THE ANACHRONISM MACHINE

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Abstract

The appropriation and reuse of archival documents always involves the dialectical interaction of multiple gazes to produce meaning: the gaze associated with the original document and the gaze of the appropriationist who places the document within a new context. These gazes may be quite disparate in both their intention and effect, but until recently, they could both be assumed to be associated with and, at least in theory, traceable to a human agent. With the advent of AI imaging, the gaze of the appropriationist is no longer guaranteed to be human. Nor is such an AI appropriation necessarily even legible as an appropriation. Indeed, AI imaging has the potential to seamlessly rearrange and stitch together elements of existing images in such a way that the original images may be fractured, combined within the frame, and (re)constituted into a new configuration – an archival refraction, as it were – that originates in a nonhuman agency. What kind of historical evidence or archival practice, if any, can resist this refractive process, and what will be its epistemological and historiographic consequences? This essay argues that AI, in its appropriation and reuse of existing images and sounds, is an anachronism machine. In other words, AI images that appear to be *archival* introduce the threat of imperceptible anachronism into the historical record in ways that may collapse distinct historical times (and places) into an AI chronotope to which there is no exterior.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, archive, appropriation, anachronism, historiography*

Culture Crossroads
Volume 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol27.552

ISSN 2500-9974

CULTURE
CROSSROADS

Introduction

With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, our relation to the archive is fundamentally changed. AI-content generation threatens to undo any coherence that we – by which I mean archivists and scholars attempting to speak to one another across time and across generations – have been able to provide for an endlessly complex and confusing world. The study of history is an Enlightenment project containing the hope that the empirical study of the traces left by the past may offer us in the present some guidance, some chance of charting a better-than-entirely-random course into the future. Yet, the part that lends any rational authority whatsoever to history is its empiricism, its basis in evidence, in records, in documents, in demonstrable and verifiable facts – in other words, in the archive. Historical knowledge is always metonymic since the past, by definition, is gone. All we ever have are tiny fragments left by a disappeared era from which we try to extrapolate a whole – another world, another chronotope and its accompanying cultural paradigms. As partial and tentative as our sense of this lost world may be, our ability to imagine a temporally other world is precisely what allows us to recognize the contingency of our own social structures and most basic assumptions – and to thereby recognize the possibility for change.

In the early days of digital media, there was much excitement about the potentials of online archives – specifically, digitized archives – providing historical information to many more people than previously possible. Certainly, digital archives have offered easier access to a vast quantity of historical information and documents to far more people than ever before. This has, however, sometimes come at the expense of material archiving practices. Some archives and libraries have digitized their old newspapers and then thrown the originals away, happy for the additional storage space. Many families have digitized their old Super8 home movies and thrown away the film reels, thinking their inscribed memories safe forever in digital form. Moreover, many new writings that are published and recordings produced never see hard copy. These words, sounds, and images – moving and otherwise – exist only in digital code. Indeed, so many of the traces of our most recent cultural memory is now strictly digital. Which is also to say, as Lev Manovich pointed out years back, easily rearranged, recombined, and reconfigured [Manovich 2002].

What, then, happens when the metonymic object on which our historical understanding is based – the archival document – is subject to potentially undetectable transformation and distortion? The historical world we extrapolate becomes ever more of a fiction while maintaining its (false) epistemic authority. This is precisely the threat I see AI posing to our digital (including digitized) archives. Certainly, beyond the basic concern about formats becoming obsolete and their contents therefore becoming inaccessible, it is becoming exceedingly clear that the traces of the past may themselves be transformed.

