly of words” (2007, 7). Beukes manufactures images with the words of her novel, and in some instances, photographs and other visual effects emerge so vividly in the prose that they become virtually visible to us as readers.

W.J.T. Mitchell’s work on visuality and the “pictorial turn,” although it does not explicitly employ the term “intermedial,” develops a framework to read the visual and other cross-medial effects that can be generated in literary fiction. Mitchell has proposed concepts such as “nesting” and “braiding,” which are useful in analysing the interactions between the verbal and visual. He defines “nesting” as the phenomenon that occurs when “one medium appears inside another as its content” (2005, 262). One example which he cites is television, when this is treated as a content element of a film, for example in a scene which depicts characters watching a television show (2005, 262). Any medium can be nested within another, as in the case of ekphrasis in prose, where the picture is “never made visible or tangible except by way of the medium of language” (2005, 262). Beukes’s novels frequently refer to such “nested” photographs, digital images, works of art, or films, and such instances of ekphrasis allow the reader to envision an object, created through a highly descriptive passage, as if it physically existed in front of the mind’s eye. Yet the novel’s intermediality is not only created by references to nested images, but is also evoked by an imitation or simulation of the style of a different medium, giving rise to what Rajewsky calls an “as if” character and an illusion-forming quality (2005, 54). Such a more complex form of interwoven intermediality, or what Mitchell describes as “braiding,” is a process when one sensory channel becomes intertwined with another to produce meaning (2005, 262). Mitchell refers to the cinematic techniques of sound synchronised with visuals to exemplify this phenomenon (2005, 262), but the concept of “braiding” can also allow us to understand cross-medial effects in literary fiction, for example Beukes’s emulation of camera-mediated ways of seeing.

Kendra: Images and Photographic Subjectivity

Photography is a key thematic and stylistic concern of the novel, and is closely linked to one of the main characters of the book. Kendra is an aspiring artist photographer working in old-school analogue film format, but becomes enmeshed in the marketing machinations of the Ghost soft drink company. Her body is genetically re-coded with nanotechnology, and her skin is inscribed with a luminous tattoo. The Ghost logo that glows from the skin of her wrist suggests that her body itself has become a medium, a signifying site for embodied advertising imagery. Kendra documents her make-over as a Ghost “sponsor baby” with her camera, recording the transformations of her tattooed skin in a series of photographs:

Four thousand one hundred and twenty photographs over the time it took to develop, like film. Played back in timelapse the bruise blossoms and bursts, resolving like a rorschach into the logo. It’s the exact colour of the phosphorescent algae shimmering in the waves on the beach in Langkawi. (Beukes 2008, 60)

The moment does not only explicitly reference photography and film, but also registers the effects of digital animation and the insidious power of corporate advertising imagery. Kendra describes the effect of viewing the photographs of her tattoo, flicking the images rapidly forward on a screen as an animated “GIF.” The flashing effect of this “GIF” image, comprising a large number of sequentially displayed photographs, is shown by the way it is “[p]layed back in timelapse,” where the short intervals of these separate image frames create the illusion of motion. This rapid succession of images on the digital screen creates a “shimmering” or flickering action, a visual effect enhanced by the reference to the glowing “phosphorescent algae” colour of the Ghost logo. The green “algae” and the “waves on the beach” both signify natural elements, which are carefully counter-poised here to sharpen the contrast between the natural world and Kendra’s artificially modified body, which now is host to the synthetic, genetically modifying technology. The animated Ghost logo on her wrist, which simulates the movement of “shimmering ... waves,” suggests a pictorial aesthetic that belies its deeper sinister portent. In figuring her tattoo as a “bruise that blossoms and bursts,” the seemingly attractive image of an unfolding flower thereby masks the corrosive and harmful reality of a deeper wound (“bruise”), a juxtaposition of innocuous surface and inner psychic depth that the Rorschach reference also points to.

