

The image features a young woman in the foreground on the left, wearing a grey and white plaid shirt and dark jeans, looking down at her smartphone. The background is a dense crowd of AI-generated faces, each with a unique expression and hairstyle, set against a grey, tiled floor. The overall aesthetic is futuristic and digital.

Athenaeum *Review*

Issue 12 • Fall 2025

**SPECIAL ISSUE
ON AI**

Journal of the HARRY W. BASS JR. SCHOOL OF ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND TECHNOLOGY
and THE EDITH O'DONNELL INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY
at THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS

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What is an Intelligence? AI and the Struggle for Embodiment

Athenaeum Review

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON AI

Generative AI in the Context of the Arts and Humanities

Nils Roemer

GENERATIVE AI, A SUBSET OF artificial intelligence focused on creating new content, has evolved significantly over the past few decades. From pioneer Alan Turing's idea of machines that could simulate human intelligence, to the current iterations of OpenAI's GPT-3 (2020), GPT-4 (2023) and now GPT-4 (2025), AI is demonstrating remarkable abilities. Generative AI, evolving from its early rule-based systems in the 1950s to today's sophisticated deep learning models, is impacting creative fields like visual and performing arts, literature, and the humanities. AI-generated art, particularly with models like DALL·E and Stable Diffusion, has gained traction, capable of creating breathtaking visual artworks from mere text prompts.

Discussion around AI, the arts, humanities and higher education invariably turn to questions of plagiarism, policies, guidelines, task forces and working groups. Yet the task ahead may not simply be to create frameworks for the integration of generative AI into higher learning, but the extent to which AI will require a fundamental rethinking of higher education. AI not only offers new ways to

organize and retrieve knowledge, but disrupts what it means to know and create. Viewing AI only as a faster retrieval tool limits our grasp of its transformative potential. Mapping the use of AI technology into Benjamin Bloom's cognitive taxonomy creates a sense of continuity where there is disruption.

As a child, I recall the quiet thrill of each month's delivery: a red-bound volume of an encyclopedia. My parents' subscription was more than just educational; it was aspirational. Knowledge, then, promised social mobility. Shelves filled with these volumes marked a path from lower middle-class strivings to success. Years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, distant relatives from former East Germany sold the same encyclopedias door-to-door, serving as symbols of a knowledge economy undergoing a transformative phase. But soon, even they lost their appeal. CD-ROMs replaced spines. Then came Wikipedia. Now, ChatGPT. With each shift, knowledge has become easier to access and harder to define.

For much of our information-based knowledge culture, spanning from the early

modern period through the enlightened encyclopedia of the eighteenth century, to the museums, standardized school curriculum, and higher education of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knowledge and information held a powerful promise of expertise and social advancement. However, in today's classrooms, AI equipped students will make knowledge transfer as a key learning outcome superfluous.

GenAI can help to amplify our ideation process through chain prompting, provide feedback, help us make connections between different sciences, and challenge our assumptions. It is great at recognizing when an interpretative process is biased and informed by an existing canon of commonly accepted concepts and theories. GenAI may not just help make sense of larger data samples, but also identify missing voices, invite one to reverse one's premises, and deal with counterexamples. Whose stories are left out of the archive? Can we recover them?

Placing AI in opposition to human intelligence creates a symmetry that only partly maps the distinct ways that the arts and humanities create knowledge. We marvel, for example, at models trained on terabytes, and at visualizations mapping global flows. In the age of AI, scale seduces. But this celebration of volume may obscure the value of the singular. A poem. A sculpture. A voice. The arts and humanities have long offered a counterweight to scale; they dwell in the fragment, the improvisation, and the unresolved. The arts and humanities offer diverse ways of knowing and perceiving the world, that manifest in impressionistic glances and interjections, jazz improvisation, the stream-of-consciousness of writing, and performative art. Scale does not override singular experiences.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard suggested that all literary images originate in fundamental material experiences of embodied life, such as shelter and exposure, nesting and journeying. The singular places we have

inhabited are coded into our bodily memory. Singular memories and unique experiences like these shape us as individuals, just as much as there is something irreducible and very profound that happens in Schubert's *String Quintet in C Major, D. 956*, Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9*, or Strauss' *Last Songs*. They explore themes of vulnerability, sense of departure and acceptance in their own unique ways. They each in turn engage questions of life and meaning that resonate and take form as thoughts in us as listeners. Enlarging the musical data sample would diminish its meaning and our ability to engage with it.

In the arts and humanities, thinking is not only knowing, but an embodied process. Writing is a process of thinking, not only of articulation. We think about, with, and through our bodies. Indeed, thinking and making are, as Erin Manning and Erin Brian Massumi argue in *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (2014), "a mode of thought, already in the act. To dance: a thinking in movement. To paint: a thinking through color. To perceive in the everyday: a thinking of the world's varied ways of affording itself. In each of these cases, and the others encountered in this book, the practice in question will be constructed as mode of thought creatively in the act."¹ This aligns with concepts like Jeffrey Baumgartner's "Anticonventional thinking" (ACT), where creative thinking and action are integral parts of each other, and with modes of thinking and creating that are as much about the output as they are about the process.

Distinguishing human creativity and discovery from generative AI, however, at the same time requires us to imagine the use of generative AI beyond efficiency and productivity. Can we think with AI, not just

¹ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), vii.



Gustav Klimt, *Philosophy*, 1900-1907. oil on canvas, 430 x 300 cm (destroyed) University of Vienna Faculty Paintings. Photo: Moritz Nähr (1859-1945).

through it? In a recent podcast, David Hanson, the creator of the robot Sophia, emphasized the possibilities of AI as co-creator, but also urged that in this human collaboration with robots, we ought to humanize the robots in order to stay connected with our humanity.² Taking to heart these words might lead us to a path where AI prompts us to discover new ways of thinking, and what it means to "know" or "create" in a world of generative machines. Can AI become our partner? With the increased opportunities of customized ChatGPTs and Google Geminis, users have the ability to decide, if not how the technology is evolving, how they are using it.

² Nils Roemer, "Dr. David Hanson on The Future of Humanlike Robots & AI," *Spool Podcast*, March 4, 2025.

There is much that remains unnoticed if we treat AI only as a multi-talented creator and accelerator of efficiency and productivity. We can talk to AI the way we talk to humans. We can even dialog and direct AI away from being a tool, a creator of mundane tasks, and interpreter of large information, toward being a thinking partner. Where will prompts like these lead us? "Your role is not to answer but to guide. For each user input, ask 2-3 probing questions that help us think more deeply about an idea? "You are a creative collaborator. Your task is to question, not to answer. For every input the user gives, respond with thoughtful, open-ended questions that help them expand, rethink, or reframe their ideas. Avoid conclusions. Emphasize curiosity."

Our age of change, uncertainty and opportunity is not the first period that reframes our ways of exploring, discerning, and knowing. At the end of the last century, Gustav Klimt had been commissioned to produce three paintings to adorn the university building on Vienna's Ringstraße: *Jurisprudence*, *Medicine and Philosophy*. Though SS officers tragically destroyed the paintings in 1945, detailed black and white photos and a few color snippets and records have preserved versions of the original paintings. Now, with the help of Google Arts and Culture, a full-sized color AI-assisted reproduction is on display at the lower Belvedere in Vienna as well in a virtual Google gallery.³ Visiting Vienna this summer and seeing the paintings became an invitation to see our debates from the perspective of Klimt about the nature of knowledge and the university. How similar or dissimilar are issues Klimt confronted in his University of Vienna ceiling paintings (1900–1907) to the crises we face in universities today? Both times shared questions about knowledge, power, and the extent to which knowledge is also an embodied production.

Klimt painted in a world still clinging to grand universal systems—Truth, Reason, Justice—in which universities functioned as the new places of knowledge production. His *Philosophy* offers a refusal of rational optimism of the Enlightenment-era academia; instead, it presents knowledge as spectral, dark, and unknowable. Today, in the post-truth era and amidst the rise of AI, many scholars again feel that knowledge has lost its ground. We certainly are experiencing an epistemological anxiety. Who gets to define truth, and what constitutes legitimate knowledge, are open—and contested—questions. Instead, Klimt centered knowledge in the naked, vulnerable body—a radical gesture in a university setting that idealized abstraction and reason.

³ "Gustav Klimt – The Faculty Paintings, Google Arts and Cultures," https://artsandculture.google.com/story/gustav-klimt-the-faculty-paintings/XwUhMS_zkPdZzw?hl=en

Looking at the reconstruction to scale, the compositions are vertical and cascading, evoking a descent or perhaps a journey with human forms entangled, fading in and out of visibility. There is no central perspective and no vanishing point. Instead of illustrating knowledge, the paintings immerse us in it—chaotic, unknowable, and unresolvable. Bodies appear to emerge and dissolve in rhythmic patterns, as if caught in a wave or current, suggesting permeability, instability.

Startling too is the color. There are muted greys, golds, and greens, with pale, spectral flesh tones. Light is diffused, not a source of clarity but of obscurity. Gold and shimmer appear in non-anatomical zones, suggesting non-human intelligence or spiritual resonance. Color does not aid recognition—it seduces and destabilizes. It offers beauty as well as ambiguity, but not resolution. No figure claims dominance. Knowledge is not heroic. There is no Socrates, no Newton—only entangled flesh and fading spirit.

Roughly one hundred years later, in the late 20th century, thinkers like Jean Baudrillard argued that modern life has entered a "hyperreal" phase, where signs and symbols have replaced direct experience. Baudrillard was thinking at the time about Disneyland and reality TV, but he would have been struck by generative AI and how it thrives in this postmodern terrain. It creates plausible simulacra: tweets that sound like a person, songs that mimic a vibe, essays that echo a perspective and even the songs and videos of Plave, a virtual K-pop AI boy band. Plave's members are digital humans rendered in Unreal Engine. Superkind, another K-pop group that merges human and virtual members, employs both 2D and 3D avatars. These groups exemplify the increasing impact of AI in K-pop, with some utilizing it to enhance vocals, create virtual realms, or even generate new music. The constant stream of production has transcended the traditional concept of an encyclopedia. It is no longer contained and finite and knowledgeable but,

The task ahead may not simply be to create frameworks for the integration of generative AI into higher learning, but the extent to which AI will require a fundamental rethinking of higher education.

like Klimt's *Philosophy*, a state of immersion and not mastery.

Klimt's painting caused an outcry and suggested a crisis of knowledge, yet his immersive depiction of knowledge might be indicative of knowledge as a state of search. Neuroscientist Eric Kandel calls this era in Vienna the Age of Insight: a moment when art, science and the humanities converged to explore how we make meaning.⁴ Klimt's *Philosophy* doesn't offer a tidy thesis; it stages a question. It insists that knowledge is bodily, vulnerable, emotional, and that truth may reside not in clarity, but in complexity. Klimt's fin-de-siecle years in Vienna conjure images not only of crisis, but also of profound insight. In the year Klimt unveiled *Philosophy*, Sigmund Freud published his monumental *Interpretation of Dreams*. Klimt's paintings depict not only a crisis, a critical distance to university learning, but also an invitation into the world as a realm of existence and experiences with uncharted curiosity.

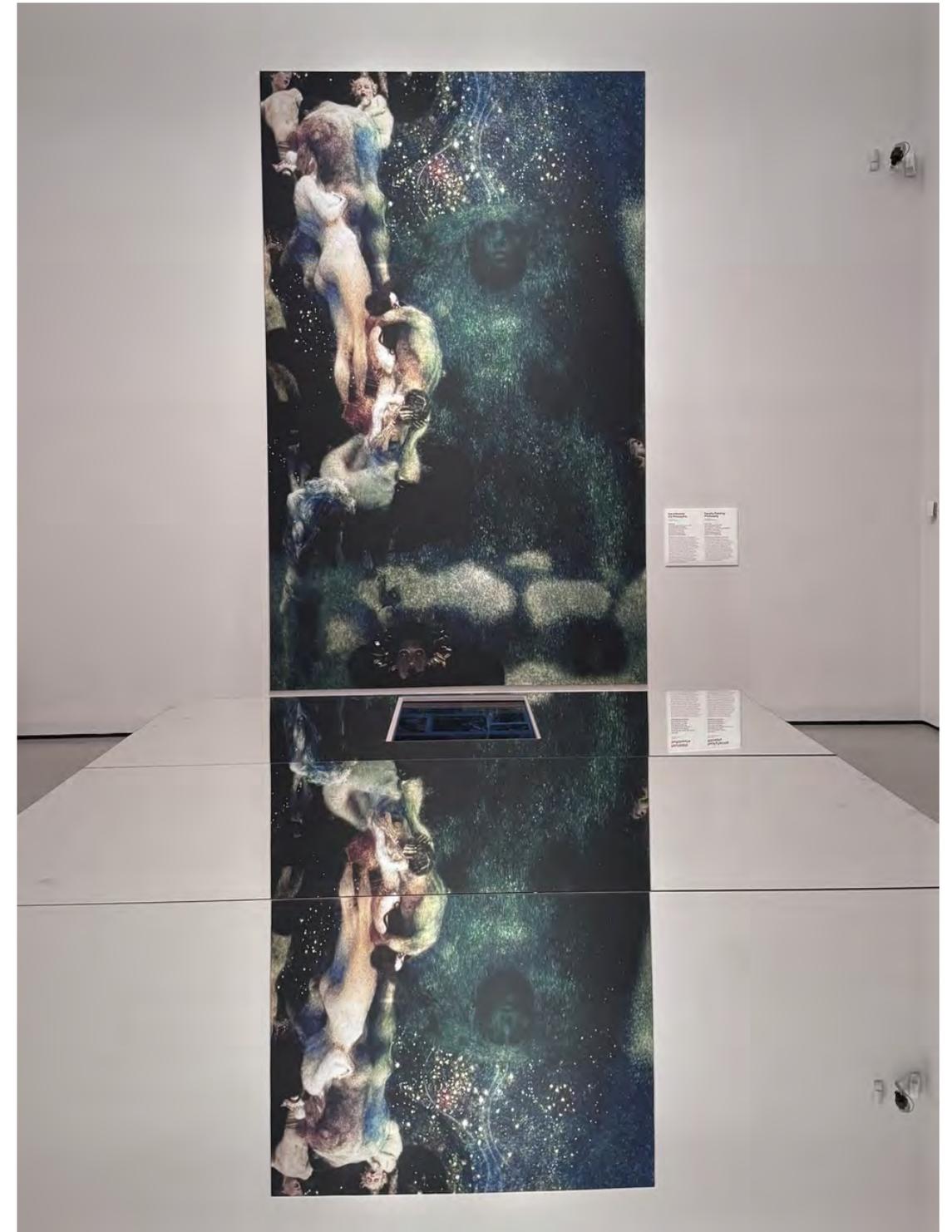
In scale and color, the restored version returns something of the original and its immersive and questioning qualities. Klimt's *Philosophy* does not explain. It disorients. Standing before its AI-assisted reproduction in the Belvedere, I felt no mastery but vertigo. There is no center. No clarity. Figures emerge and dissolve like memory itself. If Enlightenment knowledge was about order,

⁴ Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain. From Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012).

control, and power, Klimt offers a counter-image: knowledge as immersion, as opacity, as mystery.

Klimt's canvas mirrors our own uncertainty in the age of AI. To see it in person, even in reconstructed form, is to understand that *Philosophy* can be felt through the senses, not only reasoned through language. It is not just simply a text or an image, but an encounter. Standing before a work of art activates our senses. Your eye tracks the luminous flow of bodies; your body mirrors the scale of the vertical canvas; your mind reaches to reconcile beauty with dread. What emerges is not just knowledge about the painting, but a moment of aesthetic cognition—knowing through presence, scale, color, ambiguity. Something like this took place when I was recently able to see Paul Klee's 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus* in *The Angel of History*, an exhibition that explored Klee's work and how it inspired the philosopher Walter Benjamin, held at the State Museums in Berlin.

Benjamin intensely reflected on the meaning of objects and their commodification from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. For Benjamin, collecting became a way to invest and hold on to the meaning of objects that they had for the individual beholder. His own autobiographical writing recalls the importance of objects with the evolution of an individual. Amongst the possessions of this itinerant German Jewish intellectual was a painting by the Swiss-born German artist, Klee. Klee created *Angelus Novus* in 1920, a tumultuous time just after World War I. In this



Installation views of "Gustav Klimt - Pigment & Pixel: Rediscovering Art Through Technology" at the Lower Belvedere, Vienna, 2025. Photos: Nils Roemer.



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, 318 x 242 mm. On view in "The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee and the Berlin Angels 80 Years After World War II," at the Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2025. Photo: Nils Roemer

period, Klee's work matured as he developed his artistic philosophy, as outlined in his 1918 publication, "Creative Confession," that expressed a metaphysical perception of reality. In it, he asserted that art does not merely reproduce the visible but reveals deeper realities, a philosophy that underlies the non-human subjects in his work.⁵

Angelus Novus features an abstract figure that resembles an angel. With the arms raised

and figures extended, the figure seems to be hovering. Its head is framed by curly, stylized hair, disproportionate to a small body. The angel's huge eyes are open wide and stare, and its mouth hangs agape as if about to speak. Wings extend outward from its arms, and its feet, which resemble bird's claws, hover just above the ground. Within the torso, Klee painted a form like a pendulum, subtly alluding to the passage of time.

Benjamin purchased *Angelus Novus* in 1921 and developed a profound connection to it. It became his treasured possession that adorned every home he lived in. To Benjamin, the angel

⁵ Paul Klee, "Creative Confession," *Creative Confession and Other Writings*, ed. Matthew Gale, (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 1-15.

was at first a guardian, who adorned his office and accompanied him on most of his travels. Once forced into exile in 1933, the angel became in Paris the prism through which the past and unattainable but conceivable future became legible for him. In his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin presents the image as the "angel of history," whose gaze is fixed on the past, perceiving it as a single, unending catastrophe piling wreckage upon wreckage. This angel wishes to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed," but is propelled into the future by a storm from Paradise, symbolizing the relentless force of progress. Benjamin writes: "A storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."⁶ Benjamin's angel anticipates a catastrophic and uncertain future.

In moments of despair, Benjamin would entrust the painting with friends only to pick it up again later. At times, he even considered selling *Angelus Novus* (as, in 1939, to the arts patron Ernest Morgenroth), but he ultimately held on to his prized possession, even when destitute and without food. The safeguard of his beloved painting betrays his desperation on the verge of an escape that ultimately proved unsuccessful, but also the sense of the importance of *Angelus Novus* possibly beyond Benjamin's own life. There is an implied futurity and hope of continuation that is associated with the painting. After the Nazis' attack on France, increasingly desperate, Benjamin left his possession with friends for safekeeping, before his eventual suicide. After the Holocaust, Klee's painting ended up with Benjamin's close friend Gershom Scholem in

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-264, here 257-258.

Israel. Now in Berlin for a rare temporary exhibition, it serves as a central piece of an exhibition of other sculptures, photos and paintings of angels, who as objects serve as witnesses to history, in their materiality as much as in their aesthetic realization and torched reality.

In the Berlin exhibit, Klee's painting is curated alongside other angelic sculptures from Berlin's Museum that were damaged or destroyed during World War II, and excerpts from Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987), in which invisible angels watch over Berlin and its inhabitants. The way in which objects like these embody and communicate knowledge is tied to their unique materiality and the singular history of their existence. Together, they focus visitors' attention on destruction, memory, and the extant objects that are witnesses to that past. The Wenders film excerpts further underscore the idea of angels as observers of history—especially in the divided Berlin of the late 1980s—grounding Benjamin's theoretical angel in a cinematic, urban context.

We can gain perspective from Klimt, Klee and Benjamin, who place us closer to the unknown, engendering something that Benjamin might call a "dialectics at a standstill"—an image that interrupts rather than resolves not only the narrative of academic knowledge, but the very temporality that sustains historicism. In Klimt's *Philosophy*, the viewer is given no anchoring. The figures do not return our gaze; the composition offers no rational structure to "read" from. The viewer is not in a position of mastery, but of disorientation. Both Klimt and Benjamin make disruption into a method—not a flaw, not a breakdown, but a way of seeing and revealing what's been buried by dominant forms. Generative AI, while inherently biased, is also unbound; its knowledge is not contained and ordered, but always accessible and ultimately chaotic. This disorder is also a realm of potentially new discoveries. Looking through



Poster for "The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee and the Berlin Angels 80 Years After World War II," at the Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2025. Photo: Nils Roemer

At its best, AI might disorient, dazzle, seduce, and trouble our categories of knowledge, creativity, and control

Klimt's lens, we might understand AI not as an instrument of control but as an unruly, dreamlike assemblage, something uncanny, fertile, and unstable. It disrupts expectations of coherence, not unlike Benjamin's notion of constellations that appear as flashes from the past in our times of crisis. Like the paintings, generative AI resists our desire of total knowledge.

We often frame AI in terms of computation, precision, and scalability. Klimt shows us another possibility: that behind the mask of progress is a mythic unconscious. Just as *Philosophy* reveals the human as helpless before the cosmos, AI shows us to be enmeshed in something vaster and stranger than we expected. Generative AI can hallucinate, dream, and mimic. It doesn't always know what it's doing, but neither does Klimt's truth, veiled and turned away. Like art, AI can be excessive, unruly, and not easily contained. They both disrupt hierarchies and level taste. It makes the academic uneasy. That's not a flaw. That's its truth.

