

# 1 Introduction

## AI Aesthetics

*Jan-Noël Thon and Lukas R.A. Wilde*

At the time of this writing—in spring 2025—generally accessible generative AI platforms and, more specifically, AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion have been broadly available for almost three years. AI-based image enhancement and modification have also been integrated into many other applications such as the Adobe suite of image processing programs or Google phones. New generative AI applications are launched or announced almost every week, most notably perhaps Google’s moving image generator VEO2, a competitor to OpenAI’s Sora, and Janus-Pro-7B, the open-source multimodal AI model that is based on the Chinese AI startup platform DeepSeek. Generative AI is making rapid progress in other areas, as well—with the generation of music and songs, which have been widely discussed after the release of Suno AI in December 2023, being a particularly salient example (see, e.g., [Johnson et al. 2023](#); [Lin and Chen 2024](#); [Nayar 2025](#)). Since most of these technologies build on—and integrate—natural language comprehension through large language models (LLMs), they are essentially all multimodal “at heart,” even if that multimodality remains “invisible” to the users (see, e.g., [Bajohr 2024b](#); [Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 2025](#)). While text-to-image generators (such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion) and text-to-text generators (such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini) were strictly separated at first (if only in terms of their output appearances), ChatGPT-3 fundamentally changed AI image production in October 2023, with its integration of DALL·E 3 further foregrounding the multimodality of both the interface and the generated outputs. It is clear, then, that AI-generated outputs in various perceivable forms have swiftly become a salient element of our current media culture, instigating, for example, a hermeneutics of suspicion toward every new image or video now being potentially AI-generated or AI-manipulated (see, e.g., [Meyer 2024](#)); “polluting” Google search results with unmarked “AI content” (see, e.g., [Balkowitsch 2024](#)); and substantially altering the value of image, videos, and music files—mostly to the disadvantage of human artists and producers on whose work the underlying LLMs draw as training data without the former’s knowledge or consent (see, e.g., [Dornis and Stober 2024](#)).

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While there is a keen interest within media and cultural studies to come to terms with these new technologies and the diverse practices they afford, the rapid development of diffusion-based AI image generators, the more recent autoregressive models (see, e.g. [Robison 2025](#)), and LLMs more broadly poses considerable challenges to traditional humanities approaches,<sup>1</sup> not least because the breakneck speed of the AI development cycle clashes with academic publication timelines: On the one hand, it may be disappointing to publish snapshots of supposedly current practices and technologies that are already historical at the time of publication. On the other hand, however, it is just as undesirable to merely speculate about an AI future that is occluded by marketing utopias and imagined techno-catastrophes (see also, e.g., [Bareis and Katzenbach 2021](#); [Romele 2024](#) on “AI imaginaries”). Then again, it is also worth highlighting the continuities as well as the differences between AI image generators and earlier image-making technologies (see, e.g., [Somaini 2023](#); [Zylinska 2020](#)). The perceived abandonment of an immediate indexical relationship to physical reality, for example, is hardly new for digital pictures and has been controversially discussed during the emergence of digital photography and digital image editors such as Adobe Photoshop (see, e.g., [Lehmuskallio et al. 2019](#); [Mitchell 1992](#)). Indeed, the partial autonomy of a “nonhuman apparatus” generating pictures “automatically” has already been noted during the emergence of *nondigital* photography (see, e.g., [Chesher and Albarrán-Torres 2023](#)). Likewise, questions surrounding the manipulative “covert” use of AI generated images in the context of “fake news” and “deep fakes” (see, e.g., [Broinowski 2022](#)) refer back to the much older discussions surrounding “visual evidence” within documentary studies and beyond (see, e.g., [Nichols 1991](#); [Schwartz 1992](#)), which suggests that there is nothing categorially new in AI-generated images’ potential to mislead, misrepresent, and manipulate—even if the ease with which they can be used to do so certainly remains striking. Indeed, there is no simple heuristic for the (human) recognition of AI-generated images anymore, since AI image generators can be prompted to create such images not only with a more or less specific representational content that is often described as the “subject” of these images but also with a more or less specific aesthetic form that is often described in terms of their “style” (see, e.g., [Meyer 2023](#)).

