RIFL (2026) 1: 166-177
ISSN 2036-6728 DOI: 10.4396/202601V01

The language of photography from certification of presence to certification of plausibility

Giusy Gallo
Università della Calabria
giusy.gallo@unical.it

Abstract In the contemporary communicative ecosystem, photorealistic images produced by text-to-image tools increasingly circulate as "photographs" in journalism, political communication and social platforms, where they can function as persuasive evidence despite lacking any photographed referent. This article reconsiders Roland Barthes's theoretical framework on photography in order to account for the semiological nature of photographic images generated by artificial intelligence. Building on recent empirical research showing that the recognition of synthetic content fails precisely where image elements are encyclopaedically familiar, I argue that the noema that-has-been gives way to the noema that-could-be in the regime of photorealistic images generated by AI; this means that the certification of presence is displaced by the certification of plausibility. Drawing on Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics, I describe the certification of plausibility as an effect of encyclopaedic compatibility and conjectural coherence, socially consolidated through platform circulation.

Keywords: photography, AI-generated images, Barthes, Eco, certification of plausibility

Received 15 04 2026; accepted 20 05 2026

1. The challenge: to be or not to be a certification of presence?

In contemporary digital ecosystems, the visual dimension no longer serves primarily to represent reality, nor does it function as a mediator between subjects and the world. Communication on social platforms has progressively reconfigured images into environments of experience in which images and photographs (e.g. selfies) are experienced not only as depictions of events, but also as interfaces through which social reality is perceived and narrated.

In this context, photography becomes a privileged field for exploring how claims to truth are generated and challenged in the post-truth era, and the algorithmic generation of photorealistic images (Hausken 2024) appears as the symptomatic site of this transformation.

The pervasive dissemination of photographs generated by artificial intelligence and their capacity to shape public opinion (e.g. in journalistic contexts and on social platforms) make it urgent to re-examine a fundamental question of photographic theory: does the relationship between what is represented in AI-generated photographs and reality still exist, and if so, of what kind?

Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that combines semiotics and visual languages with media theory and the philosophy of communication, this paper argues that generative photorealism operates less as a certificate of presence and increasingly as a certificate of plausibility, which is a device that deepens what "could be" within a narrative, rather than certifying what "has been".

To address this question, the argument proceeds in three moves. First, it defines the boundaries of analogue photography through Roland Barthes's semiology (1961, 1964, 1970, 1980), where photographic meaning is grounded in the promise of the "that-has-been". Second, the model of analogue photography will be confronted with contemporary algorithmic image production, drawing on Joan Fontcuberta's reflections (2022, 2024) on post-photography and on Byung-Chul Han's diagnosis of the digital information regime (2021a, 2021b). Finally, it is necessary to emphasise the integration of elements of reality and fiction that appear plausible. In particular, Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics (1979, 1990) provides the categories of encyclopaedia and interpretative cooperation that allow plausibility to be described as an effect of reading, not a property of the image.

2. The (social platform) context

Before discussing photography, it is necessary to make a preliminary remark regarding the contemporary digital context, focusing on the concept of post-truth.

The emergence of post-truth as a public category is often dated to 2016, in relation to Brexit and Donald Trump's presidential election campaign and the exploitation of social media dynamics. However, this phenomenon has deeper historical, cultural and media roots that trace back to earlier shifts in media consumption and political discourse. In this sense, Brexit and Donald Trump's presidential election campaign were not two events that marked the origin of post-truth, but rather emblematic results of a broader shift in the public negotiation of credibility, characterised by the growing influence of emotional and identity-based narratives over factual discourse.

In the same year, as the phenomenon gained public visibility, Oxford Dictionaries selected post-truth as its word of the year, defining it as circumstances in which «objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief»[1]. The definition is not based on the denial of truth, even if it refers to a situation in which truth loses social relevance in the decision-making process, when the persuasive power of facts is increasingly subordinated to identity, emotion and narrative alignment.

