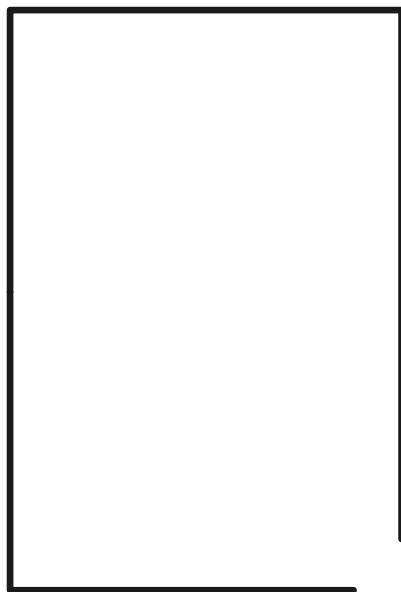


JOURNAL OF PERFORMING ARTS

JURNALUL ARTELOR SPECTACOLULUI (JAS)



Edited by Diana Nechit, Véronique Parisot, Andrei C. Șerban, Ion M. Tomuș



SPECIAL ISSUE 2025

Representation vs. Representability:
The New Taboos of Contemporary Discourse

**ELAB
CHROM**

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Foreword

In 2016, Romeo Castellucci presented *Sur le concept du visage du fils de Dieu* (*On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God*) in Rennes, drawing the ire of Catholic demonstrators who denounced the production as blasphemous and criticised the Italian director for hypostasising faith and old age in an overly naturalistic manner. In 2024, Florentina Holzinger's *Sancta*, performed at the Stuttgart Opera, provoked an outcry because of its portrayal of lesbian love, which was considered too 'explicit'. The same year, in Romania, a transgender spectator interrupted a theatrical performance, reproaching the director for having given a transgender role to a cisgender actor. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the United States, several recent film productions adopting the codes of political correctness have sparked controversy. The choice of certain directors to portray emblematic historical or literary figures in a way that contradicts their original reality is dividing audiences: for example, Anne Boleyn and Queen Elizabeth are played by black actresses, while characters from the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers or H.C. Andersen are subject to similar reinterpretations.

Creators of shows may wish to adapt or revisit existing works to express a singular artistic vision. In this sense, freedom of expression, enshrined as a fundamental right since 1789, was strengthened in France for the first time by a special law stating in its first article that artistic creation and its dissemination were free, and providing that violent interference with this freedom would be punishable by law. However, copyright, and particularly its moral aspect – perpetual and inalienable – guarantees the integrity of the original work, enabling the author or their successors to oppose any unauthorised modification.

Although recurring, the tension between the protection of copyright and the assertion of the director's and performers'

freedom of expression is growing, as illustrated by several recent disputes. For example, the Comédie-Française objected to the wishes of Bernard-Marie Koltès' brother regarding the casting of *Retour au desert* (*Return to the Desert*): should a non-Arab actor be given the role of Aziz? Similarly, can the staging of *Dialogues des Carmélites* (*Dialogues of the Carmelites*), without betraying Francis Poulenc's ideas, spare the nuns originally destined for the scaffold? There are so many visions, each legitimate, that are likely to clash: that of the author, anxious to preserve the integrity of their work, and that of the director and the artists, demanding the freedom of interpretation that is essential to the vitality and diversity of theatrical productions. The Koltès affair, like others, underlines the need for constant dialogue between creation and interpretation in order to strike a balance between respect for the author's original intentions and the artistic freedom of the performers, thus guaranteeing fruitful and lively theatrical expression.

The reception of contemporary works of art, like the recontextualization of museum collections, continues to raise fundamental questions, referring to ancient 'taboos' that plague the balance of power between ethics and aesthetics. Sex, death, disease, old age, race, dictatorship and the condition of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities remain sensitive themes for the public, whether in terms of contemporary artistic expressions or new stagings and interpretations. By confronting heritage and creation, these approaches challenge established narratives and question the tensions between memory, identity and critical engagement, in the face of creative or curatorial visions that seek to defy conformism and puritanism.

Where do we draw the line between what can be represented and what cannot? Who is entitled to set the limits of artistic, museum or heritage discourse? To what extent do copyright and the legal issues that define the ethics of representation influence – or even compromise – the work itself? How, as writers, visual artists,

museographers, etc., can we illustrate genocide, incurable disease or sexual abuse without transgressing the limits of ‘acceptable’ discourse? How far can we go in reinventing our cultural heritage without infringing the principles of an approach deemed ‘academically’ correct? Can we conceive of an authentic artistic discourse if dogma and morality impose precise limits? To what extent can ideological approaches of any kind be justified in the face of the demands of aesthetics and authenticity?

It is precisely from this accumulation of tensions, controversies, and unresolved questions that the present collective volume emerges. Conceived as a space of critical dialogue rather than normative closure, this book brings together contributions that interrogate the ethical, aesthetical, and political stakes of representation in contemporary artistic practices. Theatre, film, visual arts, museum display, and performance studies are approached here not as isolated fields, but as intersecting arenas in which questions of freedom, responsibility, authorship, and interpretation are continuously renegotiated.

The volume is the result of an inter-university partnership that brought together researchers, artists, and practitioners from different disciplinary and institutional backgrounds, united by a shared concern for the fragile balance between creative freedom and ethical accountability. Developed within the framework of the ELABCROM project, the book reflects a sustained collective effort to address sensitive and often polarizing issues through rigorous analysis, historical contextualization, and case-based inquiry. Rather than offering definitive answers, the contributions gathered here map a constellation of positions, practices, and conflicts that define the contemporary cultural landscape. By examining concrete controversies, legal disputes, artistic choices, and reception contexts, the volume seeks to illuminate how norms of acceptability are constructed, contested, and transformed. In doing so, it foregrounds the necessity of dialogue between creators, scholars, institutions,

and audiences, especially in a period marked by heightened ideological polarization and rapid shifts in cultural sensibilities.

As such, this book is both timely and necessary. It responds to an urgent need for nuanced, interdisciplinary reflection on the limits of representation and the conditions under which art continues to operate as a space of critical freedom. At the same time, it aims to provide a conceptual and methodological foundation for future research on these sensitive issues, inviting further investigation into the evolving relationship between ethics, aesthetics, and cultural memory in contemporary artistic practices.

In their analysis, **Diana Nechit** and **Véronique Parisot** examine the complex intersection of artistic creation and legal protection in the works of Bernard-Marie Koltès. They highlight a fundamental tension between a director’s interpretative freedom and the moral right to integrity protected by French law. Managed by the author’s heir, François Koltès, this legal vigilance ensures that stagings respect the “spirit” of the work—particularly its political density and specific casting requirements. The authors advocate for “inventive fidelity”, where staging becomes an ethical act that preserves Koltès’ poetic voice while allowing the text to resonate within contemporary social realities.

Vincent Chambarlhac and **Ion M. Tomuş** analyse the 1925 debut of “Les Copiaus”, the troupe formed by students of theatre reformer Jacques Copeau in Burgundy. While the troupe successfully integrated into the village of Demigny through everyday sociability and commedia dell’arte masks, their performance of Copeau’s naturalist drama, *Le Veuf*, was a significant failure. The authors explore the tension between representation (the theatrical act) and representativeness (the audience’s ability to recognize themselves). The public refused the “mirror” of their own flaws—alcoholism and tragedy—preferring the festive, stylized characters they had encountered in the village square.

Andrei C. Şerban and **Samaneh Ostad** critique how Disney commercializes cultural heritage by transforming traditional fairy tales into privatized “narrative capital”. The authors argue that Disney employs an aesthetic metamorphosis, replacing the moral ambiguity and psychological depth of Grimm and Andersen tales

with ethically homogenized spectacles. Through rigorous intellectual property control, Disney effectively “patents archetypes”, sanitizing the “symbolic terror” of original myths into consumable innocence. Brutality and justice are “anesthetized”—violence is concealed, while tragic consequences are reframed as romantic fulfillment. They suggest this transition from existential anxiety to “emotional comfort” results in a philosophy that is financially lucrative but philosophically shallow.

In a different article focused on AI cinema, **Samaneh Ostad** and **Andrei C. Șerban** argue that aesthetic value in the algorithmic age stems not from seamless realism, but from the visible tension between human intention and computational processes. They define artificial aesthetics as a framework where meaning is generated through the interaction between the creator and the system’s representational limits. The authors anchor their ethical argument in Joanna Zylińska’s “minimal ethics”, suggesting that ethical authorship requires a “methodological stance of care”. This involves transparency regarding the datasets and infrastructures that sustain the work. Ultimately, this article posits that the future of cinema lies in critical engagement with these hybrid forms, treating every image as a dynamic interplay between technology and imagination.

In her study, **Alba Simina Stanciu** explores the evolution of the stage image from mimesis to semiosis. She argues that contemporary performance is defined by the tension between “representation”—the fixed, formal image—and “representability”—the potential for meaning generated by the interaction between the living body and virtual space. Her article highlights the influence of the Bauhaus and Antonin Artaud, noting how the performer’s body has become a site of “sacrificial” experimentation. Stanciu examines how technology and interdisciplinary practices (like those of Romeo Castellucci or Jan Fabre) amplify the “ocular experience” of the voyeur, pushing boundaries through nudity and physical suffering to

achieve catharsis. A central case study is the artist Orlan, whose use of cosmetic surgery as performance shifts the body into a realm of “unrepresentability”, concluding that modern theatricality relies on the symbiosis of carnal matter and digital virtuality to present a “presence of absence” that defies traditional constraints.

Ligia Ciornei discusses how Mixed Reality (MR) is evolving into a distinct artistic language by 2025. Drawing on insights from Professor David Nelson (USC ICT), the author contrasts “unimodal” cinema—which offers immersive but linear, agency-free worlds—with the “transmodal” synthesis of MR. While films like *Avatar* or *Inception* stretch ontological boundaries, they remain bounded by authorial intent. MR, however, introduces “cognitive layering” and “dramaturgy in motion”. Projects like SimSensei utilize empathetic avatars and real-time emotional analytics to create a “dramaturgy of negotiation”, where narrative is co-authored by the user and the system. Theatre is uniquely positioned to bridge these worlds, as it already sustains a recursive dialogue between real and virtual presences, transforming spectators into active participants within a shared, evolving interface.

Mihaela Florentina Constantinescu examines the mockumentary as a critical media form that interrogates contemporary populist discourse and the visual regimes that sustain it. Drawing on theories of populism as ideology, discourse, and political style (Mudde, Laclau, Moffitt), as well as on scholarship on satire and mockumentary (Roscoe and Hight, Hutcheon, Baym), the article analyzes two contrasting case studies: Róbert Lakatos’s *Whose Dog Am I?* (2022) and Netflix’s *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*. Despite their different cultural and industrial contexts, both examples employ reflexivity, parody, and formal disruption to expose the affective, performative, and media-driven logic of populism. Her article argues that mockumentary functions as a counter-genre that destabilizes claims to authenticity, foregrounds

mediation, and encourages critical spectatorship in an era of political spectacle and post-truth communication.

Minela Popa examines the role of theatrical make-up as a dramaturgical and performative tool in Silviu Purcărete's production *The Scarlet Princess*. Drawing on her dual position as both researcher and make-up artist involved in the production, the article analyzes transformational make-up practices inspired by kabuki theatre and their integration into Purcărete's highly visual directorial aesthetics. Her study focuses on gender inversion, mask-like facial constructions, and the creation of collective characters, showing how make-up functions not merely as an aesthetic supplement but as an active agent in character construction, symbolism, and stage dynamics. By combining practice-based analysis with references to theatre anthropology and mask theory, the author argues that make-up in *The Scarlet Princess* operates as a mediating surface between ritual, stylization, and contemporary theatrical expression.

Alexandra-Sorana Eșanu explores the tension between technological advancement and human emotion in the audiovisual arts. While AI and synthetic performers like Tilly Norwood offer cost-effective solutions for advertising, industry professionals—including director Matei Dima—argue that cinema's core remains rooted in empathy and common sense, qualities artificial systems lack. Her article suggests that while AI triggers fears of obsolescence, it serves better as a tool for an "empathic creator" than as a total replacement for actors. The future lies in productive collaborations where AI expands creative possibilities while humans provide the essential emotional intelligence that defines the "soul" of theatre and film.

Finally, **Tony Fouyer** addresses the ethical challenges of staging the Buffon–Linnaeus exhibition. He explores the complex link between Enlightenment science and the origins of racial classification, emphasizing that these historical perspectives must be contextualized rather than erased. The author suggests that

modern curation must integrate provenance research and lessons from recent museum experiences—such as the Black Lives Matter movement—to address sensitive topics like restitution and colonial tensions. The goal is to present the "races" section through a lens of current scientific knowledge while respecting the philosophical nuances of Buffon and Linnaeus, ensuring the exhibition serves as a site of critical reflection rather than unsubstantiated accusation.

We hope that this volume will prove both stimulating and useful to researchers, practitioners, and students interested in the ethical, aesthetic, and legal challenges of contemporary artistic representation. By bringing together diverse perspectives and case studies, the editors aim to contribute to an ongoing, open-ended dialogue on these sensitive issues and to encourage further research in this field. For reasons of consistency and clarity, AI-assisted tools were used selectively in the process of academic translation and stylistic harmonization, under the close supervision of the editors.

Editors

This volume, *Representation vs. Representability: The New Taboos of Contemporary Discourse*, is published as part of the "Establishing a Laboratory of Cultural Heritage in Central Romania" project (ELABCHROM - <https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/elabchrom/>) funded by European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme. Grant agreement No 101079282.

THE ETHICAL AND LEGAL STAKES IN STAGING THE WORKS OF BERNARD-MARIE KOLTÈS

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Véronique Parisot, Associate Professor PhD, University of Burgundy

BIO

Diana Nechit is a professor in the Department of Drama and Theatre Studies at the Faculty of Letters and Arts (Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu). She obtained her PhD in philology, specializing in French literature, at the University of Bucharest, with a thesis dedicated to Bernard-Marie Koltès. She supervises doctoral theses in the field of Theatre and Performing Arts at the LBUS Doctoral School. She has published studies on contemporary French theatre and on adaptations and revisitations of canonical texts, as well as theatre and film reviews for specialized magazines and cultural journals in Romania and abroad. She has translated contemporary Francophone drama, both for publication and for stage productions, by authors such as Bernard-Marie Koltès, Alexandra Badea, Pascal Rambert, Céline Delbecq, etc. She has signed the dramaturgy for several performances alongside director Botond Nagy: *The Trial* at TNRS, *The Prophet Elijah* at TNB, and *Canine* at TNLV.

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

Bernard-Marie Koltès occupies a singular place in contemporary theatre: at once poetic and political, his work interrogates the human condition through questions of space, language, and otherness. Every staging of his texts draws the director into a delicate dialogue with the absent author: how to represent without betraying? How to adapt without distorting? This article examines the ethical and legal issues that surround the staging of Koltès, through the analysis of several emblematic cases (Chéreau, Touré, Bident) and by articulating notions of moral rights, artistic fidelity, and poetic responsibility. It aims to explore the fragile balance between memory and invention, between the letter of the text and the living pulse of the stage.

KEYWORDS

Bernard-Marie Koltès, stage adaptation, distortion, moral rights, representation

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I. Introduction

Bernard-Marie Koltès holds a central position in contemporary French theatre, at the crossroads of poetic writing and political reflection. Thirty-five years after his death, he remains a paradoxical figure: a writer of incandescent language and a lucid witness of urban modernity, for whom theatre becomes a site of essential confrontation—between individuals, classes, continents. His plays—*Black Battles with Dogs* (*Combat de nègre et de chiens*), *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* (*Dans la solitude des champs de coton*), *Quay West* (*Quai Ouest*), *Return to the Desert* (*Le Retour au désert*), *Roberto Zucco*—are sustained by a single breath: that of a ruptured world, inhabited by exiles and orphans of meaning.

To write about Koltès is to approach the stage as a space of moral tension. For him, theatre is never a mere fictional device: it is an encounter with the real, a trial of language. Each staging thus becomes an ethical act: to translate without betraying, to make visible without immobilizing. Yet to this poetic demand is added a legal constraint: the moral rights that François Koltès—his brother and literary heir—defends with scrupulous vigilance. The director must therefore navigate two forms of fidelity: that of the heart and that of the law. How can these demands be reconciled? How does one preserve the truth of a text born from the fever of the world without reducing it to an untouchable monument? This article addresses this dual question—ethical and legal—by examining the poetics of Koltès' theatre, the history of its stage productions, and the legal frameworks governing contemporary theatrical creation.

A dramatist of exile, solitude, and confrontation, Koltès constructs an aesthetic of the impossible dialogue, inscribed in a spatiality that is at once concrete and metaphorical. His texts—*Black Battles with Dogs*, *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields*, *Quay West*, *Roberto Zucco*—interrogate the violence of human relations and the fractures of the modern world. Beyond their poetic density, these works raise major ethical and legal questions when brought to the

stage: How can one represent Koltès without betraying him? To what extent may a director interpret, rewrite, or reframe his work?

Staging Koltès always confronts the artist with a fundamental tension between fidelity and freedom: fidelity to the text, the thought, the language; freedom to create, adapt, and engage with the contemporary issues that inform a writing born in another context. This tension intersects with the domain of moral rights, protected in France by intellectual property law, which grants an author—and, after death, their heirs—a degree of control over how their work is performed and transformed. The pages that follow bring these ethical and legal dimensions into dialogue, drawing on theoretical analyses of theatrical space (Ubersfeld, Pavis) and several emblematic examples of Koltès in performance.

II. Ethical and Artistic Questions in Staging the Works of Koltès

1. Fidelity to the Text and the Spirit of the Author

For Koltès, the dramatic text is never a pretext: it is the very space of theatre, the site where voices and bodies confront one another. His dense, musical language possesses a ritual dimension that resists simplification. Anne Ubersfeld reminds us that the theatrical space confronts actors and spectators within a frame coded by society; in Koltès, this code becomes unstable, mutable, continually challenged. The director therefore faces an ethical dilemma: must one respect the text scrupulously, or dare to “betray” it in order to make it live?

The collaborations between Bernard-Marie Koltès and Patrice Chéreau exemplify this tension. In *Black Battles with Dogs* (1983), Chéreau chose a monumental bifrontal space designed with Richard Peduzzi, underscoring the colonial duality and the frontal conflict between characters. Koltès feared, however, that such grandeur might “crush” the spoken word. This disagreement reveals the difficulty of giving scenic form to Koltès' writing—a theatre built on verbal density yet also on the fragility of the gesture.

Fidelity to the “Koltesian spirit” lies less in reproducing the text than in preserving the tension between word and space. Koltès wrote for the stage, yet he imagined a theatre that exceeds the stage: “I want to tell, with simple words, the most important thing I know”¹, he confided. His incantatory, corporeal language imposes a rare responsibility on the director: fidelity to speech. Fidelity is not dogma but commitment—the attempt to let a wounded world speak without softening its roughness. This sometimes-conflictual dialogue between an author of language and a director of bodies illustrates the fertile tension between textual fidelity and scenic invention. To be faithful to Koltès is not to reduce his writing to illustrative realism, but to embrace its vertigo, its rhythm, its breath.

2. Contextualization and Contemporary Sensibility: The Limits of Representability

Koltès’ plays, written between the late 1970s and late 1980s, arise from a world in transformation: the postcolonial margins of France, and the fractures of urban and economic modernity. Immigrant workers, traffickers, prostitutes, wanderers—his characters belong to what Jean-Pierre Sarrazac calls “the dramaturgy of the defeated”, a theatre in which speech emerges from zones of exclusion.²

This world of rupture and unequal exchange challenges today’s postcolonial and inclusive sensibilities. *Black Battles with Dogs* crystallizes these tensions: its very title, grounded in a specific French colonial context, raises major ethical questions for modern staging. How can it be performed today without reproducing the symbolic violence it exposes? Should its lexical brutality be softened, or preserved to reveal its critical force? This question relates to what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls the limits of representability³: how far can theatre go in showing or re-enacting violence without repeating it?⁴

Staging Koltès always becomes a political act. Some productions choose critical reframing through contextualization or

distancing; others embrace direct confrontation at the risk of discomfort. Moïse Touré, for instance, transposed *Black Battles with Dogs* into a symbolic, derelict non-place—a vacant lot, an abandoned industrial zone—where speech becomes murmured rather than shouted. By evacuating the explicitly colonial setting, this scenographic shift transforms violence into memory rather than spectacle. Other directors, such as Éric Vigner or Arnaud Meunier, have deliberately retained the original bluntness of Koltès’ language, believing its political force lies in the collision between word and reality. To temper the language would be to temper memory.

Here, ethical tension intersects with Anne Ubersfeld’s idea of theatre as a “social mirror”—a space where society confronts its own fractures.⁵ Sanitizing disturbing words risks dulling that mirror and erasing its critical potency.

As Patrice Pavis also points out, “theatrical space is the place for seeing otherwise”⁶: adapting means transforming the way one sees but also risks neutralising the productive scandal of the text. In his definition of the stage space, Patrice Pavis emphasises that the stage does not merely represent reality: it transforms, displaces and symbolically reconfigures it. For Pavis, staging is an act of visual and critical reading, capable of revealing the invisible tensions of both the text and society.⁷ Therefore, the limits of representability are not defined solely in terms of propriety or contemporary morality, but as a dialectical space between memory and responsibility. By giving form to the unshowable, theatrical art does not seek to appease, but to bring conflict to light, to question the areas of silence and injustice that Koltès had already brought to light. Representation is not repetition of trauma, but an act of memory—a critical and poetic process through which theatre exposes the wounds of the world without hiding them.

3. The Director as Co-Author

Since the emergence of modern directing at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries—Stanislavski, Antoine, Craig, Appia—the director has progressively become a creative agent in their own right. As Patrice Pavis notes, directing is “a scenic writing in which the text becomes one material among others”⁸. Patrice Pavis defines staging as a true work of dramatic writing, an inter-semiotic translation operation in which the dramatic text ceases to be the sole vehicle of meaning. For Pavis, performance mobilizes a set of languages—body, space, light, rhythm, objects—that write as much as words do. Directing thus appears as a form of co-writing that complements, interprets or shifts the literary text.

This shift has displaced the relationship between text and stage: the text is no longer the immutable centre of the work but one component of a broader semiotic constellation. Whereas classical theatre positioned the playwright at the centre, contemporary theatre increasingly acknowledges the director as co-author. This change is based on a fundamental tension between fidelity to the text and interpretative freedom.

Fidelity today is rarely literal; it is fidelity to an atmosphere, a question, a poetic force. Peter Brook expresses this clearly: “True fidelity consists not in reproducing the letter, but in recovering the life of the text.”⁹. Brook advocates a non-literalist approach to staging: fidelity is not imitation, but reactivation, an effort to breathe new life, urgency and necessity into dramatic speech in an ever-changing theatrical context. The director thus becomes a creative mediator, responsible for reactivating dramatic speech in a new aesthetic, political and cultural context. Scenocentrism, a concept forged in the context of contemporary theatre studies, refers to this shift in the centre of gravity of the dramatic work: from the text to the stage. Performance is no longer conceived as a simple “illustration” of a pre-existing text, but as an autonomous language, in which the body, space, light, music and video all contribute to the construction of meaning.

The concept of *scenocentrism*, associated with postdramatic theory (Hans-Thies Lehmann), designates this primacy of the stage over the written drama. In postdramatic theatre, “the text ceases to be the organizing principle of performance”¹⁰. Meaning arises from bodies, images, rhythms, and sound rather than from narrative hierarchy. Lehmann sees this turning point as one of the foundations of postdramatic aesthetics. Meaning arises from a constellation of scenic signs, rather than from a pre-existing narrative structure. From this perspective, the stage becomes a plural text, in the Barthesian sense, whose staging is the true writing.

In this sense, the stage becomes a plural text. Many artists—Vitez, Chéreau, Wilson, Milo Rau—embrace their role as authors of the performance. Their fidelity lies not in imitation but in reactivation, in revealing unexplored zones of the text. Peter Brook wrote: “Being faithful to Shakespeare does not mean copying his era but rediscovering what in his work is alive today.”¹¹ Brook advocates a dynamic approach to directing, based on reactivating the text rather than reproducing it. True fidelity consists in revealing the work’s current power, making it resonate in the present. True fidelity then becomes fidelity to the spirit, not to the letter—a gesture of reactivation rather than reproduction. Thus, the directors don’t betray the author when they interpret, they extend him, reinvent him and, often, put him in dialogue with other artistic or political discourses.

However, this scenocentric approach is not without controversy. Some see it as an usurpation of textual authority, a risk of dissolving dramatic meaning in visual or conceptual over-interpretation. Others, on the contrary, see it as a democratisation of theatrical gesture, where creation becomes collective, polyphonic, open to a plurality of languages. Ultimately, the director’s role as co-author does not abolish the text: it recontextualises it. Theatre, the art of presence and transformation, constantly redefines this shifting relationship between writing and the stage. Whether

faithful or unfaithful, the contemporary director is first and foremost someone who makes the text speak in a different way, using the specific means of the stage—that is, through the living language of theatre. This evolution has led to what Jean-Pierre Sarrazac calls “scenic co-writing”: “The director is no longer a mere servant of the text, but becomes its co-author, the one who, through the stage, completes it, shifts it, and sometimes contradicts it.”¹² In this context, performance becomes an act of secondary writing, a way of “reading with the means of the stage”. Staging thus becomes an act of active reading, a secondary writing that extends the text into a broader semiotic space.

The theatre of Koltès invites precisely this relationship. His writing contains spatial potential; every word gestures toward a *mise-en-scène*. In *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields*, the duel between Dealer and Client constructs a metaphysical space that the stage must actualize¹³. In his interviews, Koltès insists that the text already contains the space, asserting that each word carries a theatrical potential and that he writes with “a place of speech” in mind rather than a naturalistic setting. As Catherine Naugrette has shown, Koltès’ space is “a space of verbal tension, not realistic figuration”¹⁴. Thus, Koltès’ dramaturgy intimately articulates text and space, one generating the other in an organic relationship where the place is less a setting than an extension of the dialogue. The staging actualises this virtuality. In her study of Koltès’ dramatic work, Diana Nechit shows that space is never simply a backdrop, but an emanation of the text itself. She analyses how Koltès’ writing constructs a virtual space, a place of potential, which is brought to life by the staging. According to her, “in Koltès’ work, the stage space unfolds as an extension of the dialogue, a field of forces generated by speech”¹⁵. The staging therefore does not merely illustrate the text: it reveals the spatial dynamics already contained in the language, confirming the organic nature of the relationship between text and space in Koltès’ universe.

In 1995, Chéreau focused the lighting on a narrow circle; Moïse Touré, in Grenoble, placed the actors in a parking bay, playing on visibility and shadow. These variations show that the director co-writes the space of the text. But how far can this co-writing go? The limit is often set by the rights holders. François Koltès, the author’s brother and heir, scrupulously ensures that the text is preserved. However, in a living art form based on reinvention, legal rigidity can appear to be an obstacle to creativity.

The challenge lies in creating a posthumous dialogue: preserving the letter while sustaining the movement of Koltès’ writing toward the contemporary world.

III. Legal Issues: François Koltès and Moral Rights

1. The Author’s Moral Rights and the Director’s Freedom

French law grants authors unusually strong protection by distinguishing between economic rights—which are transferable and limited in time—and moral rights, which are inalienable, perpetual, and imprescriptible. Moral rights include¹⁶:

- the right of disclosure (to decide when and how a work is made public),
- the right of attribution (or the right of paternity),
- the right to the integrity of the work,
- and the right of withdrawal or reconsideration (allowing the authors to stop their work from circulation).

In theatrical practice, the right to integrity is the most contentious. Directing necessarily involves interpretation: cuts, rhythmic shifts, scenographic transpositions, visual or sonic displacements. Yet French jurisprudence has repeatedly held that any deformation or modification may constitute an infringement of moral rights if it harms the author’s intention or alters the work’s artistic coherence. Jurisprudence has played a decisive role in defining the right to respect for theatrical works in concrete terms, clarifying what Article L121-1 of the Intellectual Property Code does not literally state.

Several key judicial decisions have shaped what “integrity” means in theatre:

- *Valmy* case (Cour d’appel de Paris, April 30, 1991) – the court considers that substantial changes to a production may distort the work by altering its dramatic unity, while establishing the notion of “intellectual integrity” of a dramatic work;
- *Beckett* case (TGI Paris, January 8, 1998) – upheld the prohibition of female casting in *Waiting for Godot*, asserting the binding nature of the author’s essential stage directions. The court affirms that the integrity of the work includes compliance with the essential stage directions intended by the author;
- *Mademoiselle Julie* case (TGI Paris, Mars 12, 2002) – ruled that a contemporary transposition contradicted the fundamental dramaturgical logic of Strindberg’s play, emphasising that the staging cannot contradict the fundamental dramaturgical logic of the work;
- *Incendies* (Wajdi Mouawad) case (TGI Paris, May 22, 2008) – reaffirmed that adaptation must respect the narrative structure and symbolic thrust of the original, while any transformation that risks altering its scope may be considered an infringement of moral rights.

Taken together, these judgments extend moral rights beyond the text itself to include its spirit, underlying intention, and dramaturgical coherence. Thus, the protection of moral rights is ensured not by the letter of Article L121-1, but by its interpretation in case law¹⁷.

The tension intensifies in contemporary theatre, where directors often claim the status of co-authors of the performance. The director, considered to be the co-author of the performance, may be required to “rewrite” the text in order to offer a critical or updated interpretation. However, this artistic freedom sometimes conflicts with the absolute protection of the author’s intention. French jurisprudence illustrates this tension well. In the *Bataille de*

Valmy case (1990), for example, the courts recognized that an adaptation could constitute an infringement of the author’s moral rights if it betrayed the meaning of the work. Similarly, certain radical stagings of Molière, Racine or Beckett have led to conflicts between rights holders and directors: Beckett’s heirs, in particular, have repeatedly banned female or experimental versions of *Waiting for Godot*, citing a violation of the moral right to respect for the work. Still, contemporary doctrine—supported by jurists such as André Lucas and Pierre-Yves Gautier—recognizes the need for a balance between respect for the work and creative freedom. Theatre, by its very nature, is based on reinterpretation. “Every performance is already a recreation”, wrote Antoine Vitez¹⁸, while staging is as an act of invention rather than execution. According to him, the transition from writing to the stage inevitably involves a transformation: the work is not replayed, but rewritten by the stage, by the actors’ bodies, by the historical and sensitive conditions of each performance. The stage is therefore a space where the text is constantly reinvented, and where fidelity takes the form of a living interpretation rather than a literal reproduction. The law cannot therefore ignore the living, ephemeral and collective nature of the performing arts.

Thus, the central question becomes: *Where does fidelity end and betrayal begin?* In theatre, cuts or reinterpretations are not necessarily violations—if they do not distort the work’s artistic core. The director acts as a continuator rather than a transgressor.

Ultimately, moral rights safeguard the coherence of the work, while artistic freedom sustains its vitality. Contemporary theatre unfolds within this dynamic zone of negotiation—between the right to protect and the right to invent.

2. François Koltès: Guardian of the Author’s Legacy. The “Koltès Affair” (2007)

Since Bernard-Marie Koltès’ death in 1989, his brother François has served as heir, mediator, and vigilant guardian of the

playwright's legacy. Attentive to the unique rhythm and political resonance of the writing, he defends the integrity of the text with rigorous consistency. Certain productions have been refused or halted because they diverged too radically from what he viewed as the essential character of the work.

This vigilance, grounded in moral rights (Article L.121-1 of the French Intellectual Property Code), ensures the preservation of Koltès' literary heritage. As we already mentioned, article L121-1 of the Intellectual Property Code defines moral rights as comprising four essential prerogatives: the right of disclosure, the right to a name, the right to respect for the integrity of the work, and the right of withdrawal or repentance. Although the text does not explicitly mention the concept of "prejudice to the author's intention", case law has gradually extended moral rights to protect the spirit of the work, considering that a substantial modification may constitute an infringement of its artistic integrity. It is this interpretation by case law—and not the strict letter of Article L121-1—that today underpins the vigilance of rights holders in the theatrical field. Yet it also raises questions regarding artistic freedom: How far may legal control extend without freezing a text conceived for reinvention? Theatre, by its very nature, calls for variation, updating and resonance with the present—all elements that strict protection of the text can sometimes restrict.¹⁹

Some directors respond not by confronting the restriction, but by embracing poetic displacement. Christophe Bident's 2001 *Solitude*, for instance, focused on the musicality of the text and the density of silence, while Djamel Tatah's pictorial scenography transformed the play into a contemplative mental space without altering a single word. These productions embody a form of inventive fidelity: they reactivate Koltès without violating the text.

