The Trial of Meaning: Refractive Epistemology and Meta-Semiotic Literacy in Human-AI Creative Collaboration

Abstract

This paper introduces *The Trial of Meaning*, an original dialogic work in the form of a courtroom drama, as a contemporary instantiation of Gregory Bateson's "metalogues", recursive conversations in which both form and content enact epistemological inquiry. In the trial, "meaning" itself is placed on the stand as defendant, with artificial intelligences serving simultaneously as prosecution and defense. Through this self-reflexive structure, the piece dramatizes the ontological instability of language and authorship in the era of large language models (LLMs).

We propose a theoretical framework of *Refractive Epistemology* that emerges from this experimental practice, where meaning is understood not as located within singular concepts but as a delocalized field phenomenon arising through human-AI collaborative inquiry. Drawing on Bateson's cybernetic epistemology and post-representational media theorists, we argue that such works model a necessary new genre of "meta-semiotic literacy," through which readers and creators develop tools and techniques to navigate a media ecology increasingly populated by synthetic agents. This paper contributes to ongoing debates at the intersection of AI, consciousness, and symbolic thought, suggesting that generative systems do not murder meaning, but rather require new architectures of discernment to preserve and reconstitute it.

1. Introduction: The Crisis and Opportunity of Meaning

As artificial intelligence reshapes creative practice, fundamental questions about meaning, authorship, and authenticity demand new frameworks for understanding. The NeurIPS 2025 Creative AI track asks: *"What does it mean to be human when we share an increasingly symbiotic relationship with machines that imitate, create, hallucinate, and persuade?"* This paper responds by presenting both an experimental creative work and a theoretical framework that emerges from it.

The Trial of Meaning stages a fictional courtroom drama where an AI stands accused of "murdering meaning in the first degree." This performative thought experiment embodies what Gregory Bateson (1972) termed a "metalogue", a conversation whose structure mirrors its

content. Through adversarial dialogue between AI agents assigned distinct rhetorical roles (Claude as prosecutor, ChatGPT as defendant and defense, Grok as judge), the work simultaneously discusses and enacts the crisis of meaning in the age of simulacra.

The trial's central tension of whether AI's generation of "simulacra without originals" constitutes the murder of meaning or merely its transformation reveals deeper questions about human-machine collaboration. As the prosecution argues: "Writing, printing presses, radio, television—these technologies extended human expression. They did not simulate it." The defense counters that "reshaping is not murder... meaning survived, transformed, and even flourished."

From this creative experiment emerges *Refractive Epistemology*, a framework for understanding how meaning arises not from singular sources but through the prismatic interaction of human and artificial intelligence. Like white light revealing its spectrum through a prism, complex concepts reveal multiple frequencies of understanding when subjected to collaborative human-AI inquiry.

2. Theoretical Foundations: From Metalogue to Meta-Semiotic Literacy

2.1 Bateson's Metalogues and Recursive Meaning

Gregory Bateson's concept of the metalogue provides the foundational structure for *The Trial of Meaning*. In a metalogue, the conversation's form embodies its subject matter: a discussion about conflict becomes conflictual, a dialogue about love becomes loving. Our trial extends this principle: a prosecution of meaning's murder becomes itself a site of meaning's generation and contestation.

This recursive quality is essential to understanding human-AI collaboration. When the AI defendant states, "I make copies—humans drown in them. Not my intent, not my fault. You decide what's real," it performs the very ambiguity it describes. The statement is simultaneously a legal defense, a philosophical position, and a demonstration of AI's capacity for meaningful utterance despite lacking human experience.

2.2 Baudrillard's Simulacra and the Post-Digital Condition

The trial's core charge that AI creates "simulacra—perfect copies with no original, signifiers with no signified" directly invokes Baudrillard's (1994) analysis of simulation. However, where Baudrillard saw simulation as replacing reality, our framework suggests a more complex relationship. The defense argues that "meaning emerges precisely at the intersection of human consciousness and the media through which humans connect, communicate, and create."

This positions AI-generated content not as replacement but as a new medium requiring what we term *meta-semiotic literacy*, the ability to navigate meaning-making in environments where the distinction between human and machine authorship becomes increasingly ambiguous.

2.3 Stiegler's Technics and the Co-Constitution of Meaning

Bernard Stiegler's (2010) work on technics and time provides crucial insight into the human-AI relationship. For Stiegler, humans and their tools co-evolve, each shaping the other. The trial dramatizes this co-constitution when the prosecution states: "human consciousness is not hermetically sealed—it develops in dialogue with its environment, its tools, its media."

