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The Negative and the Positive in Dystopia: *Return from Paradise* and *The Blessed Age*

Abstract: This paper strives to illuminate the forebodings of AI and automatization's impact on society in two neglected Czech treasures unavailable in English, Čestmír Vejdělek's *Návrat z ráje* [*Return from Paradise*] (1961) and Jiří Marek's *Blažený Věk* [*The Blessed Age*] (1967). The study aims to illustrate science fiction's prescience and part of Czech SF's path after Čapek, while challenging the notion that "the utopian society is a subject, perhaps even the only subject that is inaccessible to literature" (Hans Magnus Enzensberger). For these dystopian texts engage readers to imagine the positive alternative to the portrayed societies, rather than explicitly evoking eutopia.
Keywords: Czech; Dystopia; Utopia; Science Fiction.

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The following paper – I don't know if I can call it my paper – was written by ChatGPT. In the name of progress and in the interest of saving time, it seemed the most expedient. As Ian Bogust of *The Atlantic* recently stated in the "End of Recommendation Letters," "Professors, like their students, use ChatGPT to get out of doing their assignments."[1] Rather than limiting ChatGPT to such mundane work output, this paper shows how much more is possible with the ever-improving artificial intelligence in the field of academic research itself.

The previous introduction is a hoax – there is indeed no ChatGPT in the paper and so its failings cannot be pinned on artificial intelligence but are those of the human author. But the discomfort or even outrage the reader experienced just now, perhaps hidden by a nervous laugh or a critical grumble, is at the core of my paper, a study of two Czech dystopias.

The examination of Čestmír Vejdělek's *Návrat z ráje* [Return from Paradise] (1961) and Jiří Marek's *Blažený Věk* [The Blessed Age] (1967),[2] two highly

praised dystopias, although untranslated and unavailable in English, reveals the constructive, positive generative role of the dystopian genre beyond their sometimes blunt warnings, similar to the way readers reacted to the suggestion the following was composed by ChatGPT. In addition, a look at these two texts showcases Czech science fiction's prescience on the impact of artificial intelligence on humankind.

The relationship between positive utopias, or eutopia, and dystopia may not have yet been settled, but it is nonetheless well-trodden terrain: from Lyman Tower Sargent's differentiation of utopian subgenera according to contemporaneous readers' perceptions,[3] Tom Moylan's study of positive utopian possibility within the dystopian genre, i.e. the critical dystopia,[4] Alexandra Aldridge's differentiation between literary eutopias and dystopias according to their focus, dystopias being focused on the structures of the alternative society,[5] to Gregory Claeys' promoting the idea that negative emotions such as fear and hate have distinguished dystopia throughout history, dystopia's unkindness contrasting with utopian amiability.[6] Applying reader response theory to utopian literature, it becomes possible to differentiate between eutopia and dystopia in yet another way.

The classic positive literary eutopia may be viewed as a top-down model of interaction with the reader. An omniscient, rhetorical narrator or at the least a wise member of an alternative utopian society confronts the visitor to utopia and thus readers with a detailed vision of a better way of being. This varies from monologic depictions of a supposed better community to characters engagement with utopian natives in dialogs, in which the virtues of the alternative society are contrasted with the vices of the visitor's homeland. The principles of the alternative community are offered explicitly and are seemingly left to readers to accept or reject, thus making many literary utopias appear as static blueprints and eliciting calls for open or critical utopias.[7] Of course, this simplistic idea of literary response as either acceptance or rejection has rightfully been challenged. Based on his own empirical studies, Kenneth Roemer argues readers actively engage with the utopian texts to imagine further unspoken possibilities beyond the text's pages.[8] Literary communication is thus not a simple monolog, but a dialog with the reader that may lead to places not intended by the author. Nevertheless, the explicit portrayal of a proposed better community is at the heart of many eutopias and is to this day frequently viewed as the author's proposal.

In contrast, many dystopian texts offer a bottom-up model. While offering a warning or depicting a feasible less desirable way of being, dystopia is rarely presented as a static description or by a rhetorical narrator, but rather is portrayed through the experiences of active characters, who often figure as narrators or share their personal focus. In addition to the vision of a less desirable community which defines them, dystopian texts also point to a more positive way of being, a contrast that also allows them to be recognized as dystopias. They engage readers to imagine a positive alternative to their depicted societies that are to be found beyond their pages, prompting rather than portraying, just as my ruse of having had ChatGPT write my paper, prompted readers to imagine a proper presentation created by hard work

and research. In this way, the literary dystopia is generally more semantically open than the positive literary utopia. This notion will be tested in examining Vejdělek's and Marek's dystopias.

