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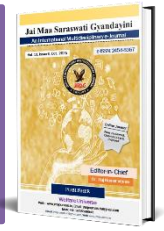

Can machines understand the Sublime: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the sublime has traditionally been associated with human experiences of awe, vastness, fear, and transcendence states that arise at the limits of perception, language, and rational comprehension. Rooted in aesthetic philosophy from thinkers such as Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant, the sublime presupposes a reflective subject capable of emotional depth, self-awareness, and moral imagination. With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and machine learning, an important philosophical question emerges: can machines, which operate through algorithms and data processing, meaningfully engage with or "understand" the sublime? This study critically examines the notion of machine understanding in relation to the sublime by distinguishing between functional recognition and experiential comprehension. It argues that while machines can be trained to identify patterns commonly associated with sublime objects such as vast landscapes, complex symphonies, or powerful literary expressions they lack the subjective consciousness and emotional reflexivity necessary for genuine sublime experience. The paper further explores whether simulated responses generated by machines challenge traditional human-centered aesthetics or merely replicate surface-level interpretations. By engaging with perspectives from aesthetics, philosophy of mind, and artificial intelligence ethics, this research concludes that machine interaction with the sublime remains fundamentally representational rather than experiential, thereby reinforcing the uniquely human dimension of the sublime while opening new debates on creativity, perception, and the limits of artificial cognition.

Introduction

The story of the Sublime begins not with machines but with mountains, storms, and the ocean. For Edmund Burke in the mid-eighteenth century, the Sublime was the experience of awe and terror in the face of overwhelming natural forces. Unlike beauty, which charmed with harmony, the Sublime confronted the viewer with something vast, obscure, and terrifying. Lightning splitting the night sky, a waterfall crashing into a gorge, the rolling immensity of the sea these were experiences that exceeded the neat categories of taste. For Burke, the Sublime depended on a paradox: it was terrifying enough to humble the observer, but

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distant enough to be contemplated without annihilation. "Terror," he wrote in his Philosophical Enquiry (1757), "is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime." It was not comfort but trembling that defined the encounter.

Immanuel Kant, writing a generation later, reframed this experience in more abstract, transcendental terms. For him, the Sublime was not simply the terror of external objects but the internal drama of the mind confronting its own limits. In his Critique of Judgment (1790), Kant distinguishes between the "mathematical Sublime" (the attempt to grasp sheer magnitude) and the "dynamical Sublime" (the encounter with overwhelming natural power). In both cases, imagination falters: the human mind cannot form an adequate image of infinity or of overwhelming force. Yet reason intervenes, asserting its supremacy by thinking beyond what imagination can picture. The Sublime thus reveals human finitude our inability to grasp totality while simultaneously affirming our transcendental capacity for thought.

The Sublime, in both Burkean and Kantian traditions, is bound to human limitation. It is precisely because we cannot comprehend infinity that the experience has power. It is because we feel small, fragile, and finite that the Sublime overwhelms us. The nineteenth-century Romantics inherited this structure. In Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, the solitary wanderer dwarfed by fog and cliffs exemplifies the human confronted with nature's immensity. In Shelley's poetry, Mont Blanc and the West Wind evoke forces beyond comprehension, stirring terror and inspiration in equal measure. The Sublime was the horizon against which human subjectivity was measured: fragile, finite, but capable of awareness.

This long history matters because it provides the conceptual framework through which we now confront artificial intelligence. For centuries, the Sublime was tethered to nature, then later to modernity's scale of industry and technology. Jean-François Lyotard, writing in the late twentieth century, argued that the Sublime in postmodernity was not simply natural but technological, cultural, and epistemic. For him, the Sublime resided in the unpresentable the fact that there is always something beyond representation, whether in art, science, or philosophy. The Sublime, in other words, persists wherever human thought encounters its limit.

Enter AI. What makes artificial intelligence uncanny is precisely this encounter with limit. Machines do not falter before vastness the way humans do. A neural network can process millions of data points in seconds; a generative model can absorb entire libraries of text without fatigue. Where Burke trembled before the storm and Kant's imagination collapsed before infinity, AI is untroubled. Vastness is its natural medium. Scale is not terror but infrastructure.

