



Life by the fire

Description

In 2014 some of us conducted experiments using an EEG headset for measuring brainwaves in human beings as they move through outdoor settings. Around that time I stumbled across a Star Trek episode called “Spock’s Brain.” I referenced the confluence between science fiction and emerging consumer-available neural headware in my post of 1 February 2014 #182 titled [Genius headgear](#).

I followed that with a post about how a phenomenological orientation to life favours things and devices that draw people together and enhance engagement with the world rather than mediate their experiences through objects that encourage synthetic other-worldly, disconnected realities.

Scifi devices that sever brains from bodies, or at least measure brain activity, would fall into the latter category of objects that ostensibly pull us apart from the world of everyday experience. On the other hand, the traditional low-tech architectural presence of the fireplace, cooking stove, or hearth functions as site of human-oriented (phenomenological) engagement.

In that post (#183 [Gathered round the hearth](#)) I favoured the view that high-tech devices, whether in fanciful scifi imagination, or as instruments of calculative data and insight, operate to emphasise *difference*.

No doubt some people and organisations become so wedded to certain technologies that such tech frames their world view and repertoire of actions entirely. But, those of a reflective disposition may also entertain the view that brains and minds are not transportable, or that emotional responses to environment are more than electrical fields measured across the human scalp.

For “reflective practitioners,” as well as the positives of digital tech, there’s the value of the *negative*. I briefly made a case, as I have done elsewhere, for technologies, as well as artworks, that disrupt and spur us on to new thinking via the differences they reveal. See post: [How to explain art](#).

I contend that when it comes to technologies, this capacity to *reveal* through difference comes in the context of understanding. For example, most people in the UK have a practical everyday understanding of how an automobile works (fuel, an engine, some electrics, combustion, etc). Apart from aiding in its operation, a practical, working understanding of a thing paves the road for an exploration of the

differences it brings to light. Driving a car is not like being driven, walking, or flying like a bird. *If not that, then what?* See post: [Art challenges life](#).

Hence, my labour to develop and convey a working understanding of how AI-based conversational large language models (LLMs) operate. The more we can understand it (in our own terms) the more discerning we can be in AI's use and our critique of it.

Here is an example of the application of AI-based [diffusion](#) imagery and video technology that I cannot yet comfortably explain or critique – though I made an attempt in the post [Bohemian melancholy](#). As my example here reveals, animating people and circumstance of 20 years past through synthetic photography is uncanny and unsettling.

Reviving an old photo

The blurry picture I included in the earlier post [Gathered round the hearth](#) is from a camping trip in the Egyptian Western Desert in 2006. The people round the fire are guides and drivers. I asked ChatGPT to enhance the image to current digital standards, and the AI video platform RunwayLM to activate the scene, suitable for looping. The fire is to burn and the people to look as if alive as they respond to one another and the warmth.

I instructed the platform not to introduce lots of extra smiling. RunwayLM introduced some audio dialogue where the men reflect on how cold it is in the desert. I've removed the audio. I headed the video with my original blurry photo taken with a PENTAX Optio S5i digital camera followed by the AI transitions.

The resulting video is entirely synthetic. It is as if I had recorded it. We couldn't record quality video with such ease in 2006. The team looks roughly as I remember them, especially the leader on the right.

Dwelling on this picture I noticed that the campers, the clients, are not visible. In fact, I recall that we (a mixed group) had to assert our presence to participate in the warmth of the fire. At times, a hearth is a place of exclusion as well as inclusion, or perhaps a site of invitation.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Body
3. Podcast

Tags

1. hearth
2. technology
3. video

Date Created

April 4, 2026

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark