



In his opening talk for the 2026 ACCA Digital Signals Summer School, *The Physics of the Image: A Genealogy of Slop*, cyberethnographer Ruby Justice Thelot asks the room – full of artists, arts workers, academics and other nodes of the contemporary art industrial complex: “ok so who here is on TikTok dot com?” Smugly I keep my Amazon Kindle-Scribe stylus-grasping hand in my lap, then crane my neck around to grab a quick visual survey. Of course, I’m expecting a mixed bag. Like, I’m not expecting as many hands reaching for the sky as you might at a Hillsong sermon; more likely a spattering of sheepish half-raises and gingerly nods. But, as far as the eye can see: nothing. Has the free urn coffee from the Buxton Contemporary foyer not kicked in yet or is this reality? There’s some light snickering, but surprisingly not a single hand raised in the at-capacity gallery space. Either actually no one here is on TikTok or no one wants to admit it. Looking back to the front, an expression of genuine surprise crosses Thelot’s face. “In a room full of contemporary artists no one’s on TikTok? Guys... The kids? They are not in the galleries”. Laughter. We all know he’s right. There’re probably like one or two people here under the age of thirty, after all.

Of course, we’re all thinking the same thing: sure none of us are ON TikTok, but nobody is really OFF TikTok. We’re all at least TikTok-adjacent. We all have our own designated meme-distributors, our reel-dealers – we’re all engaged in TikTok, right, even if we aren’t directly “plugged in”. TikTok, and the subsequent “slop” at the heart of Thelot’s presentation, are omnipresent and inescapable. We’re all, if nothing else, slop-curious, even if we’re not slurping straight from the trough itself.

But what do we talk about when we talk about slop? For Thelot, slop is imagery or content that is no longer generated by users for users, but by AI for AI – which is to say, for the metric appeasement of algorithms. The slop image, as opposed to the traditional image (which is, in the era of slop, according to Thelot, “dead” – presumably buried beside Barthes’s author and Nietzsche’s God) exists not for representation, but for distribution: “the image’s distribution becomes the very essence of what it is, it exists to be spread”. Since images no longer serve as “guides to make sense of the world”, he argues, they rather “exist as independent entities”. Something like Moltbook begins to emerge here: a social media platform for LLM agents to communicate and think exclusively with other LLM agents. This feels like a rehearsal for speculative works like Stephan Maier’s *Deviant Chain* (2019), where humans and computational systems begin to share an incomprehensible, machine-generated language.<sup>2</sup> It isn’t a stretch to consider this eerie development occurring through something like Moltbook: AI exchanging with AI in a *lingua ignota* that functions not as a semiotic chain but rather as parasemic<sup>3</sup> textures. If slop is, eventually, produced by AI for AI – what is its function? Slop is not textual, but textural.

We are in the era of what has been called “slopulism” by some – wherein, at its worst, official federal agencies repost crass deepfake videos on public social media platforms. Lest we forget Trump Gaza, an epoch-defining scoop of slop. In The New York Times, Nathan Taylor Pemberton defines slopulism as “a kind of political post that elides concrete political concerns in favor of the fast-acting satisfactions of social media rage and culture-war jargon. It’s a

[1] Justice Thelot, R, 2025, ‘The Death of the Image Has Made Us Wake up to Reality’, *Ocula*, web log, viewed 30 April 2026, <https://ocula.com/magazine/opinion/death-of-the-image-has-made-us-wake-up-to-reality/>

[2] <https://stefanmaier.studio/deviant-chain-2019/>

[3] Parasemic is a neologism I have developed around my own writing and art that describes language which exists in the vibrating region between sense and nonsense; text and texture.

political tendency that offers followers emotional gratification through mindless, performative gestures online.”<sup>4</sup> Later in the talk, Thelot is invoking the work of content creator mega-star (or, as Thelot prefers, “folk artist”) Mr Beast as a sort of proto-sloppistry when he pauses to quip “this is recorded so I’ll say it now: the future president of the United States of America”. This gets a laugh, but only a couple of weeks later, Donald Trump has gone on record to give Youtuber Jake Paul – the slightly less obnoxious brother of Youtuber Logan Paul – his “complete and total endorsement” to run for political office. Slopulism indeed. It’s easy to assume slopulism merely encapsulates mindless, passive brainrot, but as we have seen it exacerbates the darkest inclinations of the internet’s id. In The Atlantic, Lila Shroff muses on her experience opening the Sora app one morning: “I was met with a flood of strange and disturbing AI-generated videos...I scrolled through fabricated scenes of the Iran war and a barrage of fake Donald Trumps blabbering about Jeffrey Epstein. In my least favorite clip, I watched a man deep-fry an infant.”<sup>5</sup>