Yet for us, as scholars, the confrontation with AI becomes another scene of the Sublime. We find ourselves dwarfed by the speed, scale, and opacity of machine processes. The "black box" nature of deep learning that sense that no one fully understands how an algorithm arrives at its decisions mirrors the obscurity Burke found so

central to the Sublime. There is both awe and dread in the realisation that something built by human hands has exceeded the grasp of its makers. The Sublime has shifted: no longer the storm at sea, but the storm of computation.

This brings us to the academy. Scholarship has long been premised on finitude: the slow work of reading, interpreting, writing. To be a scholar was, in some sense, to wrestle with limits to read what could be read, to annotate, to argue. The Sublime marked the horizon of this work: the recognition that no individual could master all knowledge, that interpretation must proceed in fragments. The library itself was a kind of Sublime object: vast, ordered, yet inexhaustible.

What AI threatens or promises is the collapse of this horizon. A machine that can process an archive in its entirety and summarise patterns risks eliminating the very experience of finitude that defined the scholar's encounter with knowledge. The danger is not simply that machines will replace scholars, but that they will reconfigure the terms of scholarship itself. If the Sublime is the encounter with limit, what happens when the limit shifts from human finitude to machinic opacity?

This question sets the stage for the debate that follows. If we understand the Sublime as the experience of awe, terror, and transcendence at the boundaries of human capacity, then AI is not merely a tool within scholarship but a transformation of the conditions of scholarship itself. The Sublime persists, but its object has changed. Where once the horizon was nature or infinity, now it is the algorithm, the dataset, the incomprehensible flow of machine reasoning. To grasp this shift is to recognise that the philosophical inheritance of Burke, Kant, and Lyotard remains vital. The Sublime is not obsolete; it is being reconfigured in the academy under the sign of AI.

AI as Research Assistant, Colleague, or Rival

If the philosophical lens of the Sublime reveals AI as an overwhelming horizon of scale, the practical lens of scholarship forces us to confront a more immediate reality: AI is already in the academy, and it is transforming the daily labour of researchers. To understand its impact, we must resist caricature. AI is neither the miraculous oracle that its enthusiasts proclaim nor the apocalyptic menace that its detractors fear. Rather, it is a tool whose consequences depend on the forms of knowledge it encounters and the communities that wield it.

In the sciences, the case for AI is relatively straightforward. Research in physics, biology, and medicine increasingly depends on data sets of staggering size: the sequencing of genomes, the imaging of galaxies, the modelling of climate systems. Human cognition alone cannot hope to parse such scales. Here, AI functions as an indispensable prosthesis of the mind. Algorithms detect patterns invisible to the unaided researcher, flag correlations across domains, and generate hypotheses that would otherwise remain buried in statistical noise. A cancer researcher can deploy AI to sift through millions of molecular combinations in search of promising therapies. An astrophysicist can train a neural network to classify galaxies more efficiently than a graduate student chained to a microscope. In these cases, AI is not simply an

assistant but a collaborator: it extends the reach of the human into realms of complexity previously inaccessible.

The humanities, however, confront AI from a different angle. Humanities scholarship has never been about scale alone. While digital humanities projects have long embraced computational tools for text mining, topic modelling, or corpus analysis, the central value of the humanities lies not in detection but in interpretation. A historian may analyse a thousand pamphlets from the French Revolution, but the task is not merely to categorise themes. It is to contextualise them, to interpret their meanings, to weave fragments into a narrative that bears ethical and cultural significance. A literary critic may note recurring motifs across Shakespeare's plays, but the critical act lies in teasing out resonance, contradiction, irony—the subtleties of meaning that resist quantification.

Here, the promise of AI is more ambiguous. On the one hand, AI can democratize access to the humanities. Multilingual models allow scholars to cross linguistic boundaries, reading texts once inaccessible. Tools for summarisation and pattern recognition can accelerate archival work, surfacing connections that might otherwise remain invisible. For graduate students facing the daunting task of surveying vast secondary literature, AI can map intellectual landscapes in days rather than months.

But what is gained in speed may be lost in depth. AI-generated summaries risk flattening nuance, transforming the rich thicket of scholarly debate into a field of banal generalities. Worse, AI models trained on existing scholarship may recycle its blind spots and biases, reinforcing the very exclusions that humanistic inquiry has laboured to critique. A search for feminist perspectives on medieval philosophy might yield a neat list of "themes" while missing the silences, erasures, and archival absences that feminist scholars have painstakingly uncovered. The machine can imitate the surface of interpretation, but it cannot perform the ethical labour of attending to silence.