Moxyland is full of such intermedial effects that exceed ekphrastic description and characterise Kendra’s subjectivity and way of seeing. She observes the world as a photographer, through the lens, even if no physical camera is present in the scene. The effects of the Ghost energy drink on her genetically modified body are for example described in photographic terms: “I’m just ... improved. It’s like, everything’s running better ... The world seems sharper. Or fiercer. As if someone’s pulled the focus ... Where everything is intensely real. It’s super-defined” (2008, 25). Kendra sees herself in terms of a high-resolution photograph, defined by hyper-realist sharpness and attention to detail, a fitting description of her glowing, healthy-looking physical state that has been enhanced by the nanotechnology. Kendra’s futurist hybrid identity, where her body has become an amalgam of technology and human biology, is paralleled by her prosthetic desire to become an embodied camera: “If I could embed a camera inside my body, I would. But all I can do is document the cells mutating on the inside of my wrist, the pattern developing, fading up like an oldschool Polaroid as the nano spreads through my system” (2008, 8). This moment highlights the impossible coexistence between “oldschool” analogue technology and high tech “nano” bio-engineering, prefiguring Kendra’s doomed cyborg identity.

One of the complexities of Kendra as a character is her uneasy and fraught entanglement in two worlds: the futurist, high-tech dystopian surveillance society in which she has become a willing “sponsor baby” (presumably to earn money so as to make ends meet); and on the other hand, she espouses an oppositional, resistant and even anarchic creative practice that threatens to undermine the totalitarian corporate order. The key device that mediates these two worlds for Kendra is her analogue 35mm camera, allowing her to document the oppressive realities of her society, as well as express her own inner self.

As Natasha King, one of the few critics who has given explicit attention to the novel's photographic themes, has argued, "Kendra's Zion camera becomes an extension of her urban identity, and thus of her physical body. Through the documentation of the world around her the filters of her camera allow Kendra a unique perspective on the city" (2015, 32).

Kendra's nostalgic commitment to analogue photography sets her apart from the distorted, digital world of simulation in *Moxyland*. As a photographer, she is repeatedly compelled to document traces of the real in her simulacral world, which is dominated by a visual landscape of surveillance screens, commercial advertising, and digital simulation. Using the normally off-limits subway system on her way to a meeting with corporate power-players, she takes out her camera: "In my defence, it's automatic; I lift my camera, firing off three shots through the latticed residue of salt crusted over the windows. I don't think about the legal restrictions on documenting corporate space" (Beukes 2008, 1). The action of capturing these images is instinctual and unthinking, suggesting a habitual camera use, as evident by the words "it's automatic." Kendra tries to see the remnants of random beauty within corporatised and commodified spaces, and even though her indifference towards the legal restrictions might demonstrate her defiance, she appears here less interested in documenting politically subversive imagery. So while the act of taking photographs in itself is subversive, the content of her images at this stage is seemingly innocuous: she photographs the "latticed residue of salt crusted over the windows." Kendra's fascination with the arbitrary pattern of saline smears on the surface of the glass is an aesthetic that is founded on the documentation of random visual effects that are visible on the surfaces of her world—effects that have escaped the regimes of absolute order and control that structure her society.

Kendra's exploration of photographic effects in *Moxyland* is not only limited to what she actually photographs, such as her own tattoo or the train windows, but can be extended to other scenes too. Her observation of her surroundings becomes a more all-encompassing practice of photographic seeing, for example when she observes how the "train rises slightly, hissing as the hover reinflates, and glides off, the neon lights on the tunnel walls slipping into blurred darts as we pick up speed towards Adderley Station" (2008, 59). She pays attention here to how the speed of the train creates blurry light effects and interprets this visually as a motion technique. In art photography, blurred motion and/or time-lapse effects are often deliberately deployed and here the imagined image can be considered to be visually apt, mimicking the physical impression of the effects of motion in the real world. The distorted visuals that are slightly out of focus suggest a fluid sequence of images. Compared to the sterile, carefully controlled display of corporate digital images, Kendra's images and photographic ways of seeing depict the world as a flawed, volatile realm. As is evident in this moment, light plays a key role in many such scenes in the novel, and we are of course reminded that the word "photography" itself means literally "writing with light." In her deployment of

photographic moments in the novel, Beukes conspicuously writes with light so as to suggest and simulate images and camera effects in her prose.

