

**COMMENTARY**

# Encountering the Anthropocene: Geology, Culture, Ethics

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What does the proclamation of the Anthropocene – an epoch in which the human is said to have become a geological agent and who's had irreversible impact upon our planet (Kolbert, 2014; Klein, 2014) – mean for media and cultural studies? Reflecting on the crisis of human and nonhuman life as manifested in ongoing multispecies extinction, this contribution discusses how media and cultural studies can engage with the 'geological turn' (Ellsworth and Kruse, 2013). It also considers whether it makes sense to practice media and cultural studies from the perspective of deep, i.e. geological, time.

Zylinska argues that this 'naturecultural' mode of thinking can be traced back to Raymond Williams's idea of culture as 'transformation of substance at a biological level' (1997). Yet the Anthropocene may open up media and cultural studies to new ways of engaging with nature and culture, by raising questions about issues of distribution, environment and the privileging of the human as the central point of ethics (Zylinska 2015). At the same time, in its attention to both matter *and* discourse, media and cultural studies can help rein in some of the rhetorical excesses of the Anthropocene debate. Through its hermeneutic tools, it can also challenge an uncritical and moralistic focus on materiality that 'the geological turn' at times implies.

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**Keywords:** Anthropocene; culture; Earth; ethics; extinction; geological turn; life

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**Figure 1:** Joanna Zylinska (*in progress*), from *The Anthropocene: A Local History Project*.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### Author Information

Joanna Zylinska is Professor of New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. The author of five books – including *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (2014); *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (with Sarah Kember; MIT Press, 2012) and *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (2002) – she is also a co-editor of the JISC-funded project *Living Books about Life*, which publishes online books at the crossroads of the humanities and the sciences. Zylinska combines her philosophical writings with photographic art practice and curatorial work.

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