Too “Singular” for the “Technological Singularity”?: How an aesthetic emphasis on medium might inform our understanding of AI “creativity”

Wordcount (excl. title and bibliography): 2,573
Wordcount (incl. title and bibliography): 3,998

ABSTRACT

The Technological Singularity—'the idea that computers will one day be more intelligent than their human creators' (Braga and Logan, 2020: 5)—has been much-discussed in recent years, with significant advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) spurring greater interest in the topic across a wide range of disciplines. This essay brings the idea of Technological Singularity into dialogue with another form of "singularity"——the "singularity" of art. Borrowing the term from Derek Attridge (2004), for whom it referred to that unique and highly subjective quality of "literariness" that eludes description, this essay resists Attridge's restriction of this "singularity" to literature, applying the notion to "art" more broadly——whether that is music-, text-, image-, sculpture-, or performance-based. The "singularity of art" comes, then, to refer to that unique aesthetic effect which a work of art exerts on, or elicits in, the perceiving subject. The first section will examine the ways in which poststructuralist theory might challenge the supposed distinctions between the respective creative capabilities of humans and generative AI models, developing an understanding of the medium, rather than the "creator", as the site of art's "singularity". The second section will bring poststructuralism's preoccupation with the medium of language into dialogue with John Ruskin’s earlier aesthetic focus on stone—as the medium of architecture—in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). Drawing together these distinct theoretical positions, this essay will conclude by suggesting that their shared aesthetic emphasis on the medium of the artwork, rather than on artistic “creativity” at the point of conception, might offer a new perspective from which to evaluate the creativity of AI. This new perspective posits that art's "singularity" lies not in its perfection or completeness but in the *in*ability or *in*capacity of its finite medium to express or to represent its often-infinite object.

POSTSTRUCTURALISM: ERASING THE CREATOR

By focusing on patent and copyright law,[1] much of the current discussion of AI and "creativity" focuses on a legal understanding of creativity which critical theory has long seen as reductive. In 1969, Michel Foucault famously linked what he called the 'attribution of a discourse to an individual' (1979: 21) with the need for a legal subject. The idea of the creative act had, he argued, been shaped by 'the penal code' and modern society's 'circuit of property values' (1979: 21). Legal structures like copyright law were seen, then, as having helped to establish a partial, even arbitrary, idea of the creative act as a one-off endeavour performed by a legally defined, and therefore accountable, individual or group. This supposedly arbitrary idea of creativity has nonetheless come to pervade much of the discussion of whether AI is creative, with influential studies (Boden, 2016; Doshi and Hauser, 2024) identifying creativity with a definable and recognised "creator" and their creative act. As Foucault argues, though, 'we can easily imagine a culture in which discourse could circulate without any need for an author [...] in a pervasive anonymity' (1979: 28), so that words and objects could speak for themselves in the absence of a "creator". The same logic can be applied if the broader noun "art" is substituted for the narrower "discourse".

[1] See, for instance, Mammen et al. (2024), Mökander et al. (2025), Tsebee et al. (2025).

This hypothetical world that Foucault briefly invites us to imagine—in which discourse, indeed all human creation, circulates in the absence of any known creator—is in fact not so much a hypothesis as a reality for many critical theorists. Closing their highly influential 1993 book, *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler resigned themselves to an acceptance of the view that 'since [...] productions are not owned by the one who utters them', they inevitably 'continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions' (184-5). They resign themselves, in other words, to an acceptance that audiences will continue to invest their words with meaning as they read, enacting what Attridge called the "event of literature" in which 'singularity [...] occurs' (2007: 67). As such, an author's words are received and reinterpreted by a long succession of readers, so that those words cease to be the author's own. Butler also acknowledges, though, that this untethered circulation of discourse through and beyond the individual subject or "creator" has implications for the "creative act" in the moment: 'speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself,' they write (1993: 185). Speaking or writing is, then, not so much a "creative act" as a 'reiteration of a language that one never chose, [...] that one is, as it were, used by' (1993: 185). According to this school of critical theory, then, the notion of "creativity" against which AI's artistic potential is often measured is false and arbitrary. The singular "creative act" is not only eclipsed by subsequent acts of reception and reinterpretation, but is itself formed of and influenced by preceding creations which are not the creator's own. The medium in which a "creation" is expressed becomes central, and it is in this medium that its "singularity" arises.

