

Elisha, becoming ELIZA, finding Elisha

by Ilaria Vergani Bassi

Brian Eno, Rick Holland - *The Real*

The flourish
seeing the real in things
really seeing the real
describing the exact actuality
of what it is you see
or what it is you seem to see
you really seem to see the real
the exact and actual reality
of the real in things you seem to see
the real thing
and no other voice or paint in this
but just the thing, you see
the thing you see
is the real in things
what you see is what seems
the reels of this seem to mean the real in things
while real runs out and seems to reach the real
as it runs
no dry run
the real is done

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(the real is done).

The track *The Real* (2011), the fruit of a collaboration between British poet Rick Holland and Brian Eno, pioneer of electronic music, constitutes one of the most representative poetical arrangements of the post digital era.

Eno's slow accompaniment consists of sonorous, timeless notes in the most profound reflection that the relationship between man and machine has produced to this day, the imperceptible boundary between the real and the virtual.

Elisha Mudly, actress, dancer and musician, recites, in soft, neutral tones, the lines of the poet Rick Holland: "seeing the real in things / really seeing the real / describing the exact actuality / of what it is you see". In this other-worldly atmosphere - fluid, suspended, slow, delicate - the lines are repeated in the second part of the song, but Elisha's voice becomes gradually more robotic, more artificial, until it becomes that of a machine: "The things you see / is the real in things / what you see is what seems."

What do we seem to see? What is the boundary between the real and the virtual?

Perhaps by chance, perhaps deliberately, Elisha seems to become Eliza, the first example of Artificial Intelligence created in 1966 by Joseph Weizenbaum in the years of psychedelia, the years in which John Perry Barlow, singer with the Grateful Dead, envisaged a new electronic frontier based on an alternative version of reality, free and democratic. (He went on to write *A Cyberspace Independence Declaration* and founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) “an international non-profit organisation of lawyers for the protection of digital rights and freedom of speech in the context of today’s digital age”: Wikipedia).

ELIZA was a computer psychotherapist based on the therapy model of Carl Rogers, famous for repeating back to the patient what they had just said. ELIZA simulated artificial intelligence by responding to the user-patient with questions created by reformulating statements made by the patient themselves. The results were astonishing: users knew perfectly well that in reality they were only speaking to themselves, but remained seated for hours in front of the machine confiding in it.

ELIZA was followed by numerous experiments based on similar algorithms, and soon the idea was born that computers could monitor how human beings behaved and what they said. Through intelligent analysis of the data obtained from this algorithm, analysts claimed to be able to predict what society would do, and what it wanted. This was the birth of the DATABASE. This was the birth of A.I. This was the birth of the foundations of systems that would be developed in the 90s, such as “Collaborative Filtering” created in 1992 by GroupLens at the University of Minnesota. These systems were based on the idea that by comparing data on user preferences, patterns could be found on which predictions could be based. These algorithms were adopted by corporations and multinationals, and the same systems now form the basis of Amazon, Facebook, Netflix, Spotify and so on.

An interesting reflection is made by historian, journalist and BBC documentary film-maker Adam Curtis in relation to the financialisation of artificial intelligence and its effect on the man-machine relationship from the 90s to the present day: “What Amazon and many other companies began to do in the late 1990s was to build up a giant world of the past on their computer servers. A historical universe that is constantly mined to find new ways of giving back to you today what you liked yesterday - with variations. Interestingly, one of the first people to criticise these kind of “recommender systems” for their unintended effect on society was Patti Maes who had invented RINGO. She said that the inevitable effect is to narrow and simplify your experience - leading people to get stuck in a static, ever-narrowing version of themselves. Stuck in the endless you-loop. Just like with ELIZA. But like so much of the modern digital world - these new systems are very abstract. And there is little to see that happens apart from endless fingers on keyboards. So it's difficult to bring these effects into any kind of real focus. Last year - in a live show I did with Massive Attack - we tried to evoke this new world. We used a song from the 1980s called *Bela Lugosi's Dead* - which I love because it has a very powerful feel of repetition. The audience were surrounded by 11 twenty-five foot high screens. I'm not sure how successfully we did it - but what I was trying to show is how your past is continually being replayed back to you - like a modern ghost. And it means we stand still unable to move forwards. Like a story that's got stuck.” (*NOW THEN*, from the blog of Adam Curtis, 25 July 2014, BBC).

What is real? What is virtual? Where does human perception fit in, a perception distorted by this constant feed from the past, behavioural retargeting, “fake news”? While “the reels of this seem to mean the real in things / while real runs out and seems to reach the real / as it runs / no dry run / the real is done”? I interpret Holland’s words as follows: the reels = the films (films, stories, digital images, archives) in things (what we see or what we are exposed to), seems to represent the real nature of things, while reality runs out and seems to have the same function as truth, no dry run (unlike machine software which is tested in this way) truth is completed, brought to an end (whereas reality is continually changing, and time passes).

The first line of Holland’s poem begins with the words “the flourish”, which has connotations of growth and flowering. In Italian, the word for this is “florilegio”, and the same word also means “anthology”, lending wider possible interpretations of the text.

The text takes on a double meaning if we translate the first line as “growth” or as “anthology”. In the first case, if we interpret “flourish” as “growth”, we obtain a sense of man’s growing awareness in his observation of reality or what he perceives as reality. In the second case, however, if we interpret “flourish” as “anthology”, we arrive at a collection of data, the machine’s observation of man, the construction of databases.

