

**THE AESTHETIC CRISIS IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A DISCUSSION
FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF JEAN BAUDRILLARD, SUSAN SONTAG, ANDRÉ BAZIN,
PIERRE LÉVY, AND JACQUES RANCIÈRE**

 <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.073-004>

Glauber Brasileiro Batista Filho¹

Abstract

The massive production of synthetic images and videos by generative artificial intelligence systems has precipitated an aesthetic crisis that compromises the ability to distinguish documentation from artifice and reconfigures the perception of reality. This article investigates this phenomenon through qualitative theoretical research, conducted as a narrative literature review that brings the thought of Jean Baudrillard, Susan Sontag, André Bazin, Pierre Lévy, and Jacques Rancière together as its conceptual framework. The general objective is to examine philosophically how images generated by these systems disrupt the aesthetic perception of reality. Its specific objectives are to analyze the fusion of the real and the virtual, investigate the manipulation of human affects by synthetic images, and discuss possibilities for resisting the corporate capture of the power of virtualization. The analysis indicates that the conceptual vocabulary of these five authors, formulated largely before the emergence of these technologies, accurately describes their aesthetic, ethical, and political effects, revealing a continuous trajectory from the indexical photograph to the simulacrum without a referent. The study concludes that the unreal has become the new real, and the artificial the new organicity of contemporary experience, since synthetic images have come to precede what they once merely represented. As a critical contribution, it identifies the reconstruction of collective forms of perception and interpretation as a means of confronting the homogenization promoted by the market logic of large digital corporations.

¹ Specialist in Neuroscience, Education, and Child Development
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS)
Specialist in Film and Audiovisual Language
Faculdade Iguaçu (FI)
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4464-4053>

Keywords: Aesthetic Crisis, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Simulacrum, Synthetic Image, Virtualization.

INTRODUCTION

Representing reality has never been a neutral act. The way the visible is organized reflects a political and ideological struggle over ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding the sensible world. Jacques Rancière (2012, p. 100) demonstrates that every configuration of the visible and the sayable, whether in the drawing of lines, the arrangement of words, or the distribution of surfaces, simultaneously delineates partitions of common space and ways of inhabiting it. He further argues that the hierarchy of the arts has historically been aligned with the social hierarchy, with a particular “social distribution of places and dignities” (Rancière, 2012, p. 116). It follows that the dominant class in each historical period tends to establish the legitimate perception of reality, delimiting what can be seen, felt, and, consequently, believed to be true. Cinema emerged within this arena of perceptual struggle. Its origins lie not in the autonomous art form it is customarily recognized as today, but in a technique for the immediate capture of nature before the lens, grounded in the “essential objectivity” of the photographic lens and the absence of human creative intervention at the moment of recording (Bazin, 2018).

The mechanical objectivity of the apparatus does not, however, eliminate the mediation of the person operating the camera. Whoever selects a spatiotemporal fragment of the world constructs a portion of reality for themselves, one invested with a particular aesthetic. The viewer retains the freedom to interpret what is presented, because, as Bazin (2018) himself acknowledges, “cinema is a language.” No video presents reality in its entirety. It presents a fragment edited and framed according to choices that already constitute, in themselves, an aesthetic and, ultimately, political position.

Throughout the twentieth century, the refinement of cinematic techniques made it possible to construct increasingly malleable parallel realities without abandoning reference to a prior photographic record. The mass adoption of generative artificial intelligence systems for images and videos in the first

half of the 2020s broke through this boundary. With only a few text prompts, any user could produce hyperrealistic, entirely artificial images, whether or not they originated from a real source. The result is a malleable reality shaped according to the criteria of whoever commissions it: unreal and sterile, produced without the transfer of reality from the thing to its reproduction described by Bazin (2018), and without any relationship to a referent that precedes it (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 13).

This shift has a history. The nations of the so-called Third World, which underwent an intense process of acculturation, particularly from the second half of the twentieth century onward, absorbed through American cinema an aesthetic detached from the social reality in which they actually lived. Baudrillard (1991, pp. 20–21) had already identified in this movement the same operation he discerned in Disneyland: the concealment of the hyperreality of the American way of life exported to the rest of the world. The contemporary imagination has inherited this logic and now reimagines a past that never existed, producing an ultra-processed nostalgia. Entire childhoods, affective memories, and domestic landscapes that no one ever inhabited are thus reconstructed and presented to perception with the same power of belief once reserved for photographs that had actually been taken.

