

Introduzione

Automating sensibility: contributions on the relationship between human aesthetics and artificial intelligence models

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Research in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) has predominantly focused on inquiries into human cognition, comprehension, rationality, and the potential for automating these abilities through training or coding. Recent advancements in natural language processing have been the subject of extensive literature, confirming this trend. Running parallel to this line of research, a related discipline that might aptly be termed *artificial sensibility* has emerged. Models that generate images from textual prompts, compose musical themes, support diagnosis through medical imaging, or detect solemn or ironic nuances in text, all fall within the purview of this research domain.

Despite the possibility of framing these models' activities from such a perspective, there is a notable absence of substantial literature dedicated to contextualizing the issue of aesthetics. Frequently, even Computer Vision models are incorporated into the broader AI discourse, where the aesthetic dimension is subsumed under the intellectual one, thus relegating sensibility to a subordinate role. This points to a broader issue: with respect to sensibility and the aesthetic dimension, AI still struggles to constitute itself as a clearly delimited object of inquiry. AI, in other words, has entered aesthetics less as a single object than as a multiplicity of functions, objects, and conditions: a) generative models introduce new representational entities into the world, objects that may (or may not) acquire aesthetic relevance; b) Large Language Models can themselves perform aesthetic functions, detecting and describing aesthetic features of representations (graphic, textual, audiovisual, etc.); c) infrastructural and cultural shifts driven by AI reconfigure the conditions under which aesthetic objects appear. They alter how representations are produced, circulated, interpreted, and valued, while also reshaping what "making" can mean when creation is increasingly mediated by prediction, automation, and large-scale infrastructural extraction.

Across these domains, the most persistent questions are not merely “Can AI create?” but: What kind of perception does AI enact? What kind of image is an AI image? How are agency, authorship, and responsibility distributed across systems, designers, datasets, institutions, and audiences? And, more importantly, what do these shifts imply for human sensibility, agency, authorship, and more broadly for practices of sense-making? This issue of *Aesthetica* Preprint brings together seven contributions (in Italian and English) that collectively map AI’s aesthetic problem-space along three complementary sections: (1) generative models across the history of representation and mediation; (2) the epistemologies and embodiments of machine perception, from cybernetic lineages to tactile encounters; (3) creativity, authorship, and the philosophical limits of automation.

Generative models across the history of representation and mediation
(Manovich; Capone & Cimatti)

The first section situates today’s “AI images” within a longer genealogy of representational techniques and theories. Contemporary generative systems are often framed as a rupture; yet ruptures become legible only when they are placed in relation to earlier reorganizations of seeing and making, such as linear perspective, photography, or the successive waves of digital tools that progressively automated parts of visual production. Within this frame, the novelty of generative media is not simply that images are produced by machines, but that they are produced *predictively*: as statistically guided syntheses drawn from large repositories of existing cultural artifacts. This predictive regime compels aesthetics to recalibrate its own vocabulary (form and content, subject and style, originality and repetition) because it makes newly visible how cultural regularities (the frequent, the typical, the “average”) can be recombined at scale, while the rare, the idiosyncratic, and the context-bound risk being flattened into stereotypical or idealized outputs. Lev Manovich’s contribution provides the historical and conceptual scaffolding for this recalibration. By treating generative media as a media revolution comparable in scope to photography or perspective, he clarifies what is specifically “new” in AI images: not a mysterious creative faculty, but a method of cultural production based on training over vast datasets and on the automation of choices that used to be made by skilled creators (selection, variation, stylistic transformation, compositing). His arguments show how the very

category of AI functions culturally (what counts as AI shifts as soon as automation becomes familiar), and how generative systems reorganize the ecology of images, expanding the space of possible aesthetics while also intensifying pressures toward recognizable conventions and high-frequency visual patterns.

If Manovich maps the media-historical shift, Luca Capone and Felice Cimatti focus on the main philosophical problem that text-to-image and image-to-text systems force into the foreground: the relation between words and images. Starting from the apparently banal loop “prompt → generated image → linguistic description” they ask what must be the case for such translation to be possible at all. Against the common intuition that images essentially contain an ineffable excess (“the visible is not reducible to the sayable”), they propose reading that slogan not as an empirical report about an ontological remainder, but as a *grammatical* proposition: a rule that organizes our practices of meaning without deciding the nature of images as such. On this basis, the paper foregrounds a theme that resonates across the whole issue: indeterminacy is not merely a limitation of models (or of humans), but a structural feature of signification. Images and verbal expressions are both “indefinitely determinable”, and what generative systems reveal is less a clean conversion between two separate realms than a shared semiotic field in which meaning is produced, stabilized, and renegotiated through use.

