

Artificial intelligence and image politics: memory, erasures, and dissidences

Inteligência artificial e política das imagens: memória, apagamentos e dissidências

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This paper analyzes the radical transformation of the visual regime brought about by generative artificial intelligence, characterizing it as a shift from photographic representation to statistical simulation. It argues that AI systems, by training on biased datasets, perpetuate a “machinic eugenics of the gaze” that reinforces racism, ageism, and gender norms. The concept of “latent space” is explored not merely as a technical domain, but as a site of tension between algorithmic erasure and the potential for dissident visualities. Through the discussion of the author’s artistic research projects (specifically *Botannica Tirannica* and *Poisonous, Noxious and Suspicious*) and the case studies of Maria Bandeira and Luzia Pinta, the text demonstrates how AI can be used to fabulate archives for historically silenced narratives. Finally, it proposes a perspective rooted in the Global South that views technology as a tool for critical imagination and the activation of potential histories.

IA generativa,
inteligência artificial,
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espaço latente,
história potencial

*Este artigo analisa a transformação radical do regime visual provocado pela inteligência artificial generativa, caracterizando-o como uma transição da representação fotográfica para a simulação estatística. Argumenta-se que os sistemas de IA, ao serem treinados com conjuntos de dados enviesados, perpetuam uma “eugenia maquinaica do olhar”, que reforça o racismo, o etarismo e normas de gênero. O conceito de “espaço latente” é explorado não apenas como um domínio técnico, mas como um campo de tensão entre o apagamento algorítmico e o potencial de visualidades dissidentes. Por meio da discussão de projetos de pesquisa artística da autora (especificamente *Botannica Tirannica* e *Venenosas, Nocivas e Suspeitas*) e de estudos de caso de Maria Bandeira e Luzia Pinta, o texto demonstra como a IA pode ser utilizada para fabular arquivos voltados a narrativas historicamente silenciadas. Por fim, propõe-se uma perspectiva enraizada no Sul Global que compreende a tecnologia como ferramenta de imaginação crítica e de ativação de histórias potenciais.*

1 From the photographic tsunami to AI statistical paintings

Since the advent of photography, the universe of images has not undergone a transformation process as radical as that of our time. Images have ceased to be merely representations to become the primary interface of daily mediation:

they occupy our communication, traverse affective relationships, organize the infrastructure of cities, and structure surveillance aesthetics and body scanning systems in urban space. As discussed in depth in another publication (Beiguelman, 2021), when speaking of image politics, I argue that nowadays images are not merely supports for the transmission of ideas and languages; they constitute the very field of tension and political dispute of the present.

A quick numerical contrast helps to dimension the scale of the ongoing change. In 1999, it is estimated that 80 billion photographs were captured, which would equal 219 million photos per day (Lyman & Varian, 2000). Less than two decades later, in 2017, a growth of 1525% in the number of photographs produced was recorded: 1.3 trillion (Dunleavy, 2022). What explains this increase is a triad of factors: the consolidation of social networks, the popularization of camera phones (currently concentrating 94% of image production), and the dissemination of WhatsApp usage, from which, in 2024, it was projected that 6.9 billion images circulated per day (Broz, 2025).

Since 2022, however, we have entered a new visual regime, marked by the public opening of generative artificial intelligence platforms for creating images from text. Recent surveys point to a daily average of about 34 million images created with generative AI systems in 2023 (Everyapixel, 2023). Although any extrapolation should be treated with caution, this pace suggests an annual production in the order of 12 billion images. Even under conservative assumptions of moderate growth, this figure would plausibly rise to between 18 and 20 billion images per year by 2025. These numbers should be understood not as forecasts, but as indicative measures of scale.

This scale is as overwhelming as the type of operation involved in its creation processes. This imagnetic tsunami brings a particularity that transcends the question of quantity. The images we speak of are made to circulate, not necessarily to be looked at. They live less as objects of contemplation than as units of informational transit, currencies of affective exchange, or markers of presence in sociotechnical networks.

Still, from a qualitative point of view, it is necessary to ponder that images created with artificial intelligence mark a radical displacement in relation to traditional technical images, such as photography, cinema, video, and even the classic computerized image. Flusser (2008, 2013) called these images technical because they were all traversed by programs that submit the apparatuses to their rules. However, in all these cases, even if the program (industrial or electronic) imposes itself, a material ballast remains: the light impressed on the film, the electromagnetic record on the sensor, the data modeling that refers to explicit calculation processes. Generative images, on the other hand, operate by simulation. Put another way: if photography, even when manipulated, preserves something of the “this has been,” as Barthes defined it (1984, p. 115), the AI image works with a “this could be” or “this looks like.”

Often there is not even an external reference, as artificial intelligence images are always the result of statistical operations on massive databases, calculation regimes that extract patterns, combine recurring characteristics, and discard dissonances. By “framing” the world as statistical probability, AI platforms tend, thus, to result in “mean images” (Steyerl, 2025 p. 84–101)

that learn regularities from the training set and, despite producing visually plausible samples, are marked by the recurrence of relatively prototypical visual “types” (Arora & Zhang, 2017).

It is important to emphasize that technologies do not emerge in an epistemological vacuum. On the contrary, they are socially engendered and, in the case of artificial intelligence, update ancient policies of exclusion and oppression, in a wide arc ranging from racism to gender, passing through ageism and ableism, in the form of data colonialism. This notion assumes, as argued by Couldry and Mejiías (2019), that “the social relations embodied in data are part of a broader colonial (and not merely capitalist) legacy” (p. 84), wherein “the colony is not a geographic location but an ‘enhanced reality’ in which we conduct our social interactions under conditions of continuous data extraction” (p. 85).

Performing power dynamics, these relations do not replace traditional forms of expropriation and include mechanisms of social invisibilities through standardization processes in a new form of eugenics, which I term “machinic eugenics of the gaze”. This machinic eugenics operates through the massive capture of data from entire populations to feed systems that classify, select, and hierarchize people, in diverse social processes ranging from job interviews to access to the healthcare system, according to algorithmic criteria that deepen exclusions and asymmetries (Buolamwini, 2017; Owens & Walker, 2020).

This way of seeing the world refers, in the field of a genealogy of the contemporary gaze, to the experiments of Francis Galton, the father of eugenics. To define supposed “types,” such as the “Jewish type” (Figure 1), the “criminal type,” the “psychiatric hospital patient type,” Galton developed,



Figure 1 Composite Portrait of the “Jewish Type” by Francis Galton c. 1877–c.1890. (Wellcome Collection).

in the 19th century, composite portraits, which he called “statistical paintings” (Galton, 1879).

To do so, he superimposed various photographs, erasing individual differences, aiming to arrive at a generic physiognomy, a synthetic face from which racial and moral hierarchies were constructed. In the field of the history of photography, Galton’s method, although it gave rise to a creation format, can be understood as science fiction that never came to fruition. Today, however, generative models like GANs (Generative Adversary Networks) perform operations similar to those rehearsed by the British scientist in the 19th century, updated within the scope of data colonialism and foreshadowing a machinic eugenics of the gaze.

So-called beauty fictions now operate as central components of a eugenic dynamic, particularly within interactions mediated by platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Presented as accessible filters and editing tools, these features enable the modification of appearance and function as mechanisms through which users are aligned with specific aesthetic norms that are actively promoted and monetized by digital platforms themselves.

Popular “beautification” applications provide tools designed to lighten skin tone, accentuate attributes associated with traditional gender roles – such as long eyelashes for women or pronounced jawlines for men – and attenuate visible signs of aging. Beyond their documented association with feelings of inadequacy and reduced self-esteem, particularly among younger users (Chaderjian, 2022; Rowland, 2022), these systems embed eugenic assumptions that warrant critical scrutiny.

There is a clear convergence between these normative aesthetic frameworks and ideals that privilege whiteness, thinness, and youth, especially in relation to women’s bodies (Gehl et al., 2017). While this cosmetic gaze no longer takes the explicit form of historical racial hygiene policies, nor can it be attributed exclusively to social media platforms, it nonetheless reflects the ongoing reconfiguration of oppressive cultural regimes that have long targeted women (Wegenstein, 2012, p. 151).

