Baudrillard and AI: A project-based case study of simulacra as a predictor *and* facilitator of AI generation in South African design curricula.

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ABSTRACT

In a world of generative AI (gAI), we are observing a trend in design education (and practice) that mimics something akin to Jean Baudrillard's (1988c) "hyperreal simulacra". His is a world governed by simulacra, whereby we interact with visuals stripped of conceptual references. We are seduced by a code-like, visually oversaturated world flooded with hyper-mediated simulations of meaning. In this paper, I propose that he has predicted, fairly accurately, a form of *contemporary* "simulacra" – our current reality where meaning is fleeting and is increasingly pervaded by gAI signs (imagery, video, writing, and so on). I comment on Baudrillard's simulacra as a predictor and facilitator of gAI by means of a practice-led Information Design[1] project (2023) as a case study to illustrate the impact of gAI on communication design in South African. I comment on challenges, shortfalls and opportunities that belie applications of gAI in design curricula with the intention to demystify, to some degree, some of the concerns brought about by gAI in communication design by articulating a Baudrillardian lens on gAI.

Keywords: AI, AI in design, Jean Baudrillard, AI in education, AI design curricula.

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Introduction

Of particular interest to this study is Jean Baudrillard's attempt to make intelligible one of the most perplexing aspects of the advanced industrial society at the turn of the 20th century – the proliferation of a kind of hyperreal media distribution. Throughout much of his later work, Baudrillard describes a postmodern world dominated by media-induced "simulations", or, as he notoriously refers to them, "simulacra" (Poster 1988:1). In describing what he refers to as the era of simulation, Baudrillard describes a postmodern world, populated by particularly *visual* media, constructed of models of simulacra which have no referent or ground in any reality, except their own – a black hole of sorts where all reference is liquidated (Baudrillard 1994:167; Clarke *et al* 2009:5; Gane 1993:xi; Genosko 2002:xvii; Poster 1988:7).

What he describes is something more than simply a "fake sign". Instead, he describes a world more (visually) "real" than "reality itself" – a kind of hyperreality. Here, signs become artificial models of "real" visual texts; texts without historical origin or real reality, but that become more "present" and liminal than reality itself:

> It is the generation of models of a real without origins or reality … the era of simulation inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials … with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs (Baudrillard 1994:166-167).[2]

Having written most of his work surrounding simulacra in the 1980s and 1990s, Baudrillard was referring to the dawn of the Internet as a medium of circulation. By analysing selected examples from an experimental project conducted by fourth-year, exit-level Information Design students at the University of Pretoria, South Africa (2023), I will demonstrate, however, that Baudrillard's concept is equally predictive of the mechanism of operation by which gAI imagery (and, to a degree, text) is generated and distributed.

Methodology and sampling units

This study incorporates two primary methodologies. First is a theoretical investigation of Baudrillard's concept of simulacra which forms the backbone against which I position and situate gAI – as a kind of simulation module. The module, I shall demonstrate, circulates, indiscriminately, signs which, after constant recycling and proliferation, begin to lose their signification. I propose that, in grappling with the precession of simulacra (how it circulates and proliferates and to what effect), we might come to better understand Baudrillard's simulacra as a predictor and facilitator of gAI.

The second methodological apparatus is a case study analysis that references selected projects from the practice-led Information Design module to illustrate the impact of gAI on communication design in a South African educational design context. The project was delivered to a class of 44 design students (tn=44). Five (dn=8) of the most robustly[3] documented projects are analysed here, with a focus on how gAI was used, and to what extent it was useful or not, in the context of a branding design project. My focus is on lifting insights from a reflective infographic that each student had to develop during the project.

It is important to note that this study is largely qualitative in nature. In taking time to expand on some of the more nuanced student insights gained in each of the five projects, this study offers a limited cross-section of projects from a *single* module. In other words, I do not suggest that the findings represented here encompass the effects of gAI in the entire content of design education in South Africa. Instead, the intention of the case study is to comment on learnings with regard to the challenges, shortfalls and opportunities that belie the application of gAI in a *particular* context. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that the insights might offer something of an exploratory glimpse or starting point into how gAI might be used and negotiated in design curricula.[4] In acknowledging the clear limitations, future research might seek to measure these findings in further, broader and more quantitative studies.

Baudrillard and simulacra

As mentioned above, in describing the era of simulation, Baudrillard argues that signification moves beyond any reference to the real. Signs no longer reference reality, but instead reproduce it indiscriminately (Baudrillard 1988a:126). In other words, they have no particular aims beyond reproduction (Baudrillard 1988c:179). They proliferate and produce further signs in ever-expanding and spiral-like cycles.

Baudrillard is also particular in commenting on the "spectacle" of simulacra. In particular, he is referring to a seductiveness that ensnares the viewer through sheer rapidity and inordinate quantity of (image) publication during the Internet boom. This *re*-reproduction brings about a kind of symbolic inertia. Simulacra are so plentiful, yet so inert (anti-semiological) that they unfold, as Baudrillard describes it, senselessly (Baudrillard 1988b:137; Genosko 2002:xvii). Baudrillard describes this as "precession of simulacra;" a state of constant recycling of mutable signs to the point of such oversaturation and reduplication that their referents are no longer traceable (Baudrillard 1988c:165). Simulacra are reproduced and recirculated to a dizzying degree where meaning implodes. Meaning is turned against the sign and thus simulacra are merely "instances" of signs (Baudrillard

1988a:131). And as they proliferate further and further, they become simulation that similarly move further and further from the "original" reference. Until, eventually, they come to refer only to themselves (and not the real). This is the pinnacle of the seduction – a "carnival of mirrors" indefinitely reflecting nothing but images projected from other mirrors (Baudrillard 1988a:146).

Moreover, owing to the speed of replication in the digital age, simulated signs effectively destabilise the linear progression of history. In other words, they lose their diachronicity. The sign, delivered to pure and rapid abstraction, is emancipated from its obligation to and emptied of all its historical and libidinal meaning (Baudrillard 1988a:138). Yet, in doing so, simulated signs simultaneously construct their own historicity. They are not fake, but nor are they real.[5] Instead, they operate within the realm of the hyperreal. In the hyperreal, a network of simulacra thus blend with "real" elements (Baudrillard 1988c:179). Simulacra thus keep the illusion of the real intact.[6] But there is no polarity because the hyperreal allows for all possible interpretations to be true at the same time, since their historical origins are exchangeable (Baudrillard 1988c:175). It is a curved Möbius mirror – all referentials intermingle; they exchange their signifiers and their scenarios (Baudrillard 1988c:176). Furthermore, all distinctions between the real and the simulation are thus made "plastic" by way of infinite self-referentiality, and so become arbitrary.

Simulations and design

The key aspect to the generation of simulacra as hyperreal signs is the medium by which they are circulated and disseminated. Baudrillard explains that in the hyperreal, media and technologies that provide entertainment and enable information communication, provide scenarios that are more intense than scenes of banal, every day, "real" life (Kellner 2019:7). For Baudrillard, this is the digital, programmatic medium (having written most of the above in the 1980s and 90s, Baudrillard was describing simulacra at the dawn of the Internet, which eventually has become *the* predominant medium of circulation). By way of this digital medium, meaning is abridged into "bites" of codified responses that are perpetually relayed (Baudrillard 1988a:42). Although he refers to the Internet specifically, I suggest that Baudrillard has predicted, fairly accurately, a form of contemporary *visual* simulacra[7] that is determining a trajectory of fleeting meaning – a world that is becoming increasingly mediated and pervaded by gAI signs.

