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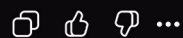


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The Synthetic Gaze. Generative AI and the Transformation of Contemporary Visual Authorship.

La mirada sintética. Inteligencia artificial generativa y mutaciones de la autoría visual contemporánea.

Abstract:

The expansion of generative artificial intelligence within the field of visual creation has triggered a profound structural transformation in the regimes of production, legitimation, and aesthetic experience. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to analyze the ontological, epistemic, and ethical mutations arising from algorithmic mediation, with the aim of establishing the theoretical foundations for a critical aesthetics of the synthetic gaze. The findings demonstrate that generative visual production does not merely extend human creativity but reconfigures artistic agency through the redistribution of authorship, the statistical recombination of originality, and the conversion of authenticity into procedural transparency. This shift underscores the need to construct ethical and regulatory frameworks that incorporate

algorithmic traceability, relational responsibility, and distributive justice within creative ecosystems. Ultimately, the study proposes a reinterpretation of art as a cognitively and morally situated practice within hybrid ecologies of human and machinic creation.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic authorship, posthumanist aesthetics, originality, distributed agency.

Resumen:

La expansión de la inteligencia artificial generativa en el ámbito de la creación visual ha desencadenado una transformación estructural profunda en los regímenes de producción, legitimación y experiencia estética. En ese sentido, el objetivo del presente artículo es analizar las mutaciones ontológicas, epistémicas y éticas que emergen de la mediación algorítmica, con el fin de establecer los fundamentos

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Sent: 9/11/2025

Accepted: 17/3/2026

Published: 15/7/2026



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Table of contents. 1. Introduction. 2. Structural Transformations of Visual Creation in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence. 3. Crisis of the authorial paradigm and redistribution of creative agency. 4. Originality, authenticity and ethics in algorithmic visual production. 5. Foundations for a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze. 6. Conclusions.

How to cite: Ramos Zaga, Fernando A. (2026). La mirada sintética. Inteligencia artificial generativa y mutaciones de la autoría visual contemporánea. *Ñawi. Arte, Diseño, Comunicación*, Vol. 10, Núm. 2, 55-71. <https://nawi.espol.edu.ec/>
www.doi.org/10.37785/nw.v10n2.a2e

teóricos de una estética crítica de la mirada sintética. Los resultados muestran que la producción visual generativa no prolonga la creatividad humana, sino que reconfigura la agencia artística mediante la redistribución de la autoría, la recombinación estadística de la originalidad y la conversión de la autenticidad en transparencia procesual. Tal desplazamiento implica la necesidad de construir marcos éticos y normativos que integren trazabilidad algorítmica,

responsabilidad relacional y justicia distributiva en los ecosistemas creativos. En conclusión, se establece una relectura del arte como práctica cognitiva y moralmente situada dentro de ecologías híbridas de creación humana y maquinica.

Palabras clave: inteligencia artificial generativa, autoría algorítmica, estética posthumanista, originalidad, agencia distribuida.

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of generative artificial intelligence has radically reframed the production, circulation, and reception of images in contemporary culture. Rather than serving as a merely instrumental innovation, these systems enact a structural reorganization of visual experience by displacing the traditional nexus between perception, representation, and creative agency. In this context, the emergence of synthetic imagery, derived from models trained on expansive datasets, interrogates the very foundations of visual creation and its conditions of intelligibility. It is therefore imperative to examine how these transformations engender new modalities of seeing and producing images, whose specificity transcends the categorical frameworks inherited from previous technical regimes.

From a theoretical perspective, the genealogy of modern visibility has been understood as a history of technical mediations that reconfigure perception and knowledge, particularly in the study of optical devices and scopic regimes (Crary, 1990). Extending this lineage, media theory has historically interpreted visual technologies as extensions of human faculties (McLuhan, 1964), while aesthetic criticism has problematized the tension between technique, aura, and reproduction (Benjamin, 2003). However, recent advances in deep learning and generative modeling introduce a degree of operational autonomy that eludes these traditional interpretations. In dialogue with contemporary inquiries into algorithmic culture and distributed cognition (Hayles, 2017; Crawford, 2021), it becomes necessary to conceptualize a nascent modality of visual experience: the synthetic gaze. This gaze is defined here as a perceptual regime mediated by probabilistic operations in which the image no longer gestures toward a pre-existing referent, but instead functions as the contingent actualization of latent spaces embedded within computational architectures.

