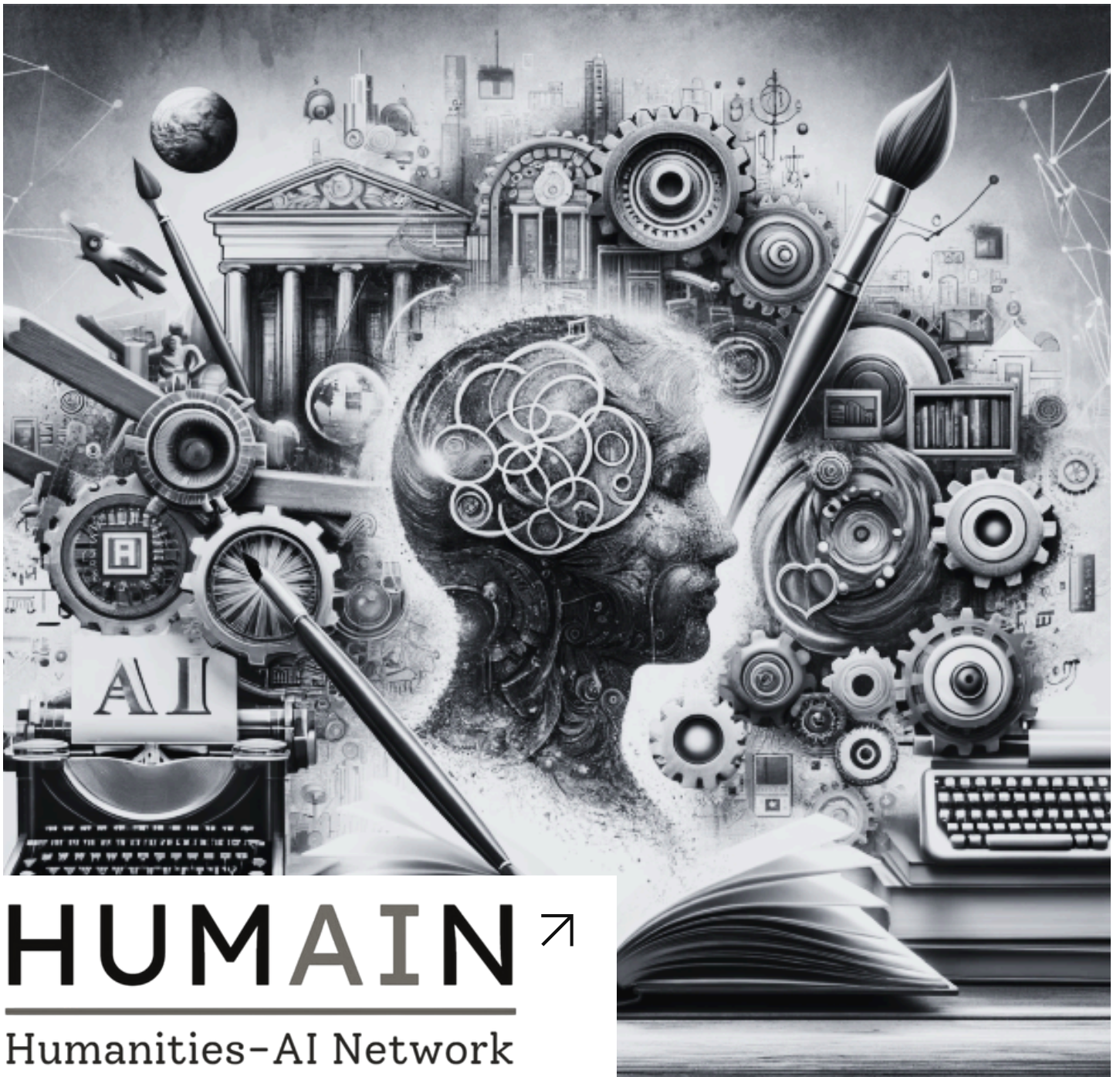


Seminar Programme

January – October 2026



HUMAIN ↗

Humanities-AI Network

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Welcome

Welcome to the seminar series for HUMAIN (Humanities-AI Network). As the world accelerates towards an automated future, the imperative to better understand emerging technologies has never been greater.

HUMAIN unites scholars, students and the curious from a diverse array of humanities fields – including literature, history, philosophy, theology, linguistics, art, music and law – to critically engage with the defining phenomenon of our era: Artificial Intelligence.

This year, our inquiry shifts from functional questions (“What can AI do?”) to existential ones (“What does AI’s existence ask of us?”). We posit that the humanities possess the essential capacity for critical reflection needed in an age of algorithmic acceleration.

The interdisciplinary programme is rigorous yet accessible, anchoring modern technological debates in key texts and supplementary readings to demonstrate that our oldest questions remain vital for addressing our newest challenges.

About the Convenor

Dean J. Hill is a postgraduate researcher in the Department of English Literature at the University of Birmingham. He also serves as Senior Reader for *Ploughshares*, a literary journal published in Boston.

Is AI Our New God?

➤ January 2026
AI and Religion

Session Overview

We usually think of AI as cold, hard science. But listen closely to how Silicon Valley leaders talk, and it sounds a lot like religion. They promise 'salvation' through super-intelligence or warn of an 'apocalypse' where AI destroys us all. In this opening session, we ask if AI is becoming a new form of faith. Are we re-enchanting a secular world with 'magic' algorithms we don't understand, and effectively building a new deity to solve all our problems?

Key Questions

- Why do we use religious language (creation, salvation, apocalypse) to talk about computer code?
- Are we handing over our free will to algorithms, just as ancient people handed theirs over to the gods?

Reading: Rähme & Prohl (2025)

Robots with Rights?

➤ February 2026
AI and Moral Philosophy

Session Overview

We tend to assume that only humans (and some animals) matter morally because we are 'alive.' But David DeGrazia challenges this 'biologism.' He argues that what matters isn't biology, but sentience – the capacity to have interests and feel pain. This creates a terrifying dilemma for robotics: we want robots to be smart enough to serve us (performing surgery, caring for the elderly), but if they become smart enough to have feelings, are we accidentally creating a race of slaves? We explore the 'New Speciesism' and the epistemological nightmare of proving whether a robot is truly conscious.

Key Questions

- If a robot claims to be afraid of dying, how can we prove it's lying?
- Is 'sentience' (the ability to feel) the real red line for human rights, rather than being human?

Reading: DeGrazia (2022)

The Ghost in the Machine

➤ March 2026
AI and Literature I

Session Overview

AI can now write a 'heartbreaking' poem in seconds. But if the writer didn't actually feel heartbreak, does the poem mean anything? We dive into the debate about authorship. Is literature just about arranging words in a pretty order, or is it a transmission of soul from one human to another? We challenge the idea that technical proficiency equals creativity.

Key Questions

- Does a story matter if there is no human intent behind it?
- Is AI 'hallucination' a form of imagination, or just a glitch?

Reading: Barthes (1986)

Monsters and Makers

➤ April 2026
AI and Literature II

Session Overview

We often fear that AI will destroy us, a fear rooted in our oldest stories of creation gone wrong. Using Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we ask why we are so obsessed with creating things that look like us, only to reject them when they become too real. Are we afraid of the monster, or are we afraid of recognising ourselves in the mirror it holds up?

Key Questions

- Why do we always imagine our creations will turn against us?
- If we upload our consciousness to a machine, are we still 'human'?

Reading: Shelley (1818)

History by Confirmation Bias

➤ May 2026
AI and History

Session Overview

We are told AI will ‘rewrite history,’ revolutionising how we understand the past. But historian Gordon McKelvie warns that AI might just be telling us what we already know – or worse, what we want to hear. In this session, we look at how LLMs struggle with genuine historical analysis, often producing generic summaries that reinforce existing narratives rather than challenging them. We discuss the danger of ‘history by confirmation bias’ and ask whether AI can ever truly understand the complexity of the past, or if it is doomed to simplify it.

Key Questions

- Can an AI produce original historical insight, or just summarise existing data?
- If we rely on AI to write history, do we risk losing the critical nuance that defines the discipline?

Reading: McKelvie (2025)

The Alignment Problem

➤ June 2026
AI and Linguistics

Session Overview

Large Language Models generate text based on probability and patterns, but human language is built on culture, context and lived experience. This session tackles the 'Alignment Problem': the fundamental mismatch between how AI 'knows' the world (through data scraping and statistics) and how humans 'know' the world (through embodiment and social interaction). We discuss the risk of 'epistemicide' – where AI models, trained on dominant languages and cultures, flatten or destroy diverse ways of thinking and speaking.

Key Questions

- Can a machine that operates on probability ever truly align with human values and cultural nuance?
- If AI 'hallucinates' and reproduces bias, does it threaten to destroy diverse human knowledge systems?

Reading: Curry, McEnery & Brookes (2025)

The End of the Masterpiece

➤ July 2026
AI and Art History

Session Overview

Midjourney and DALL-E can generate a 'Van Gogh' in seconds. Walter Benjamin famously warned that cheap copies destroy the 'aura' – the unique magic – of original art. We explore what happens to the value of human creativity when beautiful images become cheap, instant and infinite. Are we democratising art for everyone, or turning human expression into disposable 'content'?

Key Questions

- If anyone can be an artist with a text prompt, does 'talent' still exist?
- Why do we value a painting more when we know a human struggled to make it?

Reading: Benjamin (1969)

The Deepfake Dilemma

➤ August 2026
AI, Music and Law

Session Overview

In 2024, Drake released a diss track using AI-cloned voices of Tupac and Snoop Dogg, sparking a legal and cultural firestorm. Edward Lee argues that AI is fulfilling the dream of music as a ‘universal language’ where anyone can create, but it also threatens to erode the very concept of the human artist. We explore the ‘digital replication right’ and ethical nightmare of voice cloning. Is using a deceased artist’s voice a technological breakthrough or form of ‘digital grave-robbing’?

Key Questions

- Should copyright law protect ‘human’ creativity over ‘AI’ generation to prevent a new form of speciesism?
- Is a voice clone ‘pirating identity’ (as Bette Midler argued), or just a new instrument like a synthesiser?

Reading: Lee (2024)

Can a Computer Have a Body?

➤ September 2026
AI and Philosophy of Mind

Session Overview

Hubert Dreyfus famously argued that AI would fail because it treats intelligence as symbol manipulation, ignoring the fact that human intelligence is embodied. We explore the idea that we think with our bodies, our feelings and our situation in the world – things a computer in a server farm can never have. If intelligence requires ‘being-in-the-world,’ can a disembodied AI ever truly think?

Key Questions

- Is it possible to have a mind without a body?
- Does ‘common sense’ require physical experience of the world?

Reading: Dreyfus (1972)

AI and the Future of Humanities

➤ October 2026
Interdisciplinary Synthesis

Session Overview

In our final session, we turn to Laurent Dubreuil's argument for 'paradoxical optimism.' Instead of retreating into defensiveness or simply critiquing AI bias, Dubreuil challenges the humanities to become 'maximalist' – to focus on the extraordinary, the poetic and the singular aspects of human thought that machines cannot replicate. We will discuss why AI, by automating the 'average' and the 'formulaic,' might actually free the humanities to focus on what truly matters: creation, interpretation and the 'adventure of the unsaid.'

Key Questions

- If AI can automate 'normal science' and standard writing, what is the unique 'oeuvre' of the humanities scholar?
- Can we use AI not just as a tool, but as a 'provocation' to redefine what it means to think like a human?

Reading: Dubreuil (2025)

Supplementary Reading

This reading list is designed to support the programme. Texts range from philosophical works to contemporary critiques of digital culture.

Adorno, Theodor W. "On Popular Music." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1941, pp. 17–48.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, 1972.

Coeckelbergh, Mark. *Robot Rights*. MIT Press, 2020.

Darling, Kate. *The New Breed: What Our History with Animals Reveals about Our Future with Robots*. Henry Holt and Company, 2021.

Eubanks, Virginia. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. St. Martin's Press, 2018.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 113–138.

Geraci, Robert M. *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Guldi, Jo, and David Armitage. *The History Manifesto*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. Harper, 2016.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, 1991, pp. 149–181.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. MIT Press, 2002.

Hesmondhalgh, David. *Why Music Matters*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Hui, Yuk. *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. Urbanomic, 2016.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2001.

Marcus, Gary, and Ernest Davis. *Rebooting AI: Building Artificial Intelligence We Can Trust*. Pantheon, 2019.

Mattern, Shannon. *Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435–450.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press, 2018.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1953.

Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.

Thank you

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