
AI Narrative Criticism: Reimagining Meaning, Power, and Storytelling in the Algorithmic Age

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Abstract

This article introduces AI Narrative Criticism as a critical methodology for interpreting stories about, by, and through artificial intelligence in the algorithmic age. It argues that AI systems no longer serve merely as tools of communication but operate as narrative apparatuses that generate, curate, and structure meaning across cultural, literary, and digital domains. Building on poststructuralist narratology, posthuman theory, and critical media studies, the paper outlines three analytic registers: (1) narratives about AI in cultural and policy discourse that project fantasies and anxieties; (2) narratives by AI, such as large language model outputs that demand reconceptualisations of authorship and textuality, and (3) narratives through AI, shaped by algorithmic recommendation systems that structure attention, perception, and affect. Through case studies ranging from speculative fiction and machine-generated writing to platform-curated feeds, the article demonstrates how machinic narrativity unsettles traditional assumptions of intention, coherence, and human-centred authorship. To engage these transformations, the paper proposes a framework for reading AI-mediated storytelling through four methodological coordinates: contextual mapping, discursive reading, aesthetic analysis, and ethical reflexivity. The study concludes that in the age of narrative automation, literary criticism must reinvent itself to confront the aesthetic, epistemic, and political implications of machine-mediated storytelling.

Keywords: AI Narrative Criticism, Algorithmic Authorship, Machinic Narrativity, Posthumanism, Narrative Automation

Introduction

Narrative has long been the privileged domain of the human. To tell a story has been to assert agency, to organize temporal experience, and to render meaning legible within the shifting sands of the social and the symbolic. Yet in the early twenty-first century, the emergence of generative artificial intelligence, capable not only of processing but of composing narrative forms, calls this foundational premise into question. If language models can now simulate affect, mimic genre, and fabricate narrative coherence at scale, then what becomes of storytelling itself? Who, or what, is the author, the narrator, the reader? And what kinds of narratives emerge from these mechanic operations?

It is within this epistemological and cultural reconfiguration that AI Narrative Criticism seeks to intervene. This article introduces the term not as a metaphor, nor as a speculative provocation, but as a critical methodology. By AI Narrative Criticism, I refer to the interpretive study of narratives about, by, and through artificial intelligence systems. This is not a subfield of narratology, nor a computational toolkit for distant reading; rather, it is a post humanist, literary-critical approach that treats AI as a discursive and narrative actor, one that participates materially and symbolically in the production, circulation, and regulation of meaning.

Three analytic registers structure this intervention. First, narratives about AI, those that appear in speculative fiction, cinema, journalism, and policy discourse, are repositories of cultural fantasy and ideological projection. These texts do not merely depict technological futures; rather, they actively construct them. As Kate Crawford argues in *The Atlas of AI*:

AI is neither artificial nor intelligent. Rather, artificial intelligence is both embodied and material, made from natural resources, fuel, human labor, infrastructures, logistics, histories, and classifications (Crawford, 2021, p. 8).

In this sense, stories about AI often conceal the political economies and ecological violence's that subtend the myth of autonomous intelligence. They encode desires and anxieties about agency, obsolescence, control, and transcendence, and reanimate theological motifs in a mechanic vernacular.

Second, narratives by AI-texts generated by language models such as GPT-4 or visual assemblages produced by systems like DALL·E require a reconceptualization of authorship and textuality. These outputs do not emerge from consciousness, nor do they possess intentionality. Yet they circulate as meaningful artefacts, shaped by the formal and rhetorical expectations of genre, register, and context. To interpret such works demands an attunement to what I term “Algorithmic Authorship”, that is, a form of writing without a writer, generated through layers of statistical probability, embedded bias, and learned style. Here, Roland Barthes’ (1977) claim of the “death of the author” becomes, ironically, prophetic. AI is the author that arrives after the author’s demise, not to restore meaning, but to proliferate its simulations.

