Authored Intelligence

AI and Anxieties about Origination

Heidi Rae Cooley

Figure 1. AI-generated image: What is an author?

We are more freaked out by the possibility that Artificial Intelligence will assume human powers to author works, than we are that media manipulation will undermine our ability to discern reality. This, at any rate, is the lesson of the Jianwei Xun affair, which roiled the theory-sphere and popular press in the EU earlier this year. Xun's book *Ipnocrazia. Trump, Musk e la nuova architettura della realtà* (*Hypnocracy: Trump, Musk, and the New Architecture of Reality*) extended a thesis familiar to readers of Jean Baudrillard's 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation* and its many precursors: the world known through media lacks verifiable points of reference. Trump and Musk, Xun contends, are virtuosos at exploiting such a situation, multiplying narratives in so frenzied a fashion as to render futile attempts to verify—or falsify—any one of them.

While "hypnocracy" undermines our confidence that any media report might be true, Xun nonetheless counts on the names "Trump" and "Musk" to indicate authors of this alarming state of affairs. That assumption also explains the scandal that attended the revelation that "Jianwei Xun" is not, in fact, a human individual, but rather the name that philosopher Andrea Colamedici gave to his collaboration with AI. As if to underscore that we find duplicity with respect to authorial identity more unsettling than a willful assault on the possibility of establishing a social reality, Xun's publication apparently violated European AI laws, while Trump's and Musk's behavior has, so far, survived legal challenge and has been politically rewarded.

The Xun affair foregrounds our assumptions regarding authored intelligence in the 21st century. We apparently have a lot at stake in the assumption that published works are products of unique, named, human individuals. AI distributes the assumption that *someone* writes. Interestingly, there are plenty of kinds of writing that we do not expect to be authored in this way, and that do not appear to disturb this assumption. When AI takes over Google search results, for example, authority is not in peril in the same way as in the Xun case. Who cared, really, about who or what compiled the brief outputs that used to appear in the Google's ranked list of web results? Accordingly, to have this replaced by synopses explicitly identified as an AI generated summary is no big deal. "[Does] it really matter," Raúl Limón asks, "if [what we read] was written by artificial intelligence?" Or, rather, why does it seem to matter in some cases but not so much in others?

This was among the questions that French post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault raised in the late 1960s in an essay called "What Is an Author?"[1] Instead of answering, Foucault troubled the question. He identified an "author-function" at work in socio-cultural formations. His essay explains that the end of the 18th century saw a shift in thinking about the figure of the author. From that point forward, "author" no longer simply referred to a certain type of individual of genius, their works and biography (that rich source from which originality flows). Instead, the concept served a "means of classification" (123).[2] The author's name became a point of relation connecting a series of texts, and it ordered relations among said texts. For example, one could organize an author's texts according to "early and late works" or "major and lesser works." But it also allowed for standardizing an author's works according to more wide-ranging categories of theme, style, period, quality (e.g., "literary," "popular," etc.). This kind of structuring oriented readers with respect to a larger catalogue of texts in and across literary traditions and cultures. Thus, the author as a function afforded greater

1 David J. Gunkel also takes up Foucault's "What Is an Author?" as a complement to Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author" essay in "AI Signals the Death of the Author."

2 Foucault, 123.

possibilities for managing knowledge—as collected in written form—and its distribution. Moreover, the author provided a means to regulate legality (i.e., ownership) and, therefore, accountability (i.e., responsibility), in addition to managing meaning, disciplining people and organizing things.

Despite Foucault's incisive observations, we have continued to treat the "the author" as a singular being boasting exceptional qualities, whose efforts are responsible for extraordinary works. For example, we likely recognize "Spielberg," "Austen," and "Nintendo" as authoring entities. And each serves an equivalent function, even as one is a director working in a highly collaborative corporate medium, one is a fiction author we think of as an isolated genius, and one is a multinational company that produces games and gaming consoles. In each case, the name organizes groups of works that "the author" seems to have "originated." In each case, creation involves some measure of collective activity (although this differs by medium and industry); naming singular authors (Spielberg, Austen, Nintendo) tends to disguise this fact. We bring different expectations to works "by" the likes of Spielberg, Austen, and Nintendo, not because those works were solely created by Spielberg, Austen and Nintendo but because, by force of habit, the names function as brands, directing our expectations and interpretations in advance.

