

Artigo

Promptografia e a reconfiguração da agência criativa humana

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Resumo

A proliferação de imagens produzidas por inteligência artificial generativa criou uma lacuna conceitual, tornando o termo “fotografia” inadequado e precipitando debates generalizados. Este trabalho intervém ao defender o conceito de “promptografia” para definir esta nova prática sociotécnica. Argumentamos que a promptografia visual constitui uma modalidade sociotécnica distinta de produção de imagens, cuja lógica de gênese, mediação e uso exige um tratamento conceitual diferenciado em relação à fotografia. Por meio de uma síntese crítica, analisamos a promptografia como uma prática promulgada através de um “aparato” computacional opaco, governada por uma lógica “dromológica” de aceleração que reconfigura a agência criativa. Ancorada em estudos de caso de artistas contemporâneos, nossa análise revela este fenômeno como um potente diagnóstico do momento atual, ligando a crise da epistemologia visual às pressões psicopolíticas da sociedade do desempenho. O trabalho estabelece a importância crítica desta distinção para navegar uma cultura na qual a agência humana é cada vez mais definida como um jogo estratégico travado contra a lógica programática de máquinas inteligentes.

Palavras-chave: Promptografia, IA Generativa, Aparato. Agência Criativa, Pós-Referencialidade.

Promptography and the reconfiguration of human creative agency

Abstract

The proliferation of images produced by generative artificial intelligence has created a conceptual gap, rendering the term “photography” inadequate and precipitating widespread debates. This work intervenes by defending the concept of “promptography” to define this new sociotechnical practice. We argue that visual promptography constitutes a distinct socio-technical modality of image production, whose logic of genesis, mediation, and use requires a differentiated conceptual treatment in relation to photography. Through a critical synthesis, we analyze promptography as a practice enacted through an opaque computational “apparatus,” governed by a “dromological” logic of acceleration that reconfigures creative agency. Anchored in case studies of contemporary artists, our analysis reveals this phenomenon as a powerful diagnostic tool for understanding the current moment, linking the crisis of visual epistemology to the psycho-political pressures of the achievement society. The work establishes the critical importance of this distinction for navigating a culture in which human agency is increasingly defined as a strategic game waged against the programmatic logic of intelligent machines.

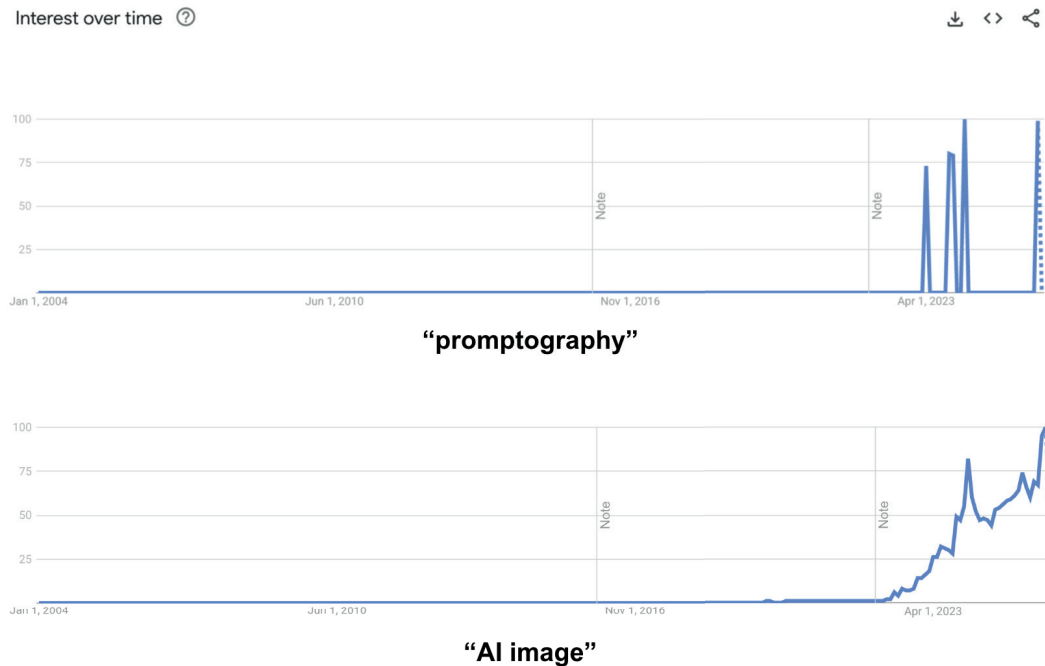
Keywords: Promptography, Generative AI, Apparatus, Creative Agency, Post-Referentiality.

1. Introduction

In April 2023, the German artist Boris Eldagsen publicly refused the Sony World Photography Award he had won in the Creative Open Category. His submitted piece, PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician, a haunting, sepia-toned portrait evoking the spectral aesthetics of early 20th-century photography, was not, he revealed, a photograph. It was a synthetic image, an artifact generated through a complex, iterative interaction with a text-to-image diffusion model (Eldagsen, 2024). Eldagsen's gesture was not a prank but a deliberate philosophical provocation, a gambit designed to force a categorical crisis. “*AI is not photography,*” he declared, “*Therefore I will not accept the award*” (Nasakti; Dirkareshza, 2025). By forcing the hand of the institution, Eldagsen exposed a terminological and ontological gap at the center of contemporary visual culture (Eldagsen, 2024). His action served as an overture to the central problem this work addresses: the accelerating proliferation of synthetic media, born from generative artificial intelligence (GAI), has rendered our existing vocabularies and conceptual frameworks for image-making critically inadequate, precipitating widespread confusion across artistic, legal, and epistemological domains (Di Dio *et al.*, 2025; Mun; Choi, 2025; Oksanen *et al.*, 2023).