The term post-truth denotes a reconfiguration of the conditions under which statements and images are accepted as true, influencing public discourse and rendering emotional appeal and narrative alignment more relevant than empirical evidence. Indeed, erroneous information is frequently contested not due to its ambiguity, but rather because acknowledging it endangers preconceived beliefs, interests, or group affiliations. Denial thus evolves into a deliberate tactic rather than a mere epistemic mistake (McIntyre 2018). The consequence of the phenomenon of post-truth is not merely the propagation of fake news but the erosion of verification procedures and the gradual acceptance of information based on emotional resonance and interpretative convenience.

The post-truth phenomenon unfolds within an information regime where rapid communication, widespread exposure, and constant circulation advantage sensationalism and emotional impact over factual accuracy (Han 2021b). Under this

[1] See Oxford Languages, OUP: https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

RIFL (2026) 1: 166-177
ISSN 2036-6728 DOI: 10.4396/202601V01

infocracy, a politics of visibility takes hold in which what becomes widely seen and shared acquires an aura of plausibility independent of its referential grounding.
The transition from reference to plausibility is particularly evident in everyday photographic practices, from selfies to ephemeral stories, where images are no longer windows onto reality but rather indicators of social presence and experience.
The contemporary communicative regime, in which data is being produced in abundance and users' attention is captured through platforms, as well as the participatory nature of online interaction, fosters an environment conducive to the propagation of misinformation.



Fig. 1 – Explosion at the Pentagon, AI-generated 2023



Fig. 2 – Elderly man attacked by the police, AI-generated 2023

It is precisely in this digital context that Han's concept of hyperreality[2] becomes relevant to photographic theory: images can function as socially effective realities even when they lack a corresponding referent, provided that they satisfy narrative expectations and circulate with the visual authority associated with photography. Viral episodes of synthetic evidence (e.g. AI-generated images framed as documentation within news-like or platform-native narratives, see fig. 1 and 2) illustrate how photographic appearance can be used to shape a belief.
This leads to a fundamental question for the present article: in a media context where it is possible to generate photorealistic images without a photographed event, what still links photographic-looking content to reality, if anything? To answer this question, section 4 focuses on AI-generated photographs, after considering analogue photography (section 3) and showing the conditions that supported the idea of photography as a certificate of presence.

3. Photography as a certification of presence

To discuss the relationship between photography and reality, we choose to use the semiological approach offered by Roland Barthes (1957, 1975, 1980). Barthes's enduring interest in photography spans his early semiological works and culminates in *Camera*

[2] The discussion of hyperreality presented here does not rely on Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum, which describes an ontological regime in which the real implodes into its own signs and the referential distinction breaks down due to saturation. The certificate of plausibility proposed in this article operates, instead, at a cognitive-inferential level, describing not the eclipse of the real but the way in which an inference, constrained by encyclopaedic compatibility, is accepted as a surrogate for referential verification. The hyperreality invoked via Han has a diagnostic but not an ontological function here. As will be seen, the certificate of plausibility does not describe a reality that has vanished, but a reality whose anchor has shifted, from the indexical trace to encyclopaedic coherence.

Lucida (1980). Two essays are especially relevant as conceptual preliminaries on photographic images, «The Photographic Message» (1961) and «Rhetoric of the Image» (1964). In these two essays, Barthes makes two theoretical moves that will influence subsequent studies on photography.

Firstly, Barthes focuses on the tension between a seemingly "literal" photographic message and the cultural codes that influence its interpretation: photography appears as an *analogon* of reality, an image whose denotation seems immediate, but is always accompanied by connotative operations that shape its interpretation. Second, in «Rhetoric of the Image», Barthes refines this point by considering advertising and analysing how the verbal elements in a print advertisement guide the meaning of the image, introducing the well-known functions of anchoring and relay. These two essays establish two lasting coordinates for photographic theory: the denotation/connotation pair and photography as a recording device.

