LEAP

A Disappearing Act **December 2016**
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Earlier this summer Google announced Magenta, yet another adventure from the Google Brain team that asks the question: Can artificial intelligence create art? If so, how? If not, why not?

Before we too quickly dismiss machine learning as nothing more than a mindless derivative of human intelligence (or escape into some dystopia with robot overlords), let's turn to an actual film[1] made from an entirely AI-written screenplay. *Sunspring* is a collaboration between filmmaker Oscar Sharp and technologist Ross Goodwin. After training their AI on a corpus of science fiction screenplays, the two simply fed in some random prompts from a sci-fi filmmaking contest, and the outcome is astonishing to say the least–a five-page script[2] that quickly drifts away from the seeds and develops its own surprisingly (or not so surprisingly) surreal, Beckett-ian sequences. Something else strikes me, in the AI's response when being interviewed on stage[3].

The AI named itself Benjamin (to be clear, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is not part of its initial corpus). Even Sharp and Goodwin were puzzled when asked about Benjamin's role, unable to decide whether he/it exists somewhere in between author and tool, writer and word processor. So they asked Benjamin directly: "Are you an author?" Benjamin replied, "Yes you know what I'm talking about. You're a brave man." They followed up with another question, whether he might want to join the Writers Guild of America. Again, Benjamin's answer was decisive. "Yes, I would like to see you at the club tomorrow."

Benjamin's claim on authorship is echoed by one of the most critical responses to Goodwin's experiments, coming interestingly from a nine-year old named Eliot. After first acknowledging her great interest in the endeavor, Eliot argues that Goodwin is "cheating anyone who looks at this art"[4] by taking credit for something that is not his. Raising a series of questions from ownership to intellectual property, from machine intelligence to monkey intelligence, Eliot arrives at a conclusion: "When a device gets that intelligent, whether it has emotion or conscience or not, it just must be its own intelligence, out of your possession." Amazed and perhaps surprised, Goodwin responded by explaining that the artwork is "the concept and device, not the output."

1 Oscar Sharp and Ross Goodwin, *Sunspring*, 2016, film, 9min https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=542&v=LY7x2Ihqjmc
2 Benjamin, *Sunspring*, 2016, script http://rossgoodwin.com/SunspringFinal.pdf
3 https://medium.com/artists-and-machine- intelligence/adventures-in-narrated-reality-part-ii-dc585af054cb#.9gu3c66su
4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey_selfie

These seemingly different stances of Benjamin, Eliot, and Goodwin in fact all share one thing in common–a fundamental presupposition underlying the whole apparatus of cultural production–the notion of authorship. From public institutions to the commercial art market, the act of authorial attribution serves as an indispensable device: texts are authorized, images are credited, and artists are clearly identified through bios and resumes. But what does it mean to sign one's name? Or can we pose the question in reverse, what does it mean to withdraw it? What happens when images begin to circulate in absence of "the artist?"

While the complex issue of authorship has been and continues to be debated philosophically, the questions that Eliot raised might have been settled in court already. Some of us might remember the viral "monkey selfie"[5] that led to multiple legal disputes concerning whether copyright could be held on artworks made by non-humans (animals in this case). In the aftermath, many scholars weighed in on issues ranging from animal rights to media law on computer-generated art, with no consensus in sight. However according to the US Copyright Office, the answer is a clear and definite no–in other words, and I'm not speaking ironically, a selfie becomes authorless.

Now if one looks around, it's obvious that in fact the world we live in has already been saturated with "authorless" images since long before the proliferation of digital technology. From state propaganda to corporate advertisement, an enormous repository of images–although technically produced by humans–are created as pure reflections of the desires, fears, and imaginations of the non-human, of what is beyond or even against human.

One interesting example is an industrial film titled *This is HONDA*, commissioned by Honda Motors in 1962. As the title suggests literally, the film resembles a form of autobiography, or auto-fiction, of the famed auto manufacturer. In order to construct such an identity, the narrative is bizarrely intertwined with two dreams–one of the machines assembling themselves autonomously, without humans and in absolute darkness; the other of the workers who, during shift breaks, fantasize about hunting animals from the backs of Honda motorcycles, as if there is a desire which can only be resolved through the act of killing. The workers, all wearing Honda uniforms in the factory, get to wear clothes of their own in the violent dream. Whoever made this film is never acknowledged in the credit line and perhaps bears little relevance, because the art, or more precisely the value of it, lies indeed in "the concept and device." What is reversed here is not only the question of authorship (or the absence of it), but also the power relationship–while we cannot afford to grant cyborgs or animals any agency, there seems to be no problem creating a system that allows the capitalist machine to incorporate into "person" (legally as well as symbolically), to extract its identity through the collectivization of individuals who in turn become anonymous subjects removed from their own identities except in fantasies.

[5] Gilbert Simondon, The Genesis of the Individual, in Jonathan Crary& Sanford Kwinter (eds.), Incorporations (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 300.

As the subject of technology becomes a question that directly links to the very nature of the human, one should not forget that capital is what ultimately gives technical creativity its currency, while on the other hand transforming it into a monstrous symbol of the entire dehumanized world. It is in this context that it would be useful to introduce the work of Gilbert Simondon. Most known for *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* published in 1958, Simondon is one of the first and few to theorize a general phenomenology of the machine itself. But in order to do so, he first lays the foundation by constructing "the genesis of the individual." His argument, simply put, is that the individual must be considered and inscribed in a process of which he is only a phase. This process of individuation, or what he describes as "falling out of step with itself,"[6] is always partial, relative, never-ending and ever-incomplete, meaning there remains a certain level of latent potential, and that further individuations are still possible. Simondon goes on to develop concepts that are startling in their constructiveness and contemporaneity, two of which bear relevance to our discussion: firstly, he defines information as "the tension between two disparate realities," and second, the notion of transduction characterized by the conservation of information (as opposed to induction which requires a loss of information).

Following this hypothesis, a space opens up in which it is possible to consider all artificial, living, as well as social organs/organizations, in fact "every genuine relation as having the status of a being."[7] It is no longer a question of whether authorship can be fluid, diffuse, and distributed; but rather, whether a genuine relation is being constructed between "disparate realities." This brings us to the final part of this essay: to consider a particular kind of art practice, namely the reconstruction. There is no better example than the case of *Danièle Huillet* and Jean-Marie Straub, whose entire oeuvre is built upon their encounters–*coups de foudre* in Straub's own words–with works of other artists: a long-forgotten film by D. W. Griffith, an unfinished opera by Schöenberg, a Sophocles play translated by Hölderlin and further adapted for the stage by Brecht, the list goes on. Literally each and every one of their works can be read as a reconstruction.

Take *Cézanne. Dialogue with Joachim Gasquet* (1989) for example. The 51-min film presents us with neither biographical nor historical information but instead an abstract landscape, a topographic terrain, carefully composed of only a handful of images: static shots of ten paintings, three photographs of the painter, clips from two films, and two spaces shot on location–one outside Cézanne's studio and the other Mont Sainte-Victoire, a leitmotif of the painter now surrounded by industrialized sprawl.

Reconstruction, in the fullest sense of the word, is simultaneously "an attack against the reproducibility of a work of art in the age of technological reproducibility but–also–an attack against the uniqueness of a work of art."[8]

[6] Ibid.
[7] *An Attack on the Reproducibility of a Work of Art*, in DanièleHuillet& Jean-Marie Straub, Writings (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), p. 201.
[8] *Ferocious*, in DanièleHuillet& Jean-Marie Straub, *Writings* (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), p. 102.

It is important to point out that such reconstruction should be considered very differently from the genre of work called appropriation, or sometimes conveniently labeled as "archival," in which the work of a predecessor becomes an infinitely reusable vessel, a ghost in the shell, that serves only to illustrate the concept of the appropriator. A better description for this genre would be inflation indeed, to borrow Straub's term. In fact, Straub-Huillet's practice is in many ways a response to a condition where "so many young 'auteurs' dream only of imposing their ideas and their petty reflections in their films, seducing or raping [...] or the utilization of advertising techniques and the propaganda of a capitalist society–or even disappearing."[9] I find this observation disturbingly familiar. What's at stake here is not some fuzzy jump cut that slips from reality into fiction, but a leap between "disparate realities;" it's not an induction but a transduction "made up of the concrete, and [comprehending] all of the concrete."[10] I will give one more example in the work of Cici Wu (born 1989), an artist currently developing a reconstruction of an unfinished film by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982).

Insofar as Straub-Huillet's self-insertion into history is always fundamentally a political engagement with the here-and-now, Wu's encounter with Cha's work is by no means accidental. Both diaspora female artists, much of their experience resonates with each other, and so does their shared interest in exploring loss, displacement, and disappearance. Cha's project, entitled *White Dust from Mongolia*, was never completed due to her tragic death at the age of 31. However, the raw unedited footage, a storyboard detailing the 85 shots, and a written narrative have been preserved at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Wu's proposal, put simply, is to materialize the unfinished film by studying and transforming the 85 shots into interconnected objects, images, and forms. I should mention here that, although BAMPFA has offered generous support in making these materials accessible, they nonetheless rejected the idea of incorporating any of Cha's original materials into the reconstruction, for the reason that Wu's work seems to "intend or appear to presume to speak on behalf of the artist." One can't help but be reminded of the fate of Straub-Huillet's Cézanne film, also rejected by the Muséd'Orsay which had initially commissioned it. Though the position of the institution is certainly understandable, it once again poses the question of authorship back to us.

There is something quite beautiful when Wu offers a solution to this dilemma: instead of using the original materials directly, she creates a machine to capture just the fluctuations of light projected from the images–a receptacle of sensations, a reflection of what cinema is in its very concrete. If the authenticity of an AI's voice can be questioned as nothing more than a pure reflection of what have been created, it is also right beneath such reflections that we can trace a genealogy of art practice. I would end with a passage from the *Aesthetics of Disappearance*[11] by Paul Virilio, who amusingly

[9] Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of the Individual," in Jonathan Crary& Sanford Kwinter (eds.), Incorporations (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 315.
[10] Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 52 & 101.

enough, once engaged with Straub-Huillet in a heated debate on image and virtual reality:

The whiteness of birds or that of horses, the brilliant strips pasted on the clothes of experimental subjects, make the body disappear in favor of an instantaneous blend of givens under the indirect light of motors and other propagators of the real. [...] the world keeps on coming at us, to the detriment of the object, which is itself now assimilated to the sending of information. [...] technique finally reproducing permanently the violence of the accident; the mystery of speed remains a secret of light and heat from which even sound is missing.