This tension has produced divergent reactions among scholars. Some embrace AI as a provocation, a kind of interlocutor that unsettles their assumptions. A philosopher might feed Kant's Critique of Judgment into a model to see what patterns of language emerge, not to replace close reading but to supplement it. A literary theorist might test whether AI-generated metaphors can spark fresh interpretations. In such cases, AI becomes less a rival than a partner a foil against which human creativity sharpens itself.

Others, however, view AI as an existential threat to the craft of scholarship. For them, research is not merely about efficiency but about the slow formation of judgment. To outsource this process to machines is to hollow out the very identity of the scholar. If AI can generate a competent literature review in minutes, what becomes of the graduate seminar, where students once learned to synthesise arguments through the patient work of annotation and comparison? If AI can draft fluent paragraphs of prose, what becomes of the struggle through which scholars clarify their own thinking?

The anxiety is not new. Every major technological shift in knowledge production has provoked similar fears. When the printing press appeared, humanists worried that the flood of books would overwhelm

discernment. When calculators entered classrooms, educators feared that students would lose the ability to think numerically. In each case, the tool redefined the boundaries of intellectual labour but did not abolish it. The same may prove true of AI. But the scale is different. Unlike the printing press, which multiplied access to existing knowledge, AI simulates the very process of generating knowledge itself. It does not merely transmit but appears to produce. This is why it feels less like an assistant and more like a rival.

Indeed, the metaphor of rivalry is difficult to escape. AI's fluency in scholarly prose unsettles because it encroaches on a domain once thought distinctly human: the articulation of ideas in language. Scholars are trained not only to think but to write, to give shape to thought through syntax, rhythm, and argument. When AI produces paragraphs that mimic this fluency, the line between authentic scholarship and synthetic pastiche blurs. The fear is not that machines will write badly, but that they will write well enough to be mistaken for us.

Yet rivalry is not destiny. The more productive stance may be to think of AI as an unruly colleague—one whose contributions are often surprising, sometimes misguided, and always in need of interpretation. A graduate student who leans too heavily on AI-generated notes will soon discover their hollowness when pressed to defend an argument. A researcher who treats machine summaries as gospel will miss the contradictions that animate genuine debate. AI may accelerate the scaffolding of scholarship, but it cannot substitute for the interpretive act itself. In this sense, the true rival of the scholar is not the machine but the temptation of intellectual laziness.

What emerges, then, is a paradox. AI is both indispensable and inadequate. It extends the scholar's reach into data and scale, yet it threatens to flatten the subtlety of humanistic interpretation. It produces fluent prose, yet it lacks judgment. It promises efficiency, yet it risks eroding the very practices through which knowledge has traditionally been formed. To navigate this paradox requires neither uncritical embrace nor outright rejection, but a more nuanced negotiation: to use AI as a tool, to recognise it as a provocation, and to resist the temptation to treat it as a replacement.

The university, long accustomed to slow revolutions, now faces a technological acceleration that mirrors the very Sublime it studies. The challenge is not only to incorporate AI into research but to reflect critically on what kind of scholarship we wish to preserve. If the scholar is more than a processor of data—if scholarship is also an ethical, interpretive, and creative act—then AI may serve less as a rival than as a mirror. It reveals with uncomfortable clarity which parts of our labour are mechanical and which remain irreducibly human.

The Student and the Machine: Pedagogy in Crisis

If researchers confront AI as a collaborator or rival, students encounter it in an even more intimate way. The classroom is where the promises and perils of artificial intelligence collide most visibly, because here the stakes are not only intellectual but formative. What is endangered is not just the production of scholarship, but the cultivation of

persons the slow, often difficult, transformation by which a student becomes a thinker.

Universities have long relied on writing as the crucible of learning. The essay, the research paper, the dissertation these are not merely instruments of evaluation but practices through which students are trained to think. To write is to wrestle with material, to order it, to confront the limits of one's understanding. Writing is slow, recursive, and often frustrating, but it is precisely in that friction that thought takes shape. As Jacques Derrida once remarked, writing is not an external transcription of thought but its very condition: we write not because we already know, but because the act of writing makes knowledge possible.

