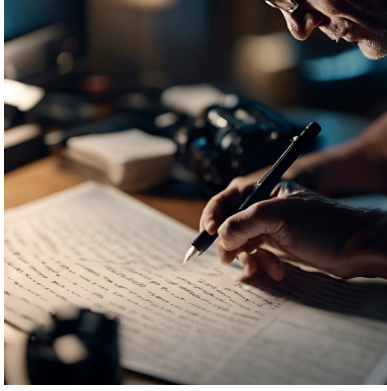


Conversation  
with Neil  
Landau edited  
by Martina  
Saltamacchia



## Creative situation

# Man will always continue to take the stage

***Does AI really pose a threat to creative work in film and TV shows production? The question is a burning one, and not just fiction, as evidenced by the long strike of screenwriters and writers in Hollywood, the mecca of the global entertainment industry. Neil Landau, an author and screenwriter among the most influential and listened-to voices, sheds light.***

The long strike in Hollywood - 150 days - put on by creative workers over the danger that AI could supplant the work of authors writing for film and TV has made a lot of noise. Especially because of the worldwide notoriety of that place, the historic temple of the entertainment industry.

To learn more, we conversed with Neil Landau, author, screenwriter and lecturer on television productions, an unquestioned and much listened-to authority..

**When the Hollywood strike started, and seeing how long it went on for, I was very struck because if we think of any job, probably screenwriting is one that we would say it's the most creative of all, and yet these people feel somehow threatened. What is that about?**

I thought the subhead for my new upcoming book, *TV Writing on Demand*, could be, *Great Television Created by Humans*. Great television created by humans for the people, because all the shows I write about, and then when I write about the art and craft of creating them, it's very much linked to humanity. And all the shows that really stand out are so unique. I do think like AI could easily write *Law and Order* episodes. There's a lot of formulaic stuff that it could do. Probably *Grey's Anatomy*, you know, any procedurals. But when you think of a movie like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, or a show like *The Bear* or *Beef* or *Succession*, you know, there's so many things that when you look at the best of the best, it's just so completely outside of what anybody's ever done before that I don't think it can even, it's hard to articulate that. It's just mystery. It's what makes art, art.

**As an author and screenwriter, don't you feel threatened by the AI rapid growth and development?**

No, I'm not worried about it at all, zero. I believe that all the best work comes from a really deep place that can't just be programmed into a machine. I do think AI can do really well at adaptation. If you give it something to do, it can do it, but the divine spark, the muse, whatever you wanna call it, nobody knows where it comes from. It's very mysterious and so how are you gonna tell an AI, how are you gonna give it a prompt to be brilliant, or to create something from nothing that we've never seen before in a complete new way? It won't know what to do, it'll be terrible.

### **Even if the prompt feeds the AI with all the details about the characters, plots and so on?**

During the whole advent of AI, somebody sent me the series finale of the TV show “Succession” as written by ChatGPT, before the final episode aired. And it said this: “We asked ChatGPT to come up with the ending.” And so they sent me the script and they said, “What do you think? How did it do?” And it was garbage, it was terrible. And this was after four seasons. It didn’t capture anything that is “Succession” and I wasn’t surprised because even Jesse Armstrong, who created and is the showrunner of “Succession,” he doesn’t know where it comes from. If you interview him, he’s completely inarticulate about what does. He’ll even tell you, he’ll say, “I don’t really know how to talk about it because I don’t know where it comes from.”

This AI-generated ending was awful, you couldn’t use any of it from “Succession.” It had the details about the characters. It knew the next part of the plot. It knew the places it could go, but it didn’t have the irony or the wit or the bite or the humor of the show. It just completely missed it. And if you asked it to do it again, you’d have to keep giving it human prompts to guide it to where, and I don’t even think Jesse Armstrong could guide it, to tell you the truth.

### **And so, why do you think Hollywood workers feel so threatened by it?**

To look at it, you have first to separate TV and film. Television in the US is made in the writers rooms, and so if you’re on staff of a certain type of show, a lot of your work is researching and coming up with possible storylines, and that can be done by AI. It could come up with possible storylines, like: take this character from the pilot, whether this is the backstory, what are possible situations this character could find him/herself in, research if there’s anything scientific or science fiction or dystopian. AI is good at predicting where things are going based on a fixed set of variables. But the art, the artistry of that, what makes it art, I know the facts, I understand the data, but how it goes through the process of the interaction with that mysterious power of creation is what can’t be defined to me, that’s the X factor. So I think for television, they won’t probably need as many writers in a writers room because a lot of that can be AI-generated.

