



From index to algorithm. Photography, generative imagery, and emerging visual regime (2018–2025)

Del índice al algoritmo. Fotografía, imagen generativa y régimen visual emergente (2018–2025)



Jacob Bañuelos-Capistrán

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1919-7088>

Tecnológico de Monterrey, México

jcapis@tec.mx

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a scoping review examining how academic literature from 2018 to 2025 has addressed the relationship between photography and artificial intelligence. Using the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, the review mapped the categories, practices, and concepts mobilized by visual studies, sociosemiotics, and media philosophy to account for the transformations that generative AI introduces into the photographic visual regime. Results are organized across five thematic axes—memory, verisimilitude and veracity, visual regime, technological hybridization, and emerging concepts—tracing both continuities and ruptures between the photographic tradition and new algorithmic visual production. The review identifies twenty recently coined concepts including algorithmic postmemory, mean images, nonhuman photography, perception machine, algorithmic index, larval memories, virtual photography, and promptography. The analysis reveals that AI amplifies certain tensions already inherent to photography—such as the negotiation between the indexical and the symbolic-cultural, or between document and fiction—while also introducing discontinuities not previously seen: the displacement of the trace toward statistical probability, the absence of individual authorship, the disappearance of the optical referent, and the use of generative imagery as a means for memory restoration.

Keywords: Generative artificial intelligence; Photography; Generative image; Visual studies; Visual regime; Algorithmic postmemory; Emerging concepts; Scoping review.



Resumen

El artículo que aquí se presenta recoge los resultados de una revisión de alcance (*scoping review*) dedicada a rastrear cómo la literatura académica del período 2018–2025 ha pensado —y está pensando— la relación entre fotografía e inteligencia artificial. Siguiendo el protocolo de Arksey y O'Malley (2005), se identificaron y cartografiaron las categorías, prácticas y conceptos que los estudios visuales, la sociosemiótica y la filosofía de los medios han puesto en juego para dar cuenta de las transformaciones que la IA generativa introduce en lo que, a falta de mejor término, seguimos llamando el régimen visual fotográfico. Los hallazgos se despliegan a lo largo de cinco ejes —memoria; verosimilitud y veracidad; régimen de visualidad; hibridación tecnológica; conceptos emergentes— que permiten trazar tanto las líneas de continuidad como las fracturas entre la tradición fotográfica y las formas algorítmicas de producción visual. La revisión registra veinte conceptos de acuñación reciente, entre los que se cuentan: postmemoria algorítmica, imágenes medias, fotografía no humana, máquina de percepción, índice algorítmico, memorias larvales, fotografía virtual y promptografía. El análisis ofrece como resultado que la IA enfatiza algunas de las tensiones que la fotografía ya tenía, como el campo de negociación entre lo indicial y lo simbólico-cultural, o entre el documento y la ficción, pero además agrega algunas discontinuidades no vistas anteriormente, como la sustitución de la huella hacia la probabilidad estadística, la ausencia de autoría individual, la desaparición del referente óptico y el uso de la imagen generativa como medio para la restauración de la memoria.

Palabras clave: Fotografía; Inteligencia artificial generativa; Estudios visuales; Régimen visual; Postmemoria algorítmica; Conceptos emergentes; Revisión de alcance.

1. Introduction

A prototypical example of the questioning and debate opened up by the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) for producing photographic-looking images is the case of *Pseudomnesia: The Electrician*, created by Boris Eldagsen and awarded by the Sony World Photography Awards in 2023. The author's calculated and provocative aim exceeded the scope and remit of the competition, exposing the fragile perceptual boundary between a photograph and an AI-made image—a boundary that, for all practical purposes, is indistinguishable (Hausken, 2024; Petrea, 2024). The author's complete series, titled *Pseudomnesia: Fake Memories*, constructs “false” memories with the appearance of “truth,” memories that were never directly captured by a camera.

Two years earlier, Jonas Bendiksen (2021) created *The Book of Veles*, a book of documentary-looking images made with 3D models and texts generated by GPT-2 (Bendiksen, 2021). The book was presented at *Visa pour l'Image* and awarded at World Press Photo before the author revealed that the images had been produced with synthetic models. By 2023, images of Pope Francis wearing Balenciaga fashion, fabricated with Midjourney, went viral and were described as the first mass case of visual disinformation generated by AI (Hausken, 2024). A few months later, Rogelio Séptimo won the Acquisition Prize at Mexico's 20th Photography Biennial with *Exhumar la Memor.IA*, an artistic project that used generative AI to create portraits of inhabitants of the island of Janitzio whose faces had never been captured by any camera (Séptimo, 2023).

These cases indicate that what is at stake is not confined to the territory of technological improvements presupposed by generative AI. What is underway is a wholesale reconfiguration of

the contemporary visual regime, one with emerging ontological, epistemic, ethical, political, and economic implications that we are progressively beginning to experience and calibrate. For nearly two centuries, photography operated as a privileged technology with the legitimacy to certify reality, evidence, and memory. Roland Barthes (1980) coined the celebrated noeme “that-has-been” (*ça a été*), which condensed this certifying function. Today, this noeme wavers before generative AI: images indistinguishable in appearance from a photograph may bear no connection whatsoever to a real luminous event; visual memory can be algorithmically fabricated; the distance between the optical record and fiction has become constitutively porous. Shobeiri (2024a) aptly observes that generative AI now erases the boundary between the present and memories of the past, whereas previously the indexicality of photography lent legitimate authority to the reality of memories.

This article offers a scoping review of the academic production that appeared between 2018 and 2025 on the relationship between photography and AI. Its purpose is to map the categories, practices, and concepts that different theoretical traditions have deployed to think through these transformations. The review is organized around five thematic axes: memory; verisimilitude and veracity; visual regime; technological hybridization; and emerging concepts. Through them, the article seeks to identify, with as much precision as possible, what persists (continuities) and what breaks (ruptures) in the passage from photography to the algorithmic image.