The frequently invoked claim that eugenics effectively ended after the Second World War is, in this context, untenable. Rather than disappearing, eugenic logic has been rearticulated in contemporary forms described by Robert A. Wilson as newgenics, in which eugenic reasoning is reframed through biomedical and technological discourses. Bodies deemed to fall outside normative parameters are no longer designated as degenerate or unfit; instead, they are categorized as less healthy or as exhibiting medical irregularities or anomalies. Consequently, they are subjected not to overt state-mandated practices such as euthanasia or sterilization, but to procedures including prenatal screening and selective abortion, framed as matters of individual reproductive choice (Wilson, 2017, p. 176).

This rearticulation sustains the myth of the norm, now intensified by the widespread deployment of artificial intelligence technologies. The notion of a standard, an essential prerequisite for any definition of normality, occupies a central position within machine learning systems. From a biopolitical perspective, the coupling of norm and standard allows contemporary AI-based image processing to be situated within a broader constellation of

social and political forces, in which the emergence of a machine-mediated eugenics of the gaze becomes conceivable.

Although artificial intelligence does not exert direct control over human vision in the sense of physically compelling attention, techniques of computer vision nonetheless shape what becomes visible and invisible. In doing so, they influence regimes of attention and contribute to the differential construction of the visuality of particular bodies and subjects within digital environments.

It is not, therefore, merely about programmer biases, as is commonly argued by relating it to the dominance of white programmers in AI modeling. It is, above all, about profound asymmetries in the formation of datasets where young faces, white individuals, males, and those from hegemonic centers prevail; scarcity of images of people non-conforming to gender normativity; underrepresentation of entire regions of the planet, among other vectors that explain the social production of biased data (Zou & Schiebinger, 2018).

Artificial intelligence models learn from these distortions and return the world in the form of an unequal statistical mirror. No less relevant in the social production of biased data are the labor systems used in the initial labeling of images that will feed the training of an AI model and the elements that a computer vision model privileges and disregards in its scans of the latent space (Crawford & Paglen, 2021; Moreschi, 2023).

2 The latent space as a crossroads between erasure and dissidence

Although it remains imperceptible to human vision, the production of generative images in contemporary artificial intelligence systems takes place within what is known as the latent space. This invisible and multidimensional domain constitutes the terrain in which AI models organize statistical and semantic relations prior to the emergence of any visible form.

Within latent space, images do not exist as figures, but as probability distributions structured through learned correlations. In “classical” generative adversarial networks, such as StyleGAN, this structure is made explicit: each point in the latent vector corresponds to a possible image, and movement within this space results in gradual variations in color, form, and identity (Karras et al., 2019).

In diffusion-based systems and multimodal architectures guided by large language models (LLMs), latent space also functions as a site of translation between modalities. Textual prompts are converted into vectors that project into this abstract domain, where relations between language and image are articulated prior to their materialization as pixels.

In this sense, AI systems “navigate” an informational space, combining and interpolating features internal to image datasets in order to generate new images from the visual material on which they were trained. Interpolation can thus be understood as the operative locus of the latent image.

To interpolate is to produce something new between two known points, to populate a path with intermediate states through a process of

internal transition. Latent spaces may therefore be conceived as spaces of transformation, in which one medium continuously metamorphoses into another from within a vast numerical matrix (Somaini, 2025, p. 37).

From this perspective, every AI-generated image functions as a repository of becomings or an archive of potential visualities embedded within other images. This condition situates contemporary image production within a new configuration of politics of the image, marked by a persistent tension between machine-based eugenic logics and the image as potential.

Although generative images are technically produced as new data derived from existing data, they are grounded in image corpora created within specific social and historical contexts. As such, AI-generated images must be understood as cultural and philosophical phenomena, in which latent space resonates with the ghosts, desires, and repetitions of historical visual cultures (Zylinska, 2020, p. 73–81).