### **And for the movies?**

I think there’s probably gonna be a premium on original stories. When you look at superhero burnout and what’s happening with Marvel, people are getting tired of recycling, even younger people, because they have TikTok and so many other things competing with it now.

Look instead at Barbie. There were so many *Barbie* screenplays developed over the years, so many. Barbie’s been around forever. Look what Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach did. Where did that come from? Now *Barbie II*, ‘cause I’m sure there will be another one since it’s such a huge phenomenon, if they make *Barbie and Ken* or they focus on whatever, AI could probably generate, say, 10 different possibilities of what that next screenplay could be and maybe there’d be some value to it, but *Barbie*, the first one, I’m talking about the creation from of just from nothing to something, you need the thing that you can’t define and that is artistry.

I do a lot of rewrite jobs where they give me a broken script or a script that’s lacking something, usually a soul, or something that makes it more unique. If you gave ChatGPT a script and said, “Deepen the female characters. Add more humor. Reset this from Los Angeles to Omaha”, it could do stuff like that, which would do a lot of the heavy lifting, but you’re still gonna need the human to go in and weave it all together and I’ll guarantee you that the parts that then transcend expectation of what it could be, the person who does that won’t be able to tell you where it came from. Like when I do rewrite jobs, they say, “We really like that metaphor that you introduced with this or that. Where did that come from?” And I’m like, “I have no idea. It just occurred to me.” And you could probably ask any writer or artist or musician, and they’ll

tell you the same thing: "I don't know." And that's what gives me confidence and reassurance that we can't be replaced, not art, and that's why.

**Do you think the AI development will create the need for new jobs to support the basic work that machines are going to do? For instance, if you start having lots of screen material written by AI, then you would need a person like yourself to put the soul into the scripts...**

A lot of what I do with scripts is called script doctoring, being a script doctor. I was thinking it could be called a soul doctor: it's not just the rewrite, it's like it's missing that certain charisma, something that it's the spirit. It's just interesting that that could be the specialization of it, 'cause it gives it its heart and its soul and that's the one thing that it's not mechanical, it's not formulaic, and it's different for every single project.

**So, you're saying, precisely this "soul" of a script that AI will never be able to generate is what it makes a show or a movie stand out?**

This is a great time of year to prove that, because all the best movies are available since now it's Academy Award consideration period of time, and everything I'm watching that's great, it's one of a kind.

Whether it's a Netflix algorithm or if it's just the studios trying to prognosticate what's gonna be the next hit, they put a lot of money into it. They can add technology to it, but they still don't know, or else every movie would be a blockbuster and every TV series would be a hit and that's not the case. Timing of the launch is part of it, what's going on in the world at that time, it's also just a lot of factors that they would have no idea what's gonna be going on in terms of a pandemic or a war, or where we are culturally and sociologically. There's a lot of factors that you can't anticipate, but I think we're starting to. It's an interesting paradox because at a time that the entertainment business, is kind of going through an existential crisis of "Are people gonna return to movie theaters beyond just for something like *Barbie*? Are people going to keep watching television with all the other options available to them?" So, I think we're moving from the logic of "every movie has to have a gigantic opening weekend and be a huge hit for it to really have value", to knowing that they can never predict that when it happens, like *Barbie*.

**Or they were waiting "Marvel" to be a hit and it wasn't.**

Yeah, so I do think it's gonna require the humans who make the decisions to look at the data from algorithms and look at what's been successful in the past and then hopefully take more risks for things that are just so unique and unusual because I think that's the only way you can create a phenomenon. *Squid Game* is an interesting case study because nobody wanted to buy it. They couldn't sell it. Netflix took it, it was like a lark, they thought, "We'll try it." It's



extremely violent and graphic and there's a lot of disturbing things about it, and it was not obvious that that would be a hit. In fact, it sat, nobody wanted it. Same thing for *Barbie*, it was developed forever. Who could have ever predicted that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* would have been successful? Or *The Queen's Gambit*, it sounds really boring to just watch somebody playing chess, so somebody's gonna have to look at all the analytics and then go, "But there's something. I'm interpreting all the data, but there's something in me that I also can't tell you why I feel this way." It just, it resonates more than the data would suggest.