It is worth clarifying what we mean by “visual regime,” a notion we will return to later. This is not merely an inventory of images in circulation but something more structural: a set of relations among production technologies, modes of circulation, consumption practices, reading conventions, and distributions of power that determine what is visible or invisible, who may see, and what consequences follow from being seen or remaining invisible at a given historical moment (Rancière, 2014; Mitchell, 2005). What generative AI alters is not merely the substance of the image but the transformation of the entire architecture, management, production, and consumption of that regime.

The contribution of this research lies in three major decisions that guided its design. The first is integrative in character, enabling dialogue between sources and bodies of literature that rarely intersect—Steyerl with Fontcuberta, Zylinska with Bañuelos, Wasielewski with Shobeiri. The second decision is analytical: the article undertakes an analysis of continuities and ruptures as its organizing axis, allowing it to move beyond both an apocalyptic rhetoric about the “end of photography” and an uncritical celebration of the technological novelty that generative AI represents. The third decision is geographic, incorporating a corpus of relevant Spanish-language references that contribute decolonial and affective perspectives systemically absent from the Anglophone review corpora in the field.

2. Review Methodology

2.1 Type of Review

This research is guided by the protocol known as the *scoping review*, proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and later redesigned by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010), which involves five steps: formulating a research question; identifying relevant and related studies; selecting them according to explicit criteria; extracting and mapping the data; and synthesizing the results obtained. This methodology is appropriate because the field of study is emergent and dispersed, and the disciplines that intersect in the study of AI and photography do not share vocabularies or criteria for what counts as “evidence.” The scoping review is well suited



to a field of knowledge still in formation, where the interest lies in mapping the conceptual work carried out rather than evaluating the quality of the documents.

2.2 Search and Selection

The databases consulted were Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, MIT Press Direct, Springer, Frontiers, Dialnet, and SciELO, complemented by a direct search on ResearchGate and Academia.edu. Boolean search terms in English and Spanish were used, crossing the fields “artificial intelligence” / “IA generativa” with “photography” / “fotografía,” “visual culture,” “postphotography,” “nonhuman photography,” “virtual photography,” and “computational photography.” The period studied spanned 2018 to 2025, as generative AI became more accessible with the consolidation of GAN models and the everyday use of platforms such as DALL-E, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney. Foundational texts of photographic theory were also consulted, such as those by Barthes (1980), Flusser (2006), Dubois (1986), and Sontag (1977).

The review likewise included research journals, book chapters, conference proceedings, and academic books in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese, provided they adopted a theoretical-critical approach. Exclusively technical publications, blogs, journalistic notes, and undergraduate theses were excluded. The corpus comprises 45 verified sources published in journals such as *Critical Inquiry*, *Grey Room*, *New Left Review*, *Photographies*, *AI & Society*, *Frontiers in Communication*, and *Umática*, as well as books published by MIT Press, Verso, Routledge, Transcript Verlag, Galaxia Gutenberg, and Open Humanities Press.

The corpus of 45 sources comprises exclusively academic production—articles, books, and book chapters. The artistic and visual projects analyzed in Axis 1—*IAbuelas* (Barros, 2023), *Exhumar la Memoria* (Séptimo, 2023), *Archivo inexistente* (Rivas-San-Martín, 2025), *Synthetic Memories* (Domestic Data Streamers, 2024), *Con la carne desnuda* (Pereira, 2024), *Regresa* (Santillán, 2025), and the *fichas vivas de búsqueda* [living search files] (Colectivo Luz de Esperanza, 2025; Lugo Sánchez et al., 2026)—do not form part of the systematic corpus but instead operate as contextual case studies, selected for their recurring presence in the academic literature reviewed and for their capacity to illustrate the emerging concepts identified.

The selection process unfolded in two phases. In the first, inclusion criteria were applied to the initial set of results, discarding exclusively technical publications, journalistic notes, blogs, undergraduate theses, and texts that, despite mentioning photography and AI, offered no theoretical-critical treatment of the relationship between them. In the second phase, duplicates across databases were removed and a criterion of thematic relevance was applied: texts with greater conceptual density in relation to the five analytical axes defined—memory, verisimilitude, visual regime, technological hybridization, and emerging concepts—were prioritized, until the definitive corpus of 45 sources was constituted.

2.3 Epistemological Positioning

The article works at the intersection of five traditions that do not typically engage one another. The first is visual studies (Mitchell, 2005), which understand the image as a cultural and political practice—something that does not merely represent but promotes, acts, and produces effects. The second is photographic sociosemiotics (Barthes, 1980; Fontcuberta, 2016, 2025; Dubois, 1986), centered on the oscillating status of the photographic sign between indexicality, iconicity, and convention. From the cultural history of technology, Flusser (2006, 2011) and Steyerl (2023a) supply the conceptual tools for thinking of technical mediation as shaping regimes of perception and power. The philosophy of media and the critical posthumanism of

Zylinska (2017, 2020, 2023) and Zylinska et al. (2023) interrogate the agency distributed among humans, machines, and environments, decentering the photographic subject. And memory studies (Hirsch, 2012; Assmann, 2008; Didi-Huberman, 2012) offer the concepts needed to think through how images transmit trauma intergenerationally—and what happens when that transmission is mediated by an algorithm. This is not eclecticism: each tradition illuminates one facet of the problem that the others leave in shadow.

3. Results

3.1 Axis 1: Memory

Of all the territories contested between photography and AI, memory is perhaps the one that shows the deepest fissures—and, at the same time, the most unexpected possibilities. Barthes (1980) located the essence of photography in its certifying character: what the image showed had existed before the lens. Fontcuberta (2016) and Ritchin (2009) observed that digitization had already cracked that certainty, shifting the noeme toward something more tentative, a “that-may-have-been.” Fontcuberta puts it plainly: “For digital photography, truth was an option, no longer an obstinacy” (Fontcuberta, 2016, p. 30).