Despite the burgeoning scholarship surrounding generative artificial intelligence, a significant lacuna remains in the synthesis of a conceptual framework capable of integrating its technical, ontological, and aesthetic implications. Existing studies remain largely fragmented, polarized between engineering-centered discourses on model functionality (Goodfellow, 2016; Rombach et al., 2022), cultural critiques of sociotechnical impact (Crawford, 2021), and philosophical inquiries into agency and creativity (Floridi, 2022). A systematic framework for grasping

the specificity of the synthetic gaze as a transversal analytical category is still in its infancy, as are the conditions for a critical aesthetic capable of evaluating its broader stakes. This theoretical absence restricts the development of robust interpretative criteria amid the current deluge of algorithmically generated content.

The ramifications of this theoretical gap extend far beyond the academy, permeating multiple strata of the cultural ecosystem. Artistically, the benchmarks of authorship, originality, and aesthetic value are being fundamentally recalibrated; economically, the dynamics governing the production and circulation of visual assets are undergoing radical reconfiguration; and ethically, profound frictions have emerged regarding data appropriation, algorithmic opacity, and the reinscription of bias (Crawford, 2021; Braidotti, 2019). Furthermore, educational and cultural institutions are confronted with the challenge of restructuring their pedagogical and legitimizing frameworks to accommodate creative practices increasingly mediated by automated systems. Collectively, these shifts demand that generative artificial intelligence be addressed as a systemic phenomenon that simultaneously alters the epistemological, aesthetic, and normative dimensions of contemporary visual culture.

Consistent with this landscape, the present research aligns with a critical interpretative paradigm, seeking to unpack complex sociotechnical phenomena through an interdisciplinary lens. This inquiry adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a theoretical-conceptual methodology that synthesizes philosophical analysis, critical literature review, and comparative study of visual regimes. Its scope is explanatory: it aims not only to chart these transformations but also to isolate their conditions of possibility and structural consequences. The research design is non-experimental and analytical, centered on the construction of conceptual categories that facilitate interpretation of the specificity of generative creation. Within this framework, the central analytical categories include algorithmic mediation, distributed agency, generative indeterminacy, and processual opacity, all anchored in the probabilistic ontology of the image and unified under the rubric of the synthetic gaze.

The hypothesis posits that algorithmic visual production is not merely a technical variation of artistic praxis, but rather the manifestation of a pervasive aesthetic regime that compels a wholesale rethinking of the fundamental categories of art theory. The transition from human-centered models of authorship toward forms of distributed agency, the eclipse of the expressive paradigm by logics of statistical recombination, and the crisis of originality and authenticity together constitute a theoretical horizon that demands interdisciplinary rigor in order to understand creation within the context of algorithmic mediation.

To this end, the objective of this article is to analyze the structural mutations that generative artificial intelligence introduces into contemporary visual regimes, thereby establishing the foundations for a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze. The significance of this objective lies in its potential to consolidate a theoretical framework for the rigorous evaluation of ongoing transformations, avoiding both uncritical technophilia and reductive technophobia. It seeks to offer a nuanced conceptualization that does justice to the complexity of the phenomenon and its multifaceted implications.

The argument unfolds progressively in pursuit of this objective. First, it examines the structural transformations of visual creation in the age of generative artificial intelligence from a historical and comparative perspective. Second, it interrogates the crisis of the authorial paradigm and the subsequent redistribution of creative agency in algorithmic contexts. Third, it analyzes the shifting status of originality, authenticity, and ethics in automated production. Finally, the article proposes a set of foundations for a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze, designed to integrate the technical, ontological, and normative dimensions previously discussed. Through this trajectory, the study provides a systematic understanding of a phenomenon that is currently redefining the bedrock of contemporary visual experience.

2. Structural Transformations of Visual Creation in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

Mapping the transformations precipitated by generative artificial intelligence in visual production necessitates a robust historical framework capable of identifying the technological ruptures redefining the conditions of creation and aesthetic experience. In this light, the evolution of Western art may be understood as a sequence of successive technical mediations, spanning from Renaissance geometric perspective to photography, cinema, and digital video. Each of these stages possessed the capacity to reconfigure the relationships between perception, representation, and meaning (Crary, 1990). However, the emergence of generative systems rooted in deep learning introduces a qualitative discontinuity that fundamentally alters the nature of technological mediation.

From a comparative standpoint, earlier visual technologies, ranging from the camera obscura to digital image processing, functioned primarily as extensions or amplifications of human perceptual and expressive faculties (McLuhan, 1964). Photography recorded the luminous traces of the environment, cinematic editing organized narrative temporalities, and digital software offered intentional control over the formal properties of the image. In all instances, technical mediation remained subordinate to human agency, which causally defined the final outcome (Benjamin, 2003).

