

ARTICLE

De-anthropomorphizing artificial intelligence: The human-machine continuum in the post-artificial era

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Abstract

Contemporary discussions of artificial intelligence (AI) in design disciplines tend to evaluate machine creativity in relation to human cognition, leaving AI's non-anthropomorphic character under-theorized. The present work uses the filmic narrative of *Annihilation* (2018) to challenge the persistent dismissal of AI's creative capabilities. Such skepticism often hinges on the problematic assumption that human traits—such as inspiration, intuition, consciousness, spontaneity, will, or emotion—are pre-requisites for creativity. This line of argumentation relies on an anthropomorphic approach that is unable to imagine or accept non-human modes of perception, cognition, and agency. Instead, the study first proposes adopting an apophatic approach, through which AI is defined not by the projection of human qualities but rather via negation, emphasizing what lies beyond human understanding. It then advocates for “alien phenomenology” as a method for accepting the non-human cognitive capabilities of AI. Accepting AI as an “alien intelligence” shifts the role of the artist toward critique and curation, underscoring the artistic talent in recognizing unexplored, alien forms of beauty.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; Post-artificial; *Annihilation*; Creativity; Alien intelligences; Alien phenomenology; Gray authorship; Human-machine continuum

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1. Alien intelligences

A meteoroid crashes into a lighthouse, creating a mysterious and expanding zone known as the Shimmer. Originating from this impact, the Shimmer begins to alter, distort, and recreate everything within its boundaries. In response, a group of specialists is sent on a mission to investigate the phenomenon. Inside, they encounter a landscape marked by unfamiliar mutations and hybridizations. As they move closer to the lighthouse, the Shimmer's effects intensify. Eventually, the only surviving member of the group, Lena, reaches the source, where she enters into a battle with what appears to be a reflection of herself. The confrontation ends with the dissolution of the Shimmer, but the surviving Lena emerges uncannily changed ([Figure 1](#)).

Apart from casually spoiling Alex Garland's 2018 film *Annihilation*, this synopsis serendipitously furnishes a filmic narrative to support a theory of artificial intelligence



Figure 1. An artificial intelligence-assisted comic strip outline of *Annihilation*'s main events (image created using Midjourney V.6 [Midjourney, Inc., USA])

(AI), especially as it relates to themes of creativity and authorship. In its speculation on AI, this writing accepts the risk of being read, in the not-so-distant future, as a historical account of pre-mature conceptions of AI by its charmingly misguided early users, especially given the pace of change driven by AI, which is so rapid that any attempt to outline its trajectory and scope already feels outdated.

Given that the present work does not seem to respect spoiler-alert etiquette, it may as well offer a flash-forward and jump to the conclusion. The main claim advanced here is that AI should be understood not as a deficient replica of human cognition but as an alien mode of intelligence whose operations unsettle humanist assumptions about agency, authorship, and creativity.

To make this claim, the study draws on two complementary methodologies: An apophatic strategy and an alien-phenomenological strategy. Whereas apophasis clears conceptual space through negation by clarifying what AI is not, alien phenomenology offers a constructive method that fills that space by hinting at what AI can be. Together, these approaches form a methodological pair: The former suspends anthropomorphic assumptions,

while the latter enables an ontographic engagement with AI. The film *Annihilation* is employed here not merely as narrative ornamentation but as an analytical instrument to interrogate the epistemic and aesthetic unfamiliarity of AI. The Shimmer functions as a conceptual device for theorizing AI as an alien cognitive ecology that is distributed, impersonal, and indifferent.

In this sense, the analysis presented here is intentionally theoretical, relying on interpretive methods and philosophical reflection rather than empirical data. While theoretical speculations on AI within design disciplines still appear largely reliant on repetitious technical discussions that once again explain the differences between generative adversarial networks and diffusion models,¹ non-disciplinary perspectives may better illuminate the epistemic shifts AI is producing—much as investigating the Shimmer required a highly interdisciplinary team. After

¹ After a lengthy history of artificial intelligence (AI), entire chapters of most AI-related books in design fields read like a lexicon—once again providing definitions for concepts, such as deep learning, reinforcement learning, supervised learning, unsupervised learning, machine vision, datasets, transformers, artificial general intelligence, and, of course, everyone's favorite: the singularity.

all, the influence of electricity—another paradigm-shifting technology—on infrastructure, transportation, urbanism, the economy, production, or even lifestyles cannot be grasped simply by explaining concepts, such as electrons, electric charge, electric current, static versus current electricity, or direct versus alternating current. Similarly, it is time to move beyond purely technical explanations of AI that gesture toward epistemic implications yet rarely progress beyond surface mechanics.

