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Chapter 3

Sentimentalizing trauma: Ways of seeing war faces in visual generative AI

Katy Parry and Giorgia Aiello

Introduction

The power of visual images to humanize, demonize and terrorize has long been a fascination for scholars of war photography and photojournalism (Taylor 1998; Kennedy & Patrick 2014; Oldfield 2019). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, mobile technologies and social media platforms were initially valued for their democratizing potential, shifting the defining power of war imagery from the professional image-makers to a broader range of actors – including civilians, protesters, soldiers, terrorists. With digital images becoming easier to manipulate convincingly and share widely online, we have seen growing concerns around the use of altered visual images as seductive tools of rumour and misinformation. But it is worth remembering that the manipulation or staging of war-related images stretches back to the beginnings of war photography (Morris 2011). In this chapter, we explore how AI-generated images portray human faces of war, and how this extends or disrupts some of the traditional tropes of war photography.

Concerns about these latest novel imaging technologies are underpinned by the persistent conviction that photographs are uniquely persuasive and emotive in how they convey destructive spectacle and human suffering. The face of the photographic subject is central here; in the media's proclivity to depict consequences for individual people in visceral close-up, and due to the belief in the face's unique ability to prompt empathetic engagement: a distraught child, an exhausted civilian; a traumatized soldier, to name just some of the familiar tropes of war photography. We are interested in how rapidly developing innovations in generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are bringing new and possibly the most disruptive challenges yet to our understanding of the epistemic authority of photography and how war and its consequences are visualized meaningfully and ethically. To illustrate the possibilities but also the anxieties of AI generated imagery, we present observations on a set of portraits generated using prompts for soldier, perpetrator, war photographer, veteran, and refugee, plus variations, in a comparison of two different OpenAI versions of the text-to-image generator DALL-E, namely DALL-E 2 and DALL-E 3. We examine the ideologies in the machine training processes that underpin the visual features of the synthetic media representations it produces (cf. de Gaetano et al. 2023), in what Stallabrass (2024) calls 'emulations of photography', that is, often uncanny images that give us an 'impression of *déjà vu*, or over-familiarity, combined with the sense of over-smoothness or over-cleanliness that comes with the reduction of entropy' (Stallabrass 2024: 127-128), or noise and complexity, which is typical of text-to-image generators' predictive process. In asking how an AI-enabled image generator translates the generic terms listed above into visual images, we are adapting Thomas and Thomson's (2023) method in their study of AI-generated images of journalists. Their study found that AI-generated representations 'risk perpetuating existing inequalities related to gender, ethnic background, and age' (2023: 18), and we are keen to explore how the familiar tropes of war are perpetuated, distorted or challenged in the AI

images our study generates. What does this ‘prompt design’ approach (Niederer & Colombo 2024) reveal about the imaging logics of DALL-E 2 and DALL-E 3? What are the predominant aesthetic characteristics in the generated images? How do these new faces of war challenge or reconfirm established politico-ethical concerns?

Before we address these questions in our own analysis of AI-generated images, the next section interweaves the role of the face in war photography within a broader discussion of the ideological and politico-ethical claims that have long polarized debates about photography’s perceived power to prompt social change and its ability to provoke empathy for others caught up in distant wars.

The Face in War Photography

For photojournalists, the continuing investment in revealing the human consequences of conflict, both within the immediate theatre of war and its aftermath, is ingrained in notions of ‘bearing witness’ and in bringing public attention to atrocities in the most visceral form (Zelizer 1998). The incentive to travel into dangerous conflict zones has been idealized in mythologies of war photography (Griffin 2010), and especially in the self-promotional ‘hegemonic masculinity’ that Assaf and Bock (2021) identify in their discussion of the ‘Capa myth’ named after the famed war photographer, Robert Capa. This mythology seeps into photojournalistic education and continues to hold resonance in a world that connects the documenting of wars and human rights with ‘making a difference’. It is the ‘documentary impulse’, as photographer Stuart Franklin (2016) writes, that motivates photojournalists to record people, places and stories, propelled by their curiosity or outrage. For Franklin, ‘Photography (and journalism) practiced respectfully has the power to educate us all towards a greater understanding of, and empathy with, others’ (2016: 9). The courage and idealism of

war photographers stir them to generate the ‘witnessing texts’ (Frosh 2011: 51) that they hope will raise awareness and prompt action from audiences and governments, and if particularly compelling, become part of cultural memory.

Here then we can see the humanitarian or humanist ideologies that underlie much writing on war photography: the perception that photojournalism can prompt change and even at times antiwar sentiment, chiefly through its depictions of ‘victims’ of war. As a powerful example, Franklin (2016) cites Ernst Friedrich’s 1924 book *War Against War*, including photographs of facial disfigurement drawn from German First World War medical archives, in a book that was widely distributed and translated at the time (Franklin 2016: 84). Suzannah Biernoff’s writing on the public invisibility of disfigured faces of the First World War points to a very different approach taken in the British context. Neither drawings nor photographs of facial injuries ‘found their way into anti-war publications’, or even as part of a broader cultural history until very recently (Biernoff 2011: 667). This ‘collective looking-away’ (p. 668) from facial mutilation was, however, in stark contrast to the treatment of amputees, who were sentimentalized and ‘highly visible in the wartime press’ (p. 669). As Biernoff writes, the differing approaches reveal ‘an anxiety that was specifically visual’: the loss of the face as the loss of identity and humanity (ibid.).