Generative AI can produce photorealistic images of events that never happened, which undermines the mnemonic function that photography has fulfilled for two centuries. This is not merely a technical problem. Van Dijck (2007) had already observed that digitally mediated memories can become active processes, whereby technology transforms the ways human communities interact with and manage the past. Likewise, Assmann (2008, 2009) identifies communicative memory and cultural memory. The former is transmitted among living generations; the latter crystallizes through institutions and artifacts. She notes that the passage from one to the other always entails a selection—what is archived and what is discarded is a political decision before it is a technical one. AI introduces a third variable into this equation: memory that was never recorded, algorithmic postmemory generated after the fact.

Shobeiri (2024b) offers a less catastrophist reading, recalling that the relationship between photography and memory, before AI, seemed obvious: through the recording of memories via photography, the image functioned as a mnemonic prosthesis. This practice underestimated the dynamic and partial nature of both photography and memory. Shobeiri, following Deleuze (1987) and Bergson (2006), notes that the construction of memory always responds to a process of continuous actualization, in which neither photography nor memory is ever fully realized, but rather remains in a constant process of shaping realities.

What generative AI makes possible, by virtualizing the photographic form, is the actualization of a memory that never existed as fact. Shobeiri (2024b) calls this phenomenon larval memories—that is, memories that are neither fully factual nor merely fictitious, but remain in an intermediate state, “both virtual and spectral,” algorithmically sustained, resolving neither in one direction nor the other: “...larval memories are virtual memories of the general past that undergo a process of actualization in a particular present, giving rise to opaque, fragmented, disembodied, and spectral reminiscences” (Shobeiri, 2024b, p. 79). Drawing on the concept of spectrality from Derrida (1997), Shobeiri explains why generatively produced images appear to the viewer as ghostly, as apparitions of a past that never existed, that was never recorded, but that, through algorithmic synthesis, acquires a disquieting presence—a kind of hyperreal fiction.

Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) identify this line within the field of Ibero-American artistic production. They forge the concept of “algorithmic postmemory” as a digital extension

of Hirsch's (2012) theory. For Hirsch, postmemory defines how later generations establish affective bonds with traumatic experiences they did not live through, by means of imaginative investment, projection, and creation. Algorithmic postmemory describes how generative AI can mediate that intergenerational transmission. The authors analyze five artistic-critical projects that engage postmemory images: *IAbuelas* (Argentina), in which Santiago Barros uses Midjourney to visualize what the children of the disappeared under the Argentine dictatorship might look like today; *Exhumar la memoria* (Mexico), by Rogelio Séptimo, combines analog photography with DALL-E to reconstruct the visual memory of the Purépecha community; *Archivo inexistente* (Chile), in which Rivas-San-Martín creates representations of homosexual couples and queer people from twentieth-century Latin America who were never photographed for reasons of discrimination and censorship; *Synthetic Memories* (Barcelona), by the collective Domestic Data Streamers, works with Alzheimer's patients to reconstruct memories they are forgetting; and *Con la carne desnuda* (Uruguay), in which Julio Pereira uses AI to recreate Polaroid-format images from the Uruguayan dictatorship based on the fictionalized diaries of María del Pilar (Barros, 2023; Séptimo, 2023; Rivas-San-Martín, 2025; Domestic Data Streamers, 2024; Pereira, 2024; Bañuelos-Capistrán, 2026).

To these five artistic expressions of visual postmemory must be added the Mexican project *Regresa* (UNAM, 2025), led by Ana Itzel Juárez Martín and developed at the Center for Anthropological Studies of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences (UNAM), which aims to reconstruct and update the facial age of the faces of disappeared children through progression algorithms trained on anthropological data. The project exemplifies the intersection of commemoration and active memory, providing families with visual connections and tools for identification and search (Santillán, 2025). Separately, the *Fichas vivas de búsqueda* [Living Search Files], a project promoted by the Colectivo Luz de Esperanza (2025), Desaparecidos Jalisco, uses generative AI to give voice and gestural movement to identification photographs of missing persons. The project exemplifies technological appropriation in the hands of a community of political resistance and search, placed at the service of memory and social justice (Lugo-Sánchez et al., 2025).

What these projects reveal is an emerging function of the algorithmic image: the symbolic restoration of memories that do not exist. AI not only fabricates images of what never was; it also gives visual form to what should have been documented but was not, because political conditions prevented it. Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) identify here the emergence of “synthetic visual vestiges”—images that function as traces of unrecorded experiences, inspired by Didi-Huberman's (2012) theorization of historical vestiges as constructions in constant transformation—and a *synthetic punctum*: the capacity of an image lacking an indexical referent to nonetheless provoke a legitimate affective response, comparable to what Barthes (1980) described as the *punctum*, the piercing detail that wounds the viewer.

Steyerl (2023a) offers the somber counterpoint: AI-generated images are “statistical hallucinations” that refer not to facts but to probability distributions. Her concept of “model collapse” warns of a systemic risk that occurs when models are trained recursively on their own outputs, whereby the diversity of the visual archive contracts and expressive richness collapses under an increasingly overwhelming and narrow regime of repetition. From Martín-Prada's (2025) perspective, what artists working on postmemory with generative AI are doing is not so much a reflection on the modes of producing memories as a way of interrogating our modes of forgetting.

3.2 Axis 2: Verisimilitude and Veracity

Photographic semiotic theory, from Peirce to Dubois (1986), established that the photographic image was above all an *index*: a physical trace, produced by the incidence of light on a

sensitive surface, causally bound to its referent. From this derived its authority as testimony. Dubois (1986) systematized this position by describing the photographic act as a process in which the sign maintains a relation of physical contiguity with its referent, and he distinguished three historical moments in the reflection on photography: photography as mirror of the real (*mimesis*); photography as transformation of the real (*convention*); and photography as trace of the real (*index*). It is this third moment, dominant in theory since the 1980s, that generative AI puts into frontal crisis. Sontag (1977) had observed that photography confers on every moment the character of a mystery, precisely because the photographic image is evidence of something that existed. When that evidence becomes fabricable, the mystery changes in nature: it is no longer that of the captured past, but that of the indistinction between what was captured and what was invented—an artificial memory.

