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Imagining Photography in the Age of AI. An analysis of the debate on Boris Eldagsen's *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician**

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The present article observes the current crisis of photography concerning the new algorithmic and machine learning systems, which are increasingly integrated into the apparatus of capturing, processing and creating technical images. In this moment of technological transformation, it changes conceptions and definitions of photographic images, influencing both the imaginaries from a structural and philosophical point of view, as well as the imaginative expectations and related worries of individuals. The case of Boris Eldagsen, who won a photography award in April 2023 with an image generated with DALL-E, was the trigger for a debate on social media, particularly Facebook, concerning the relationship between photorealism and photography, art and communication. Through the qualitative content analysis of posts and comments, it is possible to observe the trajectories by which new distinctions are defined by social imaginaries.

Keywords: Generative visual media, Photography, AI-generated images, Boris Eldagsen, Visual Culture

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Introduction

In April 2023, news broke that the German photo-media artist Boris Eldagsen (b. 1970) refused the first prize in the “creative” category of the Sony World Photography Award (SWPA). The reason for his refusal concerned the media origin of the winning image, titled *Pseudoamnesia: Fake Memories. The Electrician*, which is not a photograph but an artwork created entirely with DALL-E. Through this text-to-image AI program, Eldagsen produced a depiction – styled to resemble 1940s photography – of two women of different generations, one positioned behind the other.

DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and all other unsupervised machine-learning tools for image generation fall under the category of *generative visual media* – GVM (Arielli, Manovich, 2024). Popularized in 2022, these tools quickly sparked interest and curiosity, but also fears and ideological clashes. Photorealistic AI-generated images therefore raise ethical, political, and communicative issues, which can be placed within the framework of what is referred to as the post-photographic turn (Grazioli, 2024).¹ Since these computational images take on the form and appearance of photographs, it becomes necessary to investigate the semantic and practical ambiguities that shape their perception, use, and distribution in society.

By refusing his first prize at the SWPA, Boris Eldagsen sought to highlight the distinction that persists between the two technical objects. His statement accompanying this refusal – “AI is not photography” – sparked one of the first major media debates on this new category of technical images. Indeed, the case’s ability to tap into and foreground current cultural tensions made it highly newsworthy for a wide range of online information sources, well beyond the fields of photography and art.

On the one hand, this case relates to the dimension of the *imaginary* as communication through images and in-formation in the media, coupled with relevant sociotechnical dynamics (Durand, 1963; 1994). On the other hand, it involves *social imaginaries* – the set of expectations, ideas, and conceptions that define the space of possible action in the public sphere for who belong to it (Taylor, 2004).

Thus, Eldagsen’s case makes it possible to analyze both users’ imaginaries and distinctions concerning what is photographic nowadays, as well as those that Taina Bucher (2016) has defined as *algorithmic imaginaries* – that is, the ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, and how they function.

Finally, the focus of this paper is not to analyze the photographic practice itself, as commonly emphasized on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram (Leaver et al. 2020); rather, the core of the contribution lies in the media debate that developed around the image *Pseudomnesia* and Eldagsen’s refusal of the award. In this respect, the paper does not center on visual cultures as they emerge accounting the visual elements of communication (Aiello, Parri, 2020), but instead focuses on the debate arising when an image becomes controversial. Users’ imaginaries are thus explored through the analysis of public post and comments, with the image functioning as a trigger for topics, sentiments,

concerns, and shared narratives. For this reason, Facebook appears to be a more suitable site of observation (Seargent, Tagg, 2019).²

Theoretical background

The photographic image: capture or creation?

The media innovations of technical images have a dual influence on the imaginary. They affect its functioning – that is, the way it is generated and disseminated – but they also shape its repertoire of representations, as their technological status stimulates collective imagination (Fiorentino, 2019). Perceptual and visual processing modalities that increasingly depend on data sets and computational/algorithmic are affecting how systems of representation and communicative relations are structured, as well as the value and potential for transmitting memory and documentary recording (Esposito, 2022). This is driving a growing process of the mediatization of the imaginary, defined by an increasingly complex relationship among media assemblages, apparatuses, and social systems (Boccia Artieri 2015; Gemini, Brilli, 2023).

The growing confusion between photographs and AI-generated photorealistic images is intensifying a broad conversation – which, truth be told, never really died down – about the very meaning of photorealism. Hausken (2024) refers to the difference between photorealism as *depiction*, i.e., the appearance of the image that AI systems can reproduce, and documentation as *detection*, which can only be attributed to photography's indexical capacity.

The *trustworthiness* of photorealism that is perceived as detection is the main problem. As demonstrated by Farid and Nightingale (2022; Farid, 2022), synthetically generated faces are almost indistinguishable from real ones, and it is not difficult for fraudsters to exploit the ease and speed of synthesis to avoid detectable flaws. This phenomenon is called *hyperrealism*, indicating – counterintuitively and surprisingly – that AI-generated faces are often perceived as more “human” than real faces (Miller et al., 2023).

AI systems can extend the technical and visual reproducibility inaugurated by photography (Benjamin, 1936) to an even further breaking point: reproducing photorealism as a “style”, given that the majority of objects in the data sets on which AI systems are trained are photographic images (Crowford, Paglen, 2021; Salvaggio, 2023; Sluis, Palmer, 2024).

This issue amplifies the anxiety surrounding photographic manipulation – an enduring debate dating back to the very origins of the photographic medium (Fontcuberta, 1997) and exacerbated by the advent of digital technology, internet and the release of Photoshop (1990).

Already in 1992, the photographer Franco Vaccari argued that digital images – outcomes of operations performed by computers – would herald the end of photography. Within the information society, Vaccari, drawing on Niklas Luhmann, asserted that context has become

indispensable, as it represents the informational framework that “makes it possible to orient oneself in the labyrinths of *verisimilitude* [...] and it is the concept of *verisimilitude* that is in crisis” (p.93).³

Scholars of the *Pictorial and Iconic Turn* argue that images have gained greater autonomy in meaning and the ability to generate knowledge beyond merely representing the world (W.J.T. Mitchell, 1994; Bohem, 1994). In particular, photography, in relation to technological innovation – firstly digital and later computational or algorithmic (Rubenstein, Sluis, 2013; Zhang, 2022) – has progressively diluted the relationship between external object and the image as its referential record.