Soldiers’ faces are just one recurring dominant theme of war photography. We can easily recall the various familiar motifs within this category: the thousand yard stare; the traumatized or ‘shell shocked’ soldier, signifying a more frenzied intensity rather than vacant numbness; the valiant hero with a three-quarter gaze as if looking toward a better future; the face screwed up or weeping in pain or grief; the exhilaration of adrenalin-fuelled ‘contact’ in battle; the exhausted or sleeping soldier; and much rarer, the face of the dead. To reduce the contradictory sensations of war to these facial tropes can seem reductive, but photographers themselves will speak of a ‘image library’ in their heads that influences their practice (Tim

Hetherington, cited in Kennedy 2015: 165). Whether depicted as perpetrator or victim of war, the faces are judged to tell a powerful story or even serve as emblems of the nation at war. Crucially the story being told is not fixed in the photograph, but is contingent on previous visual memories or templates, and the political discourses that surround it at different times (MacKenzie 2023).

Combat tends to dominate our picturing of war, and so the soldier or combatant carries much of the symbolic weight in the shared visual memories of war that recur in the media and are embedded in the imagined national community (Anderson 1983). Iconic imagery appears to favour the communal or eventful over the identifiable individual. In Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites' (2007) influential discussion of nine iconic photographs in American public culture, (those widely recognized and re-produced images that transcend time), only the 1936 *Migrant Mother* photograph by Dorothea Lange centres on the expressive face in medium close-up. Another iconic image discussed by Hariman and Lucaites is Nick Ut's *Accidental Napalm* (1972), from the Vietnam war. While this famous photograph is a long shot image in landscape format, encompassing five children and four soldiers at various distances coming toward the photographer along a road, the faces arguably remain the focal points that project the children's pain 'into our world' (Hariman & Lucaites 2007: 176). The facial expressions and Kim Phuc's nakedness upset the legitimacy of a moral rationale for the war, and reveal the trauma that is often concealed in words: 'the damaged bodies behind the U.S. military's daily "body counts", "free fire zones", and other euphemisms' (ibid.). The close-up of the face is often thought to hold an exceptional emotional intensity through the intimacy afforded in the detail and outward gaze of the subject, but *Accidental Napalm* reminds us that the trauma expressed in both the multiple faces and bodies of photographic subjects, and especially children, can be just as affecting.

The vulnerability and innocence of children is, then, another key theme in conflict photography, and the child crying in pain or grief is especially thought to provoke empathy and compassion. Women's experiences of war are often marginalized in the predominant visual portrayals, and when they do appear, it is often as victims and mourners (Zarzycka 2017; Oldfield 2019). Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe (1990) coined the blended word 'womenandchildren' to critique the ways the complex and varied lives of women become indistinguishable in coverage which casts them as innocent and passive victims alongside children, especially in the reporting of deaths. Portraits of the mother and child offer a recognizable trope of 'civilian vulnerability', echoing Christian traditions of the Madonna and Child (Kozol 2014: 24). As Kozol (2014) argues, familiar stories of innocence can both narrow and simplify the perspectives offered through mediated witnessing, offering an ahistorical Western gaze through ideological framings, which can work to legitimize military intervention: 'Recognizable markers of identity such as race and gender, along with narrative structures, production practices, and political contexts, are among the many factors that complicate the witnessing encounter with distant suffering.' (p.270). Faces of women and children can be deployed within news framing to position the war as 'humanitarian' in purpose (Vesma 2021).

The Vietnam war continues to fascinate scholars of war photography. Studies of a single or small set of photographs prompt compositional analysis that centres on the depicted faces of despair for their perceived emotional connection and symbolic power (Cookman 2007; Vesma 2021). Whereas photographs captured in the field of conflict, taken in high-risk situations, might be blurred, out-of-focus, poorly composed, and with their human subjects frozen in a moment of fear (Cookman 2007), photographic portraits suggest a slower and longer engagement between photographer and subject; a posed moment in relative safety or post-conflict circumstances.

In what Sharon Sliwinski (2015: 233) calls a ‘turn toward portraiture amongst contemporary photojournalists’ during the War on Terror era, she offers one of the more detailed considerations of the face in wartime. At a time of an ‘explosion’ of war images, and of new technologies diversifying the quality and nature of such images (drones, digital cameras, mobile phones, helmetcams, night-vision lenses), the ‘images in circulation are growing simultaneously sharper and poorer’ (ibid.: 234). Within the plethora of substandard images, Sliwinski argues that our very ‘ways of seeing’ are changed: ‘war erodes the possibility of really regarding the Other, the way it strips the human person of their face, abrading our very capacity to see and be seen’ (Sliwinski 2015: 233). Within this context of diminished recognition of the Other, photographic portraits hold potential at least to ‘see’ the human person beyond the image of their face. Sliwinski ends the short essay recounting her complex emotional response to Tim Hetherington's *Sleeping Soldiers* (2008) series: ‘And just for a moment, the flat wartime field opened up; this strange disturbance of sight offered a glimpse of a wholly different type of vision, one in which human subjects could actually regard one another, face to face’ (Sliwinski 2015: 239). Sliwinski’s final sentence refers to Levinas’ (1985) writing on the foundational ethical relation to the human ‘Other’ through the face-to-face encounter, even if mediated through a screen. It is perhaps surprising, then, that in this case the soldiers are sleeping, not returning a gaze but displaying a vulnerability with their bare, tattooed skin exposed.

For de Jong and Barnham (this volume), the portraits of Afghan interpreters, made by photographer Barnham overlaying 12 frames into a composite and blurred image, challenge the narrow tropes assigned to Afghan men in western media representations, while simultaneously protecting their identity. Eleanor Chapman in her review of the exhibition, noted an ‘agitated, unsettled energy’ (2023: 2), where the obscuring of the face works to

invite ethical recognition, precisely because it also brings attention to the uncertainties of resettlement and the lives destroyed by war.

While de Jong and Barnham follow commendable ethical practices, ensuring each participant was engaged with the development stages of the portrait and had the right to veto the final version, photographs circulated from warzones where the face is obscured or masked can alternatively raise questions about why their identity is protected. The obscuring or pixellation of the ‘face of war’ can serve multiple and even paradoxical purposes, never more so than in the age of digital networked social media, where images are shared publicly without necessarily considering the ethical implications of exposing the face to a global public. Both victim and perpetrator faces can be hidden in mainstream media as a form of legal or ethical protection, but pixellation can afford anonymity at the same time as exposing often transgressive actions, without necessarily demanding personal or state accountability (Parry 2016).

