

Algorithmic Aura and Spiritual Alienation: A Critical Framework for AI-Generated Art Through Benjamin and Manovich

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence has entered visual art with remarkable speed, and its ability to produce images that resemble Renaissance and Baroque masterworks now raises difficult aesthetic and epistemological questions. These images may appear historically convincing at first glance, yet their resemblance often depends on surface pattern rather than on the deeper conditions through which artworks acquire meaning. This article develops a theoretical framework for examining that problem by bringing Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" into dialogue with Lev Manovich's idea of "computational aesthetics," while also drawing on Erwin Panofsky's iconographic method, Michael Baxandall's social art history, and Aby Warburg's theory of the *Pathosformel*. Its point of departure is a comparative study of sixteen canonical paintings, ranging from Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* and Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, alongside AI-generated versions produced through DALL·E 3 and Doubao in a doctoral study conducted at City University Malaysia (Peng, 2025). Rather than repeating the empirical findings of that study, the article uses them to ask a broader theoretical question: what happens when algorithmic pattern recognition imitates historical form without inheriting the human, symbolic, and social conditions that once gave that form its force? Across the sixteen cases, a recurring pattern becomes visible, which this article describes as "formal imitation, spiritual alienation." The AI images often reproduce stylistic syntax with impressive fluency, but they struggle to sustain symbolic depth, structural intentionality, and sociohistorical embeddedness. On this basis, the article argues that the more convincing future of AI in artistic practice does not lie in replacing human authorship, but in forms of human-machine collaboration where computational capacity remains guided by critical, historical, and humanistic judgment.

Keywords: AI-generated art, Walter Benjamin, aura, Lev Manovich, computational aesthetics, Renaissance, Baroque, formal imitation, spiritual alienation, digital humanities

INTRODUCTION

Something strange happens when an AI model generates a version of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. The architecture remains recognizable, the long table appears in its expected place, and the figures gather in uneasy groups around the central body of Christ. Even the vanishing point seems to know where it should be. Yet the image fails, not in an obvious or spectacular way, but in a quieter register where discomfort comes before analysis. The proportions feel slightly unstable. Expressions fall back on reusable facial types. The tablecloth can look oddly heavy, almost like plaster. Most importantly, the painting's psychological differentiation of the apostles, each one responding differently to Christ's announcement of betrayal, begins to dissolve into visual noise.

That failure provides the starting point for this article. AI can now produce images that resemble historical paintings with considerable technical fluency, so the more urgent issue is not resemblance itself. The more difficult question concerns what these images repeatedly fail to carry across: historical presence, symbolic pressure, pictorial intention, and the dense social meanings that make form more than arrangement. To examine

this problem, the article brings Walter Benjamin's account of the "aura" into contact with Lev Manovich's idea of "computational aesthetics." Benjamin helps clarify what is lost when an artwork's historically situated presence becomes reproducible, while Manovich gives language to the parametric and procedural logic through which digital systems reassemble visual culture. Read together, these two frameworks make visible a condition that technical evaluation alone cannot explain: formal imitation joined to spiritual alienation, where surface accuracy appears alongside a deeper loss of interior meaning.

The argument is grounded in comparative visual evidence gathered and analysed by Yu Peng in a doctoral dissertation supervised at City University Malaysia (Peng, 2025). Peng's study generated AI versions of sixteen canonical Renaissance and Baroque paintings using DALL·E 3 and Doubao. The images were produced through a structured protocol that included controlled prompt design, inclusion and exclusion screening, and a multi-criterion evaluation rubric focused on perspective, composition, chiaroscuro, iconographic coherence, and surface handling. This article does not reproduce the dissertation's empirical work in full. Instead, it develops a theoretical reading of its findings and asks how those findings might reshape art-historical thinking about AI-generated imagery. When the discussion relies on Peng's visual observations, that reliance is acknowledged directly. The theoretical extensions offered here remain distinct from the dissertation's original analysis, and the full image corpus and methodological details belong to the doctoral study itself.

