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New Writing

The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmnw20

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To cite this article: Iona Gilburt (22 Jun 2023): A machine in the loop: the peculiar intervention of artificial intelligence in writer's block, New Writing, DOI: 10.1080/14790726.2023.2223176

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2223176

NEW WRITING
https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2223176

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A machine in the loop: the peculiar intervention of artificial intelligence in writer's block

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence is changing how we can choose to resolve writing challenges. Large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT are readily accessible to generate text effortlessly. This paper explores the human-AI relationship when generative AI is used to assist a writer suffering from writer's block. Research shows that talking to others is an effective strategy for blocked writers. This other no longer needs to be a human. I examine what happens when generative AI is brought into the writing loop: the nonlinear process of writing and rewriting a creative piece. The film *Adaptation* (2002. Directed by Spike Jonze, Performance by Nicolas Cage. Meryl Streep, and Chris Cooper. Columbia), written by Charlie Kaufman, is used as a case study of writer's block to illustrate several complexities of the disorder and to theorise potential openings and limitations for the use of AI. Through the film, writer's block is also explored as having a twin pathology of hypergraphia. Writing with AI is seen to mimic peculiarities of creative writing that include projecting one's inner voice and seeking a false self. In the example of *Adaptation*, one ultimately comes to appreciate too that suffering through a block unaided can propel a writer to make bold decisions and test the limits of human creativity.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 21 February 2023
Accepted 4 June 2023

KEYWORDS
Artificial intelligence; generative AI; writer's block; hypergraphia; *Adaptation*; Charlie Kaufman

Introducing the loop

The article you are reading was written by a sole human without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Since generative AI models like OpenAI's ChatGPT are now readily available to produce text – just enter a prompt and these models conjure lines of natural language on a once blank page – it seems that asserting one's AI-affiliation could become commonplace, particularly as news surfaces of prominent journals like *Science* and *Nature* prohibiting the use of AI-generated text. Large language models (LLMs) have already been used to write articles, novels, poems, web content, and computer code, to name only a few tasks. Admittedly, my opening disclaimer asks for some faith from the reader because if there were elements of AI writing here, they would be difficult to discern. Even in very specialised fields this is becoming a problem. In the *Science* editorial 'ChatGPT is Fun, but not an Author,' which announces text from ChatGPT will be treated as plagiarism by the journal, H. Holden Thorp (2023) reports on a study in which 'abstracts created by ChatGPT were

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submitted to academic reviewers, who only caught 63% of these fakes.' The growing uncertainty underpinning human authorship is only one of the many ways the mere presence of generative AI is changing the domain of writing.

Such shifts in academic and creative writing disciplines will need to be navigated by writers, publishers, journals, and readers in their own contexts. Except in cases where institutions develop targeted AI policies, the *if*, *when*, and *how* of using generative AI models will often be left to individual decision. In opening a conversation onto the vast changes brought about by generative AI, one cannot start everywhere, just somewhere. This article is a gesture towards understanding this evolving human-AI relationship by considering how generative AI could assist in relieving the very human phenomenon of writer's block.

The term 'writer's block' was coined circa 1950 by Edmund Bergler after he spent nearly two decades studying blocked writers. Bergler received much criticism initially and defended his theory that it was a 'neurotic inhibition of productivity in creative writers' (43) by refuting 'ten fallacious arguments' popular at the time, which included such dismissive assertions as blocked writers are merely lazy (46). The concept of writer's block has since become an accepted phenomenon and is treated respectfully by researchers, medical professionals, and prolific writers like Toni Morrison and Stephen King, among others. Sarah J. Ahmed and C. Dominik Güss (2022) define writer's block as 'a period during which a competent writer cannot produce new material' (339). The inclusion of 'competent' in the definition preempts the type of dismissive criticism Bergler faced. Alice W. Flaherty (2005), writing from a neurological perspective, similarly defines the block as a mental state in which a writer cannot 'write despite being intellectually capable of doing so' (80). Flaherty also stresses that the block causes suffering. Sources of the sensation of block vary but can include issues such as self-criticism, a 'strangled feeling of inarticulateness,' an experience 'of ideas coming faster than words,' an inability to express oneself, or a feeling one has nothing to say (Flaherty 82). Unlike a condition such as agraphia, the 'loss of the skill to write' often caused by stroke, writer's block tends to be restricted to a specific project (Flaherty 83). Ahmed and Güss suggest a block can last from hours to years, and they identify causes as being either physiological, motivational, cognitive, or behavioural (or a combination of these). In their assessment of four strategies to alleviate writer's block – such as taking a break, switching to another project, forcing oneself to write, and speaking to another – Ahmed and Güss found that for the participants of their study 'the most effective solution overall was discussing ideas with others' (352). A question we can now ask with the advent of generative AI is whether that other needs to be a human.

