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“Images in the most tangled of dreams”: The cultural relations of AI slop through Walter Benjamin

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But nothing could assuage the unconscious fury of our new and tragic understanding, our sense of having been cheated, our fear, for, however we looked for it, we could not find a fit object for our disgust and despair, and so we attacked everything in our way with an equal and infinite passion.

- László Krasznahorkai

As the disaffected and the small-time saboteurs gain consciousness of their alienation, they are faced with the choice of accepting the spectacular totality, or completely rejecting it. Or, as a 1990s fly poster says to a kid sitting in the middle of a wasteland: 'Have you ever considered a career in total revolution?'

- Sadie Plant

Gleefully watching the system crash; No matter, though, they easily reboot it; Back of the napkin math, looking stupid; "Alas," all I said when I seen how they plan to use it; Thou shall not make a machine in the likeness of a human.

- billy woods

Preface and Acknowledgments

This thesis examines the phenomena of AI slop as a cultural artefact holding distinct aesthetic, political, and historical relations. I take interest in new forms of waste, junk, and spam on the internet in order to scavenge for its redemptive qualities —or, in Walter Benjamin's words, the "profane illuminations"—that can spell our sense of being with and through media in a very online world.

Thank you to my supervisors Nicholas Holm and Pansy Duncan at Massey University for graciously giving their precious time and resources to this thesis, as well as for offering additional academic opportunities during my studies. Your thoughts and ideas have made a lasting impact on me. I will cherish our eclectic conversations and meetings. To friends and family, I love you all and could never have done this without you. Mum, you are a gentle and courageous person. Dad, you've taught me to always be curious. To the E's: Evan and Emily, I'm lucky to be your annoying little brother. Elle, you have my heart, thank you for giving me new eyes to see the light in the dark (and for the everyday laughs).

From the river to the sea.

VOLITION [Easy: Success] - No. This is somewhere to be. This is all you have, but it's still something. Streets and sodium lights. The sky, the world. You're still alive.

– Robert Kurvitz

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Introduction

In 2025, the Merriam-Webster dictionary chose “Slop” as their word of the year, formally defining its meaning as “digital content of low quality that is produced usually in quantity by means of artificial intelligence” (Merriam, Webster, 2025). The etymological journey of the word “slop” begins in Old English with the term “sloppee,” derived from the root word “cusloppe,” which roughly translates to “cow dung.” By the early Modern period, the word “slop” encompassed various kinds of domestic waste and overflow from the kitchen, bathroom, or chamber-pot. Other uses of the word refer to spilling liquids, “unappetizing semi-liquids,” leftover food for animals, and to wade through wet or muddy areas—to name a few (Sibley & Wartzhog, 2025, p. 1). From early 2024 to the present, “slop” has taken on new meanings. Indeed, when used as a suffix, the term has taken a life of its own as a liquid form of pejorative internet slang, ranging from “workslop,” “uncslop,” “fedslop,” in order to name a vague, felt sense of homogeneity in our contemporary digital culture (Phillips, 2025, para. 3). More prominently, “slop” has entered popular vernacular to describe artificially generated content, specifically pointing to proliferating streams of Large Language Model (LLM) generative image and video on the internet. Widely regarded as incoherent, ugly, and low-quality, these new forms of LLM-generated cultural production have spread across all corners of the internet, with the neologism “AI slop” emerging as a means to map their distinctive visual and industrial logics.

AI slop loosely refers to low-quality, repetitive and disposable content that is generated and distributed in high volumes across online environments. Specifically, the neologism names an *excess* that is latent in generative visuality, or—to quote internet commentator Max Read—

that which “is fully optimized to its domain to the point of texturelessness or characterlessness” (2025, para. 9). Cheap, low-effort, convenient, consumable, banalized, uninspiring, and lifeless: these descriptors all appear under the umbrella of AI slop. As a consequence, AI slop signals a wider breakdown in the networked commons surrounding the “Enshittocene” of the internet—and by extension, our wider habitations within digital ecosystems (Doctorow, 2025, p. 7). But what is AI slop, more precisely? What is it *doing* in a specifically cultural sense? In this thesis, I intend to examine AI slop through three relational frames: the aesthetic, political, and historical. Or, in other words: how it looks (aesthetic), what it can do (political), and what it might say (historical) about our hallucinatory online conjecture.

To guide my discussion, I take up the German cultural theorist and philosopher Walter Benjamin as a primary point of analytical reference across the discussion. Each chapter places emphasise on a distinct theoretical problematic illuminated by key texts, fragments, and essays from Benjamin alongside the generation of early twentieth-century critical theory that his thought emerged from. I wish to advocate that the conditions of (re)production, communication, reception, taste, modes of visuality, and ways of thinking through technological phenomena may look quite different between two social, political, and historical contexts—but they indeed work under the same range of issues found in the theoretical contributions that Benjamin made in his lifetime. In similar spirit to Benjamin, I wish to “calmy and adventurously go travelling” (1935; 2006, p. 265) into the surreal corners of AI slop. In the words of visual theorist W.T.J Mitchell, images hold the “hook that arrests the beholder, activates the picture, and allows it to look back” (1984, p. 236). AI slop is looking at us—as participants of an increasingly entrenched networked culture—whether we like it or not. In short, I argue that this phenomenon of AI slop has something useful to say

about the social practices that form and shape our unsettled, fractured, but ultimately shared networked terrain.

There has no doubt been a resurgence in the studies of Walter Benjamin over recent decades. Prompted, in part, by developments such as the emergence of the World Wide Web and the entrenchment of Large Language Models (LLM) in the media ecosystem. Many scholars regard seminal essays such as the "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935; 2006) as unique augers of our current material conditions, holding a key to unveiling the conjecture we find ourselves in. The very title of Benjamin's 1935 essay has been approached if it were a plastic Marquee sign, with passersby swapping out "Technological Reproducibility" in the English title of the essay for something more relevant to current times. I wish to emphasize that this is no fault of the rich, multi-disciplinary scholarly discussion surrounding Benjamin as a figure; he left behind a scroll that continues to unravel the more we travel beyond the cultural and political fervour that marked his own time. However, this thesis intends to approach its object of study with eyes facing backwards. I interpret AI slop in the same spirit as the common "rags and refuse" which Benjamin took heed of in the manuscript for the *Arcades Project*: "But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them" (1940; 2002, p. 460). The goal of this thesis is to critically survey and interrogate these "rags and refuse" amidst which we stand, and I argue that the tools Benjamin developed to critically study the aesthetic, political, and historical relations of media can provide us with the means to examine AI slop as a culturally situated phenomenon.

An analysis of LLM-generated images through a Benjaminian lens might conclude that the decline of "uniqueness" and "authenticity" often ascribed AI slop is part of a broader and more categorical decline in cultural taste and judgement. For example, popular commentary on AI slop often evokes the "brain rot" effect in order to allude to a broader cultural downturn, in which "people quickly consume content that they know is not only unlikely to be real, but probably not meaningful or interesting" (Tidy, 2026, para. 5). Yet while this sentiment productively acknowledges the ambient nature of "sloppified" digital ecosystems, it does little to articulate *what we do* with new forms of imagery that we find aesthetically disturbing, meaningless, or fundamentally uninteresting to look at. Instead of assuming very little of AI slop beyond its negative connotations, this thesis seeks to apply Benjamin's work to these questions, while resisting popular readings of Benjamin that mythologise the disenchantment of our new media. I will argue for a materialist genealogy of AI slop that "bring[s] the present into a critical state" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 471) by implicating these new generative image-producing technologies within broader cultural trends. As polysemous as Benjamin's texts may be, I hope to excavate a specific series of frames through which we can critically assess what AI slop looks like, what it says, and what it can do.

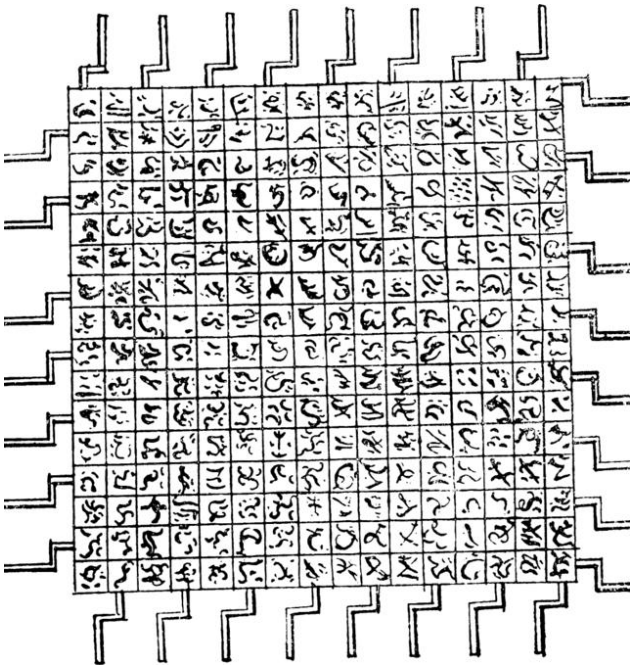


Figure 1: An illustration of the fictional "creative engine," a machine for writing books, depicted by satirical novelist Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

As this suggests, to bridge between Benjamin's conception of mediated culture and AI slop, I intend to embed the (un)popular emergence of LLM-generated images in a broader set of historical contingencies. Indeed, historical reactions to developments in the (re)production in media provide an apt frame. Take, for example, the great "technoshocks" that sprung from the printing press revolution across early modern Europe—to which novelist Jonathan Swift's satirical depiction of a fictional "creative engine" in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) expresses unfavourable sentiment for new tools of production and dissemination (Jones, C et. al, 2024, p. 4). Here, in response to the printing press, Swift depicts an "entirely dismal machine" that arbitrarily produces immense volumes of randomised text, drawing uncanny parallels with our time and anxieties following the unwelcomely received advent of LLM-generative technology. However, after the initial shock had settled, radical inventions such as the printing press—a key technological vessel for revolutionary thought—eventually yielded unprecedented shifts in cultural production, in turn reshaping social, literary, and political

perspectives. Despite LLM-generative image-producing services holding a historically unique position, can we similarly claim that they are subject to the integrative process of cultural metabolism in our digital lives? This thesis takes a closer look by examining AI slop along such relational frames: as a way to telescope the present conditions of the digital commons through the past (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 471).

In chapter one, I argue that Benjamin's theory of looking provides a useful basis for a critical analysis of AI slop at the mediative level. On this basis, I orient my discussion around the immediate function of images, drawing on photographic examples raised by Benjamin in order to discuss a key aesthetic frame—the "aura"—through which AI slop is articulated and evaluated. In particular, I articulate "quantitative" and "qualitative" aura as key frameworks for studying the aesthetics of AI slop. In order to demonstrate my argument, I apply Benjamin's two theories of the aura to a popular example of AI slop—the "Niche Apple"—and map these two definitions at the textual level of the image. Examined this way, I emphasise the qualities of *looking* attributed to Benjamin's qualitative and quantitative aura as a way to account for the eerie affectiveness attributed to AI slop at the wider scope, arguing that the indexical trace of LLM-generative imagery offers insight into the "space and time" of its particular site of production (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 518). To conclude, I affirm that Benjamin's quantitative, value-inflected, and technological account of the aura doesn't effectively capture the distinct cultural position of LLM-generative technology, while the secondary definition provides a more productive frame to study AI slop—one which posits whether or not this uncanny, generative, and "sloppified" forms of visuality can return our collective digital gaze.

In chapter two, I argue that AI slop takes on a political dimension at both the formal and structural level. Specifically, I contend with Benjamin's epilogue to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production" (1935; 2006), in which he develops a framework for thinking through the politics of new media production. Central to Benjamin's concerns here was the role that mass media has in the formation of political expression during the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany. Benjamin diagnoses two approaches to the politics of mass media: the "aestheticisation of politics" (1935; 2006, p. 269) and the "politicisation [of] art" 1935; 2006, p. 270) Across both analytical frames, I contend that AI slop operates in what Benjamin refers to as the "image space" (1929; 2004, p. 17). This being a structure of mediation that configures cultural artefacts as meaningful points of political action and thinking. From Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to the Surrealist practices of the "Exquisite Corpse," I comparatively examine AI slop under the aestheticised politics and politicised art opposition. Moving forward, I then discuss the aforementioned two axes that Benjamin takes issue with across "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006) and "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929; 2004) in order to analyse the political function of images such as Italian Brainrot figure Crocodilo Bombardiro and LLM-generative social media posts by the United States Department of Homeland Security. I contend that AI slop—once articulated through Benjamin's key problematic—holds the troubling potential to express both a reactionary politics of domination and a refusal of such domination at the visual level.

In chapter three, I examine the historical relations of "AI slop," suggesting that this enables us to defamiliarize AI slop as contingent upon existing power structures. In doing so, I place particular emphasis on Benjamin's final manuscript, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 2003), written in Nazi occupied France before his flight to the Spanish border in 1940. I argue that Benjamin's "angel of history"—appropriated from the Swiss-German painter

Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus"—represents his clearest account of his orientation toward the political theory of historical materialism. He achieves this through a unique close reading of the artwork that illustrates his critique of both dominant historicism and teleological historical materialism. Having established this, I give a close analytical account of the popular AI slop artefact "Shrimp Jesus" in order to explore Benjamin's approach to using images as a way to think-through history during uncertain sociopolitical times. By conducting a close textual analysis that shifts between Shrimp Jesus and Angelus Novus, I explore Benjamin's anti-teleological approach to cultural history, with a focus on how his thought interrupts notions of technological progress within "homogenous empty time" (1940; 2003, p. 395). Furthermore, I propose a connection between Benjamin's conception of "weak Messianic power" (1940; 2003, p. 390) as it pertains to historical thinking and Shrimp Jesus in order to articulate a wider thesis advocating for the "stray citation" (Benjamin, 1940; 2002, p. 470) of contemporary cultural production.

Overall, my approach closely aligns itself with the methodological framework that Benjamin scholar Susan Buck-Morss (1991) has developed for situating cultural artefacts—in this case, AI slop—along the unsettled historical axis they appear to appear from. In doing so, I seek to question the "the mythic immediacy of the present" (Buck-Morss, 1991, p. x) that the gravitational pull of new media and technological developments can tempt us toward. To avoid falling prey to using Benjamin's theories in an explanatory fashion "as if it were a content of some consciousness" (Adorno, et. al, 2020, 105), this thesis will avoid attempts to hastily capture flashes of juxtaposition found in the content of LLM-generative content and hastily treat them as a direct diagnosis for our present conjecture. Instead, it will canvas AI slop as a form of cultural production that allows us to grasp at a genealogy of aesthetic, political, and historical experience under the information-saturated conditions of digital

capitalism. By analysing AI slop along three related lines of critical inquiry, I put forward an argument for the *redemption* of marginal cultural artefacts as part of the struggle for an open, just, and dignified networked commons. I intend to demonstrate that AI slop revels in contradiction that is charged with the potential to unsettle conceptions of progress wound up in everyday digitally mediated life.

Into the Slopverse: Walter Benjamin & Generative AI

In this review, I examine a body of literature that is oriented around significant developments in Large Language Model (LLM) generative images across the cultural field. The structure of this discussion frames the proliferation of LLM-generative technologies not as a part of a teleological narrative of progress, but as a series of ruptures that shape and inform digital experience. Because of the complexity of LLM technologies, research on this phenomenon cut across a range of critical fields. This literature review will touch on the full breadth of work on digital and LLM-generative imagery, with a particular emphasis on work that uses Walter Benjamin's key ideas as a guiding lens.

In media and visual studies, scholarly contributions examine the slippery, ambiguous role of the contemporary digital image under a variety of frameworks. For example, Mateo Stocchetti (2014, p. 15) articulates the role of digital visuality as another by-product of mechanical reproducibility, remaining either ambivalent or supportive of dominant relations of power unless there be an effective and emancipatory use of new resources and affordances. Although the political economy of media under networked capitalism is still an enduring question, I align this study closer to literature that positions digital visuality within cultural practices. Framed through the lens of Benjamin's tendency to "think-in-images" as forms of instantaneous cognition and remapping of immediate social environments, theorists Sigrid Weigal et. al (2015) outline how the shock-producing effects of images are unique to emergent technical structures themselves. My thesis aims to articulate AI slop within this sociopolitical framework, situating technological phenomena in our given society while advocating for the actualization of its subversive potential in the digital commons.

Walter Benjamin's work as a critic and philosopher has informed scholarship on digital images in the wider sense. Tracing developments in the scholarly research requires consideration toward how digital images themselves have been articulated in relation to Benjamin's theories on media as a significant feature of meaning making and forms of experience under capitalism. Theorist Geir Sigurdsson (2001, p. 67) approaches the digital image as something Benjamin predicted in the appearance of reproducible film and photography, this being a type of multimedia which collapses the distance between the private work and the public receiver. Writing on the cultural influence of immaterial digital images, theorist Matthew Allen (2003, p. 5) points to the way that digital images complicate the notion of reproducibility itself amidst the emergence of Web 2.0 user-generated and uploaded copy culture. The 'original' version becomes even more fictitious than that of the 'authentic' photographic print from a negative, in which a copy enters the exact same equivalence of an original (Allen, 2003, p. 5). The newfound autonomy of the digital image discussed by these researchers during the arrival of participatory image reproduction on the internet has been approached with such an anticipatory, future-focused framework in mind, from which "things will literally never seem the same again" (Sigurdsson, 2001, 69). However, this thesis seeks to approach the novelty of AI slop with caution—moving instead along lines of analysis across Benjamin's historical context and our own.

More recently, there is rich scholarly interest in LLM-generative technology with key terms and ideas from Benjamin often in the fore. However, there has not yet been a rigorous approach to AI slop with the cultural context of the aesthetic, political, and historical in mind. Researchers argue that the productive logic of LLM technologies are reified into the political

economy as products of digital networked capitalism (Jones et. al, 2023, McLoughlin, 2023; Cox, 2024). Much of the critical focus so far has been on LLM-generative images as visual artworks and questions around how these objects ought to be classified and systematised within a broader framework of what artistic forms *are* and what they are capable of *doing* (Barale, 2021; Correa, 2023; Wilde. 2023; Arielli, 2024: Danesi, 2024; Calderia & Simões, 2024; Armenio, et. al, 2025; Roe, 2025; Martin 2025). This debate is suggestive of the diversifying paths which surround the evocation of Benjamin at a critical conjecture in new media developments. The main positions taken up in this area—contrary to the positivist assertion of technological liberation—are dependent on how researchers view the anticipatory effects of LLM-generative technology across particular areas of study. I intend to examine AI slop by building on such existing research with attention to Benjamin's theoretical scope and an emphasis on the materialist relationship between culture and technology. This study aligns with the notion that traditional theories of media in the humanities do not suffice as an explanatory device for contemporary phenomena *per se* (Offert, 2023, p. 124). Rather, I contend with the structural similarities between Benjamin's approach to "brush history against the grain" (1940; 1999, p. 390) and my own attempt to frame AI slop as a document of our own conjecture—no matter how peripheral it first appears. With this in mind, my research takes on a scope that encompasses both contemporary literature on LLM-generative technology and other bodies of work that share a key number of relevant features with the aesthetics, politics, and histories of digital imagery— while identifying conceptual connections to Benjamin in and out of the research.

In addition, there is an abundance of work on the social processes of LLM-generative images as artefacts of digital surplus that have since expanded the critical conversation around its contested position in digital culture (Ervik, 2023, Pretty, 2024). However, there has been

minimal research that seeks to examine LLM-generative images in terms of how they are increasingly understood in the everyday sense; that is, as an abundance of AI slop. Although "slop" as a prescriptive term has risen to ubiquity and dominates popular attitudes about LLM-generative imagery, it remains at the periphery of scholarly attention (Hoffman, 2024, para. 8). Nonetheless, the emerging literature on LLM-generative images that has since developed often frame the integration of generative imagery in digital culture as a matter of inevitability in the face of a new upset in the media field. For example, theorists Naomi Smith & Clare Southerton (2025, p. 7) articulate AI slop as a new feature of digital capitalism that "automate[s] the production" of a socio-technical configuration rooted in aesthetic excess. In a similar turn, digital design researcher Jay Rosenbaum (2025) suggests a reading of AI slop as an intentionally kitsch and authoritarian form of content that encroaches on the visual practices of online discourses. This fits closely with my political aesthetic approach to AI slop, by which I take up textual examples of LLM-generative images to serve as the basis of my analysis. However, my thesis question focuses less on discourse, and more on the receptive and affective work of AI slop. More specifically, I seek to take up the "sloppiness" of AI slop as a primary theoretical problematic as it relates to digital cultural production and its political aesthetic implications.