Once we abandon our desire that the author's name should anchor our relationship to the work—telling us how to engage it—a different set of possibilities emerges. In a recent article in a special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* focused on AI, Bill Wasik highlights how scholars, historians in particular, are experimenting with the technology. Examples he cites include finding a possible "arc" for a book based on a 100-page document of research notes, parsing "tens of thousands of handwritten records," and crafting a title for a book based on a draft. But in the article's concluding paragraph, Wasik describes being presented with the possibility that "an intelligent agent" might not only assist in the authoring of a book but might also "[stay] attached to the book" as an interpretive assistant. Reluctant to draw any conclusions about what this possibility might mean for the future of authorship, Wasik simply concludes with a rhetorical "Who's to say?" Of course, the answer depends, in part, on the strength of our commitment to the function the author's name supplies and our expectations for its ordering our relations to authored materials.

Tech and culture writer Steven Johnson, whose example serves as a framing device for Wasik's article, offers additional insights in a follow-up Substack post. He indicates that his active experimentations with Google's AI platform NotebookLM amplify familiar processes of collaboration.[3] He uses the tool mainly for brain-storming and probing exercises, mobilizing it to "generate possibilities… experiment more freely, explore different hypotheses, or fill in blank spots that I've either forgotten or not yet discovered." In other words, as a human colleague might, A.I. provides support for thinking through ideas; it does not do the writing for him. In this way, it operates as "a conduit" between himself and the materials he's already gathered. As he explains, the AI platform is "doing the reading [and writing] *with* me."

Of course, we all know that authoring does not take place exclusively in the heads of isolated individuals. It has long been a collaborative endeavor. Colamedici, of the Xun experiment, speaks to this point in an interview with Anna Lagos for *Wired*. He states: "This is how we should use AI: as an interlocutor that helps us think differently." We need to keep exploring "how [we] learn when using it." Colamedici's approach to AI is

3 It is worth noting that Johnson is Editorial Director at Google Labs, where he assisted in the development of NotebookLM.

