

Aesthetic Turn and Media Reflection of AI-driven Experimental Films in the Generative Context

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Abstract: In 2025, the 7th Hainan Island International Film Festival established the AI Film Season for the first time and received 2,852 works from 56 countries and regions around the world; the 3rd Runway AI Film Festival also selected 10 films from about 6,000 submitted short films. Together, these two events show that AI-generated images have been included in the film festival's screening list and are now a trend that demands attention from creators. This paper examines AI experimental films and studies changes in their creative paradigm, subject form, and reception mode. The study shows that changes in "reproduction/performance" to "generation/emergence", a shift from "authorship" to "human-machine collaboration", and a transition from "narrative dominance" to "sensory immersion" are all problems that the film medium faces in the era of algorithms. AI creation has the potential to expand the expressive space of images, but it also poses problems for the existing critical system due to the algorithmic black box and de-subjectification. Survey data released by Luminate in April 2026 also show that AI-generated film and television content interest among American consumers has been declining steadily; from May to November 2025, it continued to drop. Given the discrepancy between the pace of technological iteration and the acceptance of aesthetics, film theory urgently requires a more adaptable "post-human" analytical system.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Experimental Film; Aesthetic Turn; Media Reflection; Generative Aesthetics; Human-Machine Collaboration.

1. Introduction

In fact, the history of film is the history of technology. Sound films moved away from the all-visual language of silent films, and the spread of digital special effects harmed the foundation of documentary aesthetics. All of them have changed movies. However, in the past, technology has always been a "tool" to help creators achieve their goals; it has never been the end itself. Generative AI is not. With the development of deep learning, generative adversarial networks (GANs) and diffusion models, machines can now participate in the creative process to some extent, such as generating scripts, creating different styles of images, and building dynamic visuals. After accumulating a certain number of such practices, they are collectively referred to as "AI experimental films" and have gradually become an obvious problem.

The above technology trend is a serious problem for film studies. Now, the problem is no longer how to optimise the technical issue of "how to improve the production process", but rather a more fundamental question of "what is creation", "how to define authorship", and "where does the image stand ontologically". AI-generated images are not indexical representations of the objective world and do not directly express the creator's intent. They are the visual results of probability calculations on large amounts of data. Traditional film theory uses tools such as representation, expression and narration, and is not well suited to explain "generative" images. The focus of discussion should shift from "can AI create" to "what structural changes have AI creation brought about".

Using "generation" as the starting point, this paper will explore the changes in the aesthetic paradigm of AI experimental films [1]. The following are the contents of the discussion in sequence: the rearrangement of the creative subject, the alteration of visual grammar, the modification of

narrative logic, and the restructuring of sensory mechanisms. These four threads ultimately converge on a larger media issue: how AI experimental films compel us to redefine the boundaries and functions of cinema, providing a path for understanding the art of images in the age of artificial intelligence through phenomenological analysis and theoretical reflection.

2. The Disappearance of the Creative Subject and the New Paradigm of Human-Machine Collaboration

The first obvious change in the creative subject of AI experimental films is that they are now AI. Since the middle of the 20th century, scholars have begun studying the problem of authorship in film studies. Directors have always been viewed as the origin of the uniformity in film style and the creation of meaning. Even in a studio system or a group work, this idea still serves as an attribution and regulation device. The new AI image generation technology has changed this. When the machine can independently generate a coordinated and appealing moving picture based on the existing style dataset, we need to rethink the concept of "creator". Early style transfer experiments have already shown that it is feasible; AI can learn the visual features of painters such as Van Gogh and Munch, and then apply the corresponding aesthetic genes to video materials. At this time, the algorithm will perform the tasks of style recognition and visual transformation, and human work will be reduced to setting the initial conditions.

A loss of identity does not mean a loss of creativity; rather, it is the birth of a new mode of operation for human-machine collaboration. The Role of the Creator Changes [2]. Directors used to control the composition, camera movements and acting directly in the past; now, they are more like "curators" and "tuners" for the algorithms. Filter the training materials,

adjust the generation parameters, and select and arrange the usable parts from the raw material output by AI. Runway and Pika are tools that require users to write and repeatedly modify prompts to achieve the desired images through multiple attempts. It is a bit like the director and darkroom processing in the film era, but with greater uncertainty. The content generated by AI is probabilistic, and there is always a layer of algorithm mapping and translation between human intention and the final image.

Thus, new objects for film criticism have emerged. Shift the focus of criticism from the author's intention to the generation mechanism. Creators are no longer a single "genius" or an organised group; they are now networks of people, algorithms and data. Only the director's talk does not cover the analysis of such pictures. It also covers the investigation of the model's structure, the source and bias of the training data, and the values in the technical tools. For example, if the training data lacks visual materials of certain cultural types, the generated results may unconsciously reproduce or even amplify these missing biases. In the field of critical practice for AI experimental films, new descriptive tools and evaluation scales need to be developed to explore how meaning is produced, deviated from, and recombined in human-machine collaboration [3]. First, we will present the visual forms created by AI.