Although existing studies on LLM-generative have tended to elide questions about the cultural practices of digital imagery, there is a long history of scholarship on the cultural practices of digital imagery more broadly—beginning with the meme. Hardesty et. al (2019) & Sobolewski-Kiwerski (2025), develop distinct theories of internet memes that orient around the notion of the internet posts, memes, and images as a nexus for social activation. These authors frame memes in terms of their capacity to "[emerge] suddenly, in a flash," (Benjamin, 1999, 473) as "mischievous agitators" for a brief collective politics (Hardesty et.

al, 2019, 500). In this view, the cultural practices afforded by memes are predicated on their mutability, always subject to new iterations which tear memetic images away from consensus building purposes and into fragmentary yet adaptable units of meaning (Sobolewski-Kiwerski, 2025, 337-338). While useful, there are limitations to such Benjaminian studies of meme culture as conclusions can be drawn from a wide range of orientations toward his essential texts on the position that technology take shape. In other words, although AI slop has memetically spread across the internet, they aren't necessary memes themselves. Across the thesis, I aim to combine both perspectives—the anxieties and potentialities of the digital meme—in order to approach AI slop as a useful analytical object for the debate. At the same time, my point of inquiry has a narrower scope, focusing on LLM-generated images that are more closely related to content circulating online, rather than the works of visual art and mass media. This requires consideration of the literature on memetic communication and AI slop, examining how it has emerged as a form of unwelcome cultural mediation. Therefore, I acknowledge the memetic potentialities of AI slop, but seek to fill a gap between memes, digital images, and LLM-generated content as a different cultural formation.

While existing studies on LLM-generative images have set up a preliminary background for situating the cultural relations of AI slop, more recent scholarly inquiry has begun to draw on the work of Benjamin to situate the phenomena in a critical tradition of media studies. Much of the current literature in this vein agrees that Benjamin's key ideas can be productively considered in some way as a framework for understanding LLM-generative images in relation to its reproducible affordances. This has been a well explored area of cultural analysis, offering diverging findings dependant on how researchers articulate LLM-generative technology's role across varying social institutions from a descriptive or normative perspective (Stanley, 2025; Ervik, 2023; Foscolo, G & Nacif, 2025; Rosenbaum, 2025). For

example, one strand of this scholarship suggests that the exhibitory potential of LLM-generative cultural production intensifies liberatory, democratic, and participatory practices online (Ervik, 2023; Bar-Gil, 2025; Kalpokas, 2023). Benjamin's theory of the aura as it relates to new forms media is a point of contention, with researchers noting that the potentially democratic effects of LLM-generative technology are dependent on an equal sense of collaboration between human-machine subjects, allowing the receiver to differentiate between LLM-generative and human involvement in the output, and henceforth ethically identify its place in the sociocultural apparatus (Kalpokas, 2023, p. 8). Meanwhile, others point to the liberation of "human subjectivity" in LLM-generative outputs in similar spirit to of Benjamin's argument for the loss of the "aura" in the work of art as an emancipatory and democratic opportunity (Herrie et. al, 2025; Park, 2025; Jones et. al, 2023; Kemper, 2025). By contrast, I argue that Benjamin's key ideas can be productively applied to AI slop while supporting a critical disposition of LLM-generative technology with close consideration of his approaches and uses of the term across Benjamin's media theory.

Another body of existing literature on LLM-generative imagery focuses on the politics of the phenomenon, looking to address how generative imagery shapes political dispositions in the digital commons. Researchers emphasise how LLM-generative memes are circulated amidst social and political tensions, identifying the ethics of LLM-generative contents from inflammatory online discourse to social media ecosystems during national election cycles. For example, Kurt Sengul et. al (2025) have addressed how the dominant aesthetics of the populist far right have leveraged AI generated content in order to disseminate reactionary narratives online. They propose that strategic ambiguity and the semiotic 'flattening' of visual signs inherent in LLM-generative images are the central resource in online meme cultures (Senegal et. al, 2025). Researchers have been interested in context-specific uses of LLM-

generative memes across contained forum communities (Gaba & De Critstofaro, 2025) and political election cycles in the United States (Chang et. al, 2024). Other areas of scholarly attention involve systematic analysis of the quantitative rate of LLM-generative images circulating within networked communities, with an emphasis on issues of authenticity, ownership, and extremist content (Gaba & De Critstofaro, 2025; Chang et. al, 2024; Sengal et. al, 2025; Wu, 2025). These findings suggest the need for further reflection on the affective potentials of LLM-generative images as a form of endless and reconfigurable reproductive capture. However, while this area of research has examined the discoursal utilisation of LLM-generative images in online political discussions, my research looks to approach the cultural relations of AI slop through close textual analysis, situating the aesthetics, politics, and historical contingencies by a series of interpretative discussions that focus formal features of AI slop.

Overall, research into AI slop—with or without Benjamin—is a field that is expected to grow as scholarly inquiry catches up with new cultural phenomena. The existing literature reflects an interest in studying these unstable and nascent questions about the role of images as slippery forms of mediative social activity. While research into LLM-generative production provides a valuable reminder of the necessity to situate new technology against historical, social, political processes, such interpretations also offer a useful position to work through Benjamin's critical disposition toward media in the early 20th century as it relates to our current conjecture. Nevertheless, these contributions indicate the necessity for further inquiry into how AI slop appears to manifest as a critical inflexion point with regard to how we can organise ourselves within the shock, disgust, banal, or redemptive inducing qualities of LLM-generative images. Examining LLM-generative images as AI slop, then, is to critically

consider a mode of interpretation toward artefacts bound up in structures of power that, in turn, require worthy critical attention.

Chapter One: The Aura of AI Slop

> "*Mass production is the principal economic cause—and class warfare the principal social cause—of the decline of the aura.*" – Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 1940; 1999, p. 343

In a 1931 unpublished fragment, Walter Benjamin—upon witnessing the star-studded rise of Walt Disney's media mascot Mickey Mouse—remarked that the popular appeal of this whimsical media character lies "simply in the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them" (p. 545). As Benjamin (1933; 2003, p. 735) further notes, the life of Mickey Mouse is "full of miracles—miracles that not only surpass the wonders of technology, but make fun of them." However, far from presenting Mickey Mouse as a romanticism of mass media, Benjamin casts the famous cartoon rodent as a cinematographic example of "positive barbarism," acting as a break with tradition in favour of new kind of visuality that reflect the play found in new forms of media (Mourenza, 2020, p. 166). Following this example, this chapter seeks to explore the critical value of AI slop as a new kind of "sloppified" form of visuality on part of the digital commons. Although no Mickey Mouse, I argue that the "barbarous" qualities of AI slop—interpreted through Benjamin's aesthetic theory of the aura—holds a minor potentiality to reevaluate our relationship to uniqueness, artificiality, and the non-auratic function of networked media.

Benjamin's aesthetic theory can help us to clarify and extend what AI slop is doing with attention to the social practices of visuality in the digital commons. In particular, I intend to closely examine Benjamin's notion of the "aura": a theoretical term that describes the

particular cultural status of artworks. There are two definitions of the theory of the aura that I intend to examine. The first and most prominent definition is found in Benjamin's key essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility (1935; 2006), by which he asserts that mechanical reproduction liberates the work of art from its "cult value"—the social function of art that is dependent on the aura—and into a democratised function of "exhibition value." There is also a second definition, however, which is found in his earlier essay "A Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005). This definition emphasises the role of the gaze between the receiver and the cultural artefact at the experiential level. Benjamin's position on the theory of the aura depended on the particular analytical frame he prioritised across "Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005) and "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006). Whereas Benjamin's earlier account focuses on the relational encounter with the trace of a new type of arrested image emerging from photography, the later account sought to situate the aura in the historical context of reproducible technology. Taken together, both the formal characteristics of AI slop and the context of new forms of digital (re)production implicit in LLM-generated imagery structure the forthcoming discussion.

In order to build a bridge between AI slop and Benjamin's two theories of the aura, the discussion will first attempt to de-familiarize these two notable interpretations of aura as understood in media contexts taken from Benjamin's work. In the first interpretation, the aura is understood as the "strange tissue of space and time" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 518) that endows a media artefact with presence. In the second, the aura is understood as the mediative process of the artefact that allows it to "lift its gaze" and "look back at us" (Benjamin, 1931: 2005, p. 519). Later on, Benjamin more explicitly establishes the role of aura as that of a transitionary marker—or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, a "vanishing mediator" (1973, p. 78)—between the traditional heritage of the work of art and modernity. Drawing on these positions,

this chapter will elaborate Benjamin's two theories of the aura—which I interpretatively refer to as differing accounts with *quantitative* and *qualitative* emphases—in order to apply them to an example of LLM-generative imagery and excavate these broader tensions found in the theory of the aura. I refer to both versions of the aura using these terms in order to distinguish Benjamin's analytical focus between the two essays. Although both versions often overlap in their core definitions of the aura, the former implicates the aura and its subsequent vanishing as a quantitative, anthropological change to our relationship with media, while the latter gives more attention the aura as a qualitative feature of the media artefact imputed by the looking relations of the receiver. Ultimately, I argue that AI slop lacks the "value-inflected" (Ngai, 2005, p. 87) version of the aura found in Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay (1935; 2006), yet may nevertheless generate a "qualitative" aura through the operation of the collective gaze in the digital commons. Through a comparison between Benjamin's reading of Franz Kafka's childhood portrait and contemporary AI slop imagery, I demonstrate how AI slop reorganises relations of looking within "sloppified" digital culture.

1.1 Quantitative Aura: From Magician to Surgeon

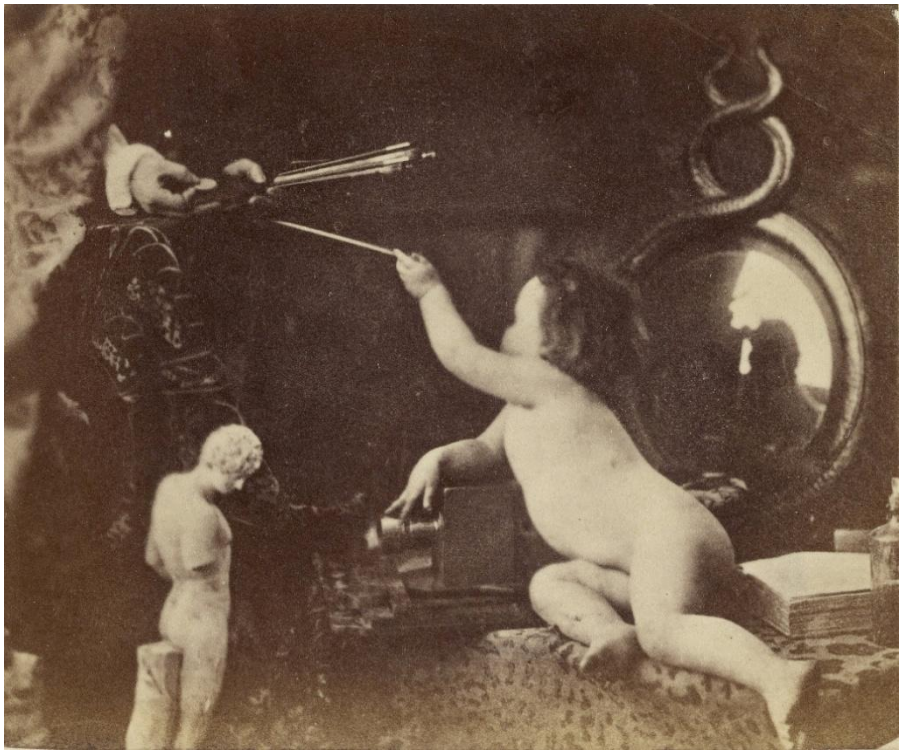


Figure 1: Oscar Gustave Rejlander's "The Infant Photography Giving the Painter an Additional Brush" (1856), depicting the tension between traditional artistic practices and the burgeoning role of technological reproduction in the Victorian period.

Perhaps the most well-known version of Benjamin's theory of aura, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935; 2006) depicts the notion in its most easily recognisable form. Here, Benjamin evokes the aura in the context of his argument regarding the emergence of technologically produced and mass received art, with cinema being the most critical site of this transformation. Central to Benjamin's argument is his emphasis on transformation in the realm of art, culture, and media in the lingering aftermath of the industrial revolution. In this context, Benjamin argues that aura is historically bound to the "cult value" of the artwork, which in turn derives from its embeddedness in ritual and tradition along with its unique existence in a specific time and place (1935; 2006, p. 253). For example, in the context of religious art: "certain statues of gods are accessible only to the

priest in the cella; certain Madonna's remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level" (1935; 2006, p. 175). Prior to technology that enabled mass reproduction, the work of art serves a sacred purpose for select members of culture under specific social conditions. We can trace the implications set forth here back to how Benjamin defines the categorical properties of aura, in which he depicts an immersive relationship between the singular receiver and the organic experience:

> A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, pp. 104-105)[1]

With a touch of melancholia, aura is described above in uniquely naturalist terms in order to express not only the "here and now" character of auratic experience, but also—in interlocutor Theodor Adorno's terms— "that which goes beyond its factual givenness, its content" (1955; 1997 p. 45). The unique presence which endows the shadow of the tree branch with "a strange tissue of space and time" is made pertinent by our fundamental inability to *preserve* the immediate experience beyond the mediative process. The experience of the aura is anchored in the *singularity* of experience that is felt by the receiver as a unique apparition of distance, a sensory relationship predicated on the singularity of the work of art. Yet at the heart of the "Work of Art" (1935; 2006) essay is the observation that the emergence of new technological practices serves to emancipate the artwork from these particular contexts into "entirely new functions" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 175) determined by the social field. This

[1] It is worth noting that this definition of the aura is borrowed almost verbatim from Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005), but is evoked in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006) with stronger emphasis on the transformative history of the aura—and thus its quantitative decline—as it moved between "cult" value and "exhibition" value. See Miriam Hansen's (2008) "Benjamin's Aura" for a systematic analysis of the concepts evolution.

emancipation leads to the increase in “exhibition” value within media artefacts, and Benjamin argues that the aura irrevocably recedes along with “cult” value (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 106). In other words, the decline of the aura reflects this categorical shift in the technical properties of the work of art as the democratised work of art— provided by reproducible mediums such as film and photography—precipitated the loss of auratic function, and with it the cult-value embedded in heritage and tradition.

In this quantitative account, Benjamin—referring to Marx—finds the dynamic of the aura in the dialectical relationship between the economic base and the cultural superstructure. The transformations of the superstructure “do not, however, call for theses on the art of the proletariat after its seizure of power, and still less for any on the art of the classless society” (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 101). Indeed, for Benjamin, the abolition of the aura presents itself as a both a unique opportunity and a threat for mass culture. As a consequence, the aura dissipates in reaction to new technologies of reproducibility, to which unlike the printing press, lithography, and photogravures, irreversibly displaces an original referent from the production process. Therefore, the traditional qualities of presence, authenticity, and the “here and now” previously inscribed in reproducible cultural artefacts undergo a crisis of meaning. In light of these technological changes in cultural production, the work of art, for Benjamin, now has the capacity to complement the syncopated rhythms of modernity in the wake of a new visual culture: “…since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it could now keep pace with speech” (1935; 2006, p. 102). At the same time, one thing is lacking in transformative cultural artefacts such as mass film and photography—the mark of the work of art’s unique existence and historical content. The “weight” that the work of art “derives from tradition” (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 103) remains unlocatable in technological reproduction, marking

the abolition of the aura. It is here that we may consider that Benjamin's theory of aura in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006) is defined by way of its own disappearance. Like Hegel's owl of Minerva, the aura is traceable by its absence in the cultural artefact.[2]

In turn, Benjamin asserts that art freed from the auratic function presents an emancipatory opportunity for the masses to confront, face-to-face, with their own reality as subjects reproduced by existing formations of class. The non-sequential cut of the camera in film, for example, destroys the continuity of experience by spatially expanding our sense of time and space itself (Conty, 2003, p. 473). As a result, what defines social experiences and encounters with the new media that has overcome the aura is this expansion of perception—to literally "get closer to things" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006; p. 105) and the immediacy of reproductive artworks that "overcome" the criteria of uniqueness, reflecting "the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 105). In short, the social function of art is no longer to perform magic. Rather, the abolition of aura strengthens our capacity to *look* once the veil has been lifted—not only in the experiential sense of the term, but also in our capacity to enlarge and make incisions into the superstructure like a surgeon. As I will show, the ubiquity of LLM-generated images reanimates the aura—as defined in the "Work of Art" essay—in scholarly discussion, in

[2] Indeed, Benjamin was not only concerned with how the abolition of the aura tears away cultural artefacts from the domain of tradition, but also how the decline of the aura was bound up with technological changes that extend human perception and brings us closer to that which had been marked by distance. Benjamin's defines the camera as a surgical instrument—enlarging our capacity for vision and sight itself (Krauss, 1993, p. 179). This is in opposition to the painter, who maintains an appropriate distance from natural reality, which Benjamin equates with the magician. Whereas the cinematographer confronts the mass audience with natural reality itself, making incisions and cuts into the raw material of reality itself: "…magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 116).

which Benjamin's prescriptive approach to aura is applied anew to contemporary forms of digital mediation.

1.2 The Auratic Imaginaries of the Internet

A number of theorists have attempted to apply Benjamin's quantitative theory of the aura to LLM-generated images. For example, in computer and information sciences, the notion of "aura" has been prescribed to LLM-generative images in order to articulate Large Language model outputs into the critical language of the humanities. Indicative of this theoretical approach, Salas-Espasa and Camacho (2025, p. 2) propose the updated term "semi-aura" as a concept that bridges the hybrid autonomy, originality, and presence of generative images to Benjamin's theory of the aura as a "distributed phenomenon" between the human prompter and the particular LLM model. Elsewhere, research premised in media and cultural studies research evoke the aura in a descriptive sense. Notably, Sungjin Park (2024, p. 1808) reframes Benjamin's aura as an element of the artwork that must go through "profound transformations"—rather than, in Benjamin's own words, "ruthless annihilation" (1935; 2006, p. 199)— in order to be fully realised in new forms of digital cultural production that are characterised by technological uniqueness. What's missing, however, is an effort to reconcile Benjamin's theory of the aura with the changing, fluid, and always unsettled receptive practices of the internet. At the same time, Benjamin's theory of the aura has undergone various transformations and interpretations depending on its particular application and disciplinary place of origin. The prevalence of AI slop has prompted many theorists to revisit Benjamin' of the aura into a new field of contestation. To explore the relationship between the theory of the aura and contemporary visual studies, let us briefly illustrate in further detail.

Ranging from early Virtual Reality to the World Wide Web, and with the introduction of consumer image editing software such as Photoshop, authenticity and originality have long been a conceptual problem in digital culture studies. For instance, Smith (2003, p. 178) postulates the revitalisation of Benjamin's aura in digital attempts to produce "total work[s] of art/Gesamtkunstwerk" through immersive visual constructs—to quite literally bring to life the "here and now" of auratic presence through new forms of mediation. Elsewhere, Søren Pold (1999, p. 23) asserts that the liberating potential of the World Wide Web enables alternative discursive formations of auratic experience amidst the emergence of "virtual monopoly capitalism." Moving further into the historical context of the early internet, Geir Sigurdsson (1997) describes the experience of viewing digital art on a computer monitor as analogous to the immersive effect of auratized art. To further underscore this point, he notes that "in cyberspace, we can *enter* works of art" (Sigurdsson, 1997, p. 66). Similarly, W.T.J Mitchell (2002, p. 488) proposes that the liquidity of photographic copies and manipulation in early online environments reverses the relationship of a copy between its referent, and therefore recovers the "breath" of life found in the notion of an original work. While others suggest that digital technologies pursue an auratic experience by the style of immediacy, aura is interpreted by Jay Bolter (2006, p. 35) as a "design parameter" for both users and creators to emulate in new digital communicative contexts. These different accounts suggest that Benjamin's quantitative aura has often been evoked in order to clarify what is elusively "missing" in digital artefacts, while also gesturing at the return of the aura in new forms of technology.

So far, we have seen that the theory of the aura has been taken up by scholars studying new media as a way to articulate the social function that new forms of art hold with emphasis on their relationship to technology (Bloomer & Marchese, 2017, p. 29). It is here that Benjamin's essay takes shape as a template against which new media objects can measured (Bloomer & Marchese, 2017, p. 31). However, I argue that the enclosed definition of "aura" that circulates the aforementioned discourse has too often fallen prey to a reading of its resurrection in the digital context that primarily concerns itself with a value-inflected reading of artistic authenticity. The limitations of this approach show the necessity to treat the concept of aura less as a passive victim of technology, but rather as the "extinction of illusory appearances" (Benjamin, 1939; 2006, p. 474) in the given media object itself. In Benjamin's words, the annihilation of aura, as understood in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006, p. 119) is in this sense an act of freedom *from* the weight of tradition. However, the auratic experience finds itself, to quote Theodor Adorno, preserved in a decayed "foggy mist" (1975, p. 3). Only this time, it finds itself within the deluge of the infinite online scroll. And yet if we recall the desire to *rescue* the aura in the cultural artefact as noted in prior contemporary approaches to Benjamin's theory, what would it mean to take this position further, to posit that the aura persists in new, unexpected, and surreal ways? To answer this question, we can examine an alternative formation of the aura—found in his earlier text "Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005)—which claims that images still hold onto the power to *look back at us*.