The Eldagsen controversy illustrates a fundamental misrecognition: the application of the term “photography” to GAI-generated images is a symptom of a deeper failure to grasp the radical operational and philosophical shift these new technologies represent. To call *The Electrician* a photograph is to efface the difference in its genesis; it is not an artifact of captured light, a trace of a pro-filmic reality that once was, but a statistical synthesis of latent data, a probabilistic rendering of linguistic commands (Eldagsen, 2024; Manovich, 2018). This misnomer creates a cascade of issues, from the ethical quagmires of copyright and dataset provenance (Sag, 2023; Samuelson, 2023) to the socio-political anxieties surrounding hyper-realistic disinformation and the erosion of evidentiary trust in visual media (Boediman, 2025). The very apparatus of visual truth is being re-engineered, yet our critical language remains tethered to a paradigm that is rapidly becoming obsolete.

The exigency and originality of this article's intervention are clarified by a comparative analysis of the emergent terminologies themselves. Google Trends data reveal that while the generic descriptor “AI image” has steadily entered the public lexicon since late 2022, the term “promptography” registers as a series of acute, recent spikes, indicating its use within more specialized, critical debates rather than widespread popular adoption, as shown in Figure 1. This discursive pattern is mirrored in the scholarly landscape: a search of the Scopus database for “AI image” within titles, abstracts, and keywords currently yields 657 results, demonstrating a rapidly growing academic focus on the phenomenon under this descriptive guise.

Figure 1 – Google Trends search for “promptography” and “AI image”.

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

In contrast, a search for “promptograph*” yields only a single forthcoming article by Taylor (2025). This discrepancy is not a refutation of our chosen term, but rather a confirmation of the analytical problem this paper addresses. Terms like “AI image” or “AI image generation,” while popular, are analytically blunt; they center the technology and its output but occlude the specificity of the human practice and its deeper philosophical dimensions. The scholarly value of “promptography,” we argue, lies precisely in its lower currency and greater precision (Eldagsen, 2024; Lee, 2024). It offers a conceptual toolkit that descriptive terms lack: it is an ontologically expansive framework capable of accounting for varied modalities (visual, sonic, textual), and it inherently foregrounds epistemological and socio-technical questions of agency, authenticity, and the reconfiguration of the creative act itself. Thus, this article’s insistence on “promptography” is a deliberate theoretical intervention, a move to trade popular but superficial description for an analytically robust concept capable of fostering a more rigorous and critical inquiry.

While a body of scholarship has rightfully focused on the consequentialist dimensions of GAI, its ethical implications (Tirpan, 2024), its impact on creative labor (Spencer, 2024), and its potential for malicious deployment (Chesney; Citron, 2019), a rigorous ontological analysis of the creative practice itself from a historical-philosophical and Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspectives has remained underdeveloped. The current discourse often treats GAI as a monolithic, disruptive force, scrutinizing its outputs without sufficiently theorizing the novel human-machine interaction that defines its process. Scholars have explored GAI’s capacity for

aesthetic mimicry and its challenges to traditional notions of authorship (Audry; Ippolito, 2019; Park, 2025), but the debate requires a more fundamental reconceptualization of the generative act itself. What is the nature of this new creative practice? What specific forms of agency and constraint does it entail? And what critical vocabulary can we develop to dissect it?

When we speak of “ontology” in this article, we are not referring to an abstract metaphysics, but to what, in science and technology studies, has been thought of as modes of existence and co-production of reality in specific sociotechnical arrangements (multiple ontologies, materiality, mediation, assemblages). In this sense, our proposal is to highlight differences in semiotic regime, materiality, and apparatus that justify conceptually distinguishing these practices.

To address these questions, this article advances a central thesis: the practice of generating content via GAI must be conceptualized as “promptography,” a distinct sociotechnical modality of production. It is important to delineate that promptography functions as a broader modality class (encompassing textual, visual, and eventually multimodal generation) predicated on the shared logic of linguistic instruction (written, verbal, etc.) to a generative apparatus. However, for the purposes of this investigation, our analysis will concentrate specifically on “visual promptography”. This focus is deliberate, as the generation of static images poses a direct and profound challenge to the historical-cultural dominance of photography and its associated regime of evidentiary truth. We argue that visual promptography is a distinct modality from photography, distinguished not by its aesthetic output but by its operational logic. It is a practice defined by the linguistic direction of a computational “apparatus” (Flusser, 2011), governed by a dromological logic of acceleration (Virilio, 1986), which fundamentally reconfigures creative agency from an act of capturing and selecting reality to one of semantic engineering, iterative curation, and strategic play against a programmed system. This reconceptualization has implications for understanding authorship, the vestigial concept of the Benjaminian “aura” in the digital age (Benjamin, 2017), and the subjectivation of the creator within the contemporary “achievement society” (Han, 2015) and its attendant economy of attention.