Third, narratives through AI refer to those algorithmically curated and sequenced by platforms. These are not stories in the traditional sense, but narrative environments, real-time assemblages of image, text, and sound, ordered by opaque recommendation systems. On TikTok, YouTube, or Twitter/X, what one sees, and in what order, becomes a function of past behaviour, predictive modelling, and commercial incentive. As Taina Bucher (2018) argues in *If... Then: Algorithmic power and politics*, algorithms do not merely structure information; they structure perception, affect, and attention (pp. 9–12). In this register, AI is not an author, but an editor, dramaturg, and censor that shapes narrative not through composition, but through modulation and visibility.

What unites these three registers is not their form, but their function. Each participates in a broader machinic narrativity, a mode of storytelling that is probabilistic, scalable, and effectively calibrated. This article thus argues that AI systems are not just technological artefacts; they are narrative apparatuses, and they demand a new critical vocabulary. AI Narrative Criticism offers such a vocabulary, not to anthropomorphise the machine, but to critically examine the aesthetic, discursive, and ideological structures through which it now speaks.

Literature Review

In the sections that follow, I first locate this critical intervention within key theoretical traditions, poststructuralist narrative theory, posthuman ontology, and critical media studies. I

then elaborate on the core tenets of AI Narrative Criticism, including new conceptual tools such as narrative algorithmics, predictive storytelling, and platformal narrativity. Finally, through close analysis of case studies, ranging from GPT-generated fiction to algorithmically curated feeds, I demonstrate how AI systems increasingly shape not only what is narrated, but how narrativity itself is conceived and experienced.

The intellectual provocation behind AI Narrative Criticism lies not in its novelty alone, but in its necessity. As artificial intelligence encroaches upon the traditionally human domain of storytelling, the ontological status of narrative itself becomes unsettled. To account for this shift, the theoretical groundwork must be drawn from traditions within literary criticism that have long interrogated the nature of narrative agency, authorship, and meaning production. From structuralist and poststructuralist narratology to posthuman theory and critical algorithm studies, the lineage of ideas that culminate in AI Narrative Criticism is necessarily interdisciplinary, yet rooted in the literary critical imperative to read closely, skeptically, and politically.

It is instructive to begin with Barthes, whose seminal essay “The Death of the Author” challenges the authority of the biographical author and opens the textual field to multiplicity and readerly co-creation (Barthes, 1977, p. 148). Yet in our moment, the author’s death is followed not only by the birth of the reader, but by the arrival of the machine. The emergence of non-human narrative agents, large language models trained on vast human corpora, complicates the Barthesian triad of author, text, and reader by inserting an opaque, probabilistic system as intermediary. The machine’s authorship is neither intentional nor entirely random, and herein lays the need for a new interpretive method. Barthes dislocated human mastery over the text; AI narrative systems dislocate the text itself from intention, coherence, and temporality.

If Barthes offered the foundational epistemological rupture, then Hayden White deepened the critical stakes. In *The Content of the Form* (1987), White argues that historical discourse is shaped not by fact but by literary tropes, emplotment, genre, and narrative structure (White, 1987, pp. 5–7). His insight that narrative is not a neutral vehicle for truth but a mode of ideological mediation is indispensable for understanding AI’s narrative

operations. Whether through algorithmically selected timelines or generated policy briefs, AI participates in what White might call emplotment by proxy, that is, stories shaped by code and data, but no less ideological for their mechanic origins.

Marie-Laure Ryan's work on digital narratives further prepares the ground for theorizing AI's entanglement with storytelling. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001), Ryan critiques the privileging of linear, immersive narrative and explores instead interactivity, multimodality, and narrative fragmentation (Ryan, 2001, pp. 5–10). Though her work centers on human-authored interactive fiction, her insights resonate with AI-generated texts that are similarly unstable and formally ambiguous. What remains under-theorized in Ryan's corpus is the shift from interactivity to automation, from the reader as co-author to the algorithm as co-narrator.

Where traditional narratology deconstructs form, post human theory deconstructs the subject. Rosi Braidotti's *The Post human* (2013) decisively reorients critical inquiry away from anthropocentrism, advocating for a "zoe-centered egalitarianism" that reconfigures subjectivity along relational and materialist lines (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 60–62). Her framework is vital for understanding AI not merely as an extension of human intention, but as a participant in a larger assemblage of meaning-making. If the post human subject is dispersed and entangled, so too must be our notion of narrative agency in digital environments.

