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New Beginnings

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Is (Post-)Human Creativity Dead?

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The new beginning of the digital era might be the end of human creativity. This could be one way of understanding our current digital predicament. The rapid advance of artificial intelligence, in particular in its relatively novel form of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), may be read in an apocalyptic way as threatening to colonise human life up to an extent that human intelligence becomes entirely subjected to AI or even obsolete. To elucidate the current human predicament, it is of great importance to grasp what we mean by *creativity*, and also to clarify how we assess the workings of GenAI in terms of intelligence, imagination, and creativity.

Creativity in Ricoeur and Castoriadis

I will take as a starting point for outlining creativity an intriguing radio debate between Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis (Adams 2017). In this debate, both philosophers put forward their specific positions on creative imagination, and, in related terms, reproductive and productive imagination.

While the philosophers find important affinities in their understandings of imagination and the creative imagination, a core point remains divisive: can imagination be *ex nihilo,* or is it always embedded in existing structures of perceiving, understanding, and so on? Castoriadis believes that in some unprecedented historical turning points, creative imagination *ex nihilo* has been crucial (i.e. the invention of philosophy, the invention of democracy); Ricoeur, to the contrary, insists that creative breakthroughs are always embedded in existing structures of thinking. As he claimed, 'one is never in a passage from nothing to something, but from something to something, from one to another – which goes from the configured to the configured, but never from the formless to form' (Adams 2017: 82). For Castoriadis, admitting to this would be coming down to 'saying that the whole history of humanity was already there at the moment the first anthropopithecus created the first spark by striking two stones to each other' (Adams 2017: 92).

Here, I will take these two contrasting positions as the starting point for elucidating how GenAI may relate to creativity and creative imagination. GenAI is clearly reproductive in that it can only operate if 'fed' enormous amounts of existing data as part of the so-called machine learning process. That is, for GenAI to create, it needs to be trained in large amounts of existing data. In this sense, there is an important dimension of repetition, reproduction, and restating a common denominator to GenAI in the way it processes data to learn patterns or regularities in texts, images, audio. A highly intriguing, and worrisome, dimension – that cannot be taken further here – is *how* GenAI turns human creativity into formalised and quantified, statistically, mathematically computer-driven processes (through the way it operates, based on tokenisation and prediction).

The dimension of *ex nihilo* creation might however also be relevant for describing GenAI's function-

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ing. Creation may emerge in moments of non-supervised processes of machine learning, where GenAI is combining its 'knowledge' to produce potentially original, non-existing ideas, propositions etc. This frequently leads to 'bullshitting', 'hallucinations', 'fake facts, or forms of 'slop'. But, may it also – more rarely so – lead to unexpected (i.e., random) forms of creativity?

If we focus more particularly on *imagination* as an important part of creativity, the question is whether AI can imagine (Wellner 2024). If imagination is understood as largely the capacity to imagine something in its absence, the emphasis is on reproduction. Hence, in Kantian terms, imagination is about 'empirical association', relating one representation to other representations on the basis of experience or learning over time (Wellner 2024: 31). A second way is 'schematism', that is, building a schema on the basis of core characteristics or essential aspects of something. This clearly has a lot to do with categorisation and being able to relate different objects, forms, or phenomena with each other on the basis of schematic similarity. This type of imagination is predominantly reproductive in recognizing patterns. A third way of imagining is 'transcendental imagination' and is more clearly productive in that it concerns imagination in the production of new forms or relationships, for instance by means of metaphors. Through the combination of existing forms, a new form may be imagined (Wellner 2024: 31-2). One might add a fourth, Castoriadian form of imagination, where the new form emerges out of nothing, or is at least not the result of combining existing forms, phenomena, ideas but is rather grounded in deep rupture. In this form of imagination, the imagined is 'freed' from any prior determination (Wellner 2024: 33). In Castoriadis, this is related to as 'otherness', that is, the 'emergence of unprecedented modes of being(s), which cannot be traced back – or explained with regard to – to pre-established nexuses of relations, meanings, etc.', in stark contrast to 'difference', that is, the 'production of the same within what is already given both on the level of "extant" being and on the level of meaning' (Mouzakitis 2014: 54).