We thus propose to frame the “AI aesthetics” of AI image generators such as DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion as a specific kind of “media aesthetics,” aiming to connect media studies even more closely to critical AI studies (see, e.g., [Lindgren 2024](#); [Raley and Rhee 2023](#); [Roberge and Castelle 2021](#)). Among other things, this implies a focus on current and developing machine learning platforms not merely as technology, narrowly understood, but as media (see, e.g., [Bolter 2023](#); [Wilde 2023](#)). As Marx notes, “the material component—*technology* narrowly conceived as a physical device—is merely one part of a complex social and institutional matrix” (1997, 979; original emphasis). Alternatively, we could also operate with an expanded

conceptualization of “technology” here. Dhaliwal, for example, argues that “technology” is itself a “compound [...] blurring economy, politics, and technics into one word” (2023, 311), and distinguishes between five different “objects of study” and related “research fields” that such an expanded conceptualization of “technology” gives rise to, namely “[m]achines and devices” (of interest to the sciences and engineering); “[c]ulture and [new media] art” (of interest to cultural studies and art history); “[p]eople and communities” (of interest to sociology and anthropology of technology); “[s]ystems and structures” (of interest to sociology and political economy); and “[t]echniques, practices, and habits” (of interest to media archaeology and cultural technologies) (2023, 313). Again, then, we cannot appropriately think through “technology” without also acknowledging the complex social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it is developed, distributed, and employed (see also, e.g., Pasquinelli 2023).

In the context of the present volume, however, we will still need to narrow our focus from all sorts of machine learning technologies (such as automated driving, automated weapons, or facial image recognition) to what is called “generative AI,” conceptualizing the latter as media that may be used for communication and interaction (which at least the outputs they generate certainly are).<sup>2</sup> Focusing more closely on the concept of media aesthetics, the “slightly jarring quality” that results from its “forcing together of modern and ancient concepts” (Mitchell 2013, 7) also requires some additional explication. Put in a nutshell, the use of the term “media aesthetics” first became widespread in the late 1980s and early 1990s in reaction to the (at that point) “new media” and their implementation in installation art and sound art (see, e.g., the survey in Schröter 2019a). Historically, then, media aesthetics initially addressed “a technologically and, above all, digitally saturated art; at the same time, its theoretical conception as a branch of media studies formulates a decidedly anti program to the classical disciplines of art history, musicology, and literary studies” (Mersch 2024, 205; our translation). From there, the term branched out into different humanities discourses, as, for example, Hausken (2013) or Mersch (2024) have reconstructed in more detail. In light of the by now many different approaches to the analysis (and within the field) of media aesthetics, we will begin by exploring how the two components of the compound (i.e., “media” and “aesthetics”) can be understood both very narrowly and very broadly, before we conclude by emphasizing the potential productivity of “middle-ground” conceptualizations of both terms. While the chapters collected within the present volume might privilege one starting point over another, the purpose of this introduction is merely to outline the range of possible approaches toward the perceivable properties of AI-generated output: We would thus like to illustrate and interrelate, with specific examples taken from existing research from the last couple of years, how explicit or implicit differences in the conceptualization of both “media” and “aesthetics” can result in quite heterogeneous positions

regarding what should be taken as “given”—and what, in contrast, should be considered to be a “matter of concern” (Latour 2004, 232).

### Narrow and Broad Conceptualizations of (AI) “Media” and (AI) “Aesthetics”

Let us begin with the first component of the compound “media aesthetics,” then, which can initially be specified by distinguishing between a narrow and a broad conceptualization of “media.” In the narrow sense, any “medium” may be understood functionally, as “a tool or *instrumentum* that emerges from an end–means relationship and imposes itself on the real, processes it, and in doing so ‘produces’ (*poein*) something else” (Mersch 2024, 214; our translation). Perhaps needless to say, this already entails vastly different approaches to media aesthetics, ranging from modernist theories of art to discourses of mass communication (see also Hausken 2013, 34). Yet, these different conceptualizations nevertheless share a common point of departure, namely the notion that “media” are more or less determined entities (or materials or channels) for and between human as well as institutional actors (see, e.g., Elleström 2021). Media scholars may then try to assess the respective affordances, limitations, and influences of this “in-betweenness,” be it positively (and often normatively) as a potential for artistic expression, or negatively (and often more descriptively) as the “distortion” of any assumed content or communicative intent within a sender–receiver model. Regardless of these (and many more) important differences, any narrow conceptualization of “media” would thus appear to start from given socio-cultural settings and “use cases,” trying to assess the (limiting or enabling) influences of the respective means of communication and interaction. In this view, AI image generators may appear as an alternative to other technologies of image production, and we might explore in which contexts, by which actors, for which means, and to which effects AI-generated images are employed in contrast to photography or hand-drawn pictures (see, e.g., Wilde 2025); how they are distributed, contextualized, and discussed in the context of fan cultures, for example (see Lamerichs 2023). Within such an already determined setting, we could also find out that fearmongering AI-generated images of “foreigners” circulated by right-wing parties on social media channels can seamlessly “replace” earlier stock photography or racist hand-drawn pictures where they serve to instigate attitudes and affects (fear, hatred) toward their depicted content that makes the latter only relevant as a type (of people, for example) (see Lemmes 2025). Perceivable technological or more broadly formal differences (“aesthetics”) thus appear to be of only minor importance in some “use cases,” while they are much more relevant in others.

