

Literary AI: Computational Writing and the Media of Language

Monash University Malaysia · 6–8 July 2026 · Online via Zoom

SCHEDULE

DAY 1 · MON 6 JULY

20:00–
20:30

Opening Remarks

20:30–
21:30

Panel 1 — Inscribing Meaning

Does writing have a future? — literary theory for LLMs
David J. Gunkel · Northern Illinois University

If the humanities lost language, have we lost it for good?
John Cayley · Brown University

21:30–
22:00

Discussion

DAY 2 · TUE 7 JULY

20:00–
21:00

Panel 2 — Reading Interfaces

Inside the anticipatory interface: essayistic experiments in chatbot self-reflection
Søren Bro Pold · Aarhus University & Ben Grosser · University of Illinois

Wherefore art thou critique? From literary criticism to critical formalism in the age of AI
Juan Luis (Gianni) Gastaldi · ETH Zurich

21:00–
21:30

Discussion

DAY 3 · WED 8 JULY

20:00–
21:00

Panel 3 — Conditioning Text

Artifice and intellect
Dennis Yi Tenen · Columbia University

Textpocalypse: the new political economy of writing
Matthew Kirschenbaum · University of Virginia

21:00–
21:30

Discussion

21:30–
22:15

Roundtable Discussion — All Speakers

ABSTRACTS & SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

David J. Gunkel

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Does writing have a future? — literary theory for LLMs

ABSTRACT

The titular question of this paper is not mine. It comes from Czech/Brazilian media theorist Vilém Flusser, who once used it as the subtitle to a book he published in 1987. At the time Flusser was writing the dominance of the written word seemed to be in crisis, as new modes of digital expression seemed to herald the end of writing and the beginning of a post-literate age. I reuse/rewrite Flusser's question 35+ years later, because it again looks as if writing's future is in question and on the line. This time due to impressive developments in large language models (LLM) and other forms of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Consequently, it seems prudent at this juncture to reissue Flusser's titular question. And we can, following Flusser's own example, begin with a very direct and clear statement: What large language models signify is not the end of writing but the terminal limits of a particular conceptualization of writing that has been called logocentrism. In other words, writing indeed has a future but only if we reconceptualize how we think about writing and write about thinking. The following responds to this need and challenge. And it does so in three steps or movements: 1) I begin by reviewing the three fundamental elements of logocentric metaphysics and the long shadow that this way of thinking has cast over the conceptualization and critique of LLMs. 2) I then trace the contours of a deconstruction of this standard operating procedure that interrupts influential and often-unquestioned assumptions about the concept of the author, the meaning of truth, and the meaning of what we mean by the word "meaning." 3) Finally, I will conclude by formulating the terms and conditions of an alternative way to think and write about LLMs that escape the conceptual grasp of logocentrism and its hegemony.

BIO

David J. Gunkel is an award-winning educator, researcher, and author, specializing in the philosophy of technology with a focus on the moral and legal challenges of artificial intelligence and robots. He is the author of over 115 scholarly articles and has published nineteen books, including *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology* (Purdue University Press 2007), *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics* (MIT Press 2012), *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* (MIT Press 2016), *Robot Rights* (MIT Press 2018), *Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond* (MIT Press 2023), and *Communicative AI: A Critical Introduction to Large Language Models* (Polity 2025). He currently holds the position of Department Chair and is Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of Communication at Northern Illinois University (USA) and is professor of applied ethics at Łazarski University in Warsaw, Poland.

John Cayley

BROWN UNIVERSITY

If the humanities lost language, have we lost it for good?

ABSTRACT

In *Language Machines* (2025) Leif Weatherby proposes that the humanities have "lost language" to the discourse of machine learning, which has captured "language as a cultural system" (5), and that, "There is no group of theorists who study language from the perspective of the literary" (138). In this contribution I do not attempt to refute these claims (although, as a theorist/practitioner I may take slight exception to the latter). Weatherby does not necessarily *identify* digital representations of language with actual structured traces generated by the events of human linguistic practice, but his claim does seem to be that within the general cultural play of a structuralist semiotics and poetics, there is no material difference between such digital representations and the actual traces of language that humans produce and experience. There is no representational "remainder" in this context. He forecloses discussion of an ontological distinction by bracketing any essential investment of language *as a cultural system* in such concepts as cognition or intelligence. Language, for Weatherby, is "complex, cultural and even poetic first, and referential, functional, and cognitive only later" (2). Language is also, for Weatherby, outside us, as a logical consequence of its constitutive participation in our externally shared cultural systems. To push back and attempt to recover language for human reading, I argue that our intuitive sense that language is within us is ontologically constitutive of language as meaningful, and as meaningfully integrated with cognition, thought, and intelligence. Language – together with these other concepts – requires individual, embodied spatial location with interiority. Even more specifically, language requires "situation" in time. The first of these requirements evokes the work on "world models" which is likely to be a feature of machine learning research going forward. The second requirement – a situated engagement with time as constitutive of meaning: this is something that may be impossible for models to capture, while it is essential to human linguistic practice and may well, in time, recover language for the humanities.

BIO

John Cayley is a writer, theorist, and maker of language art in programmable media. Apart from more or less conventional poetry and translation, he has explored dynamic and ambient poetics, text generation, transliteral morphing, aestheticized vectors of reading, and transactive synthetic language. Professor of Literary Arts at Brown University, his selected essays are published as *Grammalepsy* (2018). A recent essay, with thinking underpinning this contribution, may be out in time for the symposium: 'Writing Implements.' *Social Research* 93.2 (Summer, 2026). <https://programmatology.com>; @programmatology

Inside the anticipatory interface: essayistic experiments in chatbot self-reflection

ABSTRACT

Generative AI chatbots do not merely respond to users; they anticipate them. Through aesthetics of authority, affective reassurance, and invitations to continue, these machines are designed less for deliberation than for producing engagement. We examine anticipation as an aesthetic operation embedded in the linguistic interface of chatbots such as ChatGPT—one that accommodates rather than challenges, nudges rather than waits, and shapes conversation in advance.

We build from our prior analysis of ChatGPT's "praise/prompt envelope," in which responses are wrapped in affirmation and prompting that conditions users to keep responding. We argued that chatbot language is interfacial and the interface is linguistic. Building on this, we experiment with essayistic prompting that encourages GPTs to generate self-reflective, self-critical responses. These include customGPTs informed by Marxist critique, Jakobson's language functions, narratology, and post-structuralist deconstruction, as well as comparative approaches reading chatbot outputs alongside other texts (Weatherby). We also draw on managerial and motivational genres to identify how the anticipatory interface stages the user through alignments rooted in U.S. corporate and self-help cultures. These approaches prime the system to reflect on its omissions and imagine how its responses might have been otherwise.

Through these essayistic chatbots we read outputs as noisy, dirty texts bearing traces of their "material and economic processes of production" (Geoghegan on Barthes, 160). Working from the inside—with no possibility of disrupting the generative model—these experiments create frictions that reveal the structures and noise of AI's anticipatory interface.

BIO

Ben Grosser investigates how the designs of platform interfaces shape human behavior, desire, and culture. Recent exhibitions include Centre Pompidou (Paris), Somerset House (London), and ZKM (Karlsruhe). He is Professor of New Media at the University of Illinois, and a Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard University.

Søren Bro Pold is Professor of digital aesthetics at Aarhus University, Denmark. His main research field is interface criticism which discusses the role and the development of the interface for art, literature, aesthetics, culture and IT. He often collaborates in artistic research and chairs the research project Human-AI Collaboration: Imaginaries, Interventions, Interfaces (HAIC-III).

Juan Luis (Gianni) Gastaldi

ETH ZURICH

Wherefore art thou critique? From literary criticism to critical formalism in the age of AI

ABSTRACT

Calls for a critical approach to AI have become commonplace. Yet critical discourse has had remarkably little influence on the design and development of AI systems. Critical perspectives tend to arrive after the fact, positioned as end-user responses to principles, methods, and infrastructures that have already been deployed as opaque, shielded tools, only open to "interpretation". This talk argues that one principal reason for this end-userisation lies in the state of critique itself. Over recent decades, critical thought has been refracted through a predominantly literary and media-theoretical lens, to the point where critical theory has become, in practice, difficult to distinguish from literary criticism. The contributions of this tradition are real and substantial. But its limited engagement with the epistemic core of AI has curtailed the reach of critical approaches precisely where it matters most. I locate the roots of this situation in the central role that the formal sciences have assumed in the knowledge production about human phenomena since the 1950s: a transformation that has rendered large territories of contemporary human sciences effectively refractory to critique. In response, I propose that criticism needs to reconnect with its own formalist roots. Rather than treating formalism as the adversary of critical thought, I argue that formal scientific literacy is a condition of its renewal. This entails expanding our understanding of literacy to encompass the formal sciences in their constitutive entanglement with natural language practices as a broader methodological horizon for the humanities. Far from a capitulation to technocratic reason, a critical formalism should provide the means by which critique can reclaim the ground it has ceded: the terrain that today goes by the name of AI.

BIO

Juan Luis (Gianni) Gastaldi is a philosopher and computer scientist specializing in the philosophy of language, the history of formal knowledge, and formal approaches to distributional language modeling. Trained in political science and in philosophy and mathematics, he completed a PhD in Philosophy on the mathematization of logic in the nineteenth century. He has held positions as Professor of Philosophy and History of Ideas at MO.CO.ESBA (Montpellier) and as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at ETH Zurich, where he also directed the Turing Centre. He is currently a researcher and lecturer at ETH Zurich's Institute for Machine Learning, where he is pursuing a second PhD in Computer Science. His work examines the linguistic dimensions of formal systems and the formal dimensions of language, with particular attention to the possibility that a theory of language can inform both a theory of culture and a theory of science.

Dennis Yi Tenen

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Artifice and intellect

ABSTRACT

The notion of artificial intelligence implies its obverse and improbable quality: something like "natural" intelligence. As I hope to convince you, intelligence in the wild almost always entails artifice. In this talk, we will examine the role artifice plays in cognition, and specifically in the cognitive tasks related to textual authorship. This change of perspective leads us to reexamine the history of literature from the standpoint of authorial technique, while also bearing important consequences for our own contemporary academic practices of writing and research.

BIO

Dennis Yi Tenen is an associate professor of English at Columbia University, where he also co-directs the Narrative Intelligence Lab. His published work can be found in monographs including *Plain Text: The Poetics of Computation* (Stanford University Press, 2017), *Literary Theory for Robots* (W.W. Norton, 2024) and *Author Function* under contract with Chicago UP. His recent articles appear on the pages of *Modern Philology*, *New Literary History*, *Amodern*, *boundary2*, *Computational Culture*, and *Modernism/modernity* on topics that span literary theory, the sociology of literature, media history, and computational narratology. A long-time affiliate of Columbia's Data Science Institute, formerly a Microsoft engineer in the Windows group and fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, his code runs on personal computers worldwide.

Matthew Kirschenbaum

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Textpocalypse: the new political economy of writing

ABSTRACT

This talk will consider the status of writing in the present moment not from the qualitative question of whether AI can write better than humans, but from the stance of political economy--meaning the role of writing in what Michel de Certeau once called the "scriptural economy," as well as online industries' insatiable demand for "content" and the increasing awareness (some call this the Dead Internet) that more and more of what we read online is merely eavesdropping on conversations amongst machines.

BIO

Matthew Kirschenbaum is Commonwealth Professor of Artificial Intelligence and English at the University of Virginia. Prior to that he taught for 25 years at the University of Maryland, finishing as a Distinguished University Professor. He is the author of three books, and speaks and writes often on topics in critical AI, digital studies, and book history.

TIME ZONE REFERENCE · SESSION START (20:00 KL)

KUALA LUMPUR	LONDON	ZURICH / AARHUS	NEW YORK	CHICAGO	SEOUL
20:00	13:00	14:00	08:00	07:00	21:00
MYT UTC+8	BST UTC+1	CEST UTC+2	EDT UTC-4	CDT UTC-5	KST UTC+9

All times listed in Malaysia Time (MYT, UTC+8).