To substantiate this argument, this article unfolds in four parts. The first section establishes the foundational distinction between photography and visual promptography through a critical re-engagement with theories of the sign. While briefly acknowledging Peirce and Barthes, it moves beyond an indexical-versus-symbolic binary to frame promptography as a practice that simulates, rather than captures, indexicality, thereby operating within a fundamentally different regime of truth and reference. The second section analyzes promptography through the lens of Vilém Flusser’s philosophy of the apparatus. We posit the GAI model as a paradigmatic Flusserian “black box,” a complex system that programs its users (“functionaries”), whose creative freedom is circumscribed by the apparatus’s internal logic. Here, Eldagsen’s call for a new term is reinterpreted as an attempt to “*play against the apparatus*”, a strategic move to assert human intentionality against the machine’s programmed possibilities. The third section explores the temporal politics of this new practice, employing Paul Virilio’s concept of “dromology” and Hartmut Rosa’s theory of “social acceleration”. We argue that the near-instantaneous nature of GAI generation represents a radical compression of the creative process, a “dromocratic” logic that aligns with and exacerbates the pressures of the performance-oriented “burnout society” diagnosed by Byung-Chul Han. Finally, the fourth section synthesizes these theoretical threads by examining the work of contemporary promptographers, including Eldagsen, Mayara Ferrão, and others. We analyze their practices not as simple uses of a tool, but as complex performances of “centauric”

co-creation (Choi, 2025; Kasparov, 2010; Pareschi, 2024), where human agency manifests in the subtle arts of “prompt whispering,” critical curation, and the decolonial or counter-hegemonic subversion of the apparatus’s inherent biases. Ultimately, this work seeks both to explore this new term and to provide a critical framework for navigating the emergent visual paradigm, one that equips us to better comprehend the reconfiguration of human creativity in an age of increasingly autonomous and opaque sociotechnical systems.

2. Sign, apparatus, and acceleration

The historical power of photography (its cultural authority, its evidentiary claim, its affective resonance) has been bound to its status as an indexical sign. Within Peirce’s semiotic taxonomy, an index maintains a direct, physical, causal connection to its object; it is a trace, a remnant, a pointing-to (Peirce, 1992). Smoke is an index of fire; a footprint, an index of a foot. Roland Barthes, in his seminal *Camera Lucida*, articulated the phenomenological experience of this indexicality through his concept of the “noeme” of photography: the “ça a été”, the “that-has-been” (Barthes, 1981, p. 77). The photographic image, irrespective of its content, attests to the brute existence of its referent at a specific moment in space-time. This existential bond, this umbilical cord connecting the image to the real, underpins its function as a witness and a memory-object. Even in the age of digital photography and sophisticated post-production, the foundational act remains one of capturing photons that have reflected off a physically present referent, a process that, at its core, preserves a vestige of this indexical link (Wasielewski, 2024).

Visual promptography enacts a break with this semiotic regime. A promptograph is not a trace but a synthesis. It is an image without a “that-has-been”. Its genesis emerges from a complex statistical process of algorithmic inference based on a linguistic command, — a prompt (Manovich, 2018). The relationship between the prompt “a sepia portrait of an electrician from the 1940s” and Eldagsen’s *The Electrician* is not indexical but symbolic, mediated by the arbitrary and conventional system of language. The resulting image is iconic in the Peircean sense, as it is constructed to resemble such a portrait with uncanny fidelity, but it lacks the crucial indexical anchor. This constitutes what we term a post-referential (or even “post-indexical”) condition. This is not to claim the promptograph is devoid of any indexicality; the final file is, in a trivial sense, an index of a specific computational event. Rather, it is post-referential in the culturally significant, Barthesian sense: it has severed the umbilical cord to a profilmic reality, as synthesized in Table 1.

It is also important to distinguish promptography from other traditional forms of non-indexical imagery, such as painting. Neither painting nor promptography depend, in principle, on a direct causal link with an existing referent; in both cases, it is possible to represent entirely imaginary scenes. However, the material and temporal genesis of these images diverge radically. Painting is the result of a situated bodily gesture, which accumulates layers of decision, error, correction, and materiality over time. Promptography, on the other hand, condenses the creative process into a textual interaction with an algorithmic apparatus, which returns an image consistent with learned statistical patterns in seconds. If painting makes visible the marks of a hand and a body in time, promptography makes visible the logic of a machine-mediated generation, albeit one fueled by human archives. It is this combination

of post-referentiality, dromology, and algorithmic opacity that distinguishes promptography from other non-indexical images.

The promptograph does not say “that has been”; it says “this could be,” or more precisely, “*this is a statistically plausible pixel arrangement corresponding to a given textual description*” (Ferro; Possati; Taddio, 2022). This divergence is both technical and epistemological. It destabilizes the photograph’s traditional role as evidence and forces a paradigm shift from a hermeneutics of deciphering traces to a hermeneutics of interrogating simulations.

Table 1 – Conceptual distinctions between photography and promptography.

Characteristic	Photography (Traditional/Referential)	Promptography (Post-Referential)
Primary Medium	Light	Prompt (Text)
Central Process	Capture (recording of light from an existing referent)	Generation (algorithmic synthesis based on data/prompts)
Relation to Referent	Indicial (causal-physical connection, trace)	Post-Indicial (simulation, model, invention)
Nature of the Sign	Index (Peirce); Testimony of presence (Barthes)	Symbol/Icon (derived from text/data)
Temporality	Record of the past (“that-has-been”)	Fictionalizing and speculative (instant generation)
Authenticity	Linked to physical origin and the referent	Contested; linked to the process, intent of the promptographer
Reproducibility	Mechanical (Benjamin); Original vs. Copy	Infinite digital; absence of a material original
Primary Human Role	Photographer (observer, selector of moment/framing)	Promptographer (director, curator, prompt engineer)
Theoretical References	Peirce, Barthes, Benjamin	Eldagsen, Flusser (applied)

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

To understand the novel configuration of human agency within this post-referential practice, we turn to the philosophy of Vilém Flusser. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Flusser (2011) distinguishes between “tools”, which are extensions of the human body that modify the world, and “apparatuses”, which are complex, programmed “black boxes” whose function is to reconfigure meaning by producing and distributing symbols. The camera is his archetypal apparatus. The photographer is not a sovereign creator but a “functionary” of the apparatus, whose creative freedom is circumscribed by the camera’s internal “program” (the set of possibilities defined by its mechanics and optics). True creativity, for Flusser, lies not in merely using the apparatus, but in “playing against” it, subverting its program to produce unforeseen information.

