

HERE COME THE ROBOTS

LÁ VÊM OS ROBÔS

AQUÍ VIENEN LOS ROBOTS

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In my book *Impromptu Man*, I described my father's ambivalence about machines (Moreno, 2013). An Austrian patent on an invention called radio-film earned him a first-class ocean liner ticket to the United States in 1925, an extraordinary opportunity to escape the social and economic chaos of post-war central Europe. In the 1940s he searched for ways to use film to create massive psychodrama groups through movies, creating a company called Therapeutic Motion Pictures, though that concept never proved workable.

But even before his ocean crossing his early thinking about spontaneity was directed against the cult of machines and modern technology. Just five years before he arrived in America, the Czech Karl Capek's play *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robot) had caused a sensation in central Europe in its depiction of *robots*. In Jacob Levy Moreno's philosophy, *robopathology* was a modern disease, characterized by people becoming robots in their thorough lack of spontaneity.

In that spirit Moreno's devoted student, the sociologist Lewis Yablonsky (1972), published a book called *Robopaths*, explaining recent wartime massacres in Vietnam and shootings of young antiwar protestors as instances of the radical absence of spontaneity in affluent, high-tech American life. Robots were not only the enemy; they were a caricature of the unspontaneous person.

Moreno thus joined a long list of critics of technological modernity, often expressed as a form of alienation, a list that continues to grow to this day. The critics of modernity hail from the left and the right, from social democrats to libertarians, from Marxists to Heideggerians. But Moreno's emphasis on spontaneity as the key element that has come to be missing in modern life, rather than something like corporate capitalist domination or the loss of traditional values, rendered his view rather unique.

That perspective is especially provocative in light of the emergence of text and image-generating artificial intelligence (AI) systems in the last several years. These AI's are the new robots, utterly unspontaneous but quite convincing.

By searching for patterns in their databases, these AI platforms have become adept at predicting strings of sentences or pictures prompted by queries. Among the most prominent is ChatGPT, which is capable of modeling responses in a conversation to a degree that seems to pass the Turing test, named after the computing genius Alan Turing, who speculated that an intelligent machine would be one that could convince us it was intelligent. Indeed, ChatGPT can be quite convincing to the unknowing human—or even one who knows that the respondent is *just* an AI. Already in the last few years there have been crude online systems that interact with troubled people online as though they were human therapists, but the new language models are capable of carrying on a conversation at a level of detail that far outstrips anything seen before. Ever-faster computers, larger databases and more sophisticated algorithms promise still greater improvements in the years ahead. Soon there will be videos on-demand that are created in response to written or verbal prompts, like “Make me a Mona Lisa I can talk to.”

These developments seem to confirm Moreno's worst fears about robopathology: When interacting with a computer, a keyboard, or a microphone and speaker the robot seems utterly human. So far, though, these cyber robots are vastly more convincing in their human-like behavior than physical robots, which remain clumsy. That limitation can, however, be overcome in the “metaverse” using immersive headsets with goggles and built-in speakers.

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As a partial antidote to advancing robopathology, Moreno might have recommended *metadramas* in which our avatars could engage in psychodrama while we are wearing our headsets. An obvious objection to this method would be that the immediate physical dimension is lost, but Moreno did not seem wedded to having an *in-person* experience in all psychodramas, as indicated in his efforts for Therapeutic Motion Pictures. Working through an avatar—a kind of double—might well have been acceptable to him. A different issue, that many of the physical clues that come from working with actual embodied humans would be lost, but that is an engineering problem that merely awaits the improvement of avatars. Moreover, how one chooses to design one's avatar could be a warm-up for the basis of a psychodrama, not unlike how one chooses an auxiliary ego and why a particular one.

Who will be the first to offer an immersive metadrama? It's only a matter of time.

REFERENCES

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