I'm Afraid I Can't Do That

"Once men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them

free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them"

—Herbert 17

Dune is a sci-fi novel set in a world where technology has gained so much power that it

could make all human decisions, leading to a catastrophic war caused by the fear of humans

being replaced. The conflict ended with the prohibition of any type of technology and thinking

machines. Creating any source of technology was banned, and anyone who interacted with it was

punished (MacArthur 3-4). This fear has influenced many of the most well-known sci-fi films,

such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and *Avatar*. A common theme they

all share is that A.I. and technology are portrayed as a threat to humanity, reinforcing the idea

that this makes humans vulnerable to these thinking machines. The oppressive AI-driven world

in The Matrix, for example, generates constant anxiety for the viewer. Even without having an

idea of these movies, the idea of being controlled by something inhuman isn't only a sci-fi

concept but also a thriller. And while these films warn us from these dangers, they are constantly

being used by the big film companies, which use AI as tools that facilitate this process with more

sophisticated and less expensive visual effects that automate aspects of the film, displacing

people whose jobs relied entirely on this process (Grove 3-4).

Despite the cynicism that surrounds A.I. nowadays, one of its predecessors in the industry

had a different approach. The 80s led to the beginning of using CGI (Computer Generated

Imagery) commonly in movies. This refers to everything seen in movies created with a digital

software, just like the blue characters you see in the movie *Avatar*. *Tron,* directed by Steven

Lisberger, was the first film to use CGI. It was something completely new for that time, and in

the movie, this new concept is explored with all these technological items such as glowing

motorbikes, lighting suits, and neon weapons, which all fall into a futuristic aesthetic. This

makes *Tron* not only a revolutionary movie for the VFX (visual effects) that were used in it but

also because of the plot. It talks about a computer engineer (Flynn) whose ideas are being stolen

by someone he works with. While trying to recover his coding ideas, he encounters an AI created

by the thief. This machine is capable of digitizing him, so he's turned into a computer file and

taken to this cyberpunk world where he has to pass certain tests or games to survive (IMDB, 3).

The movie was coming up with a bigger concern, and it predicted part of our technological

world. Around twenty-five years later, AI started being used in films. One of the first approaches

to it was for *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001),* which used an algorithm

for Visual Effects. They used Massive Crowd Software to generate thousands of soldiers and be

able to fully manipulate them. For the process behind it, the elaboration was highly complex, as

they needed to use nodes and connect them to the actions that each character was able to do

(Regelous 2:19), similar to a decision tree where every branch represents a different possible

movement or behavior for these characters. Although this process is considered Artificial

Intelligence because it is a computer learning algorithm, there wasn't a generating image system

used as they were limited to processes behind the scenes.

        Since 2019, this trend has changed, and now A.I. is also affecting what we see directly on

the screen, not only the process behind it. For example, in *The Irishman*, a concept known as

deepfake was used to de-age the movie's leading actor, Robert de Niro (Huckstep 5). Compared

to the *Lord of The Rings,* here the viewer can detect the use of it, and in this case it affects the

image of de Niro, as it is transformed into his young self to give the impression that he is 24

when he is 81 years old. So, just like Flynn was digitized in Tron, now humans are also

experiencing this process, and certain aspects of themselves are losing their human value.

Despite the use of a thinking machine, the movie was a total success and was nominated for

many awards in 2019. Another Oscar-nominated film that is currently controversial is *The

Brutalist*. As there are currently no clear rules for AI use in movies to be eligible for the awards,

filmmakers only voluntarily disclose their use of AI. As a result, there are no mechanisms for

qualifying films based on the amount of A.I. used, enforcing it is a very hard criterion as it can

be used in the most minimal parts of a movie, making it difficult to track (Giardina 2-3). Similar

to the situation that happened in The Brutalist with a tool called respeecher, which allowed them

to make the voice of some characters sound more Hungarian, which is the language spoken in

part of the film (Murphy 2). When the allegations first came out the media were talking about it

as if the whole movie involved artificial intelligence with article's named such "The Brutalist

and Emilia Perez's voice-cloning controversies make AI the new awards season battleground"

and "Why People Are Freaked Out That "The Brutalist" Used AI for Architecture." Without a

formal policy of how it should be used, currently, movies can use drastic amounts of AI and not

be punished for it, but it is going to be something hard to evaluate as it is developing faster than

we can establish these laws. After this event, Adrien Brody won the award for best actor in a

leading role to other talented actors such as Timothee Chalamet, Sebastian Stan and Ralph

Fieness. Through TikTok it is noticeable how this has created discomfort to part of the audience

who watched this event, Cine Bear posted a picture of Timothee Chalamet with the quote

"Timothee Chalamet losing the oscar after taking singing lessons for five years, gaining weight,

doing everything he could to deliver the best character possible, only to lose to Adrien Brody who used A.I." This received extreme support from the public as it now has over 3.4 million likes and in the comment section it is also mentioned how Sebastian Stan, another nominee, was also stolen from getting this award. This shows how the audience is upset about this situation, and it relies on the concept of not being able to know how much AI is considered to be acceptable for a movie, leading to only subjective answers.