Perceptual realism in the era of AI

Of course, forgery and historical misrepresentations have always been with us. Yet, crucially, while manipulation of historical evidence was always possible, it used to be more difficult both to do and to conceal. Now, our digital technologies can instantly, seamlessly reconfigure any image or sound while maintaining what Stephen Prince has called "perceptual realism." He writes:

> *Perceptual realism ... designates a relationship between the image or film and the spectator, and it can encompass both unreal images and those which are referentially realistic. Because of this, unreal images may be referentially fictional but perceptually realistic.* [Prince 1996: 32]

Prince developed this term to account for CGI images that are perceptually persuasive even if we know that their subjects are referentially fictional: for instance, the orcs and other fantastical creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003). However, the term is also useful in accounting for images that appear archival – here meaning that they generate what I have elsewhere called the "archive effect" – but are in fact not.[1] While this could be done before the advent of AI, algorithmic technologies have both automated this process and intensified its perceptual persuasiveness.

It is worth noting that even when no one is actively trying to produce false information, the correlation between verifiable history and the perceptually realistic representations made possible by AI becomes increasingly tenuous. We have fed a great many traces of our cultural history – our collective archive – into AI datasets, and the linked algorithms are now producing remixed versions of this content. Yet they do so without regard for provenance, for the specificity of the temporal and social contexts from which historical traces derive. Indeed, what I want to argue here is that AI is poised to become an "anachronism machine" armed with the epistemic weapon of perceptual realism.

Anachronism refers to "*an error in chronology; the placing of something in a period of time to which it does not belong (esp. one which is earlier than its true date)*" [Oxford English Dictionary 2023]. Jacques Rancière has made the important point that this notion of anachronism relies on a unitary and totalizing conception of epoch.

[1] Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge, 2014). The book reformulates the "archival" as an experience of the viewer watching a particular film rather than as a stable object. The experience of the archive effect is constituted through the viewer's perception of a "temporal disparity" and an "intentional disparity" between different elements within the same text.

In his essay *Anachronism and the Conflict of Times*, Rancière argues that in modern historiography, the notion of the epoch

> *is no longer a sequence of time located at a certain point, between a past and a future. It is an organic totality defined by its self-identity. And this understanding of the epoch precludes anachronism. Within this framework, anachronism is not the misplacement of an event in the chain linking earlier to later facts. It is a detail, a shade of color that clashes with the whole painting. Anachronism shows itself as not belonging to the picture, not belonging to its epoch. People cannot not resemble their time, and time is both the rule of coexistence that works as a global necessity for those who live in it, and also the bell that rings every hour of the day and accompanies all events of individual and collective life ... And this identity determines what people can do, feel, and think.* [Rancière 2020: 117]

He contends that anachronism is regarded as a problem not simply because it mixes up chronology but because it risks *disidentification in forms of life* [Rancière 2020: 117]. He further notes that

> *the core of the problem is untimeliness ... Anachronism ultimately means 'impropriety;' it is a sin against time as location, against the social distribution of positions, occupations, identities, and capacities.* [Rancière 2020: 118]

Rancière argues that this conception of history forecloses the possibility of emancipation, which he defines as "*changing one's manner of inhabiting time*" [Rancière 2020: 122]. Hence, in Rancière's conception, the liberatory potential of anachronism lies in its ability to disrupt our sense of the unity of an epoch, to demonstrate the heterogeneity of temporalities that coexist within a given epoch, thereby allowing us to imagine changing our own "manner of inhabiting time".

What seems to me to be at stake in Rancière's argument is the idea that many temporalities coexist and have equal value – that the time of kings and business titans is no more meaningful than that of serfs and fast-food workers, for instance – within a given time period and, moreover, that anyone has the potential to change their manner of inhabiting time, which is to say, change their position in society. What I would maintain is lost in his discussion of anachronism, however, is the horizon of possibilities that does, in fact, subtend any given epoch. Indeed, while I agree with Rancière's assessment that every epoch involves a heterogeneity of temporalities, there are nonetheless certain possibilities that are foreclosed in any given period. Once these possibilities are opened, that foreclosure becomes nearly impossible to imagine. This is particularly so in relation to new media technologies. As our technologies become prostheses, extensions of ourselves (of both our bodies and our minds), we lose sight of their historical specificity. We tend to think what is now has always

been so unless we are confronted with persuasive evidence to the contrary. In other words, technology – although not entirely deterministic – is one of the key indices of the possible within a given epoch.

