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We Have Always Been Cake

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Since the release in August 2022 of the Beta versions of 'Midjourney', DALL-E and Stable Diffusion, the popular machine learning models that generate pictures from natural language prompts, hundreds of millions of new images have been made. At the current pace, in thetime between writing this text and going to print, a billion more will materialize into the ether. These estimates change every day, ever since algorithms write algorithms for algorithms. A Pandora's box of procedurally generated imagery has been cracked open and the uncanny spectacle of the Unreal is haunting us live in slow motion, injected into the collective consciousness through the liquid crystal screen portal of personal devices.

When nothing is real, everything is possible.

As the late Paul Virilio vividly noted:

"[Speed] perverts the illusory order of normal perception, the order of arrival of information. What could have seemed simultaneous is diversified and decomposes. With speed, the world keeps on coming at us, to the detriment of the object, which is itself now assimilated to the sending of information. It is this intervention that destroys the world as we know it, a technique now reproducing permanently the violence of the accident; the mystery of speed remains a secret of light and heat from which even sound is missing."

The dizzying speed at which these images are being produced and circulated doesn't allow for the human brain to properly process nor make sense of the implications of this exponential excess of information: a technological acceleration of such magnitude can be compared to a sort of Copernican Trauma. But unlike an unexpected traumatic event, the evolution of high-quality, "realistic" digital imagery has been a long time coming, continuously challenging the forensic value of the visual media archive, and increasingly making us *question the nature of our reality*[1].

The history of technologies deployed to craft an illusion of reality is as old as theatre, and these have often emerged accidentally from scientific experimentation, which is then applied into a variety of fields. Holography for example was invented in an attempt to improve machine vision by upgrading electronic microscopes in the late 40s but ended up igniting an entirely new artistic genre, rendered famous worldwide by the hologram of Alice Cooper by Salvador Dali and later by the 360 degrees optical illusion 'Dali Painting Gala' exhibited in 1976.

Several decades later, some of the most compelling holographic incantations conjured legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum performing on stage with an orchestra in Dubai and Paris, and Kim Kardashian's late father wishing her a happy 40th birthday. At the end of the video recordings of the performances, the figures slowly dissolve into the background leaving a wavy trail of glitter, exactly like the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella. Kim's former husband Kanye West commissioned the work from Holonet, a company specialized in "synthetic reality" for the entertainment industry as well as wealthy private individuals wishing to make their Disney fantasy dreams come true.

The intensity of the holographic artifice lies in its ghostly, elusive nature: its existence stretches somewhere between the second and the third dimension. It can only be determined in the act of perception of the viewer. The image it forms is not defined if not from a set angle and because of the human eye's anatomical properties.

Holography is a technique that enables a light field (which is generally the result of a light source scattered off objects) to be recorded and later reconstructed when the original light field is no longer present, due to the absence of the original objects[2].

Analogously, Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality powerfully deceive perception and defy the understanding of physics, often more persuasively than "immersive" VR and gaming environments. Believing in the presence of the digitally generated object in the field of view depends on AR designers' skill in adjusting the overlapping mesh grids and by approximating the perceptive lag between the focal point in the viewer's retina and the pixels on the screen or the eyeglasses lens. Eventually what matters is whether or not it "looks like" it's there. Even AI-generated images crafted in the attempt to achieve quasi-verisimilitude elicit the activation of a sort of Autofill effect in the brain, as we subconsciously try to fill in the gap between what we see and what it reminds us of.

The disorientation caused by the constant bombardment of technological novelty and visual informational noise in the digital space seems to have encouraged a series of somehow synaesthetic phenomena in vernacular visual culture, all purely analog nonetheless.

For example, surrealist face makeup is immensely popular, and self-taught talents are developing their skill by tapping into a bottomless archive of art history mood boards, creating original art, or perfectly imitating augmented reality face filter glitch effects with hollowed-out sections, mouths as eyes, and eyes as mouths.

Similarly, the trendy DIY phenomenon of crafting cakes that look like plastic, metal objects, savory meals or body parts has boomed on Instagram, Youtube and Tiktok in the past couple of years. Some incredibly gifted artists were able to reproduce a perfect Canon 5D camera, an iPhone, a Minecraft creeper, and a Nintendo Gameboy, as well as a lifelike human arm covered in tattoos. "*When Nothing is real, Everything is possible.*"[3]

Another instance of manipulation of the perception of reality and identity in mainstream culture is the 2016 music video "Famous", featuring incredibly lifelike wax figures of controversial celebrities.