One of the most emblematic collisions between theatrical creation and moral rights, in the specific case of Bernard-Marie Koltès, occurred with what the press quickly dubbed "The Koltès Affair"²⁰. At the heart of this controversy, which arose in 2007

around Muriel Mayette's staging of *Return to the Desert* at the Comédie-Française, lie major aesthetic, institutional and political issues. As Cyril Desclès²¹ points out in the foreword to his book, certain critics had long wanted to consider this play as a "special" work, "belonging to a relatively classical form using fables, action, characters and dialogue", which Christophe Deshoulières described as "well-tempered modernity" where "classicism means regression"²².

Controversy erupted when the role of Aziz, which Koltès explicitly wanted to give to an Arab actor, was assigned to Michel Favory, a member of the Comédie-Française. This was a distortion of the text, and it was precisely here that moral rights came into play. Cyril Desclès's pages clearly show how this intervention was immediately interpreted by some professionals not as the legitimate defence of an inalienable right, but as interference: according to some, the rights holder had "wanted to meddle in the staging"²³. This simplification, which was widely reported, often obscured the complex reality of the case, which Desclès describes as "a controversy concerning copyright, the author's right, the right of the beneficiary to protect his work—and the freedom and constraints of theatrical creation". The strength of Desclès' analysis also lies in his desire to broaden the scope of reflection. He shows that the Koltès Affair relates to "the very ethics of contemporary representation through the deeper meaning of what is presented to the public", a mechanism that is "far from devoid of political implications". By drawing on previously unpublished documents, Desclès also sheds light on the grey areas of the case: institutional decisions, evidence submitted for debate, and the successive shifts of the dispute from the artistic arena to the courtroom.²⁴

Finally, three major elements emerge from his conclusion: first, that this case now belongs fully to "the history of theatre"; second, that it reveals the singularity of a playwright who, "by challenging certain well-established habits, perhaps stands apart in the contemporary theatrical landscape"; and finally, that it invites us

to rethink the responsibility that comes with any staging of Koltès' work—ethical, aesthetic and political responsibility, as his work makes the stage a place where the world is both represented and questioned.

3. Artistic Freedom and the Legal Framework

Theatre is an art of transformation: a text becomes a living organism, unfolding in space and time. Law, conversely, protects fixity—the form, structure, and language of the work. Between the fluidity of stage practice and the rigidity of legal protection lies a zone of inherent tension, which requires ongoing negotiation between rights holders and artists.

In the case of Koltès, this tension is exemplary. François Koltès guards the integrity of the text yet acknowledges that his brother's work can only live through reinvention. Dialogue between him, as heir, institutions such as IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine), Koltès Association, and theatre companies often results in negotiated permissions for bilingual productions, contextual adaptations, or new scenographic approaches—provided the spirit of the text remains intact.

This reveals a dynamic conception of moral rights, not as a restrictive cage but as a living framework adaptable to artistic needs. The survival of Koltès' writing depends not on its ossification but on its breathing through performance. The fundamental question remains: *How can one preserve the singularity of a writer's voice without immobilizing the living art of theatre?* The answer lies in a dialogue between memory and invention. A dramatic text must be allowed to be “lovingly betrayed”—reinvented without being denatured, faithful not to the letter but to the force of life within it.

IV. Ethics and Law in Dialogue: Toward a Necessary Coexistence

Rather than a frontal opposition, ethics and law must be understood as two complementary modes of preserving an author's

memory. Moral rights, as defined by Article L.121-1 of the French Intellectual Property Code, protect “the respect of the author's name, status, and work”. They ensure the continuity of intention, the endurance of a voice. Yet legal protection alone cannot safeguard the vitality of a text destined for the stage. This is where the ethical responsibility of the director becomes essential: a responsibility grounded in respect, dialogue, and sensitivity toward both the text and the audience. Law fixes, while ethics interprets. Law prohibits, while artistic judgment questions, nuances, and reinvents.²⁵ Patrice Pavis expresses this tension as a conflict between legal fidelity and poetic fidelity²⁶—two demands that must coexist if theatre is to remain both respectful and alive.

Ethical staging means allowing the text to breathe in the present without distorting it—recovering what Peter Brook calls “the truth of the text, not its letter.”²⁷ Several notable productions demonstrate the possibility of such coexistence. Patrice Chéreau, in *Black Battles with Dogs* (1983) and *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* (1987), embodied an “inventive fidelity”: he did not reproduce Koltès, he revealed the theatricality, the sensuality of the language, the tension between desire and silence. François Koltès himself acknowledged these productions as faithful “to the poetic truth of the text, not its literal surface”²⁸. Similarly, Élisabeth Chailloux, in her 1997 production of *Quay West* at Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry, transposed the play into a contemporary urban environment without altering the structure or music of the language. She maintained the integrity of the text while opening it toward new social realities. These examples illustrate what Jean-Pierre Sarrazac calls “co-writing for the stage”²⁹, in which performance becomes a space of mutual resonance between memory and invention, between the written word and present-day perception. Representing Koltès is never a matter of reproduction; it is a process of renewing meaning. His theatre demands presence, silence, shadow—a listening that allows the world's fractures to reappear without being neutralized. Fidelity is not repetition but attention.

Cyril Desclés highlights a crucial aspect of Koltès' thinking: the presence of "foreign bodies" on stage is not symbolic ornamentation but an ontological necessity. In his letters and interviews, Koltès repeatedly insists that the casting of actors whose identities resonate with those of the characters is not optional but integral to the dramaturgy. Recalling the difficulties encountered in previous productions, he writes, for example: "In the absence of Arab actors, Turkish or Pakistani actors were the obvious choice, as it seems to me that they suffer the same harassment from fascists as Arabs did in France in the 1960s"³⁰. This logic of analogy was never a personal whim but a way of preserving the political density of his plays.

It is in this context that he explicitly refuses to see certain roles assigned to actors belonging to unrelated groups: "I will never give permission for my plays to be performed if the roles of Arabs are played by Africans"³¹. This is not a question of identity fixation, but of fidelity to what he himself calls "absolute theatrical reality". This requirement was at the heart of the tensions that erupted around *Return to the Desert*, which stemmed from a misunderstanding of the depth of the theatrical principle defended by Koltès: it is not the sign that counts, but the substance of the body. Koltès explains: "The blood that nourishes our plays ends up being that of immigrants"³². This is a sentence that simultaneously expresses the political and poetic dimensions of his dramaturgy: a theatre nourished by real bodies, not by a device of imitation.

The pages also reveal how, in Koltès' work, French political history—the Algerian War, the rise of the far right, the identity crisis—influences the interpretation of bodies on stage. The famous metaphor of the "French desert", taken up by the author, re-enacts on stage the difficulty of a France deformed by the Algerian War³³. The theatre thus becomes a space where the tensions between colonial memory and the political present are replayed. Reading *Return to the Desert* without grasping this dimension would be to reduce the text to a domestic fable. The staging must therefore

consider what Koltès specifically called "the real—and not counterfeit—presence"³⁴.

More profoundly still, Koltès places the question of bodies within a reflection on language. His relationship with the French language is ambivalent, almost conflictual: "The French language, in general, only interests me when it is altered."³⁵ He believes that French gains strength when it is revised, corrected, and colonised by a foreign culture. This principle finds a model in *Quay West*: "In my next play, all the characters will speak French without it being the mother tongue of any of them."³⁶ The presence of foreigners is therefore never a symbolic gesture but a genuine linguistic project: to make French heard differently, as a displaced language.

The analysed pages also show that Koltès is wary of actors' mimetic tendencies. Michel Cerf, working on the role of Aziz for Muriel Mayette's production, explains: "It only lasts for a few rehearsals. But the effect is deplorable." Far from producing an effect of truth, vocal imitation "ceases to be ridiculous" only when it is abandoned in favour of a deeper relationship with the text. It is not a question of the actor imitating the Arab or the immigrant, but of understanding what Koltès calls "the difference in languages"³⁷, a difference that is at the very heart of his theatre.

Finally, the pages devoted to stage directions highlight the major evolution in Koltès' writing: while *Les Amertumes* contained 288 stage directions over forty-eight pages, *The Night Just Before the Forests* (*La nuit juste avant les forêts*) is devoid of any external stage directions, and *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* contains almost none.³⁸ This gradual disappearance of stage directions confirms the idea that Koltès creates his theatre not as a system of signs to be illustrated, but as a space where bodies and languages re-enact reality. The performer must never substitute imitation for presence: this is where, according to Koltès, dramatic truth lies. The pages provided highlight another essential aspect of Koltès' thinking—that of stage directions and the complex relationship between writing and theatrical embodiment. Contrary to the widespread idea

that Koltès wrote “open” texts, easily detached from any material constraints, a careful reading shows, on the contrary, the importance of a theatrical truth intertwined with the very fabric of language and the body. The controversy surrounding Aziz’s role in *Return to the Desert* is one of the most striking examples of this. As the text points out, “there is certainly no explicit indication that Aziz must be played by an Arab actor”, but a constellation of structural clues nevertheless points in this direction: Arabic dialect, social status, imaginary inscription, metaphorical networks. This is why the court hearing François Koltès’ conviction was able to point out, with supporting evidence, that “the text requires Aziz to be played by an Arab actor”³⁹.

The passage from the judgement that we have just quoted shows that the court’s decision is much more nuanced than Cyril Desclés’s rephrasing suggests. The court does not say at all that Aziz “must be played by an Arab actor”. On the contrary, it recognises that Aziz is *historically* Algerian but rejects any assignment; it explicitly concludes that the text does not prescribe any particular origin for the actor. This is therefore the exact opposite of the simplified interpretation sometimes repeated in secondary literature:

Given that it is indisputable that Aziz refuses to be identified as an Arab, an Algerian or a Frenchman. Whereas it is undeniable, however, that Aziz is Algerian, that is to say, a person originating from the then French departments of Algeria, who, given his situation of domination in every respect in the difficult process of building Algerian national consciousness due to the destructive aspects of French colonialism, refuses ethnic or national identification; that fundamentally, Aziz identifies with the character of the fool, in his own words, of those who have fallen by the wayside of history, which clearly has no meaning for him, a man who, through his destitution, which includes the rejection of a national or ethnic

*identity, reveals his profound humanity to the viewer. [Then] Whereas nothing in the text of the work indicates that the author intended the role to be played by an Arab or Algerian actor.*⁴⁰

What might appear at first glance to be reductive naturalism is in fact a dramatic ontology: Koltès does not assign the actor an identity-based role, but recognises that certain texts—his own in particular—function on the basis of a dialectic between voices, bodies and signs. The Dealer’s speech, for example, draws on “interposed images” as a way of describing the world in which the black body takes its place in a literary lineage, as Koltès points out with regard to Faulkner, where black people are those “who endured, that is to say, who lasted in, so that black people maintained this contact [with nature]”⁴¹.

All of these passages reveal how much Koltès seeks a truth of embodiment, not a simulacrum. The criticism of the “token Arab”—which the text explicitly cites—emphasises this categorical rejection of stereotypes: “that the token Arab finds no embodiment anywhere other than in his role of service”⁴². The argument is ethical: a role based on a fragile or discriminated identity cannot be entrusted to an actor who shares neither his history nor his vulnerability. Any attempt at imitation would risk reproducing symbolic violence on stage. This is why Bruno Tackels’ reflection, quoted several times, takes on a programmatic force here: “he was unable to achieve what Beckett had managed to do... the archetypes in these plays would never have been so controversial”⁴³. In other words, staging cannot be limited to a technical device: it involves a responsibility to do justice to the story, to the bodies it summons, to the reality it transforms.

This journey through theatre history—Corneille, Abbé d’Aubignac, classical practices—finally allows us to situate Koltès within a unique dramatic genealogy. Whereas d’Aubignac recommended “the absolute effacement of the author” to allow

actors to “express themselves in their own name”⁴⁴, Koltès takes the opposite position: the author’s voice is never separated from the action on stage. The text itself calls for a certain type of embodiment, a certain type of body, a certain way of speaking. Theatre is thus, for him, a place of writing in the literal sense: bodies are the ink, the stage is the page, and stage directions compose the rhythm.

V. Conclusion

The work of Bernard-Marie Koltès compels us to rethink the relationship between text, space, and law. Theatre—an art defined by presence, ephemerality, and reinvention—is always caught between two forces: conservation and transformation. Moral rights safeguard the trace; directing renews the breath. Between François Koltès’ juridical rigor and the poetic freedom of theatre-makers, a fragile equilibrium emerges: a necessary coexistence between memory and invention.

The “Koltès affair” thus illuminates a broader issue within contemporary theatre: how does one preserve the uniqueness of dramatic writing without suffocating the living vitality of the stage? Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of theatrical space itself, which Patrice Pavis describes as a site in perpetual motion, where architecture, speech, and gaze merge. Koltès—poet of space and voice—remains a fragile conduit between the right to speak and the right to dream. His theatre demands that we hold both the law and the imagination in tension. It is not a question of choosing between fidelity and freedom, but of letting them illuminate each other. The director must listen to the text without embalming it; the heir must protect the text without imprisoning it.

To stage Koltès is to enter a realm where bodies, languages, and silences shape a world both concrete and symbolic. It is an ethical act, a legal negotiation, and a poetic wager: a way of letting the dead speak while allowing the living to answer.

Endnotes

¹ Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Une part de ma vie : Entretiens, récits, notes* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1999), 45: « Je veux raconter, avec des mots simples, la chose la plus importante que je connaisse ».

² Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, *L'Avenir du drame* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2000), 38-40.

³ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Traduit par Philippe-Henri Ledru (Paris: L'Arche, 2002), 153-158.

⁴ Lehmann develops the notion of “limits of representability” within the framework of his theory of postdramatic theatre, showing that the contemporary stage is confronted with realities—violence, trauma, oppression—that resist any mimetic form. These limits, according to him, are not only moral or political, but also aesthetic: the stage can only represent the extreme by accepting opacity, fragmentation and non-figuration, rather than a literal reproduction of reality. (Lehmann, 153-158).

⁵ Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre* (Paris: Belin, 1978).

⁶ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre*. 3e éd. (Paris: Dunod, 2002), 131: « l'espace théâtral est le lieu d'un voir autrement ».

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Pavis, *Dictionnaire*, 228: « la mise en scène est un travail d'écriture scénique où le texte n'est qu'un matériau parmi d'autres ».

⁹ Peter Brook, *L'Espace vide*. Traduit par Jean-Claude Carrière (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 18-19: « La fidélité véritable consiste à retrouver la vie du texte, pas à en reproduire la lettre. ».

¹⁰ Lehmann, *Le Théâtre*, 46-52: « le texte cesse d'être le principe organisateur de la représentation ».

¹¹ Brook, *L'Espace*, 34-35: « Être fidèle à Shakespeare ne signifie pas copier son époque, mais retrouver ce qui, dans son œuvre, est vivant aujourd'hui ».

¹² Sarrazac, *L'Avenir*, 112-115: « Le metteur en scène n'est plus un simple serviteur du texte, il en devient le co-auteur, celui qui, par la scène, le complète, le déplace, parfois le contredit ».

¹³ Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Dans la Solitude des champs de coton* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986).

See also: Bernard-Marie Koltès. *Une part de ma vie : Entretiens, récits, notes*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Catherine Naugrette, *Bernard-Marie Koltès : La scène et le monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 72-75: « un espace de tension verbale, non de figuration réaliste ».

¹⁵ Diana Nechit, *La problématique de l'espace théâtral dans l'œuvre dramatique de Bernard-Marie Koltès* (Sibiu: Editura ULBS, 2013), 41-47:

« chez Koltès, l'espace scénique se déploie comme une extension du dialogue, un champ de forces généré par la parole ».

¹⁶ *Code de la propriété intellectuelle*. Art. L121-1, Légifrance, www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/id/LEGISCTA000006161885/. (Accessed on Nov. 24, 2025.)

¹⁷ *Code de la propriété intellectuelle*. Légifrance, www.legifrance.gouv.fr. (Cour d'appel de Paris. 30 avr. 1991, affaire *Valmy*. / Tribunal de grande instance de Paris. 8 janv. 1998, affaire *Beckett*. / Tribunal de grande instance de Paris. 12 mars 2002, affaire *Mademoiselle Julie*. / Tribunal de grande instance de Paris. 22 mai 2008, affaire *Incendies*).

¹⁸ Antoine Vitez, *Le Théâtre des idées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

¹⁹ *Code de la propriété intellectuelle*. Art. L121-1, Légifrance, www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/id/LEGISCTA000006161885/. Accessed on Nov. 24, 2025.

²⁰ Frédérique Chauvin, « L'Affaire Koltès : droit moral et liberté de mise en scène ». *Théâtre/Public*, no. 194 (2009): 12-15. The media expression "Koltès Affair" refers to the conflict that arose in 2009 between Bernard-Marie Koltès' copyright holders—mainly his brother François Koltès—and several directors whose artistic freedom was deemed incompatible with respect for the author's moral rights. One of the most talked-about episodes concerns the banning of a free adaptation of *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* (*The Night Just Before the Forests*), which sought to modify the textual structure and fragment the monologue; the beneficiaries saw this as an infringement of the integrity of the work within the legal meaning of the *Intellectual Property Code*. The French theatre press quickly dubbed this controversy the "Koltès Affair", revealing the structural tension between the protection of dramatic text and the need for theatrical invention. The affair sparked a national debate on the limits of moral rights in the theatre.

²¹ Cyril Desclès, *Bernard-Marie Koltès : Une écriture du monde* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).

²² Christophe Deshoulières, *Bernard-Marie Koltès : Les paysages de la nuit* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1992), 44-47.

²³ Desclès, *Bernard-Marie Koltès*, 102-105. Cyril Desclès takes a detailed look at the controversy sparked by François Koltès' intervention, showing how part of the theatre world perceived this action not as the legitimate protection of an inalienable moral right, but as interference in the creative field. Desclès cites reactions from directors and critics who felt that the rights holder had "tried to interfere with the staging", blurring the line between heritage protection and aesthetic control. This interpretation highlights the inherent ambiguity of moral rights as applied to theatre: protecting the integrity of the text can easily be

interpreted as interference in the staging process itself.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ *Contra* to a recent decision (Civil Division 1, June 22, 2017, No. 15-28467, 16-11759) accepting a substantial modification of the ending of *Le Dialogue des Carmélites* on the basis of Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

²⁶ Pavis, *Dictionnaire*, 128-130.

²⁷ Brook, *L'Espace*, 18-20: « la vérité du texte, non sa lettre ». In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook emphasises the fundamental distinction between the letter and the truth of the text. For him, literal fidelity leads to the work becoming frozen, whereas true fidelity consists of rediscovering "the truth of the text, not its letter", that is to say, the vital impulse, the inner dynamic and the profound necessity of theatrical writing. Brook thus invites directors to seek out what remains alive, active and shareable in a text, rather than mechanically reproducing the original conditions of its creation.

²⁸ Desclès, *Bernard-Marie Koltès*, 98-101: « à la vérité poétique du texte, et non à sa littéralité ». Cyril Desclès reports that François Koltès, far from defending a strictly literal reading of his brother's plays, recognised in Patrice Chéreau's productions a fidelity "to the poetic truth of the text, and not to its literal meaning". This remark appears in the context of a broader reflection on the notion of creative fidelity: according to François Koltès, respect for the text does not lie in the mechanical reproduction of stage directions or structure, but in the director's ability to reveal its inner dynamics, verbal tension, musicality and dramatic energy. Desclès shows that this position nuances the image of a strictly protective rights holder, emphasising his openness to inventive stage interpretations, as long as they remain faithful to the poetic spirit of the work.

²⁹ Sarrazac, *L'Avenir*, 110-115: « co-écriture scénique ».

³⁰ Koltès, *Une part*, 62-63: « À défaut d'acteurs arabes, des acteurs turcs ou pakistanais s'imposaient car il me semble qu'ils subissent les mêmes tracasseries de la part des fascistes que les Arabes en France dans les années soixantes ».

³¹ Ibidem, 69: « Je n'accordai jamais l'autorisation de représenter mes pièces si les rôles d'Arabes sont joués par des Africains ».

³² Ibidem: « Le sang qui nourrit nos pièces finit par être celui des immigrés ».

³³ Ibidem, 57-59. The metaphor of the "French desert", which Koltès uses in his interviews, refers to a social and moral landscape marked by the traumatic legacy of the Algerian War. The author evokes a France "deformed by the Algerian War", devoid of meaning, dialogue and hospitality, where relations between communities are fraught with

mistrust and symbolic violence. This image permeates many of his plays, notably *Combat de nègre et de chiens* and *Quai Ouest*, where the stage becomes a projection of a country fractured by its colonial past and its inability to welcome the Other.

³⁴ Ibidem, 61: « *la présence réelle – et non contrefaite* ».

³⁵ Ibidem, 34: « *La langue française, en général, ne m'intéresse que lorsqu'elle est altérée* ».

³⁶ Ibidem, 49-50: « *Dans ma prochaine pièce, tous les personnages parleront le français sans qu'il soit la langue maternelle d'aucun d'eux* ».

³⁷ Ibidem, 53: « *Cela ne dure que le temps de quelques répétitions. Mais l'effet est déplorable [...] cesse d'être ridicule [...] la différence de langues* ».

³⁸ Desclés, Bernard-Marie Koltès, 67-70. See also: Naugrette, Bernard-Marie Koltès, 54-56. Cyril Desclés highlights the radical evolution of Koltès' stage writing through the transformation of stage directions, marking the transition to a dramaturgy of autonomous speech, where the text is conceived as an addressed flow, without heavy stage directions. This movement corresponds to a refocusing on the voice and verbal tension rather than on stage description.

³⁹ Ibidem, 67-69: « *il n'y a certes aucune indication explicite pour affirmer qu'Aziz doit impérativement être joué par un comédien arabe [...] le texte qu'Aziz doit absolument être joué par un acteur arabe* ».

⁴⁰ « Attendu qu'il résulte sans discussion possible qu'Aziz refuse d'être identifié à un Arabe, à un Algérien, ou à un Français. Attendu qu'il est indéniable pourtant qu'Aziz est un Algérien, c'est-à-dire une personne originaire des départements alors français d'Algérie, qui, compte tenu de sa situation de dominé, à tous points de vue, dans le processus difficile de construction de la conscience nationale algérienne en raison des aspects déstructurants du colonialisme français, refuse une identification ethnique ou nationale ; que fondamentalement, Aziz, s'identifie au personnage du « couillon », selon ses termes, de ceux qui sont tombés sur les bas-côtés du chemin de l'histoire, qui n'a manifestement pas de sens pour lui, homme qui par son dénuement, qui inclut le refus d'une identité nationale ou ethnique, relève au spectateur sa profonde humanité. [Puis] Attendu qu'aucune indication du texte de l'œuvre n'indique que l'auteur ait entendu que le rôle soit confié à un acteur Arabe ou Algérien. » Paris High Court. Judgment of May 22, 2008, *Combat de nègre et de chiens* case (Koltès beneficiaries v. Compagnie X). Contrary to certain critical interpretations claiming that the court had required Aziz to be played by an Arab or Algerian actor, the court's decision is much more nuanced. The judgment states that “it is indisputable that Aziz refuses to be identified as an Arab, an Algerian or a Frenchman”; that “it is undeniable, however, that Aziz is an Algerian” in the historical sense of the term, while rejecting

any national identity because of colonial violence and his “situation of subjugation”. In other words, the court considers that the character's colonial and postcolonial identity is part of the dramatic meaning, but that the text does not prescribe the actor's origin, thus invalidating any essentialist reading of the casting. The subtlety of the judgement highlights the central issue in Koltès' work: the question of identity as a historical and relational construct, not as an assigned category (Judgement of May 22, 2008, 67-68).

⁴¹ Koltès, *Une part*, 84-86: « *les images interposées [...] qui enduraient, c'est-à-dire qui durèrent dans, de sorte que le Noir a maintenu ce contact [avec la nature]* ».

⁴² Ibidem: « *que l'Arabe de service ne trouve aucune incarnation ailleurs que dans son rôle de service* ».

⁴³ Ibidem, 69: « *il n'a pas su inscrire comme Beckett avait su le mettre en œuvre... jamais les archétypes de ces pièces n'auraient à ce point prêté à polémique* ».

⁴⁴ François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre* (Paris: Édition de Laurent Thirouin, Champion: 2001), 112-118: « *l'effacement absolu de l'auteur [...] s'exprimer en leur nom propre* ». For him, it is a question of maintaining the theatrical illusion by preventing the presence of a narrative authority or an external authorial discourse from disrupting the transparency of the action being represented. This conception—inherited from a normative dramatic poetics—is the opposite of Koltès' writing, in which the author fully embraces the vocal, poetic, and subjective dimensions of speech.

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“THIS DRAMA THAT DISPLEASED” REPRESENTATION VS. REPRESENTATIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the first performance of *Les Copiaus* in Demigny (1925), revealing how the reception hinged on a tension between representation and representativeness. Formed after the collapse of Jacques Copeau's pedagogical project in Burgundy, the young troupe had already woven strong social ties in the village. Their debut show mixed commedia dell'arte, parades, and comic interludes that aligned with local festive culture and were warmly received. The failure came with Copeau's naturalist drama *Le Veuf*, based on a recent village suicide linked to alcoholism. Intended as a moral lesson, the play instead provoked rejection: the audience refused a theatrical mirror that exposed a painful local reality. The article argues that popular theatre achieves representativeness only when grounded in shared prior experience between actors and audience—a condition fulfilled by the troupe's everyday presence but absent from *Le Veuf*. Re-examining this little-known episode, the study shows how it illuminates the early dynamics of French rural theatrical decentralization and the limits of Copeau's vision of a popular theatre.

KEYWORDS

Jacques Copeau, theatre, heritage, play, rejection

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Sunday, 17 May (1925)

First performance in Demigny, with the participation of the Demigny Brass Band.

(...)

Michel (Saint-Denis) as Tartaglia, carrying the Copiaus' banner, paraded with the band in the afternoon. Edi (Copeau) designed and decorated a large program posted in the hall.

The hall, adorned with greenery, is full. A festive atmosphere. A telegram from Madame Copeau sends her best wishes. Overall success. The drama displeased¹.

The drama that displeased was *Le Veuf*, by Jacques Copeau. It was part of a performance given by *Les Copiaus* in Demigny, in Saône-et-Loire. This troupe—made up of students and members of the Copeau family—was formed in February 1925 after the collapse of the pedagogical project that Jacques Copeau had hoped to establish in Burgundy since September 1924. Lacking sufficient financial means, Copeau, then living in Morteuil, a hamlet of Demigny, gave up on his School. Having sacrificed everything to follow the theatre reformer, the head of the Vieux-Colombier, the young actors—some of them married—decided to form a troupe to earn a living and continue benefiting from Copeau's teaching. A tutelary figure, he lent the troupe his support and his pen; the locals soon nicknamed them “Les Copiaus.” The 17 May performance was their first official appearance—a success for the village, within which the failure of *Le Veuf* was embedded.

A brief look back at the formation of the troupe and the preparation of the performance precedes the analysis of the representation itself. Here, in hindsight, the sources are fragmentary. The *Journal de Bord* of the Copiaus, kept by Suzanne Bing whose pen was consistently favorable to the Patron, Jacques Copeau; the more critical memoirs of Jean Villard-Gilles²; and a few folios from the French National Library³ form the principal sources. One must confront the “infinite from below”⁴ represented by rural life

(Demigny) in order to grasp the sibylline remark “the drama displeased.” Yet this remark forms the nodal point of our inquiry, for it raises the question of *representation* versus *representativeness*—that is, of understanding what, for the popular audience of Demigny, is possible (or impossible) to have represented in its name. Here lies a partition of the sensible⁵: the moment at which the representativeness the public grants to a theatrical representation collapses, because it becomes intolerable in that time and place.

Understanding the specific horizon of reception.

In a short letter dated 18 February 1925 and addressed to his nephew Michel Saint-Denis, Jacques Copeau announced the dissolution of the School—the end of a brief attempt at a theatrical *phalanstère* in Morteuil that had begun in September 1924. Worn out by the long seasons at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, where since 1913 he had been reforming the stage, Copeau decided to leave Paris with very young students in order to find a healthy audience and to “*dé-cabottiner*” actor training, which he felt had been corrupted by the success of boulevard theatre. This gesture accompanied his conversion to Catholicism; Burgundy would be his desert⁶. He explained the dissolution of the School to all the students on 22 February.

Jean Villard-Gilles and Auguste Bovério decided to support themselves through theatre, and a troupe was formed. At its beginnings it included several of Copeau's close collaborators: Suzanne Bing, Auguste Boverio, Léon Chancerel, Michel Saint-Denis, Aman Maistre, and Jean Villard-Gilles, among others. Copeau's relationship to the troupe was that of both a Patron—advising, instructing, proposing exercises—and a protector who lent his name and connections to the actors. In the immediate period between February and 17 May, exercises and rehearsals continued in and around Demigny, shaping in part the eventual reception of the performance.

Although Jacques Copeau and his family lived in a large house in Morteuil, a few of the students and their families lived a short distance away (three kilometers), in Demigny⁷. This geographical proximity between the troupe and the people of Demigny manifested itself in several ways. It even predated the founding of the troupe, as shown in this letter from Marie-Hélène Copeau to her father:

*(...) We already have a very good reputation in the area. 'You've got some mighty pretty girls at your place, and handsome lads too—ah, and polite! not stuck-up!' On the day of the festival in Demigny we made a sensational entrance into the village, marching in step and singing: all the girls had a red flower in their hair and the boys one in their buttonhole. We danced in the square and drank sparkling wine at the butcher's. We had a wonderful time. We do gymnastics every morning on the road and on the grass in front of the house.'*⁸

What is essential here is the youthfulness of the theatrical community within a countryside still marked by the bloodletting of the Great War. These young people took part in village festivities and social life. Jean Villard-Gilles played the organ during Sunday services at the church while the troupe sang. All of them, to varying degrees, chatted with the villagers at *La Chaumière*, the café run by the Bravard couple. To this everyday sociability woven into village life were added elements that revealed the theatrical skills of Copeau's former students. On 29 March 1925, following the Patron's suggestion, they all went together to the masked ball in Demigny, held at the local Vauxhall. In costume, they engaged in a practical exercise in learning *commedia dell'arte*, both in the costumes themselves and in the way of embodying them. The success was immediate:

*Masked ball in Demigny. We all went in costume, and our entrance caused quite a sensation. Prizegiving: the Brighella costume worn by Janvier and the Liar costume worn by Maïene (Marie-Hélène Copeau) won first prize. Michel (Saint-Denis) as Tartaglia, Claude as Columbine, second prize. Suzanne Bing as Guillemette, third prize—awarded in the form of bottles of wine and liqueur. Madeleine as Mirandolina, Edi (Copeau) as Gilles, Pascal (Copeau) as Scapin, Madame Janvier as the Spanish woman from The Marriage of Figaro.*⁹

In the eyes of the villagers, the profession of actor was made visible at the masked ball, just as—under Jacques Copeau's guidance—the troupe and its Patron made a striking appearance at the ball held on 5 April. This closeness between the theatrical community and the village population established, almost as a matter of course, the setting for the Copiaus' first performance. It would naturally take place in the Vauxhall, whose dance floor served as a stage. Demigny, only recently electrified, benefited from the help of the stage manager Janvier, who installed an electrical panel in the hall to provide lighting (12 May). The performance could then take place with the participation of the municipal brass band.

Theatre scholarship often pays little attention to this time before the performance itself, except for analyses of costumes, rehearsals, and dress rehearsals. Yet all these scattered notes, gleaned from letters and from the Copiaus' *Journal de bord*, partly foreshadow the reception the spectacle would receive. The daily ties between the troupe and the local population naturalized their presence in the social fabric of Demigny, embedding them in festive spaces (the Vauxhall and the Bravard café, where tickets were sold), while their attendance at church services—encouraged, if not explicitly required, by the newly converted Copeau—linked the actors closely to the village community.

Unlike the itinerant fairground and theatrical troupes whose arrival in rural areas was marked by novelty, here the actors formed part of the everyday landscape. Their craft had already been displayed at the masked ball, and the enthusiasm generated by their costumes created expectations for a performance on 17 May shaped by the horizon of *commedia dell'arte*. For our purposes—between representation and representativeness—these elements are crucial. In the anticipation surrounding the performance, representativeness informed representation twice over. The performance had to align with the Demigny audience's perception of the troupe: actors steeped in *commedia dell'arte*, embodying the theatrical ideals of their Patron. But because the troupe had inserted itself into village sociability, it also had to consider itself representative of Demigny's festive culture within the performance itself. Moreover, in light of the later theoretical construction of popular theatre in which Jacques Copeau is considered a foundational figure¹⁰, this representativeness is of central importance.

