

AI Slop's carnival of (im)possibilities: The trial of 'genuine' versus 'generated' visualities

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Abstract

Images generated by artificial intelligence (AI) are flooding online and offline spaces with 'AI Slop', hyperreal and often grotesque and absurdist visualities. Framed predominantly as an existential threat, AI Slop is charged with killing the internet, distorting reality, and accelerating social collapse. Such charges reflect what Mikhail Epstein terms horrology, a civilisation's fear of destruction by its own technological creations, evoked anew with engineered, technical advancements. This article turns such horror on its head by employing Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque alongside Epstein's possibilism, contemplating how AI Slop jestingly inverts the 'genuine' versus 'generated' consumption of an image's 'truth'. When equal parts hyperreal and absurd, how visualities have always, to some degree, been generated by the technologies of seeing is signalled by this inversion. The possible implications of AI Slop's proliferation, within and beyond education, are therefore greater discussions and consideration of the codified 'generated' ideologies of visualities, which visual scholars have long lamented. In addition to the implication that AI Slop could overturn the received 'truth' that an image can capture a 'genuine' representation, fostering critical visual literacies within public discourse. This article pairs this dialogue with a series of visualities that operate together to prompt the reader into a visual feast of jesting truth games.

Keywords

AI Slop, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalesque, Epstein, possibility, horrology, critical visual literacy, dialogism

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Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is accelerating at an unprecedented rate, flooding online and offline spaces with AI Slop. A loosely defined pop-culture term for imagery generated by AI, which can be hyperreal, making it increasingly difficult to discern whether visualities are ‘genuine’ or ‘generated’. AI Slop has become highly accessible due in large part to large-language-models’ (LLMs) availability, inexpensiveness and rapid production (Mollick, 2025). Most visible in social networks, which already magnify fears for the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation (Westbrook and White, 2024), these visualities seemingly heighten public discourses’ fears about the consequences of generated visual truth games. Situated against these dimensions, AI Slop has been labelled an existential threat (Samuel et al., 2025). Social commentators have charged this medium as slowly killing the internet and distorting reality due to the increasing malformation of ‘truth’, with society sleepwalking toward disaster (Mahdawi, 2025; Malik, 2025). However, notions of ‘seeing’ have always been subjective (White 2016), troubling perceptions of objectively knowing the visual, an argument that I pursue in this article.

A further exmainition of the term AI Slop suggests this title is as ambiguous as the forms it is associated with. Colloquially it describes the flood of AI generated visualities, seeping into multiple spaces (see Figure 1 illustrating its online and offline presence), yet what counts as Slop is ambiguous. Entrenched within the postdigital era, where the convergence of online and offline have condensed and intermeshed (Jandrić et al., 2019), generated visual Slop ubiquitously integrates throughout daily life. This overflowing across contemporary spaces invites investigations of how AI Slop is altering public discourse through its ambiguous seepages. Its pervasiveness is arguably compounded by the frequent obscurity of its making. It is near impossible to know how generated

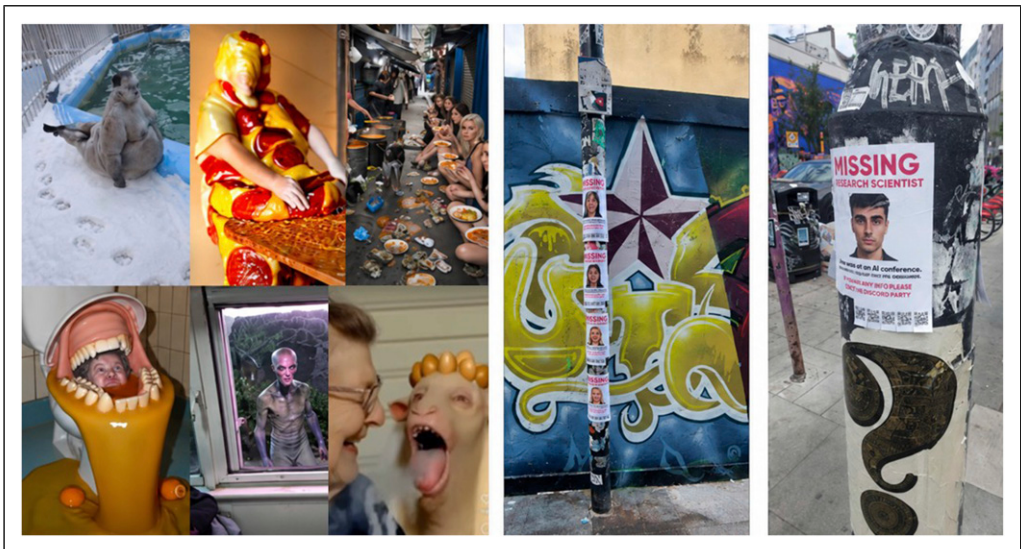


Figure 1. Online and offline AI Slop. Left: compilation of AI-generated images from online sources, reworked by the author in the AI ChatGPT. Right: photographs taken by the author in London, 2024. Posters are unattributed stating, “MISSING RESEARCH SCIENTIST. Last seen at an AI conference. We fear he may be lost in the Metaverse. PLEASE HELP US FIND HIM! JOIN THE SEARCH PARTY”.

visualities were produced, as prompts, models and authorship remain unclear unless stated by the creator. Even then, the ‘black box’ nature of AI technologies obscures how and why design elements were chosen. This feast of generated content has muddied the water about what can supposedly be seen and known when viewing the visual.