1.3 Qualitative Aura: The (Un)mediated Gaze

To demonstrate the possibility for AI slop to *look* at us, I now turn to a second, less familiar theory of aura found in Benjamin's work—one which emphasises the process of the gaze. In his 1931 essay "Little History of Photography," Benjamin (1931; 2005) offers a lyrical description of the aura which characterises the phenomenon as a form of mystical reverence

toward the object that is being perceived. Whereas in his later account, in which the aura emerges from the uniqueness of the art object and the ceremonial context in which it is embedded, this reading frames aura as a function of the audience's initial encounter with the art object. Benjamin describes the qualitative mode of aura as such:

> Experience of the aura. arises from the transposition of a response characteristic of human society to the relationship of the inanimate or nature with human beings. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of a phenomenon we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (1931; 2005, p. 519).

If understood as an invested experience on the part of the beholder, as Benjamin articulates it in this earlier formulation, the aura can refer to way of *looking* between the receiver and the art object. Here, the auratic function is dependent on both the object and the ways of seeing the object, which, together, form a historically situated and social mode of perception. Of particular importance to this definition—in a notable contrast to that offered in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006)—is an emphasis on investing the cultural artefact with the ability to return the gaze (Hansen, 2008, p. 339). In this definition, the experience of aura implies a phenomenal structure of perception within the receiver, rather than the quantitative status of production endowing the object with a historical and cultural trace. To capture this distinction more concretely, we can refer to this concept—developed in this earlier formulation—as the *qualitative* aura.

This second theory of the aura is drawn from the objects of study that Benjamin focuses on in "A Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005). In this essay, Benjamin analyses early portrait photography in order to inform his reflections on the relationship between experience

and technology. He does this in an attempt to elucidate the "looking relations" (Hansen, 2008, p. 344) set up between the camera and the subject. On this point, Benjamin lays claim to how qualitative aura changes *looking* itself:

> "[…] the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 510).

Here, Benjamin argues that the "tiny spark of contingency" is grounded in a nonreproducible trace left behind as a result of the material encounter between the photographed subject and the photographic technology—how light and shadows enters the camera, how flash interacts with the subject, and how the lens captures, freezes, and "immortalises" the long-forgotten gaze. As a result, the photograph can be understood from a semiotic perspective, leaving an indexical trace of the scene or space that it captures (Atkin, 2005, p. 163). In other words, the photograph *stands in* for its object. In contrast to his account of quantitative aura in the "Work of Art" (1935; 2006)—where the aura is functionally abolished by the advent of reproducibility—here the aura rests on its indexicality. In this account, the ubiquity of photography does not permanently abolish the auratic weight that receiver imputes in the exchange of the gaze. Rather, the aura is fragmented, splintered off, simulated, and occasionally revived by the indexical dimension that the receiver imputes—or, as Roland Barthes later observes, that which "wounds," "pricks," and "marks" the beholder (1981 p. 26).

To convey this idea, Benjamin (1931; 2005, p. 512) draws on the German impressionist painter Max Dauthendey, who, upon encountering the daguerreotype for the first time, exclaimed: “We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little, tiny faces in the picture could see us, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes.” For example—following visual theorist W.T.J Mitchell (2003, p. 36)—the desire for the receiver of a nonreproducible artefact, such as a painting or daguerreotype, to “to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture” is the result of our inclination to impute a returned gaze in the captured subject, and consequently impute *qualitative* aura. Thus, the aura emerges in the receivers compulsively searching gaze—only further, more concretely imputed by the presence of a material index. Whereas non-photographic portraits—from previously discussed digital imagery to AI slop—also often feature the gaze of a subject, the auratic trace that imparts Benjamin’s “looking relations” (Hansen, 2008, p. 344) is a more difficult claim to hold. As I will later show, for AI slop, this lies in its unique relations of production. However, to find an answer, I now turn to a studio photograph that, for Benjamin, still holds an indexical trace.



Figure 2: Studio portrait of Franz Kafka as a young boy (1887).

To illustrate *qualitative* aura at the visual level, we can examine Benjamin's remarks on an early childhood photo of the writer Franz Kafka—a photograph that he orients the theory of the aura around in "Little History of Photography (1931; 2005). Here, Benjamin pays specific attention to the auratic trace of Kafka's gaze and the self-alienation it indexes in contrast to the suffocating backdrop of a staged photography studio. Whereas the early daguerreotypes gave their subjects a character of that "seemed as real and alive as nature itself" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 512), Kafka's gaze looks indiscernibly out from the fixed conventions of the frame that reigns over its suffocating historical context. Notably, this photograph reflects a strong sense of melancholy that Benjamin associated with forms of bourgeois interiority that also structured his own early life in Weimar Germany (Hansen, 2008, p. 343). The social function of these early photographs utilises the mediative quality of the human face, where the auratic trace stands in for the real subject. Therefore, the reserved eyes of a young Kafka are emblematic to Benjamin of an auratic dimension in early portraiture photography. As a

result, the portrait of Kafka is situated from the vantage point of photographic and visual history which Benjamin would later identify more concretely in the “Work of Art” (1935; 2006) essay as the reign of “exhibition” value.

In contrast to the technologically focused account in his latter essay, here the qualitative trace of the aura is contingent upon the act of the look, and an investment of the mutual gaze on part of the receiver into the subject of the photograph. Benjamin interprets this in a wider sense as the image of eyes that have lost the ability to *return the look*. To support this connection to modernity, he finds reference in poet Charles Baudelaire’s description of the “eye of the city dweller” as “overburdened with protective functions” (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 343). Such a definition of the aura, predicated on the gaze, opens up the concept for alternative directions of analysis. Yet if we were to follow this frame, any image—photographic, digitally graphic, and LLM-generated—has the hidden capacity to invite the experience of the “semi-aura” (Salas-Espasa and Camacho, 2025, p. 2) on the basis of us being able to—in an arbitrary manner—look back and invest a privileged mode of aura wherever we please. Be that as it may, Benjamin’s qualitative theory of the aura rests upon a certain level of material indexicality imparted by the captured scene having been *really there* and therefore inviting the receiver to feel a sense of living presence.

This indexicality is a contributing factor to the structure of feeling, of tiny human faces “really seeing” the receiver (1931; 2005, p. 512), inherent in these early, marginal photographic artefacts. However, for Benjamin, the advent of photography allows for the aura to be “banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses” (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 517). In this same turn of technical improvement, Benjamin notes

that photographers sought to "simulate" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 517) the aura through alternative and artistic means—giving creative breath to otherwise near-perfect reproductions of what the human eye is capable of *looking* at. As aura recedes, the images that surround us seem to have closed their eyes off from us, and vice versa, as "living things" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 31) structuring how we mediate and interact with a particular structure of visuality. However, unlike the permanent abolition of the aura in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006), we are not entirely foreclosed from our ability to access this experience in relation to contemporary cultural artefacts that primarily circulate through intensified flows of "exhibition" value in the digital networked commons. In fact, our very engagement with works of art, images, and—as I will shortly show—AI slop, can be more productively understood as a practice in auratic *revival.* As Benjamin (1931; 2005, p. 517) articulates, these methods serve to "simulate the aura which had been banished" from the image. In this way, using Benjamin's theory of qualitative aura in the context of AI slop can ask us to assess how our modes of seeing have been organised, arranged, and constituted toward the phenomenon along alternative lines.

1.4 Kafka's Gaze & the Niche Apple

In order to assess the analytic utility of the qualitative gaze, I propose to compare its application to Franz Kafka's childhood photo, with a popular LLM-generated memetic image. We can apply Benjamin's secondary, qualitative account of the aura presented in "A Little History of Photography" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005) to AI slop in order to assess whether or not this technologically reproducible phenomenon can *look at us*, and what this might entail. By using the photograph of Kafka to complement our analysis of Benjamin's alternative theory of the aura—one that leaves behind a trace in the gaze of the photograph—we can illustrate how our modes of seeing have are being constituted in the slop-saturated

context of the digital commons. Indeed, the auratic appeal of Kafka's portrait lies less in its historically determined position in technological reproducibility—as Benjamin later suggests in "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006)—but rather from the imputed gaze, his "immensely sad eyes" (1931; 2005, p. 515). One which bears the literal trace of our look having been returned from the past by this young boy put in an uncomfortable, interiorised and ultimately simulated photographic setting (Duttlinger, 2008, p. 88).

Using Benjamin's auratic reading of Kafka's portrait, we can begin to see more clearly—through a close analysis of an example of AI slop—how the emergence of digital and LLM-generated images can be framed under Benjamin's theory of *qualitative* aura. Contemporary applications of Benjamin's account of aura converged around how new reproductive media forms changed perceptive practices through technical developments, with the existing literature naturally extending the concept into the discussion on digital images and LLM-generated images (Espasa & Camacho, 2025). Here, AI slop can serve as a counterpart to the digital image and the early practices of photography, from which the visual immedicably of communicative platforms enable generative images to proliferate into the everyday practices of online spaces. LLM-generated images circulate in a wide-ranging variety of contexts, yet one notable instance where AI slop takes shape is within the memetic practices of online short-form content. For instance, we can look at an LLM-generated meme, "Niche Fruits," which began to spread across social media platforms on June 9th, 2025. To do so, we also have to posit whether or not such an LLM-generated image can ever have an auratic gaze akin to the photograph of Franz Kafka, as simulated, artificial, and uncanny as it may be. Among the growing thematic and genre conventions of AI slop, I will focus on one image in particular: the "Niche Apple," an image rendered by the LLM-generative service Google Gemini (Hamilton, 2025).



Figure 3: An LLM-generated image of an anthropomorphic apple (Niche Apple), popular on short-form content platforms such as TikTok.

Having set up Benjamin's earlier account of the aura, does the Niche Apple look back in the same way that the childhood photo of Franz Kafka does? To answer this question of the auratic *gaze*, let's give closer attention to the components of the Niche Apple with respect to its capacity to leave behind an indexical trace. At the level of textual convention in this particular AI slop image, the composition of the Niche Apple addresses the receiver directly, seeming to invite the receiver to invest within it the potential to "look back at us" (Benjamin 1931; 2005; p. 519) through the meta-spatial medium afforded by the online post. As shown above, the apple assumes a fixed gaze directed toward our plane of reception, where we can meet its eyes equally in a similar way that we can to the young Kafka. We can identify this most clearly by how the subjects encompassing the visual frame—both in Kafka and the Niche Apple—are *seeing* us with their eyes. Both subjects looks far off into the camera,

breaking the fourth wall of the imagined camera-subject as the placeholder for the receiver. However, for Kafka, his eyes trail off into the far-right corner, appearing to meet the eyes of someone standing to the side of the photographer. Importantly, he is both looking at someone who we can imagine is *really there* in the instance that the photograph had been taken—and, in turn, looking back at us from the past into the present. For the Niche Apple, we don't have these traditional inferences to fall back on. Instead, we are put in the spatial orientation of the immediate receiver on the other side of its gaze—the subject behind the screen that it peers out from.

Upon first impression, the memetic image of the Niche Apple follows the formal conventions of a traditional headshot. The primary subject—the anthropomorphic red apple—is centred in the middle of the frame and fixes its gaze at the imaginary camera. Moreover, the subject is lit with a key light, giving proper dimension and depth to the face, and a diffuse light in order to eliminate harsh and direct shadows. Despite our a priori knowledge of the Niche Apple as a product of the LLM-generative service Google Gemini, we at once recognise the image in terms of naturalised photographic characteristics. In other words—despite its inferred allusion to the bizarre—the image appears to us as ordinary at best, and deeply mundane at worst. However, the Niche Apple has one affective quality that is highly relevant to Benjamin's qualitative aura. This being a gaze that we are compelled to impute. More specifically, the eyes of the apple imparts an intense quality of looking. We cannot help but meet the eyes of the Niche Apple, it catches us in the look. The receiver is invited to look for the aura where it is most hidden, behind the eyes of the Niche Apple. Even though the "tiny spark of contingency" (1931; 2005, p. 510) that Benjamin traces to the daguerreotype's indexical representation of the human gaze is seemingly missing here, the materiality of LLM-generative images indexes the Niche Apple into a particular time and place by

appearing to the receiver as a double character. Here, both the representation of the Niche Apple and the fact that the Niche Apple can only appear to the receiver as the way that it does through its form of generative—data composited—mode of production. Like the daguerreotype, LLM-generative images leave behind traces that reveal the materiality of its composition/ By doing so, AI slop captures a "tiny spark of contingency" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 510), the contradiction of the "real"—that what is being simulated is constructed from human-generated imagery. Thus indexing the representational quality of the human gaze to a simulated "aura" produced by its amorphous, homogenous image training. When we first look upon the "factual givenness" (Adorno, 1970; 1997, p. 338) of the image—a mundane, slightly amusing portrayal of an anthropomorphic apple, we are further compelled to read into the "intermediate" area between the receiver and the cultural artefact (Bolaños, 2025, p. 6). Therefore, the "looking relations" (Hansen, 2008, p. 344) between the receiver and the Niche Apple is—to borrow a term from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari—"reterritorialized" (1984, p. 257) from the homogenous noise of training data, and is re-established as a mediative relationship grounded in this indexical trace of social production. In other words, the collective commons rediscover themselves as inadvertent producers of AI slop by identifying themselves in the generative gaze of images such as the Niche Apple.

The compulsive search for the aura is grounded in another element found in the gaze of the Niche Apple: the glint of camera flash covering the left side of its face and caught in its eyes. Here again, the Niche Apple teases the spark of contingency which "dwell in the smallest things" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 512) of the photograph. In other words, we might say that the "strange weave of space and time" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 518) hasn't vanished entirely in the age of technological reproduction, and that the aura exists quietly between ourselves and the cultural artefacts that lift their gaze and "look back at us" (1931; 2005, p.

519). But, and most importantly, the Niche Apple is an entirely artificial gaze that bears no historical imprint of an actual subject being captured. Or, what Benjamin refers to as "the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 510). This major distinction between Benjamin's analysis of portraiture photography and LLM-generated imagery marks a crucial point of departure from the Niche Apple and the Franz Kafka photograph, yet it also proves the curious receptive qualities of AI slop. By misattributing the glint of light on the Niche Apple to the work of a camera flash that never actually occurred, the receiver compulsively locates an "inconspicuous spot" (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 510) on the textual composition of an LLM-generated image. As reproducible technologies such as the film camera, through its "devices of slow motion and enlargement," reveal the "optical unconscious" of looking (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 510), so too does AI slop reveal a different sort of unconscious process in the digital commons—that of searching for an indexical trace in images assembled out of our own training data.

Arguably—although in a different manner—this characteristic of the work of art can extend from the early daguerreotypes to the generative work of AI slop. Certainly, we receive the gaze of the Niche Apple upon our initial encounter with the image by searching for the indexical trace in forms of cultural production that demand just the opposite type of reception. Therefore, to this end, Benjamin's theory of *qualitative* aura holds up when applied to artefacts that uphold an uneasy and unfamiliar status in our culture, and it is here that the auratic function continues to reside in an unlikely manner. In usual memetic fashion, the spreadability of the Niche Apple on social media platforms—for instance, on a TikTok repost garnering one million views in a day (Hamilton, 2025)—depends on what Bradley E. Wiggans (2019, p. 6) notes as its particular discursive power. The virality of the Niche Apple

reflects its status as a cultural artefact elevated through the flows of online circulation, thus echoing Benjamin's "exhibition" value. In fact, the Niche Apple embodies "exhibition" value *tout court*—all that the image asks for is for us, the audience, to simply *look* at it.

1.5 Excess, Indexicality, & AI Slop



Figure 4 & 5: Left: A Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) portrait produced in 2018 by the art collective Obvious, which would go on to be the first artificially generated image to be put on auction at Christie's Images New York (Cohen, 2018). Right: An LLM-generated (ModelScope) snapshot of a video of Will Smith eating spaghetti, now infamous and used as a benchmark for testing generative video models (Tangermann, 2023).

Over the past few years, we have seen consumer LLM-generative services disseminate a plethora of artificially generated images across the internet. These have sparked reactions across ordinary online users and cultural commentators that range widely from condemnation, celebration, disgust, and mischief online. The striking crudeness and surrealist style of early AI slop, such as actor Will Smith attempting to eat a bowl of spaghetti in one

viral example, exemplifies how the bizarre, artificial nature of such imagery has been received in the digital commons. As one commentator notes, indicating early cultural reactions to generative visuality, the viral clip "shows a quickly morphing Smith struggling to keep his physical body contained as he tries to simulate the act of a human being eating a bowl of spaghetti" (Tangermann, 2023, para. 2). Indeed, early iterations of generative images quickly became objects of passing curiosity, taken as a bizarre phenomenon that has unsettled ordinary configuration of online visuality. These observations about LLM-generative spectacles invite us to reconsider the heuristic dimension of aesthetics in the "sloppified" age of digital visuality, just as Benjamin traces the disappearance of the index between the daguerreotype and the mechanically reproducible photograph in "Little History of Photography (1931; 2005).

Although AI slop performs poorly at mediating a gaze with "auratic" weight, users are still compelled to trace an indexical element in the Niche Apple, hence its popularised online status on social media platforms. The implications that this holds for the digital commons are valuable to study (Ervik, 2023, 80). The novelty of such encounters and the scalability that they have afforded in online platforms have subsequently proliferated into an increasingly dominant feature in what we see, scroll, post, and circulate in digital environments. To recall, amidst the immense escalation of LLM-generated content across asocial media platforms, AI slop has emerged as a pejorative term in order to capture the characteristics that make up the phenomenon as they are felt by everyday navigators of the internet (Hoffman, 2024, para. 5). As notions of authenticity become further unsettled by LLM-generative technology, the thorniness of "uniqueness" and "originality" converges closely around how Benjamin's aura has been theorized in an effort to further complicate the wager of communicative democratization vis-à-vis technology—the trade-off involving the permanent abolition of the

aura that had previously indexed the “here and now” qualities of the work of art for visual democratisation at a scale we had never seen before. As we have seen, rescuing the essential “human-ness” of the image up and against new technological phenomena has become one way for scholars to leverage Benjamin’s theory of the aura—one that finds its home in his later, technological-historical definition of the term in “The Work of Art” (1935; 2006).

The auratic function of the gaze in the Niche Apple operates as a mirror for these antagonisms and contradictions that were previously unable to be concretely expressed in a visual form. The stuffy bourgeois conventions that the Kafka looks out from is—in the case of the Niche Apple—the stuffy online interior that positions its own gaze outward to the receiver. Altogether, the qualitative aura of the Niche Apple works to establish a relation between the receiver and the gaze of the LLM-generated image. Although they are situated in different historical and cultural contexts, the photograph of Franz Kafka and the Niche Apple are doing the same thing—presenting a gaze that is set against the rupture of contradictions between its form, and the relations of production that express this form. Benjamin remarks on the abolition of the aura in “Little History of Photography” (1931; 2005, p. 518) as the “peeling away of the objects shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness-by means of its reproduction.” Indeed, at some point we may look back on the Niche Apple as a nonauratic cultural artefact—divested of its uniqueness. However, the means of reproduction which produce the gaze of the Niche Apple invite us to read the image along unsettled and re-evaluative lines.

If the Niche Apple's qualitative, experiential aura derives from the gaze it imparts—taking affective shape as a form of direct address to the receiver—what do we, as participants in digitally mediated culture, feel in return? To answer this, I want to propose a further aesthetic function of AI slop that can potentially resolve our uneasiness toward the idea of generative visuality upholding the auratic function. This being, what cultural theorist Herbert Marcuse defines as "authentic forms of contradictions" (1978, p. 31) in works of art produced under broader systems of control—from "monopoly capitalism" (1978, p. 31) to digitally networked capitalism. The autonomy of the work of art expresses itself in unique ways through LLM-generative visuality because AI slop is mediated through material economic structures—Silicon Valley research organizations and social media platforms. These structures determine the *use* value of the cultural artefacts, but not "what they are and what they say" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 32). Broader sentiment expressed toward AI slop is partially the result of LLM-generative imagery unconsciously indicating its specific site of technological production—one which has garnered an atmosphere of hostility. In the words of former Washington Post journalist Karen Attiah:

> No one wants this. No one needs this. Meta, with its incredible power over what billions of people around the world see, is willing to do nearly anything to keep us addicted to its platforms — even if that means flooding the zone with digital slop that doesn't work very well. (Attiah, 2025, p. 1, as cited in Pendergrass, et. al, 2025, p. 423)

Going further, Benjamin's theory of the aura allows us to critique AI slop upon the "forms of contradictions" (Marcuse, 1978, p. 31) that they express at the formal level. As Benjamin suggests, in the case of the history of photography: "…mechanical reproduction is a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve control over works of art" (1931; 2005, p. 523. This is true in our assessment of the Niche Apple, by which we encounter a gaze that

appears artificial, “sloppy” and meaningless—but that holds a true authentic *look* that asks us to accept the possibility of such “slop” having been composited out of our own cultural imagery and thus our own, often conspicuously consumptive, cultural practices.

