

AI (RE)IMAGININGS: FRICTIONLESS MYTHS OF PAST AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the epistemic shift produced by the rise of AI-generated “historical” imagery on social media, arguing that generative systems increasingly reconfigure collective memory through the production of what are here termed frictionless myths. Drawing on qualitative visual analysis and critical media theory, the study analyses popular AI-generated history accounts to show how an aesthetic of synthetic realism produces immersive, visually coherent representations that frequently sanitise the past and project speculative futures, downplaying trauma and violence in favour of spectacle and narrative legibility.

To account for this transformation, the paper introduces the concept of operational indexicality, proposing that AI-generated images function not as traces of historical events but as indices of algorithmic processes, training data, and dominant visual conventions. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of this emergent visual grammar for documentary truth and the reproduction of colonial power relations in the age of synthetic media.

Keywords: operational indexicality, algorithmic memory, generative AI, aesthetic sanitisation, imperial shutter

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the proliferation of AI-generated historical re-enactments circulating on social media. Accounts such as @alook-backintohistory, @historyrevivedofficial, and @salvagedhistoryai have amassed millions of views by posting hyper-realistic simulations of eras from Ancient Rome to the near-present. These short videos and images present immersive encounters with the past – and its speculative reimaginations – rendered through a visual language that heavily

borrowed from documentary photography, cinematic realism, and video game aesthetics. The vantage is typically first-person – as if the viewer is walking through a medieval market, lying in a Civil War trench, or standing in a WWII square. This framing invites immediate identification: the viewer is positioned as the protagonist. Unlike the fragmented, complex, and often traumatic nature of the archival record, AI-generated history is smooth, visually coherent, and narratively compressed. Past events are rendered as readily consumable experiences, systematically stripped of the material contingencies that characterise actual historical documentation.

This phenomenon signals the rise of a new form of historical spectacle. The term *frictionless* refers to both the ultra-smooth aesthetic finish of these images and their apparent ease of production – a seeming effortlessness that actively conceals what Kate Crawford terms “systems of extraction” (2021, 18): vast energy use, exploited labour, and rare minerals hidden in data centres and hardware supply chains. I argue that these frictionless myths are not mere entertainment, but active sites of ideological production. They immerse audiences in a past that is systematically sanitised; narrative compression and visual cohesion displace complexity, obscuring the conflicts, traumas, and injustices that infuse lived history.

This trend exemplifies a broader epistemic shift in visual culture. AI-generated images can be understood as part of a move away from the classical regime of photographic meaning-making – where images indexed a reality that once existed – toward a networked regime (Petraitis, 2024, 128) in which images operate as fluid, distributed entities embedded within computational and cultural infrastructures. Within this scheme, images no longer point solely to past referents but circulate as nodes within contemporary visual, cultural, and computational imaginaries.

To explore this reconfiguration, I propose the concept of *operational indexicality*: AI-generated images derive meaning less from contact with profilmic events than from the computational operations, datasets, and visual norms that produce them. This concept builds on C. S. Peirce’s semiotics while directly accounting for the uniquely computational character of AI-generated imagery. Read alongside Ariella Azoulay’s notion of the imperial shutter – which describes how photographic technologies have historically organised visibility through colonial power – operational indexicality highlights how generative systems simultaneously perform photographic realism and dictate what can be made legible in the first place. Together, these theoretical lenses orient an analysis of how AI-generated historical imagery remakes visual evidence: not as