From a different theoretical trajectory, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019) argues that if official history operates as an imperial and expropriative project, it becomes necessary to activate what she calls potential history: a field of unrealized possibilities, silenced events, and images that might have been read otherwise. This notion of potentiality offers a productive lens through which to rethink latent space not merely as a technical structure, but as a political and epistemic one.

The concept of latent space also finds resonance in Georges Didi-Huberman's image theory, particularly in his engagement with Aby Warburg's anthropological approach to images. Here, the potentiality of images is linked to a polychronous temporality, characterized by "long durations and temporal fissures, latencies and symptoms, fleeting memories and resurgent memories, anachronisms and critical thresholds" that activate residues of image survival in specific contexts (Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 51–52).

It is within this zone of latency and potentiality that one may begin to imagine what could be described as deviant natures or forms of intelligence other than the human and to open representational possibilities capable of fabulating archives that do not yet exist for historically silenced narratives.

My first critical gesture in the face of this scenario was the series *Flora Rebellis* (Figure 2), part of the project *Botannica Tirannica* (2022), in which I directly explored the latent space in the development of the work. In this work, I used machine learning techniques to generate beings that escaped traditional classification categories (animal, vegetable, mineral, fungal).



Figure 2 *Flora Rebellis*, machine learning screenshots. G. Beiguelman, 2021.

The database was composed of plants with racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and antisemitic names. The method consisted of interrupting the training of the algorithms at the moment they began to delineate recognizable forms. I sought to remain in the zone of instability, in the ambiguity of this abstract repository of visual possibilities that algorithms build from the patterns of the images used in training.

StyleGANs architectures generate unprecedented images, interpolating characteristics of the data from a potentially infinite territory of combinations, echoing Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of latency, for whom images carry an archive of absences and possibilities awaiting the moment to emerge. At the same time, this notion approaches Joanna Zylińska's idea of potential images, as well as Ariella Azoulay's potential history, which proposes reactivating silenced events and unrealized narratives. From this point of view, in *Flora Rebellis*, the resulting images are not merely technical creations, but materializations of historical ghosts associated with the colonial violence inscribed in botanical nomenclature, and a way of fabulating beings that challenge naturalized taxonomies.

This reading key was deepened in the project *Venenosas, Nocivas e Suspeitas (Poisonous, Noxious, and Suspicious)* (2024), inspired by plants historically stigmatized, banned, and prohibited (Figure 3). I privileged in my research those that had a strong relationship with women, whether due to their aphrodisiac, abortive properties, and care related to breastfeeding or menstruation; or for their ritual use or direct association with women, such as belladonna, carnivorous plants, and jurema (*Mimosa tenuiflora*).

The title refers to a Victorian manual by Anne Pratt (1857) intended to teach mothers to protect their children from nature, denouncing how much fear and the criminalization of these plants are rooted in colonial



Figure 3 *Poisonous, noxious and suspicious* by Giselle Beiguelman. Installation view at Margs (Museu de Arte do Rio Grande do Sul). Photo: Luciano Spinelli. 2025.

perspectives. In the installation, the plants appear as protagonists of a dissident archive, in which what was classified as “poisonous” or “suspicious” is reappropriated as a source of knowledge and dissident experiences.

In addition to living plants, which make up the work *Quintal das plantas que se bifurcam* (*Yard of forking plants*), the installation also includes prints of fictitious plants (*Plantas fabuladas / Fabulated plants*) and videos (*Plantação de memórias / Cultivation of memories*). Completing the set is a gallery of imaginary portraits of women artists and scientists who dedicated themselves to botany and who were erased from the history of art and science. Using different text-to-image AI models, I represented each of them in symbiosis with the plants they dedicated themselves to, and at the age they passed away. It was not only about paying homage to them, but also about recovering silenced memories, returning to these women a visual presence that official archives denied them.

2.1 The case of Maria Bandeira: ageism, gender, and data geopolitics

No story mobilized me as much as that of Maria Bandeira (Rio de Janeiro, 1902–1992), the first female botanist at the Rio de Janeiro Botanical Garden and a specialist in bryophytes. In the 1920s, she collected and identified more than 500 specimens of plants, fungi, and lichens. However, she never published the results, and therefore, her authorship was erased from scientific records, occupied by men. Bandeira explored areas of difficult access, corresponded with international researchers, and even studied at the Sorbonne. She had a promising scientific career before her when she decided to join the Order of Discalced Carmelites, going to live in total enclosure in a convent in Santa Teresa, Rio de Janeiro (Bediaga et al., 2016).