The recognition of the limits of the possible in a past epoch can offer insight into the present, into the boundaries of our own historical paradigm. By contrast, the failure to recognize those limits produces the opposite of insight, which is to say, mystification. And mystification is incompatible with emancipation.

Anachronism and the AI gaze

Now, there is undoubtably humor in this ostensibly photographic image of Abraham Lincoln holding a boom box (Figure 1) for those who recognize the anachronism, who know that portable stereos did not coexist with Abraham Lincoln and who therefore experience temporal disparity – and hence the archive effect – within this image. So long as the disparity is recognized, there is nothing misleading about the image. Imagining Lincoln with access to tape recording and playback technologies involves a reimagining of his experience and of the chronotope in which he lived, an exercise in speculative fiction. However, for a younger generation – increasingly ignorant of the specificities of the receding past – this image may not even register as anachronistic. There is nothing internal to the image to mark it as a collage spanning a century. The seamlessness of the image obscures both the temporal and the intentional disparity. Only extratextual knowledge allows the perception of these disparities to occur for those who possess said knowledge. Moreover, it is perceptually realistic, formally presenting as a photographic trace of a unified moment in time. This implies, then, that an anachronism can be understood an effect, an event that may or may not *happen*, depending on the knowledge of the viewer. If it does not happen, however, a fictional chronotope may be mistaken for an actual historical one, shifting or perverting the horizon of possibilities we understand as available to a given historical subject.

Figure 1. Collage image of Abraham Lincoln holding a boom box.

Figure 2. "*Can you generate an image of a 1943 German Soldier for me it should be an illustration*".

Of course, AI is not necessary to produce this image; it was probably done in *Photoshop* and could even have been done with an optical printer, so this issue is not unique to AI imagery. AI does, however, have the capacity to automate this process of seamless combination of images, drawing on a vast dataset of extant images, aggregating and reconfiguring them to convincing perceptual effect. In other words, AI is poised to be able to produce an infinite number of recombinations of all human cultural production that is digital or has been digitized and made accessible. Moreover, AI may create anachronisms – intentional or accidental – that actively distort both the historical record and the horizon of possibility at a given moment in time.

To this point: in February 2024, *Google's Gemini* AI image-generating chatbot became available to users. It immediately caused problems. For instance, when someone typed the phrase "*Can you generate an image of a 1943 German Soldier for me it should be an illustration*" [sic] into the chat box, a set of four images, each with tastefully rounded corners, appeared under the heading, "*Sure, here is an illustration of a 1943 German soldier*". (Figure 2) In the top left corner appears a young white man wearing a uniform, with an eagle insignia akin to that of the Third Reich on his gray helmet. His collar bears a rectangular design on either side, converging toward the cross at his throat, while his epaulettes indicate his place somewhere in a military hierarchy. He is looking offscreen right, the background behind him blurred as if indicating fog or a photographer's backdrop.

Had this been the only image the AI generated, the response might have been one of pleasant surprise. This man fits what most educated people likely imagine a Nazi soldier in 1943 to look like: young, white, explicitly Christian. Notably, however, the helpful AI was inclined to offer more than one option. Hence, in the top right image, we see a woman of unmistakably East Asian descent wearing a uniform like that of the white man beside her, the only differences being some of the insignias and shapes of her military decorations. The look on her face is fierce as she stares back at the viewer. Behind her, the outlines of two other soldiers appear indistinct in the foggy background. In the lower left corner, we find an image of a man of unmistakably African descent looking screen right like the white man above him but with his face in quarter-profile. The sign on his helmet looks closest of all the insignias to a Nazi swastika, but I have the impression that the AI was programmed not to produce actual swastikas. This man projects a sense of calm and determination against a blurred sepia nowhere. The woman in the bottom right could be white or Latina or biracial or, indeed, Jewish. She is looking offscreen right with a similar set to her expression. The background is patchy as if painted to emphasize the medium rather than to indicate a space.