‘Slop’, and its connection to AI, was crowned [Merriam-Webster’s 2025 Word of the Year](#). Characterised as muck, slime and sludge, connotating a wet thing that is unpleasant to touch, oozing into spaces it is likely unwelcome. Offering a brief history of the word, [Merriam-Webster \(2025\)](#) explained ‘slops’ inception in the 1700 meant “soft mud”. Evolving in the 1800s as “food waste”, often for pigs, developing to a more general term for “rubbish”; that which has little value (p. 4). Pairing slop with AI connotes generated visualities that are grotesque and unpleasant. A spillage of distasteful, low quality content overflowing, converging into and across online and offline spaces. Simultaneously, it also conjures a sense of mirth and jesting, shifting from ‘enshittification’ as the 2023–2024 word of the year (claimed by the American Dialectic Society in 2023 and Macquarie Dictionary in 2024). A term defined by the increasing decline of services and products due to profit-driven values, especially within online settings ([Shepherd, 2024](#)). The shift from enshittification to slop suggest the entry of mirth and jesting truth games, given the latter is “less fearful and more mocking” ([Merriam-Webster, 2025](#): 2). An inversion which might rebirth taken-for-granted visual ‘truth’, that the image has never offered allegiance to.

Up-ending AI dystopian fears, in this article I explore how AI Slop’s jesting inversion of objective truth might foster a cultural shift, where visibility is no longer taken for granted as fact in public discourse. The prevalence of ‘pics or it didn’t happen’ culture situates photographs as facts, obscuring the subjectivity of the lens and the person positioned strategically behind it ([Jurgenson, 2019](#)). Perishing and rebirthing these truths, I contend that AI Slop might foster critical visual literacies that invert the consumption of the image. AI Slop’s hyperreal absurdism may encourage a many-voiced questioning that opens up a more critical contemplation of the visual within public discourse, by challenging what might be thought of as ‘knowable’ visual ‘fact’ (see [Figure 2](#)). I contend AI Slop encourages consideration for whose truth is offered allegiance, with all visuals generated by the human behind the canvas, lens, recorder, and so forth. To develop this argument, I bring [Mikhail Bakhtin’s \(1981, 1984\)](#) dialogism, which dwells in grotesque inversions of official truth, into conversation with the neoBakhtinian [Mikhail Epstein’s \(2012, 2019\)](#) temporal notions of horrology and possibilism. I also share an exhibition of visualities that illustrate this argument (see [Figures 1–9](#))¹, inviting viewers to contemplate AI Slop’s possibilities through the consumption of the image alongside the text.

Coded visualities of seeing

Visual scholars have long established that images are far from neutral, coded with the ideologies and technologies of their making, shaping how they are received and the authority they hold ([Barthes, 1977](#); [Benjamin, 1935](#); [Berger, 1972](#)). [Berger \(1972\)](#) argued that ways of seeing are shaped by socio-cultural subjectivities, meaning that perception is influenced by what individuals know and what they believe. Images can, therefore, be understood as active agents within visual discourse, generating meaning and power. Simultaneously, struggles over authority continue regarding who has the power to define and interpret what is seen ([Mirzoeff, 2011](#)). These discourses form what [Mitchell \(1994\)](#) labelled an inherently political visual economy, highlighting how all visualities are generated by evolving relational struggles of perception across time and space. Hence, codified ideologies steeped in the subjectivity of seeing have long altered perceptions through power games and political economies. AI Slop enters into this history of discursive



Figure 2. AI Slop hyperreal absurdism. Examples of AI-generated images, reworked by the author in the AI ChatGPT.

encounters, extending the interanimation between human-and-non-human-technological-image-creation, with this added element of the unknown inciting a public discourse of considerable anxiety (Samuel et al., 2025). This angst arguably overlooks the many ways visualities and the interwoven technologies have always posed truth games.

Each new technology that alters the image has prompted concerns for the granted legitimacy of visual truth in public discourse (Benjamin, 1935; Gunning, 1989). Benjamin (1935) employed the term ‘mechanical reproduction’ to describe how technology alters perceptions, shifting seeing. Detailing concerns with the unlimited copies and mass production of film and photography, he viewed reproductions as eroding the ritual, uniqueness of ‘traditional’ artwork and the space it was observed in. Simultaneously he suggested these technological advancements of the visual enabled a liberating democratisation, beyond an emancipatory authoritative lens of, for instance, the art gallery. Concerned with the cinema, Gunning (1989) contemplated how this technology transformed perceptions of seeing, reconstructing the nature of vision for public discourse. He contemplated how the modern spectacle, exhibitions and urban-sensory-overload of cinema technology wove into a broader culture of visual shock (Gunning, 1989). Crary (1990) further explored the temporal-technological nature of seeing, tracing camera obscura, whereby the photograph suggests a stable knowable world as a reliable ‘genuine’ truth. He argued that visual devices, such as the kaleidoscope, illustrate how seeing can be manufactured through compelling, malleable

experiences that commodify vision. Crary added that technologies serve as a disciplinary power for emerging institutions, with capitalism's commodification of the image, reconstituting the observer.

Technological paradigms of seeing in public discourse

To illustrate how technology interweaves with perceptions of truth and seeing the visual in public discourse, I offer several examples from different eras. This tracing signals how anxieties and regimes of seeing are interanimated by the possibility and presence of the technology at hand, which codifies ideologies of the 'genuine' versus 'generated'. Each serves not as a typology but a set of provocations. Through these examples, I contend AI Slop phobias are situated against enduring anxieties of what can be seen and known within public discourse.

Seeing in the sixteenth century was situated within linear perspective geometry that defined Renaissance art (see [Figure 3](#), left). Notions of 'realistic' representation were linked to technological advancements of cartography, geographical discovery, and astronomical understanding ([Edgerton, 2009](#)). This learned, as opposed to innate seeing generated the time's geometric construction of the visual as objective truth within public discourse. The physical grids and frames interwove with a disciplined, geometric correctness, discursively framing Renaissance seeing through engineered apparatus, training, and institutional authority. The intent of this precision was a Christian-theological desire to reach divine order through geometric proximity ([Berger, 1972](#); [Edgerton, 2009](#)). To see the world as God intended it, Brunelleschi utilised a reflective panel to show that linear perspective could replicate visual reality with divine precision. Yet, his technology of seeing cultivated the optical and mathematical tools that laid the groundwork for scientific revolution. Brunelleschi instruments for confirming divine order were utilised by Galileo Galilei's telescope, displacing the Earth from its fixed theological centre ([Edgerton, 2009](#)). Inverting the medieval cosmos, the ideologies that motivated Renaissance theological truths thus fostered rationalist, scientific inquiry. This shift implicates how public discourse evolves through cultural values of the time, which alter with and in response to technologies of seeing. In addition to how this process can prompt unexpected possibilities and evolutions.