In contrast, “media” in a broader sense are not already determined factors or elements within specific mediations, but “always already in play where

culturality happens” (Mersch 2024, 215; our translation), which means that we need to consider “media” as inescapable elements of our making sense of the world. Within the anglophone tradition, Mitchell and Hansen (2010) have propagated this as an “ecological” approach to media studies, considering its object an “encompassing environment” (Hausken 2013, 42):

[A]re [media] better pictured as themselves the situation, an environment in which human experience and (inter)action take place? Would it not be better to see media, rather than as the determining factor in a cause and effect scenario, as an ecosystem in which processes may or may not take place?

(Mitchell 2013, 18)

Mersch (2024, 215) proposes to use the term “dispositive” in order to capture this broad conceptualization, as “media” in this sense are seen as positioning human subjects within the world and, in doing so, as creating or shaping their subjectivity—not only through technological means, but also, and more fundamentally, through a “semiotic formatting” of culture and society (see also already Manovich 2001, 69–93; as well as, e.g., Crano 2020; Jeong 2013). Our questions with regard to such “media” thus likewise become considerably broader, perhaps oriented toward changing notions of reality, knowledge, and society (as “imagined” communities [see Anderson 1991]) that are accessible only in a mediated fashion.

Returning to the area of generative AI, we could thus ask, for example, how notions of the “real” are transformed through the increase of AI-generated outputs. This is brought into sharp relief in Kirschenbaum’s warning of an imminent “textpocalypse” (2023, n.pag.) during which most texts online are no longer created by humans with any discernible “communicative intent,” but by AI-based chatbots. This has also become a major concern with regard to countless novels sold via Amazon or “bands” whose music is available through “regular” streaming platforms such as Spotify, despite being entirely AI-generated (see, e.g., Al-Sibai 2024; Knibbs 2024). As noted above, it should also be seen as a problem when more and more Google searches present AI-generated images whose “content” differs vastly from reality without any specific designation (see, e.g., Growcoot 2023); when social media posts (“found in the wild”) are likewise mistaken for representations of reality (see, e.g., Bond 2024); or when influencer or company profiles turn out to be wholly AI-generated (see, e.g., Medicott 2023). We are thus interested in the impact of a media environment increasingly saturated by generative AI, though this impact clearly cannot be reduced to individual AI-generated outputs. Instead, such outputs collectively contribute to creating a new “media reality” to which people and institutions will have to react in one way or another—which will most likely also have an impact on the perception of outputs that are not (or not exclusively) AI-generated.<sup>3</sup>

Just as we can distinguish between broad and narrow conceptualizations of “media,” so could we start out from two similarly “radical” (if commonly proposed) alternatives for conceptualizing the term “aesthetics” (which have also been previously discussed, in fairly similar terms, by Hausken [2013], Mersch [2024], and Schröter [2019a]).<sup>4</sup> At first glance, then, the term “aesthetics” oscillates between a philosophy of art and a philosophy of perception. In a narrow (and often normative) conceptualization of “aesthetics-as-artistics,” the focus is on skill, judgment, and connoisseurship (see, e.g., Coeckelbergh 2023; Manovich 2019). We might then ask whether or not, or to what degree, AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs have or can have artistic merit; who is the artist (or “author” [see, e.g., Bajohr 2024c; Barale 2024, 41–57]); what roles do the alleged intentions of any such actor (or their absence) play for any such assessment (see, e.g., Manovich and Arielli 2024; Moruzzi 2020); and which forms and practices of collaborative co-creation have “creative” potential (see, e.g., Feyersinger et al. 2023; Navas 2023). One particularly prominent concern here is how aesthetic judgment can be informed by political reasoning, for example, when AI imagery is generally disregarded as “slob” or as “inherently fascist” (see, e.g., Watkins 2025).<sup>5</sup>

In a broader sense, however, the term “aesthetics” is also increasingly used to refer to a more general theory of perception or “aisthesis.” Related to media (in both the broad and the narrow sense sketched above), such an “aesthetics-as-aisthetics” aims “to understand the complexity of sense perception and its embeddedness in the cultures and histories of technologies of mediation” (Hausken 2013, 30–31), and could thus perhaps also be described as a “phenomenological” approach to media aesthetics. Kirschenbaum, for example, speculated whether our recent AI-driven “algorithmic conditioning” may have created (or may yet create) a “fundamental untethering of language from conditions of lived reality [...], the moment when we question even that which we know to be bodily, palpably true because our screens—and our friends on our screens—say otherwise” (2025, 11–12). While it remains to be seen how generative AI addresses, negates, or otherwise interacts with the human senses and with our embodied perception (or embodied cognition more generally), one important line of already existing research argues that AI-generated images (and perhaps also music) is mostly about the remixing of generic “styles” or “vibes” that reproduce conventional affects (see, e.g., Meyer 2023, 108). Following theorists such as Ahmed (2010), Biondi (2022), and Massumi (1995), we could then emphasize that “vibes [...] make us *feel* a certain way. They have an *energy* that we like or don’t. We are surrounded by them. We are informed by them” (Biondi 2022; n.pag.; original emphases). An “AI aesthetics” could thus investigate the impact of algorithmically produced “vibes” as computable affects (see also Grietzer 2025).

