YELLOW COOLANT AND KELLOGG'S DIARRHEA: SLOP, SHANZHAI, AND CURSED AI AS MIMETIC AESTHETIC DETOURNEMENT

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"AI slop" is a term which has been used to characterize the proliferation of often nonsensical generative AI images across social networks, both digital and physical. Characterized as images of bland regurgitation and uncreative plagiarism, AI slop has attracted the ire of artists, critics, and cultural theorists alike. Critics including Gareth Watkins and Eryk Salvaggio have argued that AI art's use–unlike other methods of mechanical reproduction–creates "images without memory," eschewing meaning and human presence in favor of reproducing big data aesthetics through statistical image recombination. (Watkins, 2025; Salvagio, 2023) This endless recombination of bland stock images into even-more-bland ones becomes a perfect political tool to foster participation in the "fantasy" of neoliberalism, each holding the cancerous logic of late-stage capitalism in the very computation of its construction. (Salvaggio, 2023) For Salvaggio, "if the purpose of a system is what it does, the purpose of AI is slop." (2024)

But slop is only part of the story. In this paper, we draw an analogy between Cursed AI "slop" and *shanzhai* 山寨 to argue that "slop" *can* represent a form of political-aesthetic resistance to the neoliberal order represented in commercial Generative AI tools. We begin by situating Cursed AI "slop" and its role in contemporary culture, describing its entanglements with aesthetic politics. Next, we compare *shanzhai*'s communities of practice and grassroots innovation to the Cursed AI Facebook group, a 1.2-million

strong "community of art lovers with a taste for the strange." Having demonstrated a rich set of sociotechnical parallels between these two forms of cultural production, we address the theoretical implications and analyze the Cursed AI Facebook community through a political-aesthetic lens. Drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han, Jacques Ranciere, and Guy Debord, we argue that the group's communities of practice question the apparatus responsible for AI's creation and proliferation. In doing so, it creates a yellow-coolant-spattered site for critique of neoliberalism's seamless economic fantasy, primed for algorithmically mediated spread across the information ecosystem through memetic mutation and recirculation.

Despite rapid advancements in generative AI technology, its outputs remain subject to mistakes, errors, distortions and glitches. The proliferation of AI-generated content mills and engagement farms on major platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X has led to public disavowal of "slop" as low-quality, low-effort content pollution. This backlash has only heightened as US governmental agencies, like the White House and Department of Homeland Security, use AI-generated "slop" to rhetorically buttress their political agendas. These fascistic tendencies reflect not the aesthetic breaks of the avant-garde, but an authoritarian elision of rules which serves the "naked exercise of power by an in-group over and out-group." (Watkins, 2025)

Yet a growing portion of these risible, sometimes grotesque, images are generated by artist communities using AI to intentionally create distorted, unsettling depictions of pop-culture icons and licensed intellectual property in compromising situations. From depictions of infidelity starring the classic claymation character "Pingu" to a crucified Christ blasting into space from the hill at Golgotha and advertisements for "Kellogg's Diarrhea" cereal, these "cursed" images undermine neoliberal fantasy to reveal a *lack* of sense. These pop-culture grotesques recall the greymarket branding practices associated with *shanzhai*, which Anna Greenspan and Suzanne Livingston characterize as a "form of copying that drifts to become something new." (Livingston and Greenspan, 2015)

Shanzhai, originally meaning "mountain fortress," has come to refer to a mode of pirate technology design and production characterized by recursive processes of modest innovation driven by communities of practice and consumer demand. (Qian et. al, 2021) Much like shanzhai designers and manufacturers, Cursed AI artists learn to navigate and reshape technical systems to their needs, developing skills through *practice* rather than formal education. (Qian et. al, 2021) Most Cursed AI artists are not developers, but they produce uniquely odd results using careful prompting and alternative models to circumvent the hegemonic reality represented by commercial AI tools. This includes the use of prompts like "yellow coolant" to ostensibly represent puddles of urine, and

"security camera footage" to frame impossible events as real. Representation, once reduced to bits of data, becomes an object to be incrementally modified through creative intervention: a *shanzhai* practice of innovation. The Cursed AI Facebook group is a site for the proliferation and development of these practices, hosting discussion threads in which artists share their prompting strategies and alternative models.

Fountains of "yellow coolant" and "Kellogg's Diarrhea Cereal" seem, at first, to be relatively innocuous aberrations, devoid of biting commentary. But these intentionally invoked hallucinations represent not unwanted byproducts. They represent what Jacques Ranciere calls the "redistribution of the sensible," corresponding to Guy Debord's concept of *detournement*: an activist media technique of re-appropriation. (Ranciere, 2022; Debord, 1956) By appropriating and recombining pop-cultural symbols beyond their originary contexts in constructed social reality, users create a *poetry* of cursed AI in which expressive elements in new relationships reveal the contradictions which our condition takes as granted. This is an adroit, cursed perversion of AI as *form.*

When a Cursed AI artist presents their audience with representations of corporate intellectual property soaked in coolant, they have re-appropriated the components of "slop" to criticize the order it represents. An advertisement for "Kraft Macaroni and Bleach," for example, becomes a joke which criticizes the food giant's promotion of nutrient-poor, unhealthy foods at the expense of public health. As the group reacts viscerally to the idea of eating "Macaroni and Bleach," or laughs at "security camera footage" of a coolant-soaked guillotine inside a fast-food outlet, they share an embodied sensory experience to the same stimuli. This experience, for Ranciere, is the fundamental prerequisite for social change: the *sensus communus*, or community of sense. (2009)

Through cultural production processes which mirror *shanzhai* design practices, intentionally produced Cursed AI "slop" uses absurdity to critique the hegemonic social reality generative AI models are designed to represent. The phenomena of intentionally created slop produces two types of communities. The first is a community of practice, which brings creatives together to share techniques for generating "cursed" images. The second is a community of sense, a group of people who connect through shared experiences. The Cursed AI Facebook group, with over a million members, demonstrates the reach of these groups and their potential for broader significance. Therefore, AI imagery *can* be a site for aesthetic contestation, and the proliferation of "slop" can be seen as a *feature* of detournement.

By introducing counter-hegemonic AI creative practices as objects of critique, we do not

mean to dismiss the problem slop can present across many domains of media. Hallucinations set a dangerous precedent in the realm of mis/disinformation, and creative professionals are right to express concern for a seismic shift in media production threatening their livelihoods and ability to practice. This is to say nothing of how AI imagery has been used to push a fascist vision of the future by extremist groups and political figures. But rather than cede all ground to those who use AI image generation to regressive ends, this paper proposes a reframing of AI "slop" as a site for aesthetic contestation. This paper contributes to ongoing conversations on digital aesthetics, generative AI art, and AI slop. It will be of interest to scholars of post-digital culture, communities of practice, tactical/alternative media, and platform cultures.

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