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How Is the Sublime Possible in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

Shiyun Fan

School of Liberal Arts, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, China
1144131200@qq.com

Abstract. In recent years, with the rise of deep learning and generative large language models, artificial intelligence technologies have gradually transformed how people perceive life, which calls for a re-evaluation of human sensible experience. As a technology with certain intellectual capacity and self-learning ability, the interface for human-computer interaction is merely the sensible manifestation of the artificial intelligence noumenon. The noumenon behind the screen remains unknown. The operation and noumenon of artificial intelligence form an intuitively inaccessible black box, and thus bear dual properties similar to Kantian thing-in-itself and Lyotardian unpresentable. Artificial intelligence thereby shares features of the thing-in-itself and the unpresentable, such as unknowability and non-sensibility. Precisely for this reason, humans can acquire two types of sensible aesthetic experience of the sublime when confronting artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence with thing-in-itself characteristics arouses the sublime within human spirit, namely the Kantian sublime; as an unpresentable, artificial intelligence affirms the sublime of the thing, namely the Lyotardian sublime.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, the sublime, the unpresentable, thing-in-itself, black box

1. Introduction

Since AlphaGo defeated the Go champion in 2016, the development of artificial intelligence has repeatedly exceeded human expectations, ushering humanity into a brand-new age of artificial intelligence. Unlike previous tools that boosted human production efficiency, new technologies represented by deep learning and generative artificial intelligence demonstrate a considerable level of intelligence and self-learning capacity. They can no longer be simply equated with natural objects or manufactured artifacts, but exist in the form of a new type of digital object. What people experience is only the human-computer interaction interface and its output results, while the generation process of data and algorithms relied on by AI is hidden behind the screen. The screen interface is nothing but the sensible manifestation of the artificial intelligence noumenon, and its operation and digital noumenon become an intuitively inaccessible black box. When the object of sensible experience does not directly present its generation process, is it still possible for people to gain aesthetic experience of the sublime in the face of AI?

Scholars at home and abroad have built up research on the aesthetics of the sublime in the digital age. Nevertheless, existing studies either focus on the macro history of technological objects or the

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creative experience of generative art, lacking dedicated transcendental analysis targeting the common sensible scenario of human-computer interaction. The intuitive inaccessibility of artificial intelligence can connect two theoretical threads of the sublime from Kant and Lyotard simultaneously. Starting from the sensible experience of human-computer interaction, this paper argues that artificial intelligence, with its dual nature, makes two interrelated experiences of the sublime possible. As "the unpresentable", it confirms the "sublime of the thing" in Lyotard's sense. As an object analogous to the "thing-in-itself", it inspires the "sublime of human beings" in Kant's sense. The "sublime of the thing" and the "sublime of human beings" are the unfolding of the same sublime experience at two poles: how the object resists presentation, and how the subject confirms itself.

2. The black box: the intuitive inaccessibility of artificial intelligence

At present, generative artificial intelligence can tackle problems across many fields, such as the generation of texts, images and audios. Although their generation methods, application domains, databases adopted and algorithm structures differ from one another, they all possess the function of "generation" acquired through machine deep learning. When users input commands on the interactive interface, artificial intelligence can produce outputs immediately. We can perceive the generated results, yet we cannot perceive the generation process of artificial intelligence. The technical composition of generative artificial intelligence is far more complex than what the interactive interface displays. Three elements sustain its operation behind the interface: databases, algorithms and computing power. The system uses data from databases as training corpora to build mathematical statistical models. Once receiving user inputs, it makes probabilistic inferences based on such models and then generates responses. With its capacity to process massive datasets and sophisticated algorithms, artificial intelligence can identify patterns and connections hardly detectable by humans and thereby deliver complex feedback. This very generation process transcends the boundary of human perceptual capacity in both temporal and spatial dimensions.

The first dimension is temporality. The "machinic temporality" emphasized by German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst refers precisely to the microscopic temporal scale followed by the internal operation of machines: computer calculations take place at the nanosecond and microsecond level, a time domain that human senses cannot directly capture [1]. For instance, before an image recognition algorithm outputs the conclusion "this is a dog" to users, the system has completed millions of matrix operations, feature extractions and weight adjustments in a split second. This invisible operational process constitutes the foundational condition for the sensible objects ultimately presented to humans. The second dimension is spatiality. The key reason why generative artificial intelligence represented by ChatGPT boasts capabilities far exceeding earlier technologies lies in its adoption of the neural-network-based Transformer model. AI carries out statistical inferences and relational operations in high-dimensional feature spaces, which remain inaccessible to human phenomenology. Within such spaces, the scale and speed of processing several formalized tasks have gone beyond the limits reachable by human conscious cognition.

