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Against Medium Essentialism: AI-Generated Images and the Reconfiguration of Medium Classification under the Post-Medium Condition

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Abstract

This article situates AI-generated images within the theoretical context of the post-medium condition and examines how they reconfigure the classificatory logic of medium essentialism. It argues that the question of medium should not remain at the level of deciding whether an image belongs to a given medium, but should turn instead to the relations among generative mechanism, visual properties, functional operation, and institutional recognition. On this basis, the article advances a new logic of medial-property configuration. Under the post-medium condition, the multiple dimensions of the image have not disappeared; what has been loosened is the necessary connection once guaranteed by medium ontology. The theoretical force of AI-generated images lies in their capacity to detach older medial properties, such as the photographic, the pictorial, and evidentiary force, from their original material mechanisms, and to allow them to return as forms of institutional memory. In this way, AI-generated images disclose the bound relations of properties that have long been embedded in traditional medium classification.

Key Words

AI-generated images; post-medium condition; medial-property configuration; medium essentialism; institutional memory

1. Introduction: AI Images and the Theoretical Dilemma of Medium Attribution

The emergence of DALL-E 2, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and other models in 2022 marked an explosive development in the field of AI-generated images. AI images entered popular creation and public visibility for the first time on such a large and forceful scale. At the same time, controversy followed almost immediately. In the autumn of 2022, the artist Jason Allen used Midjourney, together with subsequent post-processing, to create “Théâtre D’opéra Spatial”, which won a prize in the digital art category at the 2022 Colorado State

Fair. The work provoked strong dissatisfaction among a number of artists,¹ and also set off a broader debate over the “medium attribution” of AI works. In the following year, the German photographer Boris Eldagsen won the Sony World Photography Award with an AI-generated work and then refused the prize, bringing the conflict between photography and AI once again into public view.² In fact, academic discussion of the medium attribution of AI images did not begin with the recent popularization of text-to-image models. Long before these models became widely available, digital images and computer vision had already begun to unsettle the boundaries of traditional media.³ As Manovich pointed out in 1995, the digital image does not simply terminate

photography; rather, while undermining the material basis of photography, it preserves and even reinforces the “photographic look.”⁴ This already suggests that, in the digital image era, the photographic had begun to detach itself from the ontology of the photographic medium and could exist as a visual-cultural sign. Today, the spread of text-to-image models further sharpens the theoretical urgency of discussing AI images as a problem of medium.

The crisis of medium classification brought about by AI images cannot be discussed merely from a technical perspective. It must be placed back into the history of modern art. In modern art theory, a long-standing debate has unfolded around “medium specificity” and the “post-medium condition.” What may be called medium essentialism appears, in modernist art theory, as the claim that art must return to the essence of its medium and exist by relying on the boundaries proper to that medium.⁵ Greenberg, for instance, regarded modernist art as a historical process of self-criticism within each art. Each art, by gradually eliminating external factors, eventually returned to the irreplaceable conditions of its own medium. For painting, these conditions were flatness, the boundary of the canvas, and an emphasis on visibility.⁶ In his framework, pictoriality was elevated from a visual feature of painting into the essence of painting as a medium.

Yet from a later historical perspective, the development of modern and contemporary art does not seem to have fully followed Greenberg’s expectations. The proliferation of artistic media and the diversification of artistic forms correspond more closely, perhaps, to Krauss’s theory of the post-medium condition. Indeed, the theory of the “post-medium condition” emerged precisely from a reflection on this Greenbergian pursuit of medium purity. In “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition,” Krauss uses “technical support” in place of the traditional term “medium.” What she seeks to indicate is that medium should not be reduced to a single material support. The traditional concept of medium is often understood as a fixed material support, such as the canvas. By contrast, the medium structure of contemporary art increasingly appears as a combination of technical mechanisms, conventions of display, and institutional

