Absent Presence: The Human Influence in AI-Generated Content in the Age of Technoculture

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Abstract

In recent years, the field of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly under the banner of generative AI (GAI), has made unprecedented advancements, pushing the boundaries of what was traditionally considered within the realm of human capability. AI systems have not only matched but also surpassed human proficiency in various tasks, sparking widespread discussions about their significant impact across multiple fields, including the arts and humanities. This paper considers the profound implications of AI's rapid progress and explores the concept of "Absent Presence" within the context of Derrida and Technoculture, particularly as illustrated in the arts and humanities. Drawing parallels with renowned literary and artistic works, such as Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, and Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*, the theme of absence and presence is examined in how the human actor is present even while absent, thus providing a metaphor to understand the role of human creativity in AI-generated content. Additionally, we consider the iconic empty chair paintings by Van Gogh as visual manifestation of human presence communicated without representing them. Furthermore, recent studies have unveiled the phenomenon known as Model Autophagy Disorder (MAD), highlighting the pivotal role of high-quality human-created content in AI training, as opposed to derivative AI-generated material. This discovery underscores the necessity of human input even in an era of AI-generated content, where an "Absent Presence" threads through the digital content. In this investigation, the discussion centers on the significant impact of human involvement within the realms of AI applications, even when such presence appears ostensibly absent. By examining this phenomenon through the arts and humanities perspective, the analysis brings to light the capacity for altering the terrain of innovation, understanding, and cooperation between humans and machines in these fields. The exploration emphasizes the intrinsic human element that pervades AI-driven environments, suggesting a reconfiguration of the creative, interpretive, and collaborative processes in these domains.

Keywords: *AI, Absent Presence, Technoculture, Generative AI, Human Creativity*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the field of artificial intelligence (AI) has experienced a remarkable transformation, showcasing exponential growth in capabilities that have significantly impacted global perceptions and applications. While AI has been evolving since 2015, the stable launch of

ChatGPT in November 2022 heralded a new era in generative tools (Fui-Hoon Nah et al., 2023). Day by day, these GAI algorithms and models are advancing in areas once thought to be the exclusive domain of human expertise (Inkpen et al., 2023). Tasks such as reading comprehension, speech recognition, and image identification are now performed by AI with a proficiency that often surpasses that of humans (Rajest et al., 2023). The rapid advancement in generative technology has sparked many discussions about its potential impact on various aspects of human life, including education, industry, and social interactions (Babaniyazovich, 2023; Obaigbena et al., 2024; Rathore, 2023).

The astonishing progress of AI begs the question: What does the future hold when machines can outperform humans in increasingly complex tasks? As we stand on the precipice of an era where AI systems can not only mimic but excel in human-like tasks, concerns and uncertainties about the role of AI in our lives are becoming ever more pronounced (Berretta et al., 2023; Khogali & Mekid, 2023). What implications will this have for the job market, education, and the very fabric of our society? How will AI reshape the way we interact, learn, and create? Recent developments in AI have overturned previous predictive models of its evolution, casting new doubts and concerns on what was once considered understood. This shift has injected a renewed sense of anxiety and uncertainty into discussions previously outlined in studies like the AI100 2021 report (Mellamphy, 2021).

While these questions are warranted and have even led to rebuttals that verge on human exceptionalism, the role of humans in the Fifth Industrial Revolution is ensured (Pedersen, 2024). In fact, when exploring this brave new world of AI, it is imperative to consider the concept of "Absent Presence" within the context of Derrida and Technoculture (Sahay, 1997). Just as the *Winter's Tale* of Shakespeare evokes the notion of an absent figure with a lingering agency, and the empty chairs of Van Gogh speak volumes about the presence of absence, AI, too, possesses an intriguing duality. Despite its remarkable ability to generate content autonomously, such as the text produced by ChatGPT, there exists a subtle but profound thread of human influence that weaves through AI-created content—a presence that is seemingly absent but undeniably impactful.

