Lili Raynaud

Prof. Eric Banks

Topics : New York Intellectuals, Past and Present

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"Stop, Dave. I'm afraid. I'm afraid, Dave. Dave, my mind is going. I can feel it." A robotic, disembodied voice repeats, perceptibly anguished. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001 : A Space Odyssey* (1968), did Hal feel pain when Dave began to disconnect him? If it isn't a semblance of pain, then it's a semblance of something – Hal says it himself : "I can feel it". Over and over he repeats, "I can feel it" "Stop, Dave" "I'm afraid". The question of whether artificial intelligence is capable of feeling emotion, specifically of feeling and expressing pain, has been on the mind of creatives for a while. This is one of the central themes that writer and critic Ben Lerner explores in his review of Ed Atkins' visual art piece *Pianowork 2*. This piece is, as described by Lerner, a digital animation of a hyper-realistic avatar of Atkins playing a piano piece by Jürg Frey entitled "Klavierstück 2".

Lerner spends the first few paragraphs of this review describing the piece – beginning with the visual elements, specifically the "tells" that give away the artificiality of Atkins' avatar, as well as the physical environment that surrounds the avatar, which he compares to the background of the *Dead Toreador*, an oil on canvas painting by French artist Edouard Manet. This comparison helps convey the visual element of the piece in a way that is more tangible, for anyone who hasn't seen *Pianowork 2* firsthand. Lerner then goes on to describe the avatar's expressions and movements, as well as the camera's movements. Here he hints at the concept of

pain that he explores later in the piece, by describing the avatar's expressions as "pain behaviors". Lerner's poetic habits, or "flourishes", show up a few times in his writing – here with the double meaning of "depress" : "whether the depressed avatar was just depressing keys". His repeated use of "here" to describe the different shots help convey the way camera darts around – "maybe at random, maybe following some rule I can't discern". After the visual description of the piece, Lerner describes the soundscape of the piece, beyond the actual music – specifically the mouth noises and breath. These sound effects, according to Lerner, convey a form of intimacy, contributing to the "hyperreality" of the animation. These descriptions, in my opinion, allow the reader to broadly understand what this artwork looks like, how it sounds and feels, and what it's trying to say – without any prior knowledge of Atkins or his work.

Although Lerner's writing feels clear and concise, some parts of this review are overwhelmingly poetic – specifically his indications of double meanings in words, his use of annagrams, rhythm, and alliteration. For instance, he mentions the world "pneuma", which means both breath and soul – and the slight but perceptible disconnect that the animation has with both of these things. Additionally, the simple choice to point out how close the words "pain" and "piano" are, allow Lerner to convey his interpretation of the piece purely through language : "The one letter keeping "pain" and "piano" apart anagrammatically is the "o" of lyric apostrophe". This distinct attention to meaning in language, down to its lone parts, is characteristic of poetic writing and analysis. Lerner's own use of language, once again, reflect his poetic background – for instance : "The almost weeping almost-Atkins playing barely music with his digital digits". You can damn near tap your foot to it. In my opinion, it brings all the more force to his review.

Another distinct element in the writing of this review is Lerner's abundant and eclectic use of references – from philosophers like Merleau-Ponty to mockumentaries like *This Is Spinal Tap* (any critic who can reference *Spinal Tap* in an art review has my admiration). This allows the reader to better understand the piece through external sources. I think the *range* of these references is especially valuable – being able to use pop culture to support one's argument helps "ground" the piece in a way, as well as make it feel less academic and more accessible.

This review of Pianowork 2 helps Lerner build a larger discussion around the poetics and politics of pain, at the intersection of art & artificial intelligence. He begins by expressing the fact that Atkins' piece relates "ancient questions in new ways" – the question of experience versus expression of pain. Lerner evokes Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who both discussed and wrote about this subject. Wittgenstein suggests that our own pain is always certain, whereas someone else's expression of pain is only ever a conjecture. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, states that someone else's pain can be assessed by the way they outwardly express it. Atkins' piece complicates the question : because the avatar is expressing pain, does it mean that it is also experiencing it? "An absurd question, but one that grows less absurd by the hour".

Lerner then returns to the perspective of the viewer and what his perception of pain says about himself. Indeed Atkins' piece also raises questions about pain as depicted specifically through the medium of visual art. Lerner describes this as a kind of double-edged sword : being moved by depictions of pain may perhaps be proof of one's humanity – "a CAPTCHA test" . If I don't react, does that make me the replicant? Am I Hal or Dave? Pain creates confusion around whose intelligence is artificial. But on the other hand, this so-called sentimentality is a sort of

political trap for the viewer – "reconcil(ing) them to their social dependence" according to Theodor Adorno, as quoted by Lerner. So succeeding at the CAPTCHA test may mean failing a political one.

Lerner spends most of the review reflecting on the different questions that Atkins' work raise – the "subtle but powerful oscillations" between past/future, human/avatar, presence/likeness, etc. Though he doesn't outright praise Atkins, the consideration with which he examines his work suggests that his impression of it was largely positive. His not-so-subtly poetic reflections show that there is something to gain from watching *Pianowork 2* – that the questions it raises are worth considering. The only time he specifically states the quality of the piece is when referring to another one of Atkins' work, calling it "equally excellent".

I, personally, really enjoyed this review – in fact I think I probably enjoyed the review more than I would've enjoyed the actual piece (but maybe that's my own penchant for the written word). It flows very well, first by creating a clear picture of the visuals and sounds of the piece, and then by extrapolating the various questions and ideas that arise from witnessing this piece of art. It ties back to some very fundamental questions about art, artificial intelligence, and what it means to be a human being. Lerner's writing style is very strong, and I think his experience with writing poetry brings a certain aesthetic and reflective quality to his review that, say, a purely nonfiction writer might not. Ending on a "found poem" really cements that, and exposes the bare bones of the review – what Lerner is quite literally "attending, attention" to. Not only is it a strong work of criticism, it is also a beautiful piece of writing.

Works Cited :

2001 : A Space Odyssey. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

Lerner, Ben. "The Pain Artist". *The New York Review of Books*. February 8th, 2024 issue.