This research is justified by the urgency of discussing an imagistic struggle that is already affecting perceptions of beauty and truth. Most generative artificial intelligence systems belong to a small number of transnational technology corporations and are shaping an artificial reality capable of fabricating entire events and commandeering the affects of others. In *Tela total* [Total Screen], Baudrillard had already warned that the unconditional expansion of the virtual, encompassing not only new images or remote simulation but the entire cyberspace of global finance and information superhighways, would bring about an “unprecedented desertification of real space and everything around us” (Baudrillard, 2005, pp. 16–17). He describes this conflict as a confrontation between a “very-high-frequency virtual space” and a “zero-frequency real space” (spelling follows the consulted edition, published before the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement) (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 16). This diagnosis resembles the power of virtualization described by Pierre Lévy (1996), open and collective in origin but now captured by the

logic of accumulation employed by the very companies that control the computational infrastructure of generative models.

The aesthetic crisis investigated here lies in the growing difficulty of distinguishing a recorded image from a fabricated one. It entails the collapse of verification criteria, which Baudrillard (1991, p. 14) described as the absence of a “Last Judgment” capable of distinguishing the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection. Machine-generated content circulates daily across social networks, progressively tearing through the fabric of reality and multiplying through mass sharing. The thesis advanced throughout this article is that the unreal has become the new real, and the artificial the new plastic organicity of contemporary experience.

In a society organized around a neoliberal, individualistic ideology, having access to technology capable of shaping one’s own imagistic desires within seconds is tantamount to possessing a digital weapon. It dissolves the Bazinian image-as-fact, sustained by the minimal guarantee that something existed before the lens at the moment of recording (Bazin, 2018), and replaces it with what might be called the post-image: an image that no longer derives from an event that has occurred, but anticipates and supersedes it. This radicalizes the inversion announced by Baudrillard (1991, p. 8) in relation to the map that comes to precede the territory. Today, the synthetic image likewise precedes reality, and reality, once the source of all representation, must ask the image for permission to be believed.

The general objective is to investigate philosophically how artificial intelligence systems that generate images and videos produce this disruption in the aesthetic perception of reality. The specific objectives are to analyze the contemporary fusion of the real and the virtual, understand the ways in which synthetic images manipulate human affects, and reflect on the creation of lines of flight (Deleuze; Guattari, 1995) capable of resisting the corporate capture of virtual potential. The discussion is grounded in a theoretical review of the thought of Jean Baudrillard, the anchor author of the research, Susan Sontag, André Bazin, Pierre Lévy, and Jacques Rancière. The Deleuze-Guattarian concept of the line of flight is

employed briefly in the conclusion as a complementary tool for thinking about resistance to the corporate capture of contemporary images and subjectivity.

What increasingly realistic systems establish is a new aesthetic paradigm: a perception inhabited by doubt, under the permanent suspicion that images may betray what they once purported to represent faithfully. This discomfort is compounded by a diffuse fear. Cameras, which Sontag (2004) had already compared to weapons when describing the photographic act as a “sublimated murder,” can capture, modify, and atomize whoever passes before them, reducing people to objects of observation and to a humanity that can readily be commodified. The discussion developed in the following sections proceeds from this perceptual, ethical, and political context.

METHODOLOGY

TYPE OF RESEARCH

This is theoretical research of a qualitative nature. It articulates philosophical and aesthetic concepts applied to the phenomenology of contemporary media, without resorting to data collection or statistical analysis. Its procedure is hermeneutic and uses the thought of Jean Baudrillard, Susan Sontag, André Bazin, Pierre Lévy, and Jacques Rancière as a conceptual apparatus for understanding a specific phenomenon: the impact of generative artificial intelligence systems for images and videos on the aesthetic perception of reality. The qualitative approach arises from the nature of the object itself, since the perceptual crisis established by synthetic images resists measurement and requires an interpretive analysis capable of bringing philosophy, aesthetics, and cultural criticism into dialogue.

TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTS

The technique employed is a narrative literature review. Unlike a systematic review, this approach does not require exhaustive, replicable, and previously registered search protocols. It allows for a discursive interpretation of the selected material and is widely used to discuss open-ended, emerging, or

theoretical topics (Rother, 2007). Here, it guided an intentional selection of philosophical works rather than a survey of the state of the art in artificial intelligence. The analysis is based on an exegesis of texts by the five authors around whom this article is structured: Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacros e simulação* [Simulacra and Simulation] (Baudrillard, 1991) and *Tela total* [Total Screen] (Baudrillard, 2005); Susan Sontag's *Sobre fotografia* [On Photography] (Sontag, 2004); André Bazin's *O que é o cinema?* [What Is Cinema?] (Bazin, 2018); Pierre Lévy's *O que é o virtual?* [Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age] (Lévy, 1996); and Jacques Rancière's *O destino das imagens* [The Future of the Image] (Rancière, 2012) and *A ficção documental: Marker e a ficção da memória* [Documentary Fiction: Marker and the Fiction of Memory] (Rancière, 2010). These works do not exhaust their authors' intellectual output. They were selected because each, in its own way, provides the conceptual vocabulary required by the problem under examination.

THEORETICALLY GROUNDED DISCUSSION

The discussion brings this framework into dialogue with the current context of generative image and video systems. It places concepts such as the simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1991), the Bazinian, ontologically grounded image-as-fact (Bazin, 2018), documentary fiction as a power to forge reality (Rancière, 2010), and the aesthetic unconscious, a notion through which Rancière (2009) considers the regimes that identify thought with artistic production, under critical tension. On this basis, the study assesses how the virtual, in Lévy's sense of the term (1996), has reconfigured the materiality and perception of human affects throughout the twenty-first century. The analysis is grounded not in the empirical verification of hypotheses, but in the ability of the philosophy of the image to cast critical light on a technical and cultural phenomenon that is still taking shape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

JEAN BAUDRILLARD AND THE FOUR PHASES OF THE IMAGE

Baudrillard's philosophy of simulation provides the most precise vocabulary for naming the phenomenon examined here: the progressive erasure of the boundary between the image that represents reality and the image that replaces it. The chapter "The Precession of Simulacra" opens with a maxim that appears biblical: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth. It is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 7).

It is worth unpacking what this statement asserts, because it reverses the conventional way of thinking about the copy. The simulacrum is commonly assumed to deceive because it conceals a truth that exists behind it, such that removing it would be enough to recover the original. Baudrillard argues the opposite: it is the very idea of truth that functions as a disguise, concealing the fact that there is no original to be recovered. Once this guarantor is removed, the simulacrum ceases to be a falsification of something and becomes all that remains. It is in this precise sense that it can be called true: not because it corresponds to reality, but because nothing subsists beyond it.

The way the maxim is presented reinforces this argument. Baudrillard attributes it to Ecclesiastes, although no verse in the biblical book contains such a passage, as scholars of his work have long noted. The epigraph is therefore itself a simulacrum: a text without an original that borrows the authority of a nonexistent sacred source so that it will be received as true. This is not a citation error. The philosopher enacts the book's thesis before articulating it, leading readers to experience, at the very threshold of the work, the mechanism the subsequent pages will describe.

Having formulated the principle, Baudrillard translates it into an image. Revisiting and reversing Borges's fable of cartographers whose map entirely covers the territory, the philosopher argues that "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 8). Representation no longer comes after the thing represented, but before it. What results is not a faithful copy of reality, but "a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal"

(Baudrillard, 1991, p. 8). This formulation anticipates the logic of contemporary generative systems, which do not copy a photographed referent. They synthesize novel images from statistical models trained on vast datasets, without any prior correspondence in the space-time of reality.

It is, however, in Baudrillard's formulation of the four successive phases of the image that this progression toward pure simulation receives its most systematic expression:

These would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and distorts a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 13)

Each phase corresponds to a distinct regime of appearance. The first belongs to the order of the sacrament, characteristic of the image that still maintains a relationship of good faith with what it represents. The second belongs to the order of maleficence, in which the image distorts reality while continuing to presuppose it as its origin. The third institutes the order of sorcery, in which the image merely pretends to be the appearance of something and conceals the fact that nothing exists behind it. The fourth leaves the order of appearance behind and inaugurates that of simulation proper (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 13).

Applied to generative systems, these four phases describe the trajectory from analog photography and cinema to the entirely synthetic image. The first corresponds to the classical regime of the photographic image, which operates as an indexical reflection of a reality that precedes it. The second encompasses the long historical process of technical manipulation, consisting of cuts, framing, retouching, and montage that distort reality without ceasing to use it as a reference. The third finds its most disturbing expression in hyperrealistic deepfake syntheses: videos that preserve the form of a document, whether testimony, record, or evidence, while concealing the absence of any corresponding profilmic event. What they establish is not exactly a lie, but uncertainty as to whether a referent exists. The fourth phase corresponds to the production of entirely synthetic images and videos by text-to-image and text-to-video systems that do not derive from any photographic record, even a distorted or

fictionalized one. Such images cease to refer to reality in any sense and constitute, in the author's terms, their own pure simulacrum, exchanging only with themselves within the combinatorial matrix learned by the model.

