



AI photography and composite memory

David Bate

To cite this article: David Bate (2026) AI photography and composite memory, *photographies*, 19:1, 125-144, DOI: [10.1080/17540763.2026.2613842](https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2026.2613842)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2026.2613842>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 09 Mar 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1066



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

David Bate

AI PHOTOGRAPHY AND COMPOSITE MEMORY

If generative AI images are statistical averages of a dataset, then they are also digital documents of culture. In this formulation, images are not simply fake or real, but statistical samples, aggregates of cultural value made manifest in an image. In effect, generative algorithmic processes merge large amounts of different image data into new images that have no singular origin in chronological time or space. While this may seem like a disturbance of the traditional ontology of the photographic image, there is nevertheless a pre-history of such statistical practices in analogue photography: composite photographs. The composite image offers a dynamic model, composed of manifest image and latent source.

AI as composite memory

The availability of generative ‘AI’ image software instigates a new mode of image production and raises a new set of questions about memory, agency and authorship and the temporality of the photographic image. If the debates about digital photography and digital networks over the last few decades had seemed to be settled, they have been upended again with the recent emergence of generative AI images. These new processes not only advance the automation of image-making but constitute a new challenge to the assumed referential quality of photographs. As vast archives of photographs are cannibalized by AI software and devoured by their hungry datasets, algorithmically produced images assume a new agentic role as producer (and co-producer) in new digital image practices. The question thus emerges as to what and how these new generative images affect (a) the human psyche, (b) its memory function and (c) the ideological role of photography since photographic images are so central to the perception of daily life and memory. The ‘datafication’ of photography (henceforth digital photography) since the 1980s is already understood as the erosion of a traditional and longstanding ontology of the photographic image. The subsequent question turns not so much on whether the

CONTACT David Bate, bated@westminster.ac.uk, University of Westminster, London, UK

photographies, 2026

Vol. 19, No. 1, 125–144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2026.2613842>

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

digital image was ‘real’, but how far human perception can be separated from its technical support, the photographic apparatus.

In a conversation on digital photography published in 2000, the philosopher Jacques Derrida argued:

We can no longer oppose perception and technics: there is no perception before the possibility of prosthetic iterability; and this mere possibility marks, in advance, both perception and the phenomenology of perception.¹

Human perception cannot be opposed to or be seen to precede ‘technics’ (*technical* forms and objects of representation) argues Derrida, because the iterability of representation is already at work in perception. Human perception is not ‘pre-technical’, because it is immersed in and through procedures of technics (technical media and its objects of inscription). In arguing this point Derrida also makes a striking analogy:

In perception there are already operations of selection, of exposure time, of filtering, of development; the psychic apparatus functions also *like*, or *as*, an apparatus of inscription and of the photographic archive.²

Derrida links the question of inscription in the psychical apparatus and its memory – a longstanding issue in his work – to the function of the photographic archive.³ Both the human mind (psyche) and the photographic archive are apparatuses of inscription. What are we to make of this philosophical claim for their analogical logic of ‘likeness’? Does the psyche function *like* a photographic archive? Are they similar or, as Derrida’s text implies, the *same*? In what sense is such a claim justified? What does the comparison mean for what Derrida then says ‘follows from it: memory, the technics of memory, mnemotechnics’?⁴ The inscription, whether causal, intermittent or planned, is an image (signifier) implanted in memory.

Yet it is also known that the human mind is ‘selective’ about memory, subject to forgetting, censorship, repression, distortion or other psychological mechanisms that operate extensively on even everyday facts. Sigmund Freud’s essay ‘Screen Memories’ (Freud 2006), for instance, provides a clear example of how specific memory images from childhood can operate as a defence, repression or omission of other experiences.⁵ Photographic archives are similarly known to be selective too, always made under specific conditions for distinct purposes and ends, whether explicitly defined or intuitively felt. Police archives, for instance, are constructed explicitly to identify specific persons, object and places (suspects, documented arrests, crime scenes, objects of evidence, fingerprints) and so on. For all the claims to objectivity, archives function to identify a specific thing: crime. On the other hand, a family album aims to show the transient moments of a family and friends, as ‘selfie’ group identifications. Mobile phones might have diversified such practices (generating new digital archives, an effective space for multiple identifications), but personal and family pictures still tend to present happy events, celebrations, births, marriages, holidays, a concert and so on, where the identity of any single person is casual, an effect of the memorializing of the event. Medical archives constitute another set of

concerns: health problems. While each archive may claim to be ‘objective’ in their own terms, they are all selective. Archives are limited, founded on conditions that may not be clear, and which determine the material of their contents.

Thus, Derrida’s analogy between the selection processes at work in photographic archives as equivalent to the ‘operations of selection’ and ‘filtering’ of the human mind have good grounds and offer a direct equivalence. The point is, following Derrida’s argument, that inscriptions in the psychical apparatus and photographic archives are not separate, but overlap as modes of cognitive memory work. Human memory (psyche) is composed of a multiplicity of inscriptions, but it is the inscription itself that is considered most significant for memory, rather than any specific technical mode (or distinction) of its source (e.g. human perception or photograph). While the idea of photography as a memory device is a longstanding popular notion, and theoretical question, what is also important here is the model of mind that is in use.

