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_Homogenised Heritage: AI and Central Europe

HOMOGENISED HERITAGE: AI AND CENTRAL EUROPE

THE IMPACT OF AI ON LOW-RESOURCE LANGUAGES AND VISUAL CULTURES IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

Disegno

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BEYOND COMPUTATIONAL ILLUSION: FUTURES WORTH WANTING FOR ARTISTIC PRACTICES AND TECHNICAL CULTURES

Michał Krzykawski

ABSTRACT
Artists and cultural theorists, although they use different means, share the task of problematizing culture. The urgent task now is to critically examine the ways we use AI text-to-image generators and create space for reflection about engaging with these systems. I approach this through what I term the cultural logic of computational capitalism, drawing on Fredric Jameson and Bernard Stiegler. The paper addresses how arts and humanities can help overcome this logic and transform AI's visual culture itself. Such an inquiry is essential given that AI text-to-image generators not only disrupt traditional art production but also concentrate creative power in the hands of a few dominant platforms. While these concerns are global, they require specific regional responses. Focusing on East-Central European countries, I argue that the underrepresentation of their visual cultures in AI models stems from their semi-peripheral status within global technological and economic systems. Rather than simply feeding existing AI models with better regional training data, I propose supporting dissident artistic practices that promote regional digital and digitally sustainable cultures.

#computational illusion; #computational capitalism; #art-informatics; #semiotic entropy

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AI images, whether embraced as artworks or dismissed as slop, are transforming our symbolic forms and disrupting how we produce meanings through them. This is neither "the end of art" nor "the end of thinking," but it does require us to grasp the nature of this change by understanding the limits of AI vision and of computational techniques behind it. The key challenge is both conceptual and purposeful. Conceptual, because it involves questioning how artificial intelligence was conceptualised as a mathematical object at the beginning of the eponymous discipline. Purposeful, because it is oriented toward critically integrating computational techniques into artistic practices and technical cultures as mutually constitutive, rather than focusing on whether AI is creative and can think or not. In a nutshell, visual cultures in an AI world largely depend on the intent behind the use of generative technologies and our ability to define this intent beyond the logic of (capitalist) computation that erodes all justification, without denying what those technologies can actually do.

What I call computational illusion, however, is a serious obstacle that hinders this necessary work. In what follows, I begin by unpacking what I mean by computational illusion and tracing its roots in the mechanistic conceptualisation of intelligence, a conceptualisation that precedes, and in many ways enables, the anthropomorphisation of computational machines. I then examine how the collapse of the distinction between scientific heuristics and advertising clichés has shaped the current AI landscape and the visual cultures it generates. Against this backdrop, I outline what I propose as art-informatics—an approach that repurposes computational techniques through artistic experimentation and philosophical reflection—as a possible exit route toward grounded techno-artistic practices, particularly from an East-Central European perspective.

HOW IS COMPUTATIONAL ILLUSION BROUGHT TO THE FORE?

By computational illusion I mean the false assumption that everything is computable and can be written in computer code, whether genetic code, legal code, or semiotic code. According to this misconception, life in general, biological, social and cognitive alike, is fundamentally about processing information. Computationalists believe that with adequate, uncorrupted data, a robust computing stack, and efficient algorithms, well-trained AI models can generate automated information products, and that these products interact with each other in real time, giving rise to emergent structures analogous to how organisations or knowledge emerge from biological or cognitive processes. Emergence and interaction are definitely the two buzzwords here.

Computational illusion does not originate from a science or a particular school of thought. It is neither scientific nor philosophical. Both science and philosophy require self-limitation, self-critique and self-knowledge, rather than a mere stacking of computational techniques, performance gains through optimisation, and speculative fantasies about human-AI interactions that have no grounding in social reality whatsoever. Computational illusion floats in the air, a zeitgeist of our era. On the one hand, it generates bombastic speculative scenarios about humanity's AI-driven future. On the other, it reduces concepts, hypotheses, and everyday knowledge to meaningless content. This reduction undermines critical thought, which depends on discerning differences: emergence from relationality, information from communication, communication from knowledge, reasoning from understanding, computational intelligence from other types of intelligence, intelligence from thinking and, last but not least, business from science. All things become undifferentiated. While this entropic undifferentiation spreads in our informational ecosystems—generating what I call semiotic entropy inasmuch as it involves an increase in the meaninglessness of algorithmically structured information—we lack the conceptual tools to understand both technologies and our actions within technologised environments. Developing such tools is essential to counter mainstream AI discourse that thoughtlessly ascribes human or superhuman characteristics to computational machines. This thoughtlessness is the only "existential risk" we face.

Though rooted in AI technologist circles, computational illusion extends far beyond them, manifesting in various claims that short-circuit scientific and philosophical frameworks. A few examples: that life is "the universe's most ancient technology" (Suleyman and Bhaskar 2023); that "the informational basis of all life on Earth" or "life's basic machinery" is "the universal genetic code" (Davies 2019); that "human intuition is in reality pattern recognition" (Harari 2018); that "organisms are algorithms" (Harari 2016); that "intelligence is prediction" (Blakeslee, Hawkins 2004); that "beliefs are a kind of information, thinking a kind of computation, and emotions, motives, and desires are a kind of feedback mechanism" (Pinker 2005).[1]

[1] *Some of these examples are also quoted by Bates (2025: 69–70).*

The widespread understanding and misunderstanding of computational techniques and their applications is shaped within computational illusion, creating the climate around AI, generating a sense of its ineluctability, and exerting pressure toward the mechanisation of processes, the acquisition of so-called digital competencies, and the construction of national or local language models as if no alternative course of progress were conceivable.

At the same time, all of the claims invoked could find solid legitimation in predictive processing theory or other computational accounts of the mind whose primary source of inspiration is neural networks. In the context of computational illusion, "computation" not only refers to computing machines but, more generally, to a mechanistic model of rationality applied to data processing, whether operated by algorithms or human mind-brains. What underpins this model is the assumption that reasoning is reckoning, and that we anticipate, feel, and decide what to do next through predictive mechanisms. From this perspective, it becomes plausible to regard the digital computer as the model of intelligence itself, and it follows that knowledge of artificial neural networks can only bring us closer to understanding how the biological machine operating in our brain works. This is a vicious circle, or rather an epistemological deadlock in which computational models are superimposed on the very processes of knowledge production and meaning-making.

THE MECHANISATION OF HUMANS PRECEDES THE ANTHROPOMORPHISATION OF MACHINES

The computational explanation of cognitive processes has experienced a resurgence with advances in computational techniques and the exponential growth of data since the early twenty-first century. It remains, however, one of several paradigms in contemporary cognitive sciences, and is largely dismissed as overly reductive by critical neuroscience scholarship, which emphasises the bodily constitution and environmental embeddedness of mental processes—processes that, consequently, cannot be properly understood outside their physical and social contexts (Choudhury and Slaby 2010, 11).

That said, I am not suggesting that the computational explanation of cognitive processes is entirely without merit. It is rather that it does not provide a reasonable framework for understanding how AI systems work in larger social ecosystems and why artistic or theoretical inventions cannot happen without a sensibility for what is not yet there. This involves a pull toward new possibility, and the risk of being wrong beyond a probabilistic regression to the mean that large language models have at their core.

It has become something of a commonplace among cultural theorists to warn against anthropomorphising computational machines. While some AI philosophers argue that computational systems operate an "alien mode of thought", developing what they call "the alien subjects of AI" as a theoretical framework (Parisi 2019), computational linguists and IT scholars rightly caution that anthropomorphising these systems leads us to uncritically accept how they are marketed to us as "human-like systems" that can "hallucinate," possess "reasoning capabilities," or exhibit "intelligence" (Bender and Inie 2026).

But the opposite may equally be true. Our tendency to anthropomorphise machines, which has arguably become a weakness, is itself an effect of how the human mind was mechanised and what assumptions enabled its mechanistic conceptualisation.

That these assumptions remain largely mythological and concern the myth of a machine more intelligent than the human is the central claim of what I call computational illusion. We find this myth at the very origins of the ultrashort history of AI, from the way it was conceptualised as a mathematical object to the inquiries into the possibility of realising that object in machines. Consider John McCarthy et al. (2006), who in 1955 were the first to introduce the term artificial intelligence. For them, the study of artificial intelligence was meant "to proceed on the basis of the conjecture that every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it. Also remember Alan Turing (1950), who five years earlier had conceptualised the "thinking machine" or "intelligent machine". All three names—"artificial intelligence," "thinking machine," and "intelligent machine"—refer to the same thing and derive from the assumption that the operation of intelligence is thought and that thought processes can be described in formal language. Nothing, therefore, should stand in the way of imagining that, given sufficient computational power, a machine more intelligent than humans could be built.

Let me intervene in this well-known story with a philosophical comparison. The pursuit of such a half-mythical, half-realistic machine has accompanied the history of AI like the shadow accompanying Nietzsche's "wanderer"—one that cannot shed its past or its "self," but can come to terms with it. I argue that our knowledge of AI remains in a pre-critical phase, precisely because such a reckoning has not yet taken place and computational illusion prevails. By a pre-critical phase, I mean a specific mindset embracing and testing AI without a critical reflection on its conceptual foundations and how these presuppositions shape our understanding of agency, intelligence, and the relationship between technology and social cognition, alongside the proliferation of AI models over the world. According to Hugging Face (2026), there are already two million of them.

That Turing and the organisers of the Dartmouth seminar were pragmatic visionaries in exploring the possibilities of formalizing thought processes is beyond question. "I believe that at the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted," Turing (1950, 443) predicted, bringing to a close his description of the peculiar thought experiment later known as the "Turing test." That test, as it happens, played a role inversely proportional to the interest it generated among philosophers, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, and the general public alike. As Margaret Boden (2016) aptly notes, it was "tongue in cheek: Although it featured in the opening pages, the Turing test was an adjunct within a paper primarily intended as a manifesto for a future AI. Indeed, Turing described it to his friend Robin Gandy as light-hearted 'propaganda', inviting giggles rather than serious critique".

WHEN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEURISTIC MODELS AND ADVERTISING CLICHÉS IS GONE

Far more worthy of attention than this "propaganda," however, is what lent the joke known as the Turing test its scientific legitimacy and made it so generative: a decisive turn in the twentieth-century history of the scientific study of cognitive activities, one in which observing those activities became de facto synonymous with measuring them mathematically, as though one were observing any physical body. The measurement of intelligence is a case in point. Alfred Binet, the originator of the test that gave rise to what we now know as the IQ test, when asked to define the intelligence he sought to measure in numbers, reportedly gave the provocative answer that "intelligence is what my test measures" (quoted in Lhérété 2024, 9). Subscribing to this line of reasoning and not unlike McCarthy, Turing specifically conceived the act of thinking by assuming that thought is amenable to conceptualisation as an ideal object—a mathematical object—and that it can be functionally abstracted from all spatiotemporal situatedness: the historical, social, and embodied contexts in which meanings arise. It follows that whether it is a human or a machine that thinks is of no consequence—for both, in the end, compute. It can explain why so many great computer scientists, including the Nobel Prize and Fields Medal winners, succumb so readily to AGI mythology, whether utopian or dystopian, and uncritically accept AGI as an inevitable technological trajectory. The AGI mythology is just a variant of the myth of an intelligent machine outperforming human intelligence, an echo of a heuristic computational model of human intelligence at the origins of its mechanic emulation.

The journalist Will Douglas Heaven (2025) has recently pointed out that the AGI myth has become an obsession of the tech industry and has become embedded in public debate. According to Heaven, the myth of AGI fulfils many of the criteria that qualify a theory as conspiratorial: a flexible framework that sustains belief even when reality diverges from prediction, a promise achievable only if believers uncover hidden truths, and the hope of salvation from the horrors of this world. This is why, Heaven says, it has become anchored in deeply rooted beliefs that are difficult to uproot.

A more in-depth explanation of the phenomenon, however, is possible. What we are witnessing today is the intensification of a phenomenon against which Georges Canguilhem (2008, 12) had already cautioned in 1980. This leading representative of the tradition of historical epistemology noted that expressions such as "'conscious brain', 'conscious machine', 'artificial brain' or 'artificial intelligence'", especially popular "in the Anglo-American domain", can be legitimately justified as scientific names for "heuristic models or sophisticated simulators." So far, so good. But once such expressions migrated into public debate during the industrial phase of computer technology, they became, in Canguilhem's words, "advertising clichés" that not only disorient the general public and normalise a low level of technological awareness, but also rebound on the quality of scientific research itself. As Canguilhem diagnosed with characteristic clarity: "A model of scientific research was thereby converted into a machine of ideological propaganda with a twofold purpose: to anticipate or disarm all opposition to the invasion of a means of automating the regulation of social relations; and to conceal the presence of decision-makers behind the anonymity of the machine." (12)

What has changed since then is the scale of the problem and the challenges it brings with it. The force of computational illusion has eroded the distinction between scientific heuristics and advertising clichés—a distinction Canguilhem might still have taken for granted in the era of Minitel. Their interested conflation can indeed be seen as the ideological matrix of the AI industry. What this AI ideology makes us believe is that the difference between automata and autonomy (between machine operations and human actions) is no longer functionally significant. Not because we cease to see and feel the difference, but because it becomes functionally negligible in a world that Bernard Stiegler (2016, 48) defines as "totally computational capitalism". With a nod to Nietzsche, Stiegler identifies it with "the accomplished nihilism" (48) and calls for "the transvaluation of becoming into future" (10). What underlies this condition, I would argue, is an epistemological cul-de-sac, that is, the fundamental error in assuming the adequacy of understanding reality without the critical ability to discern its social, biological, and technical dimensions.

REPURPOSING COMPUTATIONAL TECHNIQUES…

Let me be direct. Without a critical understanding of what computer code can do today and of our use of language models, we have no purpose or means to shape visual cultures that save us from semiotic entropy, that is the structural tendency toward the decline of socially produced meaning. In fact, large language models do not merely simulate intelligence, they decompose the sign system into tokens stripped of meaning and recombine them statistically. In doing so, they bypass the layer of meaning that underpins rationality and holds together the binding tissue of intelligent societies. This is not simply an instrumentalisation of language. It is a disruption of how meaning is made, from the words we use to the broader semiotic systems weaving social life. Exiting the pre-critical phase of AI and conquering some kind of technological maturity is therefore of crucial importance for understanding what is worth being efficiently computed when the capacity for speech and sign-manipulation has been technologically replicated through artificial synthesis. The conceptual tools we bring to bear on that question will determine not only how we understand AI, but how we understand ourselves.

In 1948, Norbert Wiener (2019: 54) observed: "The thought of every age is reflected in its technique". At the time, cyberneticists extensively debated the functionalities of machines along with those of organisms and societies according to the quality of information they exchange. Given this insight, it is therefore worth asking what kind of thought is reflected in generative AI and what AI would reveal itself to be if we changed the way we think about and conceptualise it. This question is not speculative. It asks instead what kind of technical cultures and related artistic practices we want to build.

In 1957, calling for the integration of technical and cultural realities, Gilbert Simondon (2017, 19) argued that what was needed to integrate them was "an awareness of the nature of machines, of their mutual relations and of their relations with man, and of the values implied in these relations". What might such awareness look like as an alternative to computational illusion, which has so systematically foreclosed it? I would argue that it lies in pursuing meaningful, rather than merely efficient, automation: not simply because it is technically possible, but only when it makes sense, and in choosing other techniques where it does not. Artistic practices seem to offer a privileged ground for cultivating such awareness.

In the AI endgame economy, when nothing can truly finish and nothing new can begin, artists who constantly work to appropriate and repurpose the tools they use to create their work become crucial. I suggest naming this kind of practice—and the broader space of inquiry it opens up—art-informatics. Without experimental artistic practices that would enable us to repurpose computational techniques through strategic alliances among socio-informatics (Wulf et al. 2018), the human sciences, and the arts, we will continue to ignore what computer code can actually achieve while generating artificial meaninglessness in a world mired in political chaos. On this, it is worth recalling Jean-François Lyotard's (1991, 57) reflection on the relation between *logos* and *techne*, "all this remains to be thought out, tried out". This is neither a utopia nor romanticism, it is the only realistic path forward in a world where non-noetic logos has become a property of computational machines and AI-generated visual culture is everyday culture.

The proponents of socio-informatics argue that computational artifacts should be embedded in social practices from the very stage of their conceptualisation. This stance stems from the awareness that the quality of these artifacts depends on how they affect those practices. This entails two things. First, applied computer science requires a solid theory of what social practice is. Second, to align machine operations with these practices, rather than with abstract "human values," applied computer science must turn to design sciences—a move which poses a significant challenge, both methodologically and epistemologically, since design is by definition theoretically underdetermined and lacks the certainty typically associated with formal sciences. In 1999, Rob Kling defined socio-informatics as "the interdisciplinary study of the design, uses and consequences of information technologies that takes into account their interaction with institutional and cultural contexts."

What would happen if we imagined a shift from design to arts? Several years before generative AI spread online, American artist Trevor Paglen (2016) described our everyday technologically saturated visual culture as "invisible," highlighting how vast the landscape of machine-made invisible images not meant for human eyes is (from surveillance camera recordings and self-driving cars to social media algorithms). As Paglen (2016) observed, the overwhelming majority of images circulating today are produced by machines for other machines, with human eyes rarely—if ever—part of the equation. He continues:

If we want to understand the invisible world of machine-machine visual culture, we need to unlearn how to see like humans. We need to learn how to see a parallel universe composed of activations, keypoints, eigenfaces, feature transforms, classifiers, training sets, and the like. But it's not just as simple as learning a different vocabulary. Formal concepts contain epistemological assumptions, which in turn have ethical consequences. The theoretical concepts we use to analyse visual culture are profoundly misleading when applied to the machinic landscape, producing distortions, vast blind spots, and wild misinterpretations (Paglen 2016).

That the commercialisation of AI image generators has only pulled us deeper into a massive, energy-consuming dataset is by now rather obvious. The problem, however, remains: the theoretical concepts we used to analyse classical visual culture (representation, meaning, semiosis, mimesis etc.) are inadequate to describe the new invisible visual culture. At the same time, what has come to a head with generative technologies is, as French and Canadian artist Gregory Chatonsky (2025) puts it, "a fundamental tension between production and consumption." The same infrastructure "can be oriented toward" either technological production or technological consumption "and big tech companies have turned a part of popular production into unbridled consumption of their technologies."

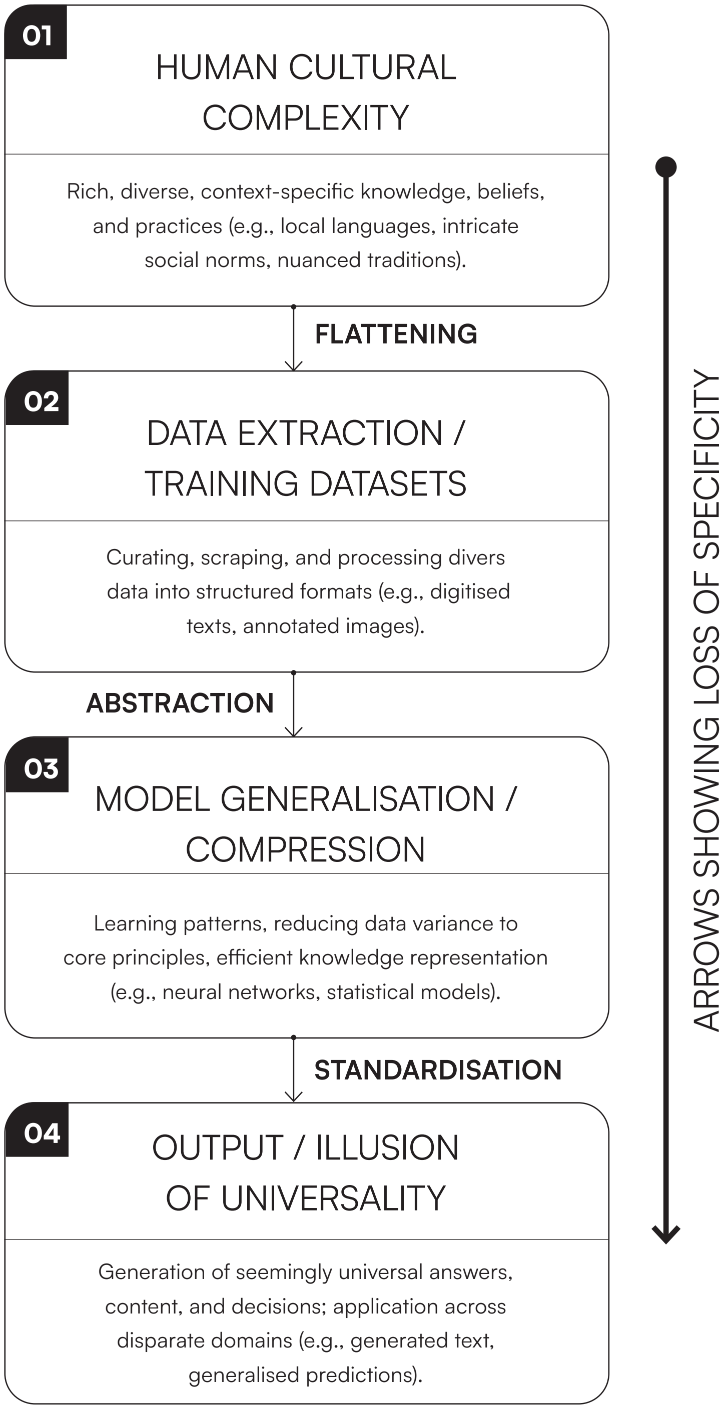
This mainstream AI landscape absolutises the "symbolic misery" with which Stiegler (2014, 10) described the 2000s. We must therefore ask whether AI images—which lack meaningful reference yet intervene in everyday life—can shape human visual culture in ways that are meaningful to us, rather than simply operating as infrastructures of our industrialised memory, of which AI slop is the most glaring by-product. Art-informatics as I envision it is a space where such questions open pathways toward thought-provoking counter-practices and experimental approaches to computing aimed at resituating their outputs within wider artistic projects. After all, what is at stake is the revaluation of something technical and artistic activities share: the promise of emancipation—what. Computational illusion offers no such emancipation; it forecloses rather than emancipates.

Art-informatics offers a way forward beyond the impasse computational illusion creates. It proposes not reforming AI systems from within but developing alternative computational practices—grounded in philosophical reflection and artistic experimentation, oriented toward symbolic production rather than operational efficiency, and embedded in communities rather than platforms.

…FROM WITHIN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

For scholars and artists in East-Central Europe, this proposition has a particular resonance, and particular urgency. We occupy a semi-peripheral position in the global value chain, cultural and economic alike, which means that the question of who controls AI systems is inseparable from the question of who controls the production of cultural meaning in our region. Providing free training data to proprietary technologies—in the belief that we are making our visual heritage "visible" in global AI landscape—stems from a core tenet of computational illusion: that well-trained AI models, given the right local data and computational resources, can produce good enough cultural content in real time. From a technopolitical perspective, this only makes our visual heritages more dependent on the operations of an invisible machine-machine infrastructure that lies beyond our understanding and our local ways of seeing. This is not the way to preserve our cultural autonomies.

The alternative I propose draws on what dissidence has meant in this part of Europe. Rather than adapting to the dominant AI-related political economy, we need to oppose it by fostering cultures of invention, rather than of mere resistance—or at least develop the capacity to do so. This requires building our own machines—experimental, non-capitalist in their design and underpinning concepts, smaller and slower yet good enough, rather than optimised and super-performing. Art-informatics suggests that the question is not whether to engage computational techniques, but how they could serve futures worth wanting for artistic practices and technical cultures. Considering where we actually stand and the prevailing despair, it is a very slight hope. But it is, perhaps, worth holding onto.


01
HUMAN CULTURAL COMPLEXITY
Rich, diverse, context-specific knowledge, beliefs, and practices (e.g., local languages, intricate social norms, nuanced traditions).
FLATTENING
02
DATA EXTRACTION / TRAINING DATASETS
Curating, scraping, and processing divers data into structured formats (e.g., digitised texts, annotated images).
ABSTRACTION
03
MODEL GENERALISATION / COMPRESSION
Learning patterns, reducing data variance to core principles, efficient knowledge representation (e.g., neural networks, statistical models).
STANDARDISATION
04
OUTPUT / ILLUSION OF UNIVERSALITY
Generation of seemingly universal answers, content, and decisions; application across disparate domains (e.g., generated text, generalised predictions).
ARROWS SHOWING LOSS OF SPECIFICITY

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