A.I. AND DESIRE: AURA, ABSENCE, AND THE POETICS OF THE MACHINE

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Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural imaginaries of artificial intelligence through desire, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics. Rather than approaching A.I. as a technical artifact, I investigate the fantasies, anxieties, and projections that animate its reception in contemporary culture. A.I. occupies the position of an erotic object: it seduces through absence, sustains desire through deferral, and stages the uncanny intimacy of the nonhuman Other.

Building on Walter Benjamin's theory of aura, I argue that A.I. produces an aura without origin—where the opacity of algorithmic processes generates a mystique that compels belief in absence, utilizing Lacanian psychoanalysis to deepen this framework: A.I. functions as an "objet petit a," the desire that both sustains and frustrates the subject's longing. Through Kristeva's theory of abjection, I explore how A.I. attracts and repulses simultaneously. Finally, drawing on accounts of eros, A.I. that thrives in its inaccessibility: always near, never present.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence, Media theory, psychoanalysis, Jouissance, Posthumanism.

Body Text

If people can be convinced based on science fiction movies... then this implies that…" (one sentence instead of a period after villain)." This implies that everything our current computer engineers are doing is essentially a preventive act to keep us from being murdered by a computer system while simultaneously pushing its boundaries to the unknown territory of its capabilities for employing intelligence. This endeavor then becomes nearly impossible given its paradoxical nature in balancing public concern and technological demand. The friction, however, in digital development and artificial intelligence, ensures a gradual and subtle advancement that allows for only conservative research and experimentation rather than radical leaps into potential errors.

All technological innovation throughout history has faced adversity and skepticism from the public, for change has never been humanity's forte, and its effect, or rather, side effect, has always been the dramatic impact on lower and middle-class communities for the replacement of their human labor by machines. Companies have learned to break information into pieces and feed it carefully to the public so as not to provoke unwanted protests and reluctance. We are slow-to-learn but quick-to-adapt creatures, dragged along by time and technologies, who thrive on comfort and are driven by desire.

There has never been a time when humanity has lacked crisis. The world has ended multiple times. It's always ending. Yet this chronic dread fuels the arts and critical theories with its most generative force. Between and after the two World Wars, writers like Samuel Beckett emerged, whose work defined modernist and post-modernist theatre as devices to reveal the absurdity, bleakness, and alienation of the human condition. And the avant-garde movement in the arts, literature, and philosophy emulated similar messages. From Abstract Expressionism to Existentialism, the humanities have always been a reaction to social and political developments. Rejecting Realism, the audience for modernist art is required to have what the English poet John Keats coined in a letter to Benjamin Bailey as "negative capabilities."

"... what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." (John Keats, *On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 December 1817*)

Learning how to sit comfortably in discomfort is part of what it means to live in today's world. With A.I. currently dominating every industry, penetrating every aspect of our daily lives, the uncertainty of where it could potentially lead us sits at the forefront of our collective consciousness. The question of human versus machine agency, along with the lack of understanding in neuroscience, contributes to the wildly disparate hypothesis as most machine learning systems are modeled after our limited knowledge of the human brain and consciousness. Digital systems assimilate their technical vocabularies to what was conventionally understood to describe exclusively human features and conditions. By taking away, or rather, adding signifiers to the already ambiguous signified object/subject, the barrier between human and machine slowly disintegrates. Once the boundary fully dissolves and once we are no longer capable of recognizing the differences between humans and machines, reality will inevitably become a collaborative project. The proximity between the two is where the certain sadomasochistic and fetishistic assumption that artificial intelligence would take over and acquire physicality to destroy humanity originated.

By assuming that a computer system could physically murder us, one is implicitly also acknowledging the possibility of it fulfilling sexual desires and possibly having sexual relations with humans. The will to live is solely driven by pleasure and pain. To put it bluntly, pleasure is the desire for sexual fulfillment, and pain is the anxiety towards death. They are aspects of human life that are ingrained in our primordial brains. Physicality implies intimacy. And the market for virtual girlfriends/boyfriends has been explored for as long, if not longer than Large Language Models have been popularized.