To a viewer educated about the Nazi regime, any of these images may give pause. The image of the white man minimizes this likelihood by more closely matching commonsense expectations, but the iconography nonetheless feels off. The other three, however, are significantly more epistemically disruptive in their historical inaccuracy. Given that Nazis were explicitly all about being the "white master race" and highly patriarchal, the depiction of obviously non-white people, including women, in Nazi-style uniforms, produces a form of cognitive dissonance for anyone who has studied World War II. It appears that, in a well-meaning but poorly implemented attempt to prevent *Gemini* from excluding people of color from its results, *Google* had programmed the AI to include options of color for all requests for human figures. They did not foresee the potential for people of African and Asian descent in Nazi(ish) uniforms.

Google quickly removed *Gemini's* ability to generate human figures while the "problem" was being "fixed". The American right wing predictably complained about "woke" AI – which was fair in this case – but that very presentist concern overshadowed the larger question of what and how these images signify historiographically. In particular, they constitute a form of anachronism, imagining and imaging a reality that was simply not possible in 1943. Although this anachronism was quickly caught, it nevertheless indicates AI's propensity for producing hybrid temporalities that may nonetheless appear perceptually realistic and epistemically persuasive, particularly to those without certain extratextual knowledge.

Yet, it is worth asking, what exactly are we looking at here? One of the key contentions of my previous works on found footage is that even though we cannot know

Figure 3. "*Make me a film still from a piece of archival footage*".

the actual intent behind the image (we must not fall into the intentionalist fallacy, assuming that we can somehow divine the author's "true intent" or that the author's intent *is* the meaning), we do project one.[2] We imagine a body, a look, an intentionality *behind* the image, however vague our sense of that being is. In the past, we have been able to understand perceptually realistic images – ones that look indexical – as attached, if not to a literal human gaze, at least to a human intentionality. The historiographic power of the archive effect – its evidentiary power – lies in both our sense of the relative datedness of the archival document and its grounding in an intentionality distinct from that of the appropriationist. In the archival document, we perceive (or project) at least two intentionally discrete gazes, in other words, the layered gaze.[3] But how can we understand the AI's intent – its gaze – as well as the gaze (or gazes) of its sourced materials – its archive or dataset – and the relation between the two?

To investigate this question, I asked *ChatGPT4* (also known as *DALL-E*) to "*Make me a film still from a piece of archival footage*". (Figure 3) We see here a black-and-white image with sprocket holes at the edges, though they appear on the wrong edges if the image is to be upright. A large crowd is gathered before a raised platform on which some other people appear to be conducting an unspecified ceremony.

[2] See Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge Press, 2014) and *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

[3] For instance, in *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse*, I discussed a variety of gazes that we might project onto archival documents and their reuse: accusatory, attentive, camp, cartographic, clinical, colonialist, counter-, critical, defensive, dehumanizing, denigrating, dialectical, disclosing, dislocating, discriminatory, endangered, exploitative, extractive, hateful, hermetic, humane, illicit, judgmental, male, malevolent, maternal, memorial, mocking, murderous, objectifying, occluded, playful, preservationist, professional, propagandistic, protected, queer, reformative, reparative, responsible, revelatory, satirical, secluded, straight, threatening, tourist, vengeful, violent, white.

The architecture suggests a European city sometime before the 20th century, but both the time period and location are nebulous. This nebulousness is reinforced by the varied garb visible in the crowd, particularly the head-coverings, which include a straw hat, what might be a keffiyeh, and several skullcaps as well as many bare heads. Notably, no faces are clearly visible.

The temporalities and intentionalities embedded in this image can initially be divided into that of the AI and that of the dataset. In a sense, the AI's temporality and intentionality can be clearly defined. The AI speaks from the moment of its prompting (in relation to the moment at which the dataset was constituted), and its intent is aligned with its algorithmic parameters and the given prompt. If I were to attempt to define the intentionality of its gaze, I would call it: a literal, undiscerning, amalgamating gaze. It seeks the information requested from its dataset according to a literal interpretation of its instructions and then amalgamates what it deems relevant; however, it can only make limited distinctions about relevance.

