

MARC BOUMEESTER

## On the ontology of synthetic desire: the politics of recursive imaging

*Sobre a ontologia do desejo sintético: a política da imagem recursiva*

*Sobre la ontología del deseo sintético: la política de la imagen recursiva*

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**Marc Boumeester**

O Dr. Marc Boumeester é pesquisador, autor e desenvolvedor educacional cujo trabalho investiga de forma contínua a ontologia da imagem. Sua teoria da percepção examina a autopoiese e a entropia em relação a como as imagens emergem, circulam e estruturam a realidade. Ele possui doutorado pela Universidade de Leiden, onde sua pesquisa explorou os desejos não antropocêntricos das condições arquitetônicas e dos meios (instáveis). Boumeester lecionou e desenvolveu programas em instituições de prestígio, incluindo a Universidade de Tecnologia de Delft, a Real Academia de Arte, a Fontys e a ArtEZ University of the Arts, onde atuou como diretor da AKI Academy of Art and Design. Fundou departamentos como Moving Image e Interactive/Media/Design, criando currículos que promovem a colaboração interdisciplinar. Ex-produtor de televisão e cinema, articula teoria e prática em palestras, conferências e publicações, incluindo *The Desire of the Medium* (2018) e *The Image by Proxy: Mass-Microimaging and the Epistemology of Platform Capitalism* (2025).

*Dr. Marc Boumeester is a researcher, author, and education developer whose work pursues a sustained inquiry into the ontology of imaging. His theory of perception examines autopoiesis and entropy in relation to how images emerge, circulate, and structure reality. He holds a PhD from Leiden University, where his research explored non-anthropocentric desires of architectural conditions and (unstable) media. Boumeester has taught and developed programmes at leading institutions, including Delft University of Technology, the Royal Academy of Art, Fontys, and ArtEZ University of the Arts, where he served as dean of the AKI Academy of Art and Design. He founded departments such as Moving Image and Interactive/Media/Design, designing curricula that foster cross-disciplinary collaboration. A former television and film producer, he bridges theory and practice through lectures, keynotes, and publications, including *The Desire of the Medium* (2018) and *The Image by Proxy: Mass-Microimaging and the Epistemology of Platform Capitalism* (2025).*

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[info@marcboumeester.com](mailto:info@marcboumeester.com)

## Resumo

Este artigo examina a ontologia do desejo sintético através das formas em evolução da imagem nas ecologias digitais contemporâneas, argumentando que a produção de imagens hoje é inseparável da agência política. Com base em trabalhos anteriores sobre a imagem por procuração – a compulsão tecno-social de produzir e circular imagens como combustível para as plataformas – a discussão se volta para a imagem por contexto, na qual sistemas automatizados contornam a percepção consciente e reduzem o humano a conjuntos de marcadores habituais. Uma terceira e mais radical formação é a imagem recursiva, sustentada por ciclos algorítmicos de produção e circulação, otimizados não para a atenção humana, mas para o reconhecimento maquínico. O artigo situa esses desenvolvimentos no âmbito do capitalismo de plataforma e da economia da atenção. O que está em jogo não são apenas sistemas técnicos, mas também regimes afetivos e epistêmicos: como as imagens estruturam a sensação, modulam o desejo e redistribuem as condições sob as quais a verdade e os valores coletivos se tornam possíveis. A teoria do afeto ressalta que as imagens operam como intensidades que circulam e se sedimentam em hábitos de percepção, estendendo infraestruturas de imagética para além da tela, nos ritmos vividos e nas ambiências dos ambientes sociais e espaciais. Para a arquitetura e o urbanismo, essas dinâmicas são decisivas. As imagens já não se limitam a representar edifícios ou cidades; elas modulam ativamente como os espaços são imaginados e habitados. À medida que mais horas da vida se desenrolam em ambientes mediados e não imediatos, a percepção espacial se reorganiza: a cidade é vivida não apenas pela presença corporal, mas também através de telas e fluxos que com ela se fundem, produzindo um mundo aumentado em que um olho está na rua e o outro na tela. As imagens recursivas sustentam motores de renderização e bancos de dados que moldam expectativas, normalizam futuros espaciais e pré-configuram comportamentos enquanto obscurecem alternativas. Em vez de tratar a obsolescência como subproduto da inovação, o artigo a reformula como condição gerativa através da qual o desejo sintético se desdobra, reorganizando a memória, a antecipação e a sintonia com as ambiências mutáveis da criação do mundo. As imagens recursivas tornam obsoletas práticas anteriores de representação, ao mesmo tempo em que retiram a própria reconhecibilidade da percepção humana – uma invisibilidade análoga às linguagens emergentes das máquinas nos sistemas de IA. A contribuição está em articular uma ontologia da imagem que demonstra como a imagética digital funciona como instrumento político que estrutura a atenção, modula o afeto e redistribui valor epistêmico e estético. Por fim, o artigo também considera a contrapraxis: práticas frágeis, porém vitais, como a somaestética, a sociocepção e a noção de um corpo de saber, que podem resistir à captura recursiva e abrir ambiências mais relacionais de percepção e de vida coletiva.

