
Digital Literary Consciousness: Exploring AI as Author, Reader, and Critic

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Abstract

The advent of artificial intelligence as an agent in literary creation, reading, and evaluation indicates an essential restructuring of what we in this paper refer to as digital literary consciousness. Based on the post-structuralist literary theory and, specifically, the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as on the digital humanities studies and ethical theories, this paper will be able to analyse the various functions that AI currently holds in the literary ecosystem. It proposes the idea that the concept of authorship as a singular human action should be rethought as a distributed, collaborative and algorithmically mediated process. AI serves as an author in four types of algorithmic authorship: fully text-generated, human-directed collaboration, adaptive interactive story, and intertextual remix. As the reader, AI does stylometric analysis, sentiment mapping, extracts narrative structure, and gives a recommendation; however, the interpretive authority of the work is subject to algorithmic bias and alignment problems. AI can provide computational stylistics and thematic evaluation at scale, but not human ethical, aesthetic or cultural judgment, as a critic. The paper situates these changes in the wider historical context from oral tradition to print culture to digital media, and explores the ethical and legal issues of plagiarism, attribution, representation, and labour, concluding with pedagogical implications for teaching literature in the age of intelligent machines.

Keywords: digital literary consciousness, artificial intelligence, computational authorship, algorithmic reading, machine criticism, ethics, pedagogy.

Introduction

“What is an author? ...the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work.” -
Michel Foucault

For centuries literary transmission relied on oral performance, myths, histories, and folktales, recited in assembly areas where storytelling was realised, active and social. The writing and, subsequently, the printing press made these fleeting actions into everlasting objects of thought. Print culture made close reading, textual annotation, and systematic scholastic examination of the literature possible. It led to the whole apparatus of literary criticism: formalism, structuralism, postcolonialism, feminist theory, and reader-response criticism. The common feature of these traditions is that the production, reception, and criticism of literary texts are human activities at their core, with their origins in the consciousness, intentions, and cultural contextuality. This paradigm started to change in the late twentieth century when digital technologies started to alter it. To allow computational processes to carry out distant reading, stylometric analysis, and to explore large corpora, digital humanities scholars employed computational tools to facilitate what Franco Moretti termed reading

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literature at the level of the system instead of the individual text (Moretti 1-2). These instruments, nevertheless, were still subservient to human interpretation. The fundamental association of scholar to text remained the same. The current time is qualitatively different. Now, large language models and generative AI systems are able to generate fiction with narrative coherence, imitate authorial style, critique prose sentiment, and write critical commentary. The creation of works like *Alice and Sparkle* (2022) by an AI chatbot that created illustrations by AI and the novel *Death of an Author* (2023) written mostly by AI tools has brought the question of ownership of creative work, copyright, and cultural worth directly into the public discourse (Reshi; Weidinger et al. 2). Emily Bender and others warn that the resulting large language models generate fluent text through statistical prediction of word sequences with no actual knowledge or intentionality, and incurs environmental costs and risks of cultural bias (Bender et al. 1-5). But fluency, which, as the popular understanding of these works testifies, is a strong substitute for meaning, is a strong surrogate of meaning. This paper presents the notion of digital literary consciousness, a novel assemblage of computational abilities, human-machine cooperation, and cultural production that jointly influence literary creation, reading, and criticism. Following a historical path from oral to print, and digital literary culture, the paper explores AI as author, reader, and critic, respectively, incorporating the theoretical views of Barthes, Foucault, Bakhtin, Iser, Kristeva, Moretti, and Bourdieu. Every section deals with the possibilities, limitations, and ethical concerns of the role played by AI, and ends with some thoughts on the issue of pedagogy and the future of literary education.

Theoretical Framework: Rethinking Authorship

Whether a person or a thing is an author has never been determined. Classical literary thinking, beginning with the Poetics of Aristotle, continuing in romantic idealism, glorified the author as the creator of meaning- a person who possessed creative intention and moral imagination. This is the conception which forms the basis of copyright law, academic canon and cultural recognition. But this assumption became a target of long-term criticism by the theory of literature written in the twentieth century. The most famous essay by Roland Barthes claims that predetermining the author means killing off all the other meanings a text can bear: the birth of the reader must come to the expense of the Death of the Author (Barthes 147). Meaning, according to this view, does not exist in the producing consciousness, but in the interpretive activity of the reader of a text that is construed as a zone of rival codes of language. In a complementary gesture, Michel Foucault restyles authorship as a discursive practice as opposed to a personalised quality: the author is an attribution site, a responsibility, a control site of society, a way in which society categorises, evaluates, and regulates discourse (Foucault 128). Barthes and Foucault do not eliminate the figure of an author, but simply shift