The first three types of imagination are obviously relevant for GenAI in terms of association, categorisation, and combining/merging. The fourth type is more complex. As Wellner claims (2024), assessing the fourth type of productive imagination can be done by pointing to the *novelty* in the imagination, meaning that something is imagined that clearly did not exist before. There is further the dimension of *surprise*, in creating a specific effect on humans. GenAI may have a distinct problem in terms of creative imagination. As Fletcher claims, 'Generative AI speeds up ideation by programming computers to do divergent thinking, brute force brainstorming. The upshot is prolific pseudocreativity: in seconds, AI can spam out more "art" than all the painters of the sixteenth century. Yet because ideation works by arbitrarily combining old stuff, the result is the opposite of innovation. Innovation isn't random: it's purposeful. Which is why it's transformative, remaking life' (Fletcher 2025:71). As Fletcher claims, what makes human imagination irreducible to the big-data driven GenAI process is its capacity for low-data, or even *no-data* intelligence (Fletcher 2024).

This brings us to a further element that is probably the most complex for GenAI to deal with, and that is the dimension of *human values* and *meaning*. Productive imagination needs a value-orientation in that otherwise it might simply result in nonsense (and hence not creating new meaning for humans). It is to this latter dimension – of *valuation* and *meaning-making* – that I will turn in the final part, but not before briefly discussing creativity in the specific context of GenAI.

Forms of Creativity in GenAI

What forms does creativity take in GenAI, if at all? The most advanced debate in this regard is probably that on GenAI and art. Can we in fact speak of genuine creativity in art when GenAI is used to (co-)produce an artwork? What are the standards that we need to consider to be able to identify creativity? In one sense, GenAI might be considered merely a tool, as in the case of the photo camera or any utensil used in art production – hence, the often repeated, and rather banal, observation that

we simply need to 'accommodate' AI as one among other (new digital) tools. This seems however to completely ignore the much deeper question of GenAI as a potentially autonomous source of creativity, hence without interference of human intervention. It may well be true that in most cases GenAI is used in art in a co-creative fashion. But, even in co-production, where GenAI is assisting creation, this leads to questions about how and when creativity enter the process. Is, for instance, an artist who provides parameters, guidelines, or specific limits to GenAI 'accompanying' a process which then involves independent creativity? Who is the creative actor in this case? And: Do we consider GenAI artwork that is created within the boundaries set by the artist to contain an autonomous creative component that in turn is to be considered a form of creativity in its own right? In what does this creativity then consist of?

If we return to Ricoeur and Castoriadis, it seems fair to say that GenAI creativity is more of the Ricoeurdian kind, in that it is largely about *reproductive* forms of imagination (that is, deeply based on input in the form of explicitly formulated guidelines, but also in terms of the actual way GenAI operates – that is, based on data training and machine learning). This creativity seems largely based on some form of *bricolage* or a random type of recombining existing forms of art or humanly-produced creations.

The deeper question remains as to whether algorithmically driven creation is in its essence a form of creativity, or whether a creative process can only be the outcome of action made by sentient human beings. If we consider creativity as grounded in authenticity and intentionality, in terms of being expressions of human sentiments and insights, driven by a specific message or intention to sort a specific effect on those who experience the artwork, then GenAI seems not to have the right credentials. It does correspond to the basic imaginative dimension of leading to something novel and original, but it does so in a random, non-intentional way. That is why some currently speak of 'artificial creativity' as a form of creativity that explicitly relates to AI, but lacks the dimensions of authenticity and intentionality. The latter would embed the form of expression in an experience of a larger community of values, whereas GenAI seems to rather randomly tap into a vast 'community' – or rather, a repository – of data accessible on the internet. Let us now turn to the dimension of valuation and meaning-making.

Creativity, humanity, and meaning

Obviously, with GenAI and art, but, in reality, equally so with other uses such as text-writing, questions of authenticity, genuineness, originality, inspiration, and authorship are of great relevance. In my view, surprisingly little discussion is held on the dimension of plagiarism and the massive utilization and reproduction of copy-right protected work by GenAI applications. In one way at least, the functioning of GenAI could be labelled a form of *organized crime* (in its massive violation of intellectual property and copyright). This may in fact not merely lead to legal and material-economic issues, but also to the alienation of artists from their own work as soon as it is massively reproduced by GenAI, in that they lose control over their own work (Smith and Southerton 2025: 3) (and in many cases, in an entirely non-transparent manner, not least due to the massive amounts of data digested by GenAI in producing its outcomes).

