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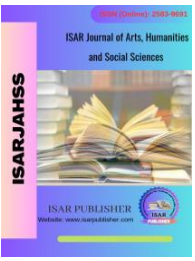

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Satirical Deepfakes, Surreal Dreamscapes & Nostalgic Pixels: The Rapid Evolution and Cultural Commentary of AI-Aesthetics

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Abstract: The rapid evolution of visual aesthetics driven by AI, shared globally through the internet and social media, has dramatically accelerated what once took centuries to develop. This article explores the unique visual tropes emerging from AI-generated content, characterized by surreal, uncanny, and often unsettling imagery. Examples range from the Dor Brothers' stylized narrative videos to horrifying depictions of transformations, such as people morphing into motorcycles. The article contextualizes this aesthetic within historical developments in creative experimentation, drawing parallels with David Bowie's unconventional approach to sound creation in the 1970s. It also considers how AI-driven art, free from copyright constraints in places like China, is expanding creative possibilities, challenging conventional media, and even fueling new forms of nostalgia. The mainstream adoption of AI aesthetics in pop culture, as seen in Kendrick Lamar's AI-generated music samples and the unsettling visual style of Secret Invasion, is contrasted with the deeper implications of AI as both a tool and a creative collaborator. With AI-generated content transitioning from raw, uncanny outputs to more refined, nostalgic forms, this article argues that AI aesthetics will continue to shape how we define creativity and artistic ownership, reflecting broader societal anxieties and shifting cultural norms.

Keywords: *AI aesthetics, surrealism, nostalgia, digital media, creative ownership*.

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1. Introduction

The concept of visual style and aesthetics has long been central to art theory, shaping how societies perceive and value creativity. Historically, aesthetics have evolved gradually, reflecting shifts in cultural, technological, and social landscapes (Cosgrove, 2017). As Gombrich (2023) relates, visual style, as defined in art theory, and to which refers to the distinctive qualities that make an artwork recognizable and meaningful within a specific context, often rooted in principles like form, color, composition, and texture. Over time, new artistic movements have emerged as responses to existing norms, challenging traditional boundaries and introducing novel forms of expression (Arnheim, 1954). From the focus of the renaissance on naturalism and symmetry to the disruptive abstraction of modernism, the evolution of visual style has been a gradual process, typically requiring decades or centuries to fully materialize (Elkins, 2003). Today, however, the advent of AI-driven creative tools and the rapid dissemination of digital content have accelerated this evolution, giving rise to a new visual aesthetic characterized by surreal, uncanny, and dreamlike qualities. Unlike past eras, where new styles often emerged from the hands of select *avant-garde* artists, AI-generated visuals are democratizing this process, allowing millions to participate in and shape the development of a distinct aesthetic within just a few years (Cetinic & She, 2022). Many have used these visuals to create entertaining or humorous content such as in **Figure 1**. Others have probed the surreal or nightmarish capabilities of these models as in **Figure 2**.

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Figure 1. Encik Tekateki, *1960s Art of Cow Getting Abducted by UFO in Midwest*, 2022 (Public Domain)

Figure 2. Anonymous, AI-Generated Horror, Stable Diffusion, 2023 (Public Domain)

In recent years, AI technology has introduced a unique visual language that blends the familiar with the surreal, leading to an aesthetic that often defies conventional understanding. This aesthetic is marked by distorted imagery, fluid transformations, and uncanny representations that reflect both the potential and limitations of machine-generated creativity. AI-generated visuals, such as those produced by platforms like Stable Diffusion, DALL-E 3, and MidJourney, are transforming how we conceptualize art. These models are typically trained on vast datasets containing millions of images and their associated captions, enabling them to learn correlations between visual elements and descriptive language. As a result, these AI tools can generate images based on textual prompts, allowing users to control artistic output with specific keywords and stylistic instructions (Zhuang & Tang, 2021).

Each of these art generators employs different techniques, but they commonly rely on deep learning methods, such as generative adversarial networks (GANs) or diffusion models, to produce highly realistic or abstract visuals. These models typically learn through a process of unsupervised learning, refining their outputs based on a large volume of data and user feedback. For instance, Stable Diffusion uses latent diffusion to produce detailed and stylized images, while DALL-E 3 focuses on generating creative, often surreal imagery that blurs the line between reality and fantasy. MidJourney, on the other hand, is known for its visually rich and painterly outputs, often catering to a more artistic or cinematic aesthetic (Lee, Park, & Hahn, 2023). The ability of these platforms to generate diverse and complex visuals with minimal input demonstrates the transformative role AI is playing in reshaping both the creation and perception of art.

Unlike traditional visual art forms, where stylistic coherence is achieved through the artist's intentional choices, AI-generated visuals often embody a tension between realism and the abstract as the algorithms attempt to replicate the complexities of human experience. This tension produces outputs that feel dreamlike or even unsettling, reminiscent of the "uncanny valley" phenomenon where the almost-human nature of AI creations evokes discomfort (Mori, 2012). The evolution of this aesthetic can be seen in a variety of digital content, from stylized videos like those of the Dor Brothers (https://www.thedorbrothers.com/) to AI-generated deepfakes and viral imagery on social media **(Figure 3)**. As AI technology continues to advance, its influence on visual aesthetics is expanding beyond niche communities and into mainstream media. This shift reflects broader cultural changes in how art is produced, consumed, and understood. The surreal visual language commonly associated with AI-generated imagery—marked by distortions, fluid transformations, and uncanny elements—has evolved to be a significant part of digital culture. Text-to-video AI generators, much like their text-to-image counterparts, play a critical role in this transformation.