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), traces the erosion of the liberal humanist subject under cybernetic discourse and computational metaphors. Her concept of distributed cognition, which posits that thought and agency are not confined to individual minds but emerge across human-machine interfaces, is foundational to theorizing algorithmic authorship (Hayles, 1999, pp. 288–289). In this view, narrative generated by AI is not authored in any traditional sense, but rather emerges through a confluence of prompts, models, code, and platforms. To read such texts requires a method attuned to procedurally, bias, and mechanic patterning.

Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) provides a final critical inflexion. Foucault asserts that discourse does not merely represent knowledge but produces it, establishing regimes of truth and structures of subjectivity (Foucault, 1972, pp. 200-205).

In applying this to AI-generated outputs, we must treat algorithmic content not as error-prone mimics of human speech but as discursive acts with real epistemological and political consequences. AI systems are not innocent tools; they are apparatuses that materialise institutional knowledge through datafied language. At stake is not merely the aesthetic dimension of AI storytelling, but the political, ontological, and epistemic conditions it presupposes. As AI continues to author, curate, and circulate narratives at scale, literary criticism must rise to the challenge of interpreting these hybrid forms, lest the work of meaning-making be surrendered to black-box logics beyond critique.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To articulate a viable theory of AI Narrative Criticism, one must first confront the philosophical assumptions embedded in narrative itself, assumptions regarding authorship, meaning, subjectivity, and power. These categories, long unsettled by structuralism and poststructuralist thought, have been further destabilized in the face of mechanic writing, predictive modeling, and algorithmic governance. If narrative has traditionally been understood as a human-centered form of cultural articulation, then the emergence of artificial intelligence as a narrative agent compels a radical rethinking of its ontological and epistemic foundations. Deploying this framework to AI-generated or AI-mediated texts, one sees that narrative is no longer a matter of aesthetic production alone, but a regime of intelligibility, governed by algorithms, training data, and institutional priorities. When ChatGPT produces a coherent paragraph about a political event, it does not do so in a vacuum; it does so within a matrix of encoded ideology, historical bias, and platform design. These outputs must be read as discursive formations, participating in what Foucault might call the "archive" of knowledge, an archive now partially automated, but no less political for its mechanic mediation.

Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism further amplifies this concern. In *The Age of Surveillance* (2019), digital platforms engage in the continuous collection and analysis of behavioral surplus, data extracted from users not merely to predict future actions, but to shape them (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8). In this sense, the predictive logics of AI systems do not only reflect cultural narratives but intervene in them, composing what might be called

anticipatory discourse: stories pre-structured to align with desired behaviors or outcomes. These are narratives without narration, authored by pattern recognition, optimized for click-through rates, and calibrated for emotional resonance. They are, to borrow from Foucault, *technologies of the self*, but automated, scaled, and invisibilised.

Yet power alone is insufficient to account for the transformations at hand. The question of meaning, how it is generated, transmitted, and disrupted, also demands reconsideration. Here, the work of Jacques Derrida becomes vital. In *Of Grammatology* (1997), Derrida destabilizes the privileging of speech over writing, proposing instead a theory of *différance*, the perpetual deferral and difference at the heart of signification (Derrida, 1997, pp. 62–63). AI-generated language, devoid of authorial intention or conscious referent, amplifies this logic to its extreme. Its coherence is syntactic, not semantic; that is, its meaning emerges not from presence but from statistical plausibility. In such texts, the sign does not point to a referent, but circulates within a closed loop of machine-learned approximation. To read AI text, then, is to read a surface of probability, where meaning is a function of proximity, not depth.

This mechanic semiotics has profound implications for subjectivity. The liberal humanist subject, the autonomous individual capable of rational thought and expressive agency, has long been critiqued within literary theory. Barthes dethroned the author; Foucault decentered the subject of knowledge; and more recently, Braidotti has reframed the post human subject as a nomadic and relational assemblage (Braidotti, 2013, p. 49). In this framework, subjectivity is no longer enclosed within the boundaries of the skin or the self, but distributed across bodies, systems, environments, and technologies. Artificial intelligence, in this light, is not simply a tool external to the subject, but a co-constituent of subjectivity, a mechanic partner in the production of identity, narrative, and desire.

