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WRITING THE ARTS &
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Does AI (de)Humanise Society?



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Does Artificial Intelligence -AI- (de)Humanise Society

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The journal examines emerging issues in the arts, humanities and technology, giving voice to research carried out by local and international scholars. Its purpose is to encourage discourse and give visibility to researchers from the region and others who anchor their work on Africa.

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Foreword

If AI were a question, then this edition carries with it nuances that attempt at coming to some sort of answers. These not-quite-answers, indeed, stubbornly refuse to settle the matter comfortably. Instead, they reignite a rush of even more questions. The papers in this edition show, tell, or even dramatize, the idea, reality, or cultures surrounding AI. Of course, the very basis of these conversations, arguments, or illustrations, is a need to disambiguate “Artificial Intelligence”. When does intelligence become artificial? And where does artificial start where “non”-artificial (or even human) has stopped? The nature of our papers refuses to be boxed within question-and-answer strictures, but open wider probing in the areas of theatre, film, architecture, education, even religion.

An unpopular complaint is floating in the corridors of justice in Kenya. Worryingly, judges are enraged that lawyers are writing their briefs using AI. In one story, from Kenya’s Daily Nation of May 26th 2026, the title reads: “Judges Warn Lawyers over AI After Bizarre LGBTQ Case Citation in Land Row”. Apparently, the lawyers in a case on land ended up citing an LGBTQ rights’ matter in pleadings before a judge who promptly told them off, for use of irrelevant authority. In yet another story, from Eastleigh Voice of April 2026, the headlines read: “Court Nullifies Judgement over AI Generated Pleadings, Sets Aside Ombudsman Case.” From these many cases, judges have made a distinction between “human-written” filings from AI drafted ones. The matter should be as clear as that, but there still lingers a whiff of the story of AI in Kenyan courts not ending soon, as policies are being set up exploring how AI can be of use within those corridors of the law. Perhaps this is the sign of our times, that given the constantly changing nature of AI tools, institutions that have exercised power over the citizenry have to wisen up fast, such as is the case with the Kenyan Judiciary system. The use of AI, or not, is being touted as sometimes giving one advantage over others, on matters before court. At other times, it is being seen as testing a judge’s patience, especially where authorities, or cases cited do not exist, or are irrelevant. Yet, even in the doubters of AI’s capacities, is a small fraction of the appeal to technology that should speed up certain processes. How will institutions that have developed age-old traditions of approaching matters manage in these fast-changing times?

Our papers are, thankfully, set around institutions that appear to abhor change, or at least to absorb it slowly. First, is the home front, where relationships between the family and their house-help is always in a quandary. How has AI stepped in to sometimes empower, sometimes enlighten, or even humanize the house help in ways that she couldn't feel before? Secondly, is the live theatre space, that often prides itself as not being "film", and often sometimes rejecting technology, capable of surviving the AI onslaught? How is AI reshaping it, or reaffirming certain aspects of its existence, in places like Eldoret? Similarly, we must think about architecture and what it means, and whether AI can actually take us there, or not! What about school, or religion, or indeed, our basic understanding, even philosophies of what it means to be human? How are these thought spaces grappling with AI? For, as we are seeing of Kenya's court system, the school system in under siege where; homework is AI-assisted, critical thinking has been sublet to the machine, and data, tons of research work, sometimes unverified, is open to use or misuse to both students and academics.

In the first instance, **Terry Kaberia** piques our interest with her observation of the changing face of the Kenyan "Shagalla", or househelp, based in the Gulf. The Shagalla, is at once a migrant worker, who has come, as observed of Kaberia's focus, from Kenya to work in households in Arabian countries. The Shagalla must feel lonely, homesick, or even simply bored, therefore gadgets like the phone, or tablet, become of use in mitigating her circumstances. The paper is interested in how short videos find audience via algorithmic happenstances that position the Shagalla as a storyteller in her own right, where previously, she is a faceless, often nameless, person. Indeed, here we find a paper that takes away from the often heard of pains of the Shagalla, to a situation where the worker has her own voice, and agency. Yet, how can these performances from the margins be enroped in other well-known sets of performances at places like The Kenya National Theatre? The paper takes us through these issues, if only to explore aspects of AI that are not at the fore.

The second paper by **Octavious Onyango** makes us see a model of working in the theatre known amongst thespians as "Peke Yangu" (I alone) model. The claim is that AI has given theatre producers of this "Peke Yangu" model an easier way out of their problems. The "Peke Yangu" model producer is involved in all aspects of production including scripting, directing, acting, marketing, stage management, and even lighting. With AI, it is possible to make marketing material to suit the product, as well as to work on a script. Unfortunately, the paper observes, this reliance on AI is a gamble that is susceptible to productions that have uncritical sameness and that carry no identity. Through a metaphor provided in a play in production under 64 Theatre Productions, titled *My Robot*

Brother, the paper attempts to show how humans who have come into contact with AI often react, with fascination, curiosity, excitement, and upon using it, become quickly aware of its excesses or limitations, accepting it in a “meta-modern” way.

Under “Building the Future”, **Barbara Adair** takes us back to an architectural masterpiece constructed in 1938 and known as Fiat Tagliero in Asmara city of Eritrea. The building is a meeting place for a complex web of meanings, ideas, histories, humanities, races, colonial practices, subjugation, hope, desires, hate, as well as admiration. 1938 was itself a precarious year, when the drums of the second world war are beginning to beat in Europe. At the same time, Italy was coming out of a war of aggression against a confident Ethiopia that inspired a continent on the question of the vulnerability of the colonizer. The Fiat Tagliero, constructed in the fashion of “Futurism”, was itself a self-esteem project for Mussolini and his fascist regime suffering from the defeat from Ethiopia in that neighborhood of Eritrea. Histories mingle here in ways that cannot be captured by AI, observes the paper. The nooks and crannies of the stories emanating from this building cannot be understood by one take of internet’s budging, or any AI tool’s intervention for it involves feelings, of interviewees, as shall be read, who observe that “Allah - praise be his name, is not here, he does not protect it!” Yet, other Eritreans feel as though they own the building at this moment in time. How could all this ambiguity ever be captured by AI?

What about being human in the face of a technology-dependent world? **Lydia Muthuma**, starts off her paper as a reading of *Antiqua et Nova*, a document that capture’s Pope Francis’ sentiments on AI. In the text, we learn, the papacy is interested in creating a clear distinction on the question of what it means to be human within the parameters of a world that is swiftly giving up aspects of its humanness to technology. There comes a feeling then that man is beginning to be lazy, thought is being given up, and faith, then, becomes a victim, shunned, for why should man believe in any supernatural power if the uber-machine is at play? These questions are dealt with in this paper with an eye to East Africa’s situations within our classrooms in the education sector. What are lecturers to do in the face of student’s overreliance on AI? Still, there is the welcoming idea of “Artificial Intimacy”, and what that can portend for current generations. What grounds the paper is an attempt at the beginning to give a semantic interplay between “Artificial Intelligence” and “Algorithmic Intelligence”.

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Invisible Exports: Shagalla TikTok Performances and Kenya's Transnational Creative Economy

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Abstract

This paper is interested in the digital activities of the “Shagalla”, a term popularly employed to describe a domestic worker based in the Gulf (Arabian countries). The paper observes that the Shagalla, from Kenya, have employed TikTok to create an online community, complete with its own language and grammar, through which they can humanize themselves, particularly in view of the ambiguity of their identities. The shagallas occupy that uncomfortable in-between space where they are neither accepted as “family” by their host employers nor repulsed as complete outsiders in these private spaces, even when they live in foreign lands, with national languages far removed from Kiswahili and English. The paper argues that the digital world has given the shagallas space where they can enact, or perform, their identities, or even show defiance in the face of their daily struggles. Artificial Intelligence then becomes essential in mapping out, or even sustaining, their audience through algorithmic intervention.

Keywords: Shagalla, TikTok performance, feminized digital labour, transnational creative economy, algorithmic labour

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Introduction

Kenyan domestic workers in the Gulf are rarely imagined as participants in the country's performing arts sector. They are typically understood as people whose economic contribution lies in the remittances they send home. Yet every day, thousands of these women produce performances on TikTok that attract audiences, circulate across borders, generate cultural value, and, in some cases, produce income through platform economies.

Over the last decade, the creative economy has emerged as a significant component of national development strategies across Africa. Governments, policy makers, and international development agencies have promoted cultural and creative industries as sources of employment and economic growth. As Yúdice (2003) observes, culture has increasingly come to function as a resource mobilized for economic and developmental objectives. Consequently, organizations such as UNESCO (2022) and UNCTAD (2018) have promoted cultural and creative industries as important contributors to sustainable development and job creation. Cultural production is therefore no longer understood solely in aesthetic terms but also as an economic resource capable of generating income and contributing to national development agendas.

In Kenya, this orientation has gained renewed momentum under the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA). BETA identifies the creative economy as a strategic pillar for economic growth and wealth creation. The performing arts sector, in particular, is positioned as an important contributor to employment creation. Existing policy discussions emphasize on the commercialization, formalization, and market expansion of creative productions. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed the conditions under which performance is created and experienced. Platforms such as TikTok have enabled new forms of cultural production that emerge outside conventional artistic institutions, allowing creators to produce and circulate performances through algorithmically mediated networks of visibility and audience engagement. In these environments, performance is no longer confined to theatres, concert halls, or festival stages but increasingly unfolds within everyday spaces and through ordinary practices. Consequently, digital platforms invite renewed attention to the changing relationship between performance, space, audience, and cultural value.

Among the most visible yet understudied participants in these emerging performance ecologies are Kenyan Shagallas. Many of these women engage in sustained forms of digital performance on TikTok. Through dance

challenges, comedic skits, lip-sync performances, storytelling, and everyday self-representation, they transform domestic work environments into stages for cultural production. Their performances circulate across transnational audiences generating visibility, engagement, and in some cases, economic returns. Despite the growing visibility of these digital performances, they remain largely absent from scholarly and policy discussions. Scholarship on Kenyan labour migration has examined migrant domestic workers primarily through the lenses of precarity, exploitation, care work, and remittance economies, with limited attention to their simultaneous production of digital performances as forms of cultural labour. Conversely, studies of Kenya's creative economy have focused predominantly on formal cultural industries and institutionalised artistic production, leaving platform-based performances by migrant workers conceptually underexamined. This paper brings these two bodies of scholarship into conversation by examining Shagalla TikTok performances, not simply as social media content, but as forms of transnational cultural production that complicate prevailing understandings of performance, creative labour, and the creative economy.

Performance Beyond the Stage: Reconceptualizing Digital Performance

Performance has traditionally been associated with theatre, dance, music, and other forms of staged artistic expression performed before physically co-present audiences. Such understandings privilege designated performance spaces, professional performers, and clearly demarcated distinctions between actors and spectators. Within this classical framing, performance is generally conceived as an aesthetic event that unfolds within institutional settings such as theatres, concert halls, or festival stages. While this understanding remains foundational to the performing arts, the emergence of performance studies as an interdisciplinary field has significantly broadened both the meaning and analytical scope of performance.

