THE ARTIFICIALITY OF ACTING

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BIO

Sorana Eșanu is a theatre and film actress, graduate of the Faculty of Theatre at the George Enescu National University of Arts (Iași), and holds a Master's degree in Performing Arts from the Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. She is currently a PhD researcher at UNAGE Iași, where her project, *The Character from the Wound. Signs, Traces, Echoes in the Actor's Body and Psyche*, coordinated by Associate Professor Ioana Petcu-Pădurean, investigates the ways in which characters leave transformative imprints – positive or negative – on the actor's body and mind. In 2021, she was awarded Best Actress at the Bacău-Fest Monodrama for her role in Medea Redux (dir. Anda Drăgan). Her professional activity includes performances in independent theatre productions and films, with significant roles in works by Mrożek, Lorca, and Beckett. She also conducts acting workshops for youth and international communities.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the growing influence of Artificial Intelligence in film and theatre, focusing on fears surrounding the replacement of human performers. Through examples such as virtual actors, digital doubles and the AI-generated character Tilly Norwood, it examines concerns about authenticity, labour rights and creative value. Industry responses—from scepticism expressed by unions and artists to advocacy from filmmakers who view AI as an useful tool - reveal an ongoing negotiation between technology and embodied performance. The discussion concludes that while AI reshapes production practices, human emotion and presence remain essential, making full replacement unlikely in the foreseeable future.

KEYWORDS

Artificial Intelligence, performance studies, motion capture, virtual actors, film and theatre innovation

CITATION SUGGESTION

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The debate surrounding Artificial Intelligence, virtual reality and special effects in film and theatre is very long and consensus remains elusive. There are always groups who welcome technological integration and others who question the validity of such approaches. As scholars have noted, defining artificial intelligence is inherently challenging "because it assumes a common understanding of 'intelligence', when, in fact, there is no consensus."[1] In any case, the artificiality implies something that is not natural, but maybe created by human, mechanical. We can understand that the creation that is *intelligent* can replicate what people are doing and this can be scary for some of us. When 3D appeared, the film industry was in panic as they thought there would be only 3D films. As when VR (virtual reality) glasses were launched, everyone thought we'll have to create films only for VR customers. When the pandemic started in 2020 we were afraid of how theatre will continue to exist and how people will get used to seeing films in their homes and not going to cinema. All of these thoughts were cancelled when theatre and cinema just continued to exist as usual, but with some improvements as online theatre, where we can also watch old plays that are not playing on stage anymore.

The same is happening now with Tilly Norwood, an AI actress, created by Xicoia, the AI division of Particle6, a production company founded by Eline Van der Velden in 2015.[2] This creates hysteria in the world of actors, as the production company claims that Tilly is expressive and keeps the continuity in acting, furthermore the creators of this *actor* are in search for a talent agency which sparked controversy among actors.

Virtual acting first emerged in science-fiction cinema where an actor performed the moves, which were later processed to create a character. As Doru Pop writes, the first virtual character in cinema was Jar-Jar Binks from the first episode of *Star Wars* (*The Phantom Menace*, 1999). Andy Serkis was the one that played the role and he became renowned for his virtual roles. Doru Pop writes about it,

saying that "Andy Serkis, the actor who played Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* series, has 'specialised' in 'virtual' roles realised with the help of digital motion capture. [...] The virtual actor (also called a synthespian or cyber-actor) no longer interacts directly with other actors, he 'plays' in an artificial universe, modified by computers into a convincing and believable space."[3] In relation to this, when Paul Walker passed away in 2013, the creators of *Fast and Furious* series filmed the remaining scenes through the use of his brothers as stand-ins and digitally recreating his image.

