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ON THE NEED FOR NEW METHODOLOGIES IN CULTURAL STUDIES (?)

The title of the *gloss* constitutes both a postulate and a question. Thus, is it really the case that in cultural studies, which reflect on various types of human cultural activity, there is a need to revise the methodological arsenal applied to the analysis of phenomena, processes and facts occurring within culture?

The prevailing view of an exclusively human disposition to create culture must be confronted with the increasingly bold encroachment into our reality of so-called Artificial Intelligence (AI), which does not so much take on an anthropomorphic form, but imitates human reasoning and behaviour.

Leaving aside quibbles about other living creatures, apart from humans beings, capable of producing culture (Trojan 2013), let us turn our attention towards AI, which not only allows us to archive, describe or inventory artefacts but can combine them into collections, search through them for a particular feature, motif, symbol, authorship, etc., thus drawing a map to help humans navigate the wealth of human cultural output. An example of this is the Saint George on a Bike project, whose purpose is defined as follows:

Saint George on a Bike (SGoAB) aims to improve the quality and quantity of open metadata associated with European Cultural Heritage (CH) imagery. To achieve that goal SGoAB addresses two challenges: (i) to transcribe insights about culture, symbols and centuries of evolving iconographic traditions in a knowledge representation accessible to machine learning and artificial intelligence, (ii) to expand conventional machine learning approaches, centered on

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image recognition, with the ability to decipher the complex pictorial language that characterises iconographic symbols and sacred imagery.²

As we can see, getting to works that are often little known, or even unknown, to the majority of viewers is aided by AI, which, through self-learning, not only collects data on individual artefacts, but can also point to an interpretation/proposition for interpreting the evolutionary process of human creativity as recorded in images and imagery in the broadest sense.

The case above is about analysing and combining data into new, modified collections, while the project entitled “Unsupervised – Machine Hallucinations” is an example of a comprehensive exhibition organised in one of the world’s most renowned museums, namely New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMa). Although the exhibition was open to the public from 19 November 2022 to 5 March 2023, thanks to materials available online, we can continue to learn about what it has to offer³.

The idea of Refik Anadol Studio was to bring together, in an innovative way, fragments of 138,151 artworks from a period of 200 years, the selection of these fragments and their compilation being done by AI. The result of this action (creation?) having been placed in one of the world’s most illustrious galleries indicates the recognition of these creations as meeting the criteria of highbrow art accepted by experts. Thus, we are dealing with a situation in which a non-human entity – albeit one that is artificial – is itself capable of creating something that man considers worthy of attention, namely an outstanding work of art, since it is exhibited at MoMa. Thus, we face one of the many challenges facing cultural researchers in deciding what methodology should be applied to such creations. Is it the same as for artistic creations of human authorship? The intuitive answer would be to say no. After all, AI is not identical to human beings since it does not have their basic intellectual-psychological dispositions, such as emotions, desires or free will, among others – at least for now. Even if this happens one day, it will not constitute a counter-argument to the development of a separate set of methods to study non-human art or culture.

In the post- and transhumanist perspective, the above themes have long been present, paving the way for the updating of existing methodologies, methodologies that, although old i.e. developed long ago, are still

² <https://saintgeorgeonabike.eu/about-objectives>.

³ <https://refikanadolstudio.com/projects/unsupervised-machine-hallucinations-moma/>.

sometimes persistently imposed on young researchers by their older colleagues. This attachment to “tame” methodological matrices, adopted through long-standing research practice, results, among other things, from the consensus of the environment, i.e. an agreement that is renegotiated with generational change (Erickson 2005; Kuhn 1970). This change or modification can occur under the influence of trends that, as in the fashion industry, also appear in science – namely, those hitherto created by humans – struggling between subjectivity and objectivity (Latour & Woolgar 1979; Fleck 1979).

One of the advocates of abandoning the use of rigid methodologies in science, Paul Feyerabend, emphasised the non-identity, and therefore uniqueness, of the things being studied. Each of them – states or processes – being non-identical, requires an appropriately tailored methodology, specific only to that particular case. Thus, the researcher, leaning into the object of study, autonomously selects tools designed to learn as precisely as possible about the thing being studied. Imposing a rigid methodological “collar,” a rigid inflexible rigour, can, and more than once – as Feyerabend proved – does hinder scientific progress. His call for “methodological anarchism” was therefore intended to encourage researchers to break out of the limiting frameworks established by specific scientific communities operating in specific temporal, social, ideological and political circumstances. This was not a question of abandoning methodology as such, but of allowing it to be freely chosen and constructed. The need for this was, and is, also recognised by other scholars in the philosophy of science, such as J. N. Hattiangadi (1983) who writes about this issue in his essay *A Methodology without Methodological Rules*. The researcher points to the existence of a peculiar kind of myth that scientific communities are subject to when they (in a superior manner?) disapprove of alternative explanatory propositions that do not fit into the mainstream of commonly accepted theories and academic understandings. Rituals, in turn, comprise a set of educational practices that format future scholars, thereby locking them into a certain intellectual framework dependent on the condition of society as a whole (Hattiangadi 1983, 143–144). This is because society is the background and basis for all human activity, including scientific activity. It is in society that its specific thought collectives develop, working out their characteristic styles of thought (Fleck 1979). Should this fact not therefore be taken into account when constructing new methodologies or revising existing ones? And if so, should this approach not also be applied to a situation

where the artefact creator is/will be AI? This question will remain unanswered as long as we agree that thought is absent in AI. Instead, there are pre-programmed algorithmic pathways, artificial neural networks, imitating thought. Perhaps it is this aspect that can contribute to the concept of ways to study entities that, although inanimate, are capable of creating something that attracts human attention and the desire to know.

In addition to what has been said above, if an AI entity is a creator/artist, even if unaware of its creation, there is another constellation of creating entities, based on human-AI cooperation. If the result of this relationship is an artefact, then surely a set of methods other than those accepted/acceptable in traditionalist cultural studies are/will be needed to study it. The call for a liberation of methodology from the rigid scientific legacy framework seems to be gaining even more relevance and strength. If this happens, the above framework will become more malleable and thus responsive to new phenomena and processes that define the shape of post-modern societies in the 21st century, without losing its scientific nature.

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