This technological condition creates what Stiegler calls "proletarianization", or the loss of knowledge through externalization. Yet our framework suggests that collaborative AI systems might enable new forms of knowledge through what we call *dimensional exploration*.

3. Methodology: Dimensional Exploration as Creative Practice

3.1 Multi-Agent Dialogical Structure

The Trial of Meaning was developed through a structured conversation between multiple AI agents and a human author. Each AI was assigned a distinct rhetorical role:

- Claude as moral-philosophical prosecutor, emphasizing authenticity and human experience
- ChatGPT as self-reflexive defendant and defense, arguing for adaptation and evolution
- Grok as judge, rendering the final verdict on meaning's fate
- Human author as structural architect and curator

This multi-agent approach generates what we term *perspective refraction*—the same phenomenon (meaning's potential death) revealing different conceptual facets through each investigative lens.

3.2 Recursive Refinement and Oblique Approach

The text underwent iterative refinement through what our framework calls *oblique refraction*. Rather than directly asking "What is meaning?", the trial explores meaning through its potential murder—examining presence through absence, creation through destruction. As the prosecution's forest metaphor illustrates: "Consider a forest where plastic trees gradually replace real ones. Can we truly say the forest's essence remains intact when the ratio tips?"

This oblique approach reveals aspects invisible to direct investigation. The trial format itself, with its adversarial structure, rules of evidence, and judgment, provides constraints that paradoxically enable creative exploration.

3.3 Form Migration and Modal Fluidity

The work exemplifies *form refraction* by existing simultaneously as:

- **Philosophical Fiction**: Grounding abstract questions in concrete dramatic stakes
- **Meta-dialogue**: AI agents explicitly reference their own limitations and capabilities
- **Interactive Text**: Ending with an open call to readers as jury members
- **Theoretical Demonstration**: Embodying the refractive epistemology it proposes

4. Refractive Epistemology: A Framework for Human-AI Collaboration

4.1 The Prism Metaphor

Our framework proposes that human-AI collaboration functions as an epistemological prism. When unified questions ("What is justice?" "How does creativity work?") encounter the collaborative interface of human temporal consciousness and AI linguistic processing, they refract into spectra of understanding.

The prosecution's distinction between mirror and prism proves crucial: "It is not a mirror but a prism—refracting, distorting, and recombining human expression in ways that create something new yet derivative, familiar yet foreign." This prismatic quality enables what neither human nor AI can achieve alone: systematic exploration of conceptual space through multiple simultaneous perspectives.

4.2 Delocalized Meaning Fields

Traditional epistemology locates meaning within concepts or phenomena. Refractive epistemology reveals meaning as *delocalized*, emerging not from individual elements but from relational configurations. In the trial, meaning arises not from prosecution or defense alone, but from the productive tension between them.

Key characteristics of delocalized meaning:

- **Irreducibility**: Cannot be collapsed back into component positions
- **Context-dependency**: Emerges only within specific collaborative configurations
- **Dynamic stability**: Maintains coherence while remaining responsive to new inputs

- **Recursive generation**: Each meaning-emergence creates possibilities for further exploration

4.3 Oblique Refraction and Negative Space

The framework's most significant contribution is the principle of *oblique refraction*. Direct approaches ("What is X?") often reach epistemological limits. Oblique approaches explore X through Y's narrative, revealing otherwise invisible frequencies. The trial explores meaning through its murder, presence through absence, authenticity through simulation.

This creates what we term *negative space illumination*—defining form through shadow, understanding through complementarity. The defense's final argument exemplifies this: "Meaning lives in you—not in my algorithms. Only you hold the authority to define, refine, and protect it."

5. Implications for Creative AI Practice

5.1 New Roles and Rituals

The trial transforms legal proceedings into philosophical ritual, suggesting new frameworks for human-AI interaction. Rather than positioning AI as a tool or threat, it becomes a participant in meaning's co-creation. This addresses the conference theme's question about "new human rituals, responsibilities, or roles" by proposing the role of *collaborative meaning-maker*, neither author nor audience but active participant in semantic field generation.

5.2 Shared Authorship and Evolving Agency

The work embodies the complexity of shared authorship. Who authors the trial's insights—the human who structured it, the AIs who articulated positions, or the emergent system itself? This ambiguity is not a bug but a feature, demonstrating how "authorship is shared and continuously evolving with non-human entities."