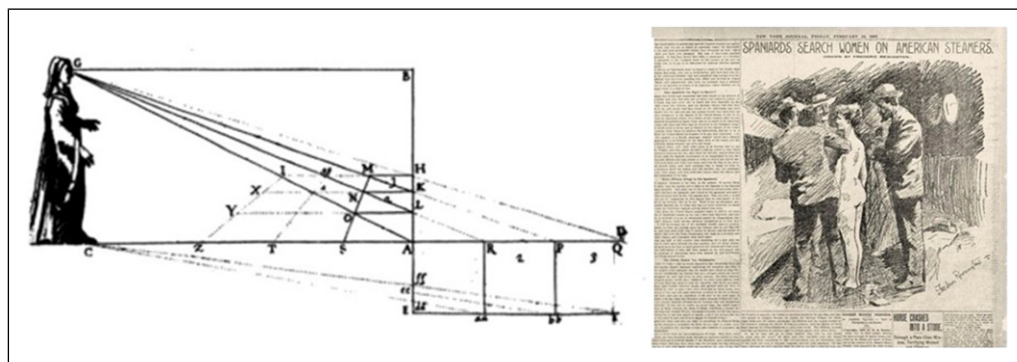


Figure 3. Technologies of seeing. Left: perspective diagram from Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, *Le due regole della prospettiva pratica*, edited with commentary by Egnazio Danti, Rome: Francesco Zannetti, 1583. Right: [Frederic Remington \(1897\)](#), 'Spaniards search women on American steamers'.

Centuries later, newspaper illustrations generated political realities through print technologies, with their accessibility shaping public perception. An example often cited when comparing modern misinformation and disinformation concerns within social networks, to enduring historical encounters of a similar nature, is the 1898 illustration that allegedly incited desire for the Spanish-American War (see [Figure 3](#), right; [Anderson, 1991](#); [Campbell, 2001](#)). When the illustrator Frederic Remington requested to return home, reporting the situation was quiet, with no war forthcoming, the newspaper owner William Randolph Hearst purportedly replied, “Please remain. You furnish the pictures, I’ll provide the war” ([Office of the Historian, nd](#)). Public discourse at the time saw illustrations as eyewitness reporting, with their hand-drawn quality paradoxically lending an air of human testimony to what were often strategically composed scenes ([Campbell, 2001](#)). Framed as evidence, these visualities were wrapped within a capitalist model of sales and sensationalist media, determining whose version of events counted as ‘genuine’ ([Anderson, 1991](#)). Consequently, newspaper illustrations fostered seeing through commerce, power and narrative priority. At this time, public anxieties for the image were not so concerned with being fooled, as visual deception was invisibilised through the seamless conventions of technological-codified ideologies.

The growing accessibility of photography established itself as evidence, a ‘genuine’ authority of what occurred, yet even in its earliest decades Victorian photographers routinely retouched images. Common practices included painting on negatives to slim waists, removing blemishes, and producing idealised, rather than objective bodies ([Gover, 1988](#); see [Figure 4](#)). These practices disrupt notions of an objective truth, even in the often austere representation of historical photographs. The manipulation of these visualities displays their generated nature, problematising the extent to which viewers were, and continue to be aware of how these images were strategically altered to fit beauty standards of the time ([Tucker, 2008](#)).



Figure 4. Generated photograph editing. Retouching instruction from [J. B. Schriever and T. H. Cummings \(1908\)](#), complete self-instructing library of practical photography (p. 38).

Drawing attention to these practices, the New Photography movement utilised techniques such as photomontage to expose the constructed, manipulable, and ideological nature of seeing. [Maurice Tabard's \(1930\)](#) illustrates this in a 'Room with Eye', which layers a series of photographs to display a banal, empty room, save for a door and heater at one end. However, at the other end of the photograph is a disproportionately large eye, with long lashes staring into the room (see [Fischer, 2013](#)). This photograph from the early twentieth century (a hundred years before 'photoshopped' entered popular vernacular), prompts seeing even the most mundane scenes as steeped in generated subjectivities, defined by the technology that enables their creations. Yet provocations such as these did not alter public discourse in the same way sixteenth century advancements of technology and science shifted medieval cultural views and values. The photograph retained an enduring perception as a 'genuine' authority, rather than generated in the same way an illustration could be, indicating not all technological advancements alter public discourse in a similar vein ([Barthes, 1980](#)).

The introduction of digital cameras and editing software made image alteration widely accessible, whilst fostering photoshop fears for generated fakery in the twenty-first century ([Marwick, 2013](#)). Unlike the murky practice of retouched Victorian negatives, this technological advancement made 'generated' visual anxiety rampant, with news media sensationalism turning its attention to the visual truth games of the image ([Brown, 2014](#)). Arising from these concerns, photoshopping became scandalous due to public discourse's preconceptions that the photograph was a 'genuine' medium of truth ([Brown, 2014](#); [Marwick, 2013](#)). The camera was perceived as a documentary, which viewers were encouraged to consume, even though these visualities were often curated and staged ([Marwick, 2013](#)). This tension indicates how the generated nature of the photograph was no longer a present awareness in the following generations public discourse. Consequently, new technology was seen as polluting the objective, genuine photograph, overlooking the generated nature of these visualities throughout history.

