



Writing and Technology

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IN HIS 2019 BOOK, *The Creativity Code: Art and Innovation in the Age of AI*, Marcus Du Sautoy, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford, opens his final chapter with the words of Douglas Hofstadter, an American scholar of cognitive science. ‘Creativity,’ says Hofstadter, ‘is the essence of that which is *not* mechanical. Yet every creative act *is* mechanical — it has its explanation no less than a case of hiccups.’

Really?

Marcus Du Sautoy is more nuanced: ‘Our creativity,’ he says, ‘is intimately bound up with free will, something it would seem impossible to automate...’

‘[T]hen again,’ he adds, ‘we might end up asking whether free will is an *illusion which just masks* [my emphasis] the complexity of our underlying algorithmic processes.’

In other words, creativity might be a *complex* case of the hiccups, after all.

I couldn’t disagree more.

How will we ever code for *experiences* of wonder, grief, joy and awe? How will a humanoid artist ever yearn? Such experiences will never be reducible to simulated feelings, even if any number of simulations might, one day, be transmitted successfully across our neural networks. Why will



powerful art defy the algorithms? Because, with all great, transformative art, we touch – at the fingertips – the ineffable.

Like most of us, I marvel at AI's advances in medicine, climate-change forecasting, and satellite navigation — areas crucial to our daily lives and our future. Yet, as a society, we don't question adequately the loudspeaker assertions of those whose skills lie far outside artistic fields when they inform us that AI will, in time, compete with or replace artists, actors, writers, composers, songwriters and choreographers.

We seem, too, to overlook the fact that the prospect of vast commercial wealth fuels many of these claims, and huge research grants too — money that is being stripped from the arts and humanities in the UK year upon year. Without an ongoing culture of the arts at their best, we may even cease to know what we are losing. We may, in other words, be conned out of that which expresses, most remarkably, what it is to be human.

Will I ever believe that transcendent art can be achieved by an AI engineer who refines, with ever greater skill, a series of algorithms; who cleverly replicates words, images and patterns; who randomises and recombines them; who ventriloquises the human voice?

No.

Powerful art arises from an artist's deep struggle and love for the world — from his or her 'passion', which is not only a state of love but of extremis too. Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence each wrote from an intense love of the detail of life, not least because they were all dying slowly and prematurely of tuberculosis. The mystery and power that are vital to transformative art are born of risk-taking and dedication, or even devotion. 'I want to live,' Chekhov's characters say, time and again, echoing their author's passion and his glimpse into the ultimate darkness. 'I want to live.'



Their voices are bright flares in the dark. They show us we are not alone.
They reveal, suddenly and astonishingly, who we are.