**Palavras-chave:** Desejo sintético. Imagem política. Imagem recursiva. Capitalismo de plataforma. Ontologia da mídia.

### Abstract

This article examines the ontology of synthetic desire through evolving forms of the image in contemporary digital ecologies, arguing that image-production today is inseparable from political agency. Building on earlier work on the image by proxy – the techno-social compulsion to produce and circulate images as fuel for platforms – the discussion turns to the image by context, where automated systems bypass conscious perception and reduce the human to clusters of habitual markers. A third, more radical formation is the recursive image, sustained through algorithmic loops of production and circulation, optimised not for human attention but for machinic recognition. The article situates these developments within platform capitalism and the attention economy. At stake are not only technical systems but also affective and epistemic regimes: how images structure sensation, modulate desire, and redistribute the conditions under which truth and collective values become possible. Affect theory underscores that images operate as intensities that circulate and sediment into habits of perception, extending infrastructures of imaging beyond the screen into the lived rhythms and ambiances of social and spatial environments. For architecture and urbanism, these dynamics are decisive. Images no longer merely depict buildings or cities; they actively modulate how spaces are imagined and inhabited. As more hours of life unfold in mediated rather than unmediated environments, spatial perception is reorganised: the city is encountered not only by bodily presence but through screens and feeds that fuse with it, producing an augmented world where one eye is on the street and the other on the screen. Recursive images underpin rendering engines and datasets that shape expectations, normalise spatial futures, and preconfigure behaviour while obscuring alternatives. Rather than treating obsolescence as a by-product of innovation, the article reframes it as the generative condition through which synthetic desire unfolds, reorganising memory, anticipation, and attunements to shifting ambiances of world-making. Recursive images render older practices of representation obsolete while withdrawing their own recognisability from human perception – an invisibility akin to emergent machine languages in AI systems. The contribution lies in articulating an image-ontology that demonstrates how digital imaging functions as a political instrument structuring attention, modulating affect, and redistributing epistemic and aesthetic value. In closing, the article also considers counterpraxis: fragile yet vital practices such as somaesthetics, socioception, and the cultivation of a body of knowing, which may resist recursive capture and open more relational ambiances of perception and collective life.

**Keywords:** Synthetic desire. Political imaging. Recursive image. Platform capitalism. Media-ontology.

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**Resumen**

Este artículo examina la ontología del deseo sintético a través de las formas en evolución de la imagen en las ecologías digitales contemporáneas, argumentando que la producción de imágenes hoy es inseparable de la agencia política. Basándose en trabajos anteriores sobre la imagen por poder – la compulsión tecno-social de producir y circular imágenes como combustible de las plataformas – la discusión se dirige a la imagen por contexto, en la cual los sistemas automatizados eluden la percepción consciente y reducen lo humano a conjuntos de marcadores habituales. Una tercera formación, más radical, es la imagen recursiva, sostenida por bucles algorítmicos de producción y circulación, optimizados no para la atención humana, sino para el reconocimiento maquínico. El artículo sitúa estos desarrollos en el marco del capitalismo de plataforma y de la economía de la atención. Lo que está en juego no son solo sistemas técnicos, sino también regímenes afectivos y epistémicos: cómo las imágenes estructuran la sensación, modulan el deseo y redistribuyen las condiciones bajo las cuales la verdad y los valores colectivos se vuelven posibles. La teoría del afecto subraya que las imágenes operan como intensidades que circulan y se sedimentan en hábitos de percepción, extendiendo las infraestructuras de lo imagético más allá de la pantalla, en los ritmos vividos y en las ambiances de los entornos sociales y espaciales. Para la arquitectura y el urbanismo, estas dinámicas son decisivas. Las imágenes ya no se limitan a representar edificios o ciudades; modulan activamente cómo los espacios son imaginados y habitados. A medida que más horas de vida transcurren en entornos mediados en lugar de inmediatos, la percepción espacial se reorganiza: la ciudad se experimenta no solo por la presencia corporal, sino también a través de pantallas y flujos que se funden con ella, produciendo un mundo aumentado en el que un ojo está en la calle y el otro en la pantalla. Las imágenes recursivas sustentan motores de renderizado y bases de datos que moldean expectativas, normalizan futuros espaciales y preconfiguran comportamientos mientras ocultan alternativas. En lugar de tratar la obsolescencia como subproducto de la innovación, el artículo la replantea como condición generativa a través de la cual el deseo sintético se despliega, reorganizando la memoria, la anticipación y las sintonías con las ambiances cambiantes de la creación del mundo. Las imágenes recursivas vuelven obsoletas las prácticas anteriores de representación, al mismo tiempo que retiran su propia reconocibilidad de la percepción humana – una invisibilidad análoga a los lenguajes maquínicos emergentes en los sistemas de IA. La contribución radica en articular una ontología de la imagen que demuestra cómo lo imagético digital funciona como un instrumento político que estructura la atención, modula el afecto y redistribuye el valor epistémico y estético. Finalmente, el artículo también considera la contrapraxis: prácticas frágiles pero vitales, como la somaestética, la sociocepción y la noción de un cuerpo de saber, que pueden resistir la captura recursiva y abrir ambiances más relacionales de percepción y de vida colectiva.