For Baudrillard (1991, p. 12), the history of the image has always also been the history of its murderous power, since images are “murderers of the real, murderers of their own model.” The decisive turning point, however, occurs in the transition from signs that conceal something to signs that conceal the fact that there is nothing:

The latter inaugurate the era of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and resurrected in advance. (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 14)

Written four decades earlier, this passage sheds light on the perceptual crisis established by the mass circulation of synthetic content on digital networks. No technical, legal, or perceptual authority can definitively and universally distinguish an authentic video from a generated one, or a photographed face from a synthesized face. The absence of this last judgment of the image constitutes the core of the problem addressed here: perception loses its criteria of verification and begins to operate under simultaneous suspicion and belief.

Baudrillard (1991, p. 14) further observes that, when reality ceases to be what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning and produces an “overvaluation of myths of origin and signs of reality,” as well as a “resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared.” This observation clarifies a now commonplace phenomenon: the industrial production of hyperrealistic images reconstructing pasts that were never lived. These are nostalgic reenactments of entire decades, modeled on the cinematic imagination of the American suburban middle classes, featuring domestic abundance and idealized familial affects. They recover no historical memory. Instead, they retrospectively fabricate an origin more convincing than any origin actually experienced.

This is the same operation the author described in Disneyland, “a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 20). The park does not exist to represent a fantasy separate from reality. It exists to conceal the fact that Los Angeles and the America surrounding it “are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 21), operating as “a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate [...] the fiction of the real” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 21). In the second half of the twentieth century, this deterrence required physical, corporate, and territorial infrastructure: a theme park, a studio, a broadcasting network. Generative systems miniaturize the same apparatus. Today, any user can produce within seconds, from a text prompt, a private Disneyland of fabricated memories without building a single set.

In an earlier passage from the same book, Baudrillard (1991, pp. 40–41) discusses the television experiment conducted in 1971 with the Loud family, who were subjected to three hundred hours of uninterrupted filming under the promise that they would be captured “as if TV were not there.” For the author, the significance of the episode lies in the fact that the selected family was already hyperreal even before filming began, “by virtue of its very selection: a typical ideal American family [...] the ideal heroine of the American way of life” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 41). What was being filmed was not a real family, but a statistical model of a family that the camera would merely consecrate as truth. Still within an analog regime, the episode anticipates what generative systems now do in an entirely synthetic manner: produce “typical,” statistically average faces, bodies, and family scenes, extracted from image datasets and presented as captures of a lived moment when, from the outset, they are combinations with no corresponding moment.

The political dimension of this analysis deserves attention. By characterizing contemporary simulation as a “strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 14), Baudrillard shows that the fabrication of images is never neutral. It always responds to a command model capable of being “reproduced an indefinite number of times” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 8). Today, these command matrices are statistical diffusion models and

the large image datasets that feed generative artificial intelligence systems, concentrated in the hands of a few transnational corporations. The production of the hyperreal therefore remains structurally controlled by those who possess the computational infrastructure, even though it is technically accessible to any individual. The murderous power of images described by Baudrillard (1991, p. 12) reappears in the twenty-first century as a concentrated power to generate simulacra on an industrial scale.

SUSAN SONTAG AND ANDRÉ BAZIN: PHOTOGRAPHY, BELIEF, AND TRUTH IN IMAGES

If Baudrillard offers the most radical diagnosis of the dissolution of the referent, Sontag and Bazin explain why analog photography and cinema were able to sustain a belief in the image that is now in decline. Sontag (2004) treats the problem as an ethical issue and examines the symbolic violence implicit in every act of photographing. Bazin (2018) develops an ontology of the photographic image and explains why photography, unlike painting, could claim an objective bond with reality. Read together, the two authors illuminate a two-sided crisis, since generative systems rupture both the ethical economy of appropriation described by Sontag and the ontological foundation of belief described by Bazin.