Points of Ambiguity

The 17 May performance was, for the troupe, a matter of urgency. After a joint procession through the streets of Demigny with the local brass band, the show opened with a prologue. The Copiaus were then introduced (*Jean Bourguignon et les Copiaus*). This was followed by *Les Sottises de Gilles*, an eighteenth-century parade piece after Thomas Gueulette, and then by Jacques Copeau's *Le Veuf*. A final divertissement, *Les jeunes filles à marier*, written by Léon Chancerel, closed the evening. Historiography quickly concluded that this first performance lacked unity—reading it as a trial run¹¹—following the account given in Jean Villard-Gilles's memoirs. Stepping outside strictly theatrical logic, one may also see here a tactic on the part of the troupe. The creation of the show was collective, while providing an opportunity to test Copeau's teaching. It was a kind of bricolage, characteristic of the Copiaus' "art of

making" and of their Patron's approach to theatre in the village¹². For this first performance, the aim was to anchor themselves within the socio-cultural texture of the village—to assemble a theatrical culture shaped by the place itself. The Copiaus (and Copeau) sought to take hold of the village through their theatrical culture.

This dynamic was signaled at once by the morning parade, where Michel Saint-Denis, as Tartaglia, carried the Vieux-Colombier banner marked with the two doves, alongside the municipal band. The show thus announced itself in the manner of small itinerant circuses, with a fairground aesthetic reminiscent of the *balagan*, yet seamlessly integrated into the village's festive traditions. The prologue, like *Jean Bourguignon et les Copiaus*, offered an opportunity for dialogue with the audience and no doubt (though the text is missing) evoked the ties forged through dances and through visits to *La Chaumière* (the Bravard café). The very figure of Jean Bourguignon, the troupe's coryphaeus—rooted in the hillside, a vigneron character created by Michel Saint-Denis—embodied the Burgundian wine culture celebrated at the time by regionalist discourse¹³. Everything here fostered a form of mutual familiarity between the public and the troupe.

Les Sottises de Gilles reinforced this dynamic. It was a fairground parade, an eighteenth-century genre meant to draw spectators to the theatre. It provided an occasion to blend medieval farce with the *commedia dell'arte* types embodied here by Jean Villard-Gilles as Gilles, Michel Saint-Denis as the master of civility, Auguste Bovério as the fencing master, and Jacques Copeau as the grammar master, among others. The project had been rehearsed in Morteuil since 27 March, and one may assume that the costumes awarded prizes at the 29 March masked ball—and the style of performance they implied—were the same. The Copiaus' familiarity with the village's festive culture was amplified here, since such short comedic scenes were designed to link the spectators' reality (the dance floor itself) to the creation of theatrical illusion through costumes and stock characters¹⁴.

An interlude closed this first part, which relied entirely on genres and stock types to capture the audience. To achieve this, all the theatrical resources of the Copiaus and Jacques Copeau's knowledge drew on cultural elements of the village and region, transporting them to the other side of the stage, into theatrical illusion. The second part of the performance pursued the same intention. It began with a burlesque interlude (*Les trois musiciens*), followed by a dramatic scene, *Le Veuf* by Jacques Copeau, which he had read to the troupe on 3 May. He wrote it based on a local news item: a widower's suicide by alcohol. Here too, but in the dramatic register, the local served as material for the theatre. The tone became lighter again with the final divertissement, *Les jeunes filles à marier*, interspersed with songs written by Léon Chancerel and Jean Villard-Gilles.

Thus, this first performance can be viewed in two ways. The first—on which I will not dwell—relates to the genres assembled here: small forms (prologue, interludes, parade) alongside drama, with music and song playing a significant role. From the standpoint of theatre history, the lack of unity is obvious, and the whole may appear as the rough draft of later shows with a more assured stylistic coherence¹⁵. In relation to the village and the troupe's circumstances, however, a second interpretation posits a deliberate tactic at work: the effort to situate themselves within a rural, winegrowing region lacking theatres and theatrical infrastructure. If the initial wager was economic, it required adapting Copeau's theatrical methods to the reality of a supposedly popular audience that had to be drawn into the theatre. The procession with the brass band, the burlesque interludes, and the parade were all elements of early twentieth-century mass culture¹⁶—in which cabaret could complement the itinerant silent cinema accompanied by music, and in which the village dance—as forms recycled for theatrical purposes. The proximity of the parade genre to the urban history of the Parisian Vauxhalls, which later became an architectural fashion spreading to provincial towns¹⁷, illustrates this continual bricolage

designed for the audience of a rural commune. Copeau and the Copiaus fashioned their offering from an urban culture of popular theatre and its direct competitors (cabarets, music halls) of the 1920s.

In terms of the pair representation/representativeness, it is the troupe's representations that negotiate with the presumed representativeness of the show as perceived from Demigny. At this price, the troupe could insert itself into the local fabric, extend its influence, and hope for commissions and invitations. Laconically, Suzanne Bing could conclude in the *Journal de bord* on the evening of 17 May: "Success overall. The drama displeased."¹⁸

It is from this gap that we must examine more closely—through the lens of popular theatre—the friction between representation and representativeness.

"Was this the kind of play one should stage before a peasant audience?"

While Suzanne Bing downplays the Patron's failure through her terse phrasing, Jean Villard-Gilles is far more forthcoming in his recollections:

It looked like one of those naturalist dramas from Antoine's era. It was the story—drawn from a real incident that had taken place in the village of Demigny—of an old, neurasthenic peasant who committed suicide by swallowing almost in one gulp a liter of marc de Bourgogne. Was this a show to present to peasants, modest people par excellence, who cannot bear to see their weaknesses or their flaws laid bare (...)?

The villagers were at last going to see this Monsieur Copeau, who was so famous... It was a disaster. Wounded in their modesty, offended, petrified, they watched this unbelievable spectacle in silence. And when Copeau collapsed after a long monologue that grew increasingly slurred, struck down by alcohol, the audience did not react... except with a disapproving silence.¹⁹

The allusion to Antoine is more revealing than it first appears. On 23 March 1925, Jacques Copeau set to work on “a long monologue based on a subject taken from the local news, *Le Veuf*,” as the Copiaus’ *Journal de bord* notes²⁰. That same day, Antoine, in his column for *L’Information financière, politique et économique*, reproduced a letter sent to him by Jacques Copeau²¹. Copeau was responding to Antoine’s previous column (9 March), in which, while criticizing *George Dandin* performed at L’Atelier by Charles Dullin—who, he claimed, had “butchered” it—Antoine suddenly inserted a jab: “this is, moreover, what happened at the Vieux-Colombier when Jacques Copeau gave us *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.”

Copeau replied to this last remark, emphasizing the influence and reputation of the Vieux-Colombier in its adaptations of canonical plays. He added:

I am not much given to polemics. But since some critics seem to enjoy spreading the rumor that I have never known how to discover a new author, if you now start claiming that I have never known how to perform an old one, I wonder what on earth I could have been doing for ten years at the Vieux-Colombier to deserve even a little of my contemporaries’ esteem.

What, then, can Copeau perform? His wounded pride is evident in the letter, and one may suppose that both the writing and the performance of *Le Veuf* were conceived as a response to Antoine. All the more so since, as Jean Villard-Gilles notes, the drama is naturalist, echoing Antoine’s recommendations in “*Causerie sur la mise en scène*” (1903)²². The character played by Jacques Copeau is socially determined by the flaws of his milieu—alcoholism. In short, he is, in the dramatist’s eyes, representative of a part of Demigny’s culture. For Copeau, constructing the character as a type also corresponded to his proselytizing intentions and to a re-enactment of his experience during the Vieux-Colombier’s American tour in the

Great War. Proselytizing: as a recent convert, he wished to make theatre an example for a popular audience, thus delivering a moral lesson through the naturalistic depiction of the effects of alcoholism leading to suicide. For the moral content of *Le Veuf*, he was likely inspired by the propaganda performances organized by prohibitionist leagues—which helped secure the Volstead Act—that he had witnessed during his American tour.

Whatever the case, *Le Veuf* was a failure.

At this point, Jean Villard-Gilles’s account takes on its full meaning when read through the lens of representativeness:

After the performance, Boverio, Chancerel, and I (Jean Villard-Gilles), who were living in Demigny at the time, found ourselves at the Bravards’ café—run by a delightful cooper-café owner—together with the mayor and two or three local notables. They expressed their disapproval at the evocation of a local tragedy that everyone wished to forget, and urged us to insist that Copeau withdraw his play from the upcoming performance that had already been announced. ‘Otherwise, you won’t have anyone there,’ they told us.’²³

Because of the location—the Bravard café, central to village sociability—and the protagonists involved (the mayor and a few local notables), what is at stake here is the *representativeness* of the performance in the eyes of the public. At this stage of the analysis, two possibilities, more complementary than they may seem, come into view. Either the drama performed by Jacques Copeau is unbearable for the Demigny audience because it is authentic (drawn from a local news item) and therefore representative of the population; or it is unbearable because it is performed by “Monsieur Copeau, who was so famous,” a mirror held up to the public in which it cannot recognize itself. Through the distancing effect of the stage, the reality of the local tragedy becomes unsustainable—something the notables of Demigny, as representatives of the community,

sought to persuade the Copiaus of in view of the second performance. Jean Villard-Gilles's class-inflected question forms the keystone of this chiasm: "*Was this a show to be presented to peasants?*" In retrospect, the reader may infer that a different audience (non-peasant?) might have tolerated it.

What is at stake for the audience during *Le Veuf* concerns the *partition of the sensible*. Although Copeau, in both his writing and his performance, believed that *Le Veuf* offered a shared element of common experience—the local news item—the audience rejected it. The dramaturge's "art of doing", here understood (as with the entire production) as a tactic meant to naturalize the troupe within the rural setting and thereby allow it to tour, failed. This failure is all the more ambiguous because the public, recognizing itself in the drama, refused the mirror held up to it, refused that identity. What the audience does recognize in the performance, ultimately, are the elements that preceded it and which they had already shared: the *commedia dell'arte* types encountered at the masked ball, the burlesque interludes, the music, the experience of parading through the streets with the brass band. The daily presence of the Copiaus in Demigny ensured the success of the performance. That presence was representative of a shared experience. *Le Veuf*, coming from the hand of Jacques Copeau—who, as a Patron, was more distant from Demigny and often absent—could not suit an audience more mixed than it appeared, because alongside the "peasants" cited by Jean Villard-Gilles were notables whose presence anticipated the summer performances in Fontaine, Gergy, and then Meursault²⁴.

There is a bias here that Villard-Gilles glosses over: for the notables, situated within an economic regionalism that was in the process of transforming the Côte and its wines into a brand²⁵, a denunciation of alcoholism by Jacques Copeau—whose fame they hoped to capitalize on—was impossible. Whatever segment of the public was present at the Vauxhall on the evening of 17 May 1925, *Le Veuf* could not be representative, and thus could not be praised. There was no shared common ground here.

What, then, can be retained from this micro-historical approach to the brief episode that launched the Copiaus—a troupe that enabled its Patron to theorize, retrospectively (in 1942), the notion of popular theatre, while also constituting one of the pioneering experiences of theatrical decentralization? The *representativeness* of a performance depends on a shared experience with the audience. Such sharing can, in some cases, take the form of co-construction. That was not the case here. The experience was built *before* the performance, even *outside* the theatre frame: the cabaret, the church, and the inn were among the spaces in which this shared experience was formed, beyond the stage itself. It was not the moment of performance that allowed the audience—largely passive—to identify with the actors and thereby validate a form of representativeness. Rather, it was the spectacle, already glimpsed beforehand at the masked ball, of what it meant to be actors—their craft—that ensured the success of the performance.

Le Veuf lay outside this tight social contiguity that allowed the local audience to appropriate the troupe as its own. It did not reveal Jacques Copeau's professional identity—his art—but imposed a local identity that the audience refused. Later, on the Côte, journalists would describe the Copiaus in these terms, writing about the *Fêtes de la vigne* in Beaune in August 1926:

*The succession of scenes proves that the Copiaus are well informed about our little affairs, our sayings, our habits—like the old 'go off to the vines.' They know all our secrets, the rascals, and they reveal them to the public! It's a betrayal. (...) Several tasks of the vineyard are then mimed by the performers with remarkable truth and an absolutely wonderful precision of gesture. The vinegrower's wife grinding the coffee, the women peeling potatoes, the staking, the spraying, the washing—these are all astonishing studies that required a long 'apprenticeship' and, above all, a keen sense of observation and proportion.*²⁶

It is this preliminary work—of appropriation and reciprocal understanding—that ultimately grounds the scene's representativeness.

ENDNOTES

1. Denis Gonthard (ed.), *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), 76.
2. Jean Villard-Gilles, *Mon demi-siècle* (Payot, 1954), 117-119.
3. Jacques Copeau Papers, National Library of France (BnF).
4. See Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot* (Flammarion, 1998).
5. See Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible* (La Fabrique, 2000).
6. The expression is Ivan Goll's, writing in *L'Intransigeant* about the flight to Burgundy: "So he found his desert in Burgundy, among the peasants, the simple and uneducated people. There, the actor pitched his tent and performed only for them, with a company of ten very young people who had never done theatre before—this being the sole valid condition for engagement and recommendation. And there, in meditation and asceticism, in poverty and in obscurity, Copeau began to perform in order to earn his own bread and to entertain human beings. (...)". Ivan Goll. "Jacques Copeau's Pure Theatre", in *Le Journal de Beaune* (16 octobre 1926) 1.
7. According to the *Journal de bord* of the Copiaus, the community settled in Morteuil comprised the Copeau family (Jacques Copeau, his wife, and their three children), the household of his nephew Michel Saint-Denis (three members), Suzanne Bing's family (three), the régisseur Janvier and his wife, as well as two younger residents. In nearby Demigny lived the Boverio couple, the family of Jean Villard-Gilles (three), the household of Aman Maistre, and Mme Saint-Denis. Although substantial in size, this community included at the time only five actors: Michel Saint-Denis, Suzanne Bing, Auguste Boverio, Jean Villard-Gilles, and Aman Maistre, together with one apprentice actress, Marie-Madeleine Gauthier. *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), 70.
8. Jacques Copeau, *Registres VI : L'école du Vieux-Colombier* (Gallimard, 2000), 429.
9. Denis Gonthard (ed.), *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), 71-72.
10. Marco Consolini, Jacques Copeau et la « découverte » de la dimension populaire du théâtre », in Marion Denizot (dir) *Théâtre populaire et représentations du peuple* (PUR, 2010), 151-166.
11. See Denis Gonthard's commentary on the *Journal de bord* of the Copiaus: Denis Gonthard (ed.), *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), note 101, 182. A comparable conclusion is likewise reached by Maria Inès Aliverti et Marco Consolini in *Jacques Copeau, Registres VII, Les années Copiaus (1925-1929)* (Gallimard, 2017).
12. On this question of tactics and the specific "arts of doing" associated with them, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life. Arts of Doing* (vol. 1), Paris, Folio, 1990, p. XLVI and following.
13. See Vincent Chambarlhac, *Un Vieux-colombier bourguignon, Une expérience de la décentralisation théâtrale (1925-1929)* (Presses de la Sorbonne, 2021) 125-137.
14. See Jennifer Ruimi. "Modernité de la parade de société en France au XVIII^e siècle" in *Diversité et modernité du théâtre du XVIII^e siècle* (Hermann, 2014), 327-341. Also see Guy Spielmann, "Investigations sur les traces de l'événement-spectacle : la parade de société et son Gilles" in A. Zygel-Basso and K. Gladu *De la conversation au conservatoire : Scénographies des genres mineurs (1680-1780)* (Hermann, 2014), 271-298.
15. "This is, all in all, the assessment of the first historian of the Copeaus, Denis Gonthard ("the Copeaus' first program is lacking in unity, to say the least!"), later taken up by a large part of the historiography. *The Logbook of the Copiaus (1924-1929)*, edited by Denis Gonthard, (Seghers, 1974), note 101, 182.
16. See Dominique Kalifa, *La culture de masse en France (1860-1930)* (La Découverte, 2001).
17. Hélène Mazzoleni. "Les Vaux-halls parisiens : vers une politique moderne des espaces urbains et spectaculaires", in Florence Fix (ed.) *Théâtre et ville. Espaces partagés : patrimoine, culture, savoir* (EUD ? 2018) 89-104. The link between Vauxhall and the parade is also discussed by Guy Spielmann in "Investigations sur les traces de l'événement-spectacle: la parade de société et son Gilles" in A. Zygel-Basso et K. Gladu, *De la conversation au conservatoire : Scénographies des genres mineurs (1680-1780)* (Hermann, 2014) 271-298.
18. Denis Gonthard (ed.), *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), 77.
19. Jean Villard-Gilles, *Mon demi-siècle* (Payot, 1954), 117-119.
20. Denis Gonthard (ed.), *Le Journal de bord des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Segers, 1974), 70.
21. Antoine, La semaine théâtrale "Une lettre de Jacques Copeau", *L'Information financière, politique et économique*, 23/03/1925, 2.
22. Brigitte Prost, *Le peuple et la scène naturaliste d'André Antoine*, In Marion Denizot (dir) *Théâtre populaire et représentations du peuple* (PUR, 2010), 61-72.

23. Jean Villard-Gilles, *Mon demi-siècle* (Payot, 1954) 119.
24. Vincent Chambarlhac, *Un Vieux-colombier bourguignon, Une expérience de la décentralisation théâtrale (1925-1929)* (Presses de la Sorbonne, 2021), 31-33.
25. Gilles Gilles, *Folklore savant et folklore commercial. Reconstruire la qualité des vins de Bourgogne. Une sociologie économique de l'image régionale de l'entre-deux-guerres*, 2 vol, PhD thesis, Université de Bourgogne, 2002.
26. "La Ile fête de la Vigne et du Vin", *Le Journal de Beaune*, 31/08/1926, 1.

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FROM FOLKLORE TO FAIRY TALE FANTASY WITHIN THE DISNEYFICATION OF CINEMA. THE CASE OF BROTHERS GRIMM AND HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Disneyfication of classic European fairy tales, focusing on how The Walt Disney Company has transformed the moral and aesthetic fabric of stories by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. Through its adaptations of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *The Snow Queen*, Disney conceals the moral violence and existential suffering that characterized the original narratives, replacing them with sentimental optimism and a commodified "age of innocence". The resulting films reframe tales of sin, punishment, and redemption into narratives of personal fulfilment and emotional reassurance. Therefore, beneath this surface of purity, Disney tends to over-aestheticize some taboo themes—death, desire, and transgression—, until altering the literary pattern.

KEYWORDS

Disneyfication, fairy tale, adaptation, Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen

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Introduction

Disney is no longer an industry. It is a state of mind.

The emergence of The Walt Disney Company as an entertainment behemoth has had far-reaching effects on the film industry; founded in 1923 as a small animation studio, Disney has grown into a multibillion-dollar company that owns a range of powerful media assets, including Marvel Studios, Pixar, Lucasfilm, and 20th Century Fox, and has contributed to a changing aesthetic in cinema, a phenomenon that has been called the “Disneyfication of film”¹. “Disneyfication” denotes the adaptation of artistic and narrative content into a commercialized, family-friendly, and formulaic model, one that privileges marketability and emotional reassurance over aesthetic or moral complexity. As Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock observe, Disney has become “a teaching machine of the culture industry”² shaping collective imagination through narratives of innocence, consumption, and moral simplicity. Its ability to define what is deemed universal, magical, and wholesome is just as powerful as its corporate reach. This article evaluates the broader social, moral, and ideological ramifications of Disneyfication while examining how it affects the production methods and content of modern film. Therefore, we will try within this article to ask some important questions regarding this artistic endeavour: In what ways does Disney’s aestheticization of violence conceal the ethical and psychological complexity of the Grimm and Andersen originals, replacing moral terror with visual delight? To what extent can Disney’s adaptations be seen as both repressing and re-enacting cultural taboos surrounding death, punishment, and desire? And mostly: how does the construction of a seemingly “innocent” world function as a form of cultural control—shaping moral imagination, childhood perception, and collective memory?

1. Disneyfication and the Shaping of Cinema

At the heart of Disneyfication lies the dominance of the franchise model in contemporary filmmaking. The Disney

Corporation’s acquisition of major entertainment properties such as Marvel, *Star Wars*, and Pixar has resulted in the consolidation of intellectual property across genres and demographics. As Jean Baudrillard might suggest, Disney’s interconnected worlds exemplify “the simulacrum”, a hyperreal system where repetition and reproduction become more authentic than the original itself³. Disney’s success has encouraged other studios—Universal, Warner Bros., and Sony—to replicate its strategies, flooding the market with interconnected cinematic universes⁴. The “Marvelization” of Hollywood is not simply an industrial phenomenon but a cultural one: a shift toward formulaic storytelling that rewards predictability and emotional closure. As Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer noted in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “culture today is infecting everything with sameness”⁵, producing standardized pleasures that maintain the illusion of choice. Disneyfication, in this sense, is the late-capitalist evolution of that logic—its stories, aesthetics, and moral codes tailored for maximum inclusivity and profitability.

Equally central to Disneyfication is the aesthetic of innocence, an ethos of “safe” entertainment designed for transgenerational audiences. The financial triumph of PG-rated films like *Finding Nemo* (2003) or *Frozen* (2013) demonstrates the commercial viability of universal accessibility. This has resulted in a homogenization of cinematic content, the avoidance of complex or mature themes in favour of clear moral binaries and reassuring narratives of self-fulfilment⁶, and an eye toward maximizing global marketability, with an eye toward selling everything from action figures to video games. This strategy is exemplified by Disney live-action remakes, like *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Aladdin* (2019), which repurpose well-known stories to trigger nostalgia and reinforce brand identity.

Visually, Disneyfication manifests in the spectacularization of cinema through CGI technology, while depicting a family-friendly cinema or content that appeals to all age groups, resulting in a homogenization of thematic material. In this sense, a lot of initiatives, especially the live-action remakes of some previous

endeavours (for example, *Beauty and the Beast* in 2017, or and *Aladdin* in 2019) tackle familiar stories in a way that reinforces the brand's core values while presenting them as safe and universally digestible. This emphasis on "safe" content has led to criticism that Hollywood has become less willing to take risks with storytelling or engage with complex, adult themes. The prioritization of financial success over artistic expression has led to a cinema environment dominated by formulaic blockbusters, leaving little room for experimental or avant-garde films. Nevertheless, despite its formulas—heroic narratives, clear moral distinctions, and predictable structures, following the pattern on the good versus evil—Disney's investments in digital innovation have revolutionized visual storytelling—from *Avatar* (2009) to *The Jungle Book* (2016)—but they also signal a shift toward hyperreal aesthetics. The screen becomes a digital playground, where photorealistic worlds replace tactile human experiences. Susan Buck-Morss warns that in the age of visual saturation, the imagination is colonized by the image⁷. The more cinema dazzles, the less it provokes; spectacle becomes a substitute for meaning. This CGI-driven spectacle is among the most visually stunning manifestations of Disneyfication in contemporary cinema. Disney has led the way in the development of digital animation technologies with movies such as *Avatar* (2009), which was produced by 20th Century Fox and *The Jungle Book* (2016), which featured the latest digital effects to construct fully realized worlds, all of which have raised the bar for the visual spectacle of popular film.

Last, Disneyfication has globalized the film industry, making stories more accessible, while standardizing pleasure (as Umberto Eco has suggested with his concept of hyperreality⁸), and erasing local voices because films are increasingly being made for transnational markets, to be watched everywhere, with the result that Western moral norms are dominating and local voices are being erased because films are increasingly made to cross cultural boundaries, Disney's global success thus reveals an unstated form of

cultural imperialism: the exportation of commodified happiness, optimism, and self-actualization as global values.

2. Right or Wrong? Towards a Critique of the Disneyfication Process

To dismiss Disneyfication solely as cultural decline would be reductive. In some respects, Disney's influence has democratized film access, creating shared experiences across generations and geographies. Its narratives of resilience and imagination, though simplified, often provide emotional entry points into complex ethical ideas. Moreover, the company's investments in animation, virtual production, and storytelling technology have advanced the medium itself, while intuiting the financial potential of a pedagogical approach. As Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock concede: "Walt Disney quickly saw the advantages to linking childhood innocence with home entertainment, which became the pedagogical vehicle to promote a set of values and practices that associated the safeguarding of childhood with a strong investment in the nuclear family, middle-class Protestant values, and the market as a sphere of consumption."⁹

But there is a price to pay within this formula that prioritizes a sanitized version of the world: it sacrifices the inherent cruelty of the stories for a dreamy American distorted reading that embraces different facets of a new patriarchal ideology. Consequently, Disney approaches a personal philosophy through converting folk narratives into commodified myths for mass consumption. In Jack Zipes' words: "The emphasis is on purification, preparing oneself to become chosen, a member of the elite, and this American cleansing process based on meritocracy replaces the old schemata of the European fairy tale while at the same time it restores notions of hierarchy and elitism, reinforces a kind of redundant behaviour controlled by a master builder such as Disney, and leads to a static dystopian vision of the world, that is, a degeneration of utopia."¹⁰

The fairy tale, once a form of collective wisdom, becomes a corporate blueprint for emotional reassurance.

Similarly, the globalization of Disney's ideology reinforces Western moral and emotional codes as universal truths. Its characters, narratives, and conflicts articulate a capitalist ethos of self-determination and consumer choice. As Baudrillard notes, "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real."¹¹ The Disney universe functions as a model of idealized order that conceals the artificiality of its own ideology. Through sentimental narratives of triumph, it neutralizes social critique, transforming moral complexity into consumable optimism. But the consequences extend beyond the screen. As the box office becomes increasingly monopolized by blockbusters, the cinematic space available for alternative storytelling contracts. The result is an aesthetic monoculture, a world where imagination itself becomes standardized under the banner of family entertainment.¹²

3. From Gothic Literature to Sugar-Coated Animations

The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen collected and authored stories that have endured for centuries. Their tales—often violent, tragic, and deeply symbolic—were intended not merely to entertain but to convey moral lessons, reflect social anxieties, and engage with themes of suffering, justice, and redemption. In contrast, the Disney adaptations of these tales, beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), have reimagined them through a distinctly modern, American lens: romantic, optimistic, and imbued with moral clarity. These interpretations are morally straightforward, romantic, and upbeat. "Disney managed to domesticate the fairy tale and restore its conservative features so that it lost its rebellious and progressive features"¹³, as Jack Zipes highlights. There are concerns over the cultural ramifications of this shift as Disney's adaptations have mostly replaced the originals in popular culture. This article seeks to examine how narrative structure, moral tone, and character

development have been altered to conform to modern standards of happiness, gender roles, and commercial appeal by contrasting significant Grimm and Andersen stories with their Disney adaptations.

3.1. Grimm Brothers and Disney: Moral Darkness vs. Romantic Idealism

Snow White: Gothic Cautionary Tale or Romantic Triumph? In The Brothers Grimm's *Snow White* (1812), themes of jealousy, innocence, and death, along with gothic imagery and moral ambivalence, dominate the narrative of a jealous and vain queen who repeatedly tries to kill her stepdaughter, culminating in a gruesome form of justice: the queen must dance in red-hot iron shoes until she dies. Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), while visually retaining elements of the gothic, transforms the tale into a romantic narrative centred on purity and resurrection. The dark moral undertones are replaced by the promise of "true love's kiss", which restores Snow White to life. Such an easy and predictable solution, compared to the original story in which the princess comes back to life after the piece of apple that was preventing her from breathing pops out of her throat while the convoy was carrying her coffin to the grave... Similarly, the dwarfs are softened from mysterious, possibly menacing forest dwellers into comedic and endearing characters. "For Disney, the Grimms' tale is not a vehicle to explore the deeper implications of the narrative and its history or to question its classical status but a vehicle to spread his message about proper sex roles, behaviour, manners, and customs. If there is a major change in the plot, it centres on the power of the prince, the only one who can save Snow White, and he becomes the focal point by the end of the story."¹⁴ The outcome is a movie that glorifies innocence, love, and optimism, as Disney does, rather than punishment, death, and inevitability, as the Grimms do. As a result, whereas Grimm's version is punitive and macabre, the original highlights the unescapable nature of death and

punishment, and the Disney version is sentimental and redemptive, replacing the plot with a lesson about eternal love. At the same time, in the Grimm tale, Snow White is largely passive, but Disney's version frames her as idealized domestic virtue—a cheerful, nurturing figure aligned with 1930s gender norms. This attitude will be changed consequently, in the latest live-action version of this fairy tale (2025), where the protagonist will be reshaped based on the principles of a feminist ideal, while causing a scandal for various reasons, including defying the description of the protagonist herself by choosing an actress with Colombian roots.

Cinderella: Suffering and Revenge or Wish Fulfilment? The Brothers Grimm version of *Cinderella*, published in 1812, is a story of endurance and revenge: she is aided not by a fairy godmother but by a magical tree planted on her mother's grave, and the story ends with brutal justice: the stepsisters mutilate their feet in an attempt to fit into the glass slipper, and their deceit is revealed when doves announce the truth, pecking out their eyes at the wedding. Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) replaces the tale's religious and violent overtones with a narrative of hope and magical intervention. The Fairy Godmother and her iconic refrain, "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo", embody the transformation of moral suffering into enchantment. The film's focus on beauty, kindness, and destiny reinforces an American Dream ideology—virtue rewarded through faith in magic and perseverance. Just as in the case of *Snow White*, Disney removes all brutality from the Grimm version of *Cinderella* which is based primarily on physical punishment as moral balance. The Grimm tale rewards moral endurance through divine justice, depicting magic as a form of sacrality, while the animation reframes success as the triumph of personality and charm, detaching from religion in the favour of a whimsical display of supernatural elements. It is clear that the consequence of such adaptations is not merely aesthetic softening but ideological reprogramming. The original tales emphasized the inevitability of pain and the moral necessity of

justice; Disney's versions promote a secular gospel of happiness and personal success.

3.2. Hans Christian Andersen and Disney: From Existential Tragedy to Romantic Fantasy

The Little Mermaid: Self-Sacrifice or Self-Fulfilment? Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837) is a deeply melancholic narrative of longing, transformation, and unrequited love. The mermaid's desire to gain a human soul or, in her words, human legs—symbolic of spiritual transcendence—drives her to sacrifice her voice and endure excruciating pain. The prince, however, marries another, and the mermaid dissolves into sea foam, achieving redemption through self-denial rather than romantic fulfilment. Andersen's tale thus explores themes of identity, spiritual yearning, and the tragic cost of love, while embodying a Christian allegory of redemption through suffering. Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) reimagines the story as a vibrant coming-of-age adventure. Ariel's longing is for freedom and self-expression, not a human soul. The tragic ending is replaced by a triumphant romantic conclusion in which love conquers all, and Ariel is rewarded for her courage and individuality. The film celebrates autonomy, optimism, and transformation through choice rather than sacrifice. If Andersen wrote a story about the cruelty of humanity and the existential tragedy of those who sacrifice their lives in the name of devotion to another, Disney's animation transforms it into a standardization of femininity tamed by masculine charm. As Giroux and Pollock state: "Ariel becomes a metaphor for the traditional housewife in the making. When Ursula tells Ariel that taking away her voice is not so bad because men don't like women who talk, the message is dramatized when the prince attempts to bestow the kiss of true love on Ariel even though she has never spoken to him. Within this rigid narrative, womanhood offers Ariel the reward of marrying the right man for renouncing her former life under the sea."¹⁵ The ending transforms tragedy into marital triumph, recasting spiritual yearning

as personal empowerment, replacing Andersen's existential and spiritual narrative for a "happily ever after" pattern.

The Snow Queen vs. Frozen: Moral Allegory or Emotional Psychology? *The Snow Queen* (1844) by Hans Christian Andersen is a sophisticated, allegorical story that examines virtue, evil, and the strength of innocence. Spiritual purity triumphing over cerebral coldness is symbolized by Gerda's attempt to save her friend Kai, whose heart has been frozen by a splinter of an evil mirror created by the Devil himself. The story's religious undertones emphasize love as a divine, redemptive force, while illustrating a philosophical allegory of the coldness of the intellect suffocating the tender manifestations of the human soul. Disney's *Frozen* (2013) retains only faint traces of Andersen's original. Elsa and Anna replace the original child protagonists, and the moral binary of good versus evil is replaced by an exploration of emotional repression and sisterhood. Elsa's powers, originally emblematic of the Snow Queen's coldness, become a metaphor for individuality and empowerment. The film's central theme—"love is an act of self-acceptance"—reflects a distinctly contemporary psychological narrative. If Andersen's story is moral and religious, having a spiritual redemption, Disney tackles an emotional narrative, focusing on the process of internal struggle for identity.