3. Reconstruction of Visual Grammar: The Aesthetic Shift from Rhetoric to Algorithm

The first modification of AI experimental films is a loosening of visual grammar. Traditional films use cameras to record physical optics, and focus, depth of field, composition and movement are all rhetorical devices that direct the audience's attention and convey the mood of the picture. The images generated by AI bypass the system [4]. It no longer collects light but, instead, uses algorithms to statistically infer the distribution of pixels and completes "filling" and "prediction" based on the patterns in the image data. The pictures have a particular style of drawing: they are soft and overly saturated, with many details but no weight of the material world. These attributes are not the result of the director's deliberate selection but rather an accidental outcome of the model reaching a high-probability output to minimise the loss function during training.

Substitution of visual logic results in a weaker connection between the image and reality. Bazin considered film to be "the asymptote of reality"; that is, a picture is a sign of the world and shares in its life. But the content generated by AI no longer refers to the outside world. Style transfer achieves parameter superposition of digital information rather than the transcription of material fragments. The image is no longer a "source" and has changed from a recording medium to a computational product [5]. AI experimental films no longer aim to reproduce or reveal objective reality, but rather to create a "hyper-reality" or "alternative reality" by integrating media characteristics at the level of aesthetics.

The visual grammar has changed, and thus the criteria for assessment have also shifted. Light, colour and depth of field in traditional film theory serve to tell stories or set a mood. AI is used to combine and adjust these factors as variables, and the original reference meaning is often lost. The source of picture meaning is based on style transfer or conceptual mixing and semantic displacement. Noir films use light and

shadow to create a sense of mystery, and thus can be applied to a pastoral theme. Therefore, new problems have emerged in critical practice: the existing terms "exquisite composition" and "careful lighting" lack explanatory power for such works. The proportion of the dataset, the generalisation capability of the model, and the consistency of the generated results have started to be discussed in terms of aesthetics. To understand how algorithms know and organise the world visually is now a problem in film studies.

4. The Disintegration of Narrative Logic and Algorithmic Generation of Plot

In addition to changes in the realm of visuals, the foundation of classical cinema, narrative, is also being dismantled in AI experimental films.

The traditional Hollywood narrative generally follows a certain system: a chain of causality, character motivation, linear time and a closed end. Behind these rules is a simulation of life and human psychology. The way AI works is not the same. Early AI scriptwriters used LSTM or Transformer architectures for script generation. The model can reproduce the surface statistical patterns of the text and has relatively regular local syntax, but when applied to the whole narrative arc, the results are often fragmented. There are jumps in the plot, sudden changes, and no connection. AI cannot understand the reasons for emotions, and it is also unable to learn about social conflicts and long-term causal relationships [6]. However, the lack of experimental films can also be used as the starting point for narrative innovation.

Narratives in AI experimental films often move away from the human-centred model and do not aim to achieve a particular end. Traditional narration does not have an explicit narrator and presents the story indirectly. Algorithms are now responsible for generating the narrative in AI-generated content. The development of the plot is no longer motivated by a conflict between characters' wishes and obstacles, but rather by the frequency of patterns in the data set and the closeness of their semantics in the vector space. When movie scripts, news, poetry and scientific papers are combined as input for the AI, the resulting narrative may be incoherent and lack a central theme. The plot is no longer an exposition of the theme or a development of character, but rather appears to be an artifact produced by the operation of the language model.

Algorithmisation of narrative logic has created new space but also raised problems for criticism. Therefore, it can be considered that this work has no pre-determined ideas and may produce surprising results in the story. The original analytical tools, namely Propp's functions of character roles and Greimas' symbolic matrix, also need to be revised. At first, these tools were used to explore the narrative systems that people have built. The AI-generated content has statistical correlations, but it does not fully align with them. What language data did the algorithm model use, according to the critics? What vector mapping was built for this data? How do Random Seeds and Temperature Parameters Affect the Narrative Direction? Most of the current research on narrative analysis has focused on how narratives are constructed and what effects they have, rather than on their content. At the same time, this algorithmic narrative has also altered the sensory mode of viewers looking at the screen [7].

5. Reorganization of Sensory Mechanisms: Immersion, Interaction, and the Aesthetic of Uncertainty

AI experimental films are changing the production process and also addressing what we mean by "watching". Traditional viewing is based on the "gaze" model, and the audience faces the screen; thus, the reception of sight and sound is unidirectional. With the application of artificial intelligence, especially in the exploration of real-time generation and interactive narrative in these two areas, this one-way relationship is gradually being broken. Some experiments have altered the content of a picture according to the reaction of the audience; some have modified attention to alter the visual display, and others have directly altered the plot based on immediate input. Thus, viewing is no longer passive reception but an active participation [8]. Although this trend is still in its early days, it has given us a clear signal: viewers are no longer passive observers but have begun to interact with the work in some way.

