TECHNOANIMALISM

Can we one day design a machine that is indistinguishable from the animal? This is the question that drove René Descartes, four hundred years ago, to his widely influential Animal-Machine hypothesis.[1] This ethological hypothesis (ethology is the study of animal behaviour – see *Animal*) claimed that animals, like other machines, were assemblages of parts and as such he rejected the idea that animals are able to attain a degree of rationality; animals do not 'think' and their behaviour is not in any way similar to human action. Nicolas Malebranche, seconding Descartes, took this idea a step further, claiming that the cries and groans of this animal-machine point to its mechanical failures (its 'cogwheels') rather than to its joy or sorrow.

Built upon the idea that one needs the human brain to think, this Cartesian hypothesis extends well into our time. For although the life sciences and related disciplines today are very much interested in how actually all animal life pursues a 'kind of' thinking, having a brain that somehow resembles the human brain is, according to many scientists, still regarded a necessity. Much of animal behaviour is still ascribed to animal instinct (innate non-reflective behaviour), developed in its contemporary form by Konrad Lorenz and Nicolaas Tinbergen in the 1950s. And this idea of 'instinct' still shows a deep Cartesian belief in humanism: it considers animal behaviour still predominantly as mechanically. This becomes all to obvious when highly complex animal behaviour, when executed by 'brainless' cytoplasm, causes fierce discussions in major scientific communities, as a fairly recent discussion in *Nature* (12 May 2005 issue) shows. The discussion (between Rüdiger Wehner and Dan-E Nilsson et al.) concerned the cubozoa, also called box jellyfish or sea wasp (though these creatures are neither of the family of the jellyfish nor of the wasp). Cubozoa move most elegantly and rapidly and react with great refinement to their environment (they are fierce hunters). They have an elaborate sensory apparatus most remarkable for the complex eyes that include very sophisticated camera lenses that come very close to our own. But the idea that these complex eyes and its complex behaviour were possible without there being a central, uniform nerve system (as with us humans) seemed to exclude the idea that this animal could think or feel, or experience joy or sorrow.

Examples like the cubozoa make us wonder what this 'machine', as Descartes proposes it, is all about. And what makes it unfit to 'think', feel and experience, like we (humans) do? In his *Discourse* Descartes is quite clear on this as he gives us two reasons for this. First of all machines could not understand language. It would probably be able to talk, Descartes already envisions, but to follow a conversation 'as even the dullest men can do', and to give some sort of an 'emphatic' response, seems impossible according to him. Second, as machines only act from the disposition of their organs, they are unable to make a rational choice, to interpret and to compare. It is for this reason that machines, according to Descartes, can never be 'creative', can never speculate and come up with 'a new idea'. Consequentially their actions, however complex mechanically speaking, are still severely limited when compared to what the *cogito* (the human 'I think') can do.

No doubt this Cartesian idea that machines can impossibly talk and act like humans do is a recurring theme in modern thought. The 'Turing Test', as developed by Alan Turing in 1936, is an imitation game which practises the Cartesian method by comparing computer intelligence to human intelligence (more or less repeated

in John Searle's Chinese Room experiment). Also Hubert Dreyfus' iconical book *What Computers Can't Do* from 1972 (smartly rewritten in as *What Computers Still Can't Do* in 1979), gives a refined overview of how the discussions on Artificial Intelligence (AI) are struggling with this (Cartesian!) idea of the human mind, showing us once more that Descartes' humanism still dominates not only our ideas on what human thinking is, but also why 'the ideas' of machines and animals are still only to be considered *in relation to* the Cartesian rational mind.