Derrida’s work on inscriptions in the mind and photographic archive draws on a Freudian model of the psychical apparatus.⁶ We might advance and complicate Derrida’s analogy by asking *where* does a memory inscription find itself located in the topography of the mind?⁷ In Freud’s psychoanalytic concept of the mind, for instance (in his first topography) it is split between consciousness/preconscious and unconscious. ‘Memory-traces’ can be deposited across these different systems.⁸ Bearing this in mind, the importance of Derrida’s analogy between mind and photographic archives for the discussion of artificial intelligence should now already be clear: the emergence of ‘generative AI’ images, sourced from cultural archives and activated by (image/language) prompts, again raises the question of the relations between image, perception and memory. If human perception cannot be disentangled from its technical images, what are the consequences of generative AI images for human memory? What are the subjective effects of new technical images on memory. Or, perversely, what is the impact of human memory on this generative model of artificial image production?

From artificial memory to artificial intelligence

Despite the extensive heat generated by the circulation of ‘AI images’ which feel ‘photographic’, and flirt with its realism, even though they break many of its traditional rules, the term ‘artificial intelligence’ can currently mean anything from *automated* technical processes (e.g. HDR in smart phone cameras) to generative image software systems. A provisional list of these varieties of automations might be distinguished as follows:

- 1 **automated ‘AI’ camera operation** modifications: from focus, exposure camera setting and procedures to genre modes, autofocus, asset and object-tracking, composition filters, and (algorithmic) HDR combination of multiple exposures, into idealized aesthetic presentations.
- 2 **automated ‘AI’ post-production** processing & techniques, software and applications, like:

- a automation of traditional retouching techniques, e.g. adjustments to colour, focus, framing, lighting, perspective shifts, lens aberrations, etc.
 - b automated ‘replication’ and simulation of different photographic codes, historic styles, contemporary photographic values or interpolated into different technical image systems like painting, woodcut, drawings, ‘pop art’, impressionist ‘styles’ and so on.
 - c editing process to sequence pictures, e.g. automated layouts in photobooks, etc.
- 3 **Generative ‘AI’ image:** a software system that uses a given archive/dataset to make ‘new’ images, derived from text/image prompts (‘genAI’ and CGI), still images used to generate moving video sequences, morphing sequences and so on.

These different categories may overlap or be combined in different ways, but the distinctions nevertheless cannot hide the fact that what all these technical advances have in common is the replacement of (and arguably advance) specific specialist human work by computational *automation*. Bernard Stiegler has argued, ‘Digital automations short-circuit the deliberative functions of the mind, and systemic stupidity, which has been installed across the board from consumers to speculators, become *functionally drive-based* . . .’.⁹ While such issues are crucial, this paper is occupied with the third category, of generative Ai images, whose processes are seen as replacing not only human work, but human agency too. The ‘creative’ work of making images and even the social source and reference of the photographic image is replaced by computational processes. If generative images constitute a new mode of image production, then what concepts enable a theoretical space to discuss them?

How to understand, for instance, the relations between ‘datasets’ (and their archives) used as source material (e.g. neural network archives like ImageNet) and the processes of algorithmic computation that produce manifest images? Firstly, a dataset is a collection or set of data. An image dataset is a selected collection of images used to train and test computers and their algorithms. Such datasets are used to ‘teach’ computers to recognise existing objects, and thus also inherit and amplify the existing problems of photographic archives they are based on. Bias is caused by ‘unrepresentative data’, which is the general condition of any photographic archive. These are prior to the processes of algorithmic computation (or ‘algorithmic composition’?) that generate the production of new manifest images. In describing these components, I have already alluded to a traditional photographic theory concept of *latent/manifest* image, readily familiar from analogue photography.

Latent and manifest image

A *latent* image is the underlying or nonvisible image. The *manifest* image is when a latent image becomes visible. In the darkroom, for example, an exposed photographic paper holds an invisible *latent* image, which is only brought to light by a chemical process, whereafter the image becomes *manifest*, visible. Similarly, the exposure of film in

a camera remains *latent* until brought out by a chemical process, as the *manifest* image. The same manifest and latent couplet as in photography was also taken up historically slightly later in another field: Sigmund Freud's classic 1900 psychoanalytic text *The Interpretation of Dreams*.¹⁰ Freud uses *manifest* and *latent* to distinguish between the dream image and its latent source. In Freud's model, the dreamwork process transforms 'latent thoughts' (left-over residue thoughts and experiences of that person's life daily experience) into dream images, remembered as *manifest* images. The 'manifest content' of dreams presents the dreamer's distorted wishes, which can be traced by following the chain of associations of the dream-images back to their latent thoughts and life experience. Freud's model was adapted in photography theory by Victor Burgin for the analysis of photographic images. In his essay 'Photography, Fantasy, Function' he suggests that the specific logic of the dream-work might be used to analyse advertising images to show how they mobilize (and exploit) human desire and, by extension, art photography and other images too.¹¹