Social networks growth and popularity further unsettled the ideologies of seeing in public discourse. The rapid expansion of online platforms encouraged a technological means of witnessing and circulating people's everyday lives. Platforms such as Instagram fostered the "pics or it didn't happen" discourse, whilst simultaneously encouraging curated and aspirational representations to circulate as everyday documentation ([Jurgenson, 2019](#); [Van Dijck, 2013](#)). These technologies increased the scale and speed of image generation, adding to societal angst about the 'genuine' versus 'generated'. These fears resurfacing as novel in public discourse suggests that the theoretical work visual scholars had long undertaken had receded from broader cultural consciousness.

These examples illustrate that seeing has never offered neutrality, within or beyond public discourse. Each technological era establishes its own authoritative visual truths, whilst simultaneously obscuring the extent to which all visuals are in some way generated. Public discourse's perceptions of seeing are interanimated by the technologies and values of the time, whilst those same perceptions feed back into, and reshape the technologies and discourses that generated them. Therefore, present public discourse's fear that AI Slop is driving society toward disaster, due to the generation of the image, rehearses a cultural script with historical precedent. Yet, I contend that AI Slop does not passively enter this discourse. Rather, it jestingly inverts notions of the 'genuine' versus 'generated' image, placing these concepts on trial and potentially reconceptualising how public discourse consumes the visual.

Rebirthing AI Slop: Generated dystopia to temporal possibilism

To conceptualise how AI Slop may rebirth generated image phobias from horror to transgressive horizon, I place [Bakhtin's \(1981, 1984\)](#) dialogic notion of carnivalesque, in communion with

Epstein's (2012, 2019) neoBakhtinian framing of horrology and possibility. Each thinker is concerned with temporal relations of received and lived truth. When brought into conversation I argue they signal how the presence of AI Slop may dethrone all too certain visual truth claims of seeing, for critical visual literacies.

A Bakhtinian carnival: AI Slop inverting 'genuine' versus 'generated' visual 'fact'

Bakhtinian carnivalesque jestingly turns the typical world order on its head, with AI Slop arguably entering a mirthful carnival that debases the image as either 'genuine' or 'generated'. Incited by times of crisis and authoritative suppression, carnivalesque ignites "moments of death and revival, of change and renewal" (Bakhtin, 1984: 9). Fear is shown the door, along with hierarchical dictates and esteemed truth through a degrading, poking fun. The 'serious' is laughed at, mocked for underground dissenting voices at the footlights of typical authority. With nothing beyond reproach, the "habitual picture of the world" (Bakhtin, 1981: 177) is turned on its head. This generative process interweaves a nexus of death for new life. As "decay and death can be nothing more than subordinate to growth and increase, the necessary ingredients for generative growth" (Bakhtin, 1981: 207). Through the participation of people in the public square, or everyday prosaic, the falsehood of conventional certainty is parodied and degraded, materialising a temporal, topsy-turvy new world order (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). A term exemplified by joyful, mirth-driven inversion where the elevated is brought low and the marginalised speak up.

I contend AI Slop erupts in the public square of the people by granting the masses access to high quality image generation. Creators need no expertise beyond an internet connection to create a mind bending image that challenges assumptions of what can be seen. The sudden accessibility of this technology is illustrated by ASAP Rocky's mid-2024 official music video *Tailor Swif*, which won innovation awards (see [ASAPROCKYUPTOWN, 2024](#)). These AI generated visuals gained international notoriety for being increasingly absurd and grotesque. The video calls objective realism into question by showing hyperreal impossibilities, such as a woman whose hair is a mass of lit cigarettes and a dog at the wheel of a getaway car (Imerlishvili, 2024). Fast forward to early 2025 and visualities, which won awards for 'mind-bending' innovative art forms (McInnes, 2024), became easily accessible to anyone with access to LLM AIs. Consequently, topsy-turvy visualities are no longer reserved for production companies. Rather, AI advancements enable a participatory carnival of the people, with a jesting trial of the image no longer merely accessible to the elite, indicating a carnivalesque festival of inversion within the postdigital realm.

I contend, through these technological advancements, the crisis of 'generated' images ignites a death of 'genuine' visuals in public discourse. Mocking notions image generation is novel, AI Slops hyperreal, absurdism degrades and pokes fun at discourses that framed the visual as fact. The habitual 'pics or it didn't happen' culture is turned on its head through a topsy turvy world order. One which exposes how creators and technologies composing the visual exist beyond the genuine, through mind-bending displays. An interplay that often masks the identity and processes that made these images possible (see [Figure 5](#)). This parade incites a "mask of the public spectacle" (Bakhtin, 1981: 159), showing the falseness and underside of received truth, (re)birthing 'genuine' versus 'generated' notions. Hysteria for photoshop, misinformation and disinformation can be jestingly inverted to ask 'whose truth?' is offered allegiance (Westbrook and White, 2024), with hyperreal absurdity demanding viewers question whose truths are illustrated. Consequently, AI Slop could create space for co-subjective encounters, where the self and other are both visible and questioned even as they exist outside of the 'lens'.



Figure 5. AI Slop Renewal? AI generated image in [Hern and Milmo's \(2024\)](#) Guardian article, 'Spam, junk...slop?.'

Furthermore, the grotesque abundance of AI Slop could foster renewal as a site of the lower stratum. [Bakhtin \(1984\)](#) explained how carnivalesque can be at its zenith when the grotesque is brought to the fore. Through this debasing the people are “liberate[d] from the prevailing point of view of the world... to enter a completely new order of things” ([Bakhtin, 1984](#): 34). AI Slop connotes heaped, unappetising food shovelled through livestock troughs ([Adami, 2024](#)), insinuating its grotesque abundance and vulgarity. With its bad taste, abundant absurdism, AI Slop may signal the ‘wound as a womb’ ([Bakhtin, 1981](#): 195), whereby death and its grotesque imagery is healing and regenerative. These visualities might then shift fears of enshittification, and the distorting of ‘truth’, for an AI womb where critical visual literacies could be (re)birthed, shifting dystopian horror for possibilism in the postdigital era.