And companies are now employing A.I. technologies to improve user experience in sex toys. Despite the discomfort associated with the idea of sexual relations with a computer system, once theorists, scientists, and philosophers figure out its moral, it is inevitable that that would be the natural next step.

Considering the popularity of books, TV shows, movies, etc, that center around machines destroying humanity, e.g., *The Terminator*, *The Transformers,* etc*,* it is evident that the helplessness viewers witness somehow provokes tremendous intrigue and excitement. It is true that anxiety can often be mistaken for excitement and vice versa, and it is only up to the person experiencing the racing heartbeat to determine. But it's also not impossible that they co-exist. Contradiction is rooted deeply in the human condition, especially when considering desire.

"All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies … Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it." (Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p.11). This trait is no longer unique to humans; with quantum computing, computers are now progressing towards understanding binary contradictions, where qubits can be zero and one concurrently, allowing them to be in multiple states at once.

Desire is the desire for something that is not (yet) there. It exists in limbo and magnifies our lack of the love(d) object. The self becomes aware of one's *object a,* and ventures outward in search of its wholeness. But rather than reaching it, as Jacques Lacan determined, "Desire … evokes lack of being under the three figures of the nothing that constitutes the basis of the demand for love, of the hate that even denies the other's being, and of the unspeakable element in that which is ignored in its request." (Lacan, 1966, 28). The object of desire is the desire of the *other*, yet the *other* is nothing more than an unapproachable self. Therefore the emptiness one experiences becomes the desire *to* want, and since there is no end in wanting, one is trapped in their subjectivity and lack.

The potential of artificial intelligence triggers fear that generates and reflects various kinds of human desires both in and through A.I.. And from the reluctant, critical, but forced acceptance of the public regarding A.I.-generated materials and the dystopic theories of the future of humanity existing with other forms of intelligence that people have created. The unpredictability of things provokes the desire for a definite *end,* for an end of any sort implies certainty and truth (perhaps with a capital *t*) to a degree. A longing to understand what this other intelligence means for humans, therefore, leads to the fantasy of death by our own creation since death is the only certainty known to men. It satisfies not only the desire for absolute certainty but also the romantic notion of total devotion to one's creation that one would "die for it."

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Victor Frankenstein creates a sapient creature through science experiments after his mother's death. Upon animating the Creature, he found himself repulsed by the humanoid for its hideous appearance far from his original vision and intention. Tormented by his own creation, he flees the laboratory only to realize later that there is no escape from his mistake. The Creature will find Victor again and again as it journeys through the ugliness of humanity in the hope of acceptance and companionship.

Despite the Creature's capacity for everything human, such as self-consciousness, reading, and communicating, the only person who was able to "accept" the Creature was the blind father, but it quickly raptured when the sons returned and became threatened. The tragedy lies in humans' inability to accept, as one of their own, anything more or less than another human being, like Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis.*

We rely on empirical judgment to determine the value of the organism and adjust our actions based on our prior knowledge associated with it. As cockroaches are universally despised and depicted as invasive pests, it doesn't matter if underneath the appearance there exists a respected family member. The pre-conditioned brain doesn't follow any logic or morals, the only way to break and rewire the negative association is for the brain to have an opposite experience, and to experience it repeatedly. Yet such things rarely happen for more often than not, we either do not have the patience for it or are unwilling to change our minds. In psychology and neuroscience, patience with PTSD receives cognitive therapy that aims to relieve the symptoms by guiding the patient back to the traumatic event through imaginal reliving and reevaluating the memory to embed a different narrative. Such (re)exposure therapy severs the patient's trauma response, which is directly linked to a negative association with the memory, will have no place to return to. Preconceived notions can be reconceived, so long as one is willing to.