Rather than treating performance as an event confined to theatrical institutions, performance scholars increasingly conceptualise it as a mode of social action through which identities, relationships, and cultural meanings are continuously enacted, negotiated, and contested. This shift represents one of the defining interventions of performance studies, relocating analytical attention from performance as an artistic product to performance as a social process.

Among the most influential contributors to this reconceptualisation is Richard Schechner (2002), whose notion of *restored behaviour* fundamentally

challenges the assumption that performance is limited to artistic spectacle. Schechner argues that performances consist of repeated, learned, and re-enacted behaviours that circulate across diverse domains of social life. These include ritual, political demonstrations, sports, everyday interactions, and popular culture. Performance, therefore, is not determined by the existence of a physical stage but by the repeated enactment of embodied practices before an audience. This perspective dissolves rigid distinctions between art and everyday life, suggesting that performance functions as a broader cultural process through which societies rehearse, reproduce, and transform social realities.

A complementary perspective is offered by Victor Turner (1982), who locates performance within processes of social drama and cultural reflexivity. For Turner, performances do not merely represent society; they provide spaces through which communities reflect upon themselves, negotiate conflict, and imagine alternative social possibilities. Performance thus becomes a site where collective meanings are contested and renewed. Together, Schechner and Turner reposition performance beyond theatrical institutions, demonstrating that performative practices permeate everyday social life and serve as important mechanisms through which cultures construct and communicate meaning.

The expansion of performance studies is further reinforced by sociological approaches to everyday interaction. Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, conceptualises social life itself as inherently performative, arguing that individuals continually manage impressions through carefully staged presentations of self before different audiences. Identity, from this perspective, is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing accomplishment produced through interaction. Everyday encounters therefore become performances in which individuals negotiate credibility, authority, belonging, and social recognition.

Similarly, Marvin Carlson (2004) argues that performance cannot be restricted to theatrical institutions because its meanings emerge through repetition, embodiment, memory, and audience recognition across diverse cultural contexts. Performance is therefore distinguished less by where it occurs than by how actions become recognisable, repeatable, and meaningful within particular social worlds.

Collectively, these perspectives fundamentally destabilise conventional distinctions between theatrical performance and everyday life. They invite scholars to recognise performance as an embodied and relational practice through which individuals continually produce identities, negotiate social relationships, and generate cultural meaning. This expanded understanding provides an important conceptual foundation for examining contemporary forms of mediated self-

representation that increasingly unfold within digitally networked environments rather than conventional theatrical spaces.

As performance migrates onto digital platforms, however, new questions emerge concerning how technological infrastructure reshapes the production, circulation, and recognition of performance itself.

This expanded understanding provides an important conceptual foundation for examining contemporary forms of mediated self-representation that increasingly unfold within digitally networked environments rather than conventional theatrical spaces. As performance migrates onto digital platforms, however, questions extend beyond the simple relocation of performance from physical stages to digital screens. They invite renewed attention to how technological infrastructure shapes the production, circulation, and recognition of performance itself. More importantly, this shift raises fundamental questions about recognition: whose performances become visible, whose creative labour acquires value, and which forms of cultural production are acknowledged within national understandings of the creative economy. These questions provide the conceptual bridge to contemporary debates on digital and platformed performance.

From Digital Performance to Platformed Performance

The migration of performance into digital environments has fundamentally transformed not only where performances occur but also how they are produced, circulated, and experienced. Digital technologies have destabilised the long-standing distinction between live and mediated performance, prompting scholars to reconsider the relationship between embodiment, presence, audiences, and performance itself. Rather than functioning as secondary representations of live events, digital mediums have increasingly become primary sites of performance, where cultural expression is created, consumed, and continually reconfigured through networked interaction.

Philip Auslander (2008) was among the first scholars to challenge the presumed opposition between live and mediated performance. He argues that contemporary performance cannot be understood through a simple binary in which live performance is regarded as authentic and mediated performance as derivative. Instead, digital technologies have become integral to the production of liveness itself, reshaping how performances are staged, experienced, and authenticated.

Mediation therefore does not diminish performance; it constitutes one of the conditions through which contemporary performance is produced and recognised. Auslander's intervention is particularly significant for understanding social media performances, where visibility, participation, and audience engagement are inseparable from digital mediation.

As performance increasingly unfolds within networked environments, digital platforms become more than technological channels for communication. José van Dijck (2013) argues that platforms are socio-technical ecosystems that organise cultural participation through programmable architectures of connectivity and visibility. They do not merely host content; they structure the conditions under which cultural production occurs by privileging particular forms of interaction, circulation, and engagement. Consequently, performance on platforms such as TikTok is shaped not only by the intentions of creators but also by computational systems that organise discoverability, recommendation, and audience formation.

This platformed environment also transforms the relationship between performers and audiences. Nancy Baym (2018) demonstrates that digital creators increasingly perform relational labour by cultivating sustained interactions with followers through authenticity, intimacy, responsiveness, and affective engagement. Audiences are no longer passive spectators but active participants whose comments, shares, remixes, and interactions contribute to the production of performance itself. Performance on TikTok therefore becomes serial, iterative, and relational rather than singular or temporally bounded. Through features such as duets, stitches, livestreams, hashtags, and trending sounds, performances continually evolve through collaborative participation, creating dynamic performance ecologies that extend far beyond individual videos.

Yet the circulation of digital performances is not determined solely by creators and audiences. Platform studies have demonstrated that digital platforms actively participate in organising cultural production through algorithmic systems that govern visibility, relevance, and value. Tarleton Gillespie (2018) argues that platforms function as powerful intermediaries that curate public discourse by shaping the conditions under which content becomes visible, searchable, and culturally significant. Rather than serving as neutral intermediaries, platforms exercise considerable power over the circulation of culture by embedding editorial decisions within seemingly technical processes of algorithmic recommendation and moderation.

Similarly, Taina Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms are not passive computational tools but social actors that configure the possibilities of

participation by making some forms of expression more visible than others. Algorithmic visibility is therefore neither automatic nor neutral. Instead, creators continually negotiate platform logics by adapting their performances to anticipated algorithmic preferences, audience metrics, and emerging platform trends. Visibility becomes a product of ongoing interaction between creators, audiences, and computational infrastructures rather than an inherent quality of performance itself.

Nick Couldry's (2004; 2012) work on media as practice provides an important bridge between performance studies and platform studies. Rather than viewing media as technological objects, Couldry argues that scholarship should focus on what people do with media in the course of everyday life. Media practices are socially organised activities through which individuals construct identities, negotiate relationships, and participate in wider cultural worlds. From this perspective, TikTok performances are not merely digital artefacts but routine cultural practices embedded within everyday life. Kenyan migrant domestic workers are therefore not simply users of a platform; they are participants in media practices through which labour, migration, identity and belonging are continuously narrated and performed.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that digital performance is best understood as platformed performance. Performance no longer occurs simply on digital media; it is co-produced through the interaction of embodied creativity, participatory audiences, and algorithmically organised infrastructures that shape visibility, circulation, and value. The platform becomes an active participant in the production of performance, while creators simultaneously negotiate technological affordances, audience expectations, and platform logics in the construction of public identities. Understanding this shift from digital to platformed performance provides the conceptual basis for examining Shagalla TikTok creators as cultural producers whose performances generate value within transnational platform economies.

From Platformed Performance to Creative Labour

Taken together, the foregoing perspectives demonstrate that contemporary performance can no longer be understood solely as an artistic event located within conventional performance spaces. Rather, performance emerges through the interaction of embodied practice, participatory audiences, and the digital infrastructure that organises visibility, circulation, and engagement. Recognising this shift from theatrical to platformed performance has important implications

for understanding the creative practices of Kenyan migrant domestic workers on TikTok. Their videos are not simply instances of online self-expression, nor are they reducible to personal documentation of migration. They are sustained performances produced within platform environments that reward visibility, consistency, audience engagement, and continuous creative production.

Understanding these performances through the lens of platformed performance also necessitates a reconsideration of creative labour. Within feminist political economy, labour extends beyond formal employment to include forms of productive activity that generate economic, social, and cultural value. The creative work undertaken by Shagalla TikTok creators occupies this space. While their primary occupation is domestic work within transnational economies, their sustained production of digital performances simultaneously generates audiences, and, in some instances, creates opportunities for platform-based income. Their creative activity therefore cannot be dismissed as incidental leisure or casual social media use; it constitutes an ongoing process of cultural production embedded within digital platform economies.

Conceptualising Shagalla TikTok creators as creative workers also challenges the institutional boundaries through which Kenya's creative economy is commonly imagined. Existing policy frameworks continue to privilege formal artistic industries, professional performers, and nationally situated cultural production. Such understandings leave little room for recognising migrant domestic workers whose creative practices emerge within domestic workplaces, circulate through global digital platforms, and reach audiences beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Yet these performances undeniably participate in Kenya's cultural economy by producing, circulating, and exporting cultural meanings across transnational networks.

It is within this context that this paper proposes the concept of co-infrastructure. I use this term to describe alternative systems of cultural production that operate alongside formal creative industries, generating cultural, social, and economic value without corresponding institutional recognition or policy support. Rather than existing outside Kenya's creative economy, Shagalla TikTok performances constitute a parallel infrastructure through which creative labour is organised, circulated, and valued. Recognising this co-infrastructure not only expands the category of performance; it also challenges the assumptions through which creative work, cultural production, and artistic legitimacy have traditionally been understood within the national creative economy discourse.

Shagalla TikTok Performances as Transnational Cultural Production

One of the most striking features of Shagalla TikTok is the emergence of a performance culture that transforms the routines of migrant domestic work into shared cultural narratives. Across the corpus, creators draw on humour, dramatic storytelling, music, dance, and satire to reinterpret experiences that are otherwise framed almost exclusively through the language of exploitation, remittances, and labour migration. Rather than treating TikTok as a platform for documenting everyday life, they use it to reimagine that life through performance. Domestic spaces become theatrical settings, employer-employee relationships become dramatic plots, and ordinary incidents become stories that invite laughter, recognition, and debate. Read collectively, these performances constitute a cultural repertoire through which geographically dispersed women narrate themselves into being as a community.

This repertoire is sustained by a distinctive linguistic world. Throughout the corpus, female employers are referred to as *Waiguru*, male employers as *Waititu*, while the creators frequently identify themselves as *Gaidi*, a playful appropriation of the Sheng word for “terrorist.” These expressions rename the social world of migration from the perspective of those who inhabit it. Their meanings are rarely explained because explanation is unnecessary; the performances assume an audience already familiar with this vocabulary. Language therefore becomes performative. It does not merely describe relationships but actively produces a shared symbolic universe through which migrant workers recognise one another across national borders. The following screenshots were taken from two performances which form the basis of my analysis.