AI unsettles this formation. When a machine can generate a competent draft in seconds, the temptation is obvious. A student facing a deadline, pressed by work or personal commitments, may find relief in the fluency of a chatbot's prose. A non-native speaker may turn to AI not merely for grammar correction but for entire paragraphs. Even conscientious students may experiment, using AI to outline, brainstorm, or rephrase. In each case, the act of writing is displaced. The slow struggle is outsourced. The crucible of thought cools prematurely.

This is why professors speak of a pedagogical crisis. It is not simply that students may cheat. Plagiarism, after all, has always existed. The difference is that AI undermines the very process of intellectual formation. When writing becomes mere prompting when the essay is reduced to a command and a response the educational encounter risks collapse. A degree becomes a certificate of machine fluency rather than human judgment.

But the story is not so simple. For some students, AI represents not a shortcut but an opening. Students with learning disabilities, who struggle with the mechanics of composition, may find in AI a prosthesis that levels the playing field. International students navigating the challenges of academic English can use AI to refine their expression, enabling their ideas to reach the page without being distorted by linguistic hurdles. In such cases, AI is not a betrayal of learning but an aid to access. It democratizes participation in the academy, widening the circle of voices that can be heard.

This ambivalence mirrors a larger pattern in the history of education. Each new technology chalkboards, typewriters, calculators, the internet has provoked fears that students will lose the skills proper to their discipline. Yet in each case, what has mattered is not the tool itself but the pedagogy surrounding it. A calculator in a classroom that still demands mental arithmetic is indeed a threat; but a calculator in a pedagogy that emphasises conceptual reasoning can be liberatory. Similarly, AI need not abolish learning, but it will require universities to rethink what forms of learning matter most.

Some institutions have responded with prohibition. Policies banning AI-generated text proliferate, backed by detection software that claims to identify machine writing. Yet these tools are unreliable, prone to false positives that risk punishing students unjustly. More importantly, prohibition alone cannot address the underlying transformation. Students will continue to use AI outside the

classroom, and no policing regime can fully contain it. The ban may protect the sanctity of assessment, but it does little to prepare students for a world in which AI is ubiquitous.

Other institutions, recognising this, are experimenting with integration. Some professors ask students to use AI in their assignments but to do so critically. A history course might require students to generate an AI summary of a primary text, then critique its omissions and inaccuracies. A literature seminar might ask students to compare AI-generated interpretations of a poem with their own, discussing what is missing from the machine's analysis. In these contexts, AI becomes less a threat than a foil: a partner in dialogue whose very limitations sharpen the student's critical awareness.

The pedagogical challenge, then, is twofold. First, to preserve those aspects of education that cannot be outsourced critical thinking, ethical judgment, creative interpretation. Second, to teach students how to engage with AI reflectively, neither fetishising its power nor ignoring its presence. Just as literacy once required learning not only how to read but how to read critically, so AI literacy will require learning how to use the machine without being used by it.

There is, however, a deeper anxiety beneath these debates: the fear that AI erodes the moral dimension of education. For centuries, the university has not only transmitted knowledge but also shaped character. The struggle of writing, the patience of research, the discipline of revision—these were more than academic skills. They were habits of the self, ways of cultivating attention, humility, and perseverance. To outsource this struggle to a machine is not just to change the mechanics of learning but to alter the moral formation of the student. A generation trained to prompt rather than to labour risks becoming clever but shallow, fluent but untested.

Yet one must be careful not to romanticise struggle for its own sake. Educational labour has often been unequally distributed, with marginalised students bearing heavier burdens. The sheer labour of mastering academic English, of navigating archives without support, of balancing study with precarious work—these struggles are not inherently ennobling. For some, AI may offer not laziness but liberation. It can strip away drudgery and allow students to focus on the conceptual heart of their studies. The question, then, is how to distinguish between the struggle that forms character and the struggle that enforces inequality.

This is where the metaphor of the Sublime reenters. For Burke and Kant, the Sublime was not about comfort but about confrontation with limit. Education, too, has always been about limits—the limit of what we know, the limit of our patience, the limit of our skill. To learn is to encounter these limits and to grow by wrestling with them. If AI removes every obstacle, education risks becoming flat, comfortable, devoid of awe. But if AI is positioned as a partner in the encounter with limit something that can accelerate, provoke, but also mislead then the Sublime dimension of education may persist. The student is still humbled, still confronted with the vastness of knowledge, but now in dialogue with the opacity of the machine.