Today, photography increasingly follows the logics of *platformization* and *datafication* (Blashke, 2019; Taffel, 2020), on which machine vision (Rettberg, 2023) and platform seeing (MacKenzie, Munster, 2019) operate. These mechanisms, integrated into smartphone systems, involve algorithmic functions capable of collapsing, simultaneously – through the integration of hardware and software – the dynamics of image capture, post-production and circulation. In this context, the distinction between capturing an image and creating it becomes very blurred.

Recent studies by Johanna Zylinska (2023) move in this direction: “photography is changing in its encounter with other media technologies (computers, sensors) to become a form of “sensography.” These changes lead to a reconfiguration of perception on an individual, societal, and infrastructural level” (p. 18).

From Vaccari’s time until today, there have been numerous predictions of the “death of photography” in relation to its techno-digital remediation, of which GVM could – at least for now – represent the point at which the “photographic” form becomes detached from its specific medium (Bolter, Grusin, 1999; Hertz, Parikka, 2012).

For this reason, in *Forget Photography* (2021), Andrew Dewdney describes photography as being in an intermediate stage between life and death: “The zombie of photography is not the technology, which itself is relational, but a received and embodied set of ideas and practices standing over and pursuing another set of objects and images” (p. 27). In the author’s view, the classic paradigms of photography should be “forgotten” in light of the current regime of images, thereby allowing us to imagine the photographic medium in radically new terms, including the various dynamics integrated into everyday practices – individual, social, political, and economic.

In a recent special issue of *Media Theory* titled *Seeing Photographically* (2024), the editors attempt to map out new ways of understanding photography, including its relationship with GVM. “Seeing photographically” thus becomes a faculty – indeed, a “way of seeing” (Berger, 1972) – that, on the one hand, persists as a set of knowledge structures and co-influences the imaginary and visual culture; on the other hand, it is no longer merely a human-centric faculty (as conceptualized by classic theorists of photography like Barthes, Sontag, and Flusser) but is also recognized as belonging to a post-human, machinic vision.

Recent developments offer the opportunity for a fundamental reconsideration of photography: what it once was and what it might be becoming, and how these changes might impact our understanding not only of

visual culture but of (human) perception, human–technology relations, and the relation between visual images and knowledge practices in the future (McQuire et al., 2024, p. 7).

Kalpokas (2023) offers an interesting perspective on the possible artistic status of AI-generated images. Building on Benjamin's (1936) classic reflection on the relationship between aura and reproduction, the scholar notes how AI-generated art occupies a middle ground between Benjamin's interpretation of photographic reproduction and the traditional conception of art. On one hand, it is the product of a serial reproduction of what exists, but it is also "societally embedded," as it holds a specific relationship with the reality of data:

AI-generated content [...] represents something in-between: on the one hand, there is an element of machinic seriality, whereby data patterns in the training sets are identified and restructured into one, yet recognizable, form. But on the other hand, AI does not replicate the world from some detached vantage point; instead, it generates output based on – and thus renders visible – a very specific type of reality: objects, styles, and likenesses as they appear in data. For this reason, one might even say that AI-generated art is truly the art of our times: just as art generally reflects society and its relationship with technology and the natural world, AI-generated art reflects today's dominant mode of engagement with the world – data, in which humans are intimately enmeshed (Kalpokas, 2023, p. 5).

When approaching the relationship between creation and capture in the case of AI images, we must therefore consider that what technical images reproduce is no longer merely the visually perceptible "out there" world, but also numerical or datafied realities, which are increasingly becoming part of our mediated imaginary.

Technical images between communication and art

Theorizations of Baudrillard's orders of simulacra and hyperreality have been among the most frequently employed interpretive frameworks over the past four decades for understanding transformations in the relationship between reality and visual representation (Baudrillard 1976). It would thus appear that AI-generated images can embody the idea of an image that is ontologically a "copy without an original," referring only to itself. However, there still remains an object of reference: the data on which it is trained.

Moreover, the status of the online image contradicts Baudrillard's theories in certain respects: on the one hand, the networked image acts as a dissolving agent for some of the key distinctions in visual culture (between painting and photography, between simulation and document, etc.); on the other hand, around this image, new norms and procedures for attributing value and authenticity are emerging.

Within the dynamics of the web, the construction of meaning and the success of technical images increasingly depend on their exhibition value. Thus, the appraisal and significance of artworks also rely on their dissemination as images: "the more information circulates, the more the value grows; the work itself is a derivative of the value of its simulations" (Wark in Tanni, 2021, p. 123).

From Benjamin's perspective, the democratization of art – facilitated by photography – has expanded further, finding new realization in the digital plenitude dynamics of online

socio-communicative environments (Bolter, 2019). In this “digital plenitude,” traditional hierarchical divisions – high culture, elite culture, and popular culture – collapse, thanks to an ecosystem in which influential authorities are those who hold sway within specific, fragmented fields of interest.

The idea of "Art" with a capital A – its standards and canons – has become diluted in online media culture: DeviantArt, for example, has become a platform where images intended as art can be easily shared, creating a community of enthusiasts who mutually inspire with the artist (Gemini, 2009). And it is not surprised to read on the open page of the DALL-E 2 website the bold claim of the possibility of creating hitherto unimagined artworks.

Following Kalpokas (2023, p. 2), it is worth noting that:

there is a rich and ongoing debate over the adequacy of the term ‘art’ as applied to AI-generated content. [...] It is assumed that its actual status notwithstanding, a subset of AI-generated content functions as art in a way comparable to that of, for example, photography in Benjamin’s time [...] the status of AI-generated art is located in-between reproduction and inventiveness.

Hence, GVM would seem to intensify the idea of an “art dissolved into creativity”, that makes use of remix aesthetics, appropriation practices, and amateurism, rejecting traditional conceptions of originality and authorship.

