

# **The Tangential Realism of @PepitoTheCat**

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There is a great deal of potential for variation between visual appearance of images and what they are intended to represent, if they are indeed representational at all. Not only can images mean things other than what they directly look like, but there are many ways of tying the visual to real-world objects and phenomena, and of interpreting those relationships. With the growing prevalence of digital, networked and algorithmic media, images have increasing ties to data, often being treated as interchangeable with it. This feeds expectations for images to be objective in the sense of acting as stand ins for or pointing to real-world entities and phenomena in a 1:1 fashion. But such conceptions tend to oversimplify connections between the visual and the real, overlooking the role of technical processes that formally and conceptually mediate the objectivity of the visual media they result in.

The referential relationships in visual media are unsteady, which complicates expectations of scientific objectivity. For example, the objectivity of an analogue photographic image lies in optically capturing appearances, translating the world as it is viewed by the human eye or through the camera's lens into a fixed image. This covers two of the three forms of visual objec-



Figure 1. Twitter posts by @PepitoTheCat, 11–29 January 2022.

tivity described by Daston and Galison,<sup>1</sup> truth-to-nature and mechanical objectivity. But not only is there potential for variation within and across those approaches to visual epistemology, new forms of visual media may also give rise to new ways of interpreting relationships between visual media and the world, touching on the third of Daston and Galison's forms of visual objectivity, that of trained judgement in making and using images.

Johanna Drucker<sup>2</sup> points out that the dynamic qualities of visual representations often have less to do with the constraints of a given medium of execution than how we think with them, or how we model interpretation. Contrasting two rather different

1 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison. *Objectivity* (New York, Cambridge: Zone Books, 2007).

2 Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press metaLABprojects, 2014), 2.

images with one another, she proposes the much older of the two as far more generative than its digital counterpart. The one from 1669, a conceptual map by Athanasius Kircher interpreting Ramon Llull's "great art of knowing" (Fig. 2), she says, "produces the knowledge it draws". Though this may go against the grain of assumptions that digital media is more dynamic than static images, Drucker argues that the other image, from the Opte Project's 2003 map of internet traffic (Fig. 3), "only displays information",<sup>3</sup> making it the more fixed of the two images. While the formerly mentioned image compels thinking, the latter—as active as what it represents may be—is merely a snapshot, a static rendering of a system at a moment in time. Though it is visually stable, Kircher's drawing has more openness to change than the digital one against which it is compared, because it lends itself to more variability of execution in the mental images that are conjured from it, while the more recently produced image is less open to variable readings as it does not require the viewer to play as active a role in its interpretation. This offers insight into the dynamic qualities that visual media may have, irrespective of their medium of execution.

While such openness to variability may not be exclusive to a particular medium or method, digital media may facilitate or emphasise these modalities more so than others. The ephemerality of digital images is especially visible in networked contexts, where they are often hyper-reactive, subject to the flux of algorithms and streams of data coursing through the various platforms we access them through. These qualities may—at least superficially—give the impression that digital images are distinct from the materiality of their more analogue counterparts, such