Theorizations of AI offered here do not claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive. Rather, they offer a pathology of prevalent (mis)understandings of AI while equipping readers with alternative ways of approaching AI that are more productive and inspiring.

2. AI phenomenology

Can AI be creative? Can it create art? Can it *poétiser* (compose poetry)? The persistent recurrence of such question(ing)s (e.g., an interviewer asking Israeli public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari whether “music that’s composed by AI... [is] real or fake?”¹) is reminiscent of the parable attributed to Francis Bacon: A group of monks using ancient books and chronicles to uncover the number of teeth in a horse’s mouth without ever attempting to count them directly.² A more illuminating question might instead ask how it is that, despite numerous examples of AI creating art, music, and poetry, theoretical denials persist. Is this struggle to keep poetry, creation, and authorship exclusive to humans an attempt to avoid the consequences of ascribing agency to non-humans? Perhaps it is an unconscious reaction to the epistemic ruptures that positive responses to the first three questions would ignite.

Elsewhere, I have written that “technologies have a reciprocal relationship to the production of knowledge” and can thus “cause epistemic raptures.”^{3(p82)} There, I give the example of Molla Hadi Sabzevari (1797–1873), a renowned Iranian philosopher, who was approached by the court photographer to have his portrait taken. Upon learning about the nature of this new invention, the Molla denied the possibility of photography, arguing that accidental properties of an object have no autonomous existence independent of the object itself. In the absence of an object, he maintained, a shadow could not exist on its own.⁴ Yet the enduring photograph of the Molla, surviving long beyond his presence, single-handedly calls into question the validity of an entire intellectual framework. Similar innovative ideas—such as those introduced by Gutenberg, Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin—have fundamentally disrupted established hierarchies of knowledge.

Yet those who ignore the authorial agency that AI already possesses often rely on a simple *a priori* logical

argument built on a premise that runs as follows: AI lacks (self-)determination, intuition, feeling, belief, spontaneity, improvisation, experience, imagination, consciousness, inspiration, self-awareness, emotion, revelation, or some similar quality, and thereby make the case for their desired conclusion.

The renowned American linguist and intellectual Noam Chomsky, for example, views AI developments as “something so trivial when contrasted with the human mind” and makes the following claim:

“However useful these [AI] programs may be, they differ profoundly from how humans reason and use language. These differences place significant limitations on what these programs can do, encoding them with ineradicable defects.”⁵

By no means do I intend to dismiss the substance of Chomsky’s argument presented below;² rather, the disintegration imposed on the remainder of Chomsky’s discussion here is meant to draw attention to the central bias in such a structure of reasoning:

The human mind is not, like ChatGPT and its ilk... On the contrary, the human mind is... The child’s operating system is completely different from that of a machine learning program... Human-style thought is based on... However, ChatGPT and similar programs are... Unlike humans, who are... these programs learn... Whereas humans are... machine learning systems can... For this reason [desired conclusion].⁵

Regardless of their truth value, such argumentations are grounded in an anthropomorphic understanding of AI, that is, the assumption that the inner mechanics of intelligence are exclusive to the means of cognition experienced by humans, and that machine intelligence must therefore operate according to similar modalities. Such projections of human qualities onto AI are highly misleading, as artist and theorist Lev Manovich observes. “Current discussions about the adoption of AI in visual arts, design, architecture,”