In the opening essay of *Sobre fotografia* [On Photography], “Na caverna de Platão” [“In Plato’s Cave”], Sontag (2004) states that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed,” an act that places the photographer “in a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge” and, therefore, power. For the author, “there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera” (Sontag, 2004). This aggression appears in everyday language, in which one speaks of “loading,” “aiming,” and “shooting” a camera, and in advertising that has historically sold the device as a “predatory weapon” (Sontag, 2004). Taking the analogy further, the author arrives at the most forceful formulation of her ethical thesis:

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder, a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. (Sontag, 2004)

This transformation of the photographed person into a possessed object underpins the ethical dilemma relevant to the present discussion. To photograph a body is to take possession of it, deprive it of part of its humanity, and make it available for uses beyond the photographed person's control. Sontag (2004) associates appropriation with a broader logic of consumption, recalling that "to consume means to burn, to use up" and therefore requires continuous replenishment. Hence, "images consume reality," and "cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete" (Sontag, 2004). Within this economy, the photographed body is readily converted into raw material for fashion, advertising, and entertainment.

While the camera was still at least a partially specialized instrument in the 1970s, it has now become an almost organic extension of the photographer. People photograph sunny days, starry nights, insects found at home, friends, relatives, and strangers. None of these acts escapes the economy of appropriation described by Sontag (2004), now practiced individually and without interruption, and aggravated by the ease, now commonplace, with which each image can be altered and transfigured according to the preferences of the person who captured it.

Before the digital age, cinema had already explored this ambiguity between photographing and possessing. Still in "Na caverna de Platão" ["In Plato's Cave"], Sontag (2004) herself invokes Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966), observing that "Antonioni has a fashion photographer hover convulsively over Veruschka's body, clicking away," and identifies in this encirclement a fantasy of sexualized possession of the photographed body (Sontag, 2004). The film's plot makes it possible to extend this reflection to the problem of photographic belief. The protagonist, a London photographer, happens to photograph a couple in a park and, after repeatedly enlarging the negative in his laboratory, becomes convinced that he has photographed a murder. When he returns to the location, he does in fact find a body in the bushes. Yet the more he enlarges and crops the image in search of evidence, the more its grain dissolves into abstraction, multiplying possible interpretations until the evidence vanishes. While remaining strictly within the analog regime, the film anticipates the question guiding this section: does

truth reside in the photograph as a record of an event, or in the multiple interpretations that can be extracted from it through successive technical transfigurations?

Bazin's ontology answers this question in its pre-digital form. For André Bazin (2018), photography is distinguished from painting by its "essential objectivity," and it is no coincidence that "the group of lenses constituting the photographic eye in lieu of the human eye is called, precisely, the 'objective.'" All other arts are grounded in the mediating presence of human beings, whereas "photography alone provides us with the advantage of their absence" (Bazin, 2018). In the author's words, "for the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent [...] an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man, according to a strict determinism" (Bazin, 2018). This mechanical genesis gives rise to a unique power of belief: when confronted with a photograph, "we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced [...] actually represented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space," because the photograph "benefits from a transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction" (Bazin, 2018).

Bazin (2018) connects this credulity to a deeper anthropological impulse dating back to ancient Egypt. Just as embalming sought to "save being through appearance" from the corrosion of time, photography and, subsequently, cinema satisfy the same "mummy complex" through technical and automatic means that precede any intention on the part of the person activating the shutter. Thus, "photography does not create eternity, as art does; it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption" (Bazin, 2018), while cinema fulfills "in time the objective character of photography [...] the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were" (Bazin, 2018).

This faith in the objectivity of the apparatus does not mean that Bazin disregarded the interpretive and necessarily partial dimension of every cinematic image. At the end of the essay "Ontologia da imagem fotográfica" ["The Ontology of the Photographic Image"], he reminds readers that, "on the other hand, cinema is a language" (Bazin, 2018). In "O mito do cinema total" ["The Myth of Total Cinema"],

he shows that the aspiration to reproduce reality in its entirety, with sound, color, depth, and movement restored in a “recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time” (Bazin, 2018), has operated since cinema’s origins as a guiding myth that has never been fully realized. An integral cinema capable of offering the complete illusion of life remains a horizon “from which we are still a long way” (Bazin, 2018).

The absolute reproduction of reality is therefore unattainable for Bazin as well. Cinema presents the reality before it while simultaneously shaping it through choices of framing, cutting, and editing, although its automatic photochemical foundation ensures that something did, in fact, exist before the lens. The viewer remains free to construct a particular interpretation of the same photographed fact, like the protagonist of *Blow-Up* confronted with the increasingly abstract grain of his enlargement. What was at stake in the analog image was not the absence of all subjective selection, but the minimal guarantee provided by the mechanical objectivity of the lens.