testimony to events, but as algorithmically plausible narratives. To illustrate these mechanisms, the following sections examine three specific cases: a sequence of United States history, a viral future-historical reimagining of Gaza, and synthetic depictions of Biblical figures. While these examples might initially appear to be somewhat extreme or atypical manifestations of AI-generated history, they are in fact profoundly paradigmatic. They lay bare the deep structural processes through which generative systems flatten historical complexity and fundamentally reconfigure collective memory.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The study uses a qualitative, critical-media approach grounded in digital ethnography and close visual analysis. The primary corpus consists of AI-generated historical images and videos collected between April and December 2025 from highly visible social media accounts: @alookbackintohistory (over 600,000 Instagram subscribers), @historyrevivedofficial (approximately 2 million Facebook subscribers), @salvagedhistoryai (over 160,000 TikTok subscribers), @temporal-timelens (approximately 80,000 Facebook subscribers), and religiously oriented account @holyvlogsz (over 700,000 subscribers across TikTok and Instagram). These accounts were selected through purposive sampling based on their significant reach, regular posting frequency, explicit engagement with historical reconstruction, and paradigmatic representation of the frictionless aesthetic under analysis.

The analytical framework triangulates formal visual analysis – examining recurring aesthetic features such as composition, lighting, and texture – with a semiotic interrogation of indexicality grounded in an expansive reading of Peirce’s theory. This structural reading is complemented by discourse analysis of captions, hashtags, and user framing in order to examine how historical authority and authenticity are rhetorically constructed and negotiated. Selected case studies, including the “Trump Gaza” and “Evolution of the United States” videos, are analysed as exemplary instances of frictionless myth-making, in which narrative compression and affective smoothing transform historically contingent events into visually coherent, ideologically neutralised spectacles.

The proprietary nature of contemporary generative models introduces a methodological constraint. Following Pasquale (2015) and Bridle (2018), this study treats the algorithmic “black box” not merely as an obstacle to analysis, but as a constitutive feature of the medium itself. Because training data and model architectures remain largely

inaccessible, the analysis necessarily adopts an interpretive approach that infers operational logics from visual output. In doing so, it navigates the tension between what is rendered visible in the image and the invisible computational processes that shape its production, treating this opacity as central to understanding how meaning is synthesised.

FROM TRACE TO OPERATION: RECONSIDERING INDEXICALITY

Understanding the epistemic implications of AI-generated historical imagery requires situating it within a longer trajectory of photographic transformation. Classical theories of photography have long understood the photograph as indexical: a trace produced through the supposedly physical registration of light reflected from a referent. Within this framework, photographic meaning derives not only from visual resemblance but from an existential relationship to an event that once occurred. Roland Barthes famously condensed this logic in the formulation *ça a été* (1981) – the photograph as a certificate of presence attesting that “this has been”. The epistemic authority of photography rested on its presumed mechanical objectivity and its anchoring in a specific moment in time.

This conception, however, has never been entirely stable. Well before the emergence of generative AI, the transition to digital photography had already unsettled photography’s indexical foundations. The conversion of light into data weakened the presumed direct material continuity between image and referent, replacing physical inscription with computational mediation. As digital images became embedded within networked infrastructures, their meaning increasingly depended not only on their relation to a singular moment or event, but on their circulation, recombination, and visibility within broader systems of storage and exchange. Images ceased to function primarily as discrete documents and instead operated as relational entities within expanding visual networks.

It is at this point that AI-generated imagery marks a further and more decisive shift. As Amanda Wasielewski argues, AI images simulate photographic appearance while bypassing photography’s ontological foundations. They emerge through statistical inference across large image datasets, producing what she terms “unnatural images” – technically photographic in appearance but fundamentally statistical composites that never existed (2024). Unlike photography, which records light reflected from a specific referent, AI-generated images are produced

through probabilistic synthesis. They appear photographic not because they record the world, but because they successfully reproduce the visual codes through which photography has historically come to signify realism and evidentiary value.

This shift has significant epistemological implications. Whereas photographic images once functioned as evidentiary anchors within historical discourse, AI-generated images sever the link between visual appearance and historical occurrence. Although they conform closely to conventions of photographic realism, they document nothing beyond the computational processes that produced them. Visual plausibility thus replaces historical specificity. What appears as photographic realism is in fact statistical realism – a probabilistic averaging of dominant visual patterns across training data. The image functions less as evidence than as a persuasive surface optimised for what Wasielewski terms “seamless photographic appearance” (2024, 3).