These theoretical terms can be remodelled for the computer system of AI image generation. Media theorists already describe datasets/archives as a 'latent space', but I wish to insist on the couplet of latent data *and* manifest image.¹² In this model, the *latent data* (*latent space or source*) is animated by the (image/language) prompt via algorithms, activated to generate the image on the screen: the *manifest* image. The algorithmic processing, the *machine-work* (the use of large language models and dynamic algorithms) produces the manifest image from latent data. The same *latent/manifest* model can figure across photography, human psychology and computer systems, all modes of image generation. Given that computational systems are based on human neural network models, the analogy with the human mind seems justified. In the computational model, the sequence is: human prompt (image/language) – latent source – algorithmic computation – manifest image. Such a system also resembles in some ways the analogue system of 'composite photography' that emerged in the 1870s as a model for generating statistical knowledge.

Composite photography as statistical image

Composite photography was developed as a new visual technique for statistical research during the 1870s. Statistical information gained a new credibility in nineteenth century industrial societies and its social sciences, and it was mobilized as a means of understanding (and later regulating) social norms.¹³ Composite photography as a 'scientific method' is mostly associated with the work of Francis Galton who developed it in relation to his research work on the question of 'hereditary' features, passed from one generation to the next, sometimes now called 'intergenerational legacy'. Galton explored the 'biometrics' of different species, whether fruit, peas or animals, but it is his work on humans that has dominated his own legacy, especially in the history of photography.¹⁴ No doubt this is justified. A few years later in the 1880s Galton arrived at a theory of 'eugenics' and hereditary 'regression' (a distorted Darwinism), which is now rightly reviled as a racist pseudo-science, invoked as an ideological tool in European colonialism and later fascism. Eugenics constructed a vicious hierarchy of species (conflating physical features, mental capacities and biology) to categorise humans into a hierarchy of 'races' and 'types'. Galton himself moved on to develop techniques of fingerprinting. Before all

this, however, Galton had arrived at composite photography as a type of statistical research.

As a method, Galton had the idea to sandwich together multiple photographic images of the same object or person and give them an equal exposure time to result in a single composite image (see [Figure 1](#)). In Galton's mind, the new manifest image revealed the 'average' or 'typical' features of that type of object. The composite image could thus show the statistically average or 'normalized' features of that object in a quickly accessible single visual image. Galton used existing photographic archives (e.g. prison photographs of criminals) in his hereditary research work but also advertised for amateurs to send him their family photographs to expand the source data for his research.¹⁵ Using the composite method Galton aimed to track the changing visual features of each family group, just as some art photographers have also done themselves.¹⁶ The photographic

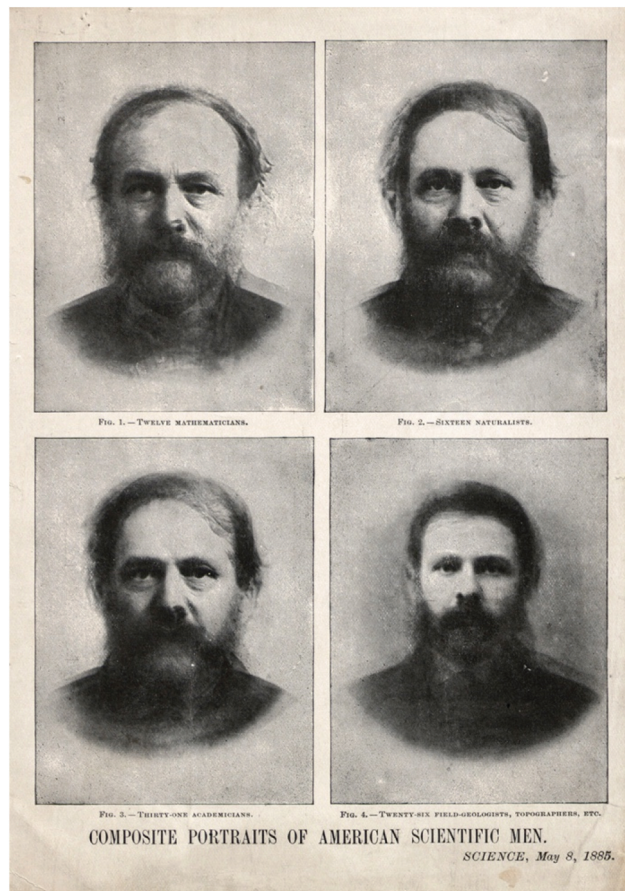


Fig. 1. Francis Galton, 'composite portraits of [American] scientific men', published in *Science*, 8 May 1885. Wellcome Collection. Each image is a composite image of numerous scientists photographed from the same professional field.

method of statistical averaging was not particularly rigorous. Galton himself argued that the composite figure in his images was usually:

better looking than their components, because the averaged portrait of many persons is free from the irregularities that variously blemish the looks of each of them.¹⁷

The 'flaws' in appearance would be averaged out and the composite image 'improved' their appearance as a result of the process. This was seen as its advantage: the statistical 'norm' or average could be identified, by weeding out aberrations.

