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BEYOND CREATIVITY: DECODING CHANGES MEDIATED BY GENERATIVE AI MODELS IN VISUAL GENERATIVE MEDIA AND CREATIVE PRODUCTION

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Introduction

The integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) into visual production has emerged as a critical area of inquiry (Livingstone, 2024), particularly following the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike. While public attention has centered on the film industry's so-called above-the-line roles—such as screenwriters and actors, where narratives of artificial creativity fueled concerns about technological unemployment, this study contends that the transformative effects of GenAI on below-the-line roles demand equal scrutiny. These positions, which include sound engineers, post-production editors, and visual effects (VFX) artists, are often mischaracterized as purely technical, despite their integral role in shaping a film's creative vision. By focusing on the VFX industry, we investigate how GenAI technologies are mediating creative production by remaining attuned to the ways these tools idealize and mediate creative workflow.

We look at GenAI company, Runway, specifically their Gen-3 Alpha model for image and video generation. The company made headlines in September 2024 because of its collaboration with the Academy Award-winning studio Lionsgate (Narayan & Nairn, 2024). The agreement grants Runway complete access to Lionsgate's archive for training a custom model which raises a series of concerns including intellectual property theft, labor extraction and automation.

We examine questions at the intersections of generative visual media, critical data studies and creative production. Specifically, we ask:

1. How human-model interactions within GenAI tools intervene, guide, enable, or constrain creative workflow?
2. How does Runway reshape, imagine, and conceptualize creative process, creative labor, and agency via its GenAI models?

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Theoretical Framework

To understand the manifold implications of GenAI on creative production, we first question what we mean by creativity when this faculty is attributed to computers. We move away from Romantic and western ideals framing creativity as the purview of artists, as a quintessentially human process driven solely by emotions and escaping rational control (Manovich & Arielli., 2024). Building on Indigenous, posthuman, and autonomist traditions, we conceive creativity from an ecological perspective (Henriksen et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018) which provides a broader and critical framework to consider the implications of GenAI on creativity, beyond the hype surrounding their real or imagined creative potential which restrain creativity to its binary and technical meanings (e.g., Boden, 1998).

We understand creativity as a cultural construct whose meaning is contingent on and shaped by social, political, cultural and technical affordance. This entails acknowledging how political, economic, and technological imperatives govern the production, valuation, and consumption of certain creative artifacts, like music, images, and texts (creativity as a *dispositif*: Reckwitz, 2017). Situating creative production as a relational process allows us to review different aspects about the (subjective) environment, (GenAI) tool, creative worker and their technical surrounding (Bueno et al., 2024). By problematizing creativity, we explore how this concept is currently modelled, embedded, and bounded (Dick, 2015) within GenAI models. To address this issue, we mobilize theories from science and technology studies (Feenberg, 1999), critical data (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Chun, 2021) and algorithm studies (Bender et al., 2021), to conceive AI as a registry of power (Crawford, 2021), a contested territory where diverging interests, epistemologies, politics, and narratives about labor, automation, and creativity converge and clash.

Methodology

To analyze how creative workflows are mediated by the model's features, defaults, and design patterns we adopt the app walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018). This analysis allows us to foreground the embedded assumptions and constraints about creative production, as well as the types of users and uses this kind of tool anticipate or privilege. Aware of the limitation of the app walkthrough method (Duguay & Gold-Apel, 2023), we extended our research protocol by borrowing practices from autoethnographic and human-computer interaction traditions. We begin with a historical inquiry to investigate the convergence between creativity and ideation of "tool" for creative production (Ingold, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Lesage, 2015). We deal with creativity as a site of rupture as part of this history of creative production tools and development of generative visual media.

Discussion

We focus on image and video creation to analyze the temporal articulation, technical features and visual affordances presented by the model. We find three key features underpinning Runway's mediation of creative production: immediacy, iterativity, and control. Immediacy refers to the Gen-3 Alpha's temporal dimension. This is evident from

the moment we enter the platform, to when a final output, like an image, is presented on the screen—all intervals of creative making or “thinking” are measured in seconds rather than minutes. The immediacy with which the model generates new videos and images when prompted is projected to blur the line between ideation and execution, making them feel simultaneous. Runway also emphasizes this aspect in its promotional content, describing execution as “the new ideation” (Runway, 2025). Second, the possibility of iterative refinement through consecutive prompting, the model seems to overcome the hylomorphic model of creativity, the idea that creation involves imposing pre-conceived mental forms onto passive matter (Ingold, 2013).

Lastly, the Gen-3 Alpha model evokes an anthropocentric vision of creativity, which positions humans as the central decision-makers in the creative workflows, with AI serving as a sophisticated tool under human direction, a non-human slave enhancing creators’ powers (Lewis et al., 2018). This interplay of immediate feedback, iterative refinement, and human control appears to reconcile what Antonio Gramsci (1934) identified as the structural divide between planning and execution in creative work. This model is propped on logics of industrial productivity, automation and computation (Schaffer, 1994) that benefit from alienating, dehumanizing and atomizing.

We find that while the model might appear to overcome the separation between ideation and execution, through rapid generation and iterative refinement, it also works to reinforce a different kind of separation between makers and materials. The model's restriction to linguistic interaction through prompts, combined with users' inability to directly engage with either the generated outputs or the underlying system (source datasets, algorithms, parameters) composing the technical ecosystem in which the creative process unfolds, widens the gap between thinking and doing in creative practice. Although the model enables continuous refinement through iterative cycles, it does so through discrete, linguistically mediated steps, prompting, rather than through the flowing engagement with materials that characterize creative practices.

Moreover, Runway’s seeming emphasis on (human) control over the model’s iterativity, reduces creative agency to aesthetic judgment of variants (Manovich & Arielli., 2024) and refinement through parametric prompting (Laba, 2024). This creates a mode of creative production that, rather than following the forces and flows of materials (Ingold, 2013), depends entirely on abstract linguistic mediation and passive aesthetic judgment, alienating the user from their skills, their products, and the materials of the creative production.

Significance

Our research highlights the urgent need to analyze the impact of GenAI on visual production, as these applications rapidly integrate into existing creative industry workflows through easy-to use plugins, extensions, and tools. We argue that GenAI in visual production does not represent an inherently new disruptive technology but an extension of the logic of creative control already in place in media industries. Even when the “new” technologies propose moments of rupture in our understanding of creativity, it does so by reshaping creative practice, expertise, skill, autonomy, and professional

identity of creative workers. Our ongoing study intervenes in such a trend of technologically mediated creativity and questions of changes in creative production.

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