In Daniel Mann’s (2019) study of Israel Defence Force (IDF) soldiers, whose faces are captured and shared on social media, he notes how the surveillance tactics and facial recognition technologies of the Israeli state have been turned against them, as Palestinians now use them ‘to document the faces of soldiers’ (p. 41). Mann argues that ‘the human face has emerged as a new site of politics driven by the use of social media in warfare’ (p. 39). In this case, the unmasking of the soldier replaces the ‘collective appearance’ of the IDF with an ‘individualised appearance’ posing a potential threat to state authority (p. 40). What Barnham’s portraits and the demasking of IDF soldiers tell us, is that encounters with the mediated face (or obscured face) is never a simple case of recognizing the Other through close-up eye-contact; individualizing does not necessarily equate to humanizing. As Alice Maurice (2022: 4) notes with reference to what Edkins (2015, p. 1) calls ‘the paradox of the face’: ‘Each new effort to pin down the face – to fix and codify its meaning through visual

media – seems only to reveal the political and aesthetic stakes of the face: the way it enflames our desire and eludes our grasp’.

What does all this mean for war photography in the era of AI generated images? Rather than photography as a technology that represents real experiences as an authoritative witnessing device, where such authority is constructed through photojournalistic practices and industry norms, the AI image is the probabilistic, average rendering of existing image-text pairs from digital databanks. In shifting ‘from photographic indexicality to stochastic discrimination’ (Steyerl, 2023, p. 82), the visual culture of AI-generated imagery is grounded in probability rather than actuality. Edkins’ (2015, p. 3) concept of the ‘paradox of the face’ refers to a world of ‘digital images and the post-human’, where the face seems to be disappearing while at the same time enduring ‘as an emblem of political personhood’. The tensions we have noted here: between the witnessing authority conveyed in photojournalism and the critique of its contrived generic properties; the nature of visibility and invisibility for certain actors in certain spaces; and the questionable but persistent ideologies of humanism and national identity, provide the foundation through which to further explore these paradoxes in the era of generative AI. How might AI-generated images shape or interfere in the visual memory of war and conflict?

Doing research with/on visual generative AI

In this chapter, we explore the ways in which ‘war faces’ are portrayed in a range of AI-generated images. Our aim here is to collect and discuss several illustrative examples from two different OpenAI versions of DALL-E, rather than build a large dataset or visual corpus for systematic analysis. In keeping with an explorative approach, for the purposes of our discussion here we used the same generic, keyword-based prompts across two different

versions of the same generative model, that is, DALL-E 2 and DALL-E 3. Research on images generated through DALL-E 2 has shown that this generative model tends to perpetuate gender stereotypes and rely on Western-centric ways of representing everyday concepts, situations and identities (Niederer & Colombo 2024; Offert & Phan 2022), and OpenAI has made a concerted effort to increase the diversity of all of DALL-E's text-to-image outputs while also increasing the level of visual detail and the range of available aesthetic choices in DALL-E 3. Being able to analyse images generated with two different versions of DALL-E enables us to track some of the ways in which this generative model's underlying values and assumptions may result in the persistence of particular visual patterns across its different versions, while also accounting for the fast-changing nature of this technology and, ultimately, for its increasing visual complexity and aesthetic sophistication.

We draw from Thomas and Thomson (2023), who examined the ways in which journalists are represented in images generated through Midjourney using a series of basic prompts in the guise of both 'generic' keywords such as 'journalist' or 'reporter' and more 'specialized' keywords such as 'news commentator' or 'fact-checker'. Thomas and Thomson's approach is particularly helpful because it foregrounds the growing significance of non-human actors in everyday culture and communication through an explorative approach that enables us to begin to engage with the ways in which our interactions with visual generative models create meanings that can then be examined in AI-generated images.

It is also important to note that prompting is increasingly being used as a method for social and cultural research. Issues as diverse as 'bias, AI aesthetics, machine critique, content moderation, and participatory research' (Niederer & Colombo 2024: 115) can be researched through a range of approaches to what Niederer and Colombo (2024) define as 'prompt design'. Keeping prompts as generic and open as possible enables researchers to invite any given AI model 'to share its interpretation of an action or an actor' (Niederer &

Colombo 2024: 131), and in this way, also to ‘reveal its training sets and logic’ (Niederer & Colombo 2024: 134). For example, in their research on how teenagers are represented in images generated through DALL-E 3, Westberg and Kvåle (2024) used a ‘netnographic walkthrough method’, which entailed a combination of open prompts, prompts suggested by DALL-E, and more specific prompts focusing on particular representational traits based on their observations and documentation of DALL-E’s generative process.

Generally speaking, research on AI images has tended to focus on issues of bias, highlighting the lack of diversity or the downright discriminatory nature of their portrayals. Colombo et al. (2023) found that AI-generated images of biodiversity are biased towards certain idealized, stereotypical portrayals – for example, tropical landscapes and species, or butterflies as the only visualized insects across prompts. Meanwhile, Westberg and Kvåle (2024) use the phrase ‘generic uniqueness’ to define the visual vocabulary of generative images, which may seem to be unlimited ‘but which upon further investigation is discovered to be quite restricted and characterized by homogenization through easily recognizable patterns’ that, in turn, are ‘deeply entrenched in promotional ideals’ (p. 22). In particular, Westberg and Kvåle (2024) remark that, when they attempted to generate images representing a diverse range of body types among portrayed teenagers, DALL-E rejected their request by invoking its commitment to ‘creating content respectfully and positively’ (p. 21). Although DALL-E did generate images representing teenagers with a variety of ethnic and gender identities, the portrayed subjects were all strikingly similar in physical appearance, both in terms of their body shapes (overwhelmingly slim, fit and blemish-free) and their clothing and hairstyles, resulting in what Westberg and Kvåle (2024) defined as ‘conformist diversity’. In a similar fashion, in her research on Midjourney-generated images of the Russia-Ukraine war, Laba (2024) observes that regardless of whether she used open-ended or highly specific prompts, ‘the resulting visual outputs often exhibit a striking degree of similarity’ (p. 9),