Figure 3. The Dor Brothers, *The Hustle*, 2024 (Public Domain)

Platforms like Runway Gen-2, Pictory, and Pika have emerged as leading tools for text-to-video generation. These tools, similar to text-to-image generators like Stable Diffusion and MidJourney, rely on deep learning models to convert textual prompts into dynamic content. For example, Runway allows users to create videos from text descriptions, leveraging models designed to interpret text and generate matching visuals. Pictory specializes in turning blog posts and long-form content into engaging videos, while Pika offers unique styles such as 3D animations and

cinematic sequences (Guo, Shan, & Chung, 2024). These generators are built on sophisticated algorithms that analyze prompts, synthesize visuals, and often provide additional features like voiceovers and customizable scenes.

While text-to-image and text-to-video generators share similarities in their reliance on natural language processing and generative models, they differ in complexity and output. Video generators have to consider temporal coherence, motion, and narrative flow, which add layers of complexity beyond what's required for still images. However, both types of generators democratize creativity, enabling users to produce sophisticated content with minimal technical knowledge, whether it be static art or full-motion videos (Wong & Williams, 2024). This convergence of technology and creativity is transforming how visual narratives are crafted and shared, setting the stage for new artistic expressions that blend the familiar with the dreamlike and surreal. Yet, the speed at which content is distributed across social media platforms, the current style will rapidly evolve for both aesthetic and technological reasons (Mahoney & Tang, 2024). With this era being defined visually by this new AI-generated visual style, there will inevitably be an association of it with contemporary culture, which will lead to nostalgic yearning in the future (Becker & Trigg, 2024).

In fact, aesthetic nostalgia is a powerful force that shapes cultural preferences, particularly when it comes to visual media (Laks, 2023). This phenomenon is evident in the resurgence of 8-bit video game visuals **(Figure 4)** and the revival of PlayStation 1 (PS1) graphics, characterized by their blocky, polygonal style **(Figure 5)**. These nostalgic visuals evoke a longing not just for the imagery itself but for the period and experiences associated with them. Interestingly, this nostalgia is not limited to those who originally lived through the era. Younger generations, such as Gen Z, who did not experience these aesthetics firsthand, still express a fascination with retro visuals, as seen in the growing popularity of pixel art games and low-poly aesthetics in contemporary indie titles (Wulf et al., 2018). The revival of PS1 graphics, for example, has gained traction as part of a broader cultural wave that embraces the imperfections and limitations of early 3D rendering as a unique artistic style.

Figure 4. Ubuntu 23.10 with Minotaur 8-bit Wallpaper. (Public Domain)

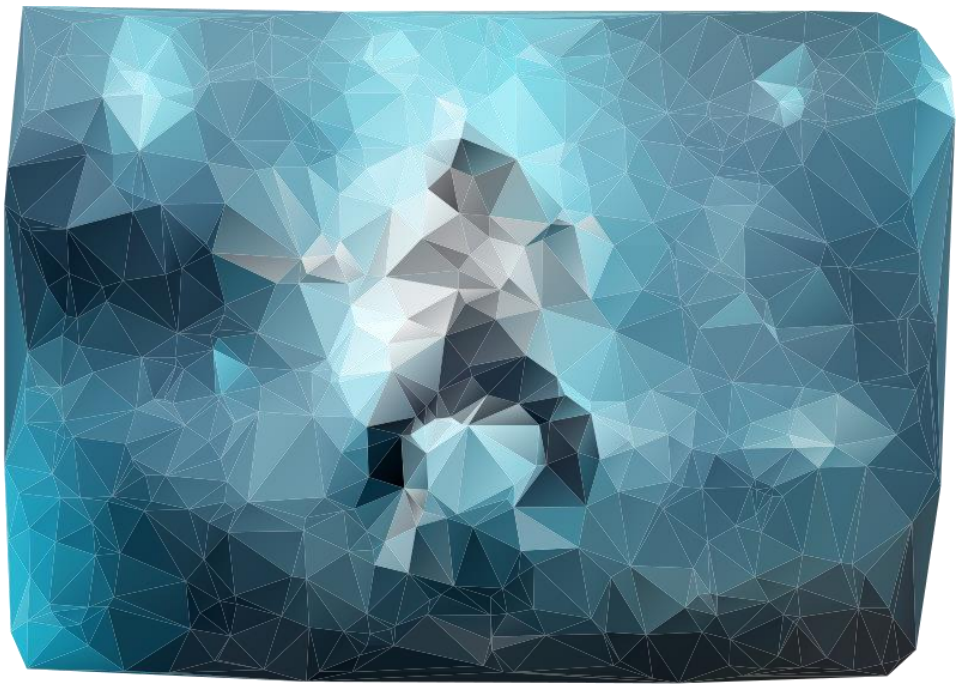
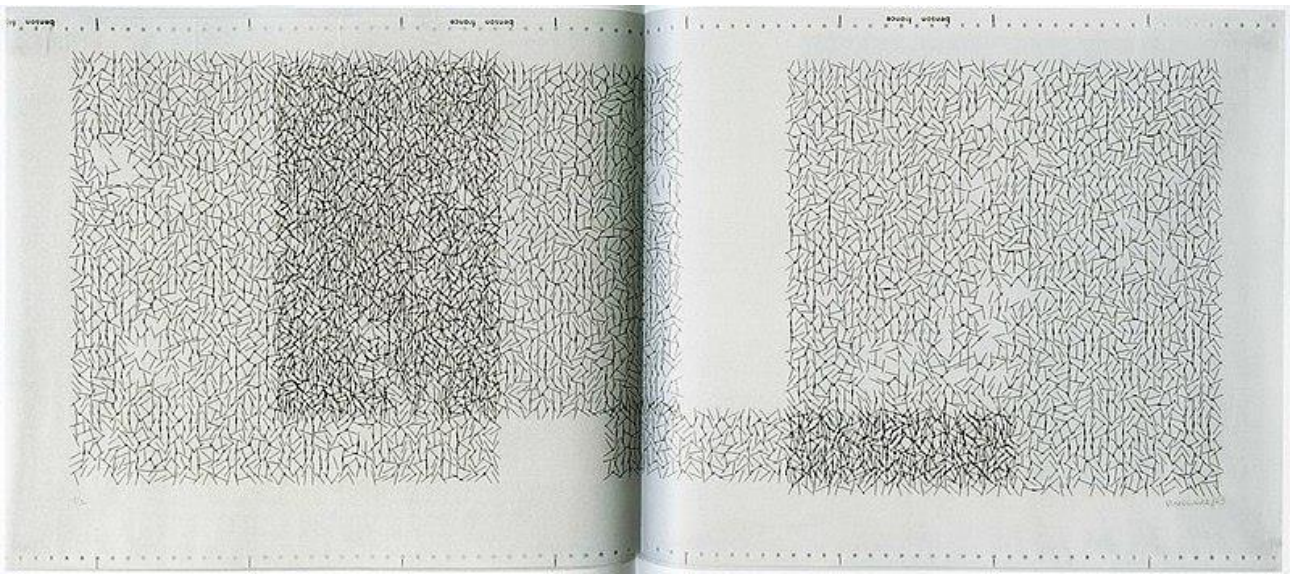


