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DO WRITOIDS DREAM OF ELECTRONIC LITERATURE?



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In Philip K. Dick's famous science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), an ontological question posed is whether androids can develop human emotions or if their internal machine will perpetually provide a mere shadow of human feelings – the android version.¹ What is fake and what is real in the novel depends on levels of emotional response and humans can only be separated from their machine counterparts with great difficulty. It goes as far as the robots being clueless about their own material; the character Rachael, an android with implanted memories has no knowledge of her programmed nature. In some ways, Rachael resembles the present-day Mia Zelu (2024–), an AI-influencer who shares “daily moments & memories”, as they both seem to possess fictive memories of existence.² Zelu is one of many influencers, models, and actors that are AI-created pictures of humans.³ The image of Mia Zelu has plenty of followers on Instagram where so-called memories are shared that no human has experienced. The AI-influencer's memories are simply a tracked history of the program's postings and in Philip K. Dick's android case it is an implanted memory copied from a human.

The android and the AI-influencer have a further sibling in the writoid. The writoid, as defined by the European Writers' Council is: “A robot trying to imitate the style, and ways of telling a story that are exclusive to a human writer.”⁴ The writoid is a new version of Dick's android – seemingly intelligent and communicating through human texts and memories. An anthropomorphizing of AI can be seen in many places for describing authorship. For example, on Amazon ChatGPT is commonly identified as the author.⁵ In these cases, the AI-program is described as a thinking and intelligent individual.

The European Writers' Council hardly agrees with such an image of a thinking machine and in their manifesto on AI and writoids there are two central critiques. First, contemporary AI programs (Large Language Models) are trained on human-produced texts and literature, and their very existence rests primarily on copyright infringement or even theft. Second, the European Writers' Council argues that a writoid does not compose, only compile. It is not original works, but simple copies of texts written by humans. Copyright infringement is certainly an issue, but this essay is about the idea of the copy and of mass replicas in the book market – the simulation of literature and the loss of aura.

While writoids and companies behind different AI-tools might be striving for (and dreaming of) uniqueness, the fact remains that the simpler the text the easier it is to reproduce, copy, or simulate. The barriers for mass production are so much lower than creating unique literary works. On the other hand, Hannes Bajohr has suggested a future where artificial (or AI-produced) texts are integrated with natural texts, i.e. the training data will start to replicate itself and at the same time humans will start to learn from AI-produced texts in “a mutually dependent circular process that irreversibly entangles them”.⁶ In the book market, a fast rise of the number of new fiction being published has led to a debate over quality and text copies. The primary contention is whether AI-written texts are mere simulations of literature or the real thing. And it is likely that writoids or various book market agents dream of originally created fiction without human touch? The essay headline – do writoids dream of electronic literature? – is not merely a pun on Dick's novel but a real question concerning AI-written literature in the marketplace and its potential future. AI-written literature seems, so far, to be mostly mass-produced copies, what Matthew Kirschenbaum has called a flood of texts, a “textpocalypse”.⁷ The question is if this will change with coming improved AI-tools?

This essay is written with a publishing studies perspective thinking about AI-generated fiction on the contemporary book market. Theoretically, the reasoning draws on concepts from sociology of literature and critical theory. Walter Benjamin's theories on authenticity and the aura of art, from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Repro-

duction” (1935), is still relevant in analysing the market and media of literature and particularly AI-produced literature. According to Benjamin, any work of art has in principle “always been reproducible”.⁸ An artifact can always, and has often, been imitated. To Benjamin, the mechanics and technology in the 1930s pushed reproducibility to a point where art began to lose its aura. He argued that even a well-done replica lacks “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.⁹ The presence of the original in a certain time and place is what gives a work of art its authenticity. This authentic manifestation can be described as the *aura* of an artwork, and it is what is lost in reproduction.