4. Sacrificing Literature in the Name of Entertainment. Some Conclusions

A strange cultural taboo governs mainstream American film, which routinely hides moral violence while commodifying physical violence for aesthetic appeal. Hollywood frequently neutralizes the unpleasantness of ethical confrontation in its quest for mass appeal by substituting romantic consolation for existential truths. In Quentin Tarantino's hyper-aestheticized universes, bloodshed is choreographed rather than morally confronted, and when violence does occur, it is often stylized and detached—what one might refer to as violence without consequence. Sanitizing moral violence

while also making physical violence more aesthetically pleasing for entertainment is a glaring contradiction. The Disneyfication of classic fairy tales, which substitutes an artificially romanticized notion of innocence for the darkness, pain, and punishment that are essential to the originals, is based on a similar mechanism of denial. Modern adaptations provide security at the expense of authenticity by removing the moral cruelty that was previously a psychological and educational rite of passage. Thus, the question arises: should tales that previously taught resiliency through fear and consequence be rewritten to calm young readers' imaginations rather than to test them? Does contemporary film run the risk of deleting the very experiences that foster moral consciousness and emotional depth in its attempt to maintain innocence?

The Disneyfication of contemporary cinema has been a game-changer for the film industry—and not always for the better. On one hand we've seen an explosion in readily available entertainment and some amazing breakthroughs in special effects, but on the other hand we're left with a cinema landscape that's blander and risk-averse than ever before. The rise of franchise driven blockbusters, CGI-heavy spectacle, and the prioritisation of marketability over artistic expression have fundamentally changed the game for filmmakers. As Disney and other media megacorporation continue to flex their muscle the long-term implications for creativity, diversity and where cinema is going are far from clear. But one thing's for certain: the Disneyfication of cinema is an all-pervasive aspect of modern film culture, one that will shape the cinematic experience for years to come.

Disney's versions of Brothers Grimm's and Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales are amongst the most significant acts of cultural re-imagining in living memory. While the originals were dark and morally ambiguous stories of good vs evil, human struggle and the human condition, Disney's versions retell those stories as feelgood tales of love and self-discovery. The re-telling of those classic stories has not only changed the narratives themselves—to

such an extent that those narratives became more popular than the originals themselves—, but also fundamentally shifted how audiences see the world and how we understand key concepts like morality, love, and identity in popular culture.¹⁶ Looking at the Disney adaptations of these classic tales through a lens gives us a glimpse of a broader cultural trend: the shift from us all being in this together to looking after number one. The fairy tale was once a reflection of our shared human struggles, while Disney's versions have turned them into a celebration of individualism, where the hero smiles, sings and is perpetually cheerful. But the transformation of Grimm's and Andersen's tales through Disneyfication is more than just a modernisation—it's a deep-down ideological shift—and a symptom of a much broader shift in our values. The originals dealt with moral complexity and the human condition, they touched on ideas of divine justice, hard knocks, and humility. But Disney's versions? They reflect a very different world—a world where we believe that success is down to the individual, that we should all be optimistic and pursue our dreams—and where suffering is just something to be got through on the way to happiness. Disney's versions of these classic tales sidestep the tough moral questions and make the bad guys pay for their transgressions. But what they're left with is a very watered down—and very Disneyfied—message. And in many cases, by making these stories more “of for everyone” Disney is stripping them of their cultural context and historical nuance. It's a bit like taking a genuine work of art, and then replicating it in as many different colours as you can come up with, just so it looks “better” to a wider audience. What used to be a cautionary tale, or a spiritual allegory is now just a vehicle for a profit-driven machine.

The fact that Disney's versions of classic fairy tales get a lot of stick for axing the violence from the originals is no surprise. In the original tales, violence wasn't some gratuitous bit of film—it was a moral reckoning, a visceral reminder that bad behaviour has consequences. The villains got punished—not because it was some

flippant way of telling kids to behave—but because it was a way of saying that the bad guys got what was coming to them. It was about order and justice in the world. Disney's decision to ditch that element in favour of a feel-good ending has fundamentally changed the moral landscape of the fairy tales. By erasing the punishment and the suffering, they've changed the story in a way that strips it of its power and meaning. This moral simplification serves a clear commercial purpose. By removing redemptive violence, the movies conform to the company's family-friendly image, guaranteeing international distribution and shielding the business from criticism. Emotionally safe stories that are readily commodified through toys, theme park attractions, and cross-promotional media take the place of the dismal reality of suffering, death, and retribution. The original fairy tales' complex engagement with human suffering becomes incompatible with a corporate philosophy that prioritizes universal appeal and perpetual consumption. By transforming moral allegory into emotional reassurance, Disney replaces the spiritual and ethical function of myth with a consumable fantasy that can be endlessly repackaged and sold. A sort of trademarked philosophy—a corporatized moral framework that standardizes emotional experience under the pretence of universal values—is also embodied in Disney's storytelling technique. Disney asserts symbolic ownership of moral and creative discourse in addition to commercializing cultural heritage through unrelenting branding and copyright control. The company's intellectual property regime effectively patents archetypes, turning centuries-old folk wisdom into privatized narrative capital. Disney does this by turning myth into a profitable, controlled, and repetitive commodity. As a result, stories become ethically homogenized, with the intricacies of justice, sacrifice, and redemption reduced to a recipe for perpetual bliss—a philosophy that is both financially successful and philosophically deficient.

In summary, Disney's renditions of traditional fairy tales' function by means of an aesthetic metamorphosis that transforms

the moral ambiguity of the originals into emotional and aesthetically pleasing spectacles. Disney turns transgression into entertainment by over-aestheticizing the brutality that originally served as a moral reckoning. This conceals the psychological and ethical seriousness of violence beneath layers of charm, colour, and music. Tales of pain and justice are reduced to ornamental illusions of salvation when moral retribution is replaced with sentimental conclusion, negating the metaphorical power of the original material. The grotesque is sublimated rather than eliminated in this act of sanitization, its remnants remaining as a suppressed taboo behind the glossy exterior of animation. The forbidden and the uncanny persist, but in disguised form: cruelty becomes choreography, death becomes sleep, and moral consequence becomes an act of romantic fulfilment. Through this process, Disney's aesthetic excess performs a cultural anesthetization—turning the existential anxiety of the Grimm and Andersen tales into consumable innocence, and the symbolic terror of myth into the emotional comfort of spectacle.

ENDNOTES:

1. In specialized literature, the concept of "Disneyfication" coexists with that of "Disneyization", the former often being used, as Alan Bryman states (Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Sage Publications, 2004), with rather pejorative connotations. Perhaps for this reason, in this article we will prefer the term "Disneyfication", given our aim to illustrate the changes that literary patterns undergo in favour of an exaggerated aestheticization that retains only a superficial resemblance to the original referent.
2. Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared. Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 12.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
4. Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 224.
5. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.
6. See Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39.
7. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).
8. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 43. Let's not forget the way Eco refers to Disneyland as a "degenerate utopia", while speaking about the way our will to buy is falsified.
9. Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared. Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 18.
10. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 297.
11. Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, 12.
12. Giroux and Pollock, *The Mouse*, 54-55.
13. Zipes, *Fairy Tales*, 275.
14. Ibidem, 293. For a more detailed analysis of the violent details removed by Disney in its version of Snow White, we recommend: Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
15. Giroux and Pollock, *The Mouse*, 99.
16. However, there are many excellent endeavours in world cinema that faithfully restore the atmosphere of these fairy tales, regardless of whether they alter the chronotope of the original texts. These include feature films like: *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005 – based on *Little Red Riding Hood*), *Tale of Tales* (Matteo Garrone, 2015 – an anthology inspired by the Brothers Grimm universe), *Gretel & Hansel* (Osgood Perkins, 2020), *The Ugly Stepsister* (Emilie Blichfeldt, 2025 – based on *Cinderella*), *The Ice Tower* (Lucile Hadzihalilovic, 2025 – based on *The Snow Queen*). Another excellent film, based on a reinterpretation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, as well as on the Japanese novel by Yasunari Kawabata, is *Sleeping Beauty* (Julia Leigh, 2011), to which we have dedicated an article exploring the aesthetic and stylistic particularities of the original fairy tale, faced with the demands of contemporary cinema: Andrei C. Șerban, "Parmi des ogres impotents, le sommeil de la femme (*Sleeping Beauty* par Julia Leigh)". *Cinematographic Art & Documentation*, no. 22 (2018): 35-43.

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ARTIFICIAL AESTHETICS: RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP, AESTHETICS, AND AFFECT IN AI-GENERATED CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how artificial intelligence is changing the work of filmmakers and the way we understand authorship in today's cinema. It looks closely at three short films made entirely with AI tools: The Frost (Waymark, 2024), Thank You for Not Answering (Paul Trillo, 2023), and Poof (Pizza Later, 2024). Rather than treating creativity as the expression of a single author, these films show it as something that takes shape between human decisions, machine outputs, and the viewer's interpretation. Using ideas from Barthes, Foucault, Manovich, Zylinska, and Arielli, the article argues that the filmmaker's role shifts from controlling images to working with what the system generates and making sense of it.

Visually, these films reveal a kind of aesthetic that comes from the technology itself; glitches, unstable textures, and partial forms that reflect the way AI "sees" and constructs the image. The emotional impact also works differently: instead of being predetermined by the filmmaker, it emerges through the viewer's response to the uncertainty and strangeness of the images. Ethically, the films raise questions about responsibility and transparency, reminding us that any creative work involving AI depends on the data, tools, and systems that make it possible.

Taken together, these films suggest that AI does not necessarily push human creativity aside. Instead, it expands the space where meaning can be produced, creating a kind of shared authorship in which humans and machines both play a part. The article uses the term "relational authorship" to describe this shift and argues that it offers a useful way to understand how aesthetics, emotion, and ethics come together in AI-generated cinema.

KEYWORDS

AI cinema, authorship, artificial aesthetics, relational ethics, nonhuman vision, affect, posthuman creativity

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence is transforming our perspective on art, creativity, and the filmmaker's role. Cinema, perhaps more than any other art form, now finds itself confronted with an old question posed under radically new conditions: who—or what—creates? The long-standing notion of authorship, once closely tied to individual expression and artistic control, is being challenged by the logic of algorithmic systems and machine learning. At the same time, the very nature of aesthetics and affect, how images move us and how visual meaning is formed, is undergoing a profound transformation.

As AI-generated cinema develops, it intensifies a set of concerns that touch on the foundations of artistic practice. Many filmmakers express a subtle but persistent worry that cinema, traditionally regarded as a deeply human art form, may be slipping away from its human makers. When algorithms can generate scenes, construct visual environments, or produce atmospheric cues, the boundaries between human creativity and machine production become increasingly difficult to define. These anxieties are not merely technical; they reach into the realm of imagination itself. If machines can simulate ways of seeing, remembering, or feeling, what remains uniquely human? This tension, around who or what can create, represent, and shape meaning, lies at the heart of contemporary debates on representation and representability.

Throughout the twentieth century, the concept of the auteur shaped both the making and interpretation of cinema. From François Truffaut's *politique des auteurs*¹ in the 1950s to Andrew Sarris's 1962 formulation of auteur theory, cinema was celebrated as the medium of individual artistic vision. Yet this modernist ideal did not go unchallenged. Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967) questioned the idea of a single origin of meaning, suggesting instead that the viewer plays an essential role in interpretation. Two years later, Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" reframed authorship as a social and discursive function, one that organizes cultural production and distributes responsibility. Together, these

perspectives reveal authorship to be relational rather than absolute, shared, negotiated, and context-dependent.

Half a century later, artificial intelligence reactivates these debates under dramatically altered circumstances. Generative systems such as Runway's Gen-2, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney extend filmmaking beyond traditional tools, enabling images to be produced through prompts rather than cameras or physical sets. Text-to-video technologies transform the filmmaker into a designer of instructions, a curator of algorithmic outputs, and an interpreter of computational unpredictability. As Lev Manovich argues, the author in digital culture is no longer a creator of fixed forms but a "programmer of cultural experiences." In this sense, creation becomes less a matter of direct control and more an act of orchestration, a process of setting conditions under which meaning can emerge through human-machine collaboration.

This article examines these shifts through an analysis of three AI-generated short films that exemplify different forms of this collaborative dynamic: *The Frost* (Waymark, 2024), *Thank You for Not Answering* (Paul Trillo, 2023), and *Poof* (Pizza Later, 2024). Together, these works show how creativity in AI cinema operates across three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Authorship**, reconceived as a distributed and relational process that blurs the boundaries between human intention and algorithmic agency;
2. **Aesthetics**, shaped by the unstable, imperfect, and often fragmentary vision characteristic of generative systems, what this study terms artificial aesthetics²;
3. **Affect**, understood as an experience co-constructed by viewers as they engage with the ambiguity and uncertainty of algorithmic images.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Barthes, Foucault, Manovich, Zylinska, and Arielli, this study argues that AI cinema requires a new conceptual vocabulary, one that understands creativity as collective, procedural, and ethically attentive. By

analyzing these three films in depth, the article proposes *relational authorship* as a framework for understanding cinematic creation in the algorithmic age: an approach that treats cinema as a shared imaginative space in which code, consciousness, and emotion converge to produce meaning.

Theoretical Framework: Authorship, Aesthetics, and Affect in the Algorithmic Age

Understanding how artificial intelligence reshapes cinematic authorship requires examining the parallel transformations occurring in aesthetics and affect. These three dimensions, authorship, aesthetic form, and emotional resonance, frame the approach of this article and guide the analysis of *The Frost*, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof*. Together, the films demonstrate that creativity and perception in AI cinema no longer belong exclusively to human agents; instead, they emerge through interactions among human intentions, algorithmic systems, and the interpretive work of viewers. Drawing on the ideas of Barthes, Foucault, Manovich, Zylinska, and Arielli, this section outlines a theoretical foundation for understanding how artistic creation, visual experience, and emotional meaning are reorganized in an era of machine-generated imagery, an era that invites renewed questions about representation and the limits of representability.

Authorship: From Singular Vision to Distributed Process

In classical film theory, authorship was closely linked to individuality and artistic coherence. The auteur functioned as the unifying force behind narrative, style, and tone, the singular mind whose vision shaped the film. Roland Barthes questioned this model in *The Death of the Author* (1967), arguing that meaning does not originate from a single source but is produced through the interplay of cultural voices and textual traces. His claim that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”²

reframed creation not as the expression of an isolated subject but as a relational process shaped by interpretation.

Michel Foucault extended this critique two years later in *What Is an Author?* (1969), describing authorship as a discursive function that organizes meaning rather than as a personal trait. For Foucault, the author is not the sovereign origin of discourse but a category that regulates its circulation, assigns responsibility, and structures how texts are understood. When considered in the context of AI-generated cinema, the author-function shifts further away from the individual. The filmmaker does not command the image in the traditional sense; instead, they configure conditions under which images may be generated, selected, and shaped.

Lev Manovich captures this shift in digital culture by describing the contemporary creator as a “programmer of cultural experiences.”³ Instead of determining every aspect of the finished form, the filmmaker designs parameters and rules through which images emerge. Creative agency remains present but becomes procedural and distributed, less about dominance and more about responsiveness. Across *The Frost*, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof*, authorship appears as a negotiation between human decision-making, algorithmic inference, and viewer participation. It becomes a mode of orchestration, a coordinated interaction between code and human intentionality.

Aesthetics: From Representation to System – The Logic of Artificial Aesthetics

If authorship increasingly resembles a process, aesthetics in AI cinema increasingly resembles a system. The term *artificial aesthetics* refers to forms of beauty generated not through human perception or craft but through computational processes. These visual qualities, shifting textures, unstable bodies, and spectral compositions result from how algorithms interpret prompts and assemble images. Lev Manovich’s concept of *database aesthetics* offers a useful framework for understanding this logic: digital art

constructs meaning through modularity⁴, repetition, and variation rather than through linear storytelling. The viewer's experience becomes a matter of recognizing emerging patterns and navigating the interplay between order and unpredictability.

This logic is visible across all three films. *The Frost*, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof* inhabit a visual space that oscillates between the photographic and the painterly, the recognizable and the abstract. Faces dissolve, objects stretch or merge, and environments shift unexpectedly, reminders that the machine's way of constructing visual reality differs fundamentally from human vision. Joanna Zylińska refers to this as *nonhuman vision*⁵, urging us "to see with the machine rather than against it."⁶ In this perspective, perception itself becomes a collaborative act: the algorithm produces possibilities, and the viewer interprets them.

Emanuele Arielli's concept of *aesthetic agency* deepens this understanding by emphasizing the viewer's role in assigning meaning to algorithmic unpredictability. What initially appears as an error or distortion becomes part of the aesthetic field, evidence of a dialogue between computational systems and human sensibility. Artificial aesthetics thus transforms the filmic image from a stable representation into a process of emergence. Each film becomes less a completed object and more an ongoing negotiation between human vision and machine-generated form, raising further questions about what can be represented and what becomes unrepresentable in algorithmic image-making.

Affect: Emotional Resonance as Co-Creation

Affect forms the emotional dimension of this distributed creative network. In classical cinema, emotional expression typically flowed from the filmmaker's intention to the spectator's response. AI-generated cinema disrupts this one-directional model. Here, emotion arises through the relationship between the viewer's interpretive work and the machine's imperfect attempts at visualizing the world.

Joanna Zylińska's reflections on *nonhuman intimacy* help clarify this shift. The emotional force of AI imagery does not depend on the machine's ability to feel; rather, it depends on our capacity to respond to its fragmented, unstable vision. We do not simply observe the machine's output; we engage with it, turning its ambiguities into feeling. Arielli reinforces this view by proposing that affect becomes a human response to computational uncertainty, a form of co-creation that results from interpreting what the system struggles to articulate.

Each of the three films illustrates this dynamic in different ways. *The Frost* constructs emotion through fading faces and dissolving landscapes, evoking fragility and memory. *Thank You for Not Answering* uses silence and blurred interiors to evoke longing and disconnection. *Poof* plays with comedic and melancholic tones as bodies appear and disappear within unstable worlds. Across these examples, affect is not delivered to the viewer; it is built through interaction. Emotion, like authorship and aesthetics, becomes a shared event shaped by human involvement with algorithmic vision.

Toward a Unified Model of Posthuman Authorship

Authorship, aesthetics, and affect function not as separate domains but as components of a single creative system. Authorship organizes relationships, aesthetics gives them visible form, and affect completes the process through perception. This framework reveals creativity in AI cinema to be both distributed and coherent, fundamentally relational rather than controlled.

The Frost, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof* embody this posthuman mode of creation by translating conceptual questions into sensory experience. They show that meaning in AI cinema emerges not from singular intention but from interaction among human, machinic, and spectatorial agencies. Beauty becomes evidence of collaboration, and emotion becomes the marker of shared engagement. What results is a paradigm of authorship

defined by transparency, responsiveness, and distributed agency, a model suited to an age in which representation is increasingly shaped by systems that both extend and unsettle human creative capacities.

Comparative Case Study: Authorship, Aesthetics, and Affect Across Three AI Short Films

The rapid emergence of AI-generated cinema between 2023 and 2024 has opened new pathways for artistic creation while raising fundamental questions about authorship, visual representation, and affective experience. Among the early works that shaped this field, *The Frost* (Waymark, 2024), *Thank You for Not Answering* (Paul Trillo, 2023), and *Poof* (Pizza Later, 2024) offer three distinct yet complementary examples of what it means to make films with and through artificial intelligence. Each film translates the collaboration between human intention and machine agency into a different audiovisual form: poetic, melancholic, and ironic, allowing us to observe how authorship in AI cinema shifts from individual vision to a distributed and relational practice. Examining them together also reveals how representation and representability are reshaped when images are generated not by cameras or bodies but by computational systems.

***The Frost*: Distributed Authorship and Poetic Perception**

The Frost, directed by Josh Rubin and produced entirely through Runway's Gen-2 text-to-video model,⁷ is often described as one of the earliest attempts at constructing a narrative film without any traditional cinematic apparatus. The film follows humans wandering through a frozen, dreamlike landscape composed of white light, reflective surfaces, and silhouettes that continuously dissolve and reform. This unstable visual world, neither fully representational nor abstract, foregrounds the extent to which AI-generated imagery operates according to a different logic of perception than human vision.

From the perspective of authorship, the film exemplifies a mode of creation defined by orchestration rather than full control. Rubin's work consists primarily of designing prompts, selecting outputs, and arranging the material produced by the algorithm. Rather than functioning as the sole creator, he collaborates with the system in an iterative process where meaning is shaped jointly by human intention and algorithmic inference. This distributed mode of authorship challenges traditional notions of the director and highlights the degree to which representation in AI cinema depends on the interplay between human curation and machinic generation.

Aesthetically, *The Frost* is marked by instability: faces fade, textures tremble, and bodies fail to resolve into coherent forms. These qualities reveal the limits of representability within algorithmic image production. The machine attempts to construct a human figure or environment, yet its outputs remain partial and fragile. This incompleteness becomes part of the aesthetic experience, drawing attention to the gap between what the system can represent and what it struggles to articulate.

Affect emerges through the viewer's engagement with this incompleteness. Because the film provides traces rather than fully formed representations, viewers must actively interpret the atmosphere and emotional tone of each scene. In this way, the film turns ambiguity into a site of co-creation, where meaning and feeling arise not from the system alone but from the viewer's attempt to make sense of what the machine can, and cannot, show.

***Thank You for Not Answering*: Fragmentation and the Machinery of Empathy**

Paul Trillo's *Thank You for Not Answering* offers a different exploration of AI-generated cinema, one grounded in fragmentation and introspection. The film depicts a series of unanswered phone calls accompanied by a synthetic voice-over reflecting on distance, memory, and connection. The visuals, produced through Runway's Gen-2 model⁸, consist of dim interiors, blurred figures, and shifting

environments that resemble fragments of recollected moments rather than coherent scenes.

Authorship in this film appears as negotiation rather than dominance. The system misrenders bodies, merges spaces, and interrupts continuity, and Trillo incorporates these disruptions into the film's tone and meaning. Instead of correcting the algorithm's inconsistencies, he uses them as expressive elements that reflect the difficulty of communication in technologically mediated environments. The director's task becomes one of interpreting machine-generated errors and integrating them into a coherent structure.

Aesthetically, the film departs from narrative cohesion and relies on intermittent, disrupted visual signals. These interruptions highlight the limits of representability in AI-generated images: the machine attempts to reconstruct human interiors and gestures but repeatedly produces partial or ambiguous forms. The resulting inconsistencies underscore the instability of identity and memory in a world increasingly shaped by digital traces.

Affect in this film emerges from a paradoxical dynamic. Although the imagery is artificial and the voice-over synthetic, the viewer is drawn into a form of empathy that arises from the system's very inability to represent fully human experiences. Viewers sense the gap between what the machine renders and what it fails to express, a gap that becomes the emotional core of the film. *Thank You for Not Answering* thus suggests that empathy in AI cinema is not generated through realism but through the viewer's encounter with the system's limitations.

Poof: Irony, Simulation, and the Aesthetics of Play

Poof takes a markedly different approach from *The Frost* and *Thank You for Not Answering*, embracing a playful and exaggerated visual style that openly foregrounds its artificial construction. Generated through Midjourney, Runway's Gen-3 model,⁹ and arranged into a sequence of short, surreal vignettes, the film

presents puppet-like digital characters moving through bright, stylized environments that resemble motion-graphics animation more than traditional cinematography. From the outset, *Poof* makes no attempt at realism; its synthetic aesthetic is central to how the film positions itself.

In terms of authorship, *Poof* adopts a self-aware mode of collaboration between filmmaker and system. Instead of hiding the algorithm's tendencies, its abrupt jumps, exaggerated motions, and impossible transformations, the film incorporates them into its expressive vocabulary. The filmmaker's creative agency lies in selecting and organizing these generative outputs, turning the system's unpredictability into a source of visual humor and commentary.

Aesthetically, the film operates within a logic of simulation rather than representation. It draws on recognizable cinematic tropes, cartoon physics, action-style beats, playful disappearances, but exaggerates them to the point where their link to embodied experience becomes intentionally thin. By highlighting Midjourney's tendency to imitate stylistic patterns without grounding them in physical realism, *Poof* invites reflection on the limits of representability in AI-generated images.

Emotionally, the film produces a mixture of amusement and reflective distance. Its humor invites the viewer to enjoy the spectacle, while its overt artificiality encourages a more analytical engagement with how AI assembles and mutates visual material. Instead of eliciting empathy for characters, *Poof* prompts viewers to observe the mechanics of generative image-making. In this way, the film uses spectacle and irony to turn technological artifice into a site of insight, showing that AI cinema can be engaging not by imitating human experience, but by revealing the processes through which its images come into being.

Comparative Synthesis: Three Modes of Posthuman Authorship

Taken together, the three films present complementary models of authorship and affect within AI cinema. Across these modes, a shared pattern becomes evident: authorship shifts from control to collaboration, aesthetics becomes a negotiation between representation and its limits, and affect is shaped by the viewer's attempt to interpret machine-generated ambiguity. These films suggest that AI cinema does not eliminate the human author but redefines authorship as a relational, distributed process in which imagination, computation, and spectatorship contribute together to the production of meaning.

From Artificial Aesthetics to Relational Ethics

The expanding body of AI-generated cinema, exemplified by *The Frost*, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof*, reflects more than a technological development; it signals a deeper reconfiguration of how creation, perception, and emotional meaning are produced and interpreted. These films do not simply demonstrate the operational capacity of generative systems; they invite a reconsideration of what it means to create and to perceive at a moment when images are increasingly generated without cameras or embodied human vision. In this sense, AI cinema directly challenges established assumptions about representation and the limits of representability, revealing how algorithmic processes both extend and constrain what can be shown, imagined, or felt.

Across all three films, authorship shifts from a singular gesture to a relational configuration. The filmmaker initiates the process, but the machine interprets; the viewer observes, but also completes. What emerges, therefore, is not a film authored exclusively by a person or a system, but a work that takes shape in the interaction between them. This is where artificial aesthetics becomes most visible: within the mediated space where human intention and algorithmic inference intersect. The aesthetic,

emotional, and ethical dimensions of these films stem precisely from this shared field of mediation.

Authorship as Mediation

Across all three films, authorship no longer appears as an act of full control but as a process shaped by negotiation between what the filmmaker intends and what the system produces. In *The Frost*, Josh Rubin works less like a traditional director and more like an editor responding to the flow of algorithmic output. His authorship is expressed through choosing, arranging, and interpreting the material generated by the model, highlighting how creation becomes a shared process distributed across human decisions and machine inference.

In *Thank You for Not Answering*, Paul Trillo confronts the fragility of communication when expression passes through an automated system. The synthetic voice, the blurred interiors, and the unstable visuals make visible the gaps that emerge when human experience is filtered through machine interpretation. Trillo's authorship resides in accepting these fractures and allowing them to shape the emotional rhythm of the film, rather than smoothing them out.

In *Poof*, authorship becomes openly self-aware. Using Midjourney and other generative tools, Pizza Later embraces the constructed nature of the imagery, letting the seams of the process remain visible. Instead of hiding the artificiality of the generative pipeline, he turns it into part of the film's identity. Here, authorship is a playful exchange between human intention and algorithmic improvisation, an approach that foregrounds mediation as the core of the creative act.

Taken together, these films demonstrate a shift toward relational authorship: a model in which meaning emerges not from a single creative source but from the dynamic interaction between human vision, computational processes, and the viewer's interpretive engagement.

Artificial Aesthetics and the Informed Viewer

Despite their differences, the three films share an aesthetic grounded in an explicit awareness of mediation. Their unstable faces, dissolving bodies, flickering textures, and shifting environments are not merely technical byproducts. They reveal how generative systems construct images based on statistical inference rather than embodied experience. In this sense, artificial aesthetics draws attention to the new ways in which images are formed and to the layers of representation encoded within machine vision.

This aesthetic depends on an informed viewer. Contemporary audiences increasingly recognize the mechanisms behind generative imagery, prompting, datasets, and model training, and this awareness becomes part of the interpretive process. Viewers do not merely consume images; they read the traces of computation within them, recognizing both the capacities and the limits of what the system can represent.

In *The Frost*, hesitation in the generated footage produces a lyrical form of ambiguity. In *Thank You for Not Answering*, fragmented editing mirrors the fractured nature of digital communication. In *Poof*, exaggeration and distortion expose the representational conventions the system imitates but does not fully control. Collectively, these films suggest that artificial aesthetics is less about visual novelty and more about the viewer's recognition of representation as a mediated, algorithmic event.

Feeling With and Through the Machine

Affect in AI cinema emerges from the interaction between human empathy and machinic limitation. Emotional resonance no longer flows unidirectionally from filmmaker to spectator. Instead, it circulates across a network of human and nonhuman actors.

In *The Frost*, the instability of faces and landscapes produces a sense of vulnerability that invites viewers to interpret what the system cannot fully resolve. In *Thank You for Not Answering*, emotional meaning is shaped by gaps in representation by the

silences, distortions, and partial images that reflect the fragmentation of mediated communication. In *Poof*, the humor and strangeness of algorithmic exaggeration generate a form of reflective distance, prompting audiences to engage emotionally not with the illusion of realism but with the visible artificiality of the generated scenes.

Affect thus becomes a shared construction: the viewer contributes meaning precisely where the system reveals its limits. The emotional dimension of AI cinema arises through the recognition of representational incompleteness, transforming the machine's constraints into sites of feeling.

Ethics of Awareness

The act of viewing AI-generated images carries ethical implications that extend beyond aesthetic response. These films draw attention to the infrastructures and datasets that underpin their creation, reminding us that every generated image is supported by layers of computational labor, training data, and algorithmic processing. Following Zylinska's concept of minimal ethics¹⁰, responsibility in this context is not defined by mastery but by attentiveness: to processes, to limitations, and to the conditions under which representation becomes possible.

In *The Frost*, ethical transparency emerges through the film's refusal to disguise the algorithmic foundations of its imagery. In *Thank You for Not Answering*, emotional engagement comes through acknowledging the failures of communication embedded within automated systems. In *Poof*, ethical awareness is expressed through humor and exposure, inviting viewers to consider the constructed nature of the images they encounter.

Across the three films, ethical seeing involves recognizing mediation itself, understanding that the human and the algorithm contribute jointly to the final image. To perceive clearly is to acknowledge these relations; to create responsibly is to make them visible.

Relational Creativity and the Future of AI Cinema

Taken together, these films point toward a redefinition of creativity in the algorithmic age. Authorship becomes shared, aesthetics becomes procedural, and affect becomes participatory. This model of creativity rejects both the ideal of the solitary genius and the fantasy of fully autonomous machine production. Instead, it frames art as an ecology of participation, in which human imagination, algorithmic processes, and viewer interpretation collectively shape meaning.

AI cinema does not signal the end of artistic imagination; rather, it expands its field of operation. It challenges us to reconsider how we understand representation, how we navigate the limits of representability, and how we take responsibility for the technological systems through which creative work is now produced. In this expanded framework, the viewer becomes the final co-author—not by accepting the illusion of realism, but by recognizing and interpreting its construction. Artificial aesthetics thus reveals a new form of beauty grounded not in mastery, but in relation.

Conclusion: Artificial Aesthetics and Relational Authorship

The rapid emergence of AI-generated cinema reopens a familiar question under new technological and conceptual conditions: what happens when artistic creation is no longer produced solely through human perception, memory, and imagination? The development of text-to-video systems has introduced both possibilities and anxieties, particularly the concern that cinema, historically grounded in embodied vision, may be gradually shifting away from human authorship. As algorithms generate visual worlds based on statistical inference rather than lived experience, the boundary between human creativity and machine production becomes increasingly difficult to define. These concerns extend beyond technical innovation; they directly engage contemporary debates on representation and the limits of

representability. If machines can construct images, gestures, or atmospheres, to what extent can they represent human experience, and where do their representational limits become visible?

The comparative analysis of *The Frost*, *Thank You for Not Answering*, and *Poof* demonstrates that AI cinema does not displace human authorship but reconfigures it. Creation unfolds not from a singular origin but within a relational network that includes human intention, algorithmic procedures, and viewer interpretation. In this sense, authorship becomes distributed: a form of shared agency shaped by negotiation rather than mastery, and by attentiveness rather than unilateral control. As Manovich suggests, digital authorship increasingly operates through procedural design rather than fixed authorial expression, a dynamic clearly illustrated in these films.

