The Ghost in the Machine: Loab, the Uncanny, and AI-Generated Art

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The concept of cursed images and objects is a type of folk narrative that is common in legend cycles. However, since the Internet became widely accessible to the public in the early 1990s a new frontier was created for these types of legends to find fertile ground to grow and thrive. Examples of this have included cursed YouTube videos, video games, Creepypasta legends, and now art generated by artificial intelligence (also referred to as AI). This paper will examine Loab, the emergent Internet legend purportedly created by AI generated art. Loab and other AI generated art is unsettling as it enters the realm of the uncanny and speaks to modern anxieties that are attached to emerging technologies. Further, AI generated art is a new medium of expression that questions the definition of humanity, authorship, and reality itself. This emerging technology is creating a space where new narratives are crafted and further cements the Internet as a legendary destination for those who seek the strange and uncanny.

In the Summer of 2022, AI generated art engines began to appear on the Internet. In a way it was (and still is) treated as a novelty and toy. Users would visit sites such as MidJourney, one of the earliest AI generated art platforms, to see what the AI algorithms would draft up with the prompts given by them. Examples of such art produced by programs such as MidJourney had a surreal and dreamlike quality. A favorite of mine was a mashup of Disney's Mickey Mouse depicted in a post-apocalyptic world inspired from the video game *Fallout* and dystopian film franchise *The Purge* (see Figure 1). Some users also fed MidJourney prompts to create realistic photos of scrapped movie productions that appeared convincing. Even I tinkered with the new technology creating unsettling images of liminal spaces that combined elements of Edward Gorey, Ansel Adams, and Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. AI-Generated Art has a dreamlike and surrealist quality that can be classified as unsettling, liminal, and cryptic.

The art being produced by a machine has invoked a vast array of emotions. On one side, there are people who view such technology as benign and a novelty. On the other, there is a camp opposite of this point of view who interpret AI generated art as threatening. The threat in question though largely stemmed from anxieties of not yet established artists who earn their living taking commission from patrons. However, the surreal and dreamlike quality of images being produced by AI generated art also left viewers uneasy and anxious as questions arose about the process and who exactly is creating these

works of art. It is the latter of these fears and anxieties where Loab gained notoriety and prominence.

The earliest reports of Loab that I could find with online newspapers began in early September of 2022. Interestingly, these online articles all indicated that Loab made her debut on Twitter in April of that year. Anthony Wood reporting for IGN heralded the arrival of Loab in September stating, "an AI art enthusiast has apparently stumbled across a creepy, recurring image –now known as Loab– which appears to be more easily generated than you'd ever expect (or want). The Internet has now dubbed Loab the first AI art cryptid." (2022). He and other media outlets go on to attribute this "discovery" to a Swedish music artist, known as Supercomposite, as the creator/discoverer of Loab who showcased the first images on their Twitter account in April of 2022 (IGN; 2022, Daily Dot; 2022, Art Net; 2022, Dazed Digital; 2022, Science Alert; 2022).

Additionally, the news reports followed the same pattern detailing the narrative. A Swedish music artist known as Supercomposite was having fun with one of the new AI art generators that is never specified. She gave the program prompts seeking an image that is opposite of American actor Marlon Brando,

> …and unexpectedly created a strange logo depicting a skyline, and the letters 'DIGITA PNTICS.' Curiosity got the best of Supercomposite, who fed the letters back to the AI as another negative prompt, wondering if it would show them a picture of Marlon Brando. In return, the program apparently returned the first images of Loab. (IGN; 2022)

Loab, the supposed opposite of Marlon Brando, is depicted as a gaunt mature woman with sunken eyes, triangular ruddy cheeks, and a blank haunted expression (see Figure 2). The narrative continues that as Supercomposite attempts to adjust the prompts and parameters with the computer program the images produced become increasingly violent and grotesque depicting hellish and nightmarish illustrations.

Figure 2. The Legend of Loab, or how Marlon Brando (Supposedly) Begat a Digital Cryptid.

This is how the legend of Loab came into being, and like contemporary legends that have preceded and will proceed her she possesses the hallmarks of vague origins, second and thirdhand accounts, and ambivalent purpose that teeters toward the sinister. So, what does it all mean?

The concept of cursed objects and images are not a recent phenomenon. Western literature and folklore are replete with them. In 1890, Oscar Wilde immortalized the genre of the cursed painting in his homoerotic novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* where a foppish dandy obsessed with his youth and beauty makes a Faustian pact to have his soul infused with a portrait done in his likeness to age while he remains forever young. The pact is nullified decades later when

Dorian Grey comes fact-to-face with his now grotesque and decrepit portrait where he quickly dies from old age (Wilde; 1890).

Figure 3. Both literary and folkloric examples of the cursed painting genre exist. Consider for example: *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *The Crying Boy* paintings.

Outside the realm of literature there are real world examples of purportedly haunted/cursed paintings. For example, there are *The Crying Boy* paintings that were popular in post-war Great Britain (see Figure 3). The legend emerged in 1985 from British tabloid, *The Sun* that the mass-produced paintings were responsible for a spate of housefires. What cemented these allegations was that *The Crying Boy* paintings were impervious to flame (Ocker; 2020). Whether or not this is due to the fact that wall décor typically falls face down during housefires is not relevant because tabloids seldom let the truth get in the way of a good story. What matters though is that cursed objects –especially cursed images and paintings– capture the popular imagination. Works of art by its very nature is supposed to invoke and illicit emotion from their viewers. It is therefore not a stretch of the

imagination to have feelings of unease and ill-omen attached to images depicting weeping children.

At this point, it should be noted that art often imitates life. This imitation of life lies on a spectrum that ranges from the abstract to hyper-realism. It is the hyper-realism on this spectrum that I want to focus on as it is tied to Loab and the genre of AI-generated art. There is a point where works of art (especially works that focus on human features) that enter what is called, "the uncanny." Pioneer of modern psychology Sigmund Freud called this *das Unheimlich*, or "not from home" (1919). In other words, it is not familiar and there produces effects of uneasiness. Tok Thompson in *Posthuman Folklore* takes this further when discussing the production of lifelike androids in Japan. He states, "as developers near the production of human-looking interfaces, people's reactions to the interfaces become increasingly unnerved. They describe the creations in terms often reserved for the supernatural: androids are 'creepy,' 'spooky,' or otherwise unsettling." (2019). The same can be said of computer-generated artwork created by either AI or humans. For example, consider the 2004 adaptation of *The Polar Express* starring Tom Hanks or *The Adventures of Tintin* in 2011. Both films failed to overcome the Uncanny Valley and ended up unsettling their audiences.

Loab, in a way, borrows from the uncanny and folk narratives that predate her. As a result, she falls into the category of what Michael Dylan Foster calls the folkloresque "where folklore is alluded to in a general way, although there is no specific connection to a particular genre or motif that already exists in folklore." (2014, Kitta; 2018). Loab is a patchwork, or rather a pastiche, of a history of unnerving paintings, literature, popular entertainment, and children's folklore such as Bloody Mary repackaged for the digital age.

While Loab is indeed uncanny and unsettling it bears noting that she is not explicitly a cursed or haunted image. According to J.W. Ocker, a cursed object is "an inanimate item that brings misfortune, harm, or death to its owners or those whom it comes into contact."

(2020). He goes on further to differentiate between cursed and haunted objects. "*Cursed* is often used synonymously with *haunted* and *possessed,* but these qualities are distinct… The difference is one of intelligence. Cursed items have none… By contrast, a haunted object has a spirit intelligence attached directly to it, and a possessed item is similarly inhabited, in this case by a demonic entity." (2020). So far, Loab has not been attributed to bringing about misfortune or haunting anyone except perhaps in someone's dreams. Therefore, her unsettling appearance in AI generated art is a projection of the viewers feelings of anxiety.

This projection of hopes, fears, and anxieties is not unlike what was documented in Jared Colton's article about the Horse E-Books Twitter account that was once believed to be generated by a chatbot, or rather artificial intelligence (2016). Followers of this Twitter account were for a time led to believe that the tweets were genuinely being produced by AI, and that a machine was producing cryptic (and sometimes interpreted as profound) messages. The followers of Horse E-Books treated the account as a type of digital Oracle of Delphi who would attempt to apply meaning to what would otherwise be considered gibberish. This is typical of emergent technologies where the public tries to make sense of the novel and give it meaning. Similarly in 2016, Microsoft launched Tay whom they hoped would be a pop icon. According to Tok Thompson, "Within in a few hours, the bot began to post racist and offensive tweets, forcing Microsoft to shut down Tay after only sixteen hours." (2019). The difference between Horse E-Books and Tay though is that Tay was actually artificial intelligence and Internet trolls fed Tay enough problematic prompts to turn the AI into a digital neo-Nazi. The hopes, fears, and anxieties being applied to this emergent technology is well-founded.

However, these feelings are nothing new when it comes to state-of-the-art technology and folklore and popular media reflect this. Consider, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. At face value it is a horror story of a mad scientist bringing a cadaver to life. It is also

in direct response to a scientific revolution taking place in the 19th Century projecting meaning and possibilities of Charles Darwin's research and findings. Later film adaptions would explore this further in what is considered in popular discourse as taboo and monstrous. The same can be said with the advent of electricity and powerlines. An illustration dating to 1889 titled, *The Unrestrained Demon* depicts the anxieties and fears during the time of the then novel technology with Death shown as a spider with a lightbulb as its abdomen sitting in a web of powerlines causing havoc in an urban setting (see Figure 4). Interestingly, the same illustration resurfaced during the Covid-19 pandemic mocking people who were panicking over 5G cellular towers being installed. Finally, the Internet is not an exception in this kind of folk speculation.

Figure 4. The Unrestrained Demon. Circa 1889.

Projections of the Internet and what it could mean for humanity since it became widely available to the public in the early 1990s has ranged on the spectrum of the hopeful, revolutionary, and terrifying. This manifested when chat rooms allowed for strangers to interact virtually and opened the possibility of meeting in real life during a time when "Stranger Danger" was still in vogue in the United States. "Stranger Danger" was the popular shorthand at the time to articulate the fears and anxieties of encountering anyone not known to the individual or community and posed a threat. Thirty years later, this notion has become a source of amusement as we live in an age of smart devices that allow us to date, hookup, and seek rides from total strangers.

Artificial intelligence has not escaped the hopes, fears, and anxieties of people and has been thoroughly articulated in popular culture. Narratives involving AI ranges on a spectrum of the benign to the malicious. At one end, we have Rosie from *The Jetsons* and Data from *Star Trek*. On the other, there is *The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, and *M3gan*. It is through these kinds of narratives that allow for the folk to explore a world of endless possibilities that technology can bring to humanity. Loab is symbolic of this and as the world catches up with science fiction, I suspect more folk narratives such as her will emerge to continue articulating meaning, belief, and implications of new technology that was once the stuff of dreams. Such narratives whether they are folk, popular culture, or a combination of the two allows the audience to speculate and call into question what exactly artificial intelligence is and how we define the parameters of humanity in an age where sentience is being rapidly redefined. In essence, folk narratives about AI functions as an uncanny mirror that reflects the best and worst that humanity has to offer.

We know that Loab is not cursed or haunted. We also know that she is a projection of the hopes, fears, and anxieties coming from digital users. What then is going on? I propose that, like Slenderman

who is also an Internet legend and monster born from online horror fiction, reverse ostension is occurring. Both Jeffrey Tolbert and Andrea Kitta agree this is what occurred with Slender Man. Kitta explains that with Slenderman reverse ostension occurs because, "we have to create both the experience and the narratives." (2018). The same can be applied with Loab. Further, while Slender Man originated as a short story on Creepy Pasta, Loab's narrative is not supplemented with an already established narrative. All we have to go on is a series of images and a vague origin story.

It is therefore up to the people (or the folk) viewing the artwork to apply meaning and a narrative to fill in the spaces of ambiguity. This is not unlike Lynne McNeill's research with Fairy Fables, a chatbot who would produce a new micronarrative fairy tale every three hours every day via Twitter and Tumblr (2018). Also, much like Colton's Horse E-Books, the messages would appear disjointed and cryptic where the audience is compelled to give the text meaning. However, so far as we know Fairy Fables are being genuinely produced by artificial intelligence. McNeill observes:

> 'Fairy Fables' has replaced the human with the mechanical, the folk with the institutional. Implicit in almost all instances of fairy tales being shared online, whether as narratives or as textual tones, there remains a sense of a 'teller,' someone behind the manifestation of tradition within the technology. Is the AI the storyteller in these contexts? Do audiences actually require a teller in order for a story to have meaning? (2018)

I feel artificial intelligence today and moving forward are becoming legitimate "tellers" and artists. The implications of mechanized/non-human folk narrators ought to be explored further in a separate paper and Tok Thompson's *Posthuman Folklore* is an excellent primer for that.

Artificial intelligence is increasingly becoming part of everyday life in the 21st Century. From Alexa and Google Home to self-driving

cars, and ChatGPT and MidJourney. It is inescapable. These devices and programs are meant to ease burdens and relieve stress. However, like with all novel technology, it sometimes goes awry. The glitches that occur create digital spaces of ambiguity waiting to be filled in with folk narratives that provide explanation. Take for example, the Allied Forces who flew during the Second World War dealt with emerging technologies that ranged from radar to newly designed aircraft. The glitches that occurred were explained with now familiar narratives of gremlins and Foo-Fighters. So, what happens when you glitch out an AI program designed to generate digital artwork that becomes unsettling? The audience will create a monster and story to make sense of the extraordinary. In this case it is Loab.

Every day the pantheon of Internet legends and cryptids is growing, and undoubtedly more ghosts lurk within the machines that are our computers and handheld mobile devices. Loab now joins the likes of Slenderman, Momo, and the Backrooms. However, is it all a hoax like the Horse E-Books Twitter account? As of now, that remains to be seen. As a folklorist I hope it is real. I hope there is a ghost in a machine who creates surrealist artwork from their dreams of electric sheep. Hoax or not, the folk narratives that give meaning and belief around Loab and other emerging technologies is fascinating. An audience member views a work of art created by something that is not human or organic and attempts to make sense of it all. These narratives speak to a broader conversation taking place on personhood, ethics, motivations, and humanity. As artificial intelligence continues to develop and evolve so do the conversations that will take place on questioning the meaning of being human and possessing humanity. We are entering a brave new world and digital folklore such as Loab further cements the Internet as a new frontier for legends to grow and thrive.

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