Thus, the kind of beauty we are accustomed to has also changed. AI generation is inherently random, and the same input will produce different results each time. In traditional creation, this uncertainty is often viewed as a flaw to be corrected; however, in AI experimental films, it has become a feature of the work. What the audience faces is no longer a fixed text, but a continuously changing generation process [9]. Viewing is now a relationship between the viewer and the viewed, involving both reception and inquiry; it anticipates and prepares for the unexpected. This way of experience is not the same as watching a film traditionally. It is closer to the experience of life with uncertainty.

However, this way of experience also has new problems. As algorithms are increasingly used to identify and respond to people's aesthetic preferences in the viewing experience, people may gradually be limited to aesthetic information that suits their interests, fewer chances will arise to experience new forms of aesthetics, and their fields of vision will gradually narrow. At the same time, if the aesthetic experience is too reliant on the accidental nature of technology, the scope of artistic evaluation may also be limited. For AI experimental films to be regarded as valuable works of art, they should also address the risks that come with technology, not just show new technology. Therefore, in addition to satisfaction surveys, other problems can be investigated in the study, such as how the new type of viewing changes people's attention. Has the Criterion for Aesthetics Changed? What kind of redefinition is occurring in the relationship between people and images?

6. Reflection on Media Ontology: The Identity and Function of Film in the Algorithmic Era

Creative subjects and visual grammar, narrative logic, and sensory experiences are all the same in their end goal: when algorithms are deeply involved in the creation of images, is it still the same kind of film?

First, let's consider the materials at this level. Traditional films are based on the recording chain of optics-chemistry-mechanics; light passes through a lens and strikes a photosensitive material to form an image that is related to reality. AI films have cut off this chain. It no longer records the optical information of the external world, and all images

are generated by calculations and outputs in the data space. The boundary between shooting and drawing has vanished, and the division of recording and synthesis is no longer necessary. Bazin's "asymptote of reality" loses its foothold in AI. Therefore, film has changed from a window on the outside world to an independent generation system within the data.

Culture is also one of the divisions. Film has always served to build a sense of collective identity by telling stories about people, society and history. The Working Mode of AI Films is Different. The narrative it produces is based on statistical recombination of existing data, lacks connection with real historical experience, and cannot be considered to have a social understanding of the real world [10]. Such images are more likely to slide towards stylised simulacra and deepen the representation crisis [11]. An unavoidable question: When the images are no longer based on people's observation and reflection of the world, can they still carry out the functions of reality observation and social criticism? Perhaps the real value of AI films does not lie in whether they can continue the tradition of traditional films, but rather in their function as an intruder that compels us to reconsider the default concepts of film and gives rise to new image ethics and expression methods in the collision between humans and machines.

Therefore, the research system will need to be modified. The traditional division of "tool/subject" cannot explain the actual function of algorithms in creation. We need to acknowledge that algorithms are already non-human entities involved in the process of meaning creation for images. In addition to the text itself, other elements of critical practice should also be considered, such as the technical infrastructure, the composition of training data, biases in algorithms, and specific processes of human-computer interaction. Only in this broader view can we embrace technological changes without losing our concern for meaning, values and people, and strive for a suitable position of a film concept that can maintain critical vitality in the age of algorithms.

7. Conclusion

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, the following judgments can be made. The development of AI experimental films indicates that there are now higher technical standards and a wider range of ideas for films. As shown in the previous discussion, this loosening has occurred at multiple levels simultaneously: at the creative end, "the author" is being replaced by a composite subject of human-machine collaboration; at the image end, rhetoric grammar is being replaced by algorithmic calculation; at the narrative end, causal progression is being replaced by probabilistic generation; and at the reception end, contemplative gaze is being replaced by interactive immersion. The four levels of change are interconnected and ultimately lead to the same problem: when images are no longer representations of reality but rather data outputs, what is the essence of the medium of film? This problem does not have an easy solution, so the system of film theory needs to be reformed.

In response to this question, the main idea of this paper is as follows: Rather than continuing to discuss whether AI can create, we should focus on how the process of meaning creation has changed since AI entered the creative field. The meaning of AI-generated images is not predetermined by the creator of the work but is formed through the collaboration of people, algorithms and data. Therefore, the object of criticism should be shifted from the text to the generation mechanism,

and at the same time, conceptual tools need to be updated accordingly. Of course, the discussion in this paper also has some deficiencies. On the one hand, AI image technology is changing at a high speed, and by 2025, new forms of practical applications may have emerged; on the other hand, the "post-human" critical framework put forward in the article is still at a conceptual stage and requires further research to establish a specific methodological path.

At least the following issues are worth paying attention to in the future: Copyright ownership and authorship attribution of AI-generated images, how the cultural bias of algorithm training data affects image output, and the long-term impact of interactive AI films on the audience's cognition. The above problems will ultimately lead to the question of whether film theory can still explore meaning and values in the age of technological change.

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