

# OUR MINIONS

*Steve Kado*

In *Minions*, the latest animated film in the *Despicable Me* franchise, the focus is not on the doings of evil genius Gru but instead on his inept helpers: small, pill-shaped creatures with either one or two goggled eyes.

This decision was natural; in the first two movies, the Minions stole the show and emerged as the series' most important intellectual property.<sup>1</sup> This could be easily confirmed by the sight of Minions on every child you saw over the last five years. Each tot hovered as the nucleus of a haze of licensed and unlicensed merchandise: backpacks, sneakers, toys, and school supplies all coated in wacky little yellow dudes. Due to their simple form, Minions are amazingly easy to pirate; the ease with which they could be bootlegged, in a factory in China or in a more homely birthday cake from grandma, on knockoff sneakers or as a piñata, meant that they could reach far beyond the normal bounds of licensed goods. Minions are a remarkably flexible text.

It was the formal openness of the Minion that held out so much promise. The advertising campaign for the movie, at least as unfurled in Los Angeles, took that flexibility and combined it with a massive amount of money into a thing to behold. No opportunity was missed: from bus shelter and poster ads that blended Minions into art history, showing Minions "painted" in the style of Leonardo, Van Gogh, Lichtenstein, and, most abstractly, Mondrian and Pollock, to fully covering the dome of the Arclight Cinema in yellow and converting it into a

giant Minion. Their faces were suddenly printed on Tic Tacs, dressing up little pills like other little pills. In a grotesque jab at the compressed commuters inside, bus wrap ads covering the windows of city busses showed a huge pile of Minions appearing to be packed into the bus floor to ceiling.

The Minions' similarity to Joe and Jill Average doesn't end with their shared commuter misery. Like us, the post-enlightenment masses, Minions aren't particularly good at anything except expressing their appreciation. Their strongest ability is to "like" their masters. As with us, there is no "dislike" option available to them. They can provide consent or they can say nothing. While they have no technical skills that could actually benefit an evil boss, we find that our own evil bosses require little of us other than buying things and allowing them to kill extrajudicially and torture when it suits them. The introduction to the movie shows how, although well meaning, the Minions manage to turn their vampire boss to stone and make their dinosaur boss extinct, in each case while attempting to show their appreciation for said boss, usually through staging some kind of Busby Berkeley/North Korean-style massed performance. While Minions do have individual personalities (a watered down version of the personality differences that define the Seven Dwarfs, for example) they can also be taken as an undifferentiated mass.

Like us, Minions consume order for pleasure at the expense of specific

skills. Specialization is no longer how the economy of the developed world functions. They/we are beyond specialization; as a class entity whose attention itself has already been monetized, they/we are only our approval — whether vocalized or tacit. While in principle they would like to help evil bosses, in practice they would rather have brunch. As a mirror reflection of the “wholly enlightened earth, radiant with triumphant calamity,”<sup>2</sup> the Minions try to do evil but in the end affect good, accidentally serving ostensibly positive social ends. In the world of the film, however, this anarchic payload fails to detonate. The best that the Minions can do is to unintentionally support the failing British empire, a real colonial villain, while trying, but failing, to serve another evil master. The Minions have it in them, both through their formal flexibility and mass character, to represent the inherently chaotic nature of groups and followers to bend the texts of power through sincere, if misdirected, appreciation. Imagine a frantic torrent of liking that overwhelms any directive force imposed on it: This is the potential power of the Minions. With a fundamental thud, the Minions fall to earth and merely represent an opportunity to instrumentalize a group without guilt, the ultimately submissive social body, open to domination, elated to do evil, the 20th century’s secret fantasy made obvious for the 21st century to laugh at. If the encompassing marketing campaign is viewed as part of the film, *Minions* totters on the threshold of being the expanded cinema event of our century, a cinematic happening to shame Gregory Markopoulos, encircling not only the filmic diegesis but also nearly the entirety of life in a major American city, as nearly every biped under four

feet was transformed into a gateway to said diegesis, the art/life divide tantalizingly permeable.



Not long after I endured *Minions*, the *Prism of Reality* editorial team visited the DARPA Robotics Challenge (DRC). Like *Minions*, the DRC was also very much aimed at children. Here too was another attempt by our post-enlightenment society to imagine a true minion, a real and useful servant—a subject upon whom we could mete out the grimmest fates with no moral aftershocks. At the DRC, humanoid robots compete against each other in an obstacle course designed to mimic the challenges of shutting down a failing nuclear reactor—a horrible situation, among many all too common horrible situations, into which society feels terrible deploying human minions. The robots had sixty minutes to drive a golf cart to a door, park, open the door, walk over the threshold, turn a valve, close a switch, saw a circle out of a piece of drywall, clamber over rubble, and then climb four stairs to a podium. Further, the robots were not permitted to be in constant communication with their masters; the course rewarded those able to function somewhat independently. Given that the tasks at hand would have taken a human all of five minutes (tops) to perform, the robots spending almost a whole hour to accomplish only a few of their goals seemed truly glacial. Most of the robots, using their semi-autonomous faculties, would stand still for a long time before taking single, balletic steps, appearing to weigh with each gentle motion the consequences of their semi-autonomy, perhaps feeling the responsibility of their embryonic AI and what independence it offered them. I was reminded of how it