Across the three works, artificial aesthetics foregrounds mediation rather than concealing it. The images openly reveal their algorithmic origins through unstable faces, flickering textures, and shifting environments. These examples show that aesthetic value in AI cinema arises not from the illusion of seamless representation but from the viewer's recognition of how the image is produced. Representability therefore becomes a central question: the films make visible both what the system can reliably generate and where its capacity to represent human experience breaks down.

This aesthetic transformation carries ethical implications. Drawing on Zylynska's notion of minimal ethics, responsibility in posthuman artistic practice arises through attentiveness to the infrastructures, datasets, and processes that enable image generation. Ethical authorship, in this context, involves acknowledging the system's contributions and its limitations, while the informed viewer participates by reading the traces of computation embedded in the image. Care becomes a methodological stance: to create and to perceive with awareness of the relations that sustain the work.

Together, the three films outline a continuum of posthuman creativity. Each film demonstrates that meaning in AI cinema arises from interaction rather than from intention alone. What becomes visible through these works is not the disappearance of human authorship but its evolution into a relational model that incorporates algorithmic processes as active partners in creation.

Looking ahead, the future of cinematographic authorship will rely on the capacity to engage critically with these hybrid forms to understand how images are generated, what they can represent, and where their representational limits appear. Artificial aesthetics, in this sense, is not merely a stylistic category but an ethical and conceptual framework for understanding creative practice in the algorithmic age. It reminds us that every act of creation, whether human or computational, is grounded in relation: a dynamic interplay between imagination, technology, and the shared spaces in which meaning is made.

ENDNOTES

1. François Truffaut introduced the notion of “*politique des auteurs*” in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s; Andrew Sarris later adapted and formalized this idea for American film criticism in his seminal essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” published in *Film Culture*.
2. Artificial aesthetics refers to the distinctive visual qualities produced by generative AI systems. Unlike traditional aesthetics shaped by human perception and intentional artistic practice, artificial aesthetics emerges from algorithmic processes, dataset structures, and machine vision. Its characteristic features—glitches, unstable textures, fluid morphing, and ambiguous forms—reflect how AI systems interpret and construct images, revealing a mode of visual production that is neither fully human nor entirely machine.
3. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
4. In digital aesthetics, “modularity” refers to the organization of images or media into discrete, reusable units, such as fragments, layers, or components, that can be rearranged, combined, or transformed by algorithmic systems. This structure enables generative models to assemble visuals through the recombination of modular parts rather than through a continuous, human-directed process.

5. “Nonhuman vision” refers to modes of seeing produced by computational systems rather than by biological perception. The term, used by Joanna Zylińska, highlights the fact that AI-generated images are shaped by datasets, algorithms, and machinic processing rather than by human sensory experience. It invites viewers to understand AI imagery as a distinct form of visibility with its own logic, constraints, and aesthetic signatures.
6. Joanna Zylińska, *AI Art: Machine Visions and Warped Dreams* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020).
7. According to Waymark, *The Frost* was generated entirely using Runway’s Gen-2 text-to-video model, which allowed the team to produce 18-second sequences at 24fps and construct the film without traditional cameras or sets.
8. According to industry coverage, *Thank You for Not Answering* was created entirely using Runway’s Gen-2 generative video model, which Trillo employed to produce the film’s fragmented visual sequences.
9. As reported by *Shots Magazine*, *Poof* was created using a combination of generative tools, including Midjourney, Luma Labs’ Dream Machine, and Runway Gen-3, which collectively shaped the film’s distinct synthetic aesthetic.
10. Joanna Zylińska develops the concept of “minimal ethics” in her book *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2014). In this work, she argues that ethical responsibility in the posthuman era should not be grounded in control or mastery, but in attentiveness, responsiveness, and care toward the networks of human and nonhuman relations that sustain life and creation.

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THE THEATRICALITY OF THE NEW PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE VIRTUAL AUTOPSY OF THE LIVING BODY IN A POSTDRAMATIC ERA. A PERFORMANCE OF SCIENTIFIC ARGUMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

The challenges posed by the potential of representability that relies on "ocular experience", which regards the visual component both material and virtual as well as the performer's body viewed as a form, are underlined by several aspects. Starting from the limits and their subsequent transgression, regarding the presence of the human body in a scenic perimeter, the involvement of performance artists - who interfere with new and shocking methods, such as: nudity, aggression of the flesh, cosmetic surgery, permanently scientifically argued - is subjected in recent decades, to an interesting process of mixing with the texture of the space, traversing simultaneously the body image modification with the evolution of image, from the pure geometric form present in the avangards of the early 20th century to the virtual transparencies of the postdramatic period. In this process, the position of the voyeur and his need for catharsis is decisive, which entails varied references either artaudian or actionist, in order to justify the growing interest in displaying the body, beyond any aesthetic restriction, from nudity to surgical intervention into its living substance. In this context, the performance artists who subjects their body to the most invasive procedures (the case of the french artist Orlan) significantly contributes to the semantic amplification of the image and the potential of representability.

KEYWORDS

performance, body, image, voyeur, actionism, postdramatic, representability

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Viewed as an intrusion into the mental, affective, and above all visual universe of contemporaneity, the complexity and abundance of references that characterize the new performance appear as mirrors of the current era. Undoubtedly, the stimuli cultivated by performance, primarily by the visual component conditioned by terms such as “ocular experience”, lead towards superimposed levels of the audience’s affects, processing in various ways these architectures which are at the same time visual and sensitive, implying a “dualistic nature of human experience”¹. This phenomenon focuses on representation and afterwards representability, and determines an interesting path of the visual texture of the performance, from *mimesis* to *semiosis*, the latter being compatible with one of the most used terms of the postdramatic theater. Invoking a crucial moment for the journey of contemporary art, defined by the shaping of an inedite attitude through which it is possible to describe the physiognomy of a performance, created by the virtual universe of digital art, the issue of underlining the representability is “inherent in this temporal process, remaining in irreconcilable tension with all fixed representations, which it traverses”². This point is supported by the perspective of the visual practitioner of the stage, who uses the chromatic, virtual material oriented by the contemporary arts, but the most pronounced impact is created by the substance of the living body, offered by the performance artist.

The study’s subchapters explore ideas about how representability is extended. They begin by examining the construction and reception of the performance image. It acts as a visual and emotional stimulus for the viewer, or *voyeur*, who is constantly seeking intellectual or emotional *catharsis*. The encounter with the performer’s body in various forms, including nudity (which still remains a taboo), requires arguments about the artist’s sacrificial role, as described by Antonin Artaud. This justifies the actionist or extreme forms used by performance artists, which

are processed through technology’s tools of amplification or sublimation.

The semantic alteration of representation. The discourse of the geometric form

Neither a debate nor a reasoning regarding the start of the process of dismembering the body and merging it with space cannot avoid the period of the early 20th-century and the avanguards (Bauhaus), followed by the müllerian “marriage between man and machine” mentioned by Lehmann who also insists upon the “couplings between organic and machinic”³. From this point of encounter between man and space, mixture which “continues under the banner of new technologies and takes hold of the human body in a comprehensive manner”⁴, a decisive moment of contemporary performance is outlined due to the play of forms-concepts starting from “representation” and its opponents: representability and “unrepresentability”. This process is triggered by the interest in rendering on the stage, a both absent and abstract reality, recovered and reassembled through universal references.

Arguments from the area of visual arts theory are pertinent, complementing the new performance approaches, invoking ideas such as the polysemic image associated with the name of Picasso, mentioned by Michael Hatt as “a direct consequence of the idea of differential meaning. An image means one thing in one context, something else in another”⁵. Up to the emphasis on the body, the visual side of the performance favours the space as its natural starting point. This interest is clearly the “engine” for both encoding and simplifying the image, by finding alternative architectures that essentialize the material formula of the stage, in order to stylize and process through form, the philosophical or metaphysical support of the performance. This method is circulated from the incipient stage of theatricalization, argued by attempts such as “extending music into space,” which links the beginnings of virtual reality in the scenic perimeter, the reforms of Adolphe Appia and the symbolism of the

mid-20th century, continuing later with the opera from Bayreuth staged by Wieland Wagner. This is the moment when the transparency of the scenic space, the “black void” associated with George Tsygyn’s scenography, becomes the proper perimeter for the imaginary, including psychoanalytic valences, favoring deliberately unstable configurations that culminate in surrealist formulas, which leap into the abyss of the unconscious, evolving into a continuous stimulus of visionarism.

Therefore, the disagreement between representation and representability can thus be indicated with the above mentioned avanguards of the early 20th century, with the directors who adhered to building a performance as their own creation, who become performance authors. Likewise, the Bauhaus moment, which proposed a mode of aggressiveness towards representation for its time, continuously stimulates the imaginary through the blend of geometry and the scientific side of form: “They were feeling their way toward a grammar of visual experience. They translated the landscape and the human form into cylinders, spheres and cubes. Or better yet, created new bodies and landscapes out of cylinders, spheres and cubes [...] The costumes went well with figure drawing classes where human bodies were rendered as diagrams”⁶. The German experimental center which culminated in this direction in the 1920s and partially 1930s, therefore had one of the most important influences in this direction, subsequently demonstrated by the activity from Black Mountain College and the American avant-garde in the mid-20th century. The non-academic allure, which, distilling itself over time, has become a quasi-academic model, leads towards the most relevant theoretical structures of contemporary art. These aspects have guided the construction of theoretical systems⁷, generated advanced studies that justify and stimulate interdisciplinary connections and research, which maintain the favorable attitude towards the extensions of representability.

From the principles of visual art to the amplification of the ocular experience

The alteration of representation that leads to an essential and fundamental intensification carried out in parallel with the aggression of taboos, generates a phenomenon that instigates the display of those “hidden” things, interpretable, unstable, creating debates from various perspectives. It is an eminently intellectual but also sensory stimulus generated by the excesses of the artists in the area of *performance art* that provoke any stage resistance. Interdisciplinary artists combine the exploration of the body with scientific investigations, change of interest which is explained by the analysts David Callahan and Anthony Barker⁸, through “the seemingly endless appetite for hero figures whose identities and bodies are unstable and improvable”⁹. The metamorphosis of the body is drawn scenically through fantasies focused on “body transformation narratives”¹⁰ justified by “the influence and reproductive systems research, a galaxy of fantasy fiction featuring magic, wizardry and witchcraft, and loosely dystopian scenarios in which bodies are experimented on, altered and transformed...”¹¹.

Undoubtedly, the body in the contemporary performance is viewed as an image, which fulfills the connection with its visual existence in a space. From this point until the sphere of Lehman’s postdramatic theater, the virtual preponderance establishes a new type of objective: “The image as representation gives us [...] the feeling of being always on the track of something else [...] hunters in search of the lost treasure [...] «in the picture», we are on the scent of a secret”¹². The references to Hans Thies Lehmann, to the infusion of multimedia strategies into the new performance—as a basic argument of postdramaticity and inherently of representability that multiplies the image and modifies the coordinates of representation—orient the valences of theatricality towards investigating the potential of any image resource, constructing the “presence of absence”, the invisible, intangible, immaterial universe that already preoccupied the interest of the

authors of an important direction of 20th-century drama and stage directing.

In consequence, the representation is subject to a path dictated by changes occurring in visual arts, pertinent to its application in performance. The rules of the image indicated by Heinrich Wölfflin in the pages of his work *Principles of Art History*¹³ could be possible approaches for representation. For a while these theories were compatible with the evolution of the stage image. In the 20th century theatricality inevitably adhered to new landmarks, multiplying the dimensions of meaning, based on an inevitable link between image and the consistency of the theatricality of the performance. This allows references to the “history of vision”¹⁴, overcoming on its way the *mimesis* and advancing towards *semiosis*, the limits of Riegl and Wölfflin’s theories. From this perspective, the contemporary art history becomes the first key to deciphering the spectacle in the 20th century, outlining the broad directions of “representability” entirely dependent on the involvement of the visual component, on the possibilities developed in experimental centers and laboratories (Società Raffaello Sanzio or Performance Studies/ Tisch School of Art), where interdisciplinarity becomes one of the main activating factors of representability, influencing the aesthetics of the new performance. The mutual contamination of thinking and artistic disciplines—which fights through hostile positions towards stable, fixed and ossified landmarks of representation—have irreversible consequences on the perception and role of the body in an artistic perimeter, even more so in choreographic spectacle but also in current theater that uses the most varied expressive and technical resources.

The artist’s body is viewed through the two key terms, which essentially indicate the process of theatricalization, moving from “representation” (approaching the image from a formal point of view, the external side) to “representability” (the juxtaposition or fusion between the potential of the image—in this case the body and the limits of its exposure with its the infinity of meanings

represented by context, messages, values). This opposition argues the direction of modern, postmodern and later postdramatic art, supported by the statements of theorists such as Alfred H. Barr and Clement Greenberg (the latter active in the ‘50s - ‘60s). The ‘70s are decisive through visual studies—*Bildwissenschaft*—a perspective motivated by the change in the image of the spectacle involving the body of the *performance* artist: “When we talk about body in the arts today it is usually in an anti-thetical manner [...] the body is discussed as an essence, a kind of «prima causa», which is modified by diverse layers of cultural encoding [...] The body always comes to represent something else, an aspect of power, an ideological position, a sexual principle, or an infringement of this principle. In this vision, the body is always conceived as an historical construct.”¹⁵. From the direction of *performance art*, its provocations always increases the theatricality, often culminating in a visual aggression on the viewer’s sensitivity, extending its limits. The involvement of technology through which the priority of body remains, but its form is dismembered, undergoing both a physical and mental process, is also remembered and outlined by Lehmann’s theoretical statements, which indicate: “Theatre is first of all anthropological, the name for a behavior (playing, showing oneself, playing roles, gathering, spectating as a virtual or real form of participation), secondly it is a situation, and only then, last of all, is it representation”¹⁶.

The voyeur’s experience, the danger of apathy and the need for catharsis

The encounter between the viewer and the spectacle, its impact on him created by the narrative and its constitutive elements where the body and the image are essential, continuously push the boundaries of “representability”, which has the obligation to diversify the relationship between the voyeur and the above mentioned hidden universe. Theatricality speculates what cannot be shown. Obviously, in the absence of this *crescendo*, the viewer’s

catharsis faces the risk of flattening the performance experience, a situation that has worried several moments in the history of the spectacle throughout the 20th century, forcing the emergence of reforms. These aspects condition the extension of the potential of representability, the recourse to elements of shock, to the aggression of traditional stage restraints, exceeding the stage prohibitions regarding the exposure of the human body. Invoking also in this context “the efficacy” of artaudian descent –encouraged by the freedoms of visionarism, by virtual space—its effect on the spectacle often transforms it an anatomical theatre in which the biological architecture of the body is scientifically displayed. The new position of the voyeur’s perspective is directed by the performance dramaturgy given by the symbolic (and not only that) autopsy of flesh and living substance. The body is subject to recomposition through distorted forms, biological decomposition, subject to physical pain, motivated by the philosophy of the inevitability of death and the decomposition of matter, an idea indicated by Hans Thies Lehmann who repeatedly appeals to Heiner Müller’s statements: “The theatre, however, consisting of a shared time-space of mortality, articulates as a performative act the necessity of engaging with death, i.e. with the (a)liveness of life”¹⁷. In this sense, the creations of performance art—Live art (a term imposed in 1994, in *Contemporary Theatre Review*) are the most relevant examples, attitudes that start again from the experimentalism of the 1960s, which reformulate the procedures of artistic composition with essential effects in the performance and especially choreography (Carolee Schneemann and Judson Dance Theatre), the representability evolving through the concepts of interdisciplinarity, through images with divergent meanings.

Moving towards the virtual image, with its involvement in performance, it offers a sublimated experience to the spectator placed in a protected position, without brutal effects on his sensitivity. The implication of interdisciplinary laboratories advances continuously the mixture between body and space, toward

a representability through mixed discourse (Josef Svoboda). This tendency is accentuated in an accelerated manner (Johannes Birringer), through relationships and connections between the human body and detached scientific encounters with its image (Romeo Castellucci) preferentially virtual. For example, Robert Lepage, through his interdisciplinary research, relies on the affiliation of the body to scenic design, generating an aesthetic linked to the fluid potential of representability, to a dramaturgy distilled from the interaction and fusion of the body with space.

Therefore, the *catharsis* of the voyeur is conditioned by various resources, by the phenomenon of immersion, by the technology directed towards the manipulation of the affects of the one who looks at the human body. He enters protected into the universe of taboo, experiencing visceral consequences, expressed or conceptualized by the possibilities of the image and digital artistry.

Artaudian resonances and “postdramatic images of the body”.

The combinatory strategies of displaying the body in relation to space outline the philosophy of contemporaneity, bringing forth images compatible with current events, promoting an aesthetic of impurity, caused by the previously mentioned interdisciplinarity and by the continuous experimental dimension. In this context, the performance artist’s thinking brings into discussion, in various ways, the main taboo of the scene, the human body: “The body or face in video is enough—for itself and for us. By contrast, an air of (productive) disappointment always surrounds the presence of real bodies. It is reminiscent of the air of mourning that, according to Hegel, surrounds the ancient Greek sculptures of gods: their all too complete and perfect presence allows for no transcendence of materiality to a more spiritual interiority”¹⁸. Also, the assertion of Allucquere Roosa, author of *The War of Desire and Technology*, emphasizes the body as the “matter” of representability, following that the mental and sensitive forces and space are transformed into image and reference, a true “narrative” or collage on which,

subsequently, performance art artists build their discourse. They process this “secret universe” visually, carnally, immersively, valorizing the need to go “beyond the image”, invoking the beauty of what is beyond representation, bringing symbols such as the “tears of the body” invoked by Jan Fabre or forms of the liquefied or mineralized body of the type of Romeo Castellucci’s investigations. These necessarily uncomfortable formulas of representability are motivated by Lehman as being protected by theatricality: “Theatre per se is already an art form of signifying, not a mimetic copying”¹⁹. The artistic openings offered by performance art subject the body to a surgical procedure that defies the old taboo, superimposes the sacred and the sacrilege, transforms the carnal substance either into mineral or liquefied material (Romeo Castellucci), or into vegetable or organic substance (Jan Fabre).

The most obvious intervention of recent arts is stimulated by the juggling with artaudian references justified by sacrifice, agony, sacredness. The artaudian theater of cruelty and the superposition of these ideas with “virtual reality” maintain the necessary sacrifice of the actor’s body in scientific form, in favor of an affective type of performance efficacy, in the manner in which Chris Salter expresses this approach: “there was a call to return to a purely human-centered notion of theatrical performance by way of the ritualistic and shamanistic transformation of the (sometimes literally) naked human body in front of a live audience”²⁰. In ways compatible with the later actionist strategies, the body and nudity become offered to the contemplation and visual-synesthetic experience of the voyeur extracted from passivity, who is transformed into an active participant, absorbed in the totality of the performance. The aggression of the artist’s body in a performance processed by technology becomes a practiced method.

Mixtures of the most diverse solutions, from artaudian resources to the most recent multimedia techniques justified by interdisciplinarity, are also demonstrated by artists inspired by the actionist excesses that stimulates one of the branches of the

Flemish wave of the 1980s, with valuable, although not immediate, consequences for the physiognomy of contemporary art. This tendency represents a suitable area for exploring scenic taboos, where the body supports a necessary overcoming of its visualization in a superficial or even trivial way²¹, which amplified the potential of representability, thanks to the appeal to the physical material of the performer. Performances in which the body is injured, blood is displayed, it experiences a real suffering are created. The emotion of the audience is directed through a “willed” strategy, which goes beyond any stability of representation, without altering the priority of the body, in the line in which Luc van den Dries mentions the concept of the “sublime body”. Invoking the leitmotif “Theatre is the most anthropomorphic art form”²², the importance of the image of the performer’s body is evident, which oscillates between taboos, theatrical models imposed by the directing: “The body transcends its own boundedness through the collective ritual of theatre, or it reaches its transcendental elevation of its boundedness by means of ecstasy, exhaustion or pain”²³.

Orlan, from “unrepresentability”²⁴ to “image-new image”

Contemporary performance is undoubtedly dependent on the strategies used by the performance artist, which is why the need to understand this eminently interdisciplinary current represents the essential step for decoding recent theatricality. Before the spectacle, but essential for its physiognomy, the fascination with the strangeness of representing an “unrepresentable” universe becomes the leitmotif of the performance artist in the 1960s, the phenomenon unfolding in abundance starting with the North American perimeter. The mixture between artistic attempts of this type and postmodern philosophical ideas, increasingly concerned the female characters at the forefront of the avant-garde. These approaches are justified by feminism and other aspects of gender studies, in which the most obvious theme brought is the female identity. The impact created by the American artist Carolee

Schneemann triggers performative formulas that concern the potential of the body's representability.

In a different register, but starting from analogous beginnings, the french artist Orlan – who moves from artistic forms defined by the old norms of representation (graphics and painting) to openings of representability (the use of one's own body) – proposes before the 1980s photographic images, fixed by the theme of her own body used as a standard. During the 1960s, the french artist makes her appearance in the forefront of artistic life with photography, with the “body-sculpture” her dominant concept in photography, followed by artistic maneuvers that expand the possibilities of displaying the human form within the artistic perimeter. Images appear that include working with a mask, supported by symbols such as the “body without identity”, later evolving towards its anatomical mutations and composite forms. Orlan starts from posing on a pedestal (religious themes) to positions in which the form is hybrid, unrecognizable. “The body sculpture” or “the body that emerges and liberates from the frame” are themes that make up the collection *Les tableaux vivant* (1977), emphasizing the relationship between the female body and the palette of relationships imposed by its existence in society, coordinated by its norms. It is an obsessive theme in the era of feminism, the artistic image becoming the result of a critical look at the landmarks of beauty, of femininity built by the western art, the artist using new resources of the image: installations, photography and performance art, permanently emphasizing the predominance of the male gaze from which femininity is constructed. References are the key to decoding the representability associated with Orlan's art, thus motivating the deformation, the experimentation with the modification of the constructed image (the stage of “baroque photography” with christian references: White Madonna vs. Black Madonna). The selection of the photographer artist is decisive, she establishes “what is real and what is not real in photography”. Continuing with the “ephemeral sculpture” defined by the eroticism

of the exhibition, the strategy that culminates in the collection “the reincarnation of Saint Orlan” is involving the formula “beyond the body” or “image-new image” (1990-1993), obtained by mutilating the carnal component, the living matter, that ensures biological functioning (the image of aesthetic surgery).

Orlan triggers contradictory disputes that question the relationship between feminism and masochism. From the representability of the previous stage, her photographic art and the variants of the artist Orlan are symbolic manifestations which appear and “document” her character, “accumulate data” guaranteeing the “durability”²⁵. It is pertinent to invoke the term “unrepresentability” referring to the artist whose poetics is outlined by “creating multiple derivatives that refer more to the absent artist that create an infinite present [...] instead of pursuing an eternal presence ... creating leftovers such as the jars with suds and other by-products”²⁶, where is indicated the relics (the body fragments). The religious references, the taboos related to them, and the living body whose modification is on display (cosmetic surgery), all establish subtle references to the artaudian artist destined for sacrifice. Representability becomes “non-representable”²⁷, a concept that offers liberties of equally rational and sensory interpretation from the part of the audience who must “get hold of her internal processes when performing—the series of actions now being transformed into series of numbers, dismembering the artist into scientifically reaped data [...] this also provides further space for reflecting on the idea of a present absence of the artist”²⁸.

For Orlan, the image, the body and the way in which it is processed, is motivated by the change of her feminine image, the recognized key of his poetics whose objective is to surpass any disciplinary boundary. Her artistic approach appears an equivalent to Lehman's intentions that signal the virtuality of the new, postdramatic performance.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study represent the consequence of two levels of investigation, based on the two key terms, representation and representability, which define the diversity of expressive manifestations in performing arts, which also raise questions regarding the possibility of expressing the still existing taboo in western art and of course, contemporary performance. Unlike previous decades, the recent performance which include the body exposure has an obvious relaxed attitude concerning using the nudity and other aggressive stage methods. The display of the human body and of the stage situations defined by its presence in either immoral or degrading poses removes the fear of repercussions, the artist invoking more than ever the lack of constraints in art. The “abolition” of stage restrictions becomes a solution of appreciation and a stimulus of the audience’s curiosity. From this point, the artist’s body becomes subject to procedures compatible with the abysmal permissiveness, and combinations with the surreal immaterial space, adaptable to any visual relationship, configuring the “absent presence”, resorting to themes such as identity and dehumanization, due to its hybrid, duplicated, multiplied form.

Without invoking the intent to exhaust the examples that discuss the increasing opposition between representation and representability, the image of performance, that links those antagonistic terms, depends on highlighting the above mentioned most important components, space and of course, body. Its presence or absence in the history of theatre or the style of the staging in which it appears remains the great provocation of the contemporary performance, amplified by the intensification and the symbiosis created between living, carnal matter and the virtuality of multi-media images, which continuously support and stimulate the representability.

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THE UNIMODAL AND MULTIMODAL WORLD: A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF MIXED REALITY?

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BIO

Ligia Ciornei is an interdisciplinary artist, screenwriter, director, and producer, known for integrating mixed reality into storytelling. She studied Film Directing and Production at I. L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, where she is now completing a PhD on immersive cinema distribution and technology. Her films—including *Clouds of Chernobyl*, *Do You Believe in God?*, and the VR short *Dr. TEX*—have screened internationally and are available on HBO Max, Tubi, and Amazon Prime. Beyond film, she creates performative installations like *Citadela* and directs theater works such as *Grounded*. She is a film selector at Simfest, an artistic consultant for the Noetic Ark, and has completed research residencies at the University of Southern California and the Birmingham Institute of Robotics. She is currently producing *Gone Guy*, a feature documentary, as well as two feature films: *Three Sisters*, *My Robot* and *Grounded Between Borders*.

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an epistemological and performative reflection on mixed reality (MR) as an emergent language uniting art, technology, and cognition. Expanding on David Nelson's notion of MR as a site of shared agency and ethical co-presence, it contrasts "unimodal" and "transmodal" universes through examples from cinema, immersive theater, and human-computer interaction. Drawing on research from the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, the study situates MR as a dramaturgic environment enabling empathic adaptation. Ultimately, it proposes MR as a new expressive grammar—an evolving "language-system" redefining narrative, perception, and presence at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

Mixed Reality (MR), unimodal narrative, multimodal interaction, adaptive dramaturgy, human-computer interaction (HCI)

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Introduction

In order to arrive at a syntax, a language, or what might ultimately be recognized as a new artistic form, as Professor David Nelson suggests, it is necessary to conceptualize the world of Mixed Reality (MR) and its established applications as they have evolved by 2025. Over the past twenty-five years—since the influential introduction of the “reality–virtuality continuum” by Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino—the landscape of published research and practical implementations has profoundly reshaped how individuals perceive and engage with digitally constructed environments.

Emergent forms of infinite, speculative, and simulated realities are increasingly framing the social and ethical architecture of the near future. Within this context, MR is no longer a matter of technical augmentation but becomes, in Nelson’s words, a domain governed by “the absolute right of ethical consciousness,”¹ wherein the deed—its phenomenological figure in mixed reality—must coincide with that which is known. In other words, MR begins to demand a redefinition of experience in which presence, agency, and perception are co-constituted within shared digital space.

Professor Nelson emphasized that what we refer to as “mixed reality” is not merely a simulated environment, but rather a domain of co-presence—of *shared agency*—in which the ethics of decision-making becomes inherently performative. Within research projects developed at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, such as SARC-VR and SimCoach, MR is not simply a technological interface; it emerges as an affective space of intervention. As Nelson articulates, “We’re designing for real-time perception and emotional response—not for fiction, but for transformation.”²

Despite these conceptual advances, recent research and innovation in interaction design methods remain insufficiently systematized, resulting in significant ambiguity. For instance, when taste, smell, and haptic modalities are subsumed under sensor-based input, a system utilizing all of these might paradoxically be classified as *unimodal*. This is rooted in the mathematical definition

of unimodality—referring to a distribution or process centered on a single peak or mode of data processing. In the context of human-machine interaction, the term “unimodal” denotes systems that rely primarily on a single sensory channel. As such, this conceptual imprecision invites reconsideration of how modality itself is defined in multimodal and transmodal interactive environments.

In the research hypothesis prompted by Professor David Nelson, the term *unimodal* is employed not in its strict sensory sense (i.e., visual, auditory, etc.), but as an epistemological metaphor: a narrative world governed by a single ontological layer and a singular logic of representation—namely, one that is physical, linear, and internally coherent. This “unimodal world” is, by its very nature, constrained within a closed paradigm of perception. As Professor Nelson pointed out during our discussion, “It still feels like a cinematic experience... interesting, but not yet a new language.” In this regard, mixed reality does not merely propose a sensory expansion, but rather a cognitive reconfiguration—a domain of multiplicity in which narrative is not merely represented, but enacted, negotiated, and co-created.

In further dialogue, we examined how traditional cinematic works tend to be inherently unimodal—“a camera perspective with no agency,” as Nelson defines it—while theatre, despite offering symbolic mobility, still lacks perceptual autonomy. By contrast, his current projects at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies incorporate eye-tracking, natural language processing sensors, and real-time emotional analytics to construct what he describes as “a dramaturgy of adaptive narrative space.”³

Films frequently depict what can be understood as a *unimodal world*—a reality constrained to a single ontological framework. This dominant framework is often rooted in the physical, where characters engage with each other and their environment in a linear, cause-and-effect sequence. Rarely do cinematic narratives allow characters to interact meaningfully with virtual elements or alternate dimensions, and when they do, such interactions are

typically justified solely through diegetic or directorial choices. In doing so, cinema reinforces the presumption that physical reality is both the sole and authoritative mode of human experience. Nevertheless, contemporary cinematic art has increasingly ventured into more interconnected narrative terrains, where hybrid realities become legitimate sites for exploring the simultaneity of the real and the virtual.

By contrast, theatrical performance often employs symbolic and metaphorical strategies to engage with unimodal and transmodal paradigms. A play might, for example, stage a character grappling with multiple coexisting realities, thereby representing the cognitive and emotional dissonance of navigating a world in which the physical and the virtual are intertwined. Alternatively, tangible props—such as a virtual reality headset or a live-streamed projection accessed through a tablet—can serve as theatrical proxies for intangible, digital experiences. These metaphoric devices are crucial for illustrating how unimodal reality is perceived and negotiated by those situated within it.

Moreover, contemporary theatre increasingly addresses themes central to mixed reality, such as the dissolution of boundaries between physical and virtual space, or the ethical ambivalence of technological mediation. Through such dramaturgical techniques, theatrical productions provide audiences with an experiential and reflective lens through which to examine the complexities of life in an era defined by hybrid ontologies.

In the performative arts, theatre occupies a privileged position in articulating the phenomenological depth of Mixed Reality (MR). Unlike cinema's fixed temporality, the stage sustains an open and recursive dialogue between real and virtual presences. In certain contemporary productions, digital avatars coexist with human actors, forming a dramaturgy of negotiation rather than representation. This hybrid format recalls what Hegel described as the reconciliation between essence and appearance, wherein spirit externalizes itself through form only to rediscover its own truth in

the act of performance⁴. Recent experiments by the USC Institute for Creative Technologies have extended this notion of “living dramaturgy” through adaptive avatars that respond to audience emotion, gesture, and language in real time, transforming the spectator into a participant within the dramaturgic fabric⁵. Such performances dissolve the boundary between author and observer, proposing theatre as a site of ontological co-creation—an evolving interface where affect, cognition, and technology converge to redefine what it means to act, perceive, and exist in shared virtual space.

The Evolution of the Unimodal World in Cinema and the Emergence of Cognitive Layering in Mixed Reality

The development of a unimodal world in cinema refers to the structured process by which a narrative is adapted to function within a single, coherent modality. This involves several distinct stages: the creation of an original narrative or the adaptation of an existing one to fit cinematic conventions; the development of characters and the narrative world; the visual design that constructs a cohesive universe; the integration of animation or visual effects to support action and enhance immersion; and the orchestration of sound and music to generate a multisensory experience. Finally, editing consolidates the elements into a seamless narrative flow. Each stage contributes to producing a self-contained world in which all expressive vectors converge to reinforce a singular perception of reality.

