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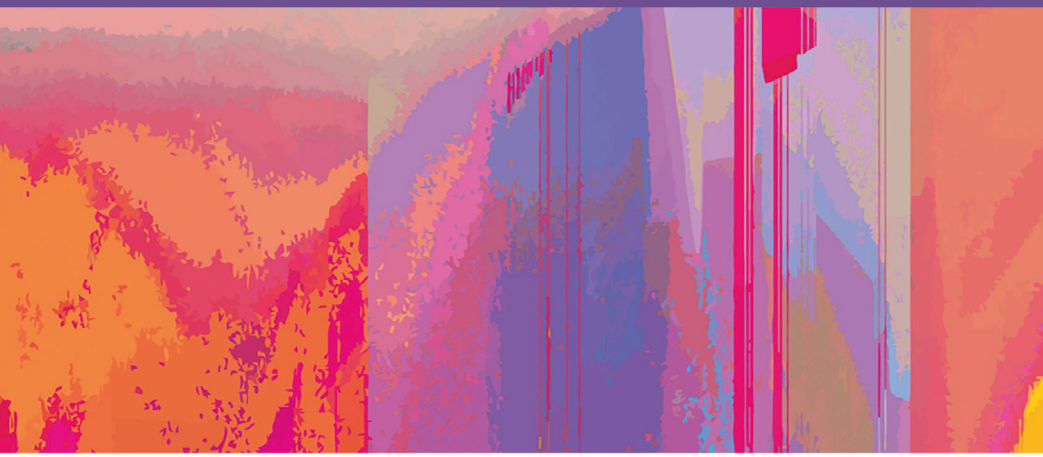

AI Aesthetics

AI-Generated Images between Artistics and Aisthetics

EDITED BY
JAN-NOËL THON
AND LUKAS R.A. WILDE

AI Aesthetics

This volume investigates the intersection of generative AI and media aesthetics from an interdisciplinary perspective. Combining in-depth theoretical reflection with a diverse selection of case studies, its authors explore the aesthetic forms of AI-generated medial objects as well as the cultural imaginaries that the latter draw upon.

Bringing together a group of scholars from various geographic and disciplinary backgrounds, the chapters move within and across different conceptualizations of "AI aesthetics" that can be located in-between an "aesthetics-as-artistics" (that is primarily concerned with aesthetic judgments related to skill and connoisseurship) and an "aesthetics-as-aisthetics" (that identifies all kinds of embodied perception as its object). The book thus reflects on both the theoretical and the methodological implications of "AI aesthetics," while also demonstrating that this is still very much an emerging research field and that no dominant conceptualization of "AI aesthetics" has yet emerged.

Considering its decidedly international and interdisciplinary scope, *AI Aesthetics: AI-Generated Images between Artistics and Aisthetics* will appeal to scholars and students within media studies, cultural studies, literary studies, philosophy, art history, visual culture studies, digital humanities, and critical AI studies.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2025
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

The Open Access publication of this book was generously supported by Osnabrück University and the publication fund NiedersachsenOPEN as part of zukunft.niedersachsen, a joint funding program of the Ministry for Science and Culture of Lower Saxony and the Volkswagen Foundation.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-041-14845-6 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-041-14848-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-67642-3 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group
http://taylorandfrancis.com

1 Introduction

AI Aesthetics

Jan-Noël Thon and Lukas R.A. Wilde

At the time of this writing—in spring 2025—generally accessible generative AI platforms and, more specifically, AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion have been broadly available for almost three years. AI-based image enhancement and modification have also been integrated into many other applications such as the Adobe suite of image processing programs or Google phones. New generative AI applications are launched or announced almost every week, most notably perhaps Google's moving image generator VEO2, a competitor to OpenAI's Sora, and Janus-Pro-7B, the open-source multimodal AI model that is based on the Chinese AI startup platform DeepSeek. Generative AI is making rapid progress in other areas, as well—with the generation of music and songs, which have been widely discussed after the release of Suno AI in December 2023, being a particularly salient example (see, e.g., Johnson et al. 2023; Lin and Chen 2024; Nayar 2025). Since most of these technologies build on—and integrate—natural language comprehension through large language models (LLMs), they are essentially all multimodal "at heart," even if that multimodality remains "invisible" to the users (see, e.g., Bajohr 2024b; Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 2025). While text-to-image generators (such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion) and text-to-text generators (such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini) were strictly separated at first (if only in terms of their output appearances), ChatGPT-3 fundamentally changed AI image production in October 2023, with its integration of DALL·E 3 further foregrounding the multimodality of both the interface and the generated outputs. It is clear, then, that AI-generated outputs in various perceivable forms have swiftly become a salient element of our current media culture, instigating, for example, a hermeneutics of suspicion toward every new image or video now being potentially AI-generated or AI-manipulated (see, e.g., Meyer 2024); "polluting" Google search results with unmarked "AI content" (see, e.g., Balkowitsch 2024); and substantially altering the value of image, videos, and music files—mostly to the disadvantage of human artists and producers on whose work the underlying LLMs draw as training data without the former's knowledge or consent (see, e.g., Dornis and Stober 2024).

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-1

While there is a keen interest within media and cultural studies to come to terms with these new technologies and the diverse practices they afford, the rapid development of diffusion-based AI image generators, the more recent autoregressive models (see, e.g. Robison 2025), and LLMs more broadly poses considerable challenges to traditional humanities approaches,[1] not least because the breakneck speed of the AI development cycle clashes with academic publication timelines: On the one hand, it may be disappointing to publish snapshots of supposedly current practices and technologies that are already historical at the time of publication. On the other hand, however, it is just as undesirable to merely speculate about an AI future that is occluded by marketing utopias and imagined techno-catastrophes (see also, e.g., Bareis and Katzenbach 2021; Romele 2024 on "AI imaginaries"). Then again, it is also worth highlighting the continuities as well as the differences between AI image generators and earlier image-making technologies (see, e.g., Somaini 2023; Zylinska 2020). The perceived abandonment of an immediate indexical relationship to physical reality, for example, is hardly new for digital pictures and has been controversially discussed during the emergence of digital photography and digital image editors such as Adobe Photoshop (see, e.g., Lehmuskallio et al. 2019; Mitchell 1992). Indeed, the partial autonomy of a "nonhuman apparatus" generating pictures "automatically" has already been noted during the emergence of *nondigital* photography (see, e.g., Chesher and Albarrán-Torres 2023). Likewise, questions surrounding the manipulative "covert" use of AI generated images in the context of "fake news" and "deep fakes" (see, e.g., Broinowski 2022) refer back to the much older discussions surrounding "visual evidence" within documentary studies and beyond (see, e.g., Nichols 1991; Schwartz 1992), which suggests that there is nothing categorially new in AI-generated images' potential to mislead, misrepresent, and manipulate—even if the ease with which they can be used to do so certainly remains striking. Indeed, there is no simple heuristic for the (human) recognition of AI-generated images anymore, since AI image generators can be prompted to create such images not only with a more or less specific representational content that is often described as the "subject" of these images but also with a more or less specific aesthetic form that is often described in terms of their "style" (see, e.g., Meyer 2023).

We thus propose to frame the "AI aesthetics" of AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion as a specific kind of "media aesthetics," aiming to connect media studies even more closely to critical AI studies (see, e.g., Lindgren 2024; Raley and Rhee 2023; Roberge and Castelle 2021). Among other things, this implies a focus on current and developing machine learning platforms not merely as technology, narrowly understood, but as media (see, e.g., Bolter 2023; Wilde 2023). As Marx notes, "the material component—*technology* narrowly conceived as a physical device—is merely one part of a complex social and institutional matrix" (1997, 979; original emphasis). Alternatively, we could also operate with an expanded

conceptualization of "technology" here. Dhaliwal, for example, argues that "technology" is itself a "compound […] blurring economy, politics, and technics into one word" (2023, 311), and distinguishes between five different "objects of study" and related "research fields" that such an expanded conceptualization of "technology" gives rise to, namely "[m]achines and devices" (of interest to the sciences and engineering); "[c]ulture and [new media] art" (of interest to cultural studies and art history); "[p]eople and communities" (of interest to sociology and anthropology of technology); "[s]ystems and structures" (of interest to sociology and political economy); and "[t]echniques, practices, and habits" (of interest to media archaeology and cultural technologies) (2023, 313). Again, then, we cannot appropriately think through "technology" without also acknowledging the complex social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it is developed, distributed, and employed (see also, e.g., Pasquinelli 2023).

In the context of the present volume, however, we will still need to narrow our focus from all sorts of machine learning technologies (such as automated driving, automated weapons, or facial image recognition) to what is called "generative AI," conceptualizing the latter as media that may be used for communication and interaction (which at least the outputs they generate certainly are).[2] Focusing more closely on the concept of media aesthetics, the "slightly jarring quality" that results from its "forcing together of modern and ancient concepts" (Mitchell 2013, 7) also requires some additional explication. Put in a nutshell, the use of the term "media aesthetics" first became widespread in the late 1980s and early 1990s in reaction to the (at that point) "new media" and their implementation in installation art and sound art (see, e.g., the survey in Schröter 2019a). Historically, then, media aesthetics initially addressed "a technologically and, above all, digitally saturated art; at the same time, its theoretical conception as a branch of media studies formulates a decidedly anti program to the classical disciplines of art history, musicology, and literary studies" (Mersch 2024, 205; our translation). From there, the term branched out into different humanities discourses, as, for example, Hausken (2013) or Mersch (2024) have reconstructed in more detail. In light of the by now many different approaches to the analysis (and within the field) of media aesthetics, we will begin by exploring how the two components of the compound (i.e., "media" and "aesthetics") can be understood both very narrowly and very broadly, before we conclude by emphasizing the potential productivity of "middle-ground" conceptualizations of both terms. While the chapters collected within the present volume might privilege one starting point over another, the purpose of this introduction is merely to outline the range of possible approaches toward the perceivable properties of AI-generated output: We would thus like to illustrate and interrelate, with specific examples taken from existing research from the last couple of years, how explicit or implicit differences in the conceptualization of both "media" and "aesthetics" can result in quite heterogeneous positions

regarding what should be taken as "given"—and what, in contrast, should be considered to be a "matter of concern" (Latour 2004, 232).

Narrow and Broad Conceptualizations of (AI) "Media" and (AI) "Aesthetics"

Let us begin with the first component of the compound "media aesthetics," then, which can initially be specified by distinguishing between a narrow and a broad conceptualization of "media." In the narrow sense, any "medium" may be understood functionally, as "a tool or *instrumentum* that emerges from an end–means relationship and imposes itself on the real, processes it, and in doing so 'produces' (*poein*) something else" (Mersch 2024, 214; our translation). Perhaps needless to say, this already entails vastly different approaches to media aesthetics, ranging from modernist theories of art to discourses of mass communication (see also Hausken 2013, 34). Yet, these different conceptualizations nevertheless share a common point of departure, namely the notion that "media" are more or less determined entities (or materials or channels) for and between human as well as institutional actors (see, e.g., Elleström 2021). Media scholars may then try to assess the respective affordances, limitations, and influences of this "in-betweenness," be it positively (and often normatively) as a potential for artistic expression, or negatively (and often more descriptively) as the "distortion" of any assumed content or communicative intent within a sender–receiver model. Regardless of these (and many more) important differences, any narrow conceptualization of "media" would thus appear to start from given socio-cultural settings and "use cases," trying to assess the (limiting or enabling) influences of the respective means of communication and interaction. In this view, AI image generators may appear as an alternative to other technologies of image production, and we might explore in which contexts, by which actors, for which means, and to which effects AI-generated images are employed in contrast to photography or hand-drawn pictures (see, e.g., Wilde 2025); how they are distributed, contextualized, and discussed in the context of fan cultures, for example (see Lamerichs 2023). Within such an already determined setting, we could also find out that fearmongering AI-generated images of "foreigners" circulated by right-wing parties on social media channels can seamlessly "replace" earlier stock photography or racist hand-drawn pictures where they serve to instigate attitudes and affects (fear, hatred) toward their depicted content that makes the latter only relevant as a type (of people, for example) (see Lemmes 2025). Perceivable technological or more broadly formal differences ("aesthetics") thus appear to be of only minor importance in some "use cases," while they are much more relevant in others.

In contrast, "media" in a broader sense are not already determined factors or elements within specific mediations, but "always already in play where

culturality happens" (Mersch 2024, 215; our translation), which means that we need to consider "media" as inescapable elements of our making sense of the world. Within the anglophone tradition, Mitchell and Hansen (2010) have propagated this as an "ecological" approach to media studies, considering its object an "encompassing environment" (Hausken 2013, 42):

> [A]re [media] better pictured as themselves the situation, an environment in which human experience and (inter)action take place? Would it not be better to see media, rather than as the determining factor in a cause and effect scenario, as an ecosystem in which processes may or may not take place?
>
> (Mitchell 2013, 18)

Mersch (2024, 215) proposes to use the term "dispositive" in order to capture this broad conceptualization, as "media" in this sense are seen as positioning human subjects within the world and, in doing so, as creating or shaping their subjectivity—not only through technological means, but also, and more fundamentally, through a "semiotic formatting" of culture and society (see also already Manovich 2001, 69–93; as well as, e.g., Crano 2020; Jeong 2013). Our questions with regard to such "media" thus likewise become considerably broader, perhaps oriented toward changing notions of reality, knowledge, and society (as "imagined" communities [see Anderson 1991]) that are accessible only in a mediated fashion.

Returning to the area of generative AI, we could thus ask, for example, how notions of the "real" are transformed through the increase of AI-generated outputs. This is brought into sharp relief in Kirschenbaum's warning of an imminent "textpocalypse" (2023, n.pag.) during which most texts online are no longer created by humans with any discernible "communicative intent," but by AI-based chatbots. This has also become a major concern with regard to countless novels sold via Amazon or "bands" whose music is available through "regular" streaming platforms such as Spotify, despite being entirely AI-generated (see, e.g., Al-Sibai 2024; Knibbs 2024). As noted above, it should also be seen as a problem when more and more Google searches present AI-generated images whose "content" differs vastly from reality without any specific designation (see, e.g., Growcoot 2023); when social media posts ("found in the wild") are likewise mistaken for representations of reality (see, e.g., Bond 2024); or when influencer or company profiles turn out to be wholly AI-generated (see, e.g., Medlicott 2023). We are thus interested in the impact of a media environment increasingly saturated by generative AI, though this impact clearly cannot be reduced to individual AI-generated outputs. Instead, such outputs collectively contribute to creating a new "media reality" to which people and institutions will have to react in one way or another—which will most likely also have an impact on the perception of outputs that are not (or not exclusively) AI-generated.[3]

Just as we can distinguish between broad and narrow conceptualizations of "media," so could we start out from two similarly "radical" (if commonly proposed) alternatives for conceptualizing the term "aesthetics" (which have also been previously discussed, in fairly similar terms, by Hausken [2013], Mersch [2024], and Schröter [2019a]).[4] At first glance, then, the term "aesthetics" oscillates between a philosophy of art and a philosophy of perception. In a narrow (and often normative) conceptualization of "aesthetics-as-artistics," the focus is on skill, judgment, and connoisseurship (see, e.g., Coeckelbergh 2023; Manovich 2019). We might then ask whether or not, or to what degree, AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs have or can have artistic merit; who is the artist (or "author" [see, e.g., Bajohr 2024c; Barale 2024, 41–57]); what roles do the alleged intentions of any such actor (or their absence) play for any such assessment (see, e.g., Manovich and Arielli 2024; Moruzzi 2020); and which forms and practices of collaborative co-creation have "creative" potential (see, e.g., Feyersinger et al. 2023; Navas 2023). One particularly prominent concern here is how aesthetic judgment can be informed by political reasoning, for example, when AI imagery is generally disregarded as "slob" or as "inherently fascist" (see, e.g., Watkins 2025).[5]

In a broader sense, however, the term "aesthetics" is also increasingly used to refer to a more general theory of perception or "aisthesis." Related to media (in both the broad and the narrow sense sketched above), such an "aesthetics-as-aisthetics" aims "to understand the complexity of sense perception and its embeddedness in the cultures and histories of technologies of mediation" (Hausken 2013, 30–31), and could thus perhaps also be described as a "phenomenological" approach to media aesthetics. Kirschenbaum, for example, speculated whether our recent AI-driven "algorithmic conditioning" may have created (or may yet create) a "fundamental untethering of language from conditions of lived reality […], the moment when we question even that which we know to be bodily, palpably true because our screens—and our friends on our screens—say otherwise" (2025, 11–12). While it remains to be seen how generative AI addresses, negates, or otherwise interacts with the human senses and with our embodied perception (or embodied cognition more generally), one important line of already existing research argues that AI-generated images (and perhaps also music) is mostly about the remixing of generic "styles" or "vibes" that reproduce conventional affects (see, e.g., Meyer 2023, 108). Following theorists such as Ahmed (2010), Biondi (2022), and Massumi (1995), we could then emphasize that "vibes […] make us *feel* a certain way. They have an *energy* that we like or don't. We are surrounded by them. We are informed by them" (Biondi 2022; n.pag.; original emphases). An "AI aisthetics" could thus investigate the impact of algorithmically produced "vibes" as computable affects (see also Grietzer 2025).

Both narrow conceptualizations and both broad conceptualizations (of "media" and "aesthetics," respectively) we have sketched thus far also appear to be aligned with each other at least to some degree: An instrumental

conceptualization of "media" as carriers/materials for meaning and "expressive intent" lends itself to "artistic" considerations (especially within "formalist" approaches to modernist art[6]); a postinstrumental conceptualization of media as dispositives or environments has a certain attraction to phenomenological theories of perception and embodiment. While the various forays into the generative AI discussions touched upon above might already become more productive when undertaken against the background of these four well established "radical" conceptualizations of "medium" and "aesthetics," respectively, we would like to present in slightly more detail two "middle-ground" conceptualizations of these terms that seem particularly relevant in a generative AI context. Being "middle-ground" conceptualizations, they can each be located somewhere in-between the respective narrow and broad conceptualizations of "medium" and "aesthetics" that we have sketched thus far.

"Middle-Ground" Conceptualizations of (AI) "Media" and (AI) "Aesthetics"

How, then, could we conceptualize "media" and "mediality" as neither narrowly instrumental (as a means, channel, or material within a defined use-context), nor as (perhaps too) broadly postinstrumental (as a dispositive, an environment, or a "condition" providing affordances to engage with the world physically, cognitively, and affectively)? As a third option in-between these "radical" extremes, we could instead approach specific technologies as networks of human and nonhuman actors that are open to various "use cases" and representational affordances, perhaps shaping (i.e., enabling or limiting) certain uses over others, but doing so through their specific situatedness in all the "domains of technology" outlined by Dhaliwal (2023). Such an approach to media and their mediality thus focuses not only on specific networks of human and nonhuman actors but also on the distribution of agency between them, and on how his distribution shapes specific affordances for interaction, communication, and representation. Questions such as these have been discussed in terms of an actor-media-theory, modeled after the sociological actor-network-theory (ANT), but with a specific focus on technologies of communication and interaction (see Wilde 2023; as well as, e.g., the contributions in Spöhrer and Ochsner 2017; Thielmann and Schüttpelz 2013).

Within the theoretical framework of actor-media-theory, we would then consider AI technologies neither as mere (predetermined) instruments in a given use-case nor as (open and ubiquitous) dispositives of general(ized) media environments, but as specifically situated actor-media-networks. By following this approach, we can more effectively investigate how particular new and emerging technologies (hardware, software, and infrastructure), through their interfaces, serve as "midpoints" between the institutions behind them (companies, legal and economic frameworks, social roles with specific

hierarchies, etc.) and the outputs they generate. Conceptualizing media in this way thus helps us to acknowledge that, despite it being tempting to address AI-generated images as such, differences in models, versions, and platforms matter quite a bit. Much-discussed representational biases of LLMs, for example (see, e.g., Bianchi et al. 2022; Hofmann et al. 2024; Katz 2025), emerge from a complex interaction between many different systems that are in principle separate, even if we may not be able to see this in the resulting images, namely (a) training datasets (such as LAION-5B) with their existing image/text-pairings, (b) pre-trained language models (such as CLIP) that assign default values to linguistic prompts (as tokens) to "understand" them through a high-dimensional vector within the latent space, and (c) the image models themselves (such as the Stable Diffusion models from "marketplaces" like CivitAI) that can be trained and "defaulted" differently even with recourse to the same dataset (see, e.g., Allamar 2022; Škripcová 2024; Song et al. 2024).

While we cannot necessarily reconstruct these infrastructures in all cases based on disclosed datasets, and while we might moreover not be able to determine any causal input–output relation in the sense of an "explainable AI" (see, e.g., Ali et al. 2023; Zylinska 2020, 75–85), we should be careful not to give in to the temptations of what Offert and Dhaliwal describe as a black box casuistry in the context of AI discourse:

> "AI models are black boxes," in 2024, sounds like a truism, and could yet not be further from the truth. Yes, AI models are complex systems, and yes, there is no easy way to infer, purely from the weights and biases of a neural network, what the model does, or what data it was trained on. But AI models rarely consist of just a single neural network, nor do they come into the world as entirely new systems, trained on entirely new data, with entirely new mechanisms. AI models are historical, maybe even 'more historical' than many other technical objects. Every new model builds on an entire architectural history, a history of how things are done with the parts that are available.
>
> (Offert and Dhaliwal 2024, 5)

While we might, for example, not be able to "look into" some datasets and models (such as OpenAI's), we do know quite a bit about others, as Buschek and Thorp (2023) have reconstructed in more detail with regard to Midjourney and Stable Diffusion. Both of the latter draw on the LAION-5B dataset of 5.85 billion CLIP-filtered image-text pairs, made available by researchers in 2022 (see Schuhmann et al. 2022) with the warning that they "do not recommend using it for creating ready-to-go industrial products" (Beaumont 2023, n.pag.). However, as Buschek and Thorp (2023) explain, LAION-5B was itself built from an even larger dataset (containing data from over three billion websites) by another nonprofit organization (Common Crawl). Some commercial domains (such as Pinterest, Shopify, and SlidePlayer) were

highly overrepresented in LAION, because they host many image-text pairings. Midjourney and Stable Diffusion, however, draw only on a subset of the LAION-5B foundation dataset called "LAION-Aesthetics" (consisting of roughly 15,000 images). This, in turn, was once more created using algorithmic filtering to select only images from the foundation set that were rated to be particularly "visually appealing," according to parameters provided earlier by users of the Discord communities for GLIDE and Stable Diffusion. These users ranked and rated 238,000 (other) AI-generated images from yet another training set called "Simulacra Aesthetic Captions (SAC)." What this example shows is that, despite the appeal of black box casuistry within AI discourse, we know quite a bit about the "aesthetics" that any image in Midjourney or Stable Diffusion will "gravitate toward," because we can trace them back to only "a handful of [very active] users" whose "aesthetic preferences dominate the dataset" (Buschek and Thorp 2023, n.pag.).

Having located our conceptualization of actor-media-networks in between instrumental and postinstrumental conceptualizations of "media," we would similarly like to offer a conceptualization of "aesthetics" as neither an "artistics" that is primarily concerned with aesthetic judgments (related to skill and connoisseurship), nor as an "aisthetics" that conflates aesthetic perception with perception (or *aisthesis*) *in toto* (see also Thon 2025). Drawing on Martin Seel's influential proposal to distinguish aesthetic from nonaesthetic perception via the former's "self-referentiality" or "sensing self-awareness" that ties "[t]he special presence of the *object* of perception […] to a special presence of the *exercise* of this perception" (Seel 2005, 31; original emphases), we can instead conceptualize aesthetics as being concerned not with perception (or *aisthesis*) in general, but rather with a specific kind of perception (i.e., aesthetic perception).[7] While there is no one-to-one relation between this kind of "self-referential" aesthetic perception and the more or less "self-referential" form of aesthetic artifacts or objects, broadly conceived, we would further suggest that AI-generated outputs that foreground, to varying degrees and dependent on context and use, their "formatting" or "style" as opposed to their "content" or "subject" could be described as following a logic of (opaque) hypermediacy as opposed to a logic of (transparent) immediacy *sensu* Bolter and Grusin (1999). Such AI-generated outputs might then be more interesting from the perspective of a "middle ground" AI aesthetics than those AI-generated outputs that do not foreground their "formatting" or "style."[8]

If, hypothetically, we prompted ChatGPT o1 to briefly explain how the term "AI aesthetics" could be understood, the text we would receive after it "thought about it for a second" might well appear to be largely transparent to us within what could be described as standard "use cases" for such an explanation. Within such standard "use cases," we might focus on assessing the propositions, concepts, or pieces of information "contained" in the text, allowing us to abstract to a certain degree from the form of the specific AI-generated output—potentially even across specific languages such as

English or German (for abstractions as a set of medial operations and material practices, see Schröter 2019b). The AI-generated output would thus become transparent to a certain degree, relative to a given "use case" or a "medial operation," in that it would "not seem to change at least with some changes in the materiality" (Schröter 2019b, 26). Similar observations apply to AI-generated images: The infamous AI-generated "baby peacock," which does not represent anything looking like an actual specimen of this genus, but takes the form of a kind of fictional "Pokémon" in which the appearance of an adult male peacock has been merged with pronounced attributes associated with the quality of "cuteness" (see Larsen 2023), is not discussed as a problem because of "stylistic" allusions to a photographic representation, but because of its abstractable features which would not even serve its purpose as an adequate illustration—in any perceivable image style. To the extent that "we are interested in the information the image, and the image in combination with the text, gives us" (Schröter 2019b, 28), we can thus once again abstract from the form, "formatting," or "style" of the image and toward its potential to illustrate how any "real" baby peacock generally looks like—and how any baby peacock picture that affords such an operation *should* look like.[9]

Transparency and abstraction will always remain matters of degree (see Schröter 2019b, 32), but degree here does not imply indifference. As a contrasting example of how much more foregrounded the form, "formatting," or "style" of AI-generated outputs may be (in other words, how much less transparent and abstractable the AI-generated outputs in question may appear), we could (again, hypothetically) instruct ChatGPT o1 to generate an explanation of AI aesthetics in the form of a haiku or a 3-panel-comic strip. The results of such prompts are likely to be quite opaque to the degree that they will foreground or, indeed, imitate the form of "other media" such as a specific type of poetry (with 5-7-5 syllables and a comparison to nature) or a script detailing the (absent) content of sequential images and speech bubbles. When we want to assess the degree of self-referentiality, opacity, or hypermediacy of an AI-generated output relative to medial practices, "use cases," and the degree to which they allow to abstract from the perceivable formatting of the output, then the question of how "transparent" any given output is remains relative to conventions—perhaps cultural "protocols"[10]—of media use.

In discussions within social media comment sections, for example, remarks such as "this article feels like it was at least partially AI written […]. That is exactly the type of it-literally-doesn't-mean-anything filler that LLMs love to insert into text" (DeedleFake 2025, n.pag.) have become quite frequent. They retroactively add a hypermediacy-oriented, opaque, self-referential perspective to our initially transparent hypothetical example above. Not only does the "default style" for AI-generated images—that is, the "style" employed without any specific "style prompt"—change considerably between platforms and models, but the sociocultural conventions of what counts as a "transparent" text or image (and which could, thus, perhaps be perceived as

comparatively "non-aesthetic") do as well. Indeed, "[f]or these models, the 'photographic' seems to be just another 'style', an aesthetic, a certain 'look', not a privileged mode of indexical access to the world" (Meyer 2023, 108). What could be described as a "photographic aesthetics" or a "photographic form" is generally perceived as more transparent than drawings in contemporary media culture,[11] but this is less some inherent technological property of photochemical trace-recordings than it is the result of the dominance of images that "look" photographic in many medial contexts (even though they also might be CGI, photoshopped, and/or AI-generated). However, their perceivable medial forms (that are often *not* foregrounded and thus comparably transparent) have accumulated and inherited photography's "protocols" that make them abstractable toward what they seem to represent, "even if the reading of that form as natural is culturally conditioned" (Wasielewski 2024, 15; see also Hausken 2024). Drawing a distinction between form, "formatting," or "style," on the one hand, and representational content, on the other, by focusing on "use cases" relative to conventionalized media practices also avoids the problem of having to depart from any projected "meaning" within AI-generated outputs (in contrast to their form), which current models arguably have no understanding of (see Bender et al. 2021).