The literature suggests family and affective reasons for this decision: grief over her parents’ death and a dispute with her brother, or the loss of a key scientific interlocutor. I allow myself to imagine other narratives as well: a brother who might have confined her out of jealousy of her success, an intellectual and perhaps romantic love for Viktor Ferdinand Brotherus, a central reference in her research, whose death she might not have borne.

In attempting to create, with AI, a portrait of Maria Bandeira at age 90, I was confronted frontally with the machinic eugenics of the gaze. The datasets that train these tools contain practically no images of Brazilian female scientists from the early 20th century, much less elderly women. The absence of photographic records and of her professional performance aggravates this gap.

Add to this the fact that we live in a sexist and ageist world, in which aging female faces are systematically erased from visual culture. I started from a rare photo in which Maria appears outdoors, in the Botanical Garden, the only woman among several men. I digitally erased the colleagues, colorized the image (Figure 4), and offered it to AI platforms (at that time, notably Runway) as a reference, asking for a portrait in which she would appear haughty, working among her plants.



Figure 4 Maria Bandeira at the Botanic Garden of Rio de Janeiro (Left). Museu do Meio Ambiente do Rio de Janeiro. (Right) Colorized and edited version by the author.

The first results revealed new biases (Figure 5). When I mentioned that she was a Brazilian personality, the AI platform depicted her as a homeless Black woman, very frail and haggard, a highly stereotypical and racist vision. When I insisted that she was white, gerontophobic images of decrepit old age appeared, in line with what Susan Sontag (1972) and other authors have denounced as the double standard of aging.



Figure 5 Development of Maria Bandeira's portrait on platforms based on Natural Language models (Runway). Giselle Beiguelman, 2024.

When I included the requirement of haughtiness in the prompt, the platform began to return plasticized figures, as if she had stepped straight out of *The Waltons*, a 1970s American TV series. It took two months of experiments to arrive at a portrait that seemed dignified to me (Figure 6): an aged woman with her chin up, surrounded by the bryophytes she studied, with a shy smile resembling the photo of her youth I worked with (Figure 4). The process evidenced, in a striking way, how differences of gender, geopolitics, and age intertwine in the data asymmetries that feed generative AI platforms for creating images.



Figure 6 Portrait of Maria Bandeira, at age 90, created with artificial intelligence (Runway) from archival images of the young scientist. Giselle Beiguelman, 2024.

2.2 Luzia Pinta and the writing of images by natural language

Another central character in this journey is Luzia Pinta (Angola, c. 1700 – date of death unknown). Enslaved as a child, she bought her manumission and lived in Sabará, Minas Gerais. She participated in *calundus*, collective rituals of Central African origin with divinatory and therapeutic functions. In these ceremonies, few people connected with ancestral spirits to channel their energies; Luzia was one of them.

Luzia had a reputation for curing body and soul. She smelled the sick to diagnose their ailments and prepared remedies with flour and roots of *pau-santo* (*Bursera graveolens*) and *abútua* (*Chondrodendron platyphyllum*), two important ritual plants in African matrix religions. Denounced to the Inquisition for “diabolical rites,” she was sent to Lisbon in 1742. She remained there for two years in captivity, suffering torture, until being condemned to exile in the Algarve, where she died without it being known when or how.

To create her portrait, I resorted to AI platforms based on natural language (systems that generate images from textual descriptions, like Runway, DALL·E – still active by that time – and Sora). The prompts were elaborated based on excerpts from her inquisitorial process, from the studies of Laura de Mello e Souza (1986), Luiz Mott (2011), and Alexandre Marcussi (2015). I did not use any imagetic reference, as they were nonexistent, apart from a painting by the Brazilian artist Alberto da Veiga Guignard.