Adopting this view of "creativity", then, blurs the boundaries between human creators and generative AI models. It lends greater credibility to arguments that the "technological singularity" is close—with regard to art and creativity, at least—by casting doubt on the frequently-used argument that "creativity" is 'a passionate emotion-filled pursuit' which cannot be replicated by AI (Braga and Logan, 2020: 17). If, as Butler argues, new writing is a mere 'reiteration' of pre-existing material, then literary "creativity" refers to nothing more than what Robert Logan and Marie Tandoc define as 'the ability to manipulate and restructure patterns' in a "novel" way (2020: 13). If this definition is accepted, the "technological singularity"—where AI comes to match or even exceed the creative and artistic capabilities of humans—becomes a very real possibility. As a recent paper from the Oxford Internet Institute put it, Large Language Models (LLMs) 'are trained on large datasets of text (often scraped from the Internet)' such that LLM's responses to prompts 'reflect a disjointed, post hoc consensus among public sources' and 'promote a relativistic [...] approach to truth' (Mittelstadt, Wachter, and Russell, 2023: 1831). The entrapment of LLM's within a language system characterised by its 'relativistic' relationship with 'truth' recalls the poststructuralist proposition that language is irrevocably divorced from any contact with "The Real" (Butler, 1993: 74), being comprised of words that are 'arbitrary abstraction[s]' of things (Nietzsche, 2019: 5). According to poststructuralist theory, then, this entrapment of generative AI models within a language system does not preclude them from the ability to perform human-like "creative" acts.

In light of this poststructuralist erasure of individual "creativity", existing literature on generative AI renders even more doubtful the proposition that the products of human "creativity" are uniquely "singular" and inimitable. A recent paper co-authored by Trinity College's own Janet Pierrehumbert states that 'it is well acknowledged that [LLMs] go beyond simply copying [their] training data', often exhibiting 'the ability to generate and process novel expressions' (Hofmann et al., 2024). The entrapment of AI models within a language system evidently does not preclude them from performing the kind of "novel" innovations in language-use that Attridge deemed central to literature's "singularity" (2004: 24). A "creative act" that

consists of reconstituting a fluid system of signification already lies within the "creative" scope of AI. In fact, when Doshi and Hauser (2024) presented a group of readers with a selection of stories and surveyed their responses, they found that readers generally considered stories more "professional" and "original"—in other words, more "literary"—when they had been written with the help of AI. In light of such results, it is doubtful that Attridge's audience-centred notion of artistic "singularity"—defined as an audience's 'awareness of [...] particularity' (2004: 66)—continues to serve as a means for differentiating between human- and AI-created "art". The "technological singularity" seems increasingly plausible.

TOWARDS THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF MEDIUM

If this reading of poststructuralist theory succeeds in moving beyond reductive assumptions about the individual and self-contained creative act, it does so in a way that seems to abolish any trace of "expression" from that act, such that the "technological singularity" becomes an inevitability. Emphasising that the 'medium' is not the creator's own, poststructuralism contends that the artwork is not produced solely by the creator, but by the creator's negotiation with their chosen medium. Once externally produced, the artwork cannot be said to fully represent the creator's vision. The artwork, rendered externally, has become an entity in itself. By executing their creative vision in a physical and therefore finite medium, divorced from the infinity of the original site conception in the creator's mind, the creator surrenders control over their artwork to the constraints of the medium in which they render it. That medium can be anything from music and language to paint and sculpture. In each case, though, the medium predates and outlives the "creative act", being governed by systems of understanding that exist and evolve outside of the artist's control. The consideration of physical media here might be more appropriate for resisting the urge to return to discussions of the mental "creative act". The act of shaping the material of a physical medium like stone, or paint on canvas, constitutes a "creative act" in itself, as well as an act of expression or execution, that is separate from the creator's original mental conception. This creative act—constituted of an imperfect and evolving act of execution, and altogether separate from the act of imagining—*is*, at present, "singular" to human beings.

