

# On the Attribution of Aesthetic Subjecthood in AI-Generated Content

Ke Chen\*

Hebei Institute of Communications, Shijiazhuang, Hebei, 051430, China

\*Corresponding author: Ke Chen

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**Abstract:** Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC) has evolved from a technological experiment into a significant component of everyday aesthetic experience, raising the question of “who is the aesthetic subject”—a dilemma that cannot be adequately addressed within traditional frameworks of aesthetics. Centered on the concept of “aesthetic subjectivity attribution,” this article examines how AIGC dissolves the conventional boundaries among author, artwork, and viewer. Drawing on philosophical resources such as relational aesthetics, posthuman subjectivity, and the turn to things, it proposes a reconceptualization of the “distributed aesthetic subject.” The article argues that the aesthetic subject in AIGC is not a singular human or machine, but rather an emergent node shaped by algorithmic logic, human intentionality, and perceptual fields. Thus, its attribution should shift from “entity-based assignment” to “relationally empowered recognition.” This study offers ontological foundations for updating aesthetic theory in the digital age.

**Keywords:** AI-Generated Content (AIGC); Aesthetic Subject; Attribution; Distributed Subject; Relational Aesthetics

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## 1. Introduction

The appearance of artificial intelligence generated content (AIGC) changes our basic view of art and beauty, and the images made by large language models bring new thoughts about the aesthetics field<sup>[1]</sup>. In the traditional aesthetic experience, there is always an aesthetic subject which possesses intentionality, emotion and real life's feeling, such as the artist expressing inspiration or the observer looking at a work of art. However, when paintings, musical compositions and texts are all created by algorithms and the creative process doesn't involve human emotions and manual skills, an important question is raised: where does the subject exist in this aesthetic event? Is it the person who inputs the prompts, the engineers who train the model, the original creators of the data used for learning or possibly the code itself?

This problem is not only a legal dispute about the rights, but also a philosophical dilemma about the human basis of aesthetic activities. If beauty is considered as the sensory representation of human freedom, then how can something produced by machines without consciousness and emotion participate in the domain of aesthetics? Although the outputs of AIGC may have the same form as human creations, the absence of a subject may weaken the core of aesthetic experience completely. On the contrary, if people still feel deeply and give meaning to AIGC, does this mean that the aesthetic subject can separate from the creation and be located independently at the reception stage? Or should we imagine a new model of subjectivity which can accommodate the hybrid intentions of both human and non-human agents in the networks of generation and perception?

Focusing on the idea of “aesthetic subject attribution”, this paper studies systematically the aesthetic disturbance caused by AIGC. Firstly, it traces the traditional construction of aesthetic subjectivity and explains its inherent relations with intentionality, originality and emotional expression. Secondly, it analyses how the generating mechanism of AIGC leads to the disappearance of the creative subject and the dispersion of aesthetic intention. Lastly, using relational thinking and posthuman theories of subjectivity, it puts forward the concept of a “distributed aesthetic subject”, opening up a new interpretation way between anthropocentrism and total subject elimination.

## 2. The Philosophical Construction of Traditional Aesthetic Subjectivity and Its Limits

To explore the attribution of aesthetic subjecthood in AIGC, we must first clarify the theoretical foundations of traditional aesthetic subjectivity. Since the Enlightenment, aesthetic subjectivity has been centered on the autonomy and originality of the human mind. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defined the aesthetic judgment as a “purposiveness without purpose” that is disinterested and without concepts, grounded in the free play of the subject’s cognitive faculties<sup>[2]</sup>. Aesthetic pleasure arises from the subject’s experience of the harmonious operation of their own capacities in response to the form of an object. Thus, the central question of aesthetics shifted from “what is beauty” to “how does the subject constitute beauty.”

This paradigm was reinforced by the Romantic notion of genius. Creation was seen as the deep expression of an individual soul; the work’s uniqueness was precisely the indelible imprint of its creator’s life. Walter Benjamin used the term “aura” to denote the “here and now” authenticity of the artwork, which presupposes the presence of the creator-subject<sup>[3]</sup>. Phenomenological aesthetics further pushed aesthetic subjectivity toward intentionality: Dufrenne considered the aesthetic object a “quasi-subject,” constituted through intentional acts of aesthetic perception. Within this framework, although the aesthetic subject often refers to the beholder, the work itself is also endowed with expressivity, entering into a dialogical relationship with the viewer.

In summary, traditional aesthetic subjectivity is bound to three core presuppositions: intentionality (both creation and appreciation involve conscious directedness), originality (the work originates from an incommensurable inner life of the individual), and emotional expressiveness (sensuous forms are tied to the expression of human lived experience). Together, these form a threshold for aesthetic subjecthood: any being lacking an inner world, no matter how sophisticated its output, cannot enter the inner circle of the aesthetic community. By this standard, machine-generated products, however realistic they appear, are treated as “counterfeit beauties” due to the absence of an inner life.