It is this guarantee that generative artificial intelligence erodes. Color filters, special effects, and digital retouching had already vastly expanded the possibilities of distortion, but they operated on a previously existing photographic record. They removed people from the background of a real scene, altered the colors of a landscape that had actually been photographed, or dramatized something that had at least once stood before the lens. Generative models dispense with this condition. The lens is replaced by statistical calculation without a shutter, light, or any object before it, capable of synthesizing bodies, faces, and landscapes with no transfer of reality whatsoever to guarantee their credibility. The Bazinian image-as-fact, grounded in the absence of creative intervention at the moment of recording, gives way to an image manufactured entirely through such intervention, now automated on an industrial scale and disguised in the objectivity that only photography could previously claim. What is lost is more than belief. Also lost is the elementary ethical condition that photographing a body should depend on the prior existence and consent of that body before a camera, a premise that the appropriation denounced by Sontag (2004) still preserved.

PIERRE LÉVY AND JACQUES RANCIÈRE: THE POWER OF VIRTUALIZATION AND THE TECHNIQUE THAT FORGES REALITY

What, then, constitutes the essence of the virtual? Is it a phantasmagorical illusion, a kind of negation of the tangible? For Pierre Lévy, this interpretation rests on a fundamental misconception. The virtual is not opposed to the real. It is the direct counterpart of the actual (Lévy, 1996). Whereas “actualizing” consists of finding a specific and closed solution to a preexisting problem, “virtualizing” makes the opposite, expansive movement, elevating an experience into an open field of questions and creative potentialities. It is a “mutation of identity,” a shift in the entity’s “ontological center of gravity” (Lévy, 1996).

This dynamic did not originate with the computer. Lévy (1996) demonstrates that virtualization has accompanied the human species since the process of hominization itself, and that writing already functioned as a powerful accelerator of this movement, desynchronizing and delocalizing memory long before the emergence of any digital technology. What is new today is its intensity, not its invention. Information, the body, affects, identity, and forms of collective life have all become objects of virtualization in a process accelerated and expanded by digital technology (Lévy, 1996).

There is an ambivalence here that Lévy (1996) himself acknowledges indirectly when he observes that physical and psychic life increasingly passes through economic, institutional, and technoscientific circuits. On the one hand, virtualization enhances the imagination and the extracorporeal presence of those who experience it. On the other, it allows itself to be captured by the logic of accumulation employed by large digital corporations, which transform avatars, identities, and affects into commodities available for consumption. This corporate appropriation suppresses precisely the most fertile aspect of virtualization, namely its open, collective, and indeterminate character, reducing it to the atomized repetition of consumption with no way out.

Cinema, in turn, does not merely record this increasingly malleable reality. It also forges it, in the precise sense Jacques Rancière assigns to the term. For the philosopher, the image is never a faithful copy

or passive reflection of an object. It is a regime of relations between visible elements and utterances, what he proposes calling *imagéité*, a set of operations that connect and disconnect the visible from its signification (Rancière, 2012, pp. 11–12). His reading of the opening shots of *A grande testemunha* [Au Hasard Balthazar], by Robert Bresson, demonstrates this point. By fragmenting the donkey's baptism scene through close-ups of the children's hands and disconnecting voices from the faces speaking, the filmmaker offers no indication of the narrative logic and creates, from the very first shots, a regime of relations among elements and functions (Rancière, 2012, pp. 11–12), reducing the action to pure operations of connection and rupture between what is seen and what is said.

This power to forge is historically situated within the tension between two measures. On the one hand is the great parataxis, the collapse of every narrative system of causes and effects in favor of a chaotic juxtaposition of sensible intensities (Rancière, 2012, pp. 53–54). On the other is the sentence-image, which can retain the power of this parataxis without becoming lost in it by combining a sentence-function of linkage with an image-function of sensory rupture (Rancière, 2012, pp. 55–56). The same power manifests itself in two forms of montage that the author distinguishes precisely: dialectical montage, which brings heterogeneous elements together to produce a revelatory shock, as in the famous Surrealist encounter between the umbrella and the sewing machine or in political photomontages that expose the economic violence concealed by official rhetoric; and symbolic montage, which weaves a hidden familiarity among disparate elements, an analogy Rancière calls mystery, capable of revealing an unexpected co-belonging among apparently distant images (Rancière, 2012, pp. 65–67).

