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Only Human

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ONLY HUMAN

JORDAN CRANDALL

What follows is an excerpt from *Autodrive*, a work of literary fiction that speculates on a future characterized by the advent of automotive intelligence. The work combines argumentation and allegory, social criticism and satire, philosophical dialogue and adventure-fantasy, in order to unsettle the stylistic unity of conventional form, move between genres and points of view, pursue eccentric alliances, facilitate insights that might not be available through analysis alone. This version is comprised of a series of excerpts from various sections of the fiction.

The Great Mural of the Highways stretches across the eastern periphery of the truck stop on a barrier wall of epic proportions, its height reminiscent of the great fortification systems of antiquity, its length stretching further than the eye can see. The various sections, notwithstanding their many inaccuracies, aim to portray a grand narrative, an overarching chronicle of late modernity as seen from the emergence of the highway network, from the first paved routes built in the early twentieth century to the present day.

The mural is about to be recognized for its contribution to national heritage, awarded the National Historical Landmark distinction it

has long sought. The parent company is making every effort to maximize the promotional impact of the honor. It has commissioned a film crew to produce a livestream experience of the day's events, commencing with a tour of the mural, already underway, and concluding with the public ceremony to follow. A flatbed truck is being used to ferry the group of truck stop clientele who appear on camera, its empty rear aluminum deck providing the stage. That is where I come in. I have been hired to lend the illusion that the truck is manually driven.

A burst of sound from on high causes heads to collectively crane skyward: it is a group of protestors who have occupied the elevated observation deck, inveighing against the rise of automotive robotics through a bullhorn. They, like the other demonstrators assembled on this day, are eager to reach the broader audience the event accords them. Decrying the highway initiatives that exclude the unequipped, bundle inequity into their design. Pave over the asymmetry they avoid attending to, the complications they do not make workable, the inequities they fail to resolve.

For the presenter hired to lead the tour, the demand to share the stage has become intolerable, an incursion that threatens the terms of the narrative contract. He came prepared to address a remote audience, not one present

on the platform with him. His indignation has only intensified as we have gotten underway and the expanding mass of attendees encroaches on his space. Although they stand right in front of him on the truck platform, he speaks of them indirectly, as if the individuals on whose behalf he was purporting to speak were not the same ones he was actually speaking to. I can sense him very clearly on the deck right behind me, his image more detailed as he backs up, framed by the rear window when I crane my neck to glance back, or cropped by the wide-angle mirrors whenever I check them. His narration, generally forceful and abrasive, shakes the cabin. The pointer that he uses to indicate the relevant details on the sections of the mural, a flexible rod of thin metal that resembles a whip antenna, occasionally punctuates his oratory with a strike against the cabin wall, producing a sharp lashing sound whose crisp, rigid immediacy makes the device seem stiffer, like a crop. I watch him closely as he sweeps it briskly between the points of reference on the mural and the group of attendees. Often pausing in the interim to aim it skyward. He holds the instrument aloft, as if awaiting reception, then lowers it back toward the group as he conveys his lines, wobbling it up and down in time with the beat of his delivery.

It was the construction of new thoroughfares, he is saying, that unlocked the automobile's potential in the first place. Fueling the rise of suburbs, revolutionizing the shipment of

freight, increasing personal freedom, creating new industries and jobs.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

If you strive to behave in a way that will not raise suspicion, as the agency expects you to do, then it is all the more important to blend in. No one would have been able to tell me apart from any of the other freight haulers I hung out with earlier in the day. Utterly nondescript. Indistinguishable from the whole. I too have worked my share of thankless, dead-end jobs.

The key to building credibility is maintaining the right quality of effortlessness. Reaching that point where you do not need to prove yourself. The sense that your identity is inherent to the situation. When self-doubt starts to creep in, you know you are in trouble. It will mean that you are losing confidence, approaching that threshold when your proficiency no longer self-evident and needs to be legitimized. You will be in danger of losing integrity. Not on your own part, but on the part of the entire production, the entire machinery of the staging. Not only your own individual actions, but the performance of the drama in which actions take shape and competence is appraised.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Maintaining character is all the more important in situations like this, where the consequences of a sudden disclosure could be dire. Situations

where, if unmasked, you could be subjected to the wrath of those who feel betrayed. Those who believed that you were really driving feeling as if they had been double-crossed, led to think you were aligned with their cause when in fact you were advancing the very means of their displacement. Perpetuating the measures that put them out of work, relegate them to the sidelines, render them obsolete. Advancing the techniques that will depose them, the initiatives that will supersede them.

In the event that this happens, the agency instructs us to find a way to elicit empathy. Make our predicament relatable to the challenges they themselves are faced with. Point out the fact that our job is, after all, a job—one of the few available for unemployed drivers. A job that is far less onerous than its precursor, with no grueling schedules and minimal physical demands. A job that helps provide the skills you need to reinvent yourself. A job that is not in danger of becoming automated. A job that only humans can do.

As we approach the Modern Times section, the presenter flings up his arms, brushing against the obtruding crowd with the instrument's sharp upward stroke, causing the ensemble to collectively recoil as he cries out:

They are on the cusp of another major transformation!

A cattle hauler pushes to the front of the platform. Is there a program to hire the

unemployed, he asks. A public works program to help build the new infrastructure.

The rod is thrust skyward, then jugged toward the man.

They will have little need! No need for barriers, lights, lane markers, signs. They will see reductions in infrastructure costs. Reductions in government spending that benefit all.

It does not help the unemployed! yells a stout trucker, nudging someone out of the way.

A hopper driver in the back asks if there is a program for learning new skills.

The bearer of the rod pauses, instrument aloft, poised at the threshold of response. He looks quizzically about, as if uncoupled from the channel, unsure of whence the answer is to come.

I recognize a service technician, a true athlete of suffering, emerging from the building opposite, an administrative complex whose windows overlook the mural and generally remain closed. Occasionally, with great effort, one will burst open, only to shut again quickly. He was on his way to the diner, a disk-shaped structure, designed to resemble a UFO, that sits at the core of the central plaza, popular among those who gather to commiserate, find solidarity in their opposition to initiatives that threaten to depose them. Not only drivers, but workers from the service establishments

to the south that rely on income from the trucking industry. Sidelined by autonomous machines that absorb functions. Relegated to the outskirts of sealed-hood chassis, unable to navigate the data systems and modules, unable to access control features that are increasingly designed for impenetrability. More than anything else, it is the Autocade initiatives that have helped galvanize the opposition. Unlike the inequities that lack symbolic potential, and which are easily subsumed and diffused, they supply a concrete form around which the community can rally, a consolidated adversary that allows its members to band together, override difference, and unify in their defiance.

Some of the clientele are old enough to understand these initiatives within a broader historical context, having witnessed the effects first hand. The proprietor of the dilapidated motel at the interchange, whom I have talked with at length, sees them within a much larger wave of displacement, a cycle of disruption commensurate with the upheaval the freeways themselves once caused when they bypassed local businesses with endless elevated stretches of concrete thoroughfares.

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POST-APOCALYPTIC SHINE IN THE AFRO-FUTURE

BRANDI THOMPSON SUMMERS

In the September 2016 issue of *W* magazine, singer, songwriter, and actress Rihanna is the cover model and subject of the “Baddest Bitch of the Post-Apocalypse” editorial spread. Styled by Edward Enninful and shot by Steven Klein, the photo-story is described as: “Tomorrow, the last woman on earth and the ruling warrior queen in a dark, dystopian future.”¹ The post-apocalyptic imagery and fashion foreshadow our presumed societal move toward the extinction of human laborers and the rise of robots over manufacturing and other industries. But Rihanna plays a glimmering, mechanical humanoid and challenges our perception of the future as she embodies luminous surfeit in contrast to geographical scarcity.

In the cover image, Rihanna’s “Tomorrow” is a bejeweled goddess. She is situated in the foreground wearing a Cartier diamond-encrusted tiara, matching drop earrings, ear cuff, and an intricate diamond choker. A thin gold chain rests delicately on her neck. In the background a small structure resembling a miniature oil rig sits ablaze. Billowy black smoke hovers and darkens the sky above. The landscape is bare and barren. The earth is flat, with small crater-like surfaces scattered