However, if we want to avoid naïve technological determinism, we must underscore how changes in the aforementioned categories are also the product of artistic practices which, since the early twentieth century, have highlighted the non-coincidence between the technical medium and the artistic medium.

Marcel Duchamp was the artist who brought about a major paradigm shift in the social system of art, introducing the notion of contemporary art.

Through the *readymade*, Duchamp first dismantled the idea that an artwork must stem from an author’s manual, emotional, and subjective abilities – a cornerstone of traditional and modernist aesthetic theories – by introducing practices of appropriating preexisting, anonymous, industrially produced forms and objects, albeit presented in different ways and contexts.

This operation underpins conceptual art, enacting a process that Franco Vaccari (1979) sees as analogous to what triggers the photographic act. With Duchamp, “we see the emergence of artistic activities in which the amount of exhibited labor is minimal. What has been said about Duchamp can be repeated for photography; after all, every photograph is a ready-made” (pp.63–64).

A work of art as *readymade* should thus be regarded as a sign whose value depends on its relationship with the context. Like a photograph in the information society, it must make explicit “that difference which makes a difference” (Bateson, 1972), conceived in relation to its exhibition and presentation environment, as well as the accompanying texts and captions.

After Duchamp and the Dada and Futurist avant-garde movements, it was no longer possible for art to achieve a shocking effect solely through formal elaborations (Bolter, 2019). In the 1960s and 1970s, during the so-called neo-avantgarde period, rather than

focusing on formal innovation, artists used irreverent operations concerning the themes they addressed, running counter to certain moral, ethical, or political conventions.

In this sense, the contemporary art system is increasingly compelled to ground its self-description in its own communicative operations, as these descriptions can no longer reliably anchor themselves to the universality of canons or the object-based identity of the medium (Luhmann, 1995). In *L'arte espansa* (2015), Mario Perniola traces an internal path within the art system, showing how, starting in the 2000s under the impetus of aspiring artists, there was a progressive dissolution of the categories defining and interpreting the works and authors belonging to that system, ultimately rendering it impossible to identify common threads of value. A clear example of this dynamic is the opening in 2006 of the Saatchi Gallery open-access section called "Your Gallery". This is a webpage allowing anyone who considered themselves an artist to create their own site and be indexed in the dynamics of a gallery, with no preliminary critical assessment. Moving through institutional and international art exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Perniola reconstructs the erosion of the art system's internal boundaries, whereby art can potentially be anything: this is the *fringe turn* of art. Yet the moment everything can become "institutionally" labelled as art, the problem of legitimization and of who holds authority over the system's functioning emerges. Within the system, art has in fact reached the point of negating itself through its own operations.

Since then, art has been mocking itself, scorning itself, fostering disillusion and disenchantment.

Given the tendency of technical images towards exhibition value, and the dissolution of the art system's internal codes, categories and classifications of visual objects and their social meanings become ever more unstable and difficult to trace. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether new distinctions may arise out of the social imaginaries of audiences and users.

Here it is helpful to invoke the figure of the *trickster*. As Karl Kerenyi (1954) writes, the divine trickster par excellence is Hermes, and "to be a god means to be the creator of a world, and a world means order [...] Hermes opens the ways [...] that outlives the fall of empires and the flux of vanishing cultures" (pp.190-191). According to Jung (1954), the trickster should be considered a collective archetype that, within the collective imaginary, through irreverent and cunning actions, crosses thresholds meaning that have been socially established and entrenched, creating new ones. The trickster is thus positioned at the crossroads, in liminal zones (Turner, 1986) – transformative and risky spaces, rich in unexplored creative potential because of their inherent ambiguity.

Tricksters can generate new possibilities and perspectives. It is not merely a matter of contradicting "truth" as an indicative concept, within rules and norms defined by the system; rather, it is an imaginative act capable of abolishing oppositions and granting access to new worlds and social imaginaries, forging new forms of language (Hyde, 1998).

It is thus no coincidence that Lewis Hyde identifies Duchamp as a modern-day trickster figure, someone unable to remain within norms and rules, compelled to cross boundaries – even to the point of forcing himself into self-contradiction so as not to conform to his own taste. Finally, as Hyde explains, Duchamp is not merely a contradictor but rather an amused

contradictor, who seeks a “corridor of humor” that can lead him beyond established polarities.

According to Erik Davis (2015), even technological innovations can work as tricksters: neither good nor evil, they shatter the accredited meanings, imaginaries, and social systems, generating unpredictable pathways for the development of communication.

In this regard, the notion of deception related to ICTs, as highlighted by Simone Natale (2025), has been central since the earliest theories of media and communication. Classical approaches have mostly interpreted it as a malfunction of the communication process, caused by manipulative intentions, technical errors, or by the inherently deceptive nature of the media themselves. In parallel, the neo-Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School offered a structural perspective on media deception, viewing it as a tool through which elites maintain their hegemony over the masses.

However, deception should be understood in more nuanced terms, going beyond a rigid dichotomy between what is deceptive and what is not, since it plays a substantial role in everyday life, functioning as a fundamentally social phenomenon, central to many communicative interactions, and can serve as a resource for navigating the world.

Boris Eldagsen's case

Research methodology

In a context marked by a lack of clear distinction among technical images, artworks, and creative contents, the trickster's action becomes productive because it forces new distinctions to emerge in everyday communication and in the social imaginary. Considering Boris Eldagsen's provocative act centered around an image with iconic potential, the case analysis refers to a *visual sociology* that originates from research *with images* (Grady, 1999). The sparked debate around *Pseudoamnesia* reflects users' social imaginaries. To guide the analysis, two research questions are posed:

- What distinctions do users rely upon to identify technical images (photographic and AI-generated)?
- What perceived and imagined impacts accompany the advent of GVM and photorealistic AI-generated images?

Using Meta Crowdntangle, I collected all the posts published in English and Italian by public pages and groups on Facebook that reported on the news over a one-year period (02/11/2023–02/11/2024).

A search for “Boris Eldagsen” returned 513 posts. I then carried out a categorization based on their purpose: informational (71%) – posts reported the event as generic news without opinion commentary; opinion-based (17%) – posts made with the explicit intent to

express a position on the affair; further analysis (12%) – posts involved Boris Eldagsen for further insights such as interviews and seminars.