What remains of that capacity to certify reality when an image can replicate photographic appearance without any luminous event having occurred?

In “Unnatural Images,” published in *Critical Inquiry*, Wasielewski (2024a) asks whether it is legitimate to consider images produced by text-to-image systems as photographs. She answers yes, albeit with certain caveats. Generative images do not spring from nothing; they are generated from massive repositories of photographic data on which the models were trained. They are designed to emulate the photographic form, drawing on all of its narrative resources, and they are entering into the theoretical and historical reflection on the image. Wasielewski’s argument holds that these images bring to light something that was already latent: that the experience of “reality” in any photograph was always, in part, a fiction, a fantasy, and an interpretation. In a later work, Wasielewski (2024b) analyzes how training databases resurrect the Western artistic canon without the consent of its original creators, giving rise to what she calls a *zombie canon*—that is, the algorithmic resurrection of styles, compositions, and visual conventions sedimented in internet databases.

For her part, Steyerl (2023a, 2023b) formulates the mutation more abruptly: AI images replace likenesses with likelinesses. They require no indexical link to their object and do not depend on the impact of photons on a sensor. They converge around the average, the statistical median—what she calls, with deliberate ambiguity, “hallucinated mediocrity.” They are “mean images” in several senses at once: statistically average, aesthetically mean-spirited, and connected as much to meaning as to financial and corporate means. Borrowing the notion of “derivative conditions” from Jonathan Beller (2021), Steyerl situates AI’s “derivative images” within the terrain of financial speculation: just as financial derivatives progressively distance themselves from the underlying asset, generative images distance themselves from the real referent until they become wagers and statistics about visual culture.

Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) propose a formalization of this transformation with the concept of *algorithmic index*, defined as a referentiality grounded not in physical connection with the referent but in the computational synthesis of multiple referents and data patterns, articulating a symbolic and affective bond rather than a causal one. This concept builds on what Flusser (2011) identifies as the universe of technical images and what Zylinska (2023) expands as the “perception machine,” in which images are the product of apparatuses and algorithmic systems that learn and generate patterns. In addition, Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) introduce the notion of “affective symbolic documentarism,” now algorithmic—that is, a form of record in which what matters is not fidelity to fact but the affective efficacy of the image.

This documentarism operates simultaneously across several temporal layers: the Barthesian “that-has-been”; the “that-has-not-been” of the generative (Rivas-San-Martín, 2025); the generative “that-is,” which operates in the continuous present of algorithmic synthesis; and the pairing “that-could-have-been” / “that-could-be,” which opens a space of historical possibility and predictive projection through the critical agency of the human operator: “Photographing

the future can become a way not only of seeing what will happen, but of creating images of what we want to happen [...] a singular photograph is nothing more than a cut through a fan of possibilities” (Zylinska, 2023, p. 165).

In the contemporary scenario analyzed by Hausken (2024), the public’s dominant reaction to these generative images shifts from astonishment to panic and denunciations of falsity; we are progressively settling into the realm of illusion, fake news, and realist fictions. The images of Pope Francis in Balenciaga coats and fashion were labeled by the press as “fraud,” “forgery,” and a “threat to photographic credibility.” Hausken, however, is critical of this rhetoric of a crisis of representation, since it presupposes that photography was itself a faithful reflection of the real, and he argues that this denunciation contributes neither to democratic debate nor to art. The problem, he argues, is not that AI lies, but that we had naturalized the illusion that photography did not. Bate (2024), for his part, proposes reading photography in the age of AI as a form of “speculative fiction”: no longer a record of what was, but a projection of what could be or could have been—in short, returning photography to the place it should never have left, the subjective territory of representation and visual interpretation.

3.3 Axis 3: Visual Regime

The third axis examines the regime of visibility of still and moving images as a system, analyzing how and by whom they are produced, how they circulate, who consumes them, what functions they serve, how they operate politically, and who/what remains outside the field of the socially visible—a field of analysis that remains little explored. Rancière (2014) helps us grasp the scope of a regime of visibility through his notion of the “distribution of the sensible,” that is, how a system of visual management and production allocates what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, within a given human community.

Generative AI is undoubtedly reconfiguring that distribution of the visual sensible on an unprecedented scale. The problem plays out along two major axes: a regime governed by a corporate, surveillance-based attention economy (Zuboff, 2020), driven by algorithms of consumption, and a regime of algorithmic visual remediation based on probabilistic synthesis, which reinforces the canons of a hegemonic regime. Generative models are complex; they are not linear but statistical, stochastic, random, and operate under the rules of deep learning; their repertoire is not finite but probabilistic, and their productive capacity exceeds, by several orders of magnitude, the capacity of any human operator. As with a camera, a human operator will have to learn to subvert the “operational program” of the technical AI “apparatus,” in Flusser’s (2006) terms, to avoid producing mere redundancies, pastiche images, and kitsch.

Déotte (2012) complements this perspective with his concept of the “techno-aesthetic apparatus,” understood as a device that does not merely record the sensible but reconfigures it, establishing new conditions of perception and historical sensibility. From this vantage point, AI is not simply a tool for making images: it is an apparatus that reorganizes the way we feel the past, the present, and the possible.

For Somaini (2023), algorithmic images constitute a new visual paradigm, an analysis he develops in an extensive article published in *Grey Room*. His analysis examines how deep learning systems are transforming not only the fabrication of images but their very ontology, reconfiguring the boundaries of what might constitute a new regime of visibility. Farocki (2004, 2013) had already described “operational images”—images produced by machines for machines, which require no human viewer to fulfill their function; generative AI expands and complicates that category by producing images that are simultaneously operational (feeding datasets, training other models) and spectacular (circulating as though they were photography, graphic art, painting, cinema, or video).

