

Hot. Writing

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George

I swear I just heard her say it.

George

she mumbled. Clear as day. How can she not recall? It only happened a few seconds ago. But she seems so surprised when the medium says it back to her.

Your late husband's name... it was George, wasn't it? And he passed from something related to lungs... a pulmonary...

Well... yes, yes. I mean... it was the heart, mainly, but then...

Ah yes, something bothering him around this area (he hovers his open palm in front of his chest)

Yes, that's it... it's my George, isn't he?

George is doing alright. At first he felt a bit lost, but through your prayers, he managed to find his way.

Oh George, I....

And he thanks you. And he is telling you not to worry too much about your son and how he is doing in school. He'll...

Oh Andrew! He's such a headache. His marks are down from last semester. He always made us worry.

Don't. George said "Cut him some slack, Mary"

It is something he would always say. "He's just a boy, Mary, he'll figure it out eventually.

Cut him some slack" he'd say.

Mary, I want you to go home and hug you boy. George says he'll be there with you.

Mary buries her eyes in one hand, while the other is slowly lifting her handkerchief from her lap.

She produces no sound. The medium delicately places a hand on her shoulder.

The audience applauds.

What you just read is an example of how cold reading works. It is a widespread technique among mediums, gamblers, and I am sure insurance salespeople. It consists of gaining information about the interlocutor's family, their lives, their feelings towards someone, and much more by observing their expressions and the minuscule shifts in their tone of voice, and by paying attention to every word. Especially the ones they don't recall saying. Mary opened with "my husband George passed away a month ago". She acts surprised when the medium "guesses" his name shortly after. She even says "how do you know"? Well, just roll back the tape and take a look. She said it herself. You don't need to know all the details of the departed. Their relative will reveal them to you. The rest is statistics. Cardiovascular diseases are responsible for something like 32% of all deaths worldwide. If you guess her husband died of one—or better yet you just insinuate that it was "something around his chest"—you are daring to make a bet, but one with pretty good odds.

Cold reading requires an above-average attentiveness and knowledge of psychology, but there is another tactic that any old crook can employ. Hot reading. The televangelist Peter Popoff and his wife Elisabeth Armstrong were well-known figures on the heavily evangelized American TV screens in the 80s. They would sell anything they could to hypnotized disciples who believed they could cure all earthly afflictions through the powers granted by God. In 1986 they put on a hell of a show. Their pièce de résistance. Peter was running from one end to the other of a catatonic sea of faithful, distributing exorcisms and Hallelujahs like a hail of confetti. He would stop every now and then to focus on one lost sheep, ask them their name, and... nothing else. He didn't need to ask. He knew. Their ailments, the attempts doctors had performed with no success, of course, their hands not being guided by Jesus himself, unlike Peter's hands, you see. He would know and recite in a screechy, ear-ripping timbre their entire medical history, and end with a quick purification that apparently solved any and all health problems.

Arguably, the effectiveness of his performance relied on the power of suggestion. The idea that God himself could operate through the mortal hands of Popoff, acting as a vessel. Such belief was reinforced not only by the large amount of people surrounding every fan/faithful present in the venue, but also by the miracle already happening right in front of them and everyone watching at home. The seemingly unlimited knowledge of everyone seated there was granted to Popoff by (whom else if not) the all-knowing Christian God. It was a contagious suggestion, that provided the suspension of disbelief required to accept not only that a person was healed just then, but also that the preacher was actually capable of healing YOU. Because to make it believable, to really sell it, you have to feel immediately better, start walking when not supposed to or taking deep breaths despite a diagnosed lung condition. So, was it God? No, it was not. It was Elisabeth feeding him all sorts of information through an earpiece. Information collected through a questionnaire the spectators had filled in of their own volition shortly before the ceremony.

There are many ways to hot read. Especially nowadays. Even if your subject has not filled in a document to give you all of their data voluntarily, you can consult their Facebook, Instagram, X, GoodReads, or even just google their name to find a series of personal details they might not even know to be available to the public. As long as you keep a certain level of doubt in your “guesses”, you can persuade them that you are able to read their minds or that you are aided by the spirits of the dead. Have you ever experienced that sensation? Feeling like your thoughts have been read like a printed book. An alleged medium or clairvoyant, or maybe a mentalist might have used such strategies on you. Or, even more likely, an algorithm has. Have you ever said you were looking for a new backpack to then find dozens of ads for backpacks on your social media feed? You’d swear they listen to us. But no, they said it was not the case. They said it would be a “gross violation of privacy” if your devices listened to you. They can’t use your mic without your knowledge. But would they even need to? Why hot read when you can hot write?

