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Graham Meikle, **Deepfakes**, London, UK: Polity, 2023, 160 pp., $19.95 (paperback).

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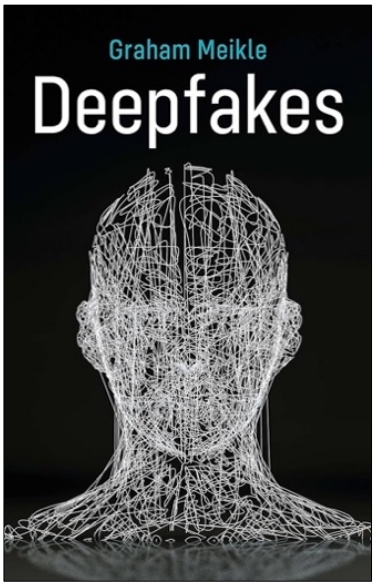

In 2023, a strangely accessible Tom Cruise went viral on TikTok. He was in a barbershop, danced, and spoke wild things. The @deeptomcruise account quickly amassed over five million followers on the Chinese platform. Around the same time, Pope Francis sported a white puff jacket on the streets of Rome as cops ushered Donald Trump toward prison. Since then, the late Morgan Freeman has been giving speeches on YouTube, and Scarlett Johanson's voice has been appropriated by Open AI, much like in Spike Jonze's movie *Her* (Jonze et al., 2014). These scenes are not just a testament to the fleetingness of viral culture on social media but are moments created by applied artificial intelligence (AI) systems trained to appropriate people's faces and traits. These algorithms fabricate actions people did not perform in real life and put them into videos or images, often becoming part of the news.

Graham Meikle's book, ***Deepfakes,*** analyzes the social context that receives and gratifies these small deceptions created by AI technologies. What some see as ominous developments of our time, Meikle portrays a compendium of initiatives comprising mainly "art, creativity, education, satire, or entertainment" content (p. 9). The book does not approach the technical aspect of producing these montages; rather, the author understands the process of creating deepfakes as remixing old DYI media, employing archival material, or appropriating images for art projects. In the case of "disinformative or non-consensual" (p. 34) aspects of media, deepfakes can serve manipulation with two primary underlying purposes: embarrassment and deception.

Let us take deepfakes' most feared attributes, for example, capturing faces for random purposes. Here, Meikle analyzes projects such as *The Rebirth of a Nation* and *Warriors* (p. 14), which upcycled people's resemblances for new critical purposes. Then, we learn why deepfakes can and cannot be of public service. This technology can enhance or change the public perception of known issues, but it can also reuse archival images for revivals or make them weapons to attack ordinary folks. Opposite to the "sophisticated" use of synthetic media (p. 122), as in the case of art projects or critical purposes, "cheap" deepfake would consist of "manipulated" material made with over-the-counter software (p. 3).

To better understand deepfakes, one needs to realize that deceptive montages and face-swapping algorithms are not necessarily arbitrary but, essentially, driven by a goal-oriented prompt. Neural networks can be manipulated to deceive what could be a more complex view of reality. Secondly, Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN) are part of this ecosystem of algorithmic ensembles, in which questions or

prompts are linked to a limited pool of preset databases. These connections will, by design, avail a superficial understanding of reality because they can, and invariably will, be rooted in an ideologically motivated agenda.

Unsurprisingly, social engines of discrimination—in this case, the will to name and shame people or voice prejudices against minoritized communities—can be at the bottom of this industry. Meikle equates *fake* with *deceptive,* where fake content settles on routinely convening a discriminatory, abusive, and illegal narration of facts.

There are fascinating snapshots of how deep deepfake can go or how deep we, as media scholars, can imagine its consequences once the appropriation of faces, voices, and popular culture becomes normalized. In a chapter called "Synthetic Porn," Meikle is bothered with deepfake makers increasingly turning to Hollywood blockbusters, such as *Avengers* (p. 44), where leading cinema actors are face-swapped into porn scenes by AI. In this expedition into deepfake porn, the likes of Emma Watson and Scarlett Johansson rank at the top. That is where "toxic" fans "assert ownership over their favorite shows, films, and performers" or where fans "threaten to take hostages and make demands" (p. 61).