Digital transformation has long been underway for actors and they were aware of the danger of being replaced. Nevertheless, the replacement didn't occur until now and it is not probable to happen too soon. There is another highly popular virtual character online, with 8.2 million followers on social media, called Lu do Magalu, which didn't significantly impact the creative industries so much even though its popularity is bigger than most actors'. Tilly Norwood is considered an opponent for human based industry, but the creator, a former actor, maintains that Tilly is just a creative work, not a replacement[4]. Probably a makeover in the acting jobs will take place as an AI actor is cheaper than a real one and some advertising can be done only with Artificial Intelligence. A study in 2024 predicted that over the next three years, the use of GenAI in creating realistic synthetic actors for film or TV will be 35% and more than 20% of jobs in film, television and animation in the U.S. is expected to be replaced, consolidated or eliminated due to generative AI - although the research does not focus on actors in particular[5]. This movement of integrating the artificiality in films or entertainment industry should be banned, but for a few years, the film festivals hosted some panels and events where it was discussed the impact of AI in the industry of cinematography and some of the masterclasses were about how to integrate it. For example, only in 2025 some important festivals debated this subject, such as Transylvania International Film Festival, Sarajevo Film Festival, Torino Film Festival, Berlin Film

Festival and Cannes Film Festival. These festivals debate about how to integrate AI in the film industry's work but also about its dangers.

While some directors and industry people are comfortable with using Artificial Intelligence when creating, some people are completely against using other tools than the human conducted. One of the second group is Peter Bradshaw who writes for The Guardian regarding being too open in this situation: "What is needed is not luddism, but a real pushback from the film industry, refusing to work with these hyper-plagiarism models – and at the same time a movement like the Dogme 95 collective led by Danish film-makers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, swearing to get back to basics, cutting out the flummery and using real actors who look real in real situations, or as real as it gets in any movie."[6] Also SAG-AFTRA, the union representing entertainment and media professionals in America and the world, released a statement in which dispraise the replacement of actors with AI: "To be clear, 'Tilly Norwood' is not an actor, it's a character generated by a computer program that was trained on the work of countless professional performers — without permission or compensation. It has no life experience to draw from, no emotion and, from what we've seen, audiences aren't interested in watching computer-generated content untethered from the human experience"[7].

One of the renown film directors and producers that support the use of AI is George Miller, the creator of *Mad Max*. He affirms that he uses tools when creating, therefore a new tool that combines all of them is very useful, also we should be open to the changes, as in the past also photography and oil painting were denied, so we have to evolve. Furthermore there should be a balance between "human creativity and machine capability"[8] according to Miller. In Romania, director Radu Jude has incorporated AI tools into his recent work, such as *Dracula*, where he satirizes the iconic narrative through AI-generated imagery. These intermezzi are intentionally low-quality, highlighting the artificial and unrefined aesthetic for humorous and critical effect[9]. Although Jude openly embraces Artificial Intelligence

and social media platforms like TikTok[10]—influences that are visible in his films—ßhe does not replace actors with digital counterparts. Instead, AI functions as a stylistic and conceptual device, not as a substitute for embodied performance.

In the past, computers and robots helped humans to solve basic tasks, such as automatically answering an email, scheduling a meeting or solving a mathematical problem. Nowadays the *electronic brain* is expected to interpret a text and to answer questions about it, also the creators are trying to mimic the human experience for machines. In 2020, Michael Wooldridge explained that "computers can reliably follow very simple instructions very, very quickly; and they can make decisions, as long as those decisions are precisely specified."[11] But in 2025, the *electronic brains* as Alan Turing named computers who were supposed to *think*, are evolved and the researchers continue to find new ways for making the machines mimic humans. Alan Turing laid the theoretical foundations for Artificial Intelligence long before the term was officially coined. In his seminal works *Intelligent Machinery* (1948) and *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (1950), Turing envisioned computers as *electronic brains*, capable of learning and reasoning, proposing the famous Turing Test as a way to determine whether a machine could exhibit human-like intelligence. His ideas framed intelligence as a process that could emerge from computation, thus bringing philosophy, logic and early computer science together. A few years later, in 1956, computer scientist John McCarthy formalised these ideas by introducing the term *Artificial Intelligence* during the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence, an event often regarded as the birth of AI as a scientific discipline. While Turing provided the conceptual groundwork, McCarthy institutionalised AI as a field of study, focusing on logical reasoning, symbolic processing and the development of programming languages, which became essential to early AI research.

