

Hertziana Studies
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FOR ART HISTORY

From Hype to Reality

Artificial Intelligence in the Study of Art and Culture

Edited by Eva Cetinić & Darío Negueruela del Castillo



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Abstract

Piera Riccio & Nuria Oliver

A Techno-Feminist Perspective on the
Algorithmic Censorship of Artistic Nudity

Keywords | *Algorithmic content moderation, Social media, Artistic nudity*



This short article focuses on the growing challenge of algorithmic censorship of artistic content on online social platforms, particularly content that exhibits nudity. Contemporary artists heavily rely on social platforms to showcase and give visibility to their work, which is increasingly judged by machine learning algorithms that decide to remove or de-prioritize content if it is deemed inappropriate. While the challenge lies in distinguishing between artistic nudity and explicit material, we address this phenomenon from a techno-feminist perspective, considering different aspects of its cultural, governance, and technological dimensions.

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1. Introduction

Online social platforms have become a crucial tool for contemporary artists to share their art, reach a broader audience, and increase their visibility.¹ With billions of users worldwide, these online environments are subject to community rules including content moderation (deletion, hiding, or de-prioritization of content) to protect vulnerable users from harmful content. The immense volume of user-generated data uploaded to these platforms—in the order of millions of posts every minute—coupled with the challenging psychological working conditions of human content moderators and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to the wide adoption of automated content moderation by means of machine learning algorithms,² giving rise to what is referred to as “algorithmic content moderation.” This process typically proceeds as follows:³ Machine learning algorithms are used to automatically detect content that violates the community guidelines to either remove or shadow-ban (de-prioritize) it. In cases where the decision is ambiguous, the algorithms flag the content to human content moderators.

Artistic expressions are not exempt from algorithmic content moderation, frequently leading to contentious case studies where artistic content is removed, banned, or de-prioritized due to e.g., political connotations, copyright violations, or the portrayal of nudity.⁴ Algorithmic censorship directly impacts the creative freedom of artists and leads to economic losses. Thus, the study of this phenomenon extends beyond an

understanding of our cultural ecosystem, as it also raises ethical questions about artistic freedom, the creators’ right to work, and their need for a secure and stable environment.

In this short article, we focus on the subject of algorithmic censorship as it applies to the artistic depiction of nudity. Nudity has been a fundamental subject of human artistic practices for thousands of years. The automatic detection of inappropriate nakedness poses significant challenges, as the distinction between artistic nudity and pornography is not always clear, depends on the context and the artist’s intention, and it may even be non-existent.⁵ Thus, tackling this ambiguity is one of the key challenges that need to be addressed in algorithmic content moderation. Moreover, depictions of nudity are historically and inherently related to notions of gender: Considering them is at the basis of our perspective.

2. Background

Algorithmic censorship of art is an under-studied topic of relevance for different research communities. Recent work has investigated this phenomenon from an artistic perspective, examining the employed creative techniques to bypass content moderation restrictions and their disproportionate impact on feminist artists.⁶ In response to the algorithmic censorship of art, activist movements—such as “Don’t Delete Art”⁷ and “Artists Against Censorship”⁸—have emerged to publicly condemn the matter. Other scholars have studied content moderation and its governance from a sociological and

1 Polaine 2005.

2 Chen 2021.

3 “How does Facebook use artificial intelligence to moderate content?”

URL: <https://www.facebook.com/help/1584908458516247>.

last accessed

10.11.23.

4 Gillespie 2020.

5 Vasilaki 2010, Patridge 2013, Eck 2001.

6 Faust 2017, Riccio et al. 2022.

7 Don’t delete Art. URL: <https://www.dontdelete.art/>.

(last accessed 10.11.23).