Renaissance and Baroque painting offer a particularly demanding field for this inquiry. These traditions do not merely provide famous images for AI to imitate; they also define two major models of Western pictorial space. Renaissance painting often depends on a closed, ordered, and perspective-unified structure, while Baroque painting tends toward open, unstable, multi-focal, and emotionally charged space. Heinrich Wölfflin's (1915/1950) distinction between closed and open form therefore provides a useful vocabulary for comparing how AI systems respond to both traditions. The comparison matters because AI does not fail in the same way across these two pictorial worlds. In Renaissance works, its weakness often appears in the handling of proportion, spatial logic, and symbolic placement. In Baroque works, the problem more frequently emerges through the flattening of movement, drama, bodily tension, and affective force. Seen together, these failures reveal a larger limitation: generative systems can approximate the look of historical form, but they do not truly enter the cultural, theological, social, and psychological structures that once made that form meaningful.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Benjamin's Aura in the Age of Algorithmic Reproduction

Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" refers to the particular presence an artwork acquires through its attachment to a specific time, place, material condition, and cultural use. For Benjamin (1936/2008), mechanical reproduction weakens this presence because it separates the work from tradition and from its "here and now," the singular existence through which it belongs to a particular historical moment. His examples were photography and film. Artificial intelligence does not simply continue that history of reproduction; it changes the problem in a more radical way.

Photography normally begins from an existing object or scene. Generative AI works differently. It produces images by modelling patterns across vast collections of visual data and recombining them through statistical prediction. The resulting image may look historically familiar, but it has no original object behind it, no gradual material history, and no direct attachment to ritual practice, patronage, workshop procedure, or theological commission. In Baudrillard's (1994) terms, it approaches the condition of a copy without an original. Its origin lies in a prompt, a dataset, a platform, and a computational process rather than in the lived conditions that shaped the historical artwork. In this sense, AI does not merely copy the old image. It averages and recomposes visual memory. The aura cannot easily survive such a process because, for Benjamin, aura depends on what resists averaging: material aging, accidental detail, specific commission, and the artist's embodied relation to a particular historical world.

This reading should not be pushed too far without qualification. Vassilev (2015) argues that the weakening of aura does not necessarily mean the complete disappearance of depth. Reproduced images can still carry cultural

emotion, symbolic force, and new forms of authenticity, especially when viewers encounter them through contemporary media contexts rather than through physical closeness to an original. Buck (2018) goes further by suggesting that AI may generate new cultural meanings from inherited visual material and should not be dismissed as merely destructive. These arguments are important because they prevent Benjamin's theory from becoming a nostalgic rejection of all technological mediation. Still, they do not remove the deeper difficulty. AI-generated art may produce new meanings, but it does so without understanding the historical meanings it borrows, rearranges, or imitates. The problem is not an occasional technical flaw. It belongs to the structure of the process itself, and it becomes visible most clearly when AI images are compared with specific works from Renaissance and Baroque painting.

Manovich's Computational Aesthetics

Lev Manovich's work on computational aesthetics (Manovich, 2013, 2018) helps explain how digital systems reorganize visual culture from within. In this framework, aesthetic qualities such as composition, colour relation, depth, surface, and pictorial balance can be translated into parameters that a mathematical model can process. That translation has consequences. Once spatial depth becomes a statistical pattern drawn from training images, it no longer carries the same intentional force it held in its original artistic setting.

Generative systems such as DALL·E 3 and contemporary diffusion models do not understand art in the humanistic sense of the word. They identify correlations between textual prompts and visual features, then produce images that appear likely to satisfy the given description (see Gatys et al., 2016, and Elgammal et al., 2017, on earlier neural approaches to image generation; Ho et al., 2020, on diffusion model architecture; Ramesh et al., 2022, on the mechanisms behind DALL·E 2). A prompt such as "High Renaissance, Italian, single-point perspective, religious scene" activates a learned cluster of visual associations. The system can assemble an image that looks compatible with that cluster. What it cannot recover is the historical reason those associations belonged together in the first place: the theological assumptions, philosophical ideas, workshop practices, systems of patronage, and social expectations that led Renaissance painters toward particular formal solutions and made those solutions intelligible to their viewers.

This produces what may be described as a disembedded visual logic. Formal elements return, sometimes with impressive fluency, but their anchoring in a coherent world of meaning has been weakened or lost. Computational aesthetics builds pictorial relationships through statistical inference rather than through contextual understanding. A complex cultural and symbolic system is reduced to adjustable visual features, and once those features are separated from the historical matrix that gave them force, they no longer signify in quite the same way.