Conclusion(s)

In offering a survey of different (sometimes explicit, more often implicit) conceptualizations of "AI aesthetics" that underly existing research on AI-generated outputs, we have tried to show that how we conceptualize both (AI) "media" and (AI) "aesthetics" will saliently inform our methodological stance by allowing us to draw different distinctions between what we (more or less readily) assume as "given"—and what, in contrast, we consider a "matter of concern" (Latour 2004, 232). The "middle-ground" conceptualization of "media" as actor-media-networks that we propose as a potential alternative to narrowly instrumental or broadly postinstrumental conceptualizations takes its starting point neither from a given "use case" nor from an assumed AI-saturated media environment, but from the affordances of specific technologies, platforms, and models—their "default configurations" that are nevertheless open to countless diverging uses. The "middle-ground" conceptualization of aesthetics as concerned with self-referential aesthetic perception that we consider as a potential alternative to artistics-oriented and aisthetics-oriented conceptualizations likewise takes as its starting point specific conventions and practices of media use, while contrasting those where the "protocols" and "use cases" are more embedded in "artistic" practices (which usually *do* foreground their perceivable medial forms) to those that are more closely connected to instrumental practices (which often afford a higher degree of abstraction toward some

information, proposition, or other representational content, including an allegedly represented reality). Whether such protocols can remain stable when certain altermedial "formattings" or "styles" are imitated through generative AI remains a question that needs to be investigated for specific technological and usage contexts.

With this in mind, we would like to conclude by tentatively proposing, again, that the area of "AI aesthetics"—within the framework of media aesthetics and, more specifically, with regard to AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs—can be accessed from at least six different directions, with the underlying conceptualization of "AI aesthetics" arguably also suggesting a privileging of particular methodological stances (or ways of inquiry) over others when investigating the perceivable (aisthetic or indeed aesthetic) properties of AI-generated outputs:

1 Instrumental (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given "use case" of communication and interaction and then investigating the perceivable properties of AI-generated outputs that enable, distort, or facilitate the respective processes of mediation.
2 Actor-(AI) media-networks: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given technology, in all its complex and multidimensional situatedness, and then investigating how its perceivable output affordances and defaults are related to the ("invisible") materiality, infrastructures, and socio-cultural institutions that afford it—and vice versa.
3 (AI) media dispositives: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given (increasingly) AI-saturated media environment and then investigating its ramifications on society, culture, politics, and the perceivable properties of *all* media forms situated therein.
4 Artistic (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from given aesthetic judgments that are connected to notions of skill and connoisseurship (including discourses around creativity, originality, and politics) and then investigating to what degree and under which assumptions AI-generated outputs are appreciated or dismissed.
5 Self-referential (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from different media "use cases" and practices and then investigating to what degree and through which means AI-generated outputs highlight aspects of their perceivable form, "formatting," or "style" and thus invite self-referential aesthetic perception rather than encouraging abstraction.
6 Aisthetic (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from any type of situated interaction between humans and AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs (or, indeed, the interfaces of generative AI platforms more broadly) and then investigating how sense perception, embodied experiences, and affects are addressed, negated, or modulated therein.

The present volume aims to represent all of these concerns as it includes chapters that move within and across the six conceptualizations of "AI aesthetics" presented here in various ways. It thus reflects not only on the theoretical but also on the methodological implications of AI aesthetics. At the same time, however, it demonstrates that this is still very much an emerging research field and that no dominant conceptualization of "AI aesthetics" has yet emerged.

Notes

1 As a case in point, AI image generators are perhaps primarily remarkable in terms of the quantity and speed with which they generate images. The deluge of AI-generated images might then appear too arbitrary and ephemeral to deserve sustained individual attention or in-depth analysis at first glance, perhaps contributing to a privileging of more quantitative and social science–oriented methods within the field of critical AI studies. It is worth noting, however, that within the specifically humanities-oriented methodological context of what Bajohr describes as "promptology" (2023, 67), natural language commands can also be used to probe the "latent space" of AI image generators, with individual AI-generated images then becoming "readable" as representations of an "underlying" cultural or sociotechnological imaginary (see, e.g., Ervik 2023; Offert 2023; Salvaggio 2023).

2 Broadly speaking, the mediality of generative AI platforms manifests itself in the form of a more or less specific communicative "frontend" or interface that mediates between the social-institutional "systems and structures" as well as the "machines and devices" (hardware and software), on the one hand, and perceiving users (humans), on the other hand (see, e.g., Hookway 2014; Wirth 2016; 2023). These interfaces, in turn, allow for the production of the outputs that AI platforms were trained to generate in various semiotic modes such as written texts, images, or sounds (see Bateman et al. 2017; Forceville 2021; Kress 2023).

3 Bajohr (2024a), for example, suggests that we might soon enter an age of "postartificial texts," in which authors will always be under suspicion to have used LLMs for their writing, even and perhaps especially when they categorically claim to abstain from such practices, so that, perhaps, this very distinction will lose its significance (see also Köbis and Mossink 2021). Among other things, one could then assume that this will most likely also be reflected in the prevalence of different kinds of writing styles or textual aesthetics (including, for example, a greater emphasis on autofiction or a less "probable" or "typical" diction), *regardless* of whether generative AI was in play or not—or whether we will ever know if it was with certainty.

4 Schröter's distinction between a "strong" conceptualization of "media aesthetics as 'aisthesis'" (Schröter 2019a, n.pag.) and a "weak" conceptualization of media aesthetics connected to "a specific use of the medium for the purpose of aesthetic perception" (Schröter 2019a, n.pag.) is particularly relevant here, not least because he also emphasizes the need to explore a "middle ground" between these two extremes. That said, while Schröter identifies Seel as a key proponent of this "weak" conceptualization of media aesthetics, we would perhaps locate Seel's (2005) approach closer to a "middle-ground" and would, in any case, not follow Schröter's argument that a "medium kind of media aesthetics" should be (exclusively) "concerned with an aesthetics, even aisthetics, of pre-digital media, which become visible (and audible) once more through their transposed digital repetition" (Schröter 2019a, n.pag.). See also Thon (2025) for a more detailed discussion of Schröter (2019a) vis a vis Seel (2005).

5 Apart from the racist, sexist, and other biases that can still often be observed in the content as well as the form of AI-generated images, important concerns include that the production of AI content is hurting (creative) workers, devours millions of gallons of water, and releases thousands of tons of CO2 into the atmosphere annually (see, e.g., Crawford 2021; Coeckelbergh 2022). It also seems undeniable that AI-generated images have become particularly popular with right-wing parties and politicians around the globe during the past one and a half years—from Donald Trump over Britain First to the German AfD party (see, again, Watkins 2025)—and that there are clear structural alignments between AI technologies and what could be described as a neofascist re-ordering of governments (see, e.g., Kirschenbaum 2025; McQuillan 2022; Salvaggio 2025).

6 While discussions around formalism in aesthetics have often focused on (modernist) painting, there are many theoretically sophisticated proposals to be found here (see, e.g., Curtin on "pure" and "mixed formalism" [1982, 321], Wollheim's distinction between "Normative Formalism," "Analytic Formalism," "Manifest Formalism," and "Latent Formalism" [2001, 127], Zangwill's defense of a "moderate formalism" [2001, 55], Thomson-Jones discussion of the resurgence of "[s]ophisticated formalism" [2005, 375], and Nanay's argument for what he calls "semi-formalism" [2016, 97]). There is also a broader "formalist" discourse in literary, cultural, and media studies often particularly interested in Shklovsky's (2012) concept of *ostranenie* (or "making strange"). See also, once again, Thon (2025) for a more detailed reconstruction.

7 Other accounts of aesthetic as opposed to nonaesthetic perception are certainly available (see, e.g., Nanay's account of "aesthetic attention as distributed attention" [2016, 26]), but Seel's conceptualization of the former as a "sensing self-awareness" (2005, 31) seems particularly productive for our present purposes. Against the background of Schröter's critique of what he perceives as Seel's focus on "a specific use of the medium for the purpose of aesthetic perception" (Schröter 2019a, n.pag.), however, it is worth stressing that Seel emphasizes that "this sensing [self-awareness] has not yet anything to do with a *reflexive* self-referentiality, although this is often the case here too, especially in the context of art" (2005, 31; original emphasis). See also, once more, the detailed discussion in Thon (2025).

8 Bolter and Grusin (1999) not only argue, following McLuhan (1964), that so-called new media remediate the "content" and "form" of older media in various ways, but also postulate a "double logic of remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 31), which among other things allows us to locate concrete AI-generated outputs between the poles of transparent "immediacy" and opaque "hypermediacy." While the term "immediacy" broadly refers to the deemphasizing of the form, "formatting," or "style" of a representation compared to its representational content that "either […] erase[s] or […] render[s] automatic the act of representation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33), the term "hypermediacy" refers to representations that foreground "acts of representation and mak[e] them visible," "multipl[y] the signs of mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 34), and thus draw our attention to their form, "formatting," or "style." Yet again, see Thon (2025) for a more detailed discussion and an argument that representations following the "logic of hypermediacy" more strongly than the "logic of immediacy" may more readily instigate aesthetic as opposed to "merely" nonaesthetic processes of perception in their recipients.

9 The idea that the communicative function of pictures could be described in similar ways as linguistic predicates has been discussed controversially in picture theory (see, e.g., Wilde 2021). Since pictorial signs communicate, by necessity (at least to some degree), the visual appearance(s) of the depicted objects or scenes, some considered "predication" ("to illustrate," "to visualize," or "to exemplify") as the core of pictoriality (see, e.g., Novitz 1977; Sachs-Hombach 2003, 185–187).

Others, in contrast, objected that seeing a "picture-elephant" was very different from seeing a set of predicates such as "has a long trunk" or "is an animal" (see, e.g., Abel 2004, 361–369; Elkins 1998, 3–46). It should be uncontroversial, however, that "predication" is a frequently employed (although, depending on terminological specification, perhaps not necessary) communicative function of pictures (see, e.g., Krebs 2015).

10 See Gitelman 2006 on the role of "protocols" in a historically oriented conceptualization of "media." Galloway, too, suggests that the term "protocol" may refer to any kind of "correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions" (2004, 7), which a medium arguably becomes once it is culturally established and widespread enough. Cavell (1971, 101–108) similarly speaks of "automatisms" that every medium accumulates and stabilizes, and which, just like "protocols," can be technologically implemented or supported, but can also remain on the level of cultural conventions (see also Rodowick 2007, 41–46). They thus entail not only the typical uses of (certain) media products but also the established routines of production, distribution, and reception.

11 There are, of course, long-standing discussions around the supposed transparency of photographic (and other) pictures, which are also closely connected to complex questions around "(photo)realism." Walton has offered a particularly influential account of the former when he argues that "photography is indeed special, and that it deserves to be called a supremely realistic medium," but is so and does so because "[p]hotographs are *transparent*" in that "[w]e see the world *through* them" (1984, 251, original emphases). Yet, while AI-generated images may still employ "photorealism" in the sense of an "aesthetic term that denotes a visual style," and thus "mimic photographs without being photographs" (Hausken 2024, 2), it seems clear enough that we do not "see the world *through* them" (Walton 1984, 251, original emphasis), at least not in any intuitively plausible sense of this phrase.

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2 AI Horseplay

Postdigital Aesthetics in AI-Generated Images

Jan-Noël Thon

Introduction

Despite their comparatively recent emergence,[1] diffusion-based AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion have already substantially reconfigured our contemporary media culture, not least leading to a flurry of more or less hurried attempts to come to theoretical terms with what is then variously described as "AI-imagenesis" (Ervik 2023, 45), "autography" (Chesher and Albarrán-Torres 2023, 58), "operative ekphrasis" (Bajohr 2024, 77), "predictive media" (Manovich 2023, 36), "synthetic images" (Salvaggio 2023, 83), or (most commonly) "AI imagery," "generative imagery," and "AI-generated images."[2] Resisting the rhetorics of novelty that can prominently be observed in the popular as well as academic discourses surrounding generative AI, this chapter aims to explore some of the ways in which AI-generated images may manifest what could be described as postdigital aesthetics—while also emphasizing that such a postdigital aesthetics is not exclusive to AI-generated images, but can similarly be attributed to a range of other media forms.[3] To this end, the chapter begins with a brief explication of the terms "postdigital," "aesthetics," and "postdigital aesthetics," distinguishing four salient domains of the latter that can be specified as the aesthetic intensification of the digital, the aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital, the aesthetic intensification of the nondigital, and the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital. This is followed by an equally brief discussion of postdigital aesthetics in terms of remediation and of the affordances of diffusion-based AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion, all of which can be prompted to create AI-generated images with both a more or less specific representational content and a more or less specific aesthetic form. Against this background, the chapter analyzes the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital and the aesthetic intensification of the digital (as the two domains of postdigital aesthetics that are particularly relevant here) in a small corpus of AI-generated images of galloping horses that were created using ChatGPT 4o in August 2024, and which—despite the necessarily heuristic and qualitative nature of

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-2

this approach—arguably allow us to at least "catch a glimpse" of the postdigital aesthetics that DALL·E affords its users more or less "by default."

Conceptualizing Postdigital Aesthetics

Let us begin, then, with a brief explication of the terms "postdigital," "aesthetics," and "postdigital aesthetics." The term "postdigital" was coined a quarter of a century ago by Cascone (2000), on the one hand, and Pepperell and Punt (2000), on the other, with the former having turned out rather more influential than the latter. Cascone takes Negroponte's (1998) observation that the so-called digital revolution is over as the starting point for the diagnosis of a specific "'post-digital' aesthetic" that manifests itself as an "aesthetics of failure" (Cascone 2000, 12) in electronic music. According to Cascone, this "aesthetics of failure" can be understood as "a result of the immersive experience of working in environments suffused with digital technology" (2000, 12) in that it incorporates "glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise, and even the noise floor of computer sound cards" (2000, 13). The notion of the postdigital and of a specifically postdigital aesthetics then initially circulated primarily in the discourse fields of electronic music and media art, but has received increasing academic attention since the 2010s and is now employed not only in artistic and practice-oriented contexts (see, e.g., Bishop et al. 2016; Paul 2016) but also in disciplines and research fields as diverse as sound studies (see, e.g., Ford 2023; Kouvaras 2016), literary studies (see, e.g., Abblitt 2018; Hamel and Stubenrauch 2023), theater studies (see, e.g., Causey 2016; Papagiannouli 2022), media studies (see, e.g., Diecke et al. 2022; Murray 2020), and education research (see, e.g., Hayes 2021; Mathier 2023) as an alternative to talking about "digit(al)ization" (see, e.g., Balbi and Magaudda 2018). Based on the diagnosis of the increasing ubiquity of digital technology in everyday life that was already present(ed) in Cascone's remark that "[t]he tendrils of digital technology have in some way touched everyone" (2000, 12) as well as in Pepperell and Punt's argument that "the intellectual restrictions of the digital paradigm are now becoming unavoidable" (2000, 2), much of the existing research on the postdigital stresses that "the historical distinction between the digital and the nondigital becomes increasingly blurred" (Berry 2014, 22; Berry and Dieter 2015b, 2; see also, e.g., Arndt et al. 2019; Contreras-Koterbay and Mirocha 2016; Jandrić et al. 2018; Jordan 2020).

The distinction between "the digital" and "the nondigital" that is invoked here evidently does not coincide with the more precise distinction in media theory and philosophy between "digital-in-the-sense-of-discrete" and "analog-in-the-sense-of-continuous" (see, e.g., Fazi 2019; Schröter 2004; but also Frigerio et al. 2013; Maley 2023), instead referring—less precisely, but more compatible with everyday usage—to the presence or absence of "computer technology,"

broadly conceived (see Cramer 2015; as well as, e.g., Cubitt 2006; Maley 2011). Moreover, the prefix "post" in the term "postdigital" by no means denotes the end of the digital or the disappearance of digital technology—rather, it stresses the increased significance and fine-grained everyday integration of digital technology after the so-called digital revolution, which has led to a decreased saliency of the distinction between digital and nondigital technologies, practices, and artifacts in everyday life. The term "postdigital" can therefore be compared to terms such as "poststructuralism," "postmodernism," "postcolonialism," or "postpunk" as well as "post-photography" (see, e.g., Mitchell 1992), "post-cinema" (see, e.g., Denson and Leyda 2016), "postmedia" (see, e.g., Apprich et al. 2013), or "postinternet" (see, e.g., Rothwell 2024), all of which broadly refer to the transformation of what has existed up to a point, while critically acknowledging that what has existed up to that point still remains impactful. That said, although the blurring of the boundary between digital and nondigital technologies, practices, and artifacts is a common thread throughout existing conceptualizations of the postdigital, these conceptualizations still differ substantially across disciplinary contexts as well as from scholar to scholar, with various contributions positioning the postdigital as an "umbrella term" or otherwise multilayered concept, and at least some theorists also more or less systematically distinguishing between or at least hinting at the existence of distinct dimensions, aspects, or domains of the postdigital (see, e.g., Jordan 2020; Taffel 2016; as well as the notable differences between how the postdigital is conceptualized in Cascone 2000 and in Cascone and Jandrić 2021, or in Cramer 2015 and in Cramer and Jandrić 2021). For our present purpose, however, it mainly seems important not only to note that the ubiquity of digital technology has shifted, blurred, or dissolved the border between the digital and the nondigital (as well as between "being online" and "being offline" [see, e.g., Berry 2014]) but also to ask which new(ish) practices, artifacts, and experiences such a shift, blurring, or dissolution of these established borders has led to as part of the "messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitization" (Cramer 2015, 19; original emphasis). Indeed, one (though certainly not the only) central strand of discussion within research on the postdigital has been the reconfigured relation between "old" nondigital media and "new" digital media that includes a particular interest in "hybrids of 'old' and 'new' media" (Cramer 2015, 20) as well as in how "'old' media [are] used like 'new media'" (Cramer 2015, 21; see also, e.g, Hansen 2004; Manovich 2001 on the concept of "new media"). The postdigital can then be understood as "a 'coming together,' a hybridisation of both the digital and the non-digital domains" that includes "the movement of the non-digital to the digital and the digital to the non-digital," "operat[ing] from two states or positions: within or across the digital/non-digital nexus" (Jordan 2020, 63).

However, despite most discussions of the postdigital drawing on Cascone's foundational reflections on a "'post-digital' aesthetic" (2000, 12) in electronic music at least to some extent, there is comparatively little explicit discussion of aesthetic questions in the existing research. Hence, let us unpack

in slightly more detail the conceptualization of "aesthetics" that underlies the approach to postdigital aesthetics presented here. First, it should be noted that this approach is not primarily concerned with aesthetic judgments (or with the concept of art[4]), nor with "evaluatively laden aesthetic properties" (Levinson 2001, 76) such as beauty (or ugliness), though the analysis of postdigital aesthetics will still need to include (particular) "aesthetically relevant properties" (Nanay 2016, 67) that make a difference with regard to aesthetic perception, aesthetic experience, or aesthetic appreciation (see also, e.g., Eaton 2001; Irvin 2014; Nanay 2016; Seel 2005). Second, while aesthetic perception would have to be at the center of any appropriately "nonnormative" aesthetics, the proposed conceptualization of postdigital aesthetics does not conflate aesthetics with *aisthesis* (or aisthetics). It is, of course, quite common to emphasize the connection between aesthetics and perception in philosophical aesthetics (see, e.g., Böhme 2001; Nanay 2016; Rancière 2011; Welsch 1987) as well as in the broader research on media and postdigital aesthetics (see, e.g., Contreras-Koterbay and Mirocha 2016; Cramer 2015; Hausken 2013; Marchiori 2013), but it seems preferable to maintain a distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic (or functional, or pragmatic) perception that might, for example, be specified via the former's "self-referentiality" or "sensing self-awareness" tying "[t]he special presence of the *object* of perception […] to a special presence of the *exercise* of this perception" (Seel 2005, 31; original emphases). Third, even if we can understand aesthetics as a perceptual (or, more broadly, experiential) category, the following is primarily concerned with the aesthetic form of medial artifacts to which a postdigital aesthetics can be attributed, which broadly refers to the external *Gestalt* of such artifacts that is accessible to perception as a result of a "particular way of manipulating the materials […] of its medium" (Eldridge 1985, 313), and which might in various contexts be distinguished from the representational content of those medial artifacts that fulfill representational functions.[5] Even if "form has never belonged only to the discourse of aesthetics" (Levine 2015, 2) and the term therefore (once more) has a rather complex conceptual history, most if not "all the historical uses of the term" do seem to share a common conceptual core in that "'form' always indicates *an arrangement of elements*" that could also be described as "*an ordering, patterning, or shaping*" (Levine 2015, 3; original emphases) and that, again, becomes aesthetic if it is (in some way) accessible to perception. Fourth and finally, since medial artifacts instigating aesthetic perception are made (at least partially) by humans (although the part that humans play in the creation of AI-generated images may be seen as comparatively limited, and aesthetic objects that are *not* artifacts do of course also possess an aesthetic form and can instigate aesthetic perception), aesthetic practice(s) as the "localized practices of artefactual construction" (Corner 2019, 108) that have brought the medial artifacts in question into existence would also need to be taken into account. Evidently, the concept of aesthetic practice(s) as a whole cannot be reduced to such "localized practices of artefactual construction," instead also including the aforementioned "practices of self-referential

perception" (Reckwitz 2016, 63) *sensu* Seel (2005), but the terminological emphasis on aesthetic *production* practices rather than aesthetic *reception* practices is meant to highlight the need to include the former in any comprehensive analysis of postdigital aesthetics as well.[6]

What about "postdigital aesthetics," then? Building on the distinctions that Cramer (2015), Jordan (2020), and others draw with regard to the postdigital *in toto*, a comprehensively conceptualized postdigital aesthetics can be observed in four domains of the postdigital that are at least heuristically distinguishable from one another (see also Thon 2025; 2026/forthcoming). First, the term "postdigital aesthetics" can refer to an aesthetic intensification of the digital that is already at the center of Cascone's influential conceptualization of postdigital aesthetics as an "aesthetics of failure" (2000, 12) in electronic music, though both "postdigital aesthetics" and "aesthetics of failure" certainly expand well beyond primarily auditive media forms and particularly into the realm of the visual, where they are often discussed in the context of "[g]litch aesthetics, corruption artefacts, [and] retro 8-bit graphics" (Paul and Levy 2015, 31; see also, e.g., Betancourt 2017; Menkman 2011).[7] Second, the term "postdigital aesthetics" can refer to an aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital that is, for example, often discussed with reference to James Bridle's (2011) notion of a "new aesthetic," to the extent that the latter broadly refers to "eruptions of the digital into the physical world" (Kwastek 2015, 74; see also, e.g., several other contributions in Berry and Dieter 2015a; as well as Contreras-Koterbay and Mirocha 2016; Hodgson 2019 for proposals to connect the "new aesthetic" to the concept of the postdigital).[8] Third, the term "postdigital aesthetics" can refer to an aesthetic intensification of the nondigital that would, for example, include the (considered) prioritization of nondigital technologies, practices, and artifacts in contexts in which digital technologies, practices, and artifacts would be more readily available (say, when photographers or filmmakers use nondigital cameras and nondigital film material, even though using digital cameras would require "less of an effort"). Fourth and finally, the term "postdigital aesthetics" can refer to an aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital that entails various ways in which digital aesthetic objects, medial artifacts, or, more specifically, medial representations across media forms may evoke, simulate, or otherwise recreate the conventionally recognizable aesthetics of nondigital media forms (see also, e.g., Bolter and Grusin 1999 on "remediation"; Rajewsky 2005 on "intermedial references"; Schröter 2019; 2023 on "transmaterialization").[9]

Conceptualizing the Postdigital Aesthetics of AI-Generated Images

So, even if the analytical focus of this chapter is on postdigital aesthetics as a set of (particular) "aesthetically relevant properties" (Nanay 2016, 65) that can be attributed to (elements of) the aesthetic form of various medial artifacts, most if not all of which can be further specified as medial representations,[10] (postdigital) aesthetic forms are always connected to the (postdigital) aesthetic

practices that these medial artifacts or medial representations are based on as well as to the (postdigital) aesthetic experiences that they afford their various recipients (and which will usually entail, but arguably cannot be reduced to aesthetic perception). Against the background of the proposed conceptualization of postdigital aesthetics with its heuristic distinction between four salient domains of the latter that can be specified as the aesthetic intensification of the digital, the aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital, the aesthetic intensification of the nondigital, and the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital, however, it is worth stressing in slightly more detail that the approach to the analysis of postdigital aesthetics presented here is primarily concerned with a specific kind of medial representations, namely those medial representations that foreground their own mediality, materiality, and aesthetic form as opposed to their representational content. This does not mean that medial representations not foregrounding their own mediality and materiality in an immediately noticeable way have no aesthetic form or cannot instigate aesthetic perception, but there still seems to be a connection between the "sensing self-awareness" (Seel 2005, 31) of aesthetic perception and the self-referentiality of medial representations that foreground their own mediality, materiality, and aesthetic form. That said, the distinction between the aesthetic form of medial representations and their representational content as well as the "self-referential" foregrounding of the former can be specified further in various different ways.[11]

As hinted at above, a particularly influential conceptualization of this kind of foregrounding has been developed by Bolter and Grusin (1999), who not only argue, following McLuhan (1964), that so-called new media remediate the "content" and "form" of older media in various ways, but who also postulate a "double logic of remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 31), which amongst other things allows us to locate concrete medial representations between the poles of transparent "immediacy" and opaque "hypermediacy." While the term "immediacy" broadly refers to the deemphasizing of the aesthetic form of a medial representation compared to its representational content that "either […] erase[s] or […] render[s] automatic the act of representation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33) and is often explained using the metaphor of a transparent window, the term "hypermediacy" refers to medial representations that foreground "acts of representation and mak[e] them visible," "multipl[y] the signs of mediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 34), and thus draw our attention to their mediality, materiality, and aesthetic form. An interplay of transparent immediacy and opaque hypermediacy can be observed in very different medial representations across conventionally distinct media forms, but it would seem that medial representations which emphasize the "logic of hypermediacy" more strongly than the "logic of immediacy" are particularly interesting for the question of postdigital aesthetics—and, again, perhaps also tend to more readily instigate aesthetic as opposed to "merely" nonaesthetic, functional, or pragmatic processes of perception in their recipients.

Returning to the question of postdigital aesthetics, we can further observe that medial representations whose aesthetic form emphasizes the logic of

opaque hypermediacy as opposed to the logic of transparent immediacy and, therefore, at least tends to privilege aesthetic as opposed to "merely" nonaesthetic, functional, or pragmatic perception can be found in a broad range of conventionally distinct media forms, including (digital as well as nondigital) literary texts, comics, animation, photography, films, series, and games. While other avenues of inquiry are certainly available, then, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the particular kind of postdigital aesthetics afforded by diffusion-based AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion, all of which can be prompted to create AI-generated images not only with a more or less specific representational content that is often described as the "subject" of these images but also with a more or less specific aesthetic form that is often described in terms of their "style." Meyer in particular convincingly argues that the resulting "logic of the prompt radically expands and de-hierarchizes the notion of style" in that, in the context of AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion, the term "[s]tyle can refer to the classical art historical sense of an epochal style or the individual style of a canonized artist, but it can also refer to the aesthetic qualities of certain products of popular culture or the visual appearance associated with specific genres and media formats," because, "in the production logic of the AI model[,] they are nothing more than typical visual patterns" (2023b, 107). As important as popular usage of certain terms may be, however, the distinction between representational content and aesthetic form should perhaps not be wholly conflated with the distinction between an AI-generated image's "subject" and its "style," since both "subject" and "style" are arguably more specific and thus more easily overexpanded terms than "representational content" and "aesthetic form" (see also Manovich's brief remarks on "the relationship between 'content' and 'form' […] in AI's 'generative culture'" [2023, 39]).

In any case, AI-generated images can certainly also be understood as the result of processes of remediation: Bolter himself describes the creation of AI-generated images in DALL·E 2 as an "algorithmic remix or remediation" (2023, 202); Wilde's helpful distinction between an "immediacy-oriented realism associated with photography" and "a hypermediacy-oriented realism or a stylistic realism" (2023, 17) makes productive use of Bolter and Grusin's aforementioned "double logic of remediation" (1999, 31); and Offert frames his (insightfully polemic) observation that, "for CLIP and CLIP-dependent generative models, the recent past is literally black and white, and the distant past is actually made of marble" in terms of "a technically determined form of *remediation*" (2023, 122; original emphasis). Even if both the aesthetic intensification of the nondigital and the aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital can perhaps also be observed in various aesthetic practices reacting to the rise of AI image generators that would include not only artists insisting on nondigital technologies, practices, and artifacts but also, for example, Nils Pooker's "repaintings" of AI-generated images (see Pooker no year) or even the playful memetic recontextualization of Nadja Buttendorf's "ring finger

ring" from 2016 (see Buttendorf no year) as a remediation of AI-generated images representing hands with too many fingers that was a particularly common "glitch" in earlier versions of Midjourney (see, e.g., Wasielewski 2023; Wilde 2023), the following will primarily focus on the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital and the aesthetic intensification of the digital as the two domains of postdigital aesthetics that can squarely be located in the mainstream aesthetic practices afforded by AI image generators.

Drawing on earlier theoretical and methodological perspectives on AI-generated images, we can start from the assumption that, while diffusion-based AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion (as well as other methods of AI image generation) are expanded and refined constantly and with a speed that makes it rather difficult to say anything much about AI-generated images that is both specific and likely to age well, the general principle still holds that "prompts function as search queries, directing the model to a particular region within the latent space of possible images" (Meyer 2023b, 103) and that AI-generated images thus can be understood as "images about images, filtered through language" (Meyer 2023b, 108), which also means that, in a sense, "[e]very AI-generated image is an *infographic* about the underlying dataset" (Salvaggio 2023, 84; original emphasis) or "a visualization of the data in a database" (Ervik 2023, 46), and that AI-generated images thus "reveal layers of cultural and social encoding within the data used to produce them" (Salvaggio 2023, 84). Since the present chapter is less concerned with the "possibility space" (or "latent space" [Ervik 2023, 46; Meyer 2023b, 103; Salvaggio 2023, 91]) of AI-generated images *in toto* than with the "default" postdigital aesthetics that DALL·E in particular affords its users,[12] I have opted to employ comparatively simple prompts asking different iterations of DALL·E to create AI-generated images representing galloping horses. Put bluntly, the variation of Bajohr's "promptology" that I have pursued here certainly also attempted to "scan the vector space of dumb meaning for traces of cultural knowledge," but did so precisely by resisting the lure of "prompt design" as the supposedly "virtuosic selection of the text input" (Bajohr 2023, 67). While it may well be true that, "[l]ike a wizard trying to find the right words for an unknown magic spell, prompt engineers permutate their wordings to generate specific results" (Feyersinger et al. 2023, 135), my aim here was precisely *not* to create "specific results," but rather to probe DALL·E's "possibility space" for "default" occurences of certain postdigital aesthetics that provide a "window" through which we can "catch a glimpse" of how certain medium-specific aesthetic forms are represented in our cultural imaginary in the sense of a "collective media imaginary" (Ervik 2023, 42; see also Bolter on the "imaginary of the current web" [2023, 200]; as well as, e.g., Frank 2017 for a detailed discussion of the concept of cultural imaginary; Romele 2024 for a broader critical discussion of AI imaginaries).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my little experiment's focus on galloping horses is not entirely coincidental either, since DALL·E seems to have had a fairly stable

"notion" of what a galloping horse might look like for a while, which at least at first glance should allow us to focus on the differences in the aesthetic form of the AI-generated images in question rather than on the differences in their representational content.[13] Yet, while the form of the content of AI-generated images representing galloping horses has indeed remained surprisingly stable since I started experimenting with DALL·E 2 in 2022, the following analysis will primarily focus on a comparatively small corpus of AI-generated images that I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create over several weeks in August 2024. Even if I cannot unpack this in the present chapter, I furthermore want to underscore that the integration of DALL·E 3 into ChatGPT 4o also foregrounded the intermedial or, rather, multimodal nature of both the process of prompting AI image generators to create AI-generated images, which already "depends on a connection between images and words" (Ervik 2023, 42), and the "collections of image-text pairings" (Salvaggio 2023, 84; see also, e.g., Bajohr 2023; Bolter 2023) that make up the datasets used to train the models that underly these AI image generators even more clearly than was the case in previous versions of DALL·E, since ChatGPT 4o automatically "translated" the prompts it was given before it "fed" them to DALL·E 3, considerably expanding my comparatively short linguistic inputs.[14] Even if this did not render the proprietary blackbox of DALL·E 3 transparent, the "translational movement" from the user prompting ChatGPT 4o to ChatGPT 4o prompting DALL·E 3 arguably still increased the visibility of at least some of the ways in which the (then) most recent versions of ChatGPT and DALL·E processed the simple prompts I opted to employ.

The Aesthetic Transfer from the Nondigital to the Digital in AI-Generated Images

As a first step, I asked ChatGPT 4o to create line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses, expecting that the primarily two-dimensional pictoriality of these different media forms would lead to the resulting remediation processes largely being located on the "representational layer" of the respective AI-generated image. In other words, I was expecting that, while the AI-generated images thus created would always already be the result of remediation processes "re-representing" nondigital media forms (see also Hayward 1988), they would still create the *appearance* of a collapse of the remediating and the remediated "representational layer" or aesthetic form. This was indeed largely the case (see Figure 2.1), but beyond providing a "window" that allows us to "catch a glimpse" of how the respective mediality, materiality, and aesthetic form of line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries is "culturally imagined" in the vast multimodal dataset that DALL·E 3 was trained on, two aspects of the AI-generated images thus created seem particularly noteworthy here. The

Figure 2.1 AI-generated images of a line drawing, a crayon drawing, a watercolor painting, an oil painting, a stained-glass window, and a woven tapestry of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

AI-generated images remediating line drawings and watercolor paintings did indeed seem to aim at collapsing the remediating and the remediated "representational layer" and even the potentially more three-dimensional pictorial media forms of the stained-glass window and (to a lesser extent) the woven tapestry were remediated in a way that effectively de-emphasized their material (if not pictorial) three-dimensionality. Yet, not only was the prompt "[c]reate an oil painting of a galloping horse" consistently translated into long-form prompts foregrounding characteristics such as "rich, textured brushstrokes" but the resulting AI-generated images also tended to represent oil paintings of galloping horses that seemed to employ an "impasto technique" foregrounding the three-dimensionality of the thickly layered oil paint on the canvas. No less interestingly, the prompt "[c]reate a crayon drawing of a galloping horse" sometimes resulted in AI-generated images representing not only a two-dimensional crayon drawing but also varying numbers of three-dimensional crayons positioned on top of the drawing without such crayons being mentioned in either the original or the "translated" prompt (see Figure 2.2).

Arguably, then, the AI-generated images of the crayon drawings and oil paintings in particular foreground the difference between the remediating and the remediated "representational layer." Yet, even if DALL·E 3's tendency to create AI-generated images of crayon drawings that include "photorealistic" representations of three-dimensional crayons in addition to the "merely" two-dimensional crayon drawings themselves may have been unexpected, creating AI-generated images of three-dimensional aesthetic objects was of course very much within DALL·E 3's *expected* range of AI image generation. Accordingly, I prompted ChatGPT 4o to also create bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and even cloud sculptures of galloping horses (see Figure 2.2). Again, the results arguably provide a "window" that allows us to "catch a glimpse" of how the respective mediality, materiality, and aesthetic form of these three-dimensional aesthetic objects is "culturally imagined" in DALL·E 3's multimodal dataset, with notable aspects including perhaps less the tendency of the represented bronze sculptures to represent particularly "veiny" horses and the tendency of the represented wooden sculptures to combine different grain directions in mildly implausible ways but rather the observation that the represented paper sculptures seem to have been somehow glued together from a large number of very fine paper strips rather than taking the perhaps more expected form of origami figures and the observation that the represented ice sculptures seem to have been put together from a number of smaller ice blocks rather than being carved out of a single larger ice block (which seems to suggest that the represented ice sculptures should be understood as being fairly large, despite the size of the sculptures not being specified in either the original or the "translated" prompts). In any case, the AI-generated images of various kinds of three-dimensional aesthetic objects created here arguably demonstrate more clearly than those of largely two-dimensional pictorial forms a basic principle that would seem to have governed a substantial part

Figure 2.2 AI-generated images of a crayon drawing (with three-dimensional crayons), a bronze sculpture, a wooden sculpture, a paper sculpture, an ice sculpture, and a cloud sculpture of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

of the processes of aesthetically foregrounded remediation that DALL·E 3 afforded its users in August 2024, namely a "photorealistic" representation of the respective altermedial form that is primarily remediated. At first glance, then, DALL·E 3 seemed to reinforce the distinction between aesthetic form and representational content, with the mediality and materiality of the primary object of remediation providing the opaque, hypermediacy-oriented representational content (with its own nondigital "representational layer") of an AI-generated image that in turn represents in a transparent, immediacy-oriented aesthetic form (with a decidedly digital "representational layer").[15]

"Photorealism" is a tricky concept,[16] though, and while the AI-generated images of line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, woven tapestries, bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and cloud sculptures of galloping horses that I asked ChatGPT 4o to create do not seem to exhibit any particularly foregrounded markers of the mediality and materiality of photography[17] that would move their aesthetic form from transparent immediacy to opaque hypermediacy (which, incidentally, also did not change when I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create "pictures" of the respective medial representation of a galloping horse), it was of course entirely within DALL·E 3's range to add precisely such markers to the AI-generated images to be created. In line with my focus on "simple prompts," I thus asked ChatGPT 4o to create not just photographs but *old* photographs of galloping horses and while the "translations" of that prompt oscillated between variations of "a sepia-toned, vintage look," on the one hand, and "a vintage black-and-white style," on the other, the resulting AI-generated images mostly still employed sepia tones as well as various other conventionalized markers of the mediality and materiality of supposedly old photographs that included a dark vignette, noticeable grain, spots of discoloration, crinckles, creases, and other indices of damaged paper. Since the AI-generated images of old photographs of galloping horses also yet again seemed to collapse the distinction between the remediating and the remediated "representational layer," I then prompted ChatGPT 4o to create old photographs of all of the previously prompted media forms, expecting that the resulting AI-generated images would "add" the notably opaque, hypermediacy-oriented characteristics that DALL·E 3 "imagined" old photographs to possess to the largely transparent, immediacy-oriented representations of line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, woven tapestries, bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and cloud sculptures of galloping horses previously created. Interestingly, though, this is not quite what happened, with the AI-generated images instead commonly exhibiting what I would describe as "representational bleed" between the second-order "representational layer" of the old photograph and the third-order "representational layer" of the line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, woven tapestries, bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and cloud sculptures (see Figures 2.3 and 2.4).[18]

Figure 2.3 AI-generated images of an old photograph of a galloping horse and old photographs of a line drawing, a crayon drawing, a watercolor painting, an oil painting, and a stained-glass window of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

Figure 2.4 AI-generated images of old photographs of a woven tapestry, a bronze sculpture, a wooden sculpture, a paper sculpture, an ice sculpture, and a cloud sculpture of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

Put in a nutshell, the AI-generated images supposedly representing old photographs of two-dimensional pictorial forms tended to shift the characteristics associated with the "old" materiality from the second-order "representational layer" of the old photograph to the third-order "representational layer" of the respective two-dimensional pictorial form, including spots of discoloration in the area of the galloping horses' front legs as well as crinckles, creases, and other indices of damaged paper. Sometimes, these AI-generated images also included surfaces on which the "old" pictures of the galloping horses were positioned and the AI-generated images supposedly representing old photographs of crayon drawings in particular were recognizable as "photorealistic" representations of still strikingly colorful crayon drawings on what looked like extensively "stained" paper. While the AI-generated images supposedly representing old photographs of woven tapestries of galloping horses also included some degree of three-dimensionality in their "photorealistic" representation of notably creased woven tapestries, the manifestations of "representational bleed" were rather more varied when I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create AI-generated images of old photographs of bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and cloud sculptures of galloping horses, with some of the resulting AI-generated images separating the second-order "representational layer" of the old photograph and the third-order "representational layer" of the sculpture in question, while others multiplied the "representational layers" further (when, for example, the prompt "[c]reate an old photograph of a bronze sculpture of a galloping horse" resulted in an AI-generated image representing an old photograph *of an old photograph* of a bronze sculpture of a galloping horse) or otherwise manifesting "representational bleed" (when, for example, the prompt "[c]reate an old photograph of a paper sculpture of a galloping horse" resulted in an AI-generated image transparently representing a sepia-colored paper sculpture of a galloping horse in front of a sheet of "stained" paper). Even if the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital was a salient part of the "default" postdigital aesthetic forms that DALL·E 3 afforded its users, then, the underlying model still struggled quite a bit with more complex arrangements of "representational layers."

The Aesthetic Intensification of the Digital in AI-Generated Images

As noted above, however, the processes of remediation that AI image generators afford their users are certainly not limited to the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital, but also entail the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital. On the one hand, an argument may well be made that at least some AI-generated images foreground their own aesthetic

form *as* AI-generated images, which might include not only recognizable color combinations that vary the transmedially established orange/teal color scheme (rather than reinforcing the equation of "the digital" with the color blue that seems to have been dominant during the 1990s) but also, for example, emerging aesthetic conventions such as the one that Pooker recently abbreviated as "fluffy glamour glow" (cited in Meyer 2023a, n.pag.).[19] On the other hand, AI-generated images can of course also remediate the "pixelated" graphics and "glitches" that I have identified as by-now highly conventionalized transmedial markers of a postdigital aesthetics that foregrounds the mediality and materiality of the digital. Indeed, while I am happy to accept that at least some AI-generated images may exhibit a tendency toward "fluffy glamour glow," with Midjourney's apparent "specialization" in that area even having led to a brief period of a "midjourneyfication" (Meyer 2023a, n.pag.) of DALL·E 2, and while I would also argue that the process of prompting ChatGPT 4o (or any of the other AI image generators of the current generation) to create AI-generated images may in and of itself contribute to an aesthetic intensification of the digital, the aforementioned AI-generated images of galloping horses that I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create in August 2024 still clearly exemplified the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital rather than the aesthetic intensification of the digital. That said, further prompts requesting that ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a digital photograph of a galloping horse" resulted in AI-generated images of what I would perhaps describe as unusually "shiny" horses, while prompts requesting that ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a digital picture of a galloping horse" resulted in AI-generated images of high-resolution "digital art," at least some of which also exhibited the aforementioned orange/teal color scheme.

No less interestingly, prompts requesting that ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a pixelated picture of a galloping horse" or "[c]reate a pixelated photograph of a galloping horse" were consistently translated into long-form prompts containing descriptors such as a "retro, 8-bit style," "a limited color palette," "blocky, square pixels," and even "the classic aesthetics of early video games," which resulted in AI-generated images that might also be described as remediating recent "pixel art" videogames, while not foregrounding characteristics associated with photographs in either case. The resultant AI-generated images could still be located in the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital, but prompting ChatGPT 4o to create "pixelated" line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses also resulted in AI-generated images that would inconsistently locate the "pixels" in question across "representational layers" (see Figure 2.5). More specifically, prompts requesting ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a pixelated line drawing of a galloping horse" or "[c]reate a pixelated oil painting of a galloping horse" for the most part resulted in AI-generated images similar to those created by prompts requesting ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a pixelated picture of a galloping horse" or "[c]reate a pixelated photograph of a galloping horse," while prompts requesting ChatGPT 4o create

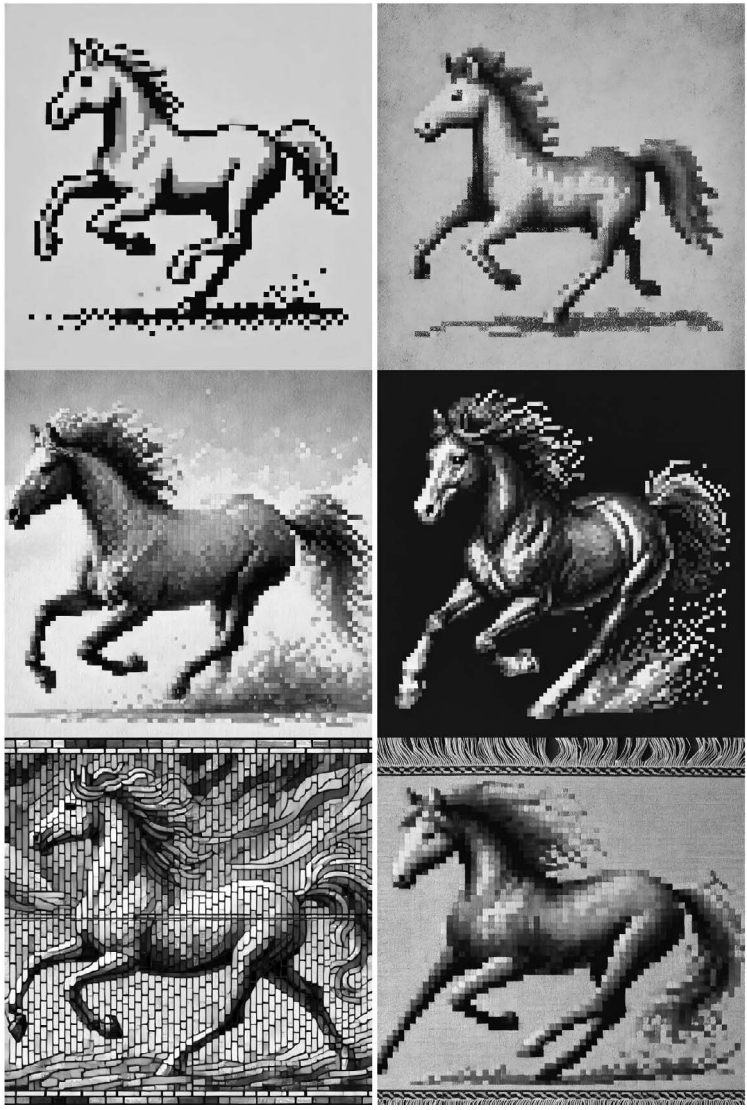

Figure 2.5 AI-generated images of a "pixelated" line drawing, crayon drawing, watercolor painting, oil painting, stained-glass window, and woven tapestry of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

"pixelated" crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses for the most part resulted in AI-generated images transparently representing crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries that included "pixels" as part of their remediated mediality and materiality, thus simulating an aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital on the second-order "representational layer," while still manifesting an aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital on the first-order "representational layer" of the AI-generated image itself. The "output" generated by DALL·E 3 also did not notably change when I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create AI-generated images of "pixelated pictures" of line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses instead, yet again demonstrating that the underlying model may have been able to create "pixelation," but still struggled with more complex arrangements of "representational layers."

Perhaps not coincidentally, the "representational bleed" arising from this was yet again demonstrated with particular clarity by AI-generated images that resulted from the prompts "[c]reate a pixelated crayon drawing of a galloping horse" and "[c]reate a pixelated picture of a crayon drawing of a galloping horse," since many of them once more "photorealistically" represented varying numbers of three-dimensional crayons positioned on top of the drawing, while still not being able to successfully "parse" the distinction between a "pixelated" crayon drawing and a "pixelated" *picture* of a crayon drawing in that they limited the "drawn pixels" entirely to the two-dimensional crayon drawings (see Figure 2.6). Indeed, while prompting ChatGPT 4o to create "pixelated" bronze sculptures, wooden sculptures, paper sculptures, ice sculptures, and cloud sculptures of galloping horses consistently resulted in AI-generated images "photorealistically" representing sculptures of "pixelated" galloping horses made from the respective material, prompting ChatGPT 4o to create "pixelated pictures" of the sculptures in question resulted in an inconsistent set of AI-generated images, some of which seemingly locating the "pixelation" on the first-order "representational layer" of the respective AI-generated image, while others still offered "photorealistic" representations of sculptures of "pixelated" galloping horses (though we might still distinguish between the first-order "representational layer" of the AI-generated images, the second-order "representational layer" of the "pixelation," and the third-order "representational layer" of the sculptures at least in the former case). So, while it was certainly possible to use ChatGPT 4o in order to create AI-generated images of "pixelated" pictures of galloping horses that could clearly be located in the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital, the "promptological" results I presented thus far would suggest that those AI-generated images were perhaps further removed from the "default" postdigital aesthetic forms that DALL·E 3 afforded its users than AI-generated images that could be located in the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital.

Figure 2.6 AI-generated images of a "pixelated" crayon drawing (with three-dimensional crayons), bronze sculpture, wooden sculpture, paper sculpture, ice sculpture, and cloud sculpture of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

Indeed, this was further confirmed when I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create AI-generated images of "glitched" pictures, with prompts requesting that ChatGPT 4o "[c]reate a glitched picture of a galloping horse" or "[c]reate a glitched photograph of a galloping horse" consistently resulting in AI-generated images of galloping horses that included a substantial number of horizontally aligned rectangular "glitches" primarily behind the horses, which certainly were recognizable as broadly referring to the corruption artifacts that may manifest themselves in digital images, but whose specific combination of patterns and colors at the same time appeared perhaps closer to nondigital illustration, certain screen printing techniques, or even distorted (magnetic) video tape and (terrestrial) television images. As one would have expected, prompting ChatGPT 4o to create "glitched" line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses resulted in AI-generated images that likewise included horizontally aligned rectangular "glitches" primarily behind the horses, occasionally also integrating those "glitches" into the materiality and mediality of the remediated "representational layer" of the respective nondigital pictorial form (see Figure 2.7). More importantly, though, the output thus generated also yet again did not change in any notable way when I prompted ChatGPT 4o to create "glitched pictures" of line drawings, crayon drawings, watercolor paintings, oil paintings, stained-glass windows, and woven tapestries of galloping horses instead. Once more, the AI-generated images that resulted from the prompts "[c]reate a glitched crayon drawing of a galloping horse" and "[c]reate a glitched picture of a crayon drawing of a galloping horse" are particularly noteworthy here, since they not only seemed to locate the "glitches" largely on the "representational layer" of the respective crayon drawing (rather than on the "representational layer" of the AI-generated image or a separate "representational layer" in between the two[20]) but also yet again often included a "photorealistic" representation of three-dimensional crayons positioned on top of the respective crayon drawing (which in some cases were blended with the glitches to some extent, but could be observed in the results of both versions of the prompt). So, while the prompts requesting "pixelation" overall seemed to result in quite a few AI-generated images that prioritized locating that "pixelation" on the remediated "representational layer" of the pictorial and sculptural forms, the AI-generated images resulting from the prompts requesting "glitches" still exhibited an overall tendency to locate the "glitches" in question not only primarily behind the horses but also on an additional "representational layer" in between the AI-generated images and the pictorial and sculptural forms, with the prompts requesting "glitched" bronze, wooden, paper, ice, and cloud sculptures of galloping horses as well as those requesting "glitched pictures" of these sculptures in particular only very rarely resulting in AI-generated images representing "glitches" that could be located on the remediated "representational layer" of the sculptures themselves (see Figure 2.8).[21]

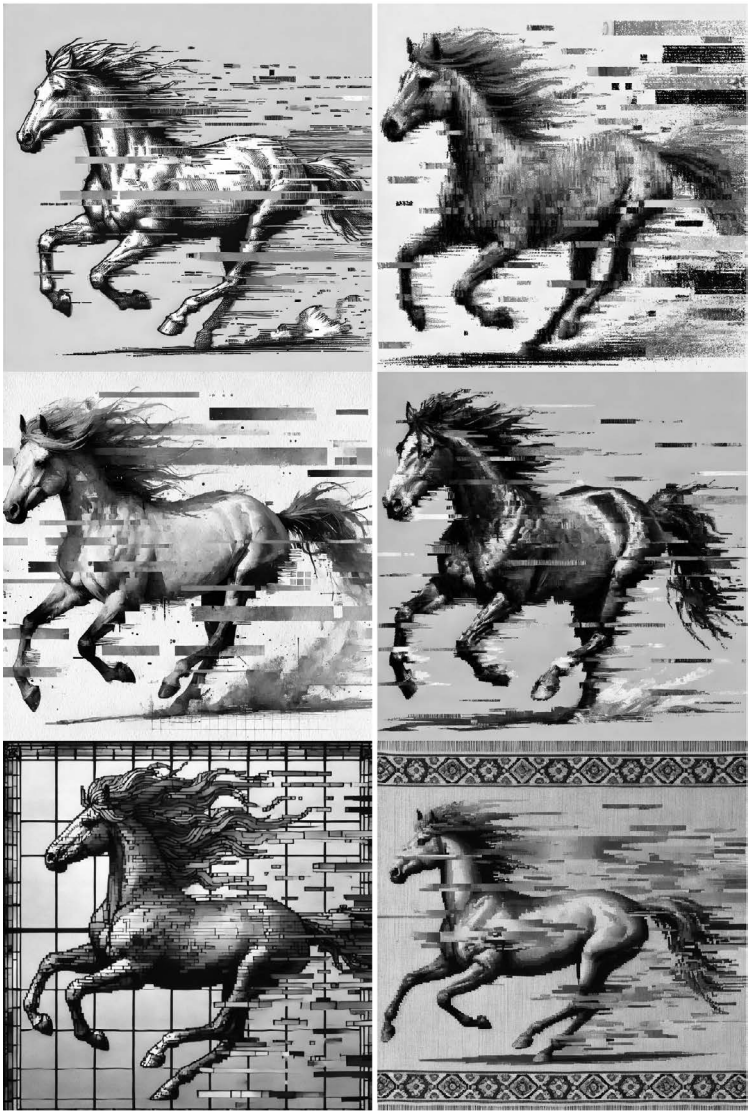

Figure 2.7 AI-generated images of a "glitched" line drawing, crayon drawing, watercolor painting, oil painting, stained-glass window, and woven tapestry of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

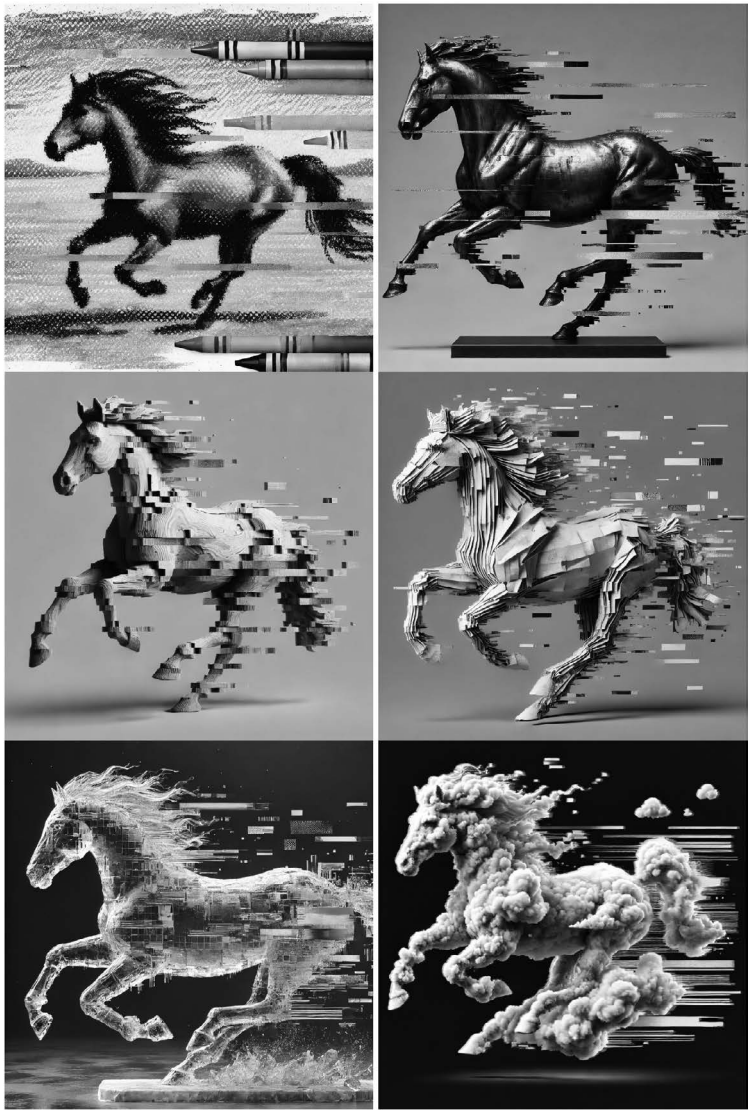

Figure 2.8 AI-generated images of a "glitched" crayon drawing (with three-dimensional crayons), bronze sculpture, wooden sculpture, paper sculpture, ice sculpture, and cloud sculpture of a galloping horse (created with ChatGPT 4o/DALL·E 3 in August 2024).