At the start of the twenty-first century we find ourselves living in an age in which both the animal (through the ecological crisis) and the machine (through the digital crisis) force us to change our behaviour and to fundamentally rethink the idea of the human and the role it plays in the world. And it is through the arts, more than anything else, that we have explored the possibilities of escape from the Humanism that suffocates us more and more (see *Art*). Challenging these extremely powerful ideas 'requires all of the resources of art, and art of the highest kind' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 187). But art is not needed for critiquing the Cartesian hypothesis, but rather for occupying it (see *Occupy*), by pushing it to its extreme (as Bergson would have it), thus questioning in various ways our ideas of 'thinking', of 'emotion', 'consciousness' and 'otherness', to name just a few important concepts at stake. Being occupied by what 'the technoanimal', as we will materialize the Cartesian hypothesis from now on, can do, means *being occupied with* the technoanimal. In other words: art poses many questions in regard to how these mechanical cries and groans 'work', how we are affected by its presumed individuality and how we care and perhaps interact with it.

Over a longer period of time, the work of Tove Kjellmark dealt with technoanimalism, giving rise to another type of animality (see also *Postanimalism*), another type of nature but above all very delicately playing the affects of the involved audience. Most strikingly is the video performance *Naked*, where we are confronted with a mechanical toy panda that most of us (grown-ups) would not care for too much. It makes odd sounds and movements that should somehow resemble the sounds and movements that baby pandas make, but these qualities have been 'humanized' in the sense that they are supposed to affect us humans the way our own spouse affects us more so than resembling the baby panda which it seems to refer to. Yet again, as it does not imitate its 'original' too successfully, most of us, I assume, would hardly be 'touched' by the toy when in a conventional situation (a toy shop, a child's room).

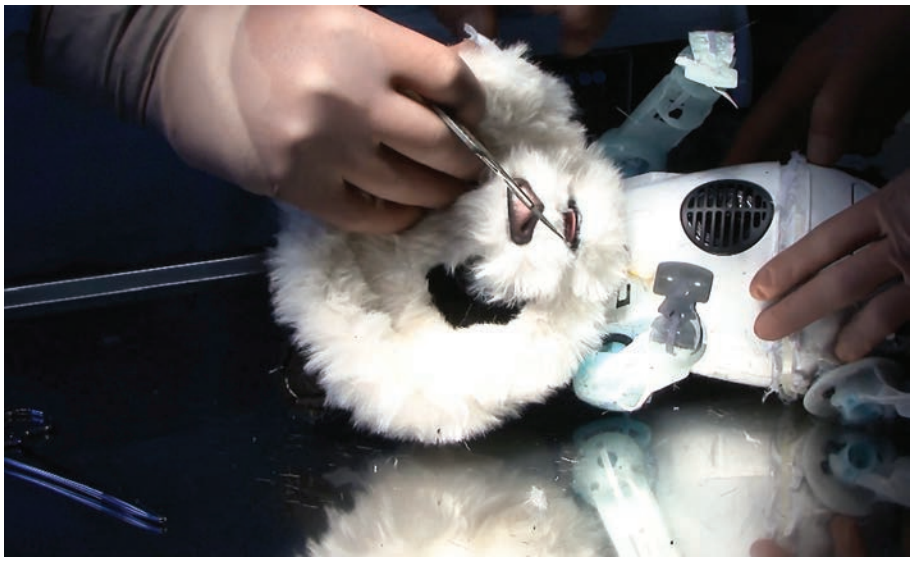
That changes when the toy panda is placed in a different situation in which its 'life' is 'at stake', as in this performance. The toy shop or the children's room, where mimicking is its ultimate goal, is very different from the operation room, with its knives, its medical specialists, its clean and white environment. The movements and the sounds, which seemed so banal at first, now rapidly gain in their appeal to reality as the pathetic clumsiness of the panda all of a sudden comes awfully close to the unpleasantness and the fearfulness we all recognize from being in the operating theatre. The affects produced have radically changed, and only seem to increase in their power as the performance continues.

The surgery being carried out is all about taking off the toy panda's skin with the greatest possible precision. We could endlessly discuss the various different signs being created as the procedures takes place, as the knives carefully remove the fur from the paws, the glue from the eye. The name of the performance, *Naked*, nicely captures the ambiguity as it poses

the question at what moment the panda is truly naked (perhaps being liberated from the skin is all about releasing the mechanism from its 'toy identity'?). Much more urgent, however, is the ongoing and – we need to mention this again – very *carefully* carried out surgery on this toy panda that *keeps on* making unpleasant sounds and clumsy movements. Even the surgeon is not at all at ease with the situation. At times he seems very nervous, even cutting himself in the glove, and actually admitted afterwards that this was a very 'traumatizing experience' for him. After seeing this video we are left with a seriously unpleasant feeling. But why?

