Creative highways and digital byways

> **Atreyu:** My horse died! I nearly drowned, I just barely got away from the Nothing! For what?! To find out what you already knew?!
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> **The Childlike Empress:** It was the only way to get in touch with an Earthling.
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> **Atreyu:** But I didn't get in touch with an Earthling!
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> **The Childlike Empress:** Yes, you did. He has suffered with you. He went through everything you went through, and now he has come here with you. He is very close, listening to every word, we say.
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> **Bastian:** What?!
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> **Atreyu:** Where is he? If he's so close, why doesn't he appear?
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> **The Childlike Empress:** He doesn't realise he's already a part of The NeverEnding Story.
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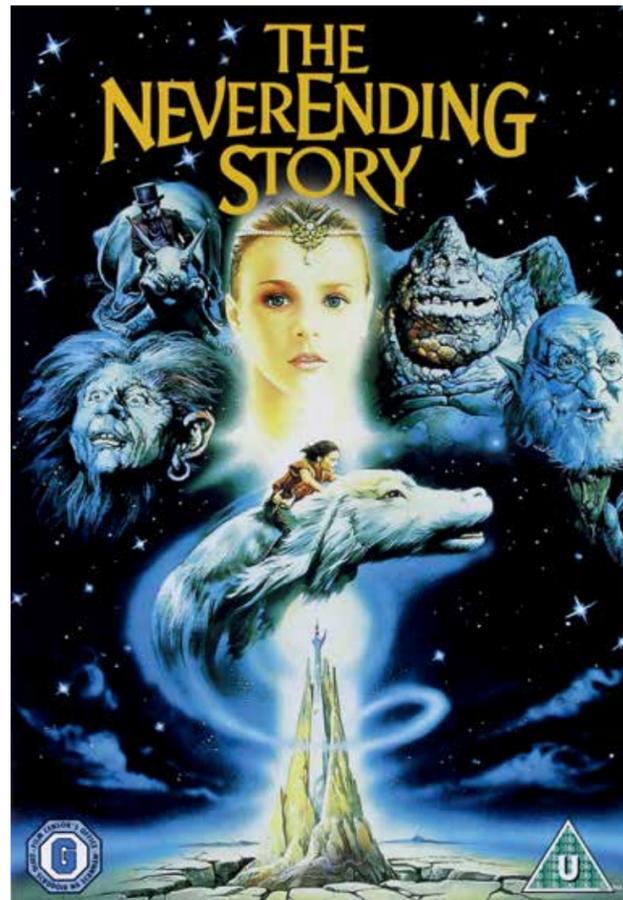> **Atreyu:** 'The NeverEnding Story'? What's that?
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> **The Childlike Empress:** Just as he is sharing all your adventures, others are sharing his. They were with him when he hid from the boys in the bookstore.
>
> **Bastian:** But that's impossible!
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> **The Childlike Empress:** They were with him when he took the book with the Auryn symbol on the cover, in which he's reading his own story, right now...
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> – Atreyu, the Childlike Empress and Bastian: *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), directed by Wolfgang Petersen and edited for English audiences by Steven Spielberg.

Spiking the lens in a clip on YouTube from CNN's *Marketplace Africa*, the disarmingly charming and exquisitely beautiful Zain Asher smiles into the camera. Across time and space, she looks directly at me from the screen of my iPad, 'Whether you're doing a web search with Google, asking Siri for directions on an iPhone, or even getting movie recommendations on Netflix, you're probably using AI every single day of your personal life,' Asher tells me... and the 2 107 geographically disparate viewers who have watched the same clip before me. The camera pans away from her in a long shot, which magically segues to logo animation for the programme. A disembodied voice pronounces that artificial intelligence is all around us. 'But are countries like South Africa adopting these technologies fast enough?' the voice asks.

Just like the character Bastian from *The NeverEnding Story* (based on Michael Ende's German novel of the same name), those viewers and I (like the countless viewers of the film, and the innumerable readers of the novel) may think that we're the ones watching, reading and/or listening... but is there someone... or *something* watching us?