relations.⁷

When the theory of the post-medium condition was first formulated, it could not yet have incorporated AI images into its argument. Today, however, the development of AI images clearly extends the scope of the post-medium condition. AI images have no photographic object and no exposure, yet they can generate a certain “photographic” quality; they have no canvas and no pigment, yet they can present a certain “pictorial” quality. A series of questions concerning the medium attribution of AI images thus appears. What this article calls the “reconfiguration of the logic of medium classification” does not mean that AI images completely overthrow existing modes of image classification. It means, rather, that AI images force us to see that the relation between medial properties and their carriers is “non-embedded”: under different technical conditions, such properties can be transferred or reorganized. In this way, a non-identity that had already existed becomes concentrated and unavoidable. At the same time, this emerging logic can also be brought back to the study of traditional media, providing an opportunity to re-examine inherited forms of medium classification.

Krauss extends the concept of medium from the concrete material basis emphasized in the Greenbergian moment to the level of technology, convention, and viewing structure. Her concern is how a work, after the collapse of traditional medium-specificity, finds a new technical support and distills from it a set of aesthetic conventions. This article, however, further extends medial properties into transferable and relational dimensions. It asks whether those medial properties that were once bound to particular media can migrate and be reorganized among different media under the post-medium condition, and whether they can be reconfigured amid the circulation of different mechanisms, functions, and institutions. In this respect, the article seeks to move the post-medium problem from the “reconfiguration of medium supports” to the “redistribution of medial properties.”

2. On Photographic Essentialism: From Mechanism to Function

In “Images from Images: Generative AI and the Reconfiguration of the Photographic,” Roland Meyer offers a substantial discussion of the medium attribution of AI images. In his view, AI images are fundamentally different from traditional photography. They are not “transparent windows,” but “distorting mirrors.” Meyer’s argument can be divided into two levels. First, by analyzing the process through which AI images are generated and by comparing it with 3D rendering, he argues that AI images lack an optical “causal relation” between camera and world. Compared with 3D rendering, they also lack the physical structure and presence of a photographed object. Their perspectival relations, viewpoints, and other image structures derive from the imitation of existing images. AI images therefore do not record a pre-existing world; they are “distorting mirrors,” which suggests that they lack the capacity to reflect reality faithfully. Second, since AI images do not come from an optical scene in reality but from a database in latent space, Meyer understands “the photographic” in AI images as a kind of style. According to him, the emergence of AI images turns the vocabulary of photographic history and photographic technique into a resource bank for prompt engineering, making the photographic into a reproducible visual style.⁸

Meyer’s argument captures the technical rupture between AI images and traditional photography. AI images do indeed operate according to principles very different from those of traditional photography. His argument also belongs to a deep theoretical lineage. From the beginning, photographic theory has revolved around the question of reality. In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin locates the crucial difference between photography and painting in the automatic production of photographic objectivity. Any form of painting, however realistic, must pass through the hand and intention of the painter; photography, by contrast, allows the object itself to leave an image through a photochemical mechanism.⁹ Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, further formulates the

ontology of photography as “that-has-been.” The central meaning of the photograph, for him, does not lie simply in what object it represents, but in its declaration that “this has been.” The photograph is therefore not merely an ordinary image, but an evidentiary remainder of past existence. In this way, the photographic becomes tightly bound to the temporal proof of the photographed object’s former presence, and the existence of this photographic “process” becomes decisive. Scruton, too, locates the significance of photography in the causal relation generated by traditional photographic methods. He proposes the notion of the “ideal photograph,” arguing that such a photograph is causally dependent upon its object, whereas painting more directly expresses the intentionality of the maker.¹⁰ Even in Krauss’s early work, a related view appears: in “Notes on the Index,” drawing on Peircean semiotics, she understands the index as a sign dependent upon a physical relation to its object, as in footprints, symptoms, shadows, and traces.¹¹ Photography is thus taken to be the most typical indexical image.