Already in 2018, Clark et al. wrote of using 'machine-in-the-loop systems' to assist humans struggling with writer's block (cognitive inertia) by designing '[a] collaborator who provides suggestions and points out new directions,' an approach they consider 'a form of psychological creativity' (329). The researchers developed prototype systems to help with story writing and with slogan writing. In 2021, a study by Duval et al. modified one of ChatGPT's antecedents Generative Pre-trained Transformer 2 (GPT-2)[1] into '[an] open-source writing tool that can help creative authors break *Writer's Block*, by proposing novel paragraphs' (2). Shakeeb A. M. Mukhtar and Pushkar S. Joglekar published a paper in 2021 exploring the use of neural networks in composing Hindi and Urdu poetry. They proposed that '[their] project demonstrates a way to overcome writers' block by suggesting machine generated prompts to the users' (14) and found that the poetry

outputs were 'acceptable by domain experts' (15). In designing the prompt system, they were careful to include specific checks against plagiarism from the corpus used to train the model.

These earlier experiments show an interest in designing tools to assist creativity rather than asking a machine to take over the task of writing (veering into plagiarism); they are attempts at bringing a machine into the writing loop (to use the terminology of Clark et al.). The language model becomes part of the nonlinear process of creative writing that comprises numerous starts, stops, edits, and rewrites – that cyclical fashioning and refashioning of a creative product. While the above studies focus on the efficacy of the technology, I would like to examine the more personal effects of bringing a machine into the loop. As Nuno Amado (2022) points out, there are psychological stakes to writing: 'The risks of writing are not only … that in doing it we are changing our relationship with ourselves, but also that writing can change our relationship with others, whether living or dead, real or not' (102). The machine is entering a psychologically charged loop, particularly in the case of the turmoil brought by writer's block. Generative AI has also, Josh Dzieza (2022) expands, developed far beyond other writing tools, and interreacting with these models can stir emotions because.

> … using AI feels different. It's apparent in the way writers talk about it, which is often in the language of collaboration and partnership. Maybe it's the fact that GPT-3 takes instruction and responds in language that makes it hard not to imagine it as an entity communicating thoughts. Or maybe it's because, unlike a dictionary, its responses are unpredictable. Whatever the reason, AI writing has entered an uncanny valley between ordinary tool and autonomous storytelling machine. This ambiguity is part of what makes the current moment both exciting and unsettling.

Dzieza fittingly summons the enduring concept of the uncanny valley in articulating our zeitgeist, which vacillates between enthusiasm at AI's potentials and fears of its harms. Roboticist Masahiro Mori invented the term in 1970 in a paper advising engineers against the desire to build robots too akin to humans in appearance. Mori theorised that one's affinity to the subject (the robot, puppet, or toy) increases as human likeness increases, yet when the likeness is too great, one is plunged into a feeling of profound eeriness (the uncanny valley). Mori advocates holding back, suggesting one can 'create a safe level of affinity by deliberately pursuing a nonhuman design' (100). The essay has found many applications beyond robotics, and it is interesting to imagine what might happens if an AI were to write at the level of an accomplished human author. In Mori's iteration, there is death in the pit of the valley, represented by the figure of the zombie. Perhaps supplanting human writers with AI would render us like this animated corpse, mumbling simple prompts and gurgles while the machine has usurped the fluency of prose. Fortunately, we are not yet in the lower depths of the valley and still have room to maneuver in its strange space. A look at writer's block might complicate the relation of likeness to affinity further when, as will be suggested, the eccentricities of AI align with the peculiarities of creative writing.