Panofsky, Baxandall, and Warburg: Three Dimensions of Cultural Depth

Panofsky, Baxandall, and Warburg make the limits of AI-generated historical imagery harder to ignore. Panofsky's (1927/1991) three-stage iconographic method, moving from pre-iconographic description to iconographic analysis and then to iconological interpretation, shows why meaning in Renaissance painting cannot be reduced to visual pattern. Perspective, for Panofsky, was never only a technical device for organizing pictorial space. It also expressed a humanistic view of the world, one in which rational human consciousness could measure, order, and visually possess the surrounding universe. An algorithm may reproduce the geometry of perspective with some accuracy, but this does not mean it has grasped the philosophical assumptions that made that geometry meaningful. The result can be an image that looks structurally familiar while remaining thin at the level of historical thought.

Baxandall adds the social and economic pressure behind form. The visual decisions of Renaissance and Baroque painters were shaped by patronage, religious institutions, workshop practices, guild expectations, and audiences whose habits of seeing had been trained by liturgy, commerce, rhetoric, and humanist education. This is the territory of what Baxandall (1972, 1988) called the "period eye." Baroque dynamism, for example, should not be treated as a decorative preference or a general taste for theatrical movement. In many religious contexts, it answered Counter-Reformation demands for images that could touch the emotions, direct attention, and move

viewers toward devotion or submission. AI can generate Baroque-style lighting because similar visual patterns occur repeatedly in its training material. The historical pressure that made such lighting necessary, however, remains outside the system's reach.

Warburg brings the problem into the field of cultural memory. His concept of *Pathosformel*, or “pathos formula,” refers to the survival of intense gestural and emotional patterns from antiquity within later Western art. These forms did not simply reappear as decorative quotations. They carried affective force, even when they returned in altered religious, political, or artistic settings (Warburg, 1999; Didi-Huberman, 2002). *Nachleben*, the afterlife or survival of antiquity, names this larger migration of forms across time. For Warburg, images are never just visible arrangements. They are charged formations, shaped by memory, emotion, and historical recurrence.

AI's relation to this Warburgian idea of survival is revealing because it seems, at first, to perform something close to *Nachleben*. It retrieves and recombines formal patterns from the history of art. Yet the resemblance is deceptive. When an AI model produces a Caravaggio-like diagonal shaft of light, it may reproduce a visual formula associated with divine intervention, grace, revelation, or spiritual crisis. What disappears is the historical and theological intensity that once gave that formula its force. The form remains visible, but the memory attached to it has been weakened. This is not simply a problem of inaccurate representation. It is the production of images that look culturally informed while being detached from the cultural memory they imitate.

The Disintegration of Renaissance Closed Narratives

Perspective as Philosophy, Not Geometry

For Panofsky (1927/1991), Renaissance perspective was a “symbolic form,” not simply a technical method for arranging space. It gave visual shape to a particular understanding of the human subject's place in the world. The single vanishing point, in this reading, formalized a subject-centred rationalism: a viewer could occupy a fixed position and encounter the world as measurable, ordered, and intellectually graspable (Damisch, 1995; Edgerton, 1975). Perspective therefore carried more than geometric function. Within this tradition, it often became a way of picturing the relation between vision, reason, and worldly order.

The DALL·E 3 generation of Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) makes this problem especially clear. Van Eyck's original builds a tightly organized visual world in which representation and symbolism are difficult to separate. The convex mirror at the centre reflects the room and two figures in the doorway. Following Panofsky's (1953) influential interpretation, scholars have often read these reflected figures as witnesses to the couple's contract, although the more specific claim that the mirror represents “divine surveillance” remains debated and should not be treated as settled. The broader point is more secure: the painting's formal order is inseparable from its symbolic register. The lit candle, the dog, the sandals, the orange, and the circular mirror frame with scenes from the Passion all belong to a dense symbolic economy. Their meaning depends not only on what each object signifies individually, but also on how these objects hold together within the composition (Harbison, 1991; Hall, 1994).

