I Sing the Mind Electric: Performing AI Poetry

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Recent year has seen an increased interest in AI creativity and AI-generated poetry. Unlike the stochastic and generative poetry projects of the past, which has been mostly viewed as a curiosity, contemporary neural networks are capable of creating poems that are barely distinguishable from those written by humans. In 2020, a book by Liza Gennart – an AI poet programmed by the Slovak artists Zuzana Husárová and L'ubomír Panák – even won a national literary award. As poetry today is presented in performative formats just as often, if not more so, as in print, my paper will discuss the aesthetic implications of performing AI texts.

Unlike other kinds of algorithms, AIs are anthropomorphic by design: they are meant to emulate human intelligence and, in case of AI art, human creativity. This makes the contested question "Who speaks the poem?" ever more pertinent. In contrast to earlier forms of generative texts, whose awkward uncanniness has typically been utilised to question the linguistic construction of subjectivity, AI poetry is characterised by a return of the lyric subject. What relationship does this subject have to the AI itself, to the person who trained it, or to the voice that speaks the poem – be it a human performer or itself a digital entity? Whereas a traditional poetry reading holds the author-lyric subject dialectic in suspension through the mediation of the voice, a performance of AI poetry does the opposite: it exacerbates the gaps that exist between the different subjectivities it manifests. The paper will examine these subjectivities and the gaps between them on two contrasting examples: the poetry recital by the humanoid robot artist Ai-Da and Zuzana Husárová's participatory reading of Liza Gennart's poems. Building on these case studies, it will discuss the aesthetic implications of the two competing conceptions for AI: Alan Turing's idea of autonomously acting anthropomorphic AI and J.R.C. Licklider's vision of AI as a collaboration between human and (fundamentally alien) machine intelligences.

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