The epistemologies and embodiments of machine perception, from cybernetic lineages to tactile encounters (Sartori; Cappelletto & Galimberti)

The second section shifts from images as outputs to perception as operativity. Sartori argues that contemporary AI inherits a bottom-up cybernetic model of learning and behavior formation, yet this inheritance is partially occluded by an extractivist paradigm that governs data, hardware, and opacity. The result is not one black box but many: we may not understand internal model processes; we may not know the objects of digital perception (training data); and we may not even be able to locate the “body” of AI, distributed across devices and infrastructures. Against this, Sartori proposes a counter-genealogy: DIY and performance-art practices that rebuild perception as situated, relational, and materially legible, projects that replace indiscriminate harvesting with consent, participation, and a consciously designed “perceptual communication”

between human and technological bodies. The aesthetic stakes here are political as much as experiential: the form of perception a technology enacts is inseparable from the social relations and ecological costs through which it is produced.

Cappelletto and Galimberti then bring the question of perception into the register of touch. Resisting brainocentric models of human–robot interaction, they focus on the bodily dimension of HRI and especially on thermoception, a sensory modality often neglected despite its strong influence on affect, trust, and willingness to cooperate. Their experimental work with the NAO robot tests how different thermal conditions in robotic grasping modulate participants’ experience and acceptance, and suggests that “a surplus of warmth,” rather than simple temperature matching, can increase willingness to engage. Here AI’s aesthetic import is not reducible to representation: it is a material partner that can disrupt bodily transparency and reconfigure expectations through its heterogeneous affordances.

Creativity, authorship, and the philosophical limits of automation (Di Stefano; Cecchi; Chiodo)

The third section addresses creativity and meaning, precisely where public discourse most quickly oscillates between hype (“AI is creative”) and dismissal (“it’s just statistics”). Di Stefano argues that AI art is philosophically productive not because it settles the question of machine creativity, but because it forces clearer distinctions between creation, generation, and interpretation. Through examples ranging from canonical art history to conceptual art, and through the problem of authorship and audience bias, he proposes that creativity is better understood as a capacity for generating meaning and significance, something institutionally and interpretively conferred, not algorithmically contained.

Cecchi’s contribution intersects with Di Stefano but shifts the emphasis: the methodological mistake is to treat AI like a new style or movement and then apply our ordinary evaluative criteria as if nothing had changed. Drawing on Garroni’s framework, Cecchi recasts creativity in terms of how rules are applied, revised, and made sense of, within experience, and asks what it would mean to attribute such creativity to an AI “artist.” His closing hypothesis is deliberately provocative: future AI art may take the form of “controlled hallucinations,” whose sense emerges after the fact through negotiation between systems and publics, an art that is post-human

not because humans disappear, but because meaning is redistributed across heterogeneous agents and interpretive practices.

Finally, Chiodo's essay pushes the issue's stakes beyond art to philosophy itself. Taking a contemporary "AI philosophy" experiment as a point of departure, she argues that even when generative systems imitate philosophical answers, they lack what human philosophers have: aesthetic existences and, therefore, meta-sense-making, the capacity to live, feel, and reflect upon the existential weight of the questions at stake. This difference, for Chiodo, connects to a broader societal tendency: exchanging the burden of autonomy for the relief of automation, especially under conditions of acceleration, uncertainty, and performance pressure. Ending here is not pessimism; it is a clarifying demand: if AI systems increasingly mediate the production of answers (aesthetic, practical, philosophical), we need conceptual and political tools to know what we are consulting, and what kind of life, sense, and responsibility we might be trading away.

Taken together, the seven papers do not offer a single verdict on AI's aesthetic status. Instead, they build a shared map of problems: prediction and representation; sign and image; black box and participation; touch and affect; creativity and interpretation; autonomy and automation. The special issue invites readers to treat AI not as an external "theme" for aesthetics, but as a pressure test for aesthetics itself, forcing the discipline to rethink what counts as sensibility, what counts as an image, what counts as creativity, and what counts as meaning when sense is increasingly co-produced by humans and machines.