'Algorithmic superstructures are looking over your shoulder,' warns a note in the programme for Impakt, a five-day digital multi-media arts festival that includes exhibitions, film screenings, lectures, panels, performances,
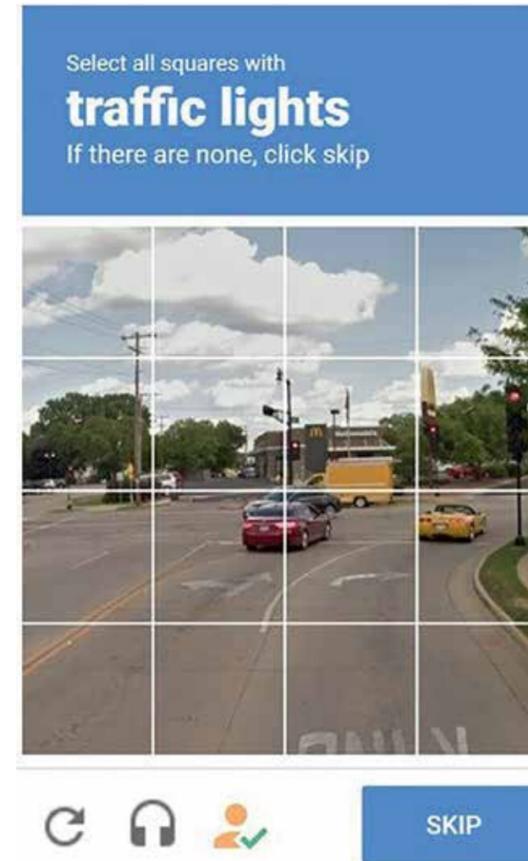
presentations, and talks by artists at various locations in Utrecht in the Netherlands.

What exactly are algorithmic superstructures? In simple terms, code is the language used to tell a computer what to do. But before you can write code, you need an algorithm – which is basically the framework for manipulating data in order to solve a particular problem, or to arrive at a particular desired outcome. So that's the algorithm part. But what are the superstructures? The most obvious of them would be search engines and social media platforms. Facebook, for example, knows a great deal of information about me and you (and 540 million other Facebook users whose records were publicly exposed on Amazon's cloud computing service. The compromised data included account names, ID numbers, and details about comments and reactions to posts). Why would Facebook want that data in the first place, and to what end? And, perhaps more curiously, why did I (along with those millions of users) volunteer all that information to Facebook so readily?

According to Google, reCAPTCHA is 'a free service from Google that helps protect websites from spam and abuse.' But how do we know that? Because Google tells us so... Could it be that when we are proving our human status by clicking on the squares that contain pictures of traffic lights, we are instead training an algorithmic superstructure to master that supposed 'human' skill? A presentation by the curators of the 2018 Impakt Festival explored the extent to which predictive analysis, data mining, machine learning, and other advanced algorithms increasingly define the outlines of our lives as digital subjects.

Meanwhile, back in South Africa, the National Arts Festival's inaugural Creativate Digital Arts Festival – presented by Standard Bank – was launched last year as a space for creatives to interrogate the intersection between creativity and technology. Similarly, the Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival, arguably the single most important digital arts festival on the continent, is an electrifying ten-day programme that illuminates the power of innovative collaboration at the crossroads of arts, culture and technology.

Whether or not South Africa is adopting new technologies fast enough is of less interest to me than the fact that we have key flagship arts initiatives focused on exploring both the opportunities and risks of such technologies in an intentional, robust and meaningful way. Becoming 'Future Fit' in order to play a meaningful role in navigating the digital highways and byways of the South African creative landscape is very much on the agenda of Business and Arts South Africa. We look forward to connecting with you there! **CF**

The next Impakt festival (www.impakt.nl/festival/) will take place from 30 October until 3 November 2019. The second edition of Creativate takes place under the umbrella of the 2019 National Arts Festival (www.nationalartsfestival.co.za). For more information about this year's Fak'ugesi Festival, keep an eye on www.fakugesi.co.za for dates and programme details.

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