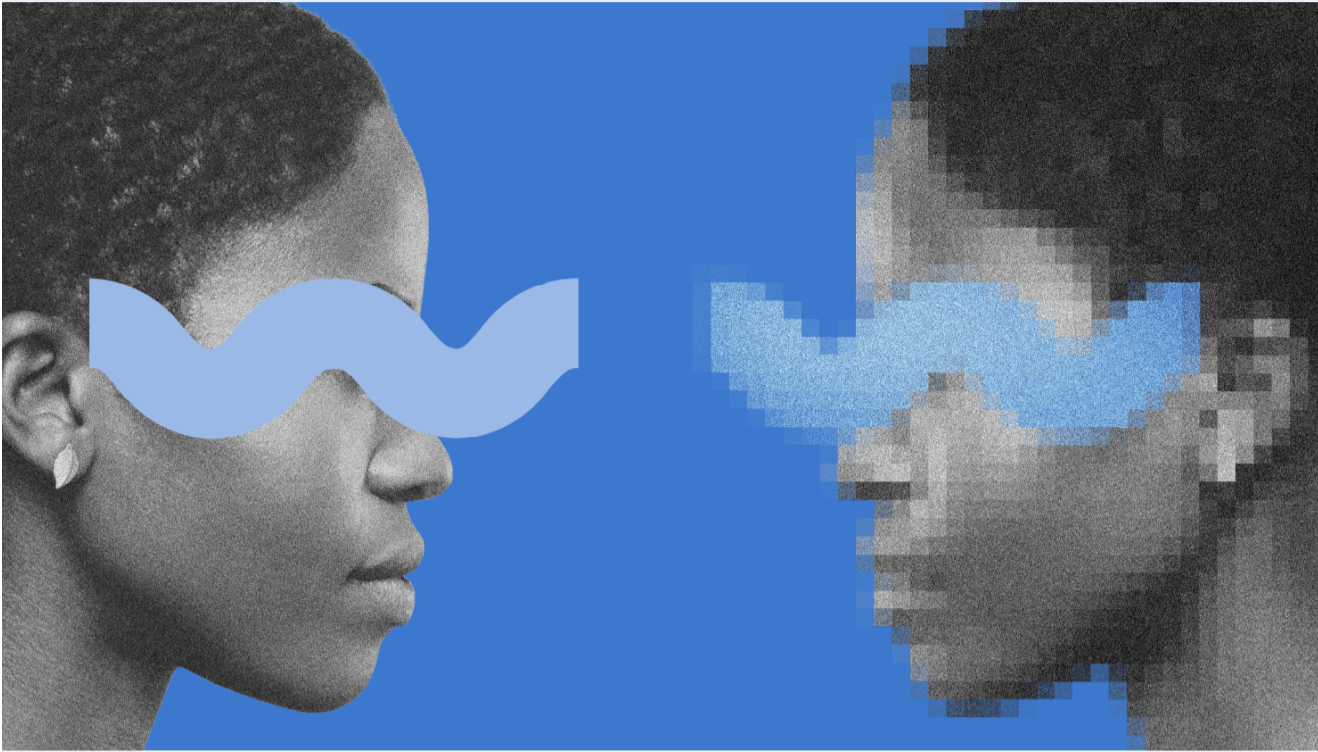


Human Conditions

Exploring the messy, contradictory, and uneasy side of creativity.



The uncanny valley is the uneasy gap

between the comfortably artificial and the convincingly human. When something lands in that gap—too lifelike to dismiss, not lifelike enough to trust—our brains flash a warning. A corpse, a predator mimicking our form, the faint coloration of disease: evolution taught us to recoil from anything almost-human but not quite. Now, 2025, that instinct is changing. We’ve started to lean into what once repelled us.

The faces generated by AI in our feeds and on our screens—once stilted, waxy, and obviously fake—now smile with ease. Their hair even shifts in the wind. Their teeth catch light! They sell us skincare, host livestreams, pose in workout gear. Because they never tire or age, they feel perpetually aspirational—enough to make us click buy.

And as this synthetic presence spreads, we’re asking unfamiliar questions. Who made that video? Who’s on the other end of this call? Increasingly, the answer is “both.” Both human and machine, both real and generated, both original and derivative.

We’ve spent years assuming the big risk with AI would be misinformation, but that’s not the only thing happening. Instead, we’re inviting in this deception that delivers novelty without risk and surprise without stakes. We’re choosing plausible unreality, because it’s more convenient, frictionless, and watchable than the truth.

This shift is subtle but significant. We no longer look to media to reveal reality, but instead to bend it. And the more unbearable the world becomes—politically, environmentally, existentially, we could keep going as I’m sure you know too well—the more seductive our synthetic fictions.

At the heart of this is a change in what we reward. We’re not responding to realism, but to the suggestion of real. A visual that’s familiar enough to recognize, strange enough to notice. AI doesn’t need to replicate truth—it just needs to get close enough to feel compelling.

A Midjourney image of Pope Francis in a gleaming white puffer coat tore through TikTok when this first started becoming a thing. Everyone knew it was fake, and that was the hook. Fashion labels reposted the meme, enjoying free reach they could never have bought with a studio shoot. Surrealism, it turns out, outperforms sincerity in raw reach and engagement.

Lately, we’ve been seeing a lot of Reels of crystal fruit being sliced by chef’s knives? Like, so many of them? And they’re racking up eight-second average watch times—double the platform norm. Knife makers, countertop brands, even telcos have used the template.

But constant exposure carries a cost. The more we acclimate to artifice, the lower our bar for believability drops. Today it’s an incredibly satisfying glass apple slice and a puffer-coat pontiff. Tomorrow, it’s a fabricated founder origin story or a “customer testimonial” that was never spoken out loud.

There’s no doubt this valley collapse is working right now. Engagement metrics prove it. The real uncertainty is how long we can keep rewarding the almost-real before we dull our appetite for the real entirely—and what safeguards brands are willing to build before that line blurs beyond repair.

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