But, after all, should we care for the faces of celebrities whose industry profits from them becoming ultra-popular worldwide? For Meikle, the problem lies in the non-consensual nature of what users, fans, or, ultimately, *exploiters* (p. 47) chase on these platforms. Any user can upload a photo of a woman and receive a naked rendering of her by email. The author argues that such cases invent more ways to abuse, even if celebrities themselves choose to appear in material that carries sexual meanings. Beyond the celebrity world, *deepfaking* can also use the faces of other public people, including well-known female journalists, who will bear the brunt and may feel publicly humiliated.

In lighthearted usages, however, erotic deepfake images have been appropriated by marginalized groups, including queer communities, to fantasize with their—often glorified—heterosexual idols in a more realistic way. This sort of intimate engagement with a celebrity was a possibility until recently denied to them, either by heteronormative scripts or the sheer absence of openly queer celebrities.

Less exists in the book about these appropriations. For Meikle, "You might use the visual aids from the film or its marketing to fuel that fantasy. But fantasy stays in your imagination" (p. 64). The book looks at the queer allegory in Kirk/Spock from *Star Trek,* often seen as a couple (p. 64), but eventually, the argument dwells far from the universe of queer fan fiction, where porn is still a lifeline for many.

In the second empirical chapter, Meikle invites the reader to explore *remixing* as the flipside of deception. It starts with *Duchamp Deepfake* (p. 81)*,* where artists put words in the mouth of the legendary French artist Marcel Duchamp. Similarly, recordings of famous faces can make them mutter whatever artists want them to say. On Instagram, a similar project appropriated Kim Kardashian's and Mark Zuckerberg's mouths, the *Big Dada/Public Faces* (p. 85)*,* later converted into a contemporary art project. *Good* deepfaking, or *remixing,* becomes a conversation with *Dada,* the early–20th century avant-garde movement.

If *Dada* thrived on collage and assemblages of postal cards and paper records, digital creators now can be less naïve and make the dead and the alive speak things they may disapprove of. The likes of

Zuckerberg can appear to confess what he does to our data, or Scarlett Johansson, the actor, can be shown in an adult scene. But what is the difference?

To answer this question, many caveats between power and affordances apply. For Meikle, the Zuckerberg case, as with the many deepfakes with Donald Trump, shows that the Facebook creator and the politician have different affordances that protect them from deepfake-made deception. "To appropriate the faces of Natalie Portman or Scarlett Johansson is to *write* a new part for these performers to play and to *produce* and *exhibit it* on video" (p. 65). Meikle sees more positive uses in David France's *Welcome to Chechnya* (p. 102), in which programmers created artificial voices to represent persecuted LGBTQ folks in Russia and then tell real stories on behalf of survivors.

The book's last chapter is dedicated to how modern politics has intertwined with the fake and how technology emerges from the current problematic background. Looking at *In the Event of Moon Disaster* (p. 121)*,* a 2019 documentary about the Apollo 11 moon landings, directors use deep fakes to imagine astronauts stranded on the moon. This art project has made the possibility of its fakeness *real* just for imaginative purposes.

The study of deepfakes has increased lately because of technological advances as well as due to its multiple moral dilemmas. *Trust No One* by Michael Grothaus (2021) is another publication that assigns an active role for the user. We could call it "*understand it before use it,*" that is, ensuring that anyone engaging with emerging technology is appropriately informed before doing so. Together with Nina Shick's (2020) *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse*, these books are complementary sources taking an approach that centers on issuing warnings about the consequences of AI, such as the normalization of disinformation. At the end of *Deepfakes,* Meikle points to detection systems, media literacy, and a fairer market as possible regulatory forces. Like the 1980's fairness doctrine vs. vast wasteland debates around the prominent role of TV in society, one continues to wonder where concerns about deepfake can land in the future. In 2024, *Deepfakes* is an excellent introduction to the few guarantees that developers and the actors behind self-generative technology grant users. Amid a centralized pool of technology owners, the book appears as an informative beginning on how we can draw constructive criticism amidst the reshaping of user experience and their values.

References

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