



The Artificial

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Editorial

Orvell noted that despite the evolution of society, imitation and authenticity function as “compass points” that guide meaning-making and retain potency as humans continue to negotiate the real and the unreal in society (ix). Describing the natural and the artificial, Birnbacher contended that, simply put, it is the difference “between what has ‘become’ and what has been ‘made’” (2): the view is that if something exists independent of human intervention, then that would make it a natural entity. Of course, he noted such a definition was not straightforward, citing examples of products manufactured by non-human beings as clear instances when such a delineation was open to interpretation and contention. For example, much debate is posed over whether the museum experience is real or artificial (Latham); if reality television can be truly authentic (Rose and Wood); whether there is value in chemical additives in food production (Carocho et al.); and how digital twins can be used to personalise medical treatment (Padoan and Plebani). These are but a few of the plethora of occasions where the natural and the artificial are debated.

Significantly then, the concept of artificiality remains contested—often viewed as unnatural, human-made, and unreal, carrying connotations of being synthetic, imitative, or insincere. These critiques persist despite the tangible benefits artificial developments offer in areas such as environmental sustainability, food technology, biology, and aesthetics. Popular culture, too, reflects our fascination with the artificial, from films like *The Matrix* and *Blade Runner* to novels like *Klara and the Sun* and the immersive realms of virtual and augmented gaming.

Given the breadth of attention on the artificial, we approached this issue from the position that the line between the natural and the artificial has grown increasingly indistinct with the rise of advanced technologies, synthetic materials, and immersive virtual environments. Artificial intelligence, for instance, has captured the imagination of media and communication scholars, heralded for its transformative potential. To this end, this issue dives into the expansive concept of the artificial, exploring its essence, diverse applications, and profound implications for society, culture, ethics, media, and the environment.

In the featured article, "Artificial Companions, Real Connections? Examining AI's Role in Social Connection", Savic explores the role of AI companions in addressing social connection amid growing concerns about loneliness and isolation. Using the Ethics of Care framework, Savic examines the implications of human-AI interactions, focussing on platforms like Replika as a case study. The analysis highlights AI's potential to provide emotional support while raising ethical concerns about emotional dependency, commodification of care, and impacts on human social skills. The article calls for proactive regulation and thoughtful design to balance AI's benefits with risks, ensuring these technologies complement rather than replace human relationships and safeguard emotional and social well-being.

The next two articles consider the artificial as it pertains to the environment. First, Crosby et al. consider the role of visual communication in understanding artificial urban wetlands, focussing on Sydney Park's award-winning wetland system in their article "Visually Communicating Artificial Urban Wetlands". Using photo diagramming, the study highlights the park's dual function as green infrastructure and a socioecological contact zone. It explores how artificial wetlands challenge traditional notions of "nature" by blending engineered systems with ecological processes. By situating Sydney Park within its colonial history and engaging with concepts such as queer ecologies and picturesque design, the article argues for a deeper appreciation of urban wetlands as interconnected systems on unceded Aboriginal land, essential for sustainability, biodiversity, and socioecological connection in urban environments.

Secondly, Gulliver, in the article "The Fossil Fuel Façade: Unmasking an Artificially Constructed Reality", shows how the fossil fuel industry constructs and perpetuates an artificial reality, masking its role in climate change. Drawing on parallels with tactics from other harmful industries, it explores narrative control, greenwashing, policy influence, and state alliances to maintain societal dependence on fossil fuels. Using longitudinal lobbying data and case studies, the analysis highlights the psychological and cultural mechanisms enabling societal complicity, including moral disengagement and identity capture. By dismantling the industry's narrative and systemic entrenchment, the article advocates for coordinated collective action to confront fossil fuel hegemony and build pathways to a sustainable, climate-conscious future.

The following eight articles discuss the artificial in entertainment and digital media. For Glitsos et al., the viral *Skibidi Toilet* phenomenon permits the exploration of monstrous digital aesthetics, and in so doing the article reflects on the cultural significance of the Web series for Gen Alpha. By analysing its bizarre humanoid characters and dystopian landscapes, "Nightmare Fuel: *Skibidi Toilet* and the Monstrous Digital" contends that *Skibidi Toilet* offers insights into contemporary anxieties about surveillance, ecological degradation, and humanity's evolving relationship with technology. The series' chaotic world, populated by hybrid figures like Cameraheads, embodies fears of merging with media technologies and surveillance culture. Positioned within Gen Alpha's mediated existence, *Skibidi Toilet* serves as both a creative expression and critique of the socio-political and environmental crises shaping their generation, offering a unique lens on the ambivalence of digital life.

In "'I felt the borders of my self blur': Artificial Bodies and Worlds in *Signalis* and *Citizen Sleeper*", Sedzielarz and Liu examine the interplay between artificiality, embodiment, and identity in the video games *Signalis* and *Citizen Sleeper*. Their article explores how these games incorporate players into artificial worlds and surrogate bodies, prompting reflection on selfhood and the construction of identity. Their analysis highlights the reciprocal relationship between players and game environments, using concepts like incorporation, hypermediacy, and the "game body" to uncover how artificiality facilitates self-discovery. They argue that, through their recursive narratives and emphasis on memory, both games illustrate the mutual construction of player experience and gameworld, offering profound insights into the nature of identity in mediated, artificial spaces.

"Looking Down Not Up: Designing for Wandering" by Gibbons critiques colonial ideologies embedded in video game design and explores alternatives that foster environmental care and reciprocal engagement. Focussing on *Walking the Face of my Dead Grandfather*, a virtual environment designed for wandering, Gibbons examines how non-linear, intuitive exploration shifts players' interactions with artificial landscapes from extraction to collaboration. By integrating principles of Indigenous environmental stewardship and encouraging attentiveness through slowed movement and minimal direction, the project demonstrates how virtual spaces can cultivate care and respect for environments. This design framework challenges colonial modes of domination in virtual environments, proposing a paradigm of collaborative co-becoming between players and spaces.

In "'A Little Limited': Artificial Aesthetics and the Cultural Politics of Julio Torres' *Fantasmas*", Blackwood and Juliff examine *Fantasmas* (2024), HBO's surreal sketch comedy by Julio Torres, through the lens of artificial aesthetics and the cultural politics of Latin identity. It argues that *Fantasmas* reflects tensions of displacement, exile, and neoliberal subjectivity through ghostly motifs and constructed artifice. Drawing on Derrida's "hauntology" and Latin diasporic trauma, the show critiques identity commodification, subjectivity under capitalism, and selfhood's fluidity in a hyper-mediated world. According to the authors, Torres's avant-garde comedic style, rooted in a subversive immigrant and queer ethos, interrogates absence, presence, and unresolved histories of Latin exile, memory, and invisibility.

Kennedy's article "'THESE VLOGS AREN'T REAL': Managing Authenticity and Privacy as Family Influencers" examines how British family vloggers The Michalaks navigate authenticity and privacy while producing commercially successful YouTube content. Kennedy analyses their use of highly stylised, cinematic "Silkeys" within raw family vlogs. These montages balance creative expression, sponsored revenue, and privacy protection, particularly for their son, Grayson. Kennedy finds that, to maintain authenticity—a critical factor for audience and brand engagement—The Michalaks employ two strategies: explicit transparency about the constructed nature of Silkeys and active viewer participation in content decisions. The study reveals how these techniques safeguard authenticity while addressing ethical concerns about children's privacy in the influencer economy.

In "The Photograph, the Archive and 'Reinterpreting' the Past in a Time of Civil War", Aung Thin and May examine how the *Reinterpret Myanmar's History* project and its resulting exhibition, *Rethink*, shape belonging in Myanmar during civil war. By engaging with archival photographs through creative reinterpretation, the project challenges state-controlled historical narratives. Drawing on Verne Harris's concept of "decolonising the archive" and Hal Foster's "archival art", the article explores how imaginative, personal, and even fictional approaches to archival material can uncover obscured histories and foster a sense of connection. Reflecting on the roles of "real" and "artificial" narratives, the authors also question the ownership, legitimacy, and decolonisation of archives amidst ongoing conflict.

Klotz explores *Sonic Dreams*, a structured improvisation by Vanessa Tomlinson, as a form of speculative utopian art inspired by José Esteban Muñoz's concept of hope as a methodology, in the article "Vanessa Tomlinson's *Sonic Dreams*: Improvising Utopia". The work tasks performers with imagining the sounds of extinct or critically endangered species, challenging the linearity of time and dominant narratives of climate despair. Using speculative and collaborative processes, *Sonic Dreams* fosters collective resistance to environmental crises and opens possibilities for alternative futures. By troubling binaries of artificial and legitimate, Klotz argues that Tomlinson's piece reconfigures loss into hope, offering a profound act of listening and world-making.

"Curating Christmas: Comparing Eclecticism on User- and Spotify-Created Playlists" by Cole and Robinson considers the interplay of personal and algorithmic music curation through an analysis of Christmas playlists on Spotify in Norway. Combining user interviews, playlist data, and network mapping, it explores the linguistic diversity and personalisation of user-generated and Spotify-

created playlists. Their findings reveal that while user playlists demonstrate greater linguistic diversity and individuality, Spotify's curated playlists promote Norwegian-language music, supporting cultural preservation. By contextualising these insights within theories of streaming, nostalgia, and identity, the article highlights how digital platforms mediate personal expression, collective identity, and national culture, challenging distinctions between "real" and "artificial" curation.

Closing off the articles on the theme of artificial and digital media is Piatti-Farnell's conceptual piece "Constructions of Luxury in Digital Visual Culture: Brands, Social Identities, and the Plurality of Uniqueness". Here Piatti-Farnell explores the evolving concept of luxury in the digital age, focussing on its representation and dissemination through visual culture and social media platforms like Instagram. She considers the interaction between tangible and imaginary aspects of luxury, highlighting how curated online narratives and imagery contribute to identity formation and consumer appeal. Through concepts like the "third realm" of luxury, she investigates the tension between authenticity and artificiality in digital luxury branding. By analysing the role of visual storytelling, digital platforms, and social media influencers, she demonstrates how luxury has become democratised, performative, and integral to self-representation.