It is this conception of fiction as fabrication rather than falsehood that guides the analysis devoted to Chris Marker's documentary *O túmulo de Alexandre* [The Last Bolshevik]. In the author's words, "To feign does not originally mean to deceive, but to forge. Fiction is the practice of artistic means to construct a 'system' of represented actions, assembled forms, and signs that respond to one another" (Rancière, 2010, p. 180). Hence, "a 'documentary film' is not the opposite of a 'fiction film,'" since both share the same artistic work of "breaking a story down into sequences or editing stories, connecting and

separating voices and bodies, sounds and images” (Rancière, 2010, p. 180). By interweaving real archival materials, testimony, and Stalinist propaganda from the past into a new poetic narrative devoted to the memory of Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin, Marker does not preserve a memory. He creates one. As Rancière observes, “a memory is not a collection of recollections in consciousness,” but “a particular set, a particular arrangement of signs, traces, and monuments” (Rancière, 2010, p. 179), an arrangement that the montage in this film deliberately constructs.

In this case, montage does not organize a stable chronology. It brings different historical periods into dialogue, freely playing with the agreements and disagreements between narrative voices and series of images from heterogeneous sources. It unites the power of a mute imprint, born from the encounter between the muteness of the machine and the silence of things, with the power of montage, which freely constructs a history and a meaning (Rancière, 2010, p. 182). It thus forges a history that none of the images possessed in isolation.

This power to forge reality runs through both Lévy’s virtualization and Rancière’s documentary fiction, and it is precisely what generative systems radicalize. Cinema has always depended on human technique and decisions about framing and montage to dramatize the ordinary, elevate everyday life, or trivialize catastrophe. Generative models automate and accelerate this power of fabrication and place it within the reach of any user, without the mediation of an artistic project or conscious poetics, producing a malleable reality that imposes itself on perception with a force of conviction previously attainable only by a carefully constructed work.

CONCLUSION

This investigation began with the hypothesis that generative artificial intelligence systems do more than technically refine image manipulation. They automate a power to simulate, appropriate, and forge reality that Baudrillard, Sontag, Bazin, Lévy, and Rancière had already identified long before these technologies existed. The review confirms this hypothesis. The distinction between image-as-record and

image-as-simulacrum, between photographic document and generative fiction, did not emerge with artificial intelligence. It is the culmination of a trajectory prepared by photography, cinema, and mass culture, now taken to its limit by systems capable of producing, without any photographed referent, images as convincing as an apparently self-evident camera record.

Each author contributed a particular perspective. The four phases of the image (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 13) described the transition from the reflection of a profound reality to a simulacrum without a referent, while the interpretation of Disneyland as a “deterrence machine” (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 21) revealed the political and economic dimension of this transformation. Sontag (2004) and Bazin (2018) explained the two foundations dissolved by the synthetic image: the ethical economy of appropriating the photographed body and the ontological belief in the prior existence of the referent before the lens. Lévy (1996) and Rancière (2010; 2012) demonstrated that virtualization and montage have always presupposed a power of openness and fabrication predating computing, one that has now been captured by transnational corporations and simultaneously automated in generative models.

The evolution of visual effects in cinema itself makes it possible to reconstruct this trajectory empirically. From the practical effects and physical miniatures of the earliest science-fiction films to digital computer-generated effects, which became more prominent beginning in the 1990s, and from these to contemporary artificial intelligence video generators such as Veo 3, developed by Google, one can observe the progressive replacement of human compositional techniques with automated statistical processes. In earlier stages, Baudrillard’s second phase predominated: the image distorted reality but still originated from a photographic record or physical miniature that actually existed before the camera. The generation of entirely synthetic video inaugurates the fourth phase (Baudrillard, 1991, p. 13): images that bear no relation whatsoever to any prior reality and are produced solely from the combinatorial matrix learned by the model.

When placed at the service of reconstructing pasts and cultural identities, this power reveals its political reach. Baudrillard (1991, pp. 20–21) interpreted Disneyland as an apparatus designed to conceal

the fact that the America surrounding it had already become hyperreal. A similar movement can be recognized in the global exportation of sports brands, soft drinks, fast-food chains, and cinematic blockbusters about American military aviation, of which Tony Scott's *Top Gun* (1986) is an emblematic example because of the role it played in enhancing the public image of the United States armed forces. This strategy of deterrence predates generative artificial intelligence by decades, but generative AI now amplifies and individualizes it. Any user can generate nostalgic images of a Brazilian childhood in the 1980s overlaid, for example, with the suburban aesthetic and warm cinematography of Steven Spielberg's films, thereby fabricating an affective origin that reproduces, without regard for historical or geographical fidelity, the same American way of life imaginary that Baudrillard (1991, p. 41) identified in the programmed hyperreality of the Loud family.