Peng's (2025) comparative analysis shows that the AI version retains many of these objects, but mainly as polished visual details. The mirror has a convincing reflective surface, the dog appears in the expected position, and the gothic window is included. Yet the image reads more as an arrangement of iconographic props than as a coherent symbolic system. In van Eyck's original, as Peng observes, line does not operate as a separate outline. It works together with light, shadow, texture, and spatial depth, producing an organic unity that supports both visual structure and symbolic meaning. In the AI-generated image, these relations become more mechanical. The contours show an “excessive regularity and smoothness,” creating an impression of precision without the integrated pictorial life that gives the original its force. Peng identifies the visual discrepancy; this article extends that observation theoretically by reading it as a case of symbolic form reproduced without fully functioning symbolic content.

Sacred Geometry and Its Dissolution

Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1495–98) brings the problem into sharper focus. The architecture draws the eye toward a point near Christ's head, and this perspectival structure is not only a matter of geometry. As Kemp (1990) shows, Leonardo's spatial design also carries a theological argument: Christ becomes the visual and narrative centre of the sacred event. Around him, the twelve apostles are arranged in groups of three, each group registering a different response to the announcement of betrayal (Clark, 1988; Steinberg, 1973). The force of the painting depends on this psychological differentiation. Leonardo does not treat the apostles as a repeated human type. He gives each figure a particular emotional and bodily reaction, built through gesture, posture, facial expression, and the carefully staged rhythm of the whole composition.

One detail requires some caution. The art-historical literature does refer to a salt cellar in relation to Judas's position and the painting's iconography (Steinberg, 1973). Yet its precise symbolic importance is not emphasized equally across major interpretations, and the damaged condition of the mural makes very confident claims about small details risky. The stronger point does not depend on that single object. The painting's meaning emerges from the way spatial order, figural psychology, symbolic detail, and theological narrative work together. That larger integration is what the AI-generated image struggles to sustain.

Peng's (2025) analysis of the Doubao-generated version identifies several recurring visual problems: disproportionate fingers, misaligned shoulders, simplified facial expressions, and a general flattening of psychological difference among the figures. The result resembles *The Last Supper* in a broad visual sense, but it does not recreate the structured drama that gives Leonardo's painting its meaning. The apostles no longer appear as distinct participants in a sacred and psychological crisis. They become variations of agitation. Perspective also loses its narrative force. The lines may suggest recession into depth, but they do not organize the scene around Christ with the same theological precision. What remains is a recognizable arrangement, while the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual structure that once animated that arrangement is weakened.

The Symbolic Economy of Closed Form

Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (1435–40) offers another way to test the limits of AI imitation. The painting does not present battle as immediate chaos or lived violence. Instead, it turns combat into an ordered field, where fallen lances, armoured bodies, horses, and weapons are drawn into a carefully controlled perspectival structure. This geometry matters because it does more than organize space. It gives visual form to a desire for rational control, and that desire also carries political implications, especially in light of the work's association with elite Medici domestic display. The scattered lances, for example, are not merely battlefield debris. They guide the eye into depth and help stabilize the composition. The knights, too, appear less as figures caught in spontaneous action than as participants in a ritualized visual arrangement. Uccello's battle is therefore both an image of conflict and an exercise in pictorial discipline.

Peng's (2025) analysis shows that the AI-generated version retains many of the expected ingredients: knights, horses, lances, armour, and the recognizable colour range associated with the original. Yet these elements no longer seem to work together with the same spatial purpose. The lances are present, but they are spread too evenly and mechanically, without the perspectival logic through which Uccello turns them into instruments of recession and control. Depth appears as a visual effect rather than as the governing structure of the image. The problem, then, is not simply that the AI image gets particular objects wrong. It fails to grasp why those objects matter compositionally. Uccello's painting uses geometry to discipline violence and to transform battle into an ordered political and aesthetic statement. The AI version can imitate the signs of that order, but it does not sustain the argument that the order was meant to make.

The Simulation of Baroque Open Narratives

What Baroque Openness Actually Requires

Baroque openness is often reduced to dynamic composition, as if diagonal movement, strong chiaroscuro, and asymmetrical arrangement were enough to define it. These features matter, and they are also among the aspects that current AI models can imitate with relative success. The problem begins when these visible signs are

mistaken for the deeper pictorial structure they serve. Baroque openness is not simply a matter of movement within the frame. It depends on a charged relation between image and viewer, where meaning emerges through instability, ambiguity, psychological pressure, and the sense that the scene exceeds its own boundaries.