As the trumpeter par excellence of post-truth, Trump is the poster boy for slopulism. Slop is neither true nor untrue but the lubricating oil of post-truth. They move together. But the “post” in post-truth is misleading. Truth hasn’t disappeared. It has been replaced by something else. Hypertruth: a regime in which things don’t need to be verified in order to function as true. Slop produces hypertruth. Through sheer volume, density, and repetition, it generates effects that feel indistinguishable from truth itself. Not because they correspond to reality, but because they circulate, accumulate, and stick. Before Trump, political lies had to be smuggled in all manner of Trojan horses. Now they are simply stated in all caps on Truth Social. The force of the claim lies not in whether it is true, but in how it moves.

But while it may seem like an emergent phenomenon of the MAGA era, hypertruth is not new. For, like slop, hypertruth has always lurked in the background as a kind of eternal demonic entity – but only now is it bursting through the pores of the earth’s surface in full fury. The internet, data centres, TikTok – these are the fracking infrastructure that have opened sinkholes in the fabric of reality, allowing the slop to bubble and surge out into the streets. Slop is an autonomous process that has always existed, outside of human temporality, laying dormant in the earth for millennia, waiting for a host. In Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s 2001 film *Kairo*, the infantile internet has become a conduit for lonely ghosts from the afterlife to proliferate the real world. If the internet is a conduit for paranormal loneliness, then social media platforms are a conduit for primordial slop. Through their density and copiousness, slop and hypertruth have lasting impacts on what we believe to be real and the power to completely shift public consciousness.

With Pandora’s Box open, we begin to see the system turn back on us. Not through any grand conspiracy, but through a much simpler dynamic. Slop accumulates. It smooths over friction, removes effort, and offers itself as a shortcut. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, we begin to rely on it: for information, for interpretation, for judgement, for thought itself. There’s a term for this: cognitive debt. The slow accrual of cost that comes from outsourcing attention and decision-making to systems that offer results without requiring

[4] Nathan Taylor Pemberton, ‘Is Slopulism Shaping Our Politics?’ *New York Times*, 25 February 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/02/13/style/slopulism-trump-conservative-social-media.html>

[5] Lila Shroff, ‘OpenAI Is Doing Everything ... Poorly’, *Atlantic*, 25 March, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/2026/03/sora-openai-identity-crisis/686544/>

understanding. Like technical debt, it compounds over time. What is gained in speed is paid for in capacity and the more we defer, the less we are able to do without it. As it circulates, slop leaves a slimy trail of dependency masquerading as convenience – and in doing so, it quietly erodes the very faculties that might allow us to resist it. One thing is for certain, we, to quote Hito Steyerl’s 2025 video work, *The Island*, “cannot fight slop with more slop”.

Back in 2020, hypertruth’s predecessor, post-truth, felt like a paranoid collective questioning of reality, a global gaslighting. The archetypal example is Trump’s voter fraud conspiracy theory. Now, six years on, hypertruth is exemplified by what Thelot calls “default fakeness”: we have been forced to assume at the outset that everything we see online, or perhaps anywhere at all, is a deepfake. Nobody wants to be the one sending their groupchat a video of a cat doing a backflip only to have the entire chat tell them that this is obviously fake. Come on Grandma, let’s get you back to bed. The ambient experience of hypertruth has become a benign, nihilistic baseline. In *The Matrix* (1999), a recurring black cat denotes a “glitch”. But the hyperreality we live inside is so much weirder than the one depicted in that film. In the (let’s call it) sloptrix, the debate over glitches has become far more granular: at the time of writing, a heated comment-war (undoubtedly between a combination of humans and bots – what’s the difference at this point) rages over whether the ring on Benjamin Netanyahu’s finger disappears for one frame of a hasbara<sup>6</sup> video released by the Israeli government. The purpose of this video is to prove to the world that Netanyahu has not, despite the wildly circulating rumours online, been killed in an Iranian airstrike. But Israel is an early adopter of generative AI as a tool of propaganda, so it is impossible to know what the truth is. Instead, it becomes a distracting game, a perverse entertainment. Are the videos and death rumours all part of a broader psyop, or is all this speculation just our way of feigning agency in a situation over which it feels like we are powerless? The fact that it is impossible to know, and that that uncertainty may itself also be part of said psyop, is the true character of hypertruth; of slop.