The crisis of pedagogy, then, is also an

opportunity. Universities can respond either by defending old forms against invasion, or by reimagining pedagogy around the presence of AI. The former risks nostalgia; the latter demands courage. What must be preserved is not the sanctity of the essay as a genre, nor the exclusivity of traditional skills, but the core of education itself: the formation of minds capable of judgment, interpretation, and ethical responsibility. These are precisely the capacities that AI cannot automate.

In this sense, the presence of AI in the classroom is itself a test of the university. It forces us to ask what education is for. Is it the transmission of information, that machines can now perform more efficiently? Or is it the cultivation of judgment, imagination, and moral responsibility—capacities that emerge only through human struggle? The answer to that question will determine whether AI becomes the ruin of pedagogy or its renewal.

Artists, Writers, and the AI Sublime: Creative Resistance and Appropriation

If scholars worry about the erosion of pedagogy, artists and writers face a parallel crisis: the destabilisation of creativity itself. For centuries, art has been conceived as the expression of human interiority, the unique voice of an individual consciousness. To paint, to write, to compose—these were acts through which the self-became visible. The arrival of AI unsettles this paradigm. Suddenly, machines can generate images in the style of Van Gogh, stories in the voice of Borges, and melodies reminiscent of Debussy. What, then, becomes of the artist when the machine imitates fluency, when style is no longer tethered to subjectivity?

The reactions from creative communities have been diverse, oscillating between rejection and appropriation, fear and fascination. The painter Kara Walker, when asked about AI-generated art, dismissed it as "an echo chamber of images, with no blood in them" (Walker, 2023). For her, art is inseparable from lived experience, from history, from trauma. To strip away that context is to produce only surface, an aesthetic without depth. Similarly, the novelist Margaret Atwood has warned that AI threatens to reduce literature to a "parody of itself," a machine that can rearrange tropes but cannot invent the pressure of necessity that drives genuine storytelling.

Others, however, see in AI a provocation. The conceptual artist Hito Steyerl describes AI not as a threat but as "a mirror that shows us the training data of our culture" (Steyerl, 2022). If AI images appear derivative, it is because they expose the derivative tendencies already present in visual culture. In this sense, AI art is not the death of originality but the revelation of its fragility. Writers, too, have experimented with AI as a collaborator rather than an enemy. The poet Sasha Stiles describes herself as a "cyborg poet," using AI to extend the reach of her language, to generate metaphors that surprise her own imagination. For her, the machine is not a rival but a co-conspirator, destabilising authorship in productive ways.

This ambivalence surfaced vividly in the recent debate over the so-called "Ghibli art trend," in which AI tools were used to reimagine ordinary photographs in the style of Studio Ghibli films. On social media, the results were striking: street corners, family pets, and landscapes transformed

into scenes suffused with the whimsical melancholy of Hayao Miyazaki. But the backlash was equally fierce. Artists argued that the style had been scraped without consent, that the "Ghibli-ification" of the world cheapened the labour of animators who had spent decades perfecting the delicacy of line and colour. Critics lamented the flattening of style into a filter, the transformation of a rich artistic tradition into a digital meme.

What is at stake in such controversies is not merely aesthetics but labour, authorship, and ethics. For human artists, style is the product of years of practice, a lifetime of choices, influences, and accidents. For machines, style is a dataset. The moral difference is stark. When an AI mimics the brushstroke of a painter or the cadence of a writer, it does so without the struggle, without the vulnerability, without the existential risk of failure. This is why so many artists feel betrayed. As one anonymous illustrator wrote during the Ghibli debate: "My style is my life. To see it replicated without my consent is to feel my life hollowed out."

Yet history suggests that art has always absorbed new technologies with ambivalence. Photography was once denounced as a death blow to painting, but it eventually gave rise to new forms, from impressionism to conceptual art. Sampling in music was once dismissed as theft, but it became the foundation of hip-hop and electronic innovation. In each case, the anxiety of automation gave way to hybrid practices. AI may follow a similar trajectory: today experienced as theft, tomorrow absorbed as medium.

