

THE FAKE IMAGE: FAKE-OUTS, AI, AND THE AESTHETICS OF POST-TRUTH POLITICS

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Endemic to the concerns of contemporary critical media theory is an unbridgeable gap between human sensation and the operations of artificial intelligence. Although special attention has been paid to the imperceptible operations of computation from the stance of human perception and visual culture, this talk instead questions the extension of cybernetic concepts of “intelligence” across society and the implications on human visual culture considered as such. To problematize the self-justifying technosocial pursuit of intelligence, I question how AI as a historical project evokes notions around truth and falsehood that work to uphold AI’s legitimacy and necessity. The following takes a step back from the technical debates of contemporary AI to ask how the aesthetics of the fake shape the performance of truth within contemporary techno-culture. The academic fetishization of the “connectionist” paradigm of AI, which draws inspiration from the mechanisms involved in the human neuron, has worked to self-justify the project of AI while neutralizing its political dimensions. While connectionist methods are often compared analogically to human biological processes, I trace a different genealogy of AI as fakeness. This approach privileges epistemological reconfigurations in the post-war project of computer simulation that favor improvisation, internal referentiality and self-regulation over intelligibility or biological analogy. Developments in computation that span its 20th century history focused on computational simulation, pattern finding, and feature generation as a means to overcome the “artifice” introduced by the human programmer. I focus on Turing’s imitation game as a case study of contemporary generative adversarial neural networks (GANs), which show us how fakeness comes about through the simulation of perception, and recursively, the perception of simulation.

Recent work in image synthesis that suggests that the hidden political bias of an image can be gleaned from feature recognition shows us not only the readiness of AI research to overcode political domains, but also how the detection and production of fakeness are part of the same epistemic project. As “deepfakes” are increasingly difficult to differentiate from “real” images, the fake becomes an ever more dominant cultural aesthetic, semiotic infrastructure, and organizing form for the reproduction of normative epistemic values in the face of precarity and post-truth paranoia. Drawing on what Mark Fisher has called “capitalist realism”, this talk will also consider the 1976 *CROSSROADS* by American filmmaker Bruce Conner, an edit of the declassified documentation from the Bikini Atoll nuclear bomb test in 1946, to draw out the role of the Cold War sciences in ushering in a new type of synthetic realism that shapes visual culture today.

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Special Issue, Ways of Machine Seeing, ("Seeing like an algorithm: operative images and emergent subjects", 2019), *Review of Communication, Optimization: Towards a Critical Concept (forthcoming)* ("Optimize User Experience": technique, model and simulation in algorithmic optimization"), *JONMAS Journal, transmediale*, and *Recursive Colonialisms: Artificial Intelligence & Speculative Computation Conference*.