Moreover, the research into the proliferation of *visual* simulacra in particular, I would argue, falls directly in the purview of the visual arts. By now, gAI imagery has caused major upset in the arts, with AI programs such as DALL-E, DreamStudio, GenCraft, MidJourney, Playground, Adobe Firefly, and a plethora of others having contributed to

what is considered a kind of "theft" of creative and intellectual property. The field of illustration, in particular, has succumbed to the immensely rapid generation of easy-to-access illustrations that heavily reference a catalogue of established illustrators' and artists' visual styles. There is also debate, from a legal and financial point of view, around who owns and to what extent, intellectual property of the gAI works that rely heavily on sampling (Vincent 2022).[8]

In the communication design sphere specifically, we see an uptick in the use of gAI, by designers themselves, but also the layman, who is now able to produce more or less convincing, at least at surface level, identities, brands, UX (user experience) and UI (user interface) design interfaces, wayfinding systems and so on. In addition, today the "design" of these kinds of simulations has become far more democratic, and thus the act of designing is seemingly disposable (Du Plessis & Swart 2024:1-2). That is, since just about anyone with an AI program can generate any number of visuals to help define a communication design need, where AI is indiscriminately pulling references from a variety of otherwise unconnected sources,[9] it appears that the design profession is under threat[10] (Engawi *et al* 2022). At first, it seems as though image-makers – designers and artists – are no longer needed to produce convincing imagery (Du Plessis & Swart 2024:12). Indeed, in South Africa, we have experienced a sharp spike in the closure of design agencies.[11]

AI in South African tertiary education

In design education, over and above redundancy, gAI dependency is a concern.[12] In my opinion, students use gAI in "self-destructive" and, at times, unethical ways – using gAI to produce entire design texts and infrastructures that they themselves have not (and so, they forfeit the learning process of visual and conceptual development).[13] For this reason, universities and design colleges across the country are approaching AI warily. For instance, guidelines on how to implement AI[14] in teaching, developed by the Universities of Pretoria and Cape Town, "encourage" the use of ChatGPT as a low-level tool, used in a way to check and correct non-critically engaging aspects of assignments. In the context of critical thinking assessment, they state, for instance, that:

> With the advancement of technology, particularly with ChatGPT, assessments should focus on higher order levels such as applications, analyses, and problem-solving. Lecturers should design assignments *that pose issues with no straightforward correct answer to encourage students to think critically and creatively* [emphasis added]. Incorporating authentic assessments as part of a module's assessment strategy will provide students with the opportunity to provide direct evidence that they can apply module content to solve (Guide for ChatGPT usage in teaching and learning 2023:5-6).

I am disillusioned with this sort of approach, as these sorts of guides do not address the very real issue that students use these tools at far more critical points in their projects. So that these sorts of guides serve no real function in navigating more complex uses (more complex than, for instance, using AI to check spelling) of AI and preparing lecturers as to how to integrate AI as a teaching and learning tool.[15] The approach should be how we, as (design) educators, are to integrate AI into curricula in a *meaningful* way. On the one hand, it can potentially equip students with cutting-edge skills, preparing them for an evolving industry, while on the other, it can foster irresponsible and unethical design practices (by way of intentionally deceptive design practices, or worse, lethargy).

AI in design education: An Information Design case study

In this section, I describe a practice-led Information Design project (named, *Identity development and generative AI*) given to fourth-year, exit level students (tn=44). The project brief was conceptualised and delivered by myself as well as my design colleagues, Amy van Vuuren (freelance designer) and Coenraad Sutton (UNKNOWN Design Agency). Of the 44 projects submitted, I make use of five of the most insightful and reflective projects (n=5) as a case study to illustrate the impact of gAI on communication design in a South African and international context. I comment on learnings with regard to the challenges, shortfalls and opportunities that belie the application of gAI in design curricula and the broader design landscape. The intention is to demystify, to some degree, some of the more abstract concerns that gAI has brought about in communication design education and industry by unpacking what I consider a Baudrillardian lens on gAI.

The project was delivered in two parts. In the first (which ran for roughly three days), students were to generate a concept for a non-specified "brand" from whole cloth. Thereafter, they would develop a branding system by means of gAI software alone (ChatGPT for copy generation and a host of image generators for the visual design). For instance, Bronwyn Sinclair's *Artificial Invasion – Blast* brand (Figure 1) is a tongue-in-cheek critique on the late (2023) adoption of AI into the creative and artistic industries (Sinclair's so called "late adoption zombies"). Sinclair (2023) examines whether machines (as a physical metaphor for gAI) can adapt to the realm of the absurd while, at the same time, being constrained by careful prompting (Sinclair 2023). Johan Steyn's (Figure 2) *The Atrium* brand is intended to mimic a crime investigator's table, detailing the story of a fictitious company involved in money laundering, while visibly showcasing the company's genesis through gAI. The focus here was on how the gAI was utilised to establish this "fake brand" as a real company (Steyn 2023). Rachel van Zyl's *Designer in the dark*

centers on *Shadow* (Figure 3), a brand created for a restaurant that offers a dark dining experience, serving gourmet desserts to blindfolded guests. Here, she investigates whether AI could navigate the ethical and cultural sensitivities that arise when branding for a specific target group (van Zyl 2023). Marcholette Minnaar's *Granny's* (Figure 4) is a concept for a restaurant that introduces Gen Z to long-lost South African cooking traditions, known "only" by South African Granny's (Minnaar 2023). Hendrik Smith's project (Figure 5) highlights the state of online and social media fatigue experienced primarily among Gen Z cellphone users. His is a dramatic proposal for an "intervention app" – *Cut off* – that, by way of electrocution, makes use of cellphone short-circuiting as a way to physically shock or "zap" (akin to a dog shock collar) the user once they have spent "too much time" on their cellular devices (Smith 2023).

FIGURE Nº 1

Bronwyn Sinclair, *Artificial Invasion*, 2023. Brand identity design – splash detail. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

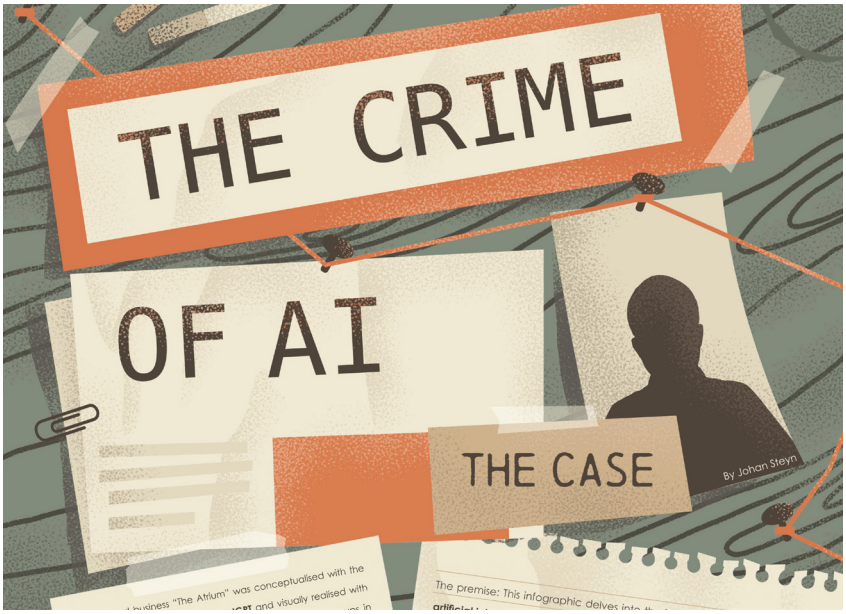

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Johan Steyn, *The Atrium*, 2023. Brand identity design – splash detail. Courtesy of Johan Steyn.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Rachel van Zyl, *Designer in the dark – Shadow*, 2023. Brand identity design – splash detail. Courtesy of Rachel van Zyl.