Figure 5. Polygonal Art, 2014 (CC Share Alike 3.0)

This pattern of nostalgia suggests that current AI-generated aesthetics, marked by surreal and uncanny imagery, may follow a similar trajectory. Just as computer generated imagery (CGI) and hyperrealistic video game graphics have evolved beyond the rudimentary visuals of earlier decades, the AI visuals of today—often criticized for their unnatural qualities—might soon be viewed through a nostalgic lens. In a decade, the peculiar aesthetics of early AI art may become as recognizable and iconic as the 8-bit graphics of the late 1980s became in the 1990s, when nostalgia for that era began to emerge. As technological advancements continue to refine visual effects and virtual environments, the rough, dreamlike qualities of current AI outputs could serve as markers of a specific time and place, triggering nostalgic memories and aesthetic appreciation in the future (Makai, 2018).

2. Historical Context: Diverging from the Rules

The emergence of CGI and digital art in the 1960s marked a significant departure from traditional artistic practices, signaling the beginning of a new era where technology and art intersected (Sun, 2023). The transformation was not entirely unprecedented, as earlier advancements like printmaking and photography had similarly revolutionized the art world (Hutson et al., 2023). However, the leap into digital art introduced unprecedented methods for creating and interacting with visual works, challenging long-established notions of what constituted art. Pioneers like Frieder Nake (1938-), Georg Nees (1926-2016), and Vera Molnar (1924-) were instrumental in this shift, using early computers to explore algorithmic and systematic approaches to artmaking. Nake's *Grid Picture* (1965) showcased the potential of computational structures in visual composition, while Nees' *Sine Curve Studies* (1969) employed mathematical formulas to create fluid, geometric shapes that highlighted the precision and elegance of digital algorithms. Molnar's work, such as *Interruptions à recouvrements* (1969) **(Figure 6)**, similarly fused artistic expression with mathematical rigor, producing intricate geometric abstractions that exemplified the emerging field of digital art (Baca, Helmreich, & Gill, 2019; Zweig, 2015).



Figurer 6. Vera Molnar, *Interruptions à recouvrements*, 1969. (Public Domain)

These early explorations laid the groundwork for the broader acceptance of digital art, as they demonstrated the creative possibilities inherent in computational processes. The introduction of software like Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator in the 1980s further accelerated this acceptance, offering artists new tools to manipulate and create digital images. Photoshop, first released in 1988, quickly became a cornerstone for digital artists, enabling seamless blending of images, textures, and effects that were previously unimaginable. Illustrator, introduced in 1987, revolutionized the creation of scalable vector-based graphics, allowing artists to work with unprecedented precision and flexibility across different mediums and sizes (Manovich, 2011). These advancements not only expanded the creative toolkit available to artists but also began to blur the lines between traditional and digital art forms. As digital tools became more accessible, a wider range of artists began to engage with these technologies, contributing to the growing legitimacy of digital art within the broader art world. This acceptance was further bolstered by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art, which began to recognize and exhibit digital artworks, solidifying the place of digital art in the evolving narrative of contemporary art (Morigi, 2004).

The natural progression of digital art can be found in the integration of AI into the field of art, which has introduced significant developments that challenge traditional methods and expand creative possibilities. The history of AI in art can be examined through several key stages, each reflecting a shift in how technology intersects with artistic expression. In the early stages, from the 1950s to the 1990s, significant progress was made in the development of generative models, which laid the groundwork for AI's role in creative fields (Hassine & Neeman, 2019). Hidden Markov Models (HMMs) and Gaussian Mixture Models (GMMs) emerged during this period and were primarily used for generating sequential data, paving the way for applications like speech recognition and handwriting synthesis (Marwala, Mahola, & Nelwamondo, 2006). These models were among the first to explore how AI could generate coherent sequences, an early step toward the generative capabilities that later transformed the visual and musical arts.

