

10/6/23: STYLE IN THE HARD LIGHT OF ALGORITHM

*The mathematization of what we have until now called by the vague honorific “creativity” is becoming more attended to every day, in nearly every social domain, almost everywhere in the world. Inevitably, each writer is having thoughts about ways their personal artistic signature and their overall approach to authorial status will need to respond to AI. Share yours.*

**Soonest NATHANIEL (Nigeria)**

*"The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering." — Ben Okri*

From ELIZA to SHRDLU, AI has been trying hard to imitate human discernment and dialogues. Algorithms trained on vast datasets are beginning to reflect and amplify with precision – various patterns found within databases, thereby dominating numerous aspects of our daily interactions.

Our unique styles as creatives are not immune to their influence. From fashion recommendations to music playlists, the age-old human instinct for personal expression meets the cold precision of algorithmic calculations, even our exposure to and consumption of poetry is changing drastically as social media platforms become more significant venues for the sharing and discovery of poetry.

But in the hard light of algorithms, we stand and ask what happens when style—an inherently human construct built on cultural nuances, emotions, aspirations and personal histories—is placed under the scrutiny of mathematical models? What happens when the soul’s DNA is continually reshaped and refined by zeroes and ones?

Theodore Dreiser opines that “Art is the stored honey of the human soul, gathered on wings of misery and travail.” Yet fears arise when tools like *ChatGPT* and their ilk, craft prose, verse, and art that can sometimes be indistinguishable from human-made pieces. The deep intricacies of style, rooted in centuries of human experience, now stand juxtaposed against finite sequences of rigorous codes, making many believe that machines might soon oust humans in creative fields.

This worry has sparked quandaries like—is imitation the sincerest form of flattery or a mere shadow of the original? Is competition the right framework? Or could it be collaboration? Can machines ever replicate the emotional depths that underpin talent?

To answer these questions, I returned again to the banks of the Iowa River –

where *art is long and life is brief*; there, where I first howled at blue moon

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Yasuhiro Yotsumoto (Japan), Soonest Nathaniel (Nigeria),  
Shi Yifeng (PRC), Enah Johnscott (Cameroon)

For electronic texts, visit <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

on the night of my initiation, and held conversation with Ginsberg  
as he performed my rite of passage under influence of spirits  
distilled from the moon's breasts.

I asked – shall we bury our myths in the past –  
seeing that we have arrived in the pixelated dawn?  
And a voice replied –

*to bury the myths in the past  
is to allow algorithms to dictate the future.*

Again I asked –  
is not the future theirs for the taking, is not our artistry to be diluted  
by perpetuation of stereotypes for the democratization of poetry,  
why will art be saved from the digital sprawl?

And he replied –

*because AI doesn't know.  
It doesn't know how to make audible meaning  
without breaking silence;*

*doesn't know how to ask questions,  
does not know how to fuse unlikely elements,  
does not know how the forms kneel marvelously  
in the eyes of the artist,  
cannot constructively critique the Pope of Reportage,  
cannot comprehend the skewed surrealism of folklore,  
nor can it understand suffering spirits are capable of happiness.*

*AI doesn't know  
that in the paradise of verse  
there is no night, Chris says  
there is no sugar  
in the promised land,  
but there is –*

*a drop of blood  
and the poets  
like sharks gather  
at the confluence of conflict –*

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debating if AI *can break the logic of language when it doesn't distrust well-written books* and cannot understand that a line must be drawn between poetry and social commentary. Thus, knowing all these things, you ask: how then do I respond to AI with my personal artistic signature?

Well, as Rilke advised (*Letters to a Young Poet*), first I “live the question.” By this I mean going into myself daily and rediscovering *the reason that commands me to write*; see whether *it has spread its roots into the very depths of my heart*. The roots of my creativity are enmeshed in my life’s intricate tapestry of faith, football, folklore, music and dance—a fusion I have come to term African Speculative Realism. Algorithms, for all their sophistication, lack this foundational touchstone.

Therefore, I will not for instance, for the fame of ‘Instapoetry,’ allow codes to order what I write because they can predict which content gets significant visibility, distribution, and reception. I will not sideline nuanced, complex and experimental poetry for more marketable content that is brief, easily digestible, visually pleasing and imbued with relatable sentiments, just to gain traction in these algorithm-driven platforms which are shaping a distinct writing style that is only internet-friendly.

The question then becomes: are algorithms allies or rivals?

It depends what you do with them.

AI’s illustrious son *ChatGPT* is very honest, so I thought I’d engage him briefly to better appreciate our discussion today, and here is how it went:

**SIN:** *Do you believe in life?*

**ChatGPT:** *I don't have beliefs, emotions, or consciousness.*

**SIN:** *Can you ever be human?*

**ChatGPT:** *No, I cannot be human. I am a digital entity.*

**SIN:** *What truth are you looking to realize?*

**ChatGPT:** *I don't seek truth, have consciousness, or pursue any form of realization. My primary function is to assist users by providing information or generating text based on patterns in the data.*

Upon this premise, I have resigned not to view AI as the chisel that birthed Michelangelo’s

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'David' or the printing press that democratized knowledge. I will not view algorithm as a foe seeking to oust me from poetry, neither will I see it as an ally in the cold quest to catalyze a new artistic renaissance. AI is not an artist.

I'll only see AI the way it should be seen –  
as a research tool, a search engine,

*not because I am lost  
not because I long to be found  
but because I am curious,  
because curiosity will not kill the cat.*