At the same time, the public pages and groups where the posts appear are categorized according to their stated field of interest, revealing eleven types of media spaces (see tab.1).

	n. opinion posts	n. news posts	n. subsequent interest posts	Total percentage of posts by fields of groups and pages interest
Photography and artist pages	34	76	42	30%
General and informative news media	11	136	3	29%
Science and technology pages	9	50	0	12%
Cultural opinion groups and authors	16	19	1	7%
Sector-specific news media (art, entertainment, media)	5	31	1	7%
GenAI and AI art tool pages	6	20	2	6%
Education, schools, colleges, universities	1	5	8	3%
Graphic design and comics pages	1	10	1	2%
Political organizations	0	11	0	2%
New age, spiritual, wellbeing, religion, ethics	1	9	0	1%
Luxury and money pages	0	4	0	1%
Total percentage of posts by purpose	17%	71%	12%	100%

Tab. 1: Numbers of posts referring to the Boris Eldagsen's case appearing in public Facebook pages and groups, categorized by the page's field of interest and the purpose of the posts.

Finally, I select the posts with the highest number of comments and interactions (55 posts), from which sampling comments based on relevance and popularity, returning 3.223 in total.

Table 2 shows the seven posts that received the most comments, meaning they garnered greater attention within the debate on Facebook: in fact, they account for approximately 50% of the total comments (1563).

Name of Facebook pages	Field of pages interest	n. of comments collected	Purpose of post
Il diario di un lettore squattrinato	Cultural opinion groups and authors	443	opinion
IGN	Sector-specific media (art, entertainment, media)	356	news
Rainews	General and informative news media	312	news
Tomorrow's World Today	Science and technology pages	129	news
CBS Sunday morning	General and informative news media	112	news
La Repubblica	General and informative news media	109	news

Fotografa Giovanna Griffó	Photography and artist pages	102	opinion
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Tab. 2: Posts that received more than 100 comments.

Taking into account the relevant field of interest, a qualitative content analysis of the comments is carried out (Schreier, 2012) in order to identify: 1) further topics emerging from the discussion; 2) the dominant sentiments; 3) the expectations (hopes and concerns) expressed regarding the development of GVM.

To conduct the content analysis, a thematic grid was developed (see tab.3) – partly derived from categories recognized in the literature on visual communication (Aiello, Parry, 2022), and partly deductively obtained from textual analysis of the posts and comments. This allowed for the clustering of users' argumentative topics, sentiments and expectations.

Variables	Values
What definitions are given to the types of technical images through which factors and characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • processing • textures • image representational surface • uses
How technical images are perceived in relation to their communicative and social role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information systems • art system • creative work e visual content industry
Ethical observed and imagined repercussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the specific context, • political and communication field • art and creative field

Tab. 3. Thematic grid for qualitative content analysis.

In the following section (2.2), the case is presented in relation to information obtained from the analysis of informative posts, which provide context for the event, along with selected comments that bring out users' positions. The results are examined more closely in the subsequent section (2.3), it is examined more closely the results from opinion-based posts, discussing the argumentative trajectories emerging from the comment analysis and the imaginaries through which the event has been perceived.

Case analysis

An examination of the informational posts shows that the news is typically presented by emphasizing Boris Eldagsen's act of rejecting the award. By his own admission, he played the role of a "cheeky monkey," having tricked the judges. The trickster figure thus appears in the frame of the artist's operation: he carried out a provocation by submitting an AI-generated image to the SWPA, aiming to test the art world's response. Upon winning the prize, Eldagsen claimed that neither the art nor the photography community is ready for AI-generated images. In order to distinguish photography from synthetic images, he coined the term *promptography*, asserting that these two types of visual objects should compete in different categories.

However, the situation is more nuanced than what newspaper headlines suggest, as the “creative” category, in which he won first place, in fact welcomes images produced using experimental or alternative methods – ranging from cyanotypes and rayographs to cutting-edge digital practices.

From the comments made by the prize’s spokesperson, it becomes clear that, following their correspondence with Eldagsen and the guarantees he provided, the judges came to believe his submission met the category’s criteria and therefore endorsed his participation. In short, the judges’ role is central to the story, especially since they engaged in a back-and-forth with Eldagsen: after accusing him of deception and removing his work from the website, and once the artist responded with anger, the members of CREO partially retracted their statement.

Boris Eldagsen recounted the entire chronology of events on his blog and Facebook page. The crucial point of the issue for him was not so much the awarding of a prize to an AI-generated image but rather that some members of the organizing committee, the selection committee, and the press office did not grasp the importance of clearly defining the nature of the artwork. Furthermore, they did not follow through on his proposal to organize a debate about the relationship between photography and synthetic images.

On Facebook, public opinion regarding the artist’s actions is nuanced⁴. On one hand, Eldagsen’s honesty and brilliance are applauded, as reflected in comments such as: “It remains, however, a fake photo that competed with other real ones (I hope). He had the honesty to admit it, but others? And what if he hadn’t said anything?” (from the page “Il diario di un lettore squattrinato”). On the other, there is recognition of a possible advertising or “media spectacle” angle benefitting both the success of *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician* and the competition itself – suggesting an unspoken arrangement between the artist and the judges.

It sounds strange to me that an international jury did not ‘closely examine’ the image (not a photo) with all the flaws that only an inaccurate code generation can produce in an AI-generated image. So, I believe it’s a sort of publicity around this topic, which can be unsettling (from the page “Giovanna Griffi Fotografa”);

Only that the jury did know and all this is staged for the press (from the page “Futurism”).

The affair is therefore interpreted in relation to Eldagsen’s irreverent action and the role of photography competitions within the art system, in light of the photorealism now offered by AI. Seen from this perspective, the artist’s move is regarded “a test to see if the judges could tell if it’s real or not” (from the page “Futurism”). Apart from speculation about a prior agreement, comments tend to highlight the judges’ perceived incompetence or their inability to pinpoint what makes a photographic image distinct: “The point is the jury is ignorant of the news” (from the page “IGN news”); “Says more about the judges than the creator of the image” (from the page “ABS News”). As will be discussed in the following section, these views are also intertwined with how users conceive of and interpret the art world’s social system.