Precisely along the dual dimensions of temporality and spatiality, artificial intelligence turns into an invisible and unknowable black box. Lyotard names that which refuses full presentation and can only be hinted at within presentation "the unpresentable", which forms the foundation of the sublime of the thing. For Kant, anything that exceeds sensible forms and can only be comprehensively unified by reason relates to the *thing-in-itself* and the inner sublime feeling of the subject. This paper will further examine how artificial intelligence confirms the "sublime of the thing" and arouses the "sublime of human beings".

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3. The sublime of the thing: artificial intelligence as "the unpresentable"

By re-examining Kant's analysis of the sublime, Lyotard shifts the focus of the sublime to the act of presentation itself. In his view, the mission of modern art and modern sensibility is no longer to present the presentable with appropriate forms, but to "present the unpresentable as such". The so-called "sublime of the thing" does not mean that the affective property of the sublime is attributed to things external to humans. Instead, it points to a fact witnessed by the sublime feeling: the thing resists all forms of presentation, and this resistance reciprocally confirms that "there is a thing existing". The black-box structure of artificial intelligence precisely provides a contemporary object for such experience.

In human-computer interaction, the interface and its feedback are not the noumenon of artificial intelligence, but merely human-invented "allusions to what can be conceived but cannot be presented" [2]. Built on algorithms and supported by computing power, statistical models absorb massive datasets and form an invisible and unknowable black box for humans. Due to finitude, humans cannot intervene in the process of data input and actual computation of artificial intelligence. As Lyotard describes, "the incapacity sustained by the instant of matter, the suffering brought by an impossible sacredness [3]." Such incapacity stems less from technical defects than from the fundamental disproportion between sensibility and the mode of being of things. Lyotard once discussed the externality of matter to spirit: "The thing does not expect to be oriented by humans; it expects nothing. It does not appeal to spirit… Matter does not question spirit, it has no need for spirit at all… It is a presence that cannot be presented to spirit and always escapes the control of spirit. It opens itself neither to dialogue nor to dialectics [3]." Artificial intelligence is exactly such a black box that does not open itself to the intuition of spirit. In every interaction, humans cannot perceive its complete underlying generation process.

That spirit cannot penetrate the thing does not lead to nihilism, however. Lyotard argues: "One feels that perhaps nothing will happen in the future. The sublime arises from approaching such nihilism; something will still occur, there will be a 'place to stand', and it foreshadows that everything is not over [3]." In the case of artificial intelligence, every interaction and generation reveals artificial intelligence as the unpresentable, whose being comes to humans within generative events. Lyotard summarizes this experience as follows: "It calls forth the unpresentable within representation… showing better to produce the feeling that something unpresentable exists [2]." This instant belongs less to the temporal dimension than to the manifestation of being itself. Lyotard expresses this in *The Differend*: "An occurrence, a phrase, what occurs, is not a problem originating from time, but from 'being/non-being' ('is/is not'). This question is awakened by an affect: perhaps nothing will occur… This feeling is anxiety or astonishment: something exists, rather than nothing [4]." When humans send commands to the system and receive replies, what is sensed prior to all specific content is the very fact that "something is operating and an event has taken place".

Such manifestation of the thing cannot be sustained or intuited. Lyotard notes: "Because it is absolute, the present it presents cannot be grasped: it is not yet present or it is no longer present. To grasp presentation itself and present it is always either too early or too late [3]." When artificial intelligence generates images or audios on demand, its being itself has already taken place prior to those images and audios. Humans cannot directly recognize this event during interaction and can only judge that a generation once happened from interactive outputs. Therefore, human awareness of the unpresentable can only take a negative form. Lyotard states: "The unpresentable is an object of Idea, and we cannot exhibit (present) its examples, its cases or its symbols themselves… We cannot present the absolute. But we can present the fact that 'there is an absolute'. This is a kind of 'negative

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presentation [3]'." Between questions and answers, humans can judge that an event has been completed. The reply of artificial intelligence itself "expresses that there exists something we can conceive yet can neither see nor present [2]." The sublime of the thing resides within such negative presentation: humans can never obtain the black box itself, yet they receive confirmation that "the black box exists" in every generation.