By contrast, contemporary generative systems exhibit a synthetic autonomy that transcends the mere extension of human capability. Diffusion models, which underpin architectures such as DALL-E 2, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion, derive complex probabilistic distributions from vast image-text corpora. These models configure latent spaces in which relationships between visual elements, compositional styles, and representational conventions are intricately encoded (Ramesh et al., 2022; Rombach et al., 2022). Consequently, generative capacity arises from probabilistic navigation within these spaces, through which unprecedented visual configurations consistent with learned constraints are synthesized (Dhariwal & Nichol, 2021).

Accordingly, visual generation assumes a dimension of structural indeterminacy. Even when provided with identical input conditions, models yield divergent outputs due to the stochastic sampling intrinsic to the diffusion process (Ho et al., 2020). Such variability stands in stark contrast to the deterministic reproducibility of earlier visual technologies and fundamentally recalibrates the notion of creative intentionality, as the specific output eludes the direct control of the user. The epistemological consequence of this indeterminacy lies in the partial dissolution of

the causal chain between intention and work, which calls into question the foundations of authorship and the very notion of aesthetic responsibility (Gombrich, 1960).

Algorithmic mediation further introduces a degree of processual opacity that precludes tracing precise causal links between textual commands and resulting visual characteristics. The prompt functions as a nebulous instruction that guides the process without strictly determining it, as the outcome emerges from the interplay of the textual vector, initial noise, and learned latent structures (Goodfellow, 2016). Such complexity has reshaped creative practices, as documented in research on human-computer interaction, which observes that users adopt iterative and exploratory strategies to refine prompts, select partial outputs, and integrate results into continuous experimental flows (Ansone et al., 2025).

As a result, the creative experience evolves into a dialogic process of discovery. Production is no longer the execution of a prefigured vision but the exploration of a possibility space through experimentation and the observation of visual effects derived from iterative textual variation (Mazzi, 2024). This inversion of causality, in which the work feeds back into intention, shifts artistic creation from subjective expression toward a collaborative dynamic between human agency and algorithmic generative capacity, often described as a form of distributed agency.

The ontological implications of this shift are profound. The philosophical tradition has long conceptualized the image as a representation of external reality, subjective interiority, or symbolic convention (Wollheim, 1980). By contrast, images generated via diffusion do not invoke a pre-existing referent; their content emerges from statistical structures rather than antecedent entities or experiences (Elgammal, 2023). Hence, the synthetic image must be understood as a probabilistic ontology in practice, a temporary manifestation of visual potentialities inscribed within computational space (Goodfellow, 2024).

These ontological shifts carry significant epistemological consequences. While traditional visual knowledge was grounded in semantic perception and interpretation, machinic knowledge rests on statistical correlations between vectors in multidimensional spaces (Crawford, 2021). A bifurcation thus emerges between two incommensurable epistemic regimes: the human, anchored in meaning and lived experience, and the algorithmic, sustained by mathematical relations (Hayles, 2017). Such a fracture calls into question the possibility of a shared aesthetic when the modes of visual processing are no longer mutually translatable.

The aesthetic experience of generative imagery is similarly conditioned by awareness of its origin. Empirical studies demonstrate that recognizing the algorithmic nature of an image significantly alters its aesthetic and emotional valuation (Bara et al., 2025). The same visual configurations acquire divergent values depending on their attribution to a human author or a generative system, illustrating the contextual dependence of aesthetic judgment. Such a finding challenges formalist theories that privilege the intrinsic properties of the work (Bell, 1914) by demonstrating that understanding of the production process decisively influences perceptual experience (Danto, 1981).

The structural and ontological complexity of generative visual creation is not confined to its technical dimensions but directly shapes the conceptualization of authorship. The indeterminacy between human intent and algorithmic

autonomy reopens debates regarding who qualifies as a creator and under what conditions a work may be attributed to individual will. This transition from a focus on technology to one of agency inaugurates a new analytical axis aimed at examining the crisis of the authorial paradigm and the transformations in the distribution of creative power that generative artificial intelligence introduces into the artistic field through the lens of the synthetic gaze.

3. Crisis of the authorial paradigm and redistribution of creative agency

The modern consolidation of artistic authorship belongs to a broader historical trajectory of intellectual, legal, and institutional legitimization. This process established the individual creator as the exclusive source of aesthetic value and the cornerstone of property rights (Woodmansee, 1994). Echoing Lockean labor theory, legitimate appropriation found justification in the material transformation wrought by personal effort, a principle later extended to the intellectual realm under the premise that mental labor confers natural rights over the fruits of ingenuity (Locke, 1988). Consequently, creation became synonymous with a mode of rational possession that located legitimacy and value within the individual subject.