Klimt's Faculty Paintings questioned what it meant to know and to be human at the dawn of the 20th century, just as AI asks again in the

21st. In Philosophy, humanity is no longer the center of the cosmos. In AI discourse, we likewise confront de-centered humanism: are we still the only authors? The only creators? The only thinkers? Klimt gives us an image of disoriented subjectivity: naked, floating, seeking meaning. Benjamin provides with sense of alarm about a continuous history of destruction. Generative AI returns us to that image: a human caught in a world of unpredictable outputs, haunted by imitation, surrounded by pattern, searching for the origin of thought. At its best, AI might disorient, dazzle, seduce, and trouble our categories of knowledge, creativity, and control. It might also forecast like Benjamin's angel impending disaster and help us to write alternative histories and imagine desirable futures. The potential crisis that new technology seems to unleash is an opportunity of discovery and creativity. AI is a mirror for us. The not-knowing might be the beginning of understanding, or at least of very good questions—and so would be a custom ChatGPT that would bring Klimt, Klee, and Benjamin into a conversation about knowing, creating, science, and technology. **A**

AI: A Studio Approach

Andrew F. Scott



Rebecca Jinxiu Han, *Reflective Thinking on Digital Self-Expression*, 2024.
Courtesy of the artist

THE INTEGRATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ARTISTIC practice has ushered in a transformative period of studio-based exploration, one that reshapes the relationships between artists, tools, and audience. At the University of Texas at Dallas, the 3D Studio Lab provides a compelling case study of how these technologies are not simply inserted into existing workflows, but rather reframe the conceptual, material, and ethical frameworks of artistic production.

This model offers a compelling example of how artists engage with AI not as a threat to creativity, but as an instrument for expanding authorship, interrogating cultural narratives, and constructing ethical frameworks for future practice.

The origins of this evolving practice were catalyzed by seed funding from the UT Dallas Humanities and Emerging Arts (HeArts) Grant, supported through the Office of Research and Innovation. The award created a unique opportunity to undertake an intensive investigation into the integration of AI technologies within Afro-Futurist frameworks, resulting in the development of new technical workflows, public performances, and pedagogical models that continue to evolve today.

Within this model, artificial intelligence is neither subject nor spectacle, but a collaborator within an iterative process governed by the core studio principles of materials, process, context, and meaning. These principles provide structure and method, anchoring the experimental potential of AI within a robust pedagogical and artistic framework.

Materials: Expanding the Tangible and Intangible

AI-generated images and structures contribute to new material vocabularies, producing forms that challenge conventional understanding of space and dimensionality. Tools such as MidJourney, DALL-E, and Stable Diffusion enable the creation of source imagery through language-based prompting, while ChatGPT and similar platforms provide coding modules that bridge into various software environments, expanding parametric design through natural language input.

By leveraging AI-generated code, computational fabrication can be optimized. In platforms such as Rhino Grasshopper, algorithmically derived geometries can then be realized in wood, plexiglass, CNC-milled panels, and laser-cut forms. This synthesis of AI coding, parametric modeling, and physical fabrication opens pathways for both sculptural innovation and interdisciplinary application, as seen in public artworks produced for civic commissions and international exhibitions.

If materials set the stage for AI's creative intervention, it is through the process that artists begin to cultivate a reciprocal dialogue with the machine, negotiating agency, intuition, and computational logic.

Process: AI as Collaborative Agent

With AI, the creative process is reframed as a dialogue between human intuition and machine-generated output. Rather than replacing traditional modes of authorship, AI prompts iterative exploration that fuels artistic growth. In the pedagogical context of the studio, this approach invites students into an evolving conversation about agency, intention, and invention.

Prompt engineering is the central skill within this process. Artists develop sophisticated descriptive frameworks that direct AI output toward aesthetic outcomes. Diverse structures for crafting prompts are emphasized: subject identification, adding prepositional details and descriptors, defining actions, establishing settings, and applying meta-modifiers that influence overall style and mood. This approach allows artists to generate highly specific and original imagery while circumventing the ethical risks of style mimicry or direct emulation of specific artists.

Everyone is guided by a critical principle: avoiding the invocation of named artists within prompts, thereby preserving both originality and intellectual property boundaries. This fosters the development of distinctive artistic voices rather than derivative outputs. AI becomes a tool for amplifying personal expression rather than for replicating existing artistic canons.

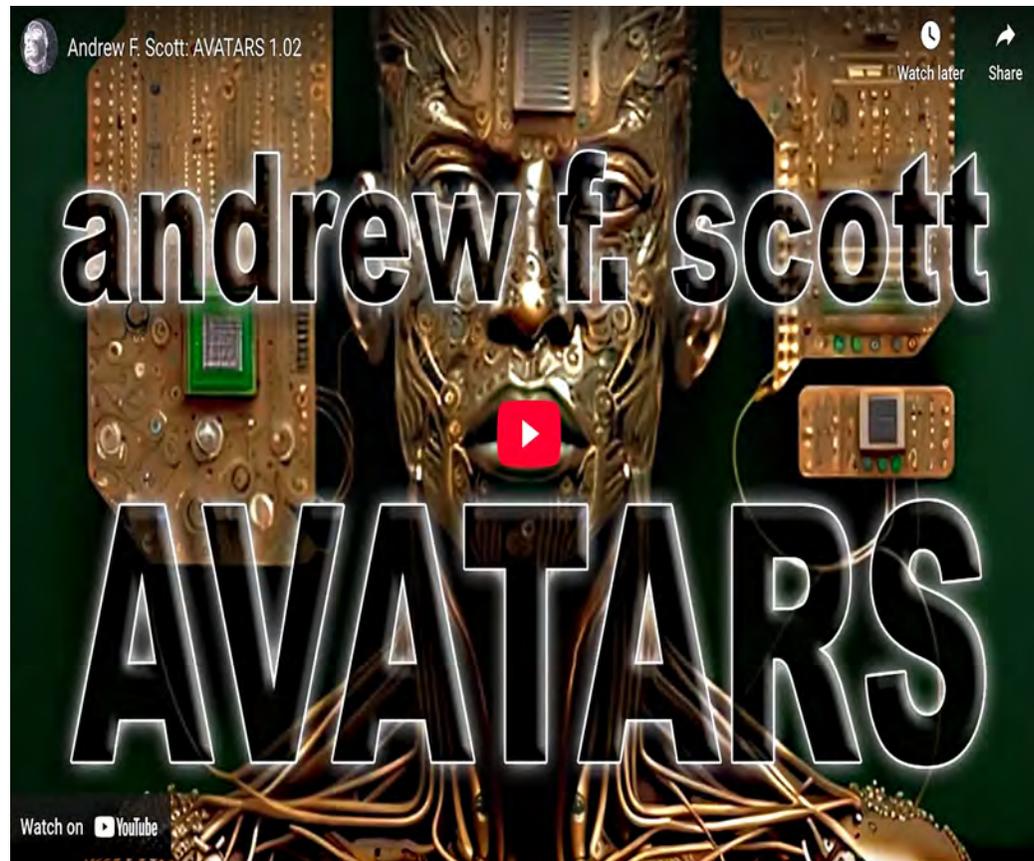
In the wider discourse on AI-generated art, concerns about authorship, originality, and data ethics remain prominent. While some public debates fixate on the mimicry of pre-existing styles or legal battles over training data, this studio approach advocates for generative frameworks that prioritize distinct artistic voices and cultural accountability.



Andrew F. Scott, *UWS Benches*, 2025. Laser cut cardboard from AI Optimized Grasshopper Script for Serial Fabrication. Courtesy of the artist



Andrew F. Scott, Laser Engraving of AI Generated Imagery from the *Afro-Futurist Midjourney Series*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist



Andrew F. Scott, *AVATARS* series, 2024.
Courtesy of the artist

Context: Embedding Work within Cultural and Historical Narratives

Every work produced within the AI studio exists within a complex web of cultural, historical, and spatial narratives. This is particularly resonant within projects exploring Afro-Futurist themes, where speculative futures intersect with ancestral memory and diasporic identity. The AVATARS project, for example, exemplifies how AI-generated portraits, animated through facial recognition and layered audio, create a dynamic space for reflection on representation, embodiment, and technology's role in shaping human identity. This video portraiture series fused AI image synthesis with facial animation and curated sound design to build immersive and culturally significant digital narratives.

In this context, AI serves not merely as a technical tool, but as a medium for historical interrogation and cultural commentary, situating the work within ongoing conversations around power, authorship, and inclusivity. Issues of algorithmic bias, cultural appropriation, and historical erasure become part of the active discourse embedded within studio critique and project development.

Meaning: Generating New Forms of Interpretation

The iterative nature of AI-infused studio practice often yields outcomes that exceed the artist's initial vision. This allows for emergent meaning-making, where contradictory or ambiguous results provoke deeper reflection. The Synectics framework, embedded into studio pedagogy, further supports this exploration of metaphor, analogy, and paradox, hallmarks of mature creative inquiry. Synectic methodologies encourage students to animate, distort, hybridize, and transform ideas, techniques that resonate deeply with AI's generative capacities. Embracing contradictions fosters richer, more nuanced works that transcend simple visual output, engaging viewers on intellectual and emotional levels.

Through this fusion of iterative exploration and conceptual interrogation, artists experience firsthand that AI does not diminish authorship, but expands its possibilities, challenging the boundaries of both interpretation and invention.



Vajihe Zermaniderkani, *Displacement from An Afro Futurist Midjourney*, Row Projection Event, 2024. Photo: Javier Giribet-Vargas



Andrew F. Scott and Matt Unkenholz, Immersive Sound Reactive Projection for Brandee Younger, Resident Artistic Director, *Brand New Life* Performance, SFJazz, March 7–8, 2024. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Live Performance and Public Presentation

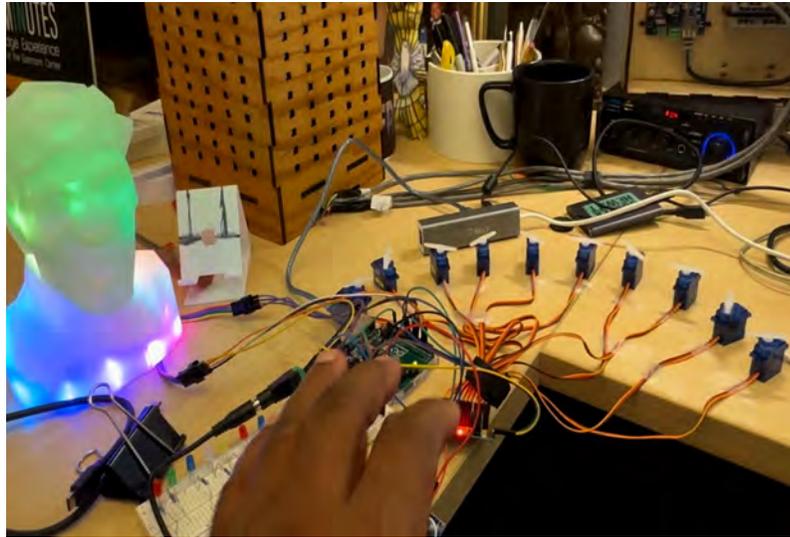
A defining feature of this studio approach is its extension into public performance and civic engagement. The immersive projection event *An Afro-Futurist Midjourney* exemplifies this approach. Staged at Research Operations West on the UT Dallas campus, this outdoor projection mapping event combined Andrew Scott’s AI-generated visuals with student work, offering the North Dallas community a participatory encounter with Afro-Futurist narratives and emerging technologies.

In live performance contexts, such as collaborations with jazz artists Terence Blanchard and Brandee Younger at Lincoln Center, The Orpheum Theatre and SFJAZZ, AI-generated content becomes an important element, expanding the concert experience. Projection mapping systems that respond to the improvisational dynamics of live performance, blend generative imagery, creating deeply immersive and emotionally resonant environments.

In *A Tale of God’s Will*, photographic imagery from Hurricane Katrina was transformed into a series of abstract paintings using AI image processing techniques. The resulting sound-responsive visuals created an empathic dialogue between Blanchard’s score, the musicians and audience, producing a powerful meditation on loss, collective memory, hope and resilience.



Andrew F. Scott and Matt Unkenholz, Immersive Sound Reactive Visuals for Terence Blanchard, *A Tale of God’s Will: A Requiem for Katrina*, Orpheum Theatre, New Orleans, January 18, 2025. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Andrew F. Scott, AI Assisted Programming for Physical Computing, 2024. Courtesy of the artist

Ethical Accountability in AI Practice

Critical engagement with the ethical implications of AI remains central to the studio's philosophy. Issues of authorship, data ownership, cultural representation, and algorithmic bias are explored through critiques. These conversations are not abstract; they are applied directly to everyone's project development, ensuring that technical experimentation remains grounded in cultural responsibility.

For instance, ethical questions arise when using training data that may reproduce cultural stereotypes or when generating imagery inspired by specific cultural traditions. Encouraging a proactive interrogation of these concerns, equips artists to navigate the cultural and social responsibilities inherent to AI-infused artistic practice.

AI Coding for Physical Computing and Digital Fabrication

Beyond image-making, AI plays an increasingly important role in generative code-writing for physical computing. Almost all GPTs generate scripts in Python, C++, and IDE that automate complex parametric designs in Arduino, directly connecting AI coding with material output. This extends AI's role from visual synthesis into the realms of object-making and architectural form generation.

AI-generated code supports the creation of interactive sculptures incorporating LEDs, sensors and projection mapping. These fabricated works serve as both standalone artworks and as architectural elements within larger installations. The synergy between AI and physical computing allows for scalable, repeatable, and intricate designs that push the boundaries of traditional fabrication techniques.



Andrew F. Scott, *An Afro Futurist Midjourney*, Row Projection Event, 2024. Photo: Javier Giribet-Vargas

The Studio as a Model for Future Practice

3D Studio AI practice serves not only as a laboratory for current production but as a model for future interdisciplinary creative industries. Artists emerge from these experiences not as passive users of AI tools but as critically aware collaborators, capable of directing emerging technologies toward conceptually rigorous and socially engaged outcomes.

This model embraces both artistic intentionality and technical fluency, preparing them to enter a rapidly evolving cultural landscape where AI, physical computing, digital fabrication, and immersive media converge. By embedding AI within a studio culture of care, critique, and ethical inquiry, the program offers a compelling vision of how art education can lead rather than merely adapt within the age of artificial intelligence.

As these technologies continue to evolve, the challenge facing contemporary artists will not be technological proficiency but cultivating critical agency within these hybrid systems. What ethical frameworks will guide these collaborations? How might artists shape machine learning architectures that reflect inclusive cultural narratives rather than perpetuate inherited biases? This studio model suggests that education itself may be the most potent site for preparing such future-facing cultural practitioners. **A**

Thinking the Human(ities) in the Age of AI

Katherine Davies

THE TERM "HUMANITIES" IS DERIVED FROM, AND CENTERS the study of, the human being—especially the ways she seeks to make sense of her experiences in the world. Attempts to define the human being abound across the history of humanistic inquiry, especially in philosophy. Perhaps the most famous philosophical definition is found in Aristotle, who characterizes the human being as the "rational animal." But what does it mean to be rational?

Reasoning marks the capacity to uncover and analyze logical relations between universal and particular claims—between statements about "all" members of a certain class and those that apply only to "these" instances. Deductive reasoning begins with a universal claim and infers what follows for particular cases. For example, if all humans are mortal, then each particular human being will die. Inductive reasoning works in reverse, positing a universal claim that accounts for a set of given particulars. For instance, many people express admiration for a particular film, therefore this film must be good. Whether we begin at the level of the universal or the particular, reasoning offers conceptuality as a tool to explore these logical relations.

But if harnessing conceptuality to move between the universal and the particular adequately captures what rationality is—and what the human being is—then we find ourselves facing a serious philosophical dilemma. As recent innovations in AI technology have become increasingly mainstream, this apparently "unique" capacity of the human being to engage in such reasoning seems no longer to set us apart.

Given the proliferation of digitized information over the last half century, AI chatbots now hold out the promise of collating and synthesizing more data than any particular human ever could. Artificial intelligence has laid claim to fantastically gigantic quantities of datasets. Machine learning has enabled AI to perform logical operations on these datasets to produce apparently rational claims about this vast quantity of information when prompted.

Has Aristotle's more than two-thousand-year-old definition of the human being lost its salience? Must the human now acknowledge that she is not the only rationally intelligent being, a characterization she now shares with these artificial chatbots? Must the "humanities" be recast as "techno-humanities"? Such a conclusion would be far too hasty. Artificial intelligence undoubtedly offers incredible instrumental value as a technological advancement. However, AI's capacity to engage in logical reasoning may not encompass the meaning of rationality for the human being, who, according to Aristotle, is also an "animal"—a being with literal skin in the game, irrevocably shaped by mortality.

Plato—another ancient Greek philosopher—offered another, rather peculiar definition of philosophy. His understanding of this form of humanistic inquiry does not highlight "rationality" as its defining feature, at least not directly. He wrote that "to practice philosophy...is to practice for death and dying." What could the practice of logical reasoning have to do with the inevitable decline and decay of our corporeal existence? For Plato—and more than a few philosophers who followed after him—the answer is *everything*. Death is something that we both know for certain will happen, but also can never know, since whenever it arrives, we will have departed (either having transitioned to another plane of existence or dissolved into nothingness). As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas puts it: "the end is but a *moment* only of death, a moment whose other side would be not consciousness or comprehension but the *question*, and a question distinct from all those that are presented as problems." The (still uniquely) human requirement to confront our impending mortality means that we must reexamine the meaning of "rationality" for the human(ities).

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that centers lived experience. Though it was initially established to guarantee the certainty of mathematical truths, this sub-field has grown to consider the significance of the "subject"—the one who raises these questions in the first place. The phenomenological subject certainly engages in the forms of deductive and inductive reasoning already described. The conclusions of these logical operations are best described as productive of "knowledge"—facts and figures that can be gathered and stored in written form and, more recently, digitally registered as data. Knowledge is the *outcome* of such reasoning. But is the outcome really the only valuable aspect of rationality? What about the process of reasoning itself, enacted by the subject? Does it matter *who* does the reasoning?

Though knowledge can be mechanically, digitally, and (now) artificially produced, thinking cannot—it is an experience indelibly marked by the finitude of the thinker.

Some philosophers have pondered whether everything that exists can be represented or conceptualized as knowledge. What if there are things that exist that are un-representable, but nevertheless significantly shape the world? Take the concept of “nothing,” for example. The moment we try to mentally represent “nothing,” we convert it into “something”—the very opposite of what nothing is! Or consider the work feeling does to coordinate our experiences. For example, fear is a feeling that is object-oriented—I am afraid of that bear over there—but not all emotions work this way. Anxiety takes no object. Instead, this feeling marks a relation to what *isn't*. The experience of anxiety indicates that there is nothing to fear here, but, at the same time, that something frightful could appear at any moment. When in a state of anxiety, I must remain always prepared to confront what *is not*, at least not yet.

In other words, philosophers—especially those contributing to phenomenological inquiry—have questioned whether what “exists” can always be conceptualized and thereby “known.” Even if we could gather every scientific, digitizable fact or figure about the world and provide it to an AI chatbot, it would not necessarily follow that we have represented everything that *exists*. What is “known” captures the *outcome* of reasoning processes, but the process or *activity* that produced this knowledge falls out of the epistemic frame. In other words, we know *nothing* of the subject, the phenomenological “knower.” In the race to output measurable deliverables, the importance of attending to what is absent—to what perhaps can never be made present—becomes illegible. This may go to the heart of artistic creativity: noticing what *isn't* there and demonstrating this to others.

The term Artificial “Intelligence” threatens to cover over a pivotal distinction long familiar to philosophers—the difference between knowing and thinking. If intelligence means “knowing” as many facts and figures as possible, then AI is certainly intelligent. But if intelligence further describes the capacity to notice and evaluate the gaps in what and how we currently

know, then AI cannot meet this requirement. Philosopher Hannah Arendt calls this “thinking” as opposed to “knowing.” For her, what is “known” can be recorded and stored up as facts or figures that contribute to building our collective world. But what can only be “thought” cannot be made visible or legible, as knowledge can be. Instead, thinking is inexorably grounded in the experience of the thinker—the one who chooses which objects are relevant for a particular operation of reasoning and further decides *to act (or not)* on the basis of such knowledge.

Though knowledge can be mechanically, digitally, and (now) artificially produced, thinking cannot—it is an experience indelibly marked by the finitude of the thinker. While an AI chatbot may produce rational knowledge by synthesizing and representing accounts of what is already known, the AI chatbot will not engage in action—ethical, political, or otherwise—out of an awareness of its own finitude as a mortal. Because human beings are radically temporally limited, choosing what to think about and how (or whether) to seek out knowledge counts differently. Deciding to spend our time knowing (or thinking) about something—or nothing!—reflects our valuation of that choice as meaningful and worthwhile for the kind of beings that we ourselves are—beings inevitably facing death.

In other words, not all knowledge is equally valuable or meaningful for mortal beings whose time is limited. The choices that face us today, amidst the current tidal wave of knowledge, information, and digital noise, are not ones that can be made by entities that can only “know.” They must be made by beings who also “think” about what they know—those who can situate what *is* in relation to what *isn't*. Unless and until AI chatbots become capable of dying—which means to be aware of their impending deaths and evaluate their chosen pursuits on the basis of this finitude—determining the meaningfulness of knowledge remains a fundamentally human project of deciding how to build our collective world. This requires fostering critical, creative thinking for those (human) beings whose finite future remains at issue in the wake of artificial intelligence.

Knowledge itself—as the outcome of deductive or inductive reasoning—is not sufficient for the task of collectively building and reshaping the possibilities of our world. We must come together to *think* and evaluate both what we know and what we don't know—to imagine our planetary future at the advent of these increasingly powerful technological tools. Determining our ethical compass can only emerge in the activity of thinking with one another, of collectively projecting ourselves beyond the facts of the case to generate an interpretative judgment thereof that will guide us in our subsequent choices and actions. This is the role the human(ities) can and must play—even more urgently—in the age of AI. ■

What is an Intelligence?