Wölfflin (1915/1950) described this as a movement away from the more fixed and self-contained spatial order of the Renaissance toward a Baroque mode in which the image appears to reach beyond itself. The viewer is no longer positioned only as an observer of a closed scene, but is drawn into a more unstable encounter with the pictorial event. Fried's (1980) notion of "theatricality" sharpens this point. Baroque painting does not merely record an action; it stages an event before the beholder and often makes that beholder feel implicated in what is unfolding. AI can produce images that look theatrical. It can arrange bodies in motion, heighten the lighting, and generate a dramatic atmosphere. What it often misses is the tension between image and viewer that gives Baroque theatricality its force.

The Gaze Architecture of *Las Meninas*

Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) pushes Baroque openness to its limit by building the whole picture around an unstable economy of looking. The painter stands at a large canvas whose face is turned away from the viewer, the Infanta Margarita and her attendants occupy the foreground, and a small mirror on the back wall returns the dim reflection of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. That mirror is the hinge of the composition. It implies that the royal couple stands roughly where the viewer stands, so the beholder is quietly folded into the scene as both witness and apparent subject of the painted gaze. Foucault (1970) read this arrangement as a meditation on representation itself, in which the sovereign position that organizes the image is also the position the image cannot finally show. The figures look out toward a place the viewer cannot occupy with any certainty, and the painting holds its audience in that suspension.

The exact logic of the mirror has been debated for decades, and the disagreement is instructive. Searle (1980) treated the picture as a genuine paradox, arguing that the painter cannot consistently be shown painting the very scene the viewer sees. Snyder and Cohen (1980) replied that the mirror reflects the canvas rather than the living monarchs, which dissolves the paradox into a more controlled play of reflection. This article does not try to settle that dispute. The meaning of *Las Meninas* lives in the reflexive tension between painter, model, mirror, and beholder, a tension that Bryson (1983) analysed as the structuring force of the gaze. The picture works because its spatial order is also a claim about who may look at whom, and on what authority.

Peng's (2025) analysis of the AI-generated version shows how thoroughly this structure resists imitation. The model reproduces the surface inventory of the scene without much difficulty. The Infanta appears in her pale dress, the attendants cluster around her, the room recedes into shadow, and a bright rectangle stands in for the mirror on the rear wall. The reflexive architecture, however, collapses. The reflected sovereigns lose their referential charge, so the bright rectangle reads as a lit panel rather than as the device that places the viewer inside the painting. The painter's outward look no longer addresses anyone in particular, and the carefully managed relation between inside and outside the frame flattens into a costumed group portrait. The AI version keeps the cast and the setting, yet the gaze that once organized them into a question about representation has gone quiet. Once again the visible arrangement survives while the structure that gave it meaning does not.

Light as Theological Argument in Caravaggio

Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600) makes light do more than illuminate the scene. A sharp beam enters from the upper right, cuts diagonally across the room, and falls toward Matthew's table of tax collectors. Its selectivity matters. The light gives visual form to the idea of grace as something directed, sudden, and difficult to resist. Matthew's uncertain gesture, often read as a startled "Who, me?", intensifies the moment, while the long-standing ambiguity over which figure should be identified as Matthew invites the viewer into the act of interpretation (Fried, 2010; Puglisi, 1998). The light therefore does not simply reveal the event. It helps produce the event as a theological drama.

This diagonal interruption of darkness also belongs to a longer Christian visual memory. Read through Warburg's idea of *Pathosformel*, Caravaggio's light can be understood as a charged pictorial formula, one that recalls earlier images in which divine presence breaks into human space. Caravaggio does not merely repeat that formula. He gives it a new force by tying it to a specific moment of calling, hesitation, and recognition. Peng's (2025) analysis suggests that the AI-generated version keeps the outward signs of *chiaroscuro*, including the contrast between dark interior and dramatic light. Yet the placement of light loses its theological precision. It becomes a style of illumination rather than an act of selection. The image recalls the look of Caravaggesque drama, but the historical and spiritual pressure carried by the formula is reduced to visual atmosphere.

