Machinic Inspiration

If there is anything left to the essence of art after the progressive rarefactions of modernism and the recursive transgressions of its successors, it lies in the capacity to *make us think*. Bereft of the norms of tradition, the aims of genre, and the constraints of medium, even the crafting of pleasurable experience has become incidental to the *cognitive role* of contemporary art. However, if we learn only one thing from Kant, it is that the *value* inherent in this role, or the *beauty* that belongs to the artwork, derives from the *cognitive process* it instigates rather than any determinate *cognitive product* it presents. Although the artwork is by no means indeterminate, its determinacy does not consist in some specific meaning conveyed to its audience. Its purpose is not to *communicate* thoughts, but to *stimulate* thinking.

But what does 'thinking' mean here? It could mean the production of 'thoughts', understood as *discursive representations* whose conceptual articulation enables them to partake in the general economy of reasoning about the world and ourselves. However, although the generality of such discursive cognition enables us to integrate the myriad *informational inputs* we receive from our environment into a unified picture of the world, there is still more to thinking, at least insofar as it depends upon more specialised cognitive processes whose outputs it integrates. Neither the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile nor the silent scream of Bacon's Pope Innocent encode a specific message, but each feeds a distinctive informational input into neural networks evolved for facial recognition and interpretation; information that is almost certainly crafted to excite them in specific ways, but which need not aim at any higher discursive synthesis. The smile's mystique and the scream's grotesqueness are an invitation and a challenge to our recognitive faculties, setting them into motion without determining their ultimate destination. It does not matter whether an artwork stimulates visual pattern recognition, auditory processing, sympathetic motor cognition, or engages our conceptual faculties directly, its aim is to *inspire* us by elevating the exercise of these faculties.

But what does 'us' mean here? It could just mean those members of *homo sapiens* who have the relevant neural wetware. However, even if we have yet to create machines capable of full blown discursive cognition (so called *Artificial General Intelligences*), the specialised cognitive processes subtending our own general intelligence increasingly incorporate *cognitive prostheses*: algorithmic supplements that format and feed information into the general discursive synthesis at different points, enhancing pattern recognition, spatial awareness, language processing, memory, and more. Nevertheless, we are only just beginning to see how the algorithmic extension of our capacity to think expands our capacity for inspiration: we are now in the process of reinventing our recognitive faculties, but we have only just begun to explore the smiles and screams that will push them beyond themselves. The frontiers of art practice become increasingly machinic precisely as the frontiers of thought become increasingly machinic. We must learn to make machines think, to inspire them to inspire us.

Bio

Peter Wolfendale is an independent philosopher living in the North East of England. He considers himself a heretical Platonist, an unorthodox Kantian, and a minimalist Hegelian, but is equally happy being described as a rationalist. His work focuses mainly upon the intersection between the methodology of metaphysics and the structure of rationality, but also includes foundational topics in the philosophy of value, ethics, aesthetics, and social theory. He is the author of 'Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes' (Falmouth: Urbanomic 2014), and his blog can be found at http://deontologistics.wordpress.com