When the video came out it triggered outrage amongst many privacy and personality rights advocates, women's rights groups in particular.

Personality rights, sometimes referred to as the right of publicity, are rights for an individual to control the commercial use of their identities, such as name, image, likeness, or other unequivocal identifiers.

Who owns the right to the image when images are everywhere, are created by everyone and no one and can't be unseen?

With the advent of AI-generated imagery, urgent questions around the efficacy and accuracy of the automation of digital identification processes also emerge.

Holographic elements are used in biometric passports superimposed to standard photo IDs to prove their authenticity by virtue of the sophisticated techniques required to prepare them, as it would be very difficult to reverse engineer and replicate one for criminal purposes. Some of the leading tech R&D initiatives specialize in face recognition, focusing on improving the accuracy of scanning devices in border zones, airports, governmental buildings and so on. Even if these tools were developed for and commissioned by clients such as governmental institutions, surveillance companies and above all the military, we take advantage of these innovations daily in our mundane activities as we cross physical thresholds and unlock exclusive access to countless services with an Apple Face ID. However, even if these tools are improving exponentially, it might be impossible to eliminate the margin of error completely.

Adobe has notoriously restricted users' ability to photoshop images of money in an effort to prevent the manufacturing of counterfeit bills. Yet there are hundreds of unauthorized tutorials online to circumvent the block. Likewise, DALL-E has a rigorous (and somewhat puritan) policy on creating images of real people and political and religious figures. Still, other open source software are gradually opting for a less rigid approach, as

their developers probably realize that limiting the creative freedom of users could turn out to be impracticable, and even backfire by fueling even more of their forbidden desires.

Deepfake pornography is prohibited by law in many countries and the issue has sparked a transnational ethical debate, yet it has already become a booming online industry worldwide. The victims are not only celebrities but often vulnerable individuals and minors. On the other hand, software and tools to detect, flag and remove "non-consensual content" are being developed, but they are still far from being advanced enough for forensic analysis. All these real and fake images being produced and circulated at exponential speed are de facto still indistinguishable.

What entities hold permission to control the freedom to imagine and create from scratch? Who has the authority to decide and the power to enforce rules on the creation of images?

For now, the most efficient measures are being applied to thwart the development of tools to realistically edit official documents, legal certificates, and electronic signatures so they do not compromise the power of border control enforcement agencies.

But we are constantly reminded that in the Metaverse we won't need any passports, even if it's still full of borders and accessibility barriers.

Many of these techniques of "synthetic truthfulness" are not new, yet they are marketed as the latest, most groundbreaking revelation by corporate ventures desperately trying to slow down expectations around the speed of progress. The latest Zuckerberg campaign to promote his version of the Metaverse is a striking example[4].

Cartoon avatars of the Gorillaz sang alongside band members at the MTV EMAs, making history as one of the most outstanding performances in music history. It was 2005. The debut AI news anchorwoman in China read the news broadcast back in 2018, the year after a popular Deep Fake of Obama by the University of Washington researchers ended up on all main news outlets saying things like "I would never say these things". The fabricated speech was real-

ized through the combination of existing video footage and motion capture, a technique used in cinema and game design since the late 80s and early 90s. In the same way, the recent speech by Volodymir Zelensky surrendering the fight against Russia was digitally manufactured. Anyone with access to these tools can type the text of an imaginary, but plausible headline about the ongoing war in Ukraine, and these would likely spit out a credible photograph of a future explosion in "4K, extremely detailed" with several aesthetic styles and angles to choose from.

Shutterstock recently announced a partnership with OpenAI to integrate image generation with DALL-E, weeks after the publication of a very convincing podcast featuring a conversation between Steve Jobs and Joe Rogan chatting on the future of AI.

A poorly paid, precarious staff in a remotely managed newsroom is probably ill equipped to establish the authenticity of these sources, let alone the average consumer.

As the field becomes progressively more enmeshed with entertainment and social media in the context of corporate platform capitalism, there has been less emphasis on developing mechanisms for the enforcement of truthfulness standards in journalism.

Expectations and pretenses of "objectivity" in journalism and documentary have been abandoned by different schools of thought, media theorists, philosophers and even historians, yet the newly discovered computational ability to artificially generate realistic images, that numerous agents perceive as real, implies a cascade of consequences on the ecology of human knowledge, that hasn't been mapped appropriately.