Hayles' theory of distributed cognition reinforces this claim. In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles traces the shift from a liberal, embodied subject to one that emerges from networks of information, code, and materiality (Hayles, 1999, p. 5). Her central thesis, that cognition can no longer be located solely within the human mind, has urgent implications for

narrative theory. If stories are cognitive acts, and if cognition is distributed, then narratives are also co-authored by systems, not in metaphor, but in operation. The machine does not merely assist; it participates. Its logics of prediction, completion, and generation are not neutral, but aesthetic forces that shape form, rhythm, and content.

Crucially, these theoretical positions converge on a shared insight: that narrativity itself is contingent, constructed, and technologically mediated. In the age of AI, this mediation becomes not only a condition of production but a site of critique. What is needed, then, is a hermeneutic method capable of tracing the operations of power, the slippages of meaning, and the hybridity's of subjectivity that define machine-mediated storytelling. AI Narrative Criticism aspires to this task, not by rejecting the literary past, but by extending its critical tools to new narrative terrains. By drawing together poststructuralist, post humanist, and media-theoretical perspectives, this section has laid the conceptual groundwork for understanding AI systems not merely as generators of content but as narrative apparatuses. They author, structure, and circulate stories within epistemic regimes that are both algorithmic and cultural. To read these stories, whether as fiction, feed, or function, is to engage a new kind of text: probabilistic, participatory, and infrastructural entangled.

Analysis

The theoretical foundation of AI Narrative Criticism is grounded in post humanism, poststructuralist narratology, and critical media theory. This section offers three case studies, drawn from cultural representation, machine-generated writing, and algorithmic media ecosystems, to illustrate how AI systems shape, mediate, and in some cases, supplant the structures of narrative authority. These examples do not merely demonstrate a changing mode of storytelling; they exemplify the conditions of narrative production in a world increasingly governed by mechanic logic.

Contemporary cinematic and literary narratives about AI routinely oscillate between utopia and dystopia, fascination and terror. Films like *Ex Machina* (2014), *Her* (2013), and *The Social Dilemma* (2020) construct artificial intelligence as a site of radical alterity, an

externalized reflection of human hopes and fears, often gendered, racialised, or mythologized. These are not just stories; they are cultural parables, mediating public discourse around agency, autonomy, and technological ethics.

In *Ex Machina* (2014), Ava's figure crystallises what Braidotti (2013) calls the posthuman predicament of *becoming-machine*. She is not simply a feminised object of Nathan's surveillance nor only a liberated subject at the film's end, but a transversal site where technology, desire, and power intersect. Her evolution resists linear teleology: she does not "progress" from object to human, but rather embodies a machinic autopoiesis, where subjectivity is produced through technological mediation itself. This complicates anthropocentric narratives that cast AI either as a threat or salvation (Braidotti, 2013, p. 94). This spectacle not only dramatises the perceived boundary between human and machine but re-inscribes it through affective intensities. In such texts, the "narrative about AI" is less a window into technological reality than a mirror reflecting ideological desire. As AI Narrative Criticism reveals, these representations are rarely neutral; they encode fantasies of mastery, fears of replacement, and a lingering attachment to the anthropocentric.

Unlike narratives about AI, which are authored by humans, the second register, narratives by AI, emerges from systems like GPT-4, trained on massive corpora of human language. These texts are not written in the conventional sense; they are statistical artefacts, generated through token prediction, optimisation, and machine learning. Yet they are legible, affectively charged, and increasingly difficult to distinguish from human-authored prose.

Consider a prompt such as: Write a short story about loneliness in a futuristic city. GPT-4 responds with a syntactically correct, emotionally resonant story, complete with plot, character development, and metaphor. What is striking, however, is not the story's depth, but its predictability. The machine echoes tropes, recycles genre conventions, and assembles clichés with uncanny fluency. Here, narrative becomes what Barthes (1977) might call *readerly* rather than *writerly* (p. 145): smooth, familiar, consumable. But the absence of conscious intent or self-awareness also renders these texts ontologically hollow—"ghosts in the machine" (Ryle, 1949, p. 13)—mimicking depth while operating through surface-level correlations.