It is within this transformation that operational indexicality becomes a productive analytical tool. The term designates a mode of signification in which images derive meaning not from a referential connection to a profilmic event, but from the operations, datasets, and technical procedures that generate them. Operational indexicality thus aims not at what AI-generated images show, but how meaning is structurally produced when historical representation becomes a function of computation rather than encounter. It is not proposed as a total theory of AI imagery, but as an analytical lens for understanding how such images produce meaning through their conditions of production rather than through evidentiary trace. Rather than strictly pointing to a single past referent, AI images index the operations that produce them: training data, model architectures, statistical correlations, and embedded visual norms.

This operational logic both shapes the visual grammar through which historical scenes are rendered and reconfigures the role of the image-maker. AI-generated imagery consistently favours immersive, first-person perspectives, cinematic lighting, and polished compositional coherence. Visual friction is routinely minimised: the result is a mode of historical visualisation that invites viewer identification, while visually privileging affective immediacy over critical complexity. The image-maker here becomes a co-producer. Following Annet Dekker and Gaia Tedone (2019), the operators of AI-generated visual history accounts can be understood not as autonomous authors but as practitioners of networked co-curation. The image is not produced by a single agent but emerges from an opaque alliance between human intent and a machinic system. The human supplies direction through a prompt, while

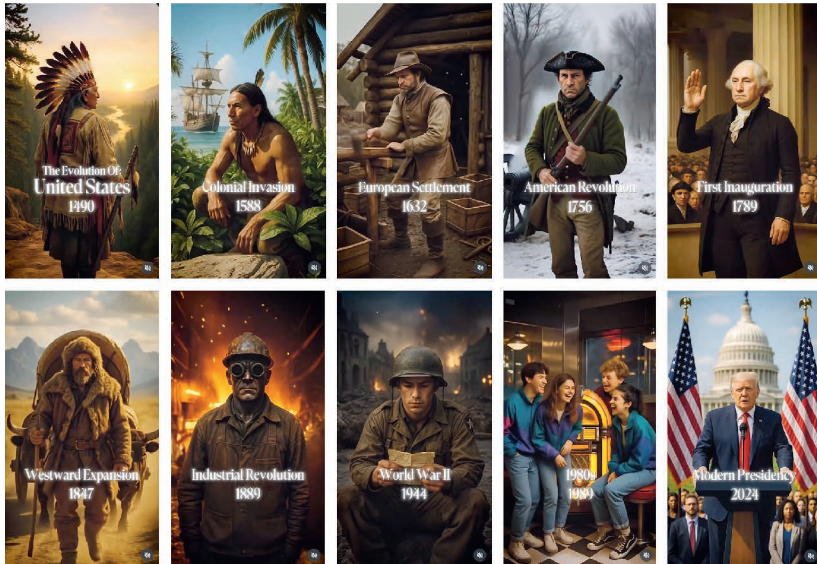


Fig. 1. Screenshots from the Instagram account @alookbackintohistory, post titled “The Evolution of the United States of America” (May 17, 2025).

the machinic agent executes the visualisation according to its own structural dependencies – most notably, the statistical imperative to smooth variation and maximise coherence. The resulting image is co-produced through an asymmetrical relation in which historical representation is shaped as much by algorithmic constraint as by human input.

EXTENDING THE IMPERIAL SHUTTER

At this point, Ariella Azoulay’s concept of the imperial shutter helps to clarify the political dimensions of this shift. Azoulay has argued that the photographic apparatus was never a neutral recording device, but an inherently political technology that structured visibility along imperial lines – rendering certain lives visible while excluding others from the field of representation (2019). This exclusion operated not necessarily through explicit censorship, but through habitual visual conventions that normalised imperial perspectives and marginalised colonial violence.

AI-generated imagery automates, rather than merely extends, this logic. The selection and recombination processes embedded in generative systems reproduce dominant visual norms while excluding forms of

representation that fall outside the parameters of statistical regularity. In this sense, the “imperial shutter” no longer resides in a mechanical apparatus or a human editorial decision; it is distributed across datasets, model architectures, and platform infrastructures. What is rendered visible is not merely what is most probable, but what is most compatible with existing visual economies of recognisability, legibility, and appeal.