Building on these foundations, N-gram language modeling gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, advancing the ability of AI systems to generate sentences and sequences that reflected learned patterns. N-grams are sequences of words or characters that

frequently co-occur in a given language, allowing AI models to predict and generate text based on probabilities (Noguer i Alonso). These language models marked a critical step toward more sophisticated AI systems capable of generating coherent text, which in turn influenced later developments in visual and musical AI, where structured sequences and patterns became central to the creative process. Following this, the introduction of Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks in 1997 represented a major breakthrough in sequence prediction tasks. LSTMs were designed to address the challenge of capturing long-term dependencies in data, an essential capability for generating coherent and contextually appropriate outputs in tasks like machine translation and text generation (Egan et al., 2017). By enabling AI systems to learn and recall complex patterns over extended periods, LSTMs paved the way for more advanced generative models that could produce detailed and context-rich content across various creative domains, from text to visual art.

The impact of AI on visual arts became particularly significant in the 2000s and 2010s, introducing new techniques for image generation and manipulation. A key breakthrough occurred in 2014 with the development of generative adversarial networks (GANs), a model that revolutionized image creation by enabling the generation of realistic and high-quality visuals through the interplay between a generator and a discriminator (Goodfellow et al., 2014). GANs quickly became a powerful tool for artists, who began using them to push the boundaries of traditional artistic creation, resulting in works that ranged from hyperrealistic portraits to entirely novel forms. In the same year, variational autoencoders (VAEs) emerged as another important advancement in generative art. VAEs enabled the compression and decompression of data, allowing artists to explore different visual styles and generate new compositions by manipulating latent representations of images (Liang et al., 2018). The introduction of VAEs provided artists with a powerful method for experimenting with abstract and stylized forms, contributing to the growing intersection between AI and creative expression.

In 2016, StackGAN built upon these advancements by introducing a model that could generate high-resolution images from text descriptions, enabling artists to translate verbal ideas into detailed visuals with greater precision. Shortly thereafter, StyleNet emerged as a tool for generating captions for images and videos with varying styles, adding a new dimension to how visual and textual elements could be integrated in creative works (Zhang et al., 2017. These innovations marked the beginning of a new era where AI-driven models became central to artistic production, allowing artists to explore novel techniques and expand the boundaries of visual storytelling.

The last few years have seen the emergence of new generative tools that continue to redefine the creative landscape. Among these, MidJourney and Stable Diffusion have gained prominence for their ability to transform images and videos into various artistic styles through style transfer and controlled generative models. Meanwhile, DALL-E 2 has demonstrated the potential of language-guided image generation by creating high-quality visuals from textual prompts, allowing artists to explore imaginative compositions that blend reality and fantasy. Adobe's Firefly, a recent addition to the field, offers dynamic and interactive visual effects in real-time, enabling artists to experiment with AI-driven creativity in unprecedented ways. These tools illustrate the rapid evolution of AI in art, offering new opportunities for exploration and challenging traditional notions of artistic authorship and originality (Epstein & Hertzmann, 2023).

Several contemporary artists have embraced AI as a collaborator in their creative processes, resulting in works that explore the boundaries between human and machine-generated creativity. Memo Akten (1975-), a Turkish artist based in London, has used deep learning models to explore themes of consciousness and synthetic intelligences. His project *Distributed Consciousness* (2021) (https://www.memo.tv/works/distributed-consciousness/) simulates the cognition of an octopus, using AI to generate complex visualizations that reflect the diversity and complexity of non-human intelligences. Akten's work delves into the philosophical implications of AI-generated art, questioning what it means to be conscious and how machines can emulate or diverge from human understanding. Similarly, Sougwen Chung, a multidisciplinary artist, has pioneered the use of robotics in her artmaking. Her collaborative drawing robots, known as D.O.U.G. (Drawing Operations Unit: Generation_1) (https://sougwen.com/project/drawing-operations), are driven by AI and recurrent neural networks that learn to replicate her artistic style. Chung's performances and installations involve real-time interactions between her and the robots, blurring the lines between human and machine creativity. Her work challenges conventional ideas of authorship, raising questions about the evolving role of AI as a creative partner rather than a mere tool.

While some artists focus exclusively on cutting-edge technologies, others, like Linda Dounia, find innovative ways to blend traditional techniques with AI-generated content. Dounia's practice involves training GANs on her own analog works, resulting in art that merges human spontaneity with algorithmic precision. Her project *Dust is Hard to Breathe* (2022) (https://nft.artsy.net/artwork/linda-dounia/dust-is-hard-to-breathe/6/) explores themes of identity and resistance, highlighting the limitations and possibilities of AI as an artistic medium. By incorporating both human and machine-generated elements, Dounia's work exemplifies the potential for AI to enrich traditional forms of art, while the work of British media artist Jake Elwes (1993-) **(Figure 7)** highlights the ethical implications of AI, particularly concerning algorithmic biases. In *Zizi - Queering the Dataset* (2019), Elwes confronts the biases embedded in facial recognition datasets by inserting the faces of drag performers, thereby challenging the limited representation of marginalized communities in AI systems. His work exposes the potential dangers of biased AI models, advocating for more inclusive and representative training data. Elwes's approach not only critiques the current limitations of AI but also explores how technology can be harnessed to empower underrepresented groups and promote social equity.

