FADE TO ALGORITHM: AI AND OUR FORMS OF CULTURAL LIFE

Introduction to a special issue of the IJAHSS

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Something is pressing on the films and series and songs that influence how we see the world. Not a rupture, more like a quiet pressure applied from inside, at every stage of the process: how scripts get developed, how images get made, how finished work finds its audience, and how that audience comes to feel that certain stories are simply the ones available to them. Artificial intelligence is now present at all of those points. What it does there, and what it costs, is what this issue examines.

The essays collected here grew out of a workshop at Boston University in October 2025, which brought together scholars and practitioners around a question that sounds simple but isn't: what happens when AI gets folded into media traditions as different as French cinephilia and Korean Hallyu, industries that share technologies but not histories, not aesthetics, not what they think culture is for?

One thing that becomes clear across these contributions is that AI doesn't arrive from outside media culture. It works by accelerating tendencies already present, toward genre hybridity, toward platformized distribution, toward cost-cutting, and in doing so makes those tendencies harder to ignore or romanticize. Barnabé Sauvage's comparative study of South Korea and France makes this concrete. Korean cinema has long survived by absorbing Hollywood genres and bending them into something local. That habit may now extend to AI itself: chaebol-backed studios experimenting with generative video, government funds backing virtual production, a bid to develop what Sauvage calls a "K AI" aesthetic rather than simply importing one. France looks different. Artisanal craft, the auteur tradition, a strong instinct to treat rapid AI integration as a threat to cultural exception rather than an opportunity. Two industries, the same tools, almost opposite instincts about what those tools are for.

Jean-Michel Frodon pushes on a more philosophical question. Even as AI seeps into every phase of filmmaking, cinema still exists as a specific apparatus, and AI, paradoxically, helps clarify what that means. Films build meaning across gaps: between shots, between screen and spectator, in the resistance of the world before the camera. None of that can be specified in advance, and no algorithm closes it. The threat of absorption, Frodon argues, also sharpens the outlines of what makes cinema irreducible.

Some of the most unsettling material here concerns what happens when no one can say with confidence who, or what, authored something. Jeroen Gerrits reads Jeunet's Amélie, made at the precise moment digital postproduction began saturating the look of popular cinema, as a film that already senses where things are heading. Its characters start to suspect that their experiences have been engineered for them, down to the "small moments of joy" that no longer feel fully their own. As cinema moves from analog to digital to AI, the skeptical questions it raises shift: from doubts about the reality of the world, to doubts about other minds, to something more intimate, an uncertainty about the self, about whether your responses to things have been quietly authored by systems you cannot see.

Sulgi Lie's essay on aespa moves into stranger territory. The K-pop group's visual world involves multiple versions of each performer appearing simultaneously, original and avatar in

parallel, synchronized by playback, neither clearly prior to the other. The most unsettling figure is Naevis: an AI-like entity in aespa's mythology who has no human original at all, and who can, within the logic of the videos, outperform and even contain her supposed creators. Lie's argument is that the music video has long been a laboratory for exactly this kind of layering and self-similarity, which is part of why avatar autonomy feels intuitive rather than shocking. The form was already there.

Sandra Laugier shifts the scale to something slower and more pervasive: the long arcs of television series, where viewers spend years with characters whose choices gradually train their own moral intuitions. Series don't just reflect values, she argues. They help form them, furnishing shared scenes through which people learn to register violence, care, injustice, democratic fragility. What has changed is that those arcs now run through recommendation systems that quietly determine what appears, when, and to whom. The same infrastructure that makes it easy to move between an American political drama, a Korean thriller, and an Israeli security series also enacts a new division of cultural visibility. Business models and data practices shape which ethical worlds feel available to which publics, and that process mostly operates below the threshold of notice.

Two essays in this issue work against the grain of scale entirely. Judith Deschamps brings AI into a nursing home and a music research laboratory in Paris, placing elderly residents and children in puberty, groups treated as invisible users of technology, at the center of artistic experiments. One project reconstructs the voice of the castrato Farinelli through neural networks. Another uses clay, conversation, and a fine-tuned language model to absorb the speech rhythms, preoccupations, and fatigue of very old people. What Deschamps is after is what she calls the infra-ordinary: the slowed gestures and minor textures that standard datasets ignore, but that can, when allowed to reshape technical systems, open different ideas about what AI is actually for. She is not interested in optimization or transhumanist escape. She is interested in entropy, aging, the voice that keeps changing.

Claire Mathieu approaches AI from a mathematician's angle, a skeptic's angle. Testing large language models on specialized material, she finds that systems extraordinarily fluent in ordinary prose stumble badly on mathematical notation, context-dependent humor, and terminological distinctions that depend on knowing a field rather than predicting plausible continuations. Her quieter observation is more troubling: models trained primarily on English-language corpora tend to export not just vocabulary but ways of organizing arguments. Even when they produce perfect French sentences, they risk flattening differences in style and thought that were sustained, historically, by other writing traditions. The danger isn't only mistranslation. It is a gradual, nearly invisible erosion of cultural variety, and convenience is what makes it hard to see.

These essays don't argue that AI is destroying cinema or homogenizing culture in any simple way. What they find, looking closely at particular industries and institutions and practices, is a slow re-sorting of what counts as a plausible image, a reasonable style, a normal way for stories to unfold. The decisions driving that re-sorting happen in editing suites, recommendation interfaces, translation workflows, funding applications. They don't arrive labeled as fateful choices. But they are choices, made by people, inside institutions, under pressures that can be named and examined and, if necessary, resisted. The futures that look inevitable are quietly made.