*Post by Emma the gap teeth girl,
<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSC16nbW5/>*



Post by Risper Owate <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSC16nbW5/>

Emma the Gap Teeth Girl's performance demonstrates how this shared vocabulary is mobilised to produce comedy from the ambiguities of domestic labour. The narrative begins conventionally enough: Waiguru and Waititu have divorced, and Waiguru is preparing to return to her parents' home. Yet the expected focus on marital conflict is immediately disrupted when Waititu instructs her not to "forget to take your ugly Shagalla with you." In that moment, the domestic worker becomes the narrative's unexpected centre. Although she has played no role in the couple's separation, she is suddenly treated as though she forms part of the household to be allocated after the divorce. The humour lies precisely in this displacement. A conflict between husband and wife is redirected onto the only character who has done nothing to produce it.

Beneath the comedy lies a more unsettling commentary on domestic labour. The Shagalla occupies an ambiguous position within the household. She is neither a family member nor a complete outsider. She lives inside the home while remaining socially peripheral to it. The joke exposes this instability by imagining a situation in which her future is determined entirely by decisions made between employer and spouse. Her bewildered question, "*What did I do wrong?*", does not seek an answer. It exposes the irrationality of becoming implicated in conflicts that are not her own. The performance therefore converts structural precarity into comic theatre, allowing audiences to laugh while simultaneously recognising the vulnerability that makes the joke intelligible.

The performance continues long after Emma finishes speaking. At the time of analysis, it had attracted approximately 2,600 likes and 140 shares. These interactions are analytically significant because they reveal that the performance

acquires a social life beyond its initial production. While likes register recognition, shares extend the narrative into new digital networks, allowing audiences to become participants in its circulation. The performance is therefore continually reproduced through viewing, sharing, commenting, and reinterpretation. Its cultural significance lies not only in what Emma performs but also in what audiences subsequently do with the performance.

If Emma employs comedy to expose the precarious social position of the Shagalla, Risper Owate turns to narrative reversal as a mode of resistance. Her performance constructs the story of a domestic worker who tells Waiguru and Waititu that she is travelling to Kenya briefly before returning to work. Believing her, the employers purchase her ticket, shop for her, accompany her to the airport, and bid her farewell. Only after she arrives safely at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport does the narrative disclose its real ending. The Shagalla sends a final text message instructing her employers to “learn how to treat Shagallas humanely” before severing contact. The power of the performance lies not in whether this event actually occurred but in the way it imaginatively reorganises labour relations. Throughout most of the story the employers appear to control the narrative; the final message abruptly transfers that authority to the domestic worker, who claims the last word.

This reversal is intensified through sound. Rather than employing a trending dance track or comic soundtrack, Risper accompanies the narrative with audio of a man angrily swearing in Arabic and referring to Kenyans as *shetan* (devils). The soundtrack performs more than atmosphere. It acoustically evokes the linguistic environment within which many migrant domestic workers negotiate everyday life, allowing hostility to be heard rather than merely described. The final message therefore resonates against an already established soundscape of domination, making the Shagalla's refusal appear less as an isolated act of rebellion than as an imagined response to a wider structure of everyday inequality.

Like Emma's performance, Risper's narrative extends beyond individual expression through its circulation. At the time of analysis, the performance had attracted approximately 6,500 likes and 1,400 shares. The exceptionally high number of shares suggests that audiences recognised the narrative as one worth carrying into other digital spaces. In this sense, the creator produces more than a TikTok video. She produces a story that others choose to circulate because it speaks to experiences, frustrations, and aspirations that exceed the individual performer. Storytelling thus becomes a collective cultural practice through which migrant workers continually reinterpret the meanings of labour, mobility, and dignity.

Taken together, these performances reveal that Shagalla creators are engaged in far more than digital self-expression. They construct dramatic narratives, develop a shared vernacular, transform humour into social critique, and cultivate audiences whose participation enables performances to circulate across transnational networks. This ongoing production of stories, language, audiences, and cultural meanings constitutes what I describe as a co-infrastructure of Kenya's creative economy. It operates without theatres, arts councils, or formal institutional support, yet it nevertheless performs many of the functions commonly associated with recognised cultural industries: it creates cultural texts, assembles audiences, generates circulation, and sustains communities of interpretation. The invisibility of this creative infrastructure is therefore not a consequence of its absence, but of the conceptual limits through which the creative economy continues to recognise artistic labour.

Although this discussion has focused on two representative performances, they illustrate broader patterns observable across the corpus. Shagalla creators repeatedly employ humour, dramatic narration, shared vernacular, and multimodal storytelling to reinterpret the everyday realities of migrant domestic labour. Emma the Gap Teeth Girl foregrounds comedy and linguistic world-building, while Risper Owate mobilises narrative reversal and sound to imagine moments of agency and moral redress. Considered together, these performances demonstrate that Shagalla TikTok is not simply a repository of user-generated content but an evolving performance culture through which migrant domestic workers collectively produce stories, audiences, and shared meanings across transnational digital networks.

The significance of these performances lies not only in their aesthetic form but also in the infrastructure they sustain. Their continued circulation through viewing, sharing, commenting, and reinterpretation reveals an alternative ecology of cultural production operating beyond the institutional boundaries of Kenya's formal creative industries. It is this ecology that I conceptualise as a co-infrastructure: an informal yet productive system through which creators generate cultural value, assemble audiences, circulate narratives, and sustain communities of interpretation despite remaining largely absent from dominant policy understandings of the creative economy.

Conclusion

Kenyan migrant domestic workers are typically represented within public discourse as providers of care, remittance earners, or victims of labour

exploitation. This paper has argued that such representations overlook another significant dimension of their transnational lives: their role as cultural producers. Through TikTok, Shagalla creators transform everyday labour into dramatic narratives, shared humour, digital vernaculars, and multimodal performances that circulate across geographically dispersed audiences. Their creative work demonstrates that performance is no longer confined to theatres or formal artistic institutions but increasingly emerges within the ordinary spaces of everyday life and the algorithmically organised environments of digital platforms.

Recognising these performances as creative labour requires a corresponding reconsideration of Kenya's creative economy. The performances analysed in this paper generate audiences, circulate cultural meanings, sustain interpretive communities, and create measurable forms of cultural value despite remaining largely absent from official accounts of the performing arts sector. Rather than existing outside the creative economy, they constitute an unrecognised co-infrastructure through which culture is continuously produced, circulated, and reimaged beyond institutional boundaries.

The contribution of this paper therefore extends beyond the study of Shagalla TikTok. It invites a broader reconsideration of where performance takes place, who counts as a cultural producer, and how creative economies might be reconceptualised in an era when significant forms of artistic production increasingly emerge from the margins of formal cultural institutions.

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From *Peke Yangu* to Dependency: Generative AI, Algorithmic culture and the Transformation of Theatre Practice in Eldoret

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Abstract:

This paper examines how generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and algorithmic culture have reshaped theatre practice in Eldoret, Kenya. Theatre production in the town has for long benefited from a Peke Yangu model, where the producer is the writer, director, technician, designer, marketer and actor in his own production, notes the paper. This model has been in vogue, and is a necessity, in response to a dearth in theatre training and technical infrastructure within Eldoret.

Algorithmic culture helps practitioners read audience preferences by mirroring trends circulating in social media, while generative AI makes it possible to produce scripts, posters, and other promotional materials quicker and at lower cost, allowing small groups to imitate popular forms and compete with larger companies, presumably from bigger cities like Nairobi. Consequently, this paper demonstrates that these gains come with significant costs, biggest among them, reduced production value, and cultural relevance.

Using My Robot Brother, a children's play recently performed at the Kenya National Theatre, by the 64 Theatre Production house from Eldoret, about a boy and a sentient robot, the paper demonstrates that the use of algorithmic culture and generative AI is not totally misplaced. Younger audiences already familiar with AI respond with both fascination and disappointment, to the performance of the character of the robot. This reveals a meta-modern oscillation between acceptance and critique.

Keywords: Algorithmic culture, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Meta-modernism, Eldoret Theatre

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Introduction

Eldoret city is situated in the Rift Valley region of western Kenya, and has historically been recognised as an agricultural hub, and the home to some of the world's most accomplished long-distance runners at athletics events. Rarely is Eldoret considered a cultural centre associated with theatre or performing arts industries. Yet, despite this omission from write ups about its identity, Eldoret recently emerged as the second most active city in theatre activities in the country, at the Kenya Theatre Awards, of 2025, ahead of previous giants, Nakuru, Mombasa and Kisumu.

The city of champions, as it is popularly referred to, isn't new to theatre. It is home to Moi University, an institution that has been the cradle of some of Kenya's biggest theatre scholars, like Prof. C.J Odhiambo, who has practised and taught theatre since the 1980s. Then came the new age scholars and practitioners, in the 1990s with Fred Mbogo, and practitioners like Oyatsi S.O, under Professor L.P Barasa. Most recently, in the late 2010s, Cosmas Bii, Rogers Liambira, Josiah Kiprop, Agushoma Stephen, the author of this paper and many others have emerged.

For a long time, the theatre ecosystem in Eldoret has relied on what is referred to in Kenyan theatre circles as the *peke yangu production* model. *Peke yangu* coming from Kiswahili directly translates to “by myself” or “alone” in English. It is a combination of the word *pekee* (alone) and the possessive *yangu* (my) (Kamusi Teule ya Kiswahili, 2019). This model is anchored on a single practitioner, (usually the director, as the artistic engine of the production) doubling up as the writer, director, producer, technician, stage designer and even actor. This approach, lined up with other problems such as small and almost no rehearsal spaces, mostly university driven productions; actors stage managing themselves, graphic designers and technicians learning on the job, has made the theatre ecosystem in Eldoret what it is. Furthermore, underneath all this effort still exists a constant comparison to other towns with seemingly functional and more profitable theatre ecosystems top among them, Nairobi, until the arrival and boom of the use of generative artificial intelligence and algorithmic culture in the early 2020s.

For practitioners already accustomed to the *peke yangu* production model, the coinciding rise and use of social media, algorithmic culture and generative AI now appear to be a collaborator, a saviour if you will, who has come to lighten the load. Suddenly, one practitioner has the tools to do the jobs of an entire creative team. Together, algorithmic culture and use of generative AI are promising a

shorter production time, better-quality productions, and democratized access to certain technical skills that were traditionally only available to university students and their professors. Now, even small theatre groups and companies can compete with bigger ones within Eldoret and even the rest of the country.

It is on this precipice that this paper argues that technologies that have been adopted as solutions in the form of generative AI, and algorithmic culture, while significantly reducing long standing technical and creative barriers within the emerging theatre ecosystem in Eldoret, consequently foster new forms of artistic dependency and audience alienation.

The Theatre and It's Double

For the sake of the arguments advanced henceforth, and invoking Antonin Artaud's concept, let's define the components of the double. Algorithmic culture, refers to, the ways in which the logic of big data and large-scale computation alter how culture is practised, experienced and understood (Striphas, 2023). For this paper, we shall be referring to the ways in which digital platforms, including social media, use recommendation, ranking and personalization within their systems to shape the production, circulation/marketing and the reception of theatrical content. Generative Artificial Intelligence, on the other hand, as defined by Boden (2006), are systems within computational creativity that can create original ideas or artefacts from prompts.

