Style, Folk Forensics, and the Post-Artificial Condition

Response to: Simon Meier-Vieracker: "No Choice: On the Stylistics of AI-Generated Texts," Journal for Media Linguistics, discussion paper 5 (2025)

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In his essay "No Choice: On the Stylistics of AI-Generated Texts," Simon Meier-Vieracker renders an important service to those of us in the humanities working on large language models as *textual* machines. Homing in on the question of style, he intervenes in a discussion that often treats this concept as either undefinable and mysterious or overly simplistic, as the parameterization of frequency, length, or similar metrics. The stakes, however, are broader. That AI-generated text *has* a style (rather than being devoid of it) and that this style is in some way *informative* about the mechanism of its generation is an assumption that sits at the junction of expert knowledge and commonplace experience: Being confronted with a text we suspect to be synthetic without being able to fully ascertain its provenance is defining of our moment, which I have called "post-artificial." (Bajohr 2024b)

One characteristic of that moment is that a receptive paranoia – familiar from certain literary theory (Sedgwick 1997) – is becoming a default mode of our collective reading practice. What is "paranoid" about it is not an excess of incontrovertible evidence but the inverse, the fact that such evidence is unavailable. Any text now can now, by some measure of plausibility, be suspected to be synthetic, while there is no way to prove the opposite. This is the post-artificial condition.

Yet readers do not respond by suspending judgment altogether. Instead, they cultivate a heightened sense of awareness that resembles connoisseurship in the art-historical sense (Berenson 1927): a practical expertise, a perceptual "knowing-how" that resists full formalization.[1] This practice might be called "folk forensics" – scanning cultural artifacts for telltale signs that indicate that it may be generated. Often, though not always, this is paired with the valuation that something "slop," that is, low-quality, engagement-driven AI content.

Online spaces such as the Reddit forum r/isthisai make this dynamic legible. Users engage in collective detective work here, so that even under conditions of post-artificial doubt, arguments for or against AI origins are put forward by pointing to specific clues. In visual media, these may include background artifacts or a specific output length typical of certain a model's constraints. For text, the task is less straightforward, though not without recurring heuristics: the use of the m-dash in ChatGPT, the "not this but that" structure, the bulletpointization of

[1] That *connoisseurship* should become a metaphor for the perceptive interaction with machine learning artifacts is no accident: It mirrors the statistical nature of current subsymbolic AI in contradistinction to the logic-symbolic reasoning of older, "GOFAI" approaches. Similar metaphors can be found in pitting the atomistic versus the holistic tradition; aggregate versus *Gestalt*; or deontology versus virtue ethics.

information, or the reliably positioned punchline that "ultimately" shows something to be "intriguing" all can serve as shibboleths marking something as AI-generated or even slop.

Of course, as Shaib et al. (2025, 1) point out, in line with the post-artificial condition, "text can be perceived as 'slop' even when not generated by AI, and not all AI-generated text reads as 'slop'." The paranoia of folk forensics always risks at sliding into the paranoia of what Garbiele de Seta (2024) calls "algorithmic folklore": confronted with opaque interfaces, readers infer "felt" explanations ("shadow banning") that may have little evidentiary basis yet serve explanations for otherwise unexplainable experiences. What is more, formerly diagnostic markers, such as the once-notorious "delving into" (Kobak et al. 2025), fade as models change but also feed back into human writing habits. Folk forensics, AI generation, and nonsynthetic text production are linked so that human writers (at least anecdotally) learn to avoid such features lest they themselves fall under suspicion. The result is a perpetual arms race between evolving models and the readers who attempt to identify them in a constant recalibration of forensic intuition.

This throws us back onto the surface. Without knowledge of the underlying mechanics, it is primarily defined by the apprehension of *style*. Indeed, style may be the primary category by which readers "gut-check" AI text in folk forensic practice. But style, as an almost auratic concept, is also notoriously hard to operationalize. Already 1962, George Kubler bemoaned its fuzziness that, in his eyes, renders it at best a post-hoc label, not an analytic category: "Style is like a rainbow. […] We can see it only briefly while we pause between the sun and the rain, and it vanishes when we go to the place where we thought we saw it." (Kubler 2008, 118) All attempts to find parameters taming this fuzziness, as Meier-Vieracker suggests in his literature review, tend to be overly reductive when style is relegated to being a function of surface markers such as word frequency, adverb count, readability scores and so on.[2] What is more, the idea of a model's singular "dataprint" (Floridi 2025) is dubious: In his own "exercises in style," Meier-Vieracker can show that models produce a variety of styles reliably.

For this reason, he proposes taking a step back and reconceptualize the concept at a deeper level. His suggestion is to understand style not so much as a sum of linguistic markers but, in a sociolinguistic and pragmatic way, as a meaningful choice among alternatives. Style, on this account (sharpened by Luhmann's notion of meaning as a surplus of possible continuations), is constituted by selection against a horizon of discarded possibilities. But this definition comes with a built-in asymmetry. If style is choice, then choice implies intention, and intention is what the model lacks. The result is a familiar conclusion: whatever appears in synthetic text is always only a simulation of the real thing – in this case, style. [3]

[2] What is more, the style of "an LLM" is mostly treated as monolithic, entrenching its "uncontroversial thingness" rather than investigating the "material-semiotic specificity" (Suchman 2023) of individual models in clearly circumscribed states.

[3] If I understand his argument correctly, this point is made via the generativist tradition Meier-Vieracker briefly reconstructs: in Rosengren's model, "style" can be formalized as a set of probabilistic "stylistic performance rules" that modulate linguistic output and can, in principle, be described without immediately collapsing into a mere marker checklist. Meier-Vieracker's point, however, seems to be that the analogy to LLMs remains limited: while

With this, Meier-Vieracker moves head-on into the "grounding" debates that have raged within the philosophy of language regarding LLMs (Mollo and Millière 2025), in which two extreme positions confront each other: The first argues that meaning can only emerge if text is "grounded in communicative intent, any model of the world, or any model of the reader's state of mind" (Bender et al. 2021; Bender and Koller 2020; Hicks et al. 2024); absent these, LLM output is at best meaningless and at worst deceptive. The second position treats intention as a misleading frame and locates meaning elsewhere: in relations internal to language as a system of signs (Gastaldi 2021; Kockelman 2024; Weatherby 2025); in the pragmatic negotiation of attribution (Coeckelbergh and Gunkel 2023); or, more Luhmannian still, in the receiver's role within the "double contingency" of communication (Esposito 2022).

Meier-Vieracker appears to sympathize with the first camp. For while he acknowledges that what LLMs produce is not *non*-style either, his explanation of what makes them such performatively competent stylist implies the notion of a "parasitic" meaning, originally employed by Stevan Harnad (1990). LLMs exploit a specifically human layer of language use, namely metapragmatic typifications and labels that circulate in discourse and can be found in training data, so that prompting can reactivate those socially stabilized mappings between labels and linguistic patterns. On this view, what we get then is at best *parasitic* style.[4]

This position is entirely plausible. It is a direct result of how Meier-Vieracker readjusts the discourse on style from a pure surface phenomenon to a discussion the depth mechanics that make it possible. But precisely because the move is so programmatic, it is worth asking what other questions it forecloses rather than enables. I can think of at least two answers here.

First and obviously, an intent-based notion that treats synthetic style as parasitic has no way of describing it on its own terms. But it is not obvious to me why this asymmetry must be built into the concept at the outset. Without reverting to the counter-position that machines have intentions (Hayles 2019), can one think of ways to uncouple this dependency? The question, in other words, is not whether LLMs "really" choose, but whether there are systematic, describable regularities that warrant being called "style" without being treated merely as a derivative imitation of human stylistic agency. One solution might be to distinguish between style as an analytic category and style as an operative category.

Analytically, "style" is the name we give to patterns we recognize and evaluate on the surface of an output; Meier-Vieracker has shown how quickly that recognition slides into reductive inventories of markers. Operatively, by contrast, "style" would denote a controllable dimension within the model: a single feature that steers generation in stable, interpretable ways. My point here is that the analytic and the operative concepts need not align.

LLMs also yield distributional regularities, their probabilities are not confined to a separable "stylistic layer" that comes after grammatical derivation. Rather, they are constitutive of generation as such, so that probabilistic profiling may be diagnostically useful yet still falls short of style as "meaningful choice" in a pragmatic sense.

[4] While Meier-Vieracker cites my notion of "dumb meaning" (Bajohr 2024a) to make his case, I am not tempted to speak of "dumb style" here, partly because the former term was originally suggested as a *middle* position between the camps mentions. The point was precisely that meaning in LLMs may *not* be solely parasitic.

Indeed, there are reasons to suspect a gap or mismatch between our metapragmatic talk of "style" and the way the model represents whatever corresponds to it. In both vision and language, it is notoriously difficult to "disentangle" a single stylistic feature from other co-varying properties. Any attempts of such disentanglement yield an inherent trade-off between style, fluency, and preserving content. (Jafaritazehjani et al. 2020) There is, in other words, no single dimension, no one "knob" called "style," that can be retrieved from a model. If stylistic effects are similarly multi-dependent in language models – emerging from interactions among wording, syntax, discourse structure, genre expectations, and decoding – then a prompt that merely demands "a style" ("formal," "florid," "ornate," "emotive") may target a human label rather than a stable internal variable. In other words, we cannot assume that a stylistic predicate on the surface corresponds directly to a discrete, manipulable category on the model's side. But latter may be exactly what a "synthetic style" would categorize.

Anecdotal experience with LLM-assisted writing points in the same direction. Stephen Marche (2023) reports that asking for prose "in the style of Raymond Chandler" often yields cliché, whereas more specific constraints (spelling out what "Chandler" is supposed to mean, or triangulating via other authors) produce better results. This suggests that "style," as a metapragmatic label, may activate coarse cultural associations rather than reliably steering the generative process toward the relevant textual dynamics. It also raises the possibility that better control may come precisely from avoiding "style" as a *named* category and prompting instead via adjacent pragmatic variables: communicative situation, persona, desired rhetorical effect, or intended audience (Liu and Hayles has experimented with these, forthcoming (Liu and Hayles forthcoming)). If that is plausible, then the theoretical task is not only to decide whether synthetic style is "real" or "parasitic," but to develop concepts for style on the model's own terms: how such variation is internally distributed, how it can be operationally constrained, and how that operational reality relates (or fails to relate) to our interpretive attributions at the surface. We still lack a vocabulary for that.

Second, the asymmetry can also be challenged from the opposite direction: not by separating human and machine style more cleanly, but by asking whether style can be conceptualized in a way that remains agnostic with respect to underlying intention and thus applies across human and nonhuman origins. If Meier-Vieracker's style-as-choice is directly connected to the idea that the surface is not enough and we need to find a motivating depth, we may ask whether this is in itself plausible when, in the post-artificial condition, surface is all we have (Bajohr 2025). The demand for a deeper explanation, treating style primarily as evidence for the question "who (or what) wrote this?," reproduces, at the level of method, the posture of suspicion that the post-artificial condition renders structurally precarious.

But suspicion is not the only possible response. As I have suggested elsewhere (Bajohr 2024b), the post-artificial condition might allow for another consequence. If the detective game becomes structurally unwinnable – if the absence of decisive evidence is not a temporary inconvenience but a permanent feature of our textual ecologies – then paranoia may give way to a more agnostic mode of reading. In that mode, what matters would not origin, but the text's

inherent qualities, its effects, or its usefulness: what it says or does in a given context, through which institutions it circulates, and how readers are positioned by it. If in such a hypothetical situation intent is no longer the privileged ground of meaning, then a definition of style as "meaningful choice" ceases to function as a boundary-policing device that secures the categorical difference between natural and artificial text. Instead, style would have to be reformulated as a reception-relevant phenomenon alone – as pure surface. It may be hard to imagine how to bracket any assumption as to intent, but is not entirely impossible either.

What Meier-Vieracker's intervention clarifies, then, is not only that "style" cannot be reduced to a checklist of markers, but that style has become the medium in which the waning default of human authorship is negotiated; it may also be the medium in which it is buried so that any conception of style based on this difference may have to be rethought. Further, in a post-artificial condition defined by pervasive uncertainty about origins, stylistics cannot confine itself to deciding whether stylistic effects are "real" or "parasitic." It must also explain how style organizes reception under epistemic constraint – how it trains intuitions, fuels folk forensics, reshapes writing habits in anticipation of suspicion; but also how it perhaps gradually reorients readers toward an agnostic economy of judgment when stable boundaries between human and synthetic texts can no longer be reliably drawn from the surface that nevertheless remains all we have.

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