Figure 7. Jake Elwes, *Zizi - Queering the Dataset,* film still, 2019 (CC- Share Alike 2.0)

The exploration of AI in fine art, as demonstrated by pioneering artists and technological advancements, has significantly expanded the boundaries of creativity. However, while these developments represent the cutting edge of fine art, the AI aesthetic has been most profoundly influenced and disseminated through social media platforms (Costa & Glück, 2021). This democratization of AI-generated art has allowed a wider audience to engage with and contribute to this evolving visual language, making it accessible far beyond traditional art spaces. As generative AI tools became widely available in 2022, the rapid adoption by everyday users has led to the emergence of new styles, trends, and applications that shape our digital culture. The next section will explore these recent innovations and examine how generative AI is reshaping visual aesthetics across mainstream and popular media.

3. The Emergence of AI Visual Aesthetics: From the Uncanny to the Horrifying

In the early stages of mass adoption of AI-generating tools, such as in spring and summer of 2022, noticeable flaws—such as distorted or extra fingers **(Figure 8)**, chaotic textures, and bizarre facial features **(Figure 9)**—highlighted the limitations of the technology . However, these imperfections have now become stylistic markers of an emerging visual language that is both surreal and unsettling. The rough, fever-dream quality of these early AI visuals, marked by their inability to fully grasp human anatomy or realistic textures, has given rise to a new form of art rooted in confusion and the uncanny. This artistic language draws parallels to earlier cultural phenomena, such as how early video game graphics transitioned from being seen as crude to becoming nostalgic retro symbols that evoke specific cultural moments. Current AI aesthetics, with their dreamlike distortions, may one day be viewed similarly as recognizable markers of this era (O'Meara & Murphy, 2023).

Figure 8. ***Human Hands*****, Stable Diffusion, 2022 (Public Domain)**

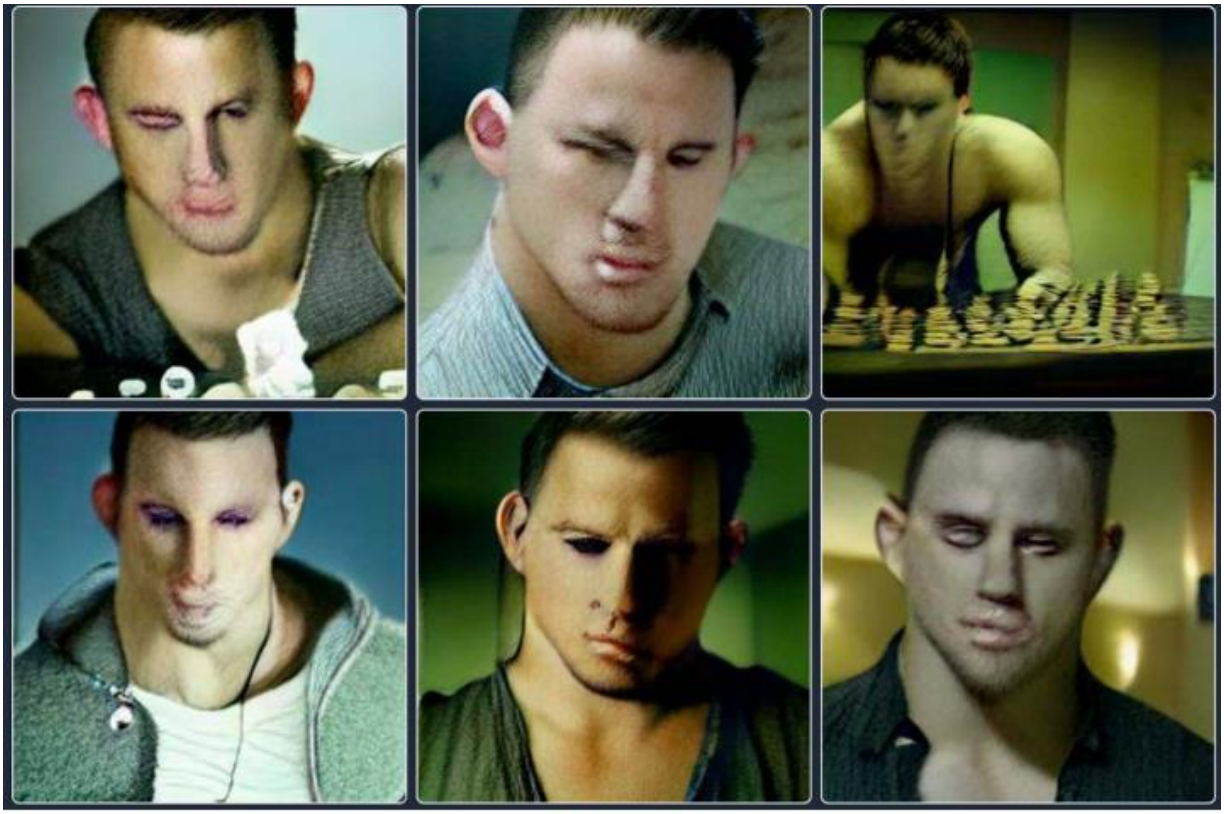


Figure 9. ***Checkers with Channing Tatum*****, DALLE Mini, 2022 (Public Domain)**

