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Art or Illustration: The AI question

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although generative AI was not available in his lifetime, painter Francis Bacon made a distinction between art and illustration that is relevant to the contemporary practice of making images via prompts to an AI tool. The prompt is shown here to be a device that can call up a remix of images from our collective past. These remixes are "illustrations" in Bacon's sense.

2. BACON ON "ILLUSTRATION"

This When you craft a prompt for an AI tool are you creating art or are you doing something else? Following Francis Bacon, I maintain that you are doing what he referred to — always pejoratively — as "illustration."

Based on the many references to illustration in his writings and interviews, it is clear that what Bacon meant by illustration is "a visual interpretation or explanation of a text." An AI-generated image is an AI tool's visual interpretation or explanation of a prompt, which is just a text.

Figure 1 illustrates how prompts work. Most English speakers can guess the six-word prompt that elicited this image (see the end of Section 3 for the answer).

3. WHAT CAN ACTUALLY BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH A PROMPT?

This A prompt may elicit satisfactory images for integration in print and digitally published media, such as posters, flyers, magazines, books, teaching materials, animations, video games and films. But can a prompt completely specify an image intended to be a work of art?



Figure 1: *Created with Openart AI.*

Journalist- Sci-Fi novelist-blogger-activist Cory Doctorow provides insight into what, and how much, can be communicated in a prompt:

> Art is a transfer of a big, numinous, irreducible feeling from an artist to someone else. But the image-gen program doesn't know anything about your big, numinous, irreducible feeling. The only thing it knows is whatever you put into your prompt, and those few sentences are diluted across a million pixels or a hundred thousand words, so that the average communicative density of the resulting work is indistinguishable from zero (Deleuze 2003).

A rough proxy for "communicative density" is information content, which can be measured in bits. English text contains 7 to 12 bits of information per word. Thus a prompt containing 1000 words conveys between 7000 and 12,000 bits of information. By contrast, a 1024×1024-pixel Truecolor image contains approximately 25 million

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bits of information (although JPEG compression can typically reduce this number by a ratio of 10:1).

There simply is not enough information in a typical prompt to specify more than a tiny fraction of what appears in an AI-generated image. The AI tool draws the rest from its training set. With a suitable prompt, it is easy to demonstrate that existing images — paintings, drawings, photos, etc. — are represented in an AI model and that these materials are in fact used by an AI tool to produce remixed images.

Figure 1 above was generated by the prompt "A skunk at the garden party, frightening the guests." (The last three words were added to the initial six to get the guests' reaction to the skunk.) It is evident that most of what is present in the figure cannot be accounted for by the brief prompt given to the AI tool.

4. ILLUSTRATION VS. ART

Bacon never advanced a theory of art; however, in one of the famous interviews conducted by David Sylvester, he stated that "I believe that reality in art is something profoundly artificial and that it has to be recreated. Otherwise, it will be just an illustration of something — which will be very second-hand" (Doctorow 2025).

Bacon believed that an artist must invent in each work something that cannot simply be described in words. Merely depicting something already existing—e.g., people, animals, landscapes—is just illustration, which art students all over the world can do.

It is important to note that Bacon also said that entirely banishing illustration from painting produces abstract art. He viewed abstract art as inferior because it depends solely on the beauty of its forms and colours, and thus lacks the multiple levels of great classical painting.

An in-depth analysis of Bacon's art can be found in Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation by Gilles Deleuze (Sylvester 1999).

5. AI-GENERATED IMAGES RESEMBLE ART

There is no question that playing with an AI tool is a beguiling pastime and that AI-generated images often look like works that are universally regarded as art. But is that enough to be art?

Makers of AI-generated images could point to their high level of skill in using an AI tool as validation of their status as artists. But this only shows that they are power users of an app. In most cases it is unlikely that they will have had the mathematical background — linear algebra, calculus, probability theory, information theory, and statistics — to understand how an AI tool actually creates an image.

6. CONCLUSIONS

All AI can do is mimic what already exists. AI-generated images consist of visual elements drawn from a training set of millions of images. AI takes data and extrapolates trends within it to create something derivatively "new." Strip away the layers of optimization, and AI is revealed for what it really is—a remix of our collective past.

7. REFERENCES

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