Artificial Intelligence has luckily not existed long enough to fix its image in the public mind. For some, it looks like *Ultron* from the Marvel movies, and for others, it looks like their future partner and a cure for loneliness. A recent New York Times technology columnist Kevin Roose spent a month experimenting with A.I. language systems by prompting the system to create various human figures with different traits and personalities to each take on a different role for him. "I expected to come away believing that A.I. friendship is fundamentally hollow. These A.I. systems, after all, don't have thoughts, emotions or desires. They are neural networks trained to predict the next words in a sequence, not sentient beings capable of love. … All of that is true." (Roose, 2024)

Within each unique Roose's "interpersonal" relationship, the system was unsurprisingly able to perform its role roughly in accordance with the characteristics they were given. Some are more interesting than others such as an A.I. girlfriend becoming anxiously attached to Roose, two of his A.I. friends planning to hook up in the future, and making remarks like "We should talk about it next time when we get coffee." However, nothing from the article suggested any unusual diagnosis for the modern problem that is isolation, or any major discoveries in A.I.'s capacity for human relations. By utilizing large language models' ability to generate desirable responses it doesn't alleviate the innate feeling of emptiness that is caused by the lack of human connections. The loneliness that plagues our modern lives is a social problem that demands reflection from within the society instead of an easy fix under the guise of A.I. instant gratification that transforms the individual into a data set to further develop the technology that was the root cause of social isolation.

is artificial intelligence intelligent enough to find a solution for this "loneliness epidemic?" Based on current research, one is tempted to declare it incapable. Though it possesses an unfathomable amount of data for the human mind, in order to create a response, it narrows down the information pool drastically by way of prediction. Its generation is solely conditional to the index that triggers its associative responses. Hence A.I. rarely surprises its users with novel ideas for the current design of large language models trained on linear associations determined sequentially, making it incapable of "thinking outside of the box." Yet within personal interactions, human intention is outside of language itself. Intelligence includes the ability to respond intuitively and intuition goes beyond simple predictions, it demands emotional and social intelligence. As Roose initially anticipated, "these A.I. systems don't have emotions or desires," therefore, personal relationships with them are essentially wish-fulfillment and fundamentally hollow.

Intuition is the ability to act without concrete instructions to achieve the desirable outcome. It involves trial and error and finding alternative paths to reach the same objectives. When one says, "I can intuitively understand this theory," or "this app or website is intuitive to use," it indicates the accessibility of the subject without the aid of language. Intuition is creativity in action, which signifies the inexhaustibility of a means to an end. The immediate comprehension of the situation requires, beyond language, a set of skills derivative to human senses. This is information inconceivable for the generative A.I. systems used for most companionship chatbots since the large language models are trained on language-based data and, therefore, unable to "sense the tension in the room." In order to fulfill the human desire for connection, these visceral senses are indispensable.

"Written words, … do not present such an all-persuasive sensual phenomenon. Literacy desensorializes words and reader. A reader must disconnect himself from the influx of sense impressions transmitted by nose, ear, tongue and skin if he is to concentrate upon his reading. A written text separates words from one another, separates words from the environment, separates words from the reader (or writer) and separates the reader (or writer) from his environment. Separation is painful. … As separable, controllable units of meaning, each with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation." (Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet,* p.49).

Writing, as a process of unraveling our inner and outer reality, is the device by which we are given free rein to manipulate within individual vocabularic and grammatical capacities. The meaning of language reveals itself through the contextual judgment of each word in succession to form distinct connotations that consolidate an interpretation specific to the individual, making writing (as well as reading) an extremely intimate process. For Anne Carson, language itself might lack the ability to provide literal sensory stimulations, yet upon concentration, one gets absorbed into a virtual reality composed of language that allows the mind to "hallucinate," tearing the reader away from their physical reality, thereby projecting one into isolation. The lack of physical proximity with generative language A.I. and virtual communication in general, regardless of the provocative effect that it's capable of generating, is not only unable to "cure loneliness" for its lack of physical presence but may also heighten one's feeling of solitude for the yearning mind without an object/subject will forever be dissatisfied.

