Projecting life onto machines

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ABSTRACT

Public discussions and imaginaries about AI often center around the idea that technologies such as neural networks might one day lead to the emergence of machines that think or even feel like humans. Drawing on histories of how people project lives onto talking things, from spiritualist seances in the Victorian era to contemporary advances in robotics, this talk argues that the "lives" of AI have more to do with how humans perceive and relate to machines exhibiting communicative behavior, than with the functioning of computing technologies in itself. Taking up this point of view helps acknowledge and further interrogate how perceptions and cultural representations inform the outcome of technologies that are programmed to interact and communicate with human users.

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BIOGRAPHY

Simone Natale is Associate Professor in Media Theory and History at the University of Turin, Italy. Before taking up this position in his hometown, he taught and researched at Columbia University, US, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, Humboldt University and the University of Cologne in Germany, and Loughborough University in the UK. He is the author of two monographs, most recently Deceitful Media: Artificial Intelligence and Social Life after the Turing Test (Oxford University Press, 2021), as well as numerous articles in some of the leading journals of his field. His research has been funded by international institutions such as AHRC, ESRC, the Humboldt Foundation and Columbia University's Italian Academy. Since 2023, he is an Editor of Media, Culture & Society, where he acted as Assistant Editor from 2019 to 2022.