felt to vote for the first time. The lead-up, the desire not to “do it wrong,” and finally the panic as the reality set in: it’s easier than falling off a log, but the mistakes make themselves regardless of how you mark the ballot. The slowness of the robots’ movements recalled the protracted gestures of Butoh. With each step they seemed to start from zero and learn everything about the gesture each time. The careful and evaluative nature of their gestures made my own over-quick and frantic motions seem ill-considered and brash—like I was failing to both relish and weigh the responsibility that my freedom to move my body allowed me. Watching the calculated movements, the reduction of human gesture to a variety of different sub-gestures understandable to a robot indeed highlighted a kind of concern for human motion that reached a level this author found truly beautiful. In this way it was perhaps the most affectingly human performance I had seen all year. All that tender care for analyzing even the most basic gestures made me look at myself moving in the mirror for weeks afterwards. Catching my reflection as I walked by a shop window, I would be amazed at what it was to walk.

Yet the choice of the vast majority of teams to design their robots to be humanoid struck me as the most difficult to decipher. In the tents surrounding the competition was a trade show of sorts, with vendors demonstrating a swimming shark robot, the well publicized Boston Dynamics Cheetah robot, and, most terrifyingly, a magnetically activated robot confetti that could build things and accomplish tasks. Why, I wonder, could not a flying robot deliver a payload of robot dust to turn a valve or flip a switch? Why focus on the perils and difficulties of bipedal

motion? Perhaps domination over bird- and dirt-shaped things lacks the thrill of domination over a man-shaped one?

To make their choice seem all the more absurd, the majority of American research institutes built their robots around the Boston Dynamics Atlas platform, a robot that resembles a top heavy football player.<sup>3</sup> That the only thing that some of the brightest engineering minds in the USA could imagine rescuing earthquake victims and shutting off nuclear reactors was a football player was another disappointment in a chain of Minion-related disappointments, cementing my belief that humanity is getting what it deserves. As Atlas-based robot after Atlas-based robot wiped out, unable to cope with their awkward center of gravity, you could almost hear the grim-faced administrator of the next leaking nuclear power plant asking his overtired staff who amongst them would volunteer for the suicide mission, call their families to say goodbye, and then enter the radioactive inferno to shut down the reactor. From their place on the ground, each of the robots seemed to say, “Why don’t you shut off your own fucking reactors?” A few research teams broke the mold, deciding, I think wisely, that bipedal motion was too difficult a problem—or perhaps an obscurely 20th-century one. Thus the winning robot, from Korea, a modified HUBO robot from Team KAIST, mostly ran on tracks, as did fan favorite CHIMP from Carnegie Mellon. The hometown hero, Robosimian, from Pasadena’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), resembled some kind of spider and walked on four articulated legs, and could also roll on wheels.

In conversation with the JPL staff it was revealed that, due to a combination of

underfunding and increased private interest in robotics, the majority of their DRC team had recently been scooped up by Google. They had therefore focused on the first several aspects of the trial, and would make no attempt to climb the final stairs, even though Robosimian was considered to be very good at this. As much as the robots themselves never ask for a paycheck, if you want really reliable help, the message is that you should be prepared to pay for it. Shortly after the DRC wrapped up, the DARPA bureaucrat in charge of the program, Dr. Gill Pratt, decamped to Toyota to head their AI and autonomous vehicle program.<sup>4</sup>

At a certain point in its second run through the course, Carnegie Mellon's CHIMP lost contact with its controllers, and mistakenly believed that it had finished the task at hand. Letting its drill fall to the ground in a surprisingly human-looking version of the "mic drop," the robot rolled off stage through the door it came in from, cutting a cocky and defiant figure. This was, if anything, the robotics version of "Take this Job and Shove It."



As handed down to us, Western Philosophy's origins in Greek thought put us in a quest for what, if anything, constitutes living a good life. Aristotle would have it that a good life would involve not just the comfort of family and friends but also being able to contribute meaningfully to a relatively "good" polis — and yet, when have we ever had that opportunity? We want to do good things, but with every choice we make another calamity, elsewhere, far away, is executed in our name. My every action has repercussions so far reaching that my most banal decision is

reflected in not just some specific outrage but also in a continued depletion of freedom for someone else. How different is paying for the privilege of choosing between fair trade and not-so-fair trade coffee and deciding whether to try walking over a pile of rubble and running through it on tracks?