Both narrow conceptualizations and both broad conceptualizations (of “media” and “aesthetics,” respectively) we have sketched thus far also appear to be aligned with each other at least to some degree: An instrumental

conceptualization of “media” as carriers/materials for meaning and “expressive intent” lends itself to “artistic” considerations (especially within “formalist” approaches to modernist art<sup>6</sup>); a postinstrumental conceptualization of media as dispositives or environments has a certain attraction to phenomenological theories of perception and embodiment. While the various forays into the generative AI discussions touched upon above might already become more productive when undertaken against the background of these four well established “radical” conceptualizations of “medium” and “aesthetics,” respectively, we would like to present in slightly more detail two “middle-ground” conceptualizations of these terms that seem particularly relevant in a generative AI context. Being “middle-ground” conceptualizations, they can each be located somewhere in-between the respective narrow and broad conceptualizations of “medium” and “aesthetics” that we have sketched thus far.

### **“Middle-Ground” Conceptualizations of (AI) “Media” and (AI) “Aesthetics”**

How, then, could we conceptualize “media” and “mediality” as neither narrowly instrumental (as a means, channel, or material within a defined use-context), nor as (perhaps too) broadly postinstrumental (as a dispositive, an environment, or a “condition” providing affordances to engage with the world physically, cognitively, and affectively)? As a third option in-between these “radical” extremes, we could instead approach specific technologies as networks of human and nonhuman actors that are open to various “use cases” and representational affordances, perhaps shaping (i.e., enabling or limiting) certain uses over others, but doing so through their specific situatedness in all the “domains of technology” outlined by [Dhaliwal \(2023\)](#). Such an approach to media and their mediality thus focuses not only on specific networks of human and nonhuman actors but also on the distribution of agency between them, and on how this distribution shapes specific affordances for interaction, communication, and representation. Questions such as these have been discussed in terms of an actor-media-theory, modeled after the sociological actor-network-theory (ANT), but with a specific focus on technologies of communication and interaction (see [Wilde 2023](#); as well as, e.g., the contributions in [Spöhrer and Ochsner 2017](#); [Thielmann and Schüttpelz 2013](#)).

Within the theoretical framework of actor-media-theory, we would then consider AI technologies neither as mere (predetermined) instruments in a given use-case nor as (open and ubiquitous) dispositives of general(ized) media environments, but as specifically situated actor-media-networks. By following this approach, we can more effectively investigate how particular new and emerging technologies (hardware, software, and infrastructure), through their interfaces, serve as “midpoints” between the institutions behind them (companies, legal and economic frameworks, social roles with specific

hierarchies, etc.) and the outputs they generate. Conceptualizing media in this way thus helps us to acknowledge that, despite it being tempting to address AI-generated images as such, differences in models, versions, and platforms matter quite a bit. Much-discussed representational biases of LLMs, for example (see, e.g., [Bianchi et al. 2022](#); [Hofmann et al. 2024](#); [Katz 2025](#)), emerge from a complex interaction between many different systems that are in principle separate, even if we may not be able to see this in the resulting images, namely (a) training datasets (such as LAION-5B) with their existing image/text-pairings, (b) pre-trained language models (such as CLIP) that assign default values to linguistic prompts (as tokens) to “understand” them through a high-dimensional vector within the latent space, and (c) the image models themselves (such as the Stable Diffusion models from “marketplaces” like CivitAI) that can be trained and “defaulted” differently even with recourse to the same dataset (see, e.g., [Allamar 2022](#); [Škripicová 2024](#); [Song et al. 2024](#)).

While we cannot necessarily reconstruct these infrastructures in all cases based on disclosed datasets, and while we might moreover not be able to determine any causal input–output relation in the sense of an “explainable AI” (see, e.g., [Ali et al. 2023](#); [Zylinska 2020](#), 75–85), we should be careful not to give in to the temptations of what Offert and Dhaliwal describe as a black box casuistry in the context of AI discourse:

“AI models are black boxes,” in 2024, sounds like a truism, and could yet not be further from the truth. Yes, AI models are complex systems, and yes, there is no easy way to infer, purely from the weights and biases of a neural network, what the model does, or what data it was trained on. But AI models rarely consist of just a single neural network, nor do they come into the world as entirely new systems, trained on entirely new data, with entirely new mechanisms. AI models are historical, maybe even ‘more historical’ than many other technical objects. Every new model builds on an entire architectural history, a history of how things are done with the parts that are available.