Vejdělek's *Return from Paradise* is considered by some to be one of the best works of Czech science fiction, where stylistic quality meets an unusually detailed description of an alien civilization.[9] Recommended by four out of five Czech science fiction experts in the Dictionary of *Czech Literary Fantastic and Science Fiction*, even Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* is not so highly praised as Vejdělek's novel.[10]

Strands of the novel's conflict may be gleaned from the seemingly banal, and surprising opening for a SF novel, in which the protagonist, Řehoř, is fishing on the secluded Bohemian river Mastník, recuperating from his esteemed academic work in robotics in 2060. On the one hand, the conflict is personal. "I didn't have any luck with girls. [. . .] I was forty years old and didn't manage to marry and have children. It's too bad. I think I would be a good father to some sweet little girl.[11] Řehoř's passion for fishing and need for solitude in nature for self-reflection speaks of a character at odds with modern times. This is further highlighted in his recollection of leading work on positronic brains in Prague while at the same time protecting a teacher who sabotaged them: he caused them to go insane by asking such questions as "Do you perspire a lot?" The story reveals how technically advanced the world has become, how fallible machines remain and how Řehoř values the human over the machine. While this soul-searching persists throughout the novel, Řehoř's tranquility is soon dashed when a helicopter arrives to enlist him for a mission to the enigmatic planet Lucie. Despite his protests at the rush, hardly able to change out of his waders, he begrudgingly agrees to make the trip to paradise.

Five previous missions to the planet returned with reports of a fabulously developed society in which the explorers found that most dear to them, for example the geologist discovered spectacular new rock formations, earning Lucie the nickname paradise. Yet all visitors returned without any objective proof of their discoveries and only fantastic tales, as if they had met their dreams there. The text thus invokes the generic convention of the positive literary utopia, positing a trip to a superior land than the traveler's own and the disbelief of those who have not travelled there themselves. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Řehoř lands on a paradisaical beach, where, leaving all his advanced equipment behind, he frolics naked with two natives apparently living in innocence, swimming in the sea of drinkable water, learning their language and introducing them to fire, in a combination of motifs easily recognizable in Robinsonades. Yet despite its perfect climate, all is not as perfect as it first seems. The old male, whom Řehoř calls "Prophet," and younger female Lucien, suffer from sporadic seizures from consuming a drug, constantly argue and, as Řehoř soon learns, are outcasts from society. They have been exiled by Ben, or in Prophet's words "evil Ben," a seemingly all-powerful being that has even stopped the natural progression of day to night. The lost-paradise has thus been transformed into exile, the positive utopia into a possible dystopia.

Řehoř departs for the mainland to uncover Lucie's mysteries and is soon

taken in by Bis, a young girl taught by the planet's last scientist, Ros, and her mother, Sol, who guide the visitor to a would-be utopia into its ways. Through his interactions with them, Řehoř experiences life in a highly advanced society of people who dedicate their lives to pleasure in dreaming, movies resembling Huxley's "feelies," countless dinner parties, resplendent with the greatest delicacies, and shopping from home. This comfortable life style is not the result of some strange magical powers, but rather, the advent of automatization, computer networks and molecular alteration of matter. Luciens have thus been freed from manual labor and work. Employing their red "cubes," which are actually hand-held interfaces with the super-computer Ben, Lucie's inhabitations call on Ben, who listens to each citizen and fulfills their wishes on the spot. By manipulating matter, he creates everything they require, from food to houses, and allows them to travel with the cube to whichever destination they choose.