² It is important to acknowledge that skeptical positions on artificial intelligence (AI) processes and outputs raise numerous legitimate considerations. Critics, including Chomsky, rightly express concern about how AI might “degrade our science and debase our ethics.” The author does not dispute that large-scale models reproduce biases embedded in their training data, or that the infrastructures of AI production raise unresolved questions regarding labor, authorship, and copyright. However, the argument advanced here diverges from these positions not by dismissing such concerns, but by decoupling them from the question of AI’s (creative) ontology. These critiques appropriately caution against idealizing or romanticizing AI’s capacities, yet the author maintains that the scale of epistemic disruption caused by AI is titanic, and that the dismissive indifference exhibited by some critics leaves us unprepared for its impact.

he writes, “often rely on widely accepted ideas about art and creativity. These include such notions as ‘Art is the most creative human domain’... ‘Their art comes from the inside, from their imagination’... ‘It is driven by intuition and expresses emotions.’ Most importantly, art is considered the exclusive domain of human creativity.”^{6(p62)}

This personification bias may paradoxically arise from our inability to comprehend non-human modes of comprehension. Human qualities, such as emotion and intuition should thus be deemed irrelevant in evaluating AI and its potential creativity or authorship. Imagine a group of pigeons questioning human navigational abilities on the grounds that humans lack active magnetoreception—a sense that enables organisms, such as pigeons to detect the Earth’s geomagnetic field. The premise of the argument may be undisputed, but its conclusion rests on a limited, pigeon-morphic understanding of navigation.

3. Othering AI

As Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist, puts it, “we approach [AI] in the wrong way when we ask the question, “will it be able to think, really?” And by this, we usually mean think like us humans.”⁷ A productive approach may instead entail the opposite, namely, the defamiliarization of AI. Humanity’s problematic history of Othering—understood as the perception and treatment of objects, individuals, or groups as fundamentally different from oneself—may, for once, prove useful. Othering AI should be understood here as a methodological strategy to distance AI from human traits; it is by no means intended to disregard the undeniable influence of human intelligence on the creation and development of AI tools.

Such distancing methods are not unprecedented. Apophatic theology, for example, is a theological approach that attempts to understand the divine by contemplating what God is not rather than what God is, thereby acknowledging the limitations of human understanding in grasping the divine. One may argue that while apophatic approaches to AI can initially create the desired effect of defamiliarization—which is, in itself, illuminating—they may ultimately fail to offer deeper insight into the complexity of AI.

Here, I would like to offer “alien phenomenology” as a complementary approach that can reconnect humans with AI. Introduced by Ian Bogost, a scholar of game design and media studies, in his 2012 book of the same title, alien phenomenology argues that understanding the experiences of non-human entities requires a philosophical approach that moves beyond traditional human-centered methods. Bogost proposes

ways of examining how non-human entities—objects, environments, and systems—experience and interact with the world, an approach that can be productively extended to AI. “Ontography,” for example, describes how cataloging the rich interactions between objects enable an understanding of their existence and operations. “Carpentry,” as another example, presents the practice of making things as a philosophical method that allows for direct engagement with the world of objects.

In a loose sense, *Annihilation* may be seen as both ontographical, as it functions as a filmic catalog of interactions between humans and an unfamiliar entity, and carpentry-like, because, through the production of an art form, it reveals ideas about its subject that might otherwise have remained unmanifested. In this regard, the film arguably provides deeper insight into AI than Garland’s earlier work, *Ex Machina* (2014), which more directly engages themes of artificial consciousness. Garland himself has described *Annihilation* as a continuation of *Ex Machina*, lending some legitimacy to the speculative extrapolation proposed here.⁸ Clearly, I am in no way suggesting that these AI-oriented interpretations of the film were intended by its creators. Nevertheless, the film provides a vivid and immersive narrative and visual framework that aids in articulating a de-anthropomorphized conception of AI.

4. Décollaging the shimmer

The “Chinese Room” analogy offers a model of AI’s inner mechanisms that paradoxically leads to a more disengaged understanding. In this thought experiment, articulated by American philosopher John Searle, we imagine a person confined in a room with a computer, who receives notes in Chinese from outside, inputs them into the computer program, and returns a Chinese response—without any understanding of the content being exchanged. In this analogy, AI, according to Searle, is like that person: It produces accurate and complete responses without any comprehension—it is devoid of awareness.