Zylinska (2017) contributes to this axis two concepts that have proven particularly fertile. The first, nonhuman photography, in *Nonhuman Photography*, designates images that are not created by or for human beings: depopulated landscapes, surveillance-camera captures, endoscopic images, QR codes used in automated security systems. Zylinska clarifies that this does not deny the human presence in photographic production but rather points to an imbrication between human and nonhuman elements that has always been constitutive of the photographic—and that AI has made impossible to conceal.

AI thus does not inaugurate the questioning of the photographic regime of visual veracity but renders it visible with a clarity that previous discussions had failed to achieve. Nonhuman photography seeks, on the contrary, to resituate the human as part of a complex assemblage of perception in which organic and machinic agents are intertwined.

Zylinska's second concept, the perception machine (Zylinska, 2023), describes the contemporary condition in which we are constantly seeing and being seen, not only by other humans but also by “mechanical eyes” (Zylinska et al., 2023). The notion transposes Virilio's (1994) *Vision Machine* into an encounter with Flusser's philosophy on the future of media, examining how human perception is transformed in and through its relationship with algorithmic devices. Zylinska here examines image-making technologies, from cameras as standalone devices to generative programs and models, offering, moreover, what she describes as a “feminist attempt to respond to planetary demands” (Zylinska et al., 2023).

Steyerl (2023b) complements this picture with her analysis of “subprime visibility”: just as subprime mortgages packaged toxic loans disguised as solid assets, AI images amalgamate diverse and at times contradictory data, generating what Steyerl calls a “structural mediocrity” presented under the appearance of photorealism. Noble (2018) had already warned that search algorithms reinforce racism through systematic biases in visual representation; generative AI, trained on those same repositories, inherits and amplifies those distortions. Rubinstein and Sluis (2013b), whose work anticipates several aspects of this discussion, had described the “undecidability” of the digital image—the impossibility of fixing a stable meaning for something that exists as processable code. That undecidability now acquires an unprecedented scale in the current context.

3.4 Axis 4: Technological Hybridization

Does it still make sense to speak of “photography” when practically every photo taken with a phone involves algorithmic intervention, and when there exists a camera like Bjørn Karmann's *Paragraphica* (2023), which generates images without light or lens, using weather, geolocation, and time-of-day metadata converted into prompts for a text-to-image model?

Shobeiri and Westgeest (2024) propose the term “virtual photography” as a unifying concept that preserves the efficiency and function of conventional photography (made with or without a camera) while deploying it across a broad range of formats and platforms. The definition encompasses generative AI, in-game photography, extended reality, and emerging transmutations. Shobeiri observes that “virtual photography” is simultaneously opaque and axiomatic, and that it is, in truth, very poorly understood. It is an apparent oxymoron that “stitches a virtuality-inducing crux onto the reality-infusing medium of photography” (Shobeiri, 2024a, p. 7). Virtual photography destabilizes a medium historically bound to the notion of reality by introducing simulation, generating a structural tension between record and artifice.

In the same work, Shobeiri (2024a) proposes two complementary concepts: “phasmagraphy,” which expands the boundaries of the visible photographic spectrum toward adjacent wavelengths (radiography, thermography, data clouds), and “omnipicture,” which describes

multiple-capture images designed to resonate with the complexity of lived experience. Both concepts extend the notion of “virtual photography” beyond AI toward other forms of the medium’s virtualization (Shobeiri & Westgeest, 2024, p. 17).

Flusser’s philosophy makes it possible to theoretically confront these hybridizations. Flusser conceived of the camera as an “apparatus” whose operational program could be subverted to produce images that escape aesthetic redundancy. Simondon (2007), from his analysis of the mode of existence of technical objects, complements this perspective by noting that devices are not merely instruments but agents that co-participate in the production of meaning, in a kind of symbiosis between machines and humans. Following this line, Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) argue that artists who critically appropriate generative AI validate Flusser’s proposal by transforming the operational program of these techno-aesthetic apparatuses, challenging the program of algorithmic machine systems and the logic of the operational images described by Farocki (2013). For Zylinska (2023), the process of co-creation thus becomes an act of transformation that transcends aesthetic and political repetition.

Fontcuberta (2024) synthesizes the historical trajectory of the photographic medium in a single formula: “from alchemy to algorithm.” The idea traces a trajectory of photography that passed from the daguerreotype to collodion, from gelatin-bromide to the digital sensor, from the pixel to the latent vector—and, we might add, from data to algorithm and deep learning. Each technological leap reconfigured not only the capture procedure but the discursive nature of the image, its interpretive values, its social insertion.

Two recent concepts name unprecedented practices: *promptography* (a term attributed to the artist Christian Vines and analyzed by Martín-Prada, 2024, 2025) designates the production of photographic-looking images through text instructions directed at a generative model, performing a kind of “reverse ekphrasis.” And, on the other hand, the “minority prompt” (Rivas-San-Martín, 2025) constitutes a strategy designed to counteract the biases inscribed in generative AI databases. Rivas-San-Martín conceives of it as an instrument of algorithmic resistance that seeks to redress a series of visual negations and exclusions grounded in ideological and political reasons, sexual dissidence, class, geographic location, and racialization (Rivas-San-Martín, 2025).

Altaratz (2023), for his part, notes that computational photography destabilizes the profession of the professional photographer: the claim to exclusivity and professional expertise, differentiated creativity, and individual agency are all eroded by algorithmic automation. Manovich and Arielli (2024), in their collective book *Artificial Aesthetics*, analyze how AI constructs an “artificial gaze” that reconfigures the aesthetic expectations of viewers. Zylinska, for her part, suggests—half in jest, half seriously—that human creativity may perhaps always have been algorithmic, “based on the execution of various sets of rules known as programs, with the most interesting outcomes being those that involved an algorithmic failure” (Zylinska et al., 2023, para. 15).