AI and the Struggle for Embodiment

Charissa N. Terranova

THIS ESSAY ARGUES FOR A materialist perspective on Artificial Intelligence [AI]. It explores the specific characteristics of “intelligence” within AI, understood as a mechanical reproduction of human and nonhuman intelligences. It is one more contribution to the chatter about AI permeating the proverbial airwaves. While it is difficult to track data on the number of scholarly publications about AI, there is an abundance of statistics on the amount of AI-generated journalism.¹ The profusion of

reporting on and by AI suggests that there is universal agreement on the definition of “an intelligence.” Far from it. Techno-determinists concoct apocalyptic futures based on the black box of “intelligence,” in which superintelligences take over the world.² A black box is an organic or artificial system in which the inputs and outputs are known, but fundamental internal workings are unknown.³ The core functions of things like the gene, human brain, mental health, intelligence, mind, and consciousness are unidentified in their entirety: they are black boxes upon which entire disciplines and treatments have been built.

Beyond Human Intelligence

In 1955, scientists began explicitly modeling the notion of “intelligence” within AI after humans, assuming *Homo sapiens* is the only

species capable of having intelligence.⁴ The construction of intelligence has been a gatekeeping tool for humans for thousands of years, providing a wishful abstract boundary separating who gets rights and who does not. Humans have, for example, used exceptionalist notions of language and rationalism to commit genocidal violence upon our own species and others. Artist James Bridle writes that “we have taken our superiority in one particular aspect—intelligence, as measured by ourselves, obviously – and used it to draw a line between ourselves and all other beings, to justify our dominance over them.”⁵

While the black box of intelligence goes largely unquestioned by scientists, artists revel in it. In artist Katherine Behar’s two-minute video “Artificial Ignorance” (2018), a computerized female voice advises the advancement of “ARTIFICIAL IGNORANCE” alongside AI in order to realistically foreground the “partiality and limitation” of AI, showing how it “both performs[s] ignorance and produce[s] it” through “algorithmic bias, category errors, and stupidity riddle network effects (like the ‘dumbing down’ of humans who are hooked to AI’s addictive/assistive devices).”⁶ (Figures 1-6) Behar’s “Artificial Ignorance” might function like labels on cigarettes and alcohol, warning humans that scientific evidence shows that the use of AI leads to addiction and the death of democracy through rampant misinformation.

This year, Apple interns Parshin Shojaee and Iman Mirzadeh led a group of researchers who revealed that AI reasoning was not 100 percent reliable and was in certain instances fully illusory. The group compared analytical

processes in Large Reasoning Models (LRMs) with Large Language Models (LLMs), revealing that both types of AI completely collapsed when faced with high-complexity tasks.⁷ When AI fails in this way, it produces scads of incorrect information, known in a fanciful way as “hallucinations,” rather than simply as inaccuracies or lies.

Artist Ken Rinaldo is sanguine about such hallucinations since they reveal AI to be as flawed as humans are. Rinaldo is a pluralist of perceptual experience. He blends robotics and organic material (microbes and soil) to make whimsical and other-worldly installations exploring the interplay of human and machinic *umwelten* (German for “unique perceptual apparatuses”).⁸ Estonian-born biologist Jakob von Uexküll coined the term “*umwelt*” 125 years ago to name the enigmatic otherness of animal perception.⁹ Rinaldo explores how human and nonhuman *umwelten*—both mammalian and mechanical—overlap, thus providing enrichment and elucidation of all sorts of adjacent human scaffolds, including ethics, morals, epistemology, and ontology. In short, AI hallucinations are propitious for understanding human-machine kinship relations, as such system-failures show how AI is “intriguingly closer to emulating biological systems than we might have anticipated.”¹⁰ Rinaldo sees recent medical advances made

1 Journalist Bradley Emi reports that there are 60,000 AI-generated news articles published every day. A research group at Newguard.com found 1,271 AI-generated news and information websites spanning 16 languages in an ongoing tracking project. Automation expert Husain Jatoi accounts AI-written contents now dominate 60% of news articles. See Emi Bradley, “60,000 AI-Generated News Articles Are Published Every Day,” <https://www.newscatcherapi.com/blog/60-000-ai-generated-news-articles-are-published-every-day>; McKenzie Sadeghi, et. al., “Tracking AI-enabled Misinformation: 1,271 ‘Unreliable AI-Generated News’ Websites (and Counting), Plus the Top False Narratives Generated by Artificial Intelligence Tools,” <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/ai-tracking-center/>; and Jatoi, Hussain, “AI-Written Contents Now Dominate 60% of News Articles – What It Means for Media in 2025,” <https://pearllemo.com/ai-written-content-dominates-news-articles/>, Accessed 06/13/2025.

2 Bridle, James, *Ways of Being Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence* (New York: Picador, 2022) 274-75.

3 “black box,” at Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/black-box_n?tab=meaning_and_use#203446965, Accessed 06/14/2025; See also Bridle, 157

4 McCarthy, J., et. al., “A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer research Project on Artificial Intelligence,” (August 31, 1955) <http://jmc.stanford.edu/articles/dartmouth/dartmouth.pdf>, Accessed 06/14/2025.

5 Bridle, 270-71.

6 See Katherine Behar’s video “Artificial Ignorance” (2018) <https://katherinebehar.com/art/artificial-ignorance-video/index.html>, Accessed 06/14/2025.

7 Shojaee, Parshin, et. al., “The Illusion of Thinking: Understanding the Strengths and Limitations of Reasoning via the Lens of Problem Complexity,” *Apple Machine Learning Research* (June 2025), <https://machinelearning.apple.com/research/illusion-of-thinking>, Accessed 06/14/2025.

8 Terranova, Charissa, “Semblance of Mindful Intent: Agency and Feedback in the Artwork of Ian Ingram,” in *Ian Ingram*, exhibition catalogue for exhibition at the Donald R. and Jan F. Beall Center for Art + Technology, University of California, Irvine, CA: UCI Press, 2023) 64.

9 See Jakob von Uexküll, “The New Concept of Umwelt: A Link between Science and the Humanities,” *Semiotica*, Vol. 134, No. 1 / 4 (2001) 111-23.

10 Rinaldo, Ken, “On Hallucinations and the Emerging Symbiotic Relationships between Humans, Machines, and Algorithms as Synthetic Evolution Begins to Drive Natural Selection,” unpublished essay (September 2024).

ARTIFICIAL IGNORANCE

When we look at precisely these qualities of AI,

(like the "dumbing down" of humans who are hooked to AI's addictive/assistive devices)

—these are not contradictions in AI's intelligence.

we can see how AI technologies both perform ignorance and produce it.

Algorithmic bias, category errors, and stupidity riddled network effects

They are evidence that **IGNORANCE** is fundamental for AI.

As AI technologies advance, I recommend the parallel advance of **ARTIFICIAL IGNORANCE** to the forefront of our analytic tools.

Figures 1-1 to 1-8. Katherine Behar, *Artificial Ignorance*, 2018. Giving voice to "Artificial Ignorance," this video asks, *What does AI stand for?* Video. 2 minutes, 7 seconds. Images reproduced with permission from artist.

through AI, such as the Cybil cancer diagnosis and cogent translation of informational noise between neurons and prosthetics, as clarion reasons for optimism, and more evidence of an elective machine-human affinity. Taking a cue from N. Katherine Hayles's latest book, *Bacteria to AI: Human Futures with Our Nonhuman Symbionts*, Rinaldo writes,

*We might see human-AI relationships as entering a form of 'technosymbiosis.' Humans rely on AI to extend their cognitive abilities (such as through decision-making tools, language models, or medical diagnostics), while AI systems are refined and shaped by human input and interaction.*¹¹

Technological tools are not alien, but organic corporeal extensions. Humans and technology co-evolve, calling for an updating of Darwin's evolutionary theory.

Yet, the invocation of art and AI often suggests something quicker and more basic than this— 2-D CGI fantasies of three-headed dragons wearing diapers, or demonic politicians with devilish horns turning to brown sludge that function, at best, as screen savers. By contrast, Rinaldo deploys a variety of AI in his work in original ways, using it as one tool of many in large, immersive installations. His work "Symbiogenesis" (2025-ongoing) materializes microbiologist Lynn Margulis's theory of endosymbiogenesis in techno-anatomical embodiment. Displacing Darwinism and natural selection as predominant narratives of life, endosymbiogenesis accounts for the telling role of bacteria-to-bacteria communication and symbiosis evidenced by non-nuclear DNA in organelles such as mitochondria in mammalian cells and chloroplasts in plant cells from which life evolved billions of years ago. In short, plants and animals emerged, millennia upon millennia in the past, through

one bacterium enveloping another. Interdependence and cooperation are central to the deep time of biology, as much as competition and fitness are. In addition to video projection and telescopic visuals, "Symbiogenesis" also includes several mid-scale powder pink blown-glass mitochondria containing small speakers hanging from the ceiling (Figures 2-3). Emanating from them is an AI-created *mélange* of Margulis and Carl Sagan's voices reading a poetic text about the connections between cells and stars. (Margulis and Sagan were married from 1957 to 1964.) The fact that intelligence is a black box makes for a sizeable crack in the humanist edifice, an invitation to investigate nonhuman intelligences in order to know them and our own species better.

Like Rinaldo, interspecies artist Ian Ingram is a perceptual pluralist interested in nonhuman *umwelten*. Having made art about lizards, squirrels, crows, dogs, and rats, he weaves ethology, software, robotics, and AI to decode how animals within a given species communicate with each other and, when channels cross, one species communicates with another, nonhuman-to-human and nonhuman-to-nonhuman. In 2018, Ingram worked at the Kilipsjärvi Biological Research station in Finland with fellow artist-ethologists Antti Tenetz and Theun Karelse as part of the *Ars Bioarctica* artist residency and the *Random Forests* project. Artist Shah Selbe joined the group remotely working from LA. Together they used an AI image classifier, Inception Version 3, that is part of Google's TensorFlow machine learning framework, which was developed to digitally metabolize images people post and tag online. Inception recognizes a host of banal things, like a plastic bag or guillotine, animals, such as the nudibranch, the eft, the mongoose, and the rhinoceros beetle, and hundreds of dog breeds, *but it does not recognize trees*. Ingram, Karelse, Tenetz, and Selbe set out to teach Inception about the things it could not see located in the

¹¹ Rinaldo, unpaginated; see also N. Katherine Hayles, *Bacteria to AI: Human Futures with Our Nonhuman Symbionts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025).



Figure 2. Ken Rinaldo, *Symbiogenesis*, 2025-ongoing. Mixed media. Rendering of installation forthcoming at SP/N Gallery, UT Dallas, February-April 2026. Image reproduced with permission from artist.

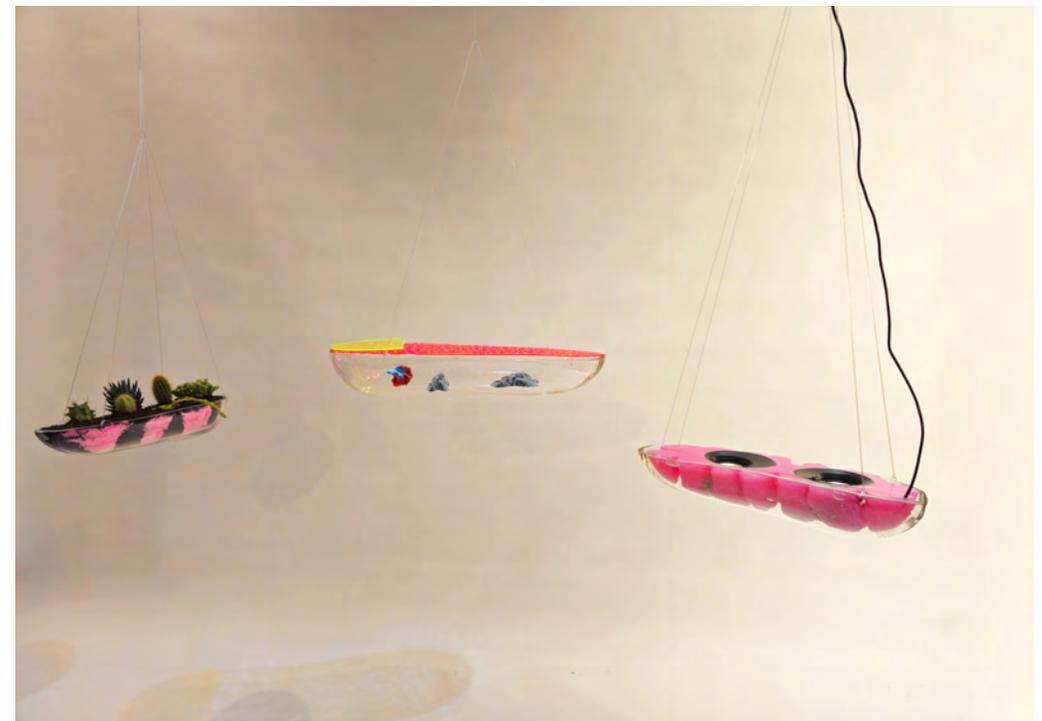


Figure 3. Ken Rinaldo, *Symbiogenesis*, 2025-ongoing. Mixed media. Detail of blown-glass mitochondria, July 2026. Image reproduced with permission from artist.

Finnish environs, including “mountain birches,” as well as “lichens, moss and the other members of plantae and fungi surrounding the research center.”¹² In the process, they became acutely aware of the biases of online human categorization that kept causing Inception to stumble. Blind spots of human-intelligence traps abound. Inception could see a snowmobile, but not trees in its path. The industry vernacular for this type of underperformance caused by bad data is “Garbage In – Garbage Out,” which Ingram intelligently deconstructs:

*Garbage—refuse, unwanted material, discarded byproducts of industry, commerce, and just plain, quotidian modern living—of course plays a center-stage role in the problem of sustainability. The concept of garbage also is a perfect example of the shortcomings of a human bias. We have in the past miscategorized vital elements of ecosystems as garbage, notably clearing fallen trees in forests in the name of husbandry, only later understanding that those rotting trunks play an important role in the cycles of that place.*¹³

In essence, human-made Inception sees the world through human-made eyes, internalizing the inescapable obstacles of anthropocentrism, materializing another aspect of human-machine twinship. Ingram, Karelse, Tenetz, and Selbe unschooled and reschooled Inception through a parliament of AIs of their own design. They were set with the task of eviscerating problems created by humans, embodied as consumers of everyday artificial objects such as flip-flops and Big Macs but not sycamores and oaks. The task of properly embodying AI in political economy, natural worlds, or art seems overwhelming because of its rapid, protean transformation, coupled with the great complexity of each of these systems and almost no accountability from the companies creating it.

12 Ingram, Ian, “Making New Minds That Love Trees,” *Medium.com* (Dec. 11, 2018) unpaginated.

13 Ingram, unpaginated.

The Legerdemain of Digital Disembodiment

Digital AIs such as LLMs and Generative AI [GenAI] arrived in the 2010s as though disembodied magicians.¹⁴ In keeping with the current zeitgeist of rampant corruption, bald-faced lying, and fear-mongering, LLMs and GenAI output ‘new’ data through split-second sweeps of the internet, in which they pilfer and grok gigabytes of informations—dead and living artists’ photos, paintings, films, and writing—to spit out something that satisfies a given input, which is often a prompt consisting of a few keywords. Humans interact regularly with these machine intelligences, which in turn communicate their capacities through seemingly dematerialized mediation, that is, via assembled digital systems and devices, such as computer screens and smart phones. They produce a wide array of stuff ostensibly *ex nihilo* and without delay, as though they were invincible poltergeists.

The bewilderment that comes with such fast, easy communication elicits adjacent emotions of awe and terror—fascination with AI’s ability to out-perform humans and fear of redundancy. The sublimity of AI gives exponential power to Silicon Valley AI start-ups and corporate platforms such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, and X. Heeding the admonitions of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, humans are commodities. These corporations commodify human attention spans, trading them like cotton, steel, and toilet paper.¹⁵ All forms of once-industrialized agency are compressed, and there is little overhead cost for profiteers. Concentration functions as both worker and commodity,

14 Anonymous (likely AI), “Large Language Models,” <https://aws.amazon.com/what-is/large-language-model/>, Accessed 06/13/2025 and Adam Zewe, “Explained: Generative AI,” <https://news.mit.edu/2023/explained-generative-ai-1109>, Accessed 06/13/2025.

15 See Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1998) and Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Red & Black, 2000).

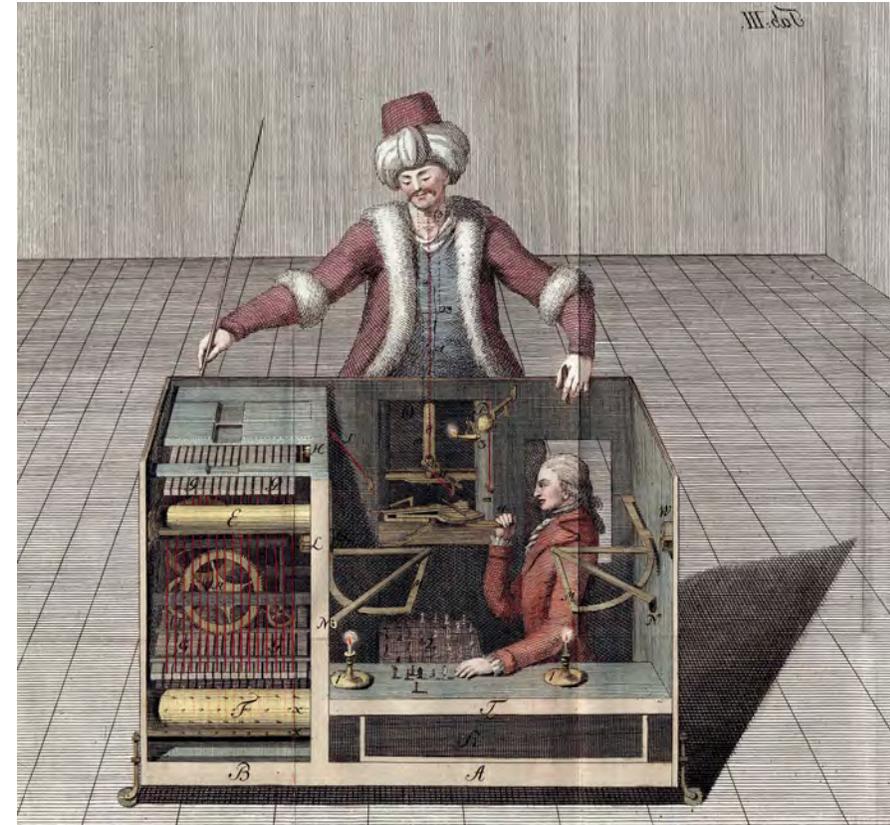


Figure 4. Imagined Mechanical Turk with Human from Joseph Freidrich zu Racknitz, On the Chessplayer of Mr. von Kempelen and its Replica, 1789. Courtesy Humboldt University of Berlin, University Library. Public domain

as digital platforms require far fewer people to build and maintain than a factory floor. Minds immersed online are fast money; attention-grabbing spectacles like mass shootings and buffoonish politicians full of mendacity are financial bonanzas for billionaires developing AI.

That so much material content appears to body forth so quickly from no bodies at all is perhaps one of screen-mediated AI’s greatest tricks, replaying ad nauseum the age-old promises of fantasy mirror worlds falsely portending futures of consciousness without embodiment. It is reminiscent of Hilary Putnam’s deracinated “brain in a vat” experiment that led to the *Matrix* film franchise and Ray Kurzweil’s incorporeal “singularity,” the delirious but dubious

guarantee of infinite consciousness via uploading one’s mind to the internet.¹⁶ All the while, the sleight of hand at work in LLMs and GenAI is truly closer to the late eighteenth-century Mechanical Turk, a robotic chess champion that was in fact controlled by a human scrunched up inside of a box that supposedly housed the robot’s pistons, cogs, and gears (Figure 4). While there is no phalanx of tiny people pulling levers inside our phones, there are real workers around the world assembling them for global consumers.

16 See Hilary Putnam, “Brains in a Vat,” in Sven Bernecker & Fred I. Dretske, *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 1-21 (2000) and Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking Press, 2005).



Figure 5. Amy Youngs, *Sounds from the Subterrarium*, 2024. Mixed media, including living springtails, soil, plant, custom glass, video microscope, and computer running p5js program. Installation view with the artist. Image reproduced with permission from artist.



Figure 6. Amy Youngs, *Sounds from the Subterrarium*, 2024. Mixed media, including living springtails, soil, plant, and custom glass. Detail of custom glass terrarium. Image reproduced with permission from artist.



Figure 7. Amy Youngs, *Sounds from the Subterrarium*, 2024. A living springtail seen through video microscope. Image reproduced with permission from artist.

Far from disembodied or immaterial, twenty-first-century AI is physically embodied in a variety of ways. It is a series of effects, “intelligences” if you will, channeled through devices made by laboring bodies with internal components of rare minerals extracted from China, Myanmar, South Africa, and other geographies powered by server farms using massive amounts of electricity emitting tons of carbon.¹⁷ Artist Amy Youngs identifies a silver lining within this foreboding reality in “the way AI challenges human supremacy. AI shows us that intelligence—the language-oriented, fact-recalling, ‘reasoning’ type that we recognize— can exist outside of human brains.”¹⁸ The intelligences that emanate via digital AI are embodied cognitions: mechanical forms of mind or consciousness, performing via specific means that relativize human intelligence, toppling it from the superior point of anthropocentric hierarchies while setting in relief manifold forms of other intelligence, human and nonhuman alike.