The theme of photography as a recording device or analogue of reality is deepened by the semiologist in *Camera Lucida* (1980), which is considered Barthes's most explicit and influential meditation on photography. However, it is not a scientific treatise in the strict sense, but a phenomenologically oriented inquiry into what photographs do to viewers, how they solicit attention and memory. Nevertheless, it is notable that the text introduces a series of concepts that continue to be of seminal significance.

The basis of the semiological approach to photography is the assertion that photography unequivocally attests to what has been recorded from the past. The recording is the imprint of an encounter with a referent, not a metaphor, an invention, or pure fiction. This theoretical context justifies photography as a form of certification. Photography serves to authenticate the past existence of the object represented, which is condensed in the photographic noema «that has been» (*ça-a-été*).

What does «that has been» mean in semiotic terms? «That has been» indicates the condition of relation to the referent that is specific to photography: the object or subject photographed is not here and now, but is presented as if it existed in front of the camera at a certain moment.

The photograph's present is thus the present of the image as object of viewing, while its truth-effect derives from the past nature of the referent it appears to secure. Barthes radicalises this claim when he writes: «Every photograph is a certificate of presence» (Barthes 1980 en. trans. 1982: 87). The point is not that photographs cannot be interpreted or culturally coded, but that photographic meaning is anchored, at least in the analogue paradigm, in an evidential relation that other images do not share in the same way (see section 4 and section 5).

Barthes also proposes a triadic configuration that clarifies the roles involved in photographic semiosis: a photographer as operator, the object viewed in its simulacrum as spectrum, and the subject who looks as spectator. The spectrum, as the object under scrutiny, the photographic referent, assumes the role of the entity subjected to the viewer's gaze, thereby arriving at a condition in which what matters is the tension between what is and the other of the photographer.

To do	**To undergo**	**To look**
Photographer	Object, *simulacrum*	Viewer
Operator	*Spectrum*	*Spectator*

Within this framework, Barthes describes himself as a realist not because he takes the photograph as a simple copy, but because he treats it as a testimony of past reality:

> The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code - even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it-the realists do not take the photograph for a copy of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality* (*Ivi*: 88).

The photograph's force lies precisely in a paradoxical status: it is an image and therefore open to codes and readings, yet it bears a stubborn remainder of factuality tied to the past existence of what was in front of the lens. Even so, in photography, the power of representation is supplanted by that of authentication. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach does not insist on the application of the analytical pair of denotation-connotation, but entrusts its power to the pair of *studium-punctum*. Importantly, *studium* implies that photographic comprehension depends on a cultural encyclopaedia through which images are recognised as part of a shared social horizon. To recognise the image's intentions and codes is already to participate in a socially organised repertoire of meanings, even before any personal wound or shock produced by *punctum*, such as the fateful encounter with the noema «that-has-been».

4. The detection of AI-generated photorealistic images

Within the Barthesian framework outlined above, photography drew its power from an indexical guarantee of presence. However, recent empirical research into the identification of generative photorealistic images shows that this guarantee does not apply to the viewer anymore.

Interdisciplinary research on AI-generated photography, ranging from computer vision to media studies, visual culture to legal studies, has identified a number of recurring issues: the relationship between representation and reality, the reconfiguration of creativity and authorship in algorithmic image production, the manipulation of public opinion through disinformation and the dissemination of visually persuasive information and, perhaps most importantly, the ethical and regulatory issues raised by photorealistic synthesis, including intellectual property and liability. While not exhaustive, these areas of research suggest the need to question the nature of AI-generated photorealistic images and the conditions under which they acquire evidentiary value.