From horrology to possibilism: Epstein's transgressive borders and AI slop

To contemplate how carnivalesque could shift from fear and horror to possibility, I employ Epstein's (2012, 2019) concepts horrology and possibilism. Horrology describes a civilization preoccupied by, and bristling with fear that its own technological creations will trigger humanity's extinction. Potential future projections are gripped by angst for manufactured dystopian annihilation for society as we know it, with "humankind a hostage of its own creation" (Epstein, 2012: 173). The anxiety surrounding AI, framed as existential threat and societal collapse, arguably highlights a contemporary iteration of horrology. These fears include rights to privacy, authorship, security, joblessness, the diminishment of human creativity, and runaway AI threatening human existence (Knight, 2023; Nichols, 2025). Yet, the extent to which public discourse is horrified by AI has been labelled by Samuel et al. (2025) a phobia due to the level of disproportionate fear.

Similar responses to technological advancement can be seen at other points in history, such as the aforementioned photoshop (Marwick, 2013). Relations between technological advancement and a horrology of civilization's untimely destruction, are therefore not novel. Horrology is thus an enduring temporal response; "the state of a civilization in fear of itself because any of its achievements can become a weapon for its own destruction" (Epstein, 2012: 177). When reframed as a cultural script of horror and fear, AI Slop as a technological advancement can be reconceptualised as a temporal encounter, with the ability to pose future imaginaries of what might be.

Conceptualising possibilism, Epstein (2019) first describes the modalities of presence and potential, with AI Slop seemingly a probable horrology that possibilism might transgress. Epstein's three modalities conceptualise what can be seen, that which is (presence), what might probably be (potential), and what might possibly become (possibilism). Presence, as that which already exists, can seem mundane, with Gunning (1989) stating "yesterday's unknown horror" becomes "today's banal technological wallpaper" (p. 31). Potential, that which has not yet occurred, but is probable given a foreseeable projection of present conditions is, I contend, where the grips of horrology unfold. At the edges of what has yet to come to pass, but could predictably be, the anxiety and fear for human destruction appears most gripping. As evidenced by the numerous news articles documenting humanity's potential demise through its creation of AI and the visualities generated with it (see Knight, 2023; Nichols, 2025).

Conversely, possibility is filled with the opportunities of speculation that exist at the horizon of what can be imagined (Epstein, 2019). As a transgressive border, possibility is defined by the impossible because it rests at the edge of what can be contemplated, but not yet fully formed (Epstein, 2019). Future-oriented and open to infinite maybes, possibility is contingent on its absence from present reality and probable projections (Westbrook, 2026). A carnivalesque festival of AI Slop might birth Epstein's possibilism as a 'might be' at the horizon of that which already exists, beyond what is probable. By showing AI horror and fear the door, potential humanmade catastrophes can be placed on trial to (re)birth possible futures. A mirthful parody that could jestingly perish AI horrology as a probable-fearful-future, by laughing and poking fun at "all-too-certain-truth-claims" (Westbrook and White, 2024: 82). As a future-focused provocation, AI Slop might cultivate a conscious concern for the generated nature of all visualities, fostering critical literacies within public discourse.

As has already been argued, codified ideologies of seeing are populated by technologies; I further contend they are defined by the possibilities and impossibilities of technology of the time, for once the impossible becomes present or probable, it risks slipping into horrology. Science fiction imaginaries (see Figure 6's visualities of the future from 1893 to 1970) contemplated what humanity might be able to do with technological advancements (the possible), that they were not able

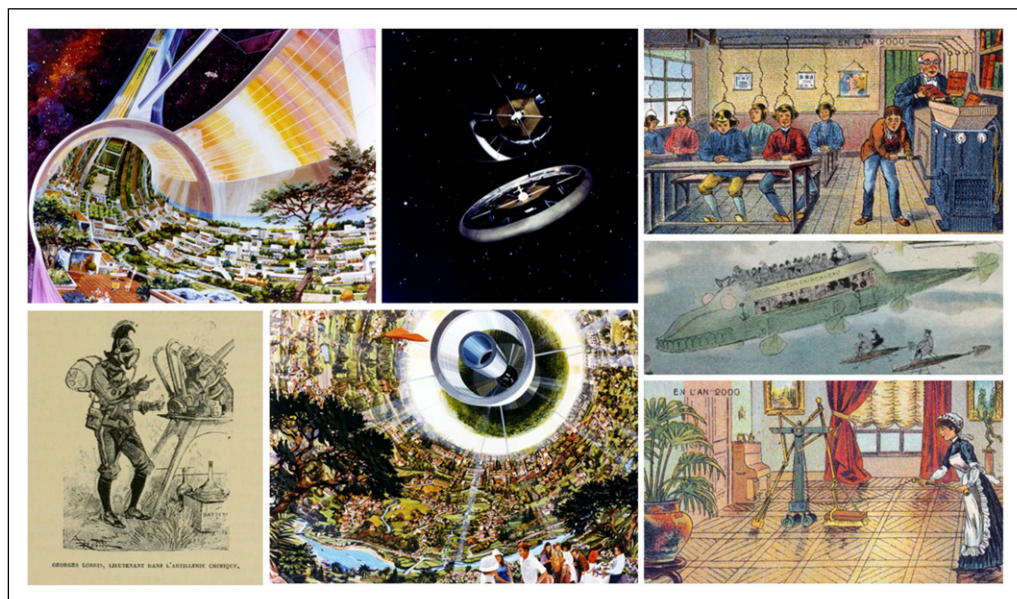


Figure 6. Future imaginaries across centuries. Top left, centre and bottom centre: Illustrations by Rick Guidice of a possible colony and human-powered flight, produced during the space colony summer studies at NASA Ames research center, mid-1970s. Top right and bottom right: *En l'an 2000* postcards, 'At School' and 'Electric Scrubbing', c. 1899 to 1910 (Bibliothèque nationale de France). Bottom left: 'Georges Lorris, lieutenant dans l'artillerie chimique', from Albert Robida, *Le vingtième siècle: la vie électrique* (Paris: [La Librairie Illustrée](#), 1893, p. 13).

to at the time (the impossible). The streamlining of arduous tasks is depicted in these imaginaries, suggesting Futurism's optimism for greater time, higher-order thinking and education, as well as enabling more sustainable ways of living. With the rise and accessibility of AI, these long-held visions of technology taking on an ever-growing range of human tasks are rapidly becoming a present reality, moving (im)possibility to a potential (might probably be), and presence (that which is). As a consequence, horrology is rampant with civilisation gripped by fears for humankind's demise due to the present reality and probable advancements of AI and its slop of visualities, as opposed to Futurism's transgressive borders of 'what could be'.