3 Ibid., 3.

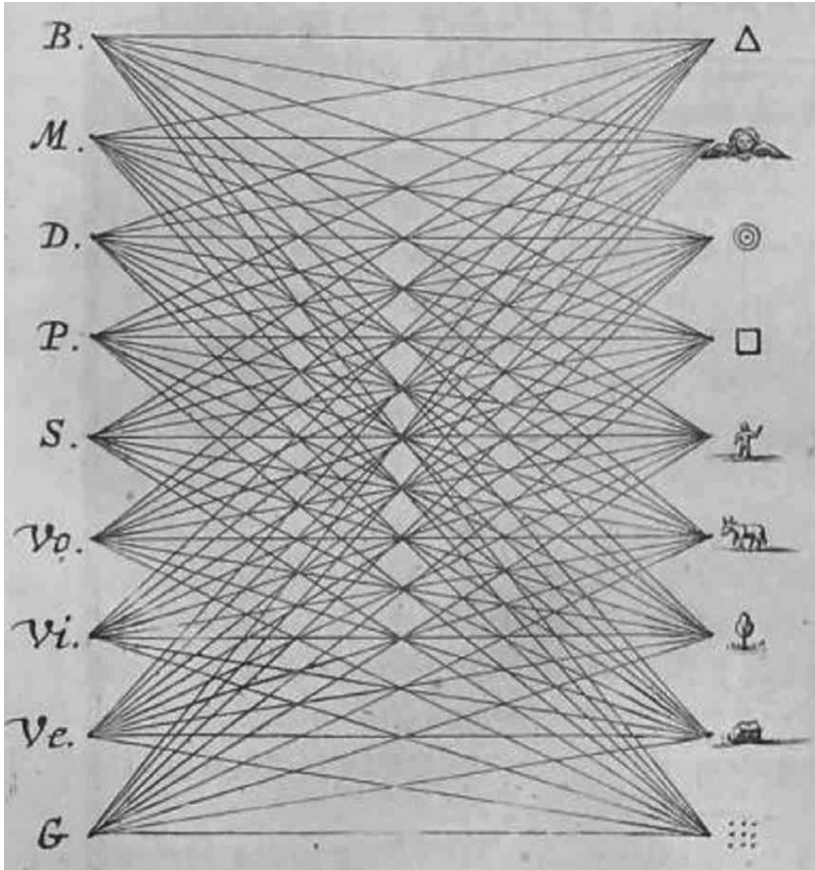


Figure 2. *Ars Magna Sciendi*. Athanasius Kircher, 1669. In Drucker, *Graphesis*, 2.

as drawings, paintings, and printed photographs. But in spite of their tendency toward the immaterial, digital artefacts are structured by not only the material, but also conceptual, constraints of the infrastructures entailed in their display, storage, and transmission.

Grounding visual media in relation to a concrete, material reality has ties to the history of the visual technologies current contexts build upon. This can be seen in the enduring associa-

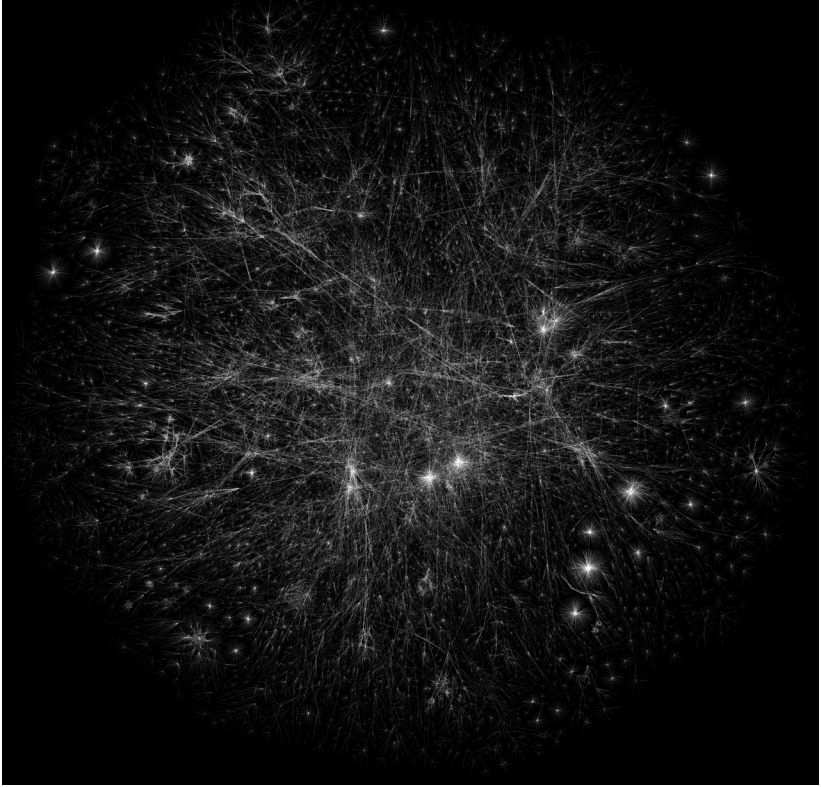


Figure 3. *The Internet*. The Opte Project, 2003. Map of internet traffic.

tion of photographic and realistic aesthetics with an inherent degree of scientific accuracy, in spite of the fact that it is well known that verisimilitude is no guarantee of truth value. What is especially interesting about photographic aesthetics in digital contexts is that the photographic exceeds beyond the limits of any specific set of tools, methods, or visual paradigms. And while data-based and photographic media may indeed present highly accurate visual representations of the world, they are also open to many layers of interpretation, both technically and conceptually. Recent attempts at imposing artificial scarcity on otherwise con-

ceptually and technically unwieldy digital artefacts also point out the degree to which such forms of visual media tend to confound ideas inherited from earlier visual paradigms that contain highly specific assumptions about the material reality that images derive from.

