

Lucy, Ethel and the Bonbon Paradox

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Science fiction author and journalist Cory Doctorow is quoted in his latest book *The Reverse Centaur's Guide to Life After AI* that "SF writers make lousy prophets, but we can be pretty good technology critics." The man responsible for the weblog *Boing Boing* and an informative newsletter at *Pluralistic.net* has recently produced a 222-page guide to thinking about artificial intelligence before it's too late.

It's just the kind of critical distance my brain needs before walking into IMTS 2026 this year. How many times will we hear phrases like "Building an AI roadmap," "AI practical steps," and/or "AI in real world applications," during the show?

In Doctorow's book he kindly breaks down the AI journey into two very distinct categories: the centaurs and the reverse centaurs. In the academic study of automation, a centaur is a person who is *assisted* by a machine; examples include riding a bicycle, driving a car, and using the mute button on your television set during commercials.

A reverse centaur is a human conscripted into acting as an assistant *to* a machine. He cites a classic *I Love Lucy* episode as a prime example of this:

"Lucy and Ethel are working on an assembly line at a chocolate factory, taking bonbons off the belt and wrapping them in paper. As the belt goes faster and faster, Lucy and Ethel have to work at superhuman speed. They're reverse centaurs: the machine can move the chocolates from one place to another, but it needs a human to pack them into the box, and the humans who act as an assistant are made to work at a pace that exceeds all human capacity until calamity ensues."

The two characters stuffing their faces with bonbons is pure sitcom gold, but in the context of automation and manufacturing today, the thought of humans trying to keep up with the shenanigans of machines is material specifically tailored to horror movies.

The quote that really resonates with me from Doctorow's book is the following, "Automation isn't necessarily the enemy of warehouse work: there's nothing wrong with a forklift! The difference between automation that helps a warehouse worker and automation that torments that worker is whether the worker gets to choose where, when, and how to use that information."

Stories about warehouse employees trying to keep up with the demands of robots and machines in shipping departments, for example, are sparking some much-needed debate on the right path forward in terms of both safety and sanity. And how many articles have you read recently where human workers were fired due to automation programs only to be rehired three months later?

IMTS 2026 is going to be another chapter in the Wild West of AI. AI can detect errors faster than humans and can be utilized in predictive maintenance to foresee and schedule fixes *before* bearings, motors and gear drives fail. There's no denying the positive impact it can have if used correctly. However, it could also shove bonbons down a conveyor line at a speed that no sweet tooth on the planet would ever be able to manage effectively.

At the end of the day, the future of AI is what we make of it. In a world full of centaurs and reverse centaurs the notion that humanity still has a choice in how this all plays out is the headline I'm sticking with.