8 Artists Against Censorship. URL: <https://www.artistsagainstcensorship.com/> (last accessed 10.11.23).

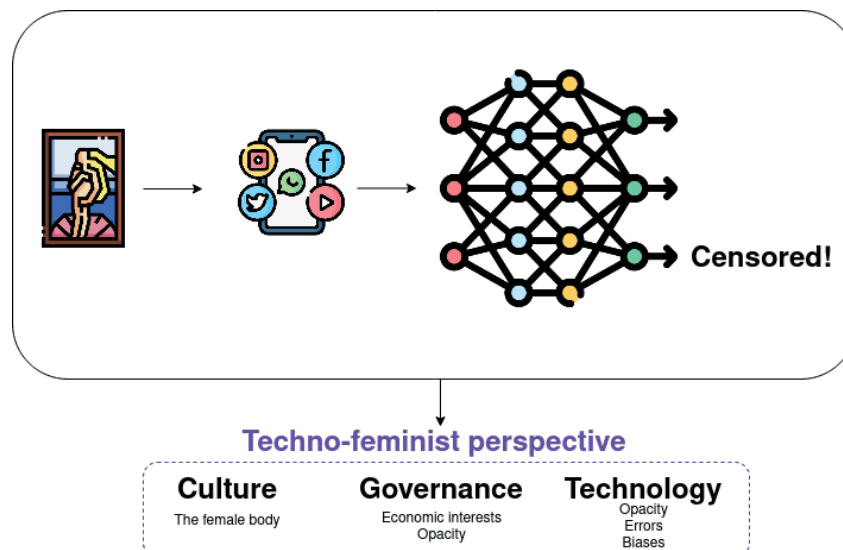


Figure 1. An illustration of the perspective analyzed by this article on the Algorithmic Censorship of Artistic Nudity. Our techno-feminist perspective entails different elements, divided in three dimensions: Culture, Governance, and Technology.

Copyright Nora Al-Badri. Source <https://www.nora-al-badri.de/works-index#neuronal-ancestral-sculptures-series>

a technical perspective,⁹ extending beyond the specific instance of artistic censorship.

the prevalence of algorithmic errors and biases from a technological perspective.

Research and activism are pivotal in enhancing public awareness and emphasizing the cultural, anthropological, and sociological consequences of artistic censorship on social media platforms. This article adopts a techno-feminist perspective, as proposed by Wajcman,¹⁰ framing our discussion of technological development as a socio-technical phenomenon that encapsulates patriarchal values and establishes gender power relationships.¹¹ Through this lens, we shed light on three key dimensions that are implicitly or explicitly associated with gendered concepts in the algorithmic censorship of online nudity. Figure 1 illustrates our framework.

Initially, we offer an insight into how algorithmic content moderation potentially influences the representation of the female body online and its interconnection with other historical periods, operating at the cultural level. Secondly, we examine the influence of private economic interests on online content moderation, operating at the governance level. Thirdly, we address the issue of transparency concerning content moderation practices and decisions, spanning both the governance and technological dimensions. Lastly, we explore

Historically, the concepts of censorship and feminism have been closely linked. Some scholars interpret the imposition of art censorship as a symbol of the war on women's freedom.¹² The 1980s, in particular, witnessed the emergence of various feminist movements actively opposing art censorship.¹³ In this short paper, rather than delving into the established connection between art censorship and feminism in a broad sense, we introduce a perspective that considers the pervasive integration of AI in artistic censorship as a further element to consider in the already intricate relationship between feminism and art censorship. Consequently, we advocate for the adoption of a techno-feminist framework.

3. Analysis

In this section, we delve into the three different elements that compose the framework for our analysis, depicted in Figure 1.

3.1. The Female Body

The way we relate to our bodies and their representation is heavily influenced by a diversity of elements, including the visual arts.¹⁴ While the female body has played a central role in art throughout history, its portrayal has largely

⁹ Gillespie 2020, Blunt et al. 2021, Elkin-Koren 2020, Myers West 2018.

¹⁰ Wajcman 2006.

¹¹ Noble / Tynes 2016.

¹² Jacobsen 1991.

¹³ Rodgerson / Semple 1990.