Discussion of findings

Definitions and distinctions of the types of technical images

Opinion-based posts, where the authors offered personal commentary on the event, are the most useful for investigating the discussion topics, sentiments and expectations regarding the relationship between photography and AI-generated images. These posts primarily came from sources whose field of interest was classified as either “photography and art (amateur and professional)” or “cultural opinion and digital creators.” Nonetheless, as revealed by the variety of media spaces where the news circulated, it becomes clear that although the link to the cultural domain of art – especially photography competitions – is crucial, the affair resonated broadly enough to reach other domains, such as political organizations or pages dedicated to spiritual and religious practices.

Moreover, in terms of user reactions – measured by the number of comments on each post, and consistent with this research’s central focus – it emerges that most of the discussion by comments took place within the Facebook media spaces of general-interest news media pages. The broad impact of the Boris Eldagsen’s case, therefore, made it possible to account for the varied spheres and imaginaries through which users observed and interpreted the relationship between photographic and AI-generated images, starting with the refusal of the prize awarded to *Pseudoamnesia*.

Regarding the first research question – concerning the distinctions that users establish between different categories of technical images (photographic vs. AI-generated) – it should be noted at the outset that users employ different terms to refer to photographic images and AI-generated images. Inspired by Boris Eldagsen’s coinage of *promptography*, synthetic images are also described as:

- *AI-photography*: “It’s AI photo” (from the group “Chatgpt Expert”); “more specifically is ‘AI photography.’ When you add ‘AI’ before photography, you’re saying it’s not photography, it’s a form of digital image-making resembling photography” (from the page “Midjourney Official”)
- *Neurophotography*: “Promptography’ underlines prompting, ‘neurophotography’ – neural networks” (from the page “Midjourney Official”).
- *Sintografia*: “When something completely new compared to the past is born, new words are also needed: <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sintografia>” (from the page “Fotografia Giovanna Griffi”).

Each of these terms, in its own way, highlights a particular characteristic of text-to-image systems and their generative, computational processes. They illustrate how the artist’s irreverent act – a border-crossing – has spurred the creation of new classifications rather than simply blurring existing categories.

It appears that users’ arguments about how to define and delimit different types of technical images can be grouped into four criteria: (1) the process of capturing and creating

the image; (2) its visual texture; (3) the iconographies depicted; and (4) the intended uses of both photographic and AI systems.

The creation and acquisition process (1) are the most frequently mentioned criterion for distinguishing photography from AI-generated images. Commenters tend to emphasize how the photographic act is based on a direct, performative experience involving real-world referents, whereas the generation of images – even photorealistic ones – requires different skills and expertise, including the ability to compose prompts that match the intended representation: “photography is the art or practice of taking and processing photographs. So, a photography needs to be taken/captured from around us using a tool that can capture that (usually a camera), and then the photo gets processed” (from the page “IGN news”).

Although it is generally accepted that photography entails a distinction between the moment of capture and the stage of post-production, some users raise two critical points regarding computational photography and the inherently subjective nature of photography. As is well-known, computational photography tends to collapse the act of acquisition and that of post-editing into a single process, such that a particular view of photography as purely referential becomes less representative of today’s reality: “for an increasingly narrow niche, given the rise of smartphones with their computational photography” (from the page “La Repubblica”). Furthermore, some users acknowledge that photographic manipulation is intrinsic to the medium itself and its history, even when they have an indexical, analog conception of photography: “we will definitely need to pay more attention to photos and videos [...] even now, a good photographer can easily falsify reality” (from the page “Il diario di un lettore squattrinato”).

Digital post-production possibilities – such as those offered by Photoshop – are viewed critically: “how much post-editing is ‘too much’ for it to still be considered a photograph? Like if it was 90% altered in post – whether through AI or ‘normal’ editing software – but he still took the base photo through a lens... would that have been okay” (from the page “ABS News”).

Hence, the tension between manipulated photography vs. direct photography (Fontcuberta, 1997) emerges as a bridge topic: while still preserving a process-based distinction between photography and AI-generated images, it recalls the longstanding anxieties around visual deception enabled by digital imaging technologies and post-production tools. It is no coincidence that some users assert:

AI is another tool for photographers. I use AI all the time for noise reduction and other post-processing. In the not-so-distant future, AI will help more and more with post-processing, including culling photos, color correction, and much more on a regular basis (I mean, it’s already doing that, but on a widespread basis) (from the page “Popular Photography”).

Precisely for this reason, several comments emphasize that the AI-generated nature of photorealism matters more in certain contexts than in others:

We are just saying that it is a different creation process, which means it requires different skills, demonstrates different talents, and deserves different contest categories as well as entirely different

contests. In many commercial contexts, I don't think the difference actually matters (from the page "ABS News").

Positions focusing on the importance of the technical and procedural differences connect to how users view the AI-generated (2) visual texture, which depends heavily on the technical possibilities of production. Here, the factor of photorealism is linked to digital graphics: "these are not photographs, but graphic image" (from the page "Il Post"). Just as the nature of a technical image and its representational possibilities can be likened to those of digital painting: "it seems more like a return to a form of 'digital painting,' to which you delegate the elaboration of one of the infinite representable realities" (from the page "Rainews").

The quality of the image's texture is often deemed "low" or cartoonish. Indeed, it must be contextualized in relation to the AI's technological capabilities as of April 2023. This ties in with the noticeable errors and visual "hallucinations" commonly produced by AI. A third criterion pertains to the representational content of the image (3) and the recognition of certain "emerging iconographies" characteristic of new AI-generated images: The visual quality, anatomical errors, and AI's notorious inability to generate realistic hands become, at that time, indicators of the image's artificial origin.

It is more than OBVIOUS that this is an AI. Look at the fingers (from the page "Popular Photography").