([Offert and Dhaliwal 2024](#), 5)

While we might, for example, not be able to “look into” some datasets and models (such as OpenAI’s), we do know quite a bit about others, as [Buschek and Thorp \(2023\)](#) have reconstructed in more detail with regard to Midjourney and Stable Diffusion. Both of the latter draw on the LAION-5B dataset of 5.85 billion CLIP-filtered image-text pairs, made available by researchers in 2022 (see [Schuhmann et al. 2022](#)) with the warning that they “do not recommend using it for creating ready-to-go industrial products” ([Beaumont 2023](#), n.pag.). However, as [Buschek and Thorp \(2023\)](#) explain, LAION-5B was itself built from an even larger dataset (containing data from over three billion websites) by another nonprofit organization (Common Crawl). Some commercial domains (such as Pinterest, Shopify, and SlidePlayer) were

highly overrepresented in LAION, because they host many image-text pairings. Midjourney and Stable Diffusion, however, draw only on a subset of the LAION-5B foundation dataset called “LAION-Aesthetics” (consisting of roughly 15,000 images). This, in turn, was once more created using algorithmic filtering to select only images from the foundation set that were rated to be particularly “visually appealing,” according to parameters provided earlier by users of the Discord communities for GLIDE and Stable Diffusion. These users ranked and rated 238,000 (other) AI-generated images from yet another training set called “Simulacra Aesthetic Captions (SAC).” What this example shows is that, despite the appeal of black box casuistry within AI discourse, we know quite a bit about the “aesthetics” that any image in Midjourney or Stable Diffusion will “gravitate toward,” because we can trace them back to only “a handful of [very active] users” whose “aesthetic preferences dominate the dataset” (Buschek and Thorp 2023, n.pag.).

Having located our conceptualization of actor-media-networks in between instrumental and postinstrumental conceptualizations of “media,” we would similarly like to offer a conceptualization of “aesthetics” as neither an “artistics” that is primarily concerned with aesthetic judgments (related to skill and connoisseurship), nor as an “aisthetics” that conflates aesthetic perception with perception (or *aisthesis*) *in toto* (see also Thon 2025). Drawing on Martin Seel’s influential proposal to distinguish aesthetic from nonaesthetic perception via the former’s “self-referentiality” or “sensing self-awareness” that ties “[t]he special presence of the *object* of perception [...] to a special presence of the *exercise* of this perception” (Seel 2005, 31; original emphases), we can instead conceptualize aesthetics as being concerned not with perception (or *aisthesis*) in general, but rather with a specific kind of perception (i.e., aesthetic perception).<sup>7</sup> While there is no one-to-one relation between this kind of “self-referential” aesthetic perception and the more or less “self-referential” form of aesthetic artifacts or objects, broadly conceived, we would further suggest that AI-generated outputs that foreground, to varying degrees and dependent on context and use, their “formatting” or “style” as opposed to their “content” or “subject” could be described as following a logic of (opaque) hypermediacy as opposed to a logic of (transparent) immediacy *sensu* Bolter and Grusin (1999). Such AI-generated outputs might then be more interesting from the perspective of a “middle ground” AI aesthetics than those AI-generated outputs that do not foreground their “formatting” or “style.”<sup>8</sup>

If, hypothetically, we prompted ChatGPT o1 to briefly explain how the term “AI aesthetics” could be understood, the text we would receive after it “thought about it for a second” might well appear to be largely transparent to us within what could be described as standard “use cases” for such an explanation. Within such standard “use cases,” we might focus on assessing the propositions, concepts, or pieces of information “contained” in the text, allowing us to abstract to a certain degree from the form of the specific AI-generated output—potentially even across specific languages such as

English or German (for abstractions as a set of medial operations and material practices, see [Schröter 2019b](#)). The AI-generated output would thus become transparent to a certain degree, relative to a given “use case” or a “medial operation,” in that it would “not seem to change at least with some changes in the materiality” ([Schröter 2019b](#), 26). Similar observations apply to AI-generated images: The infamous AI-generated “baby peacock,” which does not represent anything looking like an actual specimen of this genus, but takes the form of a kind of fictional “Pokémon” in which the appearance of an adult male peacock has been merged with pronounced attributes associated with the quality of “cuteness” (see [Larsen 2023](#)), is not discussed as a problem because of “stylistic” allusions to a photographic representation, but because of its abstractable features which would not even serve its purpose as an adequate illustration—in any perceivable image style. To the extent that “we are interested in the information the image, and the image in combination with the text, gives us” ([Schröter 2019b](#), 28), we can thus once again abstract from the form, “formatting,” or “style” of the image and toward its potential to illustrate how any “real” baby peacock generally looks like—and how any baby peacock picture that affords such an operation *should* look like.<sup>9</sup>

Transparency and abstraction will always remain matters of degree (see [Schröter 2019b](#), 32), but degree here does not imply indifference. As a contrasting example of how much more foregrounded the form, “formatting,” or “style” of AI-generated outputs may be (in other words, how much less transparent and abstractable the AI-generated outputs in question may appear), we could (again, hypothetically) instruct ChatGPT o1 to generate an explanation of AI aesthetics in the form of a haiku or a 3-panel-comic strip. The results of such prompts are likely to be quite opaque to the degree that they will foreground or, indeed, imitate the form of “other media” such as a specific type of poetry (with 5-7-5 syllables and a comparison to nature) or a script detailing the (absent) content of sequential images and speech bubbles. When we want to assess the degree of self-referentiality, opacity, or hypermediacy of an AI-generated output relative to medial practices, “use cases,” and the degree to which they allow to abstract from the perceivable formatting of the output, then the question of how “transparent” any given output is remains relative to conventions—perhaps cultural “protocols”<sup>10</sup>—of media use.