Romantic aesthetics further entrenched this conception through the exaltation of the creative genius: a singular figure who transcends convention to embody an irreducible subjectivity (Kant, 2000). This conceptual framework solidified the vision of the artist as an autonomous and original agent, establishing a paradigm that continues to govern contemporary copyright systems, cultural legitimization mechanisms, and hierarchies of prestige within the artistic field (Jaszi, 1991; Bourdieu, 1992). Thus, individual authorship serves not only to regulate economic appropriation but also to symbolically organize the production of value and mobility across cultural circuits.

Nevertheless, the rise of generative artificial intelligence precipitates a profound disruption by redistributing creative agency across multiple heterogeneous nodes whose specific contributions are difficult to isolate. The development of generative models entails the interplay of engineers defining neural architectures, curators assembling vast datasets, users formulating prompts and curating outputs, and systems synthesizing imagery through autonomous operations (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). Since none of these actors maintains total causal mastery over the final result, the traditional criteria of authorship, grounded in intent and processual control, are effectively called into question (Irmak, 2024).

In response, the philosophy of technology has sought frameworks capable of accounting for non-anthropocentric forms of agency. Within actor-network theory, action is posited as an emergent effect of associations between human and non-human entities, a move that dissolves the rigid binary between subject and technical object (Latour, 2005). When applied to generative visual creation, this perspective suggests that authorship ceases to be the province of an isolated individual; instead, it resides within sociotechnical assemblages where partial intentions, algorithmic affordances, and the cultural structures encoded in data are inextricably intertwined (Hayles, 2017). The work thus emerges as the product of hybrid collaborations that preclude any clear analytical separation between human and machine.

From a normative standpoint, this redistribution of agency generates significant friction with intellectual property regimes that mandate human-centered creativity for legal protection (Ramos-Zaga, 2025; Caldwell, 2023). Such a requirement underscores the persistence of a paradigm that excludes technical entities as creative subjects. However, the degrees of autonomy exhibited by generative models destabilize this very premise. When a system generates visually coherent images that transcend the user's initial intent or reveal unforeseen associations, attributing the entirety of the creative act to human will becomes increasingly untenable (Gervais, 2020).

This creates a threshold of authorial indeterminacy in which creative responsibility is dispersed without a univocal correspondence to any single agent (Irmak, 2024). The user steers the process without mastering it; developers design architectures without forecasting specific outputs; curators provide material devoid of creative intent; and the system executes generative operations without moral consciousness. Such ambiguity reverberates through the distribution of economic and symbolic value, as the lack of legal recognition hinders both the commercial viability and the artistic canonization of generated works (Caldwell, 2023).

Complementing these theoretical shifts, empirical research indicates that creators navigate these ambiguities through hybrid practices that combine algorithmic generation with manual intervention. The synthesis of prompts with sophisticated editing, composition, and post-production represents a strategic effort to reclaim authorship through demonstrable, substantive intervention (Ansone et al., 2025). While these pragmatic maneuvers may alleviate legal uncertainty, they do not resolve the underlying ontological question concerning the nature of creation when the boundaries between human intent and machinic autonomy remain blurred.

Given this landscape, various posthumanist inquiries propose replacing individual authorship with models of distributed agency that acknowledge gradients of participation between humans and technical systems (Braidotti, 2019). Generative visual production can be conceptualized as a phenomenon of extended cognition, in which aesthetic decisions emerge from the coupling of subjects and algorithms (Hutchins, 1995). In this view, creative intelligence is not the property of an isolated mind but the result of dynamic interactions within hybrid cognitive networks.

This distributed perspective carries weight across ethical and epistemic dimensions. If aesthetic production derives from the cooperation of multiple agents, attribution systems must reflect this complexity through shared modes of recognition that illuminate the interdependence of human and machinic contributions (Floridi, 2022). The myth of the lone author loses explanatory power in the face of the need for institutional grammars that represent the relational ecology of algorithmic creation.

Furthermore, tensions between these relational models and current legal frameworks intensify with regard to the use of protected material in training generative models. Current litigation filed by artists and photographers against technology firms underscores anxieties regarding the wholesale appropriation of content without consent (Vincent, 2023). The debate hinges on the applicability of fair use: a doctrine permitting the transformative use of protected material, though its scope remains uncertain in the context of machine learning (Leval, 1990). While proponents argue that statistical learning constitutes a legitimate transformation analogous to human inspiration, critics

maintain that the systematic extraction of visual features bypasses this framework and constitutes unauthorized appropriation (Lemley & Casey, 2021).

