

2014-03-31 the machine is learning art statement v2

In the first episode of the 1966 television series Star Trek, "The Man Trap," the crew of the Enterprise is beamed on to the surface of planet M-113. The native life form on this planet can read the minds of individual crew members, use that knowledge to assume an especially desirable physical form, and then interact with the individual crew member "as if" an imagined form from memory. Over the length of the episode, each crew member that comes in contact with this new form of life perceives it in a new, unique form.

This native life form craves salt, and is attracted to the salt content in the human bodies of crew members. The more the native life form, using the assumed human avatar, interacts with a crew member, the deeper the crew member slips under the spell of synthesized reality. With the crew members suitably bamboozled, it waits for opportune times to extract salt, slowly killing each human crew member.

Starting with the original Star Trek episode, the media text is disassembled into individual frames. Every twenty-fourth frame is analyzed by a variety of facial recognition algorithms, any recognized faces are marked on the frame as per a predefined and color-coded key, and an augmented frame is exported. Then, all the augmented frames are re-assembled at four times the original speed to produce a commentary media text that tracks the result of facial recognition algorithms across the original media text. Each newly-generated text gradually becomes more accurate at recognizing faces as the parameters converge to the ideal values over time, as a human operator tunes the parameters of the various facial recognition algorithms.

The "Machine is Learning" samples the characters and the story of The Man Trap's shape-shifting predator as a source, and uses facial recognition algorithms to mark up the source such that the computer and facial recognition algorithms become a new character in an augmented story. This new character emphasizes humanoid elements like eyes and faces, allowing the perception of the crew "as if" from the viewpoint of the native life form, or even as an omnipotent force present in both the consciousness of the native live form and all the Star Trek crew members, simultaneously.

This omnipotent force can sometimes find faces, sometimes partially find faces, sometimes find patterns and mistakenly identify facial patterns, and other-times fail outright. The series is oddly hypnotic, the comforting "classic" Star Trek characters easy to identify, before being layered with markup from the surveillance and copyright-enforcement state.

It may be easier to comprehend the power of these subservience state tools when demonstrated on benign characters in a classic sci-fi television series, than as deployed as Facebook facial recognition APIs and XML section of Facebook archives, or as the tools used by nation states to identify and assess civil populations in real time.