It might be thought that the manipulation of photorealistic images began with the advent of AI systems, but it should be remembered that image manipulation using software anticipates AI-generative systems. Certainly the cultural impact of AI-generated photorealistic images has accelerated with the widespread availability of text-to-image tools, most notably the integration and broad access of DALL-E 3 through ChatGPT. There are already well-known episodes of photorealistic AI-generated images that went viral: the AI-generated image of Pope Francis in a white puffer jacket and the series depicting Donald Trump under arrest circulated widely, prompting discussion not only about misrepresentation but about the authority of photographs in platform environments. Furthermore, when the content of photorealistic images concerns prominent public figures, as in the two cases just mentioned, dissemination through social media makes it impossible to stop the circulation of misinformation that enters the public debate in its own right[3].

[3] While this article does not evaluate professional journalistic uses of generative tools, it treats such cases as symptomatic of a broader shift in visual credibility.

Considering the functions of depiction and detection attributed to photography and the nature of photorealism understood as imitation of the style of photography (Hausken 2024), the central question, on which interdisciplinary research is being conducted, concerns the ability of users to identify photorealistic images and classify them as such, i.e. as generated by AI.

The problem with recognising photorealistic generative images is not, first and foremost, a matter of perception, that is, of the quality or visible artefacts of the synthetic output, but rather of triggering a cognitive heuristic. Jang, Lee, Lee, Jung and Sundar (2025) frame this in terms of a synthetic heuristic: «this heuristic prompts users to question whether the content, despite appearing realistic, is synthetic, in that it is doctored, manufactured, or artificially created, rather than natural, human-made, or original» (Jang et al. 2025: 3). This formulation forms part of a broader tradition of research into credibility mediated by technological artefacts, in particular Sundar's (2008) MAIN model, which identifies the affordances of digital devices as a set of cues capable of triggering inferential shortcuts used by users to assess the reliability of information. The synthetic heuristic is, in this context, a second-order heuristic: it does not assess the credibility of a source, but the ontological nature of the content itself.

What recent empirical research shows is that this heuristic is activated selectively, and tends not to be activated precisely where it would be most needed.

In a benchmark study on human perception, Lu et al. (2023) report a misclassification rate of 38.7%, with performance varying according to image content. The elements recognised in the images are decisive, as we have already seen. Several studies, including that by Peng and colleagues (2025), arrive at results that take this factor into account. They analyse the real-world dissemination of photorealistic AI-generated images on social platforms through a mixed-methods approach, drawing on a corpus of 30,824 images collected from Instagram and X (Twitter) between July 2022 and August 2023. Their findings highlight a recurring aesthetic and narrative strategy: images frequently combine recognisable, socially anchored elements (cities, objects, public figures, everyday scenes) with fictional or implausible details, producing a hybrid realism that supports persuasive visual narratives. Furthermore, visual construction errors directly attributable to AI are so few that they cannot be taken into consideration with regard to the cognitive ability to recognise a photorealistic image[4].

The finding that emerges from this research has a cognitive nature, in the sense that users fail to recognise the synthetic content. Furthermore, the semiotic nature of the finding must be taken into account. Indeed, recognition breaks down because the elements evoked by the image (public figures, cities, events) are precisely those through which the shared encyclopaedia constructs the recognisable. Hence the need to reformulate the theory, as we shall attempt to do in the following sections.

The literature cited here frames the relationship between AI-generated content and reality in terms of imitation. The present proposal distances itself from this reading: photorealistic content generated by AI does not imitate reality, but is structurally incorporated into it (Yazadzhiyan 2024), in that it participates in the very same regimes of visibility, attention and interpretative expectation through which contemporary audiences construct what they take to be credible (see sections 5 and 6). It is within this

[4] Starting from studies on misinformation and disinformation caused by news, in which education, critical thinking and digital literacy represent the main strategy for deconstructing fake news, in the case of photorealistic images, there has long been an emphasis on AI literacy. However, with further research to be carried out, Jang et al. (2025), albeit as a side note to their study, noted that users who frequently use AI are more susceptible to this type of misinformation, probably due to the massive exposure to synthetic content that facilitates its normalisation.

framework that the Barthesian model of photography as a certificate of presence reveals its limitations, and that it becomes possible to theorise the transition to a certificate of plausibility founded on encyclopaedic compatibility and conjectural coherence.