it out of the interior of the creating subject and into the social and cultural structures along which the texts travel. Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the third dimension. To Bakhtin, word in language is irreducibly heteroglossic: the word belongs half to another, and it becomes the one belonging to the speaker when it is filled with his or her own intentions (Bakhtin 293). In Bakhtin, authorship is mediative dialogic, i.e., the writer coordinates a multiplicity of social voices without subjecting them to one, authoritative point of view. These three theoretical lenses intersect on a common understanding that authorship is not an individual, hermetic action but a distributed, relational, and culturally embedded action. This is not just an academic understanding. In the traditional canon, even, authorship has been mediated and collaborative. Actors, patrons and scribes shaped Shakespeare; Dickens rewrote *Great Expectations* when readers commented, and serialisation pressured writers to change the story (Dickens 324); the auteur theory of cinema has directorial authorship of the film, which in practice is the work of hundreds of craftspeople (Sarris 20). The introduction of AI in the literary production does not mark the age of distributed authorship; it only magnifies and complicates the processes that were happening before it. The AI authorship is not, therefore, just analogies of these theoretical frameworks surveyed here, but rather a conditions of intelligibility.

AI as Author: Forms and Limits of Algorithmic Authorship

Continuing on the distributed concept of authorship described above, the section discusses the particular manifestations of AI authorship and the theoretical and practical limitations that make such creative agency qualitative. It is possible to distinguish four major forms. The former is completely generated text, where a massive language model is used to generate narrative content with a minimum of human intervention. *Death of an Author* is the text that illustrates this mode: the text of the novel was formed mostly as the result of algorithmic processing of linguistic patterns acquired with the help of huge training corpora (Weidinger et al. 2). In this respect-

- The resultant narrative shows stylistic consistency and familiar plot tropes-qualities which, according to a Barthesian view, are enough to perpetuate reader interpretation. When meaning is generated in the interaction of the reader and not in the purpose of the author (Barthes 147), the fact that the generator is not a conscious human being does not exclude the text as a participant in literature.
- The second type is human-led algorithmic collaboration, where the human partner makes prompts, conceptual parameters or stylistic guidance, and the AI produces textual and visual content based on this input. *Alice and Sparkle* exemplify this scheme: the human contributor

determined the idea of the narrative, and the AI wrote the prose and drew the pictures; the human was later attributed to the authorship of the book (Reshi; Mack Gowan). The dialogism by Bakhtin sheds light on the frame of this collaboration. Similarly, as the novelistic writer takes over and re-accentuates the voices of the existing socialities, so the human partner takes over the language created by AI and modifies it to fit a particular semantic and expressional purpose (Bakhtin 293). The last piece is a co-production where human intentionality and algorithmic output are constitutive of each other.

- Third, AI is involved in interactive and adaptive authorship, which is most apparent with procedural storytelling and AI-assisted video games. Within such environments, narrative engines spawn plot paths based on user decisions and other environmental factors, creating storyworlds that are neither entirely human nor entirely machine-generated. The author-function introduced by Foucault is suitable in the given case: the systems that dictate and share power are the algorithms, datasets, and system interface design, not in one of the human agents (Foucault 128). The works that emerge in response to this confront the integrity of the authorial identity without eliminating interpretive and value-making practices that the author-function conventionally packages.

- Fourth, AI participates in intertextual remix and stylistic emulation, using training data to create pastiches containing canonical patterns and new narrative development. Emulations of Austenian prose or Dickensian serialised fiction using AI invoke familiar stylistic and generic frameworks but add systematic variations. This practice is a part of a long tradition of literary imitation and quotation: Kristeva points out that any text is built up as a mosaic of quotations, assimilating and altering other texts (Kristeva 36). In this sense, the intertextual abilities of AI are a computational operationalisation of a property that the literary theory has historically understood as defining the totality of textual production. The boundaries of machine creativity have to be recognised against these productive possibilities. Claiming that AI generates fluent output by using statistical recognition of patterns without semantic insight or actual intentionality, Bender and colleagues make their point (Bender et al. 2).

The description of the authorship as a negotiation between the restrictions of the society and the imaginative volition, presented by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Gilbert and Gubar 22) throws light on what AI does not have: a subjectivity, which can feel the restrictions of the society within itself. AI has the ability to model the results of deliberate creativity without going through the creative process. It is crucial to understand this limit so that AI can not be disqualified from participating in the literary sphere, but create a shared division of labour between human and machine.

AI as Reader: Algorithmic Reading Practices and Their Constraints

In case authorship has been conceptually extended to include non-human agents, reading must also be extended to this activity. AI can be used to carry out several different types of algorithmic reading, all of which have a scholarly and pedagogical implication. Stylometric analysis is a computational technique to evaluate linguistic and syntactic fingerprints of texts, which can be used to attribute texts in dispute, to identify the influence of text, and to trace stylistic change over corpora (Jockers 17). It follows the way Barthes's decentring of authorial intention, which is what stylometrics perceives as a pattern present in the text but not as an expression of the psyche of the author, and Moretti's programme of distant reading, which views literature as a system by paying attention to its aggregate statistical characteristics but not its established examples (Moretti 12). Sentiment and affective analysis visualises the emotional flow of a story based on the processing of the lexical markers and semantic fields (Bamman et al. 45). Findings are able to show empathy, tension, catharsis structures that are hard to express in close reading. The theory of reader-response by Wolfgang Iser offers a theoretical background: the co-production of meaning during the interaction of text and reader, the anticipations and retroactive revisions of the reader make up the literary work as aesthetic experience (Iser 279). AI sentiment analysis scales the pursuit of affective response that Iser characterises as a key element of the reading process and makes it operational. Narrative structure extraction is a technique to extract plot, character relations, and causal links in large text corpora (Moretti 12), enabling researchers to study how story structure varies by genre and time. This method has echoes with structural morphology of the folktale (Propp 21) of structuralist narratology more generally, it illuminates the infrastructural rules of narrative intelligibility, and approaches AI as a systematic critic of the deep grammar of storytelling. The fourth algorithmic reading practice that has large cultural implications is recommendation systems. Through the examination of behavioural trends on reading and textual aspects, AI algorithms create individual literary journeys, which determine what is seen and what is overlooked by the reader. An intertextual framework proposed by Julia Kristeva (where texts are not singular entities but networks of mutual relation and transformation) offers a theoretical ground to recommendation logic: algorithms are used to operationalise the intertextuality at scale, mediating the experience of the reader with the literary field. These capabilities, however, are subject to the issue of algorithmic bias. AI systems trained on much more Western, historically canonical corpora can replicate the hierarchies of the corpora, which over-represent dominant authors and genres and marginalise non-Western, feminist, or postcolonial literary traditions (Bamman et al. 50). The structurally reproduced inequality, which uncritical AI reading potentially only continues to perpetuate, is explained by Pierre Bourdieu through his analysis of cultural production

mediated by the institutional and economic structures that privilege certain voices (Bourdieu 72). Alignment of AI systems to express interpretive plurality and representational equity, therefore, does not only turn out to be a technical problem but rather an ethical and political necessity. The idea of heteroglossia, where meaning is created out of the coexistence of conflicting social voices in a text, proposed by Bakhtin (Bakhtin 293), provides a normative ideal: AI reading systems must be created to capture literary polyphony and not to enhance dominant views.

AI as Critic: Automated Criticism, Affective Dimensions, and Limits

The further development of AI to the point where it can critique is another extension of digital literary consciousness. Automated criticism covers computational stylistics, thematic mapping, sentiment evaluation, and comparative literary evaluation - a set of analysis abilities capable of generating critical commentary at scale and speed that could not be generated by single human scholars. Computational stylistics allows AI to assess the rhetorical, syntactic, and tonal characteristics of texts, producing an evaluation of stylistic coherence, narrative tactics, and intertextual resonance (Jockers 17). When used on AI-generated fiction, they can demonstrate how far algorithmic texts adhere to or break canonical norms, which is a crucial empirical question to answer the question of the extent and boundaries of machine creativity. The approach to style as a socially and culturally mediated object, as proposed by Barthes (Barthes 148), legitimises AI stylistic analysis by focusing on textual characteristics instead of authorial interiority. Thematic and sentiment analysis expands the critical ability of AI to the evaluative realm. The plotting of affective arcs and ideological subcurrents through Victorian novels or AI generated tales can reveal the patterns that cannot be observed when reading a single text through close reading because of the temporal and cultural context of the reader (Bamman et al. 45). Here, AI criticism performs at scale what Iser describes as constitutive of aesthetic experience: the following of the interaction between textual indicators and response to affect (Iser 279). The intertextual system advanced by Kristeva also supports the idea of the comparative approach to AI criticism: since texts are in networks of relation and of mutual transformation (Kristeva 36), criticism that recognises and tracks these networks in large corpora adds real interpretive value. Algorithms have the capability of revealing intertextual relationships that individual scholars, constrained by time and access to libraries, would not have spotted. However, there is a great deal of importance to the boundaries of algorithmic criticism. Lack of consciousness limits AI's ability to make ethical judgements, aesthetic judgements, and judgements that focus on culturally oriented nuance. As Weidinger and others note, AI systems do not have lived experience and moral sensitivity underpinning human evaluative practice (Weidinger et al. 5). According to novelist and critic Jeff VanderMeer, AI criticism can recognise trends, but not capture the cultural, historical, and

emotional nuances that render literature humanly meaningful (VanderMeer). The ironic complications of a Jane Austen novel, the ethical grey areas of a Dostoevsky novel, the postcolonial echoes of the fiction of Chinua Achebe, all these need some kind of well-placed cognition that the modern AI systems are incapable of emulating. Another limitation is brought out by Bakhtin in dialogism. Authentically dialogic texts are characterised by ideological antagonisms and voices that are held in tension; an authentic heteroglossic novel is that which cannot be systematically paraphrased just because the meaning of the text is made in the tension between competing voices (Bakhtin 293). This irreducible plurality is in danger of being dissolved in aggregated metrics by AI criticism, which needs to make the text less complex into computable variables. Likewise, the abundant description of intertextuality as a location of semiotic change and ideology negotiation (Kristeva 36) is far beyond pattern-matching algorithms at present. These conditions place AI as an augmentative, as opposed to a substitutive, critical agent: it enhances the scope of human critical practice, but not its interpretive richness. The emotional aspect of AI literary interaction collides with normative issues. Sentiment analysis is capable of detecting emotive outlines, but not assessing their moral or cultural value. The description of the literary field as a hierarchy of taste and institutional authority presented by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 72) suggests that a critical assessment can never be ideologically neutral, and this argument can be extended to both the application of algorithms and human criticism. Creating AI systems of critical importance that are representationally fair, culturally aware, and able to be transparent about their constraints is thus as much an ethical as a technical endeavour.

Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Implications

The application of AI in the creation and reception of literature creates ethical and legal issues in three key areas: plagiarism and attribution, representation and equity, and labour and institutional change.

Plagiarism and attribution- It is the case of an algorithm generating narrative text, the already established copyright laws, which are based on the deliberate creative activity of a human writer, find it difficult to clarify the ownership of intellectual property. Is it the modeller who created the programmer, the organisation who deployed it or the user who designed the prompt? The situation with Alice and Sparkle was that, although the human contributor does the majority of the generative effort, the AI is credited with the work (Reshi). This imbalance brings up concerns regarding the fairness of the attribution of algorithmic contribution and the transparency of readers. Weidinger and others find clear attribution mechanisms to be necessary; they pinpoint the need to acknowledge the contribution of humans and machines without losing accountability (Weidinger et al. 7). Decentering of authorial intention in

Barthes does not remove the legal and ethical requirement of attribution systems; it merely shifts it off the shoulders of the individual producer to the shoulders of a group of agents, human and algorithmic, who are involved in the production process. Training data may unintentionally be recreated in the form of phrases, motifs, or narrative structures, which promotes the possibility of unwanted plagiarism and copyright violations. The size of the training corpora precludes systematic citation, but the results build on and in certain instances take a very close echo of existing work. To solve this problem, it is necessary to have mechanisms of transparency in the datasets, provenance of content, and legal frameworks sufficient to the hybrid character of AI-assisted creation.

Representation and equity: The AI systems that are mostly trained on Western canonical corpora are likely to propagate existing literary hierarchies, marginalise non-Western, minority and new voices, and replicate the gender, class, and racial biases inherent to historical publishing (Bamman et al. 50). In his analysis, Bourdieu emphasises the fact that cultural production is not a neutral space: the institutional frameworks influence what texts are appreciated, preserved and taught (Bourdieu 72). Any AI that trains on this biased record will replicate its biases unless measures are taken to mitigate them. Training corpus diversification, bias detection and human curatorial watch are all required but inadequate solutions; they need to be supplemented by the continued critical evaluation of AI products by scholars who are conscious of representation issues.

Labour and institutional change: The ability of AI to conduct initial stylistic analysis, create first-draft text, and create massive volumes of critical commentary reorganises the literary division of labour. Research assistance, junior academicians, or editorial roles that were traditionally done by human hands can be at least partially automated, leading to concerns of job losses, credit, and human knowledge, which is highly specialised and may be undervalued. The restructuring that Moretti envisions as being the distant reading is a practice of reinstating the literary study with technological tools (Moretti 15), which prefigures this restructuring, but leaves its equity aspects unaddressed. Higher education institutions and research centres will need to come up with explicit guidelines on how AI should be ethically utilised, how credit should be designated in hybrid human-machine scholarship and how to safeguard scholarly labour in a more highly automated environment.