**Palabras clave:** Deseo sintético. Imagen política. Imagen recursiva. Capitalismo de plataforma. Ontología de los medios.

## Introduction

In barely a generation, digital media have shifted from peripheral presence to the dominant channel of human activity – far too central to be dismissed as trivial. In the 1990s this figure was still marginal, shaped by television and the first home computers. The early 2000s brought the first surge with broadband access, followed by a sharper rise after the smartphone's launch in 2007. Around 2012, as broadband became globally widespread and mobile internet took hold, digital mediation accelerated again, pushing daily life past the halfway mark. Today, over 60% of waking life is conducted through (mobile) digital environments (OUR WORLD IN DATA, 2025). This steep temporal compression in media use parallels the ontological compression of the image itself. Images have transcended the realm of the visual; they now dominate the organisation and production of perception, memory, and desire. They no longer stand *in* for the world but *fold* back into it, structuring the very conditions through which it can be sensed or anticipated. Digital media therefore cannot be understood as secondary or supplementary to social and political life; they are the infrastructures within which perceptions and ambiances are organised – creating sensitive ecologies where change is registered before it is recognised. To study the ontology of the image today is thus to study the architectures that govern the distribution of time, attention, and ultimately, power – one inseparable from the logics of platform capitalism, where perception itself becomes a terrain of extraction and control (Grusin, 2015). For architecture and urbanism, this shift is not peripheral but constitutive. More time is now spent in mediated digital environments than in unmediated physical ones, spatial perception itself is reorganised. Built environments are no longer encountered solely through bodily presence but through layers of mediation that determine how places are imagined, remembered, and desired. Screens do not simply depict urban life from afar; they fuse with it, producing a type of augmented world in which perception is split – one eye on the screen, the other on the street. The city is lived simultaneously as space and as feed, as ambiance and as algorithm. In this sense, to ignore the contemporary condition of images is to risk misunderstanding the very materials out of which spatial life is composed today. The contemporary condition of images cannot be described simply in terms of their excess; the staggering volume of imaging is less decisive than the ontological mutations that arise<sup>1</sup>. What was once indexical has become infrastructural, images not only circulate but also create the conditions in which circulation makes sense. In this lies their political force – by restructuring the conditions of perception, memory, and belief, images intervene directly in how truths are felt, how distinctions between false and real are drawn, and how worldviews are formed. This shift is not abrupt but layered. In earlier work I introduced the concept of the *image by proxy* – an image that does not exist as a singular entity but as a machinic placeholder, its production effectively outsourced to the user (Boumeester, 2025). Social media selfies, touristic snapshots, or algorithmically generated TikTok templates exemplify this proxy condition: each is meaningful less as an individual (moving) image than as a repetition of already-existing schemas. What appears as self-expression is in fact the reproduction of familiar patterns, where the consumer becomes the unwitting producer. In this circuit, likes are misread as appreciation and followers as genuine interest, concealing the proxy's true role as fuel for circulation

<sup>1</sup> With the proliferation of digital devices and automated image production, the human-to-image ratio has become almost incalculable. Recent estimates suggest that more than four-fifths of all photographs in existence were created within the past decade, with annual growth rates continuing to accelerate. Each passing year shifts the statistical centre of visual history forward, resetting “the archive” closer to the present and rendering images from before 2015 increasingly marginal in numerical significance. The result is not simply an exponential accumulation but a temporal compression: the weight of the visual field is now overwhelmingly contemporary, reorganising both the conditions of memory and the ontological status of the image itself.