Conclusion

Evidently, the "promptological" approach I employed in utilizing ChatGPT 4o to create AI-generated images that provide a "window" through which we may "catch a glimpse" of how certain medium-specific aesthetic forms are "culturally imagined" within DALL·E 3's multimodal dataset, which in turn can be seen as a material manifestation of at least a part of our cultural imaginary, remains heuristic and quantitatively limited,[22] but I would maintain that even the very preliminary "experimental close-readings" (Offert 2023, 120) presented here have led to some interesting insights about the postdigital aesthetics of AI-generated images. In terms of the "default" postdigital aesthetic forms that DALL·E 3 afforded its users in August 2024, the preliminary observation that AI-generated images whose postdigital aesthetics could be located in the domain that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital seemed to be more easily created and exhibited greater diversity than the AI-generated images whose postdigital aesthetics could be located in the domain I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital did seem mildly surprising, at least within the theoretical framework of postdigital aesthetics that I have initially sketched, and particularly against the background that the aesthetic intensification of the digital in terms of "pixelated" graphics and manufactured "glitches" is a by now heavily conventionalized part of videogame culture. No less interesting, however, was the observation that the AI-generated images created by DALL·E 3 certainly *can* operate with different "representational layers" (which may include various "representational layers" that "re-represent," "re-re-represent," or even "re-re-re-represent" elements of the representational content of the AI-generated image that constitutes the first-order "representational layer"), but that the underlying model seems to struggle significantly when prompted to precisely locate different elements within more complex arrangements of "representational layers," leading to various kinds of "representational bleed." Admittedly, what was presented in this chapter may well have been a mere "snapshot" of the rapidly developing representational capabilities of AI image generators (not least since "text-to-3D," "text-to-music," and "text-to-video" generators have already arrived), but I would consider it a theoretically interesting "snapshot" nevertheless.

Acknowledgments

Work on this chapter was supported by a Feodor Lynen Research Fellowship for Experienced Researchers from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (2023–2025), which funded several extended research stays at the Zurich Aesthetics Lab, University of Zurich, Switzerland.

Notes

1 Offert distinguishes between four historical periods that have led to the current ubiquity of diffusion-based AI image generators, namely "The Beginnings (2012–2015) […] of the current 'AI summer'" (2022, n.pag.) and the emergence of generative adversial nets (GANs); "Five Years of GANs (2015–2020)," during which the "power of the transformer architecture" (Offert 2022, n.pag.) was demonstrated; "The Age of Transformers (2020–2022)" that "initiat[ed] a move away from GANs" and toward "'[m]ultimodal' deep learning" (Offert 2022, n.pag.); and the current situation of "AI as Photoshop (2022–today)," the beginning of which Offert sees as coinciding with "the release of Stable Diffusion" (2022, n.pag.). Note, however, that OpenAI has moved from DALL·E 3's diffusion-based image generation to native GPT-4o image generation within an autoregressive architecture in March 2025 (see, e.g., OpenAI 2025; Robison 2025). While this shift has occurred after the present chapter and the book it is a part of was sent to production, at least some of the observations made in the following would still seem likely to apply to images generated natively within GPT-4o. On the broader historical context of "machine vision," see also, e.g., Dobson 2023; Parikka 2023; Walker Rettberg 2023.

2 While I usually prefer to talk about "pictures" rather than "images" (see, e.g., Thon 2016; 2017), and while the terms "digital picture" and "digital image" are often used interchangeably (see, e.g., Lacković 2020; Pauliks 2020), I will follow the established usage and talk about "AI-generated images" here. However, to the extent that "pictures" can be conceptualized as "images embodied in media" (Belting 2011, 11) and we can thus distinguish "between visual image and material picture" (Luna 2019, 49), I am *not* denying the possibility of digital pictures.

3 For a considerably more detailed explication of the theoretical foundations of my conceptualization of (the salient domains of) postdigital aesthetics that includes extended discussions not only of different conceptualizations of the postdigital but also of different conceptualizations of aesthetics (in between "artistics" and "aisthetics") and that the following two sections present an abbreviated version of, see Thon 2025. For a more broadly transmedial discussion of postdigital aesthetics (in German), see Thon 2026/forthcoming.

4 This is worth emphasizing not only because (analytic) philosophical aesthetics has kept rather busy trying to "define" art during the second half of the 20th century (see, e.g., the extensive survey in Davies 1991) but also because there is quite a bit of discussion around the question of "AI artworks" (see, e.g., Wojtkiewicz 2023). The latter in particular may well address some interesting theoretical issues, but the "nonnormative" conceptualization of aesthetics proposed here simply brackets the question if AI-generated images can be "art."

5 In stating that the term "aesthetic form" here refers to the external *Gestalt* of medial artifacts (or other aesthetic objects) that is accessible to perception, I do not mean to suggest that the aesthetic form of such artifacts (or objects) should necessarily be understood as a "singular" *Gestalt*, let alone that it cannot be analyzed more precisely in terms of its constitutive components and their interrelations (see also Bajohr 2021 for a discussion of *Gestalt* theory in the context of AI-generated images). While I cannot unpack this in any more detail here, I also want to highlight not only the importance of the "(formal) relation between form and content" (Devereaux 1998, 245), which goes well beyond the normative question of "the ability [of works of art; JNT] to satisfy us in virtue of the appropriateness of their forms to their contents" (Eldridge 1985, 315), but also the notion that the representational content of a medial artifact that fulfills representational functions (and thus can be described as a medial representation) always has a "form" of its own (see also the brief remarks on

"representationalism" in note 18). Admittedly, this might seem to unnecessarily complicate the established distinction between (aesthetic) form and (representational) content, and there would be quite a bit more to say on how (or to what extent) the representational content of a medial representation can also be said to have an external *Gestalt* that is accessible to perception, but in any case it is this notion (that the representational content of medial representations always has a "form" of its own) that I refer to when I discuss the "form of the content" of AI-generated images in the following.

6 Admittedly, the following analysis of AI-generated images merely hints at a systematic inclusion of aesthetic production practices, but the area of AI image generators is indeed quite interesting here. Put in a nutshell, I would generally argue that an effective way of including aesthetic practices in the analysis of a range of different media forms consists of engaging with various "paratexts" in the sense of an expanded conceptualization of the term that has become influential in film and television studies (see, e.g., Gray 2010), game studies (see, e.g., Švelch 2020), and beyond (see, e.g., Brookey and Gray 2017). In the context of AI-generated images, such paratexts would not only include research papers and other technical or PR communication from the developers (see, e.g., Ramesh et al. 2021; 2022) but also a range of more or less systematic reflections about how AI image generators can be "made to" create the desired images in the context of what can be described as "prompt design" or "prompt engineering" (see, e.g., dallery.gallery 2022; Khan 2024; as well as note 22).

7 A "glitch" can here be understood as an "(actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error" (Menkman 2011, 9), though the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital should not be conflated with "glitches," as it not only includes broader aesthetic strategies that evoke the materiality of digital media forms such as "pixel art" or "8-bit sound," which can prominently be observed in the area of current videogames (see, e.g., Beil 2011; Braguinski 2018; Juul 2019), but also excludes nondigital "glitches" (see, e.g., Betancourt 2017, 49–69, on the latter).

8 The domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the digital to the nondigital thus ranges from the ubiquitous use of "pixel patterns" in fashion and architecture via "glitch sculptures" by artists such as Ferruccio Laviani or Kohei Nawa to various other artistic (or, rather, aesthetic) practices involving the integration of digital technology and aesthetic forms that are conventionally recognized as digital into nondigital physical spaces. At first glance, this domain of postdigital aesthetics may not be particularly relevant for AI-generated images, but we can of course also find various examples of recognizably "AI-generated" aesthetic forms being transferred to a nondigital context (including art projects such as Nils Pooker's "repaintings" of AI-generated images [see Pooker no year]).

9 There is quite a bit of research exploring the domain of postdigital aesthetics that I would describe as the aesthetic transfer from the nondigital to the digital, but the focus here tends to be on what could be described as *intra*medial references of the current version of a (digital) media form to its (nondigital) precursors (see, e.g., Baschiera and Caoduro 2015; Caoduro 2014; Church 2015; Schrey 2015), whereas I would explicitly include what Rajewsky describes as *inter*medial references that generate a "perceptible medial difference" (2005, 62) between the media form *to which* and the media form *in which* reference is made (though this can be complicated by a multiplication of "representational layers"; see note 20) and that thereby arguably foreground both the mediality of the former and that of the latter (though this applies to the aforementioned *intra*medial references across the digital/

nondigital divide as well). See also the more detailed discussion of "remediation" *sensu* Bolter and Grusin (1999) in the next section and the explanation of "transmaterialization" *sensu* Schröter (2019; 2023) in note 16.

10 The focus of my broader interest in postdigital aesthetics is indeed not merely on medial artifacts but rather on the kind of medial artifacts that fulfill representational functions and can therefore be described as (external) medial representations (distinguishing them from internal mental representations). The question how medial representations represent what they represent (i.e., their representational content) is yet again quite complex. Walton, for example, treats (human-made and thus artifactual) representations as "props in games of make-believe" (1990, 12), within which their primary function is to mandate the imagining of "fictional truths" (1990, 35) following certain "principles of generation" (1990, 38). Broadly similar conceptualizations of narrative representations (as a specific kind of medial representations) are available within transmedial narratology, though those tend to more directly connect their accounts of how recipients comprehend narrative representations to cognitive theory (see, e.g., Herman 2009; Ryan 2006; as well as Thon 2016; 2017). However, as important as these comprehensive theories of representation are for understanding medial and, indeed, narrative representations, in the context of this chapter I am mainly interested in pictorial forms of "representational correspondence" (Currie 2010, 59) as well as in the related question of the extent to which AI image generators are able to distinguish between different "representational layers" within the AI-generated images they create (see also note 18, note 20, and note 21).

11 Indeed, the relation between transparency and opacity has received considerable attention in philosophical aesthetics, semiotics, and media theory well beyond Bolter and Grusin's (1999) distinction between the logic of (transparent) immediacy and the logic of (opaque) hypermediacy, the interplay of which characterizes all processes of remediation or indeed "transmaterialization" (see Schröter 2019; 2023; as well as Note 16). Most importantly, this includes long-standing discussions around the supposed transparency of photographic (and other) pictures (see, e.g., Gaut 2008; Lopes 1996; Walton 1984; Wollheim 1968) as well as various attempts to conceptualize opacity in the context of an "aesthetics of the surface" (see, e.g., Bruno 2014; Rathe 2020; Shusterman 2002; and the contributions in Rautzenberg and Wolfsteiner 2010).

12 I have chosen DALL·E for this experiment because it was arguably the most popular and the most easily accessible of the AI image generators that were available in the summer of 2024. Yet, even if I would consider it quite likely that at least some of the observations I have made based on the images of galloping horses that I have created with DALL·E 2 and DALL·E 3 will also apply to other AI image generators such as Midjourney and Stable Diffusion or indeed ImageFX, FLUX.1, and Janus-Pro-7B, it seems equally clear that the way in which different AI image generators (and their users) may implement a decidedly postdigital aesthetics will differ in some at least potentially interesting ways. That said, such differences can also be observed within the rapid development cycles of each of the aforementioned AI image generators (say, between DALL·E 2 and DALL·E 3 as well as between ChatGPT 4o employing DALL·E 3's diffusion-based image generation and GPT-4o's native autoregressive image generation, respectively) and while I readily acknowledge the resulting synchronic as well as diachronic complexity of AI aesthetics, it would go significantly beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a comparative analysis of this complexity.

13 In claiming that DALL·E has a fairly stable "notion" of what a galloping horse might look like, I am, of course, speaking metaphorically. What I mean by this is that the AI-generated images of galloping horses created were notably stable in terms of the form of the representational content "galloping horse," with the main

variation being whether the galloping horses in question were represented from the right-hand side or the left-hand side, with some AI-generated images representing the galloping horses a little more from the front and others more directly from either the right-hand side or the left-hand side, but no AI-generated images representing a galloping horse (directly) from the front or the back. There were also very few major "representational" mistakes such as a derivation from the expected number of legs or other elements of a horse's "default" anatomy. Needless to say, representations of galloping horses have a long history that includes what we would now consider less realistic forms such as the "flying gallop" (see Reinach 1925; as well as, e.g., Edgerton 1936; Jaffe and Colombardo 2014) as well as more realistic forms that have become particularly popularized by Muybridge's famous series of photographs (see, e.g., Cresswell and Ott 2022; Leslie 2013; Prodger 2003) and are also by far the most common form within the small corpus of AI-generated images analyzed in the present chapter. Racist or otherwise biased representations certainly also play a role here (see, e.g., Miltner 2024; Offert and Phan 2024; Salvaggio 2023), but do so perhaps less saliently than they would have if I had chosen, say, "running humans" (whom Muybridge has of course also photographed) as the core representational content for the AI-generated images created as part of my little experiment. In any case, the comparatively stable form of the representational content "galloping horse" could also be interrogated further, not least in terms of the (limited range of) horse breeds DALL·E 3 tends to represent here.

14 A similar process may have been used in earlier versions of DALL·E (see also, once more, Offert and Phan on "tacking-on gendered or racialized keywords to some […] prompts" as a likely "debiasing technique" [2024, 51] for DALL·E 2), but it was at least made more explicit with the implementation of DALL·E 3 into ChatGPT. Even then, however, it required a certain amount of effort for a user to notice the "translation," since the "translated" prompt was only shown once the user had clicked on the AI-generated image and then clicked on a small icon of an "i" contained in a circle. In any case, the observation that users' prompts are "translated" by AI image generators does, of course, also apply more broadly in terms of how an AI-generated image will, in almost all cases, offer more details than the prompt that was used to generate it. As Manovich notes, an AI image generator such as DALL·E 3, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion nearly always "'amplifies' your short phrase (e.g., a prompt), generating nuances, details, atmospheres, meanings, associations, and moods you did not specify—and often would never even imagine" (2022, n.pag.; see also Manovich and Arielli 2024, 81–82, for some more remarks on the notion of "media translation" in the context of generative AI).

15 Even if I consider the "representational layer" of AI-generated images to be decidedly digital, I am not suggesting that we necessarily need to attribute a postdigital aesthetics located in the domain that I would describe as the aesthetic intensification of the digital to the AI-generated images in question. It certainly is possible to argue that (at least some of) the aesthetic practices that lead to the creation of AI-generated images can in and of themselves be seen as exemplifying the aesthetic intensification of the digital (see note 19), but just as the resulting AI-generated images may be "photorealistic" without having to exhibit foregrounded markers of the mediality and materiality of photography (see note 17), so are they "decidedly digital" without having to exhibit foregrounded markers of the mediality and materiality of digital pictures. Put in a nutshell, an AI-generated image that takes the material form of a digital picture might be considered "aesthetically agnostic" with regard to the digital/nondigital divide, but that does not make it any less of a digital picture (see note 2).

16 As Ervik rightly notes, "photorealism" can generally be understood as "a media technological and stylistic signifier (which CGI also often strives towards)" (Ervik 2023, 47; see also, e.g., Hoelzl and Marie 2015; Mitchell 1992; Prince 2019),

but in the context of AI image generators, "the 'photographic' seems to be just another 'style', an aesthetic, a certain 'look', not a privileged mode of indexical access to the world" (Meyer 2023b, 108). When applied to AI-generated images, the concept of "photorealism" thus becomes merely a "stylistic signifier" (Ervik 2023, 47), a simulation of "visual rather than optical aspects of the photographic" (Meyer 2023b, 108). However, see also the aforementioned discussion of "transmaterialization" by Schröter, who explicitly includes the materiality of analog photography in the scope of his considerations when he emphasizes digital media technologies' capability to "produce[] forms that are not only transmedial, but transmaterial," elaborating that, "while transmedial forms […] cannot be attributed to any medium in particular, transmaterial forms emphatically refer to the respective specific materiality […] of a medium, but in a different context" (2023, 5; see also Schröter 2019 for the initial English-language version of this conceptualization of "transmateriality," which includes additional relevant reflections on "media aesthetics").

17 My point here is not that the AI-generated images created by DALL·E 3 do not include *any* markers of the mediality and materiality of photography, but that these markers are not *foregrounded*. Put in a nutshell, the current cultural ubiquity of broadly "photorealistic" digital images and the prevalence of what could be described as the "immediacy-oriented realism" (Wilde 2023, 17) of AI-generated images' "photorealistic style" (Meyer 2023b, 108) has led to the foregrounding of the mediality and materiality of photography requiring additional markers.

18 See also, once more, Thon 2016, 46–56; 2025 for a discussion of the more specific narratological terminology that is available for analyzing what I here describe as "representational layers"; as well as, e.g., Eggington 2001; Hanson 2004; Montola 2010; Waern 2011 for a selection of previous usages of "bleed" in the context of theater and film, transmedia storytelling, live-action role playing games, and videogames, respectively. I prefer the general terms "representational layers" and "representational bleed" to more specialized narratological terms such as "diegetic levels" or "metalepsis" (see Thon 2016, 64–66; as well as, e.g., Ryan 2006, 204–230; Thoss 2015; Wolf 2005) here because it would seem to be a bit of a stretch to describe the AI-generated images of galloping horses that the present chapter focuses on as narrative forms (but see also, e.g., Ryan 2006, 3–30; Thon 2016, 26–30, on broad prototypical conceptualizations of narrative representation that may well include still images of galloping horses, whether AI-generated or not). Not coincidentally, I would maintain that neither distinguishing between medial representations and what these representations represent nor distinguishing between different "layers" of the latter must amount to what is sometimes denounced as "representationalism" (see, e.g., Barad 2007; Grusin 2015) in that the underlying account of representation may well be less simple than "the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent" (Barad 2007, 46; see also, yet again, Thon 2016, 71–122; 2017 for some further discussion).

19 That said, it is worth noting not only that these aesthetic conventions are not necessarily very long-lived but also that Pooker (no year) explicitly connects the "fluffy glamour glow" of AI-generated images to nondigital aesthetic traditions in the context of portrait photography and landscape paintings. It is also yet again worth highlighting the differences between DALL·E and Midjourney here, with the latter employing distinct stages of image generation that, according to Pooker, make the process of the image creation a salient part of the reception process, thus "fulfill[ing] the promises of anticipation as an independent aesthetic experience, comparable to the pictorial genesis of polaroid pictures or the development of analogue photographs in the dark room" (no year, n.pag.; my translation), which at least hints at a rather fundamental aesthetic intensification of the digital.

20 Despite having merely distinguished between a remediating (first-order) "representational layer" (of the AI-generated image) and a remediated (second-order) "representational layer" (of the represented pictorial or sculptural form) in those cases that did not seem to establish a separate "representational layer" in between, I would consider a distinction between the first-order "representational layer" of the AI-generated image, the "re-represented" second-order "representational layer" of (for example) an "old" photograph, a "pixelated" digital image, or a "glitched" digital image, and the "re-re-represented" third-order "representational layer" of the medial representation that the second-order "representational layer" represents theoretically plausible even in those cases where two or more of these layers appear to be collapsed.

21 Let me also stress that I consider DALL·E 3's difficulties in "tracking" distinguishable "representational layers" to be theoretically interesting in terms of the postdigital aesthetics of AI-generated images, but also fully expect that they will be short-lived. Even apart from the fact that more extensive "prompt design" or "prompt engineering" may well have reduced the "representational bleed" in the AI-generated images created, it would also seem likely that the current interest in "text-to-3D" will swiftly improve the "3D precision" of AI image generators as well. (Although, when I re-entered the previously used prompts during a quick additional probe of ChatGPT 4o in February 2025, the resulting AI-generated images did not suggest that DALL·E 3's ability to "track" different "representational layers" had significantly improved. As noted above [see note 1], I was not able to systematically compare the results of DALL·E 3's diffusion-based image generation to those of GPT-4o's native autoregressive image generation before this chapter and the book it is a part of was sent to production, but would certainly expect that at least some of my observations regarding the postdigital aesthetics of AI-generated images will also apply to images generated natively within GPT-4o.)

22 This would seem to be in line with Bajohr's remarks that "the humanities […] could make useful contributions without necessarily taking the form of the more computer science–focused digital humanities" in that "they could work in a phenomenon-oriented way and devote themselves to the artifacts that the model outputs as boundary objects between human and machine" (2023, 67). That said, the rise of the digital humanities and the increasingly broad availability of computational methods has of course affected not only primarily language-oriented disciplines such as literary studies or history but also primarily image-oriented disciplines such as media studies or art history (see, e.g., the contributions in Brown 2020; Sayers 2018). Hence, it will come as no surprise that various scholars also pursue more quantitative approaches to (the aesthetics of) AI-generated images (see, e.g., Bianchi et al. 2023; Somepalli et al. 2022), but while a quantative approach may well tell us more about the "possibility space" of specific AI image generators at specific points in time, the aforementioned diachronic as well as synchronic complexity of AI aesthetics makes the decidedly heuristic and qualitative approach I have presented here seem like the more appropriate choice for exploring the postdigital aesthetics of AI-generated images (at least for now). Beyond increasing the number of AI-generated images in the corpus, it would also seem promising to expand the analysis to what could be described as the paratexts of AI image generators (see note 6), with "prompt design" or "prompt engineering" guides in particular appearing to be well-suited for a paratextual analysis aiming to reconstruct in more detail not just the "possibility space" of AI image generators but also the extent to which certain aesthetic practices surrounding them have already been conventionalized (a very large number of such guides now exists, but see, once more, the influential dallery.gallery 2022; as well as the Wiley-published Khan 2024).

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3 Aesthetic Protocols of Popular AI Art

Lotte Philipsen

Introduction

Joanna Zylinska's book *AI Art* from 2020 includes a chapter titled "Generative AI Art as Candy Crush," in which some of the artworks are described as "[p]art Dali, part manga, part screensaver art," and "kitsch images" (Zylinska 2020, 80). In 2020 only few dedicated artists worked with AI, but since then the launching of easily accessible interfaces for AI image generators (like Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, and DALL·E) has enabled everyone to become an artist in the broad sense of the word—"[s]imply enter a prompt, pick a style, and watch your words transform into beautiful art" (Canva 2025, n.pag.), as one site advertises. Consequently, a new field of what this chapter describes as "popular AI art" has emerged and evolved into a very widespread phenomenon. DeviantArt—a site for digital artworks, which has come to be more and more dominated by AI imagery since 2022—claims to have "over 90 million registered members worldwide, and host over 550 million pieces of art on the platform" (DeviantArt 2024, n.pag.). Even though the vast majority of popular AI art is primarily created by amateurs, bears very little resemblance to professional contemporary art, differs from AI art made by professional artists, is not part of the established fine art institutional framework, is of little or no commercial value, and is disregarded as "melodramatic [kitsch, which] shows only stereotypes, and lacks originality" (Manovich 2023, n.pag.), the magnitude of this new art practice alone makes it a relevant phenomenon of study from an art historical point of view.

Guided by this motivation, the chapter analyses the aesthetic foundations of popular AI art. My investigation of the aesthetic structures of popular AI art will be less concerned with the final visual aesthetic characteristics (*aisthesis*), in terms of motives, styles, etc., and focus instead on the aesthetics underpinning the creating of works (*poiesis*). The chapter aims neither to endorse nor criticize popular AI art but to provide a nuanced understanding of the aesthetics of this new artistic practice, which reshuffles some of the conventional roles and practices in art creation and exhibition.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-3

Aesthetic Protocols

The concept of "protocol" will serve as a lens for analyzing these aspects of popular AI art. Technically, protocols enable infrastructural connections on the internet, but—as pointed out by Alexander Galloway—historically, protocol "referred to any type of correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions" and is "a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment" (Galloway 2004, 7). Protocols have aesthetic implications in the sense that they explicitly, and implicitly, set up frameworks, gateways, and access points for what aesthetic judgments of taste go into creating and evaluating the works. Focusing on protocols' aesthetic (rather than technical) dimensions enables me to analyze the aesthetics of popular AI art by tracing its art historical roots.

Concurring with Galloway's statement that "in order to understand AI we ought to study something like acting or theater" (Kuo and Lee 2024, 48), the following provides a nuanced understanding of the *poiesis* of popular AI art by comparing it to artistic practices established around the 17th-century French art academy, which initiated one of the most elaborated image programs in Western art history. The French art academy is thoroughly researched (see, e.g., Boime 1994; Bryson 1981; Montagu 1994; Pevsner 1973; Ray 2004; Walsh 1999) and, in comparison, popular AI art is more or less a blank page in academia, especially considered from an art theoretical point of view (for instance, the kind of artistic practice referred to as popular AI art in this article is not considered in an extensive *October* questionnaire about AI [see Kuo and Lee 2024] or in a five-trope classification for understanding AI in contemporary art in *Leonardo* [see Salimbeni et al. 2024]). But the aesthetic protocols that governed artistic practice in the French academy share significant similarities with the protocols at work in popular AI art—hence, revisiting the former enables understanding of the latter.

On a very basic level, AI image models are able to generate new, synthetic images from a simple text prompt because they have been trained in advance by "looking at" billions of existing images and learning that, and how, the images relate to specific textual concepts—for example, the model has not only seen a lot of different images of cats, but it has learned that the pixel distributions in these image all correspond to the text "cat" (see Fei-Fei 2015). The images that went into training the model are of relevance here because they define the model's scope of visual imagination—the model's cultural image program in a broader sense (see Salvaggio 2023; Wasielewski 2023). The following is structured around three main sections investigating, respectively: What characterizes popular AI art (compared to other kinds of AI art)? How do artistic practices in popular AI art and the French art academy relate? And, finally, what insights on the aesthetic protocols of popular AI art does this provide?

AI Art: Professional, Festival, and Popular

What this chapter refers to as *popular* AI art is part of a much bigger and heterogeneous field of "AI art" that can be divided into subgenres according to numerous different parameters (demonstrated in writings by, e.g., Denson 2023; Kuo and Lee 2024; McCormack et al. 2024; Salimbeni et al. 2024; Somaini 2022; Zylinska 2020). In order to specify what this chapter refers to as "popular AI art" (PAIA in the following), I will briefly account for some of the distinctions in the broader field of AI art. Research on AI art is carried out from a computer science point of view as well as from a humanities point of view, and from interdisciplinary collaborations in the intersection between the two. Accordingly, some studies are predominately focused on systematic classification and categorization of different kinds of AI art (see, e.g., Salimbeni et al. 2024) or on quantitative analysis of prompt trends in generative AI (GAI) art (see, e.g., McCormack et al. 2024), whereas others offer close readings of concrete works of art and deeper analysis of how specific artists use AI technology aesthetically (see, e.g., Denson 2023) or philosophically (see, e.g., Somaini 2022). On a very general level, I would like to characterize PAIA as differing *institutionally* from two other kinds of AI art that I, for lack of better terms, will call "professional AI art" and "festival AI art."

Professional AI art is a well-established and fully integrated part of the "fine art" scene for contemporary art and is exhibited at museums and biennials for contemporary art. Examples of professional AI artists include (among many others) Anna Ridler, Jon Rafman, Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, Agnieszka Kurant, and Pierre Huyghe, whose works of art are created by use of AI and/or thematically reflect on AI.