In contrast, mixed reality (MR) introduces a scenographic multiplicity—a performative space where several types of reality coexist within the same interactive frame. As Professor David Nelson emphasized in our discussions, MR does not simply add a digital overlay to the physical world but constructs a cognitive presence in which perception, attention, and interaction are dynamically co-regulated in real time: “*Mixed reality is not only visual layering—it's cognitive layering. It's dramaturgy in motion.*”

This “dramaturgy in motion”⁶ (USC ICT Research Group, 2014) entails a form of algorithmic scenography wherein space is not merely decorative but intelligent (responsive, adaptive, and user-aware). Nelson’s work on the SimSensei project at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies illustrates this principle by developing empathetic avatars that read users’ nonverbal cues and adjust narrative tempo and conversational flow accordingly. Initially conceived for post-traumatic therapeutic interventions, this system reveals significant potential for immersive theatre, where the performer becomes a responsive system, and the audience a narrative catalyst.

However, even if cinematic productions are bound to unimodal coherence, they achieve significant complexity through high-level worldbuilding. James Cameron’s *Avatar* is a paradigmatic example of a film that, while unimodal, leverages advanced technology to simulate an immersive fictional universe. Through sophisticated visual effects, sound design, and musical composition, *Avatar* creates a multisensory continuum that fully absorbs the viewer into the diegetic world. The unimodal consistency lies in its adherence to a single experiential reality—one that, though fictional, remains ontologically self-contained.

Similarly, the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix* (1999) explores speculative ontology but does so within a controlled, singular narrative structure. By deploying innovations like “bullet time” cinematography, the film enables viewers to experience the same event from multiple spatial and temporal vantage points, reinforcing the illusion of total immersion. Yet, the film remains structurally unimodal: its experiential logic unfolds within a defined, internally coherent system—the Matrix.

Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010) furthers this paradigm by interweaving dreamscapes and physical reality into a nested narrative logic. The “folding city” visual motif exemplifies how spatial manipulation can reflect psychological distortion, without abandoning the film’s central ontological frame. While these

examples stretch the formal limits of traditional cinema, they do so without crossing into the polymodal interactivity that defines MR environments.

Thus, unimodal films—despite their technological and narrative advancements—ultimately offer immersive experiences bounded by authorial intent and linear perception. As Nelson suggests, this does not negate their artistry, but it highlights a structural limit: *“Every film with an author presents, by definition, a unimodal world.”*

Mixed reality challenges this premise by replacing the singular authorial gaze with a system of negotiated presence—an emergent, interactive dramaturgy where narrative is co-authored in real time by both system and user.

Multimodality, Transmodality, and the Epistemic Threshold of Mixed Reality

American researchers in human-computer interaction, Harry Bunt and Francis Quek, have argued in separate foundational studies that human interaction with technology is inherently multimodal—rooted in the simultaneity and complementarity of sensory channels such as sight, sound, and touch. Their frameworks challenge the monolithic conceptualization of interaction design, positing instead that effective communication emerges through the integration of multiple perceptual modes. As such, re-evaluating augmented reality (AR) and mixed reality (MR) in light of this perceptual multiplicity may not only enhance interactional design but also serve as a catalyst for creative and narrative thinking in emerging experiential media⁷. (Bunt and Black, 2000)

This distinction raises a pivotal question: is mixed reality best described as a multimodal space, or does it constitute a transmodal synthesis—an emergent artistic language in its own right? In the lexicon of human-computer interaction, a “modal representation” typically refers to the dominance of a single communicative channel (visual, auditory, textual, spatial) within a given interface.

MR, by contrast, embodies transmodality: it orchestrates a space in which perception, action, and meaning are not merely parallel, but co-regulated in real time.

The devices through which MR is accessed—whether VR headsets, AR glasses, smartphones, or desktops—are not merely portals but cognitive interfaces. They modulate attention and user engagement in relation to degrees of immersion. While traditional taxonomies of MR applications are concentrated in technical fields such as medicine, architecture, and tourism, such classifications have yet to be fully extrapolated into the performative arts, where the implications for dramaturgy, authorship, and audience participation are profound and largely under-explored⁸.

Contemporary multimodal films exemplify a hybrid form of narrative expression that blends live-action, high-fidelity CGI, and immersive soundscapes. Titles such as *The Jungle Book* (2016), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) are emblematic in this regard, offering coherent fusions of digital characters, human actors, and spatialized sound. While viewers are not agents in the narrative, the cinematic experience approaches a passive form of MR wherein the sensory strata deepen immersion without enabling participatory modulation of the diegesis.

Films like *Inception* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999) push the ontological boundaries of the real and the simulated. However, they do so within a unimodal structure that positions the viewer as contemplator rather than co-creator. In contrast, the MR systems developed by Professor David Nelson at the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, particularly *SimSensei*, propose adaptive narrative architectures. Empathetic avatars within these systems respond in real time to users' emotional cues, speech, and spatial orientation, generating a dramaturgy that is not linear but reactive⁹.

As Nelson emphasized in our personal interview: "*Mixed reality is not only visual layering—it's cognitive layering. It's dramaturgy in motion.*"

Thus, rather than extending a single sensory dimension, MR platforms articulate an emergent transmodal language—one where sensory, affective, and narrative vectors interweave into a dynamic ecology of co-presence and interaction.

Examples of films considered multimodal include those that combine elements of animation, virtual reality, and live-action, as well as productions employing multiple technologies—such as surround sound, special effects, and motion capture—to create an immersive and interactive experience for audiences. Notable examples of multimodal films include *The Jungle Book* (2016), *The Lion King* (2019), *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), all of which seamlessly integrate animated sequences, live actors, and high-fidelity visual effects to construct compelling visual worlds. The narrative design of these films reflects the directors' multimodal approach, offering viewers a richer and more immersive experience. Directors make use of multiple modalities—music, sound design, production design, special effects, and performance—to construct complex and coherent cinematic universes. For example, in the *Star Wars* saga, directors have crafted a detailed world that blends elements of science fiction, fantasy, and mythology through the use of special effects, production design, and musical composition. This allows audiences to feel as though they are part of the *Star Wars* universe, deepening the immersive experience and enhancing narrative engagement.

The umbrella terms *unimodal*, *multimodal*, *tangible*, *collaborative*, and *MR (Mixed Reality)*—without clearly focusing on modality or the interaction context—represent overlapping literacies that evolve from one another and aim to simulate reality endlessly. Consequently, inaccurate representations of the available interaction methods may hinder creative thinking in future researchers and prove counterproductive to the development of MR as a discipline. Previous attempts to enumerate or classify the components of augmented and mixed reality have revealed that a clear and comprehensive taxonomy of interactions is either lacking

or insufficiently disseminated in scientific communities. Starting from the hypothesis that the mix of realities is driven by the convergence and evolution of the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, literature, and cinema), the most effective mode of communication between human and device is one that aligns with language systems already internalized over time. This mirrors the historical trajectory of cinematographic art in the 19th century, which eventually emerged as an autonomous art form.

Mixed Reality (MR)

Mixed Reality (MR) possesses all the prerequisites to become a new form of art. This article attempts to demonstrate that potential by analyzing the historical evolution of the human-computer interaction language and the corresponding technological frameworks.

Mixed Reality (MR) is an ever-evolving field whose recent innovations are beginning to delineate new models of human-computer interaction. Among the most advanced institutions in both theoretical and applied research is Meta Lab, which has adopted a shared thesis: to bring possible worlds into a unified temporal and spatial framework, both real and virtual. Through the integration of smart glasses powered by AI and AR, immersive 360-degree sound systems, and haptic feedback devices, Meta Lab aims to embed users within truly hybrid experiences.

A key challenge today concerns the development of a language adequate to this new perceptual regime, one that is simultaneously visual, tactile, sonic, and computational. This challenge is reminiscent of the emergence of cinematic language in the late 19th century, which similarly required decades of formal, technological, and narrative refinement. The arts—cinema, performance, architecture, music—are not peripheral to this transformation but central: MR, as an expressive system, evolves alongside the aesthetic and symbolic grammars of these disciplines.

Human-computer interaction (HCI) has undergone considerable refinement, nearing what some theorists call a form of cognitive symbiosis. And yet, skepticism or cautious curiosity still surrounds the public reception of augmented and mixed realities. As Gustave Le Bon argued in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, humans are deeply conditioned by the emotional resonance of images and the shifting meanings of words over time. Concepts such as *democracy* or *freedom* have held radically different connotations across cultural and historical contexts, shaped by the collective imaginaries they evoke.

In contemporary performance practice, the stage has become a laboratory for testing the porous boundaries between real and simulated experience. Directors and performers increasingly employ digital projection, motion capture, and reactive scenography to explore how perception itself can be staged. In such environments, the actor no longer interprets a fixed role but coexists with algorithmic entities that learn, mirror, or respond to human expression. The result is a dramaturgy of presence in which action is both embodied and extended, simultaneously material and virtual. Theatre, in this expanded sense, becomes a cognitive experiment—an art of adaptation—where technology amplifies rather than replaces human agency, and where performance itself becomes a dialogue between code and consciousness.

In this light, the phrase “mixed reality” may one day constitute not merely a descriptor but a foundational term in a new cognitive and symbolic language. Scholarly studies on virtuality and augmented presence point to MR as a synthesis of lived perception and technological mediation. Yet this synthesis demands temporal adaptation. As Donald Norman notes in *The Design of Everyday Things*, humans navigate systems more effectively when design aligns with intuitive perceptual schemas. The success of MR depends on cultivating such intuitive literacy across visual, auditory, and spatial channels.

Theorists like Umberto Eco and Jaakko Hintikka have framed “possible worlds” as conceptual tools for exploring narrative and logic. In MR, these worlds are no longer mere metaphors but operational environments, navigable through interaction and immersion. Dolezel and Pavel have extended this to narrative semiotics, suggesting that fictional objects and structures are cumulative models with real cognitive and emotional impacts. As users become more adept at these models, their expectations for interactivity, immersion, and coherence will increase.

However, perceptual overload remains a barrier. Unlike linear media, MR presents multidimensional data streams that must be cognitively parsed and emotionally assimilated. Here, the concept of perceptual reality—as shaped by memory, sensory input, and context—becomes central. MR systems, by blending physical and digital elements, offer enhanced perceptions that may transcend biological limitations. In cinema, such effects are anticipated in films like *Citizen Kane* and *Vertigo*, where perception and subjectivity are central themes.

In *Citizen Kane* (1941), Orson Welles constructs a fragmented portrait of the protagonist through multiple viewpoints and non-linear flashbacks. The film illustrates how narrative framing alters spectator interpretation, aligning with constructivist theories of reality. Similarly, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) uses disorienting cinematographic techniques to immerse the viewer in the protagonist’s psychological turmoil. These works anticipate the perceptual complexity of VR and MR, where users are not passive viewers but active agents within adaptive environments.

In VR, the spectator may undergo real-time transformations as if they were their own; AR introduces mediated layers of meaning atop the real; and MR—distinct in its bidirectional interaction—allows for a dynamic hybridization of memory, illusion, and agency. The result is not just a new medium, but potentially a new epistemology: a way of knowing that is embodied, co-constructed, and performative.

In live performance, the human body remains the most advanced interface ever conceived. It negotiates presence with precision and vulnerability, functioning as both transmitter and receiver of meaning. When integrated into a mixed reality environment, the performer becomes a living sensor—an instrument through which virtual and physical planes intersect. Movement acquires informational density; silence becomes a threshold for perception. The stage, once a delimited frame, transforms into a dynamic network of signals, light, and feedback. What emerges is a performative ecology where gesture, environment, and audience share the same perceptual loop. In this setting, theatre ceases to be an imitation of life and becomes its augmented continuation, a rehearsal for future forms of coexistence between human consciousness and intelligent space.

Thus, understanding MR today requires an integrated framework—drawing from philosophy, media studies, cognitive science, and aesthetic theory—to grasp its implications not only for storytelling or technology but for how we define presence, identity, and knowledge in the 21st century.

Other popular applications of Mixed Reality (MR) include simulation-based games designed to train users for various careers or to enhance their professional skills. One of the most significant artistic productions in the realm of MR-based computer games is *Second Life*. Developed by Linden Lab in 2003, this virtual environment allows users to interact within a 3D space, where they can create avatars—digital representations of themselves—and engage in a wide range of activities. In *Second Life*, users can explore, build, and even purchase virtual land. They may also participate in events, shopping experiences, or gameplay scenarios. As such, *Second Life* exemplifies the principles of mixed reality, blending real-world sensibilities with virtual autonomy. The platform empowers individuals to shape their own environments and interact in ways unattainable in the physical world. For instance, users can engage with digital objects that have no

physical counterpart—such as manipulating 3D renderings of artifacts or configuring immersive landscapes beyond physical possibility. Additionally, interactions with virtual entities, including AI-driven avatars or scripted digital characters, offer nuanced social and cognitive experiences. These interactions enhance user engagement, allowing them to explore emotional, relational, and psychological dimensions within a secure and dynamic environment. In this context, *Second Life* not only redefined virtual socialization but also laid the groundwork for deeper exploration into the nature of identity, agency, and perception in digitally constructed environments.

Conclusion

Philosophers have long debated the concept of immortality, with some arguing that it is fundamentally unattainable due to the finite nature of human existence. Others contend that immortality may be achieved through the preservation of memory and ideas, passed across generations. A further view proposes spiritual or metaphysical means—such as reincarnation or an afterlife—as potential pathways to immortality. Ultimately, there is no consensus on the matter, as philosophical positions vary widely.

Within the framework of mixed reality (MR), however, the notion of immortality takes on a new, technologically mediated dimension: the possibility of continuing to “exist” within a virtual environment after physical death. This vision assumes that some essence of consciousness—be it emotional imprint, cognitive pattern, or behavioral model—might be digitally preserved, allowing the individual to interact with others in an augmented or holographic form. This form of post-biological continuity could be achieved via artificial intelligence, which would enable a digital avatar to respond, adapt, and communicate as though still alive.

In fact, this was one of the underlying conceptual intentions behind the creation of *Second Life*—a virtual world launched by Linden Lab in 2003. The platform allowed users to craft digital

avatars, establish alternate identities, and inhabit a persistent virtual ecosystem. These avatars could, in theory, persist indefinitely, thereby granting users a sense of symbolic immortality. Even after users disengaged from the platform, their avatars could remain active, leaving behind digital traces of thought, personality, and interaction.

This perceived continuity appealed to many participants, as it enabled the exploration of selfhood and interpersonal dynamics in a safe and unregulated space. *Second Life* was revolutionary in offering a virtual sanctuary for identity experimentation, emotional rehearsal, and social simulation. Nonetheless, its popularity has waned in recent years due to the emergence of more advanced virtual reality technologies. These newer systems, equipped with real-time presence, memory storage, and AI-assisted interaction, have surpassed *Second Life* in their ability to deliver immersive and emotionally resonant experiences. As virtual and augmented reality technologies become more accessible and user-friendly, they are increasingly likely to attract broader demographics. The fusion of digital memory, behavioral learning, and holographic projection suggests a future where identity itself may be archived and reanimated—challenging the very boundaries of mortality and presence.

The diminishing appeal of *Second Life* can be attributed to its outdated graphics and lack of engaging functionalities. Technical issues such as latency further eroded its usability and, consequently, its user base. Today, *Second Life* no longer occupies the cultural and technological relevance it once did. However, its conceptual legacy finds new life in the emergence of the Metaverse—a shared, immersive virtual space that exists independently of physical reality. This interconnected digital universe enables real-time interaction between users and serves as a platform for socialization, gaming, commerce, and cultural events. From exploring virtual cities to attending concerts and conferences, the Metaverse presents a hybrid space where physical and digital realities converge.

Its potential lies not merely in technological innovation but in the way it redefines human experience and presence. The Metaverse stands as a more advanced and compelling prototype of what *Second Life* once aimed to be. Fundamentally, the trajectory of these developments underscores a deep-seated human desire for continuity—perhaps even for a form of digital immortality. As research progresses, we may soon encounter a proliferation of disembodied avatars—conscious agents suspended in fully digital realms—inhabiting a persistent virtuality characterized by infinite narrative threads. In this speculative horizon, the user ceases to be a passive observer and becomes an active participant in a digitally extended selfhood.

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MOCKING THE PEOPLE: POPULIST AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICS OF SATIRE IN CONTEMPORARY MOCKUMENTARY

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how contemporary mockumentaries critique populist discourse by appropriating and subverting documentary aesthetics. Through comparative analysis of Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* and Netflix's *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, it traces how strategies of satire, irony, and staged authenticity expose the emotional and visual grammars of nationalism and post-truth politics. Combining discourse theory with close formal analysis, the study argues that mockumentary's reflexive play with evidence and performance unsettles claims to immediacy and "common sense" central to populism, inviting active, skeptical spectatorship across distinct cultural and industrial contexts.

KEYWORDS

mockumentary, populism, satire, theatrical satire, political aesthetics

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, populism has emerged as one of the most widespread and destabilizing forces in global politics. Once considered a marginal or episodic style of political engagement, populism now constitutes a central feature of electoral strategies, political rhetoric, and media spectacle across Europe and beyond.

From the anti-immigrant slogans of Hungary's Fidesz party and the ideological rigidity of Poland's Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), to the media-savvy bombast of leaders like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, populist movements have reshaped the landscape of liberal democracies by claiming to speak directly for *the people*, a category often defined in opposition to elites, outsiders, or abstract enemies of the nation.

In parallel, populism has cultivated a highly visual and emotionally resonant media presence, relying on spectacle, affect, and simplified messaging to generate mass appeal. As populism increasingly operates through the logics of image, performance, and repetition, the role of screen media in amplifying, reframing, or contesting its discourse has become crucial to understanding its cultural force.

Within this context, the mockumentary, a hybrid genre that fuses documentary realism with fictional or satirical content, offers a unique critical position. Mockumentaries exploit the codes of factual storytelling (talking-head interviews, archival material, voice-over narration) only to subvert them, foregrounding their own intentional construction and inviting viewers to question the authority of media forms. In doing so, they not only parody specific political figures or events but also engage more broadly with the affective and visual grammars that make populism persuasive.

This paper explores the ways in which mockumentary functions as a mode of political and aesthetic resistance to populist discourse. It focuses on three case studies: Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* (2022), and the Netflix-produced *Death to 2020* and *Death*

to 2021 (dir. Al Campbell & Alice Mathias). While situated in distinct national and stylistic traditions, Eastern European documentary satire on the one hand, and Anglo-American television parody on the other, these films share a commitment to exposing the contradictions and absurdities of populist rhetoric.

The central argument of this article is that the mockumentary's power lies not only in its satirical content but also in its formal *modus operandi*: its play with authenticity, its staging of affect, and its invitation to distrust the surfaces of media truth. In a time when populist movements claim to bypass institutional filters and speak directly to the people, the mockumentary serves as a counter-genre, one that insists on mediation, complexity, and irony.

In recent years, the mockumentary has gained prominence as a comedic or entertainment format *and* as a politically charged genre capable of interrogating contemporary ideologies. With its hybrid status, blending documentary aesthetics with fictional content, it enables a unique form of critical reflection on the nature of media truth, representation, and performance. Originating in 20th-century film and television, the mockumentary has evolved from marginal satire to a globally distributed format. This evolution corresponds with the rise of media-savvy populist leaders and digitally fragmented information ecosystems, where irony, misinformation, deepfake and spectacle converge. In this confusing environment, mockumentaries increasingly serve both as mirrors and critiques of populist communication, offering viewers an opportunity to decode political spectacle and question the legitimacy of institutional narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Populism, though diverse in content, typically divides society into two opposing camps: the pure people and the corrupt elite. Cas Mudde defines populism as a "thin-centered ideology" that simplifies complex political realities into moral binaries¹. This ideological reduction allows populist leaders to portray themselves

as embodiments of the people's will, drawing legitimacy not from institutions, but from direct identification with "the people" and mass sentiment.

Ernesto Laclau's discourse-theoretical model deepens this perspective by presenting populism as a logic of articulation. Populist discourse, according to Laclau, constructs an equivalential chain among heterogeneous social demands, consolidating them into a collective identity that opposes a common antagonist: "the system," "the elite," or "globalists"². This articulation is not incidental to politics but *is* politics at its most elemental: the creation of subjects, identities, and oppositions through discourse.

Further elaborating the cultural dimension, Margaret Canovan distinguishes between two faces of populism: the redemptive and the pragmatic³. The redemptive aspect promises national renewal and moral purification, often grounded in mythic pasts. In contrast, the pragmatic dimension arises from populism's role within representative democracies. Mockumentary, as a hybrid genre, is particularly attuned to exploring these tensions: it can parody redemptive narratives while exposing the contradictions of pragmatic political action.

More recently, Benjamin Moffitt's concept of populism as a political style shifts the focus from ideology to performance. For Moffitt, populism is best understood not only through what it says but how it behaves: it thrives on spectacle, crisis narration, and affective intensity⁴. Populists frequently position themselves as underdogs or rebels, speaking in vernacular tones and staging direct confrontations with journalists, institutions, or public norms. In such performances, media presence is constitutive of populist power.

Silvio Waisbord's notion of post-truth populism sharpens this media critique. In a fragmented media landscape where facts are personalized and truth is contingent on identity, populism succeeds by aligning itself with emotional authenticity rather than empirical verifiability⁵. It offers moral clarity and affective resonance in place

of complexity and nuance, conditions under which spectacle eclipses deliberation.

The mockumentary emerges as a genre strategically positioned to counteract this logic. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight define mockumentary as a form that borrows the codes of documentary realism to construct fictional or semi-fictional narratives, thereby foregrounding the artificiality of documentary conventions⁶. In appropriating and distorting these conventions (interviews, expert testimony, archival images, direct address) mockumentaries invite skepticism toward mediated truth.

As Linda Hutcheon notes, parody and irony operate through "authorized transgression"⁷. They derive their force not from total rejection but from strategic mimicry, an internal critique from within the form. The mockumentary's ironic gaze compels the audience to reflect on the construction of meaning, whether that meaning is encoded in political speeches, cultural rituals, or media representations.

Geoffrey Baym adds that satire, especially in the age of infotainment, functions as a "discursive integration" that combines news, narrative, and performance to offer metacommentary on media itself⁸. This is crucial in the case of populism, where political spectacle often overwhelms rational discourse. The mockumentary, by deconstructing spectacle through form, becomes a powerful diagnostic and rhetorical tool.

This paper adopts a method of comparative cultural analysis informed by discourse theory and media aesthetics. Mixing close formal reading with attention to cultural and political context, it seeks to reveal how mockumentaries critique populist rhetoric and expose the media systems that enable it.

The two case studies explored in this article, Romanian-Hungarian director Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* and Netflix's *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, have been chosen to represent a spectrum of mockumentary practices that critique populist ideologies across cultural and industrial contexts. While Lakatos's

work is rooted in Eastern European nationalist discourse and employs an intimate, auteur-driven aesthetic, Brooker's Netflix specials operate through fast-paced, globally marketed satire fueled by celebrity performances and platform-based production. Together, they exemplify how mockumentary can function at both national and transnational level to question the visual grammar and emotional rhetoric of populism.

Case Study: *Whose Dog Am I?* Satirizing ethnic purity and populist myth

Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* (2022) offers a satirical dismantling of ethnic nationalism through the unlikely metaphor of canine identity. A Hungarian filmmaker born and based in Romania, Lakatos teaches film at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Cluj and is known for blending reflexive documentary with performance. As both director and protagonist, he embarks on an absurd quest to determine the "true Hungarian dog", effectively parodying the essentialist logic of identity politics in both Hungarian and Romanian populist discourse.

The film's context is key. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz government, has promoted a homogenizing ethno-nationalist narrative centered on Hungarian purity, historical grievance, and cultural exceptionalism. However, the Romanian side is no less entangled in nationalist rhetoric. In recent years, Romanian populist parties like the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), led by George Simion, and SOS Romania, under Diana Șoșoacă, and, more recently Călin Georgescu, the pro-Russian politician who almost became President, have pushed radical ethno-nationalist and anti-globalist agendas to over 20 percent of the Romanian vote. These figures present themselves as guardians of Romanian identity against perceived threats: EU integration, Hungarian irredentism, minority rights, and pandemic restrictions. Their discourse often features anti-Hungarian tropes and appeals to autochthonous purity, an ideological mirror of Orbán's rhetoric.⁹

Lakatos, as a Romanian citizen of Hungarian ethnicity, is well positioned to satirize both discourses. His identity disrupts the binary frameworks both populisms depend on. In *Whose Dog Am I?*, this disruption takes the form of a dog-breeding allegory. Pedigree, bloodline, and selective mating become proxies for the language of national belonging. The filmmaker's journey leads him through interviews with breeders, nationalist historians, and self-appointed cultural gatekeepers who articulate increasingly absurd definitions of purity. The film's central irony lies in the fact that these definitions are not scientific, but ideological, a fact underscored by the use of parodic DNA tests and pseudo-historical reconstructions.

While *Whose Dog Am I?* is rooted in documentary realism, it is unmistakably a mockumentary in structure, tone, and intent. The film draws directly on the tradition of hybrid documentary forms that critique their own construction, manipulating factual conventions to prompt critical reflection. Like canonical mockumentaries (*Zelig*, *Borat*, *This is Spinal Tap*), it embraces an aesthetic of straight-faced absurdity. But unlike many Anglo-American examples, Lakatos's mockumentary is quieter, more observational, and deeply embedded in local cultural codes.

Visually, the film mimics investigative documentaries, employing formal restraint, static compositions, and diegetic sound to simulate authenticity. Yet the narrative is structured around performative contradiction. Lakatos performs sincerity while the content of the interviews devolves into ideological farce. This tension between form and content creates a rich ironic field that mirrors the contradictions inherent in nationalist populism. The satire is brought to front by the actual dog's "dialogues", as they mimic their master's themes, in a most humorous way: Lakatos lets them "speak" through comic-book inspired dialogue boxes.

The film also critiques how populist rhetoric embeds itself in everyday practices. Dog breeders proudly assert the superiority of national breeds, echoing the language of cultural exclusivism. The repetition of these claims, never questioned, always asserted,

parallels how populist talking points circulate unchallenged in media and public discourse. Lakatos refrains from overt ridicule. Instead, he uses editing, juxtaposition, and silence to allow viewers to witness the absurdity for themselves.

One of the film's formal strategies is its meticulous replication of documentary tropes: handheld cinematography, interviews in realist settings, archival footage, and scientific diagrams are all used to lend authority to the film's otherwise absurd narrative. This tension, between realism of form and absurdity of content, is the hallmark of the mockumentary. The viewer is invited to momentarily suspend disbelief, only to later become aware of the fiction through tonal shifts, contradictions, or implausible claims. This reflexivity is what Roscoe and Hight describe as a "third-order realism", a space where the documentary illusion is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed¹⁰.

Whose Dog Am I? parodies populist obsession with ethnic purity and the documentary genre itself, especially its use in national mythmaking. It recalls historical instances where film has served nation-building ideologies, whether in Communist-era Romanian cinema or nationalist Hungarian documentary traditions. Lakatos flips this dynamic by turning the state's search for cultural essence into a personal, ironic quest that spirals into nonsense.

Crucially, Lakatos does not resolve the narrative with revelation or clarity. The quest for the "Hungarian dog" ends in ambiguity and failure, an anti-closure that subverts the catharsis expected in populist storytelling, which typically resolves crisis through the restoration of mythic order. This aesthetic resistance to resolution is itself a political act. By refusing to offer answers, the film models a way of thinking beyond binary oppositions and essentialist identity.

As a film theoretician, Lakatos also invites viewers to reflect on the mediating structures of knowledge. The documentary form, traditionally associated with truth, is turned inside out. Every truth claim becomes suspect. The title itself, *Whose Dog Am I?*, destabilizes

subjectivity: it implies that identity is a function of power, ownership, and classification. In a populist world where leaders claim to define the nation's essence, this question becomes urgent: *who gets to define whom?*

In the Romanian context, the relevance of this critique is amplified. AUR's discourse has increasingly targeted minorities, particularly Hungarians and Roma, while simultaneously appropriating populist tropes from global far-right movements. Diana Șoșoacă's rhetoric fuses conspiracy theory, Orthodox fundamentalism, and ultranationalist nostalgia into a potent media performance. Georgescu uses myths, conspiracies, movie quotes and pseudo-science to emphasize the greatness of the Romanian people to its most uneducated members. All of them have built their platforms on distrust of institutions and elites, a distrust mirrored in the populist style of Lakatos's mockumentary, albeit reversed in critical orientation.

Whose Dog Am I? shows the unique power of the mockumentary to expose the absurdities of populist ideology while simultaneously interrogating the media forms through which such ideology is produced and consumed. In the Romanian and Hungarian context, where documentary has long served as a vehicle for nationalist representation, Lakatos's film stands as a counter-genre: one that embraces reflexivity, irony, and formal complexity as tools of political critique.

Whose Dog Am I? goes beyond simply mocking nationalism. It breaks down the structures of feeling, power, and media that allow nationalism to appear natural. Through form, performance, and allegory, the film reveals the arbitrary foundations of ethnic essentialism and challenges viewers to see identity not as given, but as constructed, manipulated, and performed.

Case Study: *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*. Mockumentary as populist debunking in media-saturated democracies

The Netflix specials *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021*, produced by Broke and Bones and created by Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, adopt the mockumentary form as a mechanism for both cultural catharsis and political critique. Though less regionally anchored than Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?*, these productions function as transatlantic commentaries on the rise of populist spectacle, media saturation, and the collapse of coherent political narrative in liberal democracies.

Styled as retrospective documentaries, both specials present fictional talking-head interviews alongside real news footage from the tumultuous events of their respective years, marked by many natural and political disasters, but particularly by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As media products, they are significant not only for their content but for their promotional strategies and cultural positioning. Released globally on a leading streaming platform, both specials were marketed using the language of urgent retrospection: "The year you couldn't forget. Now you can't look away", tapping into a collective cultural fatigue. Their trailers, posters, and teaser materials emphasized both immediacy and star power, foregrounding a cast of internationally known actors: Samuel L. Jackson, Hugh Grant, Lisa Kudrow, Tracey Ullman, and Kumail Nanjiani, among others. These casting choices were not incidental. Each performer plays a hyperbolic stereotype of media figures or public voices: from a misinformed citizen to a Trumpist spokesperson, transforming familiar political roles into comic archetypes.

Laurence Fishburne's voice provides the films' distinctive, deadpan voice-over that ties together the satirical interviews and mock-news segments, giving the productions a pseudo-documentary tone, similar to David Attenborough-style narration, but with a dark comedic edge.

The inclusion of these high-profile actors serves multiple functions. First, it allows for a mimetic mirroring of real-world celebrity culture, particularly the role of celebrities in political discourse. Second, it blurs the line between satire and entertainment. The audience is drawn in by star appeal but confronted with narratives that disrupt passive consumption. Hugh Grant's portrayal of Tennyson Foss, a skeptical historian prone to revisionist perspectives, exemplifies this. His persona mocks both the pomp of elite commentary and the brittleness of institutional authority.

Crucially, *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021* must be read as extensions of Brooker's earlier project: *Black Mirror*. While *Black Mirror* explores dystopian futures shaped by surveillance, gamification, and techno-capitalism, these specials turn their gaze to the recent past, showing that dystopia is no longer speculative, it is contemporary. The aesthetics of cynicism, fragmentation, and emotional flattening that define *Black Mirror* are retooled here for satirical retrospection. The question is no longer what technology will do to us, but how media, ideology, and performance have already created a feedback loop of collective disorientation.

Netflix's promotional campaign for *Death to 2020* deliberately capitalized on the cultural capital of *Black Mirror*. Marketing materials, trailers, and social media teasers emphasized the shared creative team and tonal resemblance between the two productions. The campaign adopted the visual and rhetorical style of *Black Mirror*, sleek black backgrounds, glitch aesthetics, and sardonic taglines, to frame *Death to 2020* as a real-world extension of the series' dystopian satire.

This strategy positioned the mockumentary not merely as a comedy special but as a meta-commentary on the absurdity of recent history, inviting viewers to experience 2020 itself as a "*Black Mirror* episode come to life".

And the resulting collage, a mixture of scripted parody, improvisational comedy, and archival documentation, uses the

mockumentary form to confront the absurdity of real-world politics. Characters such as Dash Bracket (Samuel L. Jackson), a jaded reporter, and Gemma Nerrick (Diane Morgan), a clueless millennial, serve as exaggerated avatars of media personas and ordinary citizens whose perspectives are fragmented, ill-informed, or over-saturated. These archetypes represent the broader condition of a citizenry overwhelmed by political and informational chaos.

The mockumentary framework allows the creators to blend fiction with reality in ways that disorient viewers' expectations of truth and narrative structure. In particular, the use of staged interviews mimicking political commentary destabilizes traditional genre boundaries. This is intensified by the insertion of real video footage from press conferences, viral clips, and political rallies, especially those involving populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Jair Bolsonaro.