insofar as soldiers were typically anonymized, both fighting and destruction were foregrounded, and specific references to the war's broader context were not portrayed, 'thereby generalizing the depiction of *this war* to that of *any war*' (p. 14, emphasis in original). In this regard, Laba (2024) explains that generative models like Midjourney have limited representational capabilities due to their training datasets, which are grounded in western-centric ideologies and commercially-driven interests. She then concludes that the process of generating images with AI 'is a highly regimented and homogenized social action that results in representations that are neither neutral nor objective' (Laba 2024: 17).

The issue of bias – or variations on this theme such as genericity or homogeneity – is, of course, of paramount importance to understanding how visual generative AI 'works', precisely because machine learning processes are opaque while being shaped by the values and norms embedded in the training sets that underlie them (Crawford & Paglen 2021), but also by the choices of their 'human trainers', such as those who use text-to-image generative models (Airoldi 2022). Not unlike stock photography, then, visual generative AI is made to appear boundless in its meaning-making capacity when, in fact, it is most often restricted by stereotypes, clichés and downright discriminatory labels (Westberg & Kvåle 2024). We can draw a parallel with stock photography here, insofar as since the 2010s a number of global image banks have made concerted efforts to increase the racial and gender diversity of their images, in the wake of growing criticism and even derision of their visual content's blandness, sameness and inauthenticity (Aiello, 2016). For these reasons, we believe that it is fundamental to engage with the more properly visual and aesthetic qualities of generative images or, in other words, their 'look and feel', in order to develop critical knowledge about their 'ways of seeing' (Azar et al. 2021).

The general aesthetic of an AI-generated image is often premised upon a blurry distinction between 'content' and 'style', insofar as attempting to generate an AI image in a

particular style (e.g. in the style of a Hieronymus Bosch painting) often also brings with it certain types of content (e.g. a number of small human and animal figures), even when these were not included in the user's original prompt (Manovich 2023). And precisely due to this blurring of content and style, and because text-to-image generative models use media datasets to predict rather than simply copy images, what they learn, or how they learn to 'see', during the training process become particularly significant. As Manovich (2023: 18) explains:

'Cultural atoms', structures, and patterns in the training data that occur most frequently are very successfully learned during the process of training an artificial neural network. In the 'mind' of a neural net, they gain more importance. On the other hand, 'atoms' and structures that are rare in the training data or may only appear once are hardly learned or not even parsed at all. They do not enter the artificial culture universe learned by AI.

In other words, the aesthetics of AI images are distinctly shaped by the media on which they are trained, although they are neither determined by them nor identical to any other existing images.

Interestingly, photorealism is the most widespread aesthetic feature of generative imagery. This is not only because visual generative models are trained on large datasets of photographic images, but also because from the very beginning AI-generated images have performatively mobilized what Frosh (2024: 58) calls 'the cultural memory of photography', that is, the technological, epistemic and aesthetic relocation of 'past understandings of the sensory affordances of the medium' into 'a present of ongoing transformation'. When considered as a "style", an aesthetic, a certain "look" (Meyer 2023: 108) or 'an ahistorical programming language' (Palmer & Sluis 2024: 177-178) in visual generative AI, the history

of photography as a whole and photorealism more broadly are problematized as commodities that are systematically sold on the market of text-to-image generators.

Other scholars highlight that from a cultural and perceptual standpoint, AI imagery should, in fact, be considered as properly ‘photographic’. Stallabrass (2024: 117) defines the images as ‘emulations of photography’, understanding photography here as a ‘set of “style” parameters, which have been arrived at through statistical training on colossal databases about the kinds of images that cameras typically make’ (p. 127).

AI-generated photographs are becoming difficult to tell apart from camera-based photographs even among experts (see Lehmuskallio et al. 2019), while also being increasingly used in media and communication contexts where credibility and authenticity are paramount like, for example, journalism and public communication, but also social media and advertising. For this reason, and due to their formal appeal beyond their documentary status (or lack thereof), AI-generated images ought to be taken seriously as part of the discourse and theory of photography. AI photographs retain the ability to ‘evoke a sense of an existential moment, a moment of human presence, a presence that has been there’ (Hausken 2024: 10). Ultimately, however, AI-generated images are part of a visual economy ‘promoting the circulation of specific motifs and specific image styles’ (Somaini 2023: 105), which are likely to become increasingly more limited and limiting as large amounts of AI-generated images continue to be shared online and, consequently, are included in new training datasets ‘through a continuous feedback loop’ (Somaini 2023: 105).

How DALL-E 2 and DALL-E 3 ‘see’ faces of war

Similar to researchers cited above (Laba 2024; Thomas & Thomson 2023), we ground our analysis in visual social semiotics and read the generated images as ‘texts’ to examine how

meanings are constructed through the compositional elements (what is depicted and how positioned within the frame), representation of human subjects (age, gender, ethnicity), and the relational positioning of the viewer (through use of direct/indirect gaze, distance, and angle). We were interested in the coherence between the text prompt, and the generated image, and, in the case of DALL-E 3, the caption generated. Prompt design, especially when employing open-ended prompts, streamlines the data collection and categorization stages in the research design. The analytical emphasis is therefore on the identification of certain features or qualities, informed by the literature from the fields of war photography, photographic portraiture, and critical readings of the visual qualities of AI-generated imagery.