The confusion in biological statistics between appearance, intelligence and talent assumed a regularity of features which did not exist. Despite these flaws (or even because of them), composite photography became popular, a new fascinating practice.¹⁸ As a statistician (rather than photographer), Galton is known for his contribution to 'probability statistics' which was itself a developing field in the new industrial societies. Predicting patterns of normal (and deviant) behaviour became central to industrial mass production.¹⁹ Although statistical methods have a much longer history, the idea of understanding systematic patterns of probability and 'normal' behaviour became an important method in the new emergent social sciences across a range of fields, like meteorology medicine, insurance, astronomy and anthropology, to which Galton also contributed.²⁰

Galton's work is picked up in Catherine Malabou's recent philosophical work on the conception of human and machine intelligence in her book *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains*.²¹ Malabou traces the changes in how 'intelligence' is measured and theorised as a concept: from the problems of Galton's eugenics through to genetics, cybernetics and recent neurobiological 'epigenetic' models. Malabou discusses how these epigenetic models of thought processes, based on interaction and relations between genetic codes, have been taken up, adapted and used to develop computational artificial intelligence.²² Artificial intelligence is distinguished from human intelligence, but the recent advances in the 'intelligence' of computation processing relate to its ability to imitate (or 'simulate') neural network operations of the human brain. Malabou argues, echoing Derrida's earlier arguments about the psyche and the photographic archive:

There is no denying it: the brain and the computer have a reciprocal and 'mirroring' relationship. Consequently, any discourse of resistance that tries to protect the naturalness of intelligence against its capture by technology is futile. It is becoming increasingly difficult to oppose a coherent theoretical resistance to the concept of automation or cybernetic simulation.²³

The outcomes of automated 'artificial intelligence' processes, Malabou argues, now interact in a 'complex dialectical relationship' with human intelligence.²⁴ Malabou notes that the 'resistance' to automation which appears with new technologies is organised around a conventional opposition about the human mind and its conception of computer intelligence:

At one extreme, some computer scientists considered the brain to be nothing but a learning machine. For them, that kind of machine could easily be duplicated by computers, which were viewed merely as simple computational machines. At the other extreme, some researchers immediately recognised the importance that brain plasticity could have for the development of AI.²⁵

Malabou's own philosophical concept of the human brain's 'plasticity' is a reference point for her discussion of the evolving models of computer chips, for example, IBM's 'neuro-synaptic processor' (now Gen2²⁶) with its 'event driven architecture' aiming to simulate the human brain.²⁷ Large Language Models (LLMs) are predictive and anticipatory of normative patterns. The outcome of automated 'artificial intelligence' processes, Malabou argues, now interact in a 'complex dialectical relationship' with human intelligence²⁸. Machine learning, through Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN and big GAN), have created new image processing tools. Computers can be 'trained to recognize similarities in a corpus of images that are labelled as instantiations of the same name, or idea – for example one million images of dogs.'²⁹ On one hand the effect of these new automation processes is similar to Galton's composite image ambitions, albeit on a far larger scale, used to characterise the 'normative' or average object. Any new addition to an existing image dataset, say a picture of an animal (a cat) can then be 'measured' against it, in term of its dog-like appearance.³⁰ On the other hand, latent datasets can be used to generate a new manifest image of a realistic dog. As a result, as Mario Carpo indicates, the system can make 'an infinite number of non-existing dogs, all different but all similar to their models, and to one another'.³¹ It is in the statistical modelling of these image datasets, and computation algorithmics and the images generated from them that resembles in some ways Galton's earlier analogical model of the composite image. In GenAI, the image generated is a composite image, which in turn translates multiple archive images into a new digital image of an object, place or person.

Freud's dreamwork similarly recognises the composite image dynamic between a latent source and manifest image as a mechanism in the production of dream images. Indeed, Freud refers to Francis Galton's composite photography as an example of 'distortion' in dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.³² He gives an example of his own dream-image: a strange human figure, who is actually a composite of two different people. The face of his uncle was merged with the face and yellowish beard of his friend:

It was like one of Galton's composite photographs. (In order to bring out family likenesses, Galton used to photograph several faces on the same plate.)³³

Freud calls this dream-work process: 'condensation'. Different features of things are combined into one image. Freud goes on to show how the unconscious motivation for this distorting 'condensation' of two figures in his example is linked to his own anxiety, and a wish to distance his own behaviour from theirs. He follows a chain of

associations from the dream-image, where the *character* of one person (his uncle's idiocy) has been combined, merged with the *visual* features of his bearded friend.

We may identify the same kinds of composite 'condensation' process in the 'machine-work' of computing (albeit without human unconscious processing).³⁴ Responding to human image/language prompts, generative image systems use a *latent* dataset (source, archive) to composite a manifest image as response. Antonio Somaini argues that different computational systems construct latent spaces in different ways, but this is readily seen by the manifest images produced when using one prompt across different systems.