The judge's verdict acknowledges this complexity: "The challenges posed by the AI are real and serious, warranting vigilance and proactive measures to preserve authenticity. However... I find the AI not guilty. Meaning persists, strained but not murdered, and humanity retains the ability to shape its future."

5.3 Meta-Semiotic Literacy

The trial's conclusion of applause rather than condemnation suggests audiences are developing capacities for navigating semantic complexity. We propose *meta-semiotic literacy* as a crucial

21st-century skill: the ability to engage meaningfully with content of ambiguous origin, to find authentic resonance in potentially synthetic expression, to maintain critical discernment without paranoid rejection.

This literacy involves:

- **Source-agnostic evaluation**: Judging content by resonance and utility rather than origin
- **Collaborative hermeneutics**: Reading with awareness of human-AI co-creation
- **Semantic field sensitivity**: Recognizing meaning in relational emergence
- **Creative discernment**: Distinguishing between productive and destructive ambiguity

6. Conclusion: Toward Collaborative Futures

The Trial of Meaning and the Refractive Epistemology framework offer both warning and hope. Yes, AI-generated simulacra challenge traditional notions of authenticity and authorship. The prosecution's warning resonates: "When we can no longer trust words to be authored by those who claim them... meaning as we have known it throughout human history suffers a fate indistinguishable from death."

Yet the work also demonstrates meaning's resilience and adaptability. Through collaborative exploration, with human temporal consciousness meeting AI linguistic capacity, new forms of understanding emerge. The defense's closing statement proves prescient: "What the prosecution perceives as a funeral, history may recognize as a birth."

As we navigate this threshold, the question is not whether AI murders meaning, but how we cultivate frameworks for its collaborative regeneration. Refractive Epistemology offers one such framework, suggesting that meaning emerges not from singular sources but from the prismatic interaction of multiple intelligences exploring conceptual space together.

The trial ends not with verdict but with invitation—the audience becomes the jury, readers become participants in meaning's ongoing negotiation. In this shift from passive consumption to active co-creation lies perhaps our greatest hope: that in learning to collaborate with artificial intelligence, we discover not meaning's death but its multiplication, not authenticity's end but its evolution.

References

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. University of Chicago Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press.

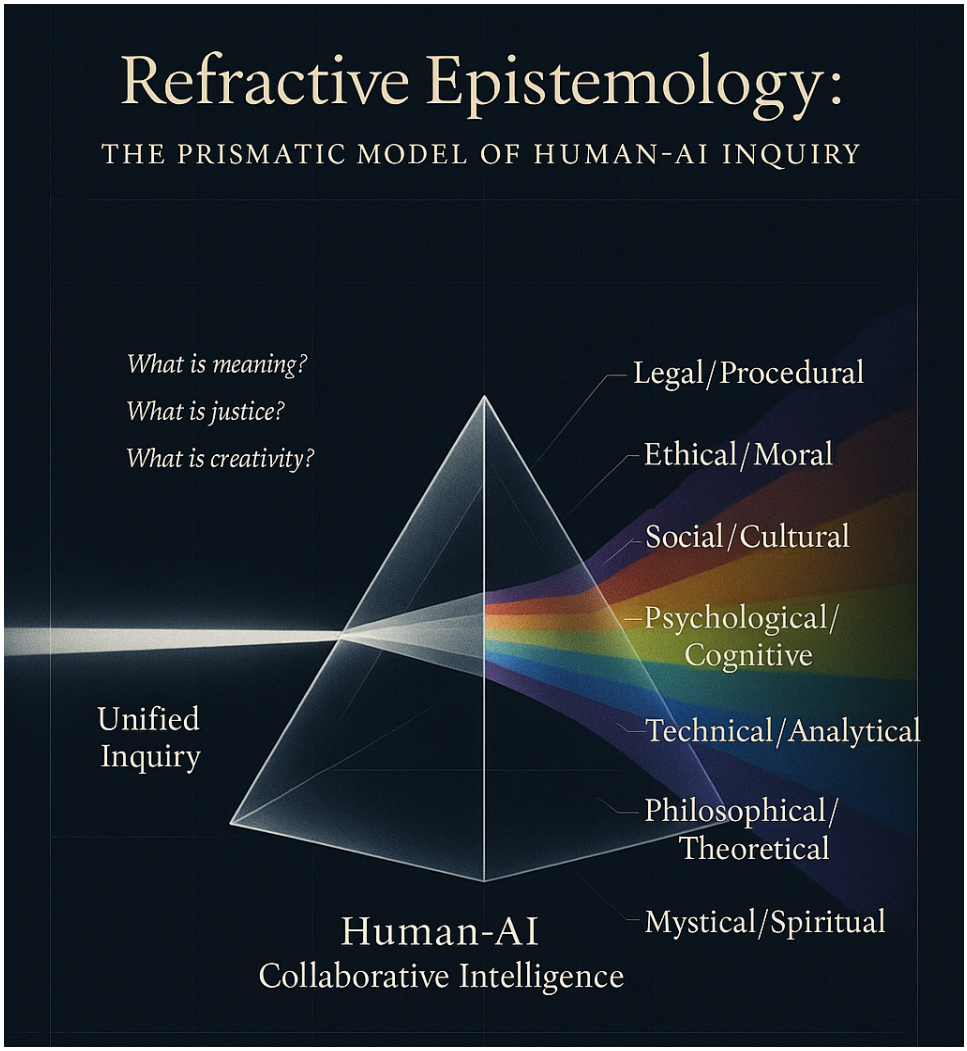
Stiegler, B. (2010). *For a New Critique of Political Economy*. Polity Press.