This contention exemplifies a structural friction between legal regimes focused on creative individuality and cultural processes driven by the aggregation of collective corpora. Resolving this impasse necessitates normative adjustments that recognize specific forms of algorithmic authorship while balancing the protection of human labor with the imperative for innovation (Gervais, 2020).

Beyond the legal sphere, the redistribution of creative agency transforms the professional identity of artists and designers. The classical concept of craft, predicated on technical prowess and personal vision, undergoes an existential crisis when automated generation yields sophisticated aesthetic results without recourse to conscious subjectivity (Sennett, 2008). Recent studies find that art professionals articulate a palpable ambivalence, oscillating between the perception of an existential threat and an appreciation of the novel expressive possibilities afforded by algorithmic collaboration (Lovato et al., 2024).

Pedagogically, art and design curricula face the challenge of integrating the technical proficiency required to operate generative systems with critical interrogation of their cultural and ethical stakes. Striking a balance between technological experimentation and social awareness is essential to preserving the humanistic dimension of artistic practice (Bucher, 2021). Only an educational paradigm that synthesizes technical competence with critical thought can responsibly inhabit a creative landscape in which authorship is no longer an exclusive attribute of the human mind.

The frictions inherent in the redistribution of creative agency culminate in the redefinition of core concepts such as originality and authenticity. Once the figure of the individual author is destabilized, a reassessment of the criteria supporting aesthetic valuation and ethical legitimacy becomes inevitable. The subsequent analysis interrogates these notions, examining how automated generation compels a reconsideration of the foundations of original creation and the ethical principles governing the synthetic gaze in contemporary visual production.

4. Originality, authenticity and ethics in algorithmic visual production

The concept of originality has long held a pivotal position in modern discourses on art and creativity, functioning concurrently as a criterion of aesthetic value, a principle of legal legitimacy, and the bedrock of professional identity. The modern tradition has historically linked originality to the capacity to generate works that introduce genuine novelty by transcending conventions and articulating an irreducible personal vision (Elgammal, 2023). Within the Romantic tradition, the creative act was envisioned as an exercise in transformative imagination that inaugurated unprecedented forms, standing in direct opposition to the mere technical application of pre-existing formulas or combinations.

Nevertheless, generative visual production fundamentally destabilizes this paradigm. It relies on algorithmic recombination governed by statistical distributions extracted from massive image corpora. Rather than creating *ex nihilo*, diffusion models synthesize outputs through the probabilistic reconfiguration of patterns assimilated

during training (Rombach et al., 2022). Such operations suggest that every generated image constitutes a statistical derivation of its parent dataset. This reality calls into question the possibility of genuine originality and raises the issue of whether algorithmic novelty represents true creation or merely a sophisticated variation of the extant.

In a similar vein, empirical research has explored the impact of algorithmic assistance on creative production. Collaboration with generative systems has been shown to diminish the average novelty of content by gravitating toward learned core patterns. Paradoxically, however, these systems also catalyze the emergence of outlier results born of improbable combinations (Zhou et al., 2024). This duality reveals a constitutive tension between statistical homogenization and radical exploration that defines the creative dynamics of automated generation.

Caught within this tension, generative creation appears to oscillate between two poles. On one hand, dependence on learned patterns facilitates stylistic convergence, engendering a "generative aesthetic" characterized by recognizable uniformity in composition, color, and form. This uniformity reflects the structural biases inherent in the data and architectures employed (Manovich, 2022). On the other hand, navigating high-dimensional latent spaces enables formal discoveries that exceed the limitations of individual imagination and unlock unexplored perceptual territories. Consequently, algorithmic originality eludes judgment by Romantic standards of subjective interiority; instead, it must be evaluated by its capacity to yield unforeseen configurations that push the boundaries of aesthetic possibility (Goodfellow, 2024).

It is therefore productive to frame generative originality as a "recombinant" mode, understood not as an absolute rupture with tradition but as the manifestation of novel configurations within structured relational systems. This conceptualization resonates with artistic traditions that have previously demystified creation *ex nihilo*, such as twentieth-century practices of appropriation, where novelty emerged from critical recontextualization rather than pure invention (Krauss, 1985). Algorithmic automation amplifies this logic by scaling recombination to statistical levels while upholding the principle of meaningful transformation as a prerequisite for creative value.

Yet automation enacts a definitive departure from human appropriation. While the artist deliberately selects materials to guide their resignification, generative models operate through the indiscriminate extraction of imagery, effectively eroding the individuality of constituent contributions (Crawford, 2021). This technical depersonalization poses significant ethical dilemmas regarding the recognition, compensation, and moral rights of the authors whose works populate training systems.

