Simon Penny – Making Sense: Cognition, Computing, Art, and Embodiment

Let's take the vast public attention on AI, and some of the hypothetical but popular consequences: machine awareness, autonomous artificial entities, and in the end either the dream or nightmare of singularity. Swimming in an ocean of media speculation, pushed even further by sensationalism, a need for understanding from the art community is rapidly emerging. Simon Penny has conjugated over the last thirty years in mechatronic art, media art theory, cognitive science and philosophy of mind. In this cleverly structured tome he discusses extensively the dualism of the biological and the computational, and, more centrally, of the subject/object and mind/body. He questions these dualisms deeply, and the consequent "computationalist" approaches, which have inherently led to the subtle diffusion of "techno solutionism". After discussing the basics and omnipresence of dualisms in the first chapter, he develops the postcognitivist approach in the second, ending with its application to art and especially media art in the last one. He builds an "aesthetics of behaviour" where computers are themselves inducing a culture of performance, fitting together (amongst others) cognitive science, neurology and art theory. The history of computing, cybernetics and AI are reinterpreted through cognitive parameters, and the difficult relationship between the logic of cognitive science and the "intelligence" of art (or "situated cognition") is amply debated making the reading of this book a desirable, intense and informed experience.

Review by Aurelio Cianotti, 17Sept2018, Neural magazine 60.