Kendra's photographic practice is initially limited to capturing aesthetic effects in the everyday, and even though these images might appear to be innocuous and politically inconsequential, it is nevertheless a practice that reflects on the larger question of truth, and what is regarded as real in her contemporary society. In a society dominated by "fake news" and digital simulation, analogue photography appears to be the only medium that can still provide immediate access to the real, and this may explain Kendra's anachronistic attachment to her pre-digital, mechanic camera. It is precisely this intrinsic link between photography and the real with which Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* insistently concerns itself. For Barthes, photography depicts "the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (1993, 76). Unlike painting or language, which always interpret the real in some way, the photograph is mechanically produced by light which passes through the lens and marks the emulsions of the negative, and this constitutes its direct link to its referent (1993, 4). The photograph therefore is indisputable evidence that something has actually been or has happened, bearing within it an "evidential force" (Barthes 1993, 87). In Kendra's Orwellian world, the truth is endlessly manipulated and twisted, and only analogue photography, a medium that cannot easily be tampered with or changed, validates that events have actually occurred. As Mr Muller, Kendra's mentor observes, "fake light can mess with the process" of creating photographic prints (Beukes 2008, 74).

As the novel progresses, Kendra increasingly slips into the role of a socially conscious witness, becoming a documentary, politically engaged photographer. One such example is when she photographs the brutal police response to a robbery in Salt River. She is confronted by vicious Aitos (genetically modified attack dogs), but says "[w]ithout thinking about it, I already have my Zion out, snapping the dog-hybrid standing hunched over the child ... And I know this is illegit, that you're not supposed to photograph police procedurals without a media permit, but I don't care" (2008, 128). In this instance, Kendra is no longer the artistic photographer in search of pretty aesthetic effects, but documents police brutality as evidence that the event actually did occur. The fact that she does not care about the police procedure and formal accreditation demonstrates her subversive attitude, and her need to document the violence that is taking place. Although the government tries to mask the horror of its suppressions by creating glossy media worlds in which all political content is censored, the dark reality is shown through Kendra's photographs.

In this instance, when Kendra documents the images of the Aito, her photographs seem to model the photographic aesthetics of celebrated street photographer and photojournalist, Henri Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson made photographs whose social and political content mattered more than formal aesthetic qualities, and his images were able to capture "decisive moments." His photography captured an event that was

momentary and spontaneous, creating images which represented the essence of the moment itself (Sariñana 2017). Kendra's photographs of events on the street also mimic the style of a long line of activist South African photographers who documented apartheid oppression and police brutality. Beukes may even have been directly referencing Jo Ractliffe's photographic project *Nadir*, which includes images of police and dogs in black townships during the apartheid era (Ractliffe 1988).

Toby: Dystopian Digitality

Taking a cue from Barthes's meditations on photography, and Kendra's commitment to analogue cameras and hand-crafted darkroom image making, we can recognise that a key element in Beukes's deployment of the intermedial is the foundational distinction between two image technologies: the analogue mode of 19th- and 20th-century photography, and an emerging 21st-century digital visibility.

This distinction between analogue and digitality is also keyed to the novel's two main characters (Kendra and Toby), and functions as a marker of a nostalgically imbued past on the one hand, and on the other hand, a dystopian futurity. The distinction between these two forms of visibility underpins the novel as a whole, and makes *Moxyland* yet another example of a number of 21st-century fictions that register a disquiet with the rise of digital technologies, networked worlds, simulacra and virtual realities. Digital technologies, especially electronic images, are imbricated in an erosion of what can be considered to be "real," raising fundamental questions about truth, authenticity and representational veracity. Such concerns about the nature of the real and the boundaries between truth and what may be digitally simulated pervade much contemporary fiction, as can be seen in a number of post-millennial novels such as J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005), Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2005), Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001), and Patrick Flanery's *I Am No One* (2016).