At this moment of accelerated platform capitalism, slop is more-or-less ambient, which means, etymologically, “from all sides”. In this context, ambience – commonly associated with words like “relaxing” and “low-stimulation” – takes on a more sinister, encroaching connotation. Unlike ambient music, which is generally considered pleasant enough to exist in the background, ambient slop is becoming more akin to the dull visual noise of advertising polluting many urban environments. Even now, after only a few years of slopulum, is it too early to say we are entering its “late stage”? The colloquial definition of slop has already shifted in the space of just a couple of years to encompass not only AI-generated content but all content within the broader slopstream. Even if it isn’t AI-generated, everything begins to take on the material quality of slop. We might call this “enslopification”<sup>7</sup>.

In *From sloppers to slopocalypse: The lexical productivity of AI slop*, Brigitte Nerlich traces a more linguistic genealogy of slop. While the noun “slop” has always held pejorative connotations since it first emerged in the 14th century, from excrement, to food waste, to slime – it came to hold the definition “something of little value” in the

[6] “The public diplomacy of Israel-called “hasbara” (roughly translated as “explaining”)-is a well-coordinated, massive effort to justify measures that are perceived as unacceptable [sic] by global opinion. The “explaining” is done in multiple forms by official state organs, private organisations and visible public figures (artists, journalists, scientists), but also as anonymous rumours spreading conspiracy theories or faked “documents” attributed to the enemy. Another hasbara strategy is to allow (or solicit) lower-level political figures to state openly what the top leaders don’t say openly or even deny-such statements, although not widely reported in the media, “explain” what the more polite statements of top politicians imply. For example, Owen Jones has shown on his podcast a recorded statement by the Israeli Deputy Parliament Speaker Nissim Vaturi, which says: “Who is innocent in Gaza? Civilians went out and slaughtered people in cold blood ... We need to separate women and children and kill the adults in Gaza, we are being too considerate.” And then he makes even a step further, including children: “Every child born now-in this minute-is already a terrorist when he is born.” This is in no way a mistake but part of a well-planned complex strategy.” - Slavoj Žižek, ‘Trump’s Hasbara’, *Memo*, vol. 3, April 2025

[7] This “enslopification” shares genetic code with Cory Doctorow’s “enshittification” - the deliberate process of businesses making their products worse over time to maximise short-term profits.

era of television. As we experience a flattening of all disparate online content into one endless, algorithmically-determined doom scroll in which everything is always already presumed to be fake, we enter pure slopspace – a state of total “content collapse”<sup>8</sup>, in which even the most serious information is trivialised amidst the detritus.

But apparently, no one in this room is even on TikTok, in the direct sense. We all just prefer, presumably, the slower dribble of content as it filters down to our respective uncool social media outlet of “choice”. I’m sure if Thelot had asked “who here is on Facebook”, the response would have been the same, only in that case everyone would just be too embarrassed to admit it. All of this to say that no one is slop-free, per se, but perhaps, tastefully, we just aren’t sitting, daily, knee deep in the sludge itself. It’s the effect of trickle-down slopenomics; a “rising sludge lifts all boats” type situation, to paraphrase that outdated neoliberal slogan. Or perhaps the total lack of raised-hands in the gallery denotes a subtle performative groupthink display of being, if not OFF-off TikTok, then at least, on principle, ABOVE it. Like, sure I have an account, but obviously I don’t have the app on my phone. Like, sure, I’ll bum a cigarette off you at the afterparty but I’m not out here fully rawdogging cigarettes, I’m not at Puff Puff Smokes buying a \$13 pack of Esses on a Friday afternoon. I’m not an addict, I’m a casual user. There’s a difference, right? There’s a difference... right?

Thelot’s talk, which, enjoyably, employs just one PowerPoint slide with two or three dot points in Times New Roman, is fully memorised. He speaks effortlessly, moving between ideas with the ease of someone who has fully internalised their research. There’s a smooth confidence to it, and his dress sense is impeccable. His grey knitted jumper looks uncannily like something worn by the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar in *The Matrix* – though this is probably a reach. Still, the comparison lingers. Like those characters, we in the audience seem to imagine ourselves as having stepped outside the system, having made a (moral?) decision to (to paraphrase Mark Zuckerberg) “rawdog reality” rather than submit to the sloptrix. In theory, we could always plug back in – have a quick scroll on someone else’s phone, dip into the feed for a moment – but fundamentally, we like to believe we’ve chosen the other side. The grass we touch may not be greener, but at least it isn’t algorithmically fertilised. The difference, of course, is that I wasn’t born into this. As a millennial, these systems grew gradually around my life, creeping in from the outside. For younger generations, the situation is inverted. They are born into it. The simulacrum is not an environment they enter, but the baseline from which they begin.