After performances such as *Do you Mind?* or after showing the video piece *Gaze* or *Naked*, people from the audience often show an urge to talk about their reactions. They describe how disturbed they become by their own reactions and emotional responses while watching this. The most disturbing thing, they say, is that they find themselves reacting more strongly watching the mechanical panda on the operation table (in *Naked*) then if it had been a real person.

It is at this very short moment between perception and the rational 'correction' that 'the shock to thought', which only art can give, happens. Only then the Animal-Machine hypothesis, as it is so deeply engraved in our thinking, is fundamentally critiqued. Suddenly someone in the audience walks up to the artist and asks, 'Why are the rabbits so sad?' or 'How did you get the elephants to group up and walk together in one direction?' The answer is that the artist has done nothing special. They are just moving in a very simple and automated pattern.



Some images from *Naked* and other installations. IMAGES COPYRIGHT TOVE KJELLMARK.

What does it say about us, Cartesians, when we react so strongly and emotionally to these plastic shapes that so obviously move with the help of small servos and batteries? What does this say about our mechanical reactions *and* actions? And why do we, so easily, attribute 'a life' to a set of cogwheels? Rather than defending or critiquing the Animal-Machine hypothesis, experiences like these play with our passions and most convincingly realize the crisis (ecological, digital, but then also capitalist) that make up our everyday lives today. They enact these crises and their consequences best, compelling us to rethink the same question over and over again: 'What happened . . .?'

See also Animal; Art; Occupy (after Deleuze); Postanimalism

Note

1. *Réponse de M. Descartes a M. Morus.* 1649. *Œuevres,* tome x. p. 204. 'Mais le plus grand de tous les préjugés que nous ayons retenus de notre enfance, est celui de croire que les bêtes pensent,' etc.

Rick Dolphijn and Tove Kjellmark

TERRESTRIAL

As a noun, terrestrial makes its first appearance in English in 1602, in Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. In the play, it refers to a mortal, a layman, a human being (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and it is coupled by way of opposition to celestial beings. In similar fashion, previous adjectival uses of the word, for example in Tyndale's 1525 English translation of the Bible, had introduced terrestrial as a reference to the earthly sphere, again in opposition to the celestial sphere. Terrestrial is – both as noun and adjective – that which pertains to the earth and the soil, to material instead of ethereal life.

Three planes present themselves to us in view of this term: terrestrial as tool to think human existence emancipated from a divine order; terrestrial as tied to earth in view of the immanent realm of planetary existence; and terrestrial in the sf-mode as envisioning terran existences – as earthly critters, and thereby disrupting the structural verticality of heaven and earth and the anthropocentric fantasies of extra-terrestrialism.

First plane: terrestrial as tool to think human existence emancipated from a divine order. Derived from the Latin *terra* (whose Greek precursor and equivalent is *gaia*), the rising usage of terrestrial in the Renaissance – of which the stress of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1305–21) on the pilgrim's worldly journey is one early example – is not surprising. The earthly existence of the human animal was of growing concern to Renaissance humanism, reaching from Dante, Erasmus and Bruno, via Shakespeare's dramatic anatomies of the human to Vico's birth of the new sciences, whereby the internal, especially gendered and racialized divisions and exclusions within the category of the 'human' were crucial to this first-wave humanist conception of 'Man' (Wynter 2003; also Bourke 2011). As Erich Auerbach's study *Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt* (1929) argued – and Edward Said was to follow Auerbach in this (Said 2003) – Dante was an early *Poet of the Secular World*, as the English translation renders the title of Auerbach's study. Emily Apter has noted that this translation is not entirely fortunate (2006: 69), as it was not so much the secular (as different from, yet folded onto the divine) but more radically the earthly (*irdisch*) that Dante, Auerbach and Said were interested in. Said argues