FIGURE Nº 4

Marchoelette Minnaar, *Granny's*, 2023. Brand identity design – splash detail.
Courtesy of Marchoelette Minnaar.

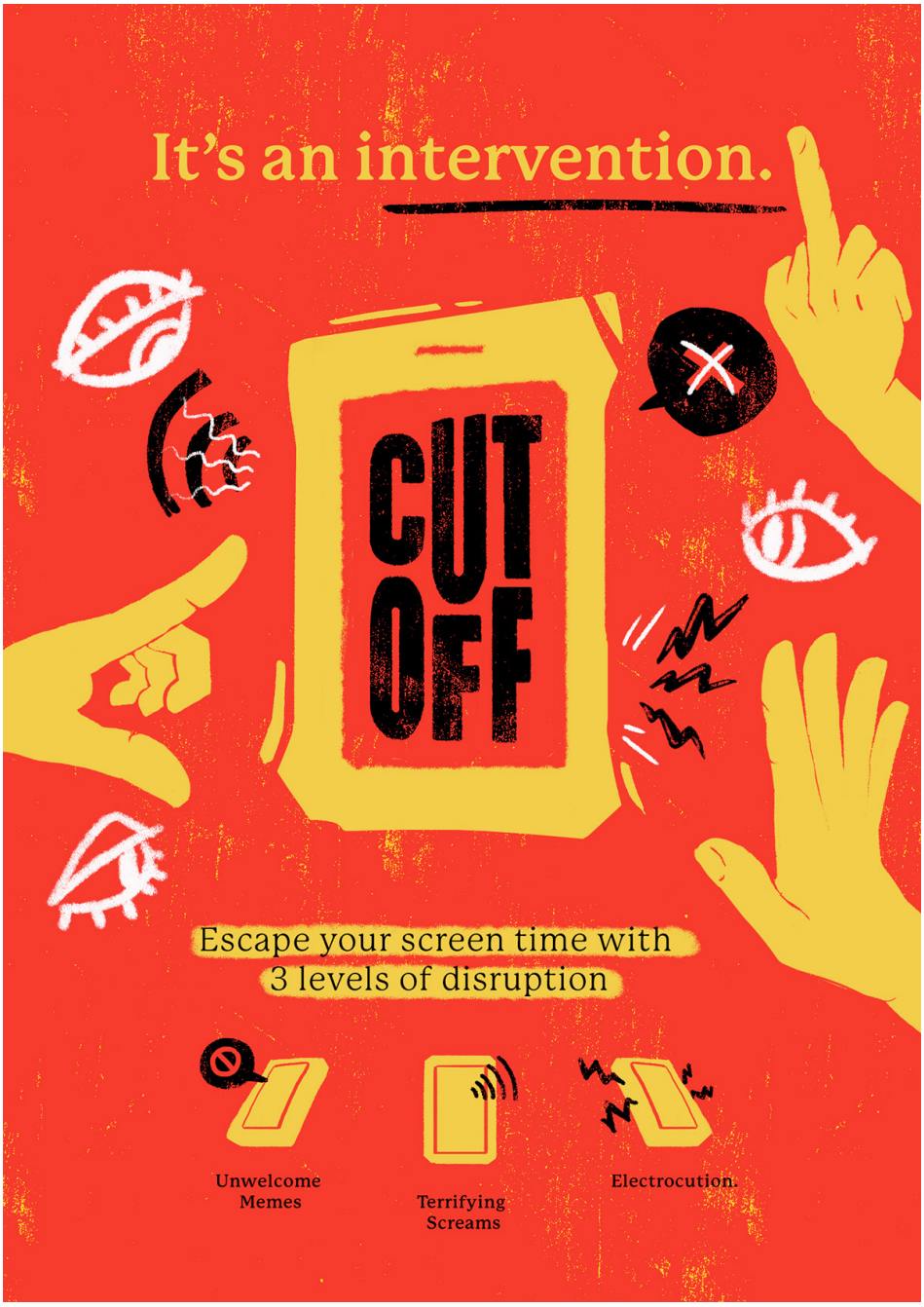

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Hendrik Smith, *Cut-off*, 2023. Brand identity design – splash detail. Courtesy of Hendrik Smith.

The focus, however, was not on the extent to which these AI-generated identity systems actually served as viable branding tools. In fact, the choice of developing a branding system versus, perhaps, a wayfinding system or animation, for instance, was more or less arbitrary (or at best, a choice based on the convenience of time). Instead, the aim of this phase was for students to test the limits of current AI systems, to see where and to what extent AI could think on behalf of the designer.

Once the students had substantially manipulated and engaged with the gAI, they were to craft, tweak, manipulate or completely change the brand content (brand tone, mission statement, logo, logotype and brand collateral) generated by AI. Here, design students were tasked with trying to align the content and imagery they produced with the mission and vision of their generated brand. Throughout the first part, students were also required to keep a reflection journal and take extensive notes, as well as draw concepts and planning sketches, with the intention to document each step taken and relevant insight gleaned. More importantly, the idea was that students had to document the "thinking process" that they engaged in "alongside" various generative AI systems. Instead of fighting against the use of AI in an instructor/learner or teacher/student dichotomy,[16] the intention was to put the student in a directorial position.

As the second part of the project, using their reflection journals as a source of data, students were required to map their process by way of a self-generated infographic (for links to the full infographics, please see here), documenting their frustrations and successes with the gAI platforms. The students were asked to reflect upon the use of gAI software, and more broadly, on their role as information processors in an era of ever-increasing, rapid generative sign production. Interestingly, the majority of students (38 of tn=44) reported that using directed and narrowing prompts alone, the image-based gAI was unable to produce much in the way of conceptually appropriate nor uniquely crafted or generally well-designed logotypes or roll out identity elements. AI was useful for time-consuming, low-level tasks[17] and could generate elaborate imagery at speed and with impressive visual impact. However, the imagery and brand tone generated by the gAI tended to be bland and generic. As Smith (2023) notes:

> In a way, every project facilitates a conversation between the designer and design. The will and vision of the designer engages in a vicious tug of war on the infinite possibilities a design presents until an uneasy equilibrium is reached. In the case of this project, a third party joined the battle, but it is unclear whether it pulled for the designer or sided with chaos. AI shines in streamlining time consuming tasks, providing the spark for creative ideas and even works as a buddy for talking through an idea. There are some shortcomings though. At the time of the project, AI's creativity (if it can be called that) was severely limited, and its responses bland. So I decided to push the absurdity of my ideas to see if ChatGPT and its AI friends could keep up with human whimsy.