As a result of this analysis, I argue that we are still able to productively search for the auratic “intermediary” of the gaze in the Niche Apple, and in turn engage in a critical practice of mediation between generative forms of visuality and our situated position of the digitally mediated receiver. By doing so, we are able to find “authentic forms of contradictions” (Marcuse, 1978, p. 31) in the affective work of AI slop. To look at the Niche Apple once again under this framework—an image that can easily foreclose any sense of auratic function under Benjamin’s later sense of its “ruthless” abolishment (1935; 2006, p. 199)—we are able to invest in a returned gaze that redeems AI slop as culturally useful artefacts. By feeling the gaze of the Niche Apple, looking beyond its “factual givenness, its content” and toward what “goes on beyond pure immediacy” (Adorno, 1970, 1997, p. 338)—we are able to interrogate the new aesthetics of the internet at the more intimate, and ultimately auratic level Benjamin’s qualitative account of aura in the Kafka photograph as this experience of alterity toward the human face appears trivial, yet the problem presented by AI slop is this experiential possibility of *looking* at being *looked at* waning into the reduction of mere objects –or in a digital context, mere visual “content.” Recall, for a final time, the distinct difference between the account of the aura provided in the later “Work of Art (Benjamin, 1935; 2006) essay and the account provided in “Little History of Photography” (1931; 2005), where the latter focuses on the ability for the object’s capacity “look back at us” (Benjamin, 1931; 2005, p. 293). Between these two accounts, we see different arguments that converge at both the loss of particularity on part of the receiver, and the potential for these images take on a form of value that is *liberated* from the entrapment of the index.

We can extend these observations to the case of AI slop— by which the aesthetic forms of these images are articulated upon their non-sense, their "inhumanness." We can search in the Niche Apple for an auratic experience in the gaze, or a "contemplative immersion" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 119), but it is the process that Benjamin refers to as "reception in distraction" (1935; 2006, p. 120) which indexes our orientation toward this gaze. AI slop asks the receiver to call upon and evaluate another sort of practice defined by the exhibitory wandering of the scroll, the click, and the look—to search for the returned gaze of the object as Benjamin did with Kafka, and find only the task to make sense of the collective online gaze mediates meaning through LLM-generated images. From here, we have to ask if the Niche Apple can offer an *actionable* gaze, and whether a call to a change in habituation can be mediated by such encounters with the production and circulation of AI slop.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the aesthetic relations of AI slop through Walter Benjamin's theory of the aura. I posit two variations of the aura, defined in two essays. The first being what I refer to as *quantitative* aura, as outlined in Benjamin's "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006). The primary function of the aura serves to demarcate between "cult" value—the historical, technological, and cultural factors that embedded the work of art in a specific atmosphere of tradition—"exhibition" value—what Benjamin refers to as the "stripping of the veil" in mass cultural artefacts as they enter a common spatial relation with one another. In the "Work of Art" (1935; 2006), Benjamin asserts that mechanical reproduction has permanently abolished the auratic function in the work of art. In turn, the primary function of mass culture exists in its social and exhibitory potentialities.

Benjamin's theory of *quantitative* aura has a rich history in media studies—with scholars extending the general premise of the auratic function in the "Work of Art" essay (1935; 2006) to new digital phenomena, including the emergence of LLM-generative images across the networked commons. One perspective, taking up a positivist frame of *quantitative* aura, asserts that the lack of such auratic space in LLM-generative images banalizes the contemplative and critical potential of the work of art in the age of the digital commons (Bolaños, 2025, p. 6). While others, committing to Benjamin's liberatory spirit in the "Work of Art" (1935; 2006) essay, see generative visuality as freed from the traditional restrictions of the auratic function. (Park, 2025, p. 1814). However, I have advocated for an alternative definition of the aura, found in Benjamin's earlier essay "A Little History of Photography" (1931; 2005) in order to traverse the aesthetics of AI slop with respect to its mediative qualities.

In conclusion, I argue that Benjamin's theory of *qualitative* aura—the indexical relation between the gaze of the receiver and the gaze of the cultural artefact (1931; 2005, p. 517)—offers a productive frame to study the strange, weird, and "sloppified" forms of LLM-generative visuality. To "compulsively search for the gaze" (Hansen, 2008, p. 341) in images such as the Niche Apple, we can move beyond a certain predetermined answer to the negative polarities of AI slop—this being, its inherent inhumanness: devoid of spirit and sensuous expression. Instead, it might be useful to interpret the sheer *ugliness* of AI slop as precisely its primary auratic function. By doing so, we can give proper shape and form to generative visuality, rehabilitating such ugliness as reflecting none other than ourselves and our mass culture amidst the post-digital turn. With this understanding in mind, I now turn to critically

assess the politics of AI slop upon its exhibitory features—traced through the aesthetic works of Benjamin's conjecture and into the twenty-first that the shared digital commons finds itself in.

Chapter Two: The Political Aesthetics of AI Slop

"*No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality.*" – Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," 1927; 1996, p. 3

In a 1934 letter, Walter Benjamin, speaking through playwright Bertolt Brecht, emphasised that we must not "start from the good old things but the bad new ones" (Benjamin, et. al, 1938; 2020, p. 106). When approaching AI slop as a novel social and technological phenomenon, this injunction is a useful starting point in our effort to examine the aesthetic and political relations of AI slop. By evoking this maxim, Brecht criticised philosopher Georg Lukács for his nostalgic attachment to "the old masters and the good old days of bourgeois culture" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 12). Likewise, examining the politics of AI slop requires us to wade through the muddy waters of the digital commons—leaving behind the internet credo of the "good old days" on our way out.

Scholars haven't yet accounted for the way the politics of LLM-generated images are encoded at the aesthetic level of form, experience, and judgement. To the extent that the political has been an important frame in discussions of AI slop, it has primarily entailed a political economic analysis of the conditions of production surrounding LLM-generative technology. There has been a comprehensive body of literature dedicated to studying the phenomena through a political-economic frame surrounding the advent of low-quality generative content (Bak-Herrie, et. al, 2025, p. 3504). For example, the concentration of power within the Silicon Valley 'Big Five' (Alphabet, Meta, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon) and

related large language model industries has driven scholarly concern about ownership, energy intensification, and ecologies of infrastructure. (Dyer-Witheford & Mularoni, 2025, p. 20). In recent years, a Marxist political economy of generative technologies has begun to shape approaches to considering their widely felt political implications. Along this conjecture, Martyn Egan (2024, p. 2) discusses how LLM technologies reflect a further development of capitalism through the labour process and social value of labour, with an emphasis on the recuperative capture of value in algorithmic models. Other researchers have been interested in the politicalised distributions of data in the computational systems of LLM technologies that point toward a set of epistemological and ethical stakes about the proliferation of "generativity as politic logic" (Amoore, et. al, 2024, p. 7). In other words, how the coding of a set system of beliefs, bias, and knowledge systems change the output of LLM-generative imagery through a particular ideological disposition. Further ventures frame the politics of LLM-generative technologies through its material systems, with analytical attention to algorithms, training data, parameters, transformers, and tokens (Dyer-Witheford & Mularoni, 2025, p. 23). However, these studies do not explore the way a politics of LLM-generative visuality operates at the register of aesthetic form and reception.

This chapter argues that Walter Benjamin's theory of political aesthetics provides us with an alternative framework. I draw on Benjamin's work to argue that the aesthetic experience of AI slop is intrinsically tied to a politics of visuality that shape what can be seen, how it is seen, and whose perspectives prevail. Specifically, I emphasise the ways political experience is constructed through the cultural and receptive practices of LLM-generative images. In order to examine the political aesthetics of AI slop this way, I take up two key ideas proposed in the epilogue of Benjamin's third version of "The Work of Art" essay—the "aestheticisation of politics" and the "politicisation of art" (1935; 2006, p. 122). To illustrate these points, I

closely read two textual examples of AI slop and examine how, or if, such cultural artefacts can reflect Benjamin's conception of political aesthetics (1935; 2005, p. 121)—that is, whether or not AI slop presents us with the aesthetics of domination, or an interrogative practice. By way of an answer, I argue that AI slop complicates notions of politicised images in a digital context, in that LLM-generative images are political explicitly upon the non-transmission of overt meaning-making signifiers. Expanding on existing research that examines encoded belief systems into the generative output of AI slop, I implicate the phenomena as an emergent resource for 'sense-making' in the context of slop-saturated digital ecosystems. This is because AI slop provides us with a set of aesthetic styles that can radically undermine and challenge the structural basis of LLM-generative technologies in our daily digitally mediated lives. By taking up a Benjaminian line of analysis, I interpret AI slop as a potential site of politicisation. I frame AI slop as a site of political aesthetics—not just because of its ugly, "sloppy" appearances, but because of the very function of LLM-generative visuality as a meditative, meaning-making practice of political aesthetics. Lastly, in complicating an analysis of LLM-generated images as didactic forms of visual communication, I argue for a counter-approach to interpreting AI slop as an open-ended site of critique on part of the digital commons. In doing so, I articulate a contemporary relationship between Benjamin's key oppositional framework and AI slop once viewed as unique cultural artefacts holding claim to a politics of reception. More broadly, this chapter will attempt to frame the political aesthetics of AI slop as a culminative development in our approach to the production and reception of images in our digital habituations.

Methodologically, to demonstrate the politics embedded in the form of AI slop more generally, I will focus on contrasting examples that share an incidentally common element—reptiles. In order to do so, I will conduct an analysis of two LLM-generated images. One

being an image shared by the United States Department of Homeland Security on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, standing for a column of ICE (Immigrations and Customs Enforcement) uniformed alligators guarding an immigration detention facility. The other image taking up our key focus is one that served as a popular example of "generative memesis"—defined as the hybrid user-LLM-generative spreadability and production of AI slop on social media platforms (Chang, et. al, 2024, p. 5)—Crocodilo Bombardiro, an LLM-generated crocodile-bomber plane hybrid. To illustrate how Benjamin conceives both sides of the political aesthetic, a reading of Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and the collaborative surrealist practice of the "Exquisite Corpse" will inform the analysis. While both of my chosen examples of AI slop hold overtly politicised elements in their own curious way, the task here is to illustrate how Benjamin's broader problematic between art and politics expresses itself clearly in a receptive analysis of AI slop.

2.1 Aestheticised Politics

In the third edition of the "Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935; 2006), Benjamin provides a working definition of "aestheticised politics" through an account of the then contentious political position of the new media in the early 20th century. Of primary interest, for Benjamin, is how the emergence of European fascism inserts forms of aesthetic expression into the domain of an "increasingly proletarian[ised]" (1935; 2006, p.122) public sphere. In this context, Benjamin accounts for "aesthetics" in his broader theory of the mediative process enabled by new technologies of reproduction (Eiland, 2003 p. 59). In his view, the cultural role of the aesthetic finds itself at a crossroads between its historically dominant function of form *a la* "disinterested pleasure" and a new "shock" inducing function to be reconstructed from the ground up. The aesthetic mode of expression allows the masses to receive and identity themselves in ways that are appropriated and

extended from the work of art, while keeping the productive forces of capitalist accumulation, production, and industry unchanged (Benjamin, 1935; 2005, p. 122). Importantly, for Benjamin (1935; 2005, p. 121), the utilisation of mass media on the basis of such identification contributes to the "aestheticisation of political life" at the most fundamental level. As Martin Jay (1992, p. 45) notes, Benjamin's own remarks on aesthetics as a differentiated realm from society—often identified with the auratic "weight" derived from tradition—supports the aestheticisation of politics as "the victory of spectacle over the public sphere." Consequently, aestheticised politics reduces the public to the passive "masses". The negative realization of the doctrine "l'art pour l'art"—art for art's sake—in all areas of cultural production and mediation allows aesthetic experience to shape and constitute how the masses identify themselves with politics. Therefore, for Benjamin (1935; 2006, p. 122), the aestheticisation of politics signals the consummation of l'art pour l'art. As domination creeps into everyday political life, the public are given the opportunity to assert themselves through a process of symbolic self-identification in the artistic gratification of the work of art—or that which is deemed beautiful by relations of power.

In the context of the aestheticisation of politics, the new media apparatus, for Benjamin, presents a new complication for the production and consumption of works of art. Technology in service of *cultural* production appears to increasingly enter the production of political *warfare,* thus rendering in material terms, the "mobiliz[ation] [of] all of today's technological resources while maintaining property relations" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 41). It is precisely the ascendancy of "pseudo-aesthetic" contemplation, once entered into the general public sphere, which presents for the masses a method to come face to face with themselves "especially suited to the camera" (Benjamin, 1935, 2006, p. 54). As mass technological production increasingly proliferates, expands, and intensifies—so too does the social

reproduction of the masses themselves (Benjamin, 1935, 2006, p. 54). It is here that the aesthetic, leveraged in opportunistic ways by the ruling political apparatus, takes on an overtly political dimension. Here, the sensuous experiences unifies the masses in an elementary and spatial sense —from the theatre halls, cinema, the spectacle of the rally, to the most ordinary and mundane aspects of daily life—while tearing them away from the realm of revolutionary political collectivity. In this respect, the aestheticisation of politics inscribes, for Benjamin (1935; 2006, p. 41), the "supreme aesthetic pleasure" of self-annihilation. To illustrate this, I will take a closer look at how Benjamin's argument concretely works in the filmic examples of his own historical moment amidst the rise of Nazi Germany.

Scholars have assumed that Benjamin was aware of Leni Riefenstahi's 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, perhaps the most infamous example of Joseph Goebbell's propagandistic film industry amidst Nazi intensification across new forms of mass media (Schiermer, 2024, p. 691; Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 38). In the film, the audience is rendered as a "double spectator" of both the surface of the screen and of the participatory audience encircling the Nuremberg stadium surrounding Hitler. In perhaps an extreme example, the militarization of society is here substantially shaped by the aestheticisation of politics. As Susan Buck-Morss (1992, p. 38) notes, *Triumph of the Will*, interpreted through a Benjaminian frame, allows the receiver to take in the scene with "disinterested pleasure, even when that scene is the preparation through ritual of a whole society for unquestioning sacrifice and ultimately, destruction, murder, and death." Indeed, the disinterested pleasure evoked by *Triumph of the Will* radically reappropriates the traditional aesthetic criteria of the work of art into an explicitly political—and, in this instance, fascistic—sphere of culture.

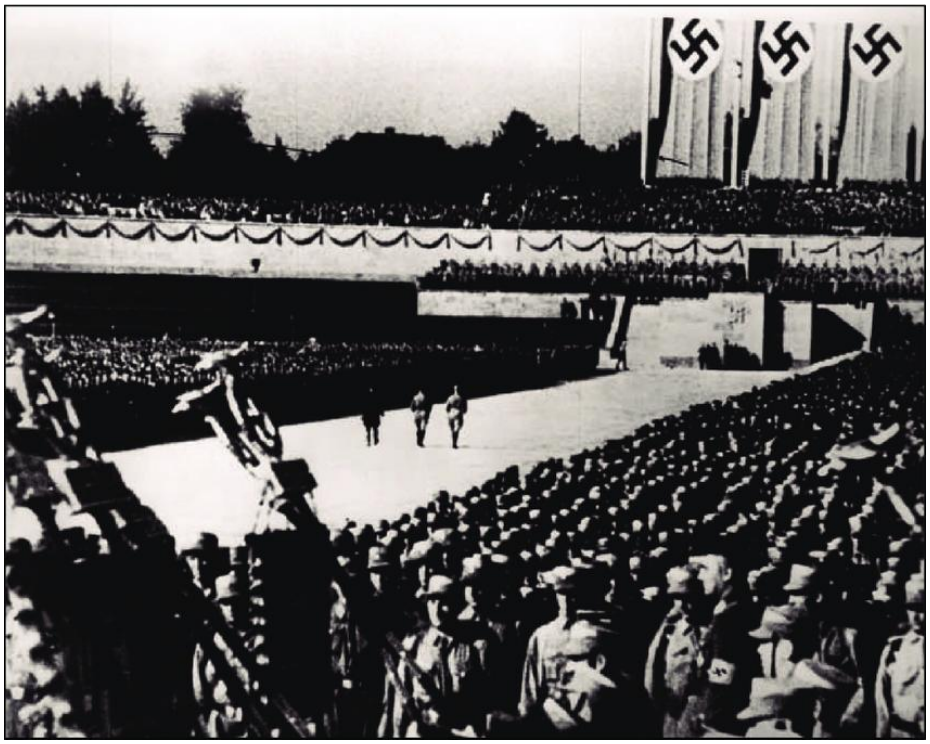


Figure 1: Still from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934), a widely known example of new media intersecting with historical fascism.

What is envisioned here is the "supreme aesthetic pleasure" (Benjamin, 1935; 2005, p. 122) of domination itself, in which emergent technologies of visuality allow the masses to converge around an "image-space" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217) that unifies the aesthetic pleasure of distanced contemplation into the virulent material practices of politics. These stakes grow larger once—as the aestheticisation of politics claims—the disinterestedness of the aesthetic realm comes to constitute a political practice that enacts domination over an organisation of life. The sentiment to which Benjamin is responding is found within F.T Marinetti's (1960, p. 182) *Futurist Manifesto* for Mussolini's Italy. For Benjamin, the manifesto's celebration of the "the beautiful ideas which kill" registers as the "principles of an aesthetic of war" (1935; 2004, p. 122). In Benjamin's view, the fascist form of visual address deploys aesthetic categories of a mythic kind, rooted in beauty, originality, empathy,

and identification (mimesis) in order to compel the masses into subordination. In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl frames the Nuremberg stadium with steady and contemplative ease: the mobilized masses are harmoniously positioned along balanced lines. For the theatre screen, such images of domination provide an "anaesthetic" experience of reception (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 38). The film provides no reflexive space to organise, critique, and question the Nuremberg rally. Rather, the audience is encouraged to view it in terms of the theology of art—as a beautiful, sensuous organisation of space, framing, light, and harmony. In this way, the aestheticisation of politics contributes to the establishment of an oppressive fascist political order.

2.2 AI Slop, Memes, & Reptiles



Figure 2: An LLM-generated image of alligators wearing ICE caps outside a United States detention facility, uploaded by the United States Department of Homeland Security on X.

To use a contentious example of AI slop, we can examine how such formal characteristics lay the groundwork for an aestheticised approach to politics. On June 28th 2025, the X (formerly known as Twitter) account of the United States Homeland Security uploaded an LLM-generated image resembling a squadron of alligators outside an immigration detention facility (Homeland Security, 2025). In the image, four alligators are placed along a uniformed horizontal axis, resembling the "skirmish line" of police and military procedure. They are positioned with relative proximity to the receiver, with each alligator appearing further and further away from the one before—yet all facing the same right-hand direction, looking forward into the distance. In the background, we see stereotypical characteristics of a detention facility: barbed wire, a surveillance tower, and a prison block bathed in dull, overcast colour. However, the black baseball caps—with an abbreviation of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in bold lettering (Homeland Security, 2025)—are the most striking and immediately apparent feature of the image. As posted, this image was accompanied by a caption: "Coming soon!" (Homeland Security, 2025), implying the anti-immigration policy that the Department of Homeland Security would soon enact.

Taken as a whole, the social media post evidently denotes the United States' federally funded immigration detention facility in the Florida Everglades, commonly referred to as "Alligator Alcatraz." At the opening of the facility, President of the United States Donald Trump joked about incarcerated detainees "run[ning] away from alligators." Underscoring the rhetoric surrounding Alligator Alcatraz, as political researcher Caitlin Jones (et. al, 2026, p. 2) notes, lies in how alligators have been historically weaponised in right-wing discourse as immigration officers—standing in as policing technologies for carceral violence. Through rhetorical spectacle, native Southeastern alligators are represented as "aggressive man-eaters, […] mobilised to threaten racialised others—currently, immigrants detained in the

Everglades" (Jones, et. al, 2026, p. 3) By engaging in harmful "generative memesis" (Chang, et. al, 2024, p. 5), the United States Homeland Security X post encodes a particular set of visual cues that correspond to a particular expression of politics—one which asserts itself as a frontier for state violence, gnashing freshwater teeth and all.