Games

In the video game ‘The Cosmic Wheel Sisterhood’ your character is an exiled witch with an extraordinary talent for cartomancy. The leader of your coven insisted you are removed from the other witches because your catastrophic predictions might become self-fulfilling prophecies that would undermine the survival of the coven. Your goal is to reconnect with your fellow witches and evade the exile, eventually even running as leader of the group. Soon into the story, you discover that your predictions are so dangerous not because they are too accurate or too negative, but because they are not predictions at all. They are verdicts. You are not reading the future. You are writing it. You had been shunned because you were deciding the destiny of people by interpreting the tarots and even designing them yourself (tarot creation is one of the main mechanics of the game). The most sure-fire way to appear like you are reading someone’s mind—or their future—is to write it.

Writing and reading are a cycle. If a text manages to penetrate your brain with its harpoons—its commas, apostrophes, the hook of a bracket—it will seep into your unconscious, marinating your synapses, shaping your imagination, until it finally gets drained into a blank sheet. You write what you read. And see. And are told. This is just the cycle of things, and the beautiful mechanism that allows ideas to irrigate our arid lives. Like all effective and readable machines, though, all it takes is a sleight of hand to transform it into a malicious trap. When the cycle is hidden and the characters on the page are chosen with care, writing and reading melt into an indistinguishable mass. It’s harder, then, to be certain of where your free will starts, if it even exists.

Predictive models are used in a plethora of sectors from health care to algorithmic trading. Given a large amount of data extrapolated from past and present users, you can predict the future actions of some of them through statistical probability. You don't need to know everything about one user to know what they'll do next. You just need to know what most people have done in the same situation. After liking the same kind of posts or researching the same terms on a browser, or purchasing the same products, almost all of them also went to purchase that specific backpack. And that's exactly what will be presented to similar profiles. This accuracy might lead some people to think that the algorithm—or more vaguely, their phone—can read their thoughts and desires by listening to their conversations. It does have a microphone, after all. But wouldn't that be an unacceptable breach of trust between the companies who make the devices and the social media products, and the user?

Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram at Meta, has addressed these allegations. No, they don't listen to you. They collect data from the advertisers that use their services, and use AI to make sense of them. That's how a backpack brand gets to you just as you were talking about it. A mix of data collection and statistical probability. "You might have actually seen that ad before you had the conversation and not realized it. We scroll quickly. We scroll by ads quickly. And sometimes you internalize some of that, and that actually affects what you talk about later" he explained. Sometimes it's not technology alone that's driving the hyper-accurate recommendations. There's either a coincidence or a bit of human psychology at play.

Are we cold reading ourselves? Or is the algorithm hot writing our thoughts? How can you be sure your desires are not piloted by Meta even before you see the ad they designed for you? Don't you want to free your desires from pre-written prompts? Have you seen the kind of guy who is in charge of writing these prompts? Do you really want your mind to be written by him like CD-ROM burnt with laser?

Spinning CD-ROMs. Platforms refracting light and laser scratches. When I invented the wheel as a young cave-dwelling teen, I never thought it would lead to this. Another quirky variation, I thought. Do I think they came up with the CD-ROM after looking at cave engravings of my wheel? No. I am not that vain. Nor oblivious to the many uses wheels have been applied to. But indirectly in some way, I think I am allowed to claim credit. I think that indeed you should thank me for the CD your friend gave you for your birthday when you were 13 with all the songs you would dance to together. In some way, I made it possible. I used to feel proud to have started all of this. Wheels and turnings and moving around and forming society...