It was also an opportunity to write an image that would emerge essentially from texts. Writing images is something very different from describing them. To describe implies translating a pre-existing visual reality into words, whereas writing an image in the context of generative AI means using language as a generative code. Although Natural Language Models (LLMs) entail the loss of the visualization of latent space and the monitoring of machine learning (which was still possible when I created *Botannica Tirannica*, in 2022) it opens the possibility of an intersemiotic work, an act of conjuring the visual from the textual, forcing the latent space to materialize a presence that history has erased, rather than merely representing what is already visible.

What I sought was a haughty figure, excavated from the data ghosts accumulated in the AI model, and not a literal illustration of the archive, but one that, like the other women in the series, carried the marks of the suffering imposed by colonial and patriarchal violence. The first results, however, revealed a disturbing pattern. Initially, white women in 18th-century postcard costumes appeared. Then, the machine offered successive figures of young Black women, stylized in the manner of runway models, always beautiful and sexualized, in poses that evoked Instagram influencers, smiling despite the suggested contexts of slavery, torture and that she was in her 40s by the she died.

Although the prompts specified she was over 40 years old, the initial results – as seen in Figure 7 – depicted very young figures, completely disconnected from the reality of a woman who had survived such intense violence. When I reinforced the age requirement to correct this, the system swung to the opposite extreme: sad, bent, and withered characters appeared,



Figure 7 Development of Luzia Pinta’s speculative portrait on platforms based on Natural Language models (DALL·E, ChatGPT and Sora). Giselle Beiguelman, 2025.

as if old age were necessarily a defeat for life. It took months of negotiations with OpenAI algorithms (DALL·E, ChatGPT and Sora), reformulating prompts, adjusting details, rejecting outputs, until arriving at an image that I consider worthy of Luzia Pinta (Figure 8): a mature, marked by her historical experience, but haughty face; a plant-woman who carries, in the very configuration of her body, the healing power of her knowledge. In the figure of Luzia, I tried to symbolically honor all the witch-women persecuted by inquisitorial regimes and their contemporary continuities.

3 Deviant images and the decolonization of the gaze

The investigative trajectory exposed here, culminating in the restored figures of Maria Bandeira and Luzia Pinta, reveals that contemporary disputes over image politics take place in the tension between algorithmic standardization and dissident narratives. Artificial intelligence devices are not neutral tools, but power infrastructures that mobilize genealogies of colonialist systems, tending toward a new form of eugenics: a “machinic eugenics of the gaze.” If, in the past, taxonomy and classification served to hierarchize lives and justify colonial domination, today these models update this violence through predictive systems and exclusionary datasets, reducing the world to a statistical mirror of inequalities where underrepresented social groups and bodies are converted into anomalies or rendered invisible.

However, accepting the technocentric horizon as an inevitable AI condition would be a defeat of critical imagination. The counterpoint to this premise requires the transformation of “latent space” from a site of reproducing statistical means into an archive of potentials and “becomings,” exploring its non-hegemonic paths. In this sense, algorithmic fabulation operates not as a denial of documentary reality, but as an activation of the “potential history” proposed by Azoulay: an exercise of filling the gaps of the official archive with the haughtiness and presence that were denied to figures like Maria Bandeira and Luzia Pinta.

Michel Foucault (1992, p. 13) reminds us that the human is a recent invention, a figure not two centuries old, and one that will disappear when our knowledge finds another form. Ailton Krenak (2023, p. 96), in turn,

insists that “the future does not exist, we only imagine it.” Between these two affirmations, I situate my research with artificial intelligence, archives, and colonial botany as an exercise of critical imagination, in which technology appears as one strategy for repopulating the imaginary with other stories, other bodies, and other possible futures, in a politics of deviant images that refuses to accept the inevitable horizon of technocentric “progress.”



Figure 8 Portrait of Luzia Pinta, at age 40, created with artificial intelligence (Sora) from information collected in texts by Alexandre Almeida Marcussi, Laura de Mello e Souza, Luiz Mott, Mary Del Priore, and an imaginary portrait of Luzia Pinta made by Alberto da Veiga Guignard. Giselle Beiguelman, 2025.

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