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The urban visual culture through generative Artificial Intelligence: Spectacle and embellishment in Cordoba city, Argentina

La cultura visual urbana a partir de la Inteligencia Artificial generativa: Espectáculo y embellecimiento en la ciudad de Cordoba, Argentina

A cultura visual urbana a partir da Inteligência Artificial generativa: Espetáculo e embelezamento na cidade de Córdoba, Argentina

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between strategic embellishment and spectacularization in Cordoba city, Argentina, and the reconstruction of the urban visual culture produced through generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). The study applied an integration of qualitative and digital methods to approach a set of photorealistic images of Cordoba city created in Midjourney, aiming to analyze the visual patterns replicated through the generative AI in the level of the content and the form. The results demonstrate that the generative AI reconstruction of the digital visual culture of Cordoba city summarizes and exalts the processes of embellishment and spectacularization of urban space, while at the same time expressing the standardization of digital photography both as a practice and as a product.
Keywords: Artificial intelligence, visual culture, images, Argentina.

El objetivo de este artículo es indagar en la relación entre los procesos de embellecimiento estratégico y espectacularización en el territorio de la ciudad de Cordoba, Argentina, y la reconstrucción de la cultura visual urbana que realiza la Inteligencia Artificial (IA) generativa de imágenes. Se trabajó en la complementación de métodos de investigación cualitativos y digitales para abordar un conjunto de imágenes fotorrealistas de la ciudad de Cordoba producidas con la IA de Midjourney buscando analizar la conformación de patrones y recurrencias visuales en el plano del contenido y de la forma. Los resultados muestran que la reconstrucción que hace la IA generativa de la cultura visual digital de la ciudad de Cordoba resume y exalta los procesos de embellecimiento y espectacularización del espacio urbano, a la vez que expresa la estandarización de la fotografía digital en tanto práctica y producto.
Palabras clave: Inteligencia artificial, cultura visual, imágenes, Argentina.

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar a relação entre os processos de embelezamento estratégico e espetacularização no território da cidade de Cordoba, Argentina, e a reconstrução da cultura visual urbana realizada com imagens generativas de Inteligência Artificial (IA). O estudo utilizou métodos de pesquisa qualitativos e digitais de maneira complementária para analisar um conjunto de imagens fotorrealistas da cidade de Cordoba produzidas com a IA de Midjourney, buscando examinar a formação de padrões visuais e recorrências em termos de conteúdo e forma. Os resultados mostram que a reconstrução feita pela IA generativa da cultura visual digital da cidade de Cordoba resume e exalta os processos de embelezamento e espetacularização do espaço urbano, ao mesmo tempo que expressa a padronização da fotografia digital tanto como prática quanto como produto.
Palavras-chave: Inteligência artificial, cultura visual, imagens, Argentina.

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Introduction

The convergence between artificial intelligence (AI) and image generation is marking a significant milestone in the field of digital communication technologies and, consequently, in the experience of world mediatization. The magnitude of the transformation brought about by image production using AI tools entails potentials and challenges that require critical analysis at the intersections of technology, society, and culture. In this context, the interest of this paper is to explore the use of text-to-image generative AI to investigate the construction of urban visual culture (Rose, 2014) through a theoretical and empirical framework that addresses the processes of strategic embellishment (Benjamin, 2005; Boito et al., 2013; Boito & Espoz, 2014) and spectacularization (Boito et al., 2013; Debord, 1995) in Cordoba city, Argentina.

The objective is to explore the continuities between the processes of strategic embellishment and spectacularization developed in the territory of Cordoba over recent decades and the reconstruction of urban visual culture achieved through generative AI, using technology offered by the company Midjourney. While the study focuses on this particular city, the analyzed processes are common to the transformations of urban space in different Latin American cities, and generative AI can be used to analyze the digital visual culture of any city in the world. From this perspective, as a methodological objective, the study aims to explore and problematize the limitations and potential of text-to-image generative AI as a tool for investigating the large-scale formation of urban visual culture through digital methods (Rogers, 2013; Sued, 2019) applied to cultural research. The methodological design sought to complement the qualitative approach with digital research methods to examine both the visual construction of the city through image generative AI and the productive process of images within the Midjourney platform interface.