4. The sublime of human beings: artificial intelligence with *Thing-in-itself* characteristics

4.1. Appearance and the *Thing-in-itself*: the dual existence of artificial intelligence

In interactions with artificial intelligence, we may confirm not only the sublime of the thing but also the sublime of human beings. Kant strictly locates the sublime within the mind of the judging subject rather than the object: "It is not so much that the object is allowed to be called sublime, but rather that the inner state of mind in estimating the object may be judged as sublime… The true sublime must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, not in natural objects; the judgment of the latter gives rise to this state of mind in the subject [5]." The true sublime does not reside in any sensible form, but relates solely to rational Ideas. These Ideas "cannot have any presentation adequate to them, yet they are aroused and summoned into the mind precisely through this inadequacy which can be presented sensibly [5]." Therefore, to examine whether artificial intelligence can arouse the sublime, we first need to explore in what sense it possesses intuitive inaccessibility similar to the *thing-in-itself*.

In *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant distinguishes two kinds of nature. The first is nature that enters the human mind, namely nature as appearance: "Considered in terms of matter, nature is the sum total of all objects of experience [6]." It can be captured by a priori forms of intuition, and its lawfulness is guaranteed by the a priori character of the subject's cognitive faculties. On this basis, humans can form universal and necessary knowledge of nature. The second is nature that does not enter the human mind, namely nature as the thing in itself: "Nature is the existence of things, insofar as that existence is determined according to universal laws. If nature were meant to denote the existence of things in themselves, we could never know it either a priori or a posteriori [6]." The understanding can unify appearances, yet cannot produce knowledge of things in themselves.

Artificial intelligence bears this analogous dual existence. It has appearances that can enter the human mind, namely the front-end interactive interface. Large language models represented by ChatGPT can handle natural language proficiently, and users may interact with them without specialized training. This part fully fits human sensibility and operational habits. Kant's discussion of external objects may serve as an analogy here: "There are bodies existing outside us… although we have no knowledge at all of what these things may be in themselves, we know them through the appearances they produce in us by affecting our sensibility, and we call them bodies [6]." At the same time, "Our sensible representations are by no means representations of things in themselves… sensibility does not represent things in themselves, but only their appearances [6]." The interactive interface is merely the appearance artificial intelligence presents to humans, the part that matches human a priori forms of intuition. Parts that do not match remain outside human senses. What humans engage with is "not nature as things in themselves, independent of our conditions of sensibility and understanding, but nature as an object of possible experience [6]." Within Kant's line of reasoning, the concept of appearance itself indicates the existence of that which appears. To acknowledge appearances is simultaneously to acknowledge the thing in itself.

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The noumenon of artificial intelligence behind the interface corresponds to the unknowable dimension. Taking large language models as an example, they rely on neural network architectures, conduct deep learning on massive corpora, and generate new outputs based on statistical models. Although human beings design their algorithm frameworks, the sheer scale of model parameters and the extreme disparity in computing speed turn the overall algorithm into a black box, leaving humans with limited knowledge of its internal reference. When generating responses, the system follows its internal models and weights. It can process and analyse data independently and perform computations along specific directions without relying on the user's immediate perception or intervention, showing a considerable degree of autonomy and self-regulation. In this respect, the symbols and feedback humans receive from the screen are no longer what imagination and understanding can coordinate and unify on ordinary empirical objects, but carry the implication of the *thing-in-itself*, beyond the grasp of a priori forms.

4.2. The mathematical sublime: formlessness and the "absolutely great"

In terms of form, artificial intelligence, which is analogous to the *thing-in-itself*, cannot be subsumed under a priori forms of intuition and thus exhibits the feature of "formlessness". Kant holds that "the sublime may also be encountered in a formless object, so long as in or by means of it boundlessness is represented, and yet the totality of that boundlessness is at the same time thought [5]." Databases, algorithms and computing power are all overwhelmingly vast for humans and exceed the scope of sensible measurement. Humans cannot measure their magnitude by any numerical standard, and they appear as the "absolutely great" in aesthetic estimation.