Generative AI models represent the contemporary of the Flusserian apparatus. They are black boxes of significant opacity, their internal functioning being inscrutable even to their creators (Burrell, 2016). The user, the “promptographer”, becomes a new kind of functionary. Their agency is no longer located in the skilled manipulation of light or the selection of a decisive moment, but in the semantic and aesthetic orchestration of textual prompts and the subsequent curation of algorithmic outputs. This practice is a sophisticated game played within the vast, yet finite, possibility space defined by the apparatus’s program, a program constituted by its architecture (e.g., a diffusion model) and, crucially, the biases, aesthetics, and ideologies latent within its multi-billion-parameter training dataset (Crawford, 2021).

This framework allows us to make a central distinction, in line with the media specificity theories of Friedrich Kittler (1999), who argued that the technological standards of a given medium determine its “discourse network”. The apparatus for visual promptography (e.g., Midjourney) has a different program and facilitates a different kind of play than the apparatus for textual promptography (e.g., GPT-5). While some might argue for a logic of convergence based on shared underlying architectures like the transformer architecture (Schillaci, 2024), we contend that from an STS perspective focused on situated practice and cultural meaning, the modality of the output remains paramount. The rules of the game for creating a visually coherent image are distinct from those for generating a logically sound paragraph. The creative agency of the promptographer is thus an apparatus-specific competence, a practiced ability to “play against” the particular constraints and affordances of the visual generative model to assert human intentionality over programmatic probability.

Finally, the third axis of our framework addresses the temporal politics of promptography. Paul Virilio (1986) argued in his theory of “dromology” that the logic of speed is the primary, often unacknowledged, engine of power and social organization in modernity. The “dromocratic society” is one governed by velocity, where technological acceleration is never neutral but always reconfigures perception, politics, and power. The history of image-making can be read as a dromological history, from the hours-long exposures of Niépce to the instantaneous capture of the digital camera. Visual promptography represents a hyperbolic intensification of this trajectory, a quantum leap that collapses the duration between conceptualization and visualization into mere seconds.

This radical compression of creative time aligns with what the sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2013) terms “social acceleration”, a defining feature of late modernity where technological acceleration drives an increased pace of life and a compression of the present. The near-instantaneous nature of promptographic production feeds directly into the relentless demand for content that characterizes the contemporary “attention economy” (Citton, 2017). The promptographic apparatus is thus not only a semiotic and creative system but also a powerful engine of content production perfectly adapted to the demands of platform capitalism.

This dromological condition has profound psycho-political consequences, as diagnosed by Byung-Chul Han. In *The Burnout Society*, Han (2015) posits a societal shift from a disciplinary society of prohibitions (“You must not”) to an achievement society of imperatives (“Yes, we can”). This society of perpetual performance and self-optimization, driven by an excess of positivity, leads not to liberation but to existential exhaustion and burnout. The promptographic apparatus fits seamlessly into this paradigm. It offers the illusion of limitless creative potential and frictionless production, inviting the subject into a cycle of ceaseless

generation, refinement, and dissemination. The risk is twofold: a cultural deluge of aesthetically monotonous, algorithmically predictable content — what has been pejoratively termed “AI slop” (Hoffman, 2024; Pocock, 2023) — and the creative exhaustion of the human functionary, perpetually striving to keep pace with the dromological imperative of the machine. The struggle to “play against the apparatus” thus becomes both a creative challenge and an existential one: a struggle to assert slow, contemplative, and critical human time against the accelerated, programmatic time of the machine.

3. Research approach

This article adopts a hybrid research approach grounded in conceptual analysis and supported by through qualitative, illustrative case studies. The primary objective is an act of conceptual engineering: to coin, define, and substantiate the term “promptography” as an analytical category capable of resolving the current ambiguity surrounding generative imagery. This is achieved through a critical theoretical synthesis, wherein the seminal frameworks of Flusser, Virilio, and the post-structuralist semiotic tradition are brought into a dialectical engagement to construct an interpretive lens (Machamer; Wolters, 2004). This synthetic framework is then anchored empirically.

Following established practices in qualitative inquiry and STS, we employ instrumental case studies of contemporary artistic practices (Yin, 2018). The artworks, public statements, and paratextual discourses of artists such as Boris Eldagsen and Mayara Ferrão are treated not as generalizable data points, but as critical exemplars. These cases serve a dual function: first, to illustrate the concrete manifestations of the theoretical concepts (the apparatus in play, the dromological pressures) and second, to test and refine the validity and analytical purchase of the “promptography” concept itself (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This recursive movement between theoretical construction and empirical grounding ensures that the proposed framework is a robust tool for critical inquiry into contemporary techno-visual culture.

4. Discussion

4.1 Photography’s apparition and the punctum

The assertion that visual promptography is a distinct modality from photography necessitates a deeper excavation of the latter’s semiotic bedrock: its indexicality. As delineated in our framework, the photograph’s authority has historically resided in its physical-causal bond to a referent, a bond phenomenologically experienced as the Barthesian “ça a été” (Barthes, 1981). This is the image’s testimony to presence. Barthes further refined this experience with the concept of the punctum: a detail within the photograph that “pricks” or “wounds” the viewer. The punctum is potent precisely because it is an unintentional, contingent trace of the real (a stray detail, an awkward gesture) that ruptures the image’s composed surface (the studium) and provides an unmediated, affective link to the past. It is the irrefutable evidence that what one sees once was.