Not only does the visual appearance of images have an unreliable relationship with whatever reality they may represent, but each image is in theory open to innumerable iterations. In this sense, current visual media contexts recalls Borges's *Book of Sand*,<sup>4</sup> constantly shifting beneath our feet. The *Book of Sand* offers a glimpse of the infinite bound within the finite, in this case taking the form of limitless pages bound in a book: "neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end".<sup>5</sup> Recent aesthetics and practices with digital, networked, and algorithmic media may present us with bounded infinitude in the sense that they are open to theoretically endless variation, replication, and dissemination. Interacting with such media artefacts and the complex infrastructures that they are orchestrated through can feel a bit like wading into muddy waters of unknown depth. These systems respond to us, but in lack of a map or mental model of their structure or functioning, it is only through echolocation, feedback loops, that we may navigate their obscurity.

We know—or at least we think we know, without always being able to confirm it—that algorithms and a sea of data<sup>6</sup> lie behind the surface of what we encounter in current visual media,

4 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Book of Sand". *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 480–83 (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 482. The book of sand is a fictional infinite book described in a short story by Borges. The fabled book is offered to the protagonist of the story by a mysterious travelling Bible salesman. "The number of pages in this book is literally infinite," the salesman says, "No page is the first page; No page is the last."

5 Borges, "The Book of Sand", 481.

6 Hito Steyerl, "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition". *E-Flux*, no. 72 (April 2016).

altering or redirecting what becomes perceptible. We know—or at least suspect—that our search terms are interpreted in unpredictable ways by search engines, but we often have little conceptual access to the parameters according to which our queries are matched with search results. This leads to an uncanny suspension between knowing and not knowing whether or the extent to which what we see in visual media is connected to any visual or material reality that exists tangibly in the real world.

A compelling example that touches on such forms visual content can be found in a Twitter bot account named @PepitoTheCat that documents the comings and goings of a housecat. The account tweets “Pépito is out” each time the eponymous cat exits his cat door, with a photograph and timestamp documenting this act. Upon Pépito’s return, a follow-up tweet announces “Pépito is back home”, accompanied by a photograph and timestamp marking Pépito’s re-entry through the catflap.

While this in some respects innocuous, Pépito the cat is indicative of a particular aesthetic that is importantly, yet very tangentially, connected to realism. And far from being alone, around 200.000 other accounts follow—and frequently reply to—this chronicle of Pépito’s daily activities.

The information content of the messages “Pépito is out” and “Pépito is back home” is very low. Each statement telling us that Pépito the cat is out or that he is in marks the binary change of Pépito’s state—or location—from inside to outside or outside to in. Little of consequence changes, visually, from post to post, other than the amount of Pépito that is visible, caught on the inside while he exits or enters. And each time stamp merely notes the moment of transition between one state and another.

What is behind such a level of enthusiasm for something as mundane as a regular cat going about its business? Perhaps it

is the subtle variability within a set of constraints that holds Pépito's fanbase in captive suspense. Another dimension that may explain the appeal of @PepitoTheCat is its temporal continuity, occurring regularly yet not precisely predictable on an ongoing basis.

Several Twitter users have pointed to similarities between @PepitoTheCat and Schrödinger's cat, the famous thought experiment used to explain the role of observation in quantum superposition. In Schrödinger's conceptual experiment, the cat is at once dead and alive in a box until it is perceived as either one: "The prevailing theory, called the Copenhagen interpretation, says that a quantum system remains in superposition until it interacts with, or is observed by the external world. When this happens, the superposition collapses into one or another of the possible definite states."<sup>7</sup> Like Schrödinger's cat, Pépito, or our knowledge of him, is suspended in a state of indeterminacy, until the moment a tweet announces Pépito's latest state change: out or in.

Like many things on the internet, this is and is not about a cat. The whole thing hinges on the material reality of a real cat actually climbing out or in through a physical cat door. It is realistic in the sense of documenting a material reality that truly exists in the world. But it is also absurdist in the same sense, that the interest in knowing whether Pépito is out or back home lies in the very fact that it's relatively inconsequential. As is the case with meme aesthetics, visual elements are treated as interchangeable, repetitious in some respects, while also emphasising the endlessness of iteration as a methodology, exploring the limits of variation within a set of constraints.