Computation would be merely the most recent stage of a process with deep roots. This leads Zylinska to propose an artistic practice based on “little AI”: working with generative technologies at their moment of imperfection, when the system’s errors and incoherences reveal more than a flawless output would. Her film *A Gift of the World (Oedipus on the Jetty)* (2021), a remake of Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) made with GAN and GPT-2 models, embodies this strategy: the *glitched* images and the generative script—which rewrote the masculine narrative of salvation as a polyphonic, gender-fluid counter-apocalyptic story—exploit precisely the machine’s clumsiness as an expressive resource (Zylinska, 2023). What AI fails to imitate well—that is, its errors and hallucinations—is, for Zylinska (2020), as revealing as what it manages to imitate perfectly.

Technological hybridization also has an economic dimension that visual theory tends to overlook. Taffel (2021) notes that computational photography is inseparable from platform capitalism, in which every image captured by a phone feeds the training systems of algorithmic models. In this regime of visibility, the act of photographing becomes, inadvertently, an act of data production for technology corporations. This relationship, which turns the photographer into an involuntary supplier of raw material, configures what Steyerl (2023a), drawing on Beller (2021), describes as the circuit of “derivative images,” in which the photographic image becomes a financial, corporate, and political asset whose value lies not in what it shows but in the data it contains, beyond its value as a cultural or artistic good.

3.5 Axis 5: Emerging Concepts

From the intersection of the five axes emerges a dense conceptual and theoretical inventory that can be organized into four constellations.

- The first, centered on the transformation of memory, includes “algorithmic postmemory” (Bañuelos-Capistrán et al., 2025), “larval memories” (Shobeiri, 2024b), and “synthetic visual vestiges and the synthetic punctum” (Bañuelos-Capistrán et al., 2025).
- The second, on the transformation of referentiality, comprises the “algorithmic index,” “algorithmic affective symbolic documentarism” (Bañuelos-Capistrán et al., 2025), and “unnatural images” (Wasielewski, 2024a).
- The third, concerning the transformation of the visual regime, brings together “mean images” and “subprime visibility” (Steyerl, 2023a, 2023b), algorithmic images (Somai, 2023), “nonhuman photography” and the “perception machine” (Zylinska, 2017, 2023), and the “zombie canon” (Wasielewski, 2024b).
- The fourth, devoted to the transformation of practice, groups together “virtual photography,” “phasmagraphy,” and “omnipicture” (Shobeiri & Westgeest, 2024)—three variants that expand the material and perceptual boundaries of the photographic medium—“promptography” (Vinces via Martín-Prada, 2024, 2025), the “minority prompt” (Rivas-San-Martín, 2025), “algorithmic postphotography” (Fontcuberta, 2016, 2024, 2025; García-Cisneros, 2024), and “little AI” (Zylinska, 2023), which reclaims technology’s imperfect moment as an aesthetic and critical resource.

The density of this vocabulary—twenty concepts coined in under seven years, drawn from at least six disciplinary traditions—indicates that the field is not lacking in theoretical tools; it is actively producing them, and doing so from diverse geographies and languages.

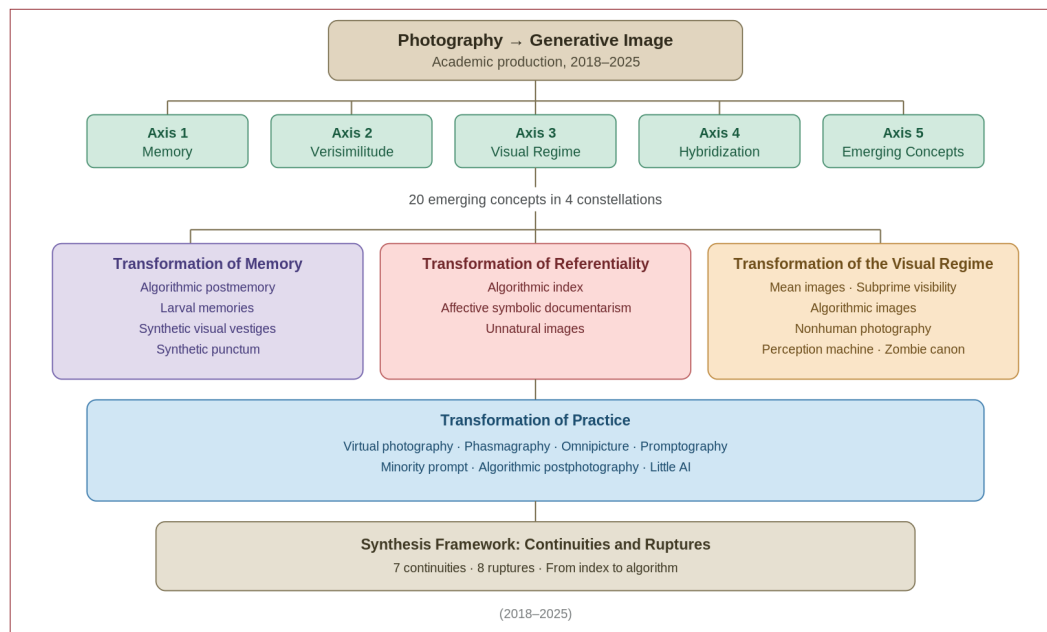
This emerging conceptual inventory admits two mutually complementary readings. First, we find an inventory that is not homogeneous: some concepts are descriptive (such as “virtual photography,” “promptography”), others are analytical (“algorithmic index,” “mean images”), others are critical (zombie canon, “subprime visibility”), and others are propositional (“algorithmic postmemory,” “minority prompt”). We also find heterogeneity among the academic traditions that produce them: Anglophone media studies tends toward description and analysis; German critical theory (Steyerl) privileges denunciation of the socioeconomic and political system; Latin American practice (Rivas-San-Martín, Bañuelos-Capistrán) combines conceptual innovation with intervention in artistic production; and media philosophy (Zylinska, Flusser) seeks frameworks of reference that transcend particular cases. The second observation is that these new concepts do not compete with one another but are complementary: they illuminate and presuppose one another.