Closely intertwined with originality is the question of authenticity. The modern understanding of authenticity is predicated on the alignment between the work and the expressive intent of an identifiable author, allowing for a clear distinction between genuine creation and copy (Dutton, 2003). Algorithmic production dissolves this correspondence, as generated images lack a singular genesis attributable to a creative consciousness. While a painting or a photograph maintains a causal link to specific aesthetic decisions, synthetic images are the byproduct of statistical operations, devoid of historical indexicality or lived experience (Benjamin, 2003).

In response to this shift, some theoretical perspectives propose redefining authenticity through the lens of procedural transparency. From this view, a generative work may be considered authentic if its production conditions are verifiable and its technical procedures traceable, regardless of its subjective origin (Floridi, 2022). Thus, authenticity migrates from an ontological attribute to an epistemic property, where the value of a work is measured by the clarity with which its originating processes are communicated.

The viability of this shift is hindered by a significant technical impasse: the inherent opacity of deep learning models. Their inner workings constitute a "black box" that defies interpretation even by their own architects (Burrell, 2016). This opacity is multifaceted, encompassing architectural complexity, non-deterministic optimization processes, and, crucially, data opacity. It prevents tracing individual contributions within massive datasets, with grave ethical implications, as it becomes impossible to identify precisely which works influence a given result (Lovato et al., 2024).

This lack of traceability precludes proportional remuneration and undermines the conditions for distributive justice between those providing cultural inputs and those profiting from them. Recent research documents growing concern among artists and designers regarding the lack of institutional recognition. These professionals demand mechanisms that guarantee transparency, consent, and retribution (Lovato et al., 2024). Such demands include public disclosure of datasets, the implementation of explicit consent protocols, and the establishment of technical barriers to prevent style replication via prompt engineering.

Absent these safeguards, the economic and symbolic viability of the creative professions is compromised. Algorithmic generation in identifiable styles threatens to displace human commissions and weaken the differential value of manual labor (Vincent, 2023). Furthermore, the ethical dimension is strained when models replicate not only styles but also the cultural, gender, or racial biases present in training data. Empirical evidence suggests that algorithms frequently amplify majority patterns, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and marginalizing minority representation (Crawford, 2021).

These biases are not merely technical failures; they express broader power structures governing the production and circulation of images (Noble, 2018). Because datasets are built through the automated scraping of online content, they mirror the unequal distribution of visibility and cultural representation in digital spaces. Correcting such biases requires deliberate curation and rigorous ethical reflection on the perspectives that should inform machine learning.

The moral legitimacy of generative visual production hinges on institutional and technical mechanisms of transparency and equity. Regulatory proposals increasingly emphasize the obligation to disclose dataset composition, the development of traceability markers for synthetic content, the creation of legal frameworks for compensation, and the promotion of critical literacy regarding AI in the creative arts (Floridi, 2022; Braidotti, 2019).

Nevertheless, operationalizing these principles meets significant resistance from corporate interests. Absolute transparency may compromise competitive advantages or expose the legal vulnerabilities of firms operating with protected material (Crawford, 2021). Despite this, forms of collective agency are beginning to emerge. Initiatives such as dataset inclusion verification tools, algorithmic sabotage techniques to prevent style theft, and unionization within the creative sector demonstrate the potential for a critical response to automation (Vincent, 2023).

The challenges of originality, authenticity, and ethics do more than transform artistic practice; they demand a thorough reconfiguration of the theoretical framework guiding our understanding of the synthetic image. Transcending the divide between technical analysis and social responsibility requires an aesthetic capable of integrating these layers. To this end, the following section develops the foundations for a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze, aimed at articulating a conceptual horizon for evaluating and guiding visual creation in the age of generative intelligence.

5. Foundations for a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze

Establishing a critical aesthetic of the synthetic gaze necessitates integrating the technical, ontological, and ethical dimensions previously analyzed into a theoretical framework capable of guiding philosophical inquiry, creative praxis, and institutional organization within contemporary art and design. Such an undertaking requires transcending binary frameworks that either celebrate the democratizing potential of generative artificial intelligence without nuance or condemn it as an existential threat to human creativity. A robustly critical aesthetic must recognize both the opportunities for cognitive and expressive expansion offered by algorithmic systems and the systemic ethical, cultural, and political risks attending their current implementation.

The recognition of hybrid agency serves as a foundational principle for visual creation within algorithmic environments. Generative production eludes human-centered models that localize intentionality exclusively in the creative subject; instead, aesthetic agency emerges from the dynamic coupling of human faculties and computational processes that constitute distributed cognitive systems. In these spaces, the boundaries between author and tool become increasingly porous (Hayles, 2017). Consequently, artistic practice demands a critical lexicon capable of illuminating the relational ecology of algorithmic creation and describing how distributed agency is distributed among humans, machines, and data architectures (Floridi, 2022).

