

The generative *illusion* of Large Language Models: Language between human subjectivity and algorithmic computation

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Large Language Models (LLMs) have raised critical questions regarding generativity. This article examines the relationship among language, *natural intelligence*, and artificial intelligence (AI) in artistic practices such as writing, with regard to the interplay between generativity and creativity. It investigates whether – and to what extent – such systems can participate in the generative processes that characterise human language, thus bringing the classical notions of generativity into dialogue with the operational dynamics of LLMs. AI’s ‘meaning simulation’ strategies will be examined through a playwriting experiment using ChatGPT. We will show that AI generativity remains at the level of surface structures, without fully accessing the semionarrative transformation that defines the *parcours génératif*, while LLMs yield a ‘generative illusion,’ keeping within the discursive level only. The impression of creativity arising at the intersection of computational recombination and human semantic investment is a hybrid artefact that reveals our interpretive habits and the machine’s generative constraints. As a result, a distributed but asymmetrical model of generativity emerges. Machines provide statistically significant discursive forms; humans provide semantic depth, narrative transformation, and cultural resonance. The article traces the tension between two registers of meaning-generation: one formal, combinatorial, and distributive; the other temporal, intentional, and transformative. We propose to name this tension the *double register of generativity*.

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This double register exposes why comparisons between human and artificial modes of meaning-making often founder on category mismatch. The machine's outputs are not deficient because of a mere lack of competence, but because they operate according to a different ontological logic, namely, distributional semantics and contextual attention rather than chronogenetic and enunciative operations. The result, as Claudio Paolucci suggests, is that the machine compels us to confront the machinic essence of human beings themselves: we too are generative machines, though endowed with temporality, intentionality, and value-oriented transformations.

Introduction

In recent years, Large Language Models (LLMs) have raised critical concerns regarding generativity (Andler 2023; Bajohr 2024; Cerutti and Laterza 2023; D'Armenio et al. 2024, 2025; Dondero 2025; Floridi 2018, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d; Leone 2023; Maestri 2025; Monti 2025; Paolucci 2025). Indeed, there is an increasing development of advanced machine learning systems to simulate (the mode of) human thought. This article examines the relationships among language, *natural* intelligence, and artificial intelligence (AI) in artistic practices such as writing.¹ The textual production of AI – usually termed *wrAlting*² – raises far-reaching points regarding the relationship between generativity and creativity. We propose to investigate whether – and to what extent – such systems can participate in the generative processes that characterise human language, thus bringing the classical notions of generativity into dialogue with the operational dynamics of LLMs.

AI's 'meaning simulation' strategies will be examined through a playwriting experiment carried out with ChatGPT. Furthermore, the differences between computational generativity – based on the statistical combination of linguistic patterns – and human creativity – based on intentionality, internal temporality, and semantic awareness – will be illustrated. One shall emphasise how AI generativity tends to remain at the level of surface structures (Greimas and Courtés 1982), without fully accessing the semionarrative transformation that defines the *parcours génératif* (generative trajectory). Rather, it is meant to highlight to what extent LLMs yield a

¹ It is important to clarify that the distinction between *natural* and *artificial* intelligence adopted in this essay does not rely on an essentialist opposition between human and machine. Rather, it designates two different regimes of meaning-generation. Human generativity unfolds through chronogenetic, enunciative, and value-oriented operations, while LLM-based generativity operates through distributional semantics, contextual attention, and statistical recombination. The relevance of the distinction, therefore, does not lie in the (im)possibility of automation, but in the semiotic structure of the processes involved. Indeed, the very success of contemporary AI in simulating linguistic behaviour makes the difference between these regimes analytically more visible, not less.

² As Luciano Floridi points out, *wrAlting* «becomes the art of crafting targeted prompts that guide an LLM toward generating the desired narrative output» (Floridi 2025c: 7).

‘generative illusion,’³ thus keeping within the discursive level only, while Greimasian generativity requires semionarrative transformations involving intentionality, temporality, and actantial coherence. Accordingly, the opening section of this article shall outline the concept of generativity, offering a theoretical framework to suggest a model of *distributed but asymmetrical generativity*, in which the human meta-author is (still) the one who manages the generative process.

Ultimately, drawing on the studies of Gustave Guillaume (chronogenesis), Antoine Culioli (mental gestures), and Luciano Floridi (distant writing), among others, we shall highlight how human generativity involves cognitive and subjective operations that cannot be reduced to syntax alone. The article thus aims to offer a further attempt at a transdisciplinary investigation into the limits and illusions of artificial intelligence, focusing on how semiotics can provide critical tools to address the issue of meaning generation in both human and artificial languages. In conclusion, we shall attempt to outline how, when comparing human intelligence and artificial intelligence, the main issue is that the categories we are disposed to use to understand humans are still unable to convey the complexity of their condition. Therefore, the foremost challenge is to establish a comparison between the two modes of generating meaning, since the categories we currently apply are not yet fully capable of resolving the issue of the double register of biological and cultural subjects in which human beings are depicted (Anderl 2023).

The claim to mechanise human thought

Mechanising processes that humans routinely perform is an endeavour that predates the rise of computers. Indeed, one of the most abiding features of human culture is the ambition to mechanise reasoning, to externalise the processes of thought into technical or symbolic artefacts. This pursuit permeates philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions, shaping a horizon in which AI can be understood less as a sudden innovation than as the most recent chapter in a long-standing enterprise. As far back as ancient times, Aristotle’s syllogism provided a model of reasoning that was both descriptive and prescriptive. When presenting inference as a measurable and reliable procedure grounded in formal structures, Aristotelian logic thus introduced the idea that thought could be codified and formalised. As a result, logic became one of the first technologies of the mind, a method for reproducing rationality independently of individual intuition. Medieval scholasticism, in its attempt to reconcile Aristotelian logic with theological discourse, further reinforced the conception of reasoning as a system of rules which could be mechanised.

³ In what follows, the term *illusion* does not denote a deception of the interpreter, but a semiotic effect. On the conceptual risks of this term in media theory, see Natale (2021).

