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Can, and should we, put a computational/mathematical concept on trial? What if its impact on culture and the environment is increasingly felt worldwide, even if it's a depersonalised, distributed, abstract, and strange object? Does it bear responsibility? With this performance, we subject latent space(s) to a juridical process. Four researchers, each working on distinct dimensions of latent spaces, namely technical, cultural, philosophical, material, and aesthetic, while attending a round table, are thrown into a scholarly trial where prosecution, defence, and witnesses stage an intellectual confrontation. This trial – where the accused is absent, yet everywhere in its immaterial pervasiveness – makes explicit the performativity and theatricality that are dominant yet understated in the academic and scholarly worlds.

The Trial Has Already Begun

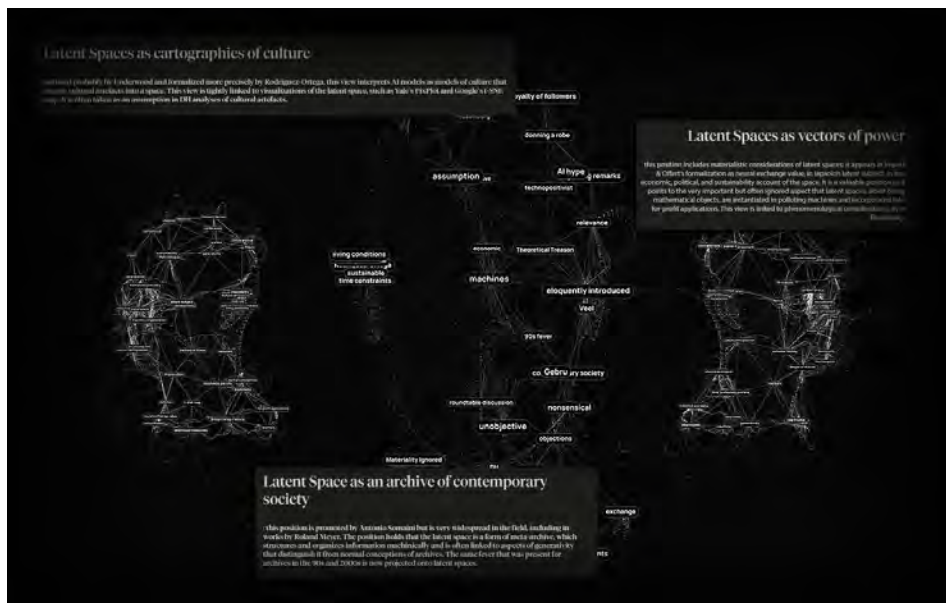


Fig. 1. Anthropomorphized latent space of texts referring to the latent space. Each figure embodies a charge that the latent space is subjected to in the performance.

AI is already on trial. Copyright infringement proceedings challenge the gathering of training material. Bias audits are conducted in ethics committees worldwide. Technical communities question opacity, irreproducibility, and theoretical incoherence. Cultural critics accuse generative systems of epistemic violence and homogenisation. Environmental activists denounce the resource depletion and pollution entailed by computational infrastructures. Yet the trial on AI's ultimate metaphor, the latent space, has not yet happened. This performance stages it.

The form of a fictional trial serves three purposes and is fitting to the latent space. Firstly, it places our attempt into a long history of judging the unsettling and politically urgent, from Elie Wiesel's *Trial of God*

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(1979), Milo Rau's *Zurich and Moscow Trials* (2013), or Tricycle Theatre's *Tribunal Plays* (1994-2012). Much like the dadaists' trial of Maurice Barrès in 1921 (Sanouillet 2005), which acts as a main inspiration, we believe the scholarly community is torn between those who see the value of the latent space and those who contest it, and that it is a necessity for the public debate to lay this contradiction bare. Like the avant-garde group a hundred years ago, by forcibly acting as two opposing groups, and enforcing through characters the conflict of contradictory opinions, we seek to bring some clarity into an otherwise heated debate. The judiciary structure that comes with a trial also allows the untwining of the political, epistemological, technical, or even metaphysical dimensions that such an object fosters.

Secondly, we conceive this performance as a way to bring into the public sphere the debates of academia. Here, the theatrical nature of academia is reversed (Seita 2022), and dry scholarly debate is instead incarnated. The form of a trial, with its debating sides, back-and-forths, repetitions, showcasing of evidence, reenactments, and a place for nuance, is a notable pedagogical instance. The interrupted nature of our trial performance also avoids the risk of imposing a unique view, but rather leaves the audience informed and ready to forge their own opinion.

Finally, as we will argue in the performance itself, we deem the latent space to be a theatrical object in itself. Its protean nature, variety of definition, and the constructed mythology around it turn the latent space into a stage upon which the desires of many are equally at home as the fears and skepticism of others.

The Charges and Their Scholarly Grounds

The starting point for this performance is a collective unrest: a shared uneasiness toward an object that has taken on outsized proportions in our academic and personal lives. That uneasiness is intellectual as much as ethical. We observe that the scholarly literature has produced several major positions on latent spaces, and that each position, examined carefully, yields a charge.

