

AI-Generated Bodies Between Proxy and Presence

When synthetic fashion models pose in the latest couture, despite having no physical counterpart, what does it mean for a body to "take place"? When job applicants submit algorithmically generated versions of themselves to employers, how are delineations between the genuine and the deceitful renegotiated? And when AI influencers accumulate millions of followers as they circulate through digital environments, staged in specific locations yet infrastructurally detached from place, how do we understand AI imagery's capacity to both ground and displace bodies?

Approaches to 'bodies as image' in scholarship have shifted significantly over recent years, moving from treating digital images of bodies as representations that can be more or less accurate but remain dissociated from a 'real self,' toward recognizing them as something emphatically (and knowingly) fabricated yet still constitutively 'real.' Work by scholars such as Coleman (2009; 2013), Jones (2013), Frosh (2015), and White et al. (2024) has moved beyond representational models toward understanding images as constitutive forces in embodied experience. Rather than representing pre-existing bodies, images function as inventive forces that actively participate in bodily becomings, they create possibilities for how bodies are experienced, desired, and lived.

Our paper extends this scholarship by examining AI-generated bodies as a critical development in this trajectory. If digital images already function as constitutive rather than merely representative, AI bodies intensify this logic to a new threshold: they are bodies that exist only as images, with no physical referent to represent. They are pure placeholders, securing visual form while permanently deferring material content. Yet they generate real affective responses, establish normative standards, and shape how physical bodies must perform to achieve platform legibility.

Methodology

Our methodology employs critical aesthetic analysis to examine how AI-generated bodies produce normative effects through visual form. This approach attends to compositional

elements – lighting, pose, styling, texture – not as neutral aesthetic choices but as ideological features that naturalize particular visions of embodiment. Drawing on visual culture studies and feminist aesthetics, we analyze how hyperreal perfection, racial ambiguity, and gendered posing function as aesthetic scaffolding that constrains embodied possibility. Critical aesthetic analysis reveals how beauty operates as a political force: seemingly apolitical visual decisions about skin tone gradients, body proportions, and environmental staging materialize hierarchies of race, gender, and class through affective appeal rather than explicit prescription.

Three Sites of AI Body Production

We examine three distinct contexts where AI-generated bodies operate as placeholders that structure contemporary embodiment: AI influencers, AI-enhanced self-presentation tools, and AI fashion models. Each reveals different dimensions of how synthetic bodies move from provisional stand-ins to legible bodies.

1. AI influencer Lil Miquela stages elaborate relationships to place: posed in cafés, streets, fashion events. Yet her connection to these locations is purely computational. The AI influencer exemplifies a "placeholder presence": the aesthetic performance of being-somewhere entirely detached from location. These bodies can be placed anywhere because they exist nowhere, their relationship to space defined not by physical coordinates but by prompt parameters and dataset fields.
2. Services like TinderProfile.ai and Businessphotos.ai generate "hire-able" or "swipe-able" synthetic composites from existing photographs, transforming self-presentation into a highly deliberate and strategic act. These tools invert conventional relationships between body and image: rather than photographs standing in for absent bodies, physical bodies increasingly function as raw material for algorithmic optimization toward synthetic ideals.

3. AI-generated fashion models represent placeholder logic's most explicit commercial application. These synthetic bodies model clothing that will be worn by physical bodies, yet they establish aesthetic standards detached from human corporeal possibility. Following Shin (2023), we investigate how these digital bodies reproduce beauty stereotypes and embody colonial gender hierarchies. Drawing on critical scholarship on racial imaginaries in digital contexts (Miyake, 2022; Sobande, 2021), we examine how AI fashion models may represent liberation from corporeal constraints whilst also intensifying oppressive beauty norms.

In critical aesthetic close-readings, we examine these three types of AI bodies as sites of corporeal imaginaries where collective fantasies about corporeality, beauty, and lifestyle are materialized. Furthermore, we investigate how AI imagery dissolves the dichotomy between reality and fiction, revealing new configurations of corporeal desire and identification.

Between Make-Believe and Make-Belief

We propose distinguishing between performances in the mode of "make-believe" and what AI bodies enable: performances in the mode of "make-belief." Traditional make-believe requires suspension of disbelief – audiences agree to temporarily accept fictional premises. AI bodies, however, operate through make-belief: they do not ask us to believe the fiction, but to structure our beliefs, desires, and embodied practices around algorithmic proxies we explicitly recognize as artificial.

This distinction matters for understanding how placeholder infrastructures harden into normative systems. AI bodies function as what the call describes as scaffolding that "constrains what may later appear and where it may circulate." They establish aesthetic parameters, racial hierarchies, and gendered norms through hyperreal perfection: bodies

that materialize collective fantasies about femininity, race, and class while erasing the situated specificities that give bodies meaning.

Keywords: AI-images, body, aesthetics, beauty, performance

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