What I find most interesting about this example is the way it is connected to the material reality of an actual cat, while not

7 See "Schrödinger's Cat", *Wikipedia*, 21/01/2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schrödinger%27s\\_cat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schrödinger%27s_cat)



actually being about that to a great extent. Does it really matter whether P  pito is “real” in the sense of being a housecat who spends his days going in and out of the house? Could a cat be traded out for other things, other animals or objects? Is the cat-flap interchangeable with other binary states?

Though these questions may seem deceptively simple, I find them more compelling than some that have traditionally been predominant in visual media. For example, it’s no longer of great consequence to ask to what extent an image captures P  pito’s likeness or how accurately this account documents his life. It’s of little import whether P  pito’s bio stating: “I’m a cat.” is true, or whether these posts could instead be the fabrication of a machine learning algorithm.

The “real or fake” trope is persistent in visual media, as evidenced by a viral sensation that flared up in 2016 around the fictional Instagram character, Lil Miquela. The project, by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou, plays on the ambiguity of audiences not being able to confidently determine whether Lil Miquela’s Instagram posts represent a real person or not. But while the uncanniness of highly realistic, detailed, or believable simulations still manages to capture a great deal of attention on the internet, it also becomes mundane due to its ubiquity. For example, the phenomenon of fake social media profiles purporting to be young women is common enough to warrant its own term, “cat-fishing”. The fact that it’s easy to fake appearances nevertheless does not appear to detract from realist aesthetics, nor from expectations for alignment between the visual and the real.

Internet users are now fairly accustomed to the artifice of visual media, that it may all be fiction to some extent, and other aspects matter more than realism in the traditional sense of an aesthetic verisimilitude or aspirations to scientific levels of ob-

jectivity. Users are also quite accustomed to the not-knowing entailed in often black-box, opaque systems. It could be precisely this suspended indeterminacy that rests at the heart of why hundreds of thousands of people may find it engaging to follow the automated account of a housecat entering and exiting a house via a cat door.

What I take away from *Pépito the cat* is that this instance may be an indication that the stakes of visual media are shifting. Realism in this context may have to do with visual representation, but on its own it tells us less than its context, its variation, its endless iteration, and having some degree of connection to the real world.

We are limited to the conditions of scientific inquiry: what is knowable and by what construct is it possible to know something? In this case, we are able to know whether *Pépito* is out or back home. We are able to see the qualities of *Pépito's* last entrance or exit and to know the moment it occurred. Anything beyond these parameters is unknowable to us, allowing—or rather, compelling—us to fill in the blanks ourselves. This brings me back to Drucker's comparison of the two maps. The variability and indeterminacy of *Pépito the cat* allows us to project onto the limited data we have, and it invokes the imagination to a greater extent than many other kinds of visual media, even those that may offer more information content.

@*PépitoTheCat* reflects back to us an ambivalent objective truth. The media ecosystem as it exists currently is built on the premises of understanding the world through apparatuses of measurement and observation. But *Pépito* also demonstrates the close connection between the world as known through data and the arbitrary nature of such scales of measure. In this way, I find the tangential realism and connection to materiality expressed in @*PépitoTheCat's* posts taps into a growing sentiment that is

shaping new visual aesthetics. It combines aspects of the empirical outlook descended from traditions of realism and objectivity with elements of the absurd. We are not about to reject realism outright, yet we see that data, on its own, has no inherent claims to truthfulness, and even the most accurate of instruments may be easily coopted for the purpose of stupid fun.

@PépitoTheCat is one instance that I believe speaks to a particularly interesting way of drawing connections between visual media, data, and the world, but it is by no means an isolated case. It is in some ways specific to the particularities of a singular cat captured by a photographic apparatus rigged up to a cat door, but it is also not about what visually appears in Pépito's tweets at all that makes this instance relevant. Rather, this example reveals ambiguities between being and appearance, representation and mediation, phenomenon and data, that are telling about current perspectives on visual media.

Instead of insisting on the direct grounding of visual media as evidence of a material reality, perhaps we can rest with the uncertainty of being and not being not necessarily cancelling one another out. What we can take away from @PépitoTheCat is that the world is rarely so simple as a binary distinction, and it's what gets caught in the middle that makes things interesting.

**Rosemary Lee** is an artist and researcher whose work focuses on the history of visual media. Lee looks at how current developments in image production fit within larger narratives about art, vision, knowledge, and relations between humans and machines. Excavating those connections through a media-archaeological perspective, she seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how current methods and ideas about art and technology continue to be influenced by those of the past.

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