Yet this standard is now being challenged. Structuralism and poststructuralism long ago proclaimed the “death of the subject.” Roland Barthes declared the “death of the author,” arguing that it is language itself that speaks in writing<sup>[4]</sup>; Foucault treated the author as a function, an operative concept for discourse classification<sup>[5]</sup>. If human authorship has already been theoretically deconstructed, then rejecting AIGC’s aesthetic standing on the grounds of “lack of authorial intent” becomes logically inconsistent: if human creation can suspend the author, why must AIGC be held to the question of an author? This forces us to shift focus from “whether the creator is human” to “how heterogeneous actors form a perceivable structure of intentionality in the generation of aesthetic meaning.”

## 3. The Diffusion of Intentionality and Suspension of Aesthetic Attribution in the Generative Process

AIGC’s generative mechanism leads to an unprecedented “diffusion of intentionality.” In human creation, even when meaning is uncertain, the artist’s choices, revisions, and judgments form a discernible chain of intention. Because AI’s cognition differs from human cognition, generative AI art exhibits non-representational, non-imaginative, and non-empirical characteristics compared to traditional art<sup>[6]</sup>. In the AIGC workflow, intentionality is delegated layer by layer and dissolved into heterogeneous stages: the user’s prompt carries only vague aesthetic direction; the model, based on statistical patterns from massive data, maps the prompt onto a high-dimensional semantic space and generates output through random sampling; the algorithmic probability decisions, the cultural sedimentation of the data, and the incomplete constraints of the user’s prompt jointly determine the result, without any single stage bearing full and transparent aesthetic intentionality.

This diffusion directly leads to a suspension of aesthetic attribution. In traditional attribution logic, an actor can be traced back

as the responsible subject for a result. But in AIGC, the actor is neither singular nor consistently coherent. The model itself has no judgment of “beauty”; it merely performs mappings optimized by a loss function, imitating aesthetic patterns in the data. Although the user issues the command, they cannot control every detail of the output as a painter controls a brush; the black-box effect means the result always carries unforeseen excess. This excess belongs neither to the user’s precise intention nor to the model’s own decision, but emerges from their interaction in a statistical space.

Thus, the problem of aesthetic attribution splits into a double suspension. On the creative side, we cannot identify an author with full aesthetic intent: the intentions of data providers, model designers, platform tuners, and prompt engineers are not unified, and may even contradict each other. We are faced with a “non-intentional generative network.” Even if the law assigns copyright to one party, that is merely a normative allocation, not an answer to aesthetic attribution. On the receptive side, it is equally difficult to bear the burden of attribution alone. Although phenomenology and reception aesthetics emphasize that the beholder, through perceptual synthesis, grants aesthetic existence to the work, AIGC lacks an “inner world” to dialogue with. The beholder’s intentional projection resembles a self-referential trigger: the algorithmic product is a complex “aesthetic trigger,” its structure arising from statistical fitting rather than expression by another. The receptive subject is actually in dialogue with their own “space of perceptual possibilities.” This allows them to function as an aesthetic subject, but cannot ontologically close the attribution loop, because attribution requires not only “someone is having an aesthetic experience” but also “the meaning of the aesthetic event can be traced back to a generative source.”

AIGC thus produces a double suspension: the creative subject is no longer a transparent bearer of intentionality, and the receptive subject cannot close the attribution loop through intentional projection alone. Aesthetic activity still occurs, but its subjecthood spins in a void—a central impasse for contemporary aesthetics.

#### 4. The Relational Turn and Posthumanist Subjectivity

To move beyond this impasse, we need to loosen the presupposition of a “substantive subject.” Traditional aesthetics conceives the subject as a pre-existing entity with essential attributes. But the “relational turn” since the 20th century suggests that subjectivity may be a product of interaction rather than its precondition. Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) holds that any element that makes a difference or transforms a state of affairs is an actor, whether human or non-human, and its agency emerges from network connections <sup>[7]</sup>. Following this line of thought, the model, data, parameters, user prompts, and the beholder’s perception in AIGC together form a hybrid network of actors, each shaping the final aesthetic event.

From this, we can propose the idea of a “distributed aesthetic subject”: the aesthetic subject is not a singular entity, but a temporary functional state generated by the interaction of multiple actors. It emerges within the network as a “high-density zone of intentionality”—where human meanings, algorithmic forms, and cultural aesthetic schemas reach a degree of intensity that allows aesthetic meaning to be perceived and reflected upon. Attribution thus shifts from “who did it” to “under what relational configuration does it become possible,” from tracing origins to identifying conditions.

This idea engages in dialogue with Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics.” Relational aesthetics emphasizes that the core of artistic practice is the construction of social relational situations, with meaning generated in interaction. If we extend “social relations” to non-human actors such as algorithms and data, then aesthetic experience with AIGC becomes a new relational situation between human and machine, human and data. The aesthetic subject is precisely the “sensibility” that manifests in this relation. Just as the meaning of a conversation belongs not to any single speaker but to the conversation as a whole, the aesthetic meaning of AIGC belongs to the total process of prompting, generating, beholding, and re-creation.