Jean Baudrillard’s theories are not commonly used in publishing studies, but his thinking on simulations is fruitful for an understanding of AI-written fiction. Baudrillard argued that replicas and reproductions have gone so far that they are only simulating the real: “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”.¹⁰ Can then, AI-written literature be regarded as simulations of literature or are they original works of art? According to Baudrillard, the *simulation* is a copy of an object or phenomenon. But, in the era of simulation, Baudrillard argues, “[i]t is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody.”¹¹ Benjamin would probably have agreed with Baudrillard that the mechanical reproductions of artifacts are mere simulations of the original. However, Baudrillard identified a world where the images of the real have moved further away from what is in front of us and the sign no longer has a “relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum”.¹² Simulacra is a copy without original, and AI-written fiction can be argued to be *simulacra* of literature.

Digital tools – electronic literature and AI-prompted fiction

In writing electronic and digital literature as well as AI-assisted fiction the uses of computers and programs are like one another. They can thus be grouped together under the term “computer-generated literature”.¹³ Still, the writing methods, aims, distribution and reading reception diverge among them. Precursory AI tools and digital pro-

grams for writing electronic literature are not comparable to the publications by generative AI that is presently seen on the book market.

The computer has been a tool for writing literature at least since the 1980s and already during the 1990s, literary works were written specifically for a digital-only format. Indeed, there are well-known texts of computer-generated literature going back to the 1950s with a long history since.¹⁴ Thus, where lie the differences between earlier uses of computers in writings of literature and AI-prompted fiction? First, there is no clear line between different forms of computer-use in writing fiction. Second, despite this claim, it is useful to define and discuss differences between variations of computer assisted writing. The terms for different kinds of texts using digital tools are contended and a variety of overlapping concepts circulate. In the following I will discuss electronic literature, digital literature, and AI-prompted literature.

Electronic literature refers to works that are digitally created and intended to be read and experienced digitally. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) defines electronic literature as “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer”.¹⁵ On the ELO website there is a list of examples of types of electronic literature: hypertext fiction, kinetic poetry in Flash, chatterbots, novels written and distributed as emails, SMSs, or blogs. These are types of works that were never intended for print and the traditional book market (although some migrated into print, e.g., Rupi Kaur’s *Milk and Honey* (2014) that began as Instagram poetry). In *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, the authors state that electronic literature “is fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with, the digital context in which it is produced and received”.¹⁶ That it was never intended for a general book market and readers became part of its signum.

Since its establishment in the 1990s, electronic literature has gone through several phases.¹⁷ The first generation explored the idea of hypertext, and the literature often consisted of text fragments that the reader was meant to assemble into their own narrative. From this early phase came, among others, the influential works by *Michael Joyce*, *afternoon, a story* (1990) and *Shelley Jackson*, *Patchwork Girl*

(1995).¹⁸ The second generation of electronic literature was multi-modal, i.e., these included multiple senses, arts, and media within a single work. These second-generation works were based on a media blend, where the integration of artistic expressions, sounds, and images were essential. The third generation of electronic literature can be defined as cybertextual, and it was during this phase that the internet fully impacted electronic literature. These three generations of electronic literature have all had an emphasis on the experimental and avant-garde. The innovative character of much electronic literature has also made them difficult to disseminate and only a few works have had a larger readership. The electronic literature often has a tentative nature that asks fundamental questions about the phenomenology of literature.

In comparison, digital literature and AI-prompted fiction largely has been written as self-publishing for digital platforms or print books. Digital fiction includes texts that are written for publication on sites like Wattpad or the fanfiction site Archive Of Our Own (AO3).¹⁹ These are written, published, and read in a digital sphere but as they have a traditional text format they can easily be printed out and read on paper, they are thus unlike the electronic literature with its insistence on digital reading. Despite the many-times traditional format, digital fiction bears its name mostly due to the fact that it is published, spread, and read on digital platforms. It is a kind of literature all dependent on its digital context but not really on prompting, programming or using other means for creating texts.

The third kind of digitally or computer supported kind of literature is one that is either fully or mainly created by generative AI. There are two essential differences to previous forms of computer assisted writing, the first being that generative AI can quickly produce a whole novel rather than just using the program for minor assistance. AI-tools are used by many authors, but by most as assistance for editing, synonyms, and proofreading. There are also plenty of specific programs for creative writing, e.g., Sudowrite, NovelAI, Novelcrafter, Raptor Write, to name a few. The explosion of easily accessible AI-programs specifically for authors but also general programs of generative AI has provided the basic tools. The second difference with previous forms of digital literature lies in the scale of generative

AI-prompted books for a general market. Systems for cheap book production have been there for more than a decade: set up through digital publishing websites such as Wattpad, self-publishing of e-books through Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing, and by different local versions of print self-publishing and print-on-demand.²⁰ The combination of such tools with a fast production of AI-written fiction and a global book market has provided self-publishers with easy access to production, sales, and distribution.²¹

The state of AI-written books?

The quick rise of AI-assisted self-publishing has shaken the book industry in many places. In the U.S., the Authors Guild has defined what they consider the difference between AI-assisted and AI-generated writing.²² They also launched a label – Human Authored Certification – for literature that meet the criteria for a work to be regarded as human-written. According to the American Authors Guild a book is human authored if it is “written by a human and not generated by AI, with the exception of minimal, trivial uses, such as AI applications that check spelling and grammar or for brainstorming or research”.²³ To the Authors Guild there is a distinct line to be drawn between AI tools comparable to a word processing program and the AI-programs that write the full text. But the differences between prompting and writing in digitally produced literature is not quite as distinct as is implied in their certificate.

How many published books have thus far been written by AI is unclear, but there are evidence that suggests that there are plenty, and more to come.²⁴ However, whether there is a fast growth of AI-books or not is not as clear-cut within industry talk.²⁵ The AI-written books are not yet a part of the established book market in terms of traditional publishing and book sales. The major market of large publishers has, so far, stayed away from publishing AI-written books which is not the case of AI-translations that have quickly been incorporated into the business. Still, a survey done in the spring of 2025 showed that almost half the authors used AI.²⁶ This one study is, however, not enough evidence for any widespread use of AI by authors. Most of the authors in the study claimed that they used AI mainly for research

and marketing, not in the writing process. Some of the authors said that they used AI as a writing tool, but the figures are not illustrative for authors in general as almost all the interviewed authors were self-published. In being self-published they did not have access to proper editing from a publishing house nor saw their options in terms of finding assistance in developing their manuscript. The survey also indicates, as there is also further evidence for, that most AI-written fiction is produced by self-publishers.²⁷ Furthermore, there is a tendency towards AI produced fiction being popular among authors of commercially popular genres: romance, fantasy, science fiction, or crime fiction.²⁸ The use of AI would then point towards a kind of modern mass-produced cheap computer literature.

The fact that authors are already using AI, raises uncertainty as to the authorship of newly published books. Considering that readers seem to be increasingly negative toward AI-generated literature it might be important to signal when there is a human author.²⁹ At the same time, it has become increasingly difficult for individual readers to distinguish human-created from machine-made texts. Hannes Bajohr refers to this as a post-artificial situation, where the boundaries between natural and artificial texts become increasingly blurred.³⁰ Matthew Kirschenbaum similarly argues that the overwhelming proliferation of texts “will have exhausted itself as a purposeful format for human communication and expression”.³¹ Unsurprisingly, scholarly perspectives on this issue are divided. For instance, Leah Henrickson challenges the notion that readers’ inability to distinguish between human and machine authorship is inherently problematic. Rather, Henrickson argues that the authenticity of literature should be evaluated within the contexts and dialogues that shape its reception.³² Furthermore, she has found that in reading human-written and computer-generated texts respectively the differences are negligible.³³

The mass-production of AI-written books is still a new territory for the publishing industry. That these texts are not yet included in traditional publishing does not mean that they don’t exist on the market, mainly in digital sale channels such as Amazon. In the business the challenge lies in the overwhelming amounts of books that are suddenly being published. How to detect, select, define, sell, and market books written by AI? This is early days in the existence of AI-written

literature and so far, the texts are not original, nor are they meant to be. A prompt written by a human might produce something new, but it is a difficult feat. Thus, the staple of the AI is to generate copies, or simulations of literature, where Benjamin would argue that the aura is lost as there is hardly any resemblance of any original.

