Beyond Replication: AI Art and Its Search for Aesthetic Value

Prompt: Could an AI ever produce works of art with the kind of aesthetic value that works of art created by humans possess? Defend your answer.

"Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life," wrote Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying – An Observation* through the character of Vivian, sparking debate on the origins of human livelihood in relation to the arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and literature. Although Wilde's observations predate concerns over artificial intelligence (AI) and its overtaking of media, his ideas of imitation and aestheticism have been noted throughout history. For the purposes of this discussion, aesthetic value will be defined as a work's capacity to evoke an emotional response from the viewer, listener, or reader when appreciated or experienced. In the paragraphs that follow, the "ideal type" will first be conceptualized in terms of art, and the aesthetic value of artwork that imitates life with that of artwork that imitates another artwork will be compared. Following this, the technical usage of these algorithms will be discussed, highlighting how an AI's algorithmic narrowmindedness often leads to inorganic repetition that is reflected in our everyday lives. While we as humans observe the physical world and draw inspiration from it in our creations, artificial intelligence relies on algorithms and machine learning[1] to create works that simply mimic this process, lacking the emotional depth and thus aesthetic value delivered by the human mind. This essay will explore the idea that, while artificial intelligence can technically and efficiently develop works of art, it inherently lacks the expression, individuality, and cultural context that characterizes human creativity.

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[1] McFarland, Alex. "Beginner's Guide to AI Image Generators." *Unite.AI*, Unite.AI, 26 Dec. 2023.
    www.unite.ai/beginners-guide-to-ai-image-
    generators/#:~:text=AI%20image%20generators%20work%20by,3D%20models%20and%20game%20assets.

In Wilde's essay, Vivian later explains how "a great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form, like an enterprising publisher." The concept of a "type" and ideas surrounding a piece's replication can be traced back to the 4th century BCE through Plato's theory of mimesis, or imitation. He argued that all art is mimetic by nature, with man perceiving his existence in representations of this "*ideal* type"[2]. Aesthetic value, according to Plato, was thus found by expressing a subject through intense idealism. His philosophical perspective could have been influenced by the societal valuation of artwork at the time, which was often reliant on a piece's idealized proportions, unity, and emotional depth[3], leaving little room for abstraction. However, he also reflects one's inherent nature to study the world around them and interpret its beauty into permanent forms, whether it be through writing, music, or visual arts. Artificial intelligence can only simulate this curiosity, sorting through neural networks to identify common traits and display them in resulting combinations. Rather than striving to showcase feelings, idealism and unity like the artists of Ancient Greece, AI programs simply predict what the user will find most desirable utilizing algorithms and preexisting works to generate a set of products. This prediction may lack cultural, personal, and ethical ideals that the user wants to incorporate in their creations, failing to capture the human thought process and experience required to obtain true beauty and aesthetic value in our society.

Though idealism is what a human artist believes something should be, realism is what something simply is. Historically, art directly inspired from real life has been celebrated as more profound in its aestheticism, finding relatability through common experience, emotion, and

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[2] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannia. "Mimesis." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., https://www.britannica.com/art/mimesis.

[3] Brommer, Gerald F. *Discovering Art History*. 4th ed., Davis Publications, 2007.

people. An artist like Gustave Courbet, for example, focused on depicting ordinary people on large canvases, showcasing the human condition and daily life in an expressive manner[4]. His works such as "The Stone Breakers" and "A Burial at Ornans" evoke empathy within the viewer, developing a personal engagement through the common, detailed experiences of physical labour and death. Artists like Courbet developed their own techniques and styles over time, being driven by personal journeys, culture, and their desire to communicate unique concepts to those around them. What artificial intelligence does not have is this ability to be directly inspired from real life[5], as its nature is fundamentally derivative. An AI trained in the style of Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night," for example, may capture swirling patterns or a blueish colour scheme, but will lack the underlying emotional turmoil and expression that characterized Van Gogh's original work.

Pieces that result from the usage of an AI are derived from other artworks rather than the direct observation of life, seeming to lose the aesthetic value found in referencing the physical world. AI's approach to art, utilizing probability and pattern recognition, may be technically proficient and have the capability to evoke an emotional response, but often results in novel homogenization and a lack of originality. While some may argue that an AI can be trained on specific and possibly more ethical sets of data, its creativity is undoubtedly limited to the confines of its code and does not change the fact that humans input their own biases and morality into the program. The irreplaceable essence of human-created art lies in its ability to convey the

[4] Galitz, Kathryn Calley. "Gustave Courbet (1819–1877)." *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Met, May 2009, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gust/hd_gust.htm.

[5] "Is AI-Generated Art Actually Art?" *University of Plymouth*, 23 Mar. 2023, www.plymouth.ac.uk/discover/is-ai-generated-art-actually-art.

artist's unique perspective, visual culture and imperfect nature without limitations, which are qualities that an AI on its own cannot truly emulate.

While artificial intelligence has demonstrated the capability to produce theoretically proficient works of art, it lacks the fundamentals of idealism, realism, individuality, and relatability that characterize true art. It was first determined that the aesthetic value of art is directly related to both Oscar Wilde's philosophy of life and Plato's theory of imitation, citing the imperfect human experience which an AI cannot replicate through pattern recognition or general predictions of what it thinks to be ideal. Artwork inspired by life and artwork inspired by art were then compared, reflecting on the homogenous nature of AI art and citing that ethicality can only come through human bias. This showcases how, despite technological advancements, the significance of human-created paintings, sculptures, music and literature, will remain prevalent in our society for years to come, and their beauty will never be matched by the likes of artificial intelligence.

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