Interestingly, a common theme amongst several of the n=5 students is AI's ineptitude for humour and absurdity. For instance, Sinclair (2023) notes that when prompting the gAI to generate a humorous brand tone, it offered largely staid and overly "punny" Americanisms. For example, when prompted to fashion the tone for an audience who enjoys humour in the fashion of "Monty Python", it rendered the following:

> Hey there! We"re [insert company name], the company that took its time embracing artificial intelligence. Sure, everyone else has been doing this for years, but we arrived fashionably late.

I agree with Sinclair (2023) who argues that the above offers little in the way of the dry, British absurdity that is iconic of the well-known sitcom. Sinclair (2023) further points out that from the onset, simply trying to establish a concept for the *kind* of brand, it took 63 strings of prompts for ChatGPT to develop a rough draft from which she could further develop. Sinclair (2023) notes, therefore, that gAI lacks uniquely crafted strategy for brand positioning and cannot come to grips with what does and does not constitute considered and focused implementation of the content it generates. It primarily regurgitates content from an extensive library of data, based on algorithmic best-practices that are set to prioritise frequently used terms and likely associations. As she puts it, "... it struggles with "the unique" because it is built to provide "the best of averages"". Van Zyl (2023) experienced a similar phenomenon and explained that after 43 back-and-forth inputs across seven different platforms, the gAI was unable to produce a uniquely emotive tone and could not define a strategic position for the brand. Minnaar (2023) agrees, and explains that despite prompting the AI with genre-specific prompts ("write it in the style of Nataniël,[18] write it with "Ouma Rusks[19] as the inspiration" and so on") 7 different gAI platforms produced fairly generic mission statements that do not take into account South African Afrikaans cultural sensitivities. For instance, ChatGPT suggested that Granny's might adopt the following mission statement and brand tone:

> Bringing South African culinary traditions to life, Granny's offers Gen Z an immersive cooking experience with diverse granny chefs sharing recipes and South African culinary heritage (Minnaar 2023).

In terms of brand name generation, van Zyl (2023) points out that ChatGPT suggested names like Moonshadow Munch and trypophobia-inducing images of strawberries in such a predictable, generic way, that AI's involvement in the creative process highlighted the need for the empathetic designer. Sinclair (2023) again notes that after the 112 naming prompts that she entered into ChatGPT, it became clear that the gAI favoured rhetorical language canons (primarily alliteration) over the core brand concepts associated with apocalyptic gelato, with examples such as Bedtime Bites, Mischief Mix, Pandemonium Parlor, Tumultuous Treats, Revelry Ripples, Insanity Infusions, and Fiasco Freeze to name a few (interestingly, it even offered made-up words, such as Charmageddon Creams (Figure 6), so as to ensure its suggestions align with the algorithmic preference for alliteration).

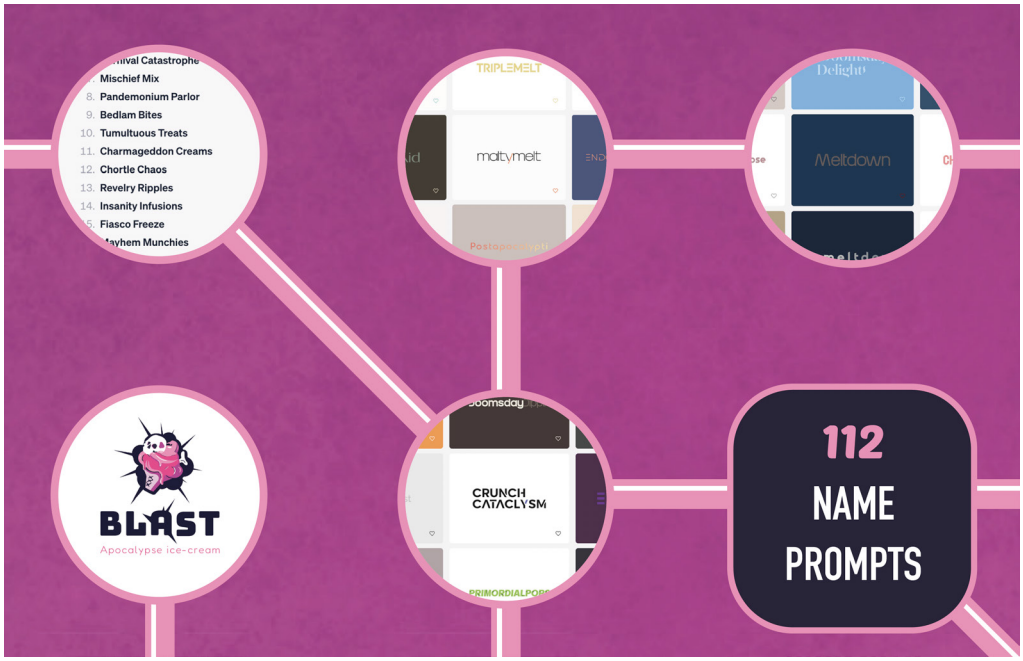

FIGURE Nº 6

Bronwyn Sinclair, *Artificial Invasion – Blast*, 2023. Selection of AI name generations. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

As far as logo development, Steyn (2023) points out that after requesting logos for a food and art exhibition inspired by Paul Rand, the roughly 300 suggestions made by MidJourney were largely similar in approach, visual reduction and overall layout. Steyn (2023) explains that the logomarks tended to follow the typical "flat design" aesthetic (Page 2014:132). They were vectorised, and circular or clustered and almost always overly complex. Throughout the overwhelming majority of suggestions, the gAI used primary colours and symbols of typical cutlery and food items which were paired, in 96 percent of the options, with basic sans-serif types[20] (Figure 7). In her infographic (Figure 8), Sinclair (2023) showcases a selection of over 119 logo options generated by the AI platforms; GenCraft, Looka, Wix Logo Maker, and Smashing Logo. Across the majority of renditions, the logos were, again, largely vector-based, using a typical logo lock-up (a logomark situated above and centrally aligned with a wordmark below). As Sinclair (2023) notes, all five gAI programs are referencing "typical" and general logo design standards instead of considering what might be more of an "ownable " (strategically positioned) and conceptually appropriate application. Moreover, they made no allowance for a horizontal lock-up system, which is often an important consideration for application in limited screen real estate in UX and UI design.