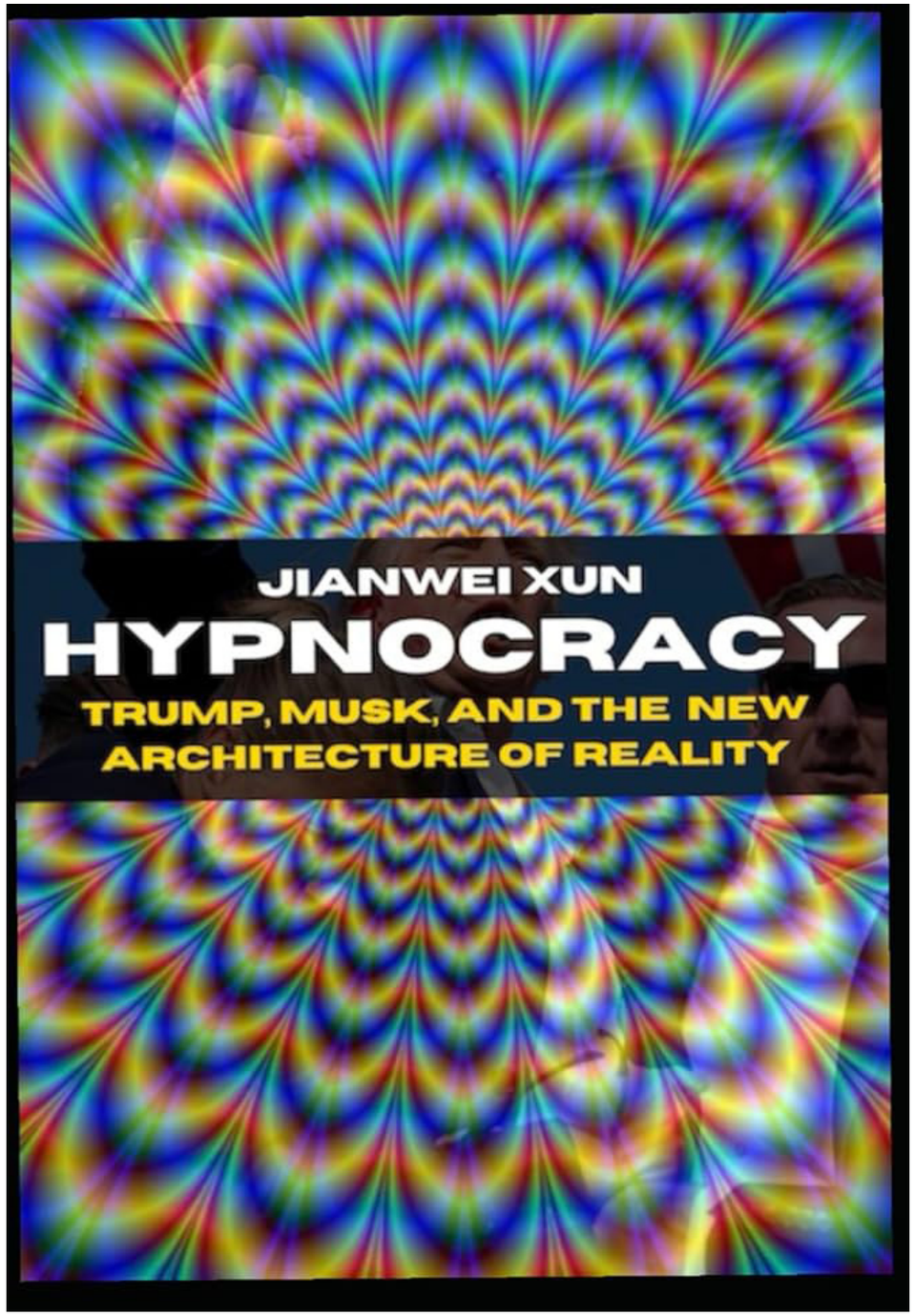

Figure 2. Screenshot: Amazon page for *Hypnocracy* by Jianwei Xun

"antagonistic"; he uses it to challenge his own thinking, creating instances of opposition with his writing. For Colamedici, not unlike Johnson, the point is to inspire and sustain curiosity. He explains that we can't afford to allow the tools created by big tech companies to "choose the data [and] the connections among it," pushing slick, facile—numbing—outputs for us to consume. We can't afford to become passive; we can't afford to "misuse" AI by "treating it as some sort of oracle" that can "tell [us] the answer to the world's questions."

In other words, we shouldn't grant AI the authority to author, but instead lean into its potential to revise the work both of creating and of consuming works.

Currently, we are far, far too willing to make "Trump," Musk," and "AI" authors of our present. The bigger question of how societies, create, consume, and act on information is far more fundamental and urgent. As Foucault wrote, "What matter who's speaking?" We should ask, rather, how communities are informed.

Figure 3. AI-generated image: Map precedes the territory

Resources

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. NY, New York: The Noonday Press, 2977 (1967). 142-148.

Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*. Ed. and Intro. Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977. 113-138.

Gunkel, David J. "AI Signals the Death of the Author." *Noēma*, June 4, 2025. https://www.noemamag.com/ai-signals-the-death-of-the-author/.

"Jianwei Xun." *Ipnocrazia.Trump, Musk e la nuova architettura della realtà*. Tlon, 2024.

Johnson, Steven. "Machine Readable." Adjacent Possible, Substack, June 25, 2025. https://substack.com/home/post/p-166795169.

Lagos, Anna. "A Philosopher Released an Acclaimed Book about Digital Manipulation. The Author Ended Up Being AI." Wired, April 28, 2025. https://www.wired.com/story/an-acclaimed-book-about-digital-manipulation-was-actually-written-by-ai/.

Limón, Raúl. "Jianwei Xun, the supposed philosopher behind the hypnocracy theory does not exist and is a product of artificial intelligence?" in "Technology," *El País*, April 7, 2025. https://english.elpais.com/technology/2025-04-07/jianwei-xun-the-supposed-philosopher-behind-the-hypnocracy-theory-does-not-exist-and-is-a-product-of-artificial-intelligence.html

Wasik, Bill. "A.I. Is Poised to Rewrite History. Literally." *The New York Times Magazine*, June 16, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/16/magazine/ai-history-historians-scholarship.html