In this LLM-generated image—which I will refer to simply as DHS Alligator— we can attempt to demonstrate where and how Benjamin's notion of an aestheticised politics is working in both content and form. Upon a first reading, we can assume, given the indicators of the social media account and linguistic connotations associated with "ICE," that this image represents the anti-immigration ideology turned policy in Donald Trump's second presidential term in the United States (Homeland Security, 2025). When read at its most literal, DHS Alligator presents a celebratory visual politics of immigration control—along similar conceptual lines to what visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzeoff (2011, p. 9) describes as the impression of a "world-generating optic". The social and political position that the Department of Homeland Security holds is expressed in the image as a "classified, spatialized, aestheticised, and militarized" complex of visuality (Mirzeoff, 2011, p. 9). However, focusing exclusively on the explicit ideological messaging in the DHS Alligator post (Homeland Security, 2025) risks an allegorical reduction to mere ideological transmission between institutional actors and networked masses.

With this in mind, let's engage with this image more closely with reference to Benjamin's theoretical framework as a way to theorise whether or not AI slop produces an aestheticisation of a particular set of politics. In order to examine DHS Alligator through Benjamin's notion of the aestheticisation of politics, an initial complication must be outlined

first. When examining the proper function of images in relation to a critique of aesthetic politics, it is necessary to clarify a distinction between digital images and the cultural artefacts of mass media in which Benjamin grounds his analysis. This distinction appears clearly in Benjamin's account of allegory and symbol in politics as such. For as Terry Eagleton (1981, p. 6) notes, Benjamin sought to demystify the *symbol* as an ideological imprint on the work of art. Going further, he notes that "the allegorical object has undergone a kind of haemorrhage of spirit drained of all immanent meaning, it lies as a pure facticity under the manipulative hand of the allegorist, awaiting such meaning as he or she may imbue it with." (Eagleton, 1981, p. 6). It is precisely Benjamin's approach to the hidden power of the symbol which finds a particular demonstration in the receptive practices of AI slop as an aestheticised politics. Because LLM-generative imagery bears no immanent meaning behind the expression of pre-existing training data, it is a fitting, yet potentially dangerous, communicative tool for state actors to interject into the digital commons. To recall, in reading Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* through Benjamin's set of concerns in the epilogue of "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006), I have shown that the aestheticisation of politics allows for the viewing of a militarised form visuality with disinterested, and ultimately self-alienated, pleasure.

In this way, we could assume that DHS Alligator seeks to demystify the ideological imprint—as an expression of anti-immigration policy distinctly tied to the United States—in the same way that fascism expects from war "the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 122). We might be encouraged to engage with the image as a source of supreme aesthetic pleasure—encapsulating the militaristic politics of ICE as something to laugh with. But, while the aestheticisation of politics invites us to identify with the symbol, AI slop invites us to laugh *at it*—or more realistically, raise critical

suspicion of its naked ideological imprints beneath the false symbol of aestheticised detachment latent in the dominant political uses of LLM-generative imagery. AI slop converges around a recursive set of aesthetic stereotypes that reproduce existing styles, motifs, and visual tropes (Helliwell, 2025, p. 14), and which can be immediately identified in DHS Alligator As LLM-generative imagery in a broader sense saturates digital networks, "slop"' emerges as an aestheticised visual language itself—articulating a set of predetermined relations of what can be seen, how we see it, and the power it engenders in the mediative process. For Benjamin (1935; 2006, p. 41), the aesthetics of "self-alienation" manifest most clearly once the politics of domination have been seized and reabsorbed into the totality of life—where the masses can find at once their gratification and subordination.

Therefore, our analysis of DHS Alligator shifts, when considering its position as AI slop, for two demonstrable reasons. Firstly—and most apparently—DHS Alligator is a "sloppy" image in the visual sense. At the outset, the aestheticised politics of DHS Alligator (Homeland Security, 2025) aligns with the discursive unsettlement of online "shitposting" (Woods, 2023, p. 361). While scholars characterise shitposting as "useless, meaningless, or absurd" content (Hower, 2018, as cited in Woods, 2023, p. 363), expressed through a particular "sloppy and amateurish […] internet aesthetic" (Douglus 2014, as cited in Woods, 2023, p. 364), DHS Alligator is different. It is "sloppy," but it is not "amateurish" in the sense that scholars attribute the "imposition of [a] messy humanity" to ordinary social media posts by everyday users. (Douglus, 2014, as cited in Woods, 2023, p. 364). Rather, through the reductive portrayal of the alligators wearing ICE caps, the image represents a flattening and concretising of politics that—unlike the "shitpost"—has no human agency behind the wheel. In Benjamin's terms, DHS Alligator seeks to grant the right to an expression of the material conditions that the image suggests from the vantage point of the dominator, peacekeeper, and

rule enforcer. Moreover, it achieves this form of dominant expression by encoding its political messaging through the "messiness" that AI slop denotes. As a result, LLM-generative images are utilised by state actors such as the Department of Homeland Security as an act of play, of tongue-in-cheek pleasure in similar fashion to the "shitpost." We see this not only in the provocative impression of the alligators as immigration officers standing guarding the detention facility, but also in the act of posting itself—a playful yet pointed performance of state power and political authority. Secondly, under this framework, AI slop attempts to express such a politics of domination, but is constrained by its own aesthetic limitations—representative of a poorly constructed and malevolent visual fragment. In other words, we don't trust the political content of DHS Alligator because its appearance as "slop" engenders a slippery sense of ambiguity in the image. "Fiat ars—pereat mundus" (Let art flourish—and the world pass away), is the motto assigned to the aestheticisation of politics in the work of art (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 42), yet generative technologies do not offer an artistic gratification that allows us to contemplate our self-identification with power in. DHS Alligator does not aspire to be a beautiful work of art, a stirring of collective energies—or in the words of the Italian Futurist manifesto, the illumination of a struggle for "a new poetry and sculpture!" (D'Annunzio, 1923, as cited in Benjamin 1935; 2004, p. 42). Instead, the image seeks to be a persuasive unit of political messaging—using LLM-generative imagery to get the message across at its most elementary sense. Consequently, DHS Alligator expresses its own internal relations as the output of AI slop.

In this way, the visuality of AI slop grants political authority its own sense of expression and self-identification in the aesthetic realm—concretising the expression of power while playing with the ambiguity that it affords. As a result, the aestheticisation of politics running in AI slop works by granting the ruins LLM-generative technologies produce an impression of self-

reflexive authority. As Naomi Stead (2003, p. 7) notes, referring to Benjamin's critique of symbolic authority: "the ruin appears to have lost its totality and descended into fragmentation, but this is a deceptive appearance, since its political program remains intact, and as totalitarian as ever." However, diverging from Benjamin's original premise of the aestheticisation of politics as a culmination of preparing society for "war at the grandest scale" (1935; 2006, p. 41), DHS Alligator encourages the receiver to view the state violence of border control militarisation with detachment—in a sense turning Benjamin's notion of the "shock effect" on its head. There is nothing beautiful, persuasive, or visually compelling in the image—rather DHS Alligator standardizes its political content by instilling a sense of synthetic realism in the production of its myth-making. It is here that the aestheticisation of politics, through AI slop, takes on a monotonous detachment from the symbolic representation of authoritarian power—or, as Benjamin later writes in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the "state of emergency in which we live" (Benjamin, 1940; 2023, p. 4). By extending the non-agential "shitposting" to LLM-generative forms of visuality, DHS Alligator aestheticizes its politics by affirming its own representational power. However, this power can only be upheld if we receive the image passively—a feature that the politicisation of art seeks to interrupt and subvert.

2.3 Politicised Aesthetics

Benjamin saw the aestheticisation of politics working in the propaganda of Nazi Germany, but he also offers his own theoretical response in the "Work of Art" (1935; 2006, p. 122) essay—the "politicisation of art." In order to differentiate our terms more clearly, let's examine Benjamin's alternative approach to the political aesthetics of art. In Benjamin's view, the dangers shown in his analysis of fascist political aesthetics invite us, in turn, to "politicise art" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 122). That is, to use aesthetics in the service of

political goals in a way that resists the all-encompassing consummation of "l'art pour l'art." As the "communist" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 122) response to fascist aestheticisation—this opposing model argues for the production of a participatory, reflexive, and interventionist politics made possible under the potentially democratizing force of the new mass media (Lindroos, 1998, p. 23). Unlike efforts to aestheticize the political, the politicisation of art entails making an aesthetic intervention into the social field that simultaneously exposes the limits of its emancipatory potential at the same time. In this way, cultural artefacts are not in subservience to the dominance of any political order, but rather open up new spaces of self-reflexive critical activity amidst material struggle.

This alternative approach to the political aesthetics of the new media isn't defined in prescriptive terms. Instead, Benjamin's notion of the "politicisation of art" (Benjamin, 1935; 2005, p. 122) gestures at a quite different, and far more difficult task.[3] This being, the process of *undoing* our seduction of the aesthetic by passing through a more interrogative and collaborative space in the public sphere—and certainly, the digital commons. From the vantage point of contemporary criticism, Benjamin's account of a "politicised art" in "The Work of Art," (1935; 2006) is clearly indebted to the early twentieth century crisis of Nazi fascism, and thus falls short of accounting for the image-based culture we are currently situated in. As theorist Michael Löwy (2024, p. 95) puts forth: "the Soviet Union appeared to Benjamin, as it did to many left-wing intellectuals throughout Europe, as their only ally in the face of the fascist menace." With these historical factors in mind, Benjamin's call to

[3] For a film—for example—to be charged with revolutionary potential, the mode of experience that the receiver enters into is one that inverts the traditionally aesthetic sphere of contemplation. The absorption of mass works of art allows the capacity for an instructive sense of disinterestedness, allowing for the sensuous of the visual to intersect down to the political and social level. As Benjamin scholar and English translator Howard Eiland (2003) notes, Benjamin's productive method of distraction—as opposed to what we might call *mere* distraction—anticipates a decentred and kinetic mode of reception. One that articulates, for example, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic method of "montage thinking" (p. 59). In this sense, the effort to "politicise" art does not necessarily require us to reject the role of the aesthetic in political life and sense-making. Rather, Benjamin is arguing for a creative, productive, and interrogative approach to the position that mediation holds in our culture.

challenge the crisis in fascism with an explicitly "politicised" utilisation of art in response to fascism need not only be a poorly-aged adherence to the Soviet realism of Stalinism—that is, as an effort to "make culture a vehicle for Communist propaganda" (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 4). Instead, we can interpret the "politicisation of art" (1935; 2006, p. 122), along with Benjamin's insistence on the opening up of space for critical thought, as a vital source of alternative cultural habituation amidst such political uncertainties.

An illustrative clarification about Benjamin's notion of politicised art is necessary before moving toward a secondary analysis of AI slop with an alternative conception of its political aesthetics in mind. Although the key political aesthetic problematic found in the later "The Work of Art" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006) text had not yet matured, Benjamin's earlier essay "Surrealism" (1929; 2004) proposes a model of politicised art through the joining of an entirely new aesthetic experience with effective material action. According to Benjamin (1929; 2004, p. 216), the surrealists must seek to expel the "bad poems" (p. 216) of romantic bourgeoisie metaphor, of which "the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things [are brought] to the point of explosion" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 210). In other words, Benjamin values the Surrealist movement for its capacity to be both sobering and intoxicating at once, providing the means to recognise the conditions of alienation as they really appear. It is here, as Joseph Weiss notes (2024, p. 272), that Benjamin parallels Marx with regard to the permanent state of instability engendered in the perpetual development of capitalist production:

> "All that is solid melts into air [Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft], all that is holy is profaned [alles Heilige wird entweiht], and humans are at last forced to look at

> their real conditions of life, their mutual relations [ihre gegenseitigen Beziehungen], with sober eyes [mit nüchternen Augen]" (Marx & Engels, 1848; 1975, p. 487)

The imperative to politicise art, developed later in "The Work of Art (1935; 2006), builds upon this moment of sobriety in which people confront their "mutual relations" (Marx & Engels, 1848, 1975, p. 487) by and through a nexus of politics emerging as a "sphere reserved one-hundred percent for images" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217). The site of political action is thus enclosed in the "image space" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217)—in which mediation and activity join in an instantaneous flash. Benjamin's theoretical approach to the Surrealist movement thus illustrates where a "politicised art" might be able to intervene.

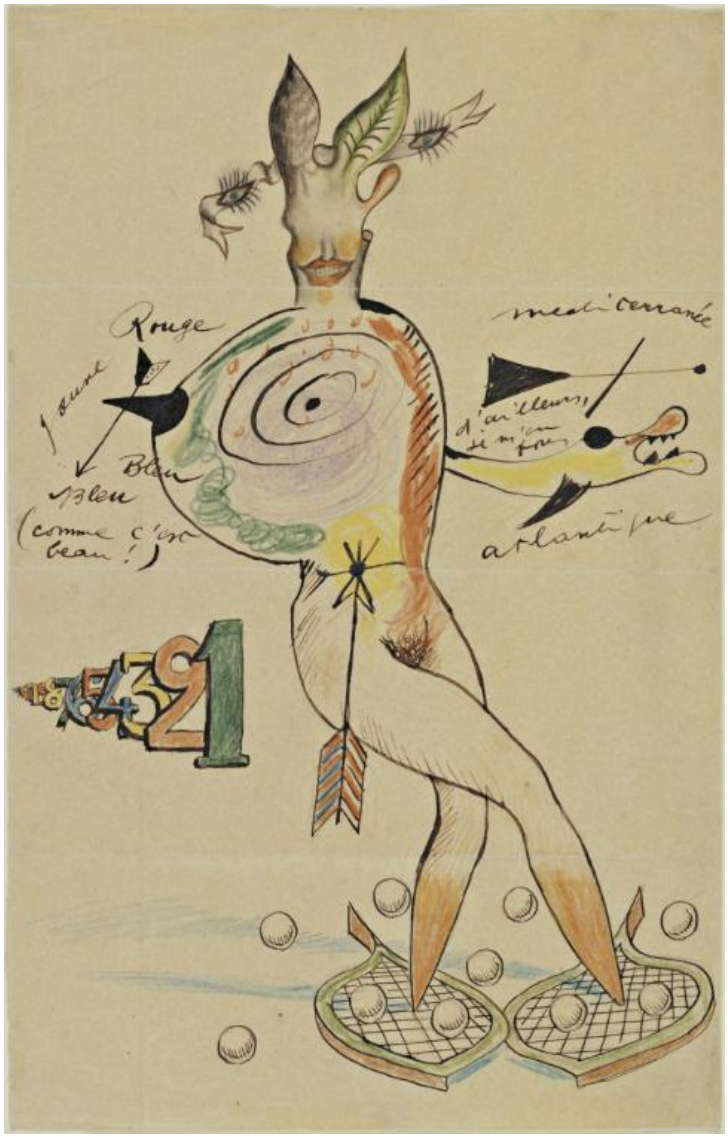


Figure 3: An example of **"**Cadavre Exquis" (Exquisite Corpse), Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, & Man Ray's *Nude* (1926-7).

Let us look at the example of the chance-based parlor game, Cadavre Exquis (Exquisite Corpse) to test Benjamin's conception of a politicised aesthetic. Active between 1926 and 1927, the group of Surrealist artists Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, and Man Ray produced procedurally collaborative sketch works. The rules of the experiment would call upon each participant to contribute to a sheet of paper, through drawing or manual image pasting, and fold the finished product in half before handing it over to the next participant.

What appears, as pictured above in the artist collective's *Nude*, is an experiment in what Benjamin describes as the *residue* of the collective body: "Nevertheless—indeed, precisely after such dialectical annihilation—this will still be an image space and, more concretely, a 'body space'" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217). Read against the questions about the role of the artwork in politics—to bring the thesis of his Surrealism essay back to the epilogue of "The Work of Art" essay (1935; 2006)—*Nude* actively resists the "aesthetic pleasures" of self-identification identified by Benjamin as "the consummation of l'art pour l'art" (p. 42). Instead, the politics of *Nude* are revealed by and through the chance for the receiver, or the masses more generally, to take over the productive work of their own "image space" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217). In this sense, the Exquisite Corpse represents one instance of what Benjamin might refer to as "politicised" cultural artefact because the image is *responding* to a set of pre-given, yet unstable forms of practices and creative processes.

While Benjamin doesn't mention the Exquisite Corpse in "Surrealism" (1929; 2006), the activities attributed to this underacknowledged part of Surrealist art history express the "bodily innerventions" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217) of chance, immediacy, and precognition that Benjamin ascribes to the political aesthetics of the movement. For Hal Foster (2014, p. 52), the Exquisite Corpse represents a "perverse assembly-line" of automation, whereby the recoding of the image along "many different hands" resembles—in a crude sense—the material expression of the collective body itself. Understood this way, the image is the product of an automated process positioned against the repetitive shock and rhythms of organised sensuous experience—"trained" under the new media forms provided by film and photography. Benjamin's account of the opportunities provided by the Surrealists infuses the epilogue of "The Work of Art" (1935; 2005) with a concrete vision of how a politicised art might take shape amidst real political danger. Here, the "politicisation of art" is

left open as a question for the future, but we can already see in “Surrealism” (1929; 2006) how this enormous response to the dangerous aestheticisation of fascist doctrine might start to take shape as a concrete aesthetic, political, and literary movement. However, by 1939, the opportunity provided by the Surrealists to produce shock effects on the collective body—as Benjamin saw in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939; 2006)—had been subsumed and disarmed. Indeed, the aesthetic properties of film provided the properties of “shock” as a method of “formal principle” (Benjamin, 1939; 2006, p. 328), thus further standardizing the aesthetic reception of film to that of a mechanised training of labour. In other words, the shock is not only no longer shocking, but a fundamental appendage in the apparatus of mass media.

However, Benjamin’s account of the political and aesthetic energy of Surrealism can find its echo in the political aesthetic work of AI slop. With an interpretation of “politicised art” through Benjamin’s attitude toward surrealism now outlined, a comparative analysis of surrealist art forms and AI slop can help frame this approach in concrete terms. With this interpretation of politicised art in mind, I argue that it is useful to approach AI slop as formations of a specific cultural conjecture, shaped and constrained by its form and mediative process. To illustrate, I now turn to an analysis of AI slop under Benjamin’s alternative political aesthetic model.

2.4 Bombardiro Crocodilo, Surrealism, & Exquisite Corpse



Figure 4: A popular character in the Italian Brainrot universe published by user @armenjiharhanyan on TikTok, Bombardiro Crocodilo is a military bomber with the head of an alligator. The image was generated by LLM model Legacy DALL-E.

"Bombardiro Crocodilo" provides for us a way to imagine how Benjamin's inquiry into a politicised aesthetics might be pushed to a particular theoretical limit. First appearing on social media platforms such as TikTok on the 20th of February, 2025, Bombardiro Crocodilo refers to an LLM-generated 'character' attributed to the 'Italian Brainrot' canon of AI slop memetic content (Hamilton, 2025). A prominent feature of this subgenre of generative style lies in the combination of seemingly disparate objects, in the case of Bombardiro Crocodilo, a warplane with a crocodile head (Hamilton, 2025). The memetic spread of Italian Brainrot has been enormous on online platforms, in part owing to the absurd humour it shares with broader internet histories of visuality, as mentioned above with regard to the "messy humanity" of the shitpost (Dinu, et. al, 2025, p. 8). Moreover, the advent of "Brainrot" images such as Bombardiro Crocodilo presents another sort of "sloppified" visuality

underpinned by what Fredric Jameson described in experimental video art as “surrealism without the unconscious” (Jameson, 1991, p. 67). This is further intensified by the way the work of AI slop artefacts such as Crocodilo Bombardiro enter and interrupt our social media feeds in diffuse and ambiguous ways—akin to what researcher Laura Glitsos names the “Scroll Land experience” (2025, para. 15). Although the DHS Alligator social media post had been disseminated on social media platforms, Bombardiro Crocodilo gained unique virality through the user-to-user circulation instead of any source connected to state and governmental authority. In this respect, the participatory nature of Bombardino Crocodilo complicates AI slop as an aestheticised politics. Instead, it opens up a way to imagine a different politics of digital space, one where we might, as Benjamin claimed, mobilise, critique, and *politicise* our shared digitally mediated space in experimental and critical ways.

In order to argue for a politicised aesthetics of AI slop, I take up Benjamin’s analysis of Surrealism—illustrated through the Exquisite Corpse—as a working frame for a creative, experimental, and interrogative approach to thinking about the role of art and politics. On first impression, the literal content expressed in the image is emblematic of the repetitive stylistic conventions that embody AI slop more generally. However, this form of AI slop also deeply intersects with Benjamin’s conception of Surrealism—and more broadly a politicised aesthetic— as an attempt to transcend the secular religion of art found in bourgeois realism in profane forms (Wolin, 1997, p. 132). If we emphasise the aesthetic form of the Surrealist’s *Nude* (Fig. 3) and Bombardiro Crocodilo (Fig. 4), they both use the industrial detritus of the machine-animal body—produced as if on a “perverse assembly-line” (Foster, 2014, p. 52). The many hands assembling the grotesque figure represented in *Nude* (Fig. 3) are correlative of the unconscious, LLM-generative “hands” assembling a war-plane-crocodile hybrid we see in Bombardiro Crocodilo (Fig. 4).