rather than as a bearer of meaning. The proxy image is never singular; it is a node in a metastable system of resemblance and reproduction. Yet the proxy does not exhaust the contemporary. A parallel phase emerged in which images function less as stand-ins than as contextual modulations. These are *images by context* – they do not claim completion but reveal their own becoming, exposing aesthetic labour as ongoing rather than finished. These images are a condensation of codification, commodification, signification, and situation, that come into existence through self-generating production and the text-to-image prompt as input. In this sense, the prompt itself already functions as a *proxy image*: a linguistic placeholder that stands in for the not-yet-seen, prefiguring the image through description rather than depiction. Artificial intelligence systems exemplify this: trained on vast databases of images, they generate new images that re-enter the databases, establishing loops of perpetual reference and mutual transformation. Such images operate through *synthetic desire* – they not only represent but actively generate ambiances of anticipation, shaping the very conditions of social affect without actual embodiment. This artificial circuit of affect and desire renders earlier manipulative practices – retouching, montage, digital editing – suddenly archaic. The third movement, which this article proposes as crucial for the understanding of our next heading, is the *recursive image*. Here, images no longer mediate between representation and context but feed directly into their own production. Prompts, which once functioned as proxy placeholders for what was not yet seen, are increasingly absorbed into machinic loops: they become training data themselves, folded back into the systems that generate further images. In this sense, recursion short-circuits the role of the human prompt. What begins as a request for an image soon becomes part of the archive that conditions future outputs, until the circuit no longer requires human input at all. What distinguishes recursion is not its fidelity to reality but its capacity to generate the very conditions of perceptibility. To approach the ontology of images today requires tracing the progression from proxy to recursion, which underscores how each layer of contemporary imaging moves further from embodiment: from representation, to the simulacrum that displaces reality, to combinatory mediation in the *image by proxy*, to synthetic invention in the *image by context*, and finally to recursive transduction in the *recursive image* – where the rules of perception are rewritten by images that already exceed them (Baudrillard, 1994; Simondon, 2022, p.186). This trajectory does not describe successive historical epochs but overlapping modalities, each of which reorganises the relation between perception, embodiment, and technicity. The journey begins from the premise that obsolescence is not the afterlife of innovation but its generative condition, making imaging of synthetic desire the *condicio sine qua non* of platform capitalism<sup>2</sup>. Partly caused and certainly intensified by artificial intelligence, capitalist structures of obsolescence determine not only *what* appears but *how* appearance itself is organised. If the simulacrum and the proxy image undermine authenticity, and the contextual image modulates desire, the recursive image raises a different question altogether: *what happens when images no longer need us to perceive them in order to persist?*

## The Ontology of the Contemporary Image

The struggle over imaging today is the struggle over reality itself. What is at stake is not merely the proliferation of visual material but the modulation of perception

<sup>2</sup> This article substantially revises the paper named “Surging Socioception: Affirming Assurance Against an Alienating Anthropocene”, approved and presented at the 5th International Congress on Ambiances, held in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon in 2024. While some concepts and arguments overlap, the present version develops a new ontological framework for the image, extending from the “image by proxy” to the “image by context” and the “recursive image.”

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itself. The ontology of images has become meta-political because it determines how truth is sensed, how distinctions between false and real are negotiated, and how collective worldviews are formed. In a climate of disinformation, algorithmic curation, and accelerated obsolescence, images do not merely represent but actively configure what can be believed, what can be remembered, and what futures can be imagined. The political force of imaging lies in this capacity to shape the perceptual ground on which judgements are made, opinions are stabilised, and polemics gain traction, which are just as damaging as the territorial, religious, and imperial wars that stem from them. The false correlation between progression and prosperity, and the equally false dichotomy between maintaining opulence and prioritising genuine well-being, are worldviews designed to clear the path for an ever-expanding appetite for profit that serves only a small group of individuals. An instrument in this is the **attention economy**, which operates through the digital realm of social media as part of the larger force of platform capitalism. As Herbert Simon already noted in 1971 (p. 37-72), in an information-rich world the scarce resource is not data but attention – the capacity to focus, select, and make meaning. What was once an economic observation has since been expanded into a governing logic: human attention is treated as a quantifiable resource, commodified and exchanged within media infrastructures. Jonathan Beller (2006) later sharpened this argument, showing how imaging transforms attention itself into labour, converting perception into value within circuits of capital. In this sense, the attention economy does not simply monetise distraction; it reorganises subjectivity by calibrating desire, affect, and time to the rhythms of continuous image circulation. Images here do not only attract or distract; they calibrate the flows of visibility on which economic value depends, turning perception itself into a resource to be mined, exchanged, and optimised. What emerges is not merely an attention economy but a **perception** economy, in which the very conditions of seeing and sensing are restructured as sites of circulation and control. The perception economy is thus not only an economic regime but an ontological one, where the organisation of desire and the very grounds of perceptibility are folded into the logics of platform capitalism. And it is political: perception becomes the terrain where inclusion and exclusion are decided, where visibility itself is rationed, amplified, or denied. What can appear, who is allowed to be seen, and under what conditions – all are preconfigured by infrastructures that govern the circulation of images.

