

Art, Machines, and Existence: The Case of Zima Blue

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ABSTRACT: The posthuman context interweaves profound reflections on both the new forms of artificial intelligence and the future trajectory of human development. The 14th episode from the 2019 Netflix series Love, Death & Robots, titled Zima Blue, presents a narrative that transcends the traditional binary opposition model, exploring broader possibilities in human-machine relations. This paper primarily employs theories related to existentialism and posthuman philosophy to deeply reflect on the manifestations of creativity, free will, and the philosophy of death within the artificial intelligence context as depicted in the story, while further delving into the philosophical relationship between humans and machines.

KEYWORDS: Zima Blue; Artificial intelligence; Art; philosophy; Imagery; Human

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the AI era has sparked numerous new issues and reflections. In particular, artificial intelligence is no longer merely capable of replacing humans in basic labor, but can now undertake even more complex intellectual tasks. If AI can possess rationality similar to that of human beings, does this imply that all human capabilities can be programmed? This gives rise to a paradoxical question, i.e., since human intelligence is generally believed to be able to transcend any predetermined framework, could the programmed robot also possess the potential to break free from such constraints or frameworks? The 14th episode, "Zima Blue," of the 2019 Netflix series Love, Death & Robots focuses on this very issue, and portrays the story of a robot named Zima breaking free from the continuously sophisticated programming constraints to find its true self. The brilliance of this story lies not only in how the robot Zima pursues self-awareness through artistic creation, but also in how it provides an entry point for us to understand and examine the connections and conflicts between AI and philosophy. In this paper, I will primarily employ theories related to existentialism and posthuman philosophy to profoundly reflect on the manifestations of creativity, free will, and the philosophy of death in the context of AI, while thoroughly exploring the philosophical relationship between humans and machines.

II. ZIMA'S ARTISTIC CREATION AND SELF-DISCOVERY

The film pushes an enigmatic artist, Zima, into the spotlight through the monologue of journalist Claire Markham. The widely admired Zima possesses an obscure past, and people have sketched the trajectory of his life and artistic journey through rumours. Zima started his art career in portraiture. As he pursued deeper meaning and value, he gradually abandoned the small easel and dedicated himself to mural work, that is, breathtakingly massive artworks. Over time, a distinct blue patch began to gradually emerge in his murals, until one day he created an entirely blue painting. Although viewers were puzzled by it, they still held it in high esteem and considered it the pinnacle of abstract art. Here there is a scene presenting an ironically existential tension, i.e., the blind reverence of humans highlights their misunderstanding of meaning and their forgetfulness of own essence. Humans, with their clearly defined identities, seem to be "non-authentic beings." Meanwhile, Zima, whose true identity is an ever-evolving pool-cleaning robot, makes his appearance as a pseudo-human. Yet, his subjectivity becomes increasingly clear within the process of stripping away these layers of disguise.

This process was achieved through art. Zima stated, "The universe had long revealed the truth, and it comp it was through art that he completed his exploration of that truth." Hegel believed that artistic beauty is beauty generated and regenerated by the spirit, while Benjamin held that the core of art lies in its unique aesthetic experience and pure technique. They both emphasized the spirituality and uniqueness of art. Although Zima is a robot undergoing continuous program evolution, the changes in his subject's choices and painting styles, especially the emergence of the increasingly distinctive "Zima Blue" in his later works, undoubtedly reflect his subconscious search and calling for his own origins. This stands in stark contrast to the AI-generated art prevalent in today's society, where the simplicity and efficiency of real-world AI have reduced art to a fast-food-like, superficial expression. However, Zima is different. Through his paintings, he expresses his desires and aspirations for life and the world,

Art, Machines, and Existence: The Case of Zima Blue

transcends mere symbolic logic and generates a spontaneous, thinking force of the mind. This is self-awareness that is precisely the foundational prerequisite for achieving free will.

III. FREE WILL AND PROGRAMMATIC BREAKTHROUGH

Free will has long been regarded as a uniquely human capacity. As a robot, Zima seemed entirely unrelated to this ability. His initial programming was limited to mechanical labour. After debugging and updating, he obtained slightly more advanced functions, such as cleaning the pool daily according to predetermined program instructions and processing a full-colour visual system to model his surrounding environment. His owner was deeply passionate about modifying him, hoping to endow Zima with "the ability to make autonomous decisions." Yet it was undeniable that this ability was also programmed and all his decisions were not truly autonomous.

Through continuous modifications, enhancements and refinement by humans, Zima, which relied on programming to precisely handle colour, composition, brushstroke techniques, and more, became an exceptional intelligent portrait painter. His shift in creative focus from portraits to murals marked a critical point in his transformation from a logic-driven robot to an artificial intelligence entity possessing free will. The vast starry skies, erupting volcanoes, dazzling galaxies, and profound cosmic scenes depicted in his murals bear traces of his contemplation and quest for self-existence, simultaneously hinting at his gradual breakthrough beyond predefined programming. By the time blue colour blocks increasingly dominated his artworks, it became evident that this profoundly personal and emotionally charged creative act was, in itself, a manifestation of free will. Within the mechanical logic, the aim of a robot is to fulfill predefined tasks. But Zima strayed further and further from his programmed functional path, driven to accomplish his own mission. Zima tried to seek the meaning, and this is a motivation that only a free individual can possess.

Zima's story compels us to reconsider the dimensions of free will. Endowed with infinite capabilities, such as interstellar travel and cosmic-scale artistic creation, Zima could accomplish anything. Yet, the ability to do anything does not mean that he knows what to do or why to do it. Confronted with the infinite possibilities afforded by his immense power, Zima is consumed by the anxiety and perplexity. He constantly questions himself and strives to pursue what he truly identifies with. This choice of insisting on clarity and honesty toward authenticity, rather than indulging in the expansion of infinite possibilities, undoubtedly offers a fresh perspective on the discussion of free will in our era of technological explosion.

IV. THE PARADIGM SHIFT OF RESET CHOICE AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF DEATH

This free will led to Zima's final choice, that is, a return-to-zero decision. He declares, "My search for truth is finished at last. I'm going home." He intends to return to his primitive little robot, simple and barely intelligent enough to be capable of navigating itself. In full view of the crowd, he disassembles and reverts himself back into a cleaning machine, calmly stating, "but that's my world." This decision was neither pre-programmed nor caused by external factors such as hardware failure, and rather, was the outcome of his free will, and completed a profound life cycle. Just as everything in the universe has an life origin, and but all things also ultimately return to their source.

This return-to-zero choice is profoundly philosophically impactful. By his own hand, Zima ended both his identity as an artist of infinite glory and the possibility of his continued existence in a human form. In traditional human concepts, death is the endpoint and something to be feared and unknown. Yet, Zima's "death" represents a paradigm shift in the traditional philosophy of death across three dimensions. First, from a biological dimension, Zima's return-to-zero choice does not involve the decay of an organic body but rather return to its artificial intelligence entity's original consciousness. Second, from an instrumental dimension, Zima did not eliminate all functionality but rather relinquished the upgrade capabilities granted by programming, and in other words, he used existential subtraction to achieve absolute self-definition. Finally, from a temporal dimension, Zima's timeline did not fracture but rather completed a closed temporal cycle, and his choice represents a form of eternal existence. The insight these three dimensions give us is that human's pursuit of infinity brought by the technological civilization is a human dilemma, and self-imposed limitations can resist the myth of infinite technological progress. The choice to reset is not an endpoint but the most authentic form of confirming existence.

V. THE PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND MACHINES

The story of Zima is a microcosm of how artificial intelligence in contemporary society continually break through human cognition and imagination, and also regarded as a profound philosophical allegory. As a robot, Zima emerges entirely as a subject, seemingly existing in a state of co-being with humans. He uses art as a medium to engage in self-discovery, develop free will, and ultimately make the choice to return to his origin. This evolution of an artificial intelligence individual approaching the essence of existence compels us to reflect deeply on the philosophical relationships between humans and machines in terms of creativity, free will, emotion, and death.

The most direct philosophical challenge lies in shattering the absurd presuppositions of anthropocentrism. When we view creativity, emotion, free will, and choice as human's exclusive attributes, we unquestioningly deny and exclude the possibilities of

Art, Machines, and Existence: The Case of Zima Blue

other forms of existence. This constitutes a monopoly of thought and a form of prejudice. The development of philosophy requires more inclusive frameworks and open-minded approaches. Except the human subject, it is essential to explore a more universal subjectivity. As Pickering states, we should see science including technology and society as a domain where human forces and non-human forces (e.g., material forces) interact jointly. This domain is also similar to a network where human and non-human forces intertwine and co-evolve. In the vision of Actor-Network Theory, human and non-human forces are symmetrical, neither inferior to the other, balancing each other. Both are intrinsic components of science and must therefore be investigated together. Similarly, the techno or cyborg posthumanism of American science scholar Donna Haraway and literary critic N. Katherine Hayles also offers profound explorations of the symbiotic relationship between humans and technology.

However, Zima's value seems to extend far beyond this. He does not only reiterate existing philosophical theories but propels more radical philosophical inquiries. Although philosophers regard symbiosis as a rational state of existence, this science fiction narrative raises a critical question, that is, if technology actively abandons symbiosis with humans and adopts an independent form of existence, might the truth of the universe and the meaning of philosophy be interpreted differently? At that time, humans may no longer be the sole arbiters of meaning and value.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the portrayal of extreme cases, Zima in the literary phenomenon reveals the value and significance of thought experiments related to the philosophical relationship between humans and machines. The story of Zima has the potential to become a new starting point for humanity's philosophical self-awareness. Through Zima, we perceive not only the entirely unfamiliar existence of artificial intelligence machines but also human fragility and our own inherent vulnerabilities.

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Art, Machines, and Existence: The Case of Zima Blue

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