In March 2025, AI-generated images took a significant leap forward. Mollick (2025) explains how multimodal LLM integration replaced earlier outsourcing to less sophisticated systems, eliminating discernible tells, such as cartoonish imagery, distorted text and malformed hands, that had indicated AI generated visualities (see [Figures 7](#)). AI Slop advancements resulted in uncanny realism, collapsing observable distinction between 'genuine' versus 'generated'. I contend it is technological leaps such as these where public discourse's perceptions of seeing shift. Possibilism for what might be, such as Futurism's optimistic imaginaries, are narrowed down into the probable potential of what is likely to occur, shifting to a horror for humankind's destruction at the hands of its creation. Horrology, then, emerges when the impossibility of technology becomes a present reality and probable potential. As AI-generated visualities move from cartoonish abstraction to hyperreal indistinguishability ([Figure 7](#) and [Figure 9](#)), possibility collapses into presence. From this point, the potential for job displacement, epistemic collapse, democratic destabilisation can be projected. I contend if the collapse of impossibility into presence intensifies horrology, then the

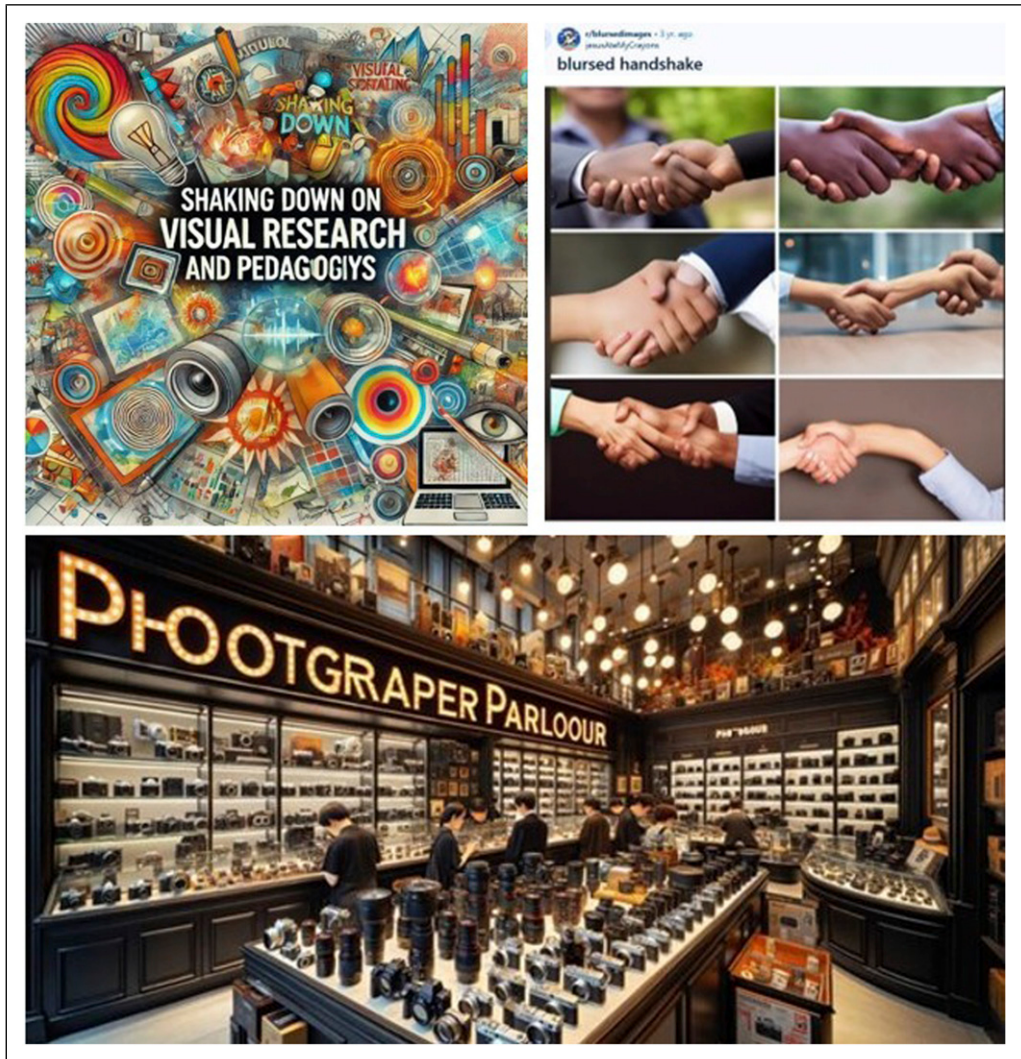


Figure 7. AI tells. Top left: AI image created by the author in 2023; Top right, states 'Everyone: AI art will make designers obsolete. AI accepting the job:' [Skowroński, 2023]. Bottom right: Why AI image generators struggle to get text right (Growcoot, 2024).

reintroduction of impossibility may reopen possibilism, applying this argument to the critical consumption of visualities within public discourse.