Platform capitalism can have such an impact because it operates not only at the level of individual users or collective institutions but at the level of **nomos** itself. In sociology, *nomos* designates the socially constructed and historically contingent habits or customs that shape social and political behaviour. It encompasses not only formal laws but also the implicit rules, conventions, and taken-for-granted forms that organise everyday life. As a framework of order that both binds and legitimises those who live within it, *nomos* functions as a social construct with inherent ethical dimensions. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, societies externalise, objectify, and then internalise an order of meaning until it becomes **common sense**, a socially established *nomos* that shields its members against chaos. Digital platforms have inserted themselves into this process, shaping not only what is exchanged but also the very capacities through which meaning is stabilised. They function less as neutral media than as infrastructures of reality, generating conditions in which reflexivity depends on mediated **source material** that is increasingly synthetic and automated. To grasp this, it is helpful to move beyond the opposition of individual and society. As Massumi (2015) notes, **what is most intensely individual is also most widely social**, and as DeLanda (1994) cautions, both macro-reductionism (where everything is explained by social totalities) and micro-reductionism (where everything is reduced to individual actions) miss the real site of agency. It is at the meso level – populations, platforms, nonhuman systems – that the decisive transformations occur. Platforms organise

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perception not on a *case-by-case basis* but through population thinking: curating tendencies, amplifying affects, and filtering percepts before they enter conscious awareness. In this way, platform capitalism operates precisely where *nomos* is formed, embedding its logics *within* the conditions of visibility and invisibility, and thus into the affective construction of everyday life.

This is also why the image by proxy, the image by context, and the recursive image must be understood as *more than* aesthetic forms: they are infrastructural agents. Each mode functions both as symptom and as driver of platform capitalism's *capacity* to colonise the level of *nomos*, reorganising the very conditions under which perception, truth, and worldviews are generated. As conceptualised earlier, the image by proxy is fuelled by a (pathological) desire *born of lack* that seeks validation through *pseudo-social* interactions. The proxy image never stands alone but functions as a node *within* a metastable system of resemblance, reproducing desire without reference to origin (Boumeester, 2024). The contemporary mediascape is saturated with such proxies: images that stand *in* without standing *for*. These are not indexical traces but machinic placeholders, bodies of signification without substance. Social media provides the clearest examples: the ubiquitous cappuccino heart, the mirror pose in standardised attire, the selfie before highlighted monuments, the reenactment of a known TikTok dance. Each new image seems to matter, yet its significance lies precisely in its indistinction. As Roland Barthes argues in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), it is not the depiction but the iteration that counts, making the next ontological shifts in imaging.

This condition resembles a subjectivity mediated through templated pseudo-social gestures. The proxy image operates through a machinic essence – it is never fixed but *emerges* from the intersecting logics of commodification, codification, signification and situation. In this sense it recalls Simondon's notion of *transduction*: a process whereby forms are continuously transformed across domains (2022, p.186). The proxy image is not a representation but a metastable transductive nexus, neither fully subjective nor fully objective. The proxy marks the exhaustion of representation through an ever-adapting embodiment of a system of signs. In contrast to Baudrillard's simulacrum (1994), which still retained the gesture of reference, the proxy dispenses with anchoring altogether. It is an image that circulates as if it were original, but whose only ontology is proximation: it exists as a shadow of resemblance, producing a *meta-image* sustained by countless iterations. Memes exemplify this recursion at the cultural level. A meme is rarely produced once; its circulation depends on iterative variation, where each new version both consumes and redefines the template. In digital culture, memes are recursive engines: they are not singular jokes but loops of collective reworking, accumulating layers of reference until they constitute their own archive of affect (Steyerl, 2017). Simondon sought to clarify the genetic unity linking different phases of individuation through what he called the *transductive dynamism* of the image<sup>3</sup>. For Simondon, a created visual object is never simply a representation or an arbitrary addition to the world, but a point of mediation where subjectivity and objectivity converge: "a double point in which the subjective world and the objective world communicate." (2022, XII). In the present context, however, this delicate linkage appears increasingly compromised. Our automated symbiosis with technology risks transforming us into fuel for its own acceleration, calcifying the relation between action and perception. The consequences are clearly visible in the shaping of worldviews, policies, and opinions – processes that affect not only cultural life but the ecological and political conditions of the planet itself.

<sup>3</sup> Simondon's account of transduction offers a useful frame for contemporary AI imaging systems, which generate recursive loops of images that act as mediators between perception and environment. In this sense, the recursive image can be seen as a technical transduction that no longer simply links subjective and objective worlds but actively reorganises the milieu in which such communication occurs.