The fact that many real-life excerpts appear more grotesque or exaggerated than their fictional counterparts becomes a key point of critique. The result is an inversion of the expected logic of satire: reality outpaces fiction.

These mockumentaries are deeply reflexive in form. They continuously break the fourth wall, reference their own scriptwriters, and question the purpose of year-end review shows themselves. This self-awareness distinguishes them from mere comedy and situates them within the lineage of satirical mockumentary as critical media practice. As Baym argues, hybrid satirical forms like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight* operate within what he calls a "discursive integration", where narrative, critique, and humor blend to reflect on the media's complicity in the political events it reports¹¹.

In *Death to 2020/2021*, this media critique is made explicit: news media is portrayed as both voyeur and cheerleader in the theater of populist performance.

Furthermore, the films reflect the exhaustion and fragmentation of the audience's political attention. Rather than

culminating in a coherent narrative of the year's events, the structure is episodic, fragmented, and often contradictory. These formal strategies mirror the affective conditions of post-truth populism, anger, irony, cynicism, fatigue, and implicate the viewer as a participant in this media ecology. The audience is not offered clarity or closure, but instead a kaleidoscopic view of mediated catastrophe.

Brooker's use of the mockumentary genre is strategic. It permits a critical distance from the source material while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of critique in a world where entertainment and political spectacle are indistinguishable. Unlike traditional documentaries, which attempt to document and interpret history, these works parody the very impossibility of doing so in an environment where narrative authority has collapsed.

In the Netflix ecosystem, these specials also represent a calculated move. Positioned as international comedy content, they reach a broad audience outside traditional national broadcasting constraints. Yet, their critique is deeply Anglo-American, focusing on the cultural and political implosions of the U.S. and U.K. in the late 2010s and early 2020s. This geopolitical focus underscores the uneven distribution of media satire: while mockumentary emerges globally, its dominant tropes remain rooted in English-speaking liberal democracies.

Death to 2020 and *Death to 2021* function as satires of populism, but also as expressions of political disillusionment in the face of systemic incoherence. Their comedy is less about laughter and more about despair rendered entertaining, a tone that perfectly matches the surreal logic of populist communication, where truth is secondary to emotional appeal, repetition, and identity affirmation.

Finally, the specials invite reflection on the limits of satire itself. By exaggerating political dysfunction and media excess, they risk numbing the viewer, rather than mobilizing critique. In many reviews, critics noted this ambivalence. The mockumentary becomes a balm for disillusioned audiences, offering catharsis without

consequence, laughter without resolution. Yet, this too is a political gesture: it holds up a mirror to spectatorship, more than to power asking whether irony is enough in an era of entrenched populism.

Speaking truth to power is now extended, as *Death to 2020* and *Death to 2021* expand the mockumentary tradition by integrating celebrity culture, global media strategies, and postmodern genre awareness into a biting, if ambivalent, critique of populist spectacle.

Comparative Analysis

The two case studies, *Whose Dog Am I?* and *Death to 2020/2021*, represent distinct but convergent uses of mockumentary as a tool for political and cultural critique. While emerging from different national contexts and stylistic traditions, both interrogate the mechanisms of populist discourse, avoiding direct polemic, through formal disruption, satire, and aesthetic estrangement. Their similarities reveal how the mockumentary genre, across its diverse ways of existing, has developed into a powerful mode for exposing ideological inconsistencies, emotional manipulation, and the mediated construction of political truth.

Mockumentary as a genre has a long and complex lineage, one that traverses national cinemas, artistic movements, and technological shifts. Originating as early as Orson Welles's infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast (1938) and Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965), the genre evolved from documentary realism and theatrical satire.

In the late 20th century, it took more overtly comic forms with works such as Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), Christopher Guest's serial mockumentary career (*Waiting for Guffman*, 1996, *Best in Show*, 2000, *A Mighty Wind*, 2003, *For Your Consideration*, 2006, and *Mascots*, 2016), and Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat* and *Borat Subsequent Movie Film* (2006 and 2020), blending improvisation with sociopolitical commentary. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight describe mockumentary as operating through the aesthetic markers of

documentary (interviews, archival footage, voice-over) not to assert truth but to destabilize it¹²

This destabilization is central to both Lakatos and Brooker's projects. In *Whose Dog Am I?*, documentary aesthetics are used to parody the pseudo-scientific pretensions of nationalist ideology. The mock-ethnographic interviews, genealogy charts, and staged historical re-enactments closely mimic state-sponsored documentaries used throughout Central and Eastern Europe to consolidate myths of ethnic continuity. Yet Lakatos subverts these conventions through tone, structure, and absurdity, highlighting the arbitrariness of identity construction and the circular logic of populist essentialism.

Brooker's *Death to 2020/2021*, by contrast, appropriates the rapid-fire pace and fragmented structure of infotainment media. In its celebrity-filled performances and scripted parody interviews, the films channel the affective chaos of populist media environments. Like *Black Mirror*, these works reflect a world where emotional appeal has displaced rational deliberation, and where the blending of fact and fiction is no longer exceptional but standard. Here, the mockumentary does not mimic truth, it parodies the crisis of knowing itself.

Despite their divergent styles, Lakatos's slow, intimate absurdity and Brooker's frenetic collage, both projects emphasize the performativity of populist discourse. Populist leaders present themselves as embodiments of "the people", employing accessible language, emotional resonance, and media spectacle to bypass institutional critique. The mockumentary form is uniquely suited to expose this performance. It allows filmmakers to inhabit and exaggerate populist modes of speech, while simultaneously pulling back the curtain on their way of constructing reality.

The films also highlight the complicity of media systems in populist ascendance. Lakatos points to the role of nationalist historical narratives and bureaucratic institutions in manufacturing ethnic identity. Brooker critiques the infotainment logic of

contemporary news media, where political dysfunction is repackaged as entertainment. In doing so, the mockumentaries extend the genre's long-standing tradition of institutional satire, dating back to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Rutles*, into the realm of digital disinformation and social media echo chambers.

Perhaps the most crucial role of these mockumentaries is that they invite active viewership. Unlike traditional documentaries, which may foster identification or moral clarity, mockumentary creates distance, suspicion, and critical reflexivity. It breaks the illusion of objectivity and demands that viewers interrogate their own assumptions. This is especially vital in the context of populism, where political engagement is often reduced to spectacle, and where emotional certainty displaces complexity.

Whose Dog Am I? and *Death to 2020/2021* exemplify the mockumentary's evolution from niche parody to a globally resonant form of political critique. They show how the genre can adapt to different cultural registers: Hungarian-Romanian border politics, Anglo-American media meltdown, while maintaining a shared function: to disrupt the aesthetic, emotional, and ideological scaffolding of populist authority.

Conclusion: mockumentary and the spectacle of populism

In an era increasingly defined by ideological polarization, emotional politics, and post-truth rhetoric, the mockumentary has emerged as one of the most effective cultural forms for interrogating the aesthetics of populism. Through irony, parody, and formal destabilization, it creates a space for critical reflection on the narratives, rituals, and media performances that underpin contemporary populist discourse. This article has explored how *Whose Dog Am I?* and *Death to 2020/2021* deploy mockumentary strategies to unmask the absurdities of populist logic and question the media environments in which it thrives.

Róbert Lakatos's *Whose Dog Am I?* demonstrates how the mockumentary can operate within local, ethnically charged

contexts to reveal the ideological scaffolding of nationalism. By embedding himself in the role of a self-critical protagonist, Lakatos interrogates the language of ethnic purity, genealogy, and institutional legitimacy with dry wit and formal precision. His film resists closure, favoring ambiguity and irony over moralizing, thereby mirroring the elaborate construction of all nationalist narratives. In the Romanian and Hungarian political climate, where populist figures like Simion, Georgescu and Șoșoacă mobilize identity as a weapon, this form of cultural critique is both timely and subversive.

By contrast, Charlie Brooker's Netflix mockumentaries offer a globalized, media-savvy form of satire that is fast-paced, image-saturated, and deeply cynical. Drawing on Brooker's *Black Mirror* sensibility and the style of infotainment, *Death to 2020/2021* parodies the very frameworks through which political discourse is consumed. The inclusion of celebrities, scripted talking-heads, and rapid-fire montage mirrors the noise of contemporary political communication and also implicates the viewer in a spectacle that is both ridiculous and inescapable. In doing so, these mockumentaries highlight the erosion of narrative coherence in liberal democracies and the affective disorientation that populism both exploits and intensifies.

Yet, the significance of these films rests not merely in their content but in their form. The mockumentary is not just a vessel for satire, it is a genre that foregrounds the act of mediation itself. It draws attention to how images are constructed, how stories are told, and how truth is framed and reframed through performance. This reflexivity is especially important in the age of populism, where leaders style themselves as outsiders while mastering media performance, and where factuality is routinely subordinated to emotional and symbolic resonance.

These works raise questions about the role of satire in political life. Can mockumentary move beyond catharsis to provoke meaningful engagement? Or does it risk becoming part of the

problem, a form of ironic detachment that neutralizes critique? The tension is real. Both Lakatos and Brooker seem aware of this ambivalence. Their films do not offer utopian alternatives or blueprints for action. Instead, they ask viewers to dwell in contradiction, to confront the absurdity of their media environment, and to question the stories they are told, whether by politicians, journalists, or filmmakers themselves.

Ultimately, mockumentary offers a space where viewers can become conscious of the very tools that shape their perception of reality. In times of populist ascendancy, when spectacle, simplification, and emotional manipulation dominate the public sphere, this genre serves a vital democratic function. It may not change the world, but it sharpens the viewer's ability to see through it.

Whose Dog Am I? and *Death to 2020/2021* are far more than just products created for the sake of entertainment. They remind us that in a world saturated by image, the politics of representation is not peripheral, it is central. And in that world, mockumentary's greatest power is to make us laugh not to forget, but to remember what we're being shown, and why.

ENDNOTES

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2. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), 74.
3. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (Harcourt Brace, 1981).
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5. Silvio Waisbord, "Truth Is What Happens to News: Journalism and the Debate over Facts in Democracy," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 13 (2018).
6. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester University Press, 2001), 2.
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TRANSFORMING FACES, TRANSFORMING ROLES: MAKEUP AND MASKS IN SILVIU PURCĂRETE'S *THE SCARLET PRINCESS*

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BIO

Minela Popa is a leading make-up artist on the Romanian stage, with extensive experience in theatre and film. Collaborating with renowned directors such as Silviu Purcărete and Robert Wilson, Popa's artistry has enriched the visual dimension of major productions and accompanied diverse theatrical aesthetics. She has had a long-standing career at the "Marin Sorescu" National Theatre in Craiova and serves as a faculty member in the Department of Arts – Theatre and Music at the Faculty of Letters in Craiova.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformative power of makeup and masks in Silviu Purcărete's staging of *The Scarlet Princess*, with a focus on my practical experience as a theatrical makeup artist in the production. The article examines how makeup functions not merely as a visual accessory, but as a crucial dramaturgical tool, shaping character identity, supporting rapid role transformations, and amplifying the symbolic and emotional dimensions of the performance. Through detailed analysis of the characters' physical configurations—including gender reversals, archetypal roles, and the embodiment of universal symbols—the study highlights the interplay between visual design, actor movement, and narrative meaning. By documenting the techniques used to create both male and female transformational masks, the research situates Purcărete's visual dramaturgy within a broader tradition of symbolic and expressionist theatrical aesthetics, while also addressing the challenges of adapting Kabuki conventions to a contemporary Romanian stage. This investigation contributes to a deeper understanding of the collaborative relationship between makeup, performance, and visual storytelling in contemporary theatre.

KEYWORDS

stage makeup, mask, character transformation, kabuki theatre, gender reversal

CITATION SUGGESTION

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For about three decades, numerous publications, bachelor's theses and doctoral studies have debated various topics related to the artistic work of the well-known contemporary Romanian director Silviu Purcărete. The object of our study will be the faces of the characters in Purcărete's plays, with the argumentation based on several plays staged in post-December Romania that had a major international impact.

Director Silviu Purcărete has staged numerous plays in which visual images reinforce the drama, often suspending the text. The precision with which he approaches the resolution of the action on stage and the attention he pays to the set design elements, which function as perfectly as a Swiss watch.

The mask, as is well known, is the symbol of theatre and has travelled through the centuries to fulfil its purpose of artistic creation. Masks made of different materials or objects placed on the actors' heads, make-up applied with cosmetics or other materials used to transform the human face, are symbolic technical elements of Purcărete's artistic creation, which shape the character by eliminating the realistic human identity in his inexhaustible work.

The play directed by Silviu Purcărete, *The Scarlet Princess*, is a performance that combines the director's deeply symbolic style with many elements of humour and irony from classical and traditional Japanese theatre. The non-conformist approach, which combines visual acting with an alert choreographic rhythm and an atmosphere charged with meaning, makes the director's distinctive style easily recognisable. He often combines modern, experimental elements with classical texts to amplify the message of the plays and create new and fascinating theatrical experiences. The play *The Scarlet Princess* is based on a dramatisation adapted by director Silviu Purcărete from a kabuki play and features Princess Sakura in the title role, who is the symbol of a superstitious society, her behaviour defying traditional royal rules causing a series of conflicts and contradictions. The show is full of black humour that encourages the audience to reflect on morality and the idea of

power in the state or the difference between appearance and essence.

The production of the play *The Scarlet Princess* (2018) at the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu brought together a large team of theatre creators: director Silviu Purcărete, set designer Dragoș Buhagiar, composer Vasile Șirli and Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, an important artist and great connoisseur of traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre. The idea of staging a Kabuki-style performance in Romania had long been a concern of Mr Constantin Chiriac, the theatre's general director, who sought to bring together artists who could make this project possible. The study of the immense original text and experimentation with traditional theatre techniques, as well as the creation of the stage space, took approximately three years. The first success of the show was the creation of a stage representing a space similar to that of the Kabuki theatre at the Culture Factory in Sibiu. Set designer Dragoș Buhagiar designed and built the stage with a double-direction turntable, the performance hall is organised in such a way that there is a *hanamichi* or "flower path"¹ which is the part of the stage where crossings to other stage spaces are made, with sloping seats positioned like those specific to traditional kabuki performances. In the set design by D. Buhagiar, we find many components of the traditional Japanese theatre structure, but also many modern set and costume elements that continue the symbolism of Purcărete's performances. As Ion M. Tomuș argues:

One of the most important set-design details has to be especially singled out: the stage is configured in such a way that it decomposes the theatrical and dramatic conventions. On the left, there are small make-up tables and tools, together with the usual mirrors and lights. These elements are a special path to the 'bowels' of the Western-like theatre production machinery: the conventions are presented in a very subtle and discrete

way, yet the effect on the audience is strong. It is an excellent option to expose the artificiality of a specific cultural environment, together with its general rules. The procedure is Western but the world it creates and depicts is Japanese. This makes the distances melt and the rules' limitations fluctuate and be malleable.²

Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, in their study on the material culture of the actor, *The Five Continents of Theatre* (2018), note that there are many similarities between traditional Japanese theatres and their history and structure, but that their evolution has been different. The stages of Nô and kabuki theatres originally had the same structure, namely the construction of the stage represented the model of a house positioned outside, in the garden. All the essential elements of the structure were similar and were used in the same way in both theatrical styles: the wooden pillars representing the delimitation of the playing spaces for the first and second actors, the central stage, the curtain, the space for musicians, the mirrored spaces where masks were changed, the painted pine tree behind the stage, the wooden staircase positioned in the centre of the stage, and the spectators who were seated on the ground around the house. Starting in 1741, kabuki theatre reorganised its stage inside a building, keeping the original stage structure and adding a *hanamichi* walkway to make it easier for actors to get on stage, as well as for the staff who served the audience with their famous teas. The location of the theatre in a covered space also required the creation of two galleries for high-ranking samurai and women. Serving tea during the intervals of kabuki performances was of great benefit to the theatre, as the tea houses (*chaya*) brought in significant profits, which meant that the financial development of kabuki theatre led to multiple improvements to the buildings and stages. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo (1910) was designed and built in reinforced concrete, inspired by the Italian theatre model, and the

stage was structured in Italian style with high arches in front of the stage, with side boxes, the *hanamichi* was built perpendicular to the stage, boxes and, as a novelty, a double turntable. The musicians were seated in the pit in front of the stage, like orchestras on Italian stages, which was unusual in traditional Nô and kabuki theatre, where they were seated on stage near the actors. The construction by D. Buhagiar is similar to that of the Imperial Theatre, which also became a model for modern Japanese theatre.

Putting on a kabuki performance in Romania is difficult, as director Silviu Purcărete explained during rehearsals for *The Scarlet Princess*, for the simple reason *that we do not know how to do Kabuki theatre*. The techniques and methods of interpretation are different and belong to centuries-old traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. The origins and first manifestations of kabuki dance and music are known to be the open-air performances on the Kamo River valley in Kyoto, where Okuni, a priestess forced to maintain the sanctuary, gathered around her a troupe of women from different social backgrounds, whose fame grew rapidly. The troupe was called kabuku. "Later, the word was written in Chinese characters ka-bu-ki: 'sing-dance-skill'. This is how kabuki was born, which established itself as the most popular form of entertainment in Japan"³.

The troupe of women did not last long and was replaced by men and young people who played female characters. Japanese kabuki theatre companies, formed in the 18th century from members of the same families, continue to develop and perfect the traditional style in their own communities. In Japan, there has never been a special form of education for training pupils or students in the field of theatre. Actors in traditional Japanese theatre are trained by a member of the company, generally only for a role that they play throughout their lives and usually inherit from a family member. Acting and dancing techniques or quick transformations remain secrets over time. Japanese actors are revered by the public precisely because the uniqueness and mastery of their work remains

a mystery. The symbols of movement, costumes and masks in traditional Japanese kabuki or Nô theatre are studied by many artists from different fields, their aesthetics being remarkable.

In Kabuki theatre, each type of character has a special costume and make-up that represents the character's identity, inherited in form and colour. The authors of the book *The Five Continents of Theatre*, Barba and Savarese, explain how to apply "traditional *kesho* face make-up"⁴.

Oshiroi is a white cream or foundation that is applied all over the face, under which facial expressions disappear. Pictorial makeup is done by drawing coloured lines, often similar to the patterns on Nô masks. To enlarge the small face and enlarge the eyes, the eyebrow line is drawn much higher than normal. The intensity of the white layer also depends on the age of the character. There is a standard makeup that can be used for many characters, but for negative characters representing villains or a category of heroes, makeup called *kumadori* is used. The lines drawn reinforce the harshness of the face and can be extended down the body to the tips of the feet, and the colours applied symbolise different states. Dark red - anger or passion, war; Black - fear, death; Pink - life, youth. Light green - calm, tranquillity.

The famous author of the kabuki play *The Scarlet Princess*, Tsuruya Namboku IV, wrote a large number of plays in which he tells the story of the beautiful princess Sakura and her. *Sakura*, or *cherry blossom*, is the flower of a Japanese ornamental cherry tree and has a scent similar to vanilla. The cherry blossom is the symbol and flower of Japan, and the moment of its blooming is considered by the Japanese to be a metaphor for nature. Cherry blossoms are also common in Japanese art, such as rituals, performances, films, cartoons, kimonos, fans, and ceramics.

Princess Sakura has been the heroine of many plays written for kabuki theatre since the 17th century, but the most important versions are believed to be those by the author Namboku, which made him famous.

The show staged by director Silviu Purcărete is based on a script written by him and is inspired by *Sakura Hime Azuma Bunsho*, by Tsuruya Namboku IV. *The Scarlet Princess* seems to be a fairy tale in which the characters experience repeated love stories, murders and reincarnations, curses and revenge. The show contains numerous symbols and expressive means specific to Purcărete's directing style, with themes and actions that straddle the line between light parody and self-irony, between Japanese Eastern tradition and European culture. Kabuki theatre performances generally feature numerous visual images resembling painted pictures, closely linked to the moment of the action, which increase the audience's interest in watching. Also, the music and harmonies used live during the show add to the intensity of the strong emotions in kabuki theatre. These two components, visuals and music, are noticeable in all of Silviu Purcărete's shows as essential artistic elements. The combination of the two styles, that of the director and that of traditional oriental theatre, in a Romanian performance based on the story of a famous princess written by a Japanese playwright in the 18th century was a big gamble won by the management of the National Theatre in Sibiu, and the success of the performance was recognised internationally. A dramatisation of a play written for kabuki theatre staged outside Japan would be impossible because the training of actors and acting is done in a personal and traditional oriental way. The preparation of the show, as well as the costumes and masks, have been studied for hundreds of years without revealing many well-hidden secrets of the techniques of execution or interpretation.

The director's biggest challenge in staging the play is changing the genders of the actors in the roles they play, which is justified by his decision to take into account the history and present of kabuki theatre. This is not the first time in Silviu Purcărete's productions that female roles are played by men and male roles by actresses. There are many examples, such as productions staged by the director, including *Phedra* after Seneca and Euripides, *Oresteia*

after Aeschylus, *Ubu Rex* after A. Jarry, *Faust* after Goethe, and . However, in the production *The Story of the Cross-Eyed Princess* after Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, the characters had to be configured taking into account the combination of the two styles, the transformation, and the context of the production. In fact, as Tomuş points out: “The men play the female roles and vice versa, as the travesty becomes one of the most important pillars of the show, with the director’s intention (completely assumed by the cast) to insist on the grotesque elements in the spiritual universe of the characters.”⁵

Actress Ofelia Popii was entrusted with the two male characters, Seigen and Gonsuke, two brothers who had completely different occupations. Father Seigen, known in his youth as Shimizu Kiyoharu, lives a beautiful love story with his disciple, Shiragiku, played by actor Iustinian Turcu. Shiragiku’s suicide makes it possible for the young soul to be reincarnated in the newborn body of Princess Sakura, from the Yoshida clan, daughter of Lord Koresada, played by the same actor. Gonsuke, Father Seigen’s brother, is a name given to him to hide his identity for the atrocities he committed. Shinubo Sota was his real name, and his profession and the way he dressed made him unrecognisable. The murder of Lord Koresada and the seduction of the young princess were part of the plan to take over the leadership and the royal seal. The story of the young princess Sakura has been the subject of many Japanese literary works, and the word *Sakura* means *Japanese cherry blossom*, which is the national symbol.

In the process of configuring the characters, the first step was to reverse and find the transformational forms of the female characters played by male actors, and the male characters played by female actors. The first transformational make-up test also required the use of costume or wig elements to achieve credibility. The creation of the female character, who represented a lady from Princess Sakura’s entourage and was comically named *geisha*, was based on the classic makeup model of a female character in kabuki

theatre, a character played by male actors. The wig that helped transform the face did not follow the references of the traditional style, but the shape created completed the proposed image and the veracity of the metamorphosis. In the case of the transformational makeup of the male characters the reference model was not very well defined due to the lack of the necessary materials used to create a male character in traditional Japanese kabuki theatre, namely the male wig fixed on a metal support, a beard or moustache shaped specifically for the character, and, above all, the choice of an actress with fine feminine features that bore no resemblance to the face of an Asian actor. The transformational makeup involved the elimination of feminine elements, such as blonde hair, covering it with a hair net under a male hat, filling in the eyebrows and structuring the face. Even though director Silviu Purcărete was not new to the transformational composition of an actress into a male character, this time the combination of his own mask style with the traditional oriental mask had a different way of being realised and conceived. The director’s positive opinion in the creative process and execution of future masks that would bear his already established signature made it possible to continue the configuration of the thirty-five transformational masks that had different types and characters.

Only one character, named *God of Theatre*, played by actor Cristian Stanca, did not undergo a transformation into a female character, but the make-up tests took longer due to the authentic traditional costumes worn by the actor throughout the performance and the different interpretations in the two parts of the show. The show opens with the “host” of the performance, actor Cristian Stanca, wearing a regal gala costume, whose mask is similar to the makeup mask of a samurai from the Edo period presenting himself before his superior. His face and neck are painted with intense white foundation, his eyebrows are covered, and his lips are painted red in the shape of a smiling face. His eyes are well outlined in black, giving the impression of a strong, all-seeing gaze. The head is

covered with a red-orange feathered helmet, a combination of the Japanese royal helmet and the deluxe helmet of the Roman soldier. The white mask worn by the performer is neutral, but the red-lined mouth has slightly raised corners in a gentle smile, the actor's face conveying a barely perceptible irony. In the second part of the show, the God of Theatre participates in the stage action, and his character transforms into a more powerful, protective, but more warlike god. The face created for him, wearing a warrior samurai costume and playing a male character similar to that in kabuki theatre, was made using the same technique as in oriental theatre but without the traditional wig. The face was covered with a dense layer of greasy white foundation, thick enough to allow the drawing of various lines, such as outlining the eyes in black, shaping the eyebrows into sharp angles, drawing parallel black lines over the mouth to visually thin the lips, or adding two small red semicircles at the inner corners of the eyes. The makeup is part of the basic makeup category in kabuki theatre, but the interest was not in creating a character of their type or a well-defined character. The addition of half a wig styled in the manner of men's wigs in kabuki theatre and a painting imitating human hair similar to Japanese samurai haircuts in continuation of the makeup creates the face of a highly theatrical character that justifies the actions of the acting. The physical resemblance to the two types influenced the acting, according to the statements made by the actor himself. The character's configuration with the help of the costume and mask was in good harmony, constituting an indisputable theatrical aesthetic form, and their influence was evident. The mask made for this surreal character is part of Purcărete's large collection of masks.

The characters of *Father Seigen and Gonsuke*, *Father Seigen's brother*, were played by actress Ofelia Popii, which was normal for an actor in Edo-period kabuki theatre, but unusual for an actress. There are countless male roles played by actresses in Silviu Purcărete's productions, but casting Ofelia Popii in the two roles was inspired, as the director knew the actress's adaptability and

availability. During rehearsals, the actress requested, as she herself stated, that the faces of the two characters she was playing be created, as she was unable to see the physical connection between them, plus the rapid transformations required by the actions of the play. The creation of the faces began by taking into account the fact that the two are brothers and have a common thread with the first appearance of Father Seigen in the exposition of the play. The basic make-up was done according to Purcărete's mask principles, in which the actress's face was covered with a thin layer of white foundation set with white powder, her eyebrows were covered with foundation and straight ones were drawn above them, as in the case of a neutral mask, and by using anthracite grey eyeshadow on the mobile eyelid and in the inner corner, the eye was made to appear larger. The same eyeshadow was used to draw shadows representing expression lines such as dark circles, corners of the mouth and facial structure by shading the nasal fossae or deepening the areas of skin formed at the junction of the zygomatic and mandibular muscles. The parts of the actress's body that remained without costume items, such as her hands, feet, neck and even part of her scalp, were painted with a white body solution to blur the colour of human skin and reinforce the surrealism of the character. Priest Seigen's first appearance was at middle age, and the director's proposal was for him to wear a grey beard covering only the middle of his chin, of medium size, similar to that of a middle-aged Christian priest. His head was covered with a grey silk stocking, which is worn under a wig to gather the hair, and together with the makeup, a basic mask was achieved without reference to kabuki theatre, but with a clear reference to Purcărețian makeup. This was followed by the creation of the character of Father Seigen in his old age, which actress Ofelia Popii created by following the text and what she felt, as she says, in all the states of sadness and suffering left behind by an impossible love. The acting and the covering of the head with a shabby hat conveyed the image of a decrepit old man with a few long strands of hair hanging from his

chin and eyes sunken into his skull. The actress had only 10-15 seconds to change characters, as she also had to change costumes and cross the stage from the outside, which made the transformation impossible under normal technical conditions. The shadows of the eye sockets were drawn using the index fingers of both hands dipped in anthracite colour, and the drawing was done in 2 seconds, and the long grey-white beard was prepared with double-sided adhesive tape, with a 2 cm base that stuck instantly.

Gonsuke is the second character played by actress Ofelia Popii in the show, and she says that he is a much funnier character than Father Seigen, a political character, similar to those of today, courageous, a motorcyclist whom she loves very much because *he metamorphoses and disguises himself*.

Even though she really liked the character dressed in a men's leather coat and motorcycle helmet, she didn't feel like herself because she didn't know what he looked like. She needed a strong masculine sign to give her the strength to transition from an old character to the liveliness and strength that characterised Gonsuke. The addition of a long, braided ponytail attached to a grey stocking worn on the head brings to mind a former samurai, which is what he is, stripped of his rights, having fled after killing Lord Koresada and disguised as an ordinary citizen. The addition of a blond-grey moustache gives the actress a fitting and convincing embodiment to complete the character, along with the much-desired image. The transitions from one character to another during the show are multiple and very fast, which required the moustache to be attached with double-sided tape, which became very painful when several shows were performed in a row. After numerous attempts, the fastening systems were replaced and the transformations were executed on time. The actress told us in an interview that during rehearsals she needed makeup or other elements that referred to a strong man, and everything became clear to her when the moustache, stockings with tails and large leather boots appeared, an image that confirmed her beliefs and shaped her character.

Regarding the remarkable interpretation of male roles by actress Ofelia Popii in Silviu Purcărete's staging of *The Scarlet Princess*, Monica Andronescu notes in her review published in *Yorick* magazine: "In the role of the priest Seigen, he has a dull, bitter glow of death that he carries with him, and the loneliness of a life lived in guilt and remorse flickers in his eyes, but also a strange mixture of scabrousness and sadness"⁶.

The character of Princess Sakura, an important figure in Japanese tradition and culture, is played by actor Iustinian Turcu. He also plays the character of Shiragiku, disciple and lover of the priest Seigen. The beginning of the show brings us the image of the two lovers, Father Seigen and Shiragiku, their story being revealed through their appearance on stage in a symbolic pose in which the character Shiragiku is naked, without priestly clothes. The information that he commits suicide and is reincarnated as Princess Sakura gives us clues about the common image of the two characters. The configuration of the two characters has the same basis, the fragile, white, delicate body of the princess is identified with the body of the beardless Shiragiku, but also with that of the young actor, very well cast, Iustinian Turcu. Since the two characters are approximately the same teenage age, even though they are of different sexes, the physical resemblance is very great, the external difference being achieved by simple means given by a few elements of costume, wig and make-up. The white makeup applied all over the body is part of the common basic line of the two characters (the fragility and beauty of the body) and is in line with the surrealist style of director Silviu Purcărete, but it also has significance in relation to the royal character of Princess Sakura. From an aesthetic point of view, the actor's painted body worked perfectly, and this white liquid foundation formed the basis of the pictorial makeup that shaped a female character with a rather fragile constitution. The basis of the face makeup was the face of the young Shiragiku and was more like the neutral mask or base mask used in traditional Japanese kabuki theatre, but the materials (makeup) used were

special professional cosmetics for theatre. The intensity of the products applied was similar to the reference, achieving uniformity and matting of the facial features.

