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Introduction to "Machine Communication"

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Whether we recognize it as such or not, we are living through the robot apocalypse that had been predicted in countless science fiction stories, novels, and films. The machines are, it seems, everywhere and participating in (or taking over) almost everything. They may have begun by displacing workers on the factory floor, but they now actively contribute to many aspects of our intellectual, social, and cultural life. This infiltration is not some future possibility coming from a distant alien world. It is here. It is now. And resistance appears futile.

In the SyFy television series *Caprica*, the short-lived prequel to Ron Moore's re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, it is revealed that the method of constructing the "perfect copy" of a person, an avatar, is little more than applying an algorithm to data. Zoe, the protagonist of the series, illuminates this "science fiction":

People leave more than footprints as they travel through life: medical scans, DNA profiles, psych evaluations, school records, e-mails, recording - video, audio, cat scans, genetic typing, synaptic records, security cameras, test results, shopping records, talent shows, ball games, traffic tickets, restaurant bills, phone records, music lists, movie tickets, tv shows, even prescriptions for birth control ¹

This is, of course, not just science fiction, but an accurate description of our current social reality. We are all being compiled and recompiled into bits of data, and this data not only produces a digital doppelgänger of each one of us but feeds the voracious machine learning algorithms at Google, Facebook, and Amazon, which in turn inform the everyday existence of the contemporary human subject in all our affairs.

In *Caprica*, this body of data--visualized in the form of the Zoe avatar--eventually becomes the prototype for the cylon, the (spoiler alert) machines who eventually rebel and (attempt to) destroy humanity. So there is an interesting dynamic here that arises from the interface of machine and human – the apparent loss of humanity to the other and the conflict between machinic communication, human communication, and all the different intersections within.

Human and machine constitute a point of interface, a place between, a common boundary, where systems or subjects inter-act, it is a permeable medium that mediates these subjectivities and their intersubjectivities. The machine--in the

¹ *Caprica*.

form of a physically embodied robot, an intelligent software algorithm, or a socialbot--now stares us in the face as another communicative subject possessing what Emmanuel Levinas called "face."² The question then, is what can or should we do in the face of this other--this other form of otherness that calls into question everything we thought we knew about the communicative subject and the subject of communication.

Caprica, like all good science fiction, is not about the future; it addresses the present. This "speculative fiction" presents this entire problematic to us in an engaging and interesting way, providing a depiction of the opportunity and challenge of reformulating the subject of communication in the face of other (kinds of) communicative subjects. In response to this, our present state of machine communication, we will must ask ourselves important but also difficult questions: What are the boundaries between human and machine? What communicative practices or precepts must be drawn, redrawn or reconsidered to explore these increasingly, or always-already technologized relationships? What kind of social world are we creating, when what matters are not just human-to-human interactions but also (and increasingly so) human-to-machine and machine-to-machine relationships? What does it mean for the human subject (and our self-centered concept of human subjectivity) when we are relentlessly intertwined with machines and all the intersections of control that come with it?

All the way back in 1948, Norbert Wiener published the appropriately titled *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, first locating this fundamental focus on control and the relationship of machine and animal communication. Later on, Donna Haraway famously noted that we have always been "cyborgs,"³ referring to the cyborg as "text, machine, body, and metaphor-all theorized and engaged in practice in terms of communication."⁴ Consequently the "robot invasion" that has been depicted and dramatized in science fiction is not a new phenomenon or even a possible future. It is a crisis that is already in progress, a break in how we think subjectivities and communication in the face of the machine and its increasingly capable communicative relationships with us.

Even Heidegger understood this challenge/opportunity and insisted on a far more complicated formulation. To him, it was more than just a problem,

² See Levinas, 1995

³ Haraway, 212

⁴ Ibid.

calling the entire notion of an isolated subject “an absurdity which misconstrues the basic ontological structure of being.”⁵ The questions that must be asked, then, are not just about our current relationship with machines, but also must involve a thorough re-thinking the very nature of being (and the “human being”) itself, complicating things in a way that forefronts the often misunderstood, yet radically important role of the machine.

What we set off to do with this issue was to explore these questions by asking contributors to interrogate and challenge the boundaries of human and machine communication. What we got in response to this provocative call were eight essays that in one way or another break new ground in the subject of communication in regards to the machine (or better “machines,” insofar as the general term “machine” is already part and parcel of the problematic to be interrogated).

Whether considering separate ontologies, reconfigured subjectivities, or “simply” opening up new spaces for inquiry, these eight articles enthusiastically interrogate a variety of perspectives regarding this critically important opportunity or challenge. Whether the question of human-machine interaction, machine-machine interaction, or machines interacting with themselves, we have assembled a collection of essays that probe the boundaries of concern for both human and machine communication. The essays make significant contributions to new understandings of interpersonal communication and the ontology of data images and processes as they are constitutive of the world. They explore the line at which the human-machine relationship dissolves through self-tracking technologies and where technologies speak more for the self, and what the “self” is, than humans often do. They identify, critique, and reconceptualize the anthropocentric prejudice of the interface and the way that the discipline of communication has formulated and operationalized models of algorithmic control. And they break new ground in the subject of communication by challenging what types of machines qualify as communicative subjects and examining how efforts to improve personalization in social robots complicate the way we understand who or what is a legitimate social subject.

The machines are not coming. They are already here. And what matters now, we believe, is how we--individually and as a community--decide to respond to this “robot invasion.” This special issue of the journal is just one attempt in

⁵ Heidegger, 64

what needs to be an on-going effort to begin to make sense of a world where we are not (and perhaps never really were) the only communicative subject.

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