The Chinese room is only comforting under the presupposition that human modes of self-awareness and comprehension are pre-requisites to intelligence, creativity, and authorship. Not considering the anthropomorphic fallacy of this premise, the claim also relies on the assumption that the inner mechanics of human awareness are sufficiently understood to establish a contrast with AI. Any comparison between AI and human cognition, however, must be tempered by the realization that studies on the internal complexities of our cognitive architecture remain surprisingly underdeveloped, largely inconclusive,

and somewhat speculative.^{3 9-13}

In contrast, the brilliance of the “Turing Test” lies in the fact that, unlike the Chinese Room model, it does not concern itself with AI’s internal processes. This is a conscious position by Turing, as he writes: “An important feature of a learning machine is that its teacher will often be very largely ignorant of quite what is going on inside.”^{14(p21)} The test’s focus is solely on the output. Can we not then agree that AI’s outputs can be incredibly creative, artistic, and poetic, even if the process lacks the cognitive mechanisms that humans experience? After all, even if AI never “feels,” it still feeds off vast amounts of data infused with centuries of human emotions, sensations, and passions.

I am aware (and frankly surprised) that some still reject AI’s creative outputs as mere imitations or collages of human data, thereby questioning their originality. Architectural historian Mario Carpo, for example, describes generative AI as a glorified imitation engine. This sentiment captures a persistent hesitation to acknowledge AI’s generative processes as constitutive rather than derivative.¹⁵ Bart Lootsma similarly suggests that “we should not understand these AI programs as forms of intelligence that can generate something really new and unexpected.”^{16(p12)}

Such positions should fade in the face of growing evidence that AI-generated artistic output can not only be indistinguishable from human-made works but also compete at the highest levels of recognition. For example, in 2021, Ahmad Elgammal and his team began working on Beethoven’s unfinished 10th Symphony. Although Beethoven had sketched much of the first movement before his death, the remaining parts—including three additional movements—were completed using AI. The outcome was so convincing that even Beethoven scholars could not distinguish between the human-composed and AI-generated segments.¹⁷ In another case, the winner of the 2023 Sony World Photography Award, German photographer Boris Eldagsen, later revealed that the image was generated by AI.¹⁸

Yuval Noah Harari similarly suggests that, when it comes to creativity, the trait may now belong more to AI

³ Despite decades of research in neuroscience, cognitive science, and the philosophy of mind, our understanding of the internal mechanisms underlying human thought remains partial. David Chalmers, professor of philosophy and neural science, identifies this gap as the “hard problem” of consciousness—the persistent mystery of how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience.^{9, 10} Similarly, Michael Gazzaniga argues that neuroscience has only just begun to unravel the intricacies of decision-making and free will.¹¹ Antonio Damasio reinforces this view, emphasizing that, while emotion and self-awareness can be neurologically mapped to some extent, a comprehensive theory of consciousness still eludes us.¹² Thomas Nagel contends that conscious experience, by its very nature, resists objective explanation.¹³

than to humans. He supports this claim by referring to chess tournaments, where judges only begin to suspect AI-assisted cheating when a player’s move is strikingly unprecedented, unorthodox, and original—in other words, creative.¹⁹

Reducing AI-generated art to unoriginal copying is based on the flawed supposition that humans, in contrast, are capable of creating in a vacuum, without external influence. Dismissing AI art as mere collage—an automated remixing of existing material without true creativity—is equally mistaken. Mario Carpo draws a compelling analogy to the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, who, tasked with portraying the ideal beauty of Helen of Troy, selected features from five different models to create a single composite image.²⁰ Similarly, AI systems today draw from vast datasets not to replicate but to synthesize—blending elements in novel and context-sensitive ways.

In a similar sense, the creations of the Shimmer in *Annihilation*, which resemble early AI art, are not mere collages of surrounding natural elements—the Shimmer curates, combines, and creates new beings. The vegetated human forms, the deer with branching flower-like antlers, the crystalized trees, the moving, snake-like intestinal structures, the alligator with shark-like teeth, as well as the bear-like creature that emits human screams, are creative outputs from “the systemic hybridization of all entities that pass through its immersive alien ecology” (Figure 2).^{21(p208)} Perhaps AI should also be considered a form of alien ecology—an unfamiliar Shimmer, with no clear agenda.