To undertake this exploration of AI's entry into the world of writer's block, I will use the film *Adaptation* (2002) as a case study. Directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation* is an intense psychological journey into writer's block. Kaufman had originally been approached to adapt Susan Orlean's non-fiction work *The Orchid*

Thief (1998) into a film script. The book centres on horticulturalist John Laroche, arrested along with members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida Dennis Osceola, Vinson Osceola, and Russell Bowers for poaching rare orchids. *The Orchid Thief* delves into case histories of orchid hunting and explores themes of obsession and disappointment. Finding himself unable to adapt the book, Kaufman instead wrote a screenplay about himself struggling to adapt the book, even inventing a fictitious twin brother as an interlocutor for the film version of himself. *Adaptation* is a tour de force of writer's block that with all its layers and narrative chaos finds itself well placed to be in conversation with generative AI. *Adaptation* evinces the space forming for generative AI to intercede, as well as the writerly neuroses that might find themselves compatible with generative AI.

The unwritable

Apt to a discussion on AI and creativity, *Adaptation* chronicles the struggle of a writer torn between what he perceives as creative artifice and what he considers authenticity and originality. Before seeing Charlie, the viewer is introduced to his clamorous inner critic as the film's opening credits appear on a blank screen while his voice-over plays. Charlie's first soliloquy berates himself for not making changes to improve himself, from learning a foreign language to exercising and losing weight, bewailing that perhaps nothing would help and he would 'still be ugly though, nothing's going to change that.' Charlie's strong criticism of himself and of his writing is vocalised continually throughout the film. When Charlie has lunch with film executive Valerie to discuss adapting *The Orchid Thief,* he sweats profusely and emphasises that he does not want the story to be 'artificially plot driven,' asking, 'Why can't there be a movie simply about flowers?' When Valerie tries to suggest that Orlean and her subject Laroche could fall in love, Charlie stresses that he does not want to 'cram in sex or guns or car chases … or characters learning profound life lessons,' rejecting familiar Hollywood plot devices and tropes.

Unfortunately, this places him at an impasse when the book proves unadaptable on its own. The beautiful and meditative prose he loves is difficult to translate onto film. During a visit to his agent, Charlie whips out a review of Orlean's book and quotes passages as evidence he cannot complete this project: while Laroche is a great character 'there's not nearly enough of him to fill a book' so Orlean 'digresses in long passages' and 'no narrative unites these passages.' Charlie declares, 'I can't structure this' and it 'has no story,' to which his agent suggests he 'make one up,' reminding Charlie of his forte for invention. Charlie after all wrote the unique and successful screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* (1999), a story about a man who finds a portal into the head of a famous actor, which made Kaufman 'the go-to oddball screenwriter at the time' (Child 2010, 58). Charlie, however, feels uncomfortable and wants to remain true to Orlean's material. The long-standing anxiety in book-to-film adaptation of treating the source material respectfully becomes entwined paradoxically with Charlie's belief there is something novel in pursuing the project on the terms he laid out for Valerie. He knows he wants to tell this story, but does not know how to proceed. He sits at his electric typewriter staring at a familiar writer's block trope: the formidable blank page. Charlie is in exactly the place where one would now be tempted to turn to generative AI. Just one prompt and the page can begin by itself.

Vauhini Vara saw the potential of using AI to write the unwritable back in 2021 when she began experimenting with GPT-3. Although initially apprehensive about what it could mean if AI were to replace herself and her husband, both professional writers, she was nonetheless drawn to it: 'I started to understand that what this technology was promising to do was to help people write what they couldn't figure out how to write on their own. And so I started thinking about what it was that I had never figured out how to write on my own' (2023). In the quiet of the night, Vara looked to GPT-3 for help in telling the true story of her sister's death, which she had been unable to write about for several years.

Vara's engagement with GPT-3, which would become nine short stories grouped under the title 'Ghosts,' (2021) began with her entering a simple prompt: 'My sister was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma when I was in my freshman year of high school and she was in her junior year.' The sentence was unassuming, the barebones of a tragedy, an outline that Vara could write without painful candour. Vara handed over her voice to the AI by writing the prompt in the first-person; the language model then continued the story, speaking as 'I,' attempting to predict what would follow. The first version it generated was a basic narrative with a happy ending. Seeing her story presented so inadequately then compelled Vara to extend the prompt and repeat the exercise. In the second iteration, she added 'I didn't understand then how serious a disease it was. But it was – serious. She died four years later. I thought I would die, too, of grief, but I did not' ('Ghosts'). Correcting the AI's initial misconception that this story would end in recovery meant Vara needed to be open. With each version, Vara's input grew more intimate. By the eighth version, Vara enters 582 words into the model and receives 742 from GPT-3. For the ninth story, Vara's prompt is 935 words long and GPT-3's contribution is only fifteen words. Writer and AI form a loop of writer prompting model, and model prompting writer. By asking an AI to tell the story poorly, Vara found a way to tell it properly.

Vara needed the impetus of a machine prompt to write, but there is something to be said in defence of allowing the natural evolution of a creative work (and a reason one might want to avoid generative AI). Look at the example of Neil Gaiman's award-winning young adult novel *The Graveyard Book* (2008). The idea for this story came when Gaiman was twenty-five years old, but he would only complete the novel when in his late forties. Watching his two-year-old son ride a tricycle among graveyard paths, Gaiman was struck by the idea of a child raised by dead people. He began the story but stopped, thinking, 'This is a better idea than I am a writer so I need to put this off' (Gaiman 2019). Gaiman met a story one day that would become something spectacular, but he needed to wait. There is a pleasing symmetry in the idea that he needed to grow up as a writer to tell this moving tale about growing up. Toni Morrison (1985) advises students not to write when they are blocked, saying, 'It's blocked because it ought to be blocked, because you haven't got it right now' (187). 'When I read a book,' Morrison stresses, 'I can always tell if the writer has written through a block. If he or she had just waited, it would have been better or different, or a little more natural. You can see the seams' (188). Morrison's 'seams' become almighty rock fractures in the case of *Adaptation* when Charlie writes himself into the story.

Charlie has no recourse to waiting. As his agent reminds him, to give the studio nothing after months of stringing them along would be career suicide. In the horticultural parlance of *The Orchid Thief*, Charlie opts for mutation (the artificial) over natural

evolution. Mutating seeds is something Laroche practices and boasts about excitedly, saying, 'You end up with some cool stuff and some ugly stuff and stuff no one has ever seen before and it's just great' (Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*, 18). In addition to strong external pressures compelling him to finish, Charlie has also placed his worth as a writer on achieving something with this project and, unlike a more straightforward case of writer's block, instead of writing nothing, Charlie's block is underpinned by hypergraphia. While Charlie seems a candidate for AI intervention (embracing mutation), in the context of hypergraphia, bringing a machine into the loop might not be efficacious.

Hypergraphia

In the poem 'Writer's Block,' Steve Evans (2015) presents the image of a bag of 'bits of words' (line 1) that 'say less' (line 3) and no longer need the writer, having formed '[a] smug support-group turned inward' (line 5). Writing about the block, he stumbles onto the problem of a word cabal: too many words, too little cooperation.

Flaherty opens this dimension onto writer's block with the hypothesis that 'hypergraphia – the medical term for the overpowering desire to write' is its twin pathology, suggesting that both 'arise from complicated abnormalities of the basic biological drive to communicate' (2). Hypergraphics have a strong motivation to write and find the writing very meaningful, though the material is not necessarily quality writing (24-25). Flaherty points out that with writer's block and hypergraphia 'the two brain states are [surprisingly] complementary without actually being opposites, which is why a writer can alternate between hypergraphia and block' (80). She uses the example of Oliver Sacks who, while writing *Uncle Tungsten*, experienced a 'high-output block,' writing about two million words for a book that would only end up being one hundred thousand long (84). Charlie too has a high output initially, and he comes to find it stifling. When he seeks advice from Robert McKee (played by Brian Cox), who tells him to start over and find a usable ending from Orlean's book, he exclaims desperately, 'I can't go back, I've got pages of false starts and wrong approaches.' Charlie's block manifests as maximum effort at stasis. We continually see him writing frenetically during *Adaptation*, though it is writing that goes nowhere, his mental energies channelled into an immovable morass.