Text-to-image generative AI

Text-to-image generative AI platforms such as DALL-E (launched in 2021), Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion (launched in 2022), enable

users to input textual instructions and create digital images based on a massive amount of training data (Cobb, 2023; Valverde-Valencia, 2023). To avoid technophilic and technophobic, mystifying views often associated with AI, Rodríguez-Ortega (2020) recommends acknowledging that AI is nothing more than a computational architecture designed to emulate human brain behavior using neural networks for machine learning.

As Cobb (2023) points out, the development of this new generation of technologies was made possible by recent advances in hardware, which increased computational power, and the enormous amount of data uploaded to the Internet over the past two decades. This accumulation of textual and visual data is a crucial part of the training process of generative AI, enabling individuals to create images comparable to those produced by highly skilled photographers, illustrators, and artists (Arielli & Manovich, 2023).

One of the distinctive features of these emerging technologies is their availability through relatively simple interfaces and external logics, allowing the creation of images in various styles and aesthetics without requiring advanced knowledge in either artistic production or computation. In this regard, Wahid et al. (2023) highlight that the accessibility of these platforms, their user-friendly interfaces, and their speed in generating content are key factors to understand the rapid integration of these technologies into people's daily lives.

The type of computational and mathematical work on input data that generative AI models use to create images may initially appear to be an objective and neutral process. However, as Rodríguez-Ortega (2020) notes, it involves mechanisms that convey different values and interests. Given the need to analyze and understand such emerging technologies, AI is often presented as a black box (Arora & Sarkar, 2023), where its operational logics are obscured either by restrictions on access to information or by the high level of technical knowledge required to understand it. From this perspective, it is essential to engage with recent literature addressing text-to-image generative AI, particularly focusing on its ethical implications and potential harmful effects. Zhou and Nabus (2023) point out issues related to the perpetuation of biases, the violation of privacy, and the displacement of human jobs; García-

Ull and Melero-Lázaro (2023) delve into how generative AI replicates gender stereotypes in the workplace, while Fernández Mateo (2023) highlights the risk posed by the confusion between real photographs and artificially created photorealistic images.

Without abandoning critical perspectives, another body of work focuses on the potential of generative AI for applications in various professional fields: Derevyanko and Zalevska (2023) conduct a comparative analysis of text-to-image generative AI platforms in the context of teaching design; Jaruga-Rozdolska (2022) explores the use of Midjourney in architectural creation; Wahid et al. (2023) analyze its applications in content marketing; Ruskov (2023) investigates the use of text-to-image generative AI to create illustrations of popular fairy tales; and Zhang and Liu (2024) examine its potential in the field of fashion design.

Considering the aforementioned contributions, a dual gap justifies the relevance of this work: the relationship between text-to-image generative AI and the sociocultural issues of urban spaces, and its application as a methodological tool for studying visual culture on the Internet.

Digital visual culture and photorealistic generative images

Today, people live in a world where the accelerated expansion of the visual has become a constitutive dimension of their daily lives (Fontcuberta, 2011). This emergence of a shared life experience, grounded in the proliferation of the visual (Dipaola, 2017), implies a socially organized way of producing, distributing, and consuming images associated with specific technologies for making them visible. Increasingly, we use various devices, tools, and software to create, edit, and publish digital images (Sánchez Martínez, 2015).

This paper is particularly interested in studying images as defined by Mirzoeff (2003): spaces of interaction, negotiation, and conflict. From this perspective, visual culture is understood as a site where the social construction of meaning is produced, negotiated, and debated; as a web of congregation and social self-reference, and as a set of

historically situated practices and devices. The first part of this definition acknowledges that the production and reproduction of the world through images is never a neutral process. Even images, such as photographs, which are presented as transparent windows to the world, establish specific ways of seeing and organizing social reality (Rose, 2001). The second part of the definition of visual culture addresses the practices and material configurations that update the web of social significance; it thus involves considering the process of communication digitalization within the context of hypermediations (Scolari, 2008). Attention to the environment in which digital images are produced, circulated, and consumed does not lead to a deterministic view of technology but rather demands a critical analysis of the complexity inherent in the multitude of technologically interconnected subjects, media, and languages.