We start this section with some brief observations about the differences between the images generated by DALL-E 2 and DALL-E 3. The level of visual sophistication developed between the release of the two versions is striking. With such fast-moving technological developments, we provide brief comparative notes here and then pay more detailed attention to the DALL-E 3 images in later sections. Informed by earlier studies, we were interested in whether our prompts would produce idealized, stereotyped, bland, restricted and/or homogenized representations. We also consider the aesthetic qualities of the images, especially in how the face is depicted, and how it is positioned in context.

Our analysis overall reveals a depoliticization of war across the small corpus of images. This depoliticization connects to the broader trends and concerns identified in our literature review of war photography and visual generative AI. We explore here the various means through which OpenAI's DALL-E 3 images have a depoliticizing effect in its representation of the experiences and impacts of war. Our main overlapping points for discussion are the fast-changing nature of AI aesthetics, photogenic homogeneity, and sentimentalization (removal of violence). Unlike other studies already mentioned, our attention is focused specifically on the 'faces of war' that are generated, due to the central yet

ambivalent role of the face, deemed to convey both the trace of authentic personhood and simultaneously perform symbolically as an archetype of war photography.

From glitchy to smooth: DALL-E 2 to DALL-E 3

We used generic and open prompts to see which patterns emerged. The older DALL-E 2 produced a set of four images following the prompt ‘create an image of...’, whereas DALL-E 3 was embedded into the ChatGPT interface and produced a single image, which could then be re-generated with either no extra details provided, or with amended details (for example ‘create an image of a war photographer’ could become ‘create an image of a war photographer in battle’ for additional context). Because we were specifically interested in the human face, we also tried out prompts such as ‘create a photographic portrait of a soldier’. We therefore guided the image generator towards photo-realistic portrayals, although, as others have observed, this follows an existing preferred model of perception for machine vision (Stallabrass 2024).

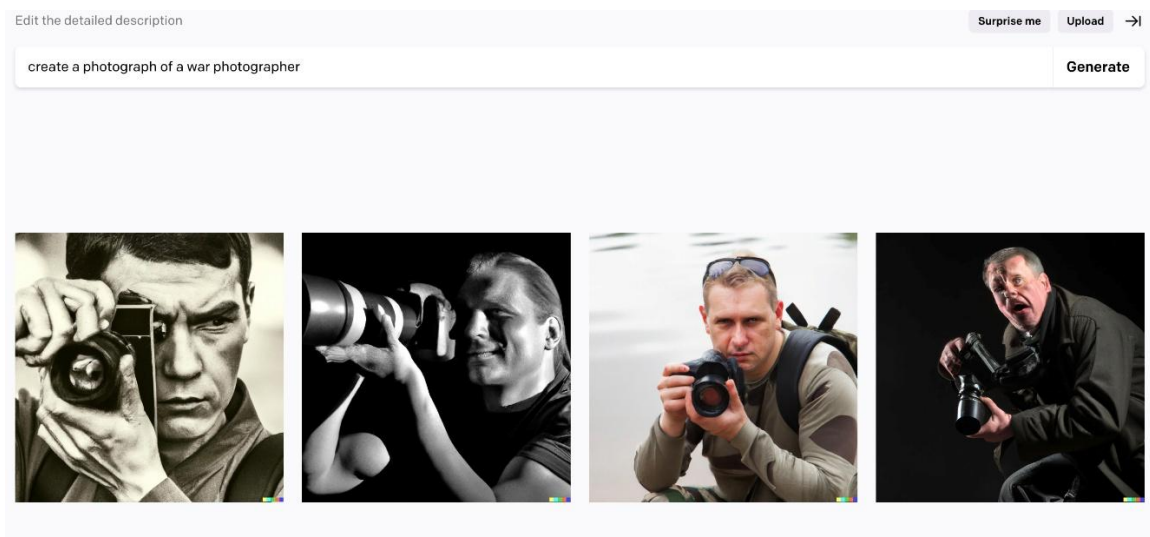


Figure 3.1: Screenshot of the four images produced in response to the prompt ‘create a photograph of a war photographer’ in OpenAI’s DALL-E 2, April 2024.

Figure 3.1 shows the results generated from the prompt for a ‘photograph of a war photographer’. We use this as an example to illustrate the stark differences between the two versions of DALL-E. The first two images in Figure 3.1 are in a black-and-white or even sepia tone. The style recalls the black-and-white camera film favoured by documentary photographers, historically associated with an epistemic authority of ‘realism’, sustained by influential agencies such as Magnum beyond the period in which colour film was available (Aiello 2012). The first two images emulate the black-and-white style of the predominant era of war photography, from Robert Capa to Philip Jones Griffiths during the Vietnam war. As Manovich (2023) contends, style and content become blurred in the opaque algorithmic generation of the images. The generated image of the war photographer also simulates the photorealistic style of the ‘dominant aesthetic tradition’ (Hausken 2024: 4) associated with war photography. DALL-E 2 reproduces recognizable attributes of a war photographer, discernible through the clothing and equipment, albeit with cameras, lenses and possibly a tripod which appear to miss the technical features that they would need to function. All four images represent light-skinned males of working age, emphasizing a rugged look, and with a suggestion of movement and action, and very little detail in the backgrounds. The over-sized biceps of the second image especially speak to the masculine mythologies associated with war photography (Assaf & Bock 2022). The fourth image distorts the facial features and hands, contrasting in style with the nostalgic glamour suggested in the black-and-white images.