Taken together, Benjamin's (1929; 2004, p. 217). politicised aesthetics appear in both images as an attempt to recode "political materialism and physical creatureliness" into a collective revolutionary discharge. AI slop is not only a pastiche of Surrealism; rather, by considering how it is an artefact of predetermined LLM-image producing tools, Bombardiro Crocodilo is "surrealism without the unconscious" (Jameson, 1991, p. 67). Therefore, if we consider AI slop's political potentialities, the surrealism at work is an unconscious, automated, and reified one. However, it still makes an intervention into our shared, collective "image-space" (1929; 2004, p. 217) in the digital commons under a different set of politicised conditions: namely, the infinite scroll that "generative memesis" (Chang, et. al, 2024, p. 4) make central to our experience of AI slop.

In contrast to thinking about AI slop as an aestheticised politics, if AI slop contains the revolutionary energy to politicise the digital commons, we can find it through the way cultural artefacts such as Bombardiro Crocodilo oppose, through our collective sense of LLM-generative aesthetic sensibilities, the reification of the digital commons as a human, bodily, space—rather than what it had always been: an intensified site of production, circulation, and consumption. By seizing on the potential for AI slop as "unconscious surrealism" (Jameson, 1991, p. 67)—we can politicise the internet in its most infrastructural and profane form, rather than consummating the aesthetic characteristics of LLM-generative visuality with our own "self-alienation" tempted by the aestheticisation of the new sensibilities afforded by AI slop at the widest scale (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 122). Bombardiro Crocolido exposes, turns loose, and illuminates our collective imaginaries of the digital commons, revealing the politicised tensions underneath the aesthetic sphere of the

internet, refusing LLM-generative visuality to be separated from the automated, alienating reality of the Slop Land (Glitsos, 2025, para. 15).

2.5 Constellations of Slop, Politics, & Power

This analysis has shown that AI slop can be read through both frames provided by the aestheticisation of politics and politization of aesthetics. Benjamin's political aesthetics remain a crucial theoretical model for thinking through emergent forms of cultural production. I argue that AI slop aestheticizes the political precisely by *resisting* a banal articulation of its own meaning, while simultaneously structuring how our mediative practices are expressed and organised in interrogative ways. AI slop—as toneless, grotesque, and mind-numbing as it might seem in our social media content feeds—has something worthwhile to say about ourselves and our relationships with others. At the same time, Benjamin's emphasis on rescuing the discontinuities out from the rubble of mass consumer culture points us toward a method of politicising AI slop in a more pointedly interventionist sense. Examining AI slop through its political potential requires us to force open and keep open such a space, in which "action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image space is opened" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217). In this respect, AI slop is as reflective of the internal antagonisms of mediation that are bound up in the logic of our networked environments.

If we take heed of AI slop as the detritus of social media and the internet more broadly, such phenomena can be taken up as an imaginary constellation of a counter-visuality with politicised potential. Benjamin's critical method is in his broader theoretical effort to bring out new forms of interplay between the aesthetic and political dynamic of cultural production.

For Eagleton (1990, p. 338), the aesthetic "imitates in its very glorious futility, in its pointless self-referentiality, in all its full-blooded formalism, is nothing less than human existence itself, which needs no rationale beyond its own self-delight, which is an end in itself and which will stoop to no external determination." As we have seen, this is nowhere clearer than the Department of Homeland Security's DHS Alligator post, in which a set of generative aesthetics inform an expressive logic of concreteness tied to the indicators of the image. However, other forms of AI slop disseminated widely across social media platforms resist the "full-blooded formalism" of the image—instead, opening up a unique critical space for new forms of practice and critique. Bombardiro Crocodilo, although representing a similar militaristic puffing out of the chest, circulates as a stand in for the irrationality that the digital network apparatus attempts to foreclose. If we hold both political aesthetic models together, AI slop appears to fit into both—as artefacts of domination and agency. However, the redemptive notion of "politicised art" reflects the broader receptive attitudes toward AI slop more systematically. Framed this way, we can disarm and refuse the aestheticisation of politics by demanding an explicitly political reading of LLM-generative visuality.

Politics do not appear to us directly through art—in this instance, through the appearance of AI slop on social media platforms in their "crude empirical state, adulterated by appearances" (Benjamin, 1935; 2019, p. 34)—but rather through a redemption of their basic elements. However, we can glimpse an energy of subversive potential in AI slop once understood as a living cultural artefact. This is clear in the very term "AI slop" itself as an organisation of critique, or in Benjamin's (1929; 2004, p. 216) terms, an "organisation of pessimism." To recall, this involves discovering the "irreconcilable collision" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217) between the politics and aesthetics of AI slop as a now saturated form of visuality. According to Benjamin, we find this contradiction in the mediative organisation of modern industrial

capitalism. In a contemporary sense, we find ourselves in such an aesthetic organisation of digitally mediated capitalism. The Brechtian maxim: "Don't start with the good old things, but the bad new ones," (1938; 2020, p. 106) crystallises across both Benjamin's time and our own conjecture. It is through this way that AI slop moves through the political and aesthetic dialectic from its negative turns first—as an unsatisfying, derivative, and at times deeply provocative cultural output that has marked the present historical conjecture.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that AI slop— when applied and examined through Walter Benjamin's theoretical framework—can be used to think through the distinction between the "aestheticisation of politics" (1935; 2006, p. 122) and the "politicisation of art" (p. 122) in the context of the digital commons. By emphasising a focus on the new aesthetic formations presented by AI slop, I argue that our engagement with the political conditions that AI slop represent can be established by addressing the visuality of LLM-generative technologies and the mediative processes on social media platforms. Benjamin's groundwork for an "aestheticised politics" requires us to consider this tension beyond such an equation between the industrial-scale fascism using traditional aesthetic categories when extended to the present historical situation. Although Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* trains and rehearses the receiver through projections of collective energy, it does so in a manner that Benjamin objects to as the aestheticisation of political domination. In a similar way, the political visuality of AI slop, given through its affective literalism, ambiguity of meaning, and closed spatial regime, becomes a vital point of inquiry upon its divergence from the aesthetic registers that dominated what Benjamin theorised as an "aestheticised politics" in a fascist and industrialised mode of capitalism. Here, institutional and state actors, such as the United States Homeland Security's "Alligator Alcatraz" X/Twitter post, appear to take steadfast use

of images that are defined by a representationally indeterminate expression of dominant reactionary politics.

AI slop aestheticizes, not for the purposes of orienting a collective politics from the ground up, but for the visual reproduction of an already existing set of relations of power—this, I believe, is its weakness and point of intervention from which criticism can be employed "at important points in this image space" (Benjamin, 1929; 2004, p. 217). In another sense, the generative memesis tied to the cultural artefacts of "Italian Brainrot" produces new aesthetic forms of negotiation across the lines of networked communities. Like the Exquisite Corpse, Crocodilo Bombardiro empties itself of any historical and political content, yet still emerges as a symbol of the emptied out and ceaselessly homogenous cultural ecosystems that have filled up our communicative screens. For AI slop, the refusal to render itself as a legible form of visuality—despite brimming with indicators of our current historical situation—imbues it with telling significance. To respond accordingly, Benjamin's articulation to "politicise art" (Benjamin, 1935; 2005, p. 121) falls short of a determinate answer, but can explain one way to theorise how AI slop can be intervened upon to reveal the contradictions of LLM-generative production and reception. The epilogue provided in the "The Work of Art" (Benjamin, 1935; 2006) reveals a historical urgency for liberatory effects to appear in the face of unprecedented crisis. This is, however, an urgency that reverberates into the politics of LLM-generative visuality, to which a new gathering of pessimism has emerged. As I will argue in the final chapter, the political aesthetic relations of AI slop can offer us a way to situate the broader position that LLM-generative technologies hold as new cultural phenomena.

Chapter Three: The History of AI Slop

> "*Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.*" – Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History," 1940; 2003, p. 402

> "*Amen, Shrimp Jesus*" – Facebook user @Love God&God Love You

In early 2024, a series of LLM-generated images, now colloquially referred to as "Shrimp Jesus," rose to immense popularity on a range of social media platforms. The name itself gives the key thematic components away—a figure of Jesus Christ seemingly composited out of crustaceans. As one of the first viral instances of "sloppy" generative content making its way into social media feeds, the story of this style of LLM-generated content speaks to the broader cultural story of AI slop. For along with the other constellation of images I have explored in the previous chapter—though to a more pervasive degree—Shrimp Jesus has garnered inexplicable popularity online. As internet commentator Max Read notes (2024), such virality lends itself to the presence of a "thriving, global gray-market economy of spammers and entrepreneurs, searching out and selling get-rich-quick schemes and arbitrage opportunities" behind the "strange, alienating flood of machine-generated content slop" (para. 13). Certainly, this is true for Shrimp Jesus, which serves as a prototypical example of AI slop from which we can develop a cultural history from. With this mind, I propose a final way to analyse AI slop through Walter Benjamin's historical-technological framework. As strange and alienating AI slop may be, the phenomenon has roots that can be excavated as artefacts to help better understand the current conditions of our digital culture.

LLM-generative imagery struggles with history. Because of the recency of the phenomenon, the existing literature that examines AI slop through a historical framework forms an underdeveloped yet growing cluster of research. For instance, Fabian Offert (2023) argues that generative image technologies, when prompted to reproduce real historical events, suffer from "syntactic invariability in the case of generally historical prompts" (p, 131). In this view, LLM-generated images, when prompted with historical specificity, are limited by the fact that the content that is able to be produced is constrained by a wide, yet ultimately homogenous, scope of objects and patterns in the given training data. In other words, as Fabian Offert notes, the material infrastructure of technology companies limit the capacity for LLM-generated images to produce "historicised" images beyond a narrow set of visual and thematic characteristics inscribed by LLM-generative training data (2023, p. 132). As a result, LLM-generative tools implicitly produce a reductive and circular remediation of history (Offert, 2023, p. 132). However, although Offert's insights are productive, they focus on the technical specificities of LLM-generative imagery itself rather than situating it in a broader historical context. To productively understand how LLM-generated imagery interacts with this broader context, Rhys Crilley and Robert A. Sanders (2025, p. 4) name the interaction between global media ecologies and digital theatrics as a "resonant slop machine." Their term names a situation within digital ecosystems whereby social and political mediation is increasingly shaped by low-or poor-quality information (Crilley & Saunders, 2025, p. 7). Recent scholarship correctly names AI slop as an effective, albeit nonsensical, incoherent, and at times unappealing, formation for interpreting global events and their position in contemporary history (Crilley & Saunders, 2025, p. 6). Yet while these preliminary readings are useful, they fall short of accounting for what LLM-generative images can suggest about our relationship with historical and technological progress at the cultural level—and why this

Messianic-cretaceous figure in particular has achieved a singular social status in the canon of AI slop imagery.



Figure 1, 2, 3, & 4: A collection of LLM-generated images from the Shrimp Jesus AI slop trend.

In this chapter, I will articulate a critical approach to Shrimp Jesus—one that primarily orients around Benjamin's metaphorical notion of cultural "debris" (1940; 2003, p. 392). My

conceptual focus will be the relationship between AI slop and history, the final of the three relations I discuss in this thesis. In what follows, LLM-generative images are interpreted as (in)effective cultural artefacts that, understood as ruins of history, allow us to process our relationship with technology at the level of reception in the digital commons. I contend that Walter Benjamin's historical-theoretical framework can usefully illustrate the phenomenon of AI slop as the "ruins" or "debris" of historical progress. In order to qualify this frame, I intend to focus critical attention on the contents of our slop saturated ecosystems as—albeit inadequate—signposts for this specific conjecture of digital culture that must be taken seriously as the ruins of cultural history, rather than the inevitable output of our specific techno-social conjecture. To support my argument, I posit that Shrimp Jesus—as a Benjaminian "ruin"—has the capacity to critique notions of deterministic "irresistibility" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392) implicit in the proliferation of LLM generative technology.

In order to advance this argument, I take up Benjamin's metaphorical and textual reading of Swiss-German artist Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," a central figure in "Thesis IX" of his manuscript "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 2003), for its capacity to illuminate the marginal documents of culture and reveal the "afterlives of that which is understood" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 460). Of course, on first impression, Angelus Novus and Shrimp Jesus might appear drastically different in content, no doubt because they have been produced under drastically different cultural and historical conditions. Yet in spite of these clear distinctions, Benjamin's reading of Angelus Novus as yet another uniquely allegorical account of his approach to "think[ing] in images" (Weigal, 1992, p. 7) can be extended to Shrimp Jesus and AI slop more broadly. As I will show, by arresting the "debris" of our networked commons, through direct attention to Shrimp Jesus, we can explore the cultural history of AI slop at the textual level of the image.

3.1 Erlösung!: Preface on Benjamin's Critique of Progress

Writing in a moment of unprecedented crisis, Benjamin's theory of history—outlined in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 2003)—sought to articulate the possibility of hope amidst the conflicts and terrors of his own moment. In doing so, Benjamin presents a critique of two dominant frameworks for understanding history in this period: classical historicism and the Marxist theory of historical materialism. While progress, for the former, is understood as a rational, progressive unfolding of events, the latter sees progress as the result of dialectical friction between social classes and relations of production. The notion of "historicism" can be described as a "chronologically well-ordered total treatment [of history] which accompanies the subject from beginning to end, attempts not to omit anything externally important, and emphasizes the great turning-points of destiny" (Auerbach, 2013; 1968, pp. 547-48). In other words, this mode of historical thinking denotes a pre-destined unfolding of events. This model, for Benjamin, is the mark of standardised history—what he refers to as "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 395). Conversely, according to historical materialism, what we call history is made up of contradictions which reproduce and eventually sublate social relations over time. As a new antagonism emerges in the field, society must adapt accordingly in order to either break with or reconstitute existing material conditions, leading to the advancement of progress through crass struggle (Edwards, 2010, p. 287). Benjamin believed both frameworks to be problematic because of their belief in progress without a redemptive relation to the past. At a glance, classical historicism and historical materialism has a shared emphasis on fossilizing the past into an imaginary "once upon a time" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 396) while being captivated by the mythic immediacy of the present (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 8). Left disappointed by both, the "Theses"

(1940; 1999) provides a philosophy of history that makes the ruins of the past—exacerbated by the productive and imperialist logic of capitalism—its key focus.

While not looking to redeem historicism, Benjamin did try to salvage historical materialism as a theoretical and philosophical model. In doing so, Benjamin articulates two Messianic terms: "weak Messianic power" (1940; 2003, p. 390) and "Messianic time" (1940; 2003, p. 396). According to Benjamin, weak Messianic power refers to the historical capacity with which each present generation is endowed to respond to the unfulfilled claims of the past. In other words, Benjamin defines "weak Messianic power" (1940; 2003, p. 390) as a relation to the past, and the subsequent social effort to "make whole" and redeem the lost causes, failures, and marginal events of the struggling oppressed classes (1940; 2003, p. 392). The relation of the living present generation, including the generations of the past, is "endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 390). What makes this conception of historical materialism "weak" (1940; 2003, p. 390) is our inability to intentionally recapitulate and conjure these relations into a predetermined post-revolutionary future (Khatib, 2013, p. 4). Nevertheless, for Benjamin, we can anticipate the outcomes of domination by tracing a redeemed conception of the present through a reconciliation with what has been lost.[4] On the other hand, "Messianic time" is a form of historical experience that interrupts the linear, homogenous flow of chronological time. Instead of a "casual nexus among various moments" (1940; 2003, p. 397), Benjamin conceives of the present as a moment in which the past and present are brought together in a constellation, making the unrealized possibilities of history available for collective

[4] A well-known depiction of Benjamin's critique can be found in another image—that of the mechanical Turk in *Thesis I* (1940; 19991940; 2003). Within the "Theses" *on the Philosophy of History* (1940; 2003), Benjamin is trying to thread together a conception of historical materialism that challenges two prominent models of understanding: totality and linearity. Of interest, for Benjamin, is a critique of unwavering faith in the dialectical engine of history, in favour of a *self-conscious* historical materialism that is focused on a radically fragmented past.

redemption. In his draft version of the “Theses” (1940; 2003), Benjamin clarifies his stance on the uses of the term: “In the idea of classless society, Marx secularised the idea of Messianic time” (1940; 2003, p. 401). The time of revolution is the secular equivalent of the Messianic time, one which wrenches lost time and history out from linear time. Together, Benjamin’s approach to historical materialism takes on a redemptive perspective, drawing on the repressed revolutionary potentialities of the past to make sense of the present conjecture.

With both terms, and with the “midnight of the century” (Serge, 1933, as cited in Löwy, 2016, p. 45) underway in 1940, Benjamin sought to define a version of historical materialism that can “express […] a certain relation to the past” (Beiner, 1984, p. 424). The redemptive model of historical materialism inscribed in Benjamin’s account of “weak Messianic power” and “Messianic time” sought to “cut through historicism” (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 255), through which both terms subject the past to the historical processes of the present in an urgent flash. While this may seem far removed from the debased reality of AI slop, Benjamin’s concerns nonetheless provides a framework to situate its historical relations as erroneous cultural artefacts of our own time. Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI, articulates this position most strikingly: "AI will probably most likely lead to the end of the world, but in the meantime, there'll be great companies" (Germain, 2026, para. 10). By using alarmist rhetoric within a broader marketing narrative, Altman effectively resigns any structural agency to the inevitability of technological progress—invoking the totalising image of revolutionary apocalypse with it. By drawing upon Benjamin’s distinctive theory of historical materialism in the “Theses” (1940; 2003), we can further examine how AI slop has interjected into the fabric of cultural history through such totalising impositions of progress as suggested by such powerful technology companies. Through a textual comparison between the Angelus Novus and Shrimp Jesus analogous to the argument presented in Benjamin’s “Theses” (1940; 2003),

we can closely examine how—or *if*—a historical analysis of such phenomena can excavate and offer critique of the models of cultural production from which AI slop has appeared.

3.2 Ruins of History: Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*



Figure 5: Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) monoprint, the visual centrepiece to Benjamin's "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003).

To explore Benjamin's account of historical materialism and its relationship to technological progress, I will examine his "angel of history." Benjamin's notion of the angel of history, as set out in "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003), is deeply grounded in a critical image of history built upon a marginal oil transfer monoprint by Paul Klee entitled "Angelus Novus" (1920; 2022). The "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003), along with Benjamin's interpretation of the monoprint, is an often referenced, but also polysemous text in the humanities. The idiosyncratic English

translation by Harry Zohn lays the thesis open to a variety of overdetermined readings in several disciplinary contexts (Hope, 2020, p. 1001). Benjamin scholars Weigal, Smith, & Kutschbach (2015, p. 352) refer to the Klee monoprint as an open ended "thought-image." By doing so, the authors critique a neutralising and deterministic approach to reading Angelus Novus and Benjamin's interpretation of the image. According to Weigel (1996, p. 54), the text has a tripartite structure, but promises no synthesis or resolve. This irreconcilability opens up, for Weigal (1996, p. 347), a multitude of theoretical approaches to the "Thesis IX". Certainly, Benjamin's approach to history is heterogeneous, in which "the has-been [das Gewesene] comes together in a flash [blitzhaft] with the Now to form a constellation" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 462). However, as Susan Buck-Morss (1991) asserts, the notion that formal interpretations of Benjamin's angel ultimately lie in the "capriciousness of the reader" (p. 54) is inadequate for any critical analysis. Angelus Novus is allegorical in its image of a non-synchronous "chain of events" (Benjamin, 19940; 2003, p. 392), but also has a specific aim to challenge such dominant conceptions of historical progress as outlined in the broader project of the "Theses" (1940; 2003). Benjamin's historical-theoretical frameworks are porous in nature, but they are helpful to us only to the extent that we excavate a concrete analysis drawn out from his particular theoretical orientation.

In "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003, p, 392) Benjamin describes the Angelus Novus as "…an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread." Going further:

> This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken

> the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm. (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392)

In this text, Benjamin is describing how the movements of "progress" create an insurmountable "piling wreckage" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392) within the structure of history. Here, the particularities of events which form and serve teleological and standardised time—from the working hours of the masses, the cyclical nature of production and accumulation, to the organisation of political revolt—are rendered from an atemporal perspective. The angel perceives each event as a whole, unbounded by the chains of linearity, and thus hovers above history in its enormity and fullness. Crucially, the particularities of progress are dissolved into one image of barbarism, with the wreckage being the insurmountable consequences of this struggle. Benjamin achieves this through an allegory that links his own text and the referential image. That the angel would like to stay, "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392), denotes a redemptive position toward the past. However, as the ceaseless engine of capitalist production and exchange grinds on, we have only been able to turn backward against the rising pile of "debris" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). The rhythm of history, for Benjamin, is a radically indeterminate process that shows itself most clearly in the "piling wreckage" (1940; 2003, p. 392)—the marginal documents, stray citation, and ugly artefacts that the dominant understanding of history as "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 395) suppresses in the name of a linear and frictionless march forward to Paradise.

