

Curating the Self: Augmented Capitalism and Generative AI for Immanent Critique

Abstract

This thesis examines how contemporary platform systems restructure the production, circulation, and valorisation¹ of the self. It argues that digital culture has shifted from representational forms of mediation towards operational and computational systems in which identity, visibility, participation, and self-image are continuously generated, classified, and modulated through algorithmic processes. Extending Guy Debord's account of spectacular mediation, the thesis argues that contemporary platform systems no longer simply represent social reality through images but computationally organise the conditions under which experience itself is produced. Mediation becomes operational rather than representational.

In contrast to existing accounts grounded primarily in the logics of representation, spectacle, attention, or data extraction, the thesis advances the concept of augmented capitalism to describe a phase of late capitalism in which platform infrastructures and artificial intelligence operationalise and automate the commodification of identity. Under augmented capitalism, the self functions simultaneously as subject, commodity, and productive infrastructure, continuously valorised through processes of data extraction, algorithmic modulation, recursive participation, and computational visibility. The thesis further argues that contemporary platform systems increasingly valorise not only labour, attention, and data, but the self-image itself, transforming identity into a recursively productive computational asset.

The research is structured around two central questions: what defines augmented capitalism, and how can these conditions be critically interrogated from within? The first is addressed through theoretical analysis; the second through a practice-based methodology grounded in immanent critique², in which critique operates through the internal and operational logics of the systems it engages. In doing so, the thesis departs from approaches that position critique as external to computational systems, arguing instead that such a stance becomes increasingly inadequate under conditions in which cultural production, social interaction, and identity formation are subsumed within algorithmic infrastructures. Rather than opposing computational systems from outside, the thesis explores how critique may be operationalised through computation itself.

Drawing upon Mark Fisher's concepts of capitalist realism, the weird, and the eerie, the thesis argues that computational mediation produces conditions of ontological instability in which agency, identity, and reality appear increasingly fragmented, distributed, and opaque. Artificial intelligence intensifies these conditions by generating synthetic forms of communication, representation, and participation that blur distinctions between human and machine agency. The thesis positions AI not as a supplementary tool of mediation but as constitutive of mediation itself. These conditions are examined through four interconnected dimensions: identity formation, weirdness, eeriness, and valorisation, which together provide a framework for analysing the operational dynamics of augmented capitalism.

This methodology is realised through the design and implementation of the Immanent Critique Engine (ICE), a generative AI framework that translates theoretical principles into computational processes governing classification, image generation, interpretation, and

critique. The system functions simultaneously as research instrument, methodological apparatus, and critical object, operationalising theoretical concepts as measurable and observable system behaviours. Rather than producing outputs that are evaluated solely as autonomous artworks, ICE generates artefacts of system behaviour through which the operational logics of computational mediation become visible. Evaluation focuses on identity formation, distributed agency, ontological instability, valorisation, and the visibility of system logic, demonstrating how critique can emerge through computational operation rather than external opposition.

The thesis contributes both a conceptual framework for understanding artificial intelligence within contemporary capitalism and a practice-based methodological model for engaging computational systems as sites of critical inquiry. It argues that under conditions of augmented capitalism, where subjectivity is continuously captured, operationalised, and reprocessed as data, critique can no longer function solely through representation, exposure, or ideological demystification. Instead, critique must engage computational systems at the level of their operation, revealing and destabilising the processes through which identity, agency, and value are produced. As such, the project intervenes in ongoing debates surrounding platform capitalism, digital labour, algorithmic culture, and AI-driven mediation by demonstrating that the critical question is no longer simply how systems of power are represented, but how critique might meaningfully operate within and against their computational infrastructures.

¹ Valorisation refers to the process through which something is transformed into a source of value within a system of economic and social relations. In Marxist theory, valorisation describes the expansion of capital through the extraction of surplus value. In this thesis, the term is extended to describe how identity, attention, affect, and participation become productive assets within platform-mediated systems.

² Immanent critique is a method of analysis that evaluates a system according to its own internal logic rather than external criteria. Developed in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel, it involves tracing contradictions that emerge from within a system's conceptual structure (Hegel, 1977, pp. 54–59). Karl Marx extends this method to political economy by demonstrating how capitalism's material practices diverge from its stated principles (Marx, 1976, pp. 163–177). In critical theory, particularly in the work of Theodor Adorno, immanent critique operates through cultural forms, revealing tensions embedded within them (Adorno, 1997, pp. 5–10). This research extends immanent critique into computational systems, where critique emerges through generative processes that simultaneously reproduce and destabilise the operational logics of platform-mediated culture