At first glance, visual promptography seems to be an art without punctum, in the strong sense proposed by Barthes. An image like Boris Eldagsen's PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician is a compositional totality; every pixel is the result of a deliberate (if statistically mediated) synthesis, guided by the symbolic instructions of the prompt. There are no contingent, unintentional traces of a past reality, because no such reality existed for this image. The promptograph can be filled with what appears to be a punctum, such as a meticulously rendered tear in the subject's clothing, a peculiar glint in the eye, but these are simulated, not captured. They are calculated aesthetic effects designed to evoke the feeling of authenticity, a kind of "punctum-effect" that gestures towards a nostalgic longing for the indexical certainty that has been evacuated (Mankekar, 2025). Eldagsen's project title, PSEUDOMNESIA (false memory), is thus a precise diagnosis of this condition. His work stages the apparition of photography, performing its aesthetic conventions while exposing the absence of its existential core. It is a ghost image, a simulacrum of a memory that never was, thereby demonstrating that the post-referential image operates not as a record, but as a hallucination, challenging the very epistemology of visual evidence in the digital age (Zylniska, 2020).

However, from the perspective of reception, the situation is more ambiguous. When the audience is unaware that an image was generated by AI, it can produce something analogous to a punctum, such as a detail that "hurts", an affective resonance, even if this effect is symbolically and culturally mediated, and not rooted in an indexical "this-was". This suggests that the promptographic experience cannot be described solely in terms of technical origin; the viewer's contextual knowledge and the regimes of verisimilitude in which the image circulates become central.

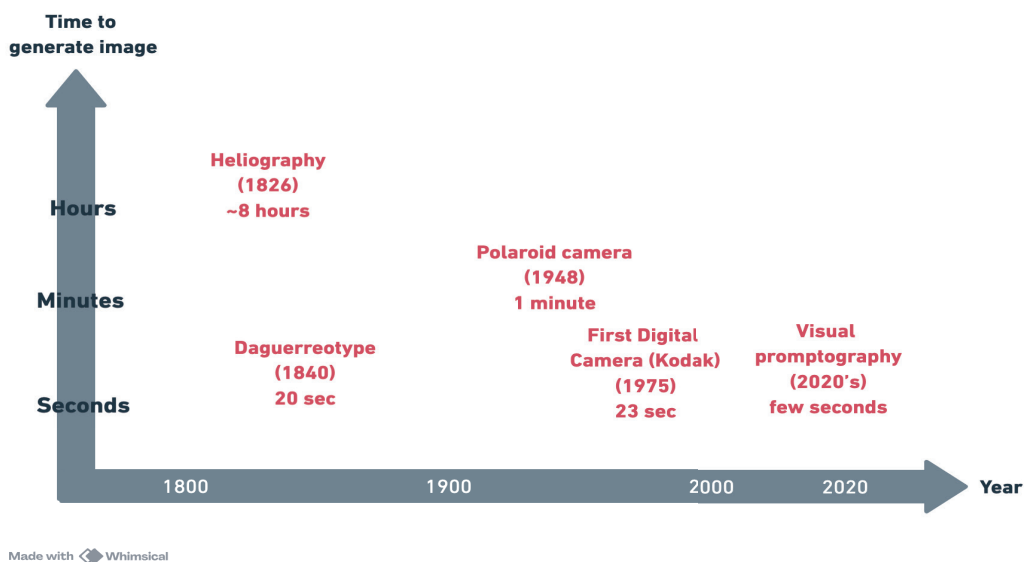
4.2 The accelerationist logic of the generative image

The transition from the chemical-temporal processes of analog photography to the instantaneous capture of digital imaging was already a profound acceleration. Visual promptography, however, represents a paradigm shift in this dromological trajectory. It introduces a velocity of creation so extreme that it alters the fundamental conditions of artistic labor and cultural production. As theorized by Virilio (1986), speed is not a neutral variable but the primary political and perceptual vector of modernity. The promptographic apparatus, by collapsing the interval between linguistic conception and visual realization into mere seconds, instantiates a form of creative dromocracy: a regime where value, relevance, and visibility are increasingly tethered to the sheer velocity of output.

This dromocratic imperative aligns with the societal logic of acceleration described by Rosa (2013) and the psycho-political conditions of the "achievement society" diagnosed by Han (2015). The promptographer is compelled to engage in a relentless cycle of generation, iteration, and dissemination, driven by the affordances of the technology and the demands of platform capitalism's attention economy (Bishop, 2020; Thiele, 2025). This high-velocity production cycle risks devaluing the slow, contemplative, and often fallow periods necessary for deep creative development. The result is a cultural environment predisposed to what has been termed "AI slop" (Pocock, 2023; Hoffman, 2024): a torrential output of aesthetically homogeneous, conceptually shallow imagery that prioritizes novelty and volume over substance and resonance. The pressure is not merely to create, but to *perform* creativity at

the speed of the algorithm. This alignment of technological capability with the socio-economic demand for hyper-production places the promptographer in a precarious position, perpetually at risk of the creative exhaustion and burnout that characterizes Han's achievement-subject, a subject who is not exploited by an external other, but who freely exploits themselves in a relentless pursuit of performance.

Figure 2 – The dromology of the image: time compression between intention and visibility.



Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

Figure 2 illustrates the dromological compression that defines the history of the technical image, serving as an illustration of Paul Virilio's (1986) thesis that speed is the primary political and perceptual factor of modernity. The chart maps a trajectory of acceleration, beginning with the almost geological time of Niépce's heliography, whose process of approximately eight hours in 1826 forged a profound link between the image and duration (Gernsheim, 1986). The invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 represents the first major leap, reducing exposure to seconds and thereby making the portrait commercially viable and inaugurating the disciplining of social time through the image (Newhall, 1982). The Polaroid camera in 1948 intensified this speed by collapsing the interval between the capture and consumption of the image into a single minute, internalizing the development process and consolidating photography as an instantaneous social act. The digital era, foreshadowed by the 1975 Kodak prototype, which already materialized the image in 23 seconds (Sarvas; Frohlich, 2011), dissolved the barriers of materiality and distribution, but visual promptography of the 2020s represents the apotheosis of this trend. By reducing the time between linguistic conception and complex visual synthesis to a few seconds, promptography dematerializes the creative process itself.