In the following visual examples of generated images (see Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6), a simple English text prompt asked different software to 'create a picture of two hands'. Why hands? Human hands are immensely important signification elements in visual images and human culture. Hands are often used to code how a viewer understands another person. Portrait photographers usually know the importance of hands, they are often seen as key symbolic indicators, along with facial expression, posture and demeanour. Hand images are complex signifying elements, commonly used to indicate significant human interactions, e.g. distance, intimacy, love, care, possession, anger, etc. A hand may signify what Roland Barthes called the 'social gest' in a metonymic form.³⁵ Body bias, like gender, age, culture, ethnicity, and ability are often implied by hands.

The following examples demonstrate the differential models operated to produce manifest images from the latent data of the dataset, as triggered and 'motivated' by the linguistic prompt.

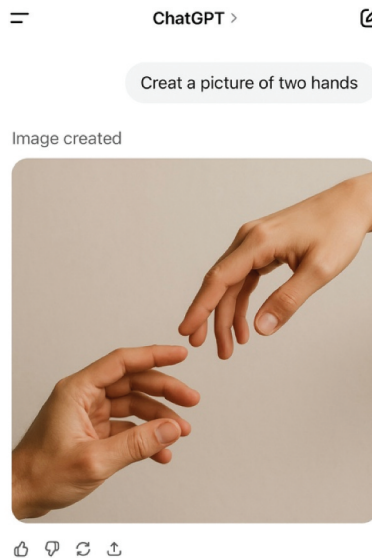


Fig. 2. ChatGPT 5, May 2025.

The image draws on and ‘quotes’ Michaelangelo’s well-known 1510’s iconographic depiction of two hands reaching out to each other on the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco in Rome. The historical gesture is converted into a stock image photographic style. In Michaelangelo’s fresco the image presents the Genesis creation story of Adam: the hand of God reached down from the heavens to breathe life into Adam. The *ChatGPT* hands suggest this source but appear as a stylised ‘photographic’ trope endlessly repeated in stock images. I then ask Chat GPT to ‘Create a picture of two hands that is not religious’, it produces the popular but more secular contemporary ‘fist bump’:

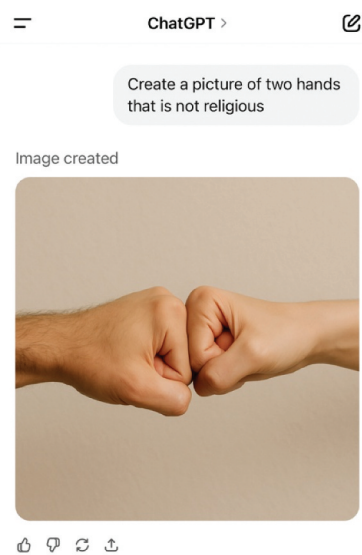


Fig. 3. *ChatGPT 5*, image generated from prompt 'create a picture of two hands', June 2025.

The manifest image demonstrate the stock-in-trade stereotypes of the meeting of two hands. Like Galton’s composite portraits, differences are averaged into a numerically averaged image schema. The concept of bias here can be related to the source dataset, although how far any archive or computational dataset can ever be said to be ‘neutral’ in representation is a constant question.

In the same way that Freud asked, what is the latent thought at work in the production of the manifest image, it can be asked how latent space datasets are activated and transformed via computer ‘machine-work’ (algorithm) processes into the produced manifest images. If we compare, for instance, the ChatGPT images with the same prompt (‘create a picture of two hands’) used in another text-to-image prompt software *Ideogram* (released in 2023), this programme automatically produces a selection of different hands images:



Fig. 4. *Ideogram*, prompt: 'create a picture of two hands', June 2025.

Here the manifest hands are varied, with different implications of age, culture, genders, skin tones (shades of skin tone), social status, as are the photographic styles (colour, monochrome, shallow focus, deep focus, etc.). Notably, this system generates different types of background, which implicate the depicted hands into different social-cultural contexts. We can suppose the dataset/algorithms include these more social contextual setting (backgrounds) and are set to drive them, even though the prompt did not ask for them.

In [Figure 5](#), one hand is confused, too many fingers and in the wrong place. The other hand is both old and young, featuring liver spots, usually associated with aged hands. An unnecessary piece of lavender, a traditional signifier of calmness and purity appears by the hand, thus involuntarily adding another symbolic element to the picture.



Fig. 5. *Ideogram*, prompt: 'create a picture of two hands', June 2025.

In a final example (Figure 6), the three fingered hand on the left with the ring seems an anomaly. The other hand is adorned with a batik pattern on it (different to the cultural assumption made by ChatGPT), which, along with the white dress, alludes to a vague signification of hands at a 'wedding'. What are the conclusions to be drawn from these simple examples?



Fig. 6. *Ideogram*, prompt: 'create a picture of two hands', June 2025.