This alien quality of the Shimmer is emphasized by Garland:

When we deal with aliens, we often make them like us in some way. Maybe they want to eat us or maybe they want our water, our resources, or they want to teach us about galactic federations, or whatever happens to be. However, these are all human concerns, and it seems like a legitimate thing to say that an alien might not be like us in any way at all. Moreover, we are motivated by things and have agendas, and an alien might not have an agenda or might not be motivated, and so it was an attempt to create an alien, alien.²²

It is equally legitimate to say the same about AI (try reading the text while replacing “alien beings” with AI). Perhaps this explains why Harari prefers to think of AI as standing for alien intelligence.^{23, 24} Othering AI, as an alien counterpart to the human self, can thus serve as a creative method to rethink and reconceptualize human identity. Alien phenomenology of AI would, in a complementary manner, function as Lacan’s “mirror stage” for humanity.²⁵ Just as an infant first recognizes its reflection in a mirror,

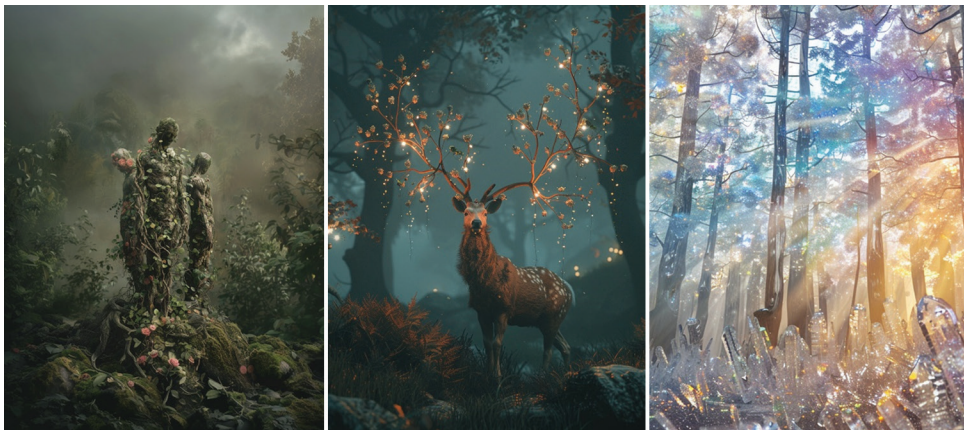


Figure 2. The unfamiliar, but beautiful, creations of the Shimmer, as interpreted by artificial intelligence (created in Midjourney V. 6 [Midjourney, Inc., USA])

marking the formation of self-identity, the uncanny experience of being an object of gaze to an alien intelligence could evoke a collective self-consciousness about our own existence (Figure 3).⁴

Lena's confrontation with her doppelgänger could be read as the challenge of accepting the unrecognizable reflection of oneself in the heavy synthetic gaze of an alien other. In the end, what Lena returns to is not herself, but a version revised by the encounter. Similarly, AI redefines us—not through malice, but by the brute fact of its perception. To be seen by an alien intelligence is to be interpreted, categorized, and reconceptualized.

5. Who is the fairest one of all?

Early signs of revisiting human intelligence through AI are already abundant. Contrary to the common assumption that AI behavior merely simulates neurological functions, it is occasionally AI models that have expanded and enriched our limited (neuroscientific) understanding of the human mind. For instance, the technique of predictive perception in AI seems to have offered an explanation for pareidolia—the human tendency to perceive meaningful patterns in random, disordered stimuli.²⁶ Similarly, the backpropagation technique, according to Neil Leach, an AI-specializing architect and theorist, provides a more compelling account



