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EXCAVATING TELEVISION MEMORY IMAGES THROUGH GENERATIVE AI

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Introduction

The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence has sparked debates of all kinds, including those that address the future of creativity and the production of media content. Also, predictions about change in employability and the need for a reinvention of different professional areas are also “hot” debates. All these aspects, although important so that the topic does not sink into a sense of excitement and light-hearted appropriation, should not hinder the fact that in terms of image production, the results are not only impressive in terms of data volume, but also provocative to understand the images themselves and their characteristics in this “new” context. Considering that images produced by generative AI are the result of processes related to their training with images and previous descriptions present on the internet itself, we can return to the question that has been the basis of our research regarding the characteristics of memory in/of digital media: how does the internet itself archive/ memorialize digital media?

In this paper we ask how, specifically, the memory of images about “television” appears on generative artificial intelligence image producing platforms. To do so, we carried out a brief excavation – a procedure inspired by media -archaeology – on two online platforms: Playground and Artbreeder. Based on a volume of approximately 200 technical images excavated, we analyzed how certain images emerge in the technical-aesthetic memory that results from the imbrications of a prompt-writing user with the technocultural dimensions of the platforms.

Memory of images/images of television memory

Our interest about television’s memory in this case is much more associated with its presence in the images that emerge on the web understood as televisualities, as proposed by Kilpp (2018): “we perceive television qualities even when they are not TV images . This television is televisuality, a virtuality that is actualized in videos as if it were (or could be) television, even if it is not (online)”.

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Therefore, this kind of trace or memory image that appears in different frames of experience can be television content itself remediated (and eventually remediated) on platforms such as YouTube or other audiovisual collections that are presented online (archives, museums, etc.) but that in this case we want to perceive them as technical images that are produced by generative AI platforms. Our emphasis in Kilpp 's quote is intentional in this sense; in this case, we are not looking for “lost” television images that appear in other digital spaces and times, but rather for the responses of artificial intelligence to searches for the term “television” on certain online generative AI platforms that produce images from text prompts.

We chose two online platforms that produce images using prompts (textual instructions) by the user. We chose platforms with a significant number of images produced and the possibility of searching by words/terms. From this perspective, we chose the platforms Playground (<https://playgroundai.com/>) and Artbreeder (<https://www.artbreeder.com/>). Our search option was to use a single term: “television”, since we were after what Manovich and Arielle (2023) call the “home style” of each platform, that is, avoiding detailing the prompt with other information about context, style, decade or any other “clue” or suggestion.

Excavations on the platforms: television constructs and televisualities

Erkki Huhtamo (1997) argues that an archaeological approach to media would have two objectives: the first would be linked to the study of the cyclical and recurring elements and motifs that underlie and guide the development of media culture. A second point would be what he calls the “excavation” of ways in which these formulations and discursive traditions were marked in specific media machines, in different historical contexts.

In order to move from the approach to procedures, we are substantially interested in the notion of “excavation” as an articulator. The notion of excavation is also a theme addressed in our scientific production (LOPES, FISCHER, 2020), in which we propose that excavation occurs both in the “material dimensions (the description and dissection of artifacts, images, devices, documents, etc.) and a memorial one (languages, mechanics, contexts of use, technocultural meanings) of objects (ibid.).”

As a new contribution to our methodological construction, we experimented with the use of the Octoparse software (octoparse.com) to capture the technical images generated by inserting the term “television” into the platforms. This is a software used for “web scrapping” activities (data scraping), a recurring process that can meet different objectives in both academic and marketing research. In our case, the idea of scraping produces an interesting intersection with the “digging” perspective that we bring from media archaeology.

Below, we reproduce some excerpts of the images generated on each platform, The full version of the results page captures is available in a specific link for access.