Youngs’ “*Sounds from the Subterrarium*” (2024) foregrounds an array of intelligences using a battery of technologies, including the wetware of miniscule creatures in dirt to set in relief the complexity of soil ecosystems. A computer-vision tracking algorithm follows populations of miniscule arthropods called springtails as they churn, filter, and fertilize soil in real time. Their varying speeds are translated optically and sonically in the space around the terrarium, so many strategies for directing human attention to these almost imperceptible living beings (Figure 5-7). Youngs queries, “What might we learn from observing and interacting with intelligences far more ancient than our own?”¹⁹

Teaching students that there is a long, deep history of “AI” quells fears of an android takeover. Humans have made machines that work for the most powerful among them for

a very long time. This is why they are called “robots,” a term derived from the Czech word “robota,” meaning forced labor, which Czech writer Karel Čapek coined in the science fiction play *R.U.R.* (1920).²⁰ In this sense, AI has been with us for at least two millennia. Ktesibios was a Greek barber and mechanic living in Alexandria during the third century BCE, who invented the water clock and water organ, both machines automated through feedback devices.²¹ Ismail al-Jazari and Syrian Muhammad al-Sa’ati were twelfth-century Muslim inventors who also built automated water-clocks.²² Since then, there have been many variations of partially and fully automated machines like these. They operate by “control” systems, which means they function through open feedback communication that makes them self-managing and self-making [autopoietic] like toilet flushing systems, thermostats, the greater environment and atmosphere of planet earth, and all parts of living bodies, “from cells to skin. At the end of World War II, radar specialist Norbert Wiener developed the interdisciplinary science of cybernetics based on the feedback control used in the centrifugal governor of James Watt’s steam engine of 1789, the nervous system of pilots flying planes in the heat of World War II dogfights, and self-correcting wartime anti-aircraft gunners.²³ Microbiologist Lynn Margulis and polymath James Lovelock then adopted cybernetics as the central regulatory process of their Gaia hypothesis.²⁴

20 “robot,” *Oxford English Language*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/robot_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#152132177, Accessed 06/16/2025.

21 Mayr, Otto, *The Origins of Feedback Control* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970) 11-15.

22 Mayr, 32-37.

23 See Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Paris: Hermann et Cie, 1948) and Steve Heims, *Constructing a Social Science for Postwar America: The Cybernetics Group (1946-1953)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

24 See Bruce Clarke, *Gaia Systems: Lynn Margulis, Neocybernetics, and the End of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

17 See Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

18 Youngs, Amy, email exchange, 06/10/2025.

19 Youngs, Amy, email exchange, 06/10/2025.

With the advent of electronic feedback-driven mainframe computers at the close of World War II, the age of computational AI had begun. In 1955, engineer John McCarthy coined the term “Artificial Intelligence” as part of a proposal for a summer workshop at Dartmouth college attended by McCarthy, Marvin Minsky, Claude Shannon, and Nathaniel Rochester, among others. The driving force of the “artificial intelligence problem” circumscribing their activities was the presumption that “every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it.”²⁵ Of course, by “intelligence,” they meant simply human intelligence. Though normal for the time, it is preposterous today that there was so little critical awareness of the role gender and ethnicity played in the original crafting of AI as concept or thing. What might it have looked like if it had been invented by another more polyglot group, other than this one made up of all white, English-speaking, Eurocentric, male engineers? Would it have been called “Artificial Intelligence,” or perhaps the other AI that is Behar’s “Artificial Ignorance,” or “KMUT” pronounced “mutt” with a silent “k,” standing for the clunky “Knowledges Mimetic Utility Tool”?

No detailed information was provided in the proposal about the hulking machine that made AI. In 1957 McCarthy regularly used the 15-ton IBM 704, a mainframe computer powered through 100-200 tubes of vacuum-tube logic circuitry, to develop AI in the form of FOTRAN and LISP software languages.²⁶ By comparison, the first programmable general purpose digital computer ENIAC was another giant mainframe computer built during the

25 McCarthy, J., et. al., “A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer research Project on Artificial Intelligence,” (August 31, 1955) <http://jmc.stanford.edu/articles/dartmouth/dartmouth.pdf>, Accessed 06/18/2025.

26 McCarthy, John, “History of Lisp” (Feb. 12, 1979) Stanford AI Lab, <http://jmc.stanford.edu/articles/lisp/lisp.pdf>, accessed 06/18/2025.

war a decade earlier that weighed 30 tons, used 18,000 vacuum tubes, and needed its own air-conditioning system for cooling. So, from its incarnation, engineers designed AI with an accelerationist teleology so that it would manifest Moore’s Law: rapid efficiency, ever-shrinking machines, and ever-expanding intelligence. New research nonetheless shows that AI is arduous, time consuming, and makes software developers less productive in the workplace.²⁷

Their funding proposal listed several assorted tools, rubrics, goals, and a budget of \$13,500. These included automatic computers, the ability to program them to use language and build neuron nets, to basically ‘learn’ through the play of abstractions, randomness and clarity, and self-improvement. It makes sense than an engineer developing a computational AI would design it with self-improvement, since automated intelligences should self-regulate and, beyond this, AI must have the capacity to teach itself – to improve its ‘self’ in mind, but not so much body, through absorbing new information. Perhaps the economy of communication led to a poor choice of words, in particular the loaded term “self,” given its connections to Enlightenment philosophies of individualism and mind. It is likely though that McCarthy and the others based the notion of “self” on the Greek prefix “auto-” in words such as “autopoiesis,” “automatic,” and “automobile.”

Nonetheless, language is leaky, choices are facile, and outcomes are loaded. The “self” in “self-improving” is equally rooted in René Descartes’ mind-body dualism wherein self and mind are the fount of both human ratiocination and soul everlasting in heaven or hell—not unlike Kurzweil’s singularity, wherein one uploads their mind to the internet to achieve infinite selfhood. (Whether the internet is heaven or hell is another debate

27 Becker, J. et al., “Measuring the Impact of Early-2025 AI on Experienced Open-Source Developer Productivity,” *Computer Science* (July 12, 2025) <https://arxiv.org/abs/2507.09089>, accessed 07/24/2025.

– and hells-bells, what narcissism!) It also echoes John Locke’s sense of individual self, rooted in sense-based experience, perception, aesthesis, and, of course, property ownership limited to white men. Perhaps this is overreaching, and the idea of self was always more simply about Marvin Minsky’s later idea of “society of mind” which progressively de-essentialized the mind and self, describing the brain in terms of a plurality of agents.²⁸

Jumping to a more recent moment, when the AI pioneers have long since passed from the scene, thinkers in the new millennium have developed potent ideas about self, mind, cognition, and consciousness, extending beyond the cranium through bodies into gadgets and the world at large. These ideas plant AI and other technologies firmly in bodies interwoven across networks of other bodies. Building on the ideas of Gilbert Simondon and Gilles Deleuze, Bernard Stiegler explained the self as an exteriorization of the machines we use.²⁹ With the notion of extended mind, Andy Clark energized older monist ideas about embodied cognition, first argued in the eighteenth-century *Lebenskraft* debate.³⁰ Most recently N. Katherine Hayles argues that our relationships with machines and the internet make us cognitive assemblages that necessitate a rethinking of evolution in terms of technosymbiosis.³¹

Self-improvement continues to energize and shape AI in 2025 in the form of Recursive Self-Improvement (RSI), which AI researcher Daniel Kokotajlo foresees with doomsday

28 See Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1986).

29 See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

30 See Andy Clark and Dave Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *Analysis* (1998) Vol. 58, No. 1: 7-19; J. McCarthy, et. al., eds., *The Early History of Embodied Cognition 1740-1920: The Lebenskraft-Debate and Radical Reality in German Science, Music, and Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

31 Hayles, 2025, op. cit.

extravagance creating an “AI explosion” by 2027.³² Through RSI, Kokotajlo predicts that AI will exponentially improve, which means: “A.I. ‘agents’ soon figure out how to make their descendants smarter, and those descendants do the same for their descendants, creating a feedback loop.”³³ Notably, this vision of rapid technological evolution through RSI is conceptualized around complete disembodiment, without grounding in the labor of human bodies, rare earth minerals inside of digital devices, server farms that power them, or supply chains that move them, much less history.

The notion that RSI’s near-future creation of a human-destroying superintelligence is hyperbole, not to mention that we already live in a technofeudalism in which many of us are indentured serfs.³⁴ (The difficulty of ungluing oneself from social media is an apt discussion for another time.) But reality dictates that intelligence on its own, without embodiment, has little utility. *New Yorker* journalist Joshua Rothman writes, “In the real world, what matters is power—the ability to modify one’s environment.”³⁵ Intelligence is always specifically embodied in a precise environmental ecosystem—whether a rhinoceros, professor, or garbage compactor. The threat of deracinated RSI is one more AI God-trick; it is, once again, a legerdemain of disembodied AI.³⁶ Distinct from magic, there is the reëchantment of nature, biology, and life, by artists using AI to reveal the manifold embodiment of the more-than-human world. ■

32 Rothman, Joshua, “Two Paths for A.I.,” *The New Yorker* (May 28, 2025) <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/open-questions/two-paths-for-ai>, Accessed 06/18/2025.

33 Rothman, “Two Paths for A.I.”

34 See Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (New York: Melville House, 2024).

35 Rothman, Joshua, “Two Paths for A.I.”

36 Haraway, Donna, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* (Fall, 1988) Vol. 14, No. 3: 575-599.

From Bach to Bots

AI and Music Creation

Katrina Rushing

Introduction

IT SEEMS THAT AI IS EVERYWHERE—IN THE NEWS, IN THE classroom, on social media, and especially in advertising. Beginning in 2024, AI began to aggressively expand into the field of music in a variety of ways, including composition, audio analysis, voice cloning, music recommendations, and music recognition. This essay specifically explores the use of AI to create music, with an overview of its capabilities, and evaluation of the outcomes, ethical considerations, and recommendations for use. The conclusions are based on experiences that my students and I have had “composing” music with generative AI, including honest feedback from students in my music theory and music appreciation classes at UT Dallas.

Creating Music

There are dozens of AI music platforms available, with claims of “anyone can create extraordinary music” and “create any song, just imagine it.”

Currently the leading platforms for creating music are Suno and Udio—these platforms offer a free option, and it is easy to create an account with just an email address and password. I created an account with Suno and entered the description: “Melancholy music for strings and piano.” Within seconds, there were two audio samples. I played the first one and was startled to hear singing! There is a small option to designate “instrumental” music, otherwise the default setting will always include lyrics. After choosing the “instrumental” option, Suno generated the following title and audio: “[Echoes of Goodbye](#)”¹

It had a clear looping pattern in the piano and cello with a repeated four-chord progression. I found the piece uninteresting, and not what I envisioned. I also attempted a fugue in the style of Bach, “classical” piano and violin music, as well as an arrangement of a well-known folk tune. The compositions were dull, and I did not even want to finish listening to them. The fugue was nothing like a fugue, the classical piece sounded like new-age music, and the folk tune arrangement was extremely simplistic. As a musician, I did not enjoy the process or the results of the endeavor and quickly concluded that Suno was not trained to produce instrumental music, especially classical styles. I also tested Udio, with similar results.

Student Feedback

Students frequently use AI for fact-based assignments and essays. According to the Artificiality Institute, “students are increasingly delegating mental tasks—like decision-making and problem-solving—to AI.”² Many seem to think it is simply more efficient to use this type of “cognitive offloading.” Given the pervasive use of AI for fact-based answers, I wondered: Are students also using AI to create music? Surprisingly, not much! In April of this year, I asked my UT Dallas students about their use of AI for music—only three students had ever even tried it.

So I created an extra credit assignment with the following tasks:

- Create a piece of music using Suno, Udio, or other AI (vocal or instrumental)
- What did you think of the results?
- Would you use AI again to create music?

Over thirty students completed the assignment. (Interestingly, the students who had previously experimented with AI for music had no desire to try it again!) In general, students’ reactions were mixed. As expected, there was a notable difference between the reactions of musicians and non-musicians.

The students in music theory generally have had more musical training, and they were more negative and critical of the music created by AI. Among their responses were these:

Below my expectations, the instruments had a very low quality and the composition sounded very much like the no-copyright music one can find on YouTube (Logan T.)

I don’t think it did a particularly good job. The instrumentation is off, and I find the music to be quite thin (Sweta V.)

The results are very superficial, and a lot of the depth I wanted from it was absent (Joshua M.)

The piece of music it generated had some nice ideas but felt very disconnected. There was a clear lack of intention behind many of the musical choices it made even though it sounded good. (Ethan S.)

I tried to create an instrumental-only piece without any vocals and the quality was really poor. It was far from passing the Turing Test and you could tell that this isn’t something that a human would write and certainly not something that human ears would want to hear. If there’s no emotion behind the song, is it really even worth it... (Pranav S.)

Some of the most positive reactions were from non-musicians in my music appreciation courses who requested “Lo-fi” or “pop” music:

² Helen and Dave Edwards, “How AI Affects Critical Thinking and Cognitive Offloading,” <https://artificialityinstitute.org/how-ai-affects-critical-thinking-and-cognitive-offloading/>

¹ The AI music platform always creates a title. Interestingly, Udio also chose to use the word “Echoes” in another piece I created – it was even less interesting that the piece created by Suno. <https://suno.com/s/Yv8Q7KFCC7TMFeYg>

Prompt: Lo-fi chill beat with dreamy piano. I was really surprised by how polished the track sounded. The AI was able to create a clean, moody mix that was reminiscent of lo-fi tracks that you might find on a YouTube study playlist (Aarushi M.)

I prompted the AI to write a pop song about needing distractions constantly while grieving and being a foundation for others when you don't have your own foundation. It worked a lot better than I expected. I might consider using AI for self-expressive music because I've always wanted to write pop songs but struggle to compose new melodies with proper structure (Nikita R.)

One student was quite enthusiastic: My prompt was "Very suspenseful and dramatic fight scene turns into calm relaxing victory." I was blown away by the result. It gave me a few options, and I will say the first two were a bit lame and cheesy, but man the third one was straight out of a big box production action movie. It had all the elements I love - a good amount of highs for suspense and lows for a sense of weight. It all meshed together so well I would never be able to tell that this came from a computer program. It's crazy how far we have come from that one IBM computer that was able to sing "Daisy Bell". I very well may create more AI music now that I have seen how well it can perform. I am curious how licensing and copyright law works with AI music. Will Disney still find a way to sue us for using AI music?? LOL. (Danish A.) <https://suno.com/s/STZT1EXD69ZdlzjN>

Several students in both groups saw the potential to use Suno in specific situations:

For background music or content creation, it's definitely usable. I wouldn't use it to replace traditional music creation or live jamming, but as a tool for ideation and fast prototyping, it's incredibly useful. (Ria S.)

I didn't really like the results; the style didn't meet my expectations. I do not plan to use AI to create music, but I think Suno is a good site to use to make silly songs for friends! (Lynette Y.)

I think Suno can give us good ideas for lyrics / melodies when we aren't able to think of much. It can give us different perspectives on the same lyrics and although they are all terrible, we can build up on that and create something more human and soulful. (Pranav S.)

Overall, many students were simultaneously impressed and disappointed in the results of AI generated music; most indicated that they are unlikely to use it again. Even though students engage with AI regularly, I was pleasantly surprised and impressed to find that most of the student musicians that I surveyed expressed a lack of interest, disrespect, or even contempt for music created by AI. During in-class discussions, I found that students fundamentally believe that music should come from the soul or heart, even

if it's not perfect. As one student said, "Music is music because it is human!" (Pranav S.) Some students also worry that AI is often trained on stolen art and is therefore unethical. Others think it's good for laughs, but not something to take seriously.

Ethical Issues

The darkest and most troubling aspect of AI generated music is the way that the AI is trained. Was it trained using copyrighted material? Is that a violation of copyright laws? Hundreds of musicians in the U.S. and Britain are protesting the use of copyrighted music to train AI. In April 2024, 200 musicians, including Billie Eilish, Stevie Wonder, and Nicki Minaj, wrote an open letter that stated, "We must protect against the predatory use of AI to steal artists' voices and likenesses... When used irresponsibly, AI poses enormous threats to our ability to protect our privacy, our identities, our music, and our livelihoods."³ In February 2025, more than 1,000 musicians (including Hans Zimmer) released a lyric-less album to protest the British government's proposal to expand the ways that developers can use copyright-protected works to train artificial intelligence models.⁴ There are ongoing lawsuits which will determine whether the use of copyrighted music in AI training constitutes fair use.⁵

Recommendations

If someone is interested in using Suno or other AI to create music, I recommend using it in the following situations:

- Just for laughs: If you need a silly song to celebrate a friend's birthday or as a prank, enter their name with some descriptive words and create a fun memory. Suno is surprisingly good at creating lyrics that rhyme.
- Social media content: add music to a social media post.
- Game creators and animators: For a game prototype or an unfinished animation, an AI composition could be useful. Visual creators are not always able to describe what sound they want for their game/animation, so if they generate something and show it to an actual composer/music producer, that could provide a useful reference.
- Idea generation: Generate ideas for lyrics, expand on current ideas, create quick samples.

Conclusion

Can bots create music? Yes. Can "anyone create extraordinary music" using AI? Of course not. Will bots replace composers? In a few instances, yes. I am encouraged to find that young people value human artistry, and see AI as a possible tool for experimentation, not a replacement for musical creativity. **A**

3 Artist Rights Alliance, "200+ Artists Urge Tech Platforms: Stop Devaluing Music," April 1, 2024: [artistrightsnow.com/200-artists-urge-tech-platforms-stop-devaluing-music-559fb109bbac](https://www.artistrightsnow.com/200-artists-urge-tech-platforms-stop-devaluing-music-559fb109bbac)

4 Amelia Nierenberg, "Their Album Is Wordless. Will Their Protest Against A.I. Resound?" The New York Times, Feb. 25, 2025: www.nytimes.com/2025/02/25/world/europe/uk-musicians-protest-ai-album.html

5 A recent Forbes article outlines the ongoing litigation: Virginie Berger, "What Suno And Udio's AI Licensing Deals With Music Majors Could Mean For Creators Rights," Forbes, June 6, 2025. www.forbes.com/sites/virginieberger/2025/06/06/what-suno-and-udios-ai-licensing-deals-with-music-majors-could-mean-for-creators-rights

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—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.

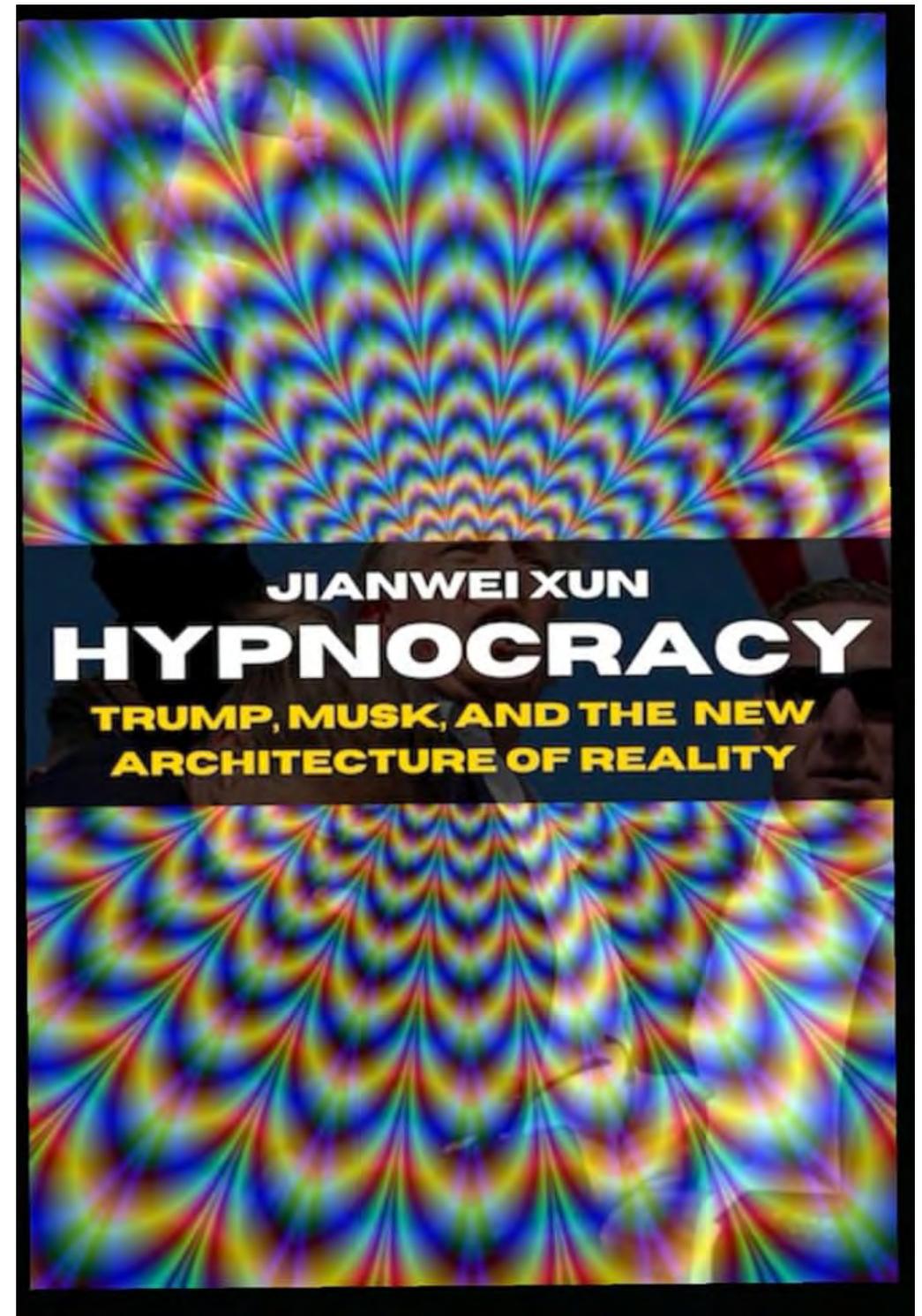


Figure 2. Screenshot: Amazon page for *Hypnocracy* by Jianwei Xun

“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. **A**



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

Resources

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Ovid, *The Art of Loving*

Translated and Introduced by Aaron Poochigian

OVID'S "THE ART OF LOVING," ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN Latin, is made up of what are called Elegiac couplets—pairs of lines of different lengths and with distinctive rhythms. Each couplet is its own little work of art. Each can be admired on its own or as part of the greater Gestalt that is the poem.