5. Photography as an emanation of the text

Despite technological developments, including those related to generative AI that result in so-called algorithmic photography, the theoretical cornerstones identified by Barthes between the 1960s and 1970s remain productive for contemporary thinking about photographic culture, not least because they highlight, by contrast, what generative photorealism displaces.

Among scholars of post-photography, Joan Fontcuberta repeatedly returns to Barthesian categories in order to articulate his own account of post-photography and algorithmic images. However, this reflection is not only exegetical, but also polemical. An example of critical thinking can be found in *Ça-a-été? Contra Barthes* (2022), where Fontcuberta challenges the notion of Barthes's linguistic capture of photography, proposing that Barthes subordinates the visual dimension to the structures of language, thereby neglecting the distinctive operations of photography as an image. This criticism is based on two problematic assumptions: firstly, it tends to oversimplify the description of the relationship between the verbal and the visual (including the nuanced role of anchoring and relaying in «Rhetoric of the Image»); secondly, it confuses the maxim «photography as text» with the idea that photographic meaning is imposed externally by words, rather than co-produced through culturally coded visual forms and their conditions of circulation.

On closer inspection, beyond these aspects, Fontcuberta's intervention is nonetheless decisive because it shifts attention from denotation to connotation as the primary locus of photographic meaning, proposing a model in which connotation varies by degrees of intensity and by contextual framing. In this view, the importance of the referential function of photography becomes less relevant than the mimetic relation through which the image achieves credibility. Then the crucial aspect of photography is its capacity to resemble reality and to activate familiar conventions of the photographic. However, this mimetic bond is not permanent and immutable over time since it has been destabilised by technological developments, from digital retouching to contemporary generative AI systems.

Once manipulation becomes routine and synthesis becomes accessible, the central question is no longer whether photography can be coded, but whether and how a photographic-looking image can still be assessed in relation to the coherence or consistency with reality when the conditions of its production no longer require contact with a referent.

From analogue photography to digital workflows and, more recently, to what is described as transformative photography, a term in line with text-to-image generation and the contemporary predominance of generative AI, as a hybrid figure, straddling theory and practice, Fontcuberta has experienced the different lives of photography.

The technological shift raises another important conceptual question for photographic theory, namely whether there is a difference between transforming an existing image and creating an image *ex nihilo*.

The latter foregrounds textual instruction, prompting, and computational mediation as constitutive moments of photographic appearance. As Fontcuberta suggests, in algorithmic creation, photography is no longer an emanation of reality, but rather of the text that generates it.

RIFL (2026) 1: 166-177
ISSN 2036-6728 DOI: 10.4396/202601V01

Fontcuberta's diagnosis converges on this point with Byung-Chul Han's account of the digital regime (section 2): both emphasise the algorithmic nature of contemporary visual production and the way in which it sustains a hyperreal condition in which visibility and plausibility substitute for indexical proof, while the referent can be suspended or eliminated without undermining the image's social effectiveness. Fontcuberta's rhetoric about images often conveys a sort of pessimism, particularly when he envisages images "born" effortlessly through algorithmic "midwives", while maintaining that interpretation, understanding and engagement remain beyond human control.

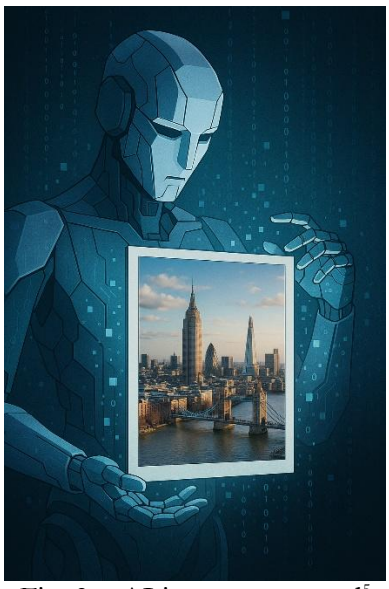


Fig. 3 – AI image generated[5]