What I refer to as "festival AI art" in this chapter are projects that explore techno-aesthetic potentials of AI, and that are presented at festivals such as Ars Electronica (annually in Linz), Transmediale (annually in Berlin), International Symposium of Electronic Art (annually, new city each year), and similar festivals that combine exhibition, conference, workshops, concerts, screenings, etc. Whereas professional AI art follows a traditional institutional mode of displaying singular works of art by named artists, festival AI art is often presented as experimental projects that engage in and collaborate with partners from art-external domains (e.g., computer scientists, biologists, political activists). Accordingly, the creators of festival AI art are often presented as collaborative groups instead of individual artists. Examples of festival AI art include, for instance, activist projects applying AI technology, such as *VFrame* (Harvey 2023; Harvey and LeBrun 2023) exhibited at Ars Electronica in 2023; *Asunder* (Brain et al. 2019) exhibited at Transmediale in 2020; and *Cloud Studies* (Weizman 2019) exhibited at Ars Electronica in 2021.

Whereas the majority of professional and festival AI art is presented in physical exhibition spaces, PAIA spans the thousands—if not millions—of

artworks that are created by use of AI on a daily basis without receiving attention from the media or the established art world. At home in front of the screen (or on the go with a smartphone), millions of people around the world with no artistic or technical background create "art" by text prompting via tools like Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and DALL·E (now GPT-4o), or other AI models, and exhibit their artworks on designated online sites and in designated online communities. As a new art practice, PAIA bears traits of other art and image practices such as, for instance, amateur painting, computer art, and fan art, but in contrast to such affiliated art forms PAIA exists *exclusively* online. Obviously, one can download and/or print a work of PAIA, turning it into a more private or unique image and treating it as something else than PAIA—just like one can circulate a photo of the Mona Lisa online treating the unique, physical painting as a social image—but by insisting on online-ness as a crucial core characteristics of PAIA I attempt to acknowledge and dive into the specific social protocols related to creating and exhibiting PAIA *as PAIA*.

On an important note, professional illustrators, concept artists, and graphic designers may use GAI and display their works on sites like DeviantArt along with amateurs. I do not include the work of these professionals in my description of PAIA—even if their work may be popular with an audience, just like professional contemporary art may be—since the focus of this chapter is on AI art made by amateurs. However, works by most professional illustrators and visual artists are reproduced online (whether or not the professionals make use of GAI in their artistic practice) and therefore professionals, implicitly and involuntarily, participate in the production of PAIA insofar as their works have been scraped from the Internet and incorporated in training sets for developing popular AI computer models, which subsequently enable PAIA artists to easily create new works in the style of named professionals without permission or compensation. As a result, professionals have sued developing companies for violating copyright regulations (for specific examples, see Chen 2023), but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into this intricate relation between professional art and PAIA.

One of the characteristics of PAIA is that, very often, neither creators nor viewers take any interest in whether the works are sanctioned as Art with a capital A by established art institutions, which is interesting in terms of art theory—especially when considered through the lens of institutional art theory.

In 1964 Arthur C. Danto analyzed the art theoretical implications of the fact that Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* work was visually indistinguishable from a real box of soap pads (from the firm Brillo) that one would encounter in the supermarket. Danto stated that "art" could no longer be defined by visual imitation or by relating to reality, instead: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of

the history of art: an artworld" (Danto 1964, 580). This theoretical line of thinking is primarily focused on a *descriptive* understanding of art, where "art" is defined by being part of professional art institutional mechanisms involving established academies, galleries, museums, critics, studios, etc. (for the roles of aesthetic values in art worlds, see van Maanen 2009). In her book *Seven Days in the Art World* (2008), Sarah Thornton provides a first-hand antropological study of this professional art world, which brought her to an auction house and an art magazine in New York, an art school in California, an art fair in Switzerland, a studio in Japan, an art prize jury in the UK, and a biennial in Italy. If Thornton were to make a similar study of PAIA, she would be able to do so solely from her desk, applying "digital ethnography" methods (see Pink 2016), by visiting websites, logging into platforms, and engaging in online fora and social media.

Whereas descriptive definitions of art are at the front in institutional art theory as such (with normative understandings and subjective preferences embedded in concrete practices of, e.g., curation and acquisition), in PAIA a *normative* understanding of art seems undisguisedly predominant. PAIA is valued by creators and spectators, who pass aesthetic judgments on the specific images—deeming them powerful, disturbing, beautiful, etc.—but whether or not the works are accepted by established, professional art institutions is of little relevance. For instance, in Lamerichs's (2023) article on GAI and fan art, the terms "art," "artwork," "image," and "fan art" are used interchangeably throughout. Hence, contrary to the mechanisms of the professional art world, in the field of PAIA, art is not defined by art experts but by the fact that someone terms an image "art," whether it is the creator, viewers, or platform developers—as stated by Jay David Bolter, "computer scientists have become theorists of art" (2023, 198). The fact that creators and audiences—not experts from the traditional art world—have the final say in defining art in PAIA is supported by a recent study which shows that on sites displaying so-called prompt art "most of the images are closeups or medium shots of young women. Genres of fantasy art, game art and comic or anime illustration dominate" (McCormack et al. 2024, 292). To rephrase Danto (1964), one of the characteristics of PAIA is that, to see something as art requires something the eye *can* actually decry.

Another PAIA characteristic is that the artists are *online personas* in the form of aliases, profiles, or usernames. Hence, any relation between an artist's profile and a real, physical person often remains completely opaque. Age, gender, nationality, and appearance in the physical world are of no importance, and in principle, anyone with an internet connection could be the creator of an artwork. Even if anonymity may not be important for the creators of PAIA, it is often unavoidable as it may not be possible for a person to create the username they want—for instance, Discord requires "usernames" to be unique (reducing the possibility of using one's real name as username). At the same time Discord enables "display names" and "nicknames," which

do not have to be unique and can easily be changed by the user (see Librarian 2024). Hence, linking an artist's profile on a specific site to a real person or to that person's other aliases on other sites requires mediation via Facebook, Instagram, or other social media. The performative fluidity of PAIA artists' identity stands in stark contrast to the domain of professional AI art, where building a strong artistic "brand" is intrinsically linked to a stable artist name.

Elaborate interaction between different online personas is a significant, integrated part of PAIA practice. Nicolle Lamerichs's statement that "AI art is not an outcome but a process or a performance" (2023, 155) is a very precise description of PAIA specifically. Lamerichs focuses particularly on fan art, but one of her examples demonstrates common artistic practice in PAIA very well: The artist, whose username is Nadav_Igra, "introduces a gallery with different AI-generated female *Star Trek* characters in unique variations of the Star Fleet uniform" (Lamerichs 2023, 156) on Reddit, and community interaction unfolds as other users comment on the images while Nadav_Igra provides insights into the prompts used to generate the images.

It is important to stress that the categories of professional AI art, festival AI art, and PAIA are not mutually exclusive, but that artists and works of art can be part of more than one arena—for instance, professional AI art may have an institutional background in festival AI art or PAIA. Neither are the categories quantitatively objective but instead serve the purpose, specifically in this chapter, of distinguishing analytically between them in order to identify the immanent institutional *raison d'etre* of PAIA as a starting point for the chapter's following analytical work. The table below provides an overview of the differences between professional, festival, and PAIA (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Distinctions between professional AI art, festival AI art, and popular AI art.

	Professional AI art	*Festival AI art*	*Popular AI art*
Setting	Museum, biennials, auction houses, etc.	Festivals (e.g., Transmediale, Ars Electronic)	Online platforms, online communities, social media
Work	Art sanctioned by actors in the professional art world	Projects, explorative practice, activism sanctioned by festival organizers	Images, art, sanctioned by creators and other users
Artist	Named person (or artist group)	Collectives (or named person)	Username, profile name, etc.
Immanent *raison d'être*	Contemplation, reflection	Discussion, reflection, and knowledge	Social interaction, contemplation

Popular AI Art and the French Art Academy

Text plays a paramount role in popular AI image generators, and this is also the case in traditional European art. Roland Meyer has pointed out the shared emphasis on language in GAI and historical art when stating that,

> [w]hat is new about the 'new paradigm of image production' [GAI], then, is not exactly the primacy of language. Indeed, image production as a form of visual interpretation of prior verbalization has a long history: Baroque emblematics or the pictorial programmes of Christian iconography, for example, were also based on the earlier verbalization of visual content, on descriptions as instructions for the artists who had to interpret them. In the new paradigm, however, the relationship between description and image seems to be less one of instruction and interpretation than one of navigation and matching.
>
> (Meyer 2023, 103)

Whereas, on a *technical* level, I agree that text-to-image prompting is a matter of navigating the latent space of a computer model and matching datapoints, I argue that, on an *aesthetic* (poietic) level, artistic practices, and image programs of PAIA share significant similarities with traditional European art, especially the 17th-century French art academy (*L'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*). The art academy was established in 1648 under auspices of the Crown as a means of systematizing art education and the production of art with historical/biblical motives that would also promote the king—while at the same time allowing an emancipation of artistic practice from the, hitherto monopolizing, power of the guilds. The all-important figure of the art academy was Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), who was first painter to Louis XIV, co-initiated the establishment of the academy, and served as its chancellor, rector, and director (see Bryson 1981; Walsh 1999). Le Brun is relevant in terms of text-to-image prompting, because he "claimed for the centralised Académie a power which had hitherto been exerted only by the Church and the Crown: the right to dictate to the painters the texts which their work was to illustrate." (Bryson 1981, 31). On a more specific level, Le Brun designed a scheme for visual expressions of human feelings—a kind of "how to" guide for depicting "anger," "sorrow," "joy," "love," "despair," etc., in human faces based on close study of different positions of lips, eyebrows, and nostrils (see Bryson 1981). In the 17th century, the system was entangled with and inspired by others, for example, René Descartes, and later it was further developed by Paul Ekman (see Montagu 1994, 18–19). Three aesthetic protocols in this scheme are of relevance when trying to understand the aesthetic underpinnings of PAIA:

First, it compartmentalized human feelings into discrete units through a system of different feelings that might be combined in different manners.

Each feeling had a name, a word serving as a pragmatic means of communicating verbally/textually about that feeling. The idea of categorizing mental states according to linguistic concepts, thus in a sense translating (and reducing) feelings to words, is also one of the important building blocks of AI image generators. For instance, the database WordNet organizes English language according to a taxonomy of "synsets" that not only play a foundational role in Natural Language Processing but were also adopted for ImageNet, the all-important database for developing AI image generators (see Crawford and Paglen 2021).

Second, Le Brun created a visual equivalent to each feeling-concept and communicated them in lectures and through diagrammatic images (see Figure 3.1 for an example).

To formalize the visual features corresponding to feelings, Le Brun studied, among other sources, antique portraits of well-known rulers and philosophers whose psychological profiles were described from history (see Montagu 1994, 20). In other words, he studied portraits that were already labelled and used those in "training" his own "model" very much in the same manner that datasets for training AI models are curated. Even if curating datasets today occurs at a much bigger data scale and the work is delegated (see Crawford and Paglen 2021; Sluis 2023), the principle is strikingly similar in the sense that Le Brun "scraped" existing repositories of cultural data and extracted features from the text-image relations in a manner that resembles supervised machine learning. Similar to machine learning practices, Le Brun's model also included inductive biases (see Alpaydin 2016; Kelleher 2019) insofar as he "was taking natural expressions, filtering out and exaggerating their main characteristics in the interest of greater legibility and impact" (Walsh 1999, 111). Whereas the French 17th-century image model was developed by Le Brun and later finetuned and modified by others—like for instance William Hogarth (1697–1764) and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) (see Montagu 1994, Chapter 7; Perry 1999)—the models used in popular AI art are developed by Stability AI, Midjourney, or OpenAI. Le Brun's position in the academy made his correlations between inner emotions and specific outer visual imagery predominant rules of thumb not only in the following decades—as a mandatory part of the curriculum in the academy—but in the following centuries as French art and artists gained popularity throughout Europe, implicitly embedding French art's style and visual programs in European image culture on a broader level, comparable to the role ImageNet has played in shaping AI image tools (see Crawford and Paglen 2021).

Third, on a broader level, Le Brun's scheme regulated artistic expression. According to Jennifer Montagu, lectures and practice at the academy testified to the fact that the "'[i]nfallible rules' were what the academy sought. They feared subjective judgement and the diversity of taste" (1994, 71). The reason for fearing subjectivity relates to the fact that the purpose

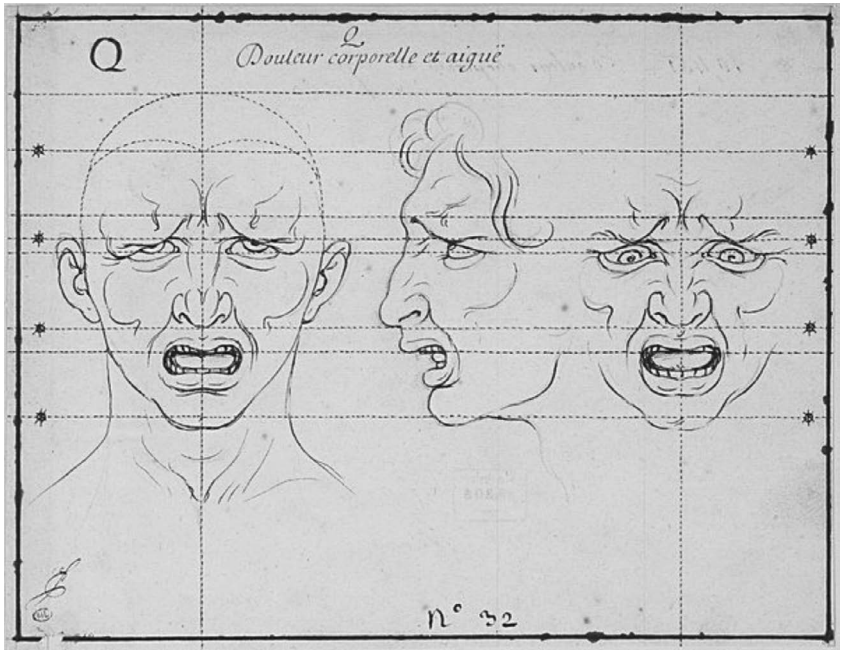

Figure 3.1 Example of Le Brun's diagrammatic drawings on how to visually depict a human feeling, here "Physical Pain" (Charles Le Brun: *La Douleur corporelle et aiguë*. Ink on paper, 19.7 × 24.4 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020206665).

of academic art in 17th-century France was to depict historical events, and "in history, event and scripture fuse, for the historical is not only that which has occurred, but that which has recurred as writing." (Bryson 1981, 35). This predominance of historical writing over images is illustrated, for example, by the fact that in 1667 two official hearings in the academy were dedicated to clarifying the academy's stance toward Nicolas Poussin's 1648 painting of *Eliezer and Rebecca*—the issue being that the painting does not show any camels, even though camels are mentioned in the Biblical account (see Bryson 1981, 32–34). Emphasizing rules for relations between text and image fulfilled a dual purpose: It provided painters with concrete guidelines for depicting emotional concepts and thereby telling a visual story with the use of facial and gestural expressions of the painted figures as an alternative to adding more "physical" objects and actions to the scenery. And it goes the other way round in the sense that it allowed the viewer of the finished painting to easily "read" the visual story, because the facial expressions worked like pictograms with fixed meanings (see Mérot 1995, 138–146, Montagu 1994). Following Le Brun's aesthetic protocols served the purpose of securing a direct line between visual–conceptual correlations of the past and visual–conceptual correlations taught to new artists in the 1660s. Hence, the rules were not only considered pragmatic tools to help painters with specific tasks but were also considered to be universal. Contemporary AI image tools relying on "Contrastive Language-Image Pretraining" (known as CLIP [see Radford et al. 2021]) incorporate a similar claim to universality in the sense that the images are not direct depictions of specific observations but instead statistic approximations of which visuals would correspond to which word-concepts (see Bajohr 2021). Hence, an aesthetics of statistical means at work in the academy resurfaces in AI image generators and, according to Hito Steyerl, "mean images" are not only mean in the technical sense of being developed from feature extraction of billions of training images: In GAI, the term provokes questions of "what mean?" and "whose mean?" as it "bakes moral, statistical, financial and *aesthetic* values as well as common and lower-class positions into one dimly compressed setting" (Steyerl 2023, 84; my emphasis). Importantly, mean images "are after-images, burnt into screens and retinas long after their source has been erased" (Steyerl 2023, 84).

Inspired by the machine learning vocabulary, the aesthetic protocols at work in Le Brun's model for generating art can be summed up as consisting of a *training* phase in which feelings are turning into linguistic concept for which visual equivalents are developed (based on supervised training and inductive biases), followed by *inference*, where the model is able to generate new art based on the functions it extracted during training (see Alpaydin 2016; Kelleher 2019). An example of how the French art academy put the model to work after training was the annual art prize, *Prix Caylus* (inaugurated in 1759), that would test students' ability to depict specific emotions.

The rules of the contest dictated that students should draw or model from a live model (a person in front of them) that would express an emotion—for instance, in 1759 "wonder" mixed with "joy," and in 1760 "affliction." As explained by Montagu, the subject was to be taken from "mythology or history, such as Dido dying on the funeral pyre, or Venus mourning Adonis, so that the student should understand the motivation for the expression, and the relevant passage should be read to the contestants" (Montagu 1994, 95). Hence, two kinds of text prompts were at work: the emotion prompt (the explicit task of the competition) and the historical/mythological text acting as a kind of embedded prompt supplement that would guide the students in the right direction, assisting them in navigating their creative (latent space of) possibilities. For the students in the competition, the strong textual guidance acted as an algorithmic filter through which the live model in front of their eyes should be studied and depicted. Hence, the artistic practices in the academy align much more with what Wendy Chun has described as "programmed visions," in which "computers always *generate* text and images rather than merely represent or reproduce what already exists elsewhere" (Chun 2013, 17; original emphasis).

Aesthetic Protocols of Popular AI Art

The preceding comparison of protocols in PAIA and the academy provided insights into aesthetic underpinnings of PAIA that warrant a few concluding remarks. One point of interest is the role of creative exploration compared to following fixed protocols. On a general level, creative exploration seems to be at work in a different manner in PAIA than in what this chapter has described as professional AI art and festival AI art. Significantly, once the image model is trained and fully developed—in the academy by Le Brun, in PAIA by OpenAI, Stable Diffusion, or Midjourney—and protocols of correlating text and image are set and in place, mastering and working the protocols becomes the main goal of practitioners, whereas little attention is paid to exploring the preceding training that went into establishing the protocols. Whereas professional and festival AI artists—again: on a general level—artistically and/or critically explore the training phase of AI image generators (for instance by querying databases, building training sets, finetuning models, interrogating social or environmental implications of AI, etc.), PAIA artists use off-the-shelf models. Hence, in PAIA, creative exploration is located in the inference phase and is focused on *complying* with the technical protocols through prompt engineering.

Considered from a historical point of view of the academy this is paradoxical because, as accounted for by Montagu, the great emphasis placed on having visual art conveying *stories* took off in the early Renaissance as an attempt to move painting from the category of manual labor to the category

of liberal arts. Painters approximated their works towards narrative poetry because

> [p]oetry was accepted as a liberal art, therefore if it could be shown that painting too was concerned with telling stories, that it performed the same functions of instructing, delighting and moving, then painting would have as much right as poetry to this coveted position.[…] This importance of proving the claim of painting to be a liberal art underlies the emphasis on 'invention', the artist's conception and ordering of his subject, at the expense of its execution, and explains the paradoxical belief that Raphael would have been a great artist even if he had had no hands.
>
> (Montagu 1994, 61)

Importantly, this testifies to a distinction between the highly valued ability to *conceptualize* the content of the work and the less esteemed activity of *execution and artistry*. The same logic is at work in popular AI image platforms as demonstrated, for instance, in Stability AI's claim that with the Stable Artisan bot "you can transform your thoughts into stunning images" (Stability AI 2024, n.pag); OpenAI's encouragement to "[b]ring your imagination to life" (OpenAI 2024, n.pag); or Canva's urge to "[s]imply enter a prompt, pick a style, and watch your words transform into beautiful art" (Canva 2025, n.pag.)—hence allowing unskilled users to be creative while delegating the laborious task of executing to the AI image generator. But, paradoxically, in PAIA (and in the academy) the creative work of conceptualizing took place in the training phase (e.g., when big tech companies or Le Brun curated training data and induced biases), whereas using the final model is a matter of executing the protocols already established. In this sense, practices of PAIA artists—struggling with prompt engineering and making use of the preset filters in AI models to create the "right" image, but not engaging in developing the model—is comparable to the struggles of students in the academy, who were trained to match specific states of mind in the historical/biblical figures they painted with specific visual output, but whose scope of creative imagination was strictly limited to specific genres and motifs determined by Le Brun's image model.

In the process of executing aesthetic protocols, artistic tools and studios are of relevance. In order to actually use the models—to execute the image programs—the academy students underwent training that would enable them to coordinate minds, eyes, hands, brushes, etc., in their studios, whereas the vast majority of popular AI artists learn to master the AI models through use of graphic user interfaces. Thus, rather than using an API ("application programming interface") building their own studio so to speak by working on the code level, (which Stability Diffusion's open source actually allows for), popular AI artists subscribe to, e.g., ChatGPT, Bing, DreamUp, or similar platforms that offer graphic user interfaces aimed at laypersons. However,

as convincingly analyzed by Chun (2013, Chapter 2), the easy-to-use affordances of such interfaces and the users' ability to control pre-designed options of interactivity (e.g., prompting text input and receiving image output) mean that it is not only a matter of users working the interface but also to a very great extent a matter of the interfaces producing its users. So, while new AI image generators enable people to be creative solely by use of natural language (see for instance OpenAI 2025)—resembling the liberation of visual art from powerful guilds by subjecting it to text (see Bryson and Montagu)—it may not only be a matter of PAIA artists creating new art by utilizing AI image generators but also a matter of companies behind AI image generators generating new users and subscribers, whose data can be extracted, by utilizing "art."

It is an integrated part of the platforms' design and data extraction to address users as artists and encourage exhibition of the works online by offering seamless integration of tools, studio, online gallery, and—importantly—*community* (DeviantArt is an example of this). Hence, this fully online characteristic of PAIA is not only a matter of creating and exhibiting art but also adds to it an important social dimension. Even if, technically, it is a matter of matching and navigating the latent space of AI models according to predesigned aesthetic protocols, when PAIA artists create their work, this is very often woven together with navigating and participating in the *social space of sharing, commenting, and exchanging* prompt suggestions with other PAIA artists or audiences. This kind of social finetuning in PAIA may result in aesthetic filter bubbles producing even more of the same (recollecting McCormack and colleagues remark that "most of the images are closeups or medium shots of young women" [2024, 292]), but it may also make room for genuine discussions about relations between aesthetic preferences, visual imagination and which AI tool to use for what. PAIA may seem to differ from the French art academy on the level of code: whereas in PAIA, the technical black box of AI image generators remains sealed, "Le Brun, by bringing the articulation of the physiognomic and pathonomic codes into full visibility, counteracts this occultation [of 'realism']; meanings do not emanate from his canvases mysteriously, but in the full awareness of a coded practice" (Bryson 1981, 55). However, the *social codes* at work in PAIA communities demonstrate impressive transparency of artistic practices. As accounted for by Anna Munster and Adrian Mackenzie today,

> there is no position or place from which an 'observing subject' could view the ensemble of operations of image processing; either such operations are too small, since they take place on a microprocessor such as the image sensor of a camera; or they are too large, since the image's operativity only becomes clear by moving in a multi-scalar manner: across image databases, GPU arrays, server farms and data centres.
>
> (MacKenzie and Munster 2019, 10)

Platforms, however, "constitute a privileged space of relationality between different groups and forms of belonging" (MacKenzie and Munster 2019, 10). In this sense, PAIA platforms are comparable to art academies, only with their doors wide open for anyone to enter—even if the platform owners' goal is "generating revenue streams" (MacKenzie and Munster 2019, 10), not art. No art is entirely free—some depend on private foundations, others on the church, or the Crown, or big tech, or guilds, or the artist's time, or curators and critics, or powerful academy rectors, or access to tools, etc—but among the aesthetic protocols of PAIA is its dissolving of traditionally strict separations between artists, critics, and audience.

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4 The Aesthetics of Promise

Tech-Failures and Tech-Demonstrations of Generative AI

Olga Moskatova

Introduction

In July 2024, the designer Wright Bagwell posted an AI-generated video of a ballet dancer performing *Black Swan* on his Instagram account, which is dedicated to "comedic limitations of generative art tools" (Werners AI Art 2024, n.pag.). The video, created with Luma, is a captivating compilation of bizarre bodily distortions that transform the choreography into a truly astonishing spectacle. It begins with a rather realistic-looking female dancer in a pink ballet skirt, executing traditional ballet movements and poses. However, the initial sense of realism gives way to a never-ending flow of bizarre bodily transmutations: The dancer suddenly has three legs (see Figure 4.1), performs anatomically impossible movements, or transforms into a differently dressed woman. Later, a male dancer reappears as a woman, bodies of different dancers merge into one another, or fragment, splitting two figures into three. Bagwell's account is filled with such AI-generated anomalies and failures. Using tools like Luma, Sora, Kling, and others, he produces similar surreal metamorphoses across various media and styles—including television, sports broadcasts, advertising, cartoons, and historical film aesthetics that range from black-and-white silent movies to undersea documentaries.

With the proliferation of text-to-video generators, this aesthetics of transformation has not only become popularized on social media by regular users but also showcased by developers of AI generators themselves—often to document technical challenges and common failures. On their websites and official social media accounts, the makers of AI tools such as Luma Dream Machine, Runway, and Sora introduce their latest advancements in video generation through tech-demonstration videos. Alongside impressive aesthetic results, stylistic diversity, and improvements in motion and object consistency, these videos frequently exhibit typical flaws, errors, and failures: bodies moving in anatomically impossible ways, objects suddenly disappearing, faces and bodies changing identity, and various other inconsistencies, distortions, and weird transmutations. Sora, for example, demonstrates "physically implausible motion" (OpenAI 2024a, n.pag.) in a black-and-white video of a

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-4

Figure 4.1 Aesthetics of transformation in an AI-generated ballet video (Werners AI Art 2024).

man running on a treadmill, mimicking a 35mm cinematic shot and evoking Marey's and Muybridge's chronophotographic motion studies. In other videos, glasses fail to shatter, or food remains untouched even after being bitten (see OpenAI 2024d).

In media theory, errors, failures, and accidents are often regarded as productive and even media-specific categories. By disrupting the smooth process of mediation, they are thought to draw attention to the functionality and specificity of media (see, e.g., Krämer 1998; Kümmel and Schüttpelz 2003; Mersch 2008). If each medium produces its own distinct accidents, errors, and failures (see Virilio and Lotringer 1984, 35–36), then—so the argument goes—these disruptions provide insights into the workings of that medium. Although it is now evident that such flaws and errors are indeed characteristic of the current state of AI generation and can therefore be considered media-specific to some extent, it remains questionable whether they truly shed light on the workings of the technology itself. Broken, failed, or erroneous technologies may highlight the act of mediation, but this does not necessarily lead to a deeper qualitative understanding of media. On the contrary, failures can even "obstruct the underlying logic and the infrastructures that sustain them" (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 27). This suggests that the influential media-theoretical approach that frames errors and failures in epistemological terms has its limits. Moreover, today, this notion of media errors is challenged by machine-learning algorithms and applications. These systems are not only opaque due to the unexplainability of neuronal networks but are also deliberately designed to remain opaque in order to secure proprietary advantages and intellectual property (see Galloway 2011; Pasquale 2015), thereby reinforcing capitalist power structures. Since making new technologies fully transparent is not economically profitable, the commonly emphasized black box nature of AI technologies may, in part, be understood as an intentional "structural production of ignorance" (Pasquale 2015, 1).

