ESSAY

# AI and Traditional Filmmaking

*Brave Worlds, New and Old*

Gary D. Rhodes, Ph.D.

ETHICAL STANDARDS COUNCIL · AIVR MPG

**Due to AI,** filmmakers around the world feel the platelets moving underneath them, seismic transformation of a type rarely experienced, arguably greater than the transition from silent to sound, black-and-white to color, and photochemical film to digital.

Exactly how major this change will become remains to be seen, onscreen and off. At present, the fault lines are exposed, with continental drift appearing more possible for the industry at any point since 1905, when the rise of nickelodeon theaters helped make films available to the masses on a regular basis, solidifying the cinema's monumental place in our lives.

It is possible to view the impact of AI on filmmaking through the lens of the past, meaning that it might represent an intensification of what has happened before, rather than an entirely new paradigm.

## COPYRIGHT AND PLAGIARISM, SINCE THE 1890S

Copyright issues have plagued filmmakers since the 1890s, when nascent companies illegally duped the magical world of Georges Méliès, a situation so bad that he sent his brother Gaston to the United States in an effort to stamp out

fever pitch with home video and the internet.

Plagiarism has been an arguable factor dating to Méliès as well. The great Spanish filmmaker Segundo de Chomón remade Méliès films like *A Trip to the Moon* without permission. The differences between inspiration and appropriation have long been blurred, as in 1930s *Flash Gordon* serials influencing the *Star Wars* saga. Blockbusters like Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* with Laura Dern regularly spawn the likes of Roger Corman's *Carnosaur* starring Dern's mother, Diane Ladd.

*The differences between inspiration and appropriation have long been blurred.*

## LIKENESS RIGHTS, FROM CHAPLIN TO ASTAIRE

Likeness rights is another longstanding issue in the film world, ranging from Charlie Chaplin imitators in the 1910s to the famous lawsuits of Bela Lugosi, Jr. against Universal Pictures for licensing his father's image beyond what the original contracts allowed.

And the problem has persisted when heirs disagree with one another, borne out publicly with Fred Astaire dancing with a Dirt Devil vacuum cleaner in the 1990s thanks to Astaire's widow, images that his daughter found abhorrent.

## SPECIALIZED LABOR AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT

CGI also allowed for the song-and-dance man to love "his" Dirt Devil, not practical effects, which necessarily brings up the question of specialized labor in film history. The coming of sound generated new jobs while eliminating others, from the artists who prepared intertitles to the musicians who played live accompaniment at theaters. CGI and green screen have lessened the need for

easy to count, decimating no less than Eastman Kodak, George Eastman having created the raw film stock that W.K.L. Dickson used as early as 1893. This is to say nothing of companies that manufactured film cameras and projectors, many displaced by DSLRs and DLPs. Technological evolution in the cinema has been a constant, and has thus regularly been responsible for technological displacement along with skill evolution.

## LABOR, AUDIENCES, AND THE VOLUME OF IT ALL

AI's effect on labor is a key concern. It is worth noting that, at the highest levels, particularly in Hollywood, studios arguably do not have a strong record of supporting workers' rights, from fighting against union formation to "runaway" productions, often shooting outside of Southern California to save money.

For audiences, AI also represents concerns, not least of which is market oversaturation, the sheer volume of "slop." That topic also potentially benefits from historical context, particularly the last 25 years in which so much human-created content populates YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms, some of it brilliant and artistic and valuable, some of it possibly not. In any event, watching all of the videos on YouTube would take hundreds of thousands of years, if not longer, with 720,000 new hours uploaded every day.

## IN CLOSING

AI filmmaking presents profound and very new questions that have yet to be answered fully. But some of its challenges have not been unknown in earlier eras, even if by comparison they represented magma convections more than the current volcanic eruptions. In both metaphors, groundbreaking technology does mean technology that breaks the ground.

Gary D. Rhodes, Ph.D.

ETHICAL STANDARDS COUNCIL · AIVR MPG