The result is an interesting parallel with the analysis of database and narrative put forward by Manovich in his essay *DATABASE AS A SYMBOLIC FORM The Database Logic*, which refers to “the “dimensions of language”, the syntagmatic dimension and the paradigmatic dimension, formulated by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Thus in Holland’s poem Elisha becomes Eliza, Eliza becomes Elisha.

What role does documentary play in relation to the database as an accessible medium on the web? For Manovich, “Database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age...The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material.” The user creates a different personal narrative experience each time.

What the Eliza experiment showed in 1966, a period of individualism and anthropocentrism, was that people felt reassured by a machine that showed them a reflection of themselves. “If you liked that, then you’ll like this.” Weizenbaum realised that, while it was very difficult to make machines think like men, it was very easy to make men think like machines, by simplifying human reasoning in the same way as occurs with a social media interface or a Facebook timeline, which is a database. Man becomes a function of the machine.

How can we harness this simplified media language and mass “mindlessness” and turn it into a message of awakening? What language should we use to communicate with people who are trapped in a static version of themselves “while real runs out and seems to reach the real / as it runs”?

Kevin Adam Curtis (born in 1955) is a British journalist, historian and documentary film-maker. “Curtis says that his favourite theme is “power and how it works in society”, and his works explore areas of sociology, psychology, philosophy and political history. Curtis describes his work as journalism that happens to be expounded via the medium of film. His films have won four BAFTAs.” (Wikipedia). Curtis’s narrative is strongly linked to databases. Curtis, “works alone, often buried in the archives, unearthing emotive material or researching obscure individuals whose influential stories have been overlooked in the grand narratives of history.” (*Adam Curtis: cult film-maker with an eye for the unsettling* - The Guardian - Sunday 4 January 2015).

Curtis defines himself as a historian and journalist rather than as a documentary film-maker.

In an interview in 2012, Curtis explained: “I’m not a documentary-maker. I’m a journalist. I like stories. And as quickly as I could, I went off and watched other films that had stories in them. What drives me is: is it possible to make real life as story-like as novels are? Or fictional films? I’ve never been interested in that observational documentary tradition [...] Good journalism should do that. What I do is I tell a good dramatic story. Most of what I nick doesn’t come from films, it comes from novels. The biggest influence I’ve ever had was actually a novel my father gave me to read at the age of about 13. It was a novel called *USA* by John Dos Passos. At that age, it just got me. You can trace back everything I do to that novel because it’s all about grand history, individual experience, their relationship. And also collages, quotes from newsreels, cinema, newspapers. And it’s about collage of history as well. That’s where I get it all from. So I tell a story, and then at the beginning and the end I argue the interpretative point on the basis of the story I’ve told you, which basically says, ‘Agree or disagree with this, but have you thought of looking at the world *this* way as a result of this story?’”

In this way, documentary becomes a highly democratic instrument because it offers everyone an understanding that they did not previously have – or at least provokes reflection.

According to Manovich, the linear narrative dimension is preserved over time because the dominant logic of the twentieth century was that of the cinema. Documentaries preserve the logic of the linear narrative by interpreting DATABASES. Narratives have played a key role in the history of every population, providing archetypes that explain daily life. Similarly, new media bring together our entire

cultural production, and it is people's use of the web that creates a constantly renewed narrative. Today, however, it is difficult to construct such a narrative, or to find "real" meaning in this immense accumulation of data: from the moment that our past is continuously reproduced and replayed, we find ourselves compelled to relive and reproduce the same experiences over and over again. Bombarded as we are by information and "fake news", it is difficult to develop a clear understanding of what is real when many 'realities' are provided by new media. We need greater awareness of our relationship with new media and a stronger sense of our own point of view so that we can challenge what we are told. I therefore believe it is important that documentaries are produced to guide us in developing this understanding and which can at the same time provide us with an understanding of the reality in which we live.

I believe it is important that Elisha reverts to recognising ELIZA as a machine and not as a virtual reflection of herself. Through this regained awareness she will ultimately control ELIZA as a communications medium, in beauty, in literature, in art, without forgetting that she has the body of a human, of an animal, broadening her ethics to a more general level, no longer anthropocentric but extending her outlook with awareness and respect to every ecosystem, whether it exists in the real world or the virtual world.

Sources:

All sources quoted are freely available on the internet, with the exception of the BBC iPlayer channel which is available only in the UK. However, many of Curtis's documentaries are available on the web on YouTube. This essay is an example of "interactive narrative". The contemporary authors cited in my short essay rely on on-demand streaming platforms such as Spotify, BBC iPlayer, iSchool and YouTube. Manovich's essay *DATABASE AS A SYMBOLIC FORM The Database Logic* is available on the iSchool of UC Berkeley in San Francisco.

Brian Eno, Rick Holland - *The Real* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2ZJz7bPpo>

Wikipedia, ELIZA - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA>

Wikipedia, John Perry Barlow - https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Perry_Barlow

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Lev Manovich, *DATABASE AS A SYMBOLIC FORM - The Database Logic* -

http://courses.ischool.berkeley.edu/i290-1/s04/readings/manovich_database.pdf

BBC Adam Curtis, *HyperNormalisation* - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04b183c/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation>

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