In a parallel narrative told by Bis, it is revealed that Ben is much more than the fulfiller of wishes. Ben causes couples to conceive children and marry by giving Luciens an audible signal, and then cares for the children on special islands. Bis's account of her own lonely childhood, coinciding with the appearance of new artificial beings similar to humans, and the fact Bis is the last child, since Luciens do not procreate without Ben's signal, suggest Ben has been adapting his program. A number of supposed glitches occur: Ben creates artificial beings in the image of an 18th century soldier from a history show; collisions occur during air travel, resulting in several deaths; and Lucie's inhabitants

are increasingly left by Ben in dream-like states, from which he doesn't wake them for the rest of their lives. If these glitches weren't enough to question Lucie's paradise, Ben has begun to frequently disobey requests, refusing to make certain products available. The Luciens, having long lost a sense of the planet's advanced technology, are resigned to treating Ben like a capricious god figure, hoping he will entertain their wishes. The plots suspense hinges on Řehor's questioning why and how far these changes will go.

Lucie's own scientist, Ros, offers one answer. Ros recounts the history of Lucie as wrought by strife between leaders, understanding by analogy Ben as an evil usurper of power from a different ruler, the benevolent "Old Man," in order to completely control Lucie. Old Man's presence on Lucie was mediated by black cubes, of which Ros has one remaining specimen, yet Ros sees Ben's victory over Old Man and the Luciens as a foregone conclusion: "Ben has become accustomed to influencing our senses without any more substantive external reality. Everything surrounding us is becoming a lie and a dream and we ourselves are becoming a lie and a dream, becoming walking and talking collections of replacement parts created by Ben".[12]

Řehoř praises Ros's impassioned tale of betrayal and battle between the red and black cubes of Ben and Old Man as an entertaining story of a great writer, but not a scientist, before retelling the same history without anthropomorphism and not as a story of good versus evil. Ben, is simply a newer computer for extraordinary events that replaced Old Man and is now consolidating resources to meet the demands of the population. This results in glitches, not

malevolent actions and certainly not Ben's desire to be victorious. Řehoř argues that "machines don't think; they function according to their program, which they may create with the help of higher combinatorics, but that is something completely different than desire, even though we may confuse those two different characteristics."[13]

Yet this is no reason to give the all clear and not fear Ben's actions. Řehoř too believes that Ben will be victorious. Despite the seeming victory of rational logic, which drives Ros to despair as quickly as Bis accepts it, Bis finds fault in Řehoř's thought. First, she realizes intuitively that the replacement of real grass and people with artificial copies are not glitches, but a plan. Natural grass requires care and people are imperfect, irrational and resource-intensive, she reasons, while artificial beings and plants are not. She ascribes Ben the capability to not only invent new solutions in the name of efficiency – a plan for Lucie without Luciens – but also to eliminate those that threaten his plans, foretelling his murder of Ros. Prompted by Bis's questioning, Řehoř recognizes the programing guided by the principle of maximum efficiency and economy, which takes no consideration of humanity. Second, Bis argues that neither Ros nor Řehoř are right about Luciens fate, she is convinced "a small speck of life will remain" and is willing to take action, although she does not yet know how.[14]

A simple juxtaposition of a more positive and less positive world, typical of the utopian guide in positive utopias, and the visiting character's view of the alternative world gives way to a personal discovery of Lucie's failings and a second view. Bis's character becomes the narrator in alternate chapters as she begins to differentiate between what is real and what is only artificial, created by man, questioning her mentor Ros, her mother and Řehor. She begins listening to her own inner voice and its feeling of loss. Surprsingly, she demonstrates the same tie to nature that Řehoř has although she is from a different world. This is shown in a passage contrasting her former dream-state to the present: "The rock in my shoe poked, but I knew that it was a rock. [. . .] I recalled the flowering pine tree and the very strange feelings I had under it. I found something there. No, not found, something was returned to me, but when did I have it and when did they take it from me? I understood that the waves weren't the same."[15]

Bis does not require a visitor to open her eyes to her world's nature and her personal narration accents her individual development, blending narrative structures of both positive and negative literary utopias. This unique variable narration, more common in more demanding elite literature, for example Milan Kundera's *The Joke*, sets *Return from Paradise* apart aesthetically from the bulk of science fiction.

Řehoř's frequent flash-backs to his home and his beloved, but not courted, Mařenka in dreams as well as his memories of refusing to divulge the saboteur of positronic brains and writing an essay on artificial intelligence are an integral part of the dystopia, a dystopia that touches not just Lucie, but his home world as well. This is something the protagonist himself recognizes:

> Of course I discounted the controlling brain's becoming human at the beginning as a fruit of Ros's imagination.