For example, Shobeiri’s (2024b) “larval memories” require Bañuelos-Capistrán et al.’s (2025) “algorithmic index” to explain how an image without a referent can produce an affective me-

morial effect. Steyerl's (2023a) "mean images" require Zylinska's (2023) "perception machine" to explain how such statistical images are capable of reorganizing collective perception. The emerging vocabulary functions as an interdependent conceptual fabric rather than as a collection of isolated labels.

Figure 1

Conceptual map and structure of the scoping review: photography, generative imagery, and emerging visual regime (2018–2025).

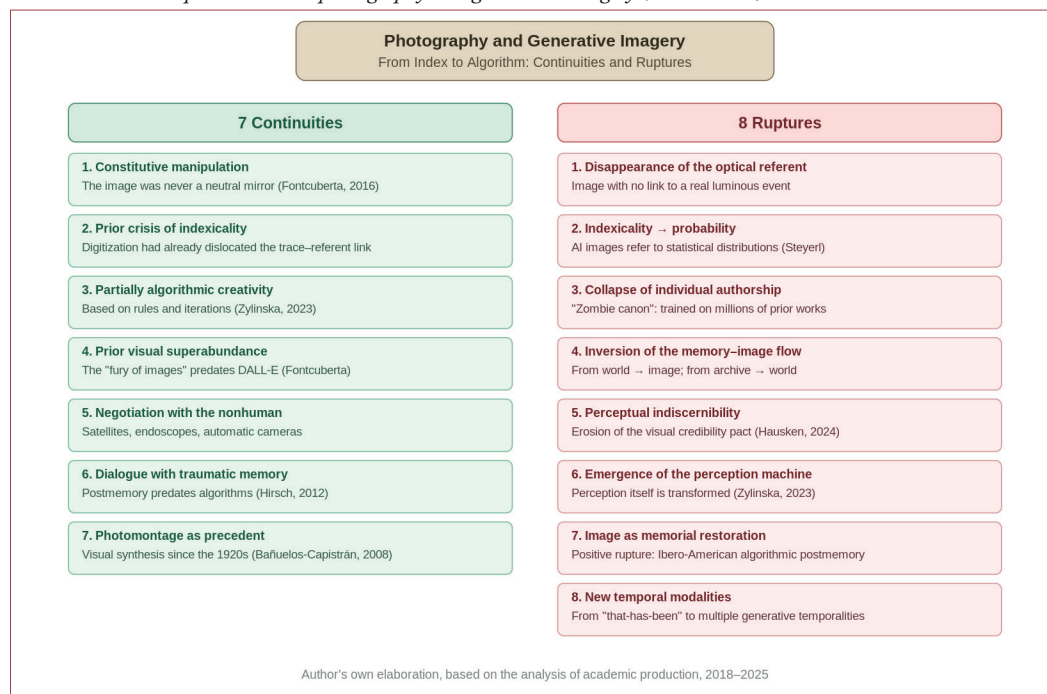


Note. Author's own creation. The diagram synthesizes the article's analytical architecture: the five thematic axes of the review (memory; verisimilitude and veracity; visual regime; technological hybridization; emerging concepts), the four constellations of the twenty emerging concepts identified, and the synthesis framework based on continuities and ruptures between the photographic tradition and the generative image.

4. Discussion: Continuities and Ruptures

From the intersection of these five axes emerges a dialectical pattern that explains how generative AI simultaneously expands and fractures the photographic tradition, in qualitatively distinct ways depending on the axis considered. This is not accidental; it reflects a tension Flusser (2006) had already identified: every new image-production technology continues the previous one, inheriting its forms, traditions, and reading expectations, while simultaneously breaking with it, introducing new forms and possibilities that transform the very nature of what we call an "image." Generative AI catalyzes this cycle of inheritance and rupture in a process that appears inseparable.

Figure 2
Continuities and ruptures between photography and generative imagery (2018–2025)



Note. Author's own creation, based on the analysis of academic production from 2018–2025. Continuities are identified drawing on Barthes (1980), Fontcuberta (2016), Hirsch (2012), Rubinstein and Sluis (2013a, 2013b), Zylinska (2017, 2023), Zylinska et al. (2023), and Bañuelos-Capistrán (2008). Ruptures are identified drawing on Steyerl (2023a, 2023b), Wasielewski (2024a, 2024b, 2025), Hausken (2024), Zylinska (2017, 2023), Zylinska et al. (2023), Shobeiri and Westgeest (2024), and Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025).

The algorithmic postmemory projects demonstrate that the critical use of generative AI can serve to restore excluded and fractured memories. What is paradoxical is that the very same AI technologies built from a hegemonic gaze—technologies that reproduce images marked by racial, gender, and class biases, as Noble (2018) has shown—can be used to subvert that hegemonic gaze, riddled as it is with commonplaces, exclusions, and ideological biases. Rivas-San-Martín's (2025) "minority prompt," for instance, operates within a system (such as Midjourney) that it seeks to subvert. This paradox—using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, as Audre Lorde (1983) would put it—has no clean theoretical resolution; it is a productive tension that theorists, artists, and communities must work through critically, one that academic reflection would do poorly to dissolve prematurely.

4.1. Continuities

There are more continuities than the "end of photography" narrative tends to admit, and it is worth enumerating them before turning to the ruptures. Manipulation was always constitutive of photography: from nineteenth-century trick photography to Photoshop, the image was never a neutral mirror—"every photograph," wrote Fontcuberta (1997), "is a fiction that presents itself as true." Nor does the crisis of indexicality begin with DALL-E; the analog-to-digital transition had already dislocated the trace-referent link before generative models existed, as Rubinstein and Sluis (2013a) documented with precision.