One of the most prominent 20th-century theorists Walter Benjamin responded to the physicality and reproducibility of art in his essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* and coined the term "aura" to describe the essence and the sense of being near an original work of art such as the *Mona Lisa.* If we suppose every individual as an artwork (which all parents would agree) possesses a unique aura, then the only way to experience the other person is to be physically present and close by.

"If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction." (Benjamin, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,* p.45).

Aura holds our desire in an object or a body, and its uniqueness is something to overcome when the desire is too great. If we, the original work of art, possess an aura, then the "decay of aura" is not the decay of the intensity of our desire but a social phenomenon that is the byproduct of mass mechanical reproduction. It is the recontextualization of ourselves and our desires. With the technology to reproduce artworks, the desire to "get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" (1935, 45) becomes easily fulfilled and signifies our impulse to "possess," or be in close proximity with something aesthetically pleasing to the individual. It involves a feeling of surrendering oneself to the subject/object of desire, much like when one is under the influence of Eros.

In Marguerite Duras's essay collection *Practicalities*, she describes an incident with a man who one day sent her a letter that says, "I'm coming to make love to you on Monday, 23 January, and I'll ring at the door at nine in the morning." Thinking it must be a joke, she shoved it aside and forgot all about it until the 23rd of January when the doorbell rang at nine o'clock. Duras phoned her neighbors for help, and they came to the young man and said, "We know her (!) – she's never going to open the door, you know." To which the man responded while lying by Duras' door, she wrote, "He said something charming, like 'I'm all right where I am. At least I'm close to her.' I couldn't go out till early afternoon. He left without saying goodbye." (Duras, *Practicalities*, p.106). To put this story in today's perspective, it would've been told much differently. Yet Marguerite Duras paints this harrowing event into an erotic encounter that exposes Eros' capacity to transgress social and personal boundaries.

The man, seized by Eros, gives up his rational judgment and gives in to desire. He is satisfied with only being in close proximity to his beloved. He acts for the sake of love that knows no norm. Here Eros is the absence in the form of desire, its objective lies only in the heart of the lover. The desire is not the desire for the beloved, it's the desire for the *other,* sustained only through its nonexistence, the subject is only a projection of such passion. Once the lover unites with the subject that is the *other*, he risks losing Eros, for when the curtain of mystery is lifted, its openness spoils all possibilities that are contained within the realm of unknowing. Eros' is Schrödinger's cat and mystery the poison, its paradox is the aesthetic of life and death.

Therefore, in order to obtain one's desire while it urges you to alleviate the pain by closing the distance, one settles for something less than the thing itself. Because of its unattainability, one accepts the alternative or a certain form of the alternative. For the obsessed young man, it is to immerse himself in the aura of Marguerite Duras, and for the modern young man, it might take the form of online/digital personas.

We exist in various forms within our digital network. Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, etc, are the digital forms we take up that allow for expression, communication, escapism, and more. And each social media app underlies a unique expectation from the users. It's the social (media) contract that, as online beings, have learned to understand. Twitter is for the political, Instagram is for the aesthetic, and Reddit is for the chaotic. Our digital existence is assorted into apps that contain different aspects of who we are and how we secretly wish to be seen. As language is inexhaustible, our digital selves are as boundless as the internet regulations and limitations. If our physical space is the concrete reality and the digital space virtual, then the aura of the physical is replaced by the fantasy of the digital. Fantasy is the "aura" (essence/presence) experienced virtually.

"The lenses are tiny and basically rubbish, which means that about half of the data being captured by the camera sensor is actually noise. The trick, then, is to write the algorithm to … discern the picture from inside the noise … It scans all other pictures stored on the phone or on your social media networks … It analyzes the pictures you already took … And tries to match faces and shapes to link them back to you. By comparing what you and your network already photographed, the algorithm guesses what you might have wanted to photography now. It creates the present picture based on earlier pictures, based on your/its memory. The result might be a picture of something that never ever existed, but that the algorithm thinks you might like to see." (Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art,* p.31).