We return to W.J.T Mitchell to understand the technological basis for the uncertain representational truth claims of digital media, particularly algorithmically generated photographic images, and their fundamental difference from classical analogue photographic processes. In an early and seminal book on the nature of digital images, *The Reconfigured Eye* (1992), Mitchell points out that digital and analogue photographs differ fundamentally. In the digital image, there is an algorithmically generated subdivision of the visual field "into a finite Cartesian grid of cells (known as pixels) ... specifying the intensity and color of each cell by means of an integer number drawn from some limited range" (1992, 5). The digital image, in essence a binary code, has a fixed or finite amount of information, which is measured in bytes. Any attempt to enlarge it beyond its set configuration results in pixelation, revealing at some point of magnification the square blocks of uniform colour. By contrast, in analogue photographs, which Mitchell terms "fossilised light" (1992, 24), there is an "unbroken sequence of subtle gradations from black to white," resulting in a picture surface that is informationally unlimited (1992, 5).

Mitchell draws two conclusions from this fundamental difference, first of which is the question of copying and reproduction. “The continuous spatial and tonal variation of analogue pictures is not exactly replicable,” claims Mitchell, “so such images cannot be transmitted or copied without degradation. Photographs of photographs, photocopies of photocopies, and copies of videotapes are always of a lower quality than originals” (1992, 6). However, a digital image, even one “that is a 1000 generations away from the original is indistinguishable from any of its progenitors” (1992, 6). In other words, the idea of an original and its copy have lost their significance in a digital environment, since a “digital copy is not a debased descendent but is absolutely indistinguishable from the original” (1992, 6).

The second related and perhaps more important point that Mitchell raises is one of veracity and manipulation, a question that *Moxyland* concerns itself with directly. Analogue photographs resist easy manipulation of their delicate emulsion surfaces. They are not easily tampered with, and darkroom forgeries can usually be readily recognised as such. But as Mitchell argues, the “essential characteristic of digital information is that it *can* be manipulated easily, in fact processing plays a central role” (1992, 7). The analogue photograph then, as Barthes already recognised, has an intrinsic direct connection to the real, a connection which is broken—or perhaps only simulated—in the digital image.

This binary opposition between analogue and digital is embodied through the characters of Kendra, the artist photographer, and Toby, an egotistical blogger who embodies a digital contemporary visuality through his advanced wearable technology. Toby makes his *début* in the novel as a sardonic, vulgar and narcissistic figure who uses digital imagery to enhance his social status. He is seamlessly immersed in the new digital world, streaming popular graphic and visual media content, which is focused on transgressive sexual and violent themes. This promiscuous, sensationalist content mostly lacks a political agenda or any awareness of the need for social change, and is therefore unthreatening to the state. The nature of his visuality is pornographic and violent, which is shared through an advanced technological medium, the “BabyStrange” (Beukes 2008, 14) coat, a wearable multi-screen garment that displays thousands of images as a series of video streams. He literally wears images, and displays them on his mobile body as he moves through the city:

My BabyStrange is set to screensaver mode, so it clicks into a new image every two minutes. Here’s a random sampling to give you an idea of what’s displaying on the smartfabric that is so bothering Ten: close-ups of especially revolting fungal skin infections, 18th-century dissection diagrams and, for a taste of local flavour, a row of smileys—that’s sheep’s heads for the uninitiated—lips peeled back to reveal grins bared in anticipation of the pot. (2008, 14–15)

Even though these images are only displayed for a short moment, they are intended to evoke a visceral response. The profusion of digital content produces a visual ubiquity, which Daniel Rubinstein, in his essay “What Is 21st Century Photography?,”

characterises as a condition of “randomised and chaotic conflation of bits of matter, strands of DNA, sub-atomic particles and computer code” (2015, 5). As videos and images are shared promiscuously as unending visual streams, the singularity of a particular photograph becomes lost. By contrast, Kendra shoots at close proximity to encourage intimacy and evoke a personal connection.

Toby’s digital immersion and obsession are also seen through the pervasiveness of digital surveillance and citizen control, which forms a significant part of the narrative. Toby fluctuates between the role of observer and the observed in an online game, noting how the “wall blanks suddenly and Moxy fills the screen. Cos Moxy is always watching. He waves a stubby little paw in disapproval” (Beukes 2008, 104). The irony here is how uncomfortable Toby is when he is being watched, which moves him from subject (when he is recording content through his “BabyStrange” coat) to object (the person being observed). The pervasive digital surveillance technology in *Moxyland* is personified when Toby refers to the “red bead of the camera” that “winks steadily, for the record, recording, recording” (2008, 124). The fact that this bead is described as red in colour signals a warning or danger, which points to the dangers associated with digital recording and corporate control.