The crisis is not limited to the difficulty of distinguishing photographed images from synthesized ones. It affects the ability to remember and recognize oneself as a subject with a history of one's own. In discussing *O túmulo de Alexandre* [The Last Bolshevik], Rancière (2010, p. 179) demonstrated that memory is an arrangement of signs and traces constructed through montage, while Lévy (1996) noted that writing had already desynchronized and delocalized human memory long before the computer. Twentieth-century science fiction anticipated, in speculative form, the most radical consequences of this logic. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Androides sonham com ovelhas elétricas?* [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?], replicants are given artificially implanted childhood memories that are subjectively indistinguishable from memories of actual experiences. Only the Voight-Kampff test, which measures involuntary reactions to questions with emotional content, can eventually distinguish the human from the artificial. Automated profiles now communicate on social networks in ways that are almost indistinguishable from human interlocutors. Although technologies currently exist that can identify whether a user is a robot, in the rush of everyday life we ultimately interact with and encounter synthetic users without realizing it. Childhoods and adolescent years that were

never lived can be fabricated on demand, most often producing images or videos aesthetically similar to the highly idealized 1980s films of Robert Zemeckis or John Hughes.

It is therefore argued that the unreal has become the new real, and the artificial the new plastic organicity of contemporary experience. This is not because material reality has ceased to exist, but because perceptual belief, previously anchored in the mechanical objectivity of the photographic lens (Bazin, 2018), has migrated to images that require no referent whatsoever. Much of the dystopian fiction of the last century, including Dick's narratives that inspired Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002), has ceased to describe a hypothetical future and now describes features already observable in the present: pervasive surveillance, fabricated identities, and an economy of images that Baudrillard (1991) anticipated in the form of simulation and deterrence.

The same diagnosis applies to the everyday capture of images. The photographic appropriation of others, described by Sontag (2004) as a "sublimated murder" committed against those photographed without their knowledge or consent, has acquired a new technical infrastructure in Ray-Ban Meta smart glasses. Equipped with a camera and artificial intelligence, they can record strangers in public spaces without those people noticing or authorizing the recording. This configuration resembles the apparatus imagined by Kathryn Bigelow in *Estranhos prazeres* [Strange Days] (1995), whose fictional SQUID technology makes it possible to record and clandestinely commercialize the sensations and experiences of others. What appeared there as speculative extrapolation became, decades later, a technically feasible and commercially available practice in which the body and image of another person once again become commodities that can be captured without consent.

The hyper-surveillance enabled by these technologies resonates with the corporate capture described by Lévy (1996), since physical and psychic life, traversed by economic, institutional, and technoscientific circuits, becomes data available for commercial exploitation and, potentially, social control. Peter Weir's *O show de Truman* [The Truman Show] (1998), in which the protagonist's entire existence is broadcast live to a global audience without his knowledge, and *Minority Report*, in which a

policing system predicts and punishes crimes before they occur, function here as fictional representations that anticipated the normalization of uninterrupted surveillance as an ordinary condition of existence. Like Baudrillard's Disneyland, this surveillance is concealed beneath the appearance of entertainment, technological convenience, or public safety.

Resisting this form of neoliberal atomization of the subject requires the reconstruction of collective ways of perceiving and interpreting images. Lévy (1996) warned that virtualization captured by the logic of accumulation risks being reduced to an atomized repetition of consumption with no way out. Bazin (2018) and Rancière (2012, pp. 65–67) demonstrated that every image, even the most objective, remains open to a plurality of interpretations and relationships of meaning constructed by those who perceive it. Contemporary subjectivity therefore constitutes an arena of political struggle, and the interpretive and collective openness of the image, now threatened by the statistical standardization of generative models, represents one of the few peaceful “lines of flight” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1995) available in the face of the homogenization promoted by large technology corporations.

The central contribution of this study is to demonstrate that the framework constructed by Baudrillard, Sontag, Bazin, Lévy, and Rancière, formulated largely before generative systems existed, remains effective in describing and problematizing their aesthetic, ethical, and political effects. Simulacrum, photographic appropriation, the objectivity of the lens, virtualization, and *imagéité* accurately name phenomena that, without this vocabulary, would risk being described solely in technical or market terms, stripped of their critical dimension. By anticipating the same concerns in narrative form, the science fiction of the last century helps us understand that the dystopian future once read as a hypothesis now presents itself as the present, populated by images and commodities that can no longer be reliably distinguished from the reality they once purported merely to record.

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