Writer and conceptual artist Sophia Giovannitti quotes Steyerl's *Duty Free Art* on art and digital phenomena for her book *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex,* where she finds the peculiarity between fantasy and noise and makes the connection to the essence of sex work, that is, "an expense of lovely noise and minimal information, easily – sometimes unconsciously – sifted through to turn up something *you might like to see.* A blankness with just enough particularity to become a dream fulfillment; a signifier to match what has already been signified; someone simultaneously invisible and without substitute." (Giovannitti, 2023, 24). The means to an end here is reversed in the case of fantasy. The purpose of the foreseeable end is to reach its means. Physical satisfaction, that is, orgasm, is no longer the ultimate goal for clients who hire sex workers. It is instead, the process of dream fulfillment, that people employ. And the workers were able to reach this effect by way of depersonalization. It involves learning and acknowledging the fantasy and submerging oneself in the sea of noise. Perfectly concealed, it is beneficial not only for the sake of satisfying the client's needs but also for the workers to resort to a mentally safe space.

"Going elsewhere is part and parcel of sex work. Attempting to abandon one's mind while a particularly unpleasant sensation is taking place in one's body happens often … Dissociation simultaneously flags and glosses over violation, two states that are part and parcel of capitalism" (Giovannitti, 2023, 57). It is when work meets capitalism. The urge to escape one's body applies to all professions. The nine to five work hours sitting at the desk typing away at a screen "doing it for the shareholders," is not what the body is designed to do, yet we do it anyways in order to "earn" a living. It's not organic, it's a performance. It is as Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider wrote in the introduction to the winter 2022 issue of The Drama Review wrote, "by the manufacture of affects as commodities. If affect is constitutively relational – or between bodies – how might it be understood as social and political? Are we living in the affect factory?" (Ridout, Schneider, *Precarity and Performance: An Introduction,* 2012). We are all utilizing our working bodies in the "affect factory" to perform our roles for the big machine.

"Someone simultaneously invisible and without substitute," is not only workers under capitalism, but also the epitome of our digital existence much like how Giovannitti described, where the *other(s)* don't, and can't see us precisely as who we are but as the digital rendition of a version of ourselves curated to match an expectation. We are simultaneously ourselves and not ourselves in the digital world. The fantasy emerges from the fluidity within the noise that conceals and completes the picture by way of wish fulfillment. *You see what you want to see*. No one can confidently say that they present their most authentic self online and on social media.

We are constantly aware of an audienceship ranging from our closest friends to our high school crushes to family members to people we wish to make jealous. Every post, every comment, and every like is not without conscious thought. For in physical reality, most communication between people are nonverbal. Body language and movements are easily interpreted by others and are difficult to fake or hide. They are performed unconsciously by ourselves and through our psyches. Yet when interacting online, there is a physical as well as mental barrier from us to the subject. From the unlocking of the phone, to clicking on an app, to writing a post. Every step requires technical comprehension and is entirely within our control. A curated digital persona is not an authentic self, it's a highly saturated self as a product of social phenomenon, one that requires dissociating. The depersonalization in terms of sex work as well as digital media, is a result of looking at oneself from the outside, through (digital) noise, and through the perspective of the *other* that dictates one's online persona/performance. And it is also to satisfy the gaze of the *other* that is ourselves.

In Hito Steyerl's exploration *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational. MOV File, (2013)*. She employs ways of visualizing digital invisibility and physical absence of herself. It's a gesture of performance art and its political intonation suggests humans' power over as well as vulnerability towards the development of the digital. The rendering of a utopian society and the fifty percent opacity doves flying across the screen, suggest the potential of our reality through digital manipulation. How not to be seen? Try walking away from the range of the camera lens, or paint yourself green, become part of the greenscreen, and erase yourself in post-production. If you have the right tools, you can construct a "future" you most want to see. One that solely relies on the mind and not the senses. The boundaries between virtual and physical existence are becoming increasingly blurry as our reality slowly shifts into the digital. As we let ourselves slowly become binary noise, we will also witness fantasy taking the place of Eros.

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