Pedagogical Implications

Pedagogy is directly affected by the change of literary roles by AI. Creative writing programs and literature classrooms will have to adjust to a world where students are exposed to AI-generated text, analysis using algorithmic tools, and navigate complicated authorship and

uniqueness issues. The analytical engagement can be facilitated by AI tools that allow students to operate with large corpora, visualise patterns of narratives, and explore stylometric and affective structures, complementing close reading instead of substituting it (Jockers 45). According to the reader-response model by Iser, AI may act as an interpretive scaffold: exposing both textual patterns and affective contours, algorithmic tools can help students focus on aspects that enhance their own interpretive activity (Iser 279). Automating interpretation is not the point, but to make it more extensive. Generative AI also presents some novel pedagogical opportunities in creative writing. Students will have the chance to play around with AI-assisted narrative, as the material to critically reflect on voice, style, originality, and ethical application. These experiments have the potential to foster creative confidence and raise the questions of authorship and attribution that AI renders urgent. The idea of the death of the author as imagined by Barthes is here turned into a practice, in this pedagogical exercise, of making students experience what it is like to write something when it is actually unclear who is speaking and who is not (Barthes 147). More importantly, AI pedagogy should involve the use of digital literacy and ethical awareness as a fundamental element. Learners should be taught to critically analyze AI generated content, identify the biases that the training data contains, and understand the ethical consequences of the content generated by algorithms (Weidinger et al. 9). The analysis by Bourdieu of cultural production as determined by the hierarchies of social and institutional structures (Bourdieu 72) offers a conceptual framework of how to teach students to question the assumptions written into AI systems and question whose voices and values they give a platform or silence. Specific attention should be paid to the design of the assessment. Competent prose can be generated by AI writing tools, and traditional text-based assessment is susceptible to misattribution. Teachers should create tests that predict the process impacting reflection on creative decision-making, critical assessment of AI results, and ethical reasoning as well as the product. Human mentorship is irreplaceable and the practice of interpretive judgement, aesthetic sensibility and ethical awareness cannot be delegated to algorithmic feedback. Thoughtfully incorporated, AI can become a co-educator in the literary education field - broadening both the range of analytical and creative potential and rendering the most profound inquiries of literary analysis new and urgent.

Conclusion

The paper has proposed that the advent of AI as author, reader, and critic is a structural shift in what can be described as digital literary consciousness, which is the new constellation of human and computational actors, cultural practices, and technological possibilities that now together constitute literary production, reception, and evaluation. Instead of approaching AI as a new phenomenon or a threat to it, the paper has contextualised this transformation in

the long tradition of literary history, oral performance up to the digital media, and in the conventional theoretical procedures of Barthes, Foucault, Bakhtin, Iser, Kristeva, Moretti, and Bourdieu. As an author, AI is also involved in distributed and collaborative authorship processes, in four modes: fully generated text, human-directed collaboration, interactive adaptive narrative, and intertextual remix, without the intentionality or moral agency assumed by classical theories of authorship. Reading AI does stylometric, affective and structural analysis on a scale that human scholarly ability cannot do, but that, like all AI, is susceptible to the bias of its training data, and needs critical alignment to guarantee representational equity. Being analytical, comparative in scope, AI will provide analytical depth and range, but lacks consciousness, cultural suitability, and ethical sensitivity and is therefore not substitutive, but augmentative. The legal, ethical and cultural concerns of such developments, which surround the issues of attribution, plagiarism, representation and labour, are real and pressing. They require institutional answers, well-defined systems of assigning the contribution of AI, diversified training corpora, bias-detecting systems, and policies safeguarding scholarly labour. Pedagogically, AI provides a challenge to literary educators to incorporate digital literacy and ethical consciousness into the curriculum without compromising the ability to interpret, perceive aesthetically and humanistically, which are the hallmarks of literary education at its finest. Digital literary consciousness does not pose a threat to the literary creations; it is its intensification and complication. The questions it brings out:

What is an author?

What is the meaning of reading?

What we do to judge literature is not new.

They are the questions of literary study which have been reposed, with a new urgency, to us, by a technology which can simulate but not substitute the human powers of meaning, of judgement and of care which literature, at its finest, develops.

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