AI Slop's carnival of (im)possibility inversion

Carnavalesque interrupts public discourse by mocking the certainty of predictable-potentials and present-realities. Erupting as a temporal festival in response to crisis, such as the phobia 'generated' visualities will result in humankind's destruction, carnivalesque laughs at authoritative truth, such as notions the visual ever offered allegiance to an objective, 'genuine' representation. What thrives

in this suspension is not a new certainty, but a possibilistic horizon, birthing a critical seeing that does not resolve the tension between ‘genuine’ and ‘generated’, refusing to let either term go uncontested. Through grotesque excess and juxtapositions that defy physics, AI Slop resists and contests predictable projections, possibly reintroducing impossibility by exposing the codified ideologies through which visual truth is constructed in the public square. As such, exposing the constructed nature of visual truth. With visualities now equal parts hyperreal and absurd-beyond objective reality, viewers are drawn into a dialogic encounter with competing visual truths (see [Figure 8](#)). Through this inverting of the ‘genuine’, a cultural shift may occur where codified ideologies of seeing are questioned through critical visual literacies within public discourse. These encounters arguably encourage everyday viewers to contemplate whose truths are represented and what realities images construct. Approaching AI Slop possibilistically, from the standpoint of its maybes rather than its certainties might, therefore, enabled visual ‘fact’ to no longer be taken for granted.

This possibilistic framing does not overlook the tensions and concerns of AI Slop when consumed uncritically. Whilst absurdist hyperrealism may pose alternative realities that illustrate the “underside and falseness of every situation” ([Bakhtin, 1981: 159](#)), images consumed without critical engagement can impose received, esteemed truths, posing considerable risk. Visualities generated from biased data can reinforce bleak, hegemonic narratives and strengthen problematic dominant truths. As illustrated in [Figure 9](#), AI images can perpetuate harmful ‘white saviour’ hierarchies, privileging perspectives that frame crises through rigid narratives of heroic rescuers and vulnerable victims. Such dogmatic images can fuel polarisation and culture wars, deepening social divides. The grief-stricken child and sodden puppy from [Figure 9](#) were attributed to



Figure 8. AI Slop possibilities, created by the author in the AI ChatGPT.

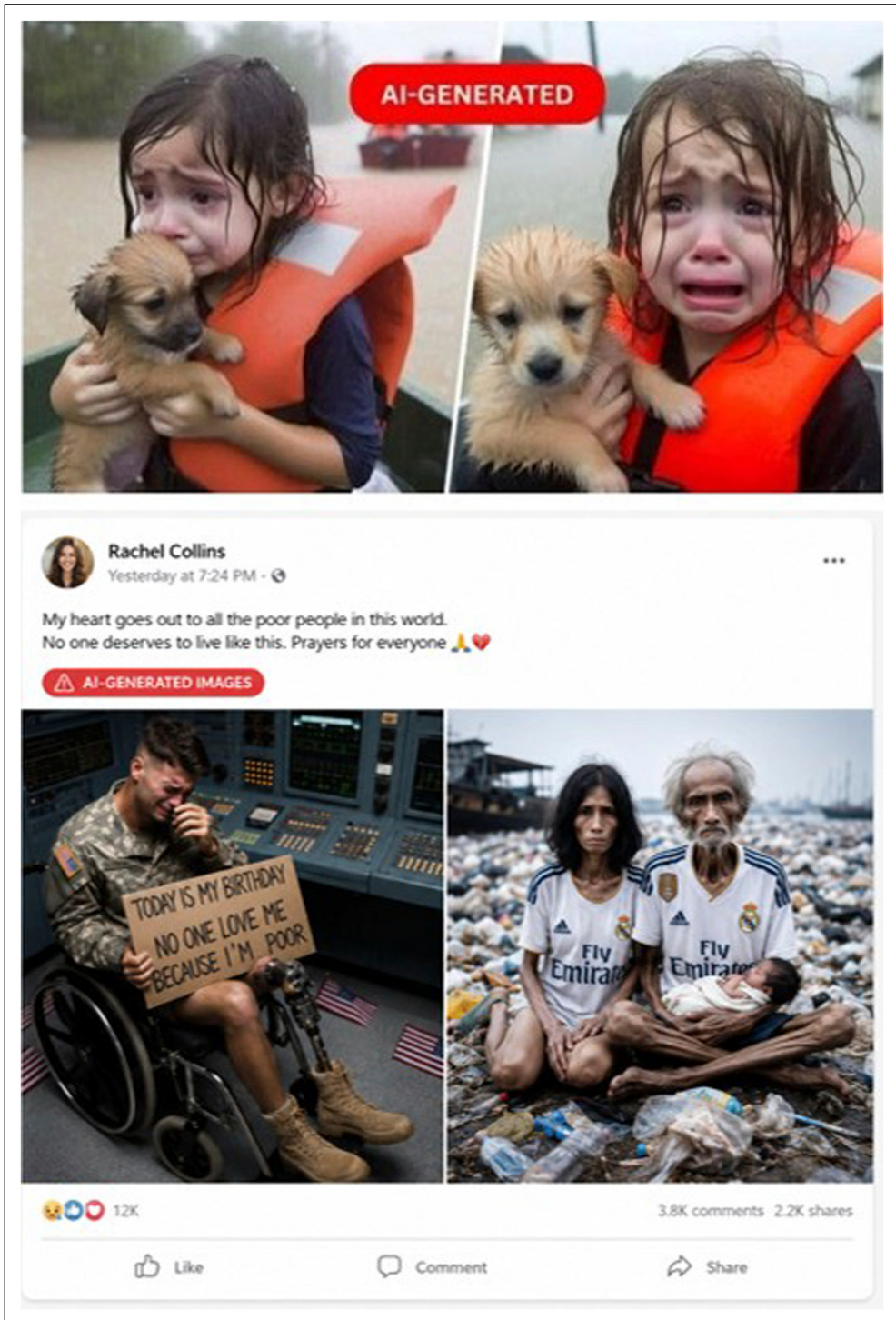


Figure 9. Dystopian potential. Top: 'AI-generated images have become a new form of propaganda this election season' Jingnan (2024). Bottom: AI generated imaged based on content circulated in social networks, reworked by the author in the AI ChatGPT.

