

Jordan Crandall on the appropriate literature for our new age of superintelligence  
Interview with Andrew Keen  
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Edited and condensed

*AK: The impact of AI on creativity is an enormously important issue, and it's one that we're going to address today with my guest, Jordan Crandall. He has a new book out, Autodrive—a book about, at least in his language, a literary odyssey along the highways at a time when a new form of superintelligence has emerged. Jordan is joining us from Los Angeles. Jordan, tell me a little bit more about the book.*

JC: Well, it consists of a series of interlinked stories—vignettes that take place in various sites around a fictional city, somewhat like Los Angeles. The superintelligent AI that emerges is one that infiltrates everyday life and subtly changes how people speak, behave, see the world, understand themselves, navigate, socialize, fantasize, all those kinds of things.

*AK: Jordan, as you know, you're Southern California type and we snobs up here in Northern California look down on you, metaphorically and literally. From up here, this language sounds interesting, but also rather pretentious. It could be something that a machine invents. Convince me that you're not a machine. What's human about you?*

JC: Oh, that's a good question. Well, I don't know. I think the boundaries between human and machine aren't so easy to sort out.

*AK: So you're acknowledging that you are a machine?*

JC: I think so. I think of the idea of the cyborg — part human, part machine, integrated into systems that extend our bodily facilities into the world and reshape our ways of seeing, our imaginaries. We all have these machinic aspects of ourselves already.

*AK: So you are a computer. You're also a visual artist. You've done a lot of exhibitions around the world. What are you trying to do in your work? What are you challenging your viewer, your reader, your listener with?*

JC: I work in the form of video installations, making films, doing performances, writing media theory and now writing fiction. These are all different ways of getting at something. And what that is I'm getting at, I think, is a way of understanding who we are and what's happening to us, individually and as a culture. A way of understanding ourselves, our identities, our place in the world in a contemporary way. I'm trying to activate the imagination in order to free us up, allow us to think differently, get out of our habitual way of seeing the world. Open up into other ways of perceiving and being.

*AK: Are there artists, writers, traditional artists that you're trying to emulate whose work you're building on? Many writers have written about superintelligence. Many science fiction writers in particular. It was an interesting piece, for example, in the Financial Times this morning, an interview with Ted Chiang whose work I think is very good. His book Arrival is a particularly*

*strong book. What corpus, what tradition are you building on in your work Autodrive?*

JC: Yes I think I'm building on a tradition of science fiction and speculative fiction with writers like Ted Chiang and also Don DeLillo, JG Ballard, David Foster Wallace. Writers who are using scientific developments in a way to look at their effect on society and subjectivity in a way that's also very accessible through stories. They're storytellers, but the scenarios they envision are informed by scientific developments and current technology. From that basis they open up narratives that have a power to captivate the imagination more than straightforward analysis.

*AK: You mention Ballard and DeLillo, both great writers. Certainly I admire what's interesting about both of them, particularly DeLillo, is they seem to have imagined reality before it happened. I keep on referring back to DeLillo's White Noise in which one of the central stories in the book was this train crash that resulted in an environmental crisis in a small town which was very mysterious and apocalyptic and absurd all at the same time. Some of Ballard's work also seems eerily predictive. Are you in your writing, trying to imagine the future before it happens? Or are you seeing, particularly in Los Angeles and Southern California the future of the world concretely before it spreads elsewhere?*

JC: I think I'm foreseeing something. For example the way that our artificial agents are becoming social actors that we relate to in new ways. I think I'm foreseeing a landscape where we become much more immersed in a world of all different kinds of actors.

*AK: You mean human actors, machine actors?*

JC: Both. So that when vehicles, for example, become very much alive, we talk to them, they become part of us.

*AK: Jordan everyone talks to their cars in Los Angeles and the cars talk back.*

JC: Yes, and also artificial agents, conversational agents, chatbots and such. Different ways that one can access technology through discourse, through verbal and nonverbal communications. I think of world where we have populated a lot of different types of actors that play a social role.

*AK: Do you think, Jordan, that the technology you're writing about, does it undermine the very idea of authorial depth, the old bourgeois notion of writing deeply about the human condition? Is this going to pen us in a bit?*

JC: It depends on how we use it, really.

*AK: What do you mean, it depends how we use it? I feel like I'm an analyst, you're on the couch, you're confessing stuff to me about machines.*

JC: You're wondering whether it's going to be replacing authoritative voices?

*AK: I mean, the kind of work you as an artist, seems to suggest that through your visual work and through your written work, you can reveal truths, complexities that we wouldn't normally*

*see. But I wonder whether machines might actually prohibit that. Maybe because if anything, our lives, our views, are going to become simpler and simpler, more and more mundane. All complex stuff will happen in machines.*

JC: That is very interesting, what you are saying.