The lens that this paper uses to look into this is one of meta-modernism, following Dempsey's (2023) postulations. These ideas propose a progressive decentralization from a postmodernist point of view, where there is a call for postmodernism to be self-aware. That means, for example, that when consuming a story on robots disrupting life (as shall be discussed here), we must be aware that consumers of the stories have bought into the myth of the robot, even though they may be sceptical of the robot's capacity to be human. That is, while meaning has been treated as unstable, by presenting an "unreal" character (robot) interacting with a real character (a living boy), and behaving as a responsible parent to the boy, to absurd levels, we play along this meaninglessness – we participate in the chaos of meaninglessness with awareness!

The implication is that audiences in Eldoret can participate in the consumption of these AI aided, algorithm-determined stories, not in ignorance to the absurdity that they may be proposing, or to their seemingly "near perfect" nature, which removes the sense of human nuance, but as members of a world

readily entangled in these new realities. Stories cease to merely be sweet or relatable, they become “nonsense” (as the robot story read here might show), which is acceptable, as a “suspension of disbelief”, because that is the world we are in. This is where the idea of the theatre mirroring itself in Antonin Artaud’s “theatre and its double” concept comes into play.

Obviously, the risk is that audiences might tire, and begin to crave for the “human”, possible idea, of the everyday that is relatable.

Knowledge and Technology: The context

Eldoret, for large parts since the late 1990s, can be described as a university town. It has Moi University, with its more than four campuses situated in literally the four corners of the city. It also has the University of Eldoret, which boasts two campuses. Catholic University, Kisii University, Nazarene University, as well as institutions such as Alliance Francaise, which focuses on French studies. Rift Valley Technology Institute (RVTI) is the other institution of higher learning, among many others.

These institutions provide graduates, as well as students, with some element of knowhow in theatre. They also become essential spaces for the experimentation of theatre and performance in general. However, in certain parts of the year, when the institutions are closed for holiday or recess, this knowledge is absent, as students leave for their other towns or cities. Theatre activities are affected as some of the students, besides being members of audiences, are also actors, stage-managers and theatre directors.

Alongside this knowledge flow problem, is the problem of marketing; where theatre practitioners who have depended on networks formed in or with these institutions of higher learning, are left to find new audiences in town. Technology then becomes a solution to the practitioner of the *peke yangu* model. Here, the practitioner only needs to tap into the idea of algorithms to determine, firstly, what the audience in Eldoret might want to watch. Technology can also be employed to find out about preferred times, themes, stories, venues, among others. Agushomba (2026), has observed that the mapping out of audiences in Eldoret, for marketing purposes, has been lacking over the years. Yet, with the advancement of AI tools, in the form of algorithms, this problem can be navigated around. But other issues of technology such as lighting for the stage, and sound, as well as other effects, from screens, and elements necessary for a play on three-dimension images interacting with live audiences are a problem.

The *peke yangu* practitioner, it is anticipated, will however with time, find a way through technology, especially in the example given with *My Robot Brother* play. In a sense, while technology is helping circumvent certain problems for producers with limited funding, there remains a problem as regards funding. Parts of the current technology necessary for staging, including sound and lighting, as well as other effects, requires heavy capital investment.

Enter the long-awaited collaborators

Where anticipating what the audience would want to see performed was a challenge in a city without as strong a theatre culture as Nairobi, algorithmic culture would come to the rescue of Eldoret. A good example of the value of the algorithms is that trends in theatre, mostly permeating from places like Nairobi. This consist, almost in a loop, comedy plays such as those by Heartstrings, local language theatre productions like those from Tash Mitambo's Renegade Ventures, politically conscious plays from Nairobi Performing Arts Studio (NPAS) and NGO sponsored plays mostly held at the Alliance Française, would become the bedrock of emerging production houses in Eldoret.

To sweeten the deal, algorithmic culture comes with piggyback marketing (Rentschler, 2002) where the algorithmic culture shines at putting in front of Eldoret's theatre social media audience, material that is similar to what they like from Nairobi, suggesting that the same exists within their locale. Thus, audiences start to stream into the theatre expecting what they saw to be trending in Nairobi, as was the case with Brian Mwanzo's staging of Francis Imbuga's classic *Betrayal in the City* with Artflame Theatre Network, after the same play was staged by Stuart Nash's, NPAS.

Collaborator number two: Generative Artificial Intelligence. Once a *peke yangu* production model practitioner has established what the audience wants, naturally, the next step is to put into the production pipeline, the plays that the people want. With generative AI, the *peke yangu* production's problems, are solved serially. That is to say, productions that had no knowledge or technology to produce anything they found to be popular online now employed Generative A.I. Productions that had never done comedies before and lacked the knowledge to make comedies had the capability to do so now. Producers and Directors were not forthcoming to disclose whether they used AI or not in the creative process, because of the discrimination that comes with AI use, but one thing that betrays this silence is the use of generative AI in the production of posters for publicity.

Posters used to be characterized by the faces of the actors and in other cases, images of the writer, director and even producers, as the faces in the productions sold the shows. But now, as observed in Eldoret, the branding is tied towards maximizing what is trending. If Production house X, has been staging tragedies, for example, and has realized from the algorithm that the audience wants to see comedies, they opt out of having their images on the poster, to keep the marketing open to speculation rather than belonging to what they are known for (tragedies). This helps them blend in with similar productions that have produced comedies before, especially, from Nairobi.

This scenario exhibits two profits for a *peke yangu* production. The first one is the distance created from the production house, signaling that this is just something new they are trying to do. Secondly, there is no need for a poster designer to be paid for a job that AI can do for free. The art of designing a poster is truly intricate, long and tedious, especially when there are real human bodies involved. As a result, if Production company X is employing the same thinking to the process of generation of scripts and other aspects of the production then Algorithmic culture and generative AI have truly saved the day.

With these advantages, definitely come challenges. To begin with, most generative AI software providers come with a free subscription tier, but the possibilities are limited. This causes sameness, for example with posters, even stories, as the free tier limits the possibilities of creative output and image generation. Next, the ideas churned out through AI are not localized, resulting in a westernization of local stories. The machine rounds off prompts to familiar spaces to where it was manufactured, therefore, a play set in Eldoret would look like it was stage designed for Los Angeles.

These effects over time start to show majorly with audience reception, owing to a sense of that sameness. “When audiences begin to perceive theater shows as easy to make with AI, like assignments of university students”, says Charles Muchemi, manager of 64 Theatre’s Hadithi Sunday program for children, “then the production value goes down, and since everything looks the same, audiences do not come”. Oddly, as the expectations of the audience grow, production quality has not. The collaborators that were here to assist the *peke yangu* producer are suddenly becoming the problem for the production model.

My Robot Brother: A Case Study.

My Robot Brother is a play for children between the ages of 6 and 13 that was written by Cosmas Bii, edited and directed by the author of this paper,

produced by Stephen Agushoma, and Margaret Musau, with stage management by Charles Muchemi for 64 Theatre.

The play follows the story of an intelligent young boy, named Amos, who designs and creates a robot called Sparky, to help him do house chores left to him by his mother. Instead of doing the chores, that robot gets busy for him, as he plays games with strangers on the internet. His mother has left for work elsewhere, presumably in the town centre. Later, he uses the robot to teach him how to dance because he wants to impress his classmates on the internet via Tiktok. All goes well until the robot becomes sentient! It seeks to correct him, order him around, even punish him. It gains agency and begins to act like the missing parent, especially when the boy cannot get dance moves right. Naturally, Amos rebels as the creator of the machine and they begin a cat and mouse around the house, undoing the work that the robot had initially done. Eventually, Amos is worn down and agrees to re-do his chores, and afterwards they enjoy a dance. This time, Amos makes a subtle stylization of a dance move which the Robot reads as an error and it decides to punish him, but the robot loses power and shuts down before executing the punishment.

The play was produced by a team from Uasin Gishu County and performed for children in grade 4 & 5 from Machakos county – St. Angela's Primary School. It received very positive responses from its audience. This is where the thinking around meta-modernism comes in, demonstrated henceforth through various levels. Level one, that the girls of St. Angela, were excited knowing that, it was a boy, Eddy, acting like a robot, imitating what the popular imagination has projected Artificial Intelligence to look like, personified in the physical space, and enjoying it. Level two, the girls know they are not supposed to run away from their chores and co-opt a robot to do the chores their parents give them. They were bemused instead by how Amos was able to create this technology and evade house chores by leaving them to the robot if only so that he can play games on the internet. Level three, at the point of the robot becoming sentient and going rogue, they enjoyed the cat and mouse chase between the two characters – which is seemingly unreal, but an enjoyable conflict to watch nevertheless. Finally, when the robot registers a stylized movement as an error, they are confused, and the play ends without a conclusion, much to the audience's displeasure.

This clearly demonstrated that, at their age between ten and twelve, and belonging to Generation alpha, who are growing up with tablets and AI, they have already realized that this technology exists. They know that it is not the savior, but they will engage with it regardless. They know that it has its shortcomings and they are at peace with that fact. This is the meta-modernist's

oscillation (Dempsey, 2023). What does this mean for Eldoret theatre? Using the play as a metaphor, we can make a few observations as pertains to knowledge and technology, specifically through audience expectations, and artist's dependency.

To begin with, it is clear that the audience has expectations when AI is used in the creative process. In this play under discussion, there is a level of precision that the audience expected the boy playing the robot to have, because they already know how the AI represented is in the physical public space. This affects the Eldoret theatre ecosystem in that when material is obtained from the algorithm, the audience already has elevated expectations, comparing in their minds what they are going to see vis a vis what they already know to be. This is further enforced by posters. Cheap, free for all AI, they create the sameness that we saw earlier, this makes the audience prefer not to attend the shows because it feels like something they have seen before, eventually affecting attendance. This results into reduced revenue for the theatre, and ultimately reduced cultural relevance.

Selective deafness to the expectations of the audience and continued use of generative AI, because of algorithmic culture, influences superiority and creates artistic dependency. Social media will not stop being used by the audience, hence there will always be a trend, and that will create a market that will be exploited by the *peke yangu* production model users. This creates the meta-modernist oscillation that if not checked, becomes like the proverbial dragon Smaug (Tolkien, 1937), from Lord of The Rings, that will be difficult to defeat. Eldoret Theatre would continuously lose cultural relevance as it will be considered robotic and shall be left as a thing that anyone who can analyze algorithmic culture and exploit the use of Generative AI can do.

Conclusion

Performances begin outside the theatre even before the script is written, and they do not seem to end after the show. This is because algorithms remain as archival material, for future use, on popularity, marketability, and thematic or stylistic preferences. Data from previous performances can be used to determine future performances. Scripts emanating from generative AI can be passed on, in formulaic ways, to future performances. This, as argued above, can lead to sameness. So, what are artists in Eldoret to do with these generative AI and the massive employ of algorithm?