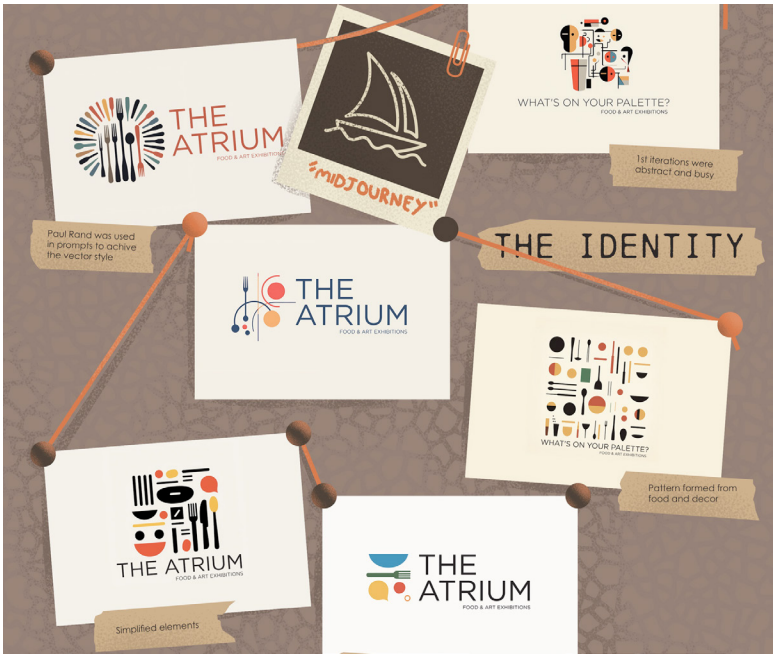

FIGURE **Nº 7**

Johan Steyn, *The Atrium*, 2023. Selection of AI logo generations. Courtesy of Johan Steyn.

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Bronwyn Sinclair, *Artificial Invasion – Blast*, 2023. Selection of AI logo generations. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

In terms of brand collateral and rollout developed by the gAI platforms, icon designs for most of the students (Figures 9a-b) were almost always presented in vector-based, single-outline format, with "rounded" corners. This is, again, a generic design standard that has persisted since 2007, and the onset of Flat design language (Page 2014:130). Patterning (Figure 10a-b) follows the same iconographic formula and tessellates the icons in either grid or brick tiling (with an offset of 1.5, either horizontally or vertically).

Figures 11a-c depict some of the brand imagery (photographic) that was developed for three of the students' projects using Playground AI (Minnaar 2023), MidJourney, (Steyn 2023) and GenCraft (Smith 2023). As is clear and perhaps predictable by now, here too, gAI generates "generic stock-imagery", typically of "everyday people" with generic smiles (with perfectly white and straight teeth), relaxed standing or sitting positions and often, disconnected and glazed-over "gazes and glares". In the case of most gAI, realistic imagery of people is almost always entirely false, in that sense that they are not of "real" or existing people.[21] This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, there is a certain uncanniness (uncanny valley, as it is generally known) to the faces (eyes in particular), and skin. Eyes appear adrift and not truly engaged with the viewer or other figures in the image, and skin is almost always perfectly smoothed with a consistent "grain" over all skin areas. Secondly, even though gAI is powerful enough to generate any number of faces and poses, it is interesting that it generally defaults to the kind of formulaic "American-esque", stock-imagery. Steyn (2023) offers an interesting insight here, noting that during the process of generating images of the fictitious persons and locations, alongside actual place names, he felt a sense of "eliciting a kind of forgery".

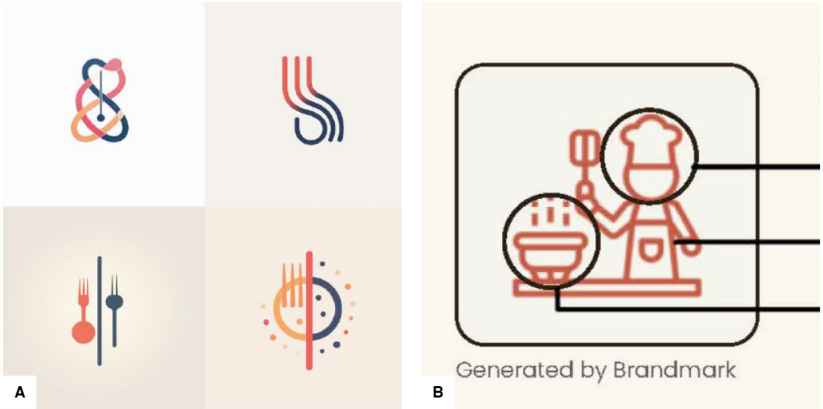

FIGURE **Nº 9**

A: Johan Steyn, *The Atrium*, 2023. Selection of AI icon generations. Courtesy of Johan Steyn.

B: Marchoelette Minnaar, *Granny's,* 2023. Selection of AI icon generations.
Courtesy of Marchoelette Minnaar.

FIGURE **Nº 10a**

Johan Steyn, *The Atrium*, 2023. Selection of AI pattern generations.
Courtesy of Johan Steyn.

FIGURE **Nº 10b**

Marchoelette Minnaar, *Granny's*, 2023. Selection of AI pattern generations.
Courtesy of Marchoelette Minnaar.

FIGURE **Nº 11**

A: Marchoelette Minnaar, *Granny's*, 2023. AI photographic generation. AI platform: Playground. Courtesy of Marchoelette Minnaar.

B: Johan Steyn, *The Atrium*, 2023. Selection of AI photographic generations. AI platform: MidJourney. Courtesy of Johan Steyn.

C: Hendrik Smith, Cut-off, 2023. AI photographic generation. AI platform: GenCraft. Courtesy of Hendrik Smith.

Although the above was indeed the dominant trend amongst 63.6% of the n=44 (28 of 44), it is worthwhile to note that a further 25% (11 of 44) reported a generally positive experience with photorealistic image generation.[22] Sinclair (2023) (Figure 12a) highlights that, initially, her prompts were fairly general, using “ice cream in apocalypse” or “ice cream in broken down city”. The resulting images were striking in their details of desecrated buildings; however, they came across as disjointed and fairly unimaginative. Interestingly, she remarks that, on the one hand, gAI falls short if prompts are too short or lack detailed descriptions. On the other hand, if the designer is able to provide a detailed description of the desired image, it is likely the case that they have a good idea of exactly what they are looking for. This invariably means that the AI will struggle to replicate or match his/her imaginative visualisation. Sinclair (2023) also notes that although gAI performs well with detailed, and realistically rendered non-human objects, the AI images themselves fell short when generating text and other visual elements (Figure 12a).

Following the generation, Sinclair (2023) pulled the selected images into Adobe Photoshop to experiment with the program’s built-in AI functionality and generative fills to extend the background, remove unwanted elements and improve human proportions. The resulting image required a tweak in terms of manual lighting and she had to add all text elements (Figure 12b). Sinclair (2023) concludes that whilst gAI is useful to start an image as a base for a visualisation, to replicate the designer’s vision, manual edits are inevitable.

FIGURE **Nº 12**

A: Bronwyn Sinclair, *Artificial Invasion – Blast*, 2023. AI photographic generation. AI platform: Adobe Photoshop. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

B: Bronwyn Sinclair, *Artificial Invasion – Blast*, 2023. AI photographic generation with a manual colour and typographic edit. AI platform: Adobe Photoshop. Courtesy of Bronwyn Sinclair.

Van Zyl (2023) agrees and remarks on the level of detail to which she had to prompt the gAI to achieve the desired outcome. She documents how, using minimal prompting such as "A single strawberry in high contrast lighting that looks realistic", the gAI produced a photograph that included entirely random visual elements. For instance, Playground AI produced an image where the pits of the strawberry where "punched out" of the main body to produce something akin to an image used to communicate trypophobia[23] (Figure 13a). This is likely because trypophobia has been a trending visual meme for the past decade or so. In order to produce a high contrast image, the gAI may have equated high contrast with Cinema Noir or some sort of other "dramatic" or "thrilling" lighting. In doing so, it may have considered a phobia, in this case a "popular memetic phobia", as a sign for "high drama." Even as the prompt became more specific, the gAI continued to include "small bumps or granules" in its presentations (Figure 13a-c). Again, we see gAI making use of "averages" or "most frequently used" algorithms to filter data sets that inform its content.