At the turn of the modern science, this ambition found new ways to be developed. 17th-century thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (Leibniz and Loemker 1956) conceived a *characteristica universalis*, a universal language of symbols through which reasoning could be reduced to calculation. The very idea that controversies could be solved mechanically, via the enforcement of a formal calculation, reveals the deep-seated desire to transfer cognitive labour into artefacts of symbolic manipulation. To this extent, Leibniz anticipates both the algorithmic logic of computation and the semiotic aim of formalising meaning through structured operations. Nevertheless, the 20th-century marked a decisive turning point. Alan Turing's machine (1936) translated the abstract notion of computation into a formal model capable of performing logical operations one at a time. Turing's machine embodies the yearning to make artifacts capable of reproducing the generative power of thought, reducing reasoning to a sequence of basic operations. From a semiotic perspective, this model highlights the combinatorial dimension of signs, treating them as symbols that can be manipulated within a closed system.

Alongside scientific models, cultural imagery has also focused on and questioned this ambition. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1996 [1818]) allegorises the modern fascination with intelligent artificial creatures and dramatises the anxieties associated with their autonomy. These anxieties, however, are inseparable from a deeper ambiguity: what is culturally perceived as machine 'autonomy' is in fact grounded in complex regimes of automation. Human beings themselves rely on internalised automatisms – linguistic routines, inferential habits, embodied schemata – that sustain agency rather than oppose it. The unease triggered by artificial systems thus stems less from their autonomy than from the externalisation and acceleration of automatisms that, in human subjects, remain embedded within temporal and enunciative experience. The figure of the Creature embodies the ambivalence of artificial life: at once a triumph of human ingenuity and a threat to the boundaries of human identity. Here, literature anticipates the demands that semiotics would later pose: to what extent can artificial entities generate meaning, and what is the status of that meaning in relation to human subjectivity? From this perspective, contemporary LLMs are not an unprecedented phenomenon, but the latest manifestation of this long-term trend: a technologically advanced form of the human impulse to mechanise reasoning and externalise generativity in artefacts. Their novelty lies not in the ambition itself, but in the scope, speed, and cultural pervasiveness with which that ambition is now being realised. These different pathways – from syllogistic logic to Turing's machine, from Leibniz's calculus to Shelley's literary imagination – testify not only to a recurring desire to construct artefacts capable of exhibiting behaviour akin to human intelligence, but also to a reflective effort to interrogate the very technologies (logical, mechanical, or computational) that define and delimit the horizon of what such intelligence can be. What they all share is not only a wish for automation but also an attempt to model the generative capacities of thought in formal, reproducible, and transferable terms.

The concept of generativity: an overview

Before examining the extent to which artificial systems can be said to generate meaning, it is worth noting how the concept of generativity has been conceptualised across different theoretical traditions. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main challenges in comparing human and artificial intelligence lies in the inadequacy of the categories currently available to account for the complexity of human subjectivity (Ander 2023). If the categories themselves are unstable, then the consequence is to apply them to machines in ways that overshadow, rather than illuminate, their specificity. For such a reason, a preliminary step is to briefly outline the conceptual field of generativity as it has emerged in linguistics and semiotics.

Such a reconstruction is not merely an exercise in intellectual history, but a methodological requirement. The comparison between human and artificial generativity can only make sense if one clarifies in advance what different traditions have meant by this term. Otherwise, we might fall into the very category mistake⁴ (Latour 2013) that it is precisely our purpose to problematise: attributing to machines forms of generativity that actually belong to distinct theoretical and cognitive domains.

Hence, the following paragraphs offer a selective mapping of the four main conceptual frameworks that have shaped the contemporary understanding of generativity: (i) Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar, which defines generativity as a formal and combinatorial property of syntax, focusing on the productivity of rules; (ii) Gustave Guillaume's psychomechanics, which relocates generativity within temporality, introducing the notion of chronogenesis as the cognitive unfolding of thought in language; (iii) Antoine Culioli's insights, which conceive generativity as a set of mental gestures, emphasising the operations of representation, predication, and validation that highlight the role of subjectivity and context; (iv) and lastly, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, who provide a semiotic description of generativity as *parcours génératif*, a trajectory of meaning that moves through deep semantic structures, narrative syntax, and discursive manifestation. Collectively, these perspectives reveal that the concept of generativity is neither univocal nor reducible to a sole dimension. They also enlighten why the evaluation of LLMs cannot be simply limited to superficial productivity: if generativity implies temporality, subjectivity, and semiotic transformation, then any attempt to refer it to artificial systems must take into account these multiple registers. The aim of this theoretical overview is therefore to reframe the analytical categories required to assess whether, and to what extent, AI partakes in the processes that characterise human generativity.

⁴ This term refers to the modern trend of mixing and misjudging different modes of existence (such as law, religion, science, etc.) when applying a unique standard or domain, instead of recognising the unique characteristics and conditions of truth of each mode.

The view of Chomsky

Chomsky's theory of transformational generative grammar (Chomsky 1965, 1995) introduced the paradigm in which language is conceived as a system of formal rules capable of generating an infinite number of grammatical sentences. The central mechanism, recursion (especially the operation Merge), defines generativity as a combinatorial property of syntax: "by a generative grammar I mean simply a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences" (Chomsky 1965: 8). This conception profoundly influenced both theoretical linguistics and the development of natural language processing, where formal models of syntax inspired computational architectures. At the same time, recursion does not denote only a formal computational property. It also names the reflexive process through which language continually turns upon itself, enabling speakers to produce representations of representations and thus to institute regimes of metalinguistic awareness. In this sense, recursion opens the space for linguistic ideologies, that is, for culturally situated conceptions of what language is and what it can do (cf. Keane 2018). However, Chomsky's framework has been criticised for marginalising semantics, pragmatics, and enunciation. As such, generativity is reduced to productivity of form, without necessarily engaging the cognitive and semiotic transformations that constitute meaning. For semiotics, this limitation is crucial: it foregrounds the gap between syntactic production and meaningful discourse.

The view of Guillaume

Guillaume's psychomechanics of language (1984) reorients the notion of generativity from structure to process. At the core of his model is *chronogenesis*, the temporal unfolding of language whereby thought is progressively actualised into discourse. Guillaume distinguishes between system time, i.e., the latent structure of language, and discourse time, i.e., the temporal manifestation of speech. This dual temporality reveals that generativity is not merely combinatorial but intrinsically dynamic, linked to the cognitive temporality of meaning construction. Such a perspective anticipates later cognitive and enactive theories of language, in which meaning is seen as emergent and temporally embodied. From a semiotic standpoint, Guillaume underscores that generativity cannot be confined to rules of form, but involves operations that articulate abstract categories (tense, aspect, modality) into lived temporal experience.