Toby’s slang and techno-savvy terms also embody the digital world he lives in. He uses neologisms like “*kif deluxe*” (274) and “super-brusque” (245) spontaneously, which exemplify his seamless immersion within the online space. The artificial nature of his words and the fluidity of his language both resonate with the virtual world that is largely hyperbolic and constantly changing. As Adalet Snyman explains, Toby cannot distinguish between the real and virtual world because his “actual environment is in constant interaction with his virtual environment” (2010, 99). Therefore, by literally wearing images and displaying it on his mobile body and using flashy phrases, he becomes intertwined with the online world.

Death of Photography

In the context of *Moxyland*’s digital landscapes, visible on “adboards,” computer game screens, simulated nature scenes projected on apartment walls, cell phones and “Baby Strange” coats, Kendra’s artistic practice reasserts the materiality of the photograph. In the simulacral world of shifting images, everchanging signs and flickering pixels, Kendra remains committed to producing singular, tangible photographs, hand-crafted in a darkroom. The photography scholars Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004) remind us that the printed photograph is a “three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image” (1), asserting its presence in the world. By taking, developing and printing her own photographs, Kendra asserts her distinctive, original self and identity. In *Moxyland*’s futuristic world, photographic film has long become obsolete and is no longer manufactured, and Kendra uses the last stocks, well past their sell-by date, to craft her images. With the help of her photographic mentor, Mr Muller, she photographs a number of images for an exhibition, deliberately using damaged, exposed and deteriorating film negatives. The chemical decay of the film emulsions creates a

distinctive aesthetic, blending with her own imperfect sense of self. This is nowhere more visible than in a single, wall-sized photograph entitled *Self-Portrait*:

Visibility limits your imagination of the ocean only as far as you can see, ten metres, fifteen at a stretch. But it's only in the utter black that you can feel the true scale, the volume and weight of that gaping unknowable drift between continents. The photograph is called *Self-Portrait*. It is a print from a rotten piece of film. 2 x 3.5m. It came out entirely black. (Beukes 2008, 66)

Even though Kendra's photograph is titled *Self-Portrait*, one cannot actually see her in the image. The dark blankness is an unfiltered and material representation of herself as an individual, suggesting her own ambivalent struggle to hold on to her identity in a shifting, dystopian world. The black depth of Kendra's *Self-Portrait* stands in contrast to her radiating and youthful external appearance, the effect of her Ghost sponsored genetic make-over, and reflects her inner world. It reveals, as Catherine Forrest (2016) has argued, Kendra's progressively "disintegrating reality" (55). It is thus possible to read these "rotten" pieces of film as metaphors for the despair in Kendra's life, foreshadowing her own death. In this sense, the photograph signifies the death or end of analogue photography, which is being supplanted by the relentless swirl of digital imagery.

A detailed interpretation of *Self-Portrait* can also show how its surface is resistant to signification. This becomes apparent when critics at the exhibition make negative remarks, for example saying "You can't even tell if it's technically good or not, it's all so ... damaged" (164). In her own brief response, Kendra explains that "under the black of *Self-Portrait* is a photograph of a photograph, clutched in my fingers, captured in the mirror with a reflected flash of light. That it's all meant to be damaged" (164). We thus come to understand that *Self-Portrait* is a "photograph of a photograph," both reflected in a mirror. The self-reflective *mise en abyme* of the mirror photograph, rendered as a surface of blanked-out blackness, deliberately functions to discourage any sense of insight into Kendra's inner world. *Self-Portrait* is thus a much more complex, self-aware and ironic image, a meta-photograph that reflects on the medium itself, and may be read as a critical commentary on the death of analogue photography.