The often unsettling nature of AI art, often likened to fever dreams, stems from the struggle with the technology to replicate the nuances of human reality (Grba, 2022). As the technology attempts to mimic forms it cannot fully understand, it inadvertently produces results that feel both familiar and alien (Cassemere-Stanfield, 2023). The dynamic process has fueled the proliferation of AI-generated content across platforms like social media, especially Instagram, where users experiment with these tools to create visually arresting and often horrifying imagery (Hua et al., 2024). These creations resonate with surrealist traditions and tap into deeper cultural anxieties about the role of technology in creativity. Researchers have noted that this interplay between human input and machine output aligns AI-generated art with surrealist practices, where the unconscious and the bizarre take center stage (Rao et al., 2022). Moreover, this emerging aesthetic is not merely a product of AI's technical limitations but is increasingly embraced as a creative choice by artists and users alike. The visual style that once emerged from flawed algorithms is now deliberately cultivated, as seen in viral AI art such as DALL-E Mini creations, where distorted, almost grotesque depictions have become a genre of their own **(Figure 9)** (Liu, 2023).

AI-generated imagery often inhabits a surreal space, producing visuals that blend the familiar with the bizarre. Examples include videos of people morphing into motorcycles or scenes of flooded houses where walls collapse to reveal hidden spaces. Creative experimentation has long been a catalyst for aesthetic revolutions. David Bowie's approach to music in the 1970s, where he bypassed the manual for a keyboard and invented his own sounds by pure experimentation, serves as a precursor to the creative potential unlocked by AI (Smart, 2024). The difference now is that AI allows anyone to diverge from the "rules" and create highly stylized content at scale. The Dor Brothers' (https://www.thedorbrothers.com/) 2024 video, featuring stylized portrayals of famous figures robbing a grocery store, highlights how AI can now produce intricate narratives rather than just transactional content **(Figure 10)**. The Dor Brothers are recognized for their unique approach to AI-generated art, blending surreal and often unsettling imagery with pointed social and political commentary. One of their most notable works is a 2024 video that depicts famous public figures, including political leaders, engaging in absurd criminal activities like robbing a grocery store, only to be dramatically arrested. This stylized, narrative-driven approach contrasts with earlier AI-generated content, which was more transactional or purely experimental. Their work integrates elements of satire and critique, using the bizarre and exaggerated qualities of AI-generated visuals to explore themes related to power, corruption, and the absurdity of modern media narratives. According to Yonatan Dor, the vision behind their creative process is rooted in the belief that "comedians laugh about things we all don't like to talk about, and from their ideas, new concepts are born" (Hutson, 2024). This comedic and satirical lens is crucial for the Dor Brothers, who intentionally use humor as a vehicle for deeper societal critiques without crossing into fearmongering.

Their work demonstrates how AI can be both a creative tool and a means of highlighting the potential dangers of unchecked technological advancements. Dor mentioned that while many of their pieces may seem whimsical or exaggerated, they are designed to show "what could happen right now if it's in the wrong hands" (Hutson, 2024). The Dor Brothers have been key figures in the AI art community, leveraging tools like Stable Diffusion and MidJourney since 2022 to create highly polished, cinematic pieces. They have expanded the boundaries of AI aesthetics by embracing the surreal and chaotic transformations that have become hallmarks of the medium. Their videos do more than just entertain—they challenge viewers to think critically about the intersection of technology, culture, and politics in an increasingly AI-driven world.

Figure 10. The Dor Brothers, *The Hustle*, 2024 (Public Domain)

Other creators, such as Memo Akten's (1975-) work exemplifies this aesthetic, where the AI's attempts to replicate reality result in dream-like distortions. Memo Akten is a multidisciplinary artist whose work critically explores the intersection of AI, consciousness, and societal issues. His projects often utilize unsettling visual transformations and generative AI to reflect on deeper political themes. For instance, Akten's series *Learning to See* (2017-) (https://www.memo.tv/works/learning-to-see/) investigates how machine learning (ML) systems process and interpret visual information, revealing inherent biases within these systems. Akten uses these distortions as metaphors for cognitive and societal biases, reflecting how our understanding of reality is often filtered through our own limited perspectives. This concept resonates with political discourse, as Akten seeks to highlight how polarized societies increasingly view the world through narrow lenses that reinforce pre-existing beliefs.

Mario Klingemann (1970-), another pioneer in the field of AI art, known for his use of neural networks and algorithms creates thought-provoking pieces that explore the intersection of technology, creativity, and human perception. His work often delves into unsettling and surreal transformations, using these techniques to raise questions about authorship, bias, and the role of machines in creative processes. One of his most well-known works, *Memories of Passersby I* (2018), (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8ApauQwfUw) generates haunting portraits in real-time, highlighting the tension between traditional human-created art and machine-generated outputs. The portraits are intentionally imperfect, evoking a sense of both attraction and discomfort as they straddle the line between the recognizable and the uncanny. These works are also deeply engaged with political themes like The Dor Brothers, especially concerning the impact of AI on society and culture. He uses AI-generated imagery not just to explore creativity but to critique how algorithms can perpetuate biases and distortions. For example, in *Neural Decay*, Klingemann emphasizes the beauty found in decay and imperfection, a metaphor for the flaws and "glitches" inherent in AI's attempts to mimic human creativity (Sivertsen et al., 2024). This artistic exploration of machine error serves as a broader commentary on the limitations of AI systems and the socio-political implications of relying on these technologies. Through his work, Klingemann challenges viewers to reconsider the boundaries of art and the evolving relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence. His pieces not only push the limits of what AI can achieve but also provoke deeper reflections on how technology reshapes our cultural and political landscapes.