Photographic essentialism, then, is not an accidental prejudice on the part of a single theorist, but a powerful theoretical lineage. This lineage explains why traditional photography has possessed such strong evidentiary force. From the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, it had a substantial theoretical and practical foundation. Yet as forms of mediation become increasingly diverse, a problem appears. These theories tend to fix the photographic within the medium of photography. Once such a theory is treated as an exclusive rule of classification, it obscures the capacity of other media to reflect reality and also obscures photography’s own capacity to process, organize, and even fabricate reality. Meyer’s argument may again serve as the example. Its difficulty lies in privileging process over result: changes at the level of mechanism are directly converted into changes at the level of properties, thereby weakening the possible functions that AI images may assume in relation to reality. AI images do not have Bazin’s automatic optical record, Barthes’s “that-has-been,” or Krauss’s physical trace. But it does not follow from the claim that “AI images are not photography” that

“AI images cannot reflect reality”; nor does it follow that “AI makes the photographic into a style.” These inferences presuppose an essentialist premise: that only the optical recording of traditional photography can be the true source of the photographic. In Meyer’s own procedure, in order to show that AI images depict no pre-existing world, he begins with the generative mechanism of AI, then compares the mechanisms of 3D rendering and AI image generation, and cites Galloway’s view of computer vision together with Panofsky’s concepts of “systematic space” and “aggregate space.”¹² Yet whether in his account of AI image mechanisms, his comparison with 3D rendering, or his theoretical demonstration, the force of the critique is directed toward the “process” of AI image generation, while the “result” of AI images is more or less passed over.

Meyer argues that 3D rendering can reflect reality because it first constructs an artificial three-dimensional world, with objects, coordinates, light sources, and a virtual camera. The virtual camera has a position, a direction of view, and a perspectival relation. This judgment, however, is not fully tenable. 3D rendering can of course establish a relation to the real world by constructing a three-dimensional model, but spatial modeling is only one mode of correspondence to reality. It does not necessarily guarantee that the image is faithful to reality or that it accurately encompasses the viewpoint and perspective of a real scene. A complete three-dimensional scene can just as well serve a purely fantastic or fictional world. If the capacity of an image to reflect reality is judged solely by whether its generative mechanism contains spatial coordinates, then could any image based on a concrete scene be understood as spatial and reality-reflecting? Could a rough sketch made by someone unable to draw, based on an actual scene, be called “spatial” and “reality-reflecting,” even if no one else could recognize what it depicts?

On the basis of the above reasoning, Meyer holds that AI images, because they lack optical and spatial correspondence to a pre-existing world, do not possess the reality-recording capacity of photography in the traditional sense. Yet this claim is not always sufficient.

Take the following image as an example. On the left is a black-and-white photograph from the late twentieth century. Due to the technical conditions of the time, it has low clarity, lacks color, and contains damaged or blurred details. On the right is the same photograph “restored” by the author using an AI tool. While adding color to the old photograph, the AI process also increases the clarity of the image and supplies certain details. It is beyond doubt that this image is based on algorithmic inference; nevertheless, within its functional and viewing context it assumes the task-structure of reality restoration, activating in the viewer an expectation oriented toward reality. This shows precisely that realist properties are configured through function and context rather than guaranteed solely by photochemical mechanism. Similar tasks, such as historical figure reconstruction and the restoration of ancient writing, also show that AI images do not necessarily stand far from reality. Moreover, current AI image generation still involves a significant degree of black-box operation.¹³ Yet no one can guarantee that future AI will not move beyond this opacity and become a fully transparent “electronic brush,” with access to massive datasets drawn from the real world in ways traditional painting never possessed. At that point, whether an image faithfully reflects reality may depend far more fully on the creator. In either case, such image results do not pass through the photochemical mechanism of the traditional camera, and they certainly involve algorithmic inference. But they cannot be understood simply as “distorting mirrors” of reality. Whether an image faithfully reflects reality is not determined solely by the process of generation; it also depends on the image result, its intended use, and its viewing context. Process determinism is, in many situations, arbitrary and counterintuitive.