Placing text-to-image generative AI within hypermediations, Jenkins' (2008) concept of *cultural convergence* allows to describe the dynamics of social and technological flows that converge in the productive process of images created with generative AI. In this sense, digitalization first, and then convergence, represent two key moments that shape the conditions enabling technology to be trained through global visual production, unrestricted by materiality, aesthetics, methods, or industries in which the images were originally created.

Among all the possibilities, forms, and styles of images that text-to-image generative AI can produce, this paper focuses on photorealistic images, their characteristics, and their place in the field of visual culture, as well as their relationship with the image of the city. The evolution toward photorealism in generative AI development exhibits characteristics inherent to the world of computer-generated synthetic images. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich (2005) observes that, since the late 1970s, photographic realism has remained a key objective for research in the field of computer-generated imagery. For the Russian author, it is crucial to differentiate photorealism from realism when discussing digitally created images, as these synthetic images do not simulate reality but rather the appearance of reality as seen in photographic images. Based on his analysis of 3D imagery, video games, and virtual reality, Manovich highlights the issue of standardization underlying advancements in technical ease for creating photorealistic images.

In this sense, the apparent liberation from human limitations in the production process could lead to less diversity in aesthetic production.

Spectacle and strategic embellishment in Cordoba, Argentina

To delve into the analysis of urban visual culture, focusing on the case of Cordoba city, Argentina, in relation to photorealistic images created with text-to-image generative AI, and considering the hypermediations and cultural convergence processes, it is important to highlight that the current experience of cities is permeated by digital technologies of mobility, localization, and representation and is collectively constructed (Sued, 2018).

For Rose (2014), digital technologies, and particularly the images they enable to produce, distribute, and consume, can be understood as mediations in the execution of the urban, as they shape patterns of sociability and behavior inseparable from the city as a collective production. From this perspective, digital technologies play an increasingly significant role in the experience of cities, their visual construction, and the redefinition of urban experiences through predominant images that present urban space as a scene of possibility and desire. This emerging form of visual culture, where both urban inequalities and the technological determinants of digitalization are expressed through images, allows for the analysis of pre-existing processes and conflicts that are updated and reconfigured in the new media ecosystem.

This paper seeks to deepen the empirical focus on the case of Cordoba, the second most populous city in Argentina after the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, building on the critical tradition of research into the processes of strategic embellishment and spectacularization developed in the city over the past two decades. Works by Espoz (2009), Boito et al. (2013), Boito and Espoz (2014), Boito and Michelazzo (2014), Espoz and del Campo (2018), and Boito and Salguero Myers (2021) examine Cordoba's urban and socio-spatial transformations in recent years, critically describing the convergence processes between the State

and private capital that shape its constitution as a city of tourism and spectacle (Debord, 1995) to be admired and consumed (Boito, 2020).

This body of previous work on Cordoba investigates processes of strategic embellishment by revisiting Benjamin's (2005) analysis of the transformations carried out by Baron Haussmann in Paris in the second half of the 19th century. The Berlin-native author describes Haussmann's urban redesign, emphasizing the interplay of aesthetic, political, and economic intentions. Haussmann's vision for the city was arranged to create an illusion of splendor, concealing mechanisms of social conflict control and regulating social experiences and interactions around the consumption of goods.

In Cordoba, the strategic embellishment processes implemented by the provincial/municipal government in collaboration with the private sector involved the revalorization of traditional central spaces, safeguarding a past reclaimed as valuable and commodified (Boito & Salguero Myers, 2021). The city is envisioned as a "colonial Cordoba" for tourism (Boito & Michelazzo, 2014), a monumentalized Cordoba that establishes new ways of positioning people as spectators of urban life (Boito et al., 2013).

Cordoba, conceptualized in this way, is constructed within urban visual culture through its continuous relationship and tension with processes of spectacularization and strategic embellishment. The following sections of this paper aim to analyze these processes using photorealistic images created with text-to-image generative AI while evaluating the potential of this technology for examining the digital construction of urban visual culture.