¹⁴ Gilman 1985, Arnheim 1954.

been shaped by male artists. Thus, women have often been reduced to symbols of male privilege and power rather than recognized as the creators of culture.¹⁵ Consequently, women have been objectified in creative expressions, leading to male-centered interpretations of the history of art. Female artists have been systematically denied proper recognition for their work—e.g., Marietta Robusti (1560–1590)—, de-valued and underestimated by their contemporaries—e.g., Judith Leyster (1609–1660)—, exoticized as exceptions—e.g., Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907)—, constantly forced into a “feminine” lens through their art—e.g., Camille Claudel (1864–1943)—or, conversely associated with masculine adjectives as a way to appreciate and justify their success—e.g., Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938) and Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907). The representations and interpretations of art have always been strongly gendered, with the very ideal of the femininity of the Renaissance woman starting as early as Vasari’s work¹⁶ and continuing later in the history of visual arts.¹⁷

In 1975, Mulvey analyzed the concept of the “male gaze” in Hollywood movies,¹⁸ according to which women are depicted as objects of sexual desire from a heterosexual male perspective. This perspective has become even more pervasive with the rise of social media¹⁹ and the broad use of algorithms. In fact, scholars have argued that the amplification of the male gaze is a result of the gender inequality in the environments where the algorithms are conceived, developed, deployed, and legislated.²⁰ Such amplification is evident in the censorship of female artistic nudity, where female bodies are often perceived as solely objects of pleasure and pornographic content.²¹ Consequently, artists who work with female nudity to challenge the patriarchal sexualization of women face stronger restrictions on their freedom of expression, both because more people report them and because the algorithms are biased.

This systematic misinterpretation and silencing of de-sexualized representations of female bodies is an important phenomenon to reflect upon, study, and address when considering the impact of machine learning algorithms on our cultural and artistic ecosystems.

3.2. Economic Interests

Relying on algorithms for content moderation undoubtedly allows the platforms to obtain significant economic gains in the form of savings,²² as automation allows them to scale-up to levels that would not be possible if they only relied on human moderators.²³ In fact, with billions of users and millions of pieces of content uploaded every day, it is impossible for human moderators to perform this task alone.

Beyond this economic impact, we need to consider that social media and related online platforms are owned by private companies with a business model that largely depends on the monetization of the content that they host. Their ultimate goal is evidently to create an economic gain. Thus, it should not be surprising that social media companies keep whitelists of users for whom content moderation is not applied, or is applied differently.²⁴ Such users are typically high-value members of the network (e.g., influencers), with hundreds of thousands or millions of followers so that their uploaded content generates significant traffic and revenue for the platform owners. This differential treatment has a direct impact on the type of content that is likely to be uploaded as its visibility and popularity will depend on how well it adheres to the mainstream aesthetics accepted on the platform, to the detriment of minority voices and perspectives which are less popular and “economically interesting.”²⁵ Profit-driven content moderation decisions tend to prioritize content that aligns with dominant cultural norms, reinforcing existing power structures and contributing to perpetuating gender

¹⁵ Chadwick 1990.

¹⁶ Vasari 1550.

¹⁷ Duncan 2019.

¹⁸ Mulvey 1975.

¹⁹ Oliver 2017.

²⁰ Sezen 2020.

²¹ Ibrahim 2017, Volkers 2020, Are 2021.

²² “Why Tailored Content Moderation Artificial Intelligence Is Worth Investing In.” URL: <https://besedo.com/knowledge-hub/blog/the-price-of-ai/> (last accessed: 14.11.23).

²³ Gillespie 2020.

²⁴ Wikipedia 2021.

²⁵ Kang / Chen / Kang 2019, You et al. 2017, Sharlow 2015, James 2014.

stereotypes and biases. Such a reinforcement is detrimental to the techno-feminist goal of challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures and amplifying diverse perspectives.

3.3. Opacity

Furthermore, the lack of transparency regarding the use and inner workings of proprietary content moderation algorithms in social platforms hinders the users' understanding of the reasons behind the censorship they experience. Thus, engaging in a public discourse about the legitimacy of this censorship becomes challenging. According to Riccio et al. (2022), content moderation algorithms play the role of an invisible critique in today's online cultural ecosystem as they not only moderate content but also determine what is seen (and not seen), boosted, promoted, or de-prioritized. In essence, algorithms dictate what aesthetic qualities are deemed acceptable or unacceptable within our socio-cultural context by pervasively influencing all the elements of the creative chain,²⁶ with the market acting as the ultimate driving force in the decision-making process. Consequently, social media platforms establish distinct—albeit invisible—boundaries between what can be posted and what cannot. Within such an opaque framework, it is hard to understand what the rules of artistic expression are nowadays. This opacity is both intentional from the side of the social platforms and technical due to the inherent complexity of the deep neural networks that are at the core of content moderation algorithms. Furthermore, the lack of transparency leads to a lack of accountability as there are no clear mechanisms for challenging or appealing content moderation decisions.