Furthermore, even if one insists on an essentialist “technical tracing,” the dataset on which the algorithmic mechanism depends still derives from the real world rather than from an idealist void of simulation, at least from the perspective of the reflection theory of dialectical materialism. Even if the parameters called upon by an AI image do not directly come from reality, they remain a secondary reflection of “primary” objective material



Figure 1. Original family photograph, 1987. Black-and-white gelatin silver photograph. Private collection. Courtesy of the author.



Figure 2. AI-restored and colorized version of Figure 1, 2026. processed by the author using ChatGPT image generation/editing tools.

reality.¹⁴

At the same time, photography itself is not necessarily a transparent record of reality. Staging, montage, commercial lighting, filters, color grading, and post-production compositing all show that photography can restore reality, but can also process, manipulate, or even fabricate it. The physical causality of photographic technology cannot guarantee that photography necessarily restores reality truthfully. Sontag argues that although photographs are often regarded as evidence of reality, they are not transparent copies; rather, through framing, selection, angle, and viewing position, they organize and interpret reality as image fragments.¹⁵ Mitchell, in his discussion of digital photography, likewise points out the inherent variability and modifiability of digital images.¹⁶ This has already shaken the evidentiary status of the traditional photograph.

From this angle, Meyer's claim that "AI makes the photographic into style" should also be reconsidered. The word "photographic" has two senses here. First, it refers to the photographic as a way of recording and restoring reality. The preceding argument has shown that this photographic property is not fully embedded in photographic technology itself. Second, it refers to concrete photographic styles: terms such as "35mm lens" and "news photography." Meyer is right to point out the encoding of these styles by

AI. AI images do indeed allow photographic techniques and stylistic vocabularies to enter the coded system of prompt engineering and training data. Yet such stylistic descriptions did not first become "callable styles" in AI images. They had already been formed in the history of photography. Photography had developed its own visual grammar, and such stylistic terms and styles had already been available for use by painting, film, advertising, game engines, and other media. As early as 1995, Manovich had argued that digital images do not simply terminate photography; rather, while undermining the material basis of photography, they reinforce the photographic look: grain, lens effects, soft light, blur, and photographic composition acquire new cultural value in digital media.¹⁷ It is therefore not AI that first turns photography into a "style". AI images act as a catalyst that further detaches an already existing visual grammar from actual shooting. In this sense, whether considered from the first or the second angle, Meyer's argument is not entirely sufficient.

Photography, then, is not identical with the photographic or with realism. AI images have neither abolished the photographic nor been the first to make photography into a style. What they do is further expose the non-identity that had already existed between the photographic and the medium of photography, compelling us to rethink the relations among an image's

mechanism, function, and mode of viewing.

3. On Pictorial Essentialism: From Material to Form

As argued above, the medium attribution of AI images should be placed back into the broader history of modern art. As flat, visual products, AI images are inevitably compared not only with photography but also with traditional painting. It should be clarified that the “pictorial essentialism” criticized here is not limited to the narrow claim that only traditional painting can count as painting. It must be acknowledged that the history of painting itself has already loosened this elementary form of medium essentialism to a considerable extent. Today, the forms of painting have been greatly expanded. New forms of painting, such as digital painting, installation-based painting, performance-oriented painting, spray painting, and street graffiti, have all been accepted to some degree as “painting.”¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that pictorial essentialism has been completely abandoned. It often continues to exist in a new form. Canvas and pigment are no longer the only standard, but from ancient cave painting and Renaissance fresco to oil painting, printmaking, digital painting, and public murals, although the media and materials of recognized pictorial forms have constantly changed, what remains more or less constant is a trace-like relation among “human being, tool, and surface.” On this basis, painting is understood as a process in which a subject, through the body or through tools, gradually organizes and revises traces on a certain surface. Similar to the optical causal relation in photography, this process becomes the foundation on which a broader pictorial essentialism relies.

