



# AI-generated art and fiction: signifying everything, meaning nothing?

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"I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved."

—Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*

Artificial intelligence (AI) 'art' generators are proliferating and gaining public attention. Tools like Midjourney or DALL-E 2 can create images based on text prompts using machine learning. Generating AI art is quickly becoming more than a recreational pastime. An AI-generated image named *Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial* recently took first place in a digital art competition at the Colorado State Fair. Nor are developments in generative AI limited to the visual arts. The AI story-writing software Sudowrite, for instance, has released a tool that is purportedly able to generate entire novels using OpenAI's natural language model.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning novel-writing tools, some have asked the question that is on many people's minds when it comes to generative AI: Do they work? The question that I think we really ought to ask is: What is the point? To arrive at an answer, we must step back and ask what art *is*. This is an ancient question, yet AI-generated art seems to pose a new category—or fall short of traditional accounts—in at least one way that I will discuss in this brief article.

What *is* art? There are many philosophies of art, but here I will consider one influential account by art critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto. According to Danto (2013), a work of art is defined by two essential criteria: (1) meaning, and (2) embodiment. Additionally, there is (3) interpretation, or the contribution made by those who view or otherwise engage with an artwork.

Let us grant that AI-generated art satisfies criterion (2). There is no reason why AI-generated art could not be embodied like human-created art (machines could brush paint on canvas; AI-generated novels could be printed and

bound). Let us furthermore assume that criterion (3) is met. At least in some cases, people will interpret AI-generated art as art proper.

The two criteria of embodiment and interpretation, then, do not pose a fundamental challenge to understanding AI-generated art as art. What about criterion (1)? What would it mean to claim that AI-generated art is *meaningful*? It is important here to differentiate between meaning (as in criterion [1]) and interpretation (as in criterion [2]). Anything can have meaning in the interpretative sense, so long as some meaning is ascribed to it by some agent. The key question is whether AI-generated art can be meaningful as such.

Intentionality is widely considered to be necessary for art to have meaning as art. For an object to be treated as an artwork, it must have been intended as one—rather than, say, as an item of utility. If someone accidentally spills paint on a sidewalk, the resulting splash of color might look interesting or beautiful; but, if there was no intention for it to be art, then why should it be deemed an artwork? We might admire the paint-splash, but there can be no question about it being meaningful (beyond the interpretative sense) when no meaning was intended. Similarly, works produced by AI might be judged as interesting or beautiful; but, given the absence of intended meaning, any discussion about the works being meaningful must necessarily be restricted to meaning-as-interpretation. In this way, AI-generated art and fiction seem to engender a kind of absolute relativism: all interpretations are equally valid (and void) if they cannot even in principle be linked to intentional meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Some have argued against relying on an author's intentions, identity, or aspects of their personality in judging a text's meaning. For example, in his 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes argues that there is no definitive meaning to a writer's work. There are many possible meanings; to consider only one—that of the author—is to limit the text inordinately. However, I take reader-response

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<sup>1</sup> While I focus on visual and literary arts in this article, AI is increasingly applied to other arts like music, filmmaking, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Some interpretations may, of course, still be considered better than others: more elaborate, logically sound, emotionally appealing, etc.

criticisms of this kind to be a reaction to the excesses of a position that we might call 'intentional absolutism': the idea that texts ultimately mean *only* what their authors intended them to mean. There are many issues with this position, which I cannot go into here.<sup>3</sup> Such a view in any case seems to deny the importance of interpretation (as specified by criterion [3]). More importantly, in my view, reader-response criticism is not the same as the position that a literary text admits of *no* intentional or structural meaning whatsoever (i.e., undermining criterion [1]). This is where AI-generated art as a category appears to disrupt the discussion, moving us away from a discussion about the relative weight of authorial/artistic intentions to the question of whether things can be art in the absence of *any* intentional meaning. For, unless AI develops the capacity to act as an intentional (artistic) agent—which may require it to develop consciousness, a perspective on the world, and so on—intentionality must remain absent from AI.