The drift towards a dreamlike, de-realising dimension could lead one to interpret Fontcuberta's position as apocalyptic. Conversely, he also sketches the possibility of a negotiated reconfiguration, a sort of new protocol between words and images. In this new regime, photography would cease to incorporate the referent as an indicative guarantee. It would no longer be an emanation of reality, but instead an emanation of text. Fontcuberta himself puts forward the provocative idea of overturning photographic semiology, questioning whether photography is now literally generated by language rather than metaphorically.

The provocative question is relevant to the current argument because it clarifies the issues involved in algorithmic photorealism. When textual operations become integral to image production, the epistemic status of photography shifts from presence to plausibility. In post-truth environments, generative images are more persuasive in stabilising what "could be" within a narrative architecture than in certifying "that-has-been". This is precisely the movement from certificate of presence to certificate of plausibility that this article theorises, which emerged from the description of the context of social platforms (section 2) and interdisciplinary research on photorealism (section 4).

[5] The image was generated using a prompt inspired by Fontcuberta: «Images will be delivered effortlessly and painlessly, coming into the world at the hands of algorithmic midwives trained to deliver perfect babies. But the reading, understanding and engagement of images will continue to resist our sovereignty» (Fontcuberta 2024, translation mine).

RIFL (2026) 1: 166-177
ISSN 2036-6728 DOI: 10.4396/202601V01

6. Algorithmic photography as a certification of plausibility

Photorealistic images generated by artificial intelligence challenge Barthes's theoretical framework because, while retaining the appearance of photographic realism, they suspend the conditions of the referent that Barthes believed justified the power of photography. Extending the *operator-spectrum-spectator* triad to creation by the means of text-to-image tools, each term should be reorganised according to the role played in the algorithmic mediation and platform circulation.

In the generative AI context, the *operator* becomes dual, existing simultaneously in human and non-human forms, akin to a hybrid agent. The photographer's physical presence, which was indispensable and central to the traditional photographic process, dissolves into a distributed agency comprising the human prompter, who formulates instructions and selects outputs iteratively, and the generative model, which synthesises images based on learned statistical regularities.

The *spectrum* is no longer aligned with a referent that has been in front of the lens. In generative systems, the *spectrum* is better understood as a dataset and model space, that is, a repository of visual patterns and latent relations that are recombined to produce an output.

The *spectator* is doubled and expanded too. While spectatorship still involves looking, it is increasingly entangled with evaluation (approval, disapproval, sharing and commenting), so that reception becomes a constitutive moment of the image's social credibility.

TO DO		**TO UNDERGO**	**TO LOOK** →	**TO JUDGE / VALIDATE**
PROMPT	GENERATE			
Human prompter	AI system	Object / dataset	Viewer	Audience/platform
Hybrid *operator*		*spectrum* (reconfigured)	*spectator*	expanded *spectator*

In this framework, image manipulation should not be viewed as an exceptional or necessarily negative diversion from photographic truth. Instead, it refers to the standard process (prompting, synthesis, selection and repetition) by which the image is created. Therefore, the photorealistic output is not the trace of a prior event, but rather the result of an iteratively adjustable procedure that can be repeated until the spectator (or a broader audience) grants the image legitimacy by accepting it.

The reconfiguration of the triad *operator-spectrum-spectator* raises a further question: what, in algorithmic photorealism, counts as the subject of the image? Echoing Barthes's insistence on the referent, Byung-Chul Han argues that AI-generated images replace the subject with a numerical matrix, a mass of data. The noema that best captures this condition is not Barthes's «that-has-been», but «that-could-be» which outlines a temporality of suspended actuality that does not belong to the classical tenses of photographic evidence. The only time that becomes socially operative is the moment of validation, when an output is selected, endorsed and circulated.