Within this logic, AI images are often thought not to possess pictoriality in the true sense. Because they do not realize pictoriality through the traditional process of human-tool-surface, they are regarded as saturated with randomness and uncertainty.¹⁹ Suspicion is focused on whether AI images possess this core generative chain of the pictorial tradition. As Ted Chiang argues, the value of art lies not

only in the final image, but also in the creator’s continuing acts of selection, judgment, and revision. AI compresses this process into prompts and automated output, which for Chiang cannot count as an artistic creation shaped by genuine choice and judgment.²⁰ This criticism seems logically coherent and highly persuasive. It does describe a real problem in the current development of AI images. Yet I would still argue that if one continues to judge new objects by means of past medium regimes, one inevitably reproduces the problem of essentialism.

Pictorial essentialism once had its historical validity. Lessing’s distinction between the limits of poetry and painting on the basis of Laocoön.²¹ In the Greenbergian moment, handwork, material, flatness, and formal autonomy were all treated as important grounds for judging the artistic value of painting. But art history has shown that the validity of such standards is not fixed; it develops and changes. As noted above, pictorial essentialism today is no longer confined to the belief that only traditional painting is painting.

What, then, is the central problem with the pictorial-essentialist inference that AI images lack pictoriality or artistic value? I suggest that there are two reasons. First, it conflates three distinct levels: medium identity, pictorial property, and judgment of artistic value. In *Languages of Art*, when Goodman distinguishes autographic from allographic arts, he argues that the identity of a painting is tied to its history of making and to the chain of originality; for this reason, a copy cannot automatically become the original.²⁴ But Goodman is concerned with the identity and authenticity of the work, not with whether a visual-cultural property can migrate across media. AI’s process of production does show that AI images differ from traditional painting. Yet this difference is a difference of medium identity. It does not allow us to conclude that AI images lack pictorial properties, since they can clearly call upon composition, color organization, brushwork, and other pictorial elements. The judgment that something “is not painting” at the level of medium identity cannot be equated with the claim that it “has no pictoriality” at the level of properties, still less with the value judgment that it “cannot



Figure 3. Édouard Manet, “Olympia”²³, 1863, oil on canvas, 130 cm × 190 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris. Image source: <https://www.artlib.cn>

become art.”

Second, as in the case of photography, pictorial essentialism compresses pictoriality too narrowly into the making of traces, while to some extent neglecting the fact that pictoriality also includes schema, viewing, and iconological structure. As Panofsky’s iconology shows, the meaning of an artistic image lies not only in material, brushwork, or style, but also in motifs, themes, symbolic structures, and cultural worldviews.²⁵ AI images certainly do not conform to the structure of traditional pictorial creation, but they can call upon the schematic systems sedimented in art history. If we dismiss this calling-up as nothing more than “surface style,” we risk understanding pictoriality in an overly narrow way.

With regard to Chiang’s criticism that AI images lack the creator’s sustained participation, it must be acknowledged that in earlier and current large AI models this “black-box” problem does exist. At the same time,

related technical practices are also developing. The “lack of sustained choice” criticized by Chiang refers primarily to a single workflow generated by front-end prompts. Creators and researchers, however, are already using control over diffusion steps, local repainting, and multi-model iteration²⁶ to gradually rebuild a human-led structure of sustained judgment. Overall, I am not rejecting pictorial essentialism’s emphasis on the experience and structure of traditional painting. What I reject is the transformation of that experience into an absolutely exclusionary condition of artistic value. Traditional pictorial structures secure their own distinctive value and attraction, but they cannot prove that non-pictorial mechanisms cannot call upon pictoriality; nor can they prove that AI images are necessarily unable to participate in artistic practice. The focus should not be placed on the dispute over whether AI images “belong to painting,” but on how they organize pictoriality in concrete

practice and how they form artistic value within specific contexts of human choice and interpretation.