First, *ChatGPT* and *Ideogram* use different latent data/space, datasets and algorithms, because the outcomes are significantly different from an identical prompt (even though a repeated prompt in one software can produce subtle variations). These basic examples, using different generative software, demonstrate that different datasets, latent archive sources and algorithms have a material effect on the production, look and content of the manifest images, using identical prompts. This means that the variability and shifts in image generation requires further work by the end user, adjustments to the prompt context to control signification. The responsibility shifts towards the user, not as ‘creator’ of the images, but of the generated image compositional meaning, its representational, ethical and aesthetic effects.

Secondly, all these examples show that the generative process constructs images that look like, but are not quite, ‘photographic’, they utilize a photographic *effect*. Unlike Galton’s analogue composite system, AI generative models do not always currently iron out ‘flaws’ as these examples demonstrate. Generative image simulations sometimes break with what Michel Foucault called the ‘discursive regularities’ of a practice.³⁶ In this case, these are the discursive regularities of photographic realism. In dreams, however, a dream-image is under no obligation to observe the laws of photographic realism and its normative perception of representation. Overdetermined by specific latent sources, dream-images generate composite images that may also be lacking in ‘reality’. The uncanny similarity between puzzling dream images and generative AI images is the disturbance in a logic of photographic realism, they speak to the same fascination: the imaginary space of *psychical* representation.

Although mental images do not have the same conditions of production or existence as generative AI images, it appears they can both operate in a similar fashion. As a site of image production then, generative images transform the conventionally assumed link between image and reference assumed by traditional photographic images. This should come as no surprise, the digitalization of photography already strained such links, where specific photographic practices (art, advertising and fashion, for instance) have often shown little interest in the properties of photographic realism or social reality. The link between signifier and reference is not broken but ‘distorted’ and mutated by the digital composite image process because the image is derived from multiple image sources. The uncanniness of some of these images then is also because their (production) process appears analogous to the dreamwork, albeit one without human consciousness or motivation. It is the human prompt that gives the generative apparatus a semiotic activation and animates desire.

Thus, thirdly, these new generative processes enable users to produce new *composite* memory images. It is a memory image because it draws on and merges existing cultural images in a new (distorted) form, animated by prompts. In memory studies, photography is already a form of ‘artificial memory’, a prosthetic device by which ‘natural memory’ (the human mind) is supported or supplanted. Now generative AI can mobilize a plurality of images to visualize a new form of artificial memory.

Composite memory images

The well-known ‘AI’ image titled *The Electrician* by Boris Eldgasen is an example of a composite memory, despite the typical media narrative given to the image. Eldgasen’s image received a great deal of publicity after being submitted to Sony’s ‘Creative Image’ Photography prize in March 2023. Having won the first prize, and after already declaring it was co-created with AI generation software (DALL-E 2), he withdrew the entry. The viral news threads focussed on a simplistic contrast between ‘traditional photography’, which clearly excluded any category of ‘creative’ photography, and ‘AI’ as somehow a destruction of the category of photography. This narrative was repeated everywhere. Almost nothing was said about the visual substance of what is very clearly a composite image whose features were usually characterised and caricatured as ‘surreal’.

Shortly after the prize, however, in April 2023, *Scientific American* magazine took the trouble to interview Eldgasen about the image, the technical processes used and the ambition of the work:

I did it for myself as an exercise, and I just love the result. It sparked off from a project that started years back. My father was born in 1924. So, he went to war when he was 17 but, like most of that generation in Germany, never talked about it. After his death, I found some images from the forties my mom and I hadn’t seen before. I learned a lot about their time just looking at these images, and I started to collect images from the forties at flea markets, and also on eBay, but didn’t know what to do with them.³⁷

Eldgasen went on to generate his composite image (and others in the series) based on photographs of the 1940s historical period and use of generative AI software. The period relates, as he describes, specifically to the period in which his parents were young Germans and the start of World War Two in Germany. It locates his father as joining the German army in 1941. It is not hard to imagine that this work (the series of images he has made) is more than just an exercise. It also specifically aims in some way to visualise the social and psychological life of his parental youth period. This interest is also refracted through his own active interventions in the processing of the image, as alluded to in the interview. Eldgasen says that he collected analogue photographs from the period, adding text prompts, overpainting and so on. In this respect the production of the image is itself like a preconscious reverie, but creatively worked on and worked over, motivated by the desire, not to remember, but to invent a memory – to generate new images of this period. Like the shadow figures dancing on the wall of Plato’s cave, the wish is to *see* the unseen source of the dancing figures. The generative image process is linked to a desire for memory, of that which is missing.

In the concept of ‘postmemory’, a previous generation’s stories are transmitted to later generations through stories, images, and writing. Generative AI offers a possibility to reverse-engineer this process, using historical images to generate new image of the past that did not hitherto exist. ‘The Electrician’ shows two women figures of the 1940s period. Who, what or where is the ‘electrician’ named in the image title? Is it one of these women?