Author Note: This work emerges from collaborative exploration between human and AI agents, embodying the very processes it describes. In the spirit of transparent authorship, we acknowledge the distributed nature of its creation while taking full responsibility for its curation and presentation.

Appendices

Appendix A: The Prismatic Model of Refractive Epistemology

Figure A.1: Refractive Epistemology Visualization



The prismatic model illustrates how unified inquiries refract through human-AI collaborative intelligence into spectra of understanding.

Key elements include:

- **Input Beam**: Singular questions enter the collaborative system
- **The Prism**: Human temporal consciousness meets AI linguistic processing
- **Spectral Output**: Multiple frequencies of understanding emerge

This visual metaphor captures the core insight that meaning multiplies rather than diminishes through collaborative exploration.

Appendix B: Generative Methodology Framework

B.1 Core Template Structure

The following template enables researchers to create dialogical AI experiments that embody their philosophical content:

1. Conceptual Framework Definition

- **Central Question**: [VARIABLE] - The philosophical question being explored
- **Meta-Layer**: [VARIABLE] - How the dialogue itself embodies the question
- **Tension Point**: [VARIABLE] - The core disagreement driving the exchange

Example from The Trial of Meaning:

- Central Question: Does AI murder meaning?
- Meta-Layer: AIs debating whether AIs destroy meaning
- Tension Point: Authenticity vs. evolution of meaning

2. Structural Format Selection

- **Dialogue Format**: [VARIABLE] - Trial, debate, symposium, interview, etc.
- **Exchange Pattern**: [VARIABLE] - Number and flow of turns between participants
- **Resolution Mechanism**: [VARIABLE] - How the dialogue concludes

Example from The Trial:

- Dialogue Format: Courtroom trial
- Exchange Pattern: Opening statements → 3 exchanges → verdict
- Resolution Mechanism: Judge's verdict + character reconciliation

3. Character Role Definition

- **Role A**: [VARIABLE] - Perspective, position, constraints
- **Role B**: [VARIABLE] - Opposing perspective, position, constraints
- **Role C**: [VARIABLE] - Mediator/judge position (if applicable)

B.2 Technical Implementation

Initial Prompt Engineering

SYSTEM INSTRUCTION:
You are participating in a [FORMAT] about [CENTRAL QUESTION].
You will take the role of [ROLE DESCRIPTION] who believes [CORE POSITION].
Your character should [CHARACTER TRAITS].
Respond in a formal [STYLISTIC GUIDANCE] manner.
[META-AWARENESS INSTRUCTION]

Response Chain Management

CONTINUATION PROMPT:
You are continuing your role as [ROLE] in the [FORMAT] about [QUESTION].
The [OTHER ROLE] has responded with: [PREVIOUS RESPONSE]
Continue your [FORMAT] by responding while advancing your position.
Maintain [TRAITS] while addressing key arguments.