The final group of articles all hinge on discussions of artificial intelligence across creative and communicative practice. Srdarov and Leaver's article "Generative AI Glitches: The Artificial Everything" begins the grouping by focussing on the glitches and refusals of generative AI (GenAI) tools, highlighting their potential to disrupt cultural norms and provoke critical reflection. Analysing images generated from prompts about Australian identity, childhood, and family, the authors explore how AI perpetuates stereotypes while producing unexpected, nonsensical outputs. These "glitches" are framed not as errors but as opportunities to challenge rigid notions of identity, gender, and cultural narratives. The authors argue that GenAI, through its failures and inaccuracies, generates new ways of thinking about the boundaries between reality and artificiality, revealing both its limitations and subversive potential.

Next, Binns investigates the aesthetic, narrative, and cultural implications of AI-generated media and simulations, examining how they challenge traditional notions of storytelling, immersion, and authenticity in the article "The Allure of Artificial Worlds: Aesthetic and Narrative Implications of AI Media and Simulations". Framing AI outputs as composite "artificial worlds", Binns explores their uncanny allure and their potential to provoke visceral, embodied reactions. Binns analyses AI-generated video works and simulative systems, highlighting their power to construct immersive experiences and influence perceptions of reality. The article concludes that these machinic imperfections, far from undermining their appeal, enhance the immersive and fantastical qualities of AI media, creating a seductive tension between control, chaos, and hyperreal engagement.

In their article "The Actotron: Envisioning the Future of Virtual Actors and Digital Storytelling", contributors Matthews and Nairn explore the transformative potential of the "Actotron", a cutting-edge AI-driven virtual actor capable of delivering dynamic, autonomous performances. Using methodologies from Future Studies and Futurecasting, Matthews and Nairn examine the implications of Actotron technology on storytelling, creativity, and the entertainment industry. Synthesising advancements in CGI, deepfakes, and modular AI systems, the Actotron challenges traditional notions of artistry while enabling cost-effective, real-time digital performances. The study considers ethical, legal, and societal impacts, emphasising the technology's potential to democratise filmmaking and reshape digital storytelling. Envisioning future scenarios, they highlight the Actotron's role in redefining creative practices in the digital age.

"Robots and Code: A Case Study on the Depiction of Artificial Intelligence in German News Media" by Krause investigates how German quality news media visually depict artificial intelligence and its risks, focussing on the role of imagery in shaping public perceptions. Analysing 21 images from

January to September 2024, the study identifies recurring visual motifs, including anthropomorphic robots, human-technology fusions, and technical elements such as code, often presented in blue-grey tones. It highlights the frequent reliance on stereotypical and science fiction-inspired visuals, alongside the growing use of AI-generated images. Through qualitative content analysis, the study emphasises the media's role in reinforcing simplified and fear-inducing narratives, underscoring the need for more nuanced portrayals of AI's societal implications.

Rounding out the issue is "On the Use of the Term Philosophy" by D'Aloia, which considers the use of the term 'philosophy' in the context of language, artificial intelligence, and meaning-making, exploring how large language models (LLMs) challenge traditional philosophical frameworks. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida, it critiques the reduction of language to computational logic, raising questions about the temporal and affective nature of meaning. The study underscores the limitations of current AI systems in replicating philosophical inquiry and human reasoning while addressing the risks of oversimplification and utilitarianism. Through philosophical and theoretical analysis, it advocates for a deeper understanding of language's evolving role in shaping thought and experience.

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Dr Angelique Nairn is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication Studies (SCS) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). As a graduate of the Bachelor of Communication Studies, she went on to complete a BCS Honours (first class) and her PhD all at AUT. Angelique has been involved in a myriad of research projects that have hinged on organisational communication, identity construction, rhetoric, and/or the creative industries. She is also interested in popular culture and particularly the representation of women, creative people and morality as they appear on screen. Her recent work has explored issues of racism, sexism, and technological determinism.

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Lorna Piatti-Farnell, PhD, is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. She is the Director of the Australasian Horror Studies Network (AHSN). Her research sits at the intersection of film, popular media, and cultural history, and focuses on discourses of corporeality, horror, bio-ethics, technology, transhumanism, ecology and environmental humanities, food, and consumer culture. She has published widely in these areas, including volumes such as *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (editor, 2018) and *Consuming Gothic: Food and Horror in Film* (Palgrave, 2017). She's currently working on a new edited volume entitled *Discourses of Eco-Horror in the 21st Century: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Environmental Anxieties in Media and Culture* (forthcoming, 2025). Prof. Piatti-Farnell is sole editor of the Routledge *Advances in Popular Culture* book series, and principal editor of the *Horror Studies* book series for Lexington/Bloomsbury.

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