



**Orpheus in
Homebase and
Other Images**

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Orpheus in Homebase and Other Images features a collection of text-images that explore the cyclical nature of existence, desire and recognition, amid the overwhelming and relentless commodification of everything. Drawing on images and texts created over the last decade, some of which are transformed through generative processes and some of which are placed in relation, the work begins with its titular poem, where the mythic figure of Orpheus (or is it someone else?) materialises in a South London DIY store, simultaneously infecting and enchanting consumer encounters – manifesting moments of longing, (mis) connection and fantasy. Blending the mythological with the quotidian, the project creates a space in which a pair of kitsch secateurs carries the same emotional weight as ancient lyre songs, and where the fluorescent-lit aisles of retail spaces are a place for jouissance in the mundane. Where, ultimately, all that we can ever know is what has been brought to the delirious recording surface that is modern existence.

Images Among Images

Am I an image? Are you one? Employing quantum field theory and ancient Buddhist philosophy, theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (2022: 131) says as much. ‘...we are nothing but images of images. Reality, including ourselves, is nothing but a thin, fragile veil, beyond which ... there is nothing.’ Elsewhere, Dorothea Olkowski (2003: 29) writes, ‘the body is a motor sensory image’, which also implies we, our imaginings and expressions are part of a universe made from nothing but images. To view ourselves in this way entails a reality in which our physical, imaginative and expressive selves are immanently intertwined. Saliently, we stop being empirical observers imprisoned outside some non-human ‘nature’ or in addition to the technologies we employ (language, mark-making, democracy or computerisation, for instance).

The philosophical logic within Thomas Nail’s (2019) *The Theory of the Image* supports a reading in which we are indeed images. After reading his work, a friend groaned (or did they raise their eyebrows?) in exasperation when I suggested we humans are images too. ‘I don’t know what you mean!’ they said dismissively. This reaction is entirely understandable. We grow up with narratives, deeply inscribed, telling us we are ‘something’ more solid, more real, more valuable than nearly all non-human things. Or we render certain humans less-than-human and therefore less valuable than others. Imagination, thought, and ideas are also not afforded ontological realness. In our common understanding, all that we observe is, if not an image, then simply a second-order ‘material’ object or ‘immaterial’ process, lower down the rungs of value.

An image, however, according to Nail’s (2019: 11) thesis, is:

‘...the mobile process by which matter twists, folds, and reflects itself into various structures of sensation and affection. By this definition, the image is not reducible to a strictly visual kind [of] image alone All sensation is thus bound together in a continuous flow of images.’ (My italics).

At which point, how can we and everything we know not be images – or, perhaps more accurately, combinations of interrelated shifting images sensing and affecting others, in a universe of images, as Rovelli suggests? If you are ‘affected’ in any way whatsoever, it is only through a flow of images, within

this reading. We, and all we can ever know, are images of images of images among images.

Is the Convergence of Human and Machine the End of Human Exceptionalism?

The presence of dynamic machine code – otherwise known as AI – that learns from, responds to, and reflects our interactions explicitly induces us to think of ourselves as ‘images amongst images’. Especially, if one considers where generative code potentially takes us. The uncanny renderings we recognise for the moment as AI point to a future in which, collectively, we will be able to reproduce pretty much anything we imagine or see, as explored in science fiction pastiche *The Orville* (MacFarlane, 2017-22) and other similar shows. While such narratives might not be taken too seriously, the ability to summon objects into being at will is no longer out of the bounds of possibility and might be seen as a semi-conscious aim for a species that believes it is facing existential oblivion. We can produce 3D objects and we can type ‘desires’ into a computer, summoning them up in seconds. Combine these related technologies, and the object-making machines imagined in *The Orville* do not seem far-fetched. The birth of photography and then radio, then television and film – the mechanical rendering of images – and now biological computing, AI and 3D prints, together signify an ability to remake reality. Additionally, code operates by rendering reality writ large as information. Code allows us to pull that information into a conceptual liquidiser (a programme such as latent space, for instance) and then eject the resulting goop outwards via a type of digital mould within moments, which we humans will then perceive as an image.

Traditionally, one might have thought of this process as ‘creating a copy’. But if the copy begins to claim as much ontological status as the original, such representational understanding may no longer remain useful or ring true. Perhaps Nail’s (2019: 11) suggestion that there are never copies, only ‘reflection, duplication [and] echo’, allows for a suitably evolved comprehension. Nail says, ‘The image is not a distinct or separate copy but, rather, the process by which matter curves, bends, folds, and bounces back and forth, or “echoes.”’ Of course, you might reply by saying that code is not material but language, but in a framework that sees the universe as ‘nothing but a thin veil’ of image of images (Rovelli, 2021; 131), no form of language exists that is not fundamentally material. From what I understand, albeit barely given its immense difficulty, this is supported by quantum field theory, which posits that all particles – which means all matter, all forces – are borne of tremblings of energy within fields, some of which interact with us perceptibly, while others remain largely imperceptible even though they are indeed material (Tong, 2017). Through our parochial body/landscape lens, we do not always see objects that are ‘graspable’. For us, some matter remains ‘immaterial’, impossible to grasp or see (even when they might be right in front of, or even in, our eyeballs!)