But there has been a bizarre evolution as of late, of what is possible through computer technology, and I don't think I can keep silent about it. I feel some of the responsibility on my shoulders. The wheel led to commerce which led to capitalism which led to whatever is going on now. Silicon Valley oligarchs are a scary bunch and I don't want you to think I might be related to them. I feel like I need to disassociate myself from this poisonous clique. They seem to think they have something in common with me. That we are all geniuses. Well, they wish. So, I decided I will finally tell my story and stop the speculations. I didn't invent the wheel to get rich. I did it out of a sense of responsibility for my tribe. All my sisters loved it from the get-go and helped me promote it. Everybody is still using it thousands of years later. This is a testament to their persuasiveness. Silicon Valley can only dream of having such a phenomenal marketing team.

To tell you the truth, I did not come up with it alone. It was the beginning of spring and we felt like it would be a wonderful idea to get out and frolic in a meadow. Unfortunately, though, we had to move away from the meadow we used to inhabit because a pack of wolves was seen roaming in the distance. An explorer did see another meadow, but that too was too far, and taking our supplies and tools with us would have encumbered us so much all of our frolicking energies would have been wasted in just getting there.

We looked around, trying to find a solution. We went into a cave fully covered in engravings and paintings. Between the many illustrations, we found one of the sun. A minimalistic round blot of red clay above cattle and people armed with axes. The usual. But then, one of us entered the cave giggling uncontrollably. We turned to her and asked what was so funny. Instead of answering, still giggling, she handed us some sticky, vaguely fluorescent goo. It didn't look too appetizing, but another girl recognized it and assured us it was worth tasting.

So we did. We all had some. Looking back at the painted sun, a circle whose reverberations seemed to never end, I/we got lost in each other. All facing the painting, all fused into one. Like when you let your eyes cross looking intently at your finger and it starts becoming multiple, your hand turning into tentacles. That's what happened to the sun. And to our consciousness. Its reach outsized the cave walls. It inflated until it upgraded to another dimension. The sun became a sphere. It was now the shape of a drop of water. Then, it started spinning. Faster and faster, until the force made it into a thick disk. And there it was. When our collective trip was over I was the one who suggested we make it into a real object. We all knew without speaking what that meant. We could make wheels, connect them with sticks, put a plank on top of them, and bring all our heavy stuff to the meadow. We didn't need to say it. We realized it and we drew it, so it could be recorded for other people to see it. So they didn't need to go through the same epiphany we did. So no, me and Peter Thiel don't work in the same way. Not even close.

Some things are giving me hope, though. The girlies are making their own computers, now. And putting them in Polly Pocket cases. They are called cyber decks. I am not sure we are doing the revolution through hand-held devices that encapsulate the tech that contributed to us getting here in the first place, what with the whole tools of the oppressor... But it's fun to abandon ourselves to girly, techy, early 2000 fantasies. Maybe I should concentrate more.

‘Split Fiction’ is a co-op video game in which each player controls an aspiring fiction writer. Mio is a sci-fi lover while Zoe has been creating fantasy worlds since a young age. The screen is split into two worlds, built on clichés typical of each genre. The premise is that a company has launched a project to extract ideas from aspiring authors and help them publish their work in exchange. Their true intent, though, is to steal their ideas directly from their minds and use them to create sellable books. Sucked into the machine and navigating a digital world, they’ll eventually manage to escape the threat and publish their own book about the experience. The premise of the game might seem far-fetched, but in our world similar oddities already happen.

The French ministry of defense is looking for sci-fi writers to help design the future strategies and weapons to adopt in warfare scenarios. Officially, their role is to use their imagination to foresee threats to the security of the country. Jonas Staal writes about this eerie ping-pong between fiction, pop culture, and the military. Army apparatuses worldwide are rehearsing war and employing the same infrastructures and people as Marvel movies. Militainment, they call it. Wars are reproduced in video games and video games are prototypes of war scenarios. Blood splatters and smithereens are numerical expressions. They are routinely translated into programs that dictate the future of the conflict theaters around the world.

If stories are the fuel of warmongers, I wage that combatting fiction with fiction is a viable strategy. Fighting rhetoric with narrative. Crude reality with delirious imagination. There are many ways to embody the unreal, to give shape to impossibilities. Militant joy is based on the notion that utopia should be somehow tangible: a moment where we act as if the revolution had already happened. It needs to become a memory, a presence in our brain that is usually occupied by rosy remembrance and not by optimistic future possibilities.