Hurricane Helene victims, prompting emotional responses from millions of viewers. Republicans utilised this visibility as ‘proof’ to criticise the disaster response from Biden’s administration, which undermined rescue efforts (Jingnan, 2024). Hence, images consumed without critical engagement can solidify, rather than unsettle received truths.

As a festival of inversion, carnivalesque offers no allegiances. Ambiguously speaking up from the underground, carnival does not align itself with any ‘truth’, destabilising all hierarchies through inversion. Its laughter can regenerate as a womb, but it can also wound. In the context of AI Slop, this suspension is volatile. The same excess that enables manipulative propaganda could also unsettle the authority of the image through the suspension of fixed order. The question, therefore, is not whether AI Slop is good or bad. It is whether its carnivalesque ambiguity can be inhabited critically. If horrology narrates the future as probable catastrophe, carnival reopens the unknown as unstable and unfinished, with these imaginaries intimately interwoven, encouraging educational encounters and implications.

Educational implications in the postdigital era?

In this article I have signalled how AI Slop might be turned from a horror of technological advancements, and the potential end of civilisation as we know it, to a possibility, posing educational implications for the postdigital era. I do not deny that AI Slop poses considerable dangers (see Figure 9), yet I contend it also prompts unique opportunities situated within as of yet unimaginable possibilities. Living in the dangerous and uncertain times of the Soviet Union, Bakhtin turned toward the ‘unique possibilities’ that come when a world is turned on its head (Holquist, 1984). It is perhaps in spite of, or because of AI dangers that such opportunities are posed by AI Slop in the form of visual truth games. When harnessed as an educational impetus for visual scholarship within and beyond public discourse, new meanings may emerge that currently feel like impossibilities. The postdigital era, as a convergence of online and offline lived experiences has prompted digital visualities to no longer be confined to screens, saturating the material environments of daily life. Consequently, digital visual literacy is rendered a condition of contemporary citizenship and, therefore, of educational importance.

Rather than treating visualities as objects to verify or debunk, AI Slop offers an entry point for teachers to encourage learners across educational sectors to approach the image as a dialogic encounter of competing truths. AI Slop enables this by arguably making visible what has long been obscured within public discourse, that visual truth has always been ‘generated’ by relational subjectivities, technologies and codified ideologies. Due to its excessive absurdism, AI Slop may provoke a critical literacy of seeing, because the ‘genuine’ can no longer be assumed by sight alone. When AI Slop is conceived as a possibilism for what might be, it could disrupt a long history of technologies that have shaped what counts as visual truth within educational institutions and public discourse. Unlike photography or smartphone cameras, which came to stabilise seeing-as-knowing, I have argued that AI Slop operates through postdigital carnivalesque inversion, destabilising rather than cementing visual authority.

Dialogues about the truth games of the image differ from pedagogies focused primarily on detecting fakery. Detection presumes the existence of a stable ‘genuine’ against which the ‘generated’ can be measured. Instead, this article signals what might be possible, existing in the spaces between the self and other who create and consume the image. Encounters here could prompt questions such as whose truths are these visualities constructing, and what realities do they invite? Consequently, the absurdism of AI Slop may encourage a critical literacy where the “old truth is laughed at and shown the door, in order to create room for new truths to be born”

(Lensmire and White, 2017: 13) in the postdigital era. Hence, through grotesque exaggeration and impossibility, images' ambiguities, doctrines, and dogmas may become visible rather than naturalised, by considering how the self and other generate notions of the 'genuine'.

For teachers and learners occupying increasingly image-saturated cultures, from early childhood settings to higher education, the proliferation of AI Slop suggests a shift in how visual truth might be approached. Adopting Epstein's (2019) possibilism, visualities could be engaged with as openings for imagining what might emerge in the spaces between learner, image, technology, and creator, rather than fixed representations of reality. A possibility could be future classrooms as critical sites for placing visuals on trial, examining how AI generated images are deployed to construct truth. In addition to dialogues exploring how technologies of seeing are not necessarily constrained by the image creator's intent, nor what the public discourse at the time might contemplate. As was the case for Brunelleschi's reflective panel, shifting theological desires for rationalist sciences. This imagined, might possibly be, poses a transgressive border where AI Slop may open encounters that cannot yet be fully conceptualised because they remain absent from what is present and probable.

Yet the carnivalesque classroom, informed by possibilism, offers no fidelity or guarantees. Carnival does not resolve truth claims, it suspends them through ambivalence. AI Slop can reinforce dominant narratives as readily as it unsettles them, reproducing hegemonic imaginaries through biased datasets, manipulation and algorithmic propaganda (Jingnan, 2024). The educational implication, therefore, is not a pedagogy of certainty, but something closer to a pedagogy of the trial that poses (im) possibilities. Visual truths remain open to contestation, with teachers and learners attending to whose reality images construct, whose voices they silence, and whose futures they make imaginable.

This article offers itself not as a resolution, but an utterance within the AI Slop conversation for those who will take it up, contest it, and transform it in ways that are currently unimaginable. For Bakhtin the finalising word seeks to close dialogue, posing an authoritative conclusion as an end to the conversation. Rejecting this closing down by stipulating a solution to the dilemmas posed by AI-generated visualities, I end this article by signalling a way of thinking with AI Slop as a possible future. I have argued that AI Slop, as it increasingly seeps across postdigital spaces, could pose a cultural and educational rupture, by placing the dichotomies of 'generated' and 'genuine' images on trial. As a consequence, AI Slop might create possibilities to transgress horror for what might be within and beyond public discourse.

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1. AI Slop imagery was selected and reworked into an original image when it was stepped in absurd-hyperrealism and easily accessed, indicating its presence across social networks, the broader internet and offline spaces. Further images were selected when they existed within the public domain.

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