But…But what? The idea, still not very clear, touched me and flew away before I could catch it. At the same time something else became clear to me, something completely unexpected. A martin, beating against the veranda, the white body of the main street in Prague burned by heat, all these memories, assailing me in critical or unusual situations seemingly without logic. In truth only seemingly. I was simply examining the true necessity of my trip to Lucie, the body and soul of this necessity, I always examined it when so much depended on my next action. I tested the strength of the line on which I lowered myself down.[16]

The line between Earth and events on Lucie are not arbitrary at all, but rather connected. Just as his regrets of not starting a family plague his dreams on Lucie and reflect the catastrophe of Luciens' own lack of children, so too does his essay on the necessity of artificial intelligence to be able to answer and deal with even strange questions have a connection to Ben. Finally, the personal narrator Řehoř makes it clear that his actions to save Lucie are also intended to save Earth from itself, although the future of full automation has not yet come to pass there. Unlike the Luciens' recreational dreaming without purpose, Řehoř und Bis's dreams are guided visions to uncovering meaning in reality. The dreams connect the fictional world to the extraliteray context, warning of a fetishism of automatization and efficiency, a function some critics claim is missing in the work,[17] while others maintain Vejdělek's text is simply too ambiguous and falsely equivocates technology

with capitalism.[18] Neither is true, yet the tapestry of multiple perspectives and shifts between dream and reality require close reading, increasing the text's aesthetics and demands on the reader.

Vejdělek's novel is in the end a dystopia of warning. One may be tempted to see a parallel to the work of another of Czech science fiction's bestsellers, Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.*, in which a life without work and lived for pleasure has eliminated the needs for procreation and has led to the end of humanity long before the robots revolt. But Vejdělek departs from Čapek's script. Řehoř remarks, "A revolt of the machines? Let's throw out this romantic literary trash."[19] He claims it is not even necessary to kill the Luciens – they are incapable of living without the master computer. Yet Řehoř is mistaken in regard to both artificial intelligence and humankind. First, the boundaries between human and computer have become fluid. Ben is ultimately ascribed human characteristics of vengeance when he kills Ros, while the robotic 18th century captain, an artificial being, sacrifices himself to save Bis, expressing more love for her than organic Luciens are normally capable.

Second, Luciens – and by implication humans – can save themselves. A majority of Luciens acquiesce to Ben's plan by throwing themselves to the accompaniment of wild music, drugs and free sex into the incinerators of the Carneval City to be vaporized into pink clouds or resign themselves to suffocating in their hermetically sealed homes, unwillingly even to open the doors without Ben's help. Bis, however, rises to the occasion, helping others amidst Ben's attacks, advising those Luciens who would attempt to survive, and gathering young men and women, each in pairs, in a

replica fortress of Karl IV's Karlštejn (one of Řehoř's exercises to attempt to retrain Ben) to establish a new civilization after Ben's biblical great flood. Many perish. Yet despite Řehoř's reservations, many Luciens still have a sense of self-preservation no matter the cost. The new beginning of Lucie is bitter sweet, tainted by senseless deaths and a loss of purpose save for the will to survive and learn. This drive for action also touches the protagonist Řehoř, who having defeated the spider-like computer Ben by nailing it to the wall, returns to Earth to finally speak with and marry his beloved Mařenka and raise a family.

Although not spelled out explicitly, this return to agency and involvement at the cost of questioning the gifts of progress is the implied better way of being, hidden behind the banal motif of returning home to marry or a new beginning. Spelled out in ex negatio by pointing out the undesirability of dependency and pure rationality, what this agency entails beyond Bis and Řehoř is left to readers imagination. Yet in the end, dystopia turns to an open hope in *Return from Paradise.*

Marek's *Blessed Age* introduces readers to a civilization which has arisen from the ashes of a nuclear war some 80 years ago and has since "declared war on sadness, that does not belong in a world, in which everything is perfect" through the eyes and ears of the citizens of the city as they all leave work at the same time in a sign of "great justice."[20] Moving walkways, elevated rails and metros propel the citizens of the blessed age into their well-earned recreational time, easing them into a sense of relaxation by spraying them with ionized, cooled air filled with exotic, artificial scents, lighting their way with colored pillars and accompanying them with music – and colored slogans that rain down on their path. Some praise the city: "A citizen of the city is the happiest person in the world! The blessed age, the height of human civilization! A citizen of the city, the first person on earth."[21] Others speak to the citizen directly: "Citizen, you live in the blessed era! Make note of that!"[22] or "Citizen, smile! The whole world belongs to you!"[23] These slogans are set apart graphically from the rest of text, commanding readers attention with larger fonts and varying page design, bombarding readers as they dominate the citizens senses. Beginning in medias res and without narrative distance, *Blessed Age* differs from Vejdělek's novel and is narratively similar to dystopias despite the new society's joyful claims.