Hayles' concept of distributed cognition offers a useful framework here. In her formulation, cognition occurs across a network of human and non-human agents (Hayles, 1999, p. 288). In GPT's storytelling, that distribution becomes evident: the model generates prose, the user refines prompts, and the training data injects ideology. Meaning emerges not from intention, but from assemblage. AI Narrative Criticism thus invites us to read these stories not for authorial insight, but for algorithmic patterning, linguistic probabilities, and socio-discursive residue.

What these machine-generated texts expose is a new mode of algorithmic authorship, in which the aesthetic value lies less in originality than in orchestration. GPT is not a writer but a collagist; its medium is not thought but pattern. To critique such work is not to lament its lack of soul, but to examine the conditions of its legibility: what cultural scripts does it automate? What voices are reproduced? What ideologies were encoded, naturalized, or erased? The third and perhaps most pervasive domain of AI narration operates not through composition but through curation. Social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram deploy algorithmic recommendation systems to organise content flows, effectively scripting user experience in narrative terms: sequences of images, micro-videos, news snippets, and emotional hooks. What emerges is not a singular story, but an affective stream, driven by past behavior and designed to shape future behavior.

This logic of predictive storytelling, content personalized, automated, and iterative, subtly shifts the narrative function from expressive to behavioral. As Zuboff (2019) notes, "the goal is no longer to know the user, but to shape the user" (p. 16). The feed becomes a narrative interface, a mechanic dramaturgy where plot is replaced by probability. Users no longer choose the story; they are positioned within one, their attention modulated by unseen scripts.

For AI Narrative Criticism, the feed must be read as a new kind of text, fragmented, personalized, and infrastructural embedded. Its narratives are dynamic, ambient, and recursive, producing not linear arcs but emotive sequences, crafted not for meaning but for engagement. To critique them is to ask not "What is the story?" but "What is being made visible, and why?" Together, these three case studies reveal how AI technologies function

narratively across domains. They are not merely background processes or facilitators of storytelling; they are active, shaping agents, writing, selecting, and sequencing stories within systems of power and desire. Whether as metaphor, generator, or curator, AI now participates in narrative production in ways that demand critical attention, not simply to what is told, but to how telling itself is transformed.

If AI Narrative Criticism calls for the expansion of hermeneutic practices into the realm of machine-mediated storytelling, it must also propose a method for doing so, a way of reading that is sensitive to form, function, infrastructure, and ideology. The traditional tools of literary criticism, close reading, genre analysis, and narratology, remain indispensable, yet they must be augmented to accommodate the distributed, predictive, and non-conscious nature of artificial intelligence as a narrative agent. In this spirit, I outline four methodological coordinates that guide the critical interpretation of narratives about, by, and through AI.

The first gesture of AI Narrative Criticism is outward: an examination of the historical, institutional, and technical contexts in which the AI system operates. No AI narrative exists in a vacuum; each is embedded within a matrix of economic interests, infrastructural design, and social discourse. Following Foucault's directive to examine "the rules of formation" that govern discourse (Foucault, 1972, p. 38), this stage interrogates the platform, dataset, and political economy of the AI system. For example, in analysing GPT-generated fiction, one must consider not only the output but also the training data, the prompting environment, and the platform's ethical constraints. Contextual mapping asks: Who built the system? What values or absences are coded into its architecture? What conditions of visibility or invisibility shape the narrative space?

Having situated the narrative, the critic then turns to its discursive operations. This involves treating the AI-generated or AI-mediated output as a textual event, shaped by power, genre, and ideology. In narratives about AI, this means close reading tropes, metaphors, and narrative structures that frame artificial intelligence within cultural discourse. In narratives by AI, this entails tracing repetitions, clichés, and aesthetic patterns under algorithmic logic. The focus here is not on the truth of the narrative but its function, how it interpolates readers,

sustains myths, or reifies categories such as “human,” “intelligent,” or “natural.” What voices are privileged? What forms of affect are evoked or excluded? What silences structure the telling?

