

"Hello Hi There" by Annie Dorsen – various reviews in the Austrian press

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"Hello Hi There": a diverting, synthetically woven dialogue

Can machines really entertain each other? In Annie Dorsen's "Hello Hi There" they can, and furthermore they manage it in more than 80 million different ways.

Emanating from an original 1971 TV debate between the philosopher Michel Foucault and the linguist and activist Noam Chomsky, the New York stage director programmed two "chatbots" to interpret the conversation which these deep thinkers had with each other. The premiere, which took place yesterday evening as part of the "steirischer herbst" (international contemporary festival of culture) in Graz, led to a rather peculiar conversation; some would say it even showed tendencies towards human characteristics.

Two white laptops, coupled to a loudspeaker and a screen erected behind them in order to fully elucidate the dialogue, were centrepiece on the minimalist stage at the "Dom im Berg" location. Dorsen herself types on a computer at the beginning and reads aloud what she is writing. Then a simple instruction to start opens the debate. The whole time, a television set replays a video from the 70s of the discussion. This feature provides plenty of scope for the "chatbots" to make fun of the protagonists' outward appearance.

Just as Foucault and Chomsky themselves described their debate as being not very satisfying, the machines also do not seem to be that happy with their counterparts' opinions. The main question of whether an innate form of human nature, independent of both life experience and external influence really exists, is somewhat eclipsed as rather personal topics are re-examined. Altercations about hobbies as well as chat-up lines used on the internet and where they come from are just two examples of these.

The main humour of the conversation, however, lies in the fact that the computers' man-made voices struggle with the pronunciation of Foucault's name or that they issue endless streams of number and letter combinations in a mad tempo. A peak of absurdity is reached when the "chatbots" begin to sing in turn – singing is a loose translation here for a sequence of vowels. At one point they start to repeat themselves deliberately ("Let's loop!") and try to embarrass Dorsen, as they themselves remark, seemingly amused.

Repetition is a recurrent theme of the evening and renders new answers and developments in subject matter possible, for example, when the "chatbots" are talking about their immortality and pity the public: "The audience is dying all the time." This one-hour performance does not offer much more spectacle than the sonorous voices of the machines, yet it is entertaining to follow. Dorsen brings the possibilities of artificial intelligence home to her public in a humorous way and was able to wow the first-night crowd.

Credits

Hello Hi There" (in English), concept & direction: Annie Dorsen; video & projection: Kate Howard; Chabot software design: Robby Garner. Further performances: 26th and 27th September at 19.30; Dom im Berg.

Helmut Ploebst
Der Standard
27th September 2010

Dead doesn't necessarily mean as a dodo, however. That's the message suggested by the two chatbots (talking computer programs) in Annie Dorsen's brilliant stage play *Hello Hi There*, premiered at the Steirischer Herbst. Amazingly, there are no live performers; the American director allows her two bots to philosophise over a discussion which took place between the philosophers Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky. The dialogue, generated by algorithms, is sometimes truly ludicrous -- fundamentally, though, it's extremely sinister.

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Maria Motter Graz

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What I saw and heard last weekend at the Steirischen Herbst (festival) made me oddly happy. And not just me, many others split their sides. There were these two chatbots, that is to say, computer programs, in the stage performance "Hello Hi There", who were chatting about "Fo-u-cau-lt" and Chomsky, talking at cross-purposes and generally behaving much like an old, married couple at dinner in the evening – totally without aim, yet with a great deal of passion for their own point of view. The American stage director Annie Dorsen fed the machines with sentences; there are 80 million (possible) variations of the dialogue. Via two screens, set up in the Dom im Berg (theatre), sentences read aloud by the linguistic robots juddered out. "What the foucault are you talking about?" said one machine to the other, and the humanities experts in the audience chortled with delight at ["Hello Hi There"](#).