The view of Culioli

Culioli (1990) shifts the focus of generativity towards enunciation and subjectivity. According to him, language is not a fixed code, but a procedure of operations: representation, predication, and validation. These operations – referred to as *mental gestures* – constitute the generative core of linguistic activity. Generativity is therefore not simply the product of rules, but the outcome of recursive, context-sensitive operations performed by speakers. This model highlights the enunciative dimension of language: meaning emerges through the speaker's negotiation of reference, value, and context. Generativity thus appears as a situated cognitive process in which subjectivity plays a constitutive role. To this extent, Culioli's theoretical framework provides critical tools for investigating the limits of artificial systems to reproduce the inferential and contextual use of language.

The view of Greimas and Courtés

Greimas and Courtés (1982) reconceptualise generativity within semiotics as a *parcours génératif*, a generative trajectory of meaning. This model describes a transformation from deep semantic structures, through narrative syntax, to discursive manifestation. Each level organises meaning in distinct ways: the semic level articulates oppositions, the narrative level structures actantial relations, and the discursive level realises enunciative forms. The generative trajectory foregrounds that meaning is not produced in one step but unfolds across levels of abstraction and realisation. Importantly, this framework allows us to distinguish between surface-level coherence and generativity (as described by Greimas and Courtés). To that extent, the issue is not whether LLMs can produce coherent discourse, but whether their enunciation activates the generative trajectory from deep semantic oppositions to surface textual realisations. LLM-based enunciation appears to operate primarily at the discursive level, recombining motifs and narrative schemata without instituting transformations of actantial structure, value oppositions, or temporal positioning. Hence, the limitation is not a lack of generativity as an abstract property, but the absence of enunciative recursion and subjectivity: the system does not occupy a position of enunciation from which semantic structures are reorganised across levels. In fact, the discourse produced by LLMs exemplifies a 'pseudo-generativity,' that is, an ability to generate plausible discursive strings without traversing the full semiotic pathway that links the deep and narrative levels to the surface. Precisely this distinction inspires the analysis in the next section.

In fact, to test whether and to what extent artificial systems can approach human generativity,⁵ we shall carry out a playwriting experiment with ChatGPT.⁶ The aim here is not to evaluate the system's technical performance, but to explore how its discursive productivity aligns – or fails to align – with the semiotic structures theorised in the traditions discussed above. This case study, therefore, serves as a testbed in which the conceptual distinctions of Chomsky, Guillaume, Culioli, and Greimas/Courtés are compared with the pragmatic dynamics of machine-assisted text production. Further theoretical tools – such as Enrico Maestri's distributional semantics (2025), Luciano Floridi's distant writing (2025c), and Margaux Cerutti and Leonardo Laterza's insights (2023) on creative computational generativity – will be drawn upon in the remarks which follow to interpret the results of this experiment and assess the semiotic status of AI-guided writing.

Case study: *The Dollmaker* experiment

The playwriting experiment titled *The Dollmaker* was conducted through a series of interactions with ChatGPT. The process began with a plot outline provided by the human meta-author,⁷ which served as a guiding structure for generating scenes. The procedure then advanced, prompt by prompt, with the meta-author directing the system toward specific stylistic models,⁸ requesting elaborations (e.g., fatal flaw, symbolic function of objects), and generating specific scenes. This procedure exemplifies the notion of 'distant writing' as elaborated by Floridi (2025c), namely, delegating textual production to a machine while maintaining human oversight of coherence, intention, and semantic relevance. Below is our chat:

⁵ As recent Italian semiotics studies have also pointed out, the debate on generativity and AI also concerns the very definition of the "machinic essence" of the human subject (Paolucci 2025). This perspective reinforces the idea that generativity is not an exclusively human prerogative, but a structural horizon in which the machine exposes, by contrast, the constitutive artificiality of human meaning production.

⁶ The experiment took place with the free version of ChatGPT-5.2.

⁷ That is, the author of this paper.

⁸ For example, one of the requests was to adopt a style reminding of authors such as Dennis Kelly and Tom Stoppard, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the chat with the AI.

ME:

If I attach the plot for a drama, would you be able to write a play?

ChatGPT:

Yes! If you share the plot, I can expand it into a full play with dialogue, stage directions, and scene structure. You can also tell me the style you'd like (classical, modern, minimalist, experimental, etc.), the length (short one-act or full-length), and the tone (serious, comedic, tragic, etc.), and I'll shape the script around that.

Would you like me to create a traditional stage play format (acts, scenes, character list, stage directions) or something more like a screenplay?

ME:

I plan to write a drama with a noir feel, resembling the works of Dennis Kelly or Tom Stoppard. Below follows the storyline.

A man and a woman, two emotionally fragile individuals facing each other in a noir setting dramatically charged. Once, towards closing time, Eva comes into the workshop of Andrea, a doll-maker who has inherited the shop from his father: she is a shy, awkward-looking woman who asks for a doll for her daughter's birthday. Fascinated by the care with which Andrea makes his dolls, elaborating meticulous and almost maniacal details, Eva is struck above all by the eyes and their surprising verisimilitude with the human gaze, a feature that distinguishes them from other dolls. A regular acquaintance begins between the two that brings the worlds of both of them ever closer together, revealing aspects of their lives tied to the struggles of loving and being loved and to the particularly cold and detached relationship they had with their own mothers. For Andrea, his mother still seems to have a strong influence on him and constantly watches over him, without ever appearing, from the backroom jealously guarded by Andrea himself, hindering him in the making of Eva's doll, who soon, to her cost, will make the sad revelation that nothing is as it appears and that there are many secrets that Andrea and his dolls hide.

ChatGPT:

Perfect – that's a wonderfully atmospheric premise. Based on your outline, I can shape it into a noir-style stage play that blends psychological tension, surreal undertones, and clipped, charged dialogue – something that nods to the sharp wit of Tom Stoppard and the unsettling intimacy of Dennis Kelly. Here's how I'd suggest structuring it before writing the full draft:

Proposed Structure

Title: The Dollmaker

Characters

- **Andrea** – a meticulous, obsessive dollmaker, mid-30s to 40s. His manner is delicate yet unsettling, with a sense that he is never entirely present.
- **Eva** – an anxious, socially awkward woman in her late 20s or 30s. She seems timid, but has flashes of sharpness when pressed.
- **The Mother** – never appears onstage, but her presence is *felt* through sounds, shadows, or even through Andrea's dialogue with the closed door.

Act I

- **Scene 1:** Eva enters Andrea's workshop near closing time. A low-lit space filled with half-finished dolls, glass eyes catching the dim light. Dialogue begins haltingly, awkwardly, circling around Eva's request. Andrea's pride in his craft emerges — especially his fixation on the eyes.
- **Scene 2:** Their conversations become regular; Eva returns to check on the doll's progress. Both reveal fragments of their personal histories — particularly their strained maternal relationships. The door to the backroom becomes a recurring motif. Eva asks about it; Andrea deflects.

Act II

- **Scene 1:** The intimacy deepens, but with unease. Eva grows fascinated — almost disturbed — by Andrea's precision and by how much of himself he pours into the dolls. There are subtle hints that the dolls may be more than they seem (gestures, sounds, lighting).
- **Scene 2:** Conflict rises. Eva presses Andrea about the unfinished doll and his secretive behavior. Tension spikes when noises emerge from the backroom. Andrea becomes agitated, protective, almost childlike in defense of his mother.

Act III

- **Scene 1:** The revelation. Eva discovers that the "mother" may be nothing more than a doll — or perhaps many dolls — Andrea has imbued with life in his mind. The truth is ambiguous: is she alive, or just his projection? The play should leave it unresolved.
- **Scene 2:** Final confrontation between Eva and Andrea. He presents Eva's daughter's doll, but it bears unsettling similarities to Eva herself. Does she accept it? Reject it? The ending should cut sharply, leaving the audience unsettled.

Tone & Style

- Dialogue: fragmented, often circling the subject, with sudden moments of raw emotion (like Stoppard's verbal wit meets Kelly's psychological brutality).
- Stagecraft: noir atmosphere — heavy shadows, sparse but significant props (dolls, a single lamp, the closed backroom door).
- Mother's presence: conveyed through sound design (a cough, a chair creak, the faint sound of scissors snipping) but never physically shown.

Would you like me to start drafting a full Act I with dialogue and stage directions (so you can see the tone and pacing), or would you prefer I first expand this outline into a complete beat-by-beat breakdown of all three acts before writing dialogue?

ME:

It would be great if you could write the first scene of Act I in full. Do you think you could do a good job? Do you think you could be quite creative? If you think so, could you please generate the scene directly in a Word file?

ChatGPT:

I've written and formatted Act I, Scene 1 of *The Dollmaker* into a Word document for you. You can download it here:

[Download *The Dollmaker* – Act I, Scene 1 \(Word file\)](#)

A striking aspect of the experiment is that the AI immediately defaulted to the classical three-act structure. This structure is the most traditional model of playwrighting, in terms of the organisation of narrative elements. In other words, it provides a guide to the construction and organisation of dramatic elements, with the aim of telling the story effectively. The theory of the three-act form stems from Aristotle's notion that every drama has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that the parts must be proportionate to each other. The current model is based on the *pièces bien faites* (well-made plays) theorised by Eugène Scribe in the 1820s (McKee 1997). The division into acts relies on the activation of fundamental narrative mechanisms, namely, a premise of the story conveyed in terms of conflict: the story progresses by developing the central conflict until its resolution.

This reliance on a classical three-act structure is not accidental: it reveals that the LLM's generativity is strongly constrained by sedimented narrative norms internalised through training data. Rather than inventing a generative trajectory, the system selects and recombines pre-existing Aristotelian writing schemas, thereby producing discursive coherence without activating deeper semio-narrative transformation. This is semiotically significant, as it illustrates Maestri's concept of *distributional semantics*, according to which the model draws upon statistically dominant patterns

in its training data. As Maestri (2025) points out, LLMs are equipped with implicit, non-symbolic semantics that depend on usage rather than rules. Their functioning, therefore, is to detect co-occurrence relationships between words that are not only close but also far apart. This process allows them to ‘speak’ fluently and coherently, despite the lack of a formalised conceptual structure. Consequently, words follow one another based on their ‘conditioned probability.’ In these AI models, meaning is a property of context and distribution, rather than an ontologically guaranteed entity. Hence, to know a word means to know how to place it in the right context.

Returning to our experiment, the three-act structure functions as a prototypical schema that guarantees surface coherence while also demonstrating the model’s reliance on codified cultural repertoires rather than the invention of genuinely new narrative forms. At this step, let us examine how ChatGPT generated the first requested scene:

Act I, Scene 1

(A dimly lit workshop. Shelves lined with half-finished dolls, their glass eyes catching the faint glow of a single desk lamp.

The ticking of a clock underscores the silence. ANDREA, in his mid-30s, sits hunched at a workbench, delicately painting the iris of a doll’s eye with painstaking precision.

The doorbell jingles – faint, hesitant. EVA enters: a shy, awkward-looking woman, late 20s. She clutches her coat tightly around her.)

EVA: (softly) Excuse me... are you still open?

(ANDREA doesn’t look up immediately. He finishes a brushstroke, then sets the brush down with exaggerated care. He turns slowly.)

ANDREA: (measured) Almost closed. But not quite.

(He studies her. A pause.)

EVA: I... I didn’t mean to intrude. I only— I was passing by, and I saw the light.

ANDREA: People don’t usually wander in at this hour. (beat) What is it you’re looking for?

EVA: A doll. For my daughter. It’s her birthday soon.

(ANDREA leans back, as if weighing the request. His gaze lingers on EVA with quiet intensity. He gestures faintly toward the shelves of half-finished dolls.)

ANDREA: There are many dolls in the world. What makes you think you’ll find the right one here?

EVA: (after a pause) I don’t know. Something about this place... it feels – (searches for the word) careful.

(ANDREA’s lips twitch with the suggestion of a smile. He rises, moving toward a cabinet of glass eyes. He opens a drawer; hundreds of tiny eyes gleam up at them.)

ANDREA: Careful. Yes. That's the word. It's all in the eyes, you see. The soul of the doll. If the eyes are wrong, the whole thing collapses.

(EVA moves closer, fascinated but unsettled by the eyes staring out.)

EVA: They look... alive.

ANDREA: (sharply, almost cutting) They are not alive. They only remind you of life. There's a difference.

(A silence. EVA shifts uncomfortably, but she cannot look away from the drawer of eyes.)

EVA: Could you make one... for her? For my daughter?

(ANDREA shuts the drawer gently, almost tenderly, and looks back at EVA with a gaze that lingers too long.)

ANDREA: Perhaps. But these things take time. Time, and patience. You'd have to come back.

EVA: I could come back.

(A long pause. The clock ticks louder. From behind the closed backroom door, faintly, a chair creaks – or perhaps it's nothing. EVA glances toward it. ANDREA notices and stiffens.)

ANDREA: (quickly) The backroom is not for customers.

EVA: I wasn't – I didn't mean –

ANDREA: (softening, almost apologetic) Some things are better left unseen.

(Another silence. ANDREA returns to his workbench, lifts the tiny eye he was painting, and holds it up toward the light. EVA watches, caught between unease and fascination.

The ticking clock continues as the lights dim slowly to black.)

--- End of Scene ---

The opening scene introduces the dollmaker Andrea and the young woman Eva in the eerie workshop setting. Since the very beginning, the motifs of the gaze and the uncanny have been at the forefront: “[Andrea] delicately adjusts the glass eye of a half-finished doll, murmuring about the light it catches.” The closed door to the backroom, repeatedly mentioned, adds to the sense of hidden menace. These elements establish isotopies (eyes, secrecy, thresholds) that structure the play's discursive level. Semiotically, these isotopies exemplify Maestri's notion of *contextual attention*: the system develops local coherence by reiterating motifs introduced in the prompt, but without transforming them into deep narrative functions. In other words, contextual attention enables the model to maintain thematic continuity at the surface of the text, ensuring that previously introduced motifs are recalled and redeployed in subsequent utterances. However, this mechanism does not operate as a transformation of narrative roles or value oppositions: the eye remains a repeated image, not a rearticulated actant; secrecy remains an atmosphere, not a conflictual programme. The result

is a discourse that is coherent in its texture, yet static in its underlying semio-narrative dynamics. This distinction is crucial for understanding how LLMs achieve stylistic plausibility while remaining confined to discursive-level generativity. In Greimasian terms, the motifs remain discursive ornamentations rather than assuming actantial roles within a semionarrative transformation. Contextual attention does not mimic the human mind; rather, it instantiates a situated, performative logic that operates at the level of discursive recombination rather than along a generative trajectory of meaning. Unlike human generativity, which unfolds across temporal, enunciative, and semantic levels, computational attention constructs coherence through statistical orientation in context. In other words, one is dealing with *computational heuristics* – to use Maestri’s terms once again – instead of deductive logic. What is at stake is an art of orientation, a pragmatic strategy of meaning whereby the machine does not deduce but constructs, and does so in a situated, adaptive, and relational manner.

What the machine seems to lack most of all is a ‘semantic capital.’ According to Floridi, this term labels “any content that can enhance someone’s power to give meaning to and make sense of (semanticise) something” (2018: 483). To semanticise, however, entails a double operation: on the one hand, giving meaning – that is, attributing sense to existing signs by situating them within a coherent interpretive framework; on the other hand, *making meaning* – that is, generating new configurations of sense that effectively expand the semantic capital of a culture. LLMs may simulate the first operation by producing isotopies and patterns of coherence that appear to ‘give’ meaning to textual elements. Yet they fall short of the second, since they do not transform the underlying values nor generate new semantic trajectories. This point anticipates the broader issue of AI creativity, understood not as stylistic novelty but as the capacity to institute new semantic and narrative configurations. Accordingly, the outputs generated by LLMs remain bound to the level of contextual attribution, while the renewal of semantic capital – making meaning rather than merely giving meaning – requires the intervention of the human meta-author, who alone possesses the intentionality and experiential depth to integrate discursive fragments into novel pathways of sense. To clarify this point, consider the difference between discursive isotopy and narrative transformation. In the opening scene of *The Dollmaker*, motifs such as eyes, thresholds, and secrecy recur, establishing a coherent isotopic network. However, in a fully semio-narrative trajectory, these motifs would be progressively invested with actantial roles and value oppositions (for instance, the eye shifting from an object of perception to a figure of surveillance or ethical judgement, thereby reconfiguring the subject-object relation and the axiological horizon of the narrative). In the LLM-generated scene, by contrast, the motifs remain stable repetitions: they sustain local coherence but do not trigger a reorganisation of actantial relations or value structures. This is why the discourse appears generative at the surface level while lacking semio-narrative creativity in the strict Greimasian sense. Let us now observe how the experiment continues through new meta-author requests.

ChatGPT:

Would you like me to continue with the full Act I in the same style, so you have a complete first act draft?

ME:

Good. I was rather wondering if you can write what you imagine as the climax scene of the whole story, the one that reveals the turning point of the plot and unveils the secrets of Andrea and his mother mentioned in the storyline I attached above. If you think so, could you please generate the scene directly in a Word file?

ChatGPT:

Here is the climax scene of *The Dollmaker*, written in full and formatted as a Word document:

Download *The Dollmaker – Act III, Climax Scene* (Word file)

Act III, Scene 2 (Climax)

(A dim, suffocating silence in the workshop. The shelves of dolls loom like silent witnesses.)

On the workbench, the nearly finished doll meant for EVA's daughter sits upright, its blank face eerily familiar.

The only light comes from a single lamp. EVA stands tense, staring at the backroom door. ANDREA is agitated, pacing.)

EVA: (shaking) Andrea... what's back there? Who's back there?

(ANDREA freezes, his back to her. His voice is calm, almost too calm.)

ANDREA: I told you. My mother. She... she watches over me. Always.

(EVA edges toward the door. The faint sound of a chair creaking again. A whisper? Or just the air. EVA reaches out. ANDREA snaps around, fierce.)

ANDREA: Don't!

EVA: (bursting out) You talk to her, but no one has seen her! Not once! You hide her away like some... some secret. I need to know!

(ANDREA rushes forward, grabbing EVA's wrist before she can touch the door. His grip is desperate, trembling.)

ANDREA: (pleading) She wouldn't like it. She wouldn't understand. She — she protects me!

EVA: (breaking free) Protects you? Or controls you?

(Without waiting, EVA yanks the door open. A wave of silence crashes over them. The stage light shifts — cold, merciless — illuminating the inside of the backroom: a single chair, a figure slumped. At first, it seems human. Then, slowly, the audience sees: it is a doll. A woman-doll. Perfectly preserved, dressed in faded clothes. Her glass eyes glint in the lamplight.)

(EVA gasps, stumbling back.)

EVA: (horrified whisper) It's not... it's not her. Andrea... that's— that's a doll. (ANDREA staggers forward, his face breaking open with anguish. He kneels beside the figure, stroking its hair with reverence.)

ANDREA: (soft, broken) No. She is here. She's always been here. She tells me what to do. She... she helps me. (beat) She loves me.

EVA: (voice rising) She's gone, Andrea! This— this is nothing but glass and cloth!

(ANDREA whirls on her, sudden fury.)

ANDREA: (shouting) Don't you dare! Don't you dare call her nothing! She is more real than you, more real than anyone!

(He grabs the unfinished doll from the bench — the one meant for EVA's daughter. He holds it up. The resemblance to EVA is unmistakable now: the face, the hair, the fragile tilt of the head.)

ANDREA: (hoarse) I made this... for you. For her. So you'll always stay. So you'll never leave me. Just like Mother.

(EVA stares, stricken. She edges backward, toward the door, but her voice is firm now, trembling with resolve.)

EVA: (quiet but fierce) You don't know love, Andrea. You only know how to trap it. To freeze it. To kill it and call it alive.

(A tense silence. ANDREA clutches the doll, torn between rage and despair. The workshop seems to close in around them. The ticking of the unseen clock grows louder, louder, until it drowns the stage. The lights flicker, narrowing until only EVA and the doll's face are illuminated. EVA's eyes meet the doll's — her own reflection staring back. Blackout.)

--- End of Climax Scene ---

The climax of the play reveals the dollmaker's secret: the presence of his mother, transformed into a doll, locked behind the forbidden door. The face-to-face between Eva and Andrea peaks with the revelation: "She isn't gone... she's here, watching through their eyes" (Act III, Climax). This moment is highly dramatic, yet its generativity is limited. The AI exploits a culturally resonant *topos* – the hidden monster, the repressed returning – but does so through recombination rather than transformation.

The climax of *The Dollmaker* illustrates most clearly what Cerutti and Laterza (2023) term as *creative computational generativity*. On the one hand, the revelation of Andrea's secret – his mother as a doll, the uncanny gaze of the glass eyes – is dramatically effective and fulfils cultural expectations of a narrative plot-twist. On the other hand, the mechanism yielding this revelation is not creative in the strong sense of the term: it is the outcome of the recombination of statistically frequent *topoi* (the hidden monster, the return of the repressed, the ambiguity of the gaze). This use of 'strong creativity' does not presuppose a romantic notion of originality as sheer norm-breaking, which

has been problematised in contemporary media theory (cf. Arielli and Manovich 2022), but refers specifically to semio-narrative transformation in the Greimasian sense. What makes this act appear 'creative' is the situated interpretive competence of the human reader, whose encyclopaedic knowledge of dramaturgical conventions allows the output to be recognised as an intentional construction. Creativity here emerges not from the text alone, but from the interaction between computational recombination and culturally trained interpretive repertoires. Cerutti and Laterza propose the notion of creative computational generativity to emphasise this ambiguity: generativity is computational, i.e., an algorithmic productivity without consciousness or intentionality, yet it may be perceived as creative insofar as human beings project onto it the qualities they associate with artistic invention. The creativity, therefore, does not reside in the machine, but in the interpretive relationship between the output and the audience. This remark finds a powerful theoretical counterpart in Floridi's concept of *semantic pareidolia* (2025d). Just as pareidolia in perception leads us to see faces in clouds or figures in stains, semantic pareidolia leads us to see meaning and intentionality in the statistically generated patterns of an LLM. The human subject, equipped with semantic capital, cannot help but invest the machine's output with coherence, depth, and even purpose. We 'read into' the text more than the machine has 'put into' it.

The intersection of these two perspectives reveals the mechanism operating in *The Dollmaker*. The machine provides the material conditions for the 'illusion' through computational generativity that recombines existing cultural repertoires. Here, illusion designates not an epistemic deception but a semiotic appearance, to say, the semblance of generative depth produced by surface-level recombination. The resulting discourse produces an appearance of semantic and narrative density by mobilising familiar dramaturgical patterns. However, this density does not arise from a transformation of underlying semantic structures, but from surface-level recombination. It is therefore the human interpreter, equipped with encyclopaedic and dramaturgical competence, who recognises these configurations as meaningful and attributes to them the semblance of an intentional artistic construction. The effect is doubly illusory: generated without intention and perceived as if intentional. In semiotic terms, this dual mechanism confirms the limits of discursive generativity in artificial systems. The LLM does not carry out semionarrative transformations; it provides isotopies, patterns, and recognisable motifs. The passage from discursive ornamentation to generative transformation requires precisely what Floridi calls semantic capital, i.e., the human capacity both to give meaning (to interpret within a framework) and to make meaning (to produce new semantic configurations). The machine may support the first operation by providing discursive cues, but it cannot accomplish the second. The impression of creativity thus arises at the intersection of computational recombination and human semantic investment: a hybrid artefact that is as revealing of our interpretive habits as it is of the machine's generative constraints.

Moving towards the final stage of the experiment, after asking ChatGPT to produce the climax scene, it was asked to explain in detail how it had constructed Andrea's fatal flaw.⁹ Afterwards, it was asked to write a monologue in which the fatal flaw emerged:

ME:

Could you explain to me in more detail what Andrea's fatal flaw is, what secret he is keeping, and, above all, how the latter is connected to his dolls' eyes?

ChatGPT:

That's a very sharp question – and it goes right to the core of what makes Andrea such a chilling, tragic figure. Let me unpack it in layers:

Andrea's Fatal Flaw

Andrea's flaw is his inability to separate love from possession.

- He craves intimacy, but he cannot tolerate the unpredictability and vulnerability that real human relationships demand.
- Instead of accepting love as something freely given, he seeks to *control* it, *freeze* it, *preserve* it.
- His dolls are his solution: perfect, compliant, unchanging companions who never leave him, never betray him, never challenge him.

This flaw warps his ability to love and ultimately isolates him – he drives away real people (like Eva) in his obsessive attempt to replace them with facsimiles.

The Secret He Is Keeping

The great secret Andrea keeps is that his mother has been dead for years – but he has 'kept' her by transforming her into one of his dolls.

- She is the ultimate prototype of his craft: the figure in the backroom that he insists is alive.
- To him, she still 'speaks' – not literally (though he may imagine it), but in the way her presence dominates his workshop and dictates his behavior.
- This secret is both his trauma and his refuge: he cannot let go of her, because to let go would mean facing a lifetime of emotional neglect, abandonment, and loss.

Thus, the mother-doll is the anchor of his delusion, and the hidden truth that Eva must eventually uncover.

⁹ The 'fatal flaw' is a struggle within a character to maintain a survival system long after it has outlived its usefulness.

The Dolls' Eyes — The Connection

The eyes are crucial because they symbolize Andrea's obsession with *capturing life without actually possessing it*.

1. Illusion of Life

- Andrea pours all his skill, artistry, and madness into making the eyes appear startlingly real.
- To him, the eyes are where 'the soul' resides – he believes if the eyes are perfect, the doll becomes a vessel for memory, presence, even love.

2. The Mother's Eyes

- The mother-doll's eyes are the model for all others. Andrea likely cast or replicated them from her in some way (this can be left ambiguous: literally copied, or symbolically his 'template').
- Every doll he makes carries an echo of her gaze, which is why his creations feel uncanny, unsettling, too human.

3. The Tragic Paradox

- The eyes make the dolls seem alive, but they also reveal Andrea's inability to accept real life. He's trapped between illusion and reality.
- His skill with the eyes is both his genius and his curse: he has perfected the art of imitation, but it bars him forever from genuine human intimacy.

In Short

- **Fatal flaw:** Andrea confuses love with control, seeking to possess people by transforming them into objects.
- **Secret:** His mother has long been dead, but he has kept her 'alive' as a doll – the most precious and most horrifying of his creations.
- **The Eyes:** The eyes are his attempt to 'resurrect' life in his dolls; they are his signature, his obsession, and his ultimate delusion – each eye staring back at him with the truth he cannot face: that love cannot be preserved in glass.

Would you like me to write a short symbolic monologue for Andrea, in which he explains (perhaps to Eva, or perhaps to the mother-doll) why the eyes matter so much – almost like his manifesto, the dark philosophy that drives him? It could crystallize his fatal flaw for the audience.

ME:

That would be a great idea!

ChatGPT:

Perfect – here’s a standalone monologue for Andrea, written in the same noir, psychologically charged style, which you could drop into Act II or Act III as his “confession” or dark philosophy.

Andrea’s Monologue: ‘The Eyes’

(Andrea at his workbench, holding a glass eye between his fingers. The light catches it as he speaks. His tone moves between reverence, bitterness, and quiet mania.)

ANDREA:

Do you know why dolls frighten people? It’s not the silence. Not the stiffness. It’s the eyes.

People can forgive a crooked smile, a clumsy hand, a body made of cloth. But the eyes – the eyes are traitors.

They remind you of something you’d rather not remember. That you are being watched. That you are *seen*.

My mother’s eyes... they never closed. Even when she slept, I swear, they were half-open, half-judging.

Cold little glass marbles staring through me, as if I were never enough. So I thought – perhaps I can make eyes that don’t condemn. Eyes that never leave. Eyes that stay.

(He lifts the eye closer, almost whispering.)

If you catch the light just so... if you paint the iris with patience, if you polish the surface until it drinks the room whole... then for a moment, a single moment, you trap something. A spark. The memory of life.

Not life itself – no, life wriggles, it betrays, it forgets. But this – (he taps the glass eye with his nail, sharply) – this remembers forever.

People think I make dolls. I don’t. I make prisons. Beautiful, delicate prisons. Because love is never safe in the world out there. Love rots, it fades, it leaves you.

But behind glass, behind paint, behind my hands – love doesn’t leave. Love stays.

And if you know where to look... the eyes will always look back.

(He holds the glass eye up against his own, aligning it so it seems to stare outward, his real eye hidden behind it. He murmurs to himself, almost to the mother’s shadow.)

They’re all watching. And as long as they watch... I am never alone.

(Blackout or interruption by Eva at this moment would add maximum tension.)

The dynamics hitherto outlined reach their high point in Andrea's monologue, where the fatal flaw is articulated through a striking aphorism: "People think I make dolls. I don't. I make prisons" (Act III, Climax). At first glance, the passage appears as a moment of dramatic revelation, but closer analysis reveals why it remains at the discursive level. The prison metaphor draws on sedimented cultural *topoi*, i.e., the body as confinement, the gaze as control, and the uncanny object as a substitute for the absent beloved. While recombining these tropes, the LLM generates an utterance that resonates culturally, but without enacting the narrative transformations that Greimas and Courtés identify as constitutive of generativity: no shift in actantial roles, no reconfiguration of value structures, no alteration of the plot's temporal logic. In other words, the line amplifies existing isotopies, but it does not generate new semantic trajectories. This reveals a structural inconsistency between the textual and metatextual levels: while the local discourse remains confined to surface recombination, the play's overall architecture reproduces an Aristotelian generative template. The appearance of creativity thus emerges from the metatextual inheritance of narrative form rather than from transformations enacted within the textual level itself.¹⁰ This gap reveals the connection between Cerutti and Laterza's creative computational generativity and Floridi's semantic pareidolia. In terms of computation, the machine offers a probabilistic recombination of motifs; in terms of hermeneutics, the reader invests this recombination with intentional depth, as if it were an epiphany; the text 'sounds' like an invention of the author because one projects onto it the qualities we expect from human creativity. Instead, what appears to be meaningful is actually the result of one's semantic capital, that is, the double operation of giving meaning (situating tropes within a framework) and making meaning (expanding those tropes into new pathways of sense). The LLM can assist with the former, but it cannot perform the latter. The monologue thus exemplifies the generative illusion: a rhetorically effective yet generatively inert output that acquires depth only through the intervention of the meta-author and the interpretive work of the reader. Such a generative illusion resonates with Leone's reflections on the semiotics of AI, in particular the notion of *latency* (Leone 2024): the machine's operations remain invisible yet produce effects that humans tend to interpret as intentional creativity. This invisibility is not a neutral absence but part of the semiotic contract that sustains the illusion of authorship.

¹⁰ Accordingly, the present analysis does not adopt a substantive theory of creativity but treats creativity as a semiotic effect emerging from the alignment or misalignment of generative levels.

The role of the meta-author

Throughout the experiment, the human interlocutor – as meta-author – played a crucial role in directing the narrative trajectory. To this extent, the dramaturgical experiment can also be read as a case of *co-enunciation* (D'Armenio et al. 2024; Dondero 2025): the text emerges not from a single subject but from the interplay of algorithmic generation and human orchestration. Semiotics of enunciation thus provides a useful framework for describing the asymmetry between machine output and human semantic investment. In making stylistic cues, demanding elaborations, and interpreting motifs, the meta-author ensured coherence and cultural resonance. This role goes beyond technical supervision: prompting constitutes a generative act, since it introduces intentionality, temporality, and value orientation into a process otherwise driven by probabilistic association. Floridi's notion of *distant writing* captures this asymmetry: the human delegates discursive production to the machine yet remains the keeper of semantic capital. Only the human agent can perform the double operation of semanticisation – giving meaning and making meaning – that transforms discursive fragments into trajectories of sense. In Culioli's terms, the meta-author performs the mental gestures of representation, predication, and validation that the machine cannot emulate. To make explicit where LLMs succeed and where they fall short in semiotic terms, the following grid maps the results of the experiment along five analytical criteria:

Criterion	Evaluation
Actantial coherence	Partial: roles identifiable (Andrea, Eva, Mother), but evolution stereotypical.
Isotopic stability	Strong: motifs of eyes and hidden room recur consistently.
Chronogenesis (temporal progression)	Weak: scenes follow structure but lack intrinsic temporal necessity.
Enunciative voice	Variable: coherent tone at times, neutral at others.
Generative trajectory	Absent without human intervention; discursive level only.

This synthesis highlights how the machine achieves stability at the discursive level but lacks the capacity for deeper narrative transformation. *The Dollmaker* experiment underlines how LLMs can produce discursive material that is coherent, stylistically recognisable, and emotionally impactful, yet their generativity remains confined to the discursive level as defined by Greimas and Courtés. The deeper transformations of meaning, those involving temporality, intentionality, and actantial reconfiguration, occur only through the intervention of the human meta-author, who mobilises semantic capital to re-inscribe machine output into meaningful trajectories.

As a result, a distributed but asymmetrical model of generativity has emerged. Machines provide statistically significant discursive forms; humans provide semantic depth, narrative transformation, and cultural resonance. This asymmetry points directly back to the challenge outlined in the introduction: our categories for comparing human and artificial intelligence remain insufficient, because they risk conflating discursive productivity with generative creativity. Addressing this insufficiency requires semiotics to disentangle the illusion of creativity from the operations of meaning-making, and to map more precisely the double register – biological and cultural – that characterises human intelligence.

The double register of generativity

This essay has traced a tension that runs from classical inquiries into mechanised reasoning to contemporary practices of *wrAlting*, i.e., a tension between two registers of meaning-generation: one formal, combinatorial, and distributive; the other temporal, intentional, and transformative. We propose to name this tension the *double register of generativity*. On the one hand, LLMs constitute a powerful mode of discursive production: rapid, statistically grounded, and capable of assembling culturally sedimented repertoires into texts that satisfy genre expectations and produce compelling surface effects. On the other hand, human generativity operates across temporal horizons and value axes: it reconfigures actantial relations, it institutes new value transpositions, and it imbues sequences of signs with experiential intentionality.

This double register is not merely descriptive but diagnostic: it exposes why comparisons between human and artificial modes of meaning-making often founder on category mismatch. The machine's outputs are not deficient because of a mere lack of competence, but because they operate according to a different ontological logic, namely, distributional semantics and contextual attention rather than chronogenetic and enunciative operations. The playwriting experiment examined above rendered this asymmetry tangible: the LLM provided discursive richness; the human meta-author reintroduced temporal depth and semantic capital. This configuration corresponds to what Cerutti and Laterza (2023) define as creative computational generativity, in which

computational generativity and human semantic investment jointly produce outputs perceived as creative. What appears, then, as creativity is frequently a hybrid artifact, i.e., an emergent effect borne of computational recombination and human semantic investment. In other words, the LLM does not engage in autonomous semionarrative invention but produces discursive material that acquires the *semblance* of creativity only through human interpretation.

Acknowledging the double register has two consequences. Methodologically, it requires that semiotics adopt instruments capable of discriminating between production levels (discursive vs. generative trajectories) and agency roles (algorithmic recombination vs. meta-author orchestration). Normatively, it invites a recalibration of expectations: to recognise the value of machine-generated material without mistaking the credibility of form for the performance of meaning-making. Semiotics, as a discipline dedicated to the analysis of meaning processes, is uniquely positioned to clarify this distinction and to resist the conflation of computational productivity with creativity. The challenge, as Andler reminds us, is that our categories are still inadequate to fully capture the complexity of human intelligence. Yet precisely for this reason, the semiotic perspective remains essential: it can be used to argue that AI outputs are not creative in themselves, but become meaningful only through the interpretive, temporal, and intentional operations of human beings. The result, as Claudio Paolucci (2025) suggests, is that the machine compels us to confront the machinic essence of human beings themselves: we too are generative machines, though endowed with temporality, intentionality, and value-oriented transformations. The double register of generativity is therefore not only a methodological tool but also a way of re-thinking the relation between human and artificial intelligence. Accordingly, the analysis of *wrAlting* is less about assessing machine competence than about refining the categories with which we account for human generativity within the double register of formal and temporal meaning-production. This shift follows from the recognition that human generativity itself relies on internalised automatisms: linguistic routines, narrative schemata, inferential habits, and embodied temporal operations. Artificial systems externalise and accelerate these automatisms, making visible their role in sustaining agency and meaning-making. The encounter with LLMs thus does not diminish human specificity but displaces it: from the capacity to combine forms toward the capacity to invest them with temporal, experiential, and value-laden significance. Revisiting human generativity in light of artificial generativity is therefore not an ancillary outcome of the analysis, but one of its central theoretical stakes.

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