ELO 26 Unsupervised

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Electronic Literature in AI Data Work

Four Exercises of Imagination

Mihai Băcăran, Independent

Abstract

This paper is based on my personal experience of working as a transcriber for AI projects between 2023 and 2025 in a Business Process Outsourcing company (BPO) located in Eastern Europe. In the form that I experienced it, transcription for AI projects consists in listening to audio recordings provided by The Client (a major tech company whose name cannot be mentioned because of non-disclosure agreements) and either transcribing them from scratch or correcting an AI generated transcription. The recordings are gathered from users of digital devices, many of whom appear to be unaware of being recorded.

The stream of audio recordings constitutes an impressive piece of electronic literature, despite the fact that it is not intended as such: an extraordinary cut-up literary composition of uncreative writing, made up of fragments of daily life (often caught unawares), combined with moments of musique concrète (from background noises to glitches in the recording process). The event that makes the difference between the audio recordings as a raw material exploited in the industrial production of so-called "artificial intelligence" and the same audio recordings as a piece of literature is the (not necessarily intentional) creation by transcribers of *imaginary artworks*. This paper aims to provide a starting point for understanding this hidden, unintended piece of electronic literature and the imaginary artworks that it engenders through four exercises of imagination, that, in different ways, glitch the context of AI data work and its imposed obscurity.

First Exercise of Imagination

One of the major challenges in writing about the labour of audio transcription for AI from the perspective of a worker (and the same goes for AI data work more generally) is the legal (or pseudo-legal) framework of non-disclosure agreements (see Bartholomew and Perrigo) that allow major tech companies to exploit personal, private information of the users, while impeding workers from talking publicly about the extent of this exploitation. Consequently, this paper cannot give a straight forward account of the audio recordings that I heard as a transcriber, and, arguably, anyway, that would not be the best method of approaching the electronic literature piece under discussion. I propose rather a few ways of avoiding the subject (see Clemens and Pettman), of erring around the subject (both around the details of audio transcription for AI as the necessarily hidden subject of discourse, and around the subjective

investments and processes of subjectivation that it entails), providing four different frames of sorts, parerga (in the sense of Derrida 37-82), for an artwork (ergon—both subject and object) that never quite comes to be. Instead of a traditional academic discourse that aims at explaining or analyzing a given research object/subject, the textual and audio-visual parerga proposed below, aim at encouraging the readers/spectators to perform exercises of imagination that reveal and re-vail the missing subject through falsification and the power of the false (see Deleuze 1985, 171-172), or, through what Laura Marks calls the feelings of fabulation (164-193).

As transcribers, we performed our daily tasks behind closed doors in strictly monitored *secure labs*. The primary function of these labs, impenetrable temples of the contemporary panopticon, is to provide a safe space for working with potentially sensitive user data, and, at the same time, to safeguard corporate secrets regarding the data and the methodologies and tools used for its manipulation. The first rule of transcription for AI projects is that nothing can be disclosed, The Client and the BPO are supposed to control all information that enters or leaves the workspace.

I cannot reveal any exact details about the secure lab, nor about the audio recordings, but you already know enough in order to be able to glitch this logic of enclosure through an exercise of imagination. What was I transcribing? Everything that you can imagine a user saying towards a device with voice recognition capabilities, or, more exactly, in the presence of such a device, given the fact that the recording can be unintentionally triggered. You know it because of articles in the press (see for example the whistleblower revelations reported by Hern 2019a, 2019b; Paul), but you also know it because you have agreed to it in the Terms and Conditions of your apps. Given the fact that you can be recorded just as well by your own devices as by the devices of other users, it is only a small logical step to realize, without me having to reveal anything, that, because of the general uptake of digital technologies in our societies, you could be recorded at any moment, intentionally or not, by the devices owned by your neighbour, the policeman who arrested you, the doctor's office, the company that provides your medical supplies, your lawyer, the phone company, the supermarket, the tech support company, etc. Nothing new.

In terms of format, the length of the audio recordings ranges all the way from a few seconds long, and such recordings are transcribed in their hundreds per day, to instances that are over an hour long, which can require multiple work days. The order of the recordings seems to be random, but they are grouped in 'projects' that give them a certain degree of consistency in terms of format and content. Many of the audio tracks that reach transcribers are fragments of initial recordings split more or less randomly in multiple pieces, and it is sometimes possible to mentally reconstruct out of the scrambled pieces the initial recording. Moreover, many recordings appear in the data set multiple times (presumably in order to ensure consistency across multiple transcriptions of the same audio content). Hence an approximate interwoven structure is contoured, punctuated by repetitions and callbacks (ritournelles), a loose texture that encourages a creative spectatorial engagement. Despite oneself, one starts to

build up meaningful (if imaginary) connections—narrative, poetic, musical, or otherwise—between the recordings, suffused with ambiguous fragments of personal experience.

Imagine for example, a 'project'—that is, an extensive set of audio recordings, with a certain degree of consistency, that transcribers will engage with for multiple days, weeks, and sometimes even months in a row—that contains, say, 10% to 20% recordings related to pornography and prayers, some of these spread over multiple audio tracks and repeated multiple times. If you have any sort of spectatorial experience with modernist avant-garde literature or art, or early net art and electronic literature (or indeed any other instances of artworks that subvert the requirement for straight-forward linear meaning and the figure of the author as a well defined subject), then this text/texture with its loose interwoven threads that cut across two highly contested areas of contemporary cultures (pornography and prayers) offers a very fertile ground for sense-making driven by the power of false—where by the power of the false I understand the unchecked proliferation of heterogeneous senses upon this non-linear intermesh of texts, of cut-ups of daily life caught (somewhat) unawares. Incidentally, such falsifications or fabulations seem to constitute some the most 'truthful' representations of life (and death) in contemporary digital cultures. No other art piece that I am aware of (or literature piece for that matter) proves either the technological and financial capacity, or the ethical irresponsibility to offer its spectators such an overwhelming, boring, exhilarating patchwork of intimate moments of daily life. (And the ethical problematic remains relevant even if most of the moments captured in the recordings are seemingly innocuous day-to-day fragments that do not pose any threat to the users by being revealed).

For the moment, this is as far as we can get, pushing at the edges of non-disclosure agreements, in terms of suggesting by means of description the electronic literature piece that coagulates behind the closed doors of the secure labs.

So, let us turn back and try a new way of avoiding the subject.

Second Exercise of Imagination

This section obliquely addresses the problematic of audio transcription for AI projects and the imperative of non-disclosure that permeates it by means of two short audio-visual works. The audio track for both of these works is based on the recording of a small, private performance, without spectators, in which I have tried to remember as closely as I could and reproduce, in a given time frame, as many fragments of the transcribed audio files as possible. Then I manipulated the resulting sound file (in different ways in the case of the two works) beyond recognition.

I kindly invite the reader to follow the links and see the works, considering them as an integral part of this paper. The short descriptions below are intended to offer potential reading keys, and do not replace the spectatorial experience with respect to the works themselves.

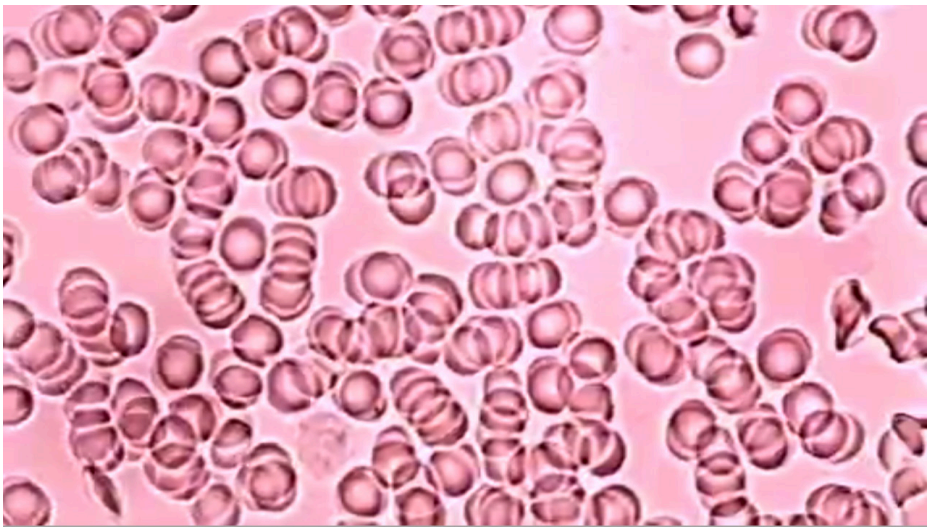

Figure 1: Data Leaks (2025), duration 1 min 56 sec.

Data Leaks (https://mihaibacaran.com/dataleaks.html) is a low-fidelity audio-visual work, in the spirit of small file media. (I am borrowing the idea of small file media from the Small File Media Festival: https://smallfile.ca/). I have cut-up the audio recording resulting form the private performance mentioned above, superimposed the parts, compressed the audio file, and converted it between different formats and different audio codecs until the words became entirely unintelligible. The video is based on images of my blood seen under a microscope, captured the very same day, distorted by glitches resulting from file compression. I have reduced the entire audio-video work, in the spirit small file media, to a dimension of less than 1 MB per minute. The work interrogates the extent to which file compression and low resolution can act as politically charged vectors in contexts permeated by imposed secrecy. Personal information is leaked and in plain view (images of my blood, my memories of recordings captured from users of digital devices by a big tech company) yet distorted to the point of noise: leaked data rich in affective charge, yet hidden from direct access and understanding.

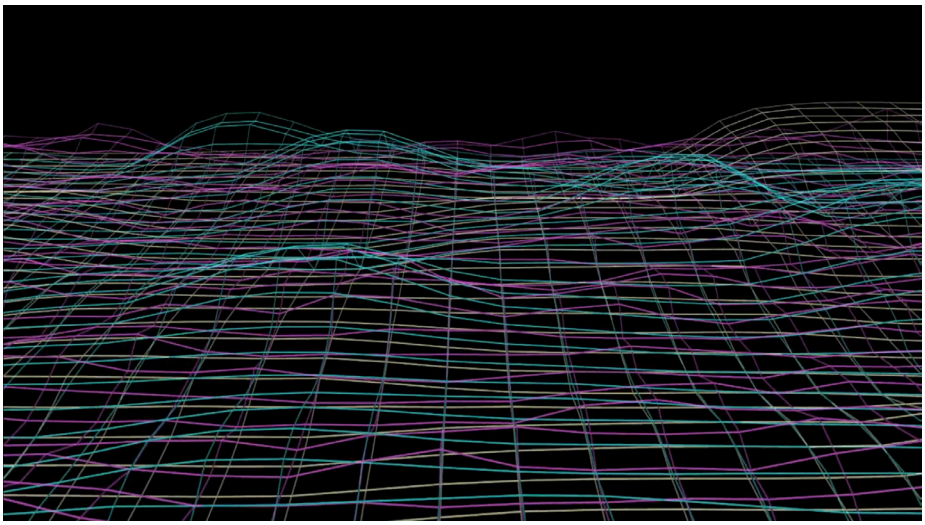

Figure 2: Folding Artificial Words (2026), duration 3 min.

For *Folding Artificial Words* (https://mihaibacaran.com/foldingartificialwords.html) I used generative methods to manipulate the audio track resulting from my private performance and visualized the results as a series of interwoven grids that respond to the sound frequencies. Other generated sounds are gradually introduced to further play with the folds in the visual representation of these strings of unrecognizable words. The result problematizes the interrelation between the artificial and the natural in “artificial intelligence” by hinting towards the artificial algorithmic processing and exploitation of natural language, the robotization of human workers involved in the production of AI algorithms (algorithms advertised as themselves

possessing human-like intelligence), but also towards the artificiality of "natural" human perception, memory, and intelligence in the first place.

The visualisation of sound gives way to the pixelated image of a microscopic ciliate (probably a Stentor), a messy amateur microscope recording from my personal archive. Words, in their originary technicity, folded and distorted beyond recognition, intertwine with the artificial representation (the microscopic image) of an intensive becoming that eludes direct understanding. If the microorganism is indeed from the genus Stentor, and the doubt is important here, a new layer of sense emerges, problematizing the concept of intelligence. Different Stentor species have been central in the last hundred years to debates over memory, learning, and rudimentary decision making in single cell organisms, suggesting that learning, memory, and consequently intelligence, are not necessarily dependent on networks of neurons.

The ambiguity of these gaps between what is perceived as natural and what is perceived as artificial is offered to the spectator as a fertile ground upon which contradictory, heterogeneous senses could sprout.

Third Exercise of Imagination

The series of audio recordings as such is simply a new form of raw material "mined" and used in the industrial production of artificial intelligence. It becomes a piece of electronic literature only inasmuch as processes of spectatorship happen, that subtly change the relationship between the subject and its environments, glitches—in the larger sense of the term proposed by Rosa Menkman (9)—in the dynamic of the interrelated mental, societal, and environmental ecologies (Guattari) that define the contemporary world.

The subtle event that creates the ambiguity which transforms (imperceptibly) the audio recordings from raw material into a piece of literature is the emergence in the labour process, for transcribers, of *imaginary artworks*. During the transcription work, probably due to the excruciating boredom of performing the same robotic tasks again and again, imagination tends to take over, combining the recordings between them, and with fragments of personal experience and memories, into complex surreal compositions (auditive, visual, haptic, etc.). Inspired by the *imaginary music* of composer Octavian Nemescu (Nemescu; Anghel), I suggest understanding such imaginary compositions, that exist only for a brief moment in the imagination of the transcribers, as artworks in their own right, despite the fact that they remain singular, 'personal', unshareable experiences (for a full account on this position please see my essay *Every Shift is A Work of Art*: https://mihaibacaran.com/writing/every_shift_is_a_work_of_art.html).

The emergence of imaginary artworks, and the consequent change of perspective that allows one to approach the string of audio recordings as literature rather than raw material for the production of

AI, is far from being a clear-cut intervention that could be positively grasped, it is rather an infrathin (Manning) fold that introduces a barely perceptible (if at all) ambiguity in the production apparatus of AI technologies. The imaginary artworks emerge inasmuch as the audio recordings can be taken as a piece of electronic literature, and, at the same time, the audio recordings become electronic literature only inasmuch as the imaginary artworks coagulate (for a very brief moment in the imagination of the transcribers). While the argument here is limited to the case of transcription for AI projects, nonetheless it can be extended to other forms of AI data work, and further to the somewhat similar case of content moderation (often strictly interrelated with the training of AI algorithms). The streams of content that workers face on a daily basis constitute some of the most intriguing masterpieces of contemporary art and literature in the second and third decades of the 21st century. The fact that they are available only to AI data workers and eschew art institutions and their traditional publics, should not stop us from recognizing and valuing them as such. Kenneth Goldsmith's take on uncreative writing can offer, from a certain perspective, the beginning of a framework in this sense, although, strictly speaking, to my knowledge, these works are unprecedented in terms of modern art history and history of literature and require a significant change in theoretical and academic approaches to electronic art and literature.

Fourth Exercise of Imagination

Instead of conclusion, as yet another way of avoiding the subject, I propose an imaginary piece of electronic literature, another infrathin subversion of the regimes of surveillance and obscurity that permeate contemporary mainstream AI technologies and the AI data work contexts that they are grounded in. I invite you to perform the following "score", whenever you find it convenient, following the instructions as closely as possible (https://mihaibacaran.com/howtosayinrussianheykevinyoureadick.html). Trigger warning: mildly explicit slang words, engages with themes of death and sexuality:

Figure 3: How to Say in Russian "Hey, Kevin, You're a Dick!"? (2025-2026).

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