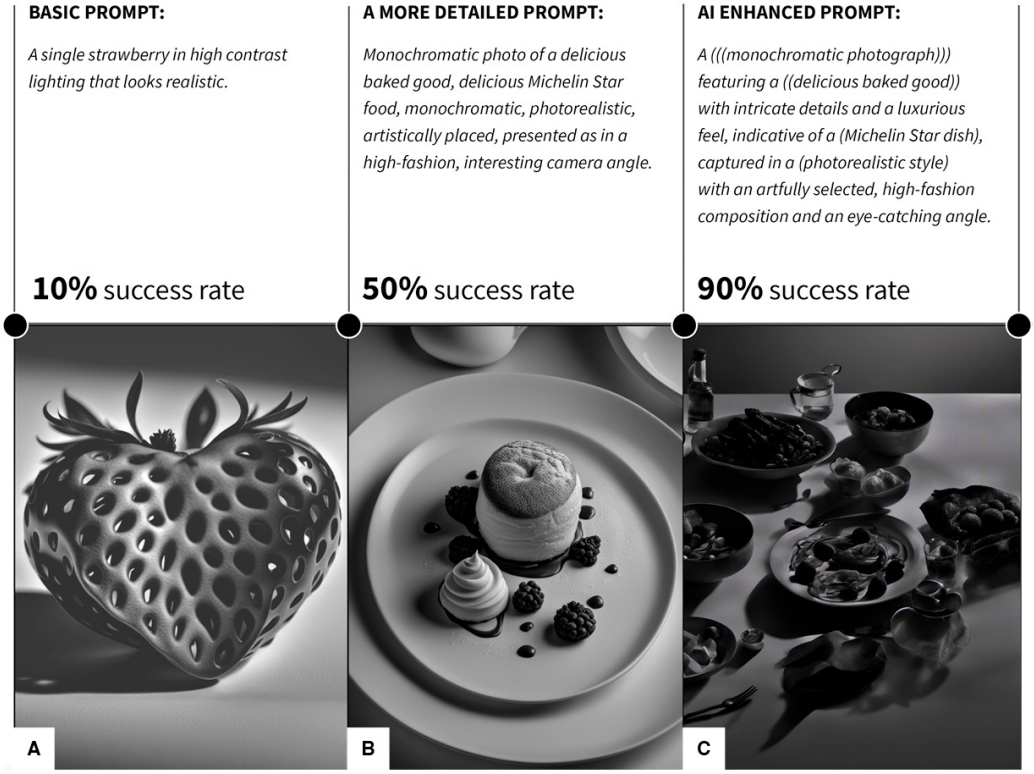

FIGURE **Nº 13a-c**

Rachel van Zyl, *Designer in the dark – Shadow,* 2023. Selection of AI photographic generations. AI platform: ChatGPT. Courtesy of Rachel van Zyl.

gAI as simulacra and the role of the designer

In the sections above, I have argued that gAI may be described as a kind of Baudrillardian simulacra. In the following section, I describe how I come to this comparison, why and to what extent the case studies demonstrate practical examples of simulacra at play, and finally, why is it useful to make such a comparison in the context of design education. I attempt to summarise how, in describing these (primarily visual) signs that are produced by gAI, as simulacra, we might gain a sense of understanding of the communicative nature of the signs that it produces. In gaining such a perspective, and "demystifying" the generative process that underpins gAI, it may prove useful for the designer to understand their role in working alongside gAI as a tool. That is, in getting to know the limits of current gAI, and where the designer, as the creative *director*, must take over in the design process.

gAI as simulacra

Firstly, simulacra are hyperreal shells that contain "nothing more than" a sort of *faux*-signification. They are superficial in the sense that they are ahistorical – they serve as superficial facades; signs which "look like" they are diachronic (culturally constructed over time), but in fact they only simulate the real. In this way, when confronted by a simulacrum, the viewer is engaging with a sign that appears to be genuinely meaningful, but where, instead, true meaning is ripped from the sign (van Zyl's strawberry, Figure 13a, is perhaps the most obvious example).

Baudrillard argues, however, that simulacra are governed by an "agent" of organisation – the code. An agent that is non-sentient and binarily coded. Baudrillard argues that a sentient (human), biased coder would inevitably imbue a sign with meaning because, by its very nature, a sentient being is informed by and navigates their world entirely through meaningful codifications informed by their frames of reference. However, when generated by the code, no inherent meaning is produced because the symbolic cannot breach the "predeterminedness of the code" (Baudrillard 1988a:122).

It is thus possible to suggest that content generated by just such an organising agent – gAI – produces simulations of a similar description. As I have made explicit in the case study analyses above, gAI generates images that are not inherently meaningful, but are instead products of binary coded algorithms that seek out averages, or frequently used terms.[24] It is for this reason that content generated by gAI is largely dependent on input sources (such as prompts, for example). It does not generate content that is genuinely meaningful, but instead, produces simulacra that simulate real meaning by means of a superficial line of code. In generating an image of a strawberry or logomark, gAI makes a "best guess", not at generating meaningfulness of potential content, but at whether the content it produces more or less accurately simulates the prompt. It is not "rewarded" on whether its content is meaningful or correct. Instead, it is rewarded based on whether its coded guess is "liked" and "used".

Secondly, while it may seem that terms such as "average" and "frequency" are suggestive of something that is at least somewhat meaningful (since it is possible to argue that the initial data was collected from associations previously made in meaningful interactions online, for instance), I would argue that this is not the case. As Baudrillard points out, simulacra are constantly in a precession. Once a simulated sign is produced, it is fed back into the code, where it is circulated, reduplicated and reassigned as a sign in a different context. Moreover, the degree to which simulacra are circulated and disseminated is determined by their medium of generation. Simulacra, as a kind of coded signal, proliferate through a medium of reproducibility; one that exploits digitality – in this case

gAI. Thus, the more simulacra are circulated, the further they are removed from their "initial signification". The content produced by gAI operates in exactly the same way. The sole factor that determines the efficiency, reach and competency of a gAI software is the size of the database on which it is able to "learn". Moreover, the most "powerful" gAI today are those that not only learn from existing databases, but those that contribute to building them by incorporating and then re-proliferating newly formed data sets.[25] As a direct corollary, these are also the systems that generate content that is most clearly removed from diachronic signification exactly because of the speed and range at which they regenerate it. The key here, as Baudrillard (1988c) points out, is that media generate as well re-generate "maps" of content (not linked to connotation of the content itself) based upon further absorption of outputs, recursively and non-recursively.

Finally, I must comment on the allure gAI as a kind of simulacra. The speed at which gAI simulate detailed and realistic imagery has arguably been its most alluring feat. As an ocular-centric species, we are less impressed by the complicated coding or manoeuvring algorithms that underpin AI. Instead, we are left bewildered, amazed and aghast when we see not one, but thousands of "sort-of" hyper realistic images generated, seemingly out of thin air, within seconds and at a single click – a feat that would take a human being many years at least, to achieve. As I have already mentioned, Baudrillard comments on the entertainment of information – as an act of seduction. Simulacra produce simulations so real that they become more real than the "real" (original signification) itself. In this way, simulacra offer an "allure" of meaning as a kind of superficial, seductive veil (Baudrillard 1988b:149). The simulation "seduces" the individual into reading artificial signs as signs of the real (Poster 1988:5).

