

Hertziana Studies
in Art History



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MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR ART HISTORY

From Hype to Reality

Artificial Intelligence in the Study of Art and Culture

Edited by Eva Cetinić & Darío Negueruela del Castillo



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Cover image: Eva Cetinić's prompt for DALL·E: "The persistence of memory in artificial intelligence, abstract, double exposure, award winning photography, colorful, macro-shot."



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Abstract

Bokar Lamine N'Diaye

Stochastic Parrots in the Ancient City?

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Recent advances in generative AI have highlighted how crucial perspectives on the temporality of technological change are to their reception. While machine-learning models are known to be the result of decades of steady progress in engineering circles, both enthusiastic and reactionary critics seem to privilege the narrative of an unprecedented ontological rupture, either extolling an imminent revolution or warning against the dissolution of the supposedly fixed human institutions of authorship and creativity. A core concern for the humanities should then be the contextualization of perspectives on human agency and creativity as contingent and culture-specific, as evidenced by historical and anthropological comparative approaches. This grounding of a disruptive technology as the latest for long-existing cultural mechanisms might help inform debates about generative AI, and counter excessive optimism or pessimism surrounding it. The Classical Greco-Roman world provides an interesting backdrop against which to examine these questions, as its conception of reality is both temporally distant and different from ours, but often invoked as the source of much of our philosophical outlook.

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1. Introduction

First off: I'm a historian. [...] It makes me think of the collapse of the Roman Empire. If you're not familiar: A once vibrant world power lost their way. This is unstoppable and we may as well accept the US's fate.

This is not assembly line work that's being threatened, this is human creative jobs. This has no historical precedent because art is not an industrialized product that's expected to be the same all the time. AI is not a power loom.¹

A popular definition of hype as “a state of anticipation generated through the circulation of promotion, resulting in a crisis of value,”² fairly describes the tone of this tweet by concept artist and anti-AI activist RJ Palmer. Faced with the perceived risks that Machine Learning (ML) generative models incur to his profession, he emphasizes his perspective as grounded in history, with a central unresolved paradox: Right before presenting AI as a sudden and unprecedented phenomenon, he characterizes it as a symptom of an inevitable historical trend of his home country towards decline—with the Roman Empire as an archetypal example. This centrality of the discontinuity introduced by AI is not unique to Palmer: Some, like the French philosopher Éric Sadin, even openly bemoan an “injunctive turn”: the alleged reversal of the proper relationship between humans and machines, the latter establishing and providing commands to the former.

Musa Victoriosa, an artwork of March 2023 by concept artist and anti-AI advocate Karla Ortiz, goes a step further from Palmer's pessimistic

yet passive witnessing of the AI timeline: Crafted as advertisement for the software Glaze, aiming to exclude digital artworks from machine learning training datasets through invisible blurring filters, this painting aims to extoll the newfound agency this move will supposedly bring traditional artists. One can note the reference to the classical Muse as a conventional symbol of artistic inspiration, the choice of depicting the titular figure as *victoriosa*, the purple, laurel crown and soaring eagles distantly recalling the Roman triumph, reframing the work as a clear martial retaliatory strike. Several pictures of Ortiz painting the canvas on an easel in her workshop (for what she is mostly known) consolidate the idea of material and traditional craft as the normative standard of artistic production.

Palmer and Ortiz's construction of Classical Antiquity as an idealized antithesis to AI art obviously reflects current concerns regarding the impact of generative ML on their livelihood: Radical upheaval of the job market, clogging of the canals of communication under a flood of generated content, and devaluation or obsolescence of human creative faculties.³ In their discourse, AI is portrayed as a jarring break in the very continuity of art. Beyond the awkward framing of art as an objective and preferably immutable cultural standard, the subordination of contemporary or digital artists to their painterly forbearers is starkly reminiscent of the long-established tendency of reactionary commentators to see Neo-Classical artworks as the sole worthy “approved art,” and later artworks as mere degenerate expedients. In the words of Florence Dupont,

¹ RJ Palmer (@arvalis), X (formerly Twitter), September 19, 2022, <https://x.com/arvalis/status/1571821476243984389> and <https://x.com/arvalis/status/1571823987252170755> [deleted by the author].

² Powers 2012, p. 863.

³ Vesa / Tienari (2020) 2022, p. 1134.



Figure 1. Karla Ortiz, *Musa Victoriosa*, March 2023.

Source: <https://x.com/kortizart/status/1636136818914762752>.

[T]oday, more than ever, antiquity plays the role of origin... At the same time, these are origins that have been neglected, increasingly ignored and therefore fantasized about. Escaping the critical scrutiny of history, Antiquity is, for some, the origin of the values of Western civilization, preserving its essence and quintessence. Antiquity becomes the stronghold to defend for those who believe in an essentialized European culture.⁴

2. A Comparative Anthropology of Generative AI?

Some form of entanglement of a somewhat skewed perception of art in Greco-Roman Antiquity (and temporality at large)⁵ and AI doom appears blatant in the aforementioned cases. In the same way as a growing number of scholars in the humanities explore “how to think from within the actual techniques, tools, and technologies of ML and how to leverage that practical knowledge in the development of new critical frameworks and methods, counter-mythologies, and epistemologies that might help enact a different way of living with AI,”⁶ the exploration of tangible and contextualized information from this time period might constitute a welcome way to lessen overenthusiastic or anxious discourse surrounding AI.

Naturally, even with the best interests of comparative research at heart, the risk of temporal bias does not spare the researchers themselves. Explicitly directing one’s focus to narratives that present robotic or android-like features runs the risk of tilting the conversation towards matters of AI sentience,⁷ which fall outside the boundaries of this study, or overriding original categories with our own operative concepts, such as the resolutely non-Ancient neologism of “*biotechne*” constructed by Adrienne Mayor in *Gods and Robots*.⁸ Consequently, the sample myths discussed below have been selected in order to present as few of the usual trappings

of technology as we currently understand it (mechanistic automata, human simulacra, etc.) as possible, instead focusing directly on fables and practices exploring the rhetoric themes that serve as the rationale for AI opponents.⁹

The idiom “stochastic parrot”¹⁰ initially proposed as a concise and evocative way to underline the factual limitations of Large Language Models (LLMs), is increasingly used as a retort to overly enthusiastic reviews of AI capabilities on social media. This expression provides us with a tentative framework of thematic comparison, by establishing which features of AI the modern West tends to imagine as both integral to the pursuit of a functional artist and unreachable for now by a machine: Namely, randomness as opposed to agency (“stochastic”), and mindless regurgitation over inspired imitation (“parrot”). As this article will try to prove, both of these dichotomies are not necessarily as irreconcilable in the ancient mindset as they sometimes are portrayed today.

3. Mimesis and Divination in Classical Discourse

3.1. Zeuxis’ Helen and Butades’ Soldier: Where is the Inspiration?

Would the Ancient Greeks have favored the easel over the digital? Is Ortiz correct in mobilizing the figure of the inspiring Muse as the sole privilege of the manual, self-expressing artist, relegating users of generative AI to mere commissioners or directors by default? Ancient discourses surrounding two myths relative to the visual arts may shed light on the ancient associations between artistic depiction and some of the most criticized features. In one of them, Zeuxis, painter *par excellence* in several myths of 5th-century Greece¹¹ is faced with a conundrum: Replicating the beauty of Helen, the most beautiful being to ever have lived, yet dead long before his time. His process, which Cicero incites his disciples to apply to their own

4 Dupont / Colonna d’Istria / Taussig 2013, p. 14.

5 Zeitlyn 2015.

6 Raley / Rhee 2023.

7 A typical example would be Roberts 2018.

8 Mayor 2018.

9 The very nature of the myth itself, as a non-committal call to a body knowledge assumed as commonly shared and always answering to the specific rhetorical goal of the utterer, is

a further conceit we sadly won’t expand upon here, but features prominently in Veyne 1983.

10 Bender et al. 2021.

11 Mansfield 2007, pp. 19–39.

literary endeavors, consists in the creation of a “corpus” of five women, chosen *in absentia* based on the beauty of their male relatives, the physical features of which he later assembles into a perfect whole—a route to which his very name, a form of the verb *zeugnumi* (yoking, fastening together) is certainly not unrelated.