The philosophical question, however, remains sharper here than in earlier shifts. Photography captured reality, but it did not invent it. Sampling reassembled sound, but it did not generate new voices ex nihilo. AI, by contrast, appears to create. It produces text and images that did not exist before. Even if its creativity is derivative, the effect is uncanny. The machine is not simply a new tool but a new authorial presence. This is why artists often describe AI in the language of the Sublime: vast, impersonal, overwhelming. The machine's generative scale thousands of images in seconds contrasts painfully with the slowness of human craft. To confront this difference is to feel dwarfed, displaced, or even annihilated.

But the Sublime is not only terror; it is also possibility. Artists who embrace AI often do so because it forces them to reimagine authorship itself. If originality has always been a myth—if every artist is shaped by influence, by tradition, by unconscious borrowing then AI merely makes this dependence visible. The anxiety of the "stolen style" is not new; what is new is the scale and speed. In this sense, AI art may not abolish originality but democratise it, enabling anyone with a prompt to participate in the act of making. Whether this democratisation is liberatory or flattening depends on the structures that surround it: will AI become a tool for collective creativity, or a weapon for corporate homogenization?

Writers, too, wrestle with this ambivalence. For some, AI represents the nightmare of industrial literature: an endless flood of machine-written novels, indistinguishable in quality, optimised for algorithmic consumption. The novelist Zadie Smith has warned that such proliferation risks diluting the

very idea of literature as an art form. Yet for others, AI may become a stimulus. Jorge Luis Borges once imagined a library containing every possible book. AI, in its generative infinity, seems to approximate this fantasy. For a writer, the machine's strangeness may serve as a creative spark, a way of encountering language beyond one's habitual limits.

What is undeniable is that AI forces artists and writers to articulate what they value in their own practice. If the machine can generate fluent images and prose, then the worth of art must lie elsewhere: in the embodied act of making, in the lived context of expression, in the ethical claim of presence. Art becomes less about the product and more about the process, less about originality and more about authenticity. As the artist Jenny Holzer once remarked, "The work exists not because it is new but because I am here." In an era of machine fluency, that insistence on presence may be the most radical gesture of all.

Thus, the response of artists and writers to AI cannot be reduced to simple rejection or embrace. It is a negotiation, an ongoing struggle with the Sublime scale of the machine. Some will resist, defending the sanctity of human expression. Others will appropriate, bending AI toward new forms of collaboration. Many will oscillate between the two, alternately fearful and fascinated. In each case, however, the encounter with AI forces a reckoning with what art has always been: not the possession of originality but the practice of making meaning in the face of contingency.

The Sublime, Kant argued, confronts us with what exceeds our power, but it also awakens in us a recognition of our freedom—the capacity to respond, to imagine, to judge. Artists and writers today stand in precisely this position. The machine overwhelms, but it also provokes. It threatens to flatten creativity, but it also demands that we redefine it. To respond with fear alone is to be crushed; to respond with imagination is to reassert the irreducibility of the human.

Conclusion

If artists confront AI as a challenge to creativity and scholars encounter it as a disruption of pedagogy, the university as an institution now faces the question of survival. For centuries, the university has justified itself as a place where knowledge is transmitted, preserved, and advanced. Yet when machines can store, retrieve, and even generate knowledge at scales and speeds no human institution can match, what becomes of this mission? If the encyclopedia, the archive, and the textbook are all folded into the algorithms of a chatbot, why should students still gather in classrooms, why should scholars labour in libraries, and why should society support universities at all?

The temptation is to imagine a future in which AI simply replaces large portions of the academic enterprise. Why spend years training in legal research when a machine can summarise cases in seconds? Why labour over statistical models when AI can generate them instantly? Why require students to memorise facts when those facts can be retrieved with a prompt? In such a future, the university appears redundant: an expensive, slow, and outdated apparatus in an age of machine fluency.

But this view mistakes information for education. Universities have never been only about the storage and delivery of data. They are sites of interpretation, of dialogue, of critical encounter. Knowledge in the humanistic sense is not simply knowing that something is the case, but knowing how to make sense of it, to weigh its meaning, to connect it to values and responsibilities. AI can generate sentences, but it cannot care whether those sentences are true, just, or beautiful. It can produce arguments, but it cannot inhabit the consequences of believing them. It can simulate interpretation, but it cannot live with the ethical weight of decisions.

This is where the humanities regain their urgency. At a time when machines can replicate the mechanics of writing, calculation, and even analysis, the distinctive task of the humanities is to cultivate judgment—the ability to discern significance, to navigate ambiguity, to live responsibly with knowledge. Literature, philosophy, history, art: these disciplines train students to ask not only what is the case but why it matters, and to whom. AI does not abolish this work; it makes it indispensable.

In this light, the challenge for the university is not to defend obsolete skills but to reorient pedagogy around capacities that machines cannot automate. Critical thinking, ethical reasoning, creative imagination, and the interpretation of human experience these must become the core. To continue assigning essays without acknowledging AI's presence is to cling to nostalgia. But to abandon writing altogether is to surrender too quickly. The future university must instead teach students how to write with AI, how to test its outputs, how to critique its biases, and how to use it without being used. This requires not less writing but more reflective writing, writing that stages a dialogue between human and machine.

Ethics will be central to this renewal. AI is not a neutral tool but a product of corporate power, trained on data scraped from billions of users without consent. It reflects and amplifies the biases of its training material, often reproducing stereotypes or erasing marginalised voices. A university that integrates AI uncritically risks becoming complicit in these injustices. The humanities, with their tradition of critique, are essential here. They remind us that technologies are not inevitable but political, not neutral but situated. To teach AI literacy is therefore not only to teach technical fluency but to cultivate ethical awareness: to ask who benefits, who is harmed, whose voices are amplified, whose are silenced.

The metaphor of the Sublime returns once more. Just as the eighteenth-century Sublime confronted the individual with the overwhelming forces of nature mountains, storms, oceans so AI confronts the contemporary subject with the overwhelming scale of data and computation. In both cases, the initial response is awe, even terror. But for Kant, the Sublime was ultimately a recognition of human freedom: confronted with forces that dwarf us, we discover that our dignity lies not in power but in judgment. So too with AI. We cannot match its speed or scale, but we can judge, interpret, and decide in ways no machine can. The renewal of the humanities lies precisely in this recognition: not in competing with AI on its terms, but in articulating

the distinctiveness of human freedom.

Practically, this renewal may take several forms. Classrooms may shift from the production of finished essays to the documentation of process, asking students to record how they used (or resisted using) AI in their work. Research may emphasise collaboration across disciplines, bringing together computer science and philosophy, engineering and ethics, literature and machine learning. Curricula may expand to include courses on the history and philosophy of technology, on digital literacy, and on the politics of algorithms. And above all, universities may need to reclaim their role as spaces of dialogue—places where students learn not only from machines but from each other, in the unpredictable, unautomated exchange of conversation.

There will, of course, be resistance. Some will insist that the humanities are already marginalised, that they cannot survive further erosion. Others will argue that embracing AI simply accelerates the corporatisation of the university, turning education into another service mediated by technology. These fears are not unfounded. Yet they also risk missing the opportunity. If the humanities have long been accused of irrelevance, AI now makes them urgent. In a world where machines can generate fluent nonsense, the ability to discern sense from nonsense is no longer optional it is survival.

One might even say that the humanities are themselves entering a Sublime moment. Overwhelmed by the machine, they confront their limits. But in that very confrontation lies the possibility of renewal. The task ahead is not to compete with AI as if it were a rival student or scholar, but to recognise it as a new condition of thought. Just as the printing press reshaped learning, just as the internet reconfigured access, so AI now forces us to reimagine what it means to know, to teach, to create. The humanities are not displaced but redefined.

To return, finally, to the artists and writers: their anxiety is not merely aesthetic but institutional. They sense, as scholars do, that AI threatens to hollow out the conditions of meaning. Yet they also sense that art and literature survive not because they are efficient, but because they are human. The same is true for the university. If it continues to defend itself as a dispenser of information, it will lose. But if it insists on its deeper vocation as a place where human freedom is cultivated in the face of overwhelming forces then AI may yet serve not as a death knell but as a catalyst.

In this sense, the future university must be neither nostalgic nor technocratic. It must be courageous. It must dare to rethink its practices, to embrace the discomfort of transformation, to preserve what is essential while letting go of what is obsolete. Only then will it remain faithful to its task: not the replication of knowledge, but the cultivation of judgment.

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