4. The Reconfiguration of the Logic of Medium-Attribute Attribution

The preceding sections have discussed the photographic and the pictorial in relation to AI images. These two issues belong to different domains and are not fully symmetrical. Because photography is technically complex and historically more recent, the former remains a strong form of medium ontology: its mechanism, realism, evidentiary function, and relatively stable institutions such as journalism and the archive have long been tightly bound together. The latter, after the force of modernist painting, has undergone continuous translation in the contemporary context. Yet both share the same essentialist logic of medium attribution: the mechanism by which a medium relates to reality is treated as the absolute basis for determining the essential properties of that medium.

This fixed logic of attribution is not caused by any one medium or any one medial property. Fundamentally, it is the result of a long development in medium theory. At the level of the image, it appears as a system in which “mechanism-feature-function-institution” is bound together. Here, “medial properties” refers to historically and institutionally assigned properties of a medium, whereas “visual features” refers to perceptible features of an image, such as realism, pictoriality, stylization, or the appearance of photographic trace.

This multidimensional binding is to some extent similar to what Michel Foucault calls a *dispositif*, that is, a network woven from heterogeneous elements such as language, non-language, technology, and institutional discipline in order to sustain certain relations of power and knowledge.²⁷ Mechanism refers to the process and method of image generation; feature refers to the visual-cognitive representation presented by the image; function refers to how the image is viewed, that is, the tasks it assumes in reality, such as recording,

restoration, fabrication, proof, and consumption; institution refers to how the image is recognized or accepted in journalism, law, art, social media, and other domains. In the traditional logic of medium classification, these four registers are often closely connected. Photography, for instance, links its mechanism of image production to realist properties, documentary function, and an institutional acceptance of the photograph as “evidence.” Painting is similar: in modernist painting theory, medium, materiality, and formal autonomy are strongly bound together, while in contemporary “expanded painting” painting is often rebound to elements such as human experience, the use of tools, painterly action, and emotional or individual expression.

Under the post-medium condition, however, this model can no longer adequately account for the development of re-mediated images. The emergence of AI-generated images is only a catalyst. It is not the first moment at which this binding structure fails—such failure had already begun to appear in various artistic practices since the twentieth century.²⁸ But AI-generated images force us to recognize the failure of this classificatory logic. They lack the physical mechanism of traditional photography, yet can call upon realist properties and participate, in particular contexts, in the restoration of reality. They do not belong to the structure of “human being-tool-surface”, yet they can generate formalized and stylized pictorial properties and enter judgments of artistic value within specific human practices. If we further consider a series of phenomena that had already existed—photographic mechanisms can also be used for artistic processing, and painting can also assume functions of realistic record and visual explanation—we can see that, in the present post-medium context, the same mechanism can generate different properties, and the same feature can be generated by different mechanisms. The same feature, when situated within different functions and institutions, can also produce very different meanings.

AI restoration of old photographs and AI fake-news images may both possess photographic and realist properties, but their functions and institutional reception are radically different. The former can serve the

restoration of reality or the supplementation of archives, while the latter can be used for false propaganda. In another configuration, however, the former could fabricate history, while the latter could, under different constraints, participate in the reconstruction of a scene. Similarly, medical illustrations and archaeological reconstructions do not depend on photographic mechanisms, yet they are still primarily used to restore or explain reality. The point, then, is that under the post-medium condition, what needs to be analyzed is no longer simply “to which medium should this image belong?” Traditional medium classification may still exist institutionally, but its explanatory stability has already been shaken in practice.