The people making those decisions, the executives and the gatekeepers in power, will always want to rely on the algorithms and the data because it insulates them from failure. They can show all the reports and say, "Well, look, look at the chart. It said this was gonna make \$100,000. I just followed the data." And yet hits and successes generally come from people who say, "The data all said this, but somehow I just had this feeling that it wouldn't." And those are always the things that do the best and it's just interesting. So, all of the algorithms and AI can only take us so far. Ultimately, a human is gonna have to take a risk or stand up and say, you know, I mean, this is one part of a decision process, but the human element needs to count for at least 51% of any decision.

### **Do you personally use AI? Do you have any benefit from it?**

I have just finished to write my seventh book, and it's the first time I'm using AI, Grammarly, to edit and proofread it. It's been so interesting. I have to say I've loved using it and I'll keep using it. It's unbelievable, like from when I did my first book to now the seventh book, I used to pay people to transcribe interviews. I would pay people to proofread. And no matter how much I would proofread, I'd still find mistakes once it was published. What's great about Grammarly for me is that it gives you really helpful suggestions without judgment or shame. So, 'cause you could give it, a lot of my other books, I'd given to some friends, "Can you read this? Let me know what you think." And there's judgment and if they catch something that could be better, I'd feel bad about myself, like, why didn't I see that? With Grammarly, it's like so gentle and nurturing. It's like, well, what if the sentence was like this? What if this was structured like this instead? I'd be like, yeah, that is better. And I'm learning from it also, like AI would almost always reorder my sentences, so instead of having like the subordinate clause first with a comma and then the strong statement, it would revert it back, so the times that it was right, it just made it more elegant, I would be like, this is great, it's gonna make me look really good and I just hit accept. The times that it's not, which is why it's still really time consuming, is sometimes it would change the context of what I was saying completely and missed the point. And so I can't just hit one button and go rewrite this, I have to go through step by step by step.

### **Besides editing and proofreading, do you use AI to help you generating ideas, for instance, "suggest me possible topics and ways to write this chapter"?**

No, and to explain you why, I'm going to use an admittedly unusual example. Last year, I had finished putting together the book proposal for my seventh book, basically the table of contents and all the topics I wanted the new book to cover. Yet, I didn't have any excitement or enthusiasm to write that book. Then, I suffered from a heart attack. I'm lying in my bed recuperating, I've been told don't work, which is very hard for me. And all of a sudden, there was this little whisper. I was watching some coming of age shows and I thought, I need to write a chapter called *Coming of Age in a New Age*. So, I reread *Catcher in the Rye*, and then I started to watch a lot of Young Adults coming of age TV series. That was the first chapter I wrote, and it wasn't in my proposal. Same with the other chapters I got excited about, there were things I hadn't already thought of, and they came to me during a time when I was not trying to come up with anything, which is where the best creative, the best art comes from.

I always tell students, “When you’re trying to come up with an idea, you’re never gonna come up with,” not never, but like go take a walk. Like go do something completely unrelated, go to a museum, go to a symphony, you’ll come up with other ideas.

**Is that the reason why you say AI can’t be asked to generate ideas?**

Yes, I feel like trying to ask AI to come up with stuff is very similar to trying to manufacture authenticity: “Make it more authentic”. But you can’t manufacture authenticity. That’s gonna be hyper-specific to everybody’s unique experience. I don’t see a place where AI is self-generating. It aggregates and it emulates, but it can’t innovate and it will never be able to innovate until we have singularity, when we don’t need to exist anymore. But as long as human beings co-exist, it’s never gonna be able to innovate the way we can because we don’t know how we do it either. We all have those precious, unique gifts inside us. What’s key to it is about accessing them and paying attention to them. When people use ChatGPT or something, they’re focusing on what they want the AI to do. But if instead to pay attention to that, you paid attention to that spark within yourself, it’s much more powerful than any AI can be and ever will be.



*Neil Landau is an award-winning American screenwriter and producer of movies and TV shows, including Melrose Place and MTV Undressed. Author of six books translated into ten languages, he is a professor of screenwriting at the University of Georgia.*