Read in this manner, "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003) can be interpreted as an expression of Benjamin's redemptive belief in the revolutionary potential of marginal visual and literary forms as pieces of "debris" charged with subversive energy. The unlikely work of art, the "rags and refuse" of commodity production, and the "stray citation" can be taken up as a method to critically understand our wider relations with a strange new modernity. As Ross (2015, p. 114) notes, Benjamin

> …chose to cite and display history's 'refuse' in part because he wanted to show that even this material could offer a redemptive, revolutionary experience of history. The marginal and only the marginal can really test the validity of a general thesis.[5]

Such an approach, as I will shortly attempt to illustrate, can also be usefully applied to make sense of the historical relations of AI slop—the perceived "rags and refuse" of digitally mediated culture. In short, the objects of history that initially feel unworthy of attention can bring historical tensions inherent in such technology to light. In what follows, I will argue that what AI slop provides is an invitation to redeem a conception of media from the past. Such an impulse for redemption can touch on what it means to have a cultural history more broadly, especially when culture appears to us, as we will later see within the content of Shrimp Jesus, as a reflexive farce.

3.3 Ruins of History II: The Internet's *Shrimp Jesus*

[5] However, we are reminded that the storm and "progress" are one (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392), and that we cannot separate the wider image of catastrophe that the angel of history sees from our own perspective of incremental change. The primary critical force behind *Thesis IX* (Benjamin, 1940; 2003)—although still implicating the dominated classes as the subject of revolutionary activity—is to establish a redemptive relation to the past. For rich discussions on Benjamin's *Thesis IX*, see Alexander Hope's (2020) "Figuring out Benjamin's 'angel of history': 'reading', Angelus Novus and sublime metaphor" in Routledge's *Textual Practice* and Michael Löwy's (2016) "Fire alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the concept of history".



Figure 6: A version of Shrimp Jesus. This LLM-generated image (DALLE-3) represents a figure resembling Jesus Christ assembled from a shoal of shrimp in a devotional pose.

Let us now look more closely at an image of Shrimp Jesus in order to find whether or not Benjamin's notion of history, articulated by the image of Angelus Novus in "Thesis IX," can be used to understand AI slop. For the purposes of close analysis, I have selected one image out of the wider trend that makes up this form of AI slop to compare with Benjamin's angel of history. Shrimp Jesus provides a backdrop for this analysis precisely because of its archetypal status in the AI slop canon and the level of cultural resonance that it has achieved in the digital network commons. Indeed, as internet commentator Di Placido pointed out during the height of this specific iteration of AI slop: "The era of AI-generated spam is upon us, and it looks like Shrimp Jesus" (2024, para 17).

At the very broadest level, Shrimp Jesus is characterised by variations of combinations between the figure of Jesus Christ and crustaceans. For example, common interactions between these two visual components consist of Christ constructed entirely out of a school of shrimp (Fig. 1; Fig. 3). The figure usually assumes a version of either the prayer pose, with outstretched and raised arms, or more notably, of religious crucifixion (Fig. 1; Fig. 2; Fig. 3). Across many samples, marble or plastic textures run up against and merge with contrasting "crustaceous" textures (Fig 2). Moreover, Shrimp Jesus is usually submerged in a body of water (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2). Although in some other iterations, he hovers over an undifferentiated blue ocean (Fig. 3 & 4). In rarer instances, Shrimp Jesus shares two halves of the key features which constitute the figure, as exemplified most clearly in the centaur-esque version of Shrimp Jesus in Figure 4. Overall, the basic units of Shrimp Jesus consist of a relation—of varying degrees, forms, and interactivity—between the figure of Jesus Christ and the visual features associated with crustaceans, or, "crustacean-icity."

The version we see in this specific iteration of Shrimp Jesus (Fig. 6) is useful to us because it encompasses, at a textual level, the characteristics associated with wider variations of Shrimp Jesus:: a figure of Jesus comprised of shrimp, swimming underwater, a "shrimp halo," and—most notably—hands dissolving into a shoal of shrimp (Costa, 2024). In this sense, the image—generated in 2024 with Microsoft Copilot, using a combination of GPT-4o and DALL-E 3 servers—is as an archetypal example of the themes, forms, and characteristics usually associated with this genre of surreal AI slop. At the same time, by examining what Shrimp Jesus reveals about the common types of imagery that LLM-generative technology produces, the image embodies the family resemblances of AI slop more broadly. In this sense, Shrimp Jesus serves as a way into excavating the patterns, motifs, and thematic qualities of AI slop that has resonated in the digital commons. With these factors in mind, this artefact—

like most LLM-generated images without copyright protection—is a historical document of the public sphere at both the figurative and legal level (Li, 2024, p. 272). Alongside the original image upload found on the online database Wikipedia, we find the generative prompt used to create the image:

> A person who looks like Jesus but who is made completely out of live shrimp, swimming underwater in the turquoise ocean, with a shrimp halo, and his hands dissolving into a shoal of shrimp (Costa, 2024).

Using this version of Shrimp Jesus (Fig. 6) as a general basis for discussion, let us now subject these features to a further analysis. By taking heed of Benjamin's concept of the angel of history viewing "the pile of debris" as it grows skyward (1940; 2003, p. 392), I examine the way Shrimp Jesus might both express and bear witness to this "pile of debris".

First, let's examine the image—using "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003) as a guiding theoretical model—at the formal level. Shrimp Jesus and Angelus Novus share several key qualities that embody "Messianic time" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). The first is the sense that both Shrimp Jesus and Angelus Novus are theological figures enacting a failed resurrection of history. Across both images, the primary subjects have connotations of redemption, salvation, protection, and intermediation between the subjects of history. Crucially, Shrimp Jesus is even closer to the position of absolute knowledge than the Angel of history—he is the direct son of God, rather than a heavenly liaison for his will. However, as noted by Benjamin, Angelus Novus is not in control of the unfolding "chain of events" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392) to which he sees one single catastrophe. The angel of history is lost, caught in the midst of contingency, and the scale of the rhetorical storm of progress is greater than the scale of the angel (Hope, 2014, p. 1012). Relatedly, the figure of Christ in Shrimp Jesus is

ambiguously positioned in a vast body of water—beneath the light of the Earth and consequently the light of knowledge and goodness. There is no index of spatiality, and we find ourselves unable to discern the scale of the subject. Looking more closely, the movement, direction, and flow of Shrimp Jesus confronts us with a compositional problem. Shrimp Jesus is either rising up toward the surface, descending down into the depths, or in stasis. Indicated by the posture of Christ's head as looking upward, we can assume that he is moving along the vertical axis. It is here that an important divergence can be made from Angelus Novus. The angel of history moves along horizontal lines propelled by "the storm blowing from Paradise" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392), while Shrimp Jesus appears to mimic the act of ascension. Most notably, this depiction of Christ appears entirely submerged underwater, the spatial depths of which are indexed beyond what we see in the frame. By embedding the son of God in Earthly organic matter—plunged into the wilderness of the sea and its creatures—Shrimp Jesus tells us the story of a failed resurrection, delivered to us through artificial, yet ultimately socially mediative means. Taken together, we can interpret in Shrimp Jesus and the Angelus Novus two theological figures that have gone astray, become disorientated by their surroundings, and ultimately unable to enact their Messianic powers through union. Or, to recall, they wish to "stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). They are both irresistibly propelled—or, for Shrimp Jesus, swamped under the pressure of the ocean—by forces beyond their ordinary means of control, to which they helplessly have their backs turned toward the tableau of the past. For Angelus Novus, this is the catastrophe of domination, Nazism, and the waste products of modernity. For Shrimp Jesus, this is the historical content of AI slop—or, more precisely, the consequences of LLM-generative image production services and the histories of technological progress that they expose.

Shrimp Jesus is a figure of a well-known Messiah—Jesus Christ. Following Euro-American representational traditions, he appears fair skinned—with a sculpted, muscular physique. At a first impression, we can glean from the image the effort to reproduce a familiar set of aesthetic categories, such as the subject of Jesus Christ positioned in the centre of the frame, an equal balance of light and shadows, and a sense of stability in the composition of its unlikely features[6]. He is raising his hands in a devotional pose, reminiscent of the frail heightened pose of Klee's Angelus Novus. It is this pose which Benjamin frames as an image of the storm of progress "…caught in [the angel's] wings" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). Indeed, Shrimp Jesus invites the receiver to feel a distinct sense of ambiguity, akin to what researcher Alice Helliwell delineates as an aesthetics of "norm violation" (2025, p. 3). We can see this in the failure of LLM-generative imagery to produce a consistent relationship between the figure of Jesus and the assemblage of shrimp, underlining an inconsistency between features, textures, and lines distinguishing Shrimp Jesus as a whole from the sum of its parts. Consequently, this image is at once disconcerting to the receiver. Something *feels* off, out of joint, and unfamiliar. More importantly, Shrimp Jesus begs the question of its own existence, with no clear function or purpose it looks to fulfil except for the mere fact of its spam-like presence. The image is brutally "just there"—the arrival of an event, or in Benjamin's (1940; 2003, p. 397) terms, "the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter." In reaction, Shrimp Jesus allows the collective receiver of the digital commons—evident by its virality and cultural significance as AI slop's posterchild—to repurpose the image as a ruin of history through its "secret index" of redemptive potential

[6] Furthermore, we have to bear in mind that the content of the image— "person who looks like Jesus but who is made completely out of live shrimp" (Costa, 2024)—is underwritten by prompted instructions generated by the human user. This discrepancy between LLM and human agency further intensifies the alienating qualities of Shrimp Jesus. In other words, it is imitating—through the ambition of accuracy, fidelity, and adherence to the request of the user prompt—a sense of fidelity that it cannot fulfil for the receiver: namely, an archetypal model of Jesus Christ. However, the question of mimesis and representation is beyond the scope of this chapter. For an anthropological perspective, see Michael Taussig's (2018, p. 127) *Memesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*: "Thus there would seem to be in this world of seeming a deeply puzzling capacity for copying and hence deception in which the "original" and the "copy" fight it out for ontological pre-eminence [.]. And this is why there have to be 'seers.' This is why there have to be healers, persons capable of judging appearance, able to distinguish the different forms of doubling."

(1940; 2003, p. 390). At a practical level, Shrimp Jesus provides us with a unique appeal to the past by situating LLM-generative technologies in relation to the waste products of digital culture. Therefore, analysing Shrimp Jesus presents a crucial moment of opportunity as LLM-generative visuality seeks to standardise and regulate itself into everyday aesthetic experience. Soon, AI slop will be unrecognizable from other forms of visuality—the "slop" will become less liquidly, trashy, and immediately identifiable—but we can still interrupt and rescue these cultural artefacts from the melancholic imperative of progress.

3.4 The Messianism of Shrimp Jesus

Going further, let us take a closer look at how the affective work of debris, failure, and Benjamin's "rags and refuse" (Ross, 2015, p. 144) operates within Shrimp Jesus. The composition of Shrimp Jesus as the arrival of a Messiah can be interpreted through Roland Barthes's notion of the "message without a code" (1961; 1978, p. 17), by which a perfect "analogon" —an immediate and obvious sense of obviousness within the content—is detected on first impression. The aesthetics of Shrimp Jesus are only present in the image in order to communicate the essential components raised by the generative prompt, using weights derived from the LLM-generative dataset to guess the most common denominator impression of Jesus Christ assembled out of crustaceans. Consequently, Shrimp Jesus is an artificially generated analogon, the reproduction of an (in)human mental image grafted onto the banalized visuality of AI slop—or, to recall, a type of surrealism "without the unconscious" (Jameson, 1991, p. 67). At the heart of its form, we see that Shrimp Jesus—although "good enough" at doing the job of imagining a "person who looks like Jesus but who is made completely out of live shrimp" (Costa, 2024) arguably does only that. In this respect, the image is a "message without a code"—asking little of the receiver but to accept Shrimp Jesus into our visual lexicon of the internet. For example, prominent visual features,

such as the figure of Jesus Christ, the environment that the figure is surrounded by, and the "crustacean-icity" of the composition, are flattened, compressed, and made legible into an extremely dense image. As one Facebook user who often shared Shrimp Jesus images on social media platforms expressed in an editorial: "I don't think anybody is going 'Hallelujah' for our shrimp lord" (Yang, 2024). The surrealism of Shrimp Jesus is indeed apparent as a hackneyed combination of the sacred and the profane. But such surrealist attitudes can point us toward Benjamin's engagement with the marginal forms of culture that inform the "wreckage" of history (1940; 2003, p. 392). Shrimp Jesus is an example of—to recall Brecht—the "bad new [things]" (Benjamin, et. al, 1938; 2020, p. 106) that we can use to examine our cultural history. It's precisely the lack of prescribed meaning in the image that makes AI slop a rich cultural artefact of our present moment.

At the same time, as the term "AI slop" implies, Shrimp Jesus is a marginal form of culture, a piece of cultural debris and in this respect it unsettles our projections of historical content onto imagery. The "angel of history," as Alexander Hope (2014) argues: *"*constructs a metaphorical analogy between seeing 'events' and the links of a chain (Kette, also shackles or necklace), binding, enslaving us both to and with this narrow and restricted view of history" (p. 1006). Read through this lens, the Angelus Novus can be understood as an allegory for Messianic time. Rather than experiencing the continuum of history with weak Messianic power as humanity does, with the present informing the past, the angel experiences everything all at once. Whereas Benjamin's (1940; 2003, p. 396) "angel of history" experiences the present as "the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation," Shrimp Jesus takes this into the current conjecture by expressing this abbreviation of history in the structure of the image itself—as a cultural ruin produced by mediated images in the LLM-generative models training data. By drawing on familiar biblical tradition we may

assume, in viewing the figure of Christ, that he stands above the "chain of events" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392) which binds and enslaves us to present time. From this perspective, Shrimp Jesus is "shot through with splinters of Messianic time" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 397). Viewed this way, if Shrimp Jesus stands in for Messianic time, the collective commons can read its relation to the past inscribed in their engagement with the image through the lens of "weak Messianic power" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 390). By providing an interruption in the flow of time—and correlatively, the flow of the online scroll, Shrimp Jesus enables us to interpret AI slop under a redemptive lens—to read in the image a certain "utopian potential which is dormant even in the most depraved forms of experiencing as collective unconscious meaning-creating activity" (Markus, 2001, p. 11).

From this perspective, Shrimp Jesus can be read through Benjamin's approach to the angel of history as the call to restore a "genuinely Messianic face" (1940; 2003, p. 403) to our reading of history—and the rags and refuse of contemporary artefacts swept along with us. In the typical "sloppy" register of LLM-generative image models available at the time of its production, the technical failure of Shrimp Jesus indicates the reality of its content as the rags and refuse of digital culture. Indeed, it is "amateurish" in form, such that we can clearly find, by way of its thematic signifiers inherent to AI slop, recognisable mistakes and errors in Shrimp Jesus: extra fingers, inconsistent visual arrangements, and an alienating competence in achieving vague photorealism (Kommers, C, et. al, 2025, p. 3). As Costa's (2024) prompt suggests, the majesty of the Messianic figure is in stark contrast to the apparently arbitrary nature of his assemblage: a school of shrimp. Noticeably, the shrimp do not entirely make up the composition of Jesus and his halo, but intersperse and conjoin with a marble-like texture ascending—or, descending—through the crystal body of water. The infinitely reproducible, yet ultimately inadequate find their homes in both examples. Look, for example, at how the

textures of the crustaceans blend, phase, and reconstruct in and out of the marble structure of Christ. In this respect, a key difference can be named between Shrimp Jesus and the Angelus Novus: Shrimp Jesus is a ruin of—rather than a reaction to—history. Unlike the "angel of history," which is a figure that Benjamin appropriates from an existing cultural artefact in order to repurpose as an allegory for the totality of Messianic time, Shrimp Jesus is the marginal product of the totality itself. In other words, the image is a preformed "rag and refuse" that we can in turn "cite and display" (Ross, 2015, p 114) to indicate our own present historical conjecture.

Thus far, we see that Shrimp Jesus situates the phenomenon of AI slop in the historical context of digitally mediated life. In more concrete terms—with attention to the marvel, awe, shock, and disgust that AI slop engenders—Shrimp Jesus signifies the path on which contemporary technological progress has taken our digital culture. It does this by giving us the chance to "open up the past" with relation to the opening of the future (Löwy, 2016, p. 115). Shrimp Jesus presents us with an image of the sheer banality of progress. It is a digital ruin, but a ruin that can be usefully recuperated into a critique of linear progress made manifest in digitally networked society. Moreover, we might go further to say that the endlessly circulatory process of AI slop is enhanced by its sheer vacuousness: Shrimp Jesus places meaningless at the centre of its own history, and thereby intensifies its own *obviousness* as a "message without a code" (Barthes, 1961; 1978, p. 17) for the age of AI slop. Through this frame, Shrimp Jesus gives us a space for critique, or in Benjamin's words, the "organisation of pessimism" (1929; 2004, p. 216) against the banalities that have configured our digital ecosystems. In our terms, historicising AI slop as a natural, inevitable, and "irresistible" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392) progression toward—as we have seen in the release of higher definition generative image models such as Midjounrey v6 and Stable

Diffusion 3—the promises of a technological utopia. What we see in front of us will indeed get better, but AI slop need not name fidelity, quality, and form. Instead, the term can be used to capture, like Shrimp Jesus left crucified and frozen underwater in digital sludge, a detour in our cultural history. This detour, however, can be a useful means to question what images can *mean*, *do*, and *open up* for our communicative commons. More precisely, we need to take a closer look at how Benjamin conceives "weak Messianic power" in his "Theses" (1940; 2002) in order to extrapolate this further into Shrimp Jesus in order to postulate whether or not the figure, like Benjamin's angel *bearing witness* to history, is capable of seeing the future—the post-revolutionary promises of "Paradise" inscribed in technological progress.

3.5 After Slop: On Post-Revolutionary Speculation



Figure 7: Francisco De Goya's *A Way of Flying* (1797-9), depicting what he referred to as "the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society" (Green, 2017, para. 1) amidst the technological speculations of the late Enlightenment.

What history does Shrimp Jesus see? If we read Shrimp Jesus as an image of history synonymous with Benjamin's own angel of history, we must emphasise the way we—as ordinary users—can potentially embody weak Messianic power (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 390). For if AI slop does anything historically, it calls upon us to read our culture *backwards* in order to find our way along the paths that have led to "sloppified" media environments. The implications of AI slop for thinking through new forms of media and technology as a means for social, political, and cultural flourishing are manifold, and they can be understood through the lens of Benjamin's critique of progress as the storm of catastrophe (1940; 2003, p. 392). In conclusion, I want to argue that Shrimp Jesus—as a cultural artefact of our digitally mediated history—can potentially provide us with the means to reevaluate what it means for culture to have a trajectory of progress at a broader level. The angel of history has its back turned to the past for a reason, and that is to "still the storm, to bandage the wounded, reawaken the dead and mend what has been put asunder" (Löwy, 2016, p. 67). However, it can only project this desire by having an endowed sense of agency, which Shrimp Jesus fails to achieve.

Until now, we have scarcely considered the theme redemption of which can pertain to both how Benjamin's angel of history and the internet's Shrimp Jesus bear witness to ruin. In "Thesis IX" (1940; 2003) Benjamin makes it clear that Angelus Novus has its own internal conceptions of temporality. It exists in a continuum of past, present, and future, and even has its own desires to redeem the oppressed classes of history—those who have been condemned and damned victims in the name of progress from irretrievable obscurity: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is

blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them." (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). Therefore, Benjamin's angel of history *sees* history unfolding before its eyes, and has its own desires that it wishes to enact—to recall, "he *sees* one single catastrophe…" (1940; 2003, p. 382). Nevertheless, the Angelus Novus is thrown into the world, pushing against the frictions of the Storm which bind and enslave material and social activity to a restricted chain of events (Hope, 2014, p. 1006).

By having the ability to anticipate how the singularities of the past will form as future wreckage, the angel is able to imagine—through its own subjective position above human activity—a post-revolutionary political situation (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 392). What Marx envisioned in classless society as the anticipatory social system distinguished by new features currently unthinkable in the present situation (1884; 2016, p. 80), Benjamin saw too in the weak Messianic power inherent in his reading of cultural history. The redemptive quality found in Benjamin's reading of Angelus Novus lies in its capacity to perceive, imagine, and conjure up a positive conception of the future out from the debris of oppressed history. Likewise, Benjamin, in a moment of crisis in Nazi occupied France, chose to attribute Paul Klee's monoprint with a counter-reading of historicism as a mere collection of alleged moments of continuity (Löwy, 2016, p. 94. This can only be achieved by endowing Angelus Novus with a particular form of redemptive desire, which brings it to life through its fundamental relation to the past.