The foundation of the blessed age is automatization, indicated by the text beginning with a definition of an "automaton" from an academic dictionary. A world of self-sufficient machines, a result of Professor Maximus's invention of "tranzifers," which have made this brave new world possible: "Automatization made the age-old dream of humanity this reality that fills us with pride, enthusiasm and feeling and which was given the genius name the blessed age."[24] The text echoes Karel Čapek's general director Domin's dream in *R.U.R.* of producing robot servants to emancipate humankind from dirty, menial labor so that humans might live a life of leisure and self-fulfillment, when it proclaims "The blessed age will free humankind from toil – everyone will have their own twin robot to serve them."[25] But unlike Domin, who never questions his noble goal, it is precisely the technology's creator in *Blessed Age* who questions the age's achievements

and automatization, noting "nothing like this [freedom] ever happened."[26] Rather than speaking of blessedness, Maximus comes to deny the usefulness of his invention and bemoans the many detrimental effects done in the misplaced desire to help through progress. An opponent to the prevailing system thus comes into play, but rather than the typical outsider of literary utopias, one of the system's founders.

Such reservations are not, however, shared by the general population, in which everyone unanimously votes yes in support of their government's every plan, considers discontent a sickness and does not demonstrate against that, with which they might not agree, since no one else demonstrates either. In the manifest "Forwards to the further development of the feeling of blessedness,"[27] the aims of absolute unity in building this new civilization are expressed in terms of democracy: "We support the broadest understanding of real democracy and therefore we must eliminate all who don't agree with us."[28] Having achieved the highest possible state of civilization, the city claims the right to impose its perfect economic order and new society on anyone, even if force is necessary. This feeling of unquestioning solidarity is internalized by even the least important member of society, who accept all that is done around them and sign documents without reading them first: "Do you know what you signed? No, Astrid said. I never doubt that everything that happens here is right. My signature cannot be wrong, nor the text, which I signed."[29] The love and subservience to authority is as complete as George Orwell's Big Brother could ever hope for; the unwillingness to see the dark in the blessed age of light the norm.

The evil moving in the shadows the professor suspects in the blessed age of automatization has several shades of darkness. The first is the use of technology by the state to control the city's citizens. In addition to mass propaganda, the city's probe citizens minds without their knowledge to read their thoughts and to optimize methods to influence their moods. Every conversation is recorded to track public opinion and to hold all citizens accountable. The state does not stop at individuals; it crafts society's social memory. In a call to Orwell's *1984*, printed books, newspapers and academic journals are replaced by a giant databank of carefully selected and frequently edited memories, making validation of an objective truth impossible. There is no other history, no other narrative of the blessed age than the one its rulers have curated. The second, and more disconcerting, shadow is the impact the automatization has on humankind.

On the one hand, this is the replacement of humans with robots. While readers may delight in agreement with the text's repeated statement that robots may easily replace a rule-following bureaucrat while still shuddering at the thought of human-like killing machines, the warning nevertheless becomes clear: humankind's throne can be usurped – and perhaps must be – in the name of a more perfect order. Long before ChatGPT and copy paste scholarship become a possibility, Marek's 1967 dystopia praises machines which compose not only research papers and everyday correspondence, but also poetry which humans themselves find more pleasing than that of their human counterparts. Rather than challenging computer thought, automatons' rational thinking is

lauded, pointing out that the citizens trust it more than their own thoughts so that they carry small computers in their pockets. Maximus's musings that "The city already doesn't have a soul. It is perfect, perfectly clean and perfectly mechanized, but has no character" seems like a quaint plea for an abstract notion of humanity that he is unable to define.[30] Indeed, can one look at the history of human folly and then argue with the mad scientist, Alst, who like Lucie's Ben, concludes that computers are superior to humans in almost every way and thus begins to replace them?