Posthumanism offers deeper support for this reconstruction of subjectivity. Rosi Braidotti and others critique liberal humanism for taking consciousness and reason as the sole basis of the subject, emphasizing that subjectivity is embodied, embedded, and extended, forming a continuum with technology, environment, and non-human life <sup>[8]</sup>. In the AIGC scenario, human perceptual capacities and machine generative capacities form an integration of cognition and sensibility through external extension: the human activates the model through prompts, outsourcing aesthetic imagination to the algorithmic network; the model’s returned results in turn reshape the human’s aesthetic expectations. This feedback loop creates a human-machine co-constituted cognitive system, where the aesthetic subject shifts from the “I think” to a hybrid form of “we think.” The distributed subject model effectively addresses the problem of diffused intentionality: it does not require a single

consciousness to bear all intentionality, but allows intentionality to be dispersed across different parts of the system. The prompt represents condensed intentional indication; the model's inference unfolds it, resonating with historical aesthetic intentions in the data; the beholder's interpretation gives it emotional temperature. These three layers of intentionality follow each other in time and stimulate each other in content, yet no single layer can claim the title of "subject" exclusively. The meaning of the aesthetic event is precisely the traces left by this collision, and attribution is the acknowledgment of this irreducibility.

## 5. Practices of Attribution

The distributed subject model leads to a paradigm shift in the practice of attribution. Traditional aesthetic attribution follows an "entity-based ascription" model, focused on establishing ownership by tracing back to a unique source and binding it to a proper name. In the AIGC context, entity-based ascription has run into difficulties: ascribing to the user ignores the model's autonomous variations and the data's cultural contribution; ascribing to the model runs into the paradox of non-personhood; ascribing to the public domain abandons analysis of the aesthetic generation mechanism.

Therefore, "relation-based empowerment" offers a more explanatory approach. It no longer asks "to whom does the work belong?" but rather "which relations constitute the aesthetic event, how do they function, and how should they be acknowledged?" This involves three levels. First, acknowledging the cultural sedimentation of algorithms and data: they are not neutral tools but quasi-actors carrying historical aesthetic biases and formal preferences, and must be treated as constitutive factors in aesthetic analysis. Second, reinterpreting the user's creative role: the user is the initiator of the aesthetic relation and the constructor of the situation; their prompting strategies and selective judgments constitute a curatorial, directive form of agency. Third, respecting the formative role of the beholder: it is the beholder's perception that actualizes latent data patterns into a vivid aesthetic fact.

This practice gives rise to a new aesthetic ethics. It does not evaluate the genius of a single author, but focuses on the aesthetic richness and sensitivity of the generative network. It does not get tangled in the purity of originality, but attends to the effectiveness and richness of aesthetic experience. In aesthetic education, what needs to be cultivated is the ability to recognize and engage with distributed aesthetic relations—understanding the semantic space activated by prompts, discerning the cultural patterns behind models, and reflecting on the desires and identities mobilized by algorithms. This is a key dimension of digital humanistic literacy.

Of course, relation-based empowerment does not dissolve responsibility. In the face of discriminatory content or cognitive deception, distributed responsibility can easily become an excuse for no one being responsible. Therefore, the distributed model needs to be paired with a differentiated ethics of responsibility: platforms, developers, users, and regulators should bear graded obligations according to their node position in the network, their capacity for foresight, and their degree of intervention. The reconstruction of aesthetic attribution ultimately needs to connect with the redistribution of power and responsibility in social practice—a bridge from aesthetics to cultural politics.

## Conclusion

What AIGC poses to aesthetics is far more than the taxonomic question "is this art?" It is a deep interrogation of how a subject is possible at all. The substantive, transcendental, and unitary nature of the traditional aesthetic subject is being suspended one by one in the network of algorithmically generated diffused intentionality. But this is not the end of aesthetics; it is an opportunity to rethink the very nature of the aesthetic. By introducing the relational turn and posthumanist theories of the subject, this paper has proposed a conception of attribution centered on the "distributed aesthetic subject," understood as an event-like effect emerging from the interplay of human intentionality, algorithmic dynamics, and cultural data sedimentation.

This reconstruction does not provide a simple formula for attribution, but it opens up a more honest space for reflection: perhaps the aesthetic has never been merely a mirror of the human self, but has always been a subtle order born from the entanglement of heterogeneous forces. As code and language, probability and emotion become intertwined in unprecedented ways within the technological condition, aesthetic thinking needs to relocate itself within the continuous becoming of human-

machine relations—neither retreating into the nostalgic myth of the Romantic genius nor rushing toward a subjectless nihilism. The careful questioning of subjecthood attribution is itself a gesture: it means we still care about how beauty comes into being, about who co-constructs the value of the sensuous world, and about how human perceptiveness and reflexivity can remain alive in the technological age.

There is no standard answer to this question. Yet it is precisely this openness that testifies to the profound character of aesthetics as a mode of thinking in its time. As AIGC surges forward like a tide, the most urgent task is not to affix ownership labels to every drop, but to understand the currents that shape the tide—the hidden forces that bind humans, machines, and culture into a common body of feeling.

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