Even though Michael Wooldridge affirms that there is a long way for machines to think as people do and to do the tasks that humans excel at, Graham Allen suggests that we live "the last human century. We are near the end (are already in the midst of the end) of human history, the period, that is, in which human beings have been indisputably the most intelligent and so, as a consequence, the dominant animal on the planet."[12] On the other hand, Allen observes that most of the people get their ideas of how robots are evolving and behaving from films. If in the past scenarios were more apocalyptic, as *The Terminator* (directed by James Cameron) and *Matrix* (directed by Lana Wachowski), from 2010 the perspective became more friendly, focused on inclusion, consciousness and ethics. Productions like *Her* (directed by Spike Jonze), *Ex Machina* (directed by Alex Garland), *Westworld* (created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy) and *Humans* (created by Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent) are exploring the relationships, empathy and the recognition of artificial consciousness.

Theatre was always a space of technological innovation—from ancient machines to multimedia projections—Artificial Intelligence is the next step in evolution on stage. Maybe in film it is easier to replace the actor, but the liveness on stage is the one that makes the performance vivid and robots cannot do the same thing with projections. This would be possible only if the machines would interact with actors, but they alone is not believable to happen. Shane Pike analyses how success performances are emerging technology with human experiences: "it has become clear that while these technologies hold immense potential to expand the boundaries of traditional theatre, their success depends on striking a delicate balance between technological innovation and the foundational principles of live performance: presence, liveness, and human connection."[13] Therefore, the theatre of the future is not digital or human, but in-between—a space where reality and virtuality coexist and the Artificial Intelligence is a scene partner, not an opponent.

As for films, there were virtual actors in the frame, but as background elements rather than leading characters. Scott Billups explains how to replicate people to look natural, not too obvious and not all the same, with the same clothes, but just as a group of people in the background would be: "You'll be making little clusters (pods) of people, and then replicating those clusters many times. If one costume is too unique or one person is wearing something that really stands out (we call it the pink fuzzybunny-hat syndrome), then the viewer's eye will notice that costume element in each pod and your gag will be a failure."[14] Computers can be helpful in certain contexts, but they are truly effective only when the work involves both sides - the human and the virtual. Any artistic product, like most fields that are fundamentally designed for human experience, requires a human component, because emotion is central to its impact. In the arts, Artificial Intelligence can be a powerful tool in the hands of an empathic creator, enabling the final work to convey a sense of soul and to reach the audience.

During the Managing Talents masterclass at Les Films de Cannes à Bucarest, Matei Dima—a Romanian actor, producer and director—was asked whether AI might replace the actors. He argued that cinema relies on emotion and common sense, qualities that the *electronic brain* currently lacks and perhaps never achieve[15].

On the other hand, there are already advertisements made entirely using synthetic actors and for the industry of advertisement, this tool is a great opportunity to reduce the costs of production. Perhaps this was the rationale behind Tilly Norwood's creation: the producers rely on artificiality as a tool for low-cost content, fully aware that the audience knows nothing is real, but its value lies in its promotional usefulness.

The evolution of Artificial Intelligence in the audiovisual arts has demonstrated that technological progress does not necessarily erase the human component but repeatedly reshapes it. Each historical moment of innovation - from 3D and VR to motion capture and virtual actors - has sparked fears of obsolescence, yet cinema

and theatre have endured, adapting and integrating these tools while preserving their core: the human experience. The emergence of fully synthetic performers like Tilly Norwood intensifies current anxieties, raising ethical issues about authenticity, labour and creative ownership. However, as both industry professionals and theorists suggest, a total replacement of human actors appears unlikely in the foreseeable future. Instead, what is unfolding is a recognition of roles: AI expands what can be created, while humans continue to provide empathy, embodiment and emotional intelligence—qualities that artificial systems still cannot replicate.

Thus, the future of performance seems to lie in choosing between the human and the artificial, but in crafting productive collaborations between them. The challenge ahead is to secure a balance in which technological innovation serves artistic expression rather than diminishing it, ensuring that the soul of cinema and theatre remains rooted in human creativity.

ENDNOTES

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