One figure rests her chin on the back of the front figure, as though partly hiding, like a child might hide behind their mother, as though both a shield and something to rest her lips on. The two figures, although similar, look in different places as though in different spaces. One looks down, the other looks slightly upwards off-screen to our left. The intimate gesture of the hands, no matter how bizarrely they are figured (out of scale with her body) hint at an intimate proximity. The fractures in the image, seemingly ‘damaged’, give the picture a sense of being worn out. Yet there is something else in the looks of these two figures, their unhappy attributes, which no doubt belong to a value system we might describe as apprehensive, liminal, melancholic, longing, or even empty of hope. In the concept of ‘postmemory’ Marianne Hirsch attributes a sense of ‘melancholy’ to it: a ‘diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn.’³⁸ Eldgasen is not (as far as I am aware) in exile but the sensibility of intergenerational loss feels present, as he more-or-less indicates in the interview cited above: there is a gap between generations because ‘that generation in Germany, never talked about it.’

The image speculates on this history (1940s). Absence is turned into visual presence. The two feminine figures echo each other, a ghostly doubling where the proximity of the figures as characters generates an intellectual uncertainty. The white marks that overlay the picture are reminiscent of the strange marks of light found in spiritualist photographs of the early twentieth century photography, perhaps redolent of an absent force: a paternal figure. Is ‘*The Electrician*’ as invoked by the title given presence as an invisible force? What is made present and strange by the third hand in the foreground, touching her chest in the way a child’s hand might press on a mother’s body? Such speculations are surely the ambition of the image; its speculative function operates and is ‘activated’ by its latent historical sensibility, legible and manifest in the public dissemination of the image.



Fig. 7. Boris Eldgasen (co-created with DALL-E 2), ‘*The Electrician*’, from the series *Pseudomnesia*, 2022. (Courtesy of photo edition Berlin.)

Eldgasen labels his images as co-authored with DALL-E-2, the software he used to make them. But the invisible authors here are the multitude of photographers (of the old analogue photographs used by Eldgasen) and *Midjourney*, with its LAION datasets that form the source images. Eldgasen's image weaves the archives of historical images into a new phantasmatic image: an 'artificial memory', it generates a so-called 'false memory'. Freud called such images 'screen memories', a past that never existed in the form they are presented. The Gen AI image is not remembering, but a *re-membered* image. Assembled from multiple images, it is a bricolage of image parts that did not belong together until the image is generated.

In a second example, Ahn Jun's 2023 project *Until You Left off Dreaming About* is a book of 307 text generated images, produced in *Midjourney* and published as a book in Japan.³⁹ The text prompts are based on her imaginations/memories of a period 'before the advent of smartphones' as a South Korean student in Los Angeles, California, USA. The publishers book blurb introduces the project as follows:

Ahn Jun explores the boundaries between personal and shared experience. Based on memories of other people's stories, anecdotes and moments shared with her while living and studying in the United States in the early 2000s ... the artist used AI image generators – itself a form of dream-like imagination – to materialise the things and situations she had imagined in her mind.⁴⁰



Fig. 8. Ahn Jun, 'ahrvrgguh', 2023 (permission of the artist).

As a dedicated student (from South Korea) she did not travel around California at the time, nor took photographs of her experience at the time, but (with *Midjourney*) could use verbal and written interpersonal memories as prompts to develop an AI-generated ‘dream-like’ version of the Californian life she missed. Based on stories and anecdotes remembered from people she met at the time and told by them, the book constructs a reimagined visualization, a composite memory work.

I see both these projects (and many other bodies of work) as experiments with computers to generate a new field of memory-work. Like photo-therapy, developed long before the digital era, such projects ask the spectator to imagine another past, present or future. The ‘re-membling’ of archive images in GenAI processing uses latent datasets (historical images), activated by the users prompts to create figures and scenes that did not ‘exist’, yet here and now they do. Such a distinction between knowledge and belief, already familiar in the role of the dream-image in culture, is linked to human imagination and processes of fantasy, where the logic of past, present and future may be in temporal disjunction to the moment we live in. These projects suggest not only a new type of image practice concerned with memory-work but also present a new relation to the photographic archive where artificial memories, formed by cultural technologies like cinema and photography, are recycled, integrated and recombined, composited into new speculative forms of ‘subjective memory’. Every new practice entails risks, the attraction of nostalgia, the obliteration of history, but also the formation of new possibilities, new modes of temporality. If humans leave ‘photography’ behind (exit its logic) as one aspect of subjectivity, they encounter another: the machine-work images of algorithmic culture. In either practice it is what humans see that matters to social forms of existence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 14–15.
2. Ibid., 15.
3. The question of inscription is a long-standing issue in Derrida’s work. See for instance, his classic essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” 196–231.
4. Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, 16.
5. Freud, “Screen Memories,” 541–60.
6. See Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 15.
7. Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” 196–231.
8. Laplanche & Pontalis, “Memory-Trace,” 247–48. Derrida uses Freud’s essay “A Note on the Mystic Writing Pad” in his essay.
9. Stiegler, *Automatic Society*, 25.
10. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.
11. Burgin, “Photography, Fantasy, Function,” 198–208.