He selected five, whose names many poets recorded because they were approved by the judgement of him who must have been the supreme judge of beauty. He chose five because he did not think all the qualities which he sought to combine in a portrayal of beauty could be found in one person, because in no single case has Nature made anything perfect and finished in every part...¹²

The peculiar status of the young women, which Cicero insists are remembered in name for their contribution, but not for the specific features they lent to the sculptures, strikes an odd resemblance to the training data of generative models, collected and annotated, yet diffused and unrecognizable in the outputted results.

A further source of information lies in the tale of Butades of Sicyone, a sculptor credited as the first depicter of a human likeness—the lover of his unnamed daughter, a departing soldier whose shadow she traced in coal for her father to fill in with clay. Frontisi-Ducroux demonstrates that Pliny’s account of the tale credibly hinges on wordplay—the Latin word *pupilla*, just like the Greek *kore*, designating both a young woman or the pupil of one’s eye—to establish a dual model of artistic *poiesis*: The daughter stands for the artist’s senses and subjectivity, sensitive to beauty yet unskilled yet also subordinated to the technical craft of the rational mind that presents them.¹³ Frontisi-Ducroux evokes in closing the possibility of the myth aptly describing the relationship between a photographer and a camera:¹⁴ Extending the parallel to the complementary abilities of the AI artist and the machine does not seem like a wild stretch.

Neither of the quoted accounts center inspiration or emotional expression, instead underlying a starkly different set of skills: Zeuxis as the master combiner, assembling details from a corpus he indirectly selected, or Butades, skilled executor of the requests of the separate “apple of his eye.” Looking at this evidence, the dichotomous opposition between “classical” or “traditional” artistic methods and the novelty of AI, as a technological and data-sampling field, does not appear as self-evident.

3.2. Agency in Praxis: The Divinatory Flight of Words and Birds as Ancient Techne

One may object that both Zeuxis and Butades operate deliberate choices that a ML model would enact in their stead. To use Bender’s terminology, beyond the *parroted* nature of the content, the further crux of the issue would lie in the *stochastic* nature of the non-sentient machine that produces it indiscriminately, and the resulting alleged divestment of human agency. While the works of anthropologists of art, most notably Alfred Gell in *Art and Agency*¹⁵ already do a great deal in recasting the artwork as an entanglement of social factors whose directionality isn’t necessarily always so obvious, we can find a further wrinkle in the institution of divination, especially in cases where it involves random processes through which human subjects apparently delegate their agency. Indeed, divination figures in good place in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, when the eponymous Titan of forethought and human savviness enumerates the different *tekhnai* (“crafts,” “know-hows”) he lent to primitive mankind to ensure its survival:

First among all beings, I learned to sift dreams for things that will necessarily happen the next day; I familiarized them with the chance utterances (*kledônes*), an art (*tekhnê*) so tricky to interpret (*duskritous*), as well as with their own chance encounters (*sumboloi*) during their daily travels. The flight of the birds (*ptesin oionon*) with hooked talons I delineated with precision, between the one which by nature is auspicious and the one which is not to be

¹² Cicero, *De Inventione*, II, 1, 3, in Cicero 1949, p. 169.

¹³ Frontisi-Ducroux 2007, pp. 39–44.

¹⁴ Frontisi-Ducroux 2007, p. 55.

¹⁵ Gell 1998.

named... In a brief sentence, learn the summary of all this: all the crafts (*tekhnai*) of mortals, it is from Prometheus that they get them.¹⁶

Just as central to human agency as medicine or metallurgy, then, are the *kledônes* and *sumboloi*—chance utterances and random meetings—as well as the witnessed flight of birds. The onset of these events is enough to trigger a shift in a decision-making process or ground a consensus, usually in favor of the individual with the wherewithal to verbally accept the omen as such.¹⁷ In Aristophanes' comical play *The Birds*, from the same period, the humor primarily stems from the transfer of responsibility to a self-important and rebellious avian race. They argue that their essential role in the human society justifies their elevation to almost divine status. A key piece of evidence they present for their supreme nature is mankind's tendency to consult the *ptesin oionon* before undertaking important projects. This practice has led to the colloquial use of the term "bird" (*ornis*) to refer to other kinds of divinatory signs that could similarly influence someone's action:¹⁸