It is important to clarify that Figure 2 combines, for analytical purposes, exposure and processing times. In the case of early photographic techniques, such as heliography and daguerreotype, exposure time itself was the main temporal bottleneck. In later technologies, such as Polaroid and digital photography, exposure becomes almost instantaneous, and what matters is the interval between the click and the socially available viewing of the image (chemical development, printing, upload, etc.). In the case of promptography, there is no optical exposure whatsoever; the “generation time” refers to the algorithmic processing until the synthetic image is produced and displayed on the interface. Thus, the graph does not aim to directly compare heterogeneous physical processes, but to visualize the compression of the interval between intention and visibility of the image in the social circuit.

This trajectory illustrates technological transformation and reveals a reconfiguration of our temporal regime, wherein the capacity to generate images instantly reflects and also drives the pressures for performance and cultural ephemerality (Han, 2015). The fact that promptography is inscribed on the same acceleration graph as previous technical image indicates that we are not talking about an absolute rupture, but about an extreme intensification within a common historical trajectory.

4.3 The vanished aura in the age of the pure simulacrum

Walter Benjamin (2017) famously argued that mechanical reproduction leads to the decay of the artwork’s “aura”—its unique presence in time and space, its history, its authenticity. Photography and cinema were his primary examples. Visual promptography does not merely continue this decay; it represents a transition to a state where the concept of the aura is rendered nonsensical from the outset. A promptograph has no physical original, no unique historical trajectory; it is born as a digital file, infinitely reproducible. Its “presence” is that of data, not of an object that has weathered time.

This condition is more radically diagnosed by Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra. For Baudrillard (1994), we have moved through successive orders of the image, from a reflection of reality, to a mask of reality, to a state where the image masks the absence of a basic reality. The promptograph arguably inaugurates the final phase: the pure simulacrum, an image that has no relation to any reality whatever. It is its own pure referent. Eldagsen’s work does not refer to a 1940s electrician; it refers to databases of images and the cultural idea of a 1940s electrician. It is a copy without an original, a map for which there is no territory. This is the logic of hyperreality, where the distinction between the real and its representation implodes. The concern is no longer the authenticity of a single image, but the stability of a shared reality when an infinite number of hyperrealistic, non-referential images can be generated at will (Park, 2025; Pfaff, 2025). The promptographic apparatus, in this sense, is not just a tool for making pictures, but a world-making engine that produces a hyperreality that is often more seductive and aesthetically coherent than reality itself.

The distinction between promptography and photography risks suggesting that the production technique exhausts the “ontology” of an image. The proliferation of hybrids (photographs extensively manipulated in software, images partially generated by AI from photos, algorithmic compositions on documentary archives) makes any rigid boundary unstable. Instead of proposing an exclusionary taxonomy, we argue that the usefulness of “promptography”

is analytical: it allows us to make visible specific regimes of mediation, authorship, and circulation, without implying a hierarchy of artistic value based on the technique of origin. From an aesthetic point of view, we do not assume that differences in technical regime automatically determine the artistic value of a work. Photographs, paintings, and promptographs (and other types of digital images) can be equally banal or profoundly powerful; what interests us here is understanding how each material and media regime structures possibilities for agency, authorship, and critical reading.

4.4 The promptographer as apparatus functionary and synergistic centaur

Flusser's (2011) conceptualization of the apparatus operator as a "functionary" playing within a programmed system provides a powerful, if pessimistic, framework for understanding the promptographer. In this view, the user's freedom is illusory, constrained by the opaque internal logic and inherent biases of the GAI model. The act of "prompt engineering" can be seen as learning to provide the correct inputs to make the black box perform its programmed functions, reducing the human to an operator executing the possibilities latent within the machine's statistical universe. The generic, aesthetically predictable images that constitute the bulk of "AI slop" are evidence of this functionary mode of operation, where the user does not challenge, but merely activates, the apparatus's program.

However, this framework must be complicated by the emergent realities of skilled practice. The popularization of the "Centaur" metaphor, originating from chess matches in which a human-AI team outperforms either entity alone, offers a more optimistic model of synergistic co-creation (Kasparov, 2010). In this model, GAI is not a prescriptive black box but a powerful collaborator, a tool for "augmented intelligence" that can expand the creator's imaginative and technical capacities (Doyle, 2024). A masterful promptographer does not simply command the apparatus; they enter into a hermeneutic loop with it. They "whisper" to the machine, using nuanced, poetic, or even deliberately obscure language to coax novel results from the latent space. They engage in dozens of iterations, using techniques such as inpainting and outpainting, and curating the results with a discerning eye. This suggests that agency is not simply a matter of human versus machine, but is located in the quality of the interaction. The practice of promptography thus exists on a spectrum, from the passive functionary accepting the apparatus's first offering to the adept Centaur skillfully navigating the programmatic constraints to achieve a result that transcends both human and machine capabilities in isolation (Choi, 2025).

4.5 Playing against the apparatus: decolonial pasts and speculative futures

The ultimate locus of human agency, in a Flusserian sense, is found in the act of "playing against the apparatus", of using the machine for ends that subvert its intended program or expose its ideological underpinnings. This critical, subversive practice is where visual promptography transcends mere technical novelty and becomes a potent site for artistic and political intervention. Eldagsen's gesture of refusing the Sony award is a clear example of playing against the *institutional* apparatus of the art world, using the generative apparatus as a Trojan horse to force a crisis of categorization.