In discussions within social media comment sections, for example, remarks such as “this article feels like it was at least partially AI written [...]. That is exactly the type of it-literally-doesn’t-mean-anything filler that LLMs love to insert into text” ([DeedleFake 2025](#), n.pag.) have become quite frequent. They retroactively add a hypermediacy-oriented, opaque, self-referential perspective to our initially transparent hypothetical example above. Not only does the “default style” for AI-generated images—that is, the “style” employed without any specific “style prompt”—change considerably between platforms and models, but the sociocultural conventions of what counts as a “transparent” text or image (and which could, thus, perhaps be perceived as

comparatively “non-aesthetic”) do as well. Indeed, “[f]or these models, the ‘photographic’ seems to be just another ‘style’, an aesthetic, a certain ‘look’, not a privileged mode of indexical access to the world” (Meyer 2023, 108). What could be described as a “photographic aesthetics” or a “photographic form” is generally perceived as more transparent than drawings in contemporary media culture,<sup>11</sup> but this is less some inherent technological property of photochemical trace-recordings than it is the result of the dominance of images that “look” photographic in many medial contexts (even though they also might be CGI, photoshopped, and/or AI-generated). However, their perceivable medial forms (that are often *not* foregrounded and thus comparably transparent) have accumulated and inherited photography’s “protocols” that make them abstractable toward what they seem to represent, “even if the reading of that form as natural is culturally conditioned” (Wasielewski 2024, 15; see also Hausken 2024). Drawing a distinction between form, “formatting,” or “style,” on the one hand, and representational content, on the other, by focusing on “use cases” relative to conventionalized media practices also avoids the problem of having to depart from any projected “meaning” within AI-generated outputs (in contrast to their form), which current models arguably have no understanding of (see Bender et al. 2021).

## Conclusion(s)

In offering a survey of different (sometimes explicit, more often implicit) conceptualizations of “AI aesthetics” that underly existing research on AI-generated outputs, we have tried to show that how we conceptualize both (AI) “media” and (AI) “aesthetics” will saliently inform our methodological stance by allowing us to draw different distinctions between what we (more or less readily) assume as “given”—and what, in contrast, we consider a “matter of concern” (Latour 2004, 232). The “middle-ground” conceptualization of “media” as actor-media-networks that we propose as a potential alternative to narrowly instrumental or broadly postinstrumental conceptualizations takes its starting point neither from a given “use case” nor from an assumed AI-saturated media environment, but from the affordances of specific technologies, platforms, and models—their “default configurations” that are nevertheless open to countless diverging uses. The “middle-ground” conceptualization of aesthetics as concerned with self-referential aesthetic perception that we consider as a potential alternative to artistic-oriented and aesthetics-oriented conceptualizations likewise takes as its starting point specific conventions and practices of media use, while contrasting those where the “protocols” and “use cases” are more embedded in “artistic” practices (which usually *do* foreground their perceivable medial forms) to those that are more closely connected to instrumental practices (which often afford a higher degree of abstraction toward some

information, proposition, or other representational content, including an allegedly represented reality). Whether such protocols can remain stable when certain altermedial “formattings” or “styles” are imitated through generative AI remains a question that needs to be investigated for specific technological and usage contexts.

With this in mind, we would like to conclude by tentatively proposing, again, that the area of “AI aesthetics”—within the framework of media aesthetics and, more specifically, with regard to AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs—can be accessed from at least six different directions, with the underlying conceptualization of “AI aesthetics” arguably also suggesting a privileging of particular methodological stances (or ways of inquiry) over others when investigating the perceivable (aesthetic or indeed aesthetic) properties of AI-generated outputs:

- 1 Instrumental (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given “use case” of communication and interaction and then investigating the perceivable properties of AI-generated outputs that enable, distort, or facilitate the respective processes of mediation.
- 2 Actor-(AI) media-networks: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given technology, in all its complex and multidimensional situatedness, and then investigating how its perceivable output affordances and defaults are related to the (“invisible”) materiality, infrastructures, and socio-cultural institutions that afford it—and vice versa.
- 3 (AI) media dispositives: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from a given (increasingly) AI-saturated media environment and then investigating its ramifications on society, culture, politics, and the perceivable properties of *all* media forms situated therein.
- 4 Artistic (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from given aesthetic judgments that are connected to notions of skill and connoisseurship (including discourses around creativity, originality, and politics) and then investigating to what degree and under which assumptions AI-generated outputs are appreciated or dismissed.
- 5 Self-referential (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from different media “use cases” and practices and then investigating to what degree and through which means AI-generated outputs highlight aspects of their perceivable form, “formatting,” or “style” and thus invite self-referential aesthetic perception rather than encouraging abstraction.
- 6 Aesthetic (AI) media: This conceptualization may prioritize starting out from any type of situated interaction between humans and AI-generated or AI-augmented outputs (or, indeed, the interfaces of generative AI platforms more broadly) and then investigating how sense perception, embodied experiences, and affects are addressed, negated, or modulated therein.

The present volume aims to represent all of these concerns as it includes chapters that move within and across the six conceptualizations of “AI aesthetics” presented here in various ways. It thus reflects not only on the theoretical but also on the methodological implications of AI aesthetics. At the same time, however, it demonstrates that this is still very much an emerging research field and that no dominant conceptualization of “AI aesthetics” has yet emerged.

## Notes

- 1 As a case in point, AI image generators are perhaps primarily remarkable in terms of the quantity and speed with which they generate images. The deluge of AI-generated images might then appear too arbitrary and ephemeral to deserve sustained individual attention or in-depth analysis at first glance, perhaps contributing to a privileging of more quantitative and social science-oriented methods within the field of critical AI studies. It is worth noting, however, that within the specifically humanities-oriented methodological context of what Bajohr describes as “promptology” (2023, 67), natural language commands can also be used to probe the “latent space” of AI image generators, with individual AI-generated images then becoming “readable” as representations of an “underlying” cultural or sociotechnological imaginary (see, e.g., [Ervik 2023](#); [Offert 2023](#); [Salvaggio 2023](#)).
- 2 Broadly speaking, the mediality of generative AI platforms manifests itself in the form of a more or less specific communicative “frontend” or interface that mediates between the social-institutional “systems and structures” as well as the “machines and devices” (hardware and software), on the one hand, and perceiving users (humans), on the other hand (see, e.g., [Hookway 2014](#); [Wirth 2016](#); [2023](#)). These interfaces, in turn, allow for the production of the outputs that AI platforms were trained to generate in various semiotic modes such as written texts, images, or sounds (see [Bateman et al. 2017](#); [Forceville 2021](#); [Kress 2023](#)).
- 3 [Bajohr \(2024a\)](#), for example, suggests that we might soon enter an age of “postartificial texts,” in which authors will always be under suspicion to have used LLMs for their writing, even and perhaps especially when they categorically claim to abstain from such practices, so that, perhaps, this very distinction will lose its significance (see also [Köbis and Mossink 2021](#)). Among other things, one could then assume that this will most likely also be reflected in the prevalence of different kinds of writing styles or textual aesthetics (including, for example, a greater emphasis on autofiction or a less “probable” or “typical” diction), *regardless* of whether generative AI was in play or not—or whether we will ever know if it was with certainty.
- 4 Schröter’s distinction between a “strong” conceptualization of “media aesthetics as ‘aisthesis’” ([Schröter 2019a](#), n.pag.) and a “weak” conceptualization of media aesthetics connected to “a specific use of the medium for the purpose of aesthetic perception” ([Schröter 2019a](#), n.pag.) is particularly relevant here, not least because he also emphasizes the need to explore a “middle ground” between these two extremes. That said, while Schröter identifies Seel as a key proponent of this “weak” conceptualization of media aesthetics, we would perhaps locate [Seel’s \(2005\)](#) approach closer to a “middle-ground” and would, in any case, not follow Schröter’s argument that a “medium kind of media aesthetics” should be (exclusively) “concerned with an aesthetics, even aisthetics, of pre-digital media, which become visible (and audible) once more through their transposed digital repetition” ([Schröter 2019a](#), n.pag.). See also [Thon \(2025\)](#) for a more detailed discussion of [Schröter \(2019a\)](#) vis a vis [Seel \(2005\)](#).