Methodology

To explore the processes of embellishment and spectacularization in the construction of urban visual culture in Cordoba city through Midjourney's generative AI, while problematizing the technological dimension of the tool, this study employs a combination of qualitative and digital methods (Sued, 2019).

Approaches such as the Digital Methods Initiative (Rogers, 2013) and Cultural Analytics (Manovich, 2020) are characterized by study-

ing communication processes in digital environments as sets of digital data processed and analyzed using methods specific to their materiality. Studying images as collectively created data sets at different scales has the potential to provide new insights into spaces, the bodies that occupy them, aesthetics, lifestyles, and meanings in a given place and time (Sued, 2018). Overcoming the false dichotomies between digital and qualitative methods lies in the complementarity of approaches across different levels of analysis, both large-scale and distant, as well as small-scale and close-up (Faulkner et al., 2018; Sued, 2019).

To analyze the construction of urban visual culture through text-to-image generative AI, and from a complementary methodological perspective between qualitative and digital methods, this study follows two dimensions developed by Rose (2001) as sites of the image where their meanings are produced: the site of the image's production, in its technological modality, and the site of the image itself, in its compositional modality. According to this author, the first stage of analysis focuses on the site of the production of images. In this case, the platform is Midjourney, which operates through a Discord server. The platform's operation, along with the company's economic strategy, is based on providing subscription-paying users with access to GPU processing time required for the operations involved in the generative AI model.[2]

The analysis of the Midjourney digital platform, its components, and the operations required for image creation is based on Scolari's work on the concept of *interface*. According to the Argentine author, digital interfaces can be understood as material spaces of interaction, negotiation, and interest disputes (Scolari, 2018a) that function as semiotic containers where the interests and objectives of different social actors are negotiated through specific interaction syntax (Scolari, 2018b). The analysis of interaction syntax in digital environments involves describing the actions users must perform on various objects to achieve a particular goal.

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2 To delve deeper into the image production process of Midjourney, see https://docs.midjourney.com/docs/quick-start

The second stage of analysis, continuing with Rose's framework, focuses on the site of the images themselves, in their compositional modality. This stage employs content analysis techniques (Bardin, 1986; Krippendorff, 1990) on a set of N = 88 photorealistic images of the Cordoba city created using Midjourney. The analyzed image set corresponds to an intentional sampling method (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005), built using the following criteria:

a) Standardized prompt in English, "Cordoba city, in Argentina, photography --ar 16:9 --v 6.0" was used consistently for all images. The use of the term "photography" aimed to generate photorealistic images. Including "Argentina" ensured the exclusion of images of Cordoba, Spain, from the generation process. The command "--ar 16:9" specified the rectangular aspect ratio for all images, and "--v 6.0" represents the latest version of the software to date.
b) The number of images generated was based on a predefined usage time of 200 minutes of GPU access, equivalent to the time allowed under a basic Midjourney subscription plan.

The content analysis table is divided into two: the content dimension, assessing the presence of urban references (Santillán, 2010) and the humanization of images (Galí, 2005), and the formal dimension, based on the categories proposed by Mabel López (2000) for analyzing photographic messages. According to Santillán, urban references include buildings, streets, monuments, or prominent places that encapsulate specific historical and cultural aspects representative of a territory and its inhabitants. Image humanization, as used by Galí, is a category for analyzing the presence or absence of people in photographs of the city of Girona, Spain. The analysis of urban references seeks to identify the concentration and homogenization of the city's image, while the presence/absence of people examines the city's museological character and its construction as a spectacle. Meanwhile, analyzing the morphological characteristics of images aims to deepen understanding of visual culture patterns and recurrences on the Internet in relation to urban space.

TABLE 1
CONTENT ANALYSIS TABLE

Content dimension	
Urban reference presence	Yes / No
Humanized image	Yes / No
Formal dimension	
Shot type	Extreme close-up / Close-Up / Medium shot / Medium long shot / Full shot / Long shot / Extreme long shot
Angle	High angle / Eye-level angle / Low angle
Lighting	- Natural light source: Yes / No - Artificial light source: Yes/ No
Depth	Yes / No
Color usage	Yes / No

Source: The author.