As such, this paper will consider the rapid strides made by AI, the concerns surrounding its omnipresence, and the philosophical underpinnings of Absent Presence in the age of AI. Drawing parallels with literary and artistic expressions of absence, we will navigate the intricate interplay between human creativity and the ever-advancing capabilities of AI, exploring the delicate balance between the two in our evolving technocultural landscape. Recent studies have shed light on a phenomenon known as Model Autophagy Disorder (MAD), which underscores the critical importance of training AI on high-quality human-created content rather than derivative AI-generated material. Through this exploration, we aim to shed light on the profound implications of AI's Absent Presence and its role in shaping the future of human interaction, creativity, and existence.

2. Absent Presence: Literary and Artistic Devices

"Absent Presence" is a nuanced concept that refers to the idea that even when a person or entity is physically absent from a particular space or situation, their influence, impact, or essence continues to be perceptible or felt (Greer, 2014). It suggests that the absence of a physical presence does not equate to a complete lack of influence or significance (Walsh, 1998). In the realms of literature and art, the theme has been deftly explored through a myriad of devices and conceits (Spikes, 1992). Such examples can be gleaned from various works, including Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella,* and Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania,* where the human actor is present even in their absence. (Note that portions of the Shakespeare and Sidney content were first printed in *The Rhetoric of Shakespeare's Women: Figures, Sense, and Structure*, diss. by Kathi Ann Vosevich, 1988.) Additionally, we shall consider Vincent van Gogh's iconic empty chair paintings, which serve as visual manifestations of human presence communicated without the direct representation of the human form.

In Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, the theme of absence and presence is poignantly explored through the character of Hermione. Despite her apparent absence due to a false death, her influence is acutely felt throughout the play. Instead of relying on what may be termed "vocal" or verbal rhetoric, Shakespeare relies on "nonvocal" or nonverbal rhetoric. By this, I mean that Hermione's "dialogue" with both her husband Leontes and the audience continues after her apparent death: her silence speaks, as it were. She is an absent presence. In other words, her absence creates a palpable tension as the audience and characters are not aware of her continued existence until the last act. Through this rhetorical device of *negatio* (a refusal to speak) Shakespeare masterfully highlights the impact of her agency, even in her physical absence.

This idea of absent presence was not unknown in the Renaissance. *Astrophil and Stella* (probably composed in the 1580s), Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence delves into the complexities of love and desire. Within this context, the theme of "Absent Presence" is masterfully and literally depicted through Astrophil's unrequited love for Stella in *Sonnet 106*: "Oh absent presence, Stella is not here." Despite her physical absence, her presence lingers in Astrophil's woeful feeling. Thoughts of Stella stay with him when she is gone, and nothing can erase her picture in his mind. This theme in Sidney's sonnets accentuates the paradoxical coexistence of absence and presence, revealing how Stella's influence remains in Astrophil's heart.

Sidney's niece and first female writer of prose fiction in English, Lady Mary Wroth, wrote an enormous romance entitled *Urania* (published in 1621), as well as a sonnet sequence as an appendix to her novel from the perspective of the woman, entitled *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Amphilanthus is absent from the sequence (aside from being mentioned in the title and in his presence in that the poems are written *to* him). This interplay between the absent figure and consequent melancholy of Pamphilia who longs for him underscores the enduring impact of his human agency, even in a world devoid of his physical presence. To quote Walter Ong, S.J., in *The Barbarian Within* (1962), absence thus both builds up barriers to communication and tears down the same barriers through communications, since these barriers "tease us to more vigorous attempts, sharper alertness, greater efforts at compassion or sympathy." In sum, the literary tradition where absence evokes presence has been well-demonstrated.

Similarly, the visual arts also demonstrate the potent nature of absence and the agency of individuals regardless of their physical presence. For instance, Vincent van Gogh's iconic series of empty chair paintings (as evinced in Figure 1) provide a visual manifestation of the concept, and have been extensively studied (Blum, 1956; Jardine & Batycky, 2015; Springer, 2001; Székely, 1982). Through these works, van Gogh conveys the profound impact of human presence even when the figure itself is absent. The empty chairs serve as placeholders for human interaction, bearing the imprints of the absent sitter. The use of color, texture, and composition in these paintings evokes a sense of longing and nostalgia, emphasizing the enduring significance of human agency in the spaces they occupy.
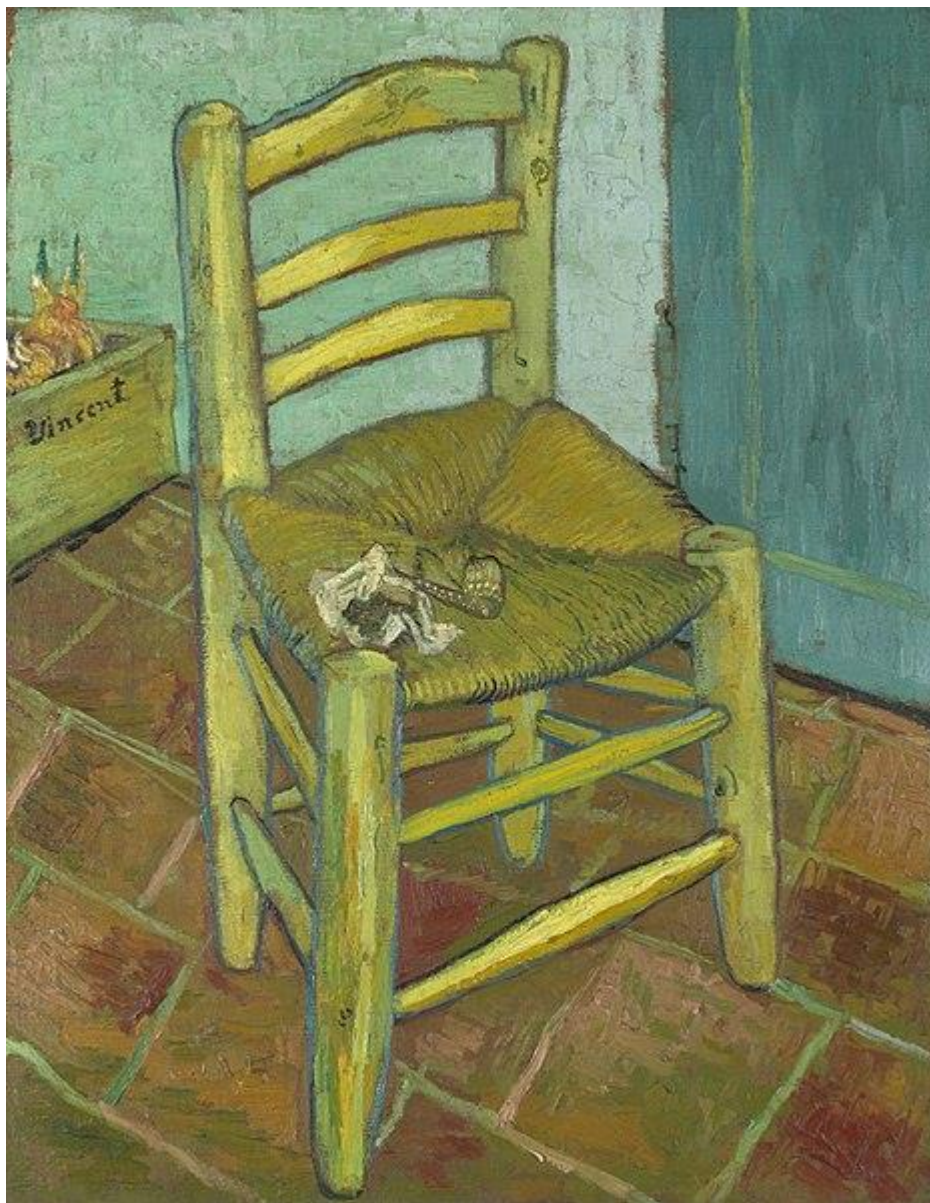

Figure 1- Vincent van Gogh, *Chair*, 1888. Public Domain.

In these literary and artistic works, the theme of Absent Presence is eloquently communicated through a rich diversity of devices and conceits. Whether through dramatic irony, rhetorical language, melancholy longing, or visual symbolism, these artists illuminate the enduring influence of humanity, of human agency, even in the absence of the physical self. These examples serve as poignant reminders that the human presence, though seemingly absent, leaves an indelible mark on the canvas of existence—just as with AI.