## The Context of the Contemporary Image

The erosion of Simondon's *double point* between action and perception marks the threshold at which new image modalities emerge. As technological infrastructures increasingly mediate this relation, images no longer operate merely as representations but as operators that automatically modulate attention and affect. In this compromised terrain, the *image by context* becomes central. Unlike the *image by proxy*, which compels humans to produce images as fuel for circulation, the contextual image arises from semi- or fully automated processes that bypass conscious cognition, reducing the human to clusters of habitual markers. Both modes co-exist, shaping production, perception, and obsolescence. Under the reign of the contextual image, generation is best understood as emission: expression created for circulation and the affective return of being liked. Value lies not in the artefact but in its capacity to enter a continuously shifting contract where visibility is payment and engagement is currency. Yet this very contract accelerates obsolescence: images expire already before release, synthetic production collapsing the distance between novelty and redundancy. Each emission thus embodies the paradox of mediated life – creation and disappearance folded into a single continuous gesture. This second modality shifts emphasis from stand-in to modulation, and acts as a machinic *condensation* of codification, commodification, signification, and situation. These images operate not as completed representations but as situated processes – gestures that expose their own becoming (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). If the proxy image is characterised by detachment, the contextual image insists on situatedness. These images derive force not from closure but from process, inserting themselves into the fragments of life rather than presenting life as completed object (Azoulay, 2008). What emerges is not a claim to authenticity (as with the proxy image) but the generation of *synthetic desire* actively generating atmospheres of anticipation, reorganising – what Massumi (2002) calls – the temporal and affective conditions of sociality. The falconer's practice of feeding *washed meat* to hawks – flesh soaked until its blood, fat, and nutritive value were removed – provides a striking analogy for the operation of synthetic desire. In falconry, such meat was not meant to sustain but to modulate: the bird's stomach was filled while its hunger persisted, producing a heightened attunement to the falconer's signals. What emerges is not simply discipline but a machinic assemblage in which falcon, flesh, and falconer are linked by flows of hunger, signal, and response. Contemporary economies of mediation operate through a similar configuration. Algorithmic prompting of synthetic images provides an endless stream of consumable surfaces, yet their libidinal density is deliberately thinned. They enact what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) describe as *desiring-machines*, albeit with a devilish agenda: productive circuits that ceaselessly couple and decouple, generating desire not from lack itself but through the very modulation of flows that produce it. Synthetic desire thus operates less as a hunger to be satisfied and more as a machinic economy of almost-satiation. Similar to the *washed meat* system, subjects within synthetic ecologies are enfolded into circuits of hollow abundance, where orientation is governed by the maintenance of desire rather than its resolution. TikTok and Instagram Stories clips are short, disposable, and designed to vanish, yet their very disappearance generates urgency and attention. The contextual image thrives on this incompleteness; it requires the viewer not only to consume but to anticipate the next fragment. The proliferation of *behind-the-scenes* aesthetics – makeup in transit, food half-eaten, workouts interrupted – underscores that what matters is not the polished object but the ambient atmosphere of becoming and the celebration of content creation rather than the content itself. Here imaging and environment are indistinguishable: the stream is an ambiance, a condition, a temporality. The *eventness* (Hansen, 2015) of the contextual image lies not in its content but in its modulation of collective duration. This loop is self-sustaining: images no longer need

a reference to the world or the body but perpetuate themselves through cycles of reproduction, creating a hall of mirrors (Crauwford, 2010; Paglen, 2019) where the distinction between *actualized* and *synthetic* dissolves. In this sense, the contextual image no longer mediates reality so much as it conditions the very temporality of experience, synchronising perception with the rhythms of platforms. What begins as the modulation of affective atmospheres thus becomes a machinic ecology of reproduction, preparing the ground for the recursive image, where circulation itself becomes both origin and destiny.

## The Recursive Image

A third and even more radical transformation occurs with the *recursive image*, where the primary source for other images is no longer the world, or even another image, but the *recursive system* itself. The recursive system can be exemplified by a striking paradox: as technology advanced to offer more precise, saturated, and affordable ways to reproduce and disseminate colour, the cultural use of colour appears to have receded. A visualisation produced by the UK Science Museum Group's project *Colour & Shape* (2025) reveals a compelling trajectory: over the past two centuries, objects have shifted toward an overwhelming preference for greys, blacks, and other neutral tones. One might expect that the introduction of colour photography, film, and television would spark an explosion of chromatic expression, yet the opposite has occurred. The most dramatic reduction in colourful imagery begins not in the black-and-white past, but around the 1970s – precisely when colour reproduction became ubiquitous in mass media. This tendency is especially evident in the automobile market. Despite the wide availability of pigments and finishes, over 75% of all cars sold annually in recent decades are white, black, grey, or silver. Colourful options remain, but they account for a shrinking minority of sales. This is the recursive logic at work: no single photograph, advertisement, or object would reveal this shift, yet over decades the pattern asserts itself. Colour has not disappeared but has been modulated by cultural and economic infrastructures until its absence feels ordinary. In a recursive environment, the individual image ceases to appear remarkable, even as its accumulation imprints collective perception. What could not be seen in any one instance becomes obvious in hindsight: a cultural desaturation calibrated by recursive systems of taste production and circulation. The recursive image no longer requires an external referent; it sustains itself by feeding on its own proliferations and pre-validates itself through algorithmic desire rather than contextualised example. Dawkins' notion of the meme (1976) presupposed human hosts who replicated cultural units through imitation. Recursive images no longer rely on such mediation: their circulation is machinic, driven not by human adoption but by algorithmic reinforcement and inter-systemic recognition. They acquire machinic momentum, sustaining themselves through loops of production and circulation that displace embodiment entirely. Recursion normalises what it repeats: when a feed presents endless variations of a given trope, the individual image ceases to appear as remarkable, even as the pattern imprints itself on collective perception. But recursion goes further: images now generate their own conditions of continuation, feeding databases, training algorithms, and shaping contexts that in turn produce further images. The recursive image succeeds not by attracting attention through depiction, but by *indexing* – by being optimised for detection, amplification, and circulation within the platform economy. It is designed to register with algorithms rather than with eyes, to be picked up, ranked, and disseminated at scales that far exceed human judgement. As Trevor Paglen (2019) has shown in his work on AI datasets, these images often circulate within closed machinic ecologies, invisible to human spectators yet decisive in shaping what becomes visible