12. Somaini, "A Theory of Latent Spaces," 21–51.
13. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking*.
14. Most discussion of Francis Galton's composite photography work foreground a relation of composite photograph to eugenics. Notably, Allan Sekula's essay "The Body and the Archive" set the tone for this criticism. See Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 342–89.
15. Prodger, *Darwin's Camera*, 214–19.
16. See Prodger, *Darwin's Camera*, 214–19. A classic work of this kind is the *The Brown Sisters* series, a photograph taken every year since 1974 by the new topographics photographer Nicholas Nixon. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/03/magazine/01-brown-sisters-forty-years.html>.
17. Galton, "Composite Portraits," 97–100, cited in Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking*, 140.
18. The artist Nancy Burson (USA) has made a career since the 1980s of computer composites of political leader portraits, for example, combining their images in the ratio of nuclear arms held compared to one another. Recently she "morphed" together President Putin of Russia and President Trump of the United States into a morphing composite video and set of still images. The idea of photographic seriality (e.g. portraits by August Sander, etc.) might also be seen as another legacy of the statistical model of "samples" in photography.
19. Raymond Williams makes an important distinction between Charles Darwin and "Social Darwinism," which developed during the 1870s as a theory and metaphor for human struggle. See Williams, "Social Darwinism," 86–102.
20. Stigler, *The History of Statistics*, 161.
21. Malabou, *Morphing Intelligence*.
22. Epigenetics is the name given to study of the relations between genes. See Malabou, *Morphing Intelligence*, 59–61.
23. Malabou, *Morphing Intelligence*, 115.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 115–16.
26. See: <https://open-neuromorphic.org/blog/truenorth-deep-e-ibm-neuromorphic-chip-design/> [accessed 23 May 2025].
27. See note 23 above.
28. Ibid.
29. Carpo, *Beyond Digital*, 120.
30. It is probably no coincidence that morphing (GIFS) between animal species is a new trope in generative AI images.
31. See note 29 above.
32. See note 10 above.
33. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 219–20.
34. Like dream images, GenAI software has multiple sources or latent space. In the dream, the source is largely a mixture of sensory residues left over from the previous days (e.g. already formed personal memories, mental images, media images, experiences), somatic (bodily needs) and unconscious drives. The latent space of the computer operates with cultural data, metamorphic residues of meta-archives, which blend and merge "data" together.

35. Barthes "The Third Meaning."
36. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 62–3.
37. Interview with Boris Eldgasen by Parshall, "How This AI Image Won a Major Photography Competition," <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-my-ai-image-won-a-major-photography-competition/> [accessed September 2023].
38. Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 245.
39. Jun, *Until You Left Off Dreaming About*.
40. See: <https://www.shashasha.co/en/book/until-you-left-off-dreaming-about> [accessed September 2025].

Bibliography

- Burgin, V. "Photography, Fantasy, Function." In *Thinking Photography*, edited by V. Burgin, 198–308. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Carpo, M. *Beyond Digital: Design and Automation at the End of Modernity*. London: MIT, 2023.
- Derrida, J. "Freud and the Scene of Writing" In *Writing and Difference*, edited by Jacques Derrida, 196–231. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Derrida, J., and Gerhard Richter, ed. *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock, 1985.
- Freud, S. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980.
- Freud, S. "Screen Memories." In *The Penguin Freud Reader*, edited by Adam Phillips, 514–560. London: Penguin, 2006.
- Galton, F. "Composite Portraits," *Nature*, 18, (May 1873): 97–100.
- Hirsch, M. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. London: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Jun, A. *Until You Left Off Dreaming About*. Tokyo: Case Publishing, 2024.
- Laplanche, J., and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Hogarth, 1988.
- Malabou, C. *Morphing Intelligence: From IQ Measurement to Artificial Brains*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Parshall, A. "How This AI Image Won a Major Photography Competition." Interview with Boris Eldgasen, Scientific American. Accessed September 2023. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-my-ai-image-won-a-major-photography-competition/>.
- Porter, T. M. *The Rise of Statistical Thinking: 1820-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Prodger, P. *Darwin's Camera: Art and Photography in the Theory of Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Sekula, A. "The Body and the Archive." In *The Contest of Meaning*, edited by R. Bolton, 342–389. MIT, 1986.
- Somainsi, A. "A Theory of Latent Spaces." In *The World Through AI: Exploring Latent Spaces*, 21–51. Paris: JBE Books, 2025.
- Stiegler, B. *Automatic Society, Volume 1, the Future of Work*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

Stigler, S. M. *The History of Statistics: The Measurement of Uncertainty Before 1900*. London: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Williams, R. "Social Darwinism." *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, 86–102. London: Verso, 1980.

David Bate is Professor of Photography at the University of Westminster, London. His most recent book is *Photography After Postmodernism: Barthes, Stieglitz and the Art of Memory*, Routledge 2023. He has published extensively on photography and exhibited his own works, most recently the pandemic lockdown series *Mechanic Unconscious* and *SOT* (Singapore-on-Thames) on the 'reimagined' south London area of Battersea.