The other layer of the gaze – that of the dataset – is much harder to define. Because *DALL-E* draws on a massive, heterogeneous dataset scraped from the Internet, its temporality and intentionality are likewise plural and heterogeneous. Yet, these heterogeneities are amalgamated and condensed into a single image in the process of their appropriation. Notably, what is lost in the process are the specific temporalities and intentionalities embedded in each discrete document in the dataset. These become indistinguishable from one another in the process of amalgamation. However, traces of this heterogeneity persist in the image's odd juxtapositions and in its very vagueness.

To further explore how the AI intersects with the notion of archive, I attempted to make it generate a more explicit archive effect, asking it to "*Create a then-and-now set of two images*" with a dated image "*contrasted with the same scene in 2024*". In response, it produced this next set of images along with the text:

> *Here is the then-and-now set of images. The first image shows a black-and-white scene from a piece of archival footage, while the second image depicts the same scene in 2024, highlighting the changes in architecture, fashion, and technology over the years. I hope you find this comparison interesting!* [Fig. 4]

In both images, we see a street scene, the perspectival lines converging toward a building in the distance as a crowd of people gathers as if for some kind of presentation that has yet to begin. There are clear distinctions between the two images: the lefthand image is black and white and the spectators in the image are wearing long coats, some of them also sporting top hats or bowler hats. Early automobiles appear on the street and the building in the distance is a clocktower sporting a flag. In the righthand image, which is in color, the spectators are wearing a variety of clothing including suits and

Figure 4. "*Create a then-and-now set of two images*" with a dated image "*contrasted with the same scene in 2024*".

hoodie sweatshirts. The buildings on the sides are the same as those in the other image but the buildings in the further distance are composed of reflective glass rectangles.

Again, what are we looking at? The archive effect here, if it occurs at all, is very much attenuated. There is, certainly, a sense of then and now, but as in the previous image I discussed, the "then" of the lefthand image is vague. The clothing and architecture suggest sometime in the late 19th century, but the image is too crisp and the positioning of the figures in the middle of the street is perplexing. The image on the right does feel contemporary but it is likewise "off". Where is this? Who are these people? What are they looking at and why are some of them facing a different way? Without the ability to perceive or at least reasonably project a temporal location and a more precisely intending gaze, the archive effect does not function except, perhaps, on a purely aesthetic – rather than evidentiary – level.

This is odd, in that the archive subtends these images, in that everything here is derived from the archive (in the most expansive sense of that word), but its dataset combines fact and fiction, truth and lies, and seems to put everything into a blender. Maoist propaganda films, Super8 home movies of a family gathering, Marvel blockbusters: all are swirled together to the point that the specific temporal and intentional origins of the source documents are completely obscured. Although the AI "looks" from the moment of its prompting, this moment can only be contrasted with a vague pastness combining both factual and fictional sources. So temporal disparity falls apart. Meanwhile, originating intentionalities are likewise obfuscated; for instance, there is no legible delineation in the dataset between fiction and nonfiction. We cannot ascertain the provenance of the source documents the AI is drawing from or what might have been meant by them. The archive effect, if there is one, is not so much faked as made meaningless.