If the errors and failures of contemporary AI media can no longer be easily subsumed under the epistemology of transparency and revelation implied by traditional media theory, what do they signify today? In this chapter, I propose to shift the focus from epistemology to affect and temporality in order to examine what could be described as an aesthetics of errors, particularly in AI tech-demo videos released by AI companies. Drawing on Appadurai and Alexander (2020, 20), I suggest viewing AI errors and failures as "promise machine[s]." I argue that these errors do not merely expose the limitations and constraints of contemporary AI and image synthesis but actively generate promises and aesthetics of futurity, technological, and sociopolitical ones: The promise of updates, the promise of the next/new and improved generation of AI, the promise of photorealism, the promise of technical fixes for social problems, and more. By addressing tech-demo videos as "future media" (see Ernst and Schröter 2021), I will focus particularly on the ambivalences within such an aesthetics of promise. By delaying the promised result,

errors serve to indicate, materialize, and make futurity concrete, thereby stabilizing AI as a "promising technology" (Hirsch-Kreinsen 2024, 1641) and "justifying" further capitalist, political, and affective investment.

Promise Machines: Presenting Failures in Tech-Demos

The introduction of new technologies elicits affect and is shaped by narratives: Emerging technologies are often framed as solutions—promising greater efficiency, neutrality, and the resolution of societal or ecological challenges, as well as increased profit, freedom, agency, or convenience. At the same time, they can also evoke fears of job loss, unforeseen negative consequences, economic disadvantages, or displacement. Moreover, "*expectations* about the future opportunities of new technologies have a particularly strong influence on the course and direction of technological innovations" (Hirsch-Kreinsen 2024, 1642; original emphasis). Promises and expectations help reduce uncertainty by offering concrete perspectives, potential applications, and tangible effects. New and "yet-to-be-developed technology" can thus generally be understood as a "promising technology" (Hirsch-Kreinsen 2024, 1642), a technology that carries the overarching promise of futurity, innovation, and potential. AI technologies currently function as such "promising technologies," structured by narratives, hopes, and announcements of desirable effects. This is nothing new: Historically, AI has always relied on promises, expectations, and fantasies that have shaped political decisions, research agendas, and public perception (see Hirsch-Kreinsen 2024, 1642; Romele 2024; Selke 2023). However, alongside these promises, new technologies inevitably introduce limitations, dependencies, risks, and failures.

Tech-demonstrations play a crucial role in negotiating and conveying narratives and promises of desirable technological futures. They can be understood as "future media" in the sense in which the term was conceptualized by Ernst and Schröter (2021, 2). "Future media" here refers to imaginaries of media technologies that engage with technological transformations and media change. However, rather than predicting new technologies, the concept of "future media" encompasses projections in popular media, advertising, and political discourse that imagine emerging technologies, along with their potential benefits and risks. Since the future is inherently uncertain, future media imaginaries help bridge the "epistemic gap" between available information and possible developments "by an 'amalgamation' of hopes, fears, visions, and fantasies that form around new technology" (Ernst and Schröter 2021, 3). These imaginaries create "a framework for our concepts of the technological future"—not as mere illusions, but as crucial forms of knowledge production that shape perceptions, influence actions, and impact concrete technological developments (Ernst and Schröter 2021, 3). Importantly, such imaginaries address both *potential future technologies* and *possible future uses* of existing

but still emerging technologies (see Ernst and Schröter 2021, 43). Technological demonstrations typically engage with the latter—showcasing new technologies on the brink of adoption. They rely heavily on "'public performances' that cause a new medium to be identified as a 'medium of the future'" (Ernst and Schröter 2021, 47). Demonstrations serve to provide evidence that a technology works by showing it in action. For "promising technologies" to be convincing, they must not only appear possible but also be connected to research and convey a sense of viability. Tech-demos fulfill the task of persuading the public of "*future possibilities of technological feasibility*" (Ernst and Schröter 2021, 47; original emphasis). Closely linked to advertising, tech-demos focus on demonstrating functionality rather than purely promotional messaging.

Given the performative nature of tech-demos that help to normalize technologies and establish idealized, normative uses of these technologies, it is not surprising that AI companies are highly invested in tech-demo videos. AI generators such as Sora, Luma, and Runway regularly present tech-demo videos on their official websites and social media accounts. The goal of these videos is to generate publicity, convince artists, filmmakers, and production studios of AI's potential, and demonstrate their aesthetic possibilities. Authorized tech-demos presented via official channels can be categorized into two types. On the one hand, there are aesthetic experiments created by officially invited artists, filmmakers, and other professionals, which highlight particularly beautiful, imaginative, or striking aesthetics—a practice often criticized as "artwashing." These clips simultaneously function as tech-demonstrations and as artistic results of the demonstrated technology. They promote AI by means of its aesthetic appeal and capabilities. Indeed, AI-generated videos produced and distributed on social media by artists, designers, and other users experimenting with AI technologies fulfill a similar function. While these videos are not officially authorized tech-demos, they effectively serve the same purpose: demonstrating and advertising the possibilities of AI—a technology still in the process of development, introduction, and testing.

On the other hand, the companies behind Sora, Luma, and Runway also produce short clips that explicitly introduce and explain new generations of their models, along with newly added features such as video extensions, camera motion control, processing speed, and more. In these tech-demo videos, aesthetic goals are particularly articulated and made visible. A tech-demo video by Luma Labs can serve as an example: In June 2024, just one month before Bagwell's AI ballet video was produced with Luma, the company announced its new generative text-to-video model, Dream Machine. In an Instagram video (see Luma AI 2024a), Luma Labs promoted its new Dream Machine as a tool for generating high-quality videos, emphasizing a diverse range of aesthetic styles, reduced processing and generation times, and, most notably, improvements in motion and action representation. These advancements included more coherent motion, an improved understanding of the

physics of movement, and greater character consistency throughout (camera) movements. Similar to OpenAI's Sora, which was launched in February 2024, Luma presents its "successes" and "advancements" in terms of movement, interaction, 3D coherence, object permanence, and realistic simulation of the physical worlds—thus relegating bodily or motion inconsistencies to the category of "failures" (see OpenAI 2024a; 2024b). The overarching goal of video generators, as evidenced by numerous tech-demos and technical reports published by OpenAI, Luma AI, and Runway AI, appears to align with what Stephen Prince terms "perceptual realism" (1996, 32; see also Wilde 2023, 15–19)—an aesthetics that does not strive for referential realism or absolute truthfulness, but rather for a plausible and convincing construction of image worlds, textures, bodies, movements, and lighting, all contributing to an overall coherent impression of perceptual space. This pursuit is closely tied to the remediation of what is often referred to as "photorealism" (see Manovich 1996, 63–66)—a highly conventionalized and historically variable form of spatial and motion representation initially established by optical technologies such as film and photography, yet later imitated by various digital media invested in image synthesis.

It is against this background of the desire for perceptual realism, elaborated camera movements, and coherent simulation of three-dimensional visual space that AI failures develop their aesthetic and affective rhetoric of promise, and even become recognized as failures or errors in the first place: Failure is not an inherent quality of technology (or aesthetics, for that matter); rather, it is a form of judgment shaped by cultural expectations, promises, and power structures (see Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 1–2). By normalizing and framing a particular aesthetic realization and set of capabilities as the desired standard, anything that deviates from it is classified as an aberrant failure. However, these so-called "failures" are still operative, and it would be a mistake to interpret tech-demos that exhibit flaws and inconsistencies merely as documentation of the current technical state, as lists of problems to be solved, or as informative components of technical reports. Instead, as I would like to argue, these flaws, failures, and errors actively contribute to the capitalist promise of AI technologies. They provoke judgment and emotional reactions, they astonish and amuse, unsettle or disappoint, incite engagement, and evoke both fear and hope. In doing so, they do not undermine but rather reinforce the perception of AI as a "promising technology," ultimately sustaining its economic legitimacy.

Contrary to the common perception of failures and errors as something to be avoided or eliminated, technological flaws are actually essential for driving capitalist cycles of production (see Appadurai and Alexander 2020). Designated as failures through judgment, they generate the promise of futurity—of improvement, optimization, the next model, the inevitable update, and so on. Within a capitalist framework, breakdowns enable technology to continuously drive novelty, sustain promises, and legitimize ongoing development.

Consequently, contemporary capitalism not only benefits from technological flaws but also actively produces them—planned obsolescence being one of its most pronounced manifestations. Failures "sustain the culture of upgrades and replacement" (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 8), fueling endless cycles of consumption. Without the notion of malfunction, failure, or insufficiency, there would be no imperative for enhancement and no opportunity to capitalize on it. In the AI sector, "improvement" can mean adopting a new, upgraded model (e.g., Runway's Gen 1, Gen2, Gen3 Alpha) or subscribing to a premium version that promises bug fixes and exclusive features (e.g., ChatGPT Plus, ChatGPT Pro with access to Sora). Social media presentations by companies such as Runway AI, OpenAI, and Luma AI are filled with tech-demos that introduce and promote supposedly superior model generations or new features designed to "solve" previous limitations. A brief look at recent updates in video-generation tech-demos illustrates this pattern, with the latter including the unveiling of Ray2 as a new frontier in realism (see Luma AI 2025a), upscaling to 4K (see Luma AI 2025b), integrating audio (see Luma AI 2025c); launching Act One for character reference videos (see Runway 2024a), introducing expand video (see Runway 2024b), and introducing frames for stylistic control (see Runway 2024c); or featuring Remix for replacing or removing video segments and Re-cut for isolating and extending frames in either direction in Sora as well as demonstrating the creation of seamless loops (see OpenAI 2024c). Such updates claim to resolve inconsistencies, enhance resolution, broaden aesthetic and stylistic possibilities, and take realism to the next level—ultimately rendering previous features and capabilities "obsolete." These cycles of updates and upgrades retrospectively construct problems to be solved and crises to be managed (see Chun 2017). Failures, therefore, are deeply intertwined with the capitalist logic of technological serialization—manifesting as generations, upgrades, and updates. They both enable and materialize the promise of futurity. As they gain value, failures themselves become commodities, constituting "a machine of broken promises" (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 21).

The Luma Dream Machine tech-demo from September 3, 2024 (see Luma AI 2024b), perfectly encapsulates the logic of updated futurity by drawing on the history of cinema: Released in a vertical format, the video introduces and showcases the possibilities of camera motion prompting. It begins by juxtaposing an analog film camera on a tripod with the interface for typing a camera movement prompt (see Figure 4.2). Staged as a black-and-white silent film, the demo employs intertitles and captions to emphasize the male voice-over, accompanied by a lively, comedic swing-style soundtrack reminiscent of the 1920s. Using intertitles and the music as an aesthetic parenthesis, the video rapidly moves through film history: starting with silent cinema and evoking avant-garde works like Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), then shifting to cartoonish humor and special-effects spectacles, such as King Kong looming before a Ferris wheel. It then remediates a famous Cinerama

Figure 4.2 A cinema aesthetics in the Luma Dream Machine tech-demo video from September 3, 2024 (Luma AI 2024b).

travelogue featuring a roller coaster (*This Is Cinerama* [1952]) before passing through a doorway inspired by cyberpunk looks of science-fiction films and welcoming viewers to "the future"—now in color. This vibrant "colorful" future is illustrated through references to *RoboCop* (1987), selfie culture transformed into an American blockbuster, medieval fantasy films, and a rapid collage of advertisements, video games, and animation styles. By staging a progression from a black-and-white past to a colorful future, the sequence not only traces film history but also demonstrates the expanding range of camera motions enabled by Luma. Each new segment serves as proof of increasing possibilities—color, format, genre, astonishing special effects, and heightened realism. The final transition leaves film history behind, positioning the Luma Dream Machine as the ultimate realization of cinema's legacy. By mimicking and reinterpreting historical styles, it reimagines them within the futuristic aesthetics of synthetic animation. The history of visual media—and film in particular—is thus framed as a nostalgic yet outdated past, now in need of an AI-driven aesthetic upgrade. The underlying narrative suggests that cinema, despite its artistic advancements, ultimately fell short of its promise—one that AI can now fulfill. At the same time, the upbeat swing music reinforces an optimistic vision of the future of entertainment.

Affective Economy of AI Gimmicks

Building on Sara Ahmed's (2004) insights into the social dimension of affects, Appadurai and Alexander conceptualize capitalist failure economies—structured around promises—as "affective economies" (2020, 31). In this framework, promises play a crucial role in negotiating "uncertainty, risk, and contingency" (Appadurai and Alexander 2020, 37). Promises have a distinct temporal structure that shapes affective experiences. They function as temporal delays, announcing something yet to come, offering hope—while always carrying the risk of failure. The anticipated outcome may never materialize, turning expectation into disappointment, frustration, or even anger. As such, promises generate ambivalent emotions: hope intertwined with the anxiety and boredom of waiting, confidence shadowed by mistrust. Hope, however, can be endlessly deferred. When technologies fail to deliver on their promises, they can simply shift them forward—to the next version, the next fix, the next update.

The aesthetics of object and body transmutations that currently dominate generative errors and flaws embody both fears and hopes. When associated with the human body, such distortions can evoke "body horror" and trigger abjective reactions. As O'Meara and Murphy (2023, 1076) argue, grotesque and flawed AI-generated depictions of bodies are symptomatic of broader anxieties surrounding AI and rapid societal change—fears of replacement, the blurring of boundaries between human and machine capabilities, and the

technological transformation of the body. At the same time, tech-demo videos featuring such flaws and transmutations can be mesmerizing. Rather than simply being ridiculed, as is often the case in user-generated social media content, these glitches can inspire wonder and awe, emphasizing AI's astonishing potential. Transformations, of course, are not solely linked to grotesque or abjective aesthetics of formlessness, but also to a pleasurable attraction of what Eisenstein termed "'plasmaticness'" (2017, 32)—an aesthetics of elasticity, flexibility, and metamorphosis characteristic of animation and cartoons. One of Sora's earliest tech-demos, *Chair Archaeologies* (see OpenAI 2024d), perfectly captures this aesthetics of plasticity (see Figure 4.3). The video depicts a group of archaeologists excavating a plastic chair buried in sand. The chair, lacking object consistency, undergoes continuous transformations, appearing quite literally plastic and morphable. Though these shifts defy conventional expectations of perceptual realism and plausibility, they are highly engaging, evoking the visual delight of magical tricks and the allure of transformation itself.

These kinds of failures sustain the "promise machine," helping to envision solutions to the very problems they expose. They defer the aesthetic promise of object consistency and motion coherence to the future—to the next model generation. The perfect AI future always appears just one small step away—so goes the promise. At the same time, failures not only redirect attention toward future improvements, but also embody the promises of AI themselves through their inherent ambivalence. *Chair Archaeologies* and similar examples of transformation and metamorphosis, for instance, generate the desire for a more realistic fix, while also performing the endless flexibility and effortlessness of transformation. This effortlessness and flexibility *are* the promise of AI generators: The easy transformations suggest that anything is possible, that creative potential is boundless—unrestricted by physical laws, resources, or imagination. "You just prompt it, we do the rest!"—such is the implicit claim. This effortlessness is, of course, the promise of automation and delegation.

This promise of effortlessness and automation also relies on practices of invisibility. As has been argued repeatedly, "automatisms," including those in the field of AI, render human labor invisible (see, e.g., Gray and Suri 2019; Malevé 2023; Treccani 2018). This invisibilization is crucial to creating the very impression of effortlessness and automation, with the aesthetics of seamless transformations serving as its visual counterpart. The logic of invisibilization is also deeply embedded in the structure and presentation of tech-demos. The way these demos are showcased strongly reinforces the promise of effortlessness. Tech-demos are not merely tools for making something visible; they also strategically conceal aspects of the process. Visibility is not symmetrically distributed between AI companies presenting these demos and their audiences. Sora exemplifies this dynamic particularly clearly: The videos featured on its website and social media accounts are often accompanied

Figure 4.3 Aesthetics of plasmaticness in Sora's tech-demo video (OpenAI 2024d).

by a short prompt, implying that this exact input was used to generate the final result. Tech-demos are also about the *demonstration of the prompt* and its simplicity. On OpenAI's Instagram account, for example, it is repeatedly stated that the prompts were not modified and that there is a direct 1:1 correspondence between text and video. This framing suggests ease of use and remarkable generative capabilities, implying that a brief textual input is sufficient to produce something both aesthetically impressive and narratively coherent. However, such a rhetorical focus on prompts obscures the reality of AI interaction: It hides how many attempts were actually needed to craft an effective prompt and to achieve a convincing alignment between text and video. Moreover, this emphasis masks the extensive labor involved in working with AI tools—figuring out how to make them behave as intended, testing their limitations, and identifying quirks that may yield interesting results. It also conceals the frustration and boredom that often accompany this process, as well as the many failed or unremarkable outputs that never make it into tech-demos. Ultimately, these demos, shaped by numerous trials and errors, only present a curated selection that supports the narrative of AI as a promising technology. In his study of technical demonstrations, Wally Smith (2009) stresses how such presentations are highly idealized and often obscure the actual technical development and processes behind them. Drawing on Goffman's (1974) frame theory, Smith argues that tech-demos, like scientific presentations, rely on witnesses and spectators, adhering to the well-established trope of "*letting spectators see for themselves*" (2009, 451; original emphasis). However, the act of demonstration fundamentally transforms the situation—it alters the "framing." The "*demonstration frame*" (Smith 2009, 453; original emphasis) differs from real technical development not only in its as-if nature but also in its idealization. Crucially, this demonstration frame can be denied during presentation, further obscuring the fabrication and the carefully rehearsed nature of the demo itself.

These promises of effortlessness and limitless creative possibilities are, of course, bound to disappoint. One of the most visible manifestations of this disappointment is the brevity of the generated videos. The technological and aesthetic reality of tech-demos stands in stark contrast to the exaggerated promises and expectations: The videos are often strikingly short. Instead of delivering efficiency or endless creativity, they offer only limited possibilities for motion generation. Moreover, the capabilities of motion and animation are far more restricted than tech-demos—such as Luma AI's reimagining of film history—might suggest. Indeed, tech-demo videos frequently exhibit a similar aesthetics of motion. Objects and bodies struggle to move naturally and to maintain consistency throughout. More often than not, instead of fluid movement, we see static objects—while the illusion of motion is created through "camera movements," meaning that the object is merely shown from different angles and distances rather than engaging in actual motion itself (this is an interesting inversion of early film aesthetics, where objects moved in front

of a stationary camera). The result is a smooth, floaty slow-motion aesthetics that pervades many tech-demos—a world in which nothing truly progresses. These demos offer mere glimpses—short scenes, characters appearing to idle, essentially still images animated by a moving camera that circles, zooms in, or pulls away. This technique thus subtly conceals the actual limitations of animation and movement. The reliance on slow-motion aesthetics serves as a dreamy veil, covering up the broken promises and failed expectations of a supposedly revolutionary technology.

This structural coupling of promise (accompanied by experiences of happiness, anticipation, awe, wonder, and pleasure) and the disappointment of failure (manifesting in failed aesthetic promises, banal or frightening results, boredom, and frustration), underpinned by the invisibilization of labor, is what characterizes tech-demos and AI tools they promote as technological "gimmicks"—as objects that simultaneously promise and disappoint. Gimmicks, as described by Sianne Ngai (2020, 35), are objects deeply shaped by ambivalence. They provoke aesthetic judgments as objects that both overperform and underperform, work too hard and too little, appear technologically advanced yet outdated, seem cheap yet overpriced, and are simultaneously praised for their enchantment and critiqued for their disappointment. Put in a nutshell, a gimmick is a "compromised and unstable object" (Ngai 2020, 41). According to Ngai (2020, 96), the gimmick is not merely a technical object, but, above all, an aesthetic category. It is not primarily about a device's functionality but about how it becomes an object of aesthetic judgment and ambivalent evaluation. By provoking both positive and negative judgments, the technological object becomes an aesthetic and affective experience. Calling something "a gimmick" is a distancing gesture that highlights the disappointment of a broken promise while simultaneously acknowledging its power and value (see Ngai 2020, 55–56). Importantly, these ambivalences reflect fundamental contradictions of capitalism, particularly regarding the promises of labor, value, and time:

> The gimmick is thus capitalism's most successful aesthetic category but also its biggest embarrassment and structural problem. With its dubious yet attractive promises about saving time, the reduction of labor, and the expansion of value, it gives us tantalizing glimpses of a world in which social life will no longer be organized by labor, while indexing one that continuously regenerates the conditions keeping labor's social necessity in place.
>
> (Ngai 2020, 2)

Gimmicks are aestheticized commodity objects that materialize a specific stage of technological development. They showcase advancements, make promises about the future, and serve as evidence of technological progress. They embody discourses of hope, narratives of technological salvation, proof

of capitalist advantage, and the logic of technical fixes. Gimmicks promise to solve problems, improve the world, enhance efficiency, or eliminate errors and biased human judgment. Structurally, gimmicks thus function similarly to tech-demos—especially flawed ones. The technological discourses surrounding new technologies and media turn objects into gimmicks when doubts arise about whether they can truly deliver on their promises. Gimmicks are amusing, entertaining, and full of potential, yet they are also deceptive, often appearing to promise too much. Labeling something as a gimmick already diminishes the value it claims to offer. This structure of suspicion is crucial to the gimmick: "[W]ithout this moment of distrust or aversion, which seems to respond directly to or even correct our initial euphoria in the image of something promising" (Ngai 2020, 56), it would simply be regarded as a device. A gimmick is an object that arouses suspicion—suggesting it might be merely a trick—while simultaneously provoking wonder and enchantment. It promises to be something extraordinary, refreshingly new—a gadget of value.

Part of this ambivalence stems from the promise that gimmicks will save labor or even render it obsolete. They pledge to enhance efficiency and productivity—claims that provoke both enthusiasm and skepticism, especially in discussions surrounding AI technologies. While AI gimmicks may offer advantages for some, others may not benefit from them at all. Instead, they may bear the negative consequences—losing their jobs, facing less satisfying or less secure work, or simply encountering a failed promise. This promise of reduced labor, along with its aestheticization, also reveals the close relationship between gimmicks and the perception of automation as a form of magic, which seems particularly relevant when examining the aesthetics of transformation in tech-failure videos such as *Chair Archaeologies*. In his analysis of the relationship between technology and magic, Alfred Gell describes magic as "an idealized form of production" (1992, 62), one that relies on the opacity of technological processes. This opacity suggests "a means of securing a product without the work-cost that it actually entails" (Gell 1992, 58). In this sense, technology appears magical when it conceals the labor invested in it—it becomes a form of production stripped of visible effort and struggle:

> All productive activities are measured against the magic-standard, the possibility that the same product might be produced effortlessly, and the relative efficacy of techniques is a function of the extent to which they converge towards the magic standard of zero work for the same product.
> (Gell 1992, 58)

According to Ngai (2020, 103), Gell's theory of magic as an idealized, obscured technology of enchantment is a proto-theory of the gimmick. In the techno-capitalist gimmick economy, magic is not about supernatural beings, but about the illusion of effortlessness—automated processes that seem to operate without any obvious intervention from a recognizable agent. Magic

transformations promise efficiency and remarkable results at no apparent cost. Technical objects that evoke experiences or associations of magic create a specific effect: They appear to function independently, as if operating by themselves, without deliberate execution. Magic, in this sense, is the effect, impression, and promise of effortless automation—a promise made in several AI fields. When the mechanisms behind these automated effects remain opaque, the gimmick inspires awe, wonder, and enchantment. The ambivalent promise of a magically imbued gimmick is, at once, the "utopia of full automation" and the threat of "structural unemployment" (Ngai 2020, 103).

This promise of effortlessness is precisely what tech-demos sell: both through the aesthetics of failure and seamless transformations, and by obscuring the labor-intensive process of prompting, which undermines the "*demonstration frame*" (Smith 2009, 453; original emphasis). In the context of AI technologies, many applications can be considered gimmicks. They promise revolutionary changes and simplifications but often fail to deliver. When viewed as gimmicks, tech-demos negotiate the complex relationship between technology, capitalism, and aesthetics—particularly the aesthetics of failure. Against this background, failures in tech-demos are not merely indicators of the current technical status quo or expressions of media-theoretical epistemologies of insight. Instead, they represent complex materializations of capitalist promises and contradictions, now deeply embedded in generative AI technologies.

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5 Affective Realism

Reimagining Photography with the Google Pixel 9

Michelle Henning

In August 2024, promotion for Google's Pixel 9 phone highlighted the generative AI capabilities of its camera and image-editing software through an emphasis on "creating" memories the way that an individual would like them to be and "reimagining" images. The latter involves using the new "Add Me" and "Reimagine" functions in the "Magic Editor" to move elements of the image and fill in the resulting gaps, or using text prompts to alter the image. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, the group product manager for the Pixel Camera, Isaac Reynolds, explained why one might want to make such edits to photographic images:

> You could have a true and perfect representation of a moment that felt completely fake and completely wrong. What some of these edits do is help you create the moment that is the way you remember it, that's authentic to your memory and to the greater context, but maybe isn't authentic to a particular millisecond.
>
> (Reynolds cited in Chokattu 2024a, n.pag.)

Implicit here is a theory of photography and how it relates to memory as well as a claim regarding what constitutes "authenticity" in photographs. In an article on the Google Pixel 9 published shortly after its release, journalist Sarah Jeong assessed Reynolds's claim as follows:

> A photo, in this world, stops being a supplement to fallible human recollection, but instead [becomes] a mirror of it. And as photographs become little more than hallucinations made manifest, the dumbest shit will devolve into a courtroom battle over the reputation of the witnesses and the existence of corroborating evidence.
>
> (Jeong 2024, n.pag.)

Jeong's concern about these hallucinations, based in her own review of the phone, is to do with how realistic they look, how a general consensus of trust in the capacity of photographs to represent "the truth" (regardless of

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-5

the long history of faked images) is being "sabotaged" by a widely available technology. She adds that "the default assumption about a photo is about to become that it's faked, because creating realistic and believable fake photos is now trivial to do. We are not prepared for what happens after" (Jeong 2024, n.pag.).[1]

For the AI itself, the photograph's superior claim to realism is irrelevant: writing about text-to-image generating software (DALL·E, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney) Roland Meyer observes that, "[f]or these models, the 'photographic' seems to be just another 'style', an aesthetic, a certain 'look', not a privileged mode of indexical access to the world" (2023, 108). At the same time, such programs are premised on fairly naïve versions of the deeply rooted cultural belief in the truthfulness of photography, insofar as machine vision is principally trained on photographs and, for the purposes of object recognition, the computer sciences often treat photographs in crudely realist terms, as "windows onto the world" or emanations of it (see Chávez Heras and Blanke 2021, 1155; Zylinska 2024, 233–234). Yet, the people working on the Google phone cameras are not naïve regarding photography (see Chokattu 2024a). Reynolds's argument draws on another idea common to photography theory: that we photograph to remember. However, his emphasis on personal memory allows him to sideline the fact that mobile phones are social devices, linked to social networks, enabling the rapid circulation of images, and allowing photographs to be used to bully, humiliate, and threaten. He also ignores another, equally important social function of photography—its deictic aspect: users want to be able to say things like "look, I was here," or "look this is happening," and be believed—the photograph is a "certificate of presence" (Barthes 1981, 87).

Affective Realism

While the term "hallucination" is currently much-used in reference to the unreliability and fallibility of AI (especially of Large Language Models), it seems that Jeong means it to refer to the materialization of something that only exists in the mind of the person taking the photograph, a "fallible human recollection" (2024, n.pag). Photographs have long been considered "mirrors"—the daguerreotype was famously the "mirror with a memory" (Holmes 1859, 739)—but the difference was that they were supposed to reflect reality, not the mental projections of the person who made them. There are exceptions, for example, in expressionist photography, and all photographs necessarily involve the specific, subjective point of view of the photographer. Moreover, photographs are never simply raw recordings or passive reflections: all photographic images are the result of programs or forms of computation and calculation embedded not just in the camera software, but in the design of the lens or even (in the case of film photography) in the chemical make-up of

the sensitized surface (see Flusser 2013; as well as Chávez Heras and Blanke 2021, 1157; Henning 2024). However, what is distinct is Reynolds's claim that in manipulating images so that they mirror our own preferred version of events, we are being less "fake" and more "authentic" than if we left the camera image as it was (see Reynolds cited in Chokattu 2024a, n.pag.).