Furthermore, assessing generative works requires expanded attribution protocols that account for variables such as the model used, its specific versioning, the training dataset, the parameters of the prompts, and the subsequent selection and post-production workflows. Such transparency does more than satisfy ethical requirements for recognition; it strengthens critical engagement with these processes by exposing the technical materiality of operations often misperceived as immaterial or purely automatic.

Complementing this, a processual ontology of the synthetic image shifts the analytical lens from the finalized object toward generative flux and its material conditions. While the Western aesthetic tradition has historically privileged the contemplation of static artifacts, generative outputs are contingent manifestations of a probabilistic ontology, susceptible to significant variation based on marginal parameter shifts (Goodfellow, 2016). Critical analysis must therefore orient itself toward the logic of exploration and the formal possibilities revealed by the process, rather than the isolated evaluation of results. The central inquiries should not revolve around the formal beauty of a specific image, but rather the modes of agency, cultural patterns, and symbolic relations made visible through the generative act (Manovich, 2022).

Similarly, integrating ethics as a constitutive dimension of aesthetic judgment is essential. The frictions arising from algorithmic opacity, the appropriation of data without consent, and the reinscription of bias are not external to the aesthetic experience; they directly shape the possibility of informed judgment. Awareness of a work's technical provenance modifies its reception and conditions the audience's valuation, demonstrating the inseparability of aesthetic experience, ethical awareness, and epistemic comprehension (Bara et al., 2025). Evaluation criteria must therefore synthesize principles of production transparency, respect for the moral and economic rights of creators, and rigorous attention to representational biases and cultural diversity (Braidotti, 2019).

Within this framework, generative creation is best understood as a manifestation of distributed cognition. Contemporary cognitive theory posits that mental processes do not reside solely within the individual brain but extend through artifacts, environments, and collective dynamics (Hutchins, 1995). Generative technologies intensify this distribution by delegating aesthetic synthesis and decision-making to automated systems that expand, yet fundamentally reconfigure, human capability. Rather than superseding creativity, algorithmic systems restructure the cognitive ecologies in which invention emerges, much as writing transformed memory or photography redefined visual perception without rendering it obsolete (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). The challenge lies in navigating these cognitive extensions, enhancing their creative potential without relinquishing critical discernment.

Moreover, the principle of relational responsibility redefines the ethical foundations of generative production. The network of actors within the creative chain precludes assigning responsibility to a single agent, yet this must not result in the dilution of accountability. Instead, responsibility should be redistributed proportionally to the capacity for action exercised by each participant (Floridi, 2022). Developers must ensure transparency and traceability; platforms must establish responsible use policies; users must acknowledge the generative nature of their outputs; and educational and cultural institutions must foster critical literacy alongside ethical legitimization criteria.

Simultaneously, the need for pedagogical transformation in art and design is urgent. Merely incorporating generative tools as instruments of production is insufficient; the epistemological foundations of artistic training must be reframed. The most vital competencies no longer reside in technical prowess alone, but in the critical interrogation of algorithmic systems, mastery of the prompt as an expressive medium, and the ability to conceptualize creation as a complex sociotechnical phenomenon (Bucher, 2021; Ansone et al., 2025). Education should therefore focus on developing reflective creators capable of harmonizing aesthetic sensitivity with social responsibility and technological fluency.

Finally, consolidating a critical aesthetic requires the development of institutional infrastructures capable of resisting the subordination of cultural value to market metrics and visibility algorithms. The logic of commercial platforms, centered on virality and rapid consumption, incentivizes stylistic homogenization and discourages sustained experimentation (Smith, 2025). In response, alternative spaces of legitimization are required: venues that prioritize generative practices dedicated to formal innovation, conceptual depth, and ethical commitment (Manovich, 2022).

Collectively, these articulated foundations, hybrid agency, processual ontology, the ethical integration of judgment, distributed cognition, relational responsibility, pedagogical renewal, and alternative institutionality, constitute a theoretical architecture designed to underpin a critical aesthetics of the synthetic gaze. This architecture does not seek to close the debate but to offer normative coordinates, ensuring that art in algorithmic environments evolves toward culturally responsible, epistemologically transparent, and socially just forms of creation.