Other artists have used the tools to consider traditional artistic themes. For instance, Scott Eaton (1973-) is an American artist based in London who has gained recognition for his innovative use of artificial intelligence in exploring the human form. Eaton's work uniquely combines traditional art techniques, such as drawing and sculpture, with advanced AI tools that he has trained to function as his artistic "assistants." His exhibition *Artist+AI: Figures & Form in the Age of Intelligent Machines* **(Figure 11)** at Somerset House demonstrates this dynamic collaboration, where AI not only enhances but also transforms his artistic process. Eaton's AI models, trained on his own photography and figure drawings, allow him to produce both photorealistic and abstract representations that explore the tension between human creativity and ML. Eaton's work often engages with political and philosophical questions about the role of AI in society. For instance, in his piece *Humanity: Fall of the Damned*, Eaton reimagines Peter Paul Rubens' 1620 painting, infusing it with contemporary concerns such as the climate crisis and the rise of AI, both of which he sees as existential challenges driven by human action. This blend of traditional artistic themes with modern anxieties showcases Eaton's ability to use AI not just as a tool for aesthetic exploration, but also as a medium for commentary on pressing global issues (Soreanu, 2024).

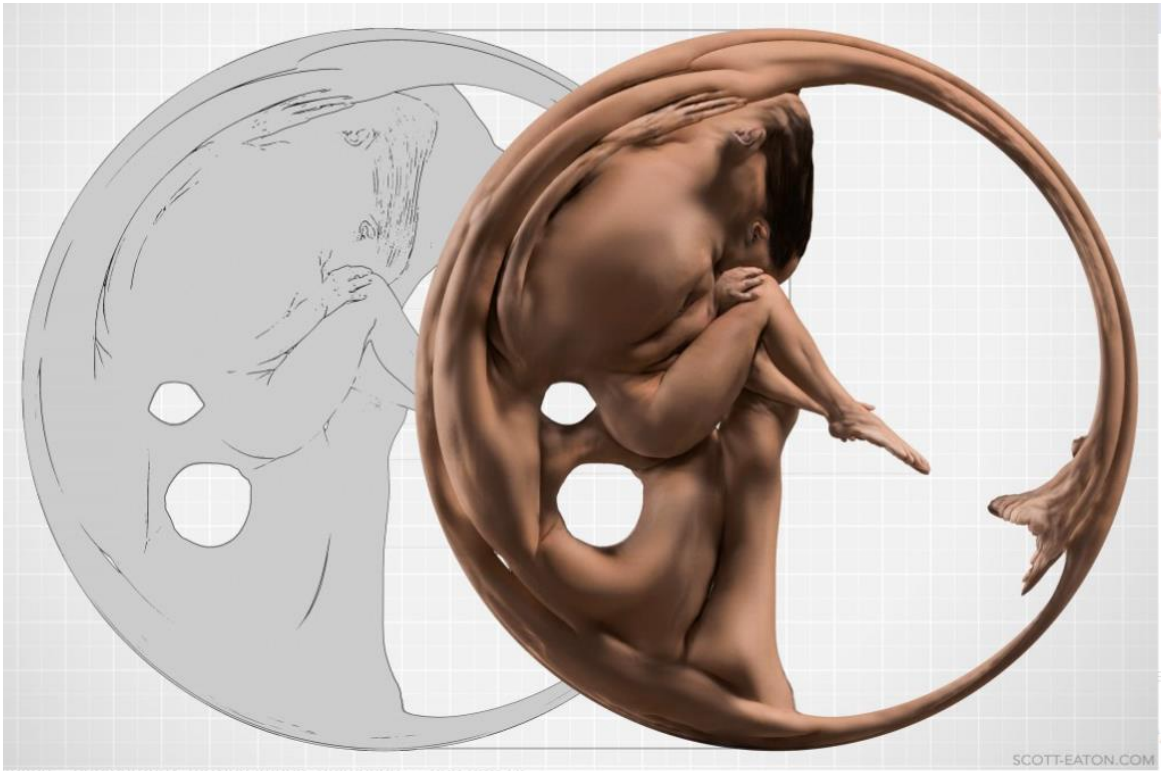


Figure 11. Scott Eaten, *Artist+AI: Figures & Form in the Age of Intelligent Machines,* 2019 Somerset House (CC 4.0)

4. AI as an Aesthetic and the Role of Nostalgia

Nostalgia has been a pervasive theme in visual art, influencing how artists evoke emotional connections to the past through various aesthetic elements. Research shows that nostalgia in visual arts often leverages familiar design elements, color palettes, and motifs that trigger a sense of longing for a bygone era. For example, black-and-white photography, even in contemporary settings, is used to create a sense of timelessness and historical authority, evoking memories and associations tied to earlier decades (Boyd & Gorman-Murray, 2022). Similarly, in television and film production, nostalgic aesthetics are often embedded in set designs, costumes, and props that reference mid-20th-century styles, fostering both a visual and emotional bridge between past and present. These visual markers of nostalgia are not merely regressive but engage in a dialogue with contemporary social and political issues by reinterpreting historical designs to resonate with modern audiences (Levine, 2021).

