

AIAI: AI — Authorship and Interpretation

The emergence of the latest wave of AI tools such as ChatGPT, used for generating text, or Midjourney, used for generating images, has raised a number of questions concerning the status of works created in this way. In our project, we are interested in two questions in particular: who can and should be named the author of an AI-generated work, and is there any sense in interpreting such works in the same way that literary and art scholars interpret texts and images created by humans. To answer these questions, we are combining theoretical work grounded in literary theory and philosophy of authorship and interpretation with sociological methods.

Throughout the 20th century, a large number of new methods of interpretation has been devised in philosophy as well as literary and art studies. In traditional hermeneutics, the premise was that we are trying to infer “what the author meant to say,” – this approach still guides many high school essays, but is rarely considered useful by contemporary scholars. Today’s interpretations are lead by a desire to know more about a given work than the author could – to know the ideological underpinnings of their judgments, the cultural biases that they unknowingly reproduced, or other forces which lead them to write (or paint) what they did. Sometimes interpretation altogether eschews the search for meaning and instead focuses on a texts or images pragmatic value, asking “what we can do with it?”. In fact, in the 1960s philosophers proclaimed the “death of the author,” claiming that he or she is irrelevant to the task of interpretation. We want to ask, what happens when generative AI enters this theoretical landscape. What are we doing when we are interpreting its “works”? Who can rightly be considered their “author” and, given that we seem to be doing well without the notion of the author – are we really prepared to tackle actually “authorless” works? And finally – a question which theoreticians often fail to ask – how do authors themselves feel about this new situation?

The proposed research seeks to answer these questions in three stages. In the first stage, already existing theories of authorship and interpretation will be assessed to judge their potential to address the challenge of generative AI. Building upon these theoretical findings, the second part of the research will consist of two stages: (1) expert interviews with artists and writers who already use generative AI in their work, focusing on their experience on authorship; (2) empirical research in which research subjects will create and co-create their own works with the aid of AI and then answer questions about their experience of authorship.

The last part of the project will seek to combine the knowledge gained from the theoretical and empirical research to work out a new framework for understanding the problems of authorship and interpretation of works generated by and with the aid of AI. Such a framework will be helpful in a number of fields, from copyright law, in which the question of authorship is hotly debated, to various domains in the humanities (from literary studies to art theory), which use diverse methods of interpretation in their work and rely on fundamental theories of authorship and interpretation.