It wasn't the first time A.I. sparked controversy in Hollywood. A specific event that led to rethinking how this technology is seen in this context was the Hollywood Strike in 2023, which led to thousands of people in the medium to stop doing their jobs in seeking protection from AI. As Winston Cho mentions in his article **"For Hollywood, AI Is a Double-Edged Sword"** "It's cheaper, but also a job killer. Expect disruption in VFX, fiercer labor fights and, possibly, an invigoration of the production landscape"(1). After the strike, actors and writers fortunately were able to get more rights, as now actors need to know when they'll be cloned digitally, and they need consent for it, and with writers, although the use is not fully prohibited, they have new regulations on how it can be credited and utilized. Contrarily people involved in the CGI side of the industry didn't received the same rights, as "The majority of VFX houses aren't unionized"(6) which results not on the selective big money makers of the entertainment industry, but on the thousands of talented artist needed for the 200,000 frames that movies usually have (Cho 5-7). Without a way of fighting for better terms, studios take advantage of the people, and their workers end up needing to work under pressure with unrealistic deadlines and cutting costs (Leston 6-8). As it is a collaborative workspace, part of the movie is the minds behind this

post-production stage. Minds that have original ideas that, by putting them together they allow

viewers to immerse in the world of the movie they are watching.

Adrienne La France, in her article In Defense of Humanity warns the reader that AI is

infiltrating these fields and that it will continue to diminish our capacities. She mentions how

"We are on this planet to seek knowledge, truth, and beauty—and that we only get so much time

to do it" (20). This motivates us to keep being curious, which is fundamental for life; it is what

makes things exciting. We can only achieve it by trying and learning things and certainly not by

knowing everything and seeking perfection. Whenever you get used to something, that thing

becomes mundane and ordinary. By setting challenges and exploring more than what we know,

our brains might feel fear and anxiety at first, but that is how we discover new things. That is

why spontaneity is something we need, and without discipline, A.I. "eclipses us in apperception"

(20), meaning we accept content that takes control of our decisions and dehumanizes us without

knowing. "There are fields, Neo, endless fields where human beings are no longer born. We are

grown" (The Matrix).

One of the biggest concerns of using AI for the film industry is that it is a field where

everything comes from human creativity, from the overall narrative to the most specific details;

they are all decisions taken by a whole team. By using this technology, we turn beautiful

masterpieces into algorithmic-generated content. As it was said by a machine in the movie *Her* "I

have so many thoughts, but they're not mine. They're just a mix of everything I've been taught."

Guillermo del Toro, a director who has successfully integrated unreal elements in his fantasy

movies has mentioned how "The value of art is not how much it costs and how little effort it

requires, it's how much would you risk to be in its presence" (27:06). This contradicts the idea of

many people in the industry who have mentioned how easy it has been to reduce costs and effort

especially in the visual effects process. His movie genre involves many digital aspects, as it has

out-of-this-world elements such as monsters, and he has successfully done it without AI, with

movies such as Pan's Labyrinth, which received the biggest standing ovation in all cinema of 22

minutes long (Sharf 3).

  This doesn't mean that movies can't evolve with technology. It's not about going back to

using strip film and no computers to achieve a successful film, but it's about using human

resources and especially human minds to the limits, to think how those blank spaces can be filled

with the technology we have. If we explain in depth how VFX works, it certainly needs a

computer for it to be achievable. Stephen Regelous, the creator of the battle scenes in The Lord

of the Rings movie, explains that it would've been impossible to get 300,000 people and

coordinate them to do something at the same time. With an algorithm, he was able to give life to

300,000 characters and make them fight each other (Regelous 0:10). This isn't disruptive with

the creative process as he self-made the whole program and used his computer knowledge to

make his idea come to life, which didn't involve the use of someone else's resources or talent to

be stolen.

  When Del Toro argues about what art means, we can see in his intentions that true art

demands something from the audience and the artist as well, whether that's time, emotional

support, effort, presence, attention, etc. A connection between them must exist for success. As

someone who has created and has been interested in art since I was 8 years old, one of the things

you value the most is your audience, and there isn't a better moment for yourself than when you

see people liking what you produce, and even if they don't like it it is always interesting to hear

their point of view. "It is so shocking to find out how many people do not believe that they can

learn, and how many more believe learning to be difficult " (Herbert 11). Within that artistic

process, if there is something I've learned, it is that we can't be seeking perfection as it doesn't

exist. What makes learning difficult is the fact of being afraid to fail while trying. This search for

perfection in film production companies, apart from substituting their jobs, is also stealing the

work of the talented CGI and VFX artists behind. Just like Ed Newton-Rex, a musical artist,

mentions in his Ted Talk, for tech companies to be able to build these AI models, they need

"people, compute and data (0:21)," and what they do is use work that they don't have a license

for to train the systems. Tragically, A.I. companies are defending themselves is by saying that

"training A.I. falls into a copyright exception which allows unlicensed copying in a limital set of

circumstances such as creating paradise of a work (5:20)." But these companies have gotten to a

point where they just want massive amounts of information and don't focus on the key thing that

is missing, which is licensing, and it has been part of the artist world for a long time. That is why

he has created a startup that helps artists get their work licensed when using these AI models, and

he wants to ensure that when these models are trained with artists' work, they're fairly

compensated for it. This has also been followed by a sign of over 11,000 artists and counting,

showing how there needs to be this dual benefit when their work is being used (Newton-Rex

9:24-12:20). A model that works like this would then force these companies to at least give

recognition to tons of things that are being stolen, but it's always the small businesses who are

looking for this change. Although it is concerning that part of Herbert's sci-fi ideas are coming

alive, as we see with initiatives such as Newton's AI licensing model, there's still a spark of

people willing to keep the film industry safe. But somewhere in the chaos, there is an audience

that still cheers, sometimes not even knowing what they are cheering for, and that can be the

scariest part of it.

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