

# The Fake Image: Deepfakes, AI, and the Recursive Aesthetics

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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 will instead question 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 technoculture.

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 20<sup>th</sup> century history focused on computational simulation, pattern finding, and feature generation as a means to overcome the “artifice” introduced by the human programmer. Within this lineage, how has the “synthetic” been mobilized towards the project of what Bill Seaman calls “neosentience”?<sup>i</sup> I focus on Turing’s imitation game and a case study of contemporary generative adversarial neural networks (GANs), which show us how fakeness comes about through recursive loops of behavioral simulation.

Recent work in image synthesis that suggests that the hidden political bias of an image can be gleaned from feature recognition shows us the readiness of AI research to overcode political domains. As “deepfakes”, a term that describes fake images and videos hallucinated by machine learning algorithms, 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. The fake image operates through the production of contradictory, overlapping and experimental realities recapitulating what Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism”-- the foreclosure of the capacity to envision alternatives to systemic capital in favor of the reproduction of the same.<sup>ii</sup> Drawing on Fisher’s paradigm, this paper characterizes the fake image as vehicle that imbricates a schema for perceiving, processing and synthesizing information as a way to organize the reproduction and performance of normative epistemologies, ushering in a new type of “synthetic realism”. As such, the deepfake serves as an object lesson that yields a reading of what it means to be human in a reality largely structured by synthetic processes.

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<sup>i</sup> Rössler, O., Seaman W. (2011) *Neosentience / The Benevolence Engine*, Intellect Press, London.

<sup>ii</sup> Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?*, Zero Books, UK.