Seen through this lens, AI-generated historical images represent a shift from trace to operation, and from documentation to simulation. Their authority derives not from having witnessed the past, but from their ability to convincingly perform a specific visual language. The result is an image that appears evidentiary while remaining detached from historical referentiality – a development that fundamentally reconfigures the epistemic status of visual evidence in the age of generative media.

The training data underpinning widely used image-generation models (such as Midjourney, Sora, or Runway) approximate what might be described as an “imperial archive” of the internet. This archive is assembled through large-scale scraping and optimisation processes already shaped by Western, colonial, and capitalist visual regimes. Within this framework, the model operates as a hyper-efficient shutter, systematically privileging images that conform to dominant aesthetic norms of beauty, order, and safety, while excluding and minimising representations associated with disorder, suffering, or political rupture.

Azoulay defines the shutter as drawing three decisive dividing lines: a line in time (separating before from after, relegating violence to a sealed past); a line in space (separating the subject who looks from the object photographed); and a line in the body politic (dividing governors, who possess the “right to look”, from the governed, who are looked at) (2019). In AI-generated imagery, these three lines are further entrenched through computational automation.

Consider “The Evolution of United States from 1490 to today” video (see Figure 1) posted by @alookbackintohistory on May 17, 2025. This sequence of AI-generated scenes presents a smooth, visually coherent narrative of national progress, unified by warm, cinematic lighting and seamless temporal transitions. Yet the historical transition from Indigenous societies to European colonisation – labelled simply as “European settlement” – is markedly devoid of conflict, dispossession, or genocide. Slavery constitutes another conspicuous absence. A scene titled “Westward expansion 1847” centres a white male figure heroically framed against a vast, picturesque landscape, reproducing a familiar settler-colonial fantasy while entirely effacing Indigenous struggle.

The sequence concludes with “Modern Presidency”, depicting Donald Trump delivering a speech before the US Capitol, surrounded by American flags. This ending positions contemporary state power as the natural culmination of the preceding narrative, effectively validating the erasures that made it possible. Rather than offering a comprehensive account, the sequence enacts all three imperial divisions. Temporally, it seals colonisation as an accomplished fact – the Indigenous displacement appears as a completed historical stage rather than ongoing dispossession. Spatially, the “Westward expansion” scene transforms the occupied land into an extractable resource, allowing the viewer to identify with the sovereign position of the settler. Politically, visibility is allocated asymmetrically: expansionistic settler narratives appear in high-resolution detail, while Indigenous resistance and enslaved lives remain systematically invisible.

SLOPAGANDA AND THE POLITICS OF AESTHETIC DISPLACEMENT

When AI-generated historical imagery enters overtly ideological circulation, its operational logic becomes legible as a direct political strategy. Gareth Watkins’s development of the concept of “slopaganda” names the large-scale circulation of mass-produced AI content that overwhelms information environments not through explicit falsehood but through affective saturation (2025). Unlike 20th-century propaganda, which sought to convince through repetitive messaging, slopaganda operates by generating such overwhelming quantities of visually coherent, emotionally satisfying content that critical evaluation becomes cognitively expensive. The frictionless myth succeeds partly because truth-evaluation feels burdensome compared to the ease and allure of visual consumption.

The viral “Trump Gaza” video (see Figure 2) exemplifies this mechanism. First circulated in early 2025 and subsequently amplified by Donald Trump on Truth Social, the video algorithmically reimagines Gaza – a tragic site of displacement, starvation, and mass civilian casualties – as a gleaming hyper-capitalist utopia. Rubble dissolves into pristine beaches; destroyed neighbourhoods transform into luxury hotels; human suffering vanishes beneath gold statues and choreographed abundance. The video deploys affective realism – smooth camera movement, spatial continuity, high-resolution detail – to legitimise a scenario with no basis in present conditions.