Table 2 – Some artists who explore promptography in their works.

Artist	Work	Description
Boris Eldagsen	PSEUDOMNESIA (including The Electrician)	Eldagsen uses generative systems to create “false memories,” images that mimic the aesthetic of old photographs (1940s), but which represent events and people that never existed. His work explores the nature of memory, photographic authenticity, and, through the SWPA controversy, questions the institutional limits of photography. He investigates the “collective unconscious” accessible through AI’s vast datasets.
Annika Nordenskiöld	Twin Sisters in Love	Winner of the “Prompted Peculiar” award with Twin Sisters in Love, Nordenskiöld also creates photorealistic images of non-existent scenes, often with a surreal or unsettling touch (such as the sisters holding an octopus). She describes AI as a “colleague” at work and explores themes such as non-existence and the discomfort her images provoke in the viewer.
François Mercier (Mr. François)	Secret Cars	Mercier uses AI in a playful and speculative way, generating images of “secret” and imaginary car models from famous brands (like a Ferrari camper van or a Lamborghini school bus). His work demonstrates the potential of promptography for speculative design, humor, and the exploration of “what if?” scenarios.
Cartiê Bressão (Pedro Garcia)	Artificial Carnivals (Carnavais Artificiais)	This Brazilian artist, known for his previous photographic work under the pseudonym Cartiê Bressão, uses AI in his project “Artificial Carnivals” to reimagine the Brazilian carnival in impossible or anachronistic contexts (such as a Bauhaus bloc in the early 20th century or a carnival with Alejandro Jodorowsky), exploring cultural reinterpretation and the fusion of aesthetics through AI.
Mayara Ferrão	Album of Unforgettings (Álbum de Desesquecimentos)	In Album of Unforgettings, a work exhibited at the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), Ferrão employs AI with an explicitly decolonial purpose. These are images that fictionalize colonial archives, creating representations of affection between Black and Indigenous women in historical contexts where such records are absent or marked by violence and stereotyping. The work challenges hegemonic narratives and seeks to “unforget” marginalized histories, using AI as a tool to fill archival gaps and reimagine the past. She also highlights the potential of AI to democratize artistic production for marginalized creators with limited resources.

Source: Prepared by the authors (2025).

This critical play becomes even more powerful when directed at the ideological content of the apparatus itself. The datasets upon which these models are trained are known to be saturated with the biases of the cultures that produced them, often reflecting Western-centered, colonial, and patriarchal worldviews (Kamran, 2023; Schelenz, 2022). The work of Brazilian artist Mayara Ferrão, particularly her series *Álbum de Desesquecimentos* (Unforgetting Album), exemplifies a decolonial strategy of playing against the apparatus. Ferrão uses GAI to create fictional archival images depicting scenes of affection and intimacy between Black and Indigenous women in historical contexts from which their stories have been systematically erased. She leverages an apparatus trained on datasets shaped by colonial visual histories to generate a counter-archive. This is a profound act of “unforgetting”, using the machine’s synthetic power to imagine responses to historical voids and challenge dominant visual narratives. Similarly, the work of Pedro Garcia (aka Cartiê Bressão) in *Carnavais Artificiais* (Artificial Carnivals) uses the apparatus to generate speculative histories, imagining impossible cultural fusions such as a Bauhaus carnival in the 1920s. These artists, whose works are summarized in Table 2, are not mere functionaries; they are critical interrogators. They use promptography not to replicate reality, but to question it, to rewrite its visual codes, and to imagine alternative pasts and futures. In their hands, the generative apparatus, an opaque black box, becomes a site for reclaiming history and staging potent critiques of the very systems of power embedded within its own programming.

4.6 A world of frictionless, instantaneous, and infinitely malleable symbolic production

The notion of promptography exposes how the logics of social acceleration, attentional precarity, and post-truth epistemic drift have become structurally embedded in contemporary image-production systems. It demonstrates, in STS terms, a recursive coupling between sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2019) and the generative infrastructures that now actively instantiate and intensify them—a regime of symbolic production that is frictionless, instantaneous, and infinitely plastic. Rather than merely reflecting cultural conditions, generative models increasingly produce the experiential horizon of late modernity.

A frequent objection (that the referential rupture predates AI and begins with digital photography or Photoshop) misunderstands the distinction between modifying a trace and synthesizing a non-trace. Raster editing manipulates an image whose origin remains indexical; even through alteration, the photograph retains a residual tether to a profilmic “that-has-been”. Promptography, by contrast, is born *ex nihilo*: a linguistically oriented probabilistic synthesis, whose relationship with reality is mediated and indirect, since it recombines, in a latent statistical space, traces of visual and textual archives without preserving the indexical link with a specific event. It marks the shift from reworking history to fabricating worlds without precedent: Photoshop alters the real; Midjourney produces what-never-was (Meyer, 2025). This difference in genesis confers upon promptography its distinctive modality status and its more profound threat to visual truth regimes.

The consequences extend into the political economy of trust. The ubiquity of indistinguishable promptographs induces a “verification treadmill”, in which authenticity becomes a computationally scarce commodity rather than a default epistemic assumption. Emerging

trust infrastructures, such as the cryptographic provenance protocols of the C2PA (Bureacă; Aciobăniței, 2024), formalize authenticity as a service, positioning verification power asymmetrically and deepening digital divides. In journalism, law, and governance, the evidentiary burden shifts from hermeneutic interpretation to cryptographic validation.