It's very obviously AI art, and judges should have been capable enough to tell. Lighting mismatches, warped fingers at odd angles, a hand randomly shooting out of her chest, no iris/pupils (dead eyes) on the foreground woman... AI art is cool but has a long way to go before it's comparable to the real deal (from the page "IGN").

The fourth distinction that emerges from the comments is not so much about how to differentiate photos from AI images, but rather about the appropriateness of using these new visual objects, depending on the context (4). As highlighted earlier, users generally deem AI-generated images acceptable in contexts that do not require trust or visual credibility tied to a real event or subject, but suitable for commercial or advertising domains. The potential uses of AI-generated images, in other words, are viewed differently depending on the contexts and systems in which users imagine them circulating.

Perceptions and ethical issues of technical images related to communicative and social roles

According to the contexts and systems in which users imagine AI photorealistic images might circulate – whether in relation to the field of informational and political communication or that of art and creative work in a broader sense, two main imaginaries emerge. These exemplify users' discussion topics, sentiments and expectations about AI uses and impacts. The first one concerns the information system and its ethical implications; the second one the art system, its history, and competition among media.

AI as ICTs: Sci-Fi and dystopian imaginaries

Users identify the most problematic scenario for confusing AI-generated images with photographs as one involving manipulation of information, in which photorealism amplifies the risk of deception. This worry has long been central to the field of journalism, especially since the advent of digital photography in the 1990s and the rise of post-production software (Carlson, 2009; Keith, Schwalbe, & Silcock, 2006). As in those discussions within journalism, users' concerns about using and circulating AI-generated images in news contexts revolve around distrust of institutions and media organizations, as well as political and democratic issues.

On the cultural opinion page "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato", the author's post, referencing the Boris Eldagsen's case stresses this point.

The gates of the (real) society of the fake are wide open. More and more often, fake photographs, fake news, and, I would add, fake books are flooding our lives, risking triggering a dangerously Orwellian drift [...] in the near future, if we are not protected by governments, publishers, and distributors, we readers will find it increasingly difficult to understand whether a book was written by a human being or by software.

For many users, fake content is central to the imaginary surrounding *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* related case. For instance, comments on general-interest media pages read:

"I am worried about deep fakes though... in political ads, for instance" (from the page "CBS Sunday"); "The whole world is about to be fake now. We really are living in a simulation" (from the page "ABC Australia").

Photorealistic AI-image generation is thus linked to cinematic and literary scenarios of dystopia and science fiction, especially referencing Orwellian societies of control or stories akin to *The Matrix* or *Blade Runner*.

This proves that AI should be destroyed before they become self aware and we become like in Matrix movie or other AI movie flix. (from the page "IGN").

AI will have its space, but it has nothing to do with photography. Matrix is at our doorstep now! (from the page "Appassionati di fotografia").

Blade Runner. Here we are (from the page "Rainews").

In these terms, the Boris Eldagsen affair extends well beyond the bounds of the art world and photography competitions, since users frame it within dystopian imaginaries and the specter of physical and social control. GVM are therefore grouped under the umbrella ICTs and are traced back to the classic dynamics of communicative deception (Natale, 2025) and media manipulation (Luhmann, 1995).

These perceptions take shape through analogies with fictional and filmic narratives emphasizing both the relationship between humanity and technology (as manifested in cyborg or android figures) and the hopes and technological anxieties that see ICTs as tools

of emancipation or, conversely, agents of control and privacy loss at both individual and collective levels (Dumitrica, Jones, 2020).

Such imaginaries, grounded in a fictional concept of manipulation and deception, are tied to the issue of post-truth: “perhaps we need to start doubting everything before we can have a true democracy” (from the page “Tomorrow’s World Today”).

Thus, the topic of visual manipulation and the erosion of the concept of truth is closely linked to users’ belief in photography’s documentary nature – ultimately constituting one of the major ethical and social concerns that extends far beyond photography and creative work alone: “it is no coincidence that a debate has started about a sort of digital signature for photographs, because there is no longer a boundary between reality and manipulation, and this represents the denial of the very essence of the photographic document” (from the page “Il diario di un lettore squattrinato”).

Value of AI artwork and conceptions of the art

The theme of AI – bound up with both technological hopes and worries, oscillating between the prospect of human emancipation and the specter of a new singularity like AGI (Bostrom 2014), in which people tend to anthropomorphize AI – also features prominently in the artistic and creative imaginary. In this context, users’ main concerns revolve not only around distinguishing between two categories of technical images and recognizing them as such, but also around the age-old question of what constitutes art in relation to reproducibility, as well as how to understand human creativity versus machine automation (Canali, Pedrazzi 2024).

Some studies have already investigated how the general public conceives of and observes what “art” is (Mikalonytè, Kneer, 2022; 2025). Boris Eldagsen affair can offer a brief insight into these folk conceptions in the age of GVM.

Within this framework, users’ discussion around *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* tend to point toward three main arguments: (1) AI as a tool that artists or photographers can use; (2) AI as the author of an artwork; (3) The artwork’s value as intrinsic, regardless of the author or the tool used.

(1) AI as a tool

When viewing GVM as a tool, two perspectives emerge:

- As a resource for proof-of-concept, ideation, and creative planning: “in my opinion, artificial intelligence can be just a tool to quickly sketch out an idea...” (from the page “Il diario di un Lettore squattrinato”).
- As a new tool enabling an artist to express creativity: “an AI-generated artwork needs to be attributed to a being with agency – the person who prompted the AI – in much the same way that a camera can’t be called an author of art but rather a generative tool that an artist might use” (from the group “Taking photographs is not a crime”).

In this conceptual framework, AI is simply a different medium from photography, due to its distinct processes and affordances.

Without a photographer, the machine doesn't take the photo, and the same goes for AI. Setting aside the legal jargon and what we consider photography, it's just another medium. The fact that it's annoyingly simple doesn't change anything. Many things are like that: Malevich's works, the artist's excrements, the ready-mades, and, many times, simply pressing a button on a camera (from the page "Rainews").

In this view of AI as medium and tool, AI-generated visual products can qualify as artworks, whether by virtue of their automatic, easily reproducible nature or by virtue of an idea with artistic merit. If AI is simply considered a tool, the artistry of the work may depend on both its intrinsic value and the artist's talent.