The promise of generative AI is the promise of unlimited ideas, which could be a hindrance to a hypergraphic. A writer well placed to observe this problem is K. Allado-McDowell, who established the Artists + Machine Intelligence programme at Google AI and has worked with GPT-3 on several book projects. To the question of writer's block, Allado-McDowell responds:

> There is a kind of writer's block that can come with generativity too. If you don't have a deep structure for what you're trying to get out, or you don't have an image that you're driving toward, or you don't have something you're trying to understand, then the act of writing can just be automatic. … It's the same with generativity. You can generate endless amounts of text that isn't good or meaningful or useful to you in that moment. (Interview)

AI can become a deep dive into the hypergraphic aspects of a writer's block, generating text without providing a way to resolve a specific project. The machine then perpetuates the hypergraphic writing loop as a vicious cycle. How helpful would AI be to Charlie? Would generative AI just propel him to more false starts and ideas? It is unclear if AI

could yet provide the type of creative shift Charlie needs to structure his material, one he achieves with the decision to change the parameters of the adaptation dramatically and make himself a character in the script.

In a study of machines and creativity, Marcus Du Sautoy (2019) raises the question of whether *transformational creativity*, a term put forward by Margaret Boden, is suited to machine intervention. Charlie's resolution for his block would fall under this rubric comprising 'transformational moments [that] hinge on changing the rules of the game, or dropping a long-held assumption' (10). Du Sautoy asks, 'Could a computer initiate the kind of phase change that can move us into a new state? … Algorithms learn how to act based on the data presented to them. Doesn't this mean that they will always be condemned to producing more of the same?' (11). Writers often remark on the unpredictability of generative AI, yet the extent to which this can be pushed is still unclear. On the other hand, the real Charlie Kaufman's metareferential turn, Andreas Mahler observes (2011), is not unprecedented: 'Talking about what you are doing (instead of simply doing it) seems to have become increasingly fashionable throughout the last couple of decades. Talking about what you are *not* doing (*and doing it by talking about it*) probably even more so' (52). In other words, when one looks through the patterns in the literary dataset, the solution to *Adaptation* emerges. Yet this is not how Charlie found his solution. It came to him unbidden in a moment of panicked epiphany, dramatised in the film when Charlie's voice-over, after another series of self-criticisms, realises, 'It's like the only thing that I'm qualified to write about is myself.' Making *Adaptation* about the writing process was only half of the solution, only half of the film. To find an ending, Charlie would need to split himself into two.

Uncanny selves

While Flaherty is cautious of pathologizing elements of creativity lest they be taken as abnormal brain states (47), she makes a compelling argument for placing certain propensities of creative writers on a continuum with several symptoms of mental illness. Many of us are familiar with depictions of the muse as an external presence that brings inspiration. Stephen King's reflections on writer's block (2006), for example, is an elaborate tale of the muse as a fickle, flea-ridden little animal that visits an open clearing where the writer waits. It is 'the lyric version,' he explains, embracing the peculiarity of his expression, 'It's not untrue, just lyrical. It's told as if the writing were separate from the writer. It's probably not, but it often feels that way … ' (2). Flaherty sees this externalisation as akin to how our daily inner voice 'can get more foreign simply by becoming more intense,' even to the point of seeming 'alien to the listener' (239). While not quite pathological hallucination, 'the similarities do make this spectrum of relations to one's inner voice blurred' (Flaherty 240). *Adaptation* dramatises this phenomenon through voice-over, simulating the illusion of hearing the inner voice as an importunate noise drowning out the external world. With writing, we expect to be in conversation with voices emanating from ourselves that are nonetheless somewhat other.

The desire to speak with an AI could represent the projection of a desire to hear this voice more clearly. Flaherty writes about her personal experience of hypergraphia during postpartum psychosis and recalls a period when her inner voice became too clamorous and impacted her ability to write. Taking a neuroleptic medication helped by

'[bringing] the voice back into a range where [she] could listen to it,' and her writing resumed its flow (241). Flaherty's problem was medical and needed clinical intervention, but in a nonclinical context, where the writer's block is not medical, perhaps interacting with generative AI could provide a similar type of relief, assisting the blocked writer by shifting the conversation away from the inner voice and handing it over to the quieter machine. If the cause of the block is due to lack of confidence, however, this could aggravate the problem. Amado points out that 'if the writing block is derived from the fear of emptiness, of having nothing original to say,' then '[a] bad solution is plagiarism, the false self of writing' (103). Letting another write is a reaffirmation that one is empty. While machine-in-the-loop approaches to working with AI are not intended as plagiarism, there is a sense of dabbling in a 'false self of writing.' Like the continuum of voices, there is a continuum of externalising and alienating oneself in the writing process.