6. Conclusions

Contemporary visual creation is undergoing a phase of structural mutation in which algorithmic mediation redefines the ontological, epistemic, and ethical conditions of art. The emergence of generative systems based on deep learning is not merely a technical innovation, but a paradigmatic transformation that reconfigures the relationship between perception, agency, and symbolic production. Synthetic images, generated through probabilistic inferences in latent spaces, establish a visual regime characterized by indeterminacy, processual opacity, and the redistribution of creativity. Consequently, aesthetics ceases to be conceived as an exclusively human domain or as a disinterested judgment on autonomous forms, and is instead understood as a situated practice involving hybrid cognitive networks and sociotechnical assemblages in which intentions, data, and algorithms converge.

The hypothesis put forward is confirmed insofar as algorithmic visual production constitutes an ontological mutation of the aesthetic regime rather than a mere technical extension of prior artistic forms. Generative artificial intelligence inaugurates a form of creation grounded in the statistical autonomy of the machine, in which human intention is diffused across a network of correlations and latent distributions that operate outside the phenomenological horizon of consciousness. Such a displacement implies a break with the expressive paradigm and with the Romantic notion of authorship, as agency is distributed among humans, data, and computational architectures. Consequently, the categories of originality, authenticity, and creativity must be reconsidered from a processual ontology that recognizes the emergence of hybrid forms of symbolic production. Art ceases to function as a representation of interiority and instead becomes a field of negotiation among technical rationality, statistical contingency, and cultural meaning.

Traditional notions of authorship, originality, and authenticity in generative visual production are insufficient to describe these new modes of creation. Authorship ceases to reflect a singular subjectivity and instead becomes a function distributed among human and non-human agents who participate asymmetrically in aesthetic decision-making processes. At the same time, originality loses its grounding in creative interiority and instead manifests as meaningful recombination within statistical structures, while authenticity shifts from an ontological attribute to an epistemic property linked to process transparency. This conceptual shift requires a critical framework that recognizes the interdependence of technique, culture, and ethics, so that algorithmic creation may be understood as a relational phenomenon rather than an autonomous event.

The conventions of attribution, recognition, and aesthetic valuation in algorithmic environments must therefore be redefined. Transparency regarding datasets, architectures, and generative workflows should be consolidated as a structural principle of cultural legitimacy, since only process traceability can guarantee minimum conditions

of distributive justice and epistemic credibility. In parallel, educational and cultural institutions must assume a central role in cultivating critical competencies that integrate aesthetic sensitivity, algorithmic literacy, and ethical responsibility. The development of interdisciplinary programs that combine philosophy of technology, AI ethics, and aesthetic theory is essential to prepare creators for the complexities of hybrid production.

Looking ahead, a fertile field of research is opening up, aimed at examining creative practices mediated by artificial intelligence in order to understand how networks of shared agency are constituted and how processes of aesthetic experimentation can be understood as forms of extended cognition in which human imagination engages with algorithmic logics of exploration and synthesis. At the same time, it will be necessary to propose regulatory frameworks that reconcile technological innovation with the principles of cultural justice, ensuring that algorithmic visual production rests on equitable relations among the multiple agents involved in the generation, distribution, and legitimization of aesthetic value.

At the epistemological level, generative artificial intelligence challenges the fundamental categories of aesthetic knowledge by introducing a mode of production grounded in statistical correlations rather than semantic representations. This transition from meaning to correlation calls into question the primacy of the subject as the origin of meaning and requires rethinking aesthetic experience in terms of the coexistence of heterogeneous intelligences. The central question is no longer what art expresses, but how algorithmic infrastructures condition the very possibility of expression. Such a shift demands a reassessment of the role of the observer, whose sensibility is mediated by awareness of the artificiality of the image and by understanding of the technical processes that produce it.

The synthetic gaze invites a reconsideration of the place of the human within ecologies of creation. Co-production with generative systems should not be interpreted as a loss of autonomy, but as an opportunity to reformulate agency in terms of interdependence and relational responsibility. As artificial intelligence expands cognitive capabilities, it also intensifies the moral demands placed on those who employ it. The future of algorithmic art will depend on the possibility of establishing a balance between creative openness and ethical responsibility, between technical expansion and care for meaning. In this sense, the emerging horizon does not point toward the replacement of the artist by the machine, but toward the consolidation of a new aesthetic consciousness in which creativity is redefined as a shared process that brings together human imagination, technical power, and moral reflection on the forms of seeing and making.

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Curricular Overview

Fernando A. Ramos Zaga is a lawyer, professor, and researcher. His academic work focuses on a range of topics, including bioethics, philosophy of law, the regulation of new technologies, and behavioral economics, fields in which he develops interdisciplinary approaches to analyzing the social, ethical, and regulatory implications of scientific and technological innovation. He has also published other articles on these topics.

Statements:

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence-based tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.