The need for recognisability and detectability of facial features at all times is inescapably assumed as THE essential precondition for the safety of humankind in the modern hyperchaotic urban context, for the smooth running of public administration, transportation, cultural events and movement across space.

In 2017 a young man in a plushy shark costume was arrested in Austria, weeks after the infamous "burka ban," a controversial law limiting the freedom to cover one's face, including for religious reasons, took effect. The order states:

"Off-piste ski masks, surgical masks outside of hospitals, and party masks are included." Similar laws have been passed throughout Europe in the past years, conspicuously due to the radicalization of the political right in the continent that a highly polarised, ruthless media landscape helped consolidate.

The threat the dancing man posed, set a dangerous precedent: for the police, any ill-intentioned individual of any age, gender, race, sexuality, citizenship, religion, and political affiliations who would dare provide an excuse to disguise their IDENTITY, sacred indicator of existence for the contemporary subject would, hence daring to challenge the fate that the authority of the State prescribed for them: the discreet fate of a featureless decorative nondescript passerby in an architectural rendering of a model city. The model citizen.

The event surprisingly didn't trigger a mediatic outrage proportional to the absurdity of the accusation. Still, the fate of the shark man is an

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ominous warning about the expansion of these kinds of controls that have been targeted at Muslim women with little widespread opposition.

Yet, after March 2020, when the new pervasive compulsory measure of wearing a face mask to limit the spread of Covid-19 was introduced, the glaring contradiction it would immediately reveal about the fragility of the Face ID regime was largely overlooked. Noticeably in the mainstream public debate. In private, in anonymous discussion forums and secret Telegram channels, conversations proliferated about strategies and reports on the control vacuum portal that the new temporary regulations unlocked: de facto, in many traditionally hyper-restricted spatial instances, one could seamlessly cross tens of "security" thresholds without ever showing their face to a law enforcement representative. Hampering contagion became the priority in the hierarchy of planetary scale risks to be curtailed. Moreover, most of the planet's travel nodes hadn't yet set up advanced digital face-scanning tech, which would still work with the mask.

This exceptional laxness has been accepted as entirely normal in a significant fraction of the planet for a short time. A regime of assumed implicit trust in the prevailing general obedience to the border control rule has allowed an unprecedented expansion of the window of flexibility of law enforcement which tolerated the daily free movement of millions of individuals who were seldom asked to show their faces. Similar to the special trust regime by which army border guards in high-risk desertic zones inhabited by a few reclusive tribes would rarely ask a well-known driver's wife to lift her niqab and would be content with him showing both their ID cards.

However, we have been constantly asked to show negative corona tests, vaccination QR codes, passenger locator forms and ad hoc Kafkesque national special certificates, which can

be falsified much more easily than an ID, and that a worn-out airport employee checking a mile-long queue couldn't possibly "scan" efficiently by relying merely on their naked eye.

"DALL-E this, Stable Diffusion that, and we still cannot copy and paste the text from a PDF without changing the formatting"[5]

Moreover, during this time, the brutal and violent defense of borders against migrants and refugees continued, and the inability to produce these sometimes highly sophisticated electronic certificates was exploited to limit the freedom of movement of people without a European or North American biometric passport.

The state of exception introduced and tested during the Covid19 pandemic has further demonstrated how the obsession for constant identification does not necessarily result in increased safety and security: there was no unusual surge of terrorist acts, kidnappings, and pubic displays of violence which the concealment of the identity of so many people could have intuitively facilitated.

The Copernican trauma of procedurally generated realistic imagery also lies in the subconscious awareness of what we still do not (and will probably never) know: "As de jure legal sovereignty loses ground to de facto platform sovereignty," we do not know how advanced and powerful these digital manipulation tools, large scale optical illusion techniques and data camouflage systems have become in the hands of dictators, secret services, transnational intelligence agencies, obscure corporate entities, and undetectable self-motivated psychopaths.

Parallel time scales of technological advancement reveal the multilayered entanglements of the social, political, techological and philosophical consciousness of our time. The future looks ominous. But we cannot keep only relying blindly on images.

1. Recurrent line in Westworld, the HBO series about the AI singularity, addressed to android hosts to ascertain their sentience.
2. Wikipedia definition
3. Pomerantsev, P. (2015). Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia. Public Affairs
4. https://twitter.com/secondfret/status/1559714315434749953?s=20&t=lom3W949arZXcHo0fNBXJw
5. https://twitter.com/vboykis/status/1563853370959478784?s=20&t=x8AyfYK_yplmYvAJDQNOVQ