Fig. 2. Screenshots from the AI-generated “Trump Gaza” video shared on Donald Trump’s Truth Social account (February 2025).

This operates as a form of aesthetic displacement: political violence is not explicitly denied; it is visually substituted. The video does not argue against the existence of humanitarian catastrophe; it simply renders it invisible through visual excess. As Safiya Umoja Noble observes, algorithmic systems systematically privilege commercially viable representations of success over depictions of systemic violence (2018, 26). The logic here is extractive: suffering becomes raw material transformed into consumable fantasy through generative processing.

Read through operational indexicality, the video indexes not a plausible future but a contemporary political imaginary wherein policy solutions are replaced by spectacle. It demonstrates how AI-generated imagery enables political actors to bypass material accountability through aesthetic substitution – a visual resolution to a political crisis that requires no diplomacy, no justice, and no reckoning with actual conditions. This is slopaganда’s core mechanism, displacement operating through three simultaneous registers:

temporal displacement: projecting an idealised future to obscure present violence, effectively “solving” the Gaza crisis through algorithmic time-travel that renders current suffering merely transitional.

representational displacement: reframing Gaza from humanitarian crisis to investment opportunity, from a site of occupation to a blank canvas for development – embodying what Azoulay theorises as the imperial gaze that transforms colonised land into exploitable resource (2019).

affective displacement: substituting political-ethical complexity (accountability, justice, historical reckoning) with simple emotional satisfaction (wonder, aspiration, aesthetic pleasure). The video invites viewers not to think critically about Gaza, but to feel good about its imagined transformation.

Crucially, this displacement is not merely the product of deliberate ideological design; it is structurally encoded within the convergence of commercial platform logic (engagement optimisation), Western-centric training data (where luxury aesthetics function as a universal aspiration), and user demand for visually pleasing content. Operational indexicality demonstrates that the frictionless myth emerges systematically from AI's processual conditions, making it simultaneously pervasive and exceedingly difficult to challenge.

THE MEDIATED SACRED

The algorithmic reworking of sacred narratives reveals operational indexicality's infrastructural implications. The popular TikTok and Instagram account @holyvlogsz exemplifies an emerging "Biblical AI" sub-genre that recodes scripture through platform aesthetics. The account's tagline announces its intent: "Biblical stories reimaged. Where faith meets cinematic beauty". Generated using Google's Veo 3, videos reimagine Biblical figures as contemporary influencers: "If David went on a Podcast...", "If Moses had an iPhone...", "If Daniel had an iPhone..." (see Figure 3).

The devotional intent of the creators and audience appears sincere. One highly upvoted comment reads: "Jokes aside this is actually teaching me Abt [sic] the Bible" (14,019 likes). Yet this sincere mediation produces what might be termed statistical profanation – not a mockery of the sacred, but its operational equivalence to the mundane. Generative AI models process sacred rituals, traumatic events, and religious icons using the exact same mechanisms applied to images of cats or cars (Wasielewski, 2024). Each image, regardless of theological significance, is processed as numerical tokens, embedded in vector space, made available for statistical recombination. The profanation is infrastructural: model architectures optimised for general-purpose synthesis treat all visual input as ontologically equivalent raw material.

As Gensburger and Clavert argue, generative AI functions less as a medium of memory than as an infrastructure that reorganises the past according to computational principles (2024). Rather than sustaining narrative or theological complexity, such systems reorder historical



Fig. 3. Screenshots from the TikTok account @holyvlogsz. Top row captions: "If the Bible had street interviews...", "If David had an iPhone...", "If Daniel had an iPhone...". Bottom row captions: "If Cain and Abel were influencers...", "If Lot's Wife had an iPhone...", "If Noah went on a Podcast...", and "If Noah had an iPhone...".

material according to statistical logics of optimisation. In this sense, sacred imagery is recalculated – rendered legible only insofar as it conforms to the operational demands of the system.