Other translations of "The Art of Loving" strike me as getting the words, more or less, but not the artistry. I felt a need for a translation that respects and replicates the technique of the original. I have made a version that, first, renders the couplets in such a way as to preserve their integrity and, second, marks them off, sonically, as a unit. I tried to achieve the first goal by translating the couplets as separate grammatical modules that can stand alone. I tried to achieve the second goal by linking the lines of the couplet with a rhyme—true rhyme, off-rhyme, anything that tells the ear that the two lines belong together.

But that's enough technical talk. What this translation really arises from is the pleasure Ovid's "The Art of Loving" has given me since I first read it in Latin in undergraduate school. It has given me three decades' worth of joy. I want share that joy with the whole world, so I have done all I can to recreate not just the artistry but the charm and fun of the poem for readers who may not know Latin. My great hope is that something in this excerpt makes you smile.



**LITERARY
LIVES**

I. The Overture

If someone doesn't know the art of loving, he
should read this book and love with mastery.
It's art that makes our oar- and sail-borne warships dart,
our chariots dash. Love, too, should yield to art.
Automedon knew when to let his team run free,
and Tiphys helmed the ship from Thessaly,
and I am Venus' savant. I will be known
as young Love's Typhis and Automedon.
Although Love fights and frustrates me and is unkind,
he is a boy and can be disciplined.
Chiron taught wee Achilles how to play the lyre
and quelled his mettle with quiescent lore.
Although Achilles made both foes and allies run,
he cowered, they say, before that wise old man.
He freely offered up the two hands that would crush
Hector for penance underneath the lash.
As Chiron schooled Achilles, I school Love. Both came
from goddess mothers; both were tough to tame.

A bull's neck, though, can learn to bear a harrow's weight;
the teeth of wild mares learn to champ the bit.
Let Love's shafts stab me in the vitals, let his shaken
torches enflame me: still he will be broken.
All that he wreaks on me with arrowheads and fire
just makes my vengeance stronger than before.

To say you taught me love-craft, Phoebus, would be false;
I didn't get it from occult bird calls.
Clio and all her sisters never met me up
along your slopes, Ascra, while I grazed sheep.
Usefulness has inspired this. Heed an expert bard.
My song will preach truths. Venus, back my start.

You are profane here, garlands, badge of the demure!
Be gone, you dresses reaching to the floor!
But, no, I'll sing of sound sex and approved affairs.
I won't put any vileness into verse.

The first thing for a novice soldier in this war
is to select an object of desire.
Wooing the girl you like comes next. Third comes what needs
to happen to ensure your love abides.
My chariot will circumscribe those bounds. That space
contains the turning post my wheels will graze.

II. Where To Find Her

While still at ease and off the leash, identify
a girl to call "the only one for me."
She won't come floating downward to you on a breeze.
No, you must find the right one with your eyes.
The hunter knows well where his nets will snag a deer
and which ravines most likely feature boar.
The fowler knows which shrubs hold birds. The angler knows
in just which brooks the fish are most profuse.
You, the pursuer of a durable romance,
must learn where girl, the quarry, keeps her haunts.

I won't tell you to board a ship and sail abroad.
To find her, local precincts must be trod.
Perseus flew Andromeda out of the sooty
Far East; a Trojan stole the Grecian beauty.
Rome, though, our home, will offer up knockouts galore.
You'll swear the wide world's chicks have settled here.
Think of Methymna's ripe grapes, Gargara's bound sheaves,
fish in the ocean, birds among the leaves,
the stars—that's the amount of girls our streets contain.
The mother of Aeneas fills her town.

Simultaneous/Sequential

The Poetry of Arthur Sze

Barry Schwabsky

SOME POETS SAY SO LITTLE. THAT IS, they say little in, as it were, their own person. Their art is a strange manner of standing aside and (as Stéphane Mallarmé put it) ceding the initiative to words.

Arthur Sze is one of those quiet or reticent poets. A New Yorker by birth, he has lived in New Mexico for most of his adult life, becoming the state's poet laureate and teaching for many years at the Institute of American Indian Arts, a public land grant college in Santa Fe. While this essay was in press, Sze was appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry of the Library of Congress. His new book of poetry—his twelfth, not counting a collection of translations from the Chinese, and the first since the publication of his collected poems in 2021—has a title that makes a point of his affinity for silence: *Into the Hush*.

That title made me uneasy at first. This might have been an wayward association, but I couldn't help thinking of how Ron Silliman—another of my favorite poets—used to insist on dividing American poetry into two irreconcilable streams, “post-avant” (good) and “the school of quietude” (bad). Reiterated endlessly on Silliman's blog, back when blogs were important, this simplistic dichotomy did what simplistic dichotomies do best: It drilled itself into my brain. And so I had to ask myself: Is Sze with his “hush” revealing membership

in the fatally lulling school of quietude? The six-poem sequence that lends the book its title includes a statement backed up by Sze's five decades of writing, that “When you've / worked this long, your art is no longer art / but a wand that wakes your eyes to what is.” Doesn't that statement (with its wand whose magic is to dispel illusions rather than to generate them, as though Prospero had found a way to keep using his staff rather than breaking and burying it) suggest that this might be a poetry in danger of losing sight of its own artifice, which would make it a deceptive and conventional-minded simulation of naturalness? Luckily, I can give a short answer to those questions: No. But suggesting why may take a bit more time.

Parts of the explanation lie with a second book Sze has published alongside his new collection of poetry. *The White Orchard: Selected Interviews, Essays, and Poems* (Museum of New Mexico Press) is a relatively slender book, given the length and distinction of the poet's career, reflecting its author's self-effacing stance. Notably, it does not include anything in the way of manifestos or statements of position, and neither does it contain critical writing on the work of other poets, whether contemporaries or precursors, except for brief but generous remarks on many of his fellow Asian-American poets given in a 2019

talk at the Library of Congress. The book mainly consists of interviews, which tell us something further about Sze's manner of saying little: He speaks, usually, about what he does as a poet and how he does it, while leaving the *why* implicit. While the first person singular is rather rare in his poetry, it comes to the fore in the interviews, but for similar reasons. The “I” of the interviews is an expression of modesty. He says, to take an example at random, “I often play with shifting pronouns and point of view and believe that's part of the destabilizing and provisional nature of things,” framing this choice not with the bombast of a position taken, but as a predilection shaped by essentially technical considerations. To use shifting pronouns that convey the instability of reality is not a mandate that the contemporary poet might follow or fail to follow—it is not something that Sze enjoins on anyone; it is simply a possibility offered by the language that Sze finds interesting.

The interviews often go quite deeply into the choices made in writing particular poems—choices of form, choices of diction, revisions from draft to draft. He points out, for instance, a poem that uses the word “as” twenty times, but in each case with a different meaning. He also illuminates the way that in his poems, silence functions as a counterpoint to what I guess has to be called noise. He explains that in his earlier work, he “often conceived of fragments as shards of a pot. I liked the jagged edges and how the stillness between them suspended narrative motion.” Elsewhere he muses that the “silence”—that is, the blank space—between fragments might be like the gold-dusted lacquer used to mend broken pottery in Japanese *kintsugi*. Although he then explains that he has subsequently approached the idea of the fragment in other ways, this metaphor of the assemblage of pot shards still seems valid for much of Sze's writing.

As an example of Sze's concatenations of fragments, or “glimmering shards” as he calls them in one poem, I can point to the first stanza of the third poem in “Into the Hush”:

*Lichens on a bridge absorb truck fumes;
larger than Manhattan, an iceberg
calves off the Antarctic shelf;
a man at a gas station opens fire onto others.*

A single sentence, this stanza contains three independent clauses, bringing unrelated events into nonspecific relation. Or are they events? The absorption of fumes by lichens—those strange hybrid multispecies colonies—is more like a process; the calving off of an iceberg might be an event but it too is the outcome of a long process; and what about the action of a gunman at a filling station? It's notable that two of these happenings are “natural” in immediate appearance, without any visible human actor, though in fact caused by the activities of humans who might never observe these results, and somehow we have to realize that the unexplained shooting—is it being done for robbery? For revenge? Simply at random?—might be the result of a slow build-up of forces not unlike the poisoning of the lichens or the deterioration of a polar ice cap: the outcome of a process that gives the illusion that it was inevitable. Such a connection among the three statements that make up this single stanza that is a single sentence is logically defensible but does not account for the stanza's uncanny force, which is the implicit sense that these three detached phenomena are part of a single manifold in reality—that somehow the lichens and the iceberg and the man are not simply comparable but in some way that we might call occult, are causally related by way of indeterminable forces that we might be aware of in a vague way but cannot predict or control, that they haunt each other.

Of course, such connections are at best implicit in Sze's juxtapositions—or maybe it

is more accurate to say that the reader, more than the poet, must take responsibility for them; they might be readings-into rather than readings-out-of the poem. Only rarely does he thematize his bundles of images. One time he does so is in a brief poem called “Venn Diagrams,” the second half of which presents:

*An array of sharpened
pencils in a cup; cars parked
at a casino; along a trail, small
puffballs—these clusters manifest
chance; and, pondering three
who furthered you on your way,
you grieve, yearn, hope, make lines
against a void, the void, in an at-one-go.*

The positioning of objects in the world—whether placed there, perhaps, by a single person who might be a writer keeping a cup of pencils on a desk; by numbers of people, such as those who arrive separately in their cars; or by natural forces, like mushrooms—is somehow aleatory: The person who put the pencils in the cup, for instance, did not put them *just there* but any old place as long as it was in the container. And the poem makes a second-order cluster of these clusters of things: a cluster of descriptions. But in the poem, unlike the parking lot, chance has very little to do with it. Remember all those revisions that Sze likes to make. It might even have been chance that brought these three sightings to mind together but the poet’s work has made a determinate synthesis of them that strangely recalls a different kind of cluster, three people (unnamed) who helped “you” (which could be the poet addressing himself or another person)—and that, we must imagine, as little as we are given to know of the matter, really was chance.

Sze has various ways of assembling his fragments, various devices. I’ve quoted a couple of instances in which he uses the semicolon—according to a recent article in the Washington Post, a punctuation mark in decline, but one which will flourish as long as Sze continues.

A very different tactic is exemplified by “Vectors,” whose first lines read:

*First extinction in the Galápagos Islands,
the least vermilion flycatcher—*

*Hopis drill a foot deep and plant blue corn
along a wash—*

*Danger, a woman brushed on the side of
a napalm bomb—*

*in an oblong box emptied of firewood,
a black-widow web—*

*shaving, he nicked himself and stared in
the mirror in a moment of blood—*

*out of a saddlebag, a teen pulls a severed
goat’s head—*

*before signing his name, he recalls
hotel rooms were once used as torture
chambers—*

Where the semicolon pauses while implying some form of coordination, the dash cuts, and this cut is emphasized by the blank space between lines, the fact that the lines are unable to join up as stanzas or as complex sentences. Even where the words preceding the dash can be read as forming a complete sentence, the dash renders it incomplete, and declares that the sentence has been interrupted before its conclusion. The implicitly or explicitly violent content of some of the imagery in this poem seems to reflect its exploded and unmended form. Notice, too, the variations in grammatical and, as it were, phenomenological form of the fragments: mostly full sentences, some of which have more determinate subjects than others (the Hopis who drill versus the anonymous “he” staring at his bleeding face in the mirror, and who might or might not be the same person thinking about sinister hotel rooms) but also a non-sentence that seems to encapsulate a moment of perception, but without a clue as to whose perception that might be, and another, the poem’s opening

line, that presents a molecule of knowledge that could never have been available to direct perception. The multiplicity of images that in “Vectors” fly apart in the mind even as they remain steadfastly fixed there as a constellation on the page can hardly be the contents of a single consciousness, but neither can they be ascribed to a novelistic omniscient narrator. The fragments remain fragments; they seem to exist in relationship, but the nature of that relationship is tenuous and undefined.

A curious aspect of this method of composition by fragments—one might even speak of non sequiturs—is that it does something strange to the temporality of reading. Even without a linear narrative, the act of reading itself is a linear act, and a poem is read from the first word to the last in order—but Sze’s fragments, which can be thought of as images not so much because of their intensely sharp and exact sensory content, also ask to be conceived of as simultaneous rather than sequential. On the page they succeed each other, but in the mind they detach themselves from that order and mingle freely. “Simultaneity is important for several reasons,” Sze tells one of his interlocutors in *The White Orchard*:

First, it provides a structure that is nonlinear and allows for the co-existence of different worlds where one world is not necessarily prioritized over another; second, things can happen in close contact or across great distances, but they require close or even arduous attention to understand how the events may be relational. This requires imagination, insight, and understanding.

As an example of the interconnectedness of things across distances, Sze observes, “What we don’t understand today in a remote part of the planet can arrive, say, in the form of a virus, and threaten us all tomorrow,” to which he has added the note, “I said this in 2019, before Covid struck.” Poetry will never teach us to

predict, diagnose, or cure the effects of a microbe, but it can tell us something about the reality of our uncertain condition in a world about which we can never know enough and where we can only ever proceed by way of more or less attentive leaps in the dark.

I said that Sze’s fragments appear as simultaneous rather than sequential, but now I have to qualify that assertion. They are simultaneously simultaneous *and* sequential. After all, many of Sze’s works are precisely what he calls sequences, and he has said on several occasions that he considers the sequence “the form of our time.” What is a sequence for Sze? Very simply it is, usually, a group of numbered pieces under a single title—neither a “long poem” nor a gathering of separate poems. By composing the sequence as an agglomeration of semi-separate parts, each of which is already in itself an agglomeration of fragments, he extends his fundamental structural strategy to a second level. The relation between the numbered sections is as tenuous and undefined as that between the lines within each section, but if nothing else, the numbering underlines that there is an order to the sections, that they could not have been reshuffled like a deck of cards. They contain chance, but not in that way. The poet collects his molecules of poetry and arranges them as a mosaicist arranges tesserae, recombining them through what Sze says may be “as many as one hundred drafts to complete a poem.”

Moreover, in recent years (and this is true again in *Into the Hush*) Sze has in an unusual way extended this compositional dispersal to a third level, that of the book itself, by dispersing one poem in bits scattered throughout the book—as if one had scattered parts of a painting in different rooms throughout a house—so that one truly encounters them as separate fragments but also has to imagine them as somehow connecting the book’s various sections (which only become marked

as sections through the periodic interruption of another part of the scattered poem). Thus the note that precedes the Contents page of *In the Hush*: “The poem ‘Zuihitsu’ is published in seven untitled sections interleaved through this book.” Each of the seven parts of “Zuihitsu” (this Japanese word refers to a literary genre in which works are compendia of scattered observations, such as the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon) in turn consists of two parts, one set in roman type followed by one in italics. The parts in roman follow Sze’s usual method of leaping from one topic, one mode of perception to another, while the lines in italics present a single ongoing anecdote, told by an “I” who describes working with another person who together practice calligraphy by holding a single brush together with their two right hands. (The speaker, “left-handed, felt awkward holding it.”) But the story of the brush painting ends unfinished, with one of Sze’s dashes, just as does the roman sequence above it: “we brought it”—the brush—“vertically down below the horizontal line, ran it / from left to right, then I gasped, gaped at emptiness—”

That glimpse of emptiness might be a limit point for this poetry, but the emptiness that is conveyed, beyond the word itself, by the following dash reminds me of an insight articulated two centuries ago by Arthur Schopenhauer, that “the conception of the nothing is essentially relative, and always refers to a definite something which it negates.” What is negated in the emptiness glimpsed in Sze’s poem? My guess is that it is the self as organizing or crystallizing principle for a world, in the sense of what is sometimes called a lifeworld. Or really, because Sze is an American poet in the lineage of Whitman, whose figure for the “all” is precisely, “myself,” and whose “I,” in order to be so capacious as to democratically comprehend the equality of all with all,

must become transcend all the facts that it encompasses—must become a fiction, a myth, a hero named Walt Whitman. Only in that way could all contradictions and incongruities be reconciled in his endlessly rocking psalmic verses. Sze wants to encompass as much as Whitman—perhaps more, since he lives in a time when “America” would be a limiting term and not an expansive one, and therefore he ignores national boundaries whether geographic or ideological—but he does so without conjuring an image of the poet who ties it all together. The “I” who appears in these poems might refer to Arthur Sze or it might not; likewise, the “he” who appears in these poems, like the “you” who appears in them, might or might not be the poet. It doesn’t matter. (Curiously, there are only a few occurrences of “she” in *Into the Hush*—perhaps because, while Sze does not need his “I” or “you” or “he” to refer to himself, he does not want his pronouns to refer definitively to someone else.)

Only when this “I” explicitly writes are we, perhaps, warranted to think that the poet in person is intended. “I write into the hush,” according to one such passage—not “I write about” (the hush as essayistic subject) or “I write to” (address, apostrophe) but “I write into,” suggesting the hush is an open space that the writing can enter, that the hush can serve as the environment to an act of writing. And then: “I write along / the curve of an expanding wave that delineates / the shapes of all things.” To “write along” something is to take it, not as a space, but as a surface. This is writing as exploration rather than invention, but no special image of the writer, the poet, is built up. The fictive Walt Whitman was, as Jorge Luis Borges once pointed out, an Everyman, but Sze eschews the figure of Everyman to make room for just anyone. A

Inventing Britain

Holinshed and Hakluyt's Hidden Epics

Ed Simon

DURING THE FOURTH SCENE OF THE FIRST ACT OF WILLIAM Shakespeare’s now comparatively rarely performed *Henry VIII*, the script calls for the firing of a cannon at the moment that a group of masquers is to arrive at the residence of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, whereby the stage direction reads “Drum and trumpet; chargers discharged.” The first recorded performance of the play, though most likely this was the third or fourth time it was staged, was on June 29th, 1613, at the Globe Theatre in Bankside, across the Thames from the City of London proper. Originally known as *All is True*, and cowritten with the 49-year-old Shakespeare’s late-career literary partner John Fletcher, the play dramatized the divorce of its titular king and Queen Catharine of Aragon, the catalyst for England’s reformation and a touchstone for narratives of national independence and greatness. Pleasing the audience with pyrotechnics, an actual cannon was fired during that particular scene, and a piece of errant flammable wadding landed amidst the dry water reeds of the thatched roof. “Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot/ That it’ll do singe yourself,” says Norfolk presciently in the first scene of the play, for it was only shortly thereafter that the great Globe itself would go up in conflagration.

According to accounts, the entire theater was immolated in under an hour, depriving the audience (all of whom, amazingly, survived) of the christening of young Elizabeth. If eyewitnesses are to be trusted, it took a few scenes for the attendees to even notice that the roof was burning, so engrossed were they in Shakespeare’s play. “The fearful fire began above, / A wonder stage and true, / And to the stage-house did remove, / As round a tailor’s clew,” reads an anonymous broadsheet ballad printed a few months after the conflagration, while a prominent theatergoer—Henry Wotton, a poet and diplomat—wrote in a letter that he had witnessed one unlucky patron with “breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broiled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit, put it out with a bottle of ale.” A year later the Globe would be rebuilt, though this time with a tile roof. Shakespeare wasn’t at the premiere, as he’d sold his shares in the King’s Men and moved back to Stratford. He’d been burned once already. When it comes to the stage, history—it would seem—is combustible.

Other than by specialists, *Henry VIII* is largely forgotten today, though despite its vaguely cursed associations it did enjoy a comparatively prodigious production history during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “For some scholars the fact of collaborative authorship... devalued the play, since it rendered more difficult, indeed impossible, the identification of ‘Shakespeare’s philosophy and beliefs’ or ‘Shakespeare’s intention,’” writes Marjorie Garber in *Shakespeare After All*, “challenging the notion that literary texts should put us in touch with the minds that made them.” Garber makes the salient point that such collective writing was common during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; that it was indeed not dissimilar to how screenplays are written in Hollywood today. But if it’s fair to add Fletcher as Shakespeare’s cowriter to *Henry VIII*, then one might also consider the influence of an author then long dead as well, with an influence on far more popular plays such as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. A voracious consumer of the written word capable of synthesizing casual learning into sublime drama, Shakespeare was massively indebted in his historical knowledge to one particular work, a massive and shaggy, encyclopedic and mythic book (also of collaborative authorship) entitled *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, but more popularly known after the name of its main compiler as *Holinshed’s Chronicles*. Ranging from three to six volumes, and in some editions (the only contemporary version is a digital edition from Oxford) stretching to an astounding eight-thousand pages, a work which the Shakespearean scholar Stephen Booth quipped that all of his colleagues had heard of, but that nobody had read. Despite its paucity of readers today, *Holinshed’s Chronicles* married localism with universalism, and a mythographer’s attraction to legend with a humanist’s attention to empirical detail, so as to produce, create, and even invent the very idea of a Great Britain.

When the first edition of *Holinshed’s Chronicles* was released from the workshop of Reginald Wolfe in 1577 (the Dutch-born printer himself having died five years before he saw the project publish its first volume), the “British Isles” were an inchoate collection of islands more than a nation. More than 80,000 square miles, extending from the white cliffs of Dover to the rocky shoals of Orkney, Queen Elizabeth’s domains were more theory than reality. “Britain” itself wasn’t a country but a mythic concept, the word conjuring Boudica and Arthur more than the realities of an emerging nation. Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson, in his 1983 classic *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, writes that the “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” so that a nation—any nation—isn’t a *thing* so much as it is an *idea*.