elsewhere. Hito Steyerl's account of the *poor image* (2012) reminds us that resolution, value, and circulation are tightly interlinked; the recursive image radicalises this condition by turning circulation itself into the site of value, with visibility calibrated less for human meaning than for machinic uptake. In this sense, recursion no longer merely intensifies the perception economy but displaces it altogether, inaugurating an indexical machinic economy in which the image itself becomes irrelevant, valued only for its function within systems of algorithmic findability and machinic perception – a trajectory that in theory culminates in the invisible image. At that point, we no longer speak of artificial intelligence but of an intelligence that is fully synthetic. Recursive images reorganise visibility itself: they do not vanish but recede into the machinic background, governing what will be seen while bypassing our gaze. What becomes obsolete is not the image but its recognisability as such. Their obsolescence is double: rendering older image practices archaic while making themselves inaccessible to human perception, even as they continue to act upon it. In this way, the recursive image marks the passage of imaging beyond the visible, into a regime where the very conditions of perception are withdrawn. Early advances in synthetic imaging relied on Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which staged a contest between a generator (producing candidate images) and a discriminator (judging their plausibility), improving outputs through iterative feedback (Goodfellow, 2014, p. 2672-2680). More recently, however, diffusion models have become the dominant paradigm. These systems learn by corrupting training images with random noise and then training themselves to reverse the process, gradually denoising noise into a coherent image (Ho, 2020, p. 6840-6851). Unlike GANs, diffusion models are inherently self-sufficient: once trained, they can generate images from noise alone, without any human input. In practice, most applications are conditioned by prompts or reference images, which guide the denoising trajectory toward human-recognisable results. Yet the critical point for recursive imaging lies in the fact that this conditioning is optional. A diffusion system can autonomously produce outputs that may be unreadable to humans yet remain perfectly legible to other machines – *invisible* images. At this moment the human function as arbiter of recognisability becomes obsolete: the image persists and circulates without us, optimised for machinic uptake and integration rather than human perception. Recursive imaging, therefore, marks the threshold where visual culture is no longer organised around what we see, but around what systems can index, classify, and replicate. The recursive image marks a transformation not just in the ontology of imaging but in the very conditions of visibility. Like barcodes or QR codes, they circulate in languages opaque to us, succeeding in the platform economy not by appearing to human eyes but by indexing themselves for machinic recognition. What becomes obsolete is not image-production or consumption, but the human claim to decide what counts as an image. The politics of recursion lies here: the struggle is no longer only over what we see, but over the infrastructures that govern what can be seen and by whom. Ontologies of the image are thus diagrams of power through which truth, desire, and worldviews are organised. Synthetic desire is not a future horizon but the lived present already folding into disappearance.

## The Body as Counterpraxis

A critical stance toward these media-ontological developments must begin by recognising that they unfold within the larger catastrophe of the Anthropocene, whose persistence is tied not only to ecological devastation but also to the short-sighted policies of global capitalism (Moore, 2015). The false equation of progress with prosperity, and the equally false opposition between luxury and well-being, have cleared the path for extractive appetites that benefit a narrow elite while destabilising

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the conditions of collective life (Klein, 2014). Attempts to respond with modernist categories – renewal, innovation, or replacement – prove inadequate, since they repeat the very causalities that produced the crisis. The polycrisis cannot be approached without dismantling entrenched binaries – body and mind, self and other, us and them – that have structured both modernist thought and its imperialist legacies (Braidotti, 2013). From this perspective, the *image by proxy* and the *image by context* are not merely aesthetic forms but symptoms of this condition: they entrench a regime in which perception is commodified and affect automated, accelerating obsolescence while naturalising asymmetries of visibility and voice (Beller, 2017). As Shoshana Zuboff argues in her analysis of surveillance capitalism (2019), such systems extract behavioural surplus from every interaction, converting perception into predictive data; the recursive image is the visual corollary of this logic, optimised not for our gaze but for platforms' extraction and monetisation of it. What, then, remains for embodiment in a recursive regime?