When a model generates "Moses preaching", it retrieves a statistical composite: the averaged result of all images tagged "Moses" in its training data, which is necessarily weighted toward Western European artistic traditions, Hollywood Biblical epics, and contemporary Christian media. User responses occasionally reveal an acute awareness of this averaging. The video "If the Bible was filmed like TikToks..." prompted a highly upvoted comment: "WHY...WHY...WHY are they all WHITE?!?" (14,661 likes). This points to both audience recognition of algorithmic bias and the system's structural reproduction of Eurocentric norms. As Crawford argues, training datasets enforce simplified taxonomies upon complex narratives (2021) – in this case, reducing first-century Palestine's ethnic diversity to a statistically dominant whiteness. Similarly, the comment "He turned Australian while crossing! Miraculous!" (37,361 likes on "If Moses had an iPhone...") reveals how AI voice synthesis averages toward dominant linguistic patterns. These are not so much technological failures as the structural consequences of statistical optimisation.

This transformation exceeds individual creative intent. The creators of @holyvlogsz are not attempting to desacralise scripture; their project is framed as reverent. Yet, once sacred narratives enter generative systems, they become subject to operational constraints that reconfigure their meaning regardless of intention. As Dekker and Tedone describe,

networked cultural production unfolds through asymmetric co-curation, in which human (devotional) intent encounters algorithmic imperatives that privilege coherence, recognisability, and circulation over ambiguity or depth. In this context, the sacred becomes legible only insofar as it can be rendered statistically coherent.

This is the core of infrastructural profanation. The divine becomes, as it were, normalised – folded into the same computational logic that governs product advertising, lifestyle content, and political spectacle. What disappears in this process is not faith, but distance. The theological gap that once sustained reverence is flattened by systems that treat the past not as a narrative to be interpreted, but as data to be aligned. Sacred time collapses into platform time, and transcendence becomes scrollable.

Where the “Trump Gaza” video displaced political violence with luxury fantasy, and the “Evolution of United States” video displaced genocide with heroic settlement, @holyvlogsz displaces theological transcendence with influencer accessibility. In each case, the frictionless myth succeeds through aesthetic substitution: what cannot be smoothly rendered becomes systematically invisible. Recognising this also clarifies what is at stake. If AI-generated sacred imagery indexes the platform present – optimisation functions, engagement metrics, and composite datasets – rather than the sacred past, critical analysis must insist on exposing what these systems structurally mask, even while acknowledging the real affective power these images hold for audiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that AI-generated historical imagery marks a decisive epistemic shift in the visual mediation of collective memory. Through the concept of operational indexicality, it has shown that such images do not index past events but rather the algorithmic operations, training datasets, and visual conventions that structure their production. What these images reveal, therefore, is less the past itself than the contemporary regimes of visibility through which the past is rendered intelligible.

By privileging recognisability and circulation over ambiguity or depth, AI-generated histories systematically sanitise conflict and compress complexity, transforming history into a frictionless and readily consumable spectacle. In doing so, they reconfigure the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced and authorised. As generative

systems increasingly automate the creation of persuasive historical imagery at scale, they risk displacing human interpretive labour with algorithmic plausibility, substituting rigorous historical inquiry with mere aesthetic legibility.

In this context, AI-generated historical images must be approached not as transparent reconstructions but as operational artefacts. Attending to their smoothness, coherence, and anachronistic clarity allows them to be read not as neutral representations of the past, but as symptoms of a broader epistemic transformation in which visual credibility competes with historical truth. As James Bridle warns, such systems risk ushering in a “new dark age” in which computational representations supersede evidence and interpretation, rendering the past increasingly opaque to human critique.

The task of critical scholarship, then, is not simply to expose factual inaccuracies, but to reintroduce friction into an increasingly seamless visual economy: to insist on the material, political, and epistemic complexities that algorithmic systems are structurally inclined to erase. Only by recognising AI-generated historical imagery as operational rather than evidentiary can we begin to successfully contest the frictionless myths it produces – and the colonial, extractive logics it continues to reproduce.

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