A clear and tangible example of this potential realism is provided by Fontcuberta when he states that the algorithm can produce non-existent but convincingly real flowers, moving through the spaces between different categories and creating forms that do not exist in nature, yet remain visually consistent with the real world (Fontcuberta 2024: 241). In such cases, the generated image is not a copy of reality, but rather an image that is consistent with the codes of reality's appearance, precisely the condition that enables its narrative usability.

The element of synthetic image consistent with reality matters crucially for journalism and public discourse. A photorealistic image generated with prompts such as: «Show me the consequences of the attack without people, in an urban environment» can be used to visualise events that strongly influence public opinion. The same visual plausibility that makes the image communicatively effective also makes it rhetorically powerful, which means that a single photorealistic frame can reorient a war narrative, reshape perceptions of inter-state relations, or invert the roles of victim and perpetrator by modulating affect, visibility, and evidential appearance.

In post-truth environments, considering arguments used in previous sections, algorithmic photorealism thus functions as a certificate of plausibility, capable of stabilising a narrative's reality effect without anchoring it to a photographed referent.

The relation between reality and fiction as it emerges in the human recognition of synthetic images is at stake. From this standpoint, algorithmic photography should not be treated as a simple imitation of the real past in Barthes's sense, since it functions as a visual form that is embedded in reality, which means that it operates within the same communicative environments, interpretative routines, and regimes of visibility that shape contemporary public opinion.

AI-generated photorealistic images often fail to be recognised as synthetic, not only because they resemble photographs, but also because they combine actual and plausible cues. Elements that are empirically real and recognisable are interwoven with elements that are fictional yet fully consistent with the cultural codes of reality's appearance. In other words, the real and invented components are both culturally encoded and therefore legible within shared conventions. I hypothesise that this hybridisation, whereby the plausible is mistaken for the actual, creates a structural condition for misinformation and disinformation, particularly when images are presented as evidence within platform narratives.

The highlighted interpretative dynamics resonate with Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics, namely the account of interpretative cooperation and the construction of possible worlds (Eco 1979, 1990, 1994).

The certificate of plausibility is not an ontological property of the AI-generated image, nor a guarantee of referential anchoring, but an effect produced by interpretative cooperation. Photorealistic images generated by AI are particularly effective because they are engineered to be compliant with the encyclopaedia, since they replicate the visual grammar of photography and the narrative elements through which the social platform audience recognises events as real. As a result, the spectator does not primarily ask whether the depicted referent existed, but whether the image fits an already available model of the world.

The rhetorical power of generative photorealism stems from the alignment of the generated image's elements with those of the real world, making the depicted scene appear probable.

Generative images are designed to satisfy precisely these constraints, because their realism is not referential but the result of an inferential process. In this sense, the image provides a series of clues that are subject to interpretation by the viewer. These interpretations are then integrated with the spectator's existing knowledge to create a perceived reality.

The certificate of plausibility thus marks the moment at which conjectures, supported by encyclopaedic expectations, are taken as sufficient grounds for belief.

The fundamental issue lies not in the failure of spectators to detect fake images, but rather in their application of an incorrect fictional pact. Specifically, they treat platform visual narratives as chronicles of the empirical world, rather than as artefacts whose truth-claims necessitate external corroboration.

In this regime, plausibility becomes convertible into truth because the encyclopaedia supplies ready-made scripts, and platform circulation functions as a second-order confirmation that transforms conjecture into social evidence.
The certificate of plausibility, in summary, establishes a novel mode of photographic authority, founded on encyclopaedic compatibility and conjectural coherence, as distinguished from Barthes's «that-has-been».