On this basis, the need to reconfigure the logic of medium-attribute attribution becomes clear. Under the post-medium condition, the logic by which medial properties are classified should shift from “binding medial properties” to “configuring medial properties.” This is not a complete rejection of the preceding account of the image as composed of “mechanism-feature-function-institution.” Rather, it divides that system into four concrete registers, such that no two registers are necessarily embedded in or bound to one another. The domains addressed by these four registers have not changed. What changes is that they are no longer treated as a rigidly embedded and bound whole, but as a relational structure capable of configuration. This model retains the four analytic registers of mechanism, feature, function, and institution, but refuses to take any one of them as the absolute ground of the others. In other words, mechanism no longer guarantees feature, feature no longer dictates function, and function is not necessarily authorized or recognized by institution. One generative mechanism can produce visual representations with different properties; the same visual feature can be produced by different mechanisms; and the same feature can acquire entirely different effects of reality in different functional and institutional contexts.

In this way, judgments about medial properties can be prevented from sliding toward two extremes. On the one hand, the model avoids conservative essentialism: it no longer insists that the photographic must

come from the camera or that the pictorial must come from the brush. On the other hand, it avoids technological nihilism: it does not assume that any AI image automatically possesses evidentiary value or artistic value. The diverse discussions of the photographic and the pictorial can thus be placed within a more general understanding. Medial properties should not be predetermined by the medium itself; the meaning of an image should be judged through the configured relations among mechanism, feature, function, and institution. Within this system, the discussion of medium shifts from “identity attribution” to “relational analysis”. In the essentialist logic of medium, the question is usually posed as: Is this image a photograph? Is it a painting? Is it art? In a configurational logic, the question must be reformulated: Through what mechanism is this image generated? What visual-cognitive properties does it call upon? What function does it perform in a concrete context? And how is it named, accepted, refused, or reauthorized by institutions such as journalism, archives, law, art, platforms, and markets?

This configuration is not static. The image event, beneath its apparently calm surface, is in fact structured by multiple tensions. Mechanism, feature, function, and institution continually enter into misalignment and appropriation in concrete image events; they also compete for interpretive dominance and institutional authorization. A generative mechanism may have already detached itself from a traditional medium, while visual properties still carry the trust regime of older media. Function may turn toward restoration or aesthetic experience, or toward false evidence and fabrication, while the institutional register continues to process such images through traditional journalistic norms, art competitions, and copyright regimes.

Consider the widely circulated image of “the Pope in a white puffer jacket”. It uses photographic properties generated by a non-photographic mechanism to activate the long-accumulated trust regime of photographic images.²⁹ Natural light, the texture of clothing, and the identity of the figure together produce the judgment that “this should really have happened”. The essence of this visual misrecognition is the premature penetration of



Figure 4. AI-generated image of Pope Francis wearing a white puffer jacket,³⁰ Midjourney, 2023. Source and copyright status to be verified.

institution by mechanism and feature: before the image has undergone any verification of reality, the evidentiary expectation carried by the photographic has already been activated.

In this sense, the configuration of medial properties is closer to a dynamic struggle. Mechanism cannot always control feature, and feature may also activate institutional memory in advance. Function can change the value-orientation of the same feature, while institution attempts to recognize, refuse, or rename that configuration. The catalytic significance of AI images lies in the way they suddenly make visible conflicts among these registers. That had previously been concealed by medium ontology.

5. Coda: The Specter of Old Media's Institutional Memory

Yet the configurability of medial properties does not mean that they enter a state of absolute

free-floating. On the contrary, AI images reveal a more complex condition: the material properties of a medium cannot be transferred, but they do not simply lose their memory. A medium can detach itself from its original mechanism and yet still carry the institutional memory formed through its own history. Modern visual media have long trained viewers to associate certain visual forms with presence, evidence, documentary force, and factuality. The photographic therefore continues into AI images. Modern aesthetic education has compressed and sedimented the compositions, brushwork, motifs, styles, and schemas of art history into shared conventions of viewing. The pictorial therefore continues into AI images. Artistic value continues to be contested around AI images because modern art institutions have already placed creation, exhibition, and interpretation within complex social relations.

