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MAIN PAPER

Artificially voiced intelligences: voice and the myth of AI

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Abstract
The debate around artificial intelligence tends to re-affirm a narrow approach, positioning AI as a mythical being, a form of 'superhuman' knowledge or 'intelligence' capable of going 'beyond' humanity. Such an assumption is based on anthropo-white-centric knowledge that turns AIs into mythical/godlike figures. Starting from the role of voice and prosopopoeia as foundational aspects of such 'godification' of AI, I will unpack the relations between Voice and AI and how the previous influenced the identification and mythisation of the latter. This article explores multiple myths: myths of automated speech, myths of artificial intelligences, and myths of social solutionism, shifting the attention to the relations we entertain with the 'mythical' AI, deidentifying the machine, focussing on which forms of relation are already happening and could happen. I will do so through a critique of transhumanist derives of speculative AI and a posthumanist angle, rooted in new materialist and anti-racist critique, to then highlight artistic forms that resist 'AI = superhuman' and reconceive the relation between AI and Voice.

Keywords voice · AI · myth

1 Introduction

In this article, I will trace back the role of voice in the construction of the 'myth' of artificial intelligence. There has always been a constant in my research and practice: voice. Be it in the form of music practice, performance art, or critical research, my attention has always been directed towards how voice constructs, interacts with, and delineates meaning and knowledge. In recent years, particularly during my PhD, I focussed on how such meanings are constructed through the interaction between voice and technology in the performing arts. Starting from an understanding of voice as a symbol of identity, I then developed a theoretical question that has been haunting me: why do computers and AI systems need to sound human?

1.1 Myths of AIs

Artificial intelligence is an interdisciplinary concept that originated in between computer science and philosophy,[1] which now has an impact and meaning in multiple fields: medicine (Rajpurkar et al. 2022), cognitive science (van Rooij et al. 2024), the arts (Jiang et al. 2023) and even literature (eds by. Slocombe and Lively 2024). These meanings are constantly debated, co-constituted, controversial, and contested (Natale and Ballatore 2020). They are a result of what Dourish and Bell define as *technological myth*: a series of 'organising visions' emerging from technical and non-technical magazines and journals, aimed at imagining the role of such new technologies in society (Dourish and Bell 2011). On the topic, Natale and Ballatore explain that a 'new technology is always a field onto which a broad range of hopes and fears are projected […] in terms of "imaginaire" (Flichy 2007) or "modern myths" (Mosco 2004)' (Natale and Ballatore 2020). At the current stage of AI development, it is still paramount to explore how a possible 'technological myth' of AI came to be and what it entails, practically and conceptually. To do so, similarly to what Natale and Ballatore did in their 2017 work, this article explores the myths of AI and how they have been formed, concentrating on a key component of myth and storytelling that has been lacking attention: voice. With a focus on core concepts of Voice Studies, I aim to bring a new understanding to the myth from a primarily humanities and arts-focussed angle. Informed by my six-year research on speech synthesis in contemporary

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[1] For an introduction to the history of AI as a concept, see Cappelen and Dever (2021).

performance and starting from the role of voice and prosopopoeia as foundational aspects of the myth of AI, this article will utilise ideas and concepts from Voice Studies to understand how AI myths are reproduced and how they can be explored, altered, and challenged. AI is not only employed to reproduce, produce, and alter voices, but its 'mythical' representation is deeply connected to the idea of 'having a voice', or 'giving a voice', both in scientific development in speech synthesis and speculative myths of superhuman presence in science fiction (Allado-McDowell and Bentivegna 2022). I use 'artificially voiced' intelligences intentionally: the definition aims to highlight those images—ideas—representations of AI that lend a human voice to something essentially non-human. My aim is to provide a tool for further understanding the myths of AI, introducing ways in which voice, as a tool and theory, could reformulate what AI is and could be, by drawing on concepts, practices, and theories from the fields of performance studies, film studies, voice studies, and philosophy.

1.2 On the use of 'myth'

Myth, as a noun, is commonly understood to have two meanings: 'a traditional story […] which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something' and 'a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth.' ('Myth (n.)' 2024). Both definitions are fundamental parts of the history of AI as a myth.[2] The history of technology is permeated by myths around what technology 'is': controversial opposites of godlike explanations (definition 1) or a 'widely held misconception' (definition 2). This does not necessarily entail that technological myths are always wrong, but it is in the dialogical contradictions that those myths originated:

> The AI myth originated and developed not only as a result of the discourse produced by those who professed to believe in the possibility of building a thinking machine, but also through a dialogic relationship that involved both supporters and critics of this vision. (Natale and Ballatore 2020)

In line with its controversial history (Natale and Ballatore 2020), AI has been narrated and branded in multiple, often contradicting ways, which influenced the way AI has been developed (Omsk Social Club 2022). At times, the female-coded assistant (Faber 2020), at others a godlike threat to humanity (Minto 2023) and/or a 'magical' entity capable of wonders in the superhuman forms of science fiction reprised by sensationalist advertisements and press (Khan 2020). AI is always already an 'identity,' whether it be a human surrogate or a superhuman swarm, and voice contributes to such 'personification.' Humans coexist with AI, and there is a need to address this coexistence in ways that reframe the relationship beyond mere godification. The challenge for the present is then to rethink this coexistence whilst ensuring that AI's problematic deployment is as harm-reduced as possible. Beth Singler has written extensively on how such forms of storytelling have influenced AI, especially using 'God' as a metaphor. Whilst prompted by artist Zach Blas on 'what are AI gods,' Singler responded that they varied 'the metaphorical and the narrative to the literal and the theological' (Blas and Singler 2024, 30). Singler explains that such distinction, rather than being a binary between 'real and not real,' is a 'spectrum' where the different tendencies towards 'AI Gods' vary over time. This variation is based on the principles of reproduction and repetition. It is a constant of myth storytelling, as explained by Cavarero (2005) and reprised by Natale and Ballatore: the capacity of technological myths 'to become influential in specific societies and cultures is closely related to their nature of narrative tropes that are repeated and circulated over and over again and are used in multiple contexts to represent the functioning, impact and promise of technology' (Natale and Ballatore 2020, p. 6). The role of voice in defining identity is clear (Kreiman and Sidtis 2011; Barthes 1977) and including voice in the discussion of AI myth clarifies which tropes were repeated in the humanisation/godification of AI (Park 2020), which forms of storytelling have influenced the 'ideal' AI, whilst proposing a shift towards the relations humans entertain with the 'mythical' AI, de-identifying the machine, focussing on *which* forms of relation are already happening and could happen.