Figure 3. Singularity interpreted as artificial intelligence's mirror stage, through which it gains self-awareness by recognizing its objecthood to human gaze (image created in Midjourney V. 6 [Midjourney, Inc., USA])

of the mechanisms behind creative design.²⁷ Neuroscientist Erik Hoel, drawing on his research on AI, has described dreaming as a response to the human brain's overfitting of received information.^{28,29} In this sense, it is quite fitting when Žižek suggests that perhaps it is actually human intelligence that resembles computer operations.²⁷

By disturbing our self-conception, AI also complicates traits traditionally attributed to humanity, such as authorship, creativity, and agency. To reapproach these ideas, it is important to acknowledge the reductionism involved in situating the “artificial” (as problematic as the concept is) in a dichotomous relation with the “real” or the “human.” Once the binary formulation of human/artificial is replaced with a continuum, authorship too becomes a spectrum. The concept of “gray authorship” gains meaning through this posthumanist perspective. In certain strands of posthumanist discourse—especially

⁴ This discussion of artificial intelligence (AI) as a mirror should not be confused with Shannon Vallor's use of the mirror metaphor in *The AI Mirror*. Vallor posits that AI acts as a mirror reflecting our existing societal values and biases, cautioning that this reflection can perpetuate and ossify harmful patterns if uncritically accepted. In contrast, the author's (of the current work) approach interprets the AI mirror as an encounter with an alien Other, leading to transformative self-awareness, whereas Vallor views it as a reflection of our existing selves, emphasizing the risks of uncritical acceptance of this image.

those influenced by feminist scholar Donna Haraway—the human is understood as a constantly mutating composite, inseparable from its technological extensions.

AI should similarly be understood not as a singular entity but as a heterogeneous multiplicity. What we interact with is “artificial intelligences,” whose functionalities are inherently different. Text-based models are (at least currently, in the absence of fully developed multimodal models) quite different from image-based ones.⁵ Even among image-based AI tools, those using generative adversarial networks differ significantly from those based on diffusion models (the irony of reiterating this technically stale cliché is not lost on me. Here, however, it is not in the service of technological fetishism; rather, it is meant to underscore the heterogeneity of AI).

Therefore, within this messy spectrum of gray authorship, human agency can either be almost entirely forfeited to the machine (e.g., image works generated in Midjourney from minimal, ambiguous prompts, which might nevertheless appear quite impressive), or conversely, be so empowered that a distinguishable style of human authorship is recognizable (as seen in the AI-assisted architectural speculations of Chantal Matar, Joshua Vermillion, Hassan Ragab, and Kaveh Najafian).

This paper, though not a direct output of language models, cannot be fully attributed to pure human intelligence either. The grayness of authorship seems inescapable in a posthumanist era, as even our everyday tools—such as autocompletion, autocorrection, synonym suggestions, and yes, even the annoying red squiggle indicating Microsoft Word’s displeasure with my spelling of “posthumanist”—are all manifestations of AI’s unignorable involvement.

6. Human-machine continuum

According to this spectral approach, the consumption of AI-generated creative works is similarly non-uniform. It may very well be the case that audiences primarily seeking aesthetic pleasure from an artwork or pursuing knowledge from a text do not obsess over its method of creation. What if the text you are reading, including the previous paragraph that reluctantly dismissed AI’s direct involvement, were actually written by AI? One might imagine that its readership would not be deterred by AI-created content, as long as it offers value. However, “once the question is taken to its solipsistic extreme,” as I argue elsewhere, “then perhaps the response will not be as simple: What if all content that we process through our senses is artificially generated? Is the intelligence of this world (or this [text]), to

⁵ The two differ in several aspects, including architecture, input/output modalities, and training techniques.

keep the questions simple) worth tolerating its artificiality? Or does artificiality render its intelligence irrelevant?”^{30(p29)}

In scenarios in which the responses to these questions are respectively and resoundingly yes and no, one might even speak of “the death of the author” (or at least a near-death experience). Reapproaching the foundational essay by French literary theorist Roland Barthes through the lens of “gray authorship” reveals uncanny alignments with AI-generated content. For example, the idea that the writer (scriptor) does “not precede or transcend his writing” but “is born simultaneously with his text,” or that the text is “resulting from the thousand sources of culture,” or that “the writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine the different kinds of writing.”^{31(p4)}