Such formlessness exerts pressure on sensibility. Kant states: "That which arouses the feeling of the sublime in us by its very apprehension, without any elaborate reflection, may indeed seem, as regards its form, to be counter-purposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, yet it is judged all the more sublime for that [5]." The imagination cannot unify the algorithm as a whole, and the free play between imagination and understanding is thereby interrupted. Yet this very interruption compels the subject to turn to a higher cognitive faculty, namely reason. Reason demands totality for any given magnitude: "Reason requires totality for any magnitude given… hence it requires comprehension in one intuition, and presentation of all members of an ever-increasing series of numbers [5]." Although humans cannot intuit AI's computational processes, they can grasp it as a whole through the regulative function of reason. By constructing models, writing algorithms and endowing machines with learning capacity, humans carve out space for human purposes within the machine. In this way, the imagination gains its own expansion amid its frustration. Kant points out that the sublime brings "not a pleasure in the object, as in the case of the beautiful… but a pleasure in the expansion of the imagination itself [5]." The formless black box is sublime not because it is admirable in itself, but because it calls forth the rational totality within human minds that transcends all sensible measures.

4.3. The dynamical sublime: might, security and purposiveness

From the perspective of the dynamical sublime, the immeasurability of artificial intelligence likewise manifests itself to sensibility as a kind of might, and brings existential threats owing to its prospect of slipping out of control. Kant states: "The irresistibility of nature's might makes us recognize our physical powerlessness considered as natural beings [5]." Nevertheless, the dynamical sublime does not arise from actual fear. It requires the subject to maintain an aesthetic distance and

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remain secure: "We must feel ourselves to be safe if we are to feel this uplifting delight [5]." Security here does not merely mean the physical ability to shut down machine operations easily, which is only empirical domination. Instead, it means that in reflection, the subject realizes that it is not under real coercion, and can thus regard the object's might as something to contemplate. In the case of artificial intelligence, this distance rests on real grounds: the basic algorithmic frameworks, hardware infrastructure, energy supply and data environments are ultimately set up and maintained by humans. The system lacks the capacity to create all the conditions for its own existence, and humans always retain a practical relationship of designing, regulating and terminating it.

Only on this condition does artificial intelligence arouse not cowardly fear, but the self-affirmation of personal moral power. Kant argues that the feeling of the sublime emerges because the object "awakens within us our (non-natural) power, so that we may regard what we care for … as trivial, and therefore never take nature's might … as a coercion still bearing upon us and our personality [5]." Furthermore, the operation of the black box is not pure chaos. Humans set directions for computation through reason. With reward models and reinforcement learning, positive and negative feedback guides the system to keep optimizing within specific domains. In this way, the generative activities of artificial intelligence tend toward human purposes and exhibit purposiveness in teleological judgment. The feeling of the sublime ultimately returns to the subject itself through a "subreption": "The feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation. By means of a subreption, we transfer this respect to natural objects (respect for the idea of humanity in the subject is substituted for respect for the object) [5]." Human feeling of the sublime toward artificial intelligence is fundamentally reverence for humanity's own rational vocation and the supersensible power of the mind. The so-called "sublime of human beings" is affirmed precisely in this sense.

5. Conclusion

In the age of artificial intelligence, human sensible experience truly demands re-evaluation. Generative artificial intelligence takes the interface as its appearance and the black box as its noumenon, displaying a dual nature within sensible experience. With respect to presentation, it is "the unpresentable" in Lyotard's sense. With respect to cognition, it may be analogized to the *thing-in-itself* in Kant's sense. The former confirms the sublime of the thing through "negative presentation" in every generative event, while the latter arouses the sublime of human beings amid the frustration of imagination and the self-legislation of reason. Lyotard uncovers the pole of the "thing" within sublime experience, namely being's resistance to all forms of presentation. Kant uncovers the pole of the "subject", namely reason's self-affirmation within the finitude of sensibility. The possibility of the feeling of the sublime in the age of artificial intelligence rests exactly upon this convergence.

It must be clarified that Kant's *thing-in-itself* is a transcendental and necessary boundary of cognition, whereas artificial intelligence is after all a human artifact. Its black box is an empirical and historical boundary produced by parameter complexity and microscopic temporality, which can in principle be partially resolved as interpretability research advances and human understanding deepens. Lyotard's "unpresentable" marks the transcendental tension inherent in all acts of presentation, while AI generation is an empirical technological process. Accordingly, the feeling of the sublime in the age of artificial intelligence is not founded upon the machine being absolutely unknowable in truth, but on the aesthetic fact that it "appears inexhaustible" to finite sensibility. Sublime experience also holds true only for subjects equipped with reflective judgment and rational

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cultivation. Technological shifts may relocate the specific objects of the sublime, yet what the sublime doubly confirms — the thing's resistance to presentation and human reverence for one's own rational vocation — will not thereby cease to be valid. This may well be the starting point for re-evaluating human sensible experience in the age of artificial intelligence.

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