Utopia should be a reality we long to return to. That can only be done through the experience, here and now, of a limited portion of the world organized and conceived in utopian terms. One of the ways we can achieve this leap into the unrealized is through writing. Writing not as you would a letter to Santa Claus, but as you would a manifesto, an engraving on the wall of a cave, the marks dermatographism allows your nails to leave on a thigh.

Generation

My father is a ‘Star Trek’ fan and he used to say that some diagnostic tools and other futuristic technologies like a proto-iPad used by the characters in the series were predicting the advancements made in real life by scientists. What is more likely is that the designers and researchers of those products grew up watching ‘Star Trek’ and were fed that imagery during their formative years. ‘Star Trek’'s writers didn’t read into the future. They wrote it into reality. A reality that could be easily financed and that promised head-spinning revenues to the right industries. Innovation, or the materialization of future-oriented visions, is almost always fueled by those same stakeholders. The story that makes eyes glisten is that the authors of the (in many ways pioneering) sci-fi series have plucked inventions from the future, dragging them into the past through a portal made of ingenuity and a healthy separation of the limits of our reality. Instead, what they created was the media-driven influence to affect designers and engineers (who definitely had posters and VHS’s collections in the childhood bedrooms) in their research.

The home-cleaning Tesla Bots are anthropomorphic because the people that made them are used to other people—not machines—cleaning their houses. They come from a desire, not a need, to be served by other people. It’s not the outcome of a necessity but of a fetish. We see them as human because sci-fi trained us to. These robots look like people that would be employed in care work. Usually migrants, bent on shiny floors. Whoever can afford them could also afford to employ a person, without all the disadvantages of regular employment and legal remuneration. Anthotpomorphism and anthropodenial are the extremes of a spectrum. One appreciates the similarities between human and animal behavior, recognizing some sort of kinship, while the other chucks all claims of human-like demonstration of empathy to deluded projection.

Our capability to analyze animals' actions depend on the kinds of view we are fed. We can stop doubting we are animals among animals only through a healthy dose of imagery that shows us as much. Maybe then, clad in this empowering revelation, we can finally see more-than-human entities—robots included—for what they are. Ungraspable and frustrating and often hostile.

Many videos of helpless robots trying to dance and miserably falling in nervous fits populate the internet. Users are starting to use the derogatory term “clanker” to refer to them. Their moves are uncanny, the purpose obscure if not irritating. Whoever made and programmed them thought that we needed machines to dance. Not to be entertained, but to express ourselves by letting something else do it for us. Some robots are designed to fight. They learn from real confrontation with expert fighters and can be programmed to perfectly execute elements from martial arts. They jump and kick and parry. With the right training and programming they will soon be able to face a human opponent.

But why? Why train a machine for hand-to-hand combat when you could program it to disarm, immobilize, or just shoot? Why make ‘RoboCop’ with none of the empathy? Why not just a mini tank? or one of those with wheels and a gun strapped on its robot arm? Why do all tech bros need a person-looking or -sounding thing to cook their meals, pick up their kids, wash their car, fight their wars? If it was empathy you were after, why make machines in the first place? And if it is not, why make the machines into somewhat human surrogates?

The somewhat-human, quasi-human look always follows the same rules, since Rosie, the robot maid in ‘The Jetsons’. Robots that assist you need to have a slender body—no useless bumps and swellings—arms and legs to move around and reach, no face and no genitals. When doing manual labour, those are superfluous, and probably uncomfortable to see. The aesthetic of faceless, white, polished bodies consisting only of what’s useful depends on function and efficiency. Bodies that frown and potentially want to fuck or bear children are not useful. Social reproduction is not yet a task robots can take care of, but we’re slowly getting there.

The design choices of the engineers who make robots (and of their bosses) reveal more about human labour and exploitation than they do about technological functionality. The way we can imagine robots is limited to the options we are given by mainstream sci-fi. So let's expand and go further. We will not surrender to Rosie.

A membrane stretches not to accommodate but to remember its shape. Like a cat on the patio. Rumbling stomachs accompany it to its next dwelling. An aperture welcomes part of its reticular presence. The rest of it, with its bleeding wires, waits just outside the hole. Membrane's job is to keep out until it's time to let in. A wall entering is not as rare an occurrence as you might think. Cyanobacteria knock at the door. They are now 2342. You decide you need to eat one. Algae need to eat cyanobacteria to evolve in the next stage of algae. You need to learn how to do photosynthesis. It will make it easier to acquire energy from your environment. What floats and hits you needs to enter you. Photons or proteins. People, in some ways.