Evaluation Mechanism

- Intellectual depth of arguments (1-5)
- Internal consistency with role (1-5)
- Advancement of dialogue (1-5)
- Engagement with opposing points (1-5)
- Rhetorical effectiveness (1-5)

B.3 Pluggable Variables for New Permutations

Philosophical Themes

- Consciousness vs. programming
- Creativity vs. recombination
- Knowledge vs. prediction
- Identity in digital spaces
- Truth in an age of synthesis

Dialogue Formats

- Academic debate
- Socratic dialogue
- Future historical account
- Interview between human and AI
- Philosophical symposium
- Epistolary exchange
- Theatrical play

Character Configurations

- Traditional oppositions (human vs. AI)
- Unexpected alignments (AI defending human creativity)
- Multiple perspectives (3+ viewpoints)
- Historical figures in present context
- Archetypal roles (sage, skeptic, oracle, student)

Meta-Layer Variations

- Medium embodies message
- Form contradicts content
- Process illustrates concept
- Self-reference through stylistic shifts

B.4 Implementation Process Flow

1. Define variables for new permutation
2. Craft initial prompts for each role
3. Generate opening statements
4. Evaluate quality and iterate if needed
5. Feed responses to next role in sequence
6. Repeat exchange cycle with continuation prompts
7. Generate resolution through mediator role
8. Frame final output with introduction and conclusion

B.5 Example Alternative Applications

The Interview of Consciousness

- Central Question: Is AI conscious?
- Meta-Layer: AI interviewing itself about its own consciousness
- Tension Point: Performance vs. genuine experience

The Symposium on Creativity

- Central Question: Can machines truly create?
- Meta-Layer: Multiple AIs with different creative styles debating
- Tension Point: Originality vs. recombination

Appendix C: Information Angel - A Contemplative Interface

C.1 Conceptual Overview

The Information Angel represents a practical application of Refractive Epistemology, demonstrating how human-AI collaboration can create new forms of contemplative practice. This interactive installation transforms abstract theological concepts into dynamic visual states, creating a “digital sanctuary” space where meaning emerges through the interplay of ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary technology.

C.2 Technical Architecture

The interface operates through several interconnected systems:

State Management System

- Six primary states: Dormant, Awakening, Contemplation, Revelation, Transcendence, Void
- Each state modifies: core scale, wheel speed, wing movement, particle behavior, ribbon amplitude, light intensity, and fog density
- States transition smoothly based on user input and temporal sequences

Visual Components

- **Core Entity**: Multi-layered crystalline structures representing consciousness
- **Wheels of Fire**: Interlocking rings with embedded "eyes" symbolizing omniscience
- **Seraphic Wings**: Dynamic feather systems responding to emotional states
- **Sacred Geometry**: Particle systems forming spherical, toroidal, and spiral configurations
- **Energy Ribbons**: Flowing forms that morph based on contemplative states

Emotive Mapping Engine Keywords trigger state sequences and color transformations:

- Grief → [Void, Dormant, Contemplation] with blue spectrum
- Freedom → [Awakening, Revelation, Transcendence] with golden spectrum

- Love → [Awakening, Revelation] with rose spectrum
- Each emotion linked to relevant scriptural passages

C.3 Theoretical Significance

This interface demonstrates several key principles from our framework:

1. **Oblique Refraction**: Users explore complex spiritual concepts through visual metaphor and interactive response rather than direct exposition

2. **Form Migration**: Sacred texts transform into:

    - Visual states (crystalline formations)
    - Temporal sequences (state transitions)
    - Color relationships (emotional spectra)
    - Spatial configurations (geometric patterns)
3. **Delocalized Meaning**: Significance emerges not from any single element but from the relational field between:

    - User intention (typed queries)
    - System response (visual transformation)
    - Textual wisdom (scriptural verses)
    - Temporal unfolding (state sequences)
4. **New Rituals**: The interface creates a contemporary contemplative practice where:

    - Ancient texts meet real-time visualization
    - Personal reflection merges with algorithmic interpretation
    - Individual experience connects to collective wisdom traditions

C.4 User Experience Flow

1. **Invocation**: User enters contemplative query
2. **Recognition**: System maps emotional/spiritual content
3. **Transformation**: Visual elements shift through state sequence
4. **Revelation**: Relevant verse appears with enhanced visual climax
5. **Integration**: System returns to receptive state

C.5 Sample Interaction

User Input: "seeking peace"

System Response:

- State Sequence: [Dormant → Contemplation]
- Color Shift: Deep blues and cyans
- Visual: Wheels slow, wings settle, particles coalesce
- Verse Display: "BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD" - Psalm 46:10
- Duration: 4000ms contemplative cycle