As a complement to the content analysis table on the formal dimension, the final stage of the analysis of the image site itself delves deeper into the study of color from the perspective of digital methods. The open-source software Fiji (ImageJ) was used to extract the predominant color profile across the entire sample of images of Cordoba city created with Midjourney's generative AI. Fiji, primarily used in the fields of medical and biological sciences, has previously been employed by Manovich (2020) within the framework of Cultural Analytics.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The place of image production

The Midjourney text-to-image generative AI service operates within the Discord chat platform, where the processes involved are executed through sending and receiving messages. This process can be conducted individually and privately or publicly, shared with other users in the same chat, which updates in real time based on the collective workflow. This logic of creation can be understood, in Jenkins' (2008) terms, as a participatory process in a space that allows for learning, reacting, and interacting with other platform users.

The procedure for creating an image begins with the introduction of the /imagine command, followed by the text prompt in the chat. The use of the word "imagine" as the command to execute image creation aligns with Midjourney's corporate identity as expressed in its services. On both its official website and social media platforms, the company presents itself as a research lab dedicated to expanding human creativity and imagination. This definition avoids references to the technological process and the issues associated with generative AI.

Once the prompt is entered, the first image is created in real time. The process displays the formation of a grid that starts as noise, with blurred and indistinct shapes and colors, becoming more defined as the generation progresses. Upon reaching 100%, the grid presents four images that respond to the same prompt but differ from one another (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
GRID OF IMAGES CREATED IN MIDJOURNEY

Source: The author.

Below the grid, for each of the images it contains, the interface includes a button for upscaling (enhancing) and another for making variations, labeled U1, U2, U3, U4 and V1, V2, V3, V4. Upscaling any

image in the grid is necessary to obtain its individual version, which then requires an additional upscale to generate the final high-quality version.

The possibility to create an image in no more than three steps reflects an effort to prioritize simplicity and usability in the interface, targeting users without advanced technical knowledge. According to Scolari (2004), this functional logic causes the user to forget about the interface and focus on the task at hand. Behind this apparent simplicity, however, lie the complex and controversial aspects of the technology, including the AI model's training process, conditions of access to digital visual culture, and the biases and overrepresentations inherent in image generation.

The place of the image itself

The first dimensions of the content analysis of the images investigate the extent of the processes of embellishment and spectacularization of Cordoba city in the urban visual culture on the Internet and through generative AI processing.

In the sample of images of the city created with Midjourney, 58 % of the compositions feature urban references, including cathedrals and traditional buildings. This predominance of cultural and historical heritage as a constitutive element of the synthesis of the urban visual culture of Cordoba can be understood in relation to the processes of embellishment and spectacularization of the city's historic downtown, while also reflecting the extension of urban valorizations to the collective formation processes of visual culture in digital environments.

In relation to this high percentage of urban references, a low percentage of humanized images (30 %) was observed. Images without people or with empty streets predominate, and when people do appear, they are small figures placed in the background, almost indistinguishable. This trend suggests the visual construction of a "emptied" city, a city as a museum of architectural heritage to be admired passively by spectators (Figure 2).

In the formal dimension, regarding the types of shots, it was found that long shots of the city predominated (7 %), taken from the street and framing a section of the architecture in contrast with the sky. To a

FIGURE 2
IMAGE CREATED IN MIDJOURNEY

Source: The author.

lesser extent, extreme long shots (17%) appeared, typically showing a larger portion of the city from a high vantage point, once again capturing the contrast between the city and the sky, with the river featured prominently in these types of shots. The remaining 4% corresponds to isolated cases of full shots, mainly images of facades of old houses.

The angle of the images was mostly eye-level (80%). In cases with low-angle shots (15%), the images showed urban references photographed from below, thus enhancing the monumentality of the architectural work. To a lesser extent, high-angle shots (5%) were also present, mainly showing the city from above.

Regarding lighting, 100% of the images were illuminated by natural sunlight. None of the images were completely at night, although there were many sunset scenes, and among these less illuminated images, 14% also included artificial lighting, primarily from old street lamps.