- 5 Apart from the racist, sexist, and other biases that can still often be observed in the content as well as the form of AI-generated images, important concerns include that the production of AI content is hurting (creative) workers, devours millions of gallons of water, and releases thousands of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere annually (see, e.g., [Crawford 2021](#); [Coeckelbergh 2022](#)). It also seems undeniable that AI-generated images have become particularly popular with right-wing parties and politicians around the globe during the past one and a half years—from Donald Trump over Britain First to the German AfD party (see, again, [Watkins 2025](#))—and that there are clear structural alignments between AI technologies and what could be described as a neofascist re-ordering of governments (see, e.g., [Kirschenbaum 2025](#); [McQuillan 2022](#); [Salvaggio 2025](#)).
- 6 While discussions around formalism in aesthetics have often focused on (modernist) painting, there are many theoretically sophisticated proposals to be found here (see, e.g., Curtin on “pure” and “mixed formalism” [1982, 321], Wollheim’s distinction between “Normative Formalism,” “Analytic Formalism,” “Manifest Formalism,” and “Latent Formalism” [2001, 127], Zangwill’s defense of a “moderate formalism” [2001, 55], Thomson-Jones discussion of the resurgence of “[s]ophisticated formalism” [2005, 375], and Nanay’s argument for what he calls “semi-formalism” [2016, 97]). There is also a broader “formalist” discourse in literary, cultural, and media studies often particularly interested in [Shklovsky’s \(2012\)](#) concept of *ostranenie* (or “making strange”). See also, once again, [Thon \(2025\)](#) for a more detailed reconstruction.
- 7 Other accounts of aesthetic as opposed to nonaesthetic perception are certainly available (see, e.g., Nanay’s account of “aesthetic attention as distributed attention” [2016, 26]), but Seel’s conceptualization of the former as a “sensing self-awareness” (2005, 31) seems particularly productive for our present purposes. Against the background of Schröter’s critique of what he perceives as Seel’s focus on “a specific use of the medium for the purpose of aesthetic perception” ([Schröter 2019a](#), n.pag.), however, it is worth stressing that Seel emphasizes that “this sensing [self-awareness] has not yet anything to do with a *reflexive* self-referentiality, although this is often the case here too, especially in the context of art” (2005, 31; original emphasis). See also, once more, the detailed discussion in [Thon \(2025\)](#).
- 8 [Bolter and Grusin \(1999\)](#) not only argue, following [McLuhan \(1964\)](#), that so-called new media remediate the “content” and “form” of older media in various ways, but also postulate a “double logic of remediation” ([Bolter and Grusin 1999](#), 31), which among other things allows us to locate concrete AI-generated outputs between the poles of transparent “immediacy” and opaque “hypermediacy.” While the term “immediacy” broadly refers to the deemphasizing of the form, “formatting,” or “style” of a representation compared to its representational content that “either [...] erase[s] or [...] render[s] automatic the act of representation” ([Bolter and Grusin 1999](#), 33), the term “hypermediacy” refers to representations that foreground “acts of representation and mak[e] them visible,” “multipl[y] the signs of mediation” ([Bolter and Grusin 1999](#), 34), and thus draw our attention to their form, “formatting,” or “style.” Yet again, see [Thon \(2025\)](#) for a more detailed discussion and an argument that representations following the “logic of hypermediacy” more strongly than the “logic of immediacy” may more readily instigate aesthetic as opposed to “merely” nonaesthetic processes of perception in their recipients.
- 9 The idea that the communicative function of pictures could be described in similar ways as linguistic predicates has been discussed controversially in picture theory (see, e.g., [Wilde 2021](#)). Since pictorial signs communicate, by necessity (at least to some degree), the visual appearance(s) of the depicted objects or scenes, some considered “predication” (“to illustrate,” “to visualize,” or “to exemplify”) as the core of pictoriality (see, e.g., [Novitz 1977](#); [Sachs-Hombach 2003](#), 185–187).

- Others, in contrast, objected that seeing a “picture-elephant” was very different from seeing a set of predicates such as “has a long trunk” or “is an animal” (see, e.g., [Abel 2004](#), 361–369; [Elkins 1998](#), 3–46). It should be uncontroversial, however, that “predication” is a frequently employed (although, depending on terminological specification, perhaps not necessary) communicative function of pictures (see, e.g., [Krebs 2015](#)).
- 10 See [Gitelman 2006](#) on the role of “protocols” in a historically oriented conceptualization of “media.” Galloway, too, suggests that the term “protocol” may refer to any kind of “correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions” (2004, 7), which a medium arguably becomes once it is culturally established and widespread enough. [Cavell \(1971, 101–108\)](#) similarly speaks of “automatisms” that every medium accumulates and stabilizes, and which, just like “protocols,” can be technologically implemented or supported, but can also remain on the level of cultural conventions (see also [Rodowick 2007](#), 41–46). They thus entail not only the typical uses of (certain) media products but also the established routines of production, distribution, and reception.
- 11 There are, of course, long-standing discussions around the supposed transparency of photographic (and other) pictures, which are also closely connected to complex questions around “(photo)realism.” Walton has offered a particularly influential account of the former when he argues that “photography is indeed special, and that it deserves to be called a supremely realistic medium,” but is so and does so because “[p]hotographs are *transparent*” in that “[w]e see the world *through* them” (1984, 251, original emphases). Yet, while AI-generated images may still employ “photorealism” in the sense of an “aesthetic term that denotes a visual style,” and thus “mimic photographs without being photographs” ([Hausken 2024](#), 2), it seems clear enough that we do not “see the world *through* them” ([Walton 1984](#), 251, original emphasis), at least not in any intuitively plausible sense of this phrase.

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