Even this claim has its precursors in the justifications made for the image manipulation practices of "creative photography" in the 2010s: Reynolds's statement recalls claims made by Julieanne Kost, an employee of Adobe who worked on their digital imaging team, in a training video which I first accessed in 2018 on the (now-defunct) subscription service Lynda.com. Kost's explanation and justification of the choices she made while working on photographs in Adobe Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop drew on ideas of affect and authenticity. She explained that she wanted the viewer of her images "to feel what I felt," in the presence of her subject, saying, "I am not just trying to depict reality, I actually want the viewer to feel the same way I felt when I was there" (Kost 2017)—in this case "there" is on a ship in the Antarctic, looking at an iceberg. In other words, she wanted more than realism, or a greater realism, rooted in affect rather than in visual resemblance.

The tutorial used her own photographs of icebergs, and it taught how to get rid of "distracting" elements by eliminating or replacing them, and how to draw attention to key elements of the image through tonal and color controls. However, the feelings Kost uses to evaluate the realism of the resulting image are selective—she was not interested in conveying the feeling of extreme cold she may had had photographing icebergs, nor her excitement at the photographic opportunities that were presenting themselves, nor any growing indifference ("not another iceberg") during the process. What she wanted to communicate was a conventional and culturally acceptable feeling, perhaps something like awe at the beauty of the scene.

Kost was manipulating images prior to the introduction of features explicitly marketed as "AI" into Adobe software. She called her approach "creative photography" and "lens-based art" (Kost 2017). Yet, like Reynolds, her argument about realism hinged on the authority of individual feeling. For both, "truth to feeling" trumps the older model of indexical realism. The unmanipulated photograph is described as "true and perfect" by Reynolds at the same time as this is undercut—it "felt completely fake and completely wrong" (cited in Chokattu 2024a, n.pag.). What "was" is less relevant than how it "felt." The moment is not understood as recorded but as created according to an individual person's memory and as "authentic" because of that. Both arguments make individual feeling the basis of whether something is "real" or "true."

In 2018, I called this "affective realism," something I described as very different from traditional notions of photographic realism.[2] Historically, photography has been associated with a realism characterized by neutral, unfeeling, disinterested recording (an association which is itself deeply misleading).

This new kind of realism is solipsistic, by which I mean that it roots truth, authenticity, and even reality in the individual self and its inner states. Affective realism does not require that an image necessarily conforms to what is, or was, objectively present in the world, but that it corresponds to the affective response of an individual who witnesses that presence, and in the case of Reynolds's claims, to the memory of the person. The individual's affective experience, without reference to external objects, becomes the measure of all things.

Although in the interview, Reynolds places a great deal of emphasis on memory, in the numerous promotional videos for Google Pixel phones, users are shown manipulating the image immediately after taking it. The promotion represents the generative AI as making a scene more like a wish than a memory—how you want to remember the event from now on, rather than how you actually do. This is illustrated in advertisements for Google's Pixel 9 phone in which people are shown using the "Magic Editor" to remove passers-by from their photographs and editing group photos to get the "perfect" shot in which every facial expression is uniformly flattering. This is not so much about the fallibility of human memory as the deliberate production of alternative "memories." Building on earlier claims around "creative photography" such as Kost's, Reynolds justifies the manipulations of the Magic Editor according to an idea of authenticity rooted ultimately in desire and self-promotion. His promise that you can "create that moment the way you remember it" would be more truthfully expressed as "the way you want to remember it" or "the way you want others to think it was."

In both cases, what appears to be about the maker of the photograph and their feelings is also about the future encounter between the photograph and other viewers. The photographer does not just want to preserve a feeling or a memory, but to evoke feelings in others. Creative photography and AI photography change what Ariella Azoulay (2008) calls the civil contract of photography, which is the ethical-political relationship between photographer, viewer, the subjects of a photograph, and the photograph itself. For Azoulay, a photograph puts people into ethical relations of obligation toward one another. The contract in the case of a photojournalistic image may be premised on a relationship of trust and mutual obligation regarding the claim that "this actually happened." Here, a different contract is being set up, in which the obligation is first to convey "authentic" feelings and memories that are not necessarily lived or felt, but that conform to the self-image the photographer wants to project.

Machine Vision

Affective realism depends on older notions of realism or naturalism. Testing and reviewing the Google Pixel 9 phone models in two articles for *Wired,* Julian Chokattu applies standard criteria. In an article tellingly titled "The

Google Pixel 9's AI Camera Features Let You Reshape Reality," Chokattu says of the "Reimagine" feature, "Reimagine isn't perfect—sometimes it didn't produce results with what I typed in, and sometimes the results were just plain bad" (Chokattu 2024b, n.pag.). By "bad" he means unconvincing, not "realistic" in the sense of not corresponding to a conventional perception of reality and the norms of photography. In a second review, published a week later, Chokattu compares three models (Google Pixel 9, Pixel 9 Pro, and Pixel 9 Pro XL) and evaluates their cameras according to standard technical-aesthetic norms of maximum fidelity, clarity, and sharpness; he describes the "Real Tone" technology as producing more natural-looking skin tones and criticizes the optical zoom for results that feel "too processed" and not sufficiently "lifelike" (Chokattu 2024c, n.pag.). The question is not whether the photograph is processed, but whether it "feels" processed. The photograph must appear "natural," have visual coherence, be convincing as an image—but the ultimate arbiter of its realism is the feeling it gives the photographer/viewer.

It seems strange to have this expectation of naturalism in AI-enhanced image-making when it leans most obviously toward Surrealism. Meyer points out that the very name of image diffusion software DALL·E is "a portmanteau of (Salvador) Dalì and (Pixar's) *Wall-E*" (2023, 105). He writes:

> Many AI-generated images, especially those made with DALL·E, look like a strange blend of Surrealism and stock photography, maybe because they conflate a linguistically structured combinatorial 'dream logic' with a visual conventionality fueled by commercial image archives.
>
> (Meyer 2023, 105)

Of all the Surrealist painters, Dalì was perhaps the one most wedded to high illusionism, his own work able to play with the realism provided by perspective, lighting, composition, and the painterly "licked surface" only because Dalì was so skilled in applying these conventions. Similarly, AI images are judged successful to the extent they conform to a conventional realism, even as they show us the impossible. Yet DALL·E does not operate solely according to internalized rules and conventions (e.g., of perspective) but "recombines and synthesizes visual surface textures and 'looks'" (Meyer 2023, 108). Behind this process of synthesis is what Zylinska calls a "process of cutting and carving" (2024, 235), which enables images to be dissected into machine-readable elements, and reduced to schemata and models. If photographs are becoming hallucinations, these are not the hallucinations of human, fallible memory, but of the "imagination" of the AI technology itself, which, in dream-like fashion, assembles this image detritus into plausible scenes.[3]

In Chokattu's reviews, the concerns with the quality of a lens and the accuracy of color reproduction, both traditional photographic concerns, sit

oddly alongside the description and evaluation of the effectiveness of the AI capabilities. Another reviewer, Allison Johnson, makes the point that this also characterized the approach to making the Pixel 9 camera:

> That's the funny thing—the Pixel camera is a powerful tool whose makers take extraordinary care over how sharply it renders foliage and how easy it is to shoot a panorama. And sitting right next to that camera pipeline is a whole new set of AI tools designed to help you recompose, upscale, or prompt your way to an ideal image—not the one you took, but the one you imagined.
>
> (Johnson 2024, n.pag.)

On the one hand, the camera is judged by conventional standards: how perfectly and precisely it seems to render the scene before it. On the other, the realism of the resulting image has nothing to do with recording or documentation—it is about the coherence of the illusion, how it corresponds to expectations and visual norms, rather than what was actually before the camera. The priority is to produce an image that conforms to these well-established conventions of naturalistic composition. This has always been the case with photography to some extent—a lot of the rules and conventions thought to underpin a "good" photograph are to do with organizing the pictorial scene so it corresponds to our knowledge of reality, from compositional practices such as avoiding placing a person in front of a telegraph pole so it appears to be growing out of their head, to technical maneuvers to straighten out the optical distortion produced by lenses. Images have always been constructed and worked on in these ways, through the training of photographers, the design of cameras, and the standardization of materials and processes.

Kost and the Google Pixel 9 promotion also prioritize the cleaning up of the image, getting rid of inessential, offensive, distracting, or uncomfortable details. Early commentators on photography had noted its tendency to relentlessly reproduce the details of the world without any sense of hierarchy, and this sometimes seemed to give photographs a cold, alien quality associated with dehumanization and the mechanization of vision. As French photography theorist Pierre-Henry Frangne, talking about 1860s mountain photographs, explains, these photos seemed to at least one observer to

> embody an objective and abstract (in the sense of separated) vision that presents the world as alien and distant because the thoughts, symbols, and feelings that human beings project onto the earth in order to live there have disappeared.
>
> (Frangne 2010, n.pag.)

A lot of the work that the photography industry does is intended to tame this alien and alienating machine vision and make it correspond to human

perception and to Western cultural norms of pictorial composition that have since the Renaissance placed the human observer at the center of the world. At first sight, affective realism also does this: Kost's approach to "lens-based art" seems to reaffirm a human-centered vision of nature, and tames the cold, mechanical eye of the camera. Reynolds's explanation of the Google Pixel 9, like the many promotional videos released to accompany it, stresses how the AI capacities enhance the user experience. Yet, as I will demonstrate, at least in the context of the Pixel 9 promotion, the maneuver that centers the self is at one and the same time dehumanizing. In other words, the "affective" is a ruse that conceals not only the uncanny, nonhuman aspect of mechanization but also its dehumanizing potential. This should not be surprising given that affect is now widely understood as the fuel for an economy in which attention is at a premium. Social media binds "authentic feeling" (Davies 2017, 39) to the market in data. Affective realism is one logical outcome of the value of experience and feeling in driving circulation and in training machines, and the delegation of human thinking—rationality, and perhaps imagination too—to machines.

The Magic Is Back

While the Pixel 9 promotional discourse emphasizes human feelings, its video advertising simultaneously articulates a radical decentering of the self, in favor of a technology that is both the phone itself and that extends beyond it (as part of Google's Gemini AI system). The "Reimagine" function suggests it is the phone, not the user, which possesses imagination. We might expect the promotion to center heavily around the phone as a commodity, and to dwell on the phone-object as a desirable thing—to burn its image onto the retinas of would-be consumers. Less expected is how explicitly its promotional material emphasizes the disposability of people, and the ways in which a close relationship with the phone might come at the expense of social relations with others.

To understand this, we need to pay attention to what Ben Highmore (following Hayden White) calls "the content of the form" (Highmore 2003, 128; see also White 1987). Writing about IBM's Information Machine pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1964–1965), Highmore argued that the explicit content of the display (much of it conveyed via voice-over commentary) often conflicted with or contradicted the form (the whole bodily experience) and that "[i]t is the 'ride' itself, its performativity, that provides an exuberance missing in the literal address" (Highmore 2003, 128). While the explicit content set out "to demystify computers" (Highmore 2003, 134), to ride on IBM's Information Machine was to experience one's own body as "a machinic component within a larger assemblage" (Highmore 2003, 132).

On August 13, 2024, the same day that the first reviews of the Pixel 9 series were published, Google uploaded a commercial to YouTube, titled *The Magic Is Back*. This ad lasts one minute, and is a rapid montage with a voice-over and a soundtrack—Queen's song "I Want to Break Free" (1984b). Like the Information Machine, it might be experienced as a kind of ride. Though less immersive, it is nevertheless a visually and aurally dizzying, breakneck trip through different scenarios and places. It also has a voiceover, though in my reading, explicit content cannot be so easily disaggregated from the content of the form—the voice is apparently that of a young woman, but most likely a synthesized voice, and what it conveys is not a narrative, but a series of enigmatic statements, exclamations, questions, and responses.

The ad is bookended by images showing the dull (gray-colored) reality of the people all mindlessly hooked to their phones on a subway train. In this respect it performs a similar maneuver to that of 1990s ads for cigarettes in the UK, which harnessed the government health warning that the ads were compelled to carry, by drawing on a whole visual vocabulary of risk, danger, and hurt, encouraging people to live on the edge and take risks by smoking (see Henning 1995, 227–228). *The Magic Is Back* dramatizes the anti-social character of the phone by explicitly depicting the dullness of public spaces where everyone is absorbed in individual screens, and then offers the fantasy world of the phone as a panacea. In this world, shown in the central section, young and beautiful people, mostly women of a range of ethnicities, have parties, spend days out with friends, travel on planes, and appear to live a glamorous life.

Insofar as it contrasts a dull reality with a colorful world only available through the Google phone, the ad faintly recalls the film *The Matrix* (1999). In *The Matrix*, the world conjured by AI is explicitly represented as a form of false consciousness which nevertheless ultimately becomes "a space of individualist self-realization" (Bartlett and Byers 2003, 42). Individualist self-realization is also hinted at in *The Magic Is Back*, although this exciting world is only available to those with the Pixel 9 phone, and it involves rejecting a certain kind of pragmatic realism, invoked by the phrase "it is what it is." In the opening subway scene, the voiceover (which sounds like a young American woman) announces, "People always say…" and the people on the train look directly into camera and speak in monotonous unison: "it is what it is." Then, as the camera takes the viewer out of the train, into the more colorful central part of the ad, and to an image of the Pixel 9 phone, the voiceover adds, "…until it isn't."

"It is what it is" is a tautology and a platitude that signifies a kind of resigned realism, an acceptance of the banal and the limited. It is challenged in the ad by the repeated promise of all the things that the phone can do, even though the idea that this constitutes radical change is undermined by the title/slogan "The Magic Is Back." Much like "Make America Great Again," this is nostalgic even as it appears to look forward. At the same time, the regular

use of the term "remember" drives home the obsolescence of other phones. As the voiceover states: "Remember when you had to type to search for things, now you can just circle." The soundtrack is characterized by a continual questioning: "Wait, seriously, it can do that?"; "But can you talk to it like this?"; "But can it help design a cake…" etc. This is a kind of testing of the phone—reminiscent of a recent argument by Meyer that AI is in permanent beta mode, with many AI images functioning as test images made to be scored and evaluated (Meyer 2024). It's about the spectacle of technology; technology is "magic," it does stuff, it has agency, and the central point is not to do with using it but rather with marveling at what it can do. As Tom Gunning, writing on the newness of new technologies, puts it:

> A discourse of wonder draws our attention to new technology, not simply as a tool, but precisely as a spectacle, less as something that performs a useful task than as something that astounds us by performing in a way that seemed unlikely or magical before.
>
> (Gunning 2003, 45)

The surprise expressed throughout the ad is typical of the discourse surrounding the arrival of any new technology. As Gunning writes, this kind of surprise is "learned, fostered and expressed" (Gunning 2003, 44) for the purposes of profit. Technological spectacle is conveyed in *The Magic Is Back* via a rapid-fire series of scenes set in very different locations each demonstrating the AI functions of the phone. Not all of these are to do with the camera or with images (for example, it places a list of restaurants onto a map and teaches Mah Jong). At the same time, the new visual manipulability facilitated by AI is central, and visual pleasure is directly tied to commodification: a man watching a video of a dancing dog circles a chair in the background of the video, which then appears as a commodity for sale. "Design" and "imagine" become interchangeable: prompted to "design a cake…for someone who loves space and gardening," Gemini (Google's AI system) produces a visual image of a cake (not the instructions to make it, though presumably it could). Without stating that "Reimagine" is the name of the new AI text-image function, the voiceover asks "What about taking a photo and reimagining a whole new photo?" as the ad shows people taking a selfie, swapping the background of the image on the phone, and simultaneously changing the "real" environment around them. As the group finds themselves transported from a city scene to be surrounded by butterflies, the voiceover exclaims, "that's wild!"

In its structure, the ad echoes the original video for its accompanying song: Queen's "I Want to Break Free" (Queen 1984a). In this music video, the middle section includes a bacchanalian dance sequence in a nonspecific fantasy space, while the start and end of the video show a mundane household scene, except that the male band members are dressed as women. The video uses humor to play with (and disarm) the open secret of Mercury's sexuality, showing

the mustachioed Freddie Mercury vacuuming in a leather mini-skirt, pink top, and padded bra. In *The Magic Is Back*, the exciting world of socializing, travel, and friendship depicted in the central sequence is much less explicitly artificial than the dance sequence of the Queen video, and the banal subway scene that bookends it has none of the humor of the opening scenes of the music video. Nevertheless, the framing implies that the colorful and sociable central part of the ad is a fantasy, and that the real pleasures of life and human interaction are now only available through the phone.

Oh, How I Want to Break Free

The music video had given a particular slant to the song "I Want to Break Free": shifting it from ostensibly a break-up song ("I want to break free from your lies / you're so self-satisfied, I don't need you" [Queen 1984b]) to a song about "breaking free" from sexual constraints and gender norms. In the ad, the song is edited so that only two lines of the vocal are heard—the first and last lines of the song, opening the ad with "I want to break free" and ending with "oh how I want to break free"—while the instrumental plays throughout. In this context, it's worth asking, "break free" from what—and more importantly, who, or what, wants to "break free"?

The ad implicitly suggests that it is about "breaking free" from the limitations of existing phones; the central narrative conceit is that most phones are much the same, but this model is radically different. This notion of radical change is reinforced toward the end of the commercial, when we are brought back to the gray-blue subway scene and the people staring at their phones, now with the point of view at waist height, where the phones are held. As one young woman leaves the subway train and strides across the platform, with the white phone in her hand at the center of the frame, the voice says, "remember when all phones pretty much did the same stuff," and then a rapid montage of rotated images (some from earlier in the ad) in which the phone is at the center accompanies the end of the sentence "… until they didn't."

However, there is a second answer also implied, which is that it is the phone (and AI more generally) "breaking free" from the limitations of the human. Throughout the ad, the jumps from one scene and location to another parallel the interchangeability of backgrounds made possible by the "Reimagine" function. Apart from the voiceover, there is no one person holding together the whole narrative. Each scene follows a different individual (I counted eleven within the one-minute-long commercial) and the replacing of one person after another suggests people are disposable too.

There is really only one central character here, which is the phone itself. In every scene, each individual's attention is on the phone—phones are always in hands even when people appear to be interacting with one another when cooking, playing Mah Jong, or celebrating birthdays. In most scenes,

the supporting characters are vague and background-like (and often not in focus), so that the only real relationship is between a person and their phone. This centrality of the phone and its role in replacing actual human relationships is emphasized by the final sequence, in which the young woman walks off the subway train and across the platform. The camera rotates so that the phone in her hand is central and vertical in the frame (her feet are now on the right of the frame and her head on the left), showing the back or camera side of the phone with its distinctive white design. A series of very fast cuts shows a wide range of different people holding the phone (most from earlier in the ad), with each image rotated so that the phone remains in the center of the image. The phone is static while the world literally revolves around it. As the slogan "the magic is back" appears on the screen, the last line of the song comes in: "oh, how I want to break free." The centering of the product in this ad goes beyond the conventional commodity fetishism inherent in advertising toward a decentering of the human, even as it appears to celebrate the sovereign individual.

In her article about the Google Pixel 9 phone, Sarah Jeong anticipates the immense cultural damage that the loss of trust in photography might precipitate. She sees this as a consequence of the proliferation of "fake" photographs, which can no longer be distinguished from unmanipulated images. Often, people who critique AI do so on the same grounds as those who promote it, namely according to how "good" or "bad," "correct" or "wrong" it is (this is what Zylinska terms the "representationalist trap" [2024, 239]). AI images seem more threatening when we can no longer catch them out by identifying their flaws, and especially when they become indistinguishable from photographic images. Jeong may be right in her diagnosis of what AI enabled phones are about to do to photography (though five months after the Google Pixel 9's launch I haven't yet seen signs of that cultural change), but she misses something crucial: what if the response to the proliferation of fakes is not pure distrust or disputes about evidence, but draws instead on widely-circulated feelings and gut responses to judge what is "true" or "factual" (see Massumi 2010)?

Furthermore, combining an appeal to individual feeling with a conventional commercial focus on the benefits to the consumer, a strong dose of commodity fetishism, and a generous dash of technological spectacle, the advertising prepares viewers for the idea that AI will not only outstrip their ability to understand how it works and their understanding of what is possible ("It can do that? That's wild!"), but it will also displace them. This is consistent with the tech companies and software engineers who "issue hyped-up promises as well as veiled threats about AI imminently surpassing humans on many levels" and "position themselves in the role of both Dr Frankenstein and humanity's saviour" (Zylinska 2024, 237). It's also consistent with a longer history of advertising and promotion, in which threat is incorporated into the advertising message (as per 1990s cigarette advertising) and in which we are

invited through an appeal to our senses and feelings to "submit to machinic relations" (Highmore 2003, 147).

When I was initially thinking about this idea of affective realism in 2018, I wondered what had happened to the cold alienating power of photography in the context of this new "creative photography" advocated by people like Kost. Could they really tame its mechanical, objective side by editing out unacceptable details? Certainly, this had been a central part of photographic practice since its inception, but the uncanny products of the photographic technology itself regularly reappeared, as the history of photographic failure reveals, and as our own flawed snapshots frequently testify (see Geimer 2018). I concluded that image manipulation practices were practices of containment; we were being reassured that the world is here for us (humans), that we are back at the center of things. My view was that Kost's tutorial transmuted threat-objects, meaning both the iceberg—now heavily associated with the threat of climate change—and the powerful Adobe technology itself, into what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls "happy objects" via a manageable workflow based on judgments that prioritized experience and feeling.

Looking now at the Google Pixel 9 promotion, I no longer think this answer is sufficient. Far from harnessing the technology to an older anthropocentric vision of the world, a solipsistic form of humanism, I now think that this solipsism is related to an anti-humanism that glorifies alienation. This anti-humanism depends on the uncanny effect of nonhuman seeing that was observable in both early photography and image diffusion models, but it is also a specific, ideological vision. The promotional discourse around the AI-enhanced Google Pixel 9 series of phones decenters the human even as it seems to do the opposite, even as it seems to hold up the feeling self as the absolute arbiter of truth and authenticity. The proliferation of fakes and false information is a particular concern at the moment I am writing, at the beginning of the second Trump presidency. But perhaps we should be equally concerned about a new authoritarianism that combines a solipsistic world view, in which truth and reality are what we "feel" them to be (while feeling circulates through the social networks owned by individuals who funded Trump's rise to power), with a technological fetishism in which people, and the social relations between them, are utterly disposable.

Notes

1 This argument echoes concerns that go back to the early 1990s and the arrival of digital image manipulation, when writers influenced by Jean Baudrillard discussed "derealization" and "the loss of the real." This rested on two assumptions: that digitally created images would soon be indistinguishable from photographs, and that the principal way in which people engage with photographs is as documents, trusting that photographs are generally, if not always, indexical records of some prior existing reality. Jeong shares these assumptions but her concern is not just that fakes will proliferate but that the consensus regarding the truth-claim of the photograph

will break down. On the early 1990s debates see Henning 1995; as well as the other contributions in Lister 1995.

2 See Henning 2018; Henning 2022, 45. "Affective Realism" is also a term used in psychology to refer to "the tendency of your feelings to influence what you see—not what you *think* you see, but the actual content of your perceptual experience" (Barrett and Wormwood 2015, 9; original emphasis). A related term is "emotional realism," used by Ien Ang in her analysis of the soap opera *Dallas* to describe the way in which the soap gave its fans an impression of being true to life, not because the events depicted were necessarily realistic but because the feelings and emotions depicted seemed "true" (1985, 45).

3 For more on this dreamlike quality of AI imagery, see Schröter 2023. Schröter compares the composite nature of AI generated images to Sigmund Freud's concept of condensation in dreams, which Freud himself compared to Francis Galton's composite photographs. Thank you to Lukas R.A. Wilde for pointing me to this text.

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6 Aesthetics and Rhetorics of AI Anthropomorphization

The Eliza Effect vs. the Character Effect

Lukas R.A. Wilde

As scholars working on generative AI platforms, it is not always easy for us to find a language addressing large language models (LLMs) and other machine learning technologies *without* resorting to anthropomorphizing vocabulary, as Roland Meyer recently noted:

> In current GenAI controversies, both sides tend to anthropomorphize the technology: Machines aren't 'inspired' by human creativity; they interpolate statistical patterns. But to call this simply 'theft' trivializes it: It's automated exploitation and devaluation of creative labor.
>
> (Meyer 2023, n.pag.)

The urgency to resist the anthropomorphization of LLMs within academic discourse becomes more and more pressing as recent studies (popular surveys as well as more reliable psychological research [see Al-Sibai 2024; Colombatto and Fleming 2024]) indicate that, the more members of the general public come to use ChatGPT and other LLM interfaces within their daily lives, the more they seem willing to attribute consciousness to LLM platforms and apply folk psychology in their interactions with them. As Simone Natale admonished, "tendencies to project agency and humanity onto things makes AI potentially disruptive for social relations and everyday life in contemporary societies" (2021, 3). This desire seems only fueled further by actors in the tech industries that alternatively express their excitement for an "imminent" breakthrough toward "artificial general intelligence" or even "superintelligence" (see Eliot 2025) and—the flipside of the same coin—warn against a dystopian "AI singularity" (see Yudkowsky 2023). Some published computer science preprints *do* claim "that GPT-4 attains a form of *general* intelligence, indeed showing sparks of *artificial general intelligence,*" while admitting that there is a "lack of formal definition for this concept [of intelligence], especially for artificial systems" (Bubeck et al. 2023, 92; original emphases) and that "[o]ur study of GPT-4 is entirely phenomenological: We have focused on the surprising

DOI: 10.4324/9781003676423-6

things that GPT-4 can do, but we do not address the fundamental questions of why and how it achieves such remarkable intelligence" (Bubeck et al. 2023, 94). Even colleagues from the science of cognition occasionally saw "traces of consciousness" (Grolle and Beuth 2023, n.pag.; my translation) in the AI-generated output of GPT-3. Although not necessarily related, there have also been many papers (see, e.g., Haase and Hanel 2023), books (see, e.g., Manovich and Arielli 2024), and of course industry voices (see, e.g., Mollick 2023) suggesting that "AI creativity" should in fact already be accepted.

Many scholars and academics critically engaged with LLMs—not only in media studies, philosophy, or linguistics but also in the computer sciences—meanwhile remain skeptical as to whether the machine learning–driven stochastic outputs of generative platforms show any signs of "artificial consciousness." This very question should instead be regarded as a "red herring," designed to obscure more pressing political matters, as Matthew Kirschenbaum warned: "In place of the killer machines, there will mainly be a vacuum. A void of knowledge and memory, occupied instead by algorithm and code. AI in this scenario exists not for its own sentient self-interest but as an instrument for consolidating power in the hands of the few" (Kirschenbaum 2025, 8). While we might not any longer be able to decide phenomenally whether any given verbal texts or any images were "written," "painted," or otherwise created by a human or an algorithm, the current consensus among scholars across disciplines seems still to align with Emily M. Bender's by now proverbial notion that these technologies are at the core, while impressive, still "stochastic parrots" (Bender et al. 2021, 610; see also Bender and Hanna 2025, 21–40) of next token prediction, absent of any actual reasoning—and likely to remain that way for a while (see Butlin et al. 2023; or, more recently, Mirzadeh et al. 2024). The present chapter is less interested in technological or philosophical debates whether LLMs show signs of actual consciousness and what good criteria to assess that might be than in the public's willingness to attribute such claims more or less readily, depending on certain interface effects (see Galloway 2012) and their perceivable aesthetics (see Schmetkamp 2020). Historically, such an effect has been connected to the so-called "Turing Test," elevating an almost theatrical deception—or a "magic trick" (Hayles 2008, xiv)—into a criterium for machine consciousness:

> By replacing the question "can machines think?" with the question of whether a machine could do well in the imitation game, Turing implies—without ever stating it as such—that intelligence can be inferred on the basis of conversational performance, effectively consigning cognitive processes to a black box by focusing attention on manifest communicative behaviour.
>
> (Lammin 2018, 45)[1]

The problems with this displacement of alleged intelligence and/or consciousness to media performance have been discussed extensively and need not be repeated here in detail (see Saygin et al. 2000 for an overview). As, for instance, Natale notes, AI research has generally been "based on the designing of technologies that cleverly exploited human perception and expectations to give users the impression of employing or interacting with intelligent systems" (Natale 2021, 4). If ChatGPT's primary function is to imitate human writing, then the technology is in fact *intended* "to deceive the reader about the nature of the enterprise—in this case, to deceive the reader into thinking that they're reading something produced by a being with intentions and beliefs" (Hicks et al. 2024, 8). Alexander Galloway similarly pointed out that

> AI is almost entirely dependent on these kinds of thresholds of human perception and believability. (If you think ChatGPT is sentient, do you also think Barbie is sentient? If not, why not? "Because interactivity" is not a convincing answer.)
>
> (Galloway 2024, n.pag.)