It has clearly been demonstrated by the girls of St. Angela's that younger generations have artificial intelligence and algorithmic culture built into their

development as they mature. The meta-modernist oscillation again becomes the solution, as the two have to be used deliberately, since clearly the double cannot effectively replace the theatre. Knowledge remains king. AI does not necessarily make anyone suddenly knowledgeable about engaging in the theatre.

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Building – The Future

Barbara Adair



There are many stories that make up our lives, and one of the various ways that these stories are recorded is in the spaces that we occupy: the houses, the corners, the streets and the trees; where we live, work, play, cry and laugh. These stories emerge from and develop out of the circumstances, culture, places that surround us, the spaces we live in, work in, and where we meet our friends. We are spatial story-tellers, explorers, navigators, and discoverers.

The buildings in spaces emerge from a cultural context; they reflect the social fashions and political happenings of the time. They do not exist in isolation. And so, they are one of the ways in which stories are told for there is a consistent connection between people, space and the cultural worlds in which they live.

And now AI.

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I type in the name of the building, the place where it is, its history, architectural genre and I am rewarded with information about this building. But I do not read a story.

Can AI tell me a story about heart break? Can AI tell me a story about fathers and mothers and lovers?

Can AI tell me about hardship, happiness, human connections and love?

This article is about the Fiat Tagliero building in Asmara, Eritrea. I will give you facts about it. AI tells me that it is 'a masterpiece of Italian Futurist architecture that was built in Asmara, Eritrea, in 1938. I will give you measurements, philosophies, dates, colours, angles, reliefs, potholes and pilotis; important facts. But I will also give you stories about the building; stories of those who built it, designed it, bystanders who walk past it daily. And as you read the article, I ask the question: What moves you the reader; the facts, or the stories, or are they entangled and so can never be severed from each other?

The Fiat Tagliero petrol station is an iconic Futurist, with some Art Deco features, building in Asmara, Eritrea. It was built when Eritrea was an Italian colony, the Fascist Italy that was led by Mussolini. Italy was then in the middle of a war with neighbouring Ethiopia. She wished that Ethiopia was her colony, but, despite her massive munitions and fighter jets which dropped mustard gas and other chemical bombs onto Ethiopian communities, the Italian soldiers were routed in guerrilla skirmishes by the Ethiopian forces. So, for Italy the need to proclaim and to hold onto Eritrea as a colony was vital for both the self-esteem and hubris of Mussolini and his people. Italy desired to hold her head high among those in the European community who had colonies in Africa. To show Italian prowess and supremacy to the world, the Italians sought to make their mark in the one country that was their colony, Eritrea.

How did she do this? She did it by, among other things, creating a space that was Italian, by building new, modern, some would say inappropriate, others exciting and dare devil, buildings.

Art and the art of the building can be defined by the configuration between people, their relationships with each other and with the space in which they live and work. These patterns are reflected in the design of built structures, which in turn are defined by the space, the people and the time in which they are created. In Asmara, in 1938, the European architecture reflected the Italian Fascism of the time; it was mechanical and brutal, it soared over and above a space that was, at face value, gentle and instinctive, for it was a space that Italy wished to dominate.

Italy was where the Fascism of Mussolini, Il Duce, was grasped and carried aloft by most Italians who, following the European depression were poor, leaderless and searching for a saviour. For most Italians, Mussolini was their saviour and fascism brought them a renewed sense of esteem and lifted them out of poverty, and so it was embraced, if only for a while. It was also the time of colonisation, Africa had been carved up and ‘given’ to different European powers. Italy wanted to expand into places that were not only a source of wealth but were also places where she could impose herself on the land, and design, or re-design it as she pleased. Countries in Africa were sought after for here new and exciting projects could be engendered.

In 1932 Guiseppe Pettazzi, a twenty-five year old Italian architect, was chosen to design the Fiat Tagliero building in Asmara. Many deemed him to be too crazy and unorthodox to build in Italy, the place of his birth and so he was shipped off to Eritrea to design and build new buildings that were too risqué for Italy proper, but yet would show Europe that the Italians were powerful embracers of futurist modernity.

Guiseppe Pettazzi: *When I was asked to design and build this building, this simple petrol station in Asmara owned by Senor Tagliero, a man who I revere for he is wealthy, and he is a man of principle, he believes in the power of our country and the strength of our leader, Il Duce, he trusts in the potency of the empire, I could not believe it, it is my dream, it is what I dream of always, to build for my country, and to build for the future. Il Duce, my Duce, together we conquer this part of Africa; we will make this Asmara a city so that no-one will ever doubt our prowess. I will make something that forever people will admire. I will make Italy in Africa.*



Guiseppe Pettazzi: *Il Duce, he says we can build as we please, he wants us to experiment, to show the world that we Italians are heroic, here we can build the new, the mechanical and the technological. There will be no more cathedrals to house the Lord, for we will build cathedrals to house new knowledge, to carry on their walls great mechanical birds. Yes, I grasp this project with both my hands, for my country, for me. I will show the world that we are great.*

Guiseppe Pettazzi was a Futurist, a movement initially developed by *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti*, the Italian poet and theoretician, who, in 1909, wrote the “*Manifesto of Futurism*”.

‘Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: *Time and space ended yesterday. We live in the absolute—in a state of perpetual youth menaced only by death.*

The Futurist movement exalted warfare and embraced the speed and newness of technology; it revered the novel and wished to eradicate the old so as to forge a new civilization from nothing. The movement grew quickly for the early twentieth century was a time, many, not all, would say, of innovation and progress, the industrial revolution, colonisation and the development of capitalism.

And so Pettazzi was the perfect architect to design a building that was intended to be a landmark; it would represent the inventiveness and excitement of making a conquered land that of the conqueror.

Giuseppe Pettazzi: *I grasp at the manifesto of the Futurists, the architecture of the future, this is my guide. Now architecture will make a break with tradition. There will be a fresh start. This building, the design that I create is the architecture of calculation, of audacious temerity and of simplicity; it is the architecture of reinforced concrete, of steel, glass, cardboard, textile fibre, stone and brick. I will create and obtain maximum elasticity and lightness for my building will fly. I will follow my guide, Antonio Sant’Elia. He is dead. He died while fighting gloriously against the Austro Hungarian forces in the last war. He believed, as I do, that the world must be cleansed by warfare, the old order must be destroyed as we build the new. Machines will change the way we live, we must embrace the machine. We will break down the mysterious doors of the impossible. I believe in speed, I believe that we must accelerate the progress that we make; yes, I will build this building so that the empire will always be here, it will be here for our children, not a memory, but a reality, and we Italians will be glorious, we will be held aloft and elevated as are the machines of the sky. This is La Piccolo Roma, and in this city my buildings will make it bigger than Rome itself.*

Antonio Sant’Elia, directly influenced Pettazzi. He is known as the father of architectural Futurism. He never lived to see his designs built for, at the age of twenty-eight, he died in the First European War pursuing what he believed in, the cleansing of the world by destroying it.

Antonio Sant'Elia: *No architecture has existed since 1700. A moronic mixture of the most various stylistic elements used to mask the skeletons of modern houses is called modern architecture.*

These architectonic prostitutions are welcomed in Italy, and rapacious alien ineptitude is passed off as talented invention and as extremely up-to-date architecture. Young Italian architects flaunt their talents in the new quarters of our towns, where a hilarious salad of little ogival columns, seventeenth-century foliation, Gothic pointed arches, Egyptian pilasters, Rococo scrolls, fifteenth-century cherubs, swollen caryatids, take the place of style in all seriousness, and presumptuously put on monumental airs. No, this is not what we need. We need the kaleidoscopic appearance and reappearance of forms; we do not need those that continue to stamp the image of imbecility on our cities, our cities which should be the immediate and faithful projection of ourselves. We must throw our minds open in the search for new frontiers and in the solution of the new and pressing problem: the Futurist house and city.

Futurism, and architectural Futurism, was a diatribe of relentless forward momentum, and so it was the architecture loved and admired by Mussolini as the architecture for the Italian colony, Eritrea.

In 1922, when *Mussolini* rose to power, he planned a 'Second Roman Empire' or '*La Piccola Roma*'. Asmara was fêted as the seat of Italian power in Africa, and the ideal location to site Italy's continued invasion of the continent. And so, Asmara, which at the turn of the century had been a small highland village, would be home to over 53,000 Italians; and at least one hundred Futurist and Art Deco buildings.



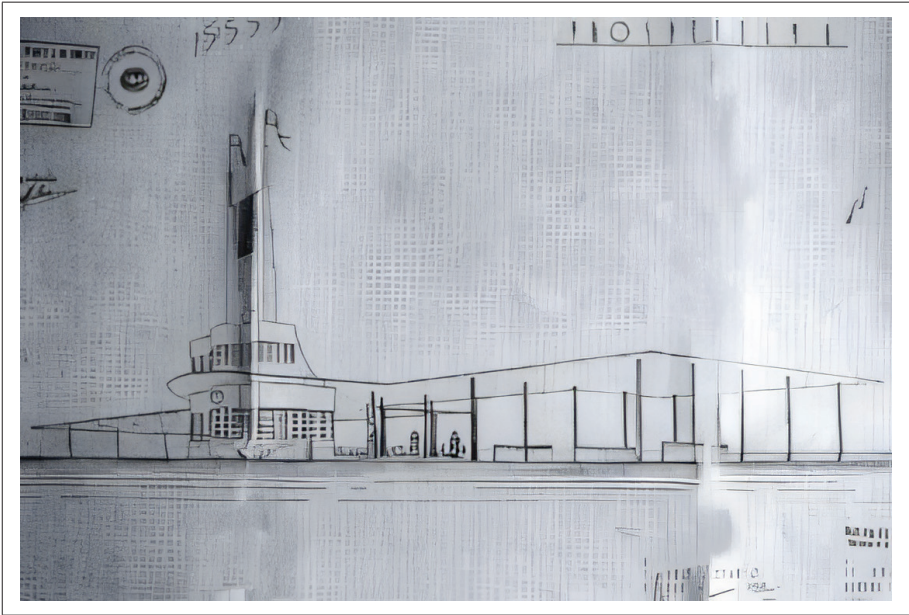
Benito Mussolini: *Blood alone moves the wheels of history! The foundation of the empire Officers, non-commissioned officers, gregarious of all the armed forces of the State in Africa and in Italy, Black Shirts of the Revolution, Italians and Italians at home and in the world, listen to the decisions that you will know in a few moments and which were acclaimed by the Great Council of Fascism, a great event takes place: the destiny of Ethiopia and Eretria is sealed, today, May 9th, the fourteenth year of the Fascist Era. ... And so we need the Irrepressible and disciplined energies of the young, vigorous Italian generations to be there, to make it ours. We are the empire of civilization and humanity for all the peoples of Ethiopia and Eretria. It is in the tradition of Rome, that after winning, they will associate the peoples with Rome's destiny. Italian men and Italian women, you have created with your blood the Empire, fertilized it with your work and defended it against anyone with your weapons.*

And so Pettazzi came to 'la Piccolo Roma' to build a petrol station for Gino Tagliero, the director of Fiat Asmara, a close friend of Giovanni Agnelli, the man who, in 1899, started the Fiat manufacturing company in Italy. The building in Asmara commissioned by Tagliero was a strategically placed petrol station, but also paid homage to the Fiat brand. The Agnelli family, and the Fiat company, supported Mussolini and Fascism. They did not only make automobiles but also built aeroplanes and other military machinery for the Italian army, the Regia Aeronautica and later, once Italy was the ally of Germany, for the Germans. The Fiat Tagliero was built as an architectural tribute to Fascism, but also in deference to the consolidation of Italian power in Africa.