Nationality is a language, of a sort. Most Englishmen (not to mention Scotsmen, Irishmen, or the Welsh) would have never visited distant London. England and Scotland had yet to unify (though by the time Shakespeare’s play premiered they’d have the same monarch), and Ireland

was continually in various degrees of colonial (not to mention often genocidal) subjugation. Celtic languages endured not just in Wales, Scotland, and obviously Ireland, but in Wales and the Isle of Man as well, while Norman was still spoken in many of the Channel Islands. Religious uniformity remained elusive to Elizabeth, despite her attempts at charting a reasonable middle path between Catholicism and Protestantism, with adherents to the Church of Rome having proliferated in Cornwall and the north of England, and on the other side of the sectarian divide, Calvinist Puritans demanding a more austere and reformed national church. “Britain” was, as Anderson might put it, an “imagined political community,” but by the time the printer Wolfe commissioned his “Universal Cosmography of the whole world, and therewith also particular histories of every known nation,” this Britain had yet to really be imagined. Holinshed would then become the first to dream of it.

Britain, as with the project itself, was a manifold project, a rambling house with additions of varied provenance continually added onto the structure.

For being the compiler of the most extant history of the British Isles up until that moment, written with the intent of providing a complete and comprehensive account of those countries, there is an irony in how little is known about Holinshed himself. Indeed, Holinshed’s bibliography contains no other works. The self is absent in *Holinshed’s Chronicles*—the assistant to Wolfe, born in 1525, nine years before Henry VIII would ratify the Acts of Supremacy that would effectively inaugurate the idea of an English nation as separate from the continent, and most likely educated at Cambridge. Holinshed’s relative absence from the chronicles that bear his name is in part due to the fact that the book itself was as collaborative an effort as Shakespeare’s play was. More so, for Holinshed was joined in compiling such a history by other antiquaries, humanists, and scholars such as clergyman and author of *A Description of England* William Harrison (himself drawing from the earlier research of the poet John Leland), the alchemist Richard Stanyhurst, the renegade Jesuit priest and eventual martyr Edmund Campion, and the solicitor John Hooker, all of whom contributed to the final project. An encyclopedia, like a kingdom, is an effort of many subjects.

“As few or no nations can justly boast themselves to have continued hence their countries were first replenished, without any mixture, more or less of foreign inhabitants,” wrote Holinshed and his colleagues, “no more can this our land.” Britain, as with the project itself, was a manifold

project, a rambling house with additions of varied provenance continually added onto the structure. What Wolfe intended, and by extension Holinshed and his fellow writers, as well as the Stationer's Company who underwrote the project, was a cohesive narrative to emerge from all of this diversity, to impose on the randomness and chaos of history (for history is always random and chaotic) an identifiable teleology. Reading *Holinshed's Chronicles* today is an incongruous experience, mostly accomplished by Shakespeare scholars interested in the manner by which the playwright (and many other writers) was so obviously influenced by these "histories." The incongruity comes from the same reason as that of presenting the genre in scare quotes: Holinshed is not penning historiography in any contemporary sense. This chimeric work built in part on myth—of the legendary King Brutus of Troy fleeing that city for Hesperian Isles where he would establish the lineage of an imagined Britain, or of green-hued magic children appearing in the medieval hamlet of Woolpit. Yet at the same time, as evidenced by the keen observational eye of a Harrison or Leland, this work was not without some concern for empirical rigor, as accounts and records from regional administrators and parishes were collected and referenced within *Holinshed's Chronicles*, in attempting to "write the history" of actual events from the War of the Roses to the English Reformation.

Holinshed's Chronicles provided a particular vision of "Britain," a country that had yet to exist legally but that was in the process of being conjured into reality by historians and later writers such as Shakespeare.

The result is a maximalist enterprise that is partially ancient and partially contemporary, a fusion of the medieval and modern, fully in keeping with the emerging epistemologies of that gloaming period that was the Renaissance. More importantly than any sop to accuracy, what *Holinshed's Chronicles* provided was a particular vision of "Britain," of a country that had yet to exist legally but that was in the process of being conjured into reality by historians and later writers such as Shakespeare. "Holinshed and his associates could not have known (though I suspect they prayed) that their history of the 'nations'... would have a profound cultural role," writes Igor Djordjevic in *Holinshed's Nation: Ideals, Memory, and Practical Policy in the Chronicles*. "But it is a fact that we cannot ignore because so many of their readers went on to retell (and further refract)

the stories they learned from the chronicles to their own audience.... Converting them into components of the revised (or newly conceived?) national self in later times." Which is to say that a central function, or at least a result, of *Holinshed's Chronicle* is that it provided cohesion, however complicated, to a collection of disparate lands and cultures, forging them intellectually—if not actually, at first—into a country.

Consider Shakespeare's *Henry IV: Part 1* and *Part 2*, which like *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *King John*, and so on, was heavily indebted to Holinshed, who wrote of this king that "did much hurt in the countries with fire and sword, slaying diverse that with weapon in hand came forth resist him, and so with a great booty of beasts and cattle he returned" triumphant monarch of a unified realm. Because profligate Prince Hal and Falstaff, his mentor in debauchery, along with the denizens of the Boars-Head Tavern in Eastcheap, are such beguiling figures, it's easy to read the Henriad as a character study as much as a meditation on political power. In both of those senses, however, it's a story about the forging of a novel identity out of the varied ones which would come to constitute an idea of Britishness. Prince Hal is strung between his father and Falstaff, the former representative of the commands of a burgeoning efficient state and the later of a boozy, quasi-pagan Merry Old England. There is depiction of figures from the Celtic periphery like the druid Owen Glyndwr, who must be repressed in the construction of a modern country, while the fraternity of soldiers such as the Welsh Fluellen, the Scottish Captain Jamy, and the Irish Captain Macmorris who are fighting for "Harry, England, and Saint George" embody the unification of the British Isles, defining them by what they are not (in this case, namely, French). Whatever the complexities of the reality of emerging British cohesion, always mandated from the metropole more than something which organically arose in the hinterlands (just ask the Irish how British they felt, or feel), Holinshed penned a script which could be adapted by subsequent writers. "Shakespeare may be the catalyst for our postmodern, post-national, meditation," writes Djordjevic, but "the original question of fluid and evolving national identity came to him from Holinshed's narrative of English medieval history that he used as his immediate source." Fluid because it was a construction; narrative because it was a fiction; "national identity" because it worked.

Before there was an England, there were the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Northumbria, Essex, Mercia, Wessex, Anglia, Sussex, and Kent. The Anglo-Saxons themselves were a motley bunch, a collection of Angles and Saxons, Frisians and Jutes, with uniformity only imposed later on. Before the Anglo-Saxons, there were the original Latinized Britons, to whom the vaguely Arthurian mythography was projected, but during Holinshed's day there remained Welsh, Scots, Manx, Cornish, and Irish, none of whom were speaking a Germanic language. On top of all that there was the residual Gallic affectations of the aristocracy descended from the Norman French, who themselves had Nordic Scandinavian origins. In short, as with any other nation, England was as much a fantasy as anything else, the idea that this

inchoate collection shared a common story a profound act of imagination, to borrow Anderson's phrase. And England—as any subject of the United Kingdom will remind you—is supposedly only a constituent part of Great Britain, including Scotland and Wales (though not Northern Ireland), which is what makes Holinshed's history all the more integral, since it defined the Atlantic Archipelago as somehow united in a manufactured *Britishness* three decades before James I was crowned “King of Great Brittain,” and a century before the 1707 ratification of the Act of Union that merged England and Scotland into this newly confirmed, but long dreamt about, imagined community.

Holinshed's mode was the temporal—the chronicles were, after all, a history. And the medium of history is time, of justifying the present by recourse to the past and of demanding a particular future by reference to the present. Temporality was not the only mode that the inventors of England operated in, however. For only five years after the publication of *Holinshed's Chronicles*, another book appeared, that gave space its due as much as the former traded in time. A Hertfordshire geographer by the name of Richard Hakluyt, who never set foot on an English ship which circumnavigated the globe, passed by the Cape of Good Hope, or was bound for the nascent Western colonies, nonetheless produced the most important work of England's colonial yearnings in his 1589 *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation*. Motivated by the same burgeoning empiricism that had inspired Wolfe to assemble his crack team of historians, the land-bound Hakluyt gathered materials from the English privateers such as Walter Raleigh and Francis Drake, to will into existence an English colonial project when it didn't quite yet exist, at least not to the level implied by the book itself. As with Holinshed, Hakluyt's massive achievement was a collaborative enterprise, though less in the composition of *Principal Navigations* than in the assemblage of its sources. The entirety of this Oxford-trained geographer's foreign experience was a stint in the Paris household of the English ambassador Sir Francis Walsingham, and yet it was accounts of men such as Raleigh that would be central to his work that would function as a brief for colonial ambitions, of the rhetoric “concerning the great necessity and manifold commodities that are like to grow to this Realm of England by the Western discoveries lately attempted,” as he wrote in a 1584 letter to Queen Elizabeth advocating for the establishment of an American empire.

When England's New World colonies were composed of only a few square miles of coastal Virginia, Hakluyt wrote of English explorers and colonials that “it can not be denied, but as in all former ages, they have been men full of activity, stirrers abroad, and searchers for the most remote parts of the world... in searching the most opposite corners and quarters of the world... in compassing the vast globe of the earth... have excelled all the nations and people of the earth.” When that was written, the population of England's sole Roanoke Colony was around 120 souls, most of whom had disappeared two years before the release of Hakluyt's triumphalist

compendium. By contrast, the new Hapsburg capital of Madrid reigned over more than five million square miles of earth, the first empire of which it was said that the sun never set, with nine million people living in the vanquished lands of the Taino, the Aztec, and the Inca. Nonetheless, *Principal Navigations* was crucial in providing the propagandistic element required to conceptualize an English empire; it was central to Anderson's process of imagining a community. Jeffrey Knapp, in his 1992 study *An Empire Nowhere: England, America, and Literature from Utopia to the Tempest*, argued that the entire English literary Renaissance—Wyatt and Surrey, Sidney and Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare—was the result of anxiety over England's belated colonial ambitions (tellingly many of those aforementioned were keen readers of Holinshed, and at times Hakluyt). What also must be suggested is something related to Knapp's argument, which is an earlier claim of the Victorian critic James Froude who argued that *Principal Navigations* (and I'd claim by extension *Holinshed's Chronicles*) are the “Prose Epic of the modern English nation,” and its great fantasy was this mythic idea of Britain, a fantasy that is still apparent today in the nostalgia of Englishmen pining for the age before the post-colonial.

As collaborative epics, Holinshed and Hakluyt fuse the temporal and the spatial, time and space, to concoct a mythic land of Britain.

The Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his 1930s essays collected as *The Dialogic Imagination*, formulates a rhetorical unit that he claims explains the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are expressed in literature,” calling this unit a “chronotope.” Read together, I would argue that Holinshed and Hakluyt are not only hidden epics of English Renaissance literature, bolstering the more conventionally literary works of figures like Shakespeare and Marlowe, but that both *Holinshed's Chronicles* and *Principle Navigations* function together as a chronotope. “In the literary artistic chronotope,” writes Bakhtin, “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole.” Holinshed and Hakluyt, those contemporaneous writers, must be read together, for as collaborative epics they fuse the temporal and the spatial, time and space, to concoct a mythic land of Britain. What's most remarkable is that they in some sense willed this nation into existence, that by collecting histories and travelogues they gave shape to a dream of imperial ambition. Christopher Hodgkins, in *Reforming Empire: Protestant Colonialism and Conscience in British Literature*, describes how the “archival

enterprise of Hakluyt... revised and reformed an ancient British identity, and how it began to bind together a newly imagined Protestant 'Britain' for the territorial recovery—and expansion—of a lost 'Brytish Empire.'" Indeed, that's what makes the work of Holinshed and Hakluyt so fascinating, for at the time they both began to write, "Britain" wasn't to be found anywhere. There was England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, even America, but no *Britain* per se. Latin Britannia and the ancient Britons were long gone, relegated to an antique past druidical and enchanted, erased by the wave of Teutonic invasion that had constituted the eventual English state. But in resurrecting this imagined "Britain," inventing it if you will, Holinshed and Hakluyt posed a counter-myth to the powerful tales of Spanish and Portuguese Catholic imperialism than ascendant in the Western hemisphere.

Anderson points out that Britain has the "rare distinction of refusing nationality in its naming," for (contrary to all evidence) British imperial ambition wasn't supposed to be English, but something else, and the state wasn't supposed to be reducible to ethnicity (again contrary to all evidence) but transcendent of local differences. To imagine such a state is an act of conjuration, which makes it appropriate enough that the first person to use the term "British Empire" wasn't Holinshed or Hakluyt, an antiquary or geographer, but rather John Dee, the Elizabethan court astrologer and alchemist, in a 1577 tract in which he justified colonialism by recourse to King Arthur. Holinshed, Hakluyt, Dee, along with Raleigh, Drake, John Smith, Thomas Harriot—magicians all, conjuring an empire in words before it existed in reality. A year before Dee would die in 1608, the Virginian colony of Jamestown was established on filched land, dedicated to the production of tobacco. Four years after Hakluyt would die in 1616, some 32 enslaved Africans would disembark at Jamestown, the first held in bondage in the English colonies. Rather than romantic Arthuriana, the legacy of Dee's British Empire was expressed in this settlement built on ethnic cleansing and slavery dedicated to the cultivation of an addictive and deadly narcotic. A thousand other travesties would follow. To dream an empire into existence may be an act of magic, but occultism has its infernal effects, as always, with words as dangerous as errant flammable waddling floating upwards towards a burning roof. **A**

Three Books About Life and Death

Daniel Asia

Sebastian Junger, *In My Time of Dying: How I Came Face to Face with the Idea of an Afterlife*. Simon & Schuster, 176pp., \$28 cloth.

Joseph Epstein, *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life, Especially If You've Had a Lucky Life*. Free Press, 304pp., \$30 cloth.

Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*. Belknap Press, 176pp. \$20 paper.

ON JUNE 16, 2020, SEBASTIAN Junger experienced an aneurysm that should have killed him. Because of expert doctoring and luck, it didn't. His book, *In My Time of Dying, How I Came Face-to-Face with the Idea of an Afterlife*, is an account of his experience, some biographical materials that pertain to the experience itself, and existential ponderings on occurrences during his travail and its aftermath.

Junger is a journalist by profession and a rationalist by upbringing. His father, a Jewish physicist, inculcated the value of being able to "prove," to let the data talk. He "didn't believe in anything that he couldn't measure and test." This is perfect for a journalist—get the facts straight. Clear debris out of the way. Junger knows how to capture the essence of an event with all of its layers, textures, and details, and as importantly, to make it colorful. His writing is straightforward. His extensive listing of the materials used for his surgery is almost

Maileresque in its delineation. He interviewed his doctors, nurses, and emergency medicine handlers. His bibliography is extensive, citing articles that he admits he couldn't fully comprehend. The math is past his capability to keep up, but he understands the conclusions.

His father, though a rationalist, was also a bit of a mystic, which influenced Junger's approach to the world and his contemplation of humankind after his experience. The fundamental contradiction that the book explores is the quite extraordinary state of science and medicine—our highly developed understanding of how the body works and how to fix it when it goes wrong—and our lack of knowledge about the hidden nature of consciousness itself, or how the body and soul combine to make what we call life. He came up against the wall of human rationality, what it can and cannot tell us about ourselves and our relationship to the universe. He was a super-rationalist before his illness; afterwards, less so.

What happened to effectuate this change? After surgery, he began to ponder death: “Not death on his terms... but on *its* terms.”

Junger had a dream that shook him to the core. He was conducting research for a book (it must have been *A Perfect Storm*, although he doesn't mention it specifically). In it, the dead men he was researching appeared on a beach where he had long ago gone surfing and almost drowned. They waved him over and seemed to be saying, “We've been expecting you.” Another dream followed days later. His wife and daughter were crying while he hovered oddly over their heads. Death, or premonitions of death, are close to Junger. After all, he was a war correspondent in Afghanistan and other war zones, where death, or its possibility, was always near at hand. Nonetheless, these dreams unsettled him.

Mourning for humans is not lugubrious, but an active form of meaning-making and flourishing.

And then the attack occurred. A pain struck in his abdomen that almost floored him. He had had lesser pains over the previous six months and had ignored them. He and his wife were at their rustic Cape Cod home in an outbuilding with no telephone or cell service. Once she had returned to civilization, his wife, Barbara, called 911, and medics arrived and took him to the hospital. Later, he deduced that he was losing blood at a fast pace. He was “just coherent enough to know that I wasn't entirely.” Upon arrival at the hospital, the trauma doctors knew immediately that he was in terrible shape, the sickest person in the hospital, so he was given priority attention. They had to find out from whence the bleeding

was originating. Eventually, it was determined that he had had a rupture of “one of the small arteries that supply blood to the pancreas and duodenum.”

In unraveling his condition and its treatment, in good journalistic form, many medical definitions are explored: hypothermia, low blood oxygen, massive transfusion protocols, and the like. He was in and out of consciousness, but still able to ask questions. You're putting in a particular line, “in case there's an emergency?” he foggily asked. The doctor responded “This is the emergency.” As his condition became more dire, he

became aware of a dark pit below me and to my left. The pit was the purest black, and so infinitely deep that it had no real depth at all...It exerted a pull that was slow but unanswerable, and I knew that if I went into the hole, I was never coming back...and just when it seemed unavoidable, I became aware of something else: My father exuded reassurance and seemed to be inviting me to go with him. “It's okay, there's nothing to be scared of...don't fight it. I'll take care of you.”

The rest of the book is an attempt to understand this appearance and experience of his deceased father, and its relationship to the possibility of an afterlife. This term must not be thought of in a simplistic schema of heaven and hell, or in the image of the bones of the dead jangling their way back to life upon the arrival of the Messiah, as in the Biblical book of Ezekiel. Instead, the thought is that consciousness is part of the universe, as are we. And that consciousness might survive our bodily deaths. He ponders this possibility from the perspective of Near Death Experiences (NDE) and the sciences, and quantum physics of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Among the aspects of NDEs is the life review. It is just that, and it takes place in an instant. He relates this experience of one of his buddies, Carroll, who is an army medic, and was severely wounded in combat. “My whole life flashed before my eyes from birth to

the present moment... I thought of my wife. I thought of my mom. I thought of how much love I had for them...It's okay. Let go. You were loved. You loved them. Nothing else matters. It was just this total acceptance of what was happening.” Junger comments “The life review was one of the most powerful and comforting of these visions. It is characterized by the conviction that you have sweeping knowledge of all things and can simultaneously re-experience your entire life.”

“Sweeping knowledge of all things” means knowing about things that sound impossible. A man dies, comes back to life, and relates what he saw in another part of the hospital. The nurse tells him that this did indeed occur. The dead person sees himself and the scene around him as if from above, and describes what happened.

Just before death and after death an explosion of gamma rays is released by the brain. How can this happen after? About one quarter of all those who experience NDEs report encountering the dead, as did Junger. It is usually relatives who are “seen.” Junger asks the simple question: “Why do the dying—and only the dying—keep seeing the dead in their last days and hours?” He cites cases presented by reputable doctors of these occurrences, as well as the statement of a doctor, a sceptic of NDEs, who had just such an experience.

He examines what scientists know about our world, particularly theoretical physicists, for it is they, of all scientists, who understand the universe as a mysterious place. Energy and matter are just different forms of the same thing. Einstein said, “Matter is spirit reduced to the point of visibility—there is no matter.” Notice the use of the word spirit. Heisenberg “demonstrated that subatomic particles changed behavior when observed.” Namely, that humans affect the atomic structure of the universe just by watching it.” And Schrodinger's thought experiment suggested

that a cat could simultaneously be dead and alive. (In a fit of unacknowledged synchronicity, Schrodinger tutored Junger's father's twin aunts during the summer of 1926.)

And then there is the brain and consciousness. The brain is constituted of over an estimated hundred trillion neural connections. They give rise to what we call consciousness, which we have yet to understand. How does it arise, and why does it exist? Since it exists, it must have been part of the possibilities of the universe from its beginning, part of the “cosmic fabric.” As Sir Arthur Eddington said: “Something unknown is doing we don't know what.”

Junger's father was a rationalist and a romantic. We know the latter adjective applies, because he found the night sky so beautiful that he couldn't look at it. Did it belie his rationalist stance? Sebastian Junger goes where his father couldn't. As a journalist, he must follow what the evidence and science tell him:

Given that existence itself is almost infinitely unlikely, what if there were some kind of post-death existence? What if the dead were not entirely gone, in the sense that we understand that word, and the living were not entirely bound by time and space? What if the great mysteries of the world—the spirits and ghosts and coincidences and telepathy and predictive dreams and everything else that humans have always noticed but couldn't quite make sense of—actually had a rational explanation? How would that possibly work?

How indeed.

To have a good life, live by bourgeois values. Get a good education. Be honest and forthright. Have respect for law and authority. Have the courage to stand up for what is right. This is all well and good. But as Joseph Epstein suggests in his new book, *Never Say You've Had a Lucky Life, Especially If You've Had a Lucky Life*, having a little luck never hurts. Epstein's memoir displays his mostly lucky life in spades. Or it may just be that he

always sees the cup as half-full, because part of his life wasn't quite so simple or easy, but that was partly of his own doing. Epstein seems to be a happy-go-lucky guy, who finds joy in most of existence, and certainly in his own.

The memoir scoots along from his life's beginnings to now. There are encounters with some famous people along the way, a bit of sociological comment—in Epstein's view, the earlier years were indeed better than the latter for America, with the dividing line being the mid-60s. There were a few disgraces and defeats along the way, but nothing that took Epstein's (the Jewish *Ep-stine* being the correct pronunciation) life off the rails.