From this angle, AI images allow the institutional memory of old media to return in a form detached from the material carrier of medium. Tagg has argued that the evidentiary force of photography is produced through optical imaging within modern institutions such as the state, the archive, law, medicine, and journalism.³¹ Yet in AI images, which have no camera, no optics, and no present object, the material basis of this institutional system is shaken. Still, the naturalized evidentiary quality accumulated by photography as a medium does not disappear. It lies latent in the training data of large models and in the expectations of viewers, like an institutional specter without an original body.

What I call "specter" here describes the invisible mode in which older media histories remain. Institutional memory is difficult to present directly in model parameters. It is counted and generalized within training data, and only when it is output by a large model does it become perceptible to the subject on the other side of mediation. The attraction and danger of AI images lie precisely here: they recall the trust of photography without possessing the indexical body of photography; they recall the art-historical memory of painting without passing through pictorial material and manual time; they enter disputes over artistic value without relying on the

traditional process of painterly making as their sole ground. Meyer's claim that "the photographic" is reconfigured as a callable style captures only the surface of this process.³² The deeper problem is that the institutional memory of old media is not eliminated by the process of stylization. It continues to operate, spectrally, within new technical mechanisms.

The theory of "remediation" holds that new media do not acquire their specificity by erasing old media, but by rewriting, absorbing, and reshaping them.³³ This article denies that new media depend on the material carriers of old media, and denies that the visual appearances produced by those carriers should be treated as their essence. It instead takes viewing convention as the point of connection through which new media produce new specificity. AI cannot generate images in a vacuum. What, then, forms the ground of these new images? How is this "specter" perceived? When confronted with AI images, are viewers judging the medium from which an image originates, or are they questioning the truth of the information it represents? These questions ultimately point to one issue: this convention of viewing is not directed simply at a medium as such; it is more deeply connected to the viewer before the image. This "specter" appears only to viewers, to those already familiar with older media, who "see" the photographic and the pictorial through visual experience and intention. Beyond the shaping force of external institutions, the modern viewing subject still retains a degree of autonomous choice. How this convention of viewing is concretely presented, however, cannot be fully clarified within the scope of this article; it may become a future direction for research on media transformation.

The post-medium condition, then, does not lead to a state without medium, nor does it mean that existing medial properties can be arbitrarily pasted together. It points instead to a path by which old media continue to be extended, transformed, and rebuilt in the forms of memory, inertia, and expectation. AI images allow media history to reappear within generative mechanisms that no longer require camera, canvas, or even more diverse material carriers. We need not keep trying to decide whether AI images replace photography or

painting. What is needed is a more balanced understanding of the mutual transformation and reauthorization between old and new media.

The rapid breakthroughs in AI image generation at the technical level and its market promotion at the application level have exposed an academic lag in practices concerning the alternation between old and new media. The alienation of AI and laborers on the production side in the production of images as commodities, the alienation of modern information dissemination on the consumption side, and the political ethics manifested behind media are all so deeply interconnected that a change in any single element affects the whole. Furthermore, the rapid development of AI images forces us to confront a more complex reality: the body of the old medium is no longer present, yet the memory of the old medium continues to operate within the image; the traditional mechanism has been replaced, yet expectations toward traditional institutions continue to return in viewing. Old media continue to exist by abandoning their material bodies and retaining their memories. In this sense, this paper employs the critique of medium essentialism to reexamine how media history continues to operate when faced with new technical mechanisms—medial properties are no longer naturally guaranteed by the ontology of medium, yet they do not detach from history and recombine arbitrarily.

In sum, the crisis of trust brought about by AI images forces the ground of trust to shift. The evidentiary tradition surrounding image-based proof, and the tradition of judgment surrounding artistic value, will not simply come to an end. "Is it a photograph?" and "Is it hand-painted?" are no longer fixed standards for judging the photographic and the pictorial. We must understand this critique of essentialism within the configured relations among mechanism, feature, function, and institution. Under the post-medium condition, what must be asked is no longer merely the medium identity of the image, but how it enters into relation with reality, history, institution, and the viewer before the image.

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