

Nesrine Malik's article on "AI slop" describes the nausea and disorientation felt in the new reign of AI-generated content but also seems to assume that we have fallen from a place of visual purity and ultimate truths that I think someone like Susan Sontag or Michel Foucault may take exception to. I think that Malik makes keen observations, both about the attention economy, which I myself have felt greatly impacted by, and also about far-right nostalgia. "Trad-wife" content is one manifestation of this, and Malik interestingly notes that "...'generative AI is structurally conservative, even nostalgic.' Generative AI is trained on pre-existing data, which research has shown is inherently biased against ethnic diversity, progressive gender roles, and sexual orientations, therefore concentrating those norms in the output" (Malik). But the tone of this article also has a noticeable longing for a time in which both written and visual content was "true." There is an argument to be made that this is equally as nostalgic as the conservative nostalgia she rightfully is averse to.

I have been interested in the work of Michel Foucault. He might invert the question and ask if truth was ever pure in the way Malik envisions. Susan Sontag made similar remarks in her essay "In Plato's Cave," saying, "It is a nostalgic time right now, and photographs actively promote nostalgia. Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (Sontag 15). Sontag wrote extensively on the nature of photographs as taking on their own power as both emblems of the past and something fluid and independent of the context in which they were taken. What Malik is impacted by is the emotional manipulation and powerful influence of images. She feels this in an immediate way surface in protectiveness over her mother as she observes her elderly mother's susceptibility to AI-generated content shared on WhatsApp. She is worried about her mother receiving misinformation as a form of manipulation of her mother's mind. "AI Slop" has made its way into our lives and, in a very personal way, into our family lives. It is possible Malik feels nostalgia for a time in which her mother was not as vulnerable to these sorts of illusions, but perhaps there is also an idealization of a time when the news her mother received was completely free of illusions, which I am resistant to and think is worth interrogating.

"AI Slop" is evidently a successful outlet for repressed feelings, hatred, resentment, forbidden and withheld desires, and nostalgia, and it has flooded the internet. Fascism seems to emerge from this sort of repression and attempts to congeal with purity, authoritative power, and fear. Social media and our devices themselves take on a role of authority in our lives that feels inescapable. The fact that "AI Slop" is handed to us on the golden platter of our smartphones wields undeniable power. The synergy of these factors places us in this strange, fragile state. In these times I think it's important to bear in mind that we have not been catapulted to another planet of media, but that advancements in technology enable a loud reverberation of repression of the past to release itself full-throttle.