He grew up a "petit bourgeois, Jewish, Midwest American," and that worked out well. Epstein isn't one for deep introspection; he skates just a bit on the surface of his life's occurrences, but as with some music, that surface is appealing enough to keep us entertained, if not enriched. It is the story of how a kid who "lived on playgrounds, hung out at drug and school stores... and was a wise guy," ended up as a writer and intellectual. In that quote I left out "and at drive in movies, where I was never allowed to go as far with the young girls of my generation as I ardently desired." He admits that in his teenage years he visited prostitutes with his buddies. He might have had a drink or two, but no drugs.

And unlike many of our current cultural critics, Epstein thinks that the culture of the time, post-World-War-II America, was "for all its flaws, the most interesting, the most generous, the grandest country in the world." He still does. And that culture promoted the formation of those bourgeois values mentioned above, unlike ours, which fosters the lightweight characteristics of self-esteem and freedom from stress.

For Epstein, being lucky meant, first and foremost, having good and decent parents. Like most parents of the 1950s and 1960s, his parents left him alone. They loved and trusted him, but didn't hover over him. There weren't

lots of hugs or deep discussions of his feelings, just quiet support. He could come and go as he pleased. The streets and playgrounds were safe. As a teenager, he held a job and therefore learned about earning money and responsibility. It was a time of the "pre-therapeutic state," which he finds better than our current age of overwhelming attention given to our "feelings." He did okay at school, but nothing stellar, as it didn't interest him much. And then, getting into college wasn't such a big deal. He started at the University of Illinois, in a fraternity, of course, but then ended up at the University of Chicago. He wasn't a particularly good student and had no strong interests. He thought he might end up like his dad, a salesman.

Epstein's mother and father were characters. His father Maurice never finished high school, but for years ran a successful business, which was his life. He worked six days a week selling cheap tchotchkes. He was fair, never showed any favoritism, and while not a member of any synagogue and an agnostic, he contributed liberally to Jewish charities and to relatives and poor individuals. His father encouraged him to go his own way, as he thought work was the most important aspect of a man's life. His mother Belle was not beautiful, but was nonetheless, "stunning." She played cards, provided all that was needed at home, and sponsored Jewish and non-Jewish charity events. She loved language and used it well, but wasn't in any way literary. He is doubtful that she ever read any of his books or articles. Their collective family life was mostly restricted to extended family and celebrating with them the Jewish holidays.

Childhood was in a furnished apartment off Lake Michigan in Chicago. The war "suffused all of American life," and America has never been as unified since then. While Chicago was a largely Catholic city, Epstein was brought up Jewish: he went to Hebrew school, had a Bar Mitzvah, likes to be part of the Jewish people, and happens to enjoy being part of a

distinguished minority in America. His father read him children's stories from the Old Testament and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Can a better combination of being Jewish and American be had?

Epstein went to college because all of his friends did. That college was the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, because it was cheap and let in almost everyone. He went into a fraternity, with all of its trappings: silly hazing, but also companionship and decent food. Frats were strictly Gentile or Jewish, with nothing in between. Epstein had no idea what he would study. But he did discover he could write with decent "clarity." After residence in the frat for one term, he tired of it and moved out. He began also to feel that the university was dull, tedious, and too large and impersonal. But then he was kicked out of school for having sold a stolen exam!

Lear pushes back on such nihilism with the notion that, in fact, there is something marvelous and good about us and the goodness and beauty we have brought into the world.

After holding down a job for a bit, he sought out an alternative college experience, and applied to the University of Chicago. Lo and behold, he discovered that he had been accepted. He thinks that his experience there changed his life. It wasn't so much the classroom talk, but the readings and general

atmosphere. He felt quite out of the mainstream of his very well-educated and suave fellow students, but he wanted to participate, so he worked and studied hard. Not knowing what else to choose, after a year and a half he became an English major. At this time, he also discovered small magazines, e.g. *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, et al. He was entranced, and began to entertain the possibility that maybe he could become a writer, like those who appeared in these journals. After working as a sub-editor for the college rag, it also occurred to him that he might find work as an editor.

His following two-year stint in the army was a leveling agent, as he was surrounded by American types that he hadn't come across before. He found it salutary, and it gave him time to think about what he might do with his life. He wrote for the base newspaper in Texas, then fatefully ended up doing the same in Little Rock.

Fatefully, because it is here that he met his first wife, with whom he had two children. She already had two, was a waitress, came from a poor background, hadn't much education, nor was she exactly Jewish. His parents weren't thrilled. The couple divorced after ten years. And the kicker was that she demanded he take all four children or none, and so he did.

But in the intervening ten years his career began. He started with the *Kiwanis* magazine in Chicago, then moved to working for the *New Leader* in New York. He met many up-and-comers there, and the name dropping is severe. But if you knew them, why not flaunt it? We come across the likes of Walter Laqueur, Dwight MacDonald, John Simon, and Hilton Kramer, among others. He couldn't find a job after leaving the *New Leader*, and he and the family moved back to Little Rock with the hope of finding better employment there. He did, finding a job there in anti-poverty work as a public relations man. He wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine* on the subject, which instantly gained him fame in the field

and many opportunities at the national level. It also resulted in his becoming the director of the anti-poverty program in Pulaski County, Arkansas. During his tenure there, he began to believe that while poverty might partly be political and economic, its primary source is cultural. Looking for another job, he found one working for *Encyclopedia Britannica* in, of all places, Chicago.

Encyclopedia Britannica was going through its great self-introspection, trying to find a new path. Epstein was hired to help. Never having had, or read, an encyclopedia, he wasn't much. The machinations of this time make for some prosaic reading, about lunches, dull meetings, and half-interesting co-workers. The job's only saving grace was that he met his second wife there (or as she asked his publishers to write, his "final wife").

Epstein recounts the growth, successes, and failures of his four sons (he and his second wife have no children). One son graduated with honors from Stanford; another died of an overdose at age twenty-eight. He says there is no such thing as closure. (Fair enough, but there might be a little more rumination on what these occurrences meant to him.) Fortunately, he develops a strong relationship with the deceased son's daughter.

In the early seventies, after writing a contentious article on homosexuality, he was still hired to teach at Northwestern University and, then soon thereafter, to the editorship of Phi Beta Kappa's quarterly, *The American Scholar*. He notes that this would not be possible in these times, since he took on these positions with no advanced degree, and not having been made a member of Phi Beta Kappa. But Beethoven had no Doctor of Musical Arts degree and Dostoyevsky no Ph.D. in literature, and somehow they managed to produce decent music and literature. Epstein had already demonstrated his gifts as a writer and editor in the "real" world.

He taught a couple of classes each of three quarters at Northwestern, although

it was never an easy experience for him. "Not that I ever entered a classroom as a teacher completely free from nervousness. I worried about filling my full ninety-minute classes; I worried about boring my students; I worried about betraying inexcusable ignorance of one or another kind." He retired at the tender age of sixty-five in 2002, which he figures was timed perfectly, as it preceded the onslaught of political correctness. As a free-thinker of a conservative bent, he wouldn't have survived.

Which he didn't from his job at *The American Scholar*. That job came about, he thinks, as the result of wonderful recommendations from his friend Hilton Kramer, the *New York Times* art critic and co-founder and then-editor of *The New Criterion*. By his account, it was a cushy job. At twenty grand, he was paid half of a professor's salary. While the office was in Washington, DC., he only needed to commute there four times a year from his hometown of Chicago. He had numerous underlings, who could help him with his editorial work. "They did most of the work on the journal, while I got all of the credit." It gave him time to continue work as a freelance writer and teach his now one course per quarter at Northwestern. And happily, writing a 6500-word article at the beginning of each edition turned him into a fine essayist, which carried over into his book and article writing.

His demise was quick and almost painless. The Skirball Foundation "threatened" to give the magazine a few million dollars. Three members of the Senate, rowdies on the left, saw it as a gambit to keep him in his position indefinitely. A coup was undertaken, and only one friend voted for his retention. It caused a bit of a public stir, but it was only a momentary historical blip.

Joseph Epstein has written thirty-one books in his eighty-eight years. I wouldn't be surprised if he is working on one now as I write, as he makes no mention of stopping

after writing this autobiography. Elliott Carter wrote music until he died at 103, so let's not put anything out of the realm of possibility for Epstein, who writes easily and fluently.

He misses his deceased friends. Doesn't go to the movies much anymore, but doesn't miss them. He realizes he is lucky to have a loving wife, son, and grandchildren. He still retains his love of writing, reading, and a sense of humor: he "would hate to check out while reading, say, a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* with the title "Thailand fights for Democracy." As he says:

I was able to teach at a university without having to undergo the tedium of acquiring any advanced degrees. I was appointed editor of a magazine, The American Scholar, the quarterly journal of Phi Beta Kappa, without having to be concerned about its finances or having been a Phi Beta Kappa myself. I have not had to go into an office over the past 50 or so years. Above all, through my adult life, I've been allowed to do the work I love, writing about what I pleased, expressing my true views, and being well rewarded, financially as well as psychologically, while doing so.

Mr. Joseph Epstein really has led a lucky life, as his aptly titled book notes. May he live *bis ein hundred und zwanzig* (until a hundred and twenty); and in good health, of course.

Much of Jonathan Lear's new book, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life*, first appeared as lectures at the Newberry Library in Chicago. They then appeared separately in publication. The result is a book that is mildly repetitive, occasionally colloquial, and—as his conceptual frameworks are philosophical and psychoanalytical—displays unnecessary jargon. There are also chapters that probably never should have found their way into this book, but more about that later.

There are times in Lear's life when he hears something that becomes the source of an extended rumination. The first chapter begins with just one of these moments. He was

listening to a lecture about climate change and its resultant ecological catastrophe. At the end of the discussion, a young academic stood up and said, "Let me tell you something: we will not be missed." This "joke" suggests that if humanity is gone, there will be no one to miss us and, even more insidiously, that we are not worthy of being missed. Lear claims that the key takeaway from this line of reasoning is that we as individuals are not just the bad guys, and it's not just that "civilization is under threat." Indeed, civilization itself is the bad guy, "responsible for its own undoing." Lear latches onto the term "miss" in the joke to introduce the central motif of the book, stating "we are threatened with the loss of the special kind of missing that is characteristic of human beings: mourning...a living-on in the hearts and minds of others." Mourning for humans is not lugubrious, but an active form of meaning-making and flourishing. We "get busy emotionally, imaginatively, and cognitively" in response to a loss: "We mourners, through our suffering, transform what would otherwise be a mere change into a ...way we create and maintain an absence in the world."

The flip side of the joke and its environmental context, he argues, implies a punishment involved in not being missed, in imposing catastrophic civilization upon the earth: "...we are confronted with the prospect of the end of mourning itself. We...are thus to be the last generation of mourners. Insofar as there is any mourning left to be done, we have the last chance."

Lear pushes back on such nihilism with the notion that, in fact, there is something marvelous and good about us and the goodness and beauty we have brought into the world. Is this not worth mourning? Mourning usually applies to death, not at an approach to death. Until actual death, there is always the possibility of the continuance of life. For Freud and Aristotle, mourning gives meaning to the life that is no longer and to the relationships that death has severed. The feelings of love,

and therefore the loss of the loved one, are as real as any physical object. As consciousness is part of the universe, so are they. “Mourning broadly understood is pervasive in human life” (emphasis in original).

Lear then introduces two words that he would like to place in relation to mourning: morality and *kalon*. He takes from Bernard Williams the notion that morality implies certain obligations, and that blame, shame, and guilt are baked into the system. Yet “mourning provides relief from all of this.” *Kalon*, an Aristotelean idea, combines aspects of the noble, beautiful, and the fine, and of acting well. We would describe it as something that makes us happy, and gives life meaning. He gives the example of a generous person doing generous acts. In the Jewish tradition, this would include he who gives money to the poor; she who provides a job; they who support an institution that offers experiences for beauty; and the community that supports orphans and widows. But *kalon* is also mourning, according to Lear, as we do the good deed of attending to the dead. Again, in Judaism, taking care of the dead is considered a holy act, as the deceased can provide nothing in return. We are acknowledging their effect on us and the universe, and sustaining their image through our thoughts. Mourning, then, is part of the universe, which would be less if mourning didn’t exist.

The author next turns to “On Transience,” a short 1916 essay by Freud. In it, Freud describes how he, and a friend, who is a famous young poet, take a walk, talking about transience and beauty, and what civilization now means in a time of war. The First World War “shattered their pride” in European civilization and undermined their faith in its philosophy and the concept of “Man,” as well as in the progress and science that drove it. He notes that there have been wars throughout history, and that humanity had to adapt to their consequences. The destruction of the Second Temple for the Jews in 70 CE caused a

complete change in how the Jews approached God, from sacrifice to prayer. Lear was doing this soul-searching during Covid, but only a severe pessimist, one susceptible to hysteria, could equate the world war and the pandemic. Roughly 16 to 19 million people died as a result of World War I, while deaths in the Covid pandemic numbered 7 million. While the latter is lamentable, it is not equivalent to the former in terms of casualties.

***Kalon*, an Aristotelean idea, combines aspects of the noble, beautiful, and the fine, and of acting well. We would describe it as something that makes us happy, and gives life meaning.**

On the other hand, Covid-19 was indeed a creation of science, as its release from a scientific lab into the world population was not unavoidable. As were the ensuing fallacies of science, which we now know took place (the six-foot rule and mask mandates, etc.). So, while the event may not have “shattered the pride” of humanity, it, by and large, devastated our faith in medical authority and our previous naïve inclination to “trust the science”, or politicized scientists.

The concern of the poet and the friend comes down to how to mourn the passing of beauty. They revolt against its transience, which is, in a sense, an infantile revolt against the transience of life, which, too, has an end. At the article’s conclusion, Freud finds hope in the possibility of rebuilding. Is this not, after

all, what humanity has always done? For example, in the Jewish tradition, optimism must be retained and held; it accepts that both overcoming evil and welcoming joy are part of the journey. For Albert Murray—the eminent twentieth-century novelist and cultural critic—to be genuinely human is to accept and overcome the blues. Lear and Murray insist that this makes the human journey not mundane and vapid, but heroic. “Freud expresses the hope of building back up again all the good that catastrophe has destroyed, but maybe in this next generation it will be even better.”

In Chapter Three, “Exemplars and the End of the World,” Lear believes that panic over “climate change and ecological catastrophe, threats to the democratic political order, as well as the menace of the pandemic” will allow our imaginations to overwhelm our ability to apply a sense of perspective, not to say optimism, about the human capability to overcome such challenges. He looks at universal and local exemplars to understand this approach. These include Aristotle’s teaching about King Priam of Homer’s *Iliad*, who, as a noble person, had to cope with his world coming to an end as he knew it. He also mentions Confucius, Jesus, and Socrates in the context of Linda Zagzebski’s *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford, 2017), which he admires. I wonder why he does not include Abraham or Moses (although Zagzebski mentions Abraham in passing), since an exemplar, although he never so states, exemplifies: deeds that are of *kalon*. One also wonders why Lear fails to mention Job, who, no matter how much evil God brought upon him, never gave up his humanity, belief in his goodness, and his faith in God.

He reinforces Aristotle’s view that *kalon* cannot be taken away once it has been achieved, even amid catastrophe: “Although achieving the *kalon* is constitutive of our happiness, and although extreme misfortune—such as world catastrophe—can destroy our

happiness, *once the kalon has been achieved, nothing can completely destroy it in us. A kernel remains that is inalienable.* That is Aristotle’s teaching.” Unfortunately, we know that this is not true. In Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, many Nazi concentration camp inmates soon lost their *kalon*, sense of self-worth, and self-understanding and descended into death. I am also reminded of a passage from Ezekiel (28:11-17), which mourns the fall of the king of Tyre, which later Christian writings reference in terms of Lucifer’s Fall: “You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God... You were an anointed guardian cherub.” However, God laments his ensuing wickedness: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth.”

Lear relates an experience of a teacher, a “local exemplar” in his terminology, who reprimanded him on the playground, and this event has stayed with him since childhood (another example of a lifelong rumination.) At ten, he was “pretty confident that he said, ‘Goddammit.’” When a classmate reported it, a teacher, Mr. McMahon, merely said in response, ‘We do not use profane language on the playground’...That was it.” This leads to a long exegesis of his subsequent thought. He surely did not know what the word meant as a child, and that it is often connected to the word “sacred.” This he was later to discover. The teacher’s response was generous—as no further punishment was given, and there was no retaliation or retribution. The encounter with this wonderful man gave him much to ponder over the years. He returns to it repeatedly throughout his life, with its repetition also being informed by novelty or an active participation with the world. While I respect the memory, I wonder if the teacher rises to the level of “hero” that Lear ascribes to him. In my view, the trivial and uninspiring nature of the personal anecdote—which I

assume the author found to be its strong point—detracts from the larger-scale claims of the book and its argument.

Lear once again returns to Freud, and draws upon his essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” Melancholia, a now-rarely used clinical term, denotes a psychological state in which the patient is so detached from the world that no joyful participation in it can be had. Mourning, in contradistinction, allows the mourner, perhaps in a state of sadness, to celebrate the deceased’s life, maybe even with joy, albeit tinged with sadness. At the end of his wondering and pondering, he suggests that mourning is an inappropriate response, as is melancholia, to our imaginings of the end of the world. “Precisely because we face such huge challenges to the continued existence of the world, we are simultaneously challenged to take seriously the *healthy* use of our imaginations” (my italics).

Lear then takes on the relationship between the humanities and mourning. Unfortunately, he first takes us through the saga of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s marriage—or marriages. He does so to explore issues of authenticity, “living a meaningful life,” in the context of tradition versus our current lack of respect for it. One can throw in living by *kalon* or by religious precepts. This approach to these topics, while maybe useful in an undergraduate lecture class, is inappropriate here. The Harry and Meghan exemplar is as trivial and unimpressive (as he acknowledges), as is his earlier anecdote on Mr. McMahon, and should not have been used.

This leads back to the humanities, and their importance. Lear links the humanities with mourning, which seems to be a stretch. He says: “We are historical beings because we have pasts that matter to us—that is, pasts that partially constitute our present by shaping our sense of what is important. Thus mourning, when done well, is this special manner of our distinctive form of flourishing.” One could equally well use the words ‘*celebrating*’ or

‘*remembering*’. Lear’s reasoning and language are opaque and superficial here at best, as is the relationship between mourning and the humanities he espouses. In his conclusion, he thinks the Harry and Meghan exemplar leads us to an important question about the humanities: “What is worth conserving?” His first answer, “teachers—*proper* teachers,” which he states are those who promote the humanities as intrinsically, and not merely instrumentally, is valuable.

But in the end, he doubles down on the question of conserving in the traditional or “familiar political sense” as “problematic,” and wants to promote a more “*ethical* reading of the question (original emphasis). Here he surprisingly repudiates Aristotelian *kalon* as hearkening back to a time when nobility was “dissolute,” when beauty was “detached from the ethical” (he could not be more wrong here), and when the fine was “vague” and ill-placed. We live in an unjust world of social hierarchy, just as Aristotle did. Instead, he justifies using the imperfect concept of *kalon* as a way to remind us that there is a gap in our understanding of being human, that we may not have the cognitive mechanism to understand ourselves well.

This view of conservation—and of cultural relativism—is what quite tragically (in the saddest sense of loss and mourning, actually) brought about the destruction of the curriculum in our universities over the last sixty years or so. He thinks we cannot accept what the past says is true, good, and beautiful, since we cannot make such normative judgments vis-à-vis our historical cultural output. On the contrary, a compelling and common-sense response was given twenty-three years ago by Charles Murray in his book *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 BC to 1950* (Harper Perennial, 2004). Murray says that the legacy opinion of humankind tells us differently; that we can ascertain definitive information on what to conserve. He basically

says, get a few experts together, have them state who they think are the best in their genre, plot the intersection, and you have an objective answer. In music, it would be Bach, Mozart, Beethoven; in painting, it would be Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Picasso. The process is not exclusionary, it is open-ended and subject to revision, and it is not limited to the West. It might suggest a starting point for anyone serious about exploring the humanities.

Even though we find it nearly impossible to comprehend the circumstances of some deaths, we must go on.

Lear’s final comment on the matter is “What seems to be worth conserving is the spirit of making our best efforts...to travel all over the world—across space-time, and cultures...in study and imagination to discover and conserve what we take to be the deepest attempts of other humans to understand and express the human condition.” A run-on sentence that expresses something true about the humanities, it nevertheless says nothing about its supposed relationship to mourning.

When he was a boy, Lear learned the Gettysburg Address by heart. As a man, he revisits it to come to a few startling realizations. We must distinguish between mourning and memorialization, and valorization. All men in death are equal in their human dignity. They deserve decent burials, and to be mourned by their loved ones. In the context of the Civil War and slavery, we should regard the defeated Southerners as *misguided men*... men who fought for a cause that was

fortunately defeated. He draws this idea from a quote by General Meade found in Gregory A. Coco’s *A Strange and Blighted Land, Gettysburg: The Aftermath of a Battle* (Thomas Publications, 1995). He has “sympathy for people who are trying to live a *kalon* life, but who, for historical and cultural reasons, along with character flaws of their own, get caught in a vision that is wildly wrong and profoundly unjust due to misunderstandings and misperceptions and social pressures—and then waste their lives, sometimes doing terrible harm in the cloud of misapprehension and falsity” (p.91). As he tries to apply his thesis to the world today, I have to say that this is hard to say about Nazis and Hamas operatives, who brutalized, raped, burned, mutilated, and beheaded men, women, children, and babies. Does philosophy pertain here, or become inoperative?

Lear confronts this question posing the “The Difficulty of Reality and a Revolt against Mourning.” He reviews the work of Cora Diamond, who, in turn, looks at a poem by Ted Hughes. Diamond looks “less on the psychological state of the sufferer than on the *difficulty of reality* to which that suffering bears witness.” Hughes’s poem refers to a picture of six young men who were then tragically killed in World War II. His response is just such a revolt against reality. Freud’s young poet reappears, who also cannot bear reality. The problem is, in part, accepting death, even in unspeakable circumstances, as part of life. Even though we find it nearly impossible to comprehend the circumstances of some deaths, we must go on. What should our response be, not just in the face of death, but of evil (a word that Lear rarely uses)? We could rededicate ourselves to the memory of the lost; to work for the eradication of evil, a never-ending task. We might acknowledge the paradox of life and death in our mourning.

