

So, I'd like to talk with you today

When TED Talk conferences first became a recurring event in 1990, they started out for a small, invite-only crowd in Monterey, California. Just over 30 years later, the TED organization now holds numerous public conferences worldwide, and offers an archive of thousands of past videos of talks that collectively get watched over 3 billion times annually.¹

In gaining cultural steam, TED Talks have helped cement an aesthetic and formula of presentation that is now ubiquitous: person on stage, at times assisted with a video or graphic-laden slide show, presents a short, inspiring talk to a crowd of attendees. In the case of TED, the talks must be 18 minutes or less. Although these talks are not explicitly for selling products or ideas, in an Inc. Magazine article entitled *Neuroscience Proves You Should Follow TED's 18-Minute Rule to Win Your Pitch*, author Carmine Gallo encourages entrepreneurs to follow this same model when wooing prospective investors.²

The founders of TED sought to spread ideas by passionate people from across the sectors of technology, entertainment, and design. As Oscar Schwartz articulates in his essay *What Was the TED Talk?*, the presentations often follow an arc like this: “there are problems in the world that make the future a scary prospect. Fortunately, though, there are solutions to each of these problems, and the solutions have been formulated by extremely smart, tech-adjacent people. For their ideas to become realities, they merely need to be articulated and spread as widely as possible.”³

¹ “Ted Talks.” TED, <https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/ted-talks>.

² Gallo, Carmine. “Neuroscience Proves You Should Follow Ted's 18-Minute Rule to Win Your Pitch.” *Inc.com*, Inc., 21 Feb. 2017, <https://www.inc.com/carmine-gallo/why-your-next-pitch-should-follow-teds-18-minute-rule.html>.

³ Schwartz, Oscar. “What Was the Ted Talk?” *The Drift*, 1 Mar. 2022, <https://www.thedriftmag.com/what-was-the-ted-talk/>.

The exact style of oration that often characterizes TED Talks — the gesticulation, the pauses, the weaving of personal narrative — is not unique to TED alone, and there is certainly a rich and longstanding tradition of rhetorical performance throughout history. As Schwartz writes, “In ancient Athens, public speaking was understood primarily as a means of persuasion; learning to convince others was the duty of a democratic citizen. For Confucius, refined speech was the embodiment of refined ethics.”⁴ In these cases as with TED, rhetorical style itself functions as a form of technology. That is, it imbues its content with particular meaning and enframes one’s relation to what is being said.

So how does the specific rhetorical style that TED Talks are known for (as well its historical and contemporary variations), reinforce a hierarchy of certain knowledges? How are expertise, professionalism, and social power — as envisioned in the neoliberal imagination — performed and aestheticized through this style? How can Artificial Intelligence and machine learning models help illustrate the formula of this rhetoric, abstract its content, and bring us to the very meaning of the form itself?

In investigation of these questions and the rhetorical style of the TED Talk, I produced a 5-minute video piece entitled *So, I’d like to talk with you today*, wherein I act as an orator delivering a speech to an anonymous audience. In addition to the orator’s outfit and body language during the speech, other TED-like aesthetics are emulated through the lighting, video framing, and number of shots used.

With a run time of 5:41, *So, I’d like to talk with you today* opens to the sound of an enthusiastic applause as the orator walks on stage. She wears stylish black ankle boots, skinny jeans, and a cranberry-red shirt under a black blazer. Small frills on the shoulders — where

⁴ Schwartz, Oscar. “What Was the Ted Talk?”

women of a previous era might have donned more heavy-handed shoulder pads — hint to the styles of times past, but signal her contemporaneity. Over her hair pulled back into a bun, the orator wears a small black microphone headset. She walks and stands with confidence and greets the crowd with a smile, crimson lips matching her shirt. When the applause settles down, the expert launches into her speech — one which flows naturally but that she has undoubtedly meticulously honed. Five minutes later, the expert finishes her speech and walks off stage to enthusiastic applause.

On the script, AI, and the formula

“The capitalist form is not only a set of economic rules and functions it is also the internalization of a certain set of limitations of psychic automatism of rules for compliance”
— Franco Berardi⁵

“In light music, once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming and feel flattered when it does.”
— Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer⁶

Watched without sound, the video appears inconspicuous; the orator’s movements are generic and familiar. With sound, however, the nonsense and non-linearity of the script become clear. This is because the transcript is a bit of a soup concocted from different sources: a combination of direct quotations, constructed text, and script generated with the help of an artificial intelligence machine learning model I built on the open-source Runway ML app.

The model I built, like other AI algorithms, works by finding patterns in the data it is given, and developing a set of rules to model them.⁷ To train my model, I used a free dataset

⁵ Berardi, Franco. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Financy*. Los Angeles, CA, 2011, Semiotext(e).

⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry as Mass Deception” (1944), in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 1998), pg. 1039

⁷ What Is Machine Learning? <https://help.runwayml.com/hc/en-us/articles/4401825577363-What-is-Machine-Learning->

compiled by user Rounak Banik from the website Kaggle.com⁸ that contains the transcripts from 2,464 different TED Talks. My model functions, in other words, to reproduce a TED Talk transcript based on whatever is entered in as a seed text. Because of the AI's allegiance to linguistic patterns (and only linguistic patterns), the generated text is largely an abstraction of what is generally considered sensible speech. All the familiar ingredients are there, and sentences may make sense on their own, but the flow between them is noticeably unnatural. An example of this is in the first minute, where the orator seems to talk around something, without ever pinning it down:

So, I'd like to talk with you today. And this is the first question that I've been asked, and it's a question that I've been asking myself since grade school. And I'm going to try to explain it to you in a way that is clear and easy to understand. So, I'm going to talk about a few different things. But before I do that, I want to talk a little bit about the background here. So before I talk, let's clear something up. It's an interesting question, and there's some real nuance to it, right? I think many people would like to know the answer...

This opening is most unnatural not in its obvious vagueness, though, but rather the endurance of the speech itself. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write, “the average length of the short story has to be rigidly adhered to. Even gags, effects, and jokes are calculated like the setting in which they are placed.”⁹ This rambling, then, is perhaps the first hint of breaking from the formula.

In addition to the material developed by the AI model, I also use several direct quotes from Season 12, Episode 13 of ABC's *Shark Tank*. Unlike a TED Talk, a *Shark Tank* pitch is made by an entrepreneur with the explicit aim of gaining investor funding. The aesthetics and oration in *Shark Tank* are somewhat different than in TED Talks. However, in conflating the two within the work, I was hoping to see and experience the ways in which they function similarly.

⁸ Kaggle offers free access to community published data and code.

⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry as Mass Deception” (1944) (excerpt), in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 1998), pg. 1039

After all, TED Talks may not be selling a product, but they are often selling an idea or a framework of thought.

There were several TED Talks that I took direct quotations from as well, including Edward Tenner’s 2019 talk “The Paradox of Efficiency”¹⁰ and Elizabeth Holmes’ 2014 talk at TEDMED. Some of the excerpts from Holmes’ talk include the statements “this future is beginning now, but engagement begins with the individual” and “technology can and is transforming our world, and many policy issues along with it.” The final line of the presentation is an intentionally truncated quote from Holmes: “And if I had one wish standing here with all of you, it would be that today, just for a minute, you think about the fact that we have this right, a human right, to engage with information...” In its shortened form, the quote positions information broadly as some malleable material for public use, forming an odd and beautiful self-referential prompt. These quotations, along with those from *Shark Tank*, position a mix of vague platitudes alternatively with discreet moments of specificity and historicity.

The aim of this work has been to investigate the technology of rhetoric as illustrated in TED Talks— that is, how the words used, the method of delivery, and the aesthetics of presentation all collaborate to shape an audience’s relationship to what is being shared. Although the words and delivery could roughly be seen as the content and the style of the piece, in the context of art broadly (and performance more specifically), this binary is a slippery one. In speaking to this, Susan Sontag writes

“Most critics would agree that a work of art does not “contain” a certain amount of content (or function—as in the case of architecture) embellished by “style.” But few address themselves to the positive consequences of what they seem to have agreed to. What is “content”? Or, more precisely, what is left of the notion of content when we have transcended the antithesis of style (or form) and content? Part of the answer lies in the fact that for a work of art to have “content” is, in itself, a rather special stylistic

¹⁰ Tenner, Edward. “The Paradox of Efficiency.” Edward Tenner: The Paradox of Efficiency | TED Talk, https://www.ted.com/talks/edward_tenner_the_paradox_of_efficiency

convention. The great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the formal function of subject-matter.”

Perhaps part of the role of abstracting speech is allowing the viewer to see the delivery itself, its theatre and its effect, with more clarity. In the case of *So, I'd like to talk with you today*, I would argue that the audience's relationship to the orator echoes that of a TED Talk, despite the void of coherent messaging. In this way, the TED Talk style is not really a style at all, but the essence of the thing itself.

On Unfixing

If the TED-style of oration serves to fix certain subject positions and relations of consumption (e.g. expert to audience member, CEO to investor, etc), is pointing back at these relations enough to destabilize them? In *So, I'd like to talk with you today*, I take on a version of the rhetorical theatre of TED Talks to consider their enfram-ability, but at the same time, largely reproduce their traditional relations. In considering future iterations of this work and direction of my performance practice and research, I am called back to both Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's charge that "creative activities are useful only if they produce new, so far unknown relations,"¹¹ and Christina Kiaer's interpretation of Boris Arvatov's "socialist object," that is, one that functions to "produce new relations of consumption, new experiences of everyday life, and new human subjects of modernity."¹² How would one practice a rhetoric that not only calls into question the construction of its own meaning, but celebrates and enacts the collaborative, the non-hierarchical, and the radical?

¹¹ Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, "Production-Reproduction" (1922), in Moholy-Nagy, Passuth (ed.), (Thames and Hudson, 1985), 289-290

¹² Kiaer, Christina. "Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects." *October*, Vol. 81 (1997). P. 105.

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