3.4. Errors

Examining the consequences of algorithmic censorship demands acknowledging the weaknesses of these algorithms, which are

susceptible to errors and biases. Many of today's social media platforms do not explicitly forbid artistic nudity in their community guidelines.²⁷ However, the discrepancy between these guidelines and the actual experience of censorship by many artists²⁸ suggests that the algorithms might not be sophisticated enough to properly discern pornography from art,²⁹ failing to understand the non-explicit intent and context related to the uploaded images.³⁰ Contextualization is a prominent focus of research in the field of Computer Vision:³¹ Even basic tasks like object detection require explicit cues to contextualize the image.³² Humans, in contrast, rely on their past experiences and diverse memories when engaging with the real world.³³ The ability to contextualize a naked body plays an important role in distinguishing between pornographic and artistic images. As a consequence, detecting porn, nudity, or NSFW (not-safe-for-work) content still represents a technical challenge.³⁴ Existing research on algorithms developed for this purpose often overlooks the nuanced distinction between artistic nudes and pornography.³⁵ Although the Computer Vision literature has explored various techniques for context integration,³⁶ there is a lack of art-centric perspectives in the methods developed to date for automatic porn or adult content detection.

3.5. Biases

In addition, any decision-making process supported or performed by machine learning algorithms requires addressing potential algorithmic biases.³⁷ Algorithmic biases or discrimination refers to the systematic and unfair treatment (discrimination) that can occur when developing, training, or deploying machine learning-based algorithms.³⁸ These biases emerge at different points of the machine learning cycle, from the data used to train them to the design choices made during their development. As a consequence, the biases may be inadvertently embedded in the algorithms and

²⁶ Kulesz 2018.

²⁷ Shapiro 2022.

²⁸ Faust 2017.

²⁹ Riccio et al. 2022.

³⁰ "Does AI have a dirty mind, too?" URL: <https://medium.com/@marekkcichy/does-ai-have-a-dirty-mind-too-6948430e4b2b> (last

accessed 10.11.23).

³¹ Computer Vision is the field within Artificial Intelligence that focuses on enabling computers to interpret and understand visual information from the world.

³² Wang / Zhu 2023.

³³ Vo 2021.

³⁴ Dubettier et al. 2023.

³⁵ Chen 2021, Wang et al. 2018.

³⁶ Lim et al. 2021, Zhang / Tseng / Kreiman 2020, Leng et al. 2021.

³⁷ Buolamwini / Gebru 2018.

³⁸ Kleinberg et al. 2018.

influence their decision-making processes, leading to unequal or unfair treatment of certain individuals, groups or content (e.g., women or portrayal of female bodies). The machine learning algorithms that permeate today's social media platforms thus automate culture through technology, replicating and possibly amplifying human biases.³⁹ In the context of algorithmic censorship, these biases could imply that certain representations of the body are more likely to be accepted than others (exacerbating the economic incentives previously discussed), or that artists representing minorities get censored more often, as Nayyar (2023), Shapiro (2022), Faust (2017) claim.

4. Conclusion

While social media offers a platform for artistic expression to a broad audience, the existing algorithmic content moderation practices create disparities in access for artists. Examining algorithmic censorship and its impact on the artistic depictions of nudity uncovers an intricate interplay of factors.

This phenomenon can be seen as a result of the economic motivations of social media companies, the lack of transparency in algorithmic content moderation, and the inherent limitations of the algorithms, as previously outlined. Furthermore, adopting a techno-feminist lens allows us to delve deeper into the gendered dimensions of algorithmic censorship, revealing how these practices contribute to reinforcing existing power dynamics and societal norms related, but not necessarily limited to, the female body.

This short paper prompts critical reflections on artistic freedom, the ethical considerations surrounding content moderation, and the need to maintain a secure and inclusive digital space for artists. In light of these interconnected issues, we hope to pave the way for innovative solutions that align with the principles of techno-feminism and contribute to a more equitable and just artistic landscape online.

³⁹ Schroeder 2021, Sezen 2020.

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