While AI-generated texts often imitate familiar styles, they do so in ways that reveal both mimicry and mechanic constraint. This calls for renewed attention to aesthetic form, syntax, rhythm, genre, and structure as sites where machine learning’s statistical logic intersects with cultural memory. Drawing on Derrida’s notion of writing as *difference*, this step attends to repetition with a difference, where the AI appears fluent, but falters at nuance, subtlety, or rupture (Derrida, 1997, pp. 62–63). Finally, AI Narrative Criticism demands an ethical reflexivity, an awareness that interpretation itself is entangled with systems of value, legibility, and legitimation. This means attending to the risks of anthropomorphisation, techno-fetishism, or deterministic readings. As Hayles (1999) reminds us that the post human does not mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the recognition of distributed agency and hybrid subjectivity (p. 291). In critiquing AI narratives, one must remain attentive to both power and potential, interrogating structures of exclusion while remaining open to emergent modes of storytelling.

Taken together, these four coordinates, contextual mapping, discursive reading, aesthetic analysis, and ethical reflexivity, compose a methodology capable of reading the machine-narrated world. They do not seek to master the system, but to critically inhabit it, tracing the shifting contours of narrative in the algorithmic age. The work of AI Narrative Criticism, then, is not merely to explain what stories are told by machines, but to ask how machines now shape the very conditions under which stories can be told.

We are living not merely in an age of artificial intelligence, but in an age of narrative automation, an era in which the structures, rhythms, and logics of storytelling are increasingly shaped, if not authored, by machinic processes. This article has proposed AI Narrative Criticism as a response to this epistemic and cultural transformation: a critical methodology attuned to the ways AI systems produce, curate, and simulate narratives across literary, cinematic, algorithmic, and infrastructural domains.

If narrative was once the exclusive province of human imagination, anchored in memory, history, and voice, it is now a shared field of contestation between organic and artificial agents. Stories are written by machines, stories are told about machines, and most pervasively, stories are selected through machines. This distributed narrativity demands a shift in our interpretive frameworks. The critic must now read not only the novel or the film, but also the algorithmic feed, the machine-generated text, the ambient narrative environment of the interface.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the critical tools for such a reading are already latent within the tradition of literary and cultural theory. Foucault's analysis of discourse as a productive regime, Barthes' challenge to authorial authority, Derrida's theory of deferral and difference, and Braidotti's post human ontology all provide the conceptual scaffolding for interpreting narratives no longer grounded in human intention or temporal continuity. What AI Narrative Criticism does is synthesize these traditions within the present technological horizon and offers a mode of reading that is neither celebratory nor paranoid, but structurally attuned to the material and semiotic conditions of algorithmic culture.

Crucially, this is not simply a story about AI. It is also a story about literary studies itself, its boundaries, its blind spots, and its responsibilities. The emergence of machine-generated texts and predictive narrative systems challenges the discipline to rethink some of its core assumptions: about authorship, about style, about meaning, and above all, about the human as the center of narrative production. To continue reading as if narrative remains exclusively human in origin and intention is to engage in a critical nostalgia, one that refuses to acknowledge the distributed, ambient, and probabilistic character of twenty-first-century storytelling. Yet this is not a call for resignation. It is a call for critical reinvention. AI-generated texts are not the end of narrative, but a new chapter in its history, one that demands careful, rigorous, and ethically reflexive reading practices. AI Narrative Criticism offers such a practice. It recognizes the machine not as an enemy of meaning but as its new collaborator, competitor, and condition. It reads across code, discourse, and form, tracing the ghostly fingerprints of prediction, optimization, and control that now shape what stories we

encounter, believe, and share. The task of the literary critic in the age of AI is not to salvage the human from the machine, nor to cede interpretive sovereignty to computation. Rather, it is to read with precision and imagination the hybrid forms of narration now emerging, and to ask, always, who is speaking here, through what infrastructure, and toward what end?

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