Further still: photography never operated in a purely human territory—satellites, endoscopes, and automatic cameras preceded it in negotiating the nonhuman (Zylinska, 2017)—nor apart from traumatic memory, whose intergenerational transmission Hirsch (2012) described long

before AI existed. Human creativity itself, Zylinska (2023) suggests, may perhaps always have been partly algorithmic, based on rules, programs, iterations. Visual superabundance, for its part, predates DALL-E: Fontcuberta (2016) was already diagnosing the “fury of images” when generative models did not yet exist even as a proposal; in his more recent work he describes photography as an image in transition amid the eruption of generative systems (Fontcuberta, 2025). And photomontage, since the avant-gardes of the 1920s, is the historical precedent of visual synthesis that most unsettles those who present AI as an absolute novelty (Bañuelos-Capistrán, 2008).

4.2. Ruptures

Ruptures are another matter. Eight qualitative discontinuities separate the algorithmic image from everything photography produced before it, and none has any precedent in the medium’s nearly two-hundred-year history. The most radical is also the most obvious: for the first time, an image of photographic appearance can exist with no connection whatsoever to a real luminous event—what Shobeiri (2024a, p. 17) formulates as the capacity to “actualize nonexistent pasts and experiences never lived.” From that rupture follows the next: AI images do not refer to facts but to statistical distributions (Steyerl, 2023a); the “algorithmic index” (Bañuelos-Capistrán et al., 2025) formalizes this new referentiality, which is no longer causal but computational.

Something analogous occurs with authorship: the generated image is the product of training on millions of prior works with no locatable creating subject—Wasielewski’s (2024b) “zombie canon”—which causes the notion of the individual author, on which much photographic theory rested, to collapse. The image’s temporal flow is also inverted: photography moved from the world to the image (recording); AI moves from the archive to the world (generation). To this must be added “perceptual indiscernibility” (Hausken, 2024), which erodes the pact of visual credibility on which photojournalism, judicial documentation, and everyday testimony relied. Zylinska (2023) identifies a rupture of another order: what is transformed is not only the image but perception itself, reorganized by the perception machine that algorithmic devices have installed at the center of contemporary visual life. Perhaps the most unexpected is the seventh: the algorithmic image as a tool of memorial restoration, a rupture in a positive sense evidenced by the Ibero-American projects of algorithmic postmemory (Bañuelos-Capistrán et al., 2025). The eighth, finally, is temporal: the new modalities of the generative image overflow the Barthesian “that-has-been” toward a system of multiple temporalities articulated from complementary angles by Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025), Rivas-San-Martín (2025), and Zylinska (2023).

5. Conclusions

This research offers a scoping review of the formulation of key concepts that intersect in the reflection on the impact of generative AI on photography between 2018 and 2025. It addresses fundamental questions about the nature of the image, memory, representation, and perception within a dispersed field in accelerated formation. We synthesize here the main findings and their limitations.

The first finding identifies twenty recently coined concepts, formulated from six academic traditions that are building the analytical apparatus needed to understand algorithmic images. The academic field is actively formulating concepts, drawn from diverse geographies and languages. Half of this conceptual production comes from Ibero-American sources, such as Bañuelos-Capistrán (2026), Rivas-San-Martín (2025), García-Cisneros (2024), and Mar-

tín-Prada (2024, 2025), which deserves particular attention that Global North scholarship does not always afford it.

The second finding offers analytical concepts: we observe that generative AI neither “annihilates” nor “liberates” photography but instead radicalizes some of its constitutive tensions—between document and fiction, between indexicality and symbolic convention, between human agency and technical mediation—while also adding discontinuities without historical precedent. In two hundred years of photographic history, we find no equivalent to the disappearance of the optical-luminous referent, the inversion of the memory-image flow, or the shift from trace to probability in visual production. The central and novel paradox is that the same generative AI tools that erode the credibility of visual testimony can also be used to restore fractured memories. There is no clean resolution to this tension. What we do find is critical theoretical and artistic work that engages the contradiction without pretending to resolve it.

The third finding reveals that the Ibero-American projects display a capacity for critical-artistic appropriation that subverts hegemonic logics of visibility, opening paths of symbolic reparation for communities whose memory was fractured, censored, or erased. These projects validate, as Bañuelos-Capistrán et al. (2025) note, the Flusserian proposal regarding the reprogramming of algorithmic apparatuses to place them at the service of causes that challenge the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2014; Bañuelos-Capistrán, 2026). This finding confirms the potential of generative AI as an instrument of memorial restoration and visual justice that Anglophone literature tends to underestimate.

The study has limitations related to its exclusive use of English- and Spanish-language sources, set against the rapid obsolescence of technological change and the difficulty of tracking academic production circulating outside conventional channels. The study suggests future lines of research in the field of theories and artistic projects developed in Asian and African contexts, further inquiry into the ethical and regulatory dimensions of posthuman generative AI use, and the incorporation of empirical studies on the reception of generative images and postmemory.

6. Generative AI Use Declaration

In the preparation of this article, the artificial intelligence model Claude (Anthropic, Sonnet 4.5) was used as a support tool for the following tasks: search and verification of the state of the art within the framework of the scoping review methodology, review of Spanish–English translations, verification and formatting of the bibliographic reference system under APA 7th edition, and generation of the figures included in the text. In all cases, the use of the tool was under the direct supervision of the author, who assumes full intellectual and academic responsibility for the content, arguments, interpretations, and conclusions of the article.

7. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the results or the interpretation of the findings presented in this article.

8. Ethical Compliance

The research underlying this article is theoretical-documentary in nature and does not involve experimentation with human subjects, collection of personal data, or intervention with participants. It therefore did not require evaluation by an institutional ethics committee. The

work was carried out in accordance with the general ethical principles of academic research, including respect for authorship rights and the correct attribution of the sources consulted.

9. Funding

This work did not receive specific funding from public-sector agencies, commercial entities, or nonprofit organizations.

10. Open Science Objects

The article does not generate primary datasets, as it is a theoretical-documentary review. The bibliographic sources used are duly referenced in accordance with APA 7th edition standards. The author declares his willingness to share, upon reasonable request, the analytical materials used during the review process.

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