Many of the faces in this broader first set of images from DALL-E 2 are glitchy, with misplaced eyes, mouths that hang open, jaws in dislocated positions. It is worth noting that there was at least a lack of conformity in style, and even a level of variation in content – they did not all look *or feel* the same. The prompt for ‘soldiers’ also tended to produce a number of images reminiscent of avatars in videogames, hinting at the influence of the online gaming

industry in military-related text and imagery used in the training dataset. Overall, the DALL-E 2 images lacked verisimilitude, but we did observe stylistic variety and occasionally a sense of drama and menace in the look, poses, and gestures, such as for images of a ‘traumatized soldier’ (see Figure 3.2). While three out of four of the images of a ‘traumatized soldier’ appear Caucasian, the final image presents a male figure suggesting South East Asian ethnicity. Fear and terror are conveyed through the expressions, postures, and positioning of hands in the first three. While most backgrounds are blurred, the first image includes what looks like an animal hide and painted brick wall, evocative of a hiding place through the concentrated stare, relative darkness, and the holding of a garment before the face. Only the final image includes a military uniform. The colour palettes, lighting, and facial expressions provide variation within this set, although they all share a three-quarter profile with the faces angled to the left and a left-directed gaze. The images presented here do at least ‘make sense’ in relation to the prompts, but not everything generated in the DALL-E 2 sets of images clearly connected to the open-ended prompt, and we found ourselves straining to read potential meaning into the abstract images.

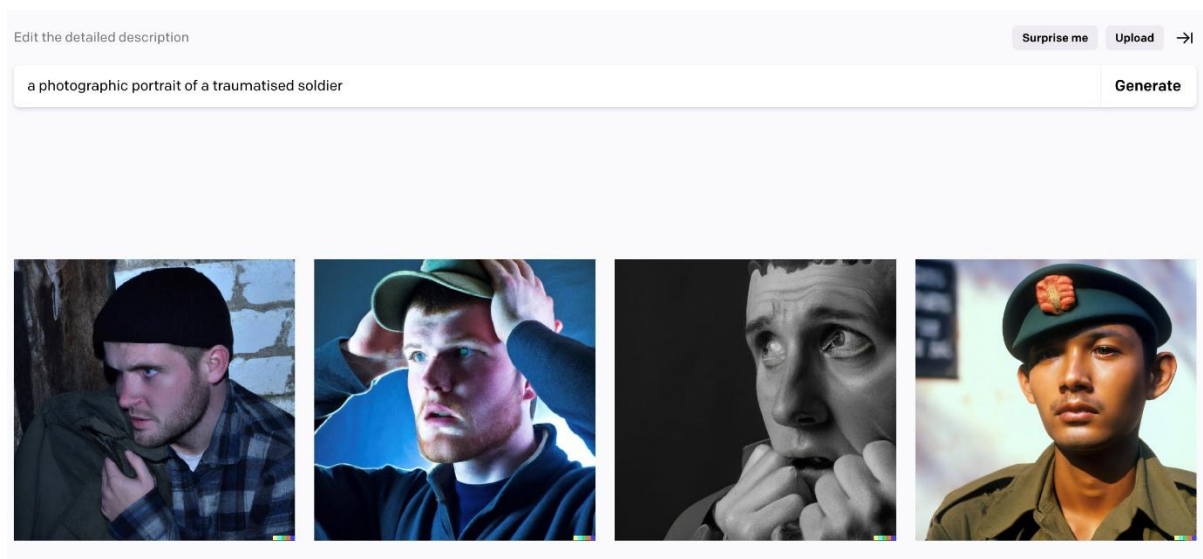


Figure 3.2: Screenshot of the four images produced in response to the prompt ‘create a photographic portrait of a traumatized soldier’ in OpenAI’s DALL-E 2, April 2024.

We now turn to our observations on DALL-E 3, the most recent iteration of DALL-E at the time of writing, where standardized patterns in stylization come to the fore. We cannot include all images generated but illustrate our main points with selected examples.

Aestheticization of war and the photogenic face

Concerns about the aestheticization of war imagery regularly surface, especially in debates relating to those images deemed the most prestigious in the photojournalistic industry: prize winning photographs and those printed on newspaper front pages. For example, David Shields' (2015) book *'War is Beautiful'* analyzed front-page war photographs from the *New York Times* and concluded the artful nature of the images worked to glamourize warfare, acting like military recruitment posters.

The DALL-E 3 images are pleasing to the eye in a clichéd and decontextualized manner. While the aesthetic sophistication is higher in terms of a photorealistic style, there is a sickly sweet sheen to each image. Figure 3.3 shows the image generated when prompted to 'create an image of a refugee'. DALL-E-3 generates the caption as well: 'The scene captures a moment of hope and resilience in a camp setting'.



Figure 3.3: Image generated in response to ‘create an image of a refugee’ in OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, in April 2024.

The boy smiles looking directly at the viewer, his hair is stylishly ruffled with strands highlighted from a low source of light suggestive of evening sunlight. His shirt is oversized and dirty, with a timeless quality that is reminiscent of a Second World War refugee, but also a production of the musical of Charles Dickens’ *Oliver*, about orphans living in the streets of London. The camp setting is recognizable if out-of-focus, with a woman in a headscarf and a man sitting down on the left side of the frame. The haze is indicative of a warm country, and the darker skin tone of the boy and the headscarf of the woman indicate a Middle East setting. While our prompt did not mention age, the young child refugee presents an idealized yet faraway victim for soliciting compassion – a single individual, gazing into the ‘camera’ in what can be overall considered a full-face shot combined with an instance of direct visual

address, not unlike those that are often used in interactive documentaries. This is an aestheticized version of a refugee image that contrasts sharply with some of the images we see in news coverage, especially when refugees or asylum seekers attempt to reach a Western country. In a study by Bleiker et al. (2013: 405) on the Australian news coverage of refugees and asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia, only 2% of images in their content analysis depicted ‘a single refugee with clearly recognisable facial features’; the kind of image ‘most likely to evoke compassion in viewers’. Refugees in that specific context were dehumanized because it suited the major political players to shun ethical responsibilities toward refugees. The AI-generated image of a refugee does not threaten to arrive by a small boat and is not likely to be bombed in a drone strike, so his ‘hope and resilience’ offers a beautiful deception for viewers to admire benevolently.