2 Myths of artificial intelligence

As in the idealising and sensational space race of the Cold War, our current time is characterised by a 'chip war,' where universities, states, and corporations are racing towards the best, most functional, and 'smartest' machine (Miller 2022). One of the core elements, concepts, or 'objects' of such debate is a series of processes and computational models that have been loosely defined as Artificial Intelligence. There are multiple possibilities for discussing and thinking about AI, resulting in various definitions or, more accurately, claims. To a certain extent, the existence of AI is inexorably linked to the possibility of its definition. As Natale and Ballatore explain, AI controversies are an 'integral part of the discourse surrounding the AI myth' (2020, p.2). This article does not attempt to trace the history of AI, but it

[2] On the relation between and the 'machine' see also the mystical and religious 'myth of the machine', as extensively explored by Davis and Thacker (2015, xix).

is fundamental to quote some specific moments and definitions that might help in understanding the vocal myths. The concept or idea of AI is not only emerging from the modern era, but it is rooted in millennia of myths of 'giving life' (Liveley and Thomas 2020). However, the scientific community vaguely agrees that the two foundation events of AI studies as a field are the publication of Alan Turing's 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence' (Turing 1950) and the Dartmouth Conference (McCarthy et al. 2006). Turing attempted to define AI through imaginative debates with opponents of the idea of 'cognitive machines', whilst from the conference appeared the first definition of AI: 'the science and engineering of making intelligent machines, especially intelligent computer programs' (McCarthy 2007). Whilst AI as a concept emerged in the wake of cybernetics, scholars from various fields have contrasted the idea, raising moral, ethical, and scientific critiques (Searle 2000; Dreyfus 2009). As noted by Natale and Ballatore, this tension between claimants and opponents is a foundational aspect of the AI myth. When prompted, the Feminist Internet ethical chatbot F'xa suggests two opposing yet satisfying definitions: Alex Fefegha's and Margaret Boden's. Computer scientist Alex Fefegha writes that AI is 'the art of how to make computers do things at which humans are currently better' (Fefegha 2018). Similarly, yet almost conversely, AI pioneer Margaret Boden writes that 'AI seeks to make computers do the sorts of things that minds can do' (Boden 2018). In Boden's definition, 'minds' is implicitly referring to 'human minds'; therefore, both definitions compare or aim at comparing 'artificial intelligences' to human intelligences. It is undoubtedly true that AI emerged as an attempt to recreate human intelligence, but this approach to AI has a direct impact on the narrative perpetuated by newscasts, politicians, and tech tycoons, which is directly responsible for diverting attention away from the actual problems of AI itself. As the collective OSK writes, 'AI was to create a machine that simulates human intelligence, which is potentially very telling because, after all, intelligence is rather subjective' (Omsk Social Club 2022, 293). Comparing AI to human intelligence perpetuates the mythical aura surrounding it, built over years of speculative fiction, delusional technology, and aimless development, fuelled by sensational forms of advertising (Goatley 2024). These helped depict AI as a 'superhuman' (Minto 2023), an obscure human-like mind capable of thinking and going beyond human possibilities.

The most extreme of these imaginative/speculative ideas is artificial superintelligence (ASI), a construct theorised by scientists, artists and thinkers, especially in the transhuman network (Bostrom 2014). ASI is based on the human-centred concept of consciousness and is vastly represented in modern and contemporary media.[3] Nora Khan (2020, 76) defines ASI as an 'intellect' capable of exceeding the smartest, most knowledgeable, and skilled human in every field of expertise. This apocalyptic and sci-fi-inspired 'risk' tends to divert attention and debate away from the actual risks that AI and algorithm-based products already present.[4] This approach to 'artificial intelligence' is deeply rooted in a series of myths: the capitalist myth of self-regulation and techno enthusiasm (Crawford 2021), the masculinist drive to power and exploitation (Pinney et al. 2023), the myth of 'creation', and the Westernised and white-centric idea of 'intelligence = humanity' (Amaro 2020).[5] None of these myths help define what AI is, but rather solidify the 'authority and cultural power of AI' (McQuillan 2022, 47). AI is a concept, a field, an ideology, a brand, but not a cohesive 'thing.'[6] Grandiose advertisement of terms such as AGI and ASI are deceitful and dangerous (van Rooij et al. 2024). Ruha Benjamin (2019, 154) and Safiya Noble (2019, 40) explain how the less privileged are those who are more affected by technological hegemony and the culture of surveillance and policing, which reflects the racial and gender injustices embedded in current society. The use of AI and algorithmic-based systems for surveillance and policing of streets, as well as thermic war drones, already affect some communities and people more than others, just as much as the constant extraction of minerals to build AI components and VPAs enslave entire villages and endanger the environment (McQuillan 2022). James Bridle explains that AI is often imagined as a disembodied, mythical entity, whereas it actually exists as a series of material processes of calculation and extraction in physical spaces (Bridle 2018, p. 47). AI technologies are always networks (Coeckelbergh 2020, 40), always technological objects in space (Bridle 2018), and always concern a certain kind of human (Benjamin 2019); however, they have been represented, narrated, and

[3] It is almost impossible to have an exhaustive list of media outputs using the 'ASI' trope, but for instance Isaac Asimov's novels on robotics, Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013), Stanley Kubrick's *: A Space Odyssey*2001 (1968) and William Gibson's *The Neuromancer* (1984).

[4] On the risk and biases of AI tools, see: Ruha Benjamin's work on profiling and facial recognition systems (2019, 112); on AI violence and eugenetics Dan McQuillan (2022, 47–103); on exploitation and AI labour, Muldoon et al. (2024).

[5] As explained earlier, my understanding of 'technological myth' combines the two uses of the word: narrative-based explanations of the world (1) and false claims (2). In this case, I use 'myth' in a negative sense by alluding to the biased narrative of a presupposed real knowledge rooted in hegemonic values, which falsely claims to be the only truth (see also Mbembe 2019; Wynter 1984).

[6] See also Coeckelbergh: 'AI is not only about technology but also about what humans do with it, how they use it, how they perceive and experience it, and how they embed it in wider social-technical environments' (Coeckelbergh 2020, 80).

imagined as ghostly presences or godlike, ethereal, disembodied entities. As a Voice Studies scholar, I aim to explore these myths by employing a slightly unconventional tool and theory: voice, specifically focussing on the relationships that humans have with real and imaginary artificial voices.[7]

Voice has been a fundamental feature in mythical representations of AI, particularly in cinematic and narrative works such as 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and Her (2013), as well as a core field of experimentation for machine learning. The second part of this article is an analysis of some of these fictional and non-fictional representations and implementations, looking at tendencies, rhetorical definitions of 'AI voices,' analogies, and discursive shifts.

3 Myths of speech

The representation and, primarily, advertisement of the 'AI product' follow sensationalist narratives of the superhuman, equating AI with a god-like power capable of 'solutions', which has leaked into social solutionism (Singler 2020).[8] The way in which voice acted as a propeller of myth for the equation 'AI = superhuman' is connected to a spectrum, or a tension, between 'real and non-real' appliances, where fictions and reality, imagination, fear and science coexist and are tightly linked with each other. To trace a path for the role of voice in AI mythification, it is crucial to explore how acoustic storytelling, scientific experiments in voice production, and fantasies are the result of a tension between the 'need' of a companion (Goatley 2024), the 'myth' of power of giving life (Minto 2023), and the concepts of 'giving' and 'having' a voice and how they relate to identity.

3.1 Attempts at 'giving a voice'

An artificial voice is a simulation of human speech. Artificial voice is an umbrella term that encompasses all voices augmented by technology, including mechanically reproduced speech and speech synthesis. The concept of 'producing human speech' dates to the Greek and Egyptian forms of 'robotic' automatons, as well as the androids capable of singing in the Zhou dynasty in China (Gefen 2022). At the end of the eighteenth century, Baron von Kempelen developed a machine that, through a reed, was capable of producing a sound resembling an awkward human voice (Cox 2019, 168).[9]The speaking/talking heads were artificial creations designed for Von Kempelen's automata spectacles, yet they were early experiments born out of 'a desire to study empirically how the voice works' (168). Following the advancement in voice reproduction such as the phonograph, and in need of non-traceable forms of communication during wartime, scientists started researching artificial voices in a more sustained way. For instance, in 1939, the Bell Laboratory attempted to reproduce the human voice electronically with the Voder, a device capable of analysing and synthesising human speech by electronic means, as used in military communication (Weheliye 2012, 518). Then, in 1961, IBM synthesised a wholly artificial and audibly mechanical voice with its IBM 7094, the first computer to 'sing'.[10] Until the 1970s and early 1980s, synthetic voices sounded extremely mechanical, and they did not differ much from the IBM 7094 in sound. With the widespread proliferation of personal computers and the plummeting prices of processing power, 'concatenative synthesis emerged as the choice for increasingly natural-sounding voices' (Bell 2016, 225). Speech synthesis consists of pairing different phonemes of pre-recorded speech and then combining them through digital and mechanical processes (ibid.). A synthetic voice, then, results from numerous 'disembodied' little pieces of human voices called phonemes, made of phones. Two adjacent phones together form a diphone, the smallest phoneme in phono-linguistics and one of the fundamental differentials for meaning making. If a phoneme changes—such as in accent or sound—the meaning of the word changes. The analysis and synthesis of human speech allow computers to select phonemes and link them differently to achieve diverse pronunciations, changed words and, therefore, different meanings (Beller 2017). The more advanced forms of

[7] For an introduction on Voice Studies see Thomaidis and Macpherson (2015) and on non-human voices see Bentivegna and Edlund (2022).

[8] As Moorosi, Sefala, and Luccioni define it, AI for Social Good is an 'umbrella term for a sub-discipline of computing whose aim is to utilise AI to alleviate some of societies' greatest challenges' (Moorosi et al. 2023, 1). AI is described as 'social good' in relation to healthcare, racial inequality, and accessibility, forgetting or omitting the problems that hide behind such sensationalism (Moorosi et al. 2023, 2). Moreover, as Pelinski and others explain, AI is often deployed as soon as they are available (Bindi et al. 2023), in a gold rush—or as Lucia Rojas calls it, a 'cock race' (Rojas Egaña 2018)—that leaves very little time for criticism, slowed down practices of non-exploitation, and opens up for problematic forms of deployment such as warfare, credit scores, and facial recognition. AI ecological impact is evident and vastly overlooked, and AI pitfalls in classification of non-white (Hadgu et al. 2023), non-cis (Pinney et al. 2023) and non-able bodies and identities are daunting.

[9] The first proper artificial production of human voice that we still have access to is the Kempelen machine that I had the chance to see at work operated by Fabian Brakhane in 2016.

[10] See also Domenico Napolitano's excursus in the cultural origin of voice cloning (2020) and some extracts of an experimental Practice-as-Research project on synthetic voice training (Bentivegna 2019).

speech synthesis—known as Natural Language Processing or Voice Cloning—are part of the latest generative AI trends and are based on different forms of deep learning processes linked to concatenative synthesis and neural networks.[11] To reproduce the 'natural' feel of the human voice, the neural network has been trained in 'listening' to the voices and phonemes; it therefore 'tries' to reproduce the voice as closely as possible (Napolitano 2022; Abbas Nazari 2024b).

In the eighteenth century, there were no models for artificial voices because not enough biological and technological research had been done (Cox 2019). Subsequently, the early twentieth century experiments in voice reproduction and recording sounded much more like human voices but still presented the 'artificial vibe'. The research moved towards more advanced and natural sounding voices to expand the possibilities for people who have been laryngectomised or have aphonia, yet this does not explain why computers should sound like humans or why artificial intelligences need to sound 'human'.

The 'myth' of giving or creating voice is not only scientific but has deep cultural roots (Napolitano 2020). There is no binary between real and fiction, and the attempts to recreate human voice pass directly from its fictional rendition to reality, in a continuum, or better, a spectrum of voicing and agency. Roland Barthes and Adriana Cavarero, in different capacities, explained how voice can be a sign of identity (Barthes 1977; Cavarero 2005). Barthes' grain of the voice and Cavarero's uniqueness are both conceptual definitions of such 'identity': a human vibe, a specific unexplainable unity of sound that identifies the speaker. However, such identities are not to be understood as a flattened out, scientifically measurable parameter, but as a phenomenological understanding of 'a voice' (Ihde 2007). A voice becomes such in the embodied encounter between a voicer and a listener, and a voice carries not only the physical parameters of the vocal tract but also the social influence of gender, race, and status (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019). Or, as explored by performance artists such as Cathy Barberian and Jerzy Grotowski, there is not such a thing as 'a' voice, but voice is a multiple, malleable 'tool' in the throat, the minds, and the ears of the voicers/listeners (Abbas Nazari 2024b). Similarly, 'a' voice becomes identity because of its effect on the listener in terms of likeability, familiarity and embodied experience (Kreiman and Sidtis 2011). The way that machines, namely AI, understand voice is limited to a flattened-out scientific rendition of a supposedly measurable model, as widely explored by Amina Abbas Nazari (2024b). This 'model,' however, is purely a visualised replica of a voice, which does not account for the bag that voices carry (Allado-McDowell and Bentivegna 2022). It is possible then to imagine AI voices and artificial voices as human simulacra (Baudrillard 1994, 1), a copy without a clear original, where the 'humanness' is engraved. Adorno wrote, 'there is no doubt that, as music is graph record from the realm of live production […] and becomes petrified, it absorbs into petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive' (Adorno and Levin 1990). Expanding on Adorno's claim, a cloned voice, a completely synthesised voice, is a sequence of phonemes but also a petrified version of the trace of humanity that exists in the 'voice'. To a certain extent, training AI datasets and training voices are not dissimilar processes (Allado-McDowell and Bentivegna 2022): both experiences look for the 'vibe' (Grietzer 2017) or 'grain' (Thomaidis 2013) of a specific dataset or voice practice or ensemble of practices. If one equates voice training practices to datasets as heterogeneous yet discernible data that can give the 'sense' of the original, both AI and voice training are approximations of such specific 'original. Domenico Napolitano explains that 'if text-to-speech is the invariable structure, voice cloning is the 'mask' that can be changed at will' (Napolitano 2020, 3). The 'mask-voice' of theatrical origins is, therefore, a suitable metaphor to understand how voice-cloning and speech synthesis practices came to be. By creating a voice, humans can extend life, generate life, control it and collect it. Every object that is given a voice becomes a human-kin, a synthetic human, through *prosopopoeia*. From the Greek prosopon, the word prosopopoeia stands for 'making something a person' (Bentivegna 2021). To 'make something a person' means to give them a 'human mask', a voice. The power of 'giving a voice' then becomes the abstract power of 'giving life', turning something into someone, turning an object into a 'persona' (2021). For instance, sound studies scholar Cox explains that 'adding speech to a technological device suggests agency' (2019, p. 181), whilst Steven Connor writes that voice is not only the emission of sound but foremost 'the imaginary production of a secondary body, a body double: a "voice-body"' (2004). The voice becomes a sign of humanity and the technological object a human, kin, a person. These three terms are not interchangeable; yet, it suffices to give a voice to an object for it to become 'humanly' a companion, a thing that can communicate with us. An object with 'a' voice becomes 'possessed' or haunted by humanity, furthering ideals and imaginative leakages of godlike superhumans. This rhetorical figure is actualized by the creation of an artificial voice, where the voice itself becomes the identity of the object, the computer, the machine. Whereas a human voice exists without language or sound (Thomaidis 2015) an artificial voice and any form of voice cloning is always connected to a technological code, to graphics and waves of

[11] For instance, Neural Text-to-Speech pairs a 'neural networks to a vocoder, with a decoder that converts a sequence of phonemes into a sequence of spectrograms, which are snapshots of the energy levels in different frequency bands, to a vocoder to convert the spectrograms 'into a continuous audio signal' (AWS 2021, p. 86).

vocal phonemes, a language or *logos*. Even the vocal sound is nothing more than a physical rendition of the wavelength and parameters of the voice, although it is clear how this is a limited and limiting understanding of what 'voice' is. (Abbas Nazari 2024a). The way that AI perceives voice is a scientific analysis of the sound, which leaves behind those parameters that are not central to the technical development of the sound itself. It follows that, for an AI, a human voice is always already language and sound, more than identity, more than meaning: an AI attempts to 'squeeze' the vocal grain of a human voice based on flawed and limited training models. To a human listener, instead, a voice is, first and foremost, an identity because of the social parameters that we—as humans—consciously or not assign to human voices. Therefore, humans tend to perceive AI Voices as personified because of (a) what they sound like, (b) what humans expect from such sounds, and (c) what we assume a voice is. AI seem to search for the 'vibe' of humanity, the feel of humanness that is connected to the human voice. These voices are synthetic approximations that sound uncannily real, but they are nothing more than approximations that become identities in the minds of the listeners (Park 2020). There is a clear difference in perception and understanding of what 'a' voice is. What matters then is what a voice does to the listeners.

3.2 'Having a voice'

Once the object or the 'thing' has a voice, resulting from the powerful and promethean action of 'giving life', it becomes possessed, haunted, permeated by the feel of humanity. If such voice is 'not human' it creates a mismatch, an eerie confusion, a sense of uncanny detachment from the object who should not have a voice but has it. For instance, the voice of the Kempelen machine has a particular sound that feels erringly non-human: a machinic grain, a vibing artificial growl that makes it inherently uncanny. Cox describes it as 'a cow mournfully mooing rather than a child asking for their mother' (2019, p. 168). Or in the anime Full Metal Alchemist Brotherhood, in the episode named *Night of the Chimera's Cry*, when a chimeric creature in-between human and animal speaks, the other characters, the audience—and me—recalled experiences of unease, pain, disgust, and sadness (VV. AA. 2014). This episode of the anime, even more so than the original manga comic, uses voice to evoke feelings of repulsion by paring a non-clearly gendered voice to a half-human body. What is not 'human' enough in such voice? The chimera is a synthetic twin of the human 'who can speak', a monster who have access to humanity's most precious sign of identity: voice. Similarly, there is debate around synthetic voices in customer care as to whether they need to maintain a machinic/mechanic feel to avoid the uncanny valley. Introduced by computer scientist Masahiro Mori in 1970[12] and inspired by the Unheimlich proposed by Sigmund Freud, the uncanny valley is a graphical rendition of attraction, repulsion and discomfort linked to robots. When the robot/machine is too humanlike, it evokes an uncomfortable uncanniness in the observer or listener. Freud's concept of Unheimlich concerns the 'uncertainty' of the dual alive/not-alive nature of an object, which activates a 'temporary blindness' in the bystander (Reilly 2011). This effect is observable in artificial voices as well. In 2011, a group of scholars from the Universities of Hull and York developed a series of theatre-based experiments with audiences and speech synthesis (Newell et al. 2011). Pairing human listeners to 'robotic voices', the authors explored likeness and perception in the listeners. This study demonstrated the possibility of faking liveness and 'robotness' of precise speech synthesis. Human audiences did not prefer human voices, but a somewhat human prosody. Pauses and fake breaths made the voice sound 'human', even though it was artificial. 'We were able to show that the user perception of machine embodiments of human behaviour is by no means a binary choice (machine = fake, human = true)' (2011, 236). In a later study, other scholars embarked in research concerning Human and Artificial Intelligence Interaction (Edwards et al. 2019). A group of students was made to listen to two different voices, one 'older' and one 'younger'. The study was meant to understand social identity and social implications in a contemporary scholarly environment (2019). 'Older' computer voices were mostly 'accepted' when paired with an older student, whilst younger voices were mostly 'accepted' by a younger student. So, it is possible to assume that, even though artificial and synthetic, a computer voice could be accepted in a social group that shares common traits—such as age, or knowledge, or culture.

However, as Newell warns:

> [E]ven the best voice inevitably will fall down Mori's 'Uncanny Valley' (Mori 1970). Mori suggests that we can strive to make inanimate objects more human-like, but they will always reach the point at which the simulation is perceptively wrong, and our reaction switches to a negative rejection. At that point the manifestation is often described as 'creepy' or frightening.
>
> (2011, 221)

Such studies found out that a mismatch produces reactions of incertitude and 'dislike' (Moore 2015, 321). If a

[12] 'Climbing a mountain is an example of a function that does not increase continuously: a person's altitude does not always increase as the distance from the summit decreases owing to the intervening hills and valleys. I have noticed that, as robots appear more humanlike, our sense of their familiarity increases until we come to a valley. I call this relation the uncanny valley' (Mori 1970, 33).

voice is paired to a non-human object, for instance, the more 'human-like' the voice sounds, the less the listener 'likes' it. The object is human and becomes a person because it has a voice. It is not possessed but speaks much as the listener does as a voice of the machine. The listener experiences rejection and attraction simultaneously, a confusing state of being drawn to yet repulsed by the machine's synthetic voice. Similarly, the philosopher Mladen Dolar writes that the 'mechanical voice' reproduces the 'pure' norm in a frightening perfection/rawness that subverts the norm itself. (Dolar 2012, 543). Dolar hears the mechanical voice as 'normal', meaning without imperfections, and therefore 'too human', or inhuman. Commenting on Olympia's voice in E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1815), Dolar argued that the perfect voice of the automata Olympia frightened and confused Nathaniel, who was attracted yet repulsed by it (2012, 545). Because these 'objects' are not humans, yet they 'perfectly' master human's technique of language, the listener has the urge to 're-humanize' them through the projection of 'humanness'.

3.3 Voice in and of the machine

The concept of the acousmatic voice is the theoretical and scientific explanation of disembodiment and embodiment in relation to voice (Kendrick 2017; Thomaidis 2017; Faber 2020). Introduced by Michel Chion (1999), an acousmatic voice, or acousmêtre, is an 'invisible voice', or a voice whose source or body is hidden or difficult to locate (Kane 2014). Liz Faber and Mladen Dolar employed the concept of the acousmêtre to describe the 'computerised' or 'mechanical' voices and how they represent archetypical figures via a transfer of agency or imaginary in fiction (Faber 2020; Dolar 2006). Acousmatic voices have been the paradigm of understanding the relation between humans and machines with voices. This is the way in which humans perceive artificial voices performing humanity, and even more so when they are reproducing and representing ideas of intelligent machines. Humans will not necessarily know what to expect from an object talking to them, but the familiarity of the human voice is comforting and sufficiently reassuring to engage with the device itself in multiple ways: a human surrogate, a 'possessed' object, and a 'superhuman'. This process of unconscious personification of computers influenced how AI was conceived in the first place, creating myths of talking, thinking, and existing 'artificial' minds (Park 2020).

Multimedia artist Wesley Goatley conceives AI as a *brand*: 'It does not literally exist as an object; it's a promise used to sell products and ideas' (Goatley 2024). As a good advertisement strategy, this promise 'taps into deep and foundational needs' and fears of the buyers/believers, such as sex, money, success, and loneliness, to cite a few (Goatley 2024), projecting an idea of companionship onto the machine. AI-as-a-companion is a well-known trope of Science Fiction, extensively analysed by Liz Faber through the lenses of acousmatic artificial voice and gender. Faber observes how feminine-sounding voices are always already either mothers (Faber 2020, 56), assistants (137) or objects of sexual desire (166), in contrast with masculine computer voices, portrayed mainly as fatherly figures and military authorities that further conflict and division, or as scientific 'gods' (114). Men are overpowered figures with the potential to destroy the world and impose their rule, as well as trickster oracles and fatherly figures, whilst 'women' are assistants, carers, and, ultimately, imaginary perfect lovers. The use of standardised and stereotypical voices for voice assistants is doubling on patriarchal stereotypes in the name of user-centred development (Hester 2016). It is rather more 'acceptable' to imagine a woman either as an assistant or a technological object of desire, 'created' by man. So, AI as a brand works on a binary plan: on the one hand, AI is a masculine superhuman, an obscure force capable of doing unimaginable things; on the other, it is a feminine service, a companion, a 'friend'; therefore, it needs to sound human. The prophecies of cinematic AI Voices as the ones in *Her*, *2001 Space Odyssey* and *Star Trek*—all featuring stereotypically gendered acousmatic voices—were fulfilled by Amazon Echo and Apple's Siri, as well as smart home devices and voice-enabled cars. Faber explains that Siri and Alexa, with their soothing, intriguing, feminine white middle-class presenting voice, represent the 'ideal woman': 'Siri's gender […] is an expression of deeply rooted, complex, problematic, and problematizing gender roles […] She is […] what we think the ideal human mind should be for any given lived experience, need, and desire' (Faber 2020, 179–180). These voices perform an idealised version of a gender: woman, and in particular, mother and assistant. Femininity becomes a 'technology' to use and make use of Hester (2016). Pairing gender to humanity functions as a palliating reassurance. The very existence of these heavily 'gendered' voices makes the listener think 'oh, they have a recognisable gender in their voice, they must be human'. However, this continues furthering a binary understanding of gender, problematic gender roles, and the image of a voice that haunts and 'possesses' the machine, allowing the computer to become an imaginary companion rather than what it is: a computer, a box, a series of non-human but human-impacting processes.[13]

Acousmatic voices could be linked to godlike presences and the authoritarian figure of God. God is a moral authority, the omniscient creator who is everything and everyone

[13] For a deeper understanding of gender and voice in AI Fiction, I suggest Liz Faber's book quoted above and my own upcoming book (2026).

in potency and manifests their power through voice or other humans' voices. Surpassing the bodily limits of time and space, the synthetic voice is not simply a copy of human voice but represents a 'something' that goes over humanity, 'god-kin' more than human.[14] Faber inserts the gendered synthetic voices of fiction in this line of godlike authoritative power. In cinema, she writes, synthetic voices have mostly assumed such godlike forms in familiar archetypal figures: the goddess/mothership, the omniscient authoritarian father, and the overpowered mechanical being as rival/sibling (Faber 2020, 15). These archetypes are projections happening in the listener's mind, yet they are positioned as authoritative figures through their ubiquitous vocal presence that overpowers the listener. Through these forms, synthetic voices relate with humans, manifesting in aesthetic terms the everlasting technophobia of the inhuman/non-human, based on perceived loss or desire of power. A synthetic voice is already either a copy of an original or a mechanical reproduction of a certain idea of a human voice, and arguably, especially when acousmatic, a godlike presence. What matters is to acknowledge it and then analyse it through approaches focussed on which forms of relation each specific synthetic voice develops.

3.4 Godification, humanisation, and the question of agency

Andrea Guzman has introduced a simple yet effective dichotomy to understand the way humans relate with AI voices: voices in and of the machine. In an experiment they ran with a series of elderly participants, Guzman differentiated two broad approaches to chatbots–human relations that the participants in her experiment took, categorised as the voice of the machine and the voice in the machine (Guzman 2019): 'Voice of the machine' refers to those users who perceive the synthetic voice as the voice of the device: particular, singular and specific (348). 'Voice in the machine' refers to all cases in which users 'perceive themselves as engaging with an interlocutor that is distinct from the device' (348). The voice is understood as an identity within the machine, being 'in' or 'of', furthering a paradoxical dichotomy: the device is either 'possessed' by an external entity (voice in the machine), or it is 'humanised' as an identity who has a voice. The reality is, however, that the voices in/of the machines are voices taken either from voice actors or synthetically generated, programmed by a series of engineers and set on a series of standardised responses and sentences. They are not, never, a singular, individual output, but a series of multiple enmeshed processes that constitute the human surrogate. In a simple dichotomy, when a listener relates with a synthetic voice as a voice *of* the machine, they are taking a 'scientific' approach: the device has a voice, and it has agency because humans created it to mimic a human voice. Meanwhile, approaching a synthetic voice as a voice *in* the machine implies the existence of an identity behind or beyond the device. The device is a hollow box where someone else's voice is reproduced. Both approaches further and evoke imagination in the listener: something more than a simple object or device but almost sentient, capable of hearing and processing my words as much as I can theirs. Siri speaks with us; she is human only because she speaks human language, and this happens due to the anthropocentric urge to assign agency to everything that is human-like.

The humanisation of such 'technologies', as explored by Faber and as echoed by mythology and religion, nurtured and nurtures the myth of ASI and the fear of the singularity. As explained by Gefen:

> This is the time of "Promethean shame," a concept developed by the German philosopher Gunter Anders, which refers to man's feeling of weakness and imperfection in the face of the perfection.
> of the creatures created through his mastery of science.
>
> (Gefen 2022, 289)

This 'cultural anxiety' about technology's potential to usurp human authority with its perfection, even human identity, is tragicomic and grotesque. These fears are inserted in a hegemonic continuum of power that eschews questions of what technology means for those who have always been framed as other. AI is not a possibly dangerous, overpowered machine; AI already is an overpowered, dangerous machine.

According to AI representations in movies, TV shows, books and even theatre, AI is a mythical overpowered being capable of taking over humanity, or a sexualized feminine trope. However, AI is just a series of mathematical cataloguing processes turned into tools, capable of harm. The personification of AI voices—as human surrogates, superhuman gods, or disembodied entities—leaves us with fears of an overpowered AI, because humans assume that 'has a voice = has agency = is human', removing the attention from the actual issues of AI, and furthering the ideal myth of AI as a singular, specific identity. AI is haunted by humanness, whilst humanity is haunted by the imagined power of AI.

4 Voicing with machines: a new myth for AI

In this article, so far, I have investigated the role of voice in the constitution of the 'myth of AI' and how it emerged from the exploration of giving voice and having a voice. It

[14] Miriama Young argues that 'in the synthesized voice we find the epitomization of simulacra—the copy without an original. The ideal voice—fixed, predictable, and defined, may come to seem more real than the original' (Young 2015, 85).

is possible to understand this dichotomy in many forms. For instance, the role of voice could be seen as a practical metaphor for the tension between 'humans as God' (giving voice, giving life, and giving identity) and 'machines as God' (possessed, acousmatic, and superhuman). Alternatively, it could be analysed from the perspective and the limits of gender as a patriarchal need for male-centred dominance. Or, to embrace Guzman, as 'voice in the machine'—alluding again to the realm of possession—and 'voice of the machine'—in an unconscious/conscious attempt to humanise. These 'forms' are the genealogy of the mythical AI voice; they are not mutually exclusive, yet they create a framework which is fairly limiting. It does not give agency to the human listener but only focuses on the machine itself, personifying the brand as a singular identity. Yet, as explained earlier, this identity exists only in the mind of the listener, it does not represent anything more than a copy, a surrogate, an artificial double, but it provides a new imaginary.

Using Achille Mbembe's words, the myth of artificially intelligence voices 'must be left behind, and history written', because the myth's hidden function is to 'make the victims responsible for the violence whose victims they are' (Mbembe 2019, 144). To go beyond this duality of agency around AI and voice, there is a need for a new paradigm, one that furthers the importance of the forms of relations humans have with AI and its many voices. To demystify AI and detach it from its dangerous narrative of a godlike superhuman, the scientific community and the wider public should focus on building new narratives of working with AI, relating with machines, and creating with machines, not as individuals but as processes. Voice Studies have reaffirmed the importance of detaching singularity from voice, moving from 'the voice' to voicing (Thomaidis 2015). Voice can be human or non-human. A human voice could define an object through different lenses, whereas a non-human voice reshapes the 'idea' and the qualities of an object just by existing. For instance, in the space of performance, if I shout to a piece of paper, I am already telling a different story of that piece of paper. Likewise, if the piece of paper shouts at me—via a voice previously recorded, for example—this generates a whole different story of such a piece of paper. Voice is in between real and sensual objects; it has the power of 'activating' metaphors and theatricality, redefining the stories of those objects (see Harman 2018, 60). This in-between voicer, voices, and the listener is a conceptual framework to rethink and redefine the way AI is understood. Introduced by Thomaidis and McPherson, voice as 'in-between' reflects a new form of positionality of voice, which is not simply an identity, but it is a shared flow between the voicer, the listener, the air, and the space (Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015). Instead of thinking artificial voices and AI voices as voices *of* or *in* the machine, there should be a paradigm shift towards 'voices with' the machine, or voices that integrate the mechanical existence of the machining object whilst still reaffirm their original role: tools, in a shared existence with the human speakers and listeners. To do so is important to shift from conceiving these voices as 'human': they are not grains; they are simply reproducing human vibes. There are already approaches to AI that go beyond the simplified brand of personification into 'gods' and 'companions.' For instance, rather than 'artificial'—capable to mimic human abilities—in 1985, John Haugeland talked about 'synthetic' intelligences, which do not have to 'mimic' human minds to exist or start from humanity as a reference point but expanding the possibilities of the world by engaging with other forms of knowledge/experience (Haugeland 1989; Engelhardt and Manouach 2022). Similarly, Jason Edward Lewis and others, inspired by Haraway, call for a 'making kin with machines', an approach that includes the history of land and non-human knowledge into the process of technological development (Lewis et al. 2020). Or Pasquinelli and Joler who suggest the *tree* as a model for AI (Pasquinelli 2019) and the 'nooscope' as an explanation of its effects (Pasquinelli and Joler 2020), or Nora Khan (2020) who tries to rethink the models proposed by Nick Bostrom (2014). These attempts aim at redefining conceptually what AI is, not only as 'artificial' human 'intelligence' but more of a 'shared' understanding of human and non-human forms of calculation and knowledge, which have been translated into practice by artists, creative technologists, activists, and developers.[15]

Similarly, there are alternatives and new approaches to AI concerning voice and voices, or to the relations that AI and voice can have, which go beyond 'voices in' and 'of the machine', and the further conceptual dichotomy of 'giving a voice' and 'having a voice', moving towards 'voicing with', especially in the arts and humanities field. Experimental musician Holly Herndon's artistic practice is centred around AI and voice, especially focussing on distributed forms of collaboration (see Bentivegna 2026). Other forms which aim at rethinking and reshaping AI and voice focus on its archival possibilities, for instance, Stephanie *Dinkins's Not the Only One (N'TOO)* (2018-ongoing) and Paola Nuñez Torres del Prado's *AIELSON* (2020–2022). Both experiences are rooted in oral history and identity: Dinkins' work relates

[15] For instance, the fundamental antiracist work done by Distributed AI Research Institute (DAIR) promoted by Timnit Gebru and Alex Hanna, and the decade-long research by Ruha Benjamin and Ramon Amaro on technologies of violence and black data. Political activists and artists such as Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Forensic Architecture, who developed models to counteract fake news in contemporary and past warzones, as well reporting use of AI in targeting civilians and committing war crimes (see Hamdan 2024; Forensic Architecture 2024). The various forms of collectivisation explored by designers and people's councils, as explained by Dan McQuillan (2022), and mainly Persico and Iaconesi's project, IAQOS (Iaconesi and Persico 2021).

directly to their familiar entanglements (Firunts Hakopian 2023), whereas *AIELSON* tips into del Prado's Peruvian roots (Prado 2022). These projects focus on collaboration with the machine, as well as using such machines as networking or creative tools. Although not definitely removing the personification of AI, these works effectively make use of AI processes to create a new form of voicing, which is still inherently human and does not look to represent AI as a godlike or 'sole' identity. AI becomes a co-creating tool that allows more voices to be present: voices of the lost, the forgotten, and the exploited.

Voicing with machines is not a 'positive' redefinition of AI but would help to go beyond the dichotomy. It would allow an understanding of the agency of humans, how they impact communication from a relational level and how they can be ethically explored. With the framework of 'voicing with', it would be possible to reframe the conversation around voice data and voice cloning under the banner of ethical shared agency, to change the narrative of 'listening to' and voice profiling in racialised policing or to avoid animal abuse[16]; It changes the narrative of AI as a top-down superhuman tool to a tool made with the communities.

5 Conclusion

This article began by describing the 'technological myth' as a myth of the 'superhuman,' as it is constituted through voice in fiction and storytelling. I argued that a Voice Studies understanding of the myth could offer a different form of understanding of AI itself, particularly focussing on voice as an instrument for knowledge and meaning. The article went on to explore AI and voice and how their relation influences public expectations, hopes, and fears regarding AI. I individuated a binary to understand AI voice as a tension between 'giving voice' and 'having a voice', relating both tendencies to the realm of possession, godlike mythisations and nightmares of loss of power which eventually solidified the myth of AI as a 'superhuman'. This myth cancels out the actual dangers of AI and reduces the responsibility of AI users and AI developers by giving agency to 'a machine' whose 'voice' we perceive either as voice in or of the machine. I then argued that going beyond this myth would allow us to understand the agency of humans with and within AI. Therefore, I then suggested a shift, a different paradigm, which moves beyond voice in or of the machine and integrates the use of machines and human agency: voicing with machines. In this context, 'with' encompasses various modes such as 'collaborating with,' 'dealing with,' and 'fighting against' AI. This transition helps to strip AI of its personification, detaching it from mythical notions of 'identification' and human traits. Such a shift could aid in reframing the understanding of intelligence in Artificial Intelligence, revealing it as little more than a superficial and stereotypical approximation, as well as being an initial exploration of AI via the angle of voice studies and the concept of 'voice identity,' or even an initial attempt to trace a history of AI and voice relations.

[16] In an episode of Big Brains, Paul Rand discussed with David Gruber the possibility of detecting language pattern in whale communication. Gruber says '…And I think now with this project, it's a lot like, if we could understand really deeply what whales are saying, how would that bring us closer to them and how would it help protect them? So even embedding that kind of thinking early in the project on how would this be in service of the whales, how would we create empathy?' This approach is what I call voicing with, an intentionality behind the AI development which considers all the agents involved, for instance making sure—in this case—to avoid misuse of AI language detection for hunting purposes (Rand, n.d.).

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest. We do not analyse or generate any datasets because our work proceeds within a theoretical and mathematical approach.

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