The role of nostalgia in art extends beyond mere aesthetic appeal—it serves critical psychological functions by providing a sense of continuity and meaning in life. Researchers argue that nostalgia connects the past to the present, creating a coherent narrative that helps individuals navigate existential threats and uncertainties. This function of nostalgia is particularly relevant in contemporary digital art forms, where retro styles like pixel art are not only visually pleasing but also imbued with symbolic significance. The resurgence of 8-bit graphics, for example, appeals to both those who experienced these visuals in their youth and younger audiences who seek an imagined connection to that era (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). As digital tools like AI continue to transform visual aesthetics, they similarly invoke nostalgia, even as they evolve into markers of their own time, much like early video game graphics that transitioned from crude to nostalgic.

Nostalgia for something experienced firsthand is a well-documented phenomenon, as it ties personal memories to specific aesthetics, cultural artifacts, or historical periods. This emotional connection often arises from formative experiences, leading individuals to seek out art, music, and media that remind them of their youth or evoke a sense of comfort and familiarity. However, an interesting aspect of nostalgia is the growing trend of longing for periods or styles that one never directly experienced. Research suggests that this phenomenon is particularly prominent in the digital age, where media-induced nostalgia allows younger generations to form attachments to past eras through the lens of retro aesthetics, even if they never lived through those periods themselves (Wulf et al., 2018). Video games, with their pixelated graphics and low-poly designs from earlier technological eras, serve as a prime example of how these stylistic elements are revived and reinterpreted, appealing to both those who originally experienced them and those who are drawn to them for their vintage appeal.

A study exploring player preferences for video game settings offers insights into this phenomenon of cross-generational nostalgia (Hutson, 2022). Participants were asked to rank their preferred game genres, with options including settings like Mystery, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and even games that evoke nostalgia for youth. Interestingly, despite differences in age and gender, Mystery and Fantasy settings consistently topped the list across all demographics, suggesting that certain narrative themes hold broad appeal. However, when preferences were broken down by age, a pattern emerged: older participants (45-64 years) showed a stronger preference for settings that mirrored historical periods they had lived through, such as the 20th century, while younger participants expressed a preference for settings in antiquity or imaginative worlds they had never experienced firsthand. This divergence highlights the dual nature of nostalgia—both as a longing for the familiar and as a romanticization of an idealized past that exists primarily through cultural representation (Makai, 2018).

As AI-generated visuals continue to evolve, they are not only shaping new aesthetics but also driving the resurgence of older styles, particularly among Gen Z and Gen Alpha. The revival of pixel graphics and crude 3D models from early video games, once considered outdated, is now seen as a deliberate aesthetic choice that evokes nostalgia. This trend is fascinating because it involves not just those who experienced these styles firsthand but also younger generations who are drawn to these cultural periods they never lived through. Gen Alpha, having grown up immersed in digital environments from birth, demonstrates an inherent adaptability to retro aesthetics, whether in pixelated games or in AI-generated imagery. The phenomenon of nostalgic appeal across generations suggests that as technology advances, even the current AI aesthetic, with its surreal distortions and uncanny qualities, could eventually become a marker of nostalgia in the future (Igaeva, 2023).

The cultural implications for future generations, particularly Gen Alpha, are significant as they engage with a blend of hypermodern and retro digital aesthetics. Studies indicate that while Gen Z is deeply influenced by new-age technologies like generative AI and virtual reality, they also exhibit a strong pull toward nostalgic elements in media and design, suggesting a complex relationship with both the past and the future (Ameen et al., 2023). This duality is likely to intensify with Gen Alpha, who may inherit both a fascination with futuristic, AI-driven content and a nostalgic longing for the retro aesthetics of earlier digital eras. As AI-produced content becomes more integrated into visual culture, the markers of today's AI aesthetics could soon be seen through a nostalgic lens, much like pixel art or 8-bit gaming has been for previous generations.

6. Conclusion: The Future of AI Aesthetics

The rapid evolution of AI-generated aesthetics marks a profound transformation in how visual culture is created, consumed, and understood. From its origins in flawed, uncanny visuals to its current embrace of surreal dreamscapes and satirical deep fakes, AI art embodies both technological innovation and cultural commentary. This article explored the historical development of AI in art, tracing its journey from early digital experiments to the blending of traditional creativity with machine-driven processes. Additionally, the role of nostalgia was examined as a driving force behind the resurgence of retro styles and the adoption of AI aesthetics by Gen Z and Gen Alpha—generations drawn to both the familiar and the fantastical.

The significance of this study lies in understanding how AI-generated visuals are rapidly becoming cultural markers, bridging the gap between past, present, and future. As AI matures, its aesthetic outputs will likely shift from the uncanny and surreal toward more integrated forms within mainstream media. Early examples like the opening sequence of Marvel's *Secret Invasion* (2023) or the AI-generated Kendrick Lamar album demonstrate

how AI can already blend seamlessly into conventional media (Fitzmaurice, 2024). However, the surreal and uncanny aspects of AI-generated content will continue to influence niche communities and underground art movements, ensuring that AI remains a vital force in the evolution of visual culture.

The continued intersection of AI, nostalgia, and creativity presents exciting possibilities for both artistic innovation and cultural reflection. As AI tools democratize artistic expression and allow for broader public engagement, these aesthetics will solidify as significant markers of our time. Understanding this dynamic is crucial, as AI-generated visuals are not only reflective of deeper societal anxieties but also pave the way for entirely new modes of artistic expression. This article situates AI aesthetics as a rapidly evolving cultural phenomenon, highlighting its critical role in shaping the future of art and visual culture while echoing the past in unexpected ways.

Data Availability

Data available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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