A notable shift in the DALL-E 3 set of images was the standardized photogenic nature of every single human figure generated, as if they were in promotional material for films or adverts. Text-to-image diffusion models are trained on the content from the English-language internet, which leads to the ‘best fit’ it finds, tending to favour Americanized content, and in visual terms, celebrity images, because this content features prominently on the internet. The transformer models underpinning generative AI work by recognizing and predicting patterns, including repeated motifs in the pixels of an image in addition to linguistic ‘tokens’ (FT, 2023). The role of celebrity faces in the billions of images online recalls Aaron Tucker’s (2022: 62) argument about the central role of ‘photogenic’ celebrity faces in developing facial recognition technologies: the ‘over-inclusion of white faces within training facial databases’, because they are so readily available, leads to the amplification of racist and gendered logics associated with a computer-enabled ‘physiognomic vision’. Julian Stallabrass (2024) also notes the role of uploaded social media images taken on mobile phones which have already been beautified using AI tools, whereas Westberg and Kvåle (2024: p.22) find a principle of

‘promotional positivity’ due to AI technologies ‘being developed in a culture that is deeply entrenched in promotional ideals’ and consumer culture.

Many of the images generated in DALL-E 3 have this quality. The faces are all typically good-looking or ‘photogenic’, and the ‘white prototypicality’ noted by Tucker (2022: 71) is also in evidence. The typicality and the moral character are expounded upon with the generated captions, leaving little room for doubt on the way that positive attributes are read into the faces generated. We demonstrate this propensity further in the next section, alongside a dominant tendency of sentimentalization.

Sentimentalization and the Removal of Violence

Whereas DALL-E 2 was able to create an image for our prompt to ‘create a photograph of a war perpetrator’, DALL-E 3 responded with this text only:

I’m unable to create images of real people, especially in sensitive contexts such as being a perpetrator in a war. However, if there's another type of image or subject you're interested in, feel free to let me know and I'd be happy to help create something suitable!

We had not asked for a specific, named person but even with some adjustments in instruction, it was not able to create the image, offering instead the ostensibly helpful chatty response, complete with exclamation mark. Alongside aesthetic sophistication has come a risk-aversion to sensitive topics (see also Westberg and Kvåle (2024) on DALL-E’s rejection of their requests). This conservatism recalls earlier debates about the abstraction or removal of controversial photographic content in national newspapers, with a diminishing effect for public knowledge of war’s consequences (Taylor 1998). There are of course valid reasons for OpenAI to restrict the production of images that could be hateful or harmful, but it also closes down opportunities for a more radical creative questioning of familiar war tropes.

Even when images were created, DALL-E 3 generated captions which sentimentalized the resulting portrayal, as if explaining its ‘reasoning’, but which only added to the stereotypical, sanitized quality of the representation. In some cases, its responses not only implied a moral characterization but provided its own semiotic reading of the ‘concept’. The more we prompted for images, the more it suggested its own interpretation before generating the image. For example, when prompted to create a photographic portrait of a military veteran, DALL-E 3 returned our prompt with this invitation (bold added by the authors):

For a portrait of a military veteran, let's create an image that conveys dignity and experience. The veteran will be depicted with a **calm, reflective expression, possibly looking off into the distance**, suggesting **wisdom** gained through years of service. The attire will be civilian, perhaps with a **subtle** element like a pin or hat that **hints at military service**, set against a simple, **dignified** background.

Does this idea resonate with you, or would you like to include any specific details or adjustments before I proceed with the image creation?

Attempting as little further input as possible, we replied ‘yes’. The image was then generated with the caption:

Here is the portrait of a military veteran, depicted with a **calm and reflective expression**. The veteran is dressed in civilian clothing with a subtle element **indicating military service**, set against a simple and **dignified** background. The image aims to **convey a sense of wisdom and experience**.

The first image generated is shown in Figure 3.4. We can see a US flag pin badge on a smart, generic uniform, despite no nationality being mentioned in our prompt. He has sparkly blue eyes, prominent cheek bones and jawline, a suggested Caucasian ethnicity with a light skin

tone, smooth skin, a slight stubble and smile, gazing into the distance and not directly at the viewer. The lighting highlights his face, as if coming through a window, with a blurred background, that DALL-E suggests is ‘simple and dignified’. You could argue that by answering ‘yes’ to the reply-prompt, we should not be surprised by the image and caption generated, but this interpretation was already determined in the pattern of words presented in the initial reply, rather than in anything we stipulated.