The Symbolic Object and the Period Eye

Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) allows Baxandall's idea of the "period eye" to be used, with some caution, beyond its original Renaissance setting. In the visual culture of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, a pearl could carry associations of purity, feminine virtue, refinement, material value, and reflected light. These meanings were not fixed in a simple one-to-one code, but they were available to viewers shaped by religious imagery, commercial culture, domestic ideals, and humanist habits of looking (Alpers, 1983; Montias, 1989). In Vermeer's painting, the pearl is therefore not merely an ornamental detail. Its force depends on the delicate relation between light, gaze, surface, and cultural suggestion.

Peng's (2025) analysis shows that the AI-generated version reduces this complexity to a polished visual effect. The pearl remains visible as a bright, reflective object associated with Vermeer, Dutch Golden Age portraiture, and the familiar look of the original painting. Yet the subtle relationship through which Vermeer gives the object its charge is weakened. In the original, the light source, the girl's turned gaze, the dark background, and the placement of the earring draw attention toward a small object that seems at once material, optical, and symbolic. In the AI version, that tension becomes flatter. The pearl is rendered convincingly as surface, but its cultural and pictorial resonance is much less secure.

Ethics, Bias, and the Architecture of Human-Machine Collaboration

Bias and the Reproduction of Cultural Hierarchies

AI's inability to understand cultural meaning does not prevent it from reproducing cultural hierarchy. This distinction matters because the two issues can easily be confused. Generative systems do reproduce cultural patterns, including the representational hierarchies embedded in the material on which they are trained. What they do not possess is a historical or semantic grasp of those patterns. The difference, then, is not between culture and non-culture, but between statistical repetition and interpretive understanding.

AI systems may reproduce Eurocentric aesthetic norms because those norms are strongly represented within the visual archives, museum collections, image databases, and online materials that shape contemporary training environments. Canonical Western artworks have long occupied privileged positions in art-historical documentation, museum visibility, digital circulation, and educational reproduction. Their recurrence gives them statistical force, quite apart from any understanding of the historical processes that made them canonical in the first place (Bender et al., 2021; Crawford, 2021). A historically inflected prompt is therefore more likely to produce an image that aligns with familiar Western conventions, not because the system understands Renaissance humanism, Baroque theatricality, or the institutional formation of the canon, but because those visual patterns have become highly available and repeatable within the data.

This is why reproducing a hierarchy is not the same as understanding it. A model can favour certain visual forms with impressive consistency while remaining blind to the social, economic, colonial, and institutional conditions that gave those forms their authority. Semantic blindness and biased pattern reproduction therefore belong together rather than contradicting each other. Because the system does not understand cultural meaning, it treats inherited hierarchies as visual probability. In doing so, it may repeat and intensify existing inequalities without any capacity to recognize, question, or historically situate them (Srinivasan & Uchino, 2022).

Authenticity and the Crisis of Authorship

Benjamin's idea of authenticity depends on the "here and now" of the original: its singular existence in a particular place and time, together with the material traces of its production, use, damage, preservation, and historical passage. AI-generated images trouble this idea in a distinctive way. They can be produced, altered, circulated, and regenerated with little attachment to a stable material origin. Their existence begins less as a unique object than as the outcome of a prompt, a model, a dataset, and a computational process. In Benjaminian terms, this makes their claim to authenticity fragile, since the image does not carry the accumulated historical presence that belongs to an original work.

Some accounts shift authenticity from the image itself to the act of prompting, treating the human user as a kind of "meta-artist" who directs the algorithmic system (Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). This argument has value, but it cannot fully resolve the problem. Prompting may involve intention, selection, revision, and judgment, yet the image still emerges through a process that does not understand the cultural meanings it assembles. The human may guide the work conceptually, but the machine generates form without historical consciousness. If the final image is what enters artistic circulation, then its authenticity cannot rest only on surface production. It must also involve the conditions of authorship, interpretation, and responsibility that surround the work.

Vassilev (2015) is right to note that contemporary viewers often experience authenticity through context, mediation, and technological circulation rather than through direct proximity to an original. Buck (2018) also reminds us that reproductive technologies can produce new cultural possibilities, not only losses. These arguments prevent Benjamin's framework from becoming a simple rejection of digital art. Still, they do not erase the gap between algorithmic production and humanistic authorship. They suggest, rather, that this gap must be openly acknowledged. AI-generated art may gain significance when human artists treat the machine as a tool within a larger critical and interpretive practice, but it becomes weaker when it is presented as if computational output alone could replace historically grounded artistic intention.