This particular feeling about just how artificial artificial intelligence really is, at least when compared to un-artificial (organic? free range?) intelligence, came into sharp relief on a chance pass-through of David Levine's recent exhibition *By-standers* at Gallery TPW in Toronto. The center of the exhibition is a performance, animated by a different actor interpreting a memorized script every hour the gallery was open. The actor wanders throughout Levine's exhibition, a set made up of prints of modified images taken from inside Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio (the most influential proponent of method acting in America, notable for alums like Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro), and a fembot mannequin head. Not having read the checklist or any press before arriving, I was the perfect audience for the piece. The text advances the actor from appearing merely like a too-forward and too-talkative fellow spectator through our dawning awareness that this is a work, moving further to manipulate the elements of the show itself, building up to a long recounting of a film that the actor, compelled by the script, has "imagined." This movie-within-the-performance-art takes us on a ride through a pastiche of 1970's American "New Hollywood" cinema. The protagonist is a young actor living in the exciting world of downtown Manhattan, taking acting classes with Strasberg and eventually helping out in a tiny role on the set of an experimental film where he

witnesses another actor undergoing a full psychic rupture while portraying Jackson Pollock painting on glass for filmmaker Hans Namuth. Embodying so fully the role of the authentic artist, enraged by being made into a mere performer for the camera, the actor's mind snaps, bursting through the role of performer-for-the-camera and into a frenzied and uncomfortable reality. Our protagonist-within-the-protagonist watches in awe as the imaginary method actor is taken to the hospital. Realizing that he will never be able to lend this degree of reality to any performance, he leaves for an endless road trip, out to gain real experience. Arriving in Los Angeles in the 1980s, at the end of a long montage, he gets work playing a crime-solving stunt man on TV, but of course he also does his own stunts, and when a stunt goes wrong the truth is revealed, his face falls off, he's been a robot this whole time.

Setting an investigation of acting inside an actor is cheeky, but the real action in the work is not in the endearing and endless recursion but in its relationship to the viewer. The actor, a minion, a robot, produces the work both for the artist (so he doesn't have to enact the performance himself) but also for us as an audience; the work casts us as the disinterested evil genius whose presence alone animates the entire performance, summoning it to exist. At the same time, however, the work (and indeed its title) calls us to reflect on our own programmed status in the encounter: While our every gesture and move is not personally programmed by David Levine, the confines of our social world (especially where the enjoyment of art is concerned) are remarkably simple to outline. What then of our actor friend, the one who is co-present with us in the gallery? Although we can decide to leave when we want, and

we can talk to each other about anything we wish, are we that different? Undoubtedly, the actor is expressing something of herself through the effort, is there voluntarily for reasons of her own, possibly just to get paid. How much difference is there between her and anyone else entering the gallery—especially given the specialized nature of the visual arts?

The yellow Minions on screen speak a kind of new-school Esperanto. My friend Nicolas joked that it was Proto-Indo-European, the false grail that lay behind the foundation of European linguistics. If the supposed language at the root of all languages could be found, then the Enlightenment could truly win and undo Yahweh's edict at the Tower of Babel that mankind would be forever divided by communication failures. No longer doomed to fuss and fight, we might truly put our reasonable selves forward. The optimists of 1800's linguistics believed that unearthing Proto-Indo-European could return humanity's lost unity. For my own part, I could identify Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, English, and Hebrew in the language of the Minions. And clearly, judging from the children playing in the lobby of the medical clinic on the ground floor of my studio building, this has made the Minions equally amusing to children of each of those languages. But in a world where the scale of domination is truly global, where each of us is engaged in activities that daily span the entire globe, either through buying a manufactured or imported good or through using electronic means of communication, how heart-warming is it that a major entertainment company can reach any children it wants? Indeed—that it can reach every child as if it were communicating to that child from their home culture, no matter how

international the product is? And what are we to make of the other Esperantos that follow us around? Remember the brief flurry of interest in “International Art English” surrounding the *Triple Canopy* article of the same name? In revealing that the argot of a very small international group unusually fixated on “platforms” was another arena where Power (capital P) gets to flex its muscles, a sound like the milling of rough grain into flour filled the office here at *Prism of Reality*. It was the sound of my dry and rock-like eyes rolling in their desiccated sockets.

What remains for us, closer to the top of the pyramid of domination than to the bottom? Our help disappointing us. Our minions either too distant for us to feel properly grateful or too near for us to overlook their faults. We’re here, yelling at our phones, screaming at the drive-through employees, and crying in the snack aisle at Trader Joe’s. We’re hoping that we’re keeping it together at least enough so that the other shoppers will believe that we’re “normal,” that we belong here too—that it isn’t someone else’s job to come over, light us up, and shut us down.

Notes:

1 This is saying a lot considering that Despicable Me also launched Pharell’s unbearably omnipresent song, “Happy.”

2 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

3 *Atlas is the successor to Boston Dynamics’ more ominously named PETMAN robot.*

4 See Toyota’s own press release: <http://corporatenews.pressroom.toyota.com/releases/toyota+establishes+ai+research+centers+mit+stanford.htm>.

