

Early aesthetics of cinema made with generative AI: the context of the +RAIN Film Fest

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Primeras estéticas del cine realizado con IA generativa: el contexto del +RAIN Film Fest

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to identify the possible aesthetic models that generative AI has introduced into cinematic language in the last three years, updating pre-existing forms and adapting them to contemporary issues such as post humanism, climate change, digital memory and societies of control. With this aim, the first European festival specialising in films made with generative AI, the +RAIN Film Fest, has been used as a context and a study corpus. Through the analysis of fifteen films featured in the 2023, 2024 and 2025 programs, we identify recurring formal aspects and their thematic correlations. Each of these aspects structures this initial aesthetic approach to this type of film to offer an overview of the different trends. In light of the emergence and popularisation of these new methods of audiovisual creation, and recognising that this is a constantly evolving territory, this article offers a novel perspective on existing research, building bridges between the past and the present, to argue that this technology also extends a branch of film history that was already contained in previous forms, as elements of early cinema, the avant-garde of the 1920s, and experimental cinema of the 1960s are revived through the possibilities of generative AI in the 21st century. Although the results cannot be extrapolated to the context of commercial cinema, they lay the groundwork for thinking about the creative processes of AI and connecting them with those of visual culture.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es identificar los posibles modelos estéticos que la IA generativa ha introducido en el lenguaje cinematográfico en los tres últimos años, actualizando unas formas preexistentes y adaptándolas a temáticas contemporáneas como el posthumanismo, la emergencia climática, la memoria digital o las sociedades de control. Para ello, se ha tomado como contexto y corpus de estudio el primer festival europeo especializado en películas realizadas con IA generativa, el +RAIN Film Fest. A partir del análisis de una quincena de películas –programadas entre 2023 y 2025– se identifican aquellos aspectos formales recurrentes y su correlación a nivel temático. Cada uno de estos aspectos estructura nuestra primera aproximación estética a este tipo de films, tratando de ofrecer un panorama de las distintas tendencias. En plena emergencia y popularización de estas nuevas metodologías de creación audiovisual, y asumiendo que este es un territorio en continua mutación, el artículo ofrece una visión novedosa a las investigaciones existentes, estableciendo puentes entre el pasado y el presente, para argumentar que esta tecnología prolonga también una historia del cine que ya estaba contenida en formas anteriores. Los vínculos con el cine de los orígenes, las vanguardias de los años veinte o el cine experimental de los años sesenta se reactualizan mediante las posibilidades de la IA generativa en pleno siglo XXI. Aunque los resultados no puedan extrapolarse al contexto del cine comercial, nos permiten sentar las bases para pensar los procesos creativos de la IA e imbricarlos en los de la cultura visual.

KEYWORDS

Generative IA; Film aesthetics; Archive; Post humanism; +Rain Film Fest; Memory; Experimental filmmaking.

PALABRAS CLAVE

IA generativa; Estética cinematográfica; Archivo; Posthumanismo; +RAIN Film Fest; Memoria; Cine experimental.



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Primeres estètiques del cinema realitzat amb IA generativa: el context del +RAIN Film Fest

RESUM

L'objectiu d'aquest article és identificar els possibles models estètics que la IA generativa ha introduït en el llenguatge cinematogràfic en els darrers tres anys, actualitzant unes formes preexistents i adaptant-les a temàtiques contemporànies com el post humanisme, l'emergència climàtica, la memòria digital o les societats de control. Per fer-ho, s'ha pres com a context i corpus d'estudi el primer festival europeu especialitzat en pel·lícules realitzades amb IA generativa, el +RAIN Film Fest. A partir de l'anàlisi d'una quinzena de pel·lícules –programades entre el 2023 i el 2025– s'identifiquen aquells aspectes formals recurrents i la seva correlació a nivell temàtic. Cadascun d'aquests aspectes estructura la nostra primera aproximació estètica a aquest tipus de films, intentant oferir un panorama de les diferents tendències. En plena emergència i popularització d'aquestes noves metodologies de creació audiovisual, i assumint que aquest és un territori en mutació contínua, l'article ofereix una visió nova a les investigacions existents, establint