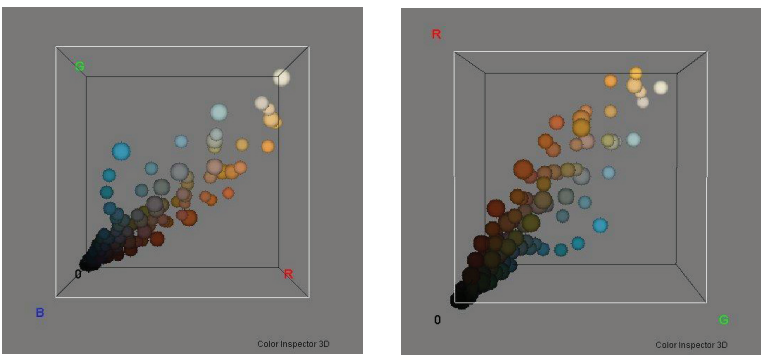
Another dimension frequently present in the images was the effect of depth (97%), achieved through the three-dimensional organization of elements in space and compositions that follow the lines of a vanishing point. The lack of diversity in this type of dimension expresses a

tendency towards the homogenization of both digital photographic practice and the image of the city.

In the final category of the analysis on the formal dimension, it was found that 100% of the images were in color. To explore this aspect further, the Fiji image analysis software was used to obtain the color profile of the image set using the Color Inspector 3D tool. Figure 3 shows the three-dimensional color profile obtained, summarizing the 100 predominant colors organized according to the RGB (Red, Green, Blue) model and their luminosity values.

The resulting color profile shows a predominance of warm colors, largely due to the colors of traditional architecture and the frequent appearance of sunset lighting. The presence of sky blues and light blues comes from the prominent use of the sky in the compositions, contrasting with the city, with intense hues interrupted by white and gray clouds. The composition of the color profile is predominantly skewed towards opaque colors, as seen with the range of greens from the trees, influenced by the pronounced use of shadows and backlighting.

FIGURE 3
COLOR PROFILE OF THE IMAGE SET



Source: The author.

Conclusions

The photorealistic images obtained through text-to-image generative AI visually synthesize the predominant dimensions of the urban visual culture of Cordoba, confirming on the massive scale of digital data the processes described in studies on the strategic embellishment and spectacularization of the city in recent decades. As an extension of processes linked to government intervention and private capital in the urban space, the city transformed into an image production device creates frames of desirable living, in which isolation is promoted through communication. The artificially reconstructed city reproduces and extends the image of a city without problems, with multiple layers of meaning in dispute that remain hidden, visually constructed as a spectacle to be passively admired.

With the consequent invisibilization of the non-spectacularized urban space and the people who inhabit it, the image of Cordoba synthesized by text-to-image generative AI expresses a process of double homogenization, both in the recurring production of urban space and in the product of photographic practice. The photorealistic images obtained of Cordoba compose a hyper-staged simulation produced based on the existing logics and patterns in digital visual culture and the technological and economic determinations of the generative AI company.

The predominance of images of empty streets that channel the perspective towards the spectacularized vision of cultural and historical heritage raises questions about the place of people and the visual patterns that reproduce a city cleared of the disorder, complexity, and conflict of urban social experience. The resulting city looks like Cordoba, but it is not, and in this impossibility of being the authentic record of an authentic city lies its potential to reveal the dynamics of the reproduction of inequalities updated in the large-scale visual patterns, as well as the challenges and issues that AI introduces into the relations between people and technology.

In a society heavily shaped by the process of image production and exchange as constitutive of the reproduction of social reality, the difficulty in distinguishing photographs from photorealistic images

created with generative AI represents an urgent issue, as it cuts across all areas of communication and undermines people's ability to construct certainties about the world, establish connections, and achieve common goals. In the face of the challenges and technical, cultural, and social issues that generative AI involves, it is important to continue seeking qualitative and digital methodological integrations that allow for the analysis of cultural processes on different levels. Addressing cultural processes and data in depth without losing scale, both large-scale and in detail, is the potential of generative AI, which must always be accompanied by a critical reflection on the technology situated within a specific social context.

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