In contrast Shrimp Jesus, as the cultural and technological construct of LLM-generative technology, does not have the capacity for the historical awareness that Benjamin's ascribes to the angel of history. It does not see the wreckage of history, as Angelus Novus does as "one

single catastrophe" (Benjamin, 1940; 1996, p. 392). However, the collective commons of the internet *can*, by associating this wreckage, as a marginal cultural document, with "slop." On this basis, we could potentially assume that Shrimp Jesus is an inverse mirror of our cultural history, epitomised and flattened by LLM-generative technologies. By refusing to concede that Shrimp Jesus *sees*—through the perspective of Messianic time—we assign a different form of power to it. Namely, its potential to reflect our own conditions back into our cultural history through our own capacity to enact weak Messianic power when processing, critiquing, and evaluating AI slop as a cultural document of our contemporary history, one which is increasingly mediated through oversaturated and "sloppified" information ecosystems.

AI slop remediates images of the past in order to produce images of the present. And yet, Shrimp Jesus speculates a version of the future that was built on the "piles of wreckage" to which Angelus Novus bears witness to (1940; 2003, p. 392). In other words, AI slop contains not a highly sought after "view from nowhere" (Nagel, 1989, p. 25) of objective perspective, but rather reproduces the perspective of our own culture, politics, and history throughout the past. We can identify this by the way Shrimp Jesus represents a failed resurrection through Messianic time, he is lost and submerged beneath the chain of events while at the same time holding no locatable sense of agency behind the production of the image. LLM-generative technologies treat the whole history of human culture—albeit drawn from the inherent Eurocentrism of dominant technology companies—as a homogeneous set of training data (Bansal, et. al, p. 356). In this way, Shrimp Jesus more closely produces a model of history as "homogenous" and "empty" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 395) that the angel of history can only helplessly observe. Understood this way, Shrimp Jesus arguably conceals in itself a

critique of teleological linearity through its very inability to see, react to, and anticipate the revolutionary future that LLM-generative technologies claim to hold over us.

As I have argued, the historical relations bound up in Shrimp Jesus allow for the possibility of a redemptive critique. We see an image of the Messiah adrift, submerged, gone astray, and reunited with organic, albeit crustaceous, flesh. It is a striking composition, one that can be textually delineated along similar lines to Benjamin's meditations on the angel of history in "Thesis IX." However, the most crucial departure from Angelus Novus doesn't lie in its visual, syntactic, and thematic structures. Rather, its most significant divergence from the Angelus Novus lies in its relation to history. While Benjamin's angel of history is *alive* in the sense that it sees the history of class struggle as a single compressed moment, filled with the "presence of the now," Shrimp Jesus is situated in "the homogenous, empty time" of LLM-generative visuality (1940; 2003, p. 395). The difference between the two images lies in their relative proximity to totalising impositions of past, present, and future. Commenting on the contingency of fashion, which can be extrapolated to the fashions of contemporary technological phenomena, Benjamin posits that "Fashion has a nose for the topical" (1940; 2003, p. 395). Going further:

> …no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger's leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution. (1940; 1990, p. 395).

Perhaps the angel of history, as a Messianic witness to the unfolding nature of historical materialism, wishes to see the leap in the open air of history as much as it wishes to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (1940; 2003, p. 392). To move forward

into the future, with the fullest sense of a redeemed past, is the dialectical motion of pre-revolution into post-revolution. A golden future-time embodied by Benjamin's "now-time" [Jetztzeit] (1940; 2003, p. 395) fulfilled by Messianic time. Conversely, the internet's Shrimp Jesus is only capable of positing a *speculative* future marked by its own contingencies. In the absence of embodiment—to make itself unexpectedly "flash up" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 381) to the historical subject—AI slop can only reproduce a petrified image of history, and consequently, a petrified tiger leap into the future; one which provides an anaesthetic to our engagement with media. Art allows us to process the world in uncertain times, to speculate the future as it relates to the presence of the now. For LLM-generative images, there is no primary subject at the wheel except the dead, remediated images of the past. Only ourselves, as—often unwilling—participants navigating the "Enshittocene" (Doctorow, p. 7) of the internet, can we imagine a different kind of future: to seize on the rags and refuse of AI slop, and redeem them as artefacts of our present conjecture. In other words, to situate Shrimp Jesus as a historical ruin—rather than as a reified imperative to the productive logic of progress.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how the historical relations of AI slop can be understood through Walter Benjamin's conception of historical materialism as a redemptive practice of analysis. Running through Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 2003) is a theoretical position that emphasizes the marginal fragments of culture as representative of a current historical situation. It is in this situation, for Benjamin (1940; 2003, p. 391) a "flash[ing]" in a moment of unprecedented danger, that the concept of inevitable progress a "fall of the stream" with which we are moving along (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 393) can be critically unsettled upon its normative lines.

Shrimp Jesus. once cast through a Benjaminian historical analysis, expresses a cultural reaction toward “homogenous, empty time” (Benjamin, 1940; 1996, p. 395). Made pertinent as a “waste product” that has escaped dominant conceptions of progress, and the banality that such progress holds in our networked ecosystems, Shrimp Jesus—in marginal, image-based form—can reveal a crises in the laws of dominant notions of progress felt across the globalised technology sector. This reading shows how Benjamin’s historical thought, although read as mystical, gnomic, and even irrational by critical discourse, emerges from “the very nature of politics as a collective, plural human activity,” as Löwy (2016, p. 110) articulates. As I have shown, this practice begins by taking such images seriously—in the same way that they take *us* seriously as viewers, receivers, clicks, and engagement traffic. AI slop presents us, as participants of digital culture, with a unique opportunity to “activate the emergency brake” (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 402) on the locomotive of irresistible technological progress, and to critically assess the fruits of disappointment they have produced amongst the digital networked commons.

In conclusion, AI slop can invite us to read, interpret, and glean meaning from what it can say about our historical relations with generative technology. Particularly, in the act of detecting the visual characteristics—the clues and tell-tale signs marking slop as a valuable cultural document of history—our suspicion toward AI slop can help us cast a broader discourse surrounding the technologies which have come to increasingly prevail over every day networked experience. Benjamin posits, in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940; 2003), a method of grasping diachronic changes only detectable in hindsight, in the hope of preserving and sustaining a kernel of redemption in the face of disarmament. We can see this

in Shrimp Jesus as an established figure in the story and history of what AI slop has come to signify. The historical phenomena of AI slop—however contemporary it may appear—can be used to bring us closer to the crudeness of the present, and in turn allow us to reflect on the cultural relations which bear onto our fragile media ecosystems

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to examine AI slop as a cultural artefact of digital networked capitalism through aesthetic, political, and historical frameworks. The life and thought of cultural critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin has provided the theoretical focus across each chapter. As I have argued, Benjamin's work offers a valuable resource for rethinking and critically examining the negative turns of the cultural dialectic. In Benjamin's 1935 expose for the *Arcades Project*, he summarises his approach to conceptualising the economic base as an expression of the cultural superstructure of capitalist life under clear terms:

> […] They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements, in the course of waking up, is the paradigm of dialectical thinking. Thus, dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning. With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled. (1940; 2002, p. 13).

If dreaming precipitates the awakening of a historical epoch, AI slop provides both the dream—with its liquid, surreal, and alienating affect—and the crumbling of the dream, indicating the limits of digital networked capitalism to deliver flourishing experience. In similar vain to the "products" spawned from the forces of production across the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and now twenty first century, AI slop finds itself lingering on the threshold between the old epochs and the new. Benjamin found this most pertinent in the old arcades of 19th century bourgeoisie French culture, from which the images of bygone, pre-capitalist culture had been, in his view, immolated within the "temples

of commodity capital" (Benjamin, 1940; 2002, p. 37). Likewise, if we frame networked capitalism—the shared digital commons that inhabit the communicative structures of the internet—through Benjamin's approach to the arcades, AI slop emerges as a useful residue of our own cultural history.

The foreground of this study on AI slop, as I have delineated across the three preceding chapters, opens on the consumer-tailored release of generative image production models. 2023 saw online services such as Microsoft's Bing Image Creator, using OpenAI's DALL-E 3 servers prompt a deluge of bizarre, inexplicable, and poor-quality images into the digital commons (Judkis, 2024). These LLM-generative services were near instant, easy to use, and packaged with certain promises of technological wonder. At this point, "slop" as a general descriptor had not yet come to name such generative content, yet the virality of early LLM-generative images indicated significant changes in our digitally mediated information economy. Since phenomena such as the Niche Apple, Crocodilo Bombardiro, Alligator Alcatraz, and Shrimp Jesus have come to populate our attention economy, the term AI slop is now widely applied to LLM-generative images as means to put a name on these previously unnameable cultural artefacts. This signals a time where our modes of aesthetic judgement, political sensibilities, and historical ways of thinking through technological progress come under serious scrutiny amidst the proliferation of such destabilising media phenomena. In the words of theorist Guy Debord, writing on the negation of aestheticised consumption in the political heat of 1967, the sphere of images operates within a "battleground which has changed and yet remains the same—they are following a new 'General Ludd' who, this time, urges them to attack the machinery of permitted consumption" (1967; 2021, p. 62). Likewise, although on a different spectrum of analysis, Benjamin posits in "Convolute K" of the

Arcades Project the inherently sensuous relationship that the collective receiver has towards artistic consumption:

> The masses positively require from the work of art (which, for them, has its place in the circle of consumer items) something that is warming. Here the flame most readily kindled is that of hatred. Its heat, however, burns or sears without providing the 'heart's ease' which qualifies art for consumption. (1940; 1999, p. 395)

Here, Benjamin is clearly anticipating, and perhaps watching unfold in his time of writing, the emergence of popular culture as a sort of reaction, in a Hegelian sense, to the capitalist economies preparing for war in the early 20th century—an ambition for war that mobilised many corners of cultural apperception that we take for granted today. It is here that the aesthetic, political, and historical relations of film, literature, and mass media in a broader sense underwent, as Benjamin rightly found, transformations which "bears [their] end within [themselves] and unfolds it […] by cunning" (1940; 2002, p. 37). To conclude my analysis of AI slop as artefacts bearing aesthetic, political, and historical relations, I advocate for a critical perspective akin to the perspective Benjamin ascribes to Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" (1920). More specifically, that AI slop is a wreckage; the forms of debris, waste, and excess that escape productive logic. These forms of LLM-generative imagery implicate not just the contemporary conjecture in which we now find ourselves in through digital networked capitalism, but those "temples of commodity capital" (Benjamin, 1940; 1999, p. 37) which have shaped and formed our relationships toward art, technology, and history in the wake of what Adorno and Horkheimer call the culture industry. The story pertaining to AI slop contains within itself the story of our shared media superstructure. Technological developments have certainly transformed the culture industry from the theatre hall to the social media platform, but the motivating forces behind "sloppified" forms of cultural content begin much earlier than the recent phenomena marking this period of writing.

In chapter one, I developed an analysis of the mediative processes of AI slop. There, I took up Benjamin's notion of aura as a primary theoretical framework to discuss how our relationship toward the art form has experienced both a flattening and liberating transformation *in situ* to the reproduction of the work of art. Benjamin argues that the work of art, once situated within its cult value, has undergone an emancipatory process by which it assigns itself with an exhibition value. Instead of an experiential process tied to a specific time and space, art finds its significance in its reproducible and exhibitory potential (Benjamin; 1935; 2006, p. 142). As other scholars contend, the significance of this framework can be readily applied to different sorts of technological transformations which depend on instantaneous, wide market, and easily reproducible factors. Pond (1999) finds this in digital artwork itself, from which immersive cyberspace environments offer a way into experiencing—as Adorno (1975, p. 15) extrapolated from Benjamin—the decayed, preserved aura kept in a "foggy mist" within readily accessible technological frameworks. The destruction of the aura, for Benjamin, offers a kernel of immense possibility for emancipatory effects. Certainly, this can be said to be true for the Soviet filmmakers of the early 20th century, the French Surrealists, the New York avant-garde, and the offsprings of digital cultural production that benefit from Benjmain's notion of art as a political practice. We would be worse off without them, but then, are we worse off without AI slop? I argue that we may well be, if only for the possibilities the phenomena provides for us to critically reevaluate how we value, circulate, and take up aesthetic practices that can productively reflect the material and social practices of media.

Building on the fact that political aesthetic practices are articulated together, I argue in the second chapter that the practices of AI slop can be framed through Benjamin's epilogue in the third version of "The Work of Art" (1935; 2006, p. 122), which distinguishes between the "aestheticisation of politics" and the "politicisation of art." This, for Benjamin, demarcates an existential problem driven by the emergence of reproducible art and post-World War I capitalist upheaval. Capitalism presented itself as another sort of crisis in the first half of the 20th century, where the position of mass media is dependent upon how the masses take up, express, and produce themselves as primary political subjects. From Bertolt Brecht to Leni Riefenstahl, the art produced by a given society—along with new modes of mechanical reproduction and the expansion of the immediately perceptible given by technology—fashions itself along the lines of politics. Across chapter two, I trace Benjamin's conception of aestheticised politics through various cultural examples. In this context, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), serving as a textual touchpoint to orient and clarify how the consummation of a fashioned politics—Nazi Germany—enters into a purely aestheticised form. In other words, with its "whole social function" having been revolutionised, art is no longer founded on ritual: "it is based on a different practice: politics." (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 143).

The textual, figural, and communicative work of AI slop is political in the same sense. We can see this at the level of the institutional, in which the circulation of generative imagery presents itself in authoritative channels of government and state media. More specifically, we can find this in the Department of Homeland Security of the United States. The DHS Alligator social media post is aestheticised politics at a dense, extreme, and state-sanctioned level. However, unlike Riefenstahl's film, AI slop does not work through the work of disinterested pleasure. In fact, it does not innately operate through a pleasurable register at all, which in turn prepares war and fascism for the artistic gratification of self-annihilation, as

signified by the Olympian stadium uniting Hitler with the ecstasy of the masses (Benjamin, 19236, p. 147). Rather, to turn Benjamin's postscript for "The Work of Art" *(*1935) on a different conceptual angle, AI slop saturates political visuality with a different sort of *unpleasure* as a structure of feeling. In the DHS Alligator post, the image is indexed by political authority only to the extent that such authority is refused by the social characteristics of AI slop—ugliness, provocation, spam, junk, and filler. To recall the Italian futurists, "Fiat ars—pereat mundus (Let art flourish—and the world perish)," is the motto assigned to the aestheticisation of politics in the work of art (Benjamin, 1935; 2006, p. 42), yet LLM-generative technologies fail to offer an artistic gratification through which we can contemplate our self-identification with power. What AI slop achieves instead is the banality of domination.

However, I further contend that the kernel of subversion shown by Benjamin—the interruption of the "image-space" that digital technologies uphold—carries itself in AI slop. In chapter two, I argued, with reference to the Surrealist practice of Exquisite Corpse, that this kernel of subversion can also be interpreted through the politicalised art framework of Benjamin's interrogative aesthetics. To recall, AI slop—characterized as the "synthetic goop" (Crawford, 2025) of the networked commons—is emblematic of such generative production. I posited that in order for AI slop to be repurposed at important points in the "image-space," we have to transform our pessimism into a productive energy of refusal, while maintaining that *we* are composing the digital goop. What we make do with this goop is political, and can be politicised through Bombardiro Crocodilo by way of extending Benjamin's claim to an interrogative approach to art.

How might this be achieved without collapsing a politics of visuality with an aestheticised dependence on distanced contemplation? We might go on to posit that Bombardiro Crocodilo, ugliness and all, holds a politics that can only be expressed through a disinterested, secular engagement with art: receiving, judging, and making theoretical interventions about the compositional issues of LLM-generative imagery. Yet this reduces the harmful qualities of AI slop when used as a tool of political persuasion to a remote level of aesthetic evaluation. Here, we again run into the broader problem of the relationship between theory and practice. However, Benjamin's notion of aestheticised politics escapes the sphere of distanced contemplation by moving from the subjects own self-subjugation to the subjects own self-consciousness: "Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in "human material" for the natural material society has denied it" (1935; 2006, p. 143). I argued that we see this already in the receptive practices of Bombardiro Crocodilo by the way the networked commons has given it a secondary subversive meaning beyond the apparent literalness encoded in the dominant features of AI slop. It disarms warfare, militarisation, and imperialism through its own self-ridicule and translation into the automatic aesthetics of LLM-generative visuality. Therefore, our reading of AI slop omits the consumption of aestheticised warfare in our very refusal engage with such artefacts at the passively contemplative level.

In the final chapter, I framed AI slop through historical relations. By doing so, I placed particular emphasis on Benjamin's final manuscript written in Nazi occupied France before fleeing to the Spanish border in 1940, his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 2003). I argued that Benjamin's "angel of history"—appropriated from Paul Klee's 1920 oil monoprint "Angelus Novus"—is his clearest account of his toward historical materialism. As I have shown, the critical theorist achieves this through a unique close reading of the artwork

in order to illustrate his critique of both dominant historicism and teleological historical materialism. The historical materialist, for Benjamin, is allegorized through the figure of the technician of photography, who lets in, reconfigures, and narrows in on the shades of light encircling a given object of study. Concepts—and new historical phenomena which form and reproduce concepts concerning the historical materialist—appear to "enter into" the copper photographic plate that is henceforth "develop[ed]" by the researcher in the field. Therefore, according to the critical theorist, "Social tradition is a camera" from which a specific literary task is given to "*arrest* the image" (Benjamin, 1938; 2023, p. 103) as it comes into being.

AI slop has the capacity to help us think through new forms of mediation as a means for social, political, and cultural flourishing. In chapter three, I explored this through the lens of Benjamin's concept of Messianic time and weak messianism. In particular, I argued that "Shrimp Jesus"—as a cultural artefact of our digitally mediated history—could give us the means to reevaluate what it means for culture to have a trajectory of progress more broadly. The angel of history has its back turned to the past for a reason, and that is to "still the storm, to bandage the wounded, reawaken the dead and mend what has been put asunder" (Lowy, 2016, p. 67). Through this frame, we can interpret the allegorical work of Shrimp Jesus as a pressure point of critique about the position that LLM-generative technology holds in our cultural history. Or, in Benjamin's words, an "organisation of pessimism" (1929; 2004, p. 216) against the banalities that have configured our digital ecosystems. This being, the culminative result of—as Benjamin (1940; 2003) notes in his preparatory text for the "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

> The project of discovering "laws" for the course of historical events is not the only means—and hardly the most subtle—of assimilating historiography to natural science.

> The notion that the historian's task is to make the past "present" is guilty of the same fraudulence, and is far less transparent. (p. 401)

What AI slop enables within the digital networked commons is an attempt to redeem a conception of media from the past amidst unfavourable present conditions of the internet. Such an impulse for redemption can touch on what it means to have a cultural history more broadly, especially when culture appears to us—for instance, within the content of Shrimp Jesus—as a reflexive farce. The infinitely reproducible, yet ultimately inadequate artefacts of digital capitalist production find their homes in the historical relations of AI slop. However, Shrimp Jesus, as the immediate symbol of AI slop as a cultural phenomenon, contains in itself a kernel of refusal that can only be read within the content itself—particularly with regard to how the disappointments and "ugliness" of our new visual culture incongruously rub up against the mantra of Utopia imparted by popular technological discourse.

To conclude, I have examined the cultural relations of AI slop through three respective Benjaminian frames in order to advocate for a form of analysis that resists the "fall of the stream" with which we, as participants of digital culture "thought it was moving" (Benjamin, 1940; 2003, p. 393). In this light, a Benjaminian approach allows us to understand that we do not have to accept new forms of technological and cultural production as normative and integratory matter of fact. AI slop holds similarities to Jonathan Swift's mockery of the printing press in his "creative engine," in the sense that both carry a dimension of critique in response to the upheaval of cultural practices. Only this time, the endless stream of LLM-generated content comes from its very material mode of production. Refusal is not easy, and it may require rigorous, ardent, but ultimately creative forms of critique and activity. As I have attempted to communicate by interweaving an analysis of media objects caught up in

the blinding light of the ominous new with Benjamin's thought, this struggle need not be a call to arms for a more "human" intervention, nor should a generation of new Luddites spring up. Rather, we can make use of and mend with the cultural objects we are surrounded by in order to indicate the steps for the future required so as to not let our critical and collective thought come across "resigned and tired, as though such obstruction were its own fault and not the signature of the thing itself" (Adorno, 1955, p. 153). In the face of such a demand for *terminus ad quem* in our cultural attitudes to Large Language Models and generative visuality, we can refuse their positive imperatives. Instead of saying—to quote website developer Mihir Moroju (2026, para. 2)—that "your AI slop bores me," I propose a way of viewing AI slop that presents a kernel, a splinter, in digital networked capitalism which asks us to redraw our own sense of cultural being in the midst of an increasingly alienated online world.

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