*AK: What does it mean, Jordan, in terms of our relationship with what you call superintelligence — does it make us more or less reliant on it? How will that reveal or change the nature of our relationships with machines?*

JC: I think that as we become more reliant on machines, as they become integrated with our own thought process, our own way of thinking, we won't always necessarily know where the idea came from that we had. So I see it as an extension of our thinking on the one side and also a way of influencing our thinking from the outside. The way we think and talk about things changes in a way that seems natural to us because we don't understand how it's been shaped. The systems of meaning and communication that we're engaged with influence our thought patterns, influence the way we think, the way we understand ourselves, but we don't necessarily realize that this is happening. That's what interests me mostly — how the artificial agents and intelligent systems that we relate to influence us, become part of us. The boundaries between us and them become more porous.

*AK: That's pretty interesting in the way in which those borders, as you suggest, have broken down and it's harder and harder to know what's human and what's a machine. Do you think it's an appropriate question for writers, philosophers who are thinking about our new superintelligent age to present our challenge as hanging on to our humanity, that the great confrontation is between humans and machines? Or are you suggesting that machines are already human and humans are already machines? So it's an oversimplistic way of thinking about it?*

JC: I think that the antagonistic relationship between humans and machines is very easy to dramatize, make into the stuff of stories and films where technology is depicted as a threat to something that is uniquely human about us. There's a lot of dramatic potential in that, and certainly stories and films make use of it. But I think that the situation is really much more nuanced. In trying to grasp that subtlety, it becomes less and less dramatically interesting. So the challenge is actually to try to make it interesting. And I think that's one of the big challenges in writing the book. It's not this kind of big, dramatic clash between humans and the rise of artificial intelligence as menace. Something that is suddenly introduced into the world and confronts us directly, threatens our place in the driver's seat.

*AK: There's your driving again. That's your Los Angeles. The book is, of course, called Autodrive.*

JC: Cars are fully automated and basically humans don't really have a lot to do. And so there's a lot of ways of dealing with infiltrations of the machine, trying to engage with the machine that is already very much integrated into everything.

*AK: Jordan one of the most memorable conversations I had about AI was a couple of years ago with my old friend Jeanette Winterson, another brilliant writer, not a science fiction writer, but whose latest book is on AI. She's also a woman brought up in a strongly religious tradition, and I think her literary career and much of her life has been this odd struggle between thinking for herself, if you like, and thinking her way out of her religious background. And with AI, she seems to have found her way back in. In your view, in this age of superintelligence, is this going to, as Jeanette seems to suggest, make us more religious or at least more spiritual?*

JC: That's a good question. I think there's lots of scenarios where people see this superintelligence becoming a kind of godlike entity that is so much larger than we are and knows so much more than we do. I don't necessarily foresee that happening, but I think that there is a way in which artificial superintelligence actually begins to exceed the abilities of humans, becomes something that really challenges our place in the world and challenges a lot of the ideologies we've had. Religious, certainly. I think it will cause us to question what is meaningful and what the purpose of life is and some of the bigger questions. It will cause us to think about the knowledge structures that give meaning to our world and our place in it. How we understand ourselves and our purpose.

*AK: You describe yourself as a media artist and performer, and as I said, you do video installations all around the world. I wonder whether you're concerned that this generative AI technology is going to make you redundant. Sometimes you go to these exhibits and they appear as if a machine has created them. Clearly there are humans behind them. What do you think that an artist like you can contribute, that smart machines won't be able to? Or perhaps will you, like everybody else, have nothing to do in our age of superintelligence?*

JC: As an artist, the ability to make art with these new tools will become much easier. You can glimpse the potential for all manner of creative work coming into play through films, photographs, certainly writings, all kinds of things. Work that challenges what it means to be an artist. Opening up the possibility of artmaking to a much broader public.

*AK: I mean, does that make you worried? Are you going to lose your job? Who's going to show your work? If you're made, so to speak, redundant, if all your skills can be replicated by a machine, how will you spend your day?*

JC: I would like to continue making art because I think that's just what I do. And I always think I will always find a way to do that. And one of the things that's really interesting about doing that is that you're always kept on your toes, you always take what you're given and make something of it. So I think that I will continue to make something of it. I don't see it actually being something that would replace me, but something that would challenge me to do different things or more interesting things.

*AK: So finally and I think I've asked this before, I'm not sure if you answered it. Jordan what worries you? What are you most nervous about this new age? You've given a lot of thought to it as a visual artist, as a professor, as a writer, about our new age of superintelligence. What scares you? What keeps you up at night?*

JC: I worry about the spread of misinformation. The spread of fake media, of videos, articles, sound work that actually purports to represent something real. The flood of false information or disinformation becoming so great that we no longer are able to distinguish what's real and what's not. And I think that would be something that really tears apart the fabric of society, our ability to have some kind of common world that we can all agree on, that performs the basis for our understanding and our ways of dealing with each other.