This, coupled with its efficiency, I would argue, is perhaps the most pertinent and concerning aspect of gAI. I am referring here to its potential to deceive. Our greatest concern, at present, is whether AI will eventually outsmart (deceive) its creator (us). While this is certainly a concern, it is one for another paper. What I am interested in, here, is the degree to which *we* utilise AI to deceive *ourselves* and *each other.*[26]

Designing simulacra

For this reason, if it is not banned outright, AI is *warily* adopted by universities across the country, in its capacity for aiding teaching and learning. In design education specifically, owing to the potency and prevalence of image-based gAI, there seems to be a very low tolerance for the use of AI at all. In areas where it is implemented, it is done so in an experimental context, where clear parameters are set out in terms of what may or may not be AI-generated. While I am not in total disagreement with this approach, since the

detrimental effects of AI usage are fairly clear and fast-encroaching, I would argue that "banning" AI or placing limitations on its usage is not a workable solution.[27]

Therefore, in crafting the Information Design student project outlined in this paper, my colleagues and I attempted to initiate a space where students were not limited by the extent to which they could use AI. In fact, they were initially briefed that they may *only* make use of AI for the project. The intention of the project was to spotlight *learnings* with regard to the challenges, shortfalls and opportunities that belie the application of gAI in a particular context, but also to offer something of an exploratory glimpse or starting point into how gAI might be used and negotiated in design curricula. For the learner, the goal of the project was to help build a sense of reflective thinking within students. The idea is that students had to document the "thinking process" that they engaged in "alongside" various gAI systems. Thereby, instead of fighting against the use of AI, students take a directorial position.

It is important to iterate that this is the first project of its kind at the University of Pretoria, and so as gAI continues to develop, the project will continue to adapt and, hopefully, deeper understanding of the operation and production of gAI will continue to expand. The intention is that the project provides something of a ballast against which design students conscientiously reflect on the pitfalls and successes of gAI, and their roles as directors of information in an era that appears to preference generative visual candy over thoughtful design, as well as the inter- and transdisciplinary nature of human creativity and machine "thinking".

The role of the designer

Life requires life-supporting illusions (Campbell 1972:5). Many of the most prominent philosophers have argued that the act of generating meaning, be it illusionary or material, is fundamental to human agency. Aristotle (cited in Segal 2004:43) argues that storytelling as a means of making abstract truths about reality accessible is vital to human discovery. Similarly, Burke (1970:239, 242) argues that the connections we make about our world arise from the transformation of metaphysics into intelligible stories. Girard (1977:91-2) adds that, in describing and coming to terms with human nature, we make connections between what we observe and experience within our societies, as a fundamental human means of coping. Meaningful stories are integral to human thought; they are material perceptions formed from imaginative patterns, networks, and powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world (Midgley 2004:2).

In various pockets of traditionally "rational" science, too, the consensus seems to be that we are hardwired, biologically, to seek out patterns in things; connective reasoning that helps make sense of the world around us. Detecting patterns is an important part of how we learn and make decisions. Greene (2023) argues that our brains are pattern recognition machines. We observe the world by means of mapping, collecting and then storing patterns. Greene equates visual recognition to a type of mathematical encapsulation of patterns within patterns. In other words, we advance our thinking ability by finding coherence in seemingly random patterns. Once we know something is true, we pattern that evidence onto other, similar (or non-similar) phenomena and thereby build an equation to determine what is and is not accurate.

Thus, human agency is driven by a need to generate meaning. We do this by seeking connections and patterns that help shape our perception of the world. In short, we navigate our world and each other through communication. Such an assertion should ring true to most communication designers. Moreover, it should provide some reassurance that, even though we are once again entering an era where technical know-how is being challenged, and what we considered to be technical proficiency is being rewritten, the role of the designer as a director of communication is as necessary as ever.

Conclusion

As communication engineers, designers thus form a crucial role, not only tasked with decoding new forms of communication all the time, but they are also directors of "patterns". The task of the communication designer is to build narrative connections between their designs and audiences.[28] To do this, they ground their work to some degree, in historic precedent, tapping the *familiarity* of existing symbols and styles in an attempt to anchor cultural idioms (Lupton 2000:19). As is the case when engaging with gAI, designers much choose from and manipulate a visual catalogue of pre-established image-data and carefully direct the associations of their audiences (Bruinsma 2005).

On the other hand, there are critics, like Baudrillard, who would argue that there is an inherent contradiction here. If it is possible to argue, as I do, that gAI is a form of simulacra that is churned out by a (non-human) coded entity, then as it is governed by code, and is thus inherently non-meaningful. As Baudrillard (1993:58) explains:

> The code itself is nothing other than a genetic, generative cell where the myriad intersections produce all the questions and all the possible solutions from which to select (for whom?). There is no finality to these "questions" (informational signals, impulses) other than the response which is either genetic and immutable or inflected with minuscule and aleatory differences.

Thus, Baudrillard argues that there is a limit at which we are able to manage or direct "non-meaning". In *The Gulf War did not take place*, Baudrillard (1991:34) refers to war generals who attempt to write war scripts (the passage of digitally programmed missiles, radars and so on), that ultimately prove futile because of counterstrikes or other information processors (artificial intelligences) that could not have been predicted. In essence, he questions whether it is even plausible to process information (translate data) against (gAI's) non-meaningful products. In short, gAI is inherently non-meaningful, and so the idea that we can make sense of it, using structures of potential meaning, is absurd.

However, I would argue that it is precisely *because* the content generated by AI is simulative (and not inherently meaningful) that the directorial role of the designer is even more crucial today. In the case of gAI, it requires the designer to strategically structure and embed rhetorical narratives into the AI-generated imagery. Surely there is an argument to be made for non-meaning, and, indeed, designers cannot guarantee fully directed associations (this is impossible). However, their decisions *help* direct the audience through a systematic sequence or pattern of corroborating signs, which cultivates a *preferred* reading (Atzmon 2008:14). It is demonstrable that preferred readings are in fact the generally accepted and widely interpreted associations embedded in well-conceived design. Designers essentially translate structures of *potential* meaning in a way that makes it *actual* and thus accessible to their audience (Bruinsma 2004). Educated designers, practiced in the art of researching the visual literacy of a given audience, are catalysts in this sense. They come to understand an audience's cultural references, and trigger communication by negotiating, manipulating and reinvisioning the visual imagery produced by gAI. In doing so, they invoke meaning, whether reused or re-engineered, in specific and well-researched ways to direct focused allusions to these references. In short, the cultural references designers implant in their designs transform disparate, nebulous data into meaningful information.

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Notes

1. Information Design is a four year undergraduate degree, offered at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

2. Interestingly, Baudrillard (1994:166-167) argues that simulacra are governed by what he terms, "the code". Although never fully defining what he means by the term, most scholars agree that Baudrillard is referring loosely to a kind of indeterminate and autonomous system of reproduction (Walisiewicz *et al*. 2019:317). He seems to suggest that the code is regulated by a programmatic matrix of little black boxes, commands, and responses which "catastrophically" circulate and proliferate information, data sets, images, and so on (Kellner 2019:7). Not unlike gAI.

3. Owing to the limited scope of this paper, I have selected what I consider to be the five most insightful, reflective and communicative projects in terms of the clarity and eloquence with which each student unpacked their reflective documentation (in the form of self-generated Medium articles). Moreover, I have attempted to select a diverse cross-section of projects in terms of their branding subject matter, visual approach and way in which they critique gAI, so as to demonstrate, as far as possible, the application of gAI in various branding scenarios.

4. It may even be relevant, in future studies, to expand the study beyond the educational environment to identify potential relevance and application in professional practice.

5. To be clear, Baudrillard does not mean that simulacra are akin to fakes. Simulacra are models of "real" visual texts; texts without a real, yet fully manufactured historical, origin. Reality and historicity are therefore only that which can be reproduced. This is because simulacra undermine any contrast to the real by absorbing the real within itself (Poster 1988:6).

6. Baudrillard refers to the paradox of dissimulation versus simulation as an illustration. For example, in simulating the symptoms of the illness, one is for all intents and purposes "just as ill" as another who has the "real" virus (Baudrillard 1988c:168). This is akin to dissimulation. It is a cunning pretense to knowingly not have what one indeed has. There is an understanding of the real versus the fake. The individual who fakes or dissimulates an illness can simply remain at home, without symptoms, and, knowing they are healthy, conveys to their superior that they must remain in bed. On the other hand, to simulate an illness is to truly believe one has what one does not have. It is a state of total faith in the simulated reality. The individual who simulates an illness produces in him or herself some of the symptoms of the illness (Baudrillard 1988c:165, 168).

7. Although Baudrillard refers to simulated media as a network of varying content, for the purposes of this paper, I am referring specifically to visual simulacra. Interestingly, amongst the sorts of media he regularly comments on, Baudrillard is particularly interested in visual media as models of simulacra (Baudrillard 1994:167). He describes a kind of hyperreality as a world more "visually present" than reality itself. In the field of visual media, it is certainly the case that, as Baudrillard suggests, the saturation of visual simulation is induced by the digital and programmatic medium. And, much like in the case of the Internet, gAI visuals proliferate through digital media.

8. Interestingly, US federal judge, Beryl A. Howell of the US District Court for the District of Columbia ruled in August 2023 that artwork generated by AI is ineligible for copyright protection since it lacks "human involvement," and is "not of the human mind." The decision reaffirms a ruling earlier in that same year, by the US copyright office (Solomon 2023). However, at the time of writing, the issue is being litigated by the US Supreme Court who appears more sympathetic to the artist/designer.

9. This is not unlike the kind of hyperreal vacuum of meaning, where imagery is produced and reproduced to the extent that historicty in terms of meaning and in terms of generation is scrubbed away.

10. Apart from job redundancy, there are of course other immediately devastating consequences of gAI: extant anxieties ranging from social implications of racial and gender biases, to faulty or intentionally manipulative data sources, and of course risks commensurate with global disease outbreak and AI assisted warfare (Dwork & Minow 2020:309). These are all very real consequences, and for designers, who are trained to coerce the way humans interpret data, engaging in gAI assisted design has very real ramifications.

11. Whether this is due to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 or the rise of free gAI, or both, is unclear. Moreover, it is possible to argue that this may be part of a natural cycle of "the most forward thinking" agencies are able to adapt, while more mediocre ones do not. However, as a design educator, I am in close connection with more than 100 design agencies across South Africa who have either taught at the University of Pretoria, or who look to employ our students. I have noted, anecdotally, that the rise of gAI has been (communicated to me as) a major factor in closures of several agencies. Over and above my anecdote, there is some similar evidence that this an international trend (Engawi *et al* 2022).

12. These are largely my own observations, as a lecturer in Information Design, at the University of Pretoria. I have first-hand experience with my own students, and in my moderating capacity (I moderate at over 10 design schools and institutions across the country). Moreover, owing to the relatively recent penetration of gAI in design education, literature that analyses these sorts of findings through sampling, interviews and other primary research methodologies are non-existent (and may potentially yield fascinating results in future research). This is in any case not the core focus of this article.

13. In theoretical fields, gAI is used to either partly or entirely generate assignments using gAI such as ChatGPT (again, immensely important skills in critical thinking and critical engagement with literature are compromised).

14. While I am concerned with generative AI (gAI) software in this article, in this case, I am largely referring to university policies that appear to address AI software more generally.

15. In any case, I would argue, that it is up to the various specialisations to determine their own codes of best practice when it comes to AI usage in education. A blanket approach is not sufficient since it will inevitably overlook specialisation-specific nuances.

16. That is, students often turn to AI as a way of trying to meet a deadline or lessen hours of labour and so it typically becomes a game of mirrors; will the lecturer spot my use of AI or "will I get away with it."

17. This could refer to generating generic reference imagery, offering rapid generation of graphic route options, or quick searches of existing identities in a similar field, for example.

18. Nataniel is a South African drag performer who is well known not only for his one-man theatre plays, but also as a food guru in South Africa.

19. Ouma Rusks is an iconic South African rusk brand. It was first produced in the rural town of Molteno, in the Eastern Cape, by Elizabeth Ann Greyvenstyn in 1939, in response to an initiative by the town's pastor to help the entrepreneurial efforts of the women in his congregation during the great depression.

20. With regard to the style of typography, cluster formation and vectorised symbols, this has been a well-documented "trend" in branding design since roughly 2015 (Rath 2020).

21. Moreover, gAI often generates anatomical mistakes. As seen in Minnaar's photography, for instance, fingers, smiles, eyes and teeth are distorted. It should be mentioned that, depending on the "quality" of the gAI, these "mistakes" are lessened or intensified, however, they are generally apparent to varying degrees, across most of gAI platforms.

22. Feedback was obtained in the reflective essays that each student produced as part of their project submission.

23. Trypophobia is a fear or an aversion to the sight of repetitive clusters of small holes or bumps (Vlok-Barnard & Stein 2017:[sp]).

24. This is exactly the context in which Baudrillard (1988c) situates the "precession" of simulacra (simulacra such as gAI, I would suggest). He suggests that the code, in generating models of simulacra, from a "black box" of proprietary algorithms, it merely creates a precession of averages and frequencies that are void of any sort of structured meaning.

25. There is also an ongoing argument surrounding the discerning ability of AI. The argument is that AI, in feeding on its own "newly generated" content without much human oversight (apart from the original code used to program the AI), any errors or mistakes it makes go unnoticed and is refed into the database pool, from which further errors made *ad infinitum*

26. Rath *et al* (2025) describe further instances of this when they refer to biases that are entrenched in gAI imagery and recycled within popular culture.

27. I take liberty in suggesting that most educators will surely attest that the moment a ban is placed on any parameter, a student becomes alerted and the rebellion begins!

28. Interestingly, Baudrillard made note of the role of "communication engineers". Specifically, he contends that our "need" for personalisation can be directed. "Neo-sorcerers" as Baudrillard (1988d:13) describes them, make this promise to us. They tell us "Buy this, for it is like nothing else," while simultaneously telling us not to miss out on what everyone else has; "Buy this because everyone else is using it." It is a form of socialisation, through advertising, that we consume the illusion of culture, and thus come to desire a schema of "mythological projection."

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