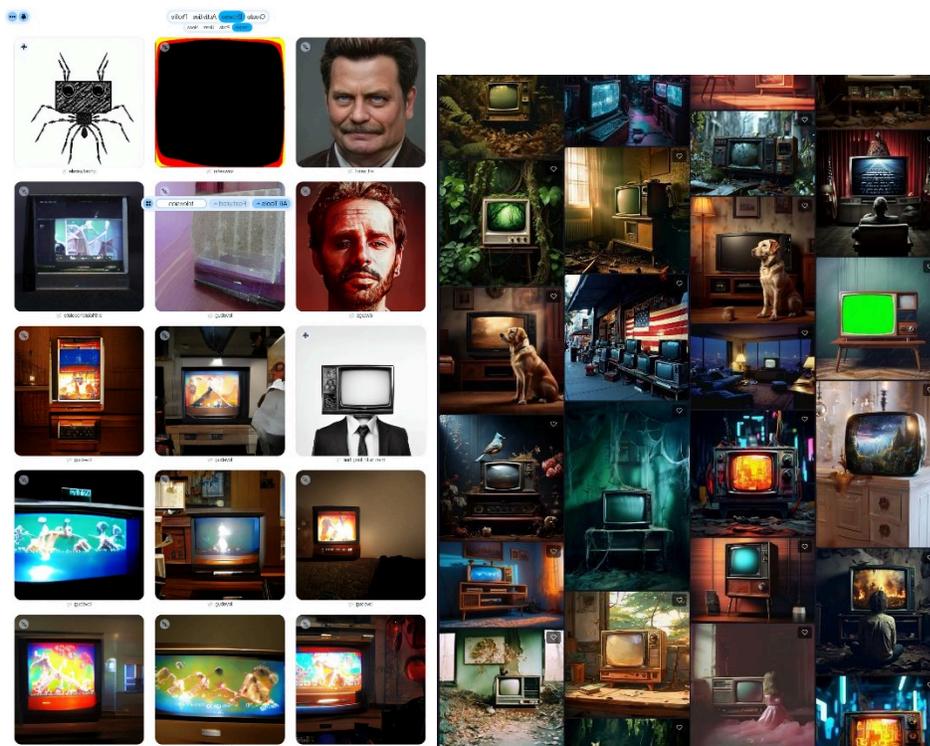


Figure 1 – Excerpt of images generated by searching for the word “television ” in Artbreeder (left) and Playground AI (right). Source: author

Preliminary findings

Based on the movements carried out so far – which evidently require better conceptual and methodological exploration, we bring some reflective insights that result from initial impressions on the scraped/excavated images:

The televisualities that emerge from the extractions are strongly associated with the hardware dimension of television, that is, the presence of the television set, visually dated as belonging to an “analog era”, is predominant in both extractions.

The devices – especially in the Playground platform – also dominate the image as the predominant item in the frame and are inserted in analogous contexts (living rooms consistent with the age of the device, so to speak) but also in contrasting environments, sometimes decadent, worn, abandoned, or even in more contrasting situations with the presence of neon, inside a forest, etc. Images can also be seen with the devices stacked on top of each other, also in a situation of accumulation/abandonment.

In the Artbreeder platform, the presence of the television set, although persistent and with characteristics similar to those seen in the excavation in Playground, also presents images referring to the reproduction of images of television celebrities (actors, presenters, tropes) always in “close-up”. The memory of the TV, in this sense, expands to Hollywood’s *star system*.

It is necessary to recognize that AI image generation platforms have some complexity in their constitution and operation, thus, there is a set of variables in terms of models used by them, as well as the use of filters or other compositions that can potentially bring other images to the surface. In this sense, our option of reducing the search to a single word and not moving other parameters is still a timid option to reduce disparities.

Finally, we must state that, although television carries multiple approaches in academia and in the industry, its strongest image-memory – resulting from an articulation between the requests of the user formulating the prompt and the images and descriptions trained by the platforms – seems to have frozen in a moment prior to television transformations such as digitalization, streaming, etc. The extinct devices – who could have predicted – are responsible for perpetuating the images of television memory in our 21st century technoculture.

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