It’s not surprising that *The Matrix* hovers in the background of Thelot’s talk. At one point he mentions bots “swarming”. The language is already there. And in *The Treachery of the Image*, he sketches a near future in which this distinction collapses entirely: networks producing images for other networks, the human no longer the primary addressee. Images no longer tethered to a maker, but circulating within a closed loop, by machines, for machines.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Death of the Image Has Made Us Wake up to Reality*, Thelot timestamps the beginning of the images’ terminal trajectory to 2025, to the first week of OpenAI’s image generation model, which saw an overwhelming deluge of images generated

[8] “Content collapse, as I define it, is the tendency of social media to blur traditional distinctions among once distinct types of information – distinctions of form, register, sense, and importance. As social media becomes the main conduit for information of all sorts – personal correspondence, news and opinion, entertainment, art, instruction, and on and on – it homogenizes that information as well as our responses to it.” - Carr, N., 2020, ‘From context collapse to content collapse’, *Rough Type*, web log, viewed 30 April 2026, <https://www.roughtype.com/?p=8724>.

[9] Justice Thelot, R., 2023 ‘The Treachery of Images’, *Outland*, web log, viewed 30 April 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250119042454/https://outland.art/generative-ai-and-technical-images/>

in the style of Studio Ghibli. In that week alone, 700 million new images were produced, propelling the realm of images into a rapid entropy of hot, pixelated gruel. One gets the sense that, even now, the entire history of human images is being silently processed in the background, awaiting total ghiblification. After this “death”, slop abounds like a carrion battlefield. Like microplastics, it does not disappear, it accumulates. It persists. If the image has died, one might ask whether slop itself can survive. If slop is primordial, is it eschalogical too? Ecological, social and philosophical costs aside - the computational cost is enormous, the economic model unstable. Enormously popular products like OpenAI’s Sora are suddenly and unceremoniously rolled-back. It’s tempting to imagine a breaking point. But this assumes slop needs to endure in order to matter. It doesn’t. Slop doesn’t depend on any single platform, model, or company. It is already ambient, its particles lingering in the atmosphere. Whether it expands, mutates, or collapses entirely, the condition it has produced remains. In this sense, slop begins to resemble what Timothy Morton calls a hyperobject: something massively distributed in time and space relative to human perception.

In this vein, let us attempt an anatomy of slop to complement Thelot’s genealogy:

Slop is viscous. You can log off, delete the app, touch grass as much as you want, but slop persists culturally and relationally. It sticks to you, your friends, your inbox. Traces of slop have been found in your drinking water.

Slop is nonlocal. You never encounter slop in totality, only in discrete packets. A clip, a post, a feed. But the system producing it is everywhere at once: an ocean.

Slop is temporally vast. Not because any individual image lasts, but because the sloptrix never sleeps. At this very moment, in the middle of your difficult divorce, you might be served an AI-generated ad in a voice uncannily close to your mother’s soothing tone. You are the only person who will ever see it. It appears, disappears, and yet remains, deep inside the cloud<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, slop is frictionless. You don’t chew on slop, you gulp it down. It arrives pre-processed, pre-digested. Cognition, by contrast, is slow, resistant, abrasive. Thinking hurts, but it feels good.

When I asked an LLM for its thoughts on this text, it suggested I was “overcooking the mythical register”, that the metaphors were (“ironically”) collapsing into mush. The real irony is that smoothing out the edges only makes it more slop-like. Tighter yet sloppier. Slop is not messy. It’s smooth. To engage in “organic” thought is to follow rugged pathways that meander and spiral, occasionally . By contrast, slop offers the answer before the question has finished forming. And after a while, the question stops forming altogether.

[10] If 2025 brought the death of the image, then surely, too, it brought the death of the idea of “the cloud” within the popular imaginary. With AI companies’ prolific building of data centres all over the world, the airy myth of data floating adobe us in some ethereal non-space has been replaced with the cold, hard reality of the actual physical, economic and ecological demands of our technological epoch.

# DIGITAL SIGNALS SUMMER SCHOOL

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