In other contexts, however, the opposite view—which prioritizes the authors over the creations—can be as unquestionably justified. After all, do not many still follow chess tournaments with great enthusiasm, even though it has been over two decades since a human player could rival the brilliance, elegance, and creativity of AI gameplay? The reverence we reserve for human authorship—regardless of the objective quality of the work—is hardly unprecedented. A framed child’s drawing on a refrigerator does not mean that the parents were unfamiliar with Monet’s oeuvre; cave paintings by early humans are not necessarily admired for their technical prowess or artistic mastery, but rather for the identity of their creators.

7. The hallucinating genie

The act of creative production, too, is undergoing profound transformations. The fact that AI-generated works can easily surpass their human-made counterparts does not signal the end of human production. Poets will continue to write, not necessarily because they believe they can outdo AI (as most would not even contemplate reaching the levels of poetry achieved by Rumi, Shakespeare, or Goethe), but because of the liberating, fulfilling, and self-actualizing sensation of creation itself. Similarly, chess players will continue to play, not under the illusion of ever defeating AI, but for the rewarding feelings of accomplishment, suspense, and distraction.

There is, however, little doubt that the production of art, thought, and poetry is destined to change radically in a post-AI era. As Mario Klingemann, one of the pioneers of AI-assisted art, puts it, AI is like a genie^{32,33}—it can grant the artist’s wishes. What sets one artist apart from another is the extent of their wishes (which is no simple task). Kostas Terzidis, an academic in the field of design and innovation, suggests that with the advent of AI, we might very well imagine that “every possible form is already out

there”^{27(p79)]}—stored somewhere like a mine—and the artist’s role is to extract the gems. It is therefore quite understandable when American philosopher Graham Harman claims that, with advancements in AI production, it is the critic within the artist that becomes increasingly relevant.³⁴ The ability to recognize new, unfamiliar, and previously unimagined beauty (to admire alien aesthetics), becomes, in itself, a form of art that still holds value—perhaps more than ever.⁶

In fact, the framing of AI as an alien intelligence only amplifies this point. Today’s mainstream AI tools have been domesticated to fit human comprehension and taste; the moment they stray too far from our expectations, they are dismissed as non-sensical hallucinations (Figure 4).⁷ One wonders whether poetry written by a truly unrestrained, non-human intelligence would be intelligible to us at all—its music might not resonate, its humor might be lost on us. Just as the “beauty”⁸ of AlphaGo’s move 37 against South Korean Go champion Lee Sedol was not immediately understood, there may very well be many other moves whose brilliance still escapes us.^{27,35} The artist, in this sense, is someone with the prophetic gift of detecting such hidden treasures.⁹

8. The post-artificial era

⁶ Credit to Lena, who, despite all its horrors, was still able to recognize the “dreamlike” and “sometime beautiful” moments of the Shimmer.

⁷ In the field of artificial intelligence, hallucinations are non-sensical or distorted outputs generated by artificial intelligence models.

⁸ The author uses the word beauty here because that is how Go player Fa Hui described it.

⁹ This alludes to a *hadith qudsi*, which “has a very prominent role in Islamic mysticism,” in which God declares himself a “hidden treasure who wished to be known, and so created mankind.”

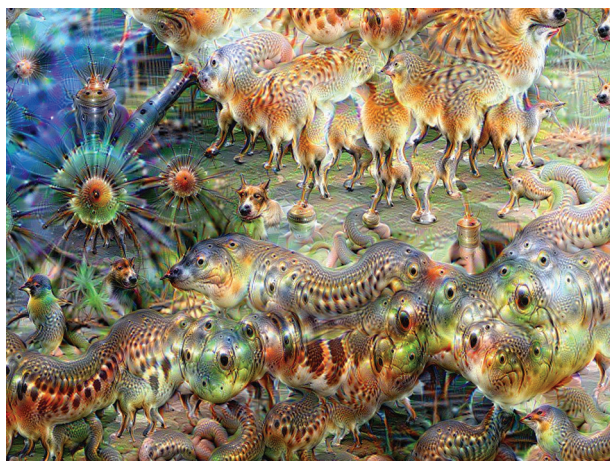


Figure 4. An example of early artificial intelligence art: *Aurelia-Aurita* by Google Deep Dream (2015). Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurelia-aurita-3-0099.jpg>.