The trouble for us is that we still think and speak in terms of separate humans as ontologically superior beings who look at images, from outside, above, or beyond a universe in which the rest of reality exists. Dynamic-information-based technologies blur that distinction. The technologies, the scientific theories, processes and the machinery that inform them, we humans, along with all other ‘stuff’ we know, can now be rendered ‘informational goop’. Once that happens, the long-held distinction between our externalisations (our writing, our films, our art, our technologies) and us is over.

Perhaps, that is what upsets many of us most. AI’s presence is the clearest indication of a potential collapse of superiority or even an inversion. This does not imply that justifiable concerns many have related to AI are not valid. However, what was once certain, fixed, and clearly separate is no longer so – we are

surely no longer on top of, or at least fairly high up, any imagined ‘triangle of being’, or else the sovereign of human-centric structure. Before, we looked at objects and were their masters. Now our objects look at us and integrate with what and who we are; in our imaginaries, they even threaten to become our masters instead. And because we are integrated (through our banking apps, our social media feeds, our health records and more), informational convergence feels utterly unavoidable. Media convergence refers to the collapse of traditional boundaries between different forms of communication—print becoming digital, television bleeding into social media— creating interconnected networks. Humans, long accustomed to habitual distinctions and demarcations, are finding convergence beyond ‘media-proper’ immensely destabilising, as boundaries surrounding gender, socialisation, culture, and even the relationship between flesh and technological media dissolve. We ought to be kinder to ourselves and each other. Like AI, hate it, or have some more nuanced attitude — the transition we’re living through is indeed seismic.

My Images and I

The images included in *Orpheus in Homebase* and *Other Images* are a combination of photographs I took in 2014 and so-called AI-images. The older pictures in the book were part of a now-defunct – aptly so, one might conclude – module called *The Art of Photography*; the first in an online degree I had no intention of completing when I began. They were produced for an assignment titled *Colour* and asked that we wrestle with the challenges of reproducing different hues, shades, and vibrancies while developing techniques to overcome limitations, as well as taking advantage of inherent characteristics, such as leaning into contrast to enhance vibrancy. From the beginning, I was not content with mere technicalities, and, having learnt from the tutor guiding me through the programme that a more conceptual approach was not only acceptable but welcomed, I moved beyond dogmatic technical concerns to explore sense memories triggered by vibrantly coloured fragments of narrative from my life.

Chiefly, I had in mind a technicolour recollection from early childhood which was undoubtedly informed by a mixture of cinematic convention, wrapped in nostalgia and invention. These personal fragments, already mediated through a blend of camera technology and the childlike storytelling, were themselves images in Nail’s sense – not copies of experience but the process by which my material memories are folded and reflected. What would happen, I wondered, when these old images of images of images became the raw material for another sedimented layer of technical mediation?

Nearly a decade later, I revisited the assignment and uploaded it to a proprietary image generator. In a sense, I willingly gave some of my layered history to ‘the commodification apparatus’ before waiting to see what would be regurgitated, potentially adding to the story of what and who I am; reducing my history (the period of grief and self-discovery that may be fairly predictable following a divorce) and self – all of it into an informational digitised soup, or the goop as I have called it – my life in 0s and 1s – before seeing what new images the apparatus might spit out.

This willingness to give myself over to the latent spaces of generative AI does not automatically suggest I am succumbing to its logic. But rather stems from a desire to ‘stay with the trouble’, as Donna Haraway (2016) might say, and inject the messiness of my humanity into our increasingly techno-alien, highly commodified landscape. Let me be flawed and let my flaws inform you, I say to the machine. I don’t care whether the images that emerge are ‘original’ or not. Perhaps I no longer believe the hyper-individualised

myth our culture accepts as ‘real’ about originality.

Omnilinearity

This exchange – from lived experience of images to images of lived experience – informed as it all is by the stuff we watch on TV, in the cinema or on our devices – from image to algorithm, from algorithm back to image, from image to material booklet and possibly other media yet to emerge for the sake of social media – creates a multi-facing, omnilinear journey (if such a thing can exist!) informed by entangled, networked, generative feedback loops. (Too tautological? Perhaps!) It both resists and emulates the ‘fluid, smooth, fast circulation’ that author Anna Kornbluh (2023) identifies in Immediacy as essential to late capitalism. It resists, not least because I self-consciously refuse the apparatus’ temporal pace which urges me to work quickly and efficiently, to make the work obvious and didactic, or clearly marketable – it won’t be labelled analogue, digital or AI, or even photography for instance; and emulates because I do not shy away from the technology that speaks to the energies of our time. It aims to exist dialectically – negatively and positively – its paradoxes and contradictions something to illuminate, rather than overcome. They embody the tensions identified between immediacy and slowness, endings and beginnings, the constant tiny deaths, births and near misses that write the musical hum of existence into being. The publication is a collection of images. And a meditation on the intersecting processes that define what we are today; reducible information in constant emergence, yet still dreaming, suffering, feeling, and dying, just as we always have done.

So, am I an image? Are you?

I guess the answer is yes, yes and yes again! But this is not so bad.

Orpheus in Homebase and Other Images is available as a limited edition zine from my website:
www.sarahjanefield.com/products.

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