Human-Machine Collaboration: Evidence and Architecture

Human-machine collaboration offers a more convincing alternative to the fantasy of algorithmic autonomy. This is not simply a hopeful compromise added at the end of the argument. It already appears in parts of contemporary computational art and digital humanities (Zylinska, 2020), where artists use machine learning without surrendering authorship to the system.

Several documented practices make this model clearer. Refik Anadol's large-scale data sculptures, including *Machine Hallucinations* (2019) and *Unsupervised* (2022), use machine learning to process archival and institutional datasets, but the artistic decision-making does not disappear into the software. Anadol's authorship remains visible in the choice of data, the design of the generative process, and the way the final work is staged, framed, and encountered by viewers. The machine extends the scale and variability of visual production, but the work still depends on human decisions about what the data means, how it should appear, and what kind of experience it should produce. Memo Akten's *Learning to See* series offers a related example. Neural networks trained on selected thematic datasets, such as water, fire, and plants, become a medium for examining perception itself. The artist's role is not located in every pixel of the output, but in deciding what the system is asked to attend to, how that attention is structured, and why the resulting images matter. In this sense, both artists illustrate what Peng (2025) describes as the role of the human as an "architect of meaning."

This collaborative model does not remove the structural limitation identified in this article. It works by confronting that limitation directly. If an AI system reduces Baroque chiaroscuro to dramatic lighting, an artist with knowledge of Caravaggio's theological and spatial logic can redirect the output, revise it, or use it as raw material for a more historically aware image. If the system turns the objects in *The Arnolfini Portrait* into decorative props, a human collaborator can restore attention to the symbolic relations among mirror, candle, dog, sandals, fruit, and interior space. The machine may offer speed, variation, and formal possibility, but those qualities become artistically meaningful only when guided by judgment, historical awareness, and interpretive purpose.

The value of collaboration, then, lies not in pretending that AI has overcome its semantic blindness. It lies in managing that blindness critically. The artist has to recognize where the algorithm smooths out cultural specificity, where it repeats inherited conventions too easily, and where it turns charged historical forms into attractive surfaces. Such work requires more than technical competence. It requires art-historical knowledge, iconographic sensitivity, theological and social awareness, and the ability to read form as meaning. Far from making humanistic education obsolete, AI makes its absence more visible. Without that knowledge, computational power produces images that may be visually impressive, but culturally thin.

CONCLUSION

Generative artificial intelligence can produce images that immediately hold the eye. Renaissance interiors appear with convincing spatial order. Baroque lighting can look intense and dramatic. Portraits take on the pose, surface, and atmosphere associated with the old masters. At the level of visual syntax, this mimicry is increasingly impressive. Yet the closer these images are read, the more their limitations become visible. They often reproduce the look of historical painting without sustaining the symbolic relations, theological arguments, social conditions, and humanistic ideas that once made those forms meaningful. Across the sixteen cases examined from Renaissance and Baroque painting, this repeated gap is the central finding of the article.

The problem is not accidental. Renaissance pictorial space depended on perspective as more than a technical device. It gave visual form to a humanistic understanding of order, vision, and the rational subject's place in the world. Baroque painting, in turn, relied on light, gaze, bodily movement, and ambiguity to create a more unstable encounter between image and viewer. These structures were not simply stylistic choices. They belonged to particular religious, philosophical, social, and artistic worlds. AI systems can identify and recombine the visible patterns produced by those worlds, but they do not understand the cultural pressures that gave those patterns force. Meaning begins when form is held inside a tradition of interpretation. Pattern alone cannot provide that.

The more useful response, then, is not to reject AI as an artistic tool, but to treat it with clearer limits. Human-machine collaboration becomes valuable precisely where the system fails. An algorithm may render a pearl, a candle, or a diagonal shaft of light with technical polish, but a human artist or scholar can recognize why such details matter and how they belong within a larger symbolic structure. The same is true of perspective. A model may generate converging lines, but a historically informed human collaborator can decide whether those lines should organize the image around a theological, psychological, or narrative centre. Technology can widen the formal possibilities of art, but it cannot decide what those possibilities mean. If art in the algorithmic age is to carry cultural depth rather than merely simulate it, that depth will still have to come from human judgment, historical memory, and interpretive responsibility.

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