Preparing the actor for the painting of his face and body required a period of time during which he was washed and dried. The young man's mask began with an attempt to remove his hair, to give the impression of baldness, by gluing his hair to his head with a strong gel and dyeing it with liquid foundation for the body. The colour, thickness and cut of the hair were a great help in creating an optical illusion, a necessary theatrical convention. The eyebrows were removed by covering them with a solution of mastic ether (which has the property of sticking only to human skin or latex), special eyebrow wax and a high-coverage, skin-coloured foundation. This was followed by covering the face with a professional white foundation called *Supracolor*, used for makeup on large theatre stages, in a fairly thick layer, just enough to be able to draw or paint the following lines. The foundation was set, in the first stage, with white powder, which reinforced the mattifying effect and, after application, also protected the face from any perspiration. The eyebrows were drawn parallel to the iris of the eyes, about 2 cm above the covered eyebrows. This gives the impression of a neutral mask which, with slight movements, creates expressions that can convey joy or sadness. What differentiates this mask from a traditional oriental one and leads us to the symbolism of director Purcărete is the pictorial format of the eyes, which needed to be enlarged, but also a three-dimensional correction in order to bring the actor's eyes, positioned deep in the eye sockets, as far forward as possible. This was achieved by drawing a somewhat rectangular triangle with black ink over the mobile eyelid, which had a slight right angle towards the outer corner of the eye, close to the concavity of the covered eyebrow, and the three-dimensionality was achieved by the two sides of the triangle that followed the concavity or convexity of the mobile eyelid, as well as by accentuating the actors' eyelashes with mascara. The eyes thus contoured were ready

for the rest of the makeup needed to transform the actor into a female character representing a symbol of Japanese nobility. The lips were covered with white foundation, an aesthetic technique signifying that the character was speaking on stage, but at the same time preparing for the very quick change to the next character. The finalisation of this character consisted of painting the neck, hands, feet and bust with professional white liquid foundation, specially designed for the body and which can be applied with a device called an airbrush, brush or makeup sponge. After application, all the products used are fixed with a fixing spray that has the property of making the makeup more resistant over time. Even with all these fixatives, body makeup needs to be constantly reapplied due to the stage actions involving body movements specific to the director's style. The actor's transition into the character of Princess Sakura was studied at length due to the rapid changes, the addition of many feminine costume elements, and the transformational pictorial and make- s similar to the female masks used in traditional Japanese kabuki theatre. As the director's instructions regarding the characters' faces indicated that *they were not really from kabuki theatre*, the reference for Sakura is, in fact, a geisha from the samurai period, when feminine beauty was perfected. At the director's request, two concentric circles were drawn on each breast on the well-painted body, giving the illusion of protrusions representing the young princess's breasts, over which elements representing her femininity were added, such as red gloves, a fan, a silk bodysuit covering the body, and a black wig with long hair falling down the back, typical of young women, not only Japanese. Following studies on the relationship between hair colour and personality, various researchers have estimated that around two-thirds of the world's population has naturally brown or black hair. People in this category have strong self-confidence and are intelligent, with a logical way of thinking. Choosing a black wig was a good solution from all points of view, taking into account the aesthetic component, as the princess's appearance was absolutely fascinating with her floating

gait, as if she had come from another world, from another time. The way she was wrapped in a paper dress like a cocoon, the character's face transformed into a princess, were exceptional achievements. The actor's transformation took a maximum of five minutes, during which time he moved from one side of the stage to the other, picked up his costume elements, applied his make-up, wig and enormous paper dress. After painting and redoing the body make-up, a white stocking was applied to the head, which served as the base for attaching the wig. Red blush was applied to the white areas around the eyebrows, the upper eyelids and the entire space formed by removing the eyebrows up to the drawn ones, restoring the beauty and femininity of the face.

Princess Sakura's face is completed by painting her lips red, reducing the size of her mouth by drawing the outline of her lips in the shape of a strawberry, and covering the remaining areas without makeup with thick white paint. To create the princess's mask, a combination of the three shades of makeup used in the first makeup and masks in history was used: white, red, and black. The perfection of their combination remains valid in the creation of the faces of the other female characters, except that, in order to avoid monotony, different colour combinations were used, while still maintaining the original colour scheme.

Regarding the director's instructions for the final scene of the play, after going through all the devastating states and actions of an abused woman, she tells of the princess's association with the character Rosalinda from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, a female character played by a man, whose disguise is ultimately revealed, which makes the interpretation difficult, but also highlights her mastery. At the end of the play, the indication was that the actor Iustinian Turcu is exposed, no longer wants to play the role of a woman, takes off the wig that represents the symbol of femininity, angry and upset to play the whole story of this princess, who has gone through all the difficult situations of a deceived and abused woman. The actor also confirms that the revelation by removing the

wig is achieved when the character receives the information that there is a possibility of Shiragiku's reincarnation, as well as the ambiguity given by the duality of the characters. The physical vulgarity of the character Sakura is achieved by replacing the beautiful black wig with a red wig and bright red lipstick to exaggerate the lips. Naturally, there are very few people who have naturally red hair, but this colour is very common among people who dye their hair in different shades of red, simply because they are perceived as more seductive, mysterious, romantic or powerful and passionate beings. The body is scantily covered with a slip that highlights beautiful physical features, but presents us with the typology of a prostitute. The masks created in Purcărete's performances connect the visual form of the characters with the theme of the performance, becoming part of the story. Sometimes makeup can support inner psychological transformations. Regarding the actor's artistic achievement, Monica Andronescu writes in her review published in the online theatre magazine that "Iustinian Turcu, in the role of Princess Sakura, creates a character of terrible strangeness. An extraordinary grace in every movement, a delicate beauty that shines through in every gesture, a natural nobility that is so naturally played and assumed"⁷

It is well known that, in Silviu Purcărete's performances, makeup plays an important role in constructing the unique theatrical universe, but also the atmosphere necessary for his visual symbolism style. In the play *The Story of the Cross-Eyed Princess*, makeup intensifies the dramatic meanings, accentuating the symbolic side of the characters and enhancing the surrealism characteristic of kabuki theatre. The transformations undergone by the actors take on symbolic dimensions, with the characters representing not only individuals in a well-known story, but also universal meanings. The director creates several couples who, through their closeness and configuration, are charged with universal meanings or symbols. Father Seigen and Shiragiku, Gonsuke and Princess Sakura, Irumo Akudoru and Gengo Sadake,

Shichiro and Lady Oju, or the priest Zangetsu and his secret mistress Nagora, who, as in other cases, use makeup to emphasise certain human traits, but highlighting their caricatured or grotesque, character. By forming couples that reflect forbidden desires such as royalty, cruelty or erotic fantasies, his characters become archetypes, creating universally valid forms and entities.

The method of applying transformational male makeup is roughly identical for all female performers in the show *The Scarlet Princess*, with differences being determined by the actresses' physiognomies and the characters they play, which are more or less caricatured or archetypal. The group named by the director as *the priests at the temple* consists of 15 actresses dressed in classic men's costumes with hats and glasses without lenses, a configuration that has succeeded in creating an image close to transformation. The number of members in the group is the same as that of the standard ancient choruses used in Sophocles' time, which allows us to attribute all the roles and actions of the tragedy to them. As in ancient theatre, where the chorus played an essential role in commenting on and emphasising the actions and morality of the play, the group of priests sings, talks to the audience or intervenes concretely in the dramatisation of the actions. Compared to the members of ancient choirs who wore masks, the members of the group of priests were configured with a mask made of makeup to create more symbols of communities, an element that emphasised the way of communicating and understanding with the audience, but also helped to change the roles of the actors.

Controlling the focus of an audience is vital to making mask theatre work. Quite simply, the audience should know where to look at any one time. Split focus occurs when the audience are trying to look at something when they shouldn't be! Sometimes it is part of the action – a visual chord – that we ask the audience to take in several things at once. But generally, we

*want them to follow a flow of thought, of non-verbal communication and conversation around the stage.*⁸

The group represented the community as a "character", a construction that appears in all of Silviu Purcărete's performances, through which the opinions and feelings of the community are reflected. The separation of the group by different stage spaces by the main characters or by the stage space in which the dramatic conflicts take place demonstrates the direct inactivity of the group and the importance of the existence of eyewitnesses in the action of the story. Like all groups, such as the chorus, created by the director in most of his shows, this group plays the role of observer of the actions and witness to the events. The eyes must be highlighted with black eye shadow, but in the context of masculine transformations, the pencil outline had to create a stronger image of them, without accentuating and emphasising feminine features. By casting actresses of similar stature and age, dressed and made up in roughly the same way, a compact group was created whose image suggested a group of Asian actors participating in events taking place at the beginning of the stories in kabuki theatre. The individualisation of characters' faces achieved through transformational male makeup was influenced by the character types established in American silent films or recognisable caricature types. Covering the head and, implicitly, the hair with pieces of white, black or beige silk stockings was a technique used to highlight the surrealism and symbolism of religion and its social reflection.

As in many of the performances by the famous director Silviu Purcărete and in the performance *The Scarlet Princess*, masks and make-up play an important role in creating the atmosphere and universe specific to Purcărete. His visual directing style has long been established, as has the way he combines images representing the physical or aesthetic aspects of the characters in the story of the play. In this production, the surreal atmosphere characteristic of

stories written for kabuki theatre is also achieved through the use of make-up that emphasises the symbolic side of the characters or intensifies the visual effects that highlight their specific caricatural nature. Costumes and makeup are used to suggest themes of religious or mythological rituals, often succeeding in creating archetypal figures of superior entities. In this context, the creation of different masks with the help of makeup becomes an important artistic tool in creating the external forms of characters that can convey many emotional states and profound configurations of the human species.

Similar to the great international directors, Silviu Purcărete's directorial style is also marked by the importance he gives to masks and makeup created in a personal style as justified dramatic tools, not just aesthetic accessories. The use of make-up for many characters is a way of finding identities or transforming characters, but it is most common in performances where the relationship between fantasy and surrounding reality becomes possible. One can speak of a specific, unmistakable line of makeup in Purcărete's performances, which contains an essential symbolism that helps to deepen and understand the complexity of his productions.

Through the use of makeup and masks, Silviu Purcărete multiplies actors' identities and emphasizes the duality of characters, while creating a fantastical universe where identity can be concealed or fragmented. Caricatural or exaggerated makeup intensifies emotional states and highlights the symbolic dimension of the characters. Transformational makeup allows performers to embody archetypal or universal figures. Purcărete's visual style is reinforced by extreme gestures and movements, with masks contributing both to audience impact and to actors' expressive freedom. In this way, masks connect the visual form of the characters to the thematic structure of the performance, becoming an integral part of the narrative and, at times, externalizing inner psychological transformations.

ENDNOTES

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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 replacement⁴. 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 particular⁵. 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 effect⁹. Although Jude openly embraces Artificial Intelligence

and social media platforms like TikTok¹⁰—influences that are visible in his films—βhe 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 achieve¹⁵.

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.

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THE HIDDEN SIDE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT. A BUFFON-LINNÉ EXHIBITION TO BE TAKEN WITH A PINCH OF SALT

Tony Fouyer

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BIO

Tony Fouyer, a research associate at UMR 6298 ARTEHIS and a lecturer at the University of Burgundy Europe, currently directs the Buffon Museum and Park in Montbard. In this role, he promotes the work of two eminent figures: Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), and Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716-1800), both natives of this small town in the Côte-d'Or region. Author of articles highlighting the work of Buffon and Daubenton, he is also interested in topics related to major contemporary issues.

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ABSTRACT

The Buffon Museum in Montbard aims to soon reunite the two great naturalists, Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Karl von Linné. However, mention of the project raises the “complex” question of theories about humanity developed by scientists and reused, particularly by authoritarian regimes. While Buffon has relatively flown under the radar, Linnaeus was heavily criticized in both Sweden and England during the *Black Lives Matter* movement. The reason was his categorizing humanity into four varieties. These were quickly named and understood as “races,” making Linnaeus “the founding father of scientific racism” and therefore of “modern racial thought.” The Swedish debate in 2020 was intense and raised the question of removing statues of the country's most famous scientist. Buffon, however, did not receive such treatment, which was rather reserved for Colbert. So, what narratives can we develop around these two Enlightenment scholars without obscuring these aspects and without this polarizing the exhibition? Already seen as scientists who are complete opposites, objects of clichés and a merciless duel that the era is so fond of, we would like to show the reflections and systems developed by the two figures, including on humans. Whether we like it or not, we will contribute to the construction of a memorial story and the staging used, in each of the exhibition contexts, will participate in this.

KEYWORDS

Buffon Museum, representation, visual, exhibition, science

CITATION SUGGESTION

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Introduction

To mark the 250th anniversary of Carl Linnaeus's death, the Buffon Museum and Park wishes to honor the renowned Swedish naturalist. A contemporary of Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, born the same year, the Swedish scholar is the leading authority on the classification of species. His *Systema Naturae*¹ (Fig. 1), published in 1735 at the young age of 28, brought him particular fame. Buffon, who at the same time was working on his life's work, the 36-volume *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*², did not share this vision of the discipline.

The two engaged in a series of verbal sparring matches, albeit from a distance. While this rivalry is often highlighted, as evidenced in several publications, it is important to step back and move beyond this confrontational approach to present both perspectives in a more factual manner. This, at least, is how the museum and its partners—the Linnean Society of London and the Linnaeus Museum in Uppsala—intend to present the work of these two figures in an exhibition that will be partly itinerant.

In a context of discovering the world and, consequently, the Other, the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, was also the century of the emergence of racism. Although the term was not clearly defined at the time, it constituted one of the sensitive points of the period and of the major figures of the era. Philosophers and scientists were not spared. The societal challenges of our time, punctuated by large-scale like *Black Lives Matter movement*, invite us to be critical. Therefore, how can we present these revolutionary works without ignoring these controversial aspects of their research?

One Science, Two Perspectives

Georges Louis Leclerc, who would become the Count of Buffon (Fig. 2), was born in Montbard on September 7, 1707. A

member of the local bourgeoisie, nothing seemed to destine him for the career he would pursue. After completing classical studies, first in law, then in medicine, he became interested—in connection with the Count of Maurepas and for the needs of the Navy—in forestry. In 1733, he presented a paper to the French Academy of Sciences in Paris. The subject, on probability, allowed him to become an assistant mechanic. His work on forestry, which he never abandoned, led to his appointment in 1739 as assistant to the botany section and later as an associate member. The death of Cisternai du Fay, Superintendent of the King's Garden, that same year proved a stroke of luck. Buffon's connections with Maurepas enabled him to obtain this prestigious position. One of his missions was to create a description of the King's Cabinet, an undertaking that would lead him to the creation of *L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*³.

Linnaeus, for his part, was born in Råshult, Sweden, a few months before Buffon, on May 23, 1707. Born into a religious family with a keen interest in botany, he quickly developed a passion for the discipline. Wishing to become a doctor, he attended Lund University before transferring to Uppsala University. There, he became a demonstrator at the botanical garden in 1730⁴. He obtained his doctorate in Holland in 1735⁵. That same year, he published the first edition of his *Systema Naturae*.

Buffon and Linnaeus both provided solutions for considering natural history in its entirety. From the outset of his undertaking, Buffon emphasized the immensity of the task and its inexhaustible nature⁶. Aware of these limitations, he emphasizes above all the methodological ambition of the project and the need to “see a lot and review often”⁷.

Indeed, in order for Buffon's proposed experience to align with this approach, he needed to showcase what was not always accessible. While natural history cabinets and

academies were well established throughout the country at the beginning of the 18th century⁸ and can allow the observation of more or less well-known specimens⁹. This could not suffice to meet the initial ambition of Buffon's educational project.

To fill this gap, Buffon and his collaborators used three methods, summarized by Benoît De Baere in a 2007 article. The first consisted of visualizing the subject through plates and vignettes. These were mostly black and white, but colored and watercolored when the illustration focused on birds.¹⁰ (Fig. 3). The second consists of a textual production combining description and poetic expression related to the different species. The final device is attributable to Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton¹¹. These are summary tables in which the scientist compares the data he collects during his anatomical research¹². These three perfectly complementary systems give Buffon's work a particular dimension, which has led to recent research on it. Linnaeus, whose classification system is still used today, presents a completely different vision of natural history. This system, presented in 1735, is a classification of the three kingdoms of nature: mineral, vegetable, and animal¹³. Far removed from Buffon's concerns and the pedagogical objective his contemporary wished to implement, Linnaeus opted for a much less visual formula, but offered a detailed examination of all living beings, allowing each one to be classified and placed in a classification based on morphological study¹⁴.

Although the first edition of *Systema Naturae* consisted of only 10 folio pages, the work gradually expanded and became more complex over time. The most decisive part of Linnaeus's work occurred in the 10th edition, which introduced the famous binomial nomenclature¹⁵, whose legacy we can still see today, was first applied to the animal in the 12th edition, in 1758. This nomenclature, far removed from

images and the desire to focus on aspects other than morphology, distinguishes the two naturalists.

The Origins of "Race"

In this context, it is not surprising that the place of humans is also at the heart of the tensions between the two naturalists. In the 12th edition of his *Systema Naturae*, Linnaeus places humans among the quadrupeds at the head of the Primates, along with other species such as the horse¹⁶ (Fig. 4). Having named humankind *Homo sapiens*, he turned his attention to varieties. He did not use the term "race" and characterized humankind, as he had done with plants and products, based on known geography. He then took into account climatic and environmental factors. In the 1740 edition, Linnaeus classified humankind into four taxonomic categories: *Europaeus albus*, *Americanus rebescens*, *Asiaticus fuscus* et *Africanus niger*¹⁷. He later added *Homo ferus* and *Homo monstrosus* to this list¹⁸. Erza Tawil, in 2006, admitted that in the context of the 18th century, the taxonomic categories established by Linnaeus referred to geographical aspects and not biological and morphological ones¹⁹. While skin color is indeed a criterion of distinction in the Linnaean system, Staffan Muller-Wille²⁰ has recently been demonstrated that for Linnaeus, this criterion was as accidental as weight or stature.

This climatic and environmental dimension is also found in Buffon who, aware of the importance of external factors, integrates it into his thinking on generations. Buffon's anthropological system is also based on varieties. From this point of view, therefore, Buffon and Linnaeus converge²¹. While Buffon's name is sometimes linked to the concept of race, it is difficult to attribute to him a key role in its emergence. As Thierry Hoquet emphasized in a 2014 article, Buffon did not define the concept. His use of the term was sporadic and

referred only to “different types of realities or taxonomic levels”²². It is particularly noticeable that the term is used interchangeably to refer to “the people”, generations, local varieties of a species, or “lineages” (Fig. 5). This ambiguity, which is very present in Buffon’s text, refers to these local varieties caused by external factors, including climate and diet²³. Although some of Buffon’s hypotheses are quite brutal—at least in their presentation—the scientist acknowledges that all humans originally descended from a single species²⁴. The absence of illustrations indicating each variety clearly shows that physical characteristics are unimportant. He makes this explicit in the text in volume IX, when he refers to Linnaean taxonomies and states that this man “is only the same man tinged with the color of the climate”²⁵.

The idea of hierarchy, often associated with Linnaeus, appears to be artificial and clearly stems more from a later reading of his works than from any genuine desire for hierarchy, even when he explores the relationship between *Homo sapiens* and great apes. Linnaeus then focuses solely on “irrefutable differences and similarities”²⁶. However, Linnaeus relied as much on the physical characteristics as on the moral component of peoples. In this respect, his classification, which does not involve a hierarchy, corresponds to what we call “races”²⁷.

As we can see, the question is as thorny as it is complex. Moreover, the search for the concept’s origin seems futile – even if the Linnaean classification is the closest approximation²⁸—and corresponds primarily to contemporary considerations.

Exposing “Races”

In recent years, the news surrounding racism and antisemitism has become more pressing. This context, far from being confined to France, is global and has found its most

intense expression in the Black Lives Matter movement. Created in 2013 following the death of Trayvon Martin²⁹ Following the acquittal of the police officer who killed him, the movement became highly globalized in 2020, after the death of George Floyd³⁰. While the movement is global at this precise moment, its expression remains highly differentiated at the local level³¹.

Black Lives Matter movement has challenged our perception of the Enlightenment. Among the figures most affected is Colbert in France³², which nearly led to his downfall, and Linnaeus abroad. The most eminent scientific figure in Sweden, the naturalist was particularly criticized both in Sweden and in England³³ and its legacy was threatened. While the situation has calmed down, it is important to keep this context in mind and not to ignore certain aspects of the Enlightenment. From this perspective, the exhibition “Racism: The Invention of Human Race,” which took place at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, is relevant³⁴. The exhibition focuses on the 18th century and does not neglect the role that the Enlightenment played. It allows for a cross-referencing of sources and immerses us in the Age of Enlightenment while also extending to the current context.

A true social phenomenon, it has contributed—in a way—to the production of exhibitions on the theme. This theme has been explored since 2017 by the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. It is entitled *Nous et les Autres, des préjugés au racisme*³⁵ and is designed to be itinerant. It was also featured in 2018 at the Chicago History Museum with the exhibition *Race: Are we so different?*. The Fine Arts have also embraced it. This is notably the case with the exhibition *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*, which was held at the Musée d’Orsay. The approach combined art history and the history of ideas, going back to the abolition of slavery in France³⁶. *Paris noir*³⁷, It reveals the

presence and influence of Black artists in France. It shows another side of artistic production, one that has often been rendered invisible. This approach has given a voice back to communities, representing a kind of reversal of the relationship to art. A reversal of perspectives, particularly of the perspective of the Other, was already explored in 2016 in the exhibition *Homme blanc, homme noir*³⁸. She then invited Westerners to change their perspective.

This multifaceted inquiry extends to collections themselves, with provenance research emerging relatively recently—coinciding with the political context and the need, in particular, to ease tensions with former colonies, as well as with issues related to restitution³⁹. The exhibition *L'Afrique en musée*⁴⁰, presentation of the multi-year research on the history of the primary collections held in French museums demonstrates both the professionals' interest in the subject and the scale of the phenomenon.

The methods used to present artworks, objects, and narratives varied considerably and reflected the approaches taken by the curators and the context in which the artists and communities they highlighted lived. The same should be true for the exhibition *Buffon-Linné*.

In conclusion

While the *Buffon-Linnaeus* exhibition project primarily aims to explore the worldview and scientific thinking of these two eminent figures of the Enlightenment, the section on “races” should not be taken lightly. It is neither a question of concealing certain facts nor of making unsubstantiated accusations. From this perspective, as we have emphasized, the connection between Buffon, Linnaeus, and racism is more complex than it appears.

The current context in which we operate—even if it is more peaceful—necessitates revisiting this aspect. However, it

is essential to place the statements made within their historical context. We must therefore find the tools to discuss “races” without distorting the thought or philosophy of these two great figures of the Enlightenment. The sequence presented to visitors must reflect the current state of our knowledge on the subject, but also draw inspiration from pre-existing museum experiences, particularly since the *Black Lives Matter* movement. This will be one of the challenges facing the scientific committee and the exhibition curators.

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16. Bange, “Linné,” 11; Charmantier, “Linneaus and Race.”

17. Charmantier, “Linneaus and Race.”

18. Thierry Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race et racialisation de l’humain : Bernier, Buffon, Linné,” in *L’invention de la race* (La Découverte, 2014), 35–37.

19. Erza Tawil, *The Making of Racial Sentiment* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

20. Staffan Muller-Wille, “Linnaeus and the Four Corners of the World,” in *The Cultural Politics of Blood, 1500–1900*, ed. Kimberly Anne Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 195.

21. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race.”

22. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 31. Buffon’s role in the evolution of the concept of species is, for its part, well identified, see Buffon, *HN*, 4, p. 384–385; Philippe R. Sloan, “The Idea of Racial Degeneracy in Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*,” in *Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 293–321.

23. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 33.

24. Buffon, *HN*, 3, p. 529–530 : “tout concourt donc à prouver que le genre humain n’est pas composé d’espèces essentiellement différentes entre elles ; qu’au contraire, il n’y a eu originairement qu’une seule espèce d’hommes”.

25. Buffon, *HN*, 2.

26. Gunnar Broberg, *Homo sapiens L. Studier i Carl von Linnés naturuppfattning och människolära* (Almqvist & Wiksell i distribution, 1975).

27. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 39.

28. Ibid., 41–42.

29. Lizette Alvarez, “Trayvon Martin: le procès qui ravive la question raciale,” *Courrier International*, July 14, 2013 <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/trayvon-martin-le-proces-qui-ravive-la-question-raciale>.

30. Kristine Roth and Alli McCracken Jarrar, “Justice for George Floyd: A Year of Global Activism for Black Lives and Against Police Violence,” *Amnesty International*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/justice-for-george-floyd-a-year-of-global-activism/>. On this subject, see Audrey Célestine and Nicolas Martin-Breteau, “Un mouvement, pas un moment : Black Lives Matter et la revendication des luttes minoritaires à l’ère d’Obama,” *Politique américaine* 28 (2016): 15–39.

31. Audrey Célestine, Nicolas Martin-Breteau and Charlotte Recoquillon, “Introduction – Black Lives Matter: un mouvement transnational,” *Esclavages & post-esclavages* no. 6 (2022).

32. V. D., “VIDÉO. Antiracisme : pourquoi la statue de Colbert est devenue la cible des manifestants,” *Le Parisien*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/video-antiracisme-pourquoi-la-statue-de-colbert-est-devenue-la-cible-des-manifestants-09-06-2020-8336277.php>; Clément Gassy, “Esclavage : faut-il débaptiser les lieux nommés ‘Colbert’, ministre de Louis XIV et auteur du Code Noir?” *La Dépêche*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2020/06/13/esclavage-faut-il-debaptiser-les-lieux-nommes-colbert-ministre-de-louis-xiv-et-auteur-du-code-noir-8889733.php>; Jean-Luc Mounier, “Dans le sillage de ‘Black Lives Matter’, le fracas des statues qu’on déboulonne,” *France 24*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20200610-dans-le-sillage-de-black-lives-matter-le-fracas-des-statues-qu-on-d%C3%A9boulonne>; Magali Lesauvage, “Le déboulonnage des statues symboles de la colonisation essaime en Europe,” *Le quotidien de l’art*, no. 1967, June 11, 2020, <https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/1967-le-d%C3%A9boulonnage-des-statues-symboles-de-la->

colonisation-essaimen-europe.html. For a more complete overview of the phenomenon, see Bertrand Tillier, *La Disgrâce des statues: Essai sur les conflits de mémoire, de la Révolution française à Black Lives Matter* (Payot, 2022).

33. On this subject, see Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström and Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (2022): 27–55.

34. May 19, 2018 – January 6, 2019, Deutsch Hygiene Museum, Dresde.

35. March 31, 2017 – January 6, 2018, Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

36. March 26 – July 21, 2019, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

37. *Paris noir. Circulations artistiques et luttes anticoloniales, 1950-2000*, March 19 – June 30, 2025, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

38. *Homme blanc, homme noir. Les représentations de l'Occidental dans l'art africain du 20ème siècle*, June 15 – October 9, 2016, Musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac, Paris.

39. On this subject, see in particular Maris Cornu, *Entre-temps: Le bien culturel et le droit* (Daloz, 2023).

40. *L'Afrique en musée*, in partnership with the Institut national de l'Histoire de l'Art (INHA, Paris). The objective of this thematic exhibition was to provide, throughout France, an exhibition on the formation of collections of African objects in French museums. The exhibitions, visible for varying periods from one museum to another, had to be inaugurated in conjunction with the international symposium held at the INHA.

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Figure 1 : Linné, *Systema Naturae*, Leiden, 1735.

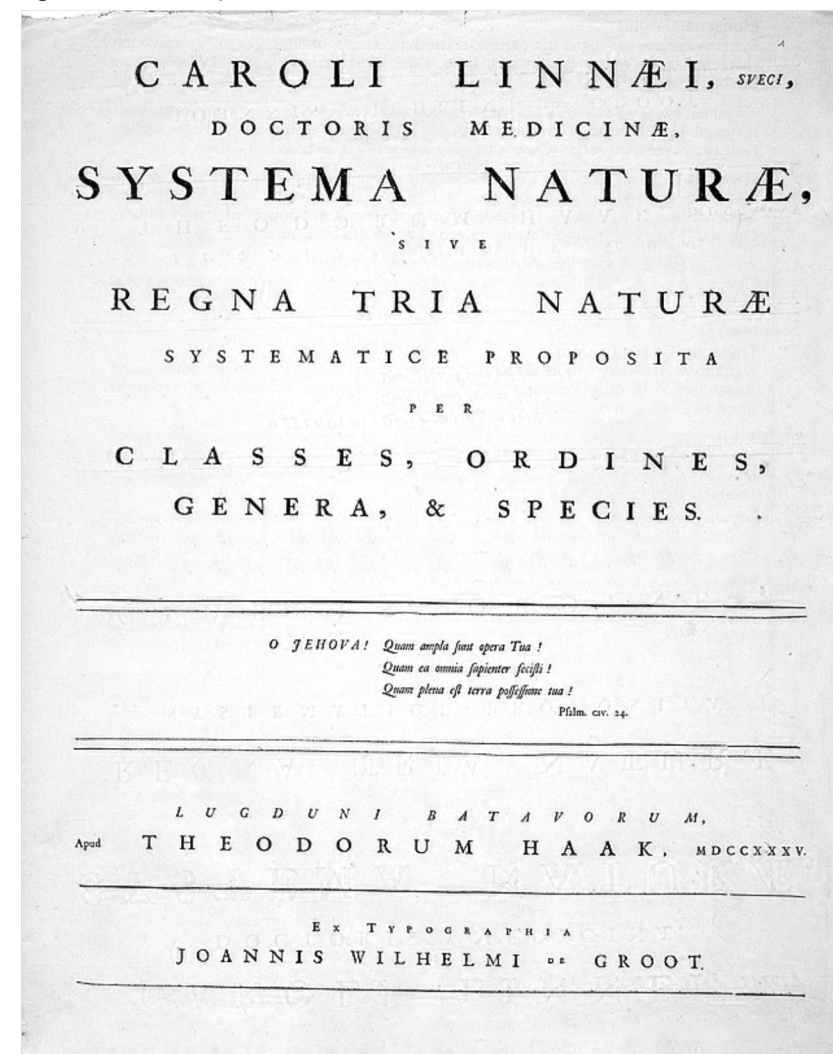


Figure 2 : François Hubert Drouais, *Portrait de Buffon*, oil on canvas, 1761 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard, inv. 98.3.1)



Figure 3 : Le Paon, Detail of *L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, volume on birds, p. 433, pl. II, 1777 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard)

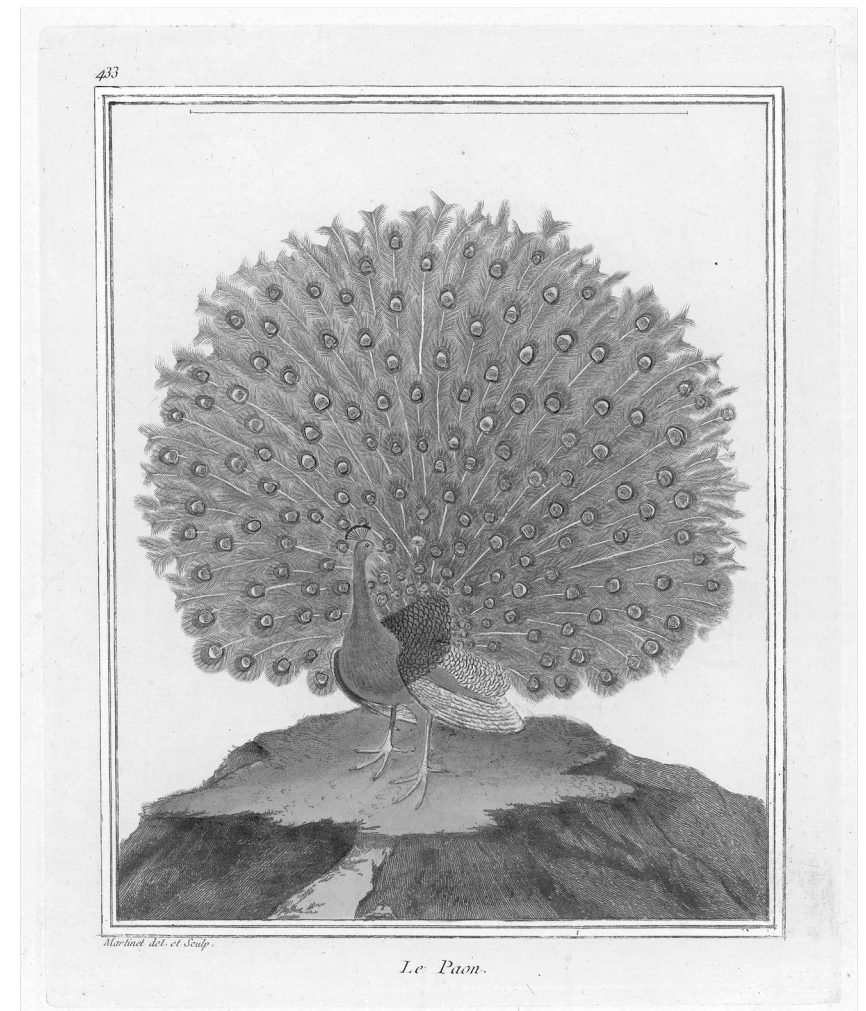


Figure 4 : Linné, *Anthropomorpha*, detail from *Systema Naturae*, 1735.

I. QUADRUPEDIA.			
<i>Corpus hirsutum. Pedes quatuor. Feminae viviparæ, lactiferæ.</i>			
ANTHROPO- MORPHA. <i>Dentes primores 4. utrinque: vel nulli.</i>	Homo.	<i>Noſce te ipſum.</i>	H { <i>Europæus albeſc. Americanus rubeſc. Aſiaticus fulcus. Africanus nigr.</i>
	Simia.	ANTERIORES. POSTERIORES. <i>Digiti 5. 5. Posterioreſ antetioribus ſimiles.</i>	<i>Simia cauda carens. Papio. Satyrus. Cercopithecus. Cynocephalus.</i>
	Bradypus.	<i>Digiti 3. vel 2. . . . 3.</i>	<i>Ai. Ignavus. Tardigradus.</i>

Figure 5 : L'enfant pie, *Supplements of L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, IV, p. 568, pl. II, 1777 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard)