

A Cat's Tale

Gustavo Dessal

David Means, author of six volumes of short stories, has caught my attention in his column published in the NYT on 26 March. It is entitled "*A.I. Can't Write My Cat Story Because It Hasn't Felt What I Feel*."¹ It is a curious title, because in recent times applications are being developed that are capable of replacing creators in the production of artistic, literary and pictorial images. I have not been able to verify the results or the quality (I am not trained as a critic), but I find it interesting to read how a writer positions himself in the face of this debate. I emphasise the word "debate" because even true A.I. experts do not entirely agree on the problem of creation and authorship.

I read Tales Tomasini, one of the most important curators of digital art, who writes an intelligent reflection on the subject: "AI AI AI". He begins by reminding us, as has been the case throughout the history of technologies, that there is a tendency to consider A.I. as the source of evil. "Artists have been revered for creating things out of nothing, and transforming ideas into thought-provoking concepts. However, the notion that machines can possess these abilities raises some questions. For example, can a device be truly creative?" I invite the reader to read his text² because it asks fundamental questions: from what kind of void is the artistic creation of a speaking being and a machine generated? What are the differences?

Let us go back to David Means and his cat story. The fascinating thing is that, in truth, he reveals that this story has not yet been published, but it has been going around in his head for fifteen years, stirring in his imagination from several moments that continue into the present. A fleeting encounter, a note written in his notebook, a fragment of memory, an association provoked by a detail of urban life, the sensation of heat on a sunny day.

Let me quote a statement that contains something very delicate and profound: "I'm not going to go pick a fight with A.I., or even argue with the fact that this technology can mimic artwork, or assist humans in the creation of art, but I can say, right now, here, taking a break from working on my cat story, that A.I. will

¹ Means, D., "A.I. Can't Write My Cat Story Because It Hasn't Felt What I Feel"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/26/opinion/ai-art-fiction.html>

² Tomasini, T., "AI AI AI", <https://www.labirinto.art/legatum-collection>

never be able to do what I can do because A.I. has never felt what I've felt. It will never move through the emotional matrix of living a singular, individual life."³

How can we not hear in this last sentence that poetic language springs from that secret source where words and body are knotted, interwoven, unwoven, torn, mortified and exalted around a void that is its own, unrepeatable, inimitable? This void, this emptiness is not programmable. What will emerge from it cannot be predicted. David Means has enough dignity not to belittle what A.I. may give us. Achievements that in the end are also the result of the action of the speaking being, and that undoubtedly constitute the possibility of prowess in multiple fields of human collectives. But the problem arises from the moment when A.I. becomes progressively autonomous from the control of its creators. Here the road splits in two possible directions. One is that the neutrality of A.I. should be fully trustworthy: why should we speaking beings, in our exquisite mastery, be more trustworthy than A.I. outside our domain? The other direction is that the alleged neutrality of machines is not so, as has been evident in the very serious mistakes it has led to, especially in the area of facial recognition, or in the obstacles to the allocation of mortgages to non-white people. Ultimately, this "digital colonialism", as Abeba Birhane⁴ has named it, designates the fact that A.I. feeds on the best and worst of the billions of data on the web. It can be argued that these deviations, which have caused serious damage to the lives of thousands of people, will be remedied. But the experts themselves admit that others will emerge, and that the fate of an A.I. emancipated from its original inventors may drag us into a nightmare.

As speaking, sexed, death-conscious beings - even if our unconscious is unaware of it - we are confronted with a relationship to the real of existence nowhere comparable to that of the most sophisticated operating systems, even if in the future they were to mimetically replicate a human creation. It may be an astonishing work of art, but it will be lifeless, because machines possess a language not linked to what Marguerite Duras expressed thus: "One writes with the force of the body". A force that circles around the edge that encircles the mystery of life.

There is a question that is still premature for A.I. engineers and programmers to answer: is there a tipping point at which the system moves from being a real subjected to calculable laws to a lawless real? We do know that the laws of robotics formulated by Isaac Asimov are no longer valid. Artistic creation is not

³ Means, D., op. cit.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abeba_Birhane

programmable, and it knows something of the living that A.I. excludes, even if many of its prodigies reach the sublime. This excellence does not prevent A.I. from being a dead process, since it is stripped of any sensibility capable of entering into jouissance in its most equivocal sense. The jouissance that infiltrates the history and intimate vagaries of a speaking being. David Means' success in his debate with A.I. is to open up a question, an invitation to think about difference.

Psychoanalysis is called upon to take an interest in this dimension of the present.

23rd April 2023

Translated by Florencia F.C. Shanahan