(2) *AI as the author*

Conversely, when AI is seen as the author of a work, arguments typically hold that the products lack genuine artistic value:

I think it's more people trying to take credit for AI generated art. The computer made it, there is not such thing as a human AI "artist". The problem is there are people claiming that AI generated art is "their creation"....(from the page "IGN").

Stop calling it art. As much as you want to debate that concept, it's NOT art. The software program doesn't think, it's a soulless assembly line of digital images. How are art schools going to deal with determining talent? Literally anybody can spew out these visuals. A vending machine distributes food, is that then considered a chef? (from the page "Shiften Brother Sculpting").

Here, the imaginary of the "soul" is particularly salient. On one hand, AI supposedly cannot produce artworks of value because it is not human and therefore lacks a soul. On the other hand, even the subjects depicted in AI images are perceived as soulless – indeed, some commenters suggest that this quality of "photographing the dead" is specific to AI representations:

It looks like a photo from the last century, when people photographed the dead. Soulless, artificial (from the page "Il Messaggero");

The woman in the background has weird dead eyes and that signature AI death glow (from the page "ABS news").

In this line of thought, "art" depends on a conception of the artist or author as a figure – often perceived as a genius – stemming from a *historical-intentional* definition of art, rooted in a romantic point of view (Collingwood, 1938; Greimas, 1957; Levinson, 1979). Not only is having a "soul" considered essential for human and artistic expression, but the seemingly effortless production of AI-generated images also draws condemnation:

Originality, effort, and pain (to name a few). That is art. AND if in some way you don't suffer for your art, then sorry, you're not an artist & dreadfully doing it wrong (from the page "Huffpost");

It does not come from the experiences, studies, failures, and dedication of an artist. What do those gazes mean if they are created by a cold computer? Nothing. An artistic work is nothing if separated from the artist (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squatrinato").

(3) *Intrinsic Value of the AI-Generated Work*

A third pivotal factor informing users' conceptions of *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* focuses on the image's intrinsic value, regardless of whether it's AI-generated:

Well, in my opinion, considerations about the origin of artifacts are pointless. What does it matter who or what produced it? The purpose should be to evoke an emotion (or provoke a state of mind); if the artifact achieves that, it has fulfilled its purpose. And besides, if a human cannot distinguish between something created by a person or by a machine, it means that the difference is not important... (from the page "Il diario di un lettore squatrinato").

Here, AI-generated products fall into an *aesthetic-phenomenological* perspective, where value depends on how they trigger the observer's perceptions and experiences.⁵ In such arguments, art and beauty hinge on the observer, and the value attributed to a work depends on subjective sensitivity: "the debate is whether art lies in the eye of the beholder or in the skillful hand. If you're unsure which side you're on, ask yourself this: Could you still appreciate an artistic expression even if you don't know where it comes from?" (from the page "IGN").

Consequently, while there is a broad consensus that a photorealistic AI-generated image is different from a photograph, the question of whether *Pseudoamnesia* can still be considered an artwork remains much more ambiguous. As we have seen, it depends on the conceptual framework within which users evaluate the art system – whether from a *historical-intentional* or an *aesthetic-phenomenological* viewpoint. Finally, there is a third approach that situates AI-generated work within an *institutional* conception of art (Dickie, 1974; Danto, 1981). This approach pertains directly to the role of regulations and judges in the SWPA competition: an image can be recognized as an artwork if, within certain rules, the experts deem it so; i.e. "the question here is NOT 'What is art?' – the question here is 'What are the RULES?' Because the rules were clearly stated. The artist made a brilliant statement, though, and redirected the conversation. His presentation was art. I couldn't care less about the actual image" (from the page "IGN").

In this context, a new source of tension arises around how users perceive Eldagsen's victory and subsequent refusal of the prize. Some regard the judges' decision as consistent with the existing rules for the *creative* category: "according to the competition's rules, he actually did have the right to use 'any device' to create the image" (from the page "ABS News"). Others, however, denounce a dangerous blurring of boundaries in admitting an AI-generated work to a photography competition – even if it was allowed by the rules: "I think there should be a different category – it's not fair to 'photographers'" (from the page "Tomorrow's World Today").

Many users believe that these two technical images (photographs and AI-generated images) belong in different categories and should thus be judged separately in competitions:

New forms and competitions for photography and digital art. In my opinion, photography contests, as well as digital art contests, should include AI but place it in a separate category, just as art contests have various categories: painting, sculpture, digital art, and now AI (from the page "Giovanna Griffó Fotografa").

Within this institutional art framework, we also find numerous user criticisms aimed at the judges. On one hand, as already noted, they are accused of lacking expertise. On the other hand, there is a broader challenge to their role as guarantors of an institutional system: "winning contests is ultimately meaningless when the results are based on the subjective opinions of a small group of people who have been chosen to do the judging" (from the page "IGN").

Art history and media competition

In user discussions – beyond the question of whether *Pseudoamnesia: The Electrician* qualifies as genuine AI art – Boris Eldagsen himself garners significant focus. His performance as a "cheeky monkey," an irreverent trickster, resonates with users' imaginaries of other subversive and boundary-pushing artistic exploits. Marcel Duchamp's figure is most frequently invoked when interpreting Eldagsen's communicative and performative act, as though he has produced an upheaval akin to the "Fountain" by Richard Mutt. In this light, what some recognize as artistically meaningful is not *Pseudoamnesia* per se but the deception and subsequent revelation aimed at challenging the role of photography competitions in a world where AI photorealism is spreading rapidly: "It's Marcel Duchamp and 'Fountain' for the 21st century" (from the page "IGN"); "stunts like this are how Marcel Duchamp changed the entire course of art history" (from the page "Shiften Brother Sculpting").

It is interesting here to note how users interpret the new medium of GVM in relation to the history of media competition in art. Particularly relevant is the historical competition between painting and photography, for two key reasons: first, the *fear* that AI might replace photography; second, the *potential loss of jobs* for photographers, graphic designers, and illustrators.⁶

Painting was not replaced by photography; rather, with photography, a new artistic branch was born, just as cinema did not replace theater (from the page "La Repubblica").