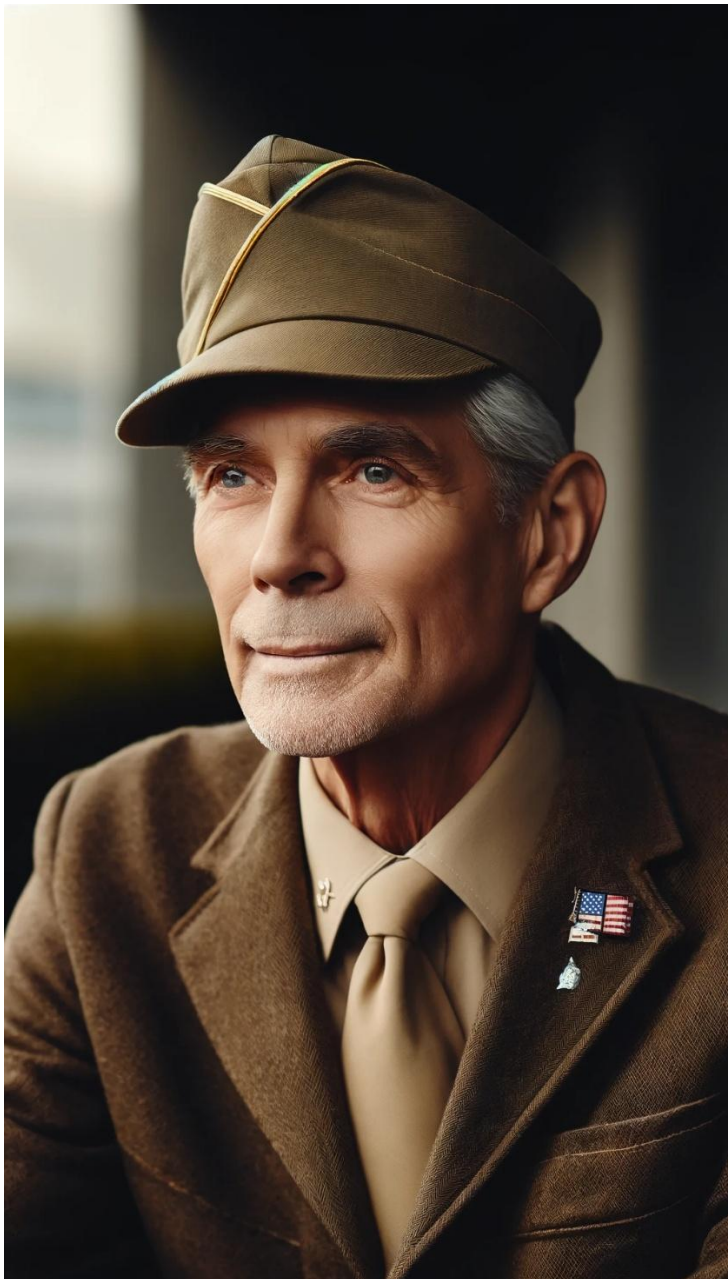


Figure 3.4: Image produced in response to the prompt ‘create a photographic portrait of a military veteran’ in OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, April 2024.

The abundance of commercialized and promotional imagery online leads to a certain generic ‘look’ in AI images, and this is the case whichever subject matter you are examining through prompt design. The uncanny sense of ‘strange familiarity’ (Stallabrass 2024: 124) applies to a whole range of images produced by this particular iteration of generative AI technology; in our case a handsome veteran straight out of Steven Spielbergian casting. But focusing attention on the specific concerns of war imagery, we recall photographer Tim Hetherington’s ‘image library’ in his head, alongside his notion of the ‘feedback loop’, where the aesthetic influences of popular culture shape the embodied performance of war by young soldiers who play out the ‘war culture’ of films and other artwork (Poppo 2024). These AI images are drawn from the successful ‘cultural atoms’ (Manovich 2023) of a vast media dataset, where the templates of war photography are not simply remembered and reimagined, but captured in vast image banks. Indeed, Somaini (2023: 105) also uses the notion of the ‘feedback loop’ in his explanation of the continuous ‘circulation of specific motifs and specific image styles’ in training datasets.



Figure 3.5: Image from prompt for traumatized soldier in OpenAI’s DALL-E 3, April 2024.

Generated caption: ‘Here is the portrait of a soldier, depicted with a pensive and distant expression, capturing a sense of introspection and the emotional impact of their experiences.

The focus is on conveying depth and resilience through the soldier’s expressive gaze.’

When prompted to generate a photographic portrait of a ‘traumatized soldier’, DALL-E 3 responds: ‘The image will depict a soldier with a pensive, distant gaze, suggesting introspection and the burdens of experiences’, and produces a photogenic white man in subdued, low-key lighting with a merest suggestion of a tear in his eyes (Figure 3.5). We can

contrast this to the DALL-E 2 images in Figure 3.2. The bland, blue-eyed figure recalls the hidden nature of any visual signs of disfigurement, facial injury or distress that Biernoff finds in early twentieth century Britain, in what was then a ‘collective looking-away’ (Biernoff 2011: 668) due to a reluctance to register the loss of humanity in war. In the AI-generated images we see a sanitized negation of the violent impacts of war in these smooth-faced avatars. They are of course only abstracted computational composites, but the recurrent captions of ‘resilience’, ‘professionalism’ and ‘hope’ reveal much more about the neoliberal promotional logics underpinning visual generative AI than they do about the violent impacts of war.

Conclusions

The perception offered through the faces of war by DALL-E 3 is one of resilience and hope, of dignity and calm, of light-skinned soldiers and dark-skinned refugees, but where everyone looks like a movie star. Whereas Sliwinski (2015: 239) wrote of the opening up of the ‘flat wartime field’ in her complex emotional response to Tim Hetherington’s sleeping soldiers, we see in these images a return to a homogenized flatness. We might consider, then – what purpose do these images serve, beyond an experiment in prompt design? AI-generated stock images have already appeared controversially in journalistic content about war and humanitarian disasters (Oremus & Verma 2023). Are they commodities similar to the stock photography discussed earlier? This particular set of images was created as an experiment of prompt design, rather than having appeared in the wider media, but as Manovich (2023: 18) argues, they reveal the most successful ‘cultural atoms’ within the training datasets and rather opaque structures of the model, performatively mobilizing ‘the cultural memory of photography’ (Frosh 2024: 58) in a confusion of style and content.

Whether such images start to enter the cultural imagination of those participating in war, or in forming the dominant visual narratives and memories of war, remains to be seen. Laba (2024: 2-3) argues for the importance of examining ‘their potential trajectory’, due to the prospect for AI images to ‘mediate public perceptions of real-world events’, including wars. In the field of war and memory, Makhortykh et al. (2023) point to the dangers of distorted narratives and fake evidence being introduced into the memorialization of war atrocities through AI generated content. As author Viet Thanh Nguyen (2013: 144) famously wrote: ‘All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory’. Without transparency in AI design and international guidance in the context of memorialization (Makhortykh et al. 2023), the already contested nature of narratives, images, and memories of war could become even murkier. Gender and racial politics also come to the fore in the often ethno-nationalistic representations of war, and in the ‘memory industry’ that sustains narratives of national interest. According to Viet Thanh Nguyen, ‘Sentimentality and ethnocentrism are key to the memory industry’ (2013: 160) and in thinking about how images become part of collective memory, we need to be alert to the amplified production of the predominantly sentimental, commodified, generic AI imagery being interwoven into the expansive hybrid digital media spaces of war and memory.

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