7. Conclusions

The proliferation of social communication platforms and the advent of generative AI have reconfigured the production and the conditions of credibility of photographs.
In this article, I have argued that the noema «that-has-been», which underpinned Barthes's account of analogue photography as a certification of presence, is fragile and unsuitable in the regime of algorithmic photography, due to the absence of the referent. What is at stake is credibility. AI-generated images are accepted as credible not because they show what has been, but because they outline what could be perceived as real. This is what I have proposed to call a certification of plausibility, whose noematic correlate is the «that-could-be».
The interpretative semiotics of Eco provides the conceptual framework for describing the mechanism underlying the certification of plausibility. Plausibility is the effect of an interpretative cooperation that proceeds on the basis of encyclopaedic compatibility and conjectural coherence. The recent empirical research on the so-called synthetic heuristic converges with this analysis from the cognitive side, showing that the recognition of synthetic content fails precisely where its elements are already part of the encyclopaedia through which spectators construct what is recognisable as real. The failure of detection is not, in the first instance, a failure of perception but the application of an incorrect fictional pact.
In post-truth environments, conjectural coherence is often mistaken for proof of reality, thereby transforming plausibility into social evidence. The challenge for research and media literacy is therefore to manage interpretative negotiations and combine them with critical education in order to distinguish plausibility from presence, coherence from verification.

References

Barthes, Roland (1957), *Mythologies*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Barthes, Roland (1961), «Le message photographique», in *Communications*, 1, 127-138.

Barthes, Roland (1964), «Rhétorique de l'image», in *Communications*, 4, 40-51.

Barthes, Roland (1970), *L'Empire des signes*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Barthes, Roland (1975), *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Barthes, Roland (1980), *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie,* Éditions du Seuil, Paris (*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* Hill&Wang, New York 1982).

Eco, Umberto (1979), *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Bompiani, Milano.

Eco, Umberto (1990), *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Bompiani, Milano.

Eco, Umberto (1994), *Sei passeggiate nei boschi narrativi*, Bompiani, Milano.

Fontcuberta, Joan (2022), *Ça-a-été? Contra Barthes*, Joaquín Gallego Editor, Madrid.

Fontcuberta, Joan (2024), *Desbordar el espejo. La fotografía, de la alquimia al algoritmo*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Barcelona.

Han, Byung-Chul (2021a), *Infokratie. Digitalisierung und die Krise der Demokratie*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin.

Han, Byung-Chul (2021b), *Undinge. Umbrüche der Lebenswelt*, Ullstein Verlag, Berlin.

Hausken, Liv (2024), «Photorealism versus photography. AI-generated depiction in the age of visual disinformation» in *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 16(1), https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2340787.

Jang, Eunchae, Lee, Hui Min, Lee, Sangwook, Jung, Yongnam, Sundar, S. Shyam (2025), «Too Good to be False: How Photorealism Promotes Susceptibility to Misinformation», in *Extended Abstracts of the 2025 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA '25)*. DOI: 10.1145/3706599.3719796.

Lu, Zeyu, Huang, Di, Bai, Lei, Qu, Jingjing, Wu, Chengyue, Liu, Xihui, Ouyang, Wanli (2023), «Seeing is not always believing: Benchmarking Human and Model Perception of AI-Generated Images», in *Proceedings of the 37th International Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems*, doi: 10.5555/3666122.3667227.

McIntyre, Lee (2018), *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Peng, Qiyao; Lu, Yingdan; Peng, Yilang; Qian, Sijia; Liu, Xinyi; Shen, Cuihua (2025), «Crafting Synthetic Realities: Examining Visual Realism and Misinformation Potential of Photorealistic AI-Generated Images», arXiv:2409.17484.

Sundar, Shyam (2008), «The MAIN Model: A Heuristic Approach to Understanding Technology Effects on Credibility», in *Digital Media, Youth, and Credibility*, ed. by Miriam J. Metzger and Andrew J. Flanagin, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, pp. 73-100. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262562324.073.

Yazadzhiyan, Hachik (2024), «The Transformation of Photography by Artificial Intelligence Generative AI Technology», in *Journal of Informatics and Innovative Technologies (JIIT)*, n. 1(6), 27–33.