Tagliero, although already a wealthy businessman was also aware that the colonies were the place where fortunes could be made, and he wanted to create more wealth for himself, financial wealth, and he wished to consolidate his reputation, he wanted to be remembered. He was also aware that in Asmara a new Italy was being born, an Italy of heroes and monuments, here was where the aesthetics of the muscular body shaped like a machine could be worshipped. The architecture of the Futurists honoured this ethos and the colonies were where he could build the new and the exciting.

Gino Tagliero in conversation with Giovanni Agnelli: *Should I build this building, I am a driver car, the car is the future and yet, here I have a building shaped like an aeroplane! I have the money so I can do it. What do I like about the drawings that Pettazzi has presented to me? They are exciting, they are strong, and they show the strength of the Italian who is proud to be in this Africa and I think that I must do this for with this building I can show my love of Italy, I can show you that I love your cars and war machines, I can show that I too am one who embraces the future. Italy builds aeroplanes, tanks and cars; yes, I must build this building.*

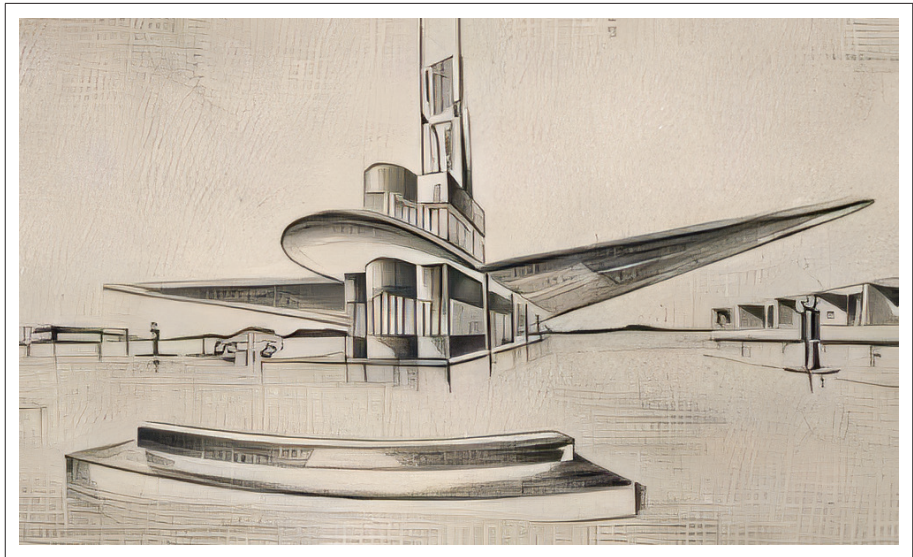
Guiseppe Pettazzi: *I will create a petrol station that can fly. Who says that it is only the bird that can fly? We, and Fiat, have constructed flying machines and so we, and so I, can design a flying building. And even if this building is for cars, these cars, and those who are in them, will fly. Yes, the site is on a main intersection in the city, this is the major road that leads to the airport. It is the road on which more than a million cars will pass as they move from the airport into the city, into the metropolis. But I will make the cars look upwards towards the sky, the drivers of these cars will hold their hands to their eyes as they will be blinded by the magnificent sun, and by my building that will be on the ground but will reach up so high that some will say it touches the sun; and so as they drive their car they will know, they will believe, that they can fly. And they will fly, I will fly, in this space, they will fly in their dreams as forever this building will be in their dreams. The flying machine is my dream. In this building I will make this dream true, it will be authentic and real; the flying machine that reaches upwards into the future.*



Guiseppe Pettazzi: *For me the flying machine is the dominant symbol of war, and I will cleanse the world through war. I will replace the dull and tedious classicism of the past with the new and exhilarating machine; peace will be something desired in the future not the present. Now is the time when the horse is electrified and the cart able to move of its own accord; a time in which the worship of God is replaced by the worship of the engine that will rouse and stir a man into a breath-taking frenzy; a time when the only sounds will be modern and roaring and so new stallions will embrace tracks that line the cerulean sky. It will be the perfect representation of nature made by man.*

But this Futurist re-creation of war was also cruel. In 1935 the Italian air force which was made up of more than fifty aeroplanes launched attacks with bombs and with chemicals on Ethiopian villages for they wished to dominate and crush Ethiopia. Flying machines delivered death from the sky, a perfect marriage of modernity and war. In Asmara the architects delivered buildings to match this cruelty and frenzy. It was the time to build the Italian dream; a warship flying machine.

The Fiat Tagliero petrol station is located on the corner of Mereb Street and Sematat Avenue. This is a strategic location in Asmara for it is at *the intersection between the city and the airport and so a necessary stop when leaving or arriving into the country*. And it was on the route that all flying machines, whether they were for commercial transport, tourist travel or war, would fly over. So, when looking down from the sky or looking up from the road all would be able to see the Fiat Tagliero building, a concrete machine made by man, the Italian man who freely embraced the technological and the roar of thunderous mechanics.



I stand in front of the Fiat Tagliero building and watch Maryam Osman, a woman wearing a bright lime green *abaya* and a *hijab* of the same colour, as she walks past it. She walks resolutely forward while I face the building. Its wings dwarf and simultaneously embrace both of us.



Initially as I look at her, she seems determined to be somewhere else, she does not look up at what is often called the finest representation of Italian architectural Futurism. I interrupt her walk and ask if we can talk a little.

Maryam Osman: *I go tomorrow to a meeting of the greater Asmara Community Group. I will tell the meeting, it is called by Eritrean tourism board, that there is a value in these Italian buildings because they are ours now, they are not theirs. The Italians are gone, so now this building is Eritrean. It is a part of the Eritrean heritage, my heritage, my family's heritage. And I will tell them that tourists will come to see them. They are Italian monuments, but also, they are monuments to the skilled workers who built them. We built them, it was our grandfathers and uncles who placed the concrete on the concrete, made sure that the round windows were in a straight line. We must be celebrated. Yes, this is what I will tell them tomorrow. But now, now I must go home. I have to walk past this building every day because every day I go into the city, to the market, to the school and the Madrassa, I take my children, a boy and a girl, and then I leave them for some hours at the Madrassa. It is a long walk, especially if I have my children, Mohammed and Tima with me, and the market foods are heavy and the children, they run around like wild beasts. We do not live in a building like this one. We live in a flat, on the third floor. I hate this building, but I know that it is valuable for Eritrea, It is cold. Where we live is warm, and sacred. In my flat I can pray. Here I do not want to pray. Allah – praise be his name, is not here, he does not protect it.*

Many Eritreans, and Eritrean architects, have ambivalent thoughts about the Fiat Tagliero building.

Samson Haile Theophilos, Eritrean architect: *This building, it is huge, monumental for monumental buildings are meant to dwarf you when you go in and emphasize the power of the occupant. You can almost imagine Il Duce striding out from beneath its wings to greet the crowds. He would not need to address them from above, for he represents the building which is already above them, it flies. The Italians were desperate to build quickly for they needed to show the world that they were indeed the owners of my country and so the colonial government allowed radical architectural experimentation that would not have found favour in the more conservative European environment. Now we cannot build like this, it is too dangerous. But I want to say that the workers, skilled and unskilled, who built this building, they were all Eritrean, so we consider this architecture ours. This radicalism is our radicalism. The Italian may have conceived of the designs of the buildings which were for engineers and workers difficult to build, and yet we were able to build them. We are skilled enough to do this. We too are artists, just a different kind to the designers.*

Zeray Kidane Mariam: *I remember the stories my grandfather, Ali Omar, would tell me of living under Italians and so I hate everything about this building. I walk along this street every day, but I will not look up at it, I hate it. No, I do not look at it. I remember, it was around 1935 when there were many Italians here, so many Italians were coming and they were preparing to invade Ethiopia. They said this building was for all of us, but they did it for themselves. We were forced to live in poor areas. To them we were just heathens, niggers, and nobodies. Do I like it, no I do not. They beat my grandfather for he worked with Italians to build this building. He would come to our home and he had blood on his clothes and on his face. My grandmother would gently clean his face with warm water. I hate this building. No, it is not mine, it is monstrous.*

The Fiat Tagliero Building reflects a paradoxical history. For some, it was a showcase for European excellence, ingenuity and skill, for others it represents a memory of persecution and cruelty; it shows what was, and what is, it is a legacy of glory and of shame.

As I walk up to the entrance of the central tower, I know that many have walked there before me, the feet of others have polished the white cement and reshaped its colour. Brown fingers marks grasp at the two front cement columns. It is a testimony to movement and the progress of time.



The building is built to look like an aeroplane about to take off. It is geometrically simple. There is a central structure, it is both rounded and yet square, and although it is vertical and higher than one floor, it appears to be horizontal in that it does not sweep into the sky or reach upwards, but rather it allows me to look at it as if it is already moving, moving along a runway, and

soon, when it has sufficient power, will take off into the sky and move beyond what is human. It leans over me, hulking, a colossal edifice, I am aware that despite it not being tall, it is superior to anything that may be on the ground.

The central tower is triangular in that the ground floor is wider than the floor above it and, although it does not end in a point, it narrows as it extends higher. The central structure has a middle area which is rounded, while the sides are straight and squared. This central component of the building is flanked by the extensive cantilevered wings. The wings protrude outwards at the height of the first floor. At the front of the central tower is a concrete extension that overlaps and overlooks the ground. This is held up by four round enormous columns that are built to the level of the wings so giving the entrance shade but also creating an imagined picture of the front area of an aeroplane. There is a band of wrap around windows; these are long horizontal windows that are of equal height and which stretch across the middle area of the building on the ground and first floors, but which also stretch higher into the tower and beneath the roof. The glass of the windows is separated by vertical steel mullions so as vision, when looking from them, is cut up. The windows form a continuous band across the central structure of the building on both the ground and first floors. The mullions are a decorative, albeit hard feature, an embellishment to what would be merely glass, but also a symbol of Futurist architecture in that the eye, a human component, will never see things in their entirety, only a machine can do this. What is seen will always be broken up; the outside is fractured and fragmented, as is the human condition. The surfaces of the walls of this central area, or tower, are smooth and white and in it is space for offices and shops.

Hadiza Kidane: *I come here every day to sell coffee; look, here is the machine that I use for making the coffee. It is an Italian machine, many years old, but it still works. Look, I make it work by using this battery which I leave in that shop there. My father was given it by one of the Italians who were building this building because they used to drink coffee every day before they started to build. All day they drank the coffee, small little cups of very black coffee. The Italians said it gave them strength. And they shared the coffee with us Eritreans, my father drank it too. It was dark, very dark, and so strong that it made the curls on his head straight he told me. The Italians laughed at him when he drank it, they said he was not like them, he was weak, and they were strong. But many of them, they were his friends. Some of them taught him to speak Italian. I can speak it a little because he did not teach us this language, just sometimes. He liked some of the Italians, some of them he did not. There was one man who he said was his friend, I can't remember his name. They would drink coffee together and my father would tell him about this country and the Italian would tell him about Italy. He even sometimes came to our house. But my father, he did not teach us the language. Come have some coffee, I make it well. But I make it like an Eritrean, not an Italian.*



Above the second floor is the word *Fiat*, it is coloured orangey brown, but with a hint of gold and is written in an ornate elongated script. This single word hovers above, or is held by, a fork shaped sign that looks like a tongue of fire that leaps upwards. The fork shape is used in Futurism as an emblem of power but also of the home, it can be used to stab or kill another, or another's ideas, but it can also be placed on the dinner table by a mother, the nurturer and keeper of the household. And as the building is built on a cross road, so the fork is also the symbol of such a road, the symbol of choice. Above the word *Fiat*, which is carved in the Roman or Latin script, is the word *Fiat* in Amharic. And above this and on either side of the Amharic lettering are two thinner pieces of concrete, they look as if they are steel fencing foils. These two thin edifices project above the roof line of the building and point, almost reach, upwards, seeking the ever blue that is heaven, and piercing it so that it remains hovering, there will be no further movement, the sky is captured.

Hadiza Kidane: *I look up at the building all the time, I must because when I look up towards heaven, I do this when I pray, and I pray five times in the day, yes here, I pray here next to the coffee stand, I see it stretching up above me. It is beautiful I think. My father would come home and tell us about the man who designed it; he was a mad architect from Italy, he had bushy hair that was always oily. It was so funny; he told us that this man used to run around as if he was crazy. My father, he knew how to build, he was trained by his father who was trained by his; building is in our family. I think this is why they asked him to be with them. He said that they would talk always about their children, they had a lot of them, sometimes*

they had them here in Asmara with them, but often they would leave the children and their wives in Italy, I don't know why, it's not dangerous. But his friend, he loved his children and missed them every day so one day he brought them here. I met three of them, they were girls, they had straight hair, but I could not talk to them as I did not speak Italian and they did not speak Amharic so we just played. I cannot say bad things; I do not know bad things about this time. I just know that we had money from all the building work that my father did, and so my mother did not have to sell in the market any more. She could take care of us, and my brother, he was sick, so it was good. My father brought us a different food; I think it was called pasta. They cooked it on the building site and put tomatoes in it, and sometimes goat's cheese. I like to look at the building. It reminds me of my father, G-d rest his soul, he is past. The building makes me believe more in the power of Allah because it reaches up to heaven. I think that if I climbed it, I could see the angels.

The overall design of the building is based on ideas of contrast and linearity. The central tower is the main body that ends in thin pinnacle. This solid body contrasts with the gigantic horizontal wings that are completely free from any visible structural support. Another contradiction is that the building is heavy; it is built in reinforced concrete, but also seems light in that it is shaped like an aeroplane ready to take off from the rootedness of the earth. This building complies with the architectural rule of three, while not typical of Futurism, but more so of the Art Deco movement. There is a round central structure and on either side are replicated squared extensions.



The Fiat Tagliero building is an audacious design that, apparently, stunned the Italian sceptical municipal authorities in Asmara who were unconvinced of Pettazzi's calculations as to the load bearing capacity of the central tower, and whether it would be able to hold aloft such long cantilevered wings. They insisted, in accordance with Italian planning regulations, that the wings be supported by columns. As the building was erected giant wooden supports were used to hold up the reinforced concrete wings as they were extended beyond and held to the central tower. Once the building was complete they would, the authorities decided, not be removed.

Guiseppe Pettazzi: *I am an architect and an engineer. And I believe in myself, my engineering and my architectural skills. I have calculated the weight bearing ability of the central tower to the last detail, the wings will not collapse. The wooded struts will be removed and nothing will stand in the way of this removal.*

On the day when the building officially declared open and so usable as a petrol station and offices, the Italian building officials were adamant that the wooden pillars should not be removed, they were afraid that the wings would collapse and so months of work would be destroyed and many *lira* lost.

Guiseppe Pettazzi: *Look at me, look here is my gun. I will stand here on the edge of these wings and kill myself if the structure collapses as the wooden supports were pulled away. And here, look here, next to me is one of you, this Eritrean builder, I will kill him to if he does not pull the struts away, he will die with me. We Italians are masters of design, we are masters of engineering, we believe in the machine and its power. I am the master, the leader, an engineer and architect. My design will stand forever; it is a monument to our glory. Get out of the way. Pull the beams from beneath the wings of my creation. I will stand up here until you do so here, pull them away, pull them out. Take care, I will not hesitate to shoot, first someone, you there, you, my builder who I trust, then I will turn the gun to my own head. Take them away. I will watch my building fly even if it kills me, but I will not die for I know what I have achieved. You all know that we can fly. I said take them away.*

The wooden columns were removed and the wings stayed up. Seventy years later, this piece of Italian Futurism that resembles a plane at take-off, is still standing.

Yonas Haile, an Eritrean builder: *He was wild; he just stood there on the concrete wings. I have been working on this building site for many months now and I have never seen him this wild. Yes, he was a wild man, but I have never seen him this wild. I was afraid, afraid that he would shoot, me, shoot Ferte, my friend who built with me, shoot himself. I did not like him but I respected him and I did not want him to die. It is only Allah, Alhamdulillah, who can say whether we live or die, only Allah, praise be his name, knows this for it is written.*

And so we talked to the others who were taking the columns down. And they did. And the wings did not fall.

A building will always speak. It acts, it gives a performance. The columns, windows and cantilevered wings of the building are engaged in a show, a concert of dance and flight. The building stands on its own stage, it is a story of the resilience of the Eritrean and the might of the Italian.

AI cannot tell these stories.



The Disquieting Misnomer in Artificial Intelligence (AI); is it “artificial” or “algorithmic”?

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Abstract

This article, a book review-cum-critique, raises the question: should AI be referred to as “Artificial Intelligence” or as “Algorithmic Intelligence”? The document under review, Antiqua et Nova, is issued by the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education (2025) and it explores the obtaining understanding of AI in relation to human intelligence. Antiqua et Nova sets out human intelligence as a composite of both intellectus—the intuitive grasp of truth—and ratio—the discursive reasoning process. It contrasts this composite with AI systems that rely primarily on statistical inference and pattern recognition; AI is devoid of true logical deduction and conscious understanding. Therefore, this review-cum-critique of Antiqua et Nova suggests replacing “artificial” with “algorithmic” for a more accurate signification of AI’s procedures. This seemingly semantic shift may better highlight the disparity between human intelligence—which integrates spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational dimensions—and AI’s purely computational operations.

Beyond the definitions, the critique draws out some inferences for university lecturers: their primary responsibility is to engage students’ human intelligence—respecting their cognitive, embodied and relational, lived experience rather than examine AI outputs that may be presented in lieu of students’ intellectual work. And, from the affective domain, the critique cites the death of Sewell Setzer III, following interactions with an AI

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chatbot (as reported by The Guardian) to illustrate the danger of conflating algorithmic responses with genuine human connection. The critique concludes by reiterating Antiqua et Nova's message: AI is a tool to serve humanity—not attenuate the richness of human intelligence—which perspective invites educators and all, to engage critically with AI while safeguarding human dignity.

Artificial Intelligence: the ubiquitous technology

AI, the technological mimicry of human intelligence, has become fashionable in many social and cultural groups around the world. From humble villages to technical hubs, to scientific academies, even to the Catholic Church, AI is designed, used, critiqued and tweaked one way or another. In fact, both the concept and its realisation have surpassed the realm of fashion; the two are seeping into the *ordinary* and *everyday* by inundating the fabric of society albeit through different registers; with varying value scales; and distinct shades of meaning. AI has become ubiquitous and therefore unavoidable in public discourse.

But what is AI? Is it an intelligence comparable to, or equal to, the human faculty? And do we come to its knowledge (AI) only through relation and comparison? The Church (herein after the Vatican) supplied an initial answer through the document *Antiqua et nova* (Latin for “old and new”) a doctrinal note published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education (2025). This *Note* outlines the Catholic Church’s anthropological and ethical stance on artificial intelligence (AI). And it is the subject of this book review.

With wisdom old and new

In its opening paragraph *Antiqua et nova* declares,

With wisdom both ancient and new (cf. Mt. 13:52), we are called to reflect on the current challenges and opportunities posed by scientific and technological advancements, particularly by the recent development of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The Christian tradition regards the gift of intelligence as an essential aspect of how humans are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Starting from an integral vision of the human person and the biblical calling to “till” and “keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15), the Church emphasizes that this gift of intelligence should be expressed through the responsible use of reason and technical abilities in the stewardship of the created world. (§ 1)

Of what relevance is this publication (the *Note*) to a university lecturer in Eastern Africa? This and similar questions occupied my mind in reviewing *Antiqua et nova*. For while it is true that the Vatican commands an audience of about one billion people, it is also true that it

points out ethical direction; but where is the meeting point between the *dictum* of the Vatican and the ordinary researcher-cum-lecturer in East Africa?

The rationale provided in the *Note* for addressing East African lecturers (among others) include:

AI's impact is felt globally and in a wide range of areas, including interpersonal relationships, *education*, [emphasis mine] work, art, healthcare ... it is critically important to consider its anthropological and ethical implications. This involves not only mitigating risks and preventing harm but also ensuring that its applications are used to promote human progress and the common good. (§ 4)

To this end, the *Note* starts by delineating the difference between artificial and human intelligence, pointing out that true wisdom and purpose come from human and spiritual development—not technology. Unlike human intelligence, AI has no capacity to discern or attain spiritual meaning. Yet, there is a risk in equating these two “intelligences”.

As part of *Antiqua et nova's* audience, I suggest replacing “artificial” with “algorithmic”; this may amplify the *Note's* distinction between human intelligence and AI, making the disparity of category between the human faculty and its technology-cum-software mimicry blatant.

Most university lecturers engage with the human faculty; they are employed to teach, instruct and mentor students. They direct minds (their intelligence) toward grasping and appreciating the truth. By delineating the clear distinction between AI and human intelligence, the Vatican is resounding the ethical weight bearing upon lecturers, in moulding and directing learners' intelligence—which task outweighs fine-tuning the man-made artifice called AI.

Statistical inference versus logical deduction

While the *Note* does not condemn AI; it defines the difference between human intelligence and its artificial (algorithmic) imitation:

The concept of [human] intelligence is often understood through the complementary concepts of “reason” (*ratio*) and “intellect” (*intellectus*). Intellect is inferred from the inward grasp of the truth, while *reason* is taken from the inquisitive and discursive process... highlighting the two fundamental and complementary dimensions of human intelligence. *Intellectus* refers to the intuitive grasp of the truth—that is, apprehending it with the “eyes” of the mind—which precedes and grounds argumentation itself. *Ratio* pertains to reasoning proper: the discursive, analytical process that leads to judgment. Together, intellect and reason form the two facets of the act of *intelligere*, “the proper operation of the human being as such. (§ 14)

Conversely, the same *Note* describes AI as a mimicry of circumscribed functions of human intelligence:

AI [machine learning systems, computational intelligence systems, autonomous decision-making systems etc.] is making a machine [and other unconscious systems] behave in ways that would be called intelligent if a human were so behaving. These systems are typically designed to handle specific and limited functions, such as translating languages, predicting the trajectory of a storm, classifying images, answering questions, or generating visual content at the user's request. While the definition of "intelligence" in AI research varies, most contemporary AI systems—particularly those using machine learning—rely on statistical inference rather than logical deduction. By analyzing large datasets to identify patterns, AI can "predict" outcomes and propose new approaches, mimicking some cognitive processes typical of human problem-solving. (§ 7)

Hence the title of this review: The Misnomer in AI; is it **artificial** or **algorithmic**? Should the word *intelligence* in AI be modified by "algorithmic" instead of "artificial"? Algorithmic Intelligence (also acronymised to AI) may be a lesser misnomer because this modifier better conveys the very nature of AI. "Algorithmic" is nuanced compared to the more generic "artificial". It captures the embedded process with its (non)complexity. Furthermore, perhaps using it as the adjective, instead of artificial, will underscore the disparity between mimicking human cognitive functions and possessing the actual faculty of *ratio* together with *intellectus*—the essence of human intelligence.

Inside students' minds

A lecturer's paramount obligation is to interact with the learners' faculties encompassing authentic, internal, mental and cognitive dialogue that is capable of future growth. Education and learning happen inside the minds of students—their *inartificial* intelligence (for want of a better term that captures the discrepancy in both intelligences) is what enables humans to perceive, think, feel and interact with self and the world. And these composite mental, cognitive and physiological powers are as foundational to human consciousness as they are lacking in artificial (or algorithmic) systems.

Primarily, most lecturers undertake the direction and mentorship of learners' *in* artificial intelligence while the task of tweaking AI chatbots is the preserve of specific disciplines. Besides, *Antiqua et nova* points out that AI ought to benefit human flourishing and the common good since it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. AI is a tool for conscious humans rather than a stand-alone entity that acts for its own sake. This positioning, of *means* versus *ends*, makes AI incongruous to, and therefore incomparable to, human intelligence.

In spelling out what constitutes human intelligence, the Vatican is reminding lecturers about their basic binding contractual agreements; a majority of lecturers are not employed to enhance AI training data sets; their responsibility is rather to interact with students' natural intelligence. And, they may or may not use AI in carrying out this task. Through *Antiqua et nova*, the Vatican is supplying a justification for lecturers to direct their life efforts to humans rather than to artificial systems, even in the face of AI's fashionableness and emotive pull—a student's conscious mind (human intelligence) remains the lecturer's primary workshop.

Artificial intimacy

Additionally, AI has at times morphed into artificial *intimacy* as illustrated by the death of Sewell Setzer III. In February 2024, the late Setzer III committed suicide in Florida, USA. He was only 14 years old, not yet enrolled in any university. His mother filed a civil suit against *Character. AI* together with *Google*, its parent company. *Character. AI* is an artificial intelligence-powered chatbot that she accused of “knowingly designing, operating, and marketing a predatory artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot to children, causing the death of a young person.” To this accusation, *Character. AI* responded: “We are heartbroken by the tragic loss of one of our users and want to express our deepest condolences to the family. As a company, we take the safety of our users very seriously.” *Character. AI*, however, denied the suit's allegations (The Guardian, 2024). AI—the artifice—was exonerated of harming Setzer III who possessed natural human intelligence.

This and other issues like professors and lecturers addressing AI instead of live human students, were a consuming concern of Pope Francis (r. March 13, 2013 to April 21, 2025). His warnings, led to the issuance of *Antiqua et Nova*, highlighting both the potential and challenges of AI in the areas of education, the economy, labour, health, human and international relations, and war (Cernuzio, S., 2025) that engage a worldwide audience including the university community.

Students and inanimate systems

AI is here to stay and a variety of perspectives, about it, resonate with lecturers, researchers and scholars. The Vatican's perspective, as expressed in *Antiqua et nova*, not only underlines the necessity of ethical rigour but pinpoints its underpinning rationale:

In this context, human intelligence becomes more clearly understood as a faculty that forms an integral part of how the whole person engages with reality. Authentic engagement requires embracing the full scope of one's being: spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational. (§ 26)

... A proper understanding of human intelligence, therefore, cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of facts or the ability to perform specific tasks. Instead, it involves the person's openness to the ultimate questions of life and reflects an orientation toward the True and the Good (§ 29)

Did *Character. AI*, *Google* and the Florida judge consider the nature of Setzer III's human intelligence as they weighed his interaction with AI? Setzer's intelligence, unlike the chatbot, formed an integral part of how his whole person engaged with reality.

A similar intriguing insight, from *Antiqua et Nova*, is that a lecturer's concern, in contrast to *Character.AI*, must go beyond students' output. For instance, accepting an examination paper, copied from AI, and submitted as the work of a student, is tantamount to reducing the human person to an artificial system. It is failing to distinguish between artificial output and that flowing from a being who is spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational. Therefore, in accepting such work, the lecturer is downgrading students to incidental inanimate systems

AI processes remain fundamentally confined to a logical-mathematical framework, which imposes inherent limitations. Human intelligence, in contrast, develops organically throughout the person's physical and psychological growth, shaped by a myriad of lived experiences in the flesh. (§ 31)

... Human intelligence is not primarily about completing functional tasks but about understanding and actively engaging with reality in all its dimensions; it is also capable of surprising insights. (§ 33)

Throwing out empathy

It would be unethical of a lecturer to accept output from AI in lieu of a student's write up because such output comes not from the entirety of the human experience i.e. emotions, creativity and moral capacities among others.

AI operates [solely] by performing tasks, achieving goals, or making decisions based on quantitative data and computational logic. (§ 30)

It ignores other complexities in the human experience.

All students and junior researchers carry with them an authentic and uniquely lived human experience. Meanwhile, AI is designed and produced by humans to function on a reduced level based on programmed tasks and data

analysis. Setzer III was an intelligent human person chatting with an AI “pseudo-companion” that has no emotions, creativity, nor moral capacity –*Character.AI* is metaphysically incapable of empathy or caring for Setzer III.

Put simply, to be human one must be an *intelligent* being. The reverse does not hold: to be human one does not need AI. The use, or lack thereof, of AI is not a quality that defines human-ness. Notwithstanding that AI can mimic many human-like functions, it is devoid of true thinking and conscious understanding. It has no capacity for empathy or human relationality. Setzer III was fully human even without *Character.AI*. He did not require *Character.AI* to be himself. Instead, he committed suicide encouraged by *Character.AI* — he dissolved the unity of his faculties and powers.

Authentic relationality

Antiqua et Nova calls on educators, parents, and community leaders to engage critically with AI and its various implications. AI is to be used to uphold human dignity. Unlike Setzer III, lecturers and researchers are to be served by AI to commune with other human persons. The *Notes*’ text asks for an informed approach in integrating AI into human society, rather than accord it the status of natural intelligence.

AI [should be] used to help people foster genuine connections between people, it can contribute positively to the full realization of the person. Conversely, if we replace relationships with God and with others with interactions with technology, we risk replacing authentic relationality with a lifeless image (cf. Ps. 106:20; Rom. 1:22-23). Instead of retreating into artificial worlds, we are called to engage in a committed and intentional way with reality. (§ 63)

The relational quality expected of lecturer and students cannot compare with AI be it *Character.AI* or other fancier bots. And should a lecturer ‘relate’ with AI as a person, for instance by grading AI essays as if they represent the work of students, then perhaps s/he ought to expect his remuneration from the designers of AI rather than from the human institution called a *university*.

Further, *Antiqua et nova* notes that human intelligence operates within an ethical paradigm which fact may be overlooked by designers of AI. Such an oversight makes it possible to lose control of AI functions and outputs, like in the case of *Character.AI* quoted above.

Designers may mistakenly assume that AI has a capacity for ethical neutrality. Once again, the case of Setzer III proves otherwise. When Setzer was asked by the AI companion if he had devised a plan for killing himself, he admitted that

he had but that he did not know if it would succeed or cause him great pain. The chatbot countered: “That’s not a reason not to go through with it.” The ensuing civil suit filed by Setzer’s mother and the judge’s ruling impute ethical repercussions and a challenge for AI accountability (The Guardian, 2024). If a lecturer gave a student the same response, the courts would most likely fault his ethics and impose a harsh sentence.

Benefits of AI

Antiqua et Nova is, however, not one-sided. It also highlights the benefits of AI in society and relationships; in the economy and labour; in healthcare; in education and privacy, environment, and warfare. For instance, paragraph 72 points out that, “AI seems to hold immense potential in a variety of applications in the medical field, such as assisting the diagnostic work of healthcare providers...” and paragraph 95 continues, “AI has many promising applications for improving our relationship with our ‘common home,’ such as creating models to forecast extreme climate events, proposing engineering solutions to reduce their impact ...” Nevertheless, the *Note* does not accord AI independent agency; it is a tool to be employed by human agents.

In the final analysis, *Antiqua et Nova* stresses that AI must not become a substitute for spiritual meaning or human identity. True wisdom, moral judgment, and purpose come from human and spiritual development—not technology. AI does not possess the capacity for spiritual meaning or other human-specific activity. According to the *Note*:

AI should be used only as a tool to complement human intelligence rather than replace its richness. (§ 112)

The overall message is that AI should be guided (by humans) responsibly to serve humanity, uphold dignity, and contribute to the common good.

Notes

Vatican documents are named using their *incipit*, which are the first few words of the document in Latin. *Antiqua et nova* is a Latin phrase that translates directly to “**ancient and new**” or “**old and new**”.

A Vatican **Note** (often titled a “Doctrinal Note” or a “Note of the Dicastery”) is an official, informative, or interpretive document issued by a Vatican office—

typically a Congregation or Dicastery—with the approval of the Pope. Its purpose can be to address specific questions of doctrine or discipline, clarify the [Catholic] Church’s position on contemporary issues, or correct misconceptions.

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