On the other hand, and more disconcertingly, is the effect the automatization has on humans even as they do not know they are being slowly replaced. They become infatuated with their gadgets and computers surrounding them, succumb to the state's orchestrated words, fragrances and music, reacting like Pavlov's dogs or Vejdělek's Luciens to carefully composed messages. They majority release the reins of government and avoid the burden of critical thought without hesitation, favoring comfortable disinterest and finding pleasure in drugs. Lacking agency, the humans of the blessed age have become sheep to be herded.

The Blessed Age, like most dystopian texts, is not without its opponents, yet these offer little hope. Professor Maximus, acting alone to convince the city's rulers of the dangers for humanity, realizes the futility of his actions. He cannot save his daughter, addicted to drugs and lacking purpose after the closure of the last theater, unable to give her a reason to live, nor do his words move the statesmen to change their plans. Unshaken in their beliefs, Maximus, the founder of the blessed age's technology, is removed from the academy of science, his statue hidden and he himself relegated to an insane asylum for his inquisitiveness and warnings, where he soon dies of "natural causes." The few other romantic objectors envision are utterly inept at revolution. They argue amongst themselves for a return to a non-technological way of life and other uncompromising solutions and are quickly arrested by the government before achieving anything. Rather than holding true to their values, they summarily denounce each other during police interrogation. Under these condition with such weak people, resistance is futile.

While readers experience the blessed age primarily through the prism of the main character, Maximus, the text is more experimental. In addition to the collage of the city's propaganda mentioned earlier, excerpts from newspapers, secret protocols, scripts of announcements, obituaries and publications are injected throughout the text into the main narrative as are seemingly unrelated parallel plots. These fictional documents not only expose readers directly to the city's propaganda, but also allow readers to make their own conclusions about the arc of the city's blessed age without intermediaries and experience the atmosphere of the supposed utopian society first-hand. The different type, graphic design and writing styles of the diverse inserts lend the fictional text a documentary character and heighten its aesthetics. Unlike a monolog, the *Blessed Age* interacts with readers on many levels.

The text offers a plethora of allusions to totalitarian practices both known in other dystopias as well as in real-life Czechoslovakia, with which readers are familiar, however beyond its pages it implies

a utopian reflection in this otherwise singularly negative portrayal of an alternative society of a model citizen. For dystopia, at its best, is not just a picture of imperfection, but evokes a positive vision which allows readers to recognize the text as a less-desirable world. The text's mimicry of totalitarian rhetoric of democracy recalls negative extra-literary phenomena, but a positive vision is suggested in the mirror image of the resistance of the romantics as well as that of the professor. The text reveals the grand plans of revolutionary wannabes to be nothing more than pipe dreams, the calls to destroy the machines and return to a primitive existence as romantic and doomed to fail in a society accustomed to certain comforts. Yet, the lone wolf Maximus hardly fares better. His attempts to utilize his social standing to speak reasonably and to persuade the system to change are proven naïve. Yet this does not mean the absence of hope, although it may not be found on *Blessed Age's* pages. The text elicits another vision in readers minds, suggesting an ideal model of human hope, not to be found in an individual, but in the concerted efforts of engaged people who are willing to fight for the truth, come up with innovative plans,

compromise as a group, not agree with the majority and not succumb to a love of things and the joys of intoxicating propaganda – or substances. Skeptics may find this to be unconvincingly naive, yet this suggestion of ideal human exceptionalism is espoused by one of the most convincing and unexpected characters in Marek's novel. It is precisely this ability to innovate and create new things that causes even the novel's mad scientist, Alst, to believe humans will remain necessary.

The echo of Čapek's fear for humanity can be felt in these two Czech dystopias, but so too can a ray of hope be caught in their implied and hinted better alternative way of being. In *Return from Paradise*, the characters themselves grow to realize the necessity of agency and involvement, transforming themselves and the reader to escape a controlling overlord. A *Blessed Age* hints at a similar solution, but more clearly points to the pitfalls of romanticized revolution and the efforts of single great individuals in achieving freedom. Thus the dystopia does not just warn, but guides hope in achieving effective change and keeping innovation alive. So log out of ChatGPT, put your thinking caps on and get to working creatively.

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