THE BIRDS: We are to you Ammon, Delphi, Dodona, Phoebus Apollo. For you first turn to birds before undertaking any course, whether that be trade, and towards acquisition of livelihood, and towards marriage of a man. And you label as "birds" (*órnin te nomízete*) all the things you employ to discern matters of divination (*diakrínei manteías*): to you, an ominous rumor (*phémē*) is a "bird" (*órnin*); you call a sneeze (*ptarmón*) a "bird," a chance encounter (*súmbolon*) a "bird," a sound (*phōnēn*) a "bird," [encountering] a servant (*therápon*) a "bird," a dream (*ónon*) a "bird." Are we not clearly the prophetic (*manteĩos*) Apollo to you? If then you recognize us (*nomísēte*) as gods, we shall be your divining Muses, through us you will know the winds and the seasons, summer, winter, and the temperate months. We shall not withdraw ourselves to the highest clouds like Zeus, but shall be among you.¹⁹

The humor of this comedic passage lies at least partly in the Athenian audience's perception of the tacit ambiguity at the heart of their practice of divination: while an essential piece of meaning- and decision-making, even closer to human senses than deities due to their tangible existence, divinatory vessels such as birds are ultimately only an extension of mankind's agency, with the idea of their actual supremacy relegated to the satirical realm. One could even surmise that this scenario of the divinatory vessels exploiting this reliance of men to claim agency of their own, here played for laughs by Aristophanes, constitutes an early comparanda to the "rebellion of the machines" trope, common in both fictional depictions and current safety polemics surrounding artificial intelligence.

As we can see from the examples above, the institution of divination alone challenges deeply set dichotomies of the modern epistemological model: proactivity versus passivity, randomness versus deliberate course of action, arbitrary noise versus meaningful signal. Such evidence comforts us in abandoning the idea of a sudden "injunctive turn" tied to modernity (as Sadin claims), or the association of these themes solely with the mechanical or biological sciences (as does Mayor).

4. Conclusion

While insufficient to fully encompass the diversity and mutability of conceptions of agency and the creative process in the Greco-Roman ancient world, this short inventory of "counter-myths" proves the richness of contrast that such comparison can bring. Instead of an idealized apex of aesthetics and expressivity, forever marred by modernity, several indirect clues and testimonies from the Ancient themselves help us piece together a far more nuanced picture, and a number of epistemological constructs (the diffused body of Zeuxis' Helen, or the agentic recasting of random divinatory outcomes) that may inform our own behavior regarding artificial intelligence.

¹⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, v. 484-499. Translation adapted from Calame 2017.
¹⁷ Lateiner 2005.

¹⁸ For more on this double meaning of *ornis*, and the divinatory role of birds in general, see Mynott 2018.

¹⁹ Aristoph., *Birds* 717-731. Translation adapted from Aristophanes 1938, vv. 717-731.

This article in no way seeks to censor the likes of Ortiz or Palmer, nor to enshrine this particular angle on Antiquity as the enlightened standard in these matters. In a similar way as the Ancient scholars and playwrights wielded the narrative of folktales, the constructions of expressions, either idiomatic or narrative, is a crucial feature for scholars to monitor and engage with the full breadth of the “data arena” surrounding the applications of machine learning.²⁰ As such, the most defining staple of critical AI as a growing discipline might well reside in its embrace of these semantic or polemic imprecisions as spurious entry points rather than unwelcome noise, starting with the deliberate academic use of the polythetic and ever vaguer term of “artificial intelligence”:

Critical AI, while recognizing the reductive, even absurd aspects of the term “AI” and the magical thinking it perpetuates, nonetheless allows for a kind of linguistic pragmatism, treating the term metonymically and engaging AI as an assemblage of technological arrangements and sociotechnical practices, as concept, ideology, and *dispositif*.²¹

²⁰ Ślosarski 2023.

²¹ Raley / Rhee 2023, p. 188.

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