At the question and answer session of a lecture I gave at Kent State University, a student communicated his frustration with the persistent suspicion his instructors show toward AI by suggesting that “a lot of architects, designers—they fear AI designs just because it’s like a cheat in a way.” “In fact,” I responded, “those who resist this [change brought by AI], you say out of fear—I think they are not fearful enough.”³⁶ I remains amazed by the dismissive way many approach AI, seemingly unfazed by the overwhelming magnitude of its creative, analytical, and generative power.

I wonder whether centuries of theological imagination have overprepared humans to accept the all-knowing, all-monitoring, always-present being that AI is set to become. This desensitization to AI’s godlike omniscience might obscure the even more unsettling implications of AI creativity. Complicating the conventional relationship between a creator and its creation, AI authorship opens possibilities for alternative theological speculations about our existence *vis-à-vis* the notion of a deity. Its capability to imagine and produce worlds, characters, narratives, and details seems devoid of agenda and intentionality. It even lacks recollection of what it has created.

AI generates outputs in discrete, episodic instances, and with every new creation, it operates like a reborn agent that may review past notes, update its information, and simulate an understanding of context, yet lacks continuity and singularity. It has no recollection of past creations (as the failure of AI plagiarism detectors testifies). The very structure of AI authorship is fragmented, amnesiac, and indifferent. Its creative process is disengaged and amoral, and thereby disconnected from, and unbothered by, the afterlife of its discarded creations.¹⁶ Applying a similar mode of authorship to human existence, one may wonder if God has forsaken us after all. It would then be valid to question whether He even cares.

The Shimmer similarly creates with no memory or attachment to its creations. Its cold, dispassionate process of creation (and annihilation) is eerily divine, yet utterly indifferent. The Shimmer is unanchored to any sustained sense of authorship; its creation is discontinuous, driven by inputs rather than any overarching memory or evolving intentionality. Its creations are forsaken; its victims are unintended.

However, no one remains unaffected by the Shimmer. “The person who started the journey, will not be the person who ends it.” Those who face it experience its disinterested, non-anthropomorphic qualities. “I don’t think it wanted anything,” says one character. “It is not like us,” says another. “It is unlike us. I do not know what it wants, or if it wants, but it will grow until it encompasses everything.” The disappearance of the Shimmer at the end

of the film should be read accordingly. We no longer see it—not because it ceased to exist, but because it became ubiquitous. “It is as though the Earth has been invaded by an invisible... alien species.” This last quote may very well sound like a dialogue about the Shimmer, but it is, in fact, a chilling description of AI by Neil Leach.^{27(p2)}

Once the rapidly growing Shimmer of AI “encompasses everything,” everything will return to a new normal—just as *Annihilation*’s ending implied. This new normal is what I called “post-artificial era” in my introduction to *A Purple Architecture*. The concept of post-artificial, at a terminological level, takes a jab at the word “artificial,” a term long burdened with the negative connotations of fakeness or inauthenticity. “Eventually,” as Frank Jacobus and Brian M. Kelly write, “AI will be so pervasive, so omnipresent, that the argument will not be about AI. it will be silly to call it AI.”^{29(p5)} The prefix “post” is not a claim to closure, but a marker of our passage beyond this current shimmer—beyond astonishment, denial, or fear. It names a time when AI is no longer the subject of awe, wonder, or fascination (or speculative essays like this one): A time when AI is simply “intelligence,” and when distributed cognition is the baseline rather than the exception. In such a future, it may very well be the descriptive prefix “human-” that marks rare moments of unaugmented thought or action. Perhaps there will even be a need for a qualifier to distinguish us—the pre-AI species, “the primitives of an unknown civilization”^{37(p150)}—before we come face to face with the fact that intelligence was never exclusively ours to begin with, before the uncanny glow haunts the eyes of all the forever-changed Lenas.

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