Self-portraits, especially images taken in mirrors, conventionally act as an extension of the photographer, and we might also relate Kendra's image to Robert Mapplethorpe's famous *Self-Portrait* (1988). Mapplethorpe was an American photographer who became well-known for his sensitive yet blunt treatment of controversial subject matter, using black and white photography. His own AIDS diagnosis in the 1980s contributed to the conditions of his *Self-Portrait*, and the image depicted his deteriorating health. The dark aura of the photograph, the skull cane he clutches at and the black clothing he wears suggest his "gradual fading away" (Mc Ateer 2013). Even his head that is slightly out of focus foregrounds his shifting sense of self and identity. This particular example illustrates how self-portraits have the ability to act as spaces of self-disclosure for the photographer.

Kendra is eventually euthanised at the end of the novel, succumbing to the power of the corporation, and in her last moments before she is killed, she still retains a photographic point of view, observing her imminent death as if through the lens of a camera:

My eyelids flutter, letting in snatches of light like a strobe, snapshots of movement. Dr Precious pushes my shoulders, holding me down. Andile's mouth twitches. He looks away. I can't keep my eyes open. I can't move my arms. I try and push up, through the dark, which is wide open, too open, so I'm drowning in it, fighting. (Beukes 2008, 286)

This is a key, final moment in the novel, in which Kendra's physical death becomes aligned with the death of analogue photography: she merges into the photographic representation of herself, namely the dark, submerged oceanic world of the *Self-Portrait*. In these final moments she holds on dispassionately to the verities that only her camera can provide. She mimics photographic seeing through the action of her eyelids that are fluttering and letting in flashes of light. The language suggests the opening and closing movements of the shutter of a camera as her eyes let in moments of light. Her words, "I can't keep my eyes open," signify a loss of sight and consciousness, but also become a metaphor for how the shutters of this subjective, embodied "camera" are finally closing down forever. The chilling ending of the novel underlines the fact that this society can no longer accommodate Kendra nor her photographic practice, perhaps because her observant mode of being and her relentless documentation of the truth of her world are too rebellious and threatening. Even though Kendra consents to be injected with experimental nanotechnology and commits to becoming a brand ambassador for the corporation, she remains entangled in an anarchic, pre-digital form of photo-capturing. Her documentary, observant photographic practice is therefore seen as dangerous and disruptive in the totalitarian world of the novel.

Conclusion

Our intermedial reading of *Moxyland* has explored the text's multiple "nested" references to images, as well as techniques of "braiding" where visual effects are woven into the prose itself. The ubiquitous presence of photography in the novel suggests a pervasive photographic visuality, and at times mimics ways of seeing through a camera lens. Beukes uses writing to simulate camera techniques and visual effects in her narrative, most conspicuously in her use of reflective surfaces, light effects and motion techniques.

But a key structuring binary in the novel concerns the opposition between two fundamentally different forms of image technologies, namely classical analogue photography and digital imagery. As we have seen, these two different visual modes are associated with two of the main characters, Kendra and Toby respectively, but are also freighted with aesthetic, ethical, and political consequences. In remaining committed—to the end—to a representational technology that is resistant to manipulation and simulation, Kendra asserts the value of documenting reality in a manner that is truthful. As Roland Barthes put it, "the essence of photography" is its direct connection to reality,

a “direct contact with the thing, or as if the photograph is the thing—even though it’s an image, it really is the thing” (1993, 64). Photographs authenticate the existence of the real world in front of the lens, forming an “umbilical cord” made of light that joins the image to its subject (1993, 81). In a digital world, this direct connection between image and reality is increasingly tenuous, arbitrary and random, opening up the spectre of totalitarian information control, fake news, and media manipulation, a world in which citizens no longer have any access to truth and pictures no longer tell us what has really happened. Although we live in an image-saturated age, this is a “post-photographic era” (1992, n.p.), as Mitchell, in the sub-title of his book, has described it.

Beukes’s novel, read through this opposition between analogue photography and digital visuality, is thus a cautionary, sombre tale about a future in which digital imagery and information manipulation are on the ascendancy. Cameras, and the people who use them, have both become obsolete and defunct in a new age where the documentary, truth-telling potential of analogue photography is no longer viable. *Moxyland* can thus be re-read as an exploration of the future of images and digital technology, and of the consequences that these shifts in visual media may have on society.

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