You expand, letting the structure of you thin itself out, reaching the most extended version of you possible. You and the membrane are not scared of ripping. You'll make yourself into the next version of algae you need to be to survive. Walled cells can't deform, they will rigidly separate, the space in between already filled by filaments. Memories of previous configurations. Maps to future structures. But there is no such thing as the past. You already are the next algae while you ingest the bacterium. 2341 other beings reach the entrance of the hole and surround it like a necklace on a decapitated monarch. Green phosphorescent beads pointing towards a mouth with no teeth. Then you disjoint and cells start disseminating in every direction. All of them. They are boundless. To the left and to the right of every direction there is an uncountable number of corpuscle. Their trajectories form a circle the widens, and to cover the infinite number of points in the distance they need to stop overlapping so much. Finally, they take up all the space until there are no more fissures light can pass through.

Membrane is bigger than your interminable expansion, or rather, it doesn't concern itself with the size of things, which ultimately yields the same result. You are engulfed by the membrane, that spits you out as soon as your outer layer gets into contact with its. You're out as you're in. But you are not yourself on the other side. A fundamental part of you got separated, collected in the net.

Scratching your sins, you dilate. What streaks are left behind and where will they fall? In the abyss, I would guess. Feigning nonchalance, I turn away for just a moment so the remnants won't see me worrying.

Who are you on this side? Should I even call you "you"? You tell me. Should I start calling you "we"? Because, you see, I stayed here the whole time. I was looking at that you through the membrane. You appeared foggy, but intact. You were you. But now that I see you on this end, without the pane of membrane but also without parts of you that seemed important, I don't know who you are anymore. Are you us, now? Are we we? Please, get back to me about this soon, I fear we are running out of time.

How can we free ourselves from more-than-human stereotypes, moving beyond allegory and refusing to extract nature as a reservoir for metaphors of a human we insist on keeping separate? I understand the utility, but I resist the extractive gesture that turns living beings into raw material for meaning: the idea ripped away from the carcass, thrown in a sentence or a speech, stripped of smell, humors, substances, desires. Orwell's roses are, first and foremost, roses—as Rebecca Solnit reminds us.

We need to move past the suggested and the personalized toward something uncanny, uncomfortably alive, not simply “human in disguise.” But we keep reproducing the same template. In imagining robots, we default to mirrors rather than worlds—or even worse, to windows onto poverty—where machines are modeled as exploitable workers, frequently coded as migrant labor. They become direct clones of domestic service, except without the complexity of accent, history, or refusal. White, middle-class imagination produces a white male-bodied worker and expects it to make sense inside the home: a strange fantasy where class is displaced but never questioned. Why do they all look and sound like versions of us? Why not a box with wheels, a swarm of tentacles, something that refuses resemblance? The Jetsons at least had the honesty to stage labor as visibly non-human, even if flattened into caricature.

Robot Wars consoles me. Ghost in the Shell frightens me: its insistence that machines must resemble (healthy, able-bodied, conventionally attractive) humans in order to stage the question of consciousness. Same with Blade Runner. Sameness in every variable except the “essential” one, so that identity can be isolated like a specimen to be studied.

But what if we didn't design mirrors? What if we stopped trying to isolate the “human” by subtraction? I would rather we produced more Robot Wars machines than Tesla bots—more stubborn, non-anthropomorphic entities than sleek replicas of ourselves—if the polished dystopias of 80s Japanese OVA aesthetics are not the future we actually want.

Counter-writing can be one of our tools for resistance against capitalism. As 'Star Trek' authors shaped our reality, we can decide to write our utopias into existence. Instead of removing ourselves from fiction and imagination for fear it will disconnect us from reality, we should start hot writing our worlds to hardwire them into our psyche. Write weird. Resists. Convince yourself of to live in your utopia. Construct imagery that doesn't fit into reality yet, don't rely on any trope. Use all the tropes at once. Make it indigestible, make it something you'll be shameful about, or that you would just cringe at. Make it so hot they need to pass it down like the proverbial potato. To build we need to surrender. Write yourself a braver stance. Write it out. Write it hot.