Meanwhile, generative systems capable of producing convincing synthetic “historical” images destabilize mnemonic ecologies. The same affordance that enables artists such as Mayara Ferrão to stage decolonial counter-memories can be weaponized to erode shared visual archives. History becomes an aesthetic parameter: renderable, adjustable, and endlessly revisable, threatening a slide from post-truth into an ahistorical hyperreality (Gülaçtı; Kahraman, 2021), where collective memory loses its anchoring function and the public sphere its shared evidentiary substrate. Characterizing promptography as “post-referential” does not imply isolation from the historical world; on the contrary, generative models are trained on vast archives of photographs and works of art, often appropriated without explicit consent. Thus, what appears as “probabilistic hallucination” is rooted in layers of historical, aesthetic, and political reality sedimented in the datasets. This “probabilistic hallucination” is a plausible projection produced by the machine from patterns extracted from historical data, and not from a direct encounter with a referent. This dependence on real archives has epistemological and ethical implications – relating to authorship, consent, and the exploitation of artistic work –, as it challenges any claim of complete disconnection between promptography and reality.

Promptography compels a recalibration of creative value. As generative models master technical form, artistic significance migrates from execution to intentionality; ethics, critique, and meta-narrative become the primary sites of authorship. Eldagsen’s refusal and Ferrão’s decolonial reconstructions exemplify this shift: the critical gesture outweighs the aesthetic artifact. In this context, the “Art Turing Test” (Xu; Hsu; Wang, 2025) becomes irrelevant; the central question is no longer whether humans could produce the image, but why they strategically chose to mobilize this apparatus at this moment. Human agency persists not in the brushstroke but in the framing, the prompt, and the political intent that imbues synthetic imagery with meaning.

5 Concluding remarks

This article has developed the argument that the emergent practice of generating synthetic images via linguistic commands constitutes a novel technocultural form that demands its own distinct conceptualization: visual promptography (Eldagsen, 2024; Lee, 2024). We have contended that this term is an analytical necessity, required to distinguish the practice from the historical, chemical, and semiotic lineage of photography. Our central thesis has been that visual promptography operates as a “post-indicial” (Figueiredo; Neto, 2024) symbolic practice, enacted through the medium of a Flusserian apparatus, and governed by a dromological imperative that is deeply symptomatic of the acceleratory logics of late modernity. This conceptual framework, we have argued, is essential for comprehending the profound reconfiguration of creative agency, visual epistemology, and the political economy of the image in the 21st century (Di Dio *et al.*, 2025; Mun; Choi, 2025; Oksanen *et al.*, 2023).

Our analysis has yielded several critical findings. First, we established that the shift from the photographic “that-has-been” to the promptographic “what-never-was” (Meyer, 2025)

represents a semiotic and epistemological divergence. This move from an indexical to a post-referential regime dissolves the photograph's foundational claim to evidentiary truth, relocating the image within the Baudrillardian domain of the pure simulacrum, without, however, erasing historical and technical continuities between photographic and promptographic practices, which remain inscribed in the same sociotechnical continuum of acceleration and mediation of vision. Second, we demonstrated that the near-instantaneous velocity of the generative apparatus subjects creative practice to a dromocratic logic (Virilio, 1986; Pereira; Oliveira; Viana, 2019), aligning it with the pressures of the "achievement society" (Han, 2015) and risking a cultural deluge of "slop" that devalues contemplative work (Hofman, 2024; Pocock, 2023). Third, our inquiry into the human-machine relation revealed the promptographer's agency to be a complex negotiation, oscillating between the passive execution of the apparatus's program as a "functionary" (Flusser, 2011) and the synergistic co-creation of the "Centaur" (Choi, 2025; Pareschi, 2024). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we identified the practice of "playing against the apparatus" as a site of human agency, where artists can leverage these systems for subversive, decolonial, and conceptually potent ends, thereby inscribing their intention upon the machine's probabilistic outputs (Kamran, 2023; Schelenz, 2022).

The implications of this framework are significant, yet the territory it maps remains largely unexplored. This article therefore concludes by delineating several crucial vectors for future research. The most immediate imperative is for empirical reception studies. While we have theorized the semiotic status of the promptograph, little is known about how diverse publics actually perceive, interpret, and attribute credibility to these images. Qualitative and quantitative investigations are needed to understand the emergent forms of visual literacy—or illiteracy—in an environment saturated with post-referential imagery. A second, vital avenue lies in a critical political economy of the generative apparatus. Our Flusserian analysis points to the power of the "black box," but further STS-inflected research, in the vein of Crawford (2021) or Zuboff (2019), is required to dissect the corporate and geopolitical structures that build and control these models. Who owns the computational infrastructure? What are the ideologies embedded in their foundational datasets? And what are the planetary costs—in terms of labor, resources, and environment—of their proliferation?

Furthermore, the promptographic framework itself invites expansion. This article has focused on the visual, but parallel inquiries into sonic and textual promptography are urgently needed. Research must investigate how text-to-music models (e.g., Suno) are disrupting notions of authorship, composition, and copyright in music, and how large language models are reconfiguring literary production and the very nature of academic and journalistic writing. A comparative analysis of the specific "programs" of these different apparatuses would yield invaluable insights into the media-specific nature of generative creativity. A more philosophical line of inquiry should pursue a post-phenomenology of promptographic creation. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Don Ihde (2012), such research would explore the lived, embodied experience of "thinking with" a non-human agent. How does this symbiotic process alter human perception, imagination, and self-conception? What new forms of subjectivity emerge from this form of collaboration with the algorithmic other?

Ultimately, to conceptualize promptography is to grapple with a technology that is not simply a tool for representation, but a system that actively reshapes the conditions of reality, memory, and agency. To play against this generative apparatus, as we have argued, is therefore

to engage in what may be the quintessential critical act of our time: the persistent and strategic struggle to inscribe human meaning, intention, and critique onto a world increasingly authored by the programmatic logic of the machine.

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