

Transcendent Man at the Deli

Les Elkind

Sitting in Canter's deli, on Fairfax in W. Hollywood, I'm hoping for a reconnection to my past. And for redemption, after the devastating disappointment I endured last year in New York, at Katz's deli on Houston St.

But Hallelujah, here at Canter's the pickle, true harbinger of the deli experience, is perfect; the corned beef/pastrami/chopped liver and rye bread are all are very good, and even if the potato salad is too sweet at least it's the right *type* of potato salad. Overall, I feel comforted, if not exactly redeemed. I sit back sipping my Dr. Brown's cream soda, connecting with all my experiences down through the years that have tasted thus. Not to mention the reassurance I'm finding in this evidence that my sense of taste remains intact, that I still know The Difference. I sit here doing something that can only be described as *kvelling*.

And taking a video of my half eaten sandwich. Slightly weird, but I'm sure I'm far from the weirdest person who's come in here to Canter's on a food hegira. And I am a true pilgrim, pure of heart and yearning of palate in my quest for authentic deli. Of course this is LA, after all, where a dozen weirdos a day probably come in and video their meal the same way I'm doing right now.

And I realize that, in a strange echo of this obsession with traditional deli, the quest that has drawn me here to LA to see Transcendent Man is also rooted in a kind of tradition, a traditional quest of the branch of weirdos to which I apparently belong. This would be the weirdos who seek to fathom the elusive nature of their connection with their own neurobiology, the apparatus that appears to sustain the consciousness they call "me," and through which the taste and texture of corned beef, pastrami, and chopped liver are experienced as they are. That is the reason why, while on my mission of understanding to this special screening of Transcendent Man, the movie about Ray Kurzweil, I have stopped at Canter's for this deli sandwich. This sandwich is really the tasty confluence of memory, psychology, and neurobiology, seasoned with the mystery of identity. But, given all that, it is also still a GREAT corned beef, pastrami, and chopped liver on rye. My mouth is too full to speak, and therefore, as Wittgenstein so aptly put it, "what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.."

Transcendent Man was not enormously interesting for me because it didn't elaborate further on K's ideas, or even follow up with any direct response from K to the various objections raised by dissenters and demurrers in interviews that were included in the film. It seemed mostly directed at people who haven't already pondered The Singularity is Near – or even read it.

The "meet and greet" beforehand was interesting as a chance to observe K, who seemed calm, relatively devoid of celebrity attitude, and gracious in enduring the hour of frenzied hand clasping, earnest snippets of conversation, and constant requests to pose for photos. I was impressed by his ability to stay on topic without coming across as monomaniacal. He is clearly nerdy, but he appeared to wear his star power gracefully along with his nerdiness. That has a way of making for a compelling avatar.

I did appreciate the diversity of K's experiences as depicted in the movie, although I would have loved more on Stevie Wonder and his collaboration with K on the invention of the synthesizer, and perhaps less on the emotional family connection between K and his Dad. The highlight of the movie, for me, was near the end, when K briefly addressed the question of the existence of God. His response, low key and not emphasized much in the film, was something I myself have considered from time to time as a possibly true answer to the question "does God exist?" Kurzweil's answer: "Not yet."