This is where the writings of the nineteenth-century aesthetic theorist and art critic, John Ruskin, can inform our understanding of the "singularity" of human artistic creativity. Deeply shaped by his own observation of his era's advances in automation and the decline of artisanal workmanship during the industrial revolution,[2] Ruskin mounted an impassioned defence of the singular quality he found in the output of artisanal labourers in his famous aesthetic travelogue, *The Stones of Venice*. A labourer, he wrote, could be either 'a tool [...] or a man', but not 'both' (1884: 161). 'If you will have [...] precision out of them', he wrote, 'and have their arms measure like cog-wheels, and their fingers strike curves like compasses, you must *unhumanize* [them]' (161-2; my emphasis). He defended this position on the grounds that, for humans to work with precision, '[a]ll the energy of their spirit must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves' (162). If humans 'begin to imagine, to think', he continued, 'the engine-tuned precision is lost at once' (162). He presented, therefore, a fundamental trade-off between perfection of creative *conception*, and perfection of *execution*, dismissing the latter as a form of 'servile' labour, which could only be achieved at the expense of the former. In his emphasis on the place of medium in the creative act, Ruskin's arguments anticipated the poststructuralist postulation that 'literature', as an art-form, 'lives by being outside of itself

[2] For more on technological unemployment in this period, see Schneider (2025).

within the figures of a language that is [...] not its own' (Derrida, 2016: 296). Separated from its medium, the foundational poststructuralist theorist Jacquez Derrida maintained, literature 'would die' (2016: 296). The same can be said of a sculpture—which only comes to be when it is carved or moulded in physical matter—or a painting—which only comes to be once paint has been physically applied to canvas. That these physical works are poor representations of the original conception is central: it is only as a poor representation of the original conception that art comes to be. Returning to the fundamental trade-off Ruskin presented between artistic conception and perfect execution in light of Derrida's remarks, the theorists' distinct positions come together to extend the possibility that the mooted "singularity" of human art lies in the failure of external *execution* to fully represent original mental *conception*.

To supplant Ruskin's insistence on imperfect execution for Attridge's emphasis on audience reception (2004: 66) is to refute the proposition that AI can exceed the artistic potential of humans, on the grounds that the "singularity" of art lies not in its *conception* but in its *execution*. This cannot, however, be grounded simply on the assumption that AI execution is too "perfect"—according to Ruskin's criteria—to be considered artful: as Margaret Boden has argued, generative AI too makes mistakes, and often diverges from user input prompts during the process of execution. This seems to challenge the idea that generative AI is simply what Ruskin deemed a 'servile' labourer, or a 'machine'. For Ruskin, though, the imperfections of execution were not valuable simply as "mistakes" in themselves, rather because he saw them as the natural products of artistic *overreach*. In the 'formless, [...] anatomiless and rigid' quality of the cathedral's gargoyles, Ruskin treasured the 'signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone', contrasting these traces with the fine-tuned inexpressive precision of modern production, which relied on what he scathingly called the 'degradation of the operative into a machine' (1884: 163). He detected in the imperfect strokes of anonymous historic stonemasons a 'ruggedness of work' that expressed 'the hard habits of the arm and heart that grew on them as they swung the axe or pressed the plough' (1884: 158). The strokes of chisel on stone, or equally of brush on canvas or pen on paper, had come to convey a whole set of meanings that were entirely divorced from the artist's mental conception. These meanings had arisen as the artist chafed against the limitations of a physical medium that resisted their mental power, working upon their materials with a physical force that was altogether distinct from that of their mental instruments. It was in the resultant imperfection of execution that Ruskin located the "singularity" of human art; and imperfection was, in turn, seen to arise from imaginative overreach——from the mind's vision exceeding both the affordances of matter and the limited physical capabilities of the artist to shape that matter to their will. It was in this *overreach* that Ruskin found the unique quality, or "singularity", of art.

CONCLUSION

By privileging the imperfections of the finite physical processes by which mental visions became external objects, Ruskin's theory of art serves to bypass current debates about what constitutes a "creative" idea. His insistence on the imperfect physical execution of the artistic vision might serve as something of a dialectical synthesis in the context of current debates about AI and the "technological singularity", refuting both the position that AI *can* replicate the "spark" of human creativity, and the position that it *cannot*. If generative AI is to replicate and surpass the "singularity" of human art—which it would have to do in order for the "technological singularity" to be achieved—then the ambition of its "creative" ideas will have to exceed the possibilities of execution; its powers of execution will, moreover, have to be driven by unconscious or semi-conscious forces of habit and technique that exist entirely apart

from, and are unperceived by, its data-processing software, so that a full separation between the processes of conception and execution can be achieved. Whether generative AI is capable of achieving this artistically productive disconnect between the conception and execution of a "creative" vision, given the current integration of its design and execution processes, is another question which must be considered in assessing how close we are to the "technological singularity".

REFERENCES

Attridge, Derek. (2004). *The Singularity of Literature*. (London: Routledge).

Barthes, Roland. (1995; First published 1967). 'The Death of the Author'. Seán Burke (ed.), *Authorship from Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press). Pp. 125-130.

Boden, Margaret. (2019). 'The Gothic and Computer Art'. Margaret Boden and Ernest Edmonds (eds.), *From Fingers to Digits: An Artificial Aesthetic*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT University Press). Pp. 155-179.

Braga, Adriana, and Robert K. Logan. (2020). 'The Emperor of Strong AI Has No Clothes: Limits to Artificial Intelligence'. Robert K. Logan and Adriana Braga (eds.), *AI and the Singularity*. (Basel: Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute). Pp. 5-26.

Butler, Judith. (1993). *Bodies that Matter*. (New York: Routledge).

Derrida, Jacquez and Gayatri C. Spivak (trans.). (2016). *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press).

Doshi, Anil R., and Oliver P. Hauser. (2024). 'Generative AI enhances individual creativity but reduces the collective diversity of novel content', *Science Advances*, 10. 28. Pp. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adn5290.

Foucault, Michel, and Donald F. Bouchard (trans.). (1979). 'What Is an Author?', *Screen*, 20. 1. Pp. 13-34.

Hofmann, Valentin, et al.. (2024). ‘Derivational Morphology Reveals Analogical Generalization in Large Language Models’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122. 19. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2423232122.

Logan, Robert K., and Marie Tandoc. (2020). 'Thinking in Patterns and the Pattern of Human Thought as Contrasted with AI Data Processing'. Robert K. Logan and Adriana Braga (eds.), *AI and the Singularity*. (Basel: Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute). Pp. 137-152.

Mammen, Christian et al.. (2024). 'Creativity, Artificial Intelligence, and the Requirement of Human Authors and Inventors in Copyright Law'. Social Science Research Network (SSRN). DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4892973.

Mittelstadt, Brent, Sandra Wachter, and Chris Russell. (2023). 'To protect science, we must use LLMs as zero-shot translators', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7. 1. Pp. 1830-1832.

Mökander, Jakob et al.. (2025). 'Rebooting Copyright: How the UK Can Be a Global Leader in the Arts and AI'. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. DOI: https://institute.global/insights/tech-and-digitalisation/rebooting-copyright-how-the-uk-can-be-a-global-leader-in-the-arts-and-ai.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, and A. K. M. Adam. (2019). *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*. (Oxford: Quadriga).

Ruskin, John. (1884). *The Stones of Venice*, Volume 2. (New York: John Wiley and Sons).

Schneider, Benjamin. (2025). 'Technological Unemployment in the British Industrial Revolution: The Destruction of Hand-Spinning', *Past & Present*, 10. 1. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtae049.

Tsebee, Dorcas, et al.. (2025). 'Enhancing creativity and innovation through the protection of AI-generated works: an analysis of international legal systems and lessons for Africa', *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 39. 2. Pp. 1–21.