Returning to the dimension of creativity, it is difficult to see how GenAI could be radically creative – in a spontaneous, disruptive, original way – without direct human intervention. In fact, artmaking is to be considered first and foremost, not a technique, or the mechanical application of tools, but a form of unique self-expression, disclosure of the world, and creation of a relationship with the world (Sontag's classic discussion of photography is relevant here: see Sontag 2005; cf. Smith and Southerton 2025). In this regard, it is difficult to see how GenAI-produced or even co-produced art or other creations can live up to an idea of what Hartmut Rosa has called 'resonance', that is, an

interpersonal relation with the world in terms of acting on the world and receiving responses from the world. This, in fact, also related to forms of *alienation*. Alienation may concern the creator, who becomes separated from his or her artwork, but it may equally regard the consumers of art or other cultural works who may feel increasingly estranged from the world due to the 'uncanniness' of GenAI products. GenAI's reproductions of (human) reality feel familiar, while at the same time producing dimensions that are 'off', strange, unsettling, and hence may fail to achieve a meaningful relation with the world. Smith and Southerton interestingly argue that GenAI is able to reproduce the 'vibes' of humanly created work (associations based on salient but superficial characteristics), but not the 'aura' (as Benjamin famously argued, in the reproduction of art, the aura of the original artwork gets lost, along with the latter's situated creation and being in time and space; Smith and Southerton 2025: 3).

This brings us to shared standards of value and truth-creation. Purposeful creativity means forms of creativity that are embedded in, relate to, or have transformative effects on collective understandings of society, morality, and the truth. A significant hurdle in GenAI is that it is mimicking the workings of an individual human brain (Collins 2025: 1258) in terms of imitating neural nets and neural net-based learning. It is made aware of moral dimensions and ethical questions only due to active human intervention in its learning process (for instance, not to instigate violence, or endorse human behaviour that might be harmful). Collins reports on how older versions of ChatGPT were collaborative when prompted 'how to construct a bomb' whereas newer versions have been corrected by human intervention through ex-post rule creation. By itself, GenAI is not able to socialise into a moral horizon of human collectivities and hence to acquire forms of human knowledge that are not about digesting large amounts of data, and finding potentially meaningful patterns, but rather about latent knowledge, informal conventions, and socially embedded forms of interaction and meaning-creation.

Some argue that creativity as such would need to be redefined, so as to potentially include post-human forms of agency and creativity (Bassett 2024). Creativity under the influence of AI developments is said to move towards a different balance of authorial creativity and forms of simulation and recombination, so that any sharp distinction between author and tool may be difficult to make in practice. Admittedly, various forms of human creativity are grounded in forms of copying, inspiration, and unacknowledged reproduction. And perhaps news forms of value could be conceptualised in relation to GenAI forms of creativity, hinging predominantly on recombination and randomness (which is however not the basis of creative imagination, Fletcher 2024). But the issue is: even if we can imagine multi-layered, multi-agent forms of creativity, the emergence of any creative instance is to be embedded in human considerations of the (narration of) value and meaning – hence, in a reappropriation of any GenAI based creation in human terms.

Indeed, Collins insists on the role of socialisation of AI as the only way of turning AI into a partner in processes of meaningful creation. He uses the obvious, but powerful, example of language: language fluency is based on humans becoming embedded in the discourse of societies, which means that one can only reproduce and grasp the finesses of a foreign language if one is socialised into its context of use (Collins 2025: 1262). This indicates that the deeper meaning of human life cannot be grasped by merely reproducing patterns of past behaviour and expressions through the identification of the right 'vibes', reconstructing human life and meaning through its regularities and repetitive patterns present in enormous amounts of humanly (and increasingly also non-humanly) produced data. Fletcher claims that a deeper, 'primal intelligence' of human beings is based on the capacity of storytelling, which means building on experience and past events, but also being able to rapidly respond to new, unexpected situations through meaningful stories (Fletcher 2025). As also Galimberti recently emphasised in an op-ed for the Italian newspaper *la Repubblica*, GenAI entirely disregards the unpredictable, spontaneous, changing, and *ex nihilo* nature of human creativity.

In conclusion, the 'new beginning' of artificial creativity is to be deeply and critically reflected upon, its significant limitations to be made explicit, and its uncritical diffusion creatively *resisted*.

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