Nevertheless, perhaps there is another way to incorporate intentionality in discussions about the meaning of AI-generated art. One could argue something like the following. For intentionality in AI-generated art, we must look not at the process or outcome of generation, but rather at the *input*—that is, at the prompts that are fed into it. Prompts are created by people with intentions. Therefore, we might ask: Has a prompt been successfully converted into an image or a text in accordance with the human intentions behind the prompt? If so, then perhaps there may be some intention-based meaning to AI-generated art after all. Yet, this is still a highly limited conception, unlikely to be satisfactory. If I ask a painter to paint my portrait, the portrait's meaning is connected to what the artist chooses to create—e.g., how she expresses my existence and personality through paint on a canvas. That I have commissioned the portrait is important for its existence, but that is not something that we usually count in determining the meaning of art.

What about AI-generated images or texts that are edited by human beings? There may be greater scope for something like intentionality-as-curation here. In more structurally collaborative cases, human intentionality may play a larger role in shaping AI-generated art. We might retouch a portrait that we have not set out to paint; or edit a novel that we have not bled at a typewriter, to use Ernest Hemingway's phrase. Perhaps there is a kind of continuum, where the more that human beings do to an AI-generated piece—the more that human intentions feed into and (re)shape it—the more we might speak of the outcome in terms of having intentional meaning. I will leave this as an open question, even if my intuition is that intentionality-as-curation is not sufficient for

a full-fledged theory of intentional meaning in AI-generated art and fiction.

Before concluding, I want to offer one concrete example. Fyodor Dostoevsky intended to write a sequel to his great 1880 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Unfortunately, he died before he could take on this task. Now, imagine prompting a generative AI tool like ChatGPT to write the intended sequel. Imagine that it generates a 600-page novel entitled *The Life of Alyosha*. What could this AI-generated novel mean?

My discussion above suggests that we could try to interpret *The Life of Alyosha* in many ways, but that the novel would not be meaningful. There is, moreover, a great irony in even wanting to generate such a novel. In his life and art, Dostoevsky consistently railed against hyper-rationalism—against cold, rational calculation—and championed the expression of the free, spontaneous, individual personality. In response to an AI-generated sequel—probabilistic, deterministic, nonintentional—a passage from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) seems apt:

"I [...] would not be the least bit surprised if suddenly, out of the blue, amid the universal future reasonableness, some gentleman of ignoble, or, better, retrograde and jeering physiognomy, should emerge, set his arms akimbo, and say to us all: 'Well, gentlemen, why don't we reduce all this reasonableness to dust with one good kick, for the sole purpose of sending all these logarithms to the devil and living once more according to our own stupid will!'"<sup>4</sup>

We might judge that *The Life of Alyosha* quite successfully mimics Dostoevsky's writing style. As a technological development, as an indicator of potentiality, we might be impressed. There may even be an interesting sentence here and there. And yet, channeling some of Dostoevsky's heroes, reading it may just make us want to give it a good kick—and insist on creating by our own stupid, human will.

There are myriad moral issues posed by the widespread use of AI-generated art, like the lamentable labor conditions of many of the people needed to train AI tools, the use (theft) of existing materials produced through human efforts, the prospect of AI-generated art crowding out human art and replacing precarious human artists, and so on. As important as these issues are, I have not been concerned with them here. I have stepped back and asked fundamental questions about the meaning of art in relation to AI. What is art? What makes it meaningful? Unless we can come up with convincing positive answers to these questions for AI-generated art and fiction, its products remain hollow.

<sup>3</sup> To name just one issue, authorial intentions are rarely straightforwardly determined.

<sup>4</sup> Translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky (Dostoevsky 1864/2006, 24).

According to Danto, a problem “is not a philosophical problem unless it is possible to imagine that its solution will consist in showing how appearance has been taken for reality” (1989, 6). We have not yet witnessed full-fledged AI-generated art and fiction. We have not seen a society in which AI-generated art is ubiquitous.

Have we already taken appearances for reality?

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**Data availability** The manuscript has no associated data.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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