3. Human-Created Content in Training Models

In the realm of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in the development of Large Language Models (LLM) and art generators, the concept of "Absent Presence" takes on a distinctive dimension. It becomes evident that AI, despite its remarkable capabilities, relies heavily on the foundation laid by human-created content for the generation of high-quality output (Mondal et al., 2024). LLMs, such as ChatGPT by OpenAI, are trained on vast datasets that encompass a wide spectrum of human knowledge, language, and culture (Pawade et al., 2024). These datasets comprise texts, documents, literature, and conversations created by humans over centuries. In essence, these models inherit and build upon the collective wisdom and creativity of humanity. The very existence of these models is a testament to the enduring presence of human contributions in the world of AI (Chakrabarty et al., 2024). Thus, while AI, including LLM and art generators, can generate new content, remix existing material, and offer fresh interpretations, it is essential to recognize that this creativity is rooted in the input, source material, and data it has been trained on. AI acts as a tool that extends the reach of human creativity but does not replace it. In this context, the notion of Absent Presence becomes apparent. AI becomes a conduit through which the human creative spirit continues to shape and evolve.

Recent research, as highlighted by Yang (2024), has shed light on a phenomenon termed Model Autophagy Disorder (MAD). This disorder occurs when AI-generated content is continuously fed back into AI models for training, resulting in a decline in output quality and diversity. It suggests that without a steady supply of fresh, real data sourced from original human work, rather than AI-generated content, generative models may suffer from degradation in precision and recall. This underscores the critical role of human input and creativity in ensuring the continued excellence of AI-generated content. As well, the interconnectedness of AI-synthesized content within the AI ecosystem is evident in datasets like LAION-5B, used in training text-to-image models. This dataset contains synthetic images sampled from earlier generations of generative models, emphasizing how AI-generated content builds upon itself. However, the quality and diversity of this content are directly influenced by the quality and diversity of the original human-created data (Schumann et al., 2024).

As AI-generated content becomes more prevalent in various domains, including education, industry, and social life, the question arises: What happens when AI models start training on AI-generated data rather than primarily human-generated content? Shumailov and his team (2023) have looked into this issue and found that training models using AI-generated content can lead to irreversible defects, known as "model collapse." This phenomenon occurs as models forget the true underlying data distribution over time, ultimately generating content with increased errors and reduced variety. It highlights the irreplaceable role of original human-generated data in

maintaining the quality and diversity of AI-generated content. Therefore, the presence of humans, even when seemingly absent from agency in the creative process in the context of AI-generated content underscores the enduring influence of human creativity and input. AI, while a powerful tool, relies on the rich diversity of human-created content for its foundation. As AI continues to advance and shape various aspects of our lives, the presence of humanity remains palpable, even in seemingly automated content output.

4. Conclusion

In the ever-evolving landscape of technology and generative artificial intelligence, the concept of "Absent Presence" serves as a profound reminder that the human essence and influence will always be an integral part of content consumed by humans. While AI continues to advance and amaze with its capabilities, it is essential to acknowledge that its prowess is built upon the foundation of human creativity, knowledge, and ingenuity. As noted in the context of AI-generated content, from Large Language Models (LLMs) to art generators, the presence of humanity even while seemingly absent is strikingly evident. AI depends on the vast reservoir of human-created content for its training and inspiration. It serves as a tool that extends and amplifies human creativity rather than replacing it. The enduring impact of human agency can be perceived in the very essence of AI-generated output.

However, the concept of "Absent Presence" also carries a note of caution. Recent research has highlighted the importance of maintaining a steady supply of high-quality human-created data to prevent "Model Autophagy Disorder" and "model collapse" in AI. These findings emphasize that while AI can create and innovate, it thrives when nourished by the richness of human input and originality. The concept under investigation is a testament to the enduring legacy of humanity in the world of AI and technology. It assures us that even as AI continues to advance, the human touch, creativity, and intellect will remain an intrinsic part of the content that enriches our lives. It underscores the symbiotic relationship between human ingenuity and technological progress, ensuring that the human spirit will always be present in the content that resonates with us.

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