The view of latent space as a meta-archive, promoted by Somaini (2025) and drawing on the archival fever of the 1990s and 2000s, holds that latent spaces structure and organise information machinically, encoding relational properties and generative affinities in ways traditional archives cannot. This view is largely metaphorical and mostly tied to discriminative models such as ResNets, yet it has become pervasive, projecting onto a mathematical object the same cultural desires previously attached to the archive. It yields *Charge 1: Epistemic Violence Through Dimensional Reduction*. To archive is to select and compress; to compress is to erase; and what is erased is not noise but particularity, marginality, and difference. Korzybski's warning is precise: the map is not the territory, and the latent space's infinity of potential states remains infinitely smaller than the infinity of the world.

The view of latent spaces as cartographies of culture, initiated by Underwood (2021) and formalised by Rodriguez-Ortega (2022), and instantiated in tools like Yale's PixPlot and Google's t-SNE visualisations, treats AI models as navigable maps of cultural production. This view dominates digital humanities practice and has produced genuinely productive analytical instruments. Yet it consistently suppresses its own assumptions: that culture can be encoded, that distances in high-dimensional space are semantically meaningful, that the patterns made visible are discoveries rather than artefacts of training. It yields *Charge 2: Cultural Homogenisation Through Statistical Averaging*. The cartographic promise of revealing hidden structure conceals a flattening operation where marginal, contested, and culturally specific artefacts are absorbed into dominant statistical patterns. As Bender *et al.*'s figure of the stochastic parrot suggests (2021), and as Crawford's critique of AI (2021) as the triumph of statistical banality makes explicit, latent spaces do not encode culture but its average.

There is an oscillation between treating, on one side, latent spaces as spaces of Deleuzian potentiality, navigable planes of immanence, and generators of hidden possibilities (Negueruela del Castillo and Neri 2025); and, on the other, as either semi-divine objects rising in a state of despair (Beguš 2026), and as mere statistical approximations, epistemically banal. This oscillation reveals a third and more damaging problem. The same scholarly community simultaneously invokes transcendence and banality, archive and noise, virtuality and approximation. Schaerf's concept of folk theories (2025), after Kempton (1986), sharpens the charge considerably, as many accounts invoke "latent space" for models that do not technically possess one, notably transformer-based architectures where no explicit latent bottleneck exists. The theoretical object on trial may be, in the end, a collective fiction without a rigorous technical referent, applied indiscriminately. This yields *Charge 3: Wilful Inconsistency and Theoretical Incoherence*, or, as the prosecution will argue, treason against rigorous thought. The defence may reframe this as productive cognitive dissonance, a generative ambiguity that has enabled interdisciplinary dialogue. The prosecution will argue it is simply an inconsistency disguised as ambiguity.

Finally, the materialist position formalised by Impett and Offert (2023) as neural exchange value, and developed by Iapaolo (2026) through the figure of the latent subject, insists that latent spaces, however abstract mathematically, are instantiated in energy-consuming machines, incorporated into extractive for-profit applications, and entangled with structures of environmental destruction and economic inequality. The mathematical elegance of the object does not exempt it from the conditions of its existence (Dumas Primbault and Guhenneec 2026). This yields *Charge 4: Materiality Conveniently Ignored*. This is a charge that, as the performance will demonstrate, is also a charge against the trial itself: the very form of a scholarly proceeding tends to bracket material consequences in favour of epistemological debate.

Structure and Characters

The performance runs for approximately thirty minutes across three acts, beginning as something else entirely.

Act 1 opens as a conventional academic roundtable. Researchers are introduced; a welcome slide is projected; the moderator sets an agenda. The theoretical disagreement that the roundtable format cannot contain erupts as a conflict. Without announcement, the furniture is rearranged, the moderator becomes a judge, and the roundtable becomes a courtroom.

Act 2 stages the formal opening of proceedings. The court clerk reads the four charges. The Head Attorney for the Prosecution, who began the roundtable as its invited skeptic, delivers opening remarks. The Head Attorney for the Defense, who began as the invited proponent, responds. The two positions, previously constrained by collegial politeness, are now adversarial and unambiguous.

Act 3 calls three witnesses, each embodying a distinct scholarly and human position. The Digital Art Historian testifies to Charges 1 and 2, recounting, in stylised first-person, the experience of working with latent space visualisations as both revelatory and reductive. Under cross-examination by the defence, they are accused of the very behaviours they decry: using the tools, reproducing the compressions, and benefiting from the maps they critique. The Evangelist is called reluctantly by the prosecution to demonstrate Charge 3. The prosecution treats them as Plato treated the sophists, constantly trying to catch them in a contradiction. The defence's cross-examination functions more as reassurance than as interrogation, suggesting that the latent space doesn't care what the verdict is as much as it does about the loyalty of its followers. Finally, Eminent Domain testifies to Charge 4: a person whose living conditions have been destroyed by the construction of a data centre nearby. This testimony is constantly interrupted by defence objections of relevance, sustained by the judge. The material victim cannot speak without being silenced by procedural form. The bureaucratic repeated silencing destroys the trial itself, and participants return back to their original academic personas. A short remark by the now-Moderator concludes the roundtable.

Relevance

This performance contributes to xCoAx's central concerns at several levels simultaneously. It takes a concept native to computational arts research and submits it to the format of a trial, which is both structured rigorously and is theatrical in productive ways. It aims to perform the inter-disciplinarity that the field requires, staging disagreements between researchers with distinct methodological commitments. It employs AI as dramaturgical material rather than as subject of distant critique, making the technology present and active within the performance itself. And it refuses resolution: the interrupted verdict is an

expansion to the field of the audience, who leave informed, implicated, and equipped to forge their own opinion.

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