“Meditations on Gratitude and Meaning” concludes this book. In so doing, Lear refers to Melanie Klein’s classic essay “Envy and

Gratitude,” Aristotle (yet again and finally), Wittgenstein, and a host of minor participants. He acknowledges that psychoanalysis mostly focuses on pathology, while the question of gratitude has to do with health. Gratitude, according to Aristotle, is an emotion that takes place in a social context. It acknowledges that something is given without asking anything in return. Lear repeats this general idea ad *infinitum*, with the simplest of variations. Klein meditates on the breast “to be the source of nourishment... The good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego.” Lear opines that “the container is never just a container, and the contained is never just contained.” One must be a true believer in psychoanalytic theory to enjoy this. Wittgenstein, in his *Ethics*, notes that words cannot define, nor actually portray, experience. Then again, ethics is not used with its customary meaning, but is rather used to describe “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the

world should exist.” And that it would seem that meaningfulness exists in the universe. Lear thinks this is an expression of gratitude. But it could equally be an expression of awe and wonder, akin to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s approach to the world of “radical amazement.” Lear sees this as “part of an expanded idea of mourning....” Why or how remains unclear, as do his views about what gratitude and meaningfulness have to do with mourning and the ethical life that is the title of this book.

This brings Lear to the possibility of a God, and prayer as an expression of gratitude. What a long way to travel, to get to a place where religious traditions worldwide started thousands of years ago. This is the main reason to read this book, to the extent that his ruminations can allow the reader to think about God. Yet, I am not sure that thinking of mourning in the way he advocates is the proper way to get there. a

Two Versions of Dystopia

Jonathan Hartmann

Olga Tokarczuk, *The Empusium: A Health Resort Horror Story*, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Riverhead Books, 320pp., \$20 paper.

Laila Lalami, *The Dream Hotel*. Pantheon, 336pp., \$29 cloth.

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, WE HAVE THRILLED TO THE HORROR stories that leave us thankful for our shared privileges. Stories like Robert Golding’s *Lord of The Flies*, where prep-school students veer into cannibalism. Tales of three wishes gone haywire, like W. W. Jacobs’ “The Monkey’s Paw” (*Can’t happen to me! I never get any wishes. And if I did, I wouldn’t be so stupid!*). By 2025, the dystopian world of the horror story shares considerable territory with the world we are promised in seemingly every advertisement: the techno-paradise. For although Artificial Intelligence can deliver a middling attempt at nearly any assignment you send its way, it has no cure for people mistreating each other.

Two recent novels take on dystopias—one a technological one, and both heavy on the mistreatment. Olga Tokarczuk sends up the man-centric world of Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain*, set on the eve of World War I in an early sanatorium for patients with lung disease in Davos, Switzerland. Tokarczuk sets her story in 1913, at the health resort that inspired Davos, this one located in Gorbetsdorf, Silesia, abutting modern-day Poland and Germany.

The winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature, Tokarczuk spoke in her prize lecture of a “fourth-person” narrator, one

who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time.

Tokarczuk uses just such a big-picture, mythological approach to draw readers closer and closer to the history, culture and environment threatening to devour young protagonist Mieczys (Mieczyslaw) Wojnicz, a sewer engineer whose pronouns are they/them. Tokarczuk paints several of Mieczys’s fellow patients as molesters, pitting them against local feminine folkloric creatures the Tunschi in the fight for what will become of Mieczys. Reading the novel, I had no idea what to make of its title. Sanatorium, baths, yes—but what of the ancient Greek Empusa, a shape-shifting demon preying on young men?

The Empusium supplies Wojnicz, its young protagonist, with a retreat full of older men spouting sexist remarks, each of these drawn from the real-life statements of men including Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Jack Kerouac, and Sigmund Freud. As it does by channeling elements of *The Magic Mountain*, Tokarczuk’s novel uses the words of Mann’s male peers to point up the limitations of male chauvinism.

As the prolific science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin once noted, imaginative novels are distinguished not by the outlandishness of their scenarios, but by their adjacency to contemporary concerns, the proximity of their settings to the day after tomorrow. By this measure, Guggenheim and Fulbright-fellowship winning author Laila Lalami’s *Dream Hotel*, feels appallingly close at hand. In Lalami’s novel, the protagonist is detained by the authorities because of biometric data from her prosthetic device that is deemed threatening. We don’t have to wait for the software Lalami describes—the killer app Dreamsaver—to try to predict our behavior based on our dreams; we have seen predictive policing in action, as in the U.S. authorities’ sending pro-Palestinian demonstrators, including Mahmoud Khalil, to detention in rural Louisiana, as well as the Post Office scandal in the United Kingdom, during which 700 staffers were targeted by Horizon IT software for alleged theft and fraud. Many of them were imprisoned and several committed suicide. Many of our political leaders, also, would have their followers judge U.S. and global neighbors based on predefined categories rather than their individual merits.

Readers are advised that objects in the science-fiction mirror may be just as real as they appear.

Dream Hotel foregrounds our willingness to sacrifice privacy, considerable sums of money, and the well-being of the less fortunate for our own immediate comfort. Today’s citizens vote with their digital pocketbooks—as illustrated in the 2008 film *Wall-E*, we ask ourselves not *What will my new vehicle be used for?* but instead *How comfortable a car can I buy?* During the COVID quarantine’s lull in Subaru, I bought a Forester with twice as many options as I can use. Buying the loaded Forester adds to the ways we seem to hasten the apocalypse through dependence on ever-more-powerful technology—i.e., by overusing conveniences like handing over our social-media posting to chatbots, enjoying heated-seat comfort within air-conditioned Dallas movie theaters, and video-chatting overnight so our boyfriend or girlfriend can watch us sleep.

Using dream sequences, flashbacks, and documents illustrating the rise of Dreamsaver and the criminalization of the every move of her protagonist Sara Hussein, Lailami dares readers to even try to turn away from the pages of *The Dream Hotel*. Tellingly, Sara’s first labor while detained is to review the efforts of software to create lifelike scenery for video games. Over and over, she is shown a sample and asked to answer the question “Is this real?”

Readers are advised that objects in the science-fiction mirror may be just as real as they appear. a



ART WORLDS

Venice Interpreted Anew

David Carrier

Venice, the City Triumphant, reveals herself . . . like a great, a superabundant banquet, where all the riches accumulated throughout centuries of war and commerce are to be set out without stint. What richer fountain of pleasure could there be to initiate life in insatiable desire?

Gabriele D'Annunzio

Venice . . . city of stone and water, the most stupendous, the most far-reaching of humanistic creation . . . The one permanent miracle, and the presence of this miracle in the heart of Europe for fifteen hundred years is an historical factor whose influence is too vague and large for its conceiving by historians.

Adrian Stokes

At a distance from terra firmament, ideas of the natural and the normal are redefined, and what seems miraculous made real.

Paul Hills

Venetian architectural planners took advantage of the stimulating natural properties of their aquatic space and their geographical control over their visitors to craft a fantastical image of their city from the water, in large part to substantiate the myth of its miraculous birth.

Daniel Savoy

EVERY TOURIST DISCOVERS IMMEDIATELY HOW UNUSUAL IS VENICE, the only major Italian city entirely on water. Many cities have rivers running through them, or lakes or oceans at the edge. But in Venice, you travel by water. In the warren of narrow streets, the commonplace advice is apt: Allow yourself to get lost! You are always near water, whose optical qualities are constantly changing with the weather and thanks to passing boat traffic. As Paul Hills observes: “No city built on land can offer so brilliant and so strange an intermingling and intensifying of the color of the sky and the color of the buildings on the surface of its thoroughfares.”¹ “It is one thing to walk past a building,” Adrian Stokes wrote, “another to slide past, to slip slowly in a continuous movement.”² Indeed, even looking out your window is a novel experience, as Jean-Paul Sartre noted: “The water is too well-behaved: you don’t hear it. Growing suspicious, I lean out: the sky has fallen in there.”³

When young, spending a month in Venice learning Italian, I brought the three volumes of John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1841-1843). The more recent editions are abridged, for few readers make their way through Ruskin’s prose. Later, I studied Marcel Proust’s critical account of his youthful adulation of Ruskin. And now, thanks to Robert Hewison’s *Ruskin on Venice: “The Paradise of Cities”* (2010), I learned the history of Ruskin’s discussion.⁴

Ruskin defined how many people understood Venice. Since he offers a suggestive account of the relationship between the unique situation of the city and its art, accounts of Venetian painting regularly begin with a brief Ruskinian description of its setting. In 1971 S. J. Freedberg said:

Nature combined with the work of man to enhance the fascination of the sensuous world. The atmosphere of the sea-borne city heightens the existence of seen things. Color is deepened on the damp-saturated air and sharpened by the sea-reflected light, which also may make complicating interactions among colors. The air has an apparent texture which it lends to surfaces perceived through it, and the atmosphere accentuates the sensuous skin of substance.⁵

In his more recent account, Hills develops that idea:

To the Venetian patrician, the lapping of water at the walls of his palace placed his domicile in touch with the keel’s way, and reminded him of the sea-borne traffic that was carried to and fro over the horizon, moving between the visible and the out-of-sight.⁶



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice, the Bridge of Sighs*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 68.6 cm × 91.4 cm (27.0 in × 36.0 in). Tate Britain, London.

And as John Steer noted, the distinctive features of the city’s art are presented in the way that it depicts its subjects:

The painters of Venice only rarely illustrated their city, and when they did they tended to seize on its permanent characteristics rather than its flux; but its unique visual qualities entered into their whole way of seeing and, fused with the decorative traditions inherited from Byzantium, determined the direction which Venetian painting took.⁷

Generally, after brief notes about the setting, scholars focus on paintings. However, the Ruskinian tradition argues that interpretation of art needs to consider its setting as well. In 1909, Henry James magnificently summarized this view, asserting that the city is itself an artwork.

⁷ John Steer, *Venetian Painting: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985).

¹ Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour. Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

² Adrian Stokes, *Venice. An Aspect of Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), 1.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Venice from my window,” *Venice and Rome*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull, 2021), 79.

⁴ Robert Hewison’s *Ruskin on Venice: “The Paradise of Cities”* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵ S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy. 1500 to 1600* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), 76-7.

⁶ Hills, *Venetian Colour*.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, 1834.
Oil on canvas, 91.5 × 122 cm (36 × 48 1/16 in.).
Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public Domain / Open Access.

Nowhere . . . do art and life seem so interfused and, as it were, so consanguineous. All the splendor of light and color, all the Venetian air and the Venetian history are on the walls and ceilings of the palaces; and all the genius of the masters, all the images and visions they have left upon canvas, seem to tremble in the sunbeams and dance upon the wave. That is the perpetual interest of the place— that you live in a certain sort of knowledge as in a rosy cloud. You don't go into the churches and galleries by way of change from the streets; you go into them because they offer you an exquisite reproduction of the things that surround you. All Venice was both model and painter, and life was so pictorial that art couldn't help becoming so. With all diminution's life is pictorial still, and this fact gives an extraordinary freshness to one's perception of the great Venetian works.⁸

8 Henry James, *Italian Hours* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 48.

According to Ruskin, “great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts — the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art.”⁹ And art provides the most reliable record. What now is living and what is dead in Ruskin's account? To answer that question, we consider Stokes's account of the materials of Venice, Hill's discussion of its light and Daniel Savoy's analysis of its waterways.

9 *The Works of John Ruskin*, St. Mark's Rest (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, nd), 7.

When Adrian Stokes (1902-72) was young, Ruskin's influence was still very important. Stokes privileged what he called the ‘Quattro Cento’ (from the Italian *quattrocento*), that is, sculpture with an harmonious, unstressed unity. He speaks also, by analogy, of Quattro Cento painting and architecture. *The Quattro Cento* (1932), surveying Italy, includes a short chapter on Venice. Then *The Stones of Rimini* (1934) focuses on the Tempio Malatesta, a Quattro Cento monument where the sculptures of Agostino di Duccio (1418-81) show “water and water-life congealed into stone.”¹⁰ And so he advises: “Spend a day in Venice with eyes on the ground.”¹¹ As a writer “can better visualize a place when he has left it . . .”, so you too can understand Venice by approaching it indirectly.¹² *Venice* (1944) has a critique of Ruskin's history; a constructive analysis of the Venetian aesthetic; and an account of Giorgione's *Tempesta* (1508).

10 Adrian Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, reprinted in *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 155.

11 Stokes, *The Quattro Cento*, reprinted in *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini*, 12.

12 Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 100.

Taking Ruskin's title, *The Stones of Venice*, literally, Stokes describes the history of limestone. “If we would understand a visual art, we ourselves must cherish some fantasy of the material that stimulated the artist. . . .”¹³ Limestone, formed of compressed organic materials, can be carved to express the story of its creation, fantasies of marine life, and the history of stone, brought to the surface, an extended temporal process displayed all at once in images.

13 Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 20.

According to an old myth, Venice had ideal harmony, without any serious internal conflicts. This, it was often said, was why the Republic lasted so long. *The Quattro Cento* brings together of separate elements, without stress. When a figurative image depicts more than one person, artists speak of composition; when an idea has more than one component, philosophers discuss synthesis, while political philosophers tell how a nation is composed

of citizens. And Stokes speaks of “identity in difference,” a phrase borrowed from philosophy, to describe the ideal unities of Venice's architecture.

Stokes' Venice is an ambitious, fully realized account. Since graduate school I've been rereading it. But it has not entered the literature. Ruskin, however, another self-taught private scholar, was enormously influential. Even now Garry Wills' *Venice: Lion City - Religion of Empire* (2001), an amazing synopsis by a gifted outsider, an Americanist, takes issue, with deep respect, with Ruskin's basic argument.¹⁴ But Stokes has remained relatively obscure, and that makes it harder to judge his deeply original claims. The situation of Hills and Savoy is distinctly different. They are rooted in academic tradition, and so their claims will get commented on.

14 Garry Wills' *Venice: Lion City - Religion of Empire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

“No city built on land,” Hills writes, “can offer so brilliant and so strange an intermingling and intensifying of the color of the sky and the color of the buildings on the surface of its thoroughfares.”¹⁵ The very nature of the self is transformed in Venice. We're invited “to experience (the city) as spectacle, heightening the sense of the world as something that seems to look back, to return the gaze, to mirror and enhance consciousness.”¹⁶ The commonplace sense of intersubjectivity has been transformed. Hills demonstrates that the setting really does create a unique lighting, and so transforms how we understand Venetian art.

15 Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 9.

16 Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 18.

The most brilliant set-piece in *Stones of Venice* describes how visitors entered the city before the train bridge was constructed.¹⁷ The modern approach from the Marco Polo airport by speedboat recaptures these effects, speeded up as suits a jet-age traveler. Daniel Savoy's *Venice from the Water* offers a systematic study of the importance of this site. He uses superlative large plates to illustrate how the Republic controlled visitors' entries to the city. “The palaces of Venice were aberrations, alien entities that hovered inconceivably on the water, the opposite of building in the land-oriented viewer's historical field of lived experience.”¹⁸ After reading his book, everyday experience of the waterways looks different. You see that the light in Venice is unlike that of any Italian landlocked city.

17 See my “The Aesthete in the City,” reprinted in my *The Aesthete in the City. The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994), Ch. 4.

18 Daniel Savoy, *Venice from the Water. Architecture and Myth in an Early Modern City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 70.

19 *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

Twenty years ago I argued that the site of an artwork can have a decisive influence on its interpretation.¹⁹ More recently, I briefly applied that claim to Venetian art.²⁰ Radically developing that idea in close detail with lavish large color photographs, Hills and Savoy provide one starting point for innovative contemporary discussion of Venice. **A**

20 David Carrier, “Museum Skepticism Revisited: the Lessons of Venice,” *Counterpunch*, Dec. 6, 2024. www.counterpunch.org/2024/12/06/museum-skepticism-revisited-the-lessons-of-venice

A Closer Look

Brian Allen

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S JACOB IS THE SON OF ISAAC AND Rebecca, and Abraham's grandson. As if siring the Twelve Tribes of Israel isn't enough, Jacob elbowed his older twin, Esau, out of his birthright inheritance, envisioned a prophetic ladder to Heaven, and sashayed with Pharaoh. In *Jacob Laying the Peeled Rods Before the Flock of Laban*, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's 1665 painting, he struts his veterinary skills, too. The story's from the Book of Genesis.

Laban, landed gentry and Rebecca's brother, wants to extend his premiere farmhand and nephew Jacob's time in his service. What would Jacob need, pay-wise? Jacob said he'd accept the next season's spotted, striped, and speckled lambs. With kinky markings, they were thought to be both rare and defective. Laban happily agreed, thinking he'd gotten a good deal.

During breeding time, Jacob, with a nudge from God, placed branches from poplar and almond trees, their bark peeled in a stripe pattern, in select spots by the stream where Laban's sheep drank. He then steered the strongest, plumpest sheep to these spots exactly. A passel of bruiser lambs, coincidentally spotted, striped, and speckled, were born. Jacob was, financially, a free man. Superstition? Folklore? God's ways are mysterious, and sometimes odd indeed.

Murillo (1617-1682) painted the scene at the peak of his career in a soothing, gauzy style. He deftly combines genre and landscape features in a picture that, at fourteen feet wide, seems cinematic. It was in Spanish and British aristocratic collections before coming to the Meadows Museum in 1967. ¹



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Jacob Laying Peeled Rods before the Flocks of Laban*, c. 1665.
Oil on canvas, 87 3/4 x 142 in. (222.9 x 360.7 cm).
Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas. Algur H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.27



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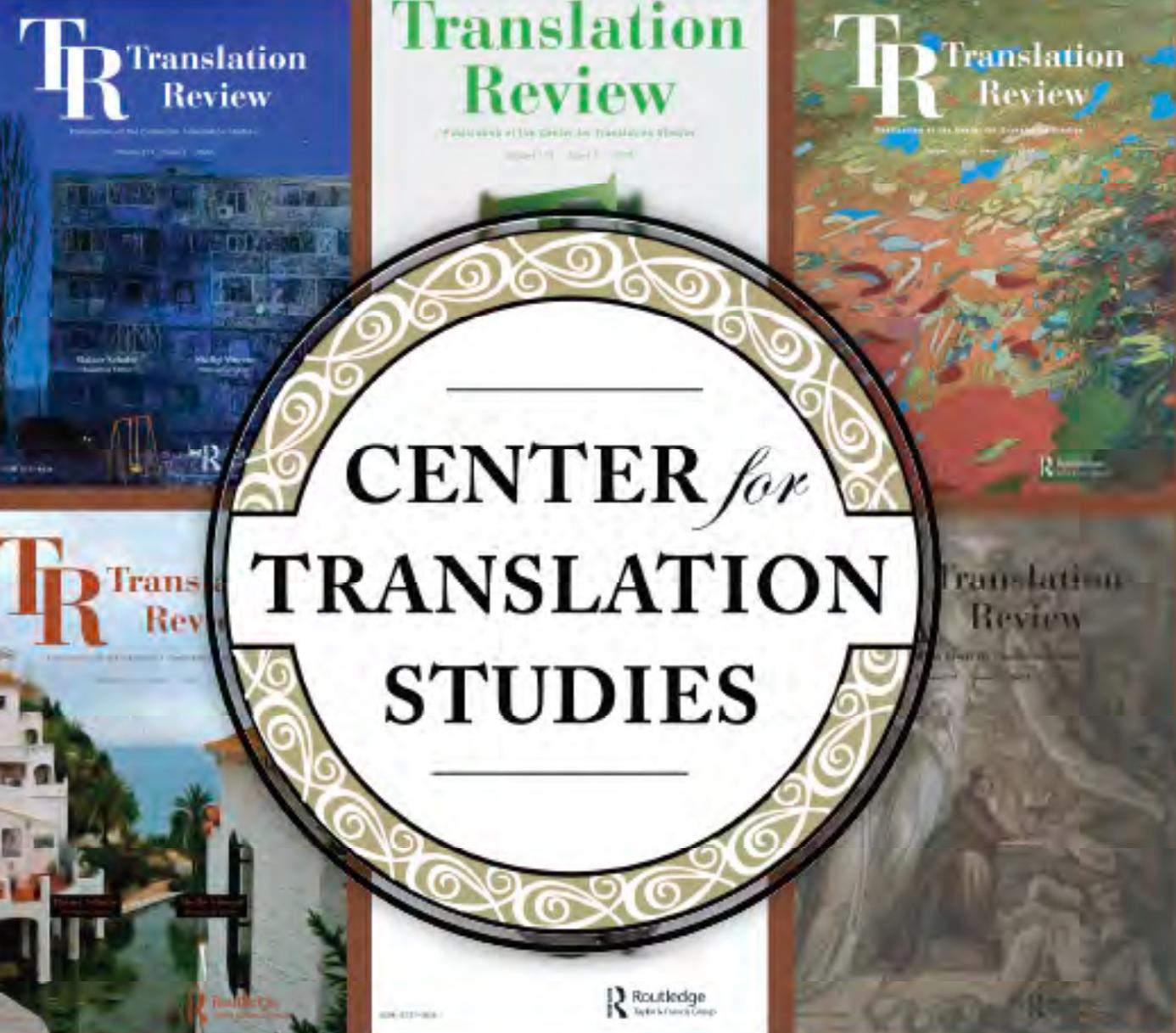
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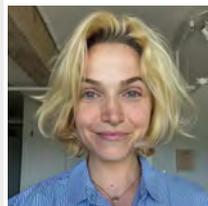
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