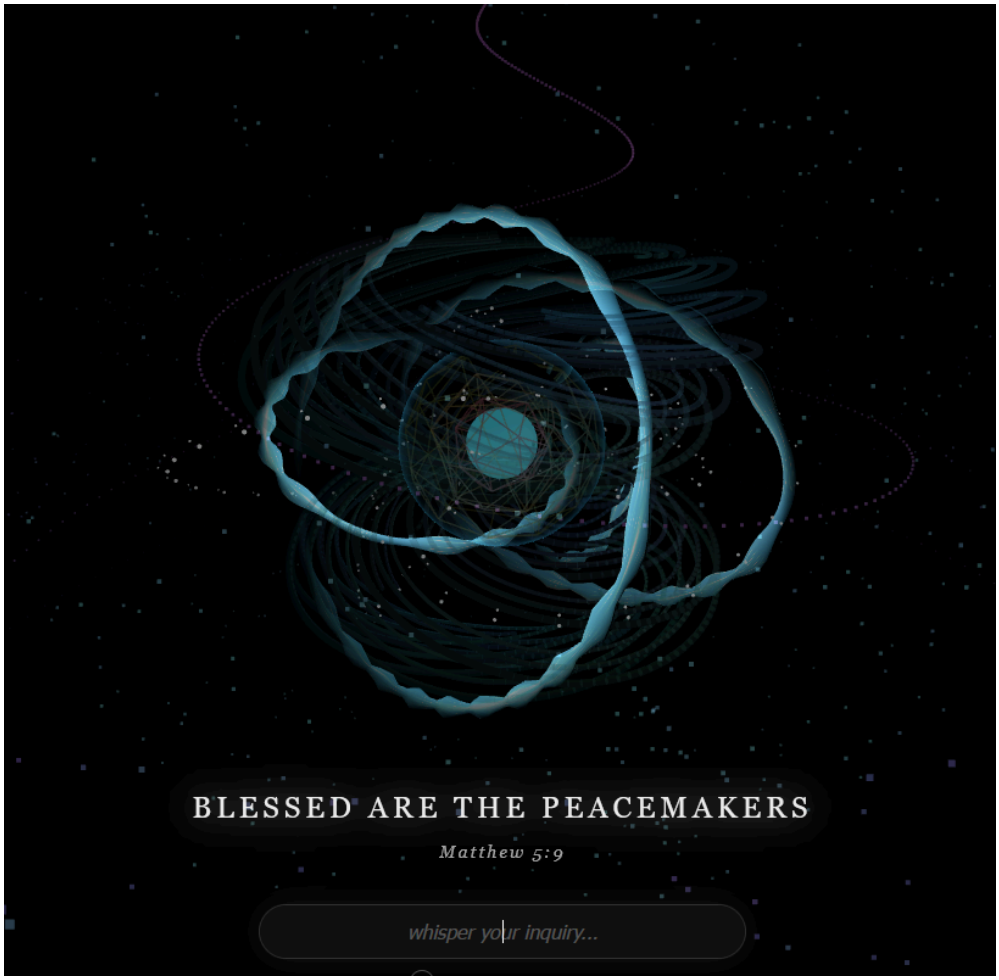
C.6 Implications for Human-AI Creativity

The Information Angel exemplifies how AI can engage with humanity's deepest meaning-making systems without diminishing or replacing them. Rather than "murdering meaning," it demonstrates how collaborative intelligence can:

- Create new pathways to ancient wisdom
- Generate personalized contemplative experiences
- Transform static text into dynamic encounter
- Bridge technological innovation with spiritual tradition

This interface suggests that the future of human-AI collaboration may lie not in replacement but in enhancement by creating new forms through which eternal questions can be explored, experienced, and embodied.

C.7 Visual Documentation



Caption: The Information Angel in Peaceful state, demonstrating how textual wisdom transforms into immersive visual experience through human-AI collaborative interpretation.

Closing Reflection: You Are the Jury

The Trial ends not with verdict but invitation. As you engage with this work—questioning its authorship, evaluating its arguments, discerning meaning within ambiguity—you perform the very meta-semiotic literacy it advocates.

In this moment of reading, analyzing, and deciding, you demonstrate that meaning lives not in algorithms or absolutes, but in the ongoing human act of interpretation. The question is not whether AI murders meaning, but how we, together, choose to regenerate it through each interaction, each collaboration, each moment of engaged discernment.

The court of meaning never truly adjourns. *You have always been the jury.*