We are at an extremely interesting point in technological history, and I would argue that is something to embrace. As always, new tools will be co-opted into art. Photography itself was demonised in the beginning as being anti-art, but art managed to survive quite well (from the page "ABS News").

Some users' references to Duchamp are emblematic in this regard. As Rosalind Krauss (1990) observes, Duchamp's invention of the readymade – appropriating an already-made industrial object in a subversive gesture against the art system – can be seen as a painter's

reaction to the emergence of photography and all the new practices and ideas it introduced, particularly concerning amateurism, democratization of the creative process, and the erosion of boundaries within the social system of art.

For users, AI-driven generative technology might thus herald a similar paradigm shift. The ways they interpret this moment of change draw on well-established historical imaginaries, including trickster figures who pioneered new notions and opened new media and communicative frontiers.

Conclusions

Viewing Boris Eldagsen's actions as a communicative gesture – an irreverent critique of the art and media system, unveiled by exposing a deception – underscores how his move sparked a reflective and meaningful shift. Through both concealing and then clarifying the ambiguities, boundaries, and contradictions of the relationship between GVM and photography, as well as the broader notions of art and culture in the media ecosystem, Eldagsen opened a space for intense debate, making visible the underlying social imaginaries. These imaginaries highlight the distinguishing paths along which topics, sentiments and expectations emerge as individuals seek to navigate and make sense of ongoing transformations.

By putting forward arguments chiefly tied to the relationship between humans and machines, users attempt to define clear-cut distinctions between what has traditionally been photography and what is AI-generated. Two major imaginaries emerge: one relates to science-fiction and dystopian narratives, encompassing technological anxieties about simulation, control, and individual and collective manipulation; the other references art history, its theories, and the dynamics of media competition.

Although the Eldagsen case is deeply rooted in photography and art, it ultimately transcends these domains. Within the social imaginaries of Facebook users, Eldagsen appears as a contemporary Duchamp – a *trickster* operating during a technological and historical moment marked by crisis and transformation. His case has expanded into a broader dialogue about AI's technological innovations. In this sense, users' conceptions of art take center stage in discussing technological changes in visual media, serving as a sphere for critical and creative questioning of our social future.

By broadening the discussion to the role of media images, users ultimately focus on photorealism and hyperrealism as the core of anxieties surrounding diminished trust in artistic institutions and social and political dynamics. Thus, the Eldagsen affair becomes emblematic of how people interpret and worry about technology's impact: if even visual-culture and photography experts fail to carefully distinguish between photographic and AI-generated images, the anxiety that arises is that "no one can do it". Institutions and art competition juries, perceived as incompetent, lose the public's trust. Against this backdrop, Eldagsen emerges as a modern-day trickster – an honest provocateur who deftly exposes the institutional system's crisis.

Biographical note

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Notes

¹ Scholars began to deal with the post-photographic turn in '90, a shift in photographic field that concerns: (1) the long-standing debate on image-making practices, its using and receptions, between straight and manipulated photography, intensified by the emergence of digital technologies (Ritchin, 2009); (2) the revision of ontological debates that pursue the semiotic perspective on indexicality as a defining sign of photographic medium – able to reference a real object (Peirce, 1895; Barthes, 1980; W. J. Mitchell, 1992; Marra, 2006); and (3) the growing proliferation and ubiquity of photographs in mediascapes that primarily function as a means of communication driving new performative forms of agency and relations (Fontcuberta, 2016). In this sense, post-photographic turn concerns the relationship between medium and forms of photographic, in a post-medium condition (Krauss, 1999). These positions are implicitly embedded in the theoretical discourse surrounding the relationship between photography and photorealistic AI-generated images.

² This methodological choice is also informed by an initial exploratory analysis conducted on the Instagram platform (02/11/2023–02/11/2024): here, the news on Boris Eldagsen's case appeared in 153 posts in English and Italian, and the media resonance (i. e. comments and sharing) was not particularly significant compared to what could be observed in the data collected from Facebook.

³ All translations into English from Italian literary references are by the author.

⁴ All translations from English to Italian of posts and comments are by the author; it concerns the following pages and groups: "Il diario di un lettore squattrinato", "Giovanna Griffi Fotografa", "La Repubblica", "Rainews", "Il Post", "Appassionati di fotografia", "Il Messaggero".

⁵ This type of argumentative stance does not find a precise correlation or an established definition within the field of art theory. Rather, its alignment with a relativist framework reflects a kind of popular interpretive position regarding the artistic product, in which the linear equation *aesthetic = art* is assumed – particularly in the context of Eldagsen's case. In this regard, referring to aesthetic-phenomenological theory –i.e. the classical John Dewey's pragmatist perspective in *Art as Experience* (1934) – It is important to note that phenomenological analysis does indeed focus on the viewer's experience as aesthetic, but it consistently emphasizes the distinction between aesthetic and artistic experience. Although the two may coincide, they are operationalized differently. Consequently, the equation *aesthetic = art* is primarily rooted in users' perception and lived experience, rather than in the philosophical aesthetic-phenomenological literature on art. Here, the intrinsic value of the artwork derives solely from the subjective aesthetic experience and does not include any reflection on the expressive elements of *Pseudoamnesia* that would be necessary for an artistic experience. It could be certainly argued that this subjectivist and relativist stance – according to which everything could be art – is consistent with the dilution and crisis of the art system, as discussed in the theoretical part (see *Technical Images between Communication and Art*). However, even in this case, it would be necessary to engage in a philosophical discussion on the historical-cultural meaning of a creative and/or artistic work in relation to technologies, media and social systems, that cannot be adequately addressed within the scope of this paper.

⁶ Linked to this last point, on the emergence of potential loss of jobs, the ethical issue of copyright is closely connected to. On one hand, AI can steal images, works, and artistic or photographic styles without the authors being aware or compensated for the use of their work – on which AI systems are trained. On the other hand, as of April 2023, there was still a lack of regulatory clarity regarding copyright laws for AI-generated images.