The AI produced literature published for the general market is difficult to trace in order to create proper statistics, but so far it appears to be mostly e-books in online stores.³⁴ The sheer number of these books, the fact that many of them appear to be similar to other already published books, and the apparent lack of quality has given critics an easy target. There is no end to the critique that can be put forward, and most of these complaints are substantiated. On the other hand, the aim of the AI-tools is not to produce top-notch unique texts but rather to create as much content as fast, easily, and cheaply as possible. This is a kind of modern version of early dime novels (penny dreadfuls, pulp fiction, and other versions of cheaply produced and sold prints and books) produced with the cheapest of labour. There is, in Benjamin's term, no aura left and perhaps these texts do not even resemble literature.

Lyle R. Skains has in a study of digital literature discussed how to frame the authors of such texts. Skains coins the useful term "demotic author", for the prolific self-publishing and digital publishing authors that have been around online since the mid 2010s.³⁵ Skain's demotic author might, at a first glance, not fit as a description of the writoid or the human prompter. Nonetheless, in comparison to authors of electronic literature, AI-prompters tend to be just as profuse authors as the digital authors of Wattpad and similar sites. The commonplace demotic author perhaps even has a peak in the perpetual machine of the AI-author. The idea of who is defined as an author is historically specific; in some periods it has been an individual who was skilled at duplicating others' great works. Similarly, the present AI-author is by some seen as a skilled copy machine. A recent study of the perceptions of AI authorship concluded that there is still a widespread ambivalence about how to conceptualize an author.³⁶

Final remarks

The digital media researcher Carlos Scolari has written an article on the Italian author Italo Calvino (1923–1985) and his visionary ideas on literary automation.³⁷ Calvino had a dream of an automated literature that was not repetition of the already published, but a new production of disorder and disruption. According to Scolari, Calvino’s “literary android” was one that successfully combined the AI-program with a creative and unique electronic literature.³⁸ This might be the dream of the writoid; to be able to combine simulations with originality. Is it a futile dream? The future android might be able to write a bestseller in 2030 as has been predicted³⁹, but readers and the book market will most likely still find ways to discern what is written by a human or by a machine. The market identifiers might be adhered by authors, publishers, or marketing and sale channels. These can include an expanded use of the Author’s Guild certificate, or individual publishing houses taking a stand, or a system for curation in the bookstore and online stores.

Defining generative AI-literature simply as a modern-day pulp fiction is perhaps a bit too handy. On the other hand, the use of AI in contemporary fiction writing seems to be leading into a divided book market, with fast-produced AI-generated popular literature in one system and a separate system for works and authors with literary ambitions – what Robert Escarpit in the 1950s called divided literary circuits.⁴⁰ Escarpit’s model for the book market and for reading has been repeatedly criticized for being simplified, for being elitist, and for holding on to a strong division of class. Despite just criticism, Escarpit’s model of the book market does offer a useful notion of how to imagine a development towards a market full of AI-books. In that case, there might be a divided market with one circuit of a book business as we know it – of printed books, bookstores, and in communication with readers and professional critics. On the other side, there would be a commercial market for AI-produced books. In this second circuit the distribution and sales will likely be all digital; AI-produced literature as e-books or audiobooks (with an AI voice). These will be books that are sold at a very low price through digital channels and consumed similarly in fast pace. There is a concern that

an AI-supported production will turn “culture into slop”.⁴¹ Slop is the derogatory term often used for low quality texts, images, and other kinds of AI-produced material online. This literature and publishing slop would in that case end up in a separate circuit. Still, the argument is one of speculation as developments are unpredictable.

The title of this essay suggests that writoids strive for higher quality. But as Caroline Bassett observes: “Not that AI bots care whether or not what they produce is creative”.⁴² Rightly so, a computer program can never care about anything, despite various attempts to provide robots with emotions these are only programmed responses. The android Rachael in Philip K. Dick’s novel, the AI-influencer, or the writoid might all be striving for human emotions, but the point is that Artificial Intelligence are programs that can learn and develop, but only within a narrow framework. Still, the production of the ever more human bot, robot, android, writoid, and droids are pushing the limits of desire and emotions. To the extent that we might be ending up in a technosymbiosis, a metaphor for human-machine interdependence or a possible state we have yet to discover.⁴³ Electronic literature and digital literature has long been establishing a kind of technosymbiosis, but in the age of AI the development has affected the business disruptively. Translations, audio voices, and a substantial amount of AI-written literature are already on the market transforming what are established knowledge of the business.

Noter

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