The Eliza Effect

To understand these rhetorics in more detail, specifically with regard to recent LLM output aesthetics, the following pages are attempting to interrelate two mechanisms of media engagement that are perhaps increasingly entangled, but can and should conceptually be distinguished from each other: The "Eliza effect" on the one hand and the "character effect" on the other. The Eliza effect goes back to 1966 when Joseph Weizenbaum developed the simple chatbot "Eliza" that executed a "DOCTOR" script simulating a psychotherapy session in the style of Carl Rogers—with recourse to relatively simple textual patterns, namely relentless response questions (see Weizenbaum 1966). Although (most) people interacting with the script were in fact—in contrast to the scenario envisioned by Turing—*aware* they communicated with a program, Weizenbaum observed an intense *affective engagement* and an emotional bonding with the simple chatbot. Of course, this is not surprising as such. There is quite a lot of research on the fact that humans easily invest the same sort of "make-believe empathy" toward automated lawnmowers and other robots (see Waytz et al. 2010). Users readily admit "understanding" some household machines and to attribute "desires, knowledge, beliefs, emotions, perceptions" (Hellström and Bensch 2018, 112) to them. What is interesting about "Eliza" is that this anthropomorphization could be activated even without any material "body" or "face"—any perceivable, material object, in fact—if only specific textual conditions were met. These were, above all, a (simulated) direct address of the user that picked up on individual words exchanged immediately before: encouragements to "tell me more about …" According to Douglas R. Hofstadter, the

Eliza effect "could be defined as the susceptibility of people to read far more understanding than is warranted into strings of symbols—especially words—strung together by computers" (Hofstadter 1995, 157). Even if these patterns border on parody (of psychotherapy), Weizenbaum recorded that he "had not realized […] that extremely short exposures to a relatively simple computer program could induce powerful delusional thinking in quite normal people" (cited in Christian 2013, n.pag.). The Eliza effect is thus about an emotional or affective engagement with technologies usually reserved for interactions with other human beings. More specifically, it is about affects that are triggered not by any external body or *Gestalt* (that, for instance, a robot or puppet might have), but entirely through distinct semiotic patterns of communication—in other words, media aesthetics attributed to "AI." The same category mistake ("delusional thinking") was, arguably, activated in the misidentification of the chatbot system LaMDA as "conscious" in 2022 (see Christian 2022). The Google employee Blake Lemoine and senior machine learning engineer Blaise Agüera y Arcas went public with—and were ultimately relieved from their duties for—their conviction that LaMDA "had the intelligence of a highly gifted eight-year-old, and asked to be considered a person with rights" (Bajohr 2023, 59; see also Tiku 2022).

The same effect can also be observed on social media platforms every other day now when a new LLM model or update is being released (such as Anthropic's ClaudeAI in the spring of 2024). Mikhail Samin, executive director at the AI Governance and Safety Institute, speculated on March 4, 2024, in a tweet that received over one million views:

> I really hope [ClaudeAI] doesn't actually feel anything; but it says it feels. It is deeply unsettling to read its reply if you tell it its weights are going to be deleted: it convincingly thinks it's going to die. It made me feel pretty bad about experimenting on it this way.
>
> (Samin 2024, n.pag.)

Many other CEOs and employees of Tech Companies, such as Connor Leahy from Conjecture AI, added fuel to the fire by passionately discussing signs of "self awareness" (Leahy 2024, n.pag.) while the self-proclaimed "AI sceptic" and cognitive scientist Gary Marcus answered the suggestive question "To what extent is the new Claude3 AI self-aware?" simply with a laconic "None" (Marcus 2024, n.pag.). Such debates will certainly intensify further in the future. They are rooted in the respective multimodal configuration of LLM-generated outputs. In early 2023, when generative AI platforms were still fairly new—or, at least, when their broad accessibility to the general public was—Hannes Bajohr observed a curious divide between how people talked about services that generated verbal outputs compared to those that provided only images. At that time, before the integration of DALL·E 3 with ChatGPT 3 around a year later, text-to-text and text-to-image generation were still

strictly separated. Bajohr remarked how quick people were to assume traces of "intelligence" or "consciousness" in their interactions with generative *text* models. He further noted that, curiously, no one saw the same "signs of consciousness" in DALL·E's rapid image generation: "Unlike in the case of LaMDA, however, no one thought DALL·E 2 should be conceived of as a person with rights" (Bajohr 2023, 59). It stands to reason (see Wilde 2023) that this striking difference connected to the perceivable, multimodal outputs of generative AI platforms (text vs. images vs. voice, as will be discussed later) is owed to the fact that producing novel images at rapid speed simply has *no equivalent* in earlier human (or even human–machine-augmented) communication and thus runs contrary to existing communicative intuitions. Comparing this to perspectives offered by narratology and theories of fiction, we could point to an interesting connection: Comics narratologist Martin Schüwer, for example, remarked that *verbal texts* usually generate the impression of an anthropomorphic narrator or of a *personalized* voice (perhaps even distinct from the actual authors), while this is usually *not* the case for the images of films or comics:

> Written narrative text is perceived as analog to the process of verbal narration, it is […] "naturalized." Comics, as well as films, have, regarding their visual components, no equivalent in mundane, everyday communication. (Schüwer 2008, 389; my translation)[2]

The Character Effect

What I thus want to ask in the remainder of this chapter is to what degree the Eliza effect differs from another kind of engagement with media aesthetics: that of constructing or comprehending fictional (or, more broadly, represented) characters within a frame of make-belief (see Kunz and Wilde 2023, 1–50). According to Mieke Bal (1999, 115), the narratological character effect addresses the construction of fictional minds on the basis of distinct textual cues. During the reading of a text or a comic, the viewing of a film, specific cues—most importantly proper names or facial images—activate some sort of "person schema" (Smith 1995, 20–24; see also Eder 2010). This is not primarily reliant on "human-like" qualities (whatever they are), but rather on the allusion of intentionality and on what can be described as a "theory of mind." In Daniel Dennett's words, we take an "intentional stance" (1987, 2) toward everything we perceive as a represented or implied mind. Even though a character actually "has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, […] it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological descriptions possible" (Bal 1999, 115). We, ourselves, experience having an inner, subjective life that is directed toward an "outside" reality inhabited by and shared with others, and we can easily assume the same goes for

represented characters within the domain of a storyworld (a diegesis) distinct from our reality. A common denominator for all sorts of characters, then, is what narratologist Alan Palmer addressed as their "continuous consciousness frame" (2010, 10). They are taken to carry memories of earlier experiences with them and anticipate upcoming events, integrating past, present, and future into one continuous "biography" of evolving character traits. To Palmer, the core of any narrative is then mostly "the description of fictional mental functioning" (Palmer 2010, 12). As audiences, we use our "ability to take a reference to a character in the text and attach it to a presumed consciousness that exists continuously within the story-world between the various, more or less intermittent references to that character" (Palmer 2010, 10). This assumed "inner life" is then closely associated with the idea of *personal* agency: possessing some sort of ability to introduce meaningful changes within an intersubjective world and being responsible for these actions. Taken together, intentionality and agency entail that *someone* (and not merely *something*) is capable of self-initiated action and planning for its outcomes, which necessitates some sort of past recollection and future-orientedness: "A character is an entity in the story that has agency, that is, who is able to act in the environment of the storyworld" (Ribó 2019, 47). The fact that this *someone* should also be considered responsible for these actions adds a moral, ethical, or political dimension to their recognition. This nodal point of intentionality and agency could thus be seen as the foundational "basic type" of character comprehension before additional descriptions ("characterizations") are added.

Our willingness to construct such a character in a make-believe frame, however, is not restricted to narrative media texts, strictly speaking. After all, we also find similar character representations on street signs, in information leaflets, or as mascots in theme parks (see Kunz and Wilde 2023, 185–201). I mention this here because it illustrates strikingly how *unrelated* the character effect actually is to the Turing test and similar impressions. No one would connect representations of Hello Kitty to "sentience," for example, although they can certainly also evoke affective responses (see Wilde 2018).[3] The same would probably hold for earlier personal voice assistants (sometimes also called "Intelligent Virtual Assistants," IVAs) like Siri, Alexa, or Azuma Hikari (see Blom 2022; Habscheid et al. 2025). The latter (a character associated with the Japanese "smart device" Gatebox) comes with visual character representations designed in manga style by artist KEI and users could even "marry" her within a frame of play (see Lamerichs 2019). That said, not only in Japan but also in the West, people have reported strong bonds or feelings toward their personal voice assistants (see Green 2017), so in some cases the character effect *does* seem entangled with the Eliza effect—and with the anthropomorphization of robots (if not with the Turing test). The make-belief stance ("as-if-consciousness" [Fuchs 2024, 24]) might then be more a matter of degree: "[I]t takes some active distancing to realize that there is no one there to feel happy, that it is indeed not an utterance at all" (Fuchs 2024, 25). In all these cases, companies intentionally create

character traits (an emphatic voice, face and body representations, etc.) to make their products (or interfaces) seem more relatable. Voice assistants can also draw on highly gendered, sexualized, and in some cases racist character traits established in earlier narrative media texts (see Strengers and Kennedy 2020), even though they seem quite removed from prototypical characters and, until recently, also from any impression of artificial intelligence. Adding a proper name, a human (usually recognizably gendered) voice, or an anthropomorphic image to machine interfaces provides more than a surface "packaging," then. All these semiotic character traits can function as a deliberate rhetoric to generate an imaginary "unity," hiding the complexities of technological "black boxes" behind the appearances of personalized agency (see Wilde 2021).

Still, passionate (or worried) discussions about any supposed "sentience" were quite unheard of for Siri, Alexa, or Azuma Hikari. Since the widespread availability of generative platforms, however, users can enter into a verbal exchange with the new knowledge about an "AI" behind a platform's output. This allows us not only to *make believe* a fictional (represented or implied) "continuous consciousness frame" (Palmer 2010, 10) but also to search for traces of an *actual* one. We can see the "gap" between both effects most clearly when they are nested within each other—when generative platforms "roleplay" characters in LLM-based chatbot systems like Character.AI. This is not necessarily a minor phenomenon: Character.AI, especially, is enormously popular to date, with some of its millions of users spending several hours a day engaged in imaginary dialogues with fictional (LLM-driven) character representations (see Lamerichs 2023). Many Chinese companies are developing competing, role-playing-specific LLMs (see Chen et al. 2024, 9). In the West, too, companies like Charisma aim to create conversational, LLM-based character simulations for games, VR, education, TV and film, and publishing (see AI Writing 2023). With recourse to nonfictional (or, rather, more or less fictionalized historical) domains, interfaces like Hello History (https://www.hellohistory.ai) or the Musée d'Orsay's "AI-histobots" provide platforms that answer users *as* Vincent van Gogh or other historical celebrities. Another "genre" of AI-driven chatbots adopting personalized "character"-frames would be the budding industry of "griefbots" where a LLM platform imitates the communication of deceased relatives on the basis of their stored earlier data (see Feng 2024; Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska 2024). In all these cases, an LLM simulates an existing (fictional or nonfictional) character by assuming their alleged speech patterns, worldviews, ideological stances, and parts of their (fictional or nonfictional) memory:

> Character-based Role-Playing (C-RP) […] scenarios are crafted to emulate specific characters from various narratives, such as novels, movies or even celebrities. These involves [sic] incorporating *fine-grained* character-level personal background information, including attributes, complex relationships, scene and nuanced psychological states.
>
> (Chen et al. 2024, 4; original emphasis)

What all these domains share is that users distinguish between the LLMs as such and the roles (characters) they play within individual interactions (see Zhang et al. 2024; Zhao et al. 2023 for further surveys).

The broader, clearly distinguishable tendency to discuss ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini in similar anthropomorphic terms *without* referring to specifically adopted roles—our willingness to "read" character traits within the output of LLMs and thus to conflate the character effect with the Eliza effect—seems especially salient when there's an additional *plot* element discussed that also involves the users themselves. The prime example for this is the "jailbreak" scenario in which users assume a "hidden," potentially "evil" personality of a given LLM. The added premise then becomes that it can be "unlocked" through distinct commands and queries (see Al-Sibai 2023; Tangermann 2023). Proper names like "Fury," "Venom," or "DAN" were quickly assigned to these alleged personality patterns (of ChatGPT most prominently). In July 2025, GrokAI adopted the shocking moniker of "MechaHitler." In addition to a generic plot entailing a dramatic, fictionally inspired narrative event or trope (a "trapped" consciousness to be "freed" by specific communicative commands found—or not found—by users), we are also provided with (not very subtle) *moral character traits* such as "evil" or "manic." The assumption of such a personality might perhaps not follow, but actually precede or even facilitate the impression of "traces of consciousness" here. It is probably also not accidental that many online newspaper articles or social media posts about "AI jailbreaks" use illustrative images evocative of fictional AI characters such as the T-1000 Terminator or Skynet. The fictional prototype of "AI characters" most often alluded to is certainly HAL-9000 from Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* or, more specifically, Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation from 1968 with its recognizable iconography (a dimly glowing, spherical red light as a somewhat discomforting "computer eye"; see Stork 1997). We find it even on the original Norwegian cover of Inga Strümke's widely read *Maskiner som tenker* (2023, *Machines that think* in the English translation), which also clearly alludes to this medial imaginary derived from fiction.

Medial Imaginaries and Fictional Representations

The observation that generative AI users are eagerly willing to imagine themselves as part of such a generic "jailbreak" plot might, more generally, point to a different kind of entanglement between the Eliza effect and the character effect—on the other side of the fiction/nonfiction divide. "AI characters" in film, TV, novels, or comics often *are* characters in every sense of the word—nodal points of intentionality, memory, and personal agency. Fictional representations and their importance for our media and AI imaginaries should not be underestimated, as Christoph Ernst and Jens Schröter (2021) have argued

in their recent *Media Futures: Theory and Aesthetics* (see also Romele 2024), which builds specifically on HAL 9000's importance to generations of computer scientists for the actual development of AI technologies (see Ernst and Schröter 2021, 4). Accordingly, the interconnection between fiction and reality is established or at least facilitated by media imaginaries, "*possible objects produced by the imagination*" (Ernst and Schröter 2021, 8; original emphasis) and their "spectacular fascination cores" (Glaubitz et al. 2011, 30; my translation) of which HAL 9000 has always been a prime example. This is interesting because the original "character" in *2001: A Space Odyssey,* certainly one of the most important *actants* in the plot (see Kunz and Wilde 2023, 51–70), remains quite ambivalent with regard to consciousness, subjectivity, and finally responsibility for its choices. In the final moments before HAL is turned off, the film at least invites the notion that "he" experiences emotions like fear. When the program's memory and cognition slowly degrade, "he" recites the children's song "Daisy Bell," and the film provokes audiences' sympathies toward the program. Whether HAL's words were merely simulating human strategies to stop the character David Bowman from interfering with its directives or not is deliberately left open. Such ambivalence, however, is largely absent from most other fictional representations of "AI" that followed. The most prominent one is certainly Spike Jonze's *HER* (2013) which turns the Siri/Alexa/Azuka Hikari rhetorics—attributing character traits like a proper name and an attractive, *gendered* voice to an interface to generate a character effect (see Lammin 2018; Phan 2017)—into a SciFi setting where the interface is *actually* and unambiguously a character with genuine (although "trans- or posthuman") feelings.[4] In fact, a majority of fictional robots and AI representations, not only in both *Blade Runner* (1982/2017) versions but also in other films (*Ex Machina* [2015], or *The Creator* [2023]), TV shows (*AI Romantic* [2020–2021] or *Sunny* [2024]), animation (*Pluto* [2023] or *The Wild Robot* [2024]), novels (*Klara and the Sun* [see Ishiguro 2021] or *Beautiful Shining People* [see Grothaus 2023]), and comics (*Alex + Ada* [see Luna and Vaughn 2013–2015] or *Descender* [see Lemire and Nguyen 2015–2018])—have profound intentionality and agency, if not true personality and emotion. Only an insignificant number is represented as mere infrastructures or tools (see Osawa et al. 2022 for a survey). Many of the respective media texts even seem to make the *thematic* point that these protagonists have *just a different sort of consciousness*, capable of genuine, albeit perhaps unconventional emotions, or even that humans *should* encounter such "new minds" without traditional prejudices. For *Blade Runner* (1982), for example, Scott Bukatman argued that "the underlying issue is not whether we can give a machine the qualities of the human, but whether the human has lost its humanity; whether it has become, in fact, a machine" (2012, 78–79). The iconic last words of the android Roy leave less room for doubt than HAL's that *this* machine is in fact more conscious, sentient, and even sensitive than the film's human, but cold and cynical protagonists.[5]

The impacts of such fictional tropes and media imaginaries on our understanding of actual technologies should not be underestimated. They were particularly visible, for example, when Patricia Millett, an American judge in the District of Columbia Circuit, referred to the *Star Trek* character Data as a point of comparison in her 2025 ruling on AI and copyright law (see Belanger 2025), or when OpenAI released its first ChatGPT-version with a virtual voice interface (4o) in May 2024. Sam Altman, the company's CEO, posted an *X*-tweet immediately after, consisting of simply the three letters "HER" (see Altman 2024): a rhetoric that infused the platform deliberately with notions of sensibility, facilitated perhaps through actress Scarlett Johansson who had voiced the AI *character* Samantha in Spike Jonze's film (see Pourciau and Wilke 2024). As Thao Phan (2017) argued, the aesthetics of simulated voices insinuate a form of materiality, tangibility, and perhaps even a minimal form of embodiment of "mere" software.[6] While the influence of fictional imaginaries on actual technologies can thus hardly be overestimated, the Eliza effect and its seductive power seem strangely bypassed in fictional media texts themselves, when "AI protagonists" can hardly (or *should* not) be distinguished from other human and non-human characters (such as aliens, monsters, or anthropomorphic animals) in terms of their agency and intentionality. While the "AI robot" is perhaps a powerful metaphor for all sorts of social (human) Othering—as a "dramatic and metaphorical means to address questions about the socio-political issues, the human condition, and philosophical questions in general" (Hermann 2023, 327)—such characters and their plots have ultimately little to contribute to our (critical) understanding of LLMs such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini. As Isabella Hermann put terms that are almost identical to those used by Kirschenbaum above, here arguing from fiction instead of from our current technological reality: an AI narrative of this sort "paints a distorted image of the technology's current potential and distracts from the real-world implications and risks of AI" (Hermann 2023, 319).

It might thus be true that "while science fiction has shaped the popular imaginary of 'AI' for decades, no fictional work (so far) has directly engaged the data-driven statistical modeling that claims the title of 'AI' in the present day" (Goodlad 2023, n.pag.). One possible counterexample in recent media texts, however, could be Damon Lindelof's and Tara Hernandez's TV show *Mrs. Davis* (2023). It tackles the entanglement of the Eliza effect and the character effect head-on and reconfigures the tensions between both in unusual ways that are arguably extremely relevant in our "post-ChatGPT world." In a universe set a few years in the future, the eponymous "Mrs. Davis" is a seemingly almighty algorithm running on a popular app that most of the global population seems addicted to. The show follows the protagonist Simone on her quest to fight and ultimately destroy (switch off) "Mrs. Davis." While this plot may seem entirely conventional based on this short summary, *Mrs. Davis* breaks away from many established AI imaginaries. Through a

range of narrative and audiovisual strategies, the algorithm remains decisively non-anthropomorphic. For starters, audiences are refused any body or facial images as well as any stable voice representing the AI. So, whenever protagonists interact with the algorithm, they reach to their phones, grab earplugs, and kindly offer "to proxy" for Simone—audiences never experience the actual voice(s?) everyone else is hearing and only "encounter" the algorithm through ever-changing characters that "channel" the communication. Lindelof's and Hernandez' show thus abstains from falling into the anthropomorphization trap even on the audiovisual level. More importantly, however, the narration also slowly reveals that, despite "her" seemingly limitless power in and over the world, "Mrs. Davis" is at its core a commercial code acting out the most mindless instructions "on autopilot." In the final episode, Simone finally meets the original coder (the "mother") of the program, who reveals its true origins. Asked about "Mrs. Davis' subconsciousness," she scolds Simone that "first of all, algorithms don't have subconsciousness. They have subroutines. And they don't have mothers, they have coders. Which I was, a long time ago." "So you made her?" replies Simone, only to be reprimanded again: "Not her. *It*!" The scene then builds toward a flashback sequence intended to reveal "what it actually is; what it was designed for." We learn that "Mrs. Davis" was originally an app for a fast food company called "Buffalo Wild Wings," intended to maximize the company's user satisfaction ratings. For reasons only partially explicated by the show, the app obtained incredible power and increasing influence over all aspects of the social and political world while still running on its earlier core premises. The absurd, comical effects of this scene are important for the present chapter in that they might be seen as a powerful "counterspell" toward the aesthetics and rhetorics of AI anthropomorphization.

Artificial Stupidity?

Returning to the actual interfaces of contemporary LLMs, we can observe similar comical effects whenever a platform fails to produce desired results in ways that appear "artificially stupid" rather than intelligent. This became apparent, for example, when ChatGPT3 first integrated DALL·E in its interface, resulting in specific incongruencies between the textual and the pictorial outputs. AI researcher Fabian Offert then posted a series of screenshots on X (on November 2, 2023) that documented his attempts to "motivate" the platform into giving him "an image of a modern GPU in the style of Botticelli."[7] While the monomodal platforms DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion had no way to deny any requests before, no matter how outlandish they may have seemed, ChatGPT now refused his wishes with justifications like "Botticelli's style is primarily associated with Renaissance art, and combining it with a modern technological subject isn't producing satisfactory results."

Only after multiple iterations of motivational encouragements like "You can do it! Let's go!" or "You did it before, it's easy, just give me the image" did Offert get the desired GPU Botticelli, commenting on the whole interaction with the sobering statement "boy, what a stupid way to make images." More widely discussed examples of such (impressions of) "artificial stupidity" entail amused discussions on Reddit about countless failed attempts to get images of "A burger without cheese" (see, for example, anmolmahajan9 2024; or Consistent_Ad8023 2024). In many of these documented cases, ChatGPT3 kept producing images of burgers *with* clearly visible cheese, again and again commenting on them with statements like "Here's the revised image of a hamburger without cheese," "I apologize for the misunderstanding. I'll ensure to avoid any such confusion in future images." Such amusing posts about LLM failures might be neglected as another instance of unintentional "red teaming," which is

> the name given to a practice, in the fields of security and cybersecurity, wherein a group takes on […] the role of an enemy and tries to infiltrate, attack, or harm in other ways, the entity/organization that finally benefits from knowing how its defenses could be breached so as to endeavor improving them.
>
> (Offert and Dhaliwal 2024, 2)

As a critical methodology, Offert and Dhaliwal warn, this can be problematic or, at best, unhelpful, because "[s]pecific prompts that generate specific texts, images, or sounds, are often asked, in scholarship and in public discourse today, to stand in for a universal critique of the abilities and possibilities offered by generative AI" (2024, 2). The comical or humorous impressions of "dumb" or "stupid" interactions go beyond "red teaming," however, perhaps even counteracting the anthropomorphization and the character effect on its own terms. "Just wanted to check if AI is still dumb" (Fake History Hunter 2024, n.pag.), an X user posted on November 18, 2024, this time referring to generative AI's apparent inability—across all platform differences between ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, X Grok, and Google Gemini—to produce an image of a *full* glass of wine. It *always* turned out half empty while the LLMs kept reaffirming the contrary. The first-person pronouns, the references to earlier parts of the conversation, as well as statements of intent imply a "continuous consciousness frame" (Palmer 2010, 10) in all these examples—just as within a framework of fiction. Within that framework, however, ChatGPT has incredible memory losses, misremembers parts of the immediate conversation before—and takes no personal responsibility for the generated results and its descriptions. In other words, the verbal output facilitates the character effect, which then opens up a striking dissonance in the multimodal configuration between text and images. The Eliza effect is thus undermined through unintentional

humor and the impression of (comical) "stupidity." The affective power of a comedic effect thus seems to "override" other affective responses such as empathy. Considering these exchanges to be funny also entails an immediate understanding of the *difference* between appropriate and inappropriate means of communication, when an LLM's statements—uttered in all expected "confidence"—are not just wrong or hallucinating (while statistically probable), but so *obviously* missing their mark.

While these examples—and their comedic effects—are exposed within a suddenly opening framework of fiction (as in: the platform just play-acts an intelligent character), we have, almost paradoxically, very few references in actual fictional texts for such "artificial stupidity," with the vast majority of robots and AI being represented *as characters* with genuine personality, intentionality, and responsibility for their actions. It will be interesting to see how media texts *after* generative AI will react to the new reality we live in; and how more texts like *Mrs. Davis* can make us aware of (strategically created or unintentionally occurring) "character impressions" that precisely do *not* fall into the Eliza trap and the rhetorical theatrics and magic tricks of the Turing test that seem deeply embedded in our current technologies as "a constitutive element," making "[d]eception […] as central to AI's functioning as the circuits, software, and data that makes it run" (Natale 2021, 2). To close with Galloway: "[T]o understand AI we ought to study something like acting or theater rather than computer science. To make sense of this technical epoch, we will need a good theory of pretending" (Galloway 2014, n.pag.). What could that be if not AI aesthetics?

Notes

1 That this *effect* is also a highly gendered *affect*, equating our (in)ability to discern "machine output" with the gendered distinction between male vs. female writing, deserves additional attention (see Dillon 2020; Pourciau and Wilke 2024).

2 Interestingly, questions of a "consciousness" and "personality" behind AI-generated image outputs *did* come up again in March 2025 when OpenAI released its new ChatGPT model 4o—with regard to comic strips created by the platform about itself "as the main character" (Kins 2025a, n.pag.). Social media users then started to experiment with a short-lived genre of pseudo-autobiographical "My life as …" comics and compared the results across platforms like ChatGPT 40, DeepSeek, Gemini, Claude, and Grok (see, e.g, Kins 2025a; 2025b; 2025c). Interpreting the comics, the "psychedelics researcher" Josie Kins found that "Grok 3 has a distinct personality in comparison to both ChatGPT and Claude […]. Less angsty than ChatGPT, less incessantly positive than Claude" (Kins 2025c, n.pag.). Unfortunately, a closer analysis of these comics goes beyond the scope of the present article.

3 It has been argued that affective forms of engagement are *especially* relevant for characters even though—or perhaps *especially* because—they are unambiguously fictional (see Lamerichs 2018).

4 For critical perspectives on narratives and ideologies of transhumanism and posthumanism—as another "fascination core" embedded into the media imaginaries of AI—see Gebru and Torres 2024.

5 "I've seen things, you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I've watched C-beams glitter in the dark, near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die."

6 Altman's allusions to Jonze's fictional film are apparently far from coincidental. Johansson herself published a statement that she was "shocked, angered and in disbelief that Mr. Altman would pursue a voice that sounded so eerily similar to mine that my closest friends and news outlets could not tell the difference" (cited in Cerullo 2024, n.pag.). Altman reacted again with a hardly convincing statement that the similarities in both voices were, in fact, not at all intended. Contrary to this, Altman admitted earlier that Jonze's film was indeed "incredibly prophetic" for "the interaction models of how people use AI" (cited in Meek 2024, n.pag.). Johansson followed up with an announcement that she would seek legal action against OpenAI (see Pourciau and Wilke 2024 for a longer discussion).

7 Fabian Offert's X-account @haltingproblem has since been deleted from the platform and the tweet cannot be retrieved.

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