In the Age of A.I., Major in Being Human

February 23, 2023

Last summer, a piece of artwork generated with artificial intelligence took a first prize at the Colorado State Fair. To me, the image looks like a view from the back of the stage at an opera. You see the backs of three singers, then, past them, vague squiggles and forms that may or may not be an audience, and all around, dominating everything, the fantastical Lord of the Rings-style palace where they are performing.

The artwork looks cool at first glance, but after a second it feels kind of lifeless.

"As I came back to the image and sat with it for a while, I found that my efforts to engage it at depth were thwarted," L.M. Sacasas wrote in his newsletter on technology and culture. "This happened when I began to inspect the image more closely. As I did so, my experience of the image began to devolve rather than deepen."

This is what many of us notice about art or prose generated by A.I. It's often bland and vague. It's missing a humanistic core. It's missing an individual person's passion, pain, longings and a life of deeply felt personal experiences. It does not spring from a person's imagination, bursts of insight, anxiety and joy that underlie any profound work of human creativity.

This points to what could be the core reality of the coming A.I. age. A.I. will probably give us fantastic tools that will help us outsource a lot of our current mental work. At the same time, A.I. will force us humans to double down on those talents and skills that only humans possess. The most important thing about A.I. may be that it shows us what it can't do, and so reveals who we are and what we have to offer.

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