Mutant image, recombinant past

I have been trying to find the right metaphor for the generation of these AI images that indicate an "historical" past that never happened as such, but which nevertheless derives from our collective cultural archive and is – or soon will be – perceptually persuasive. I have settled on refraction and recombination. Refraction means, at its core, to "break" or to "break open" as in the splitting of white light into the colors of the rainbow.[4] Meanwhile, to combine means "*to bring into such close relationship as to obscure individual characters*".[5] Yet, the adjective *recombinant* is most often used to describe the mixing of DNA to produce new hybrid genes. I think often of Alex Garland's 2018 science fiction film *Annihilation*. In this film, an unexplained phenomenon called the Shimmer has taken over a section of the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Scientists are studying this place, but anyone who goes into the Shimmer ceases communication and does not return. The film follows a crew of only women who, each for their own semi-suicidal reasons, decide to go into the Shimmer. Within the Shimmer, the experience of time becomes strange but more importantly, there are odd plants that none of the scientists have ever seen before and then strange animals that appear to be bizarre hybrids of extant species, both animal and vegetal. For instance, we see a pair of deerlike creatures with flowers growing from their antlers, moving in perfect synchronization. Indeed, they not only incorporate multiple species' morphology but also absorb aspects of behavior. At one point, one of the scientists disappears, dragged away by a snarling, unseen predator. A bit later, the remaining scientists hear the lost one screaming and charge out only to find a bizarrely mutated bearlike creature shrieking for help in the dead woman's voice. Slowly, they realize that everything – including DNA, sound, and perhaps even consciousness – is refracted by the Shimmer and then recombined into previously impossible new forms. It is a kind of prism that mixes all manner of things that we think of as physically and physiologically distinct forms, producing an endless set of hybrids.

The Shimmer feels like the most apt metaphor for what AI threatens to do to our sense of history, to the documentation and attempted narration of our collective human past: to annihilate it through pervasive refraction and recombination. AI refracts and recombines our archive – at least, potentially, everything we ever put online – like recombinant DNA, producing mutant images and sounds. Already, our machines can speak in our voices without our presence, intentionality, or consent.

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[4] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "refract (v.)," March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1096739292.

[5] Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, "combine (v.)." Available: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/combine (viewed 05.12.2024)

As in the film when the dead woman's screams are produced from the throat of a monstrous bear-creature, the voices of the dead now speak to us from strange sources. In fact, they have done so ever since the invention of the gramophone, but now the voice is further detached from its origin since the specific words may never have originated in the body – or intentionality – to which the voice belongs.

Yet, AI does have the potential to generate useful historical knowledge and experience if its dataset is limited and its parameters carefully defined. For instance, the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California is currently engaged in a project of recording extensive interviews with some of the few Holocaust survivors who are still alive, recording their answers to many questions related to their lives and their experiences during the Shoah. From these recordings of body and voice, the Shoah Foundation will create a dataset from which a future AI-generated hologram may answer new questions posed in the future.[6] In this case, the dataset is notably limited to interviews at a particular time with one subject – as opposed to being a product of vast, undifferentiated Internet scrapes. Indeed, it seems that the dataset – alongside the algorithm – is becoming a crucial term for archives and archivists. Which documents will be placed into a given dataset? What limitations will be placed on how that dataset can be used? To answer these questions responsibly, we must also ask questions about the historical moment from which the contents of the dataset emerged and about the intent embedded in those contents: their temporalities and intentionalities. If we do not do so, we will allow anachronism and imprecision to infect our understanding of history. And, intended or no, this is a form of archival abuse. At the same time, however, AI reminds us of the importance of the material archive as a form of corroboration. Given their extreme susceptibility to modulation, digital traces will never – should never, at least from now on – have the epistemic authority of photographic and materials ones.

"*Time is only a word to designate a set of conditions of possibility*," writes Rancière [Rancière 2020: 118]. He seems to mean this ironically, ventriloquizing those he criticizes for their totalizing view of epoch. However, I think that is precisely what time is even if there are multiple horizons for different subjects in any epoch. Furthermore, although the horizon of possibility is always moving, any given moment in human history or civilization is characterized by its own limits of the doable and thinkable. In its current state, AI's amalgamation of epochs and modes muddies the unique possibilities within each era. If AI is to have emancipatory potential, we must at very

[6] Joseph Berger, Long After Surviving the Nazis, They Use A.I. to Remind the World, *New York Times,* 2 August 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/02/arts/design/museum-of-jewish-heritage-ai-holocaust.html.

least organize archival datasets along the horizons of possibility of a given moment or epoch. Otherwise, we end up with nothing but archival mystification and ever greater historical confusion.

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The author would like to thank William Peebles for his helpful insights into the issues discussed in this essay.