One response lies in reclaiming the somaesthetic dimension of perception. Shusterman's somaesthetics (2008) insists on the body as a locus of sensory self-fashioning, irreducible to mediation; against the drift of commodified imaging – where perception risks being displaced by machinic circuits such as biometric surveillance or quantified-self apps – it affirms the immediacy of interoception, proprioception, and tactility as anchors of presence. At a collective scale, this extends to an attunement to the proximities and relations that constitute the *nomos* – the development of *socioception* as an implicit sense. *Socioception and somaesthetics* resist automation by foregrounding our capacity to sense context not as mediated abstraction but as lived milieu.

A second response lies in safeguarding the spaces of education; (art and design) schools can be instrumentalised as seed banks for divergent thinking and preparatory enclaves for open, collective spaces that resist feeding the neoliberal attention economy. Here it becomes crucial to build education around a *body of knowing* rather than the classical *body of knowledge*<sup>4</sup>. Whereas knowledge can be canonised, commodified, and even weaponised, knowing cannot be owned. Braidotti (2013) frames knowledge not as possession but as a situated, relational practice: it is never fully ours, but a condition we inhabit. The body of knowing thus does not accumulate discrete objects but sustains attunements, orientations, and relational capacities. It is not mastery but participation, not possession but exposure. In this sense, the body of knowing complements somaesthetics and socioception by reminding us that we are not subjects who command knowledge, but beings known through our embodied and collective practices (Barad, 2007). This resonates with Paulo Freire's (1970) insistence that education should be dialogical and transformative rather than transmissive: a praxis of freedom where knowledge emerges through participation in collective life. Against the machinic drift, somaesthetics and socioception emphasise an embodied, relational awareness that resists reduction to data traces or habitual markers. The challenge, then, is not to invent a new future *ex nihilo* but to reconfigure the existing – repurposing the machinic logics of modernism, reversing their inputs and outputs, and redirecting them toward forms of sensing and imagining that are less extractive, less binary, and more attuned to the interdependencies of human and nonhuman worlds.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of a body of knowing is proposed here as a conceptual alternative to the classical body of knowledge. While it resonates with Karen Barad's account of knowing as material practice, Brian Massumi's emphasis on knowing as process, and strands of indigenous epistemologies that frame knowledge as relational and lived, this formulation is introduced as a new contribution that reframes knowing as an embodied, non-possessive condition rather than a commodifiable asset.

## Final Considerations

What is at stake is not only epistemological but ontological: images have become the very condition of perceptibility, reorganising how worlds are sensed, inhabited, and governed. The proxy, contextual, and recursive image may render older image practices obsolete and withdraw their legibility from us, but none erases our capacity to act. Agency persists not in controlling images as discrete objects, but in navigating and reconfiguring the infrastructures through which they circulate, modulate, and reproduce. The alarm around so-called *Italian brain rot* – manifest in absurdist micro-icons such as *Ballerina Cappuccino* with her 55 million (and counting) TikTok views, *Bombardiro Crocodilo*, *Skibidi Toilet*, or *Sigma Giga Chad* – is often framed as evidence of cultural decay, a corrosion of children's attention spans and cognitive faculties. Yet to dismiss these phenomena purely as decline is to overlook their complexity. At one level, nonsense functions as rebellion: in a world offering young people little long-term perspective – economic precarity, climate crisis, political instability – embracing rot becomes a refusal of demands for seriousness, productivity, and linear progress. What if the true rot is not in the children's brains at all, but in the real world – its extractive economies, exhausted politics, and collapsing ecologies? Against this backdrop, playful nonsense might be less degeneration than survival strategy. From the perspective of image ontology, brain rot signals a crucial shift. These loops, fragments, and memes exemplify the image by proxy: endlessly replicated templates that users re-enact without origin or endpoint, sustained less by representation than by circulation. At the same time, they prefigure the image by context, where affect and atmosphere matter more than content: the joke is not in what *Ballerina Cappuccino* means, but in how it modulates attention, repetition, and belonging. And, perhaps most unsettling, brain rot gestures toward the recursive image, where visibility no longer depends on human spectatorship but on machinic uptake – algorithms recognising patterns, amplifying loops, and feeding them back into circulation. What looks like nonsense at the surface is, ontologically, a site where images detach from representation and enter self-sustaining ecologies of circulation. Seen in this light, Italian brain rot is not merely a symptom of decline but a testing ground for the ontological mutations of the image itself. It rebels against a grim future, exploits platform logics, produces fleeting forms of collective belonging, and continues a century-old tradition of nonsense as resistance – all while demonstrating how images today no longer need stable referents, only loops of reproduction. To call it rot may therefore obscure its radicality: that in a decomposing world, children are already inhabiting the recursive logics of synthetic desire<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This text has been linguistically reviewed with the assistance of an artificial intelligence tool yet all ideas, concepts, and arguments are the sole work of the author.

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