Adaptation suggests using a 'false self of writing' when the true self is floundering. The decision of the real Kaufman to write himself into the screenplay led him to create twin Brother Donald, who decides to become a screenwriter. As a writer, Donald is the antithesis of Charlie. He attends a three-day writing seminar and wholeheartedly embraces the rule-based instruction that Charlie feels is dangerous because, as he tells Donald, 'a writer should always have that goal [of writing something new], writing is a journey into the unknown.' Donald welcomes the generic, the formulaic, and produces a screenplay about a serial killer with multiple personality disorder – a film that to Charlie is cliché upon Hollywood cliché. Unlike Charlie, Donald has no inner voice holding him back, and his screenplay comes together seemingly effortlessly. Donald becomes the device for completing *Adaptation* when Charlie hands over control of the narrative to him. After Charlie is too nervous to speak to Susan Orlean, he asks Donald to take his place and interview her. From this point, the story races forward and brings in all the elements Charlie refused to include initially: drugs, sex, and even car chases. The viewer enters a narrative storyline that Donald may have invented. In the fictionalised version of Orlean's story, Donald and Charlie follow Orlean to Florida and discover she is having an affair with Laroche, who extracts an opioid-like drug from orchids. They catch Charlie spying on them and take him to the swamp to kill him. In the final chase sequence, Donald is shot and then killed in a car crash, Laroche is attacked by an alligator, and Orlean and Charlie learn profound life lessons. The character of Donald seems to give the real Charlie Kaufman licence to make up a story with Orlean's material. Donald is needed for this project alone and then dispatched before the end.

The use of Donald recalls how Vara too handed her story over to a false writing self, asking GPT-3 to narrate her sister's passing. As Vara was compelled to be more open with the model, she found that the AI was becoming a version of herself, saying, 'the more I gave this algorithm, the more it was able to essentially mimic my voice and even my emotions, the way I was really feeling. And when it started to do that … it was really spooky for me' (2023). The real Charlie Kaufman split himself into Charlie and Donald and was thus able to exit the project with his whole self intact (since both characters remained projections of himself). Vara too could extract herself from the writing loop as she was telling an autobiographical story. The AI mimicked her voice but ultimately the truth of the experience resided in her, in what she had lived.

There is a danger, however, that in writing with AI, one could lose one's voice. Allado-McDowell intentionally pursued this risk when writing the novella *Amor Cringe* (2022a)

with GPT-3. Whereas their previous collaboration with GPT-3 *Pharmako-AI* (2020) was a series of conversations, with each voice kept apart, for a fiction project Allado-McDowell needed a more unified narrative perspective:

> Rather than being really specific and clear about whose voice is whose, through typography, this involved a process of mixing and blending voices: forgetting where things originated. That's what I was experimenting with: immersing myself in that way and not worrying about attribution. (Allado-McDowell 2022c)

While Allado-McDowell's literary experiment was conscious, other writers such as Jennifer Lepp have found themselves losing grasp of their authorial voice inadvertently. Dzieza shares Lepp's experience in the context of how online platforms are changing publishing. Lepp, a writer who publishes through Amazon's publishing arm Kindle Direct, is under increasing pressure to produce content or lose followers to other authors. She assigns herself forty-nine days to write and edit a new book. Struggling with this time constraint, Lepp turned to using Sudowrite, one of many AI writing programmes built on the GPT-3 model. Lepp noticed a change when she was no longer dreaming about her characters and thinking about them as often, something that had always been part of the immersive experience of writing for her. She then found herself losing the moral thread she had always tried to weave into her narratives, recounting to Dzieza, 'It didn't feel like mine anymore. It was very uncomfortable to look back over what I wrote and not really feel connected to the words or the ideas.' Lepp eventually found a way to write with AI, needing it to circumvent the fatigue that comes from her demanding writing practice. 'I don't get as deeply into the writing as I did before,' she reflects, 'and yet, I found a balance where I still feel very connected to the story, and I still feel it's wholly mine.' Lepp's experience suggests a tradeoff of depth for higher output, a highly personal compromise.

To lose oneself in the AI may conversely be the very reason one turns to these tools. Flaherty notes that treating the muse as an external presence can be considered as a way for an author to deny responsibility either for shocking ideas or for pursuing a writing path when it is considered socially unacceptable (239). The false self of AI could also be a way to hide. Allado-McDowell's process with *Amor Cringe* highlights how using AI can be employed to circumvent chagrin. The novella pursues the phenomenon of 'cringe,' which 'refers to behaviour online and IRL [in real life] that makes an observer cringe in secondhand embarrassment' (Allado-McDowell 2022b). The narrator of the novel is a DJ living in the basement of a TikTok house populated by several 'TikTok boys,' adolescents of unspecified age who party, shoot videos for TikTok, and occasionally sleep with one another. The narrator flounders through drug rehabilitation and humiliating relationships, including an affair with a married pastor. In addition to using embarrassing material, Allado-McDowell explains how the writing process in general is inherently embarrassing: 'What reads well in a first draft doesn't always read well the next day. In that sense, writing is a very cringe experience' (2022b). Allado-McDowell suggests that turning to generative AI can be freeing because the text 'doesn't come from you,' and they foresee in AI a different writerly identity 'where it's less about destroying your ego or judging yourself constantly, and more about what you can create without having to be the sole owner of all the words;' AI thus offers 'a less neurotic experience' (2022c). In this line of practice, bringing a machine into the loop feels akin to outsourcing elements of one's psyche.

Breaking the loop

In the instance of *Adaptation,* however, removing the neuroses would collapse the story. Charlie's decision to place himself in the script is an extreme iteration of placing oneself on display. He shares all his insecurities and even shows himself masturbating to the jacket cover of *The Orchid Thief*. Confessing to Donald that he has written himself into the story, he says, 'It's self-indulgent. It's narcissistic. It's solipsistic. It's pathetic. I'm pathetic. I'm fat and pathetic.' But, as the real Charlie Kaufman recounts, this was the only way: 'I was getting nothing done. I was going out of my mind. And then I came up with this idea to include myself in the story, because it seemed that my energy was in the paralysis of not being able to write' (qtd. in Child, 60). The energy of paralysis is what gives the film an appearance Mahler articulates as a 'a highly complex, seemingly self-generating fictive product' (68). We watch the struggle with all its false starts and shifts in direction as if it is unfolding extemporaneously. By being forced to own all his words, Charlie is forced to embrace all the seams that make *Adaptation* remarkable. The purpose of Charlie's block can perhaps be found in the poetic lines by Yuichi Handa (2021):

> If all of this were pleasant and comforting, masses would have slid down this same rabbit hole. But you seek what others overlook. So have courage, and plunge down into this great big hollow of a depression disguised as a block.
>
> There's something important to be learned here. (Chapter 13)

While *Adaptation* takes many liberties with *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean ultimately felt that Kaufman captured something important. Despite initial shock and apprehension, she shared, 'What I admire the most is that it's very true to the book's themes of life and obsession, and there are also insights into things which are much more subtle in the book about longing, and about disappointment' (2012). Orlean in her own journey never saw the elusive ghost orchid that Laroche had been arrested for poaching and, in a way, she never saw her book adapted to film. Charlie instead made a screenplay that was brand Kaufmann: a book-to-film adaptation that could only have been written by the mind behind *Being John Malkovich*. A lesson from *Adaptation* to consider before turning to generative AI is to think of writer's block as an ailment with a purpose. The block may be designed to heal you of the compunction to write the wrong story and miss out on a spectacular mutation.

Notes

1. ChatGPT is fine-tuned from GPT-3.5. OpenAI finished training the model in 2022. ChatGPT can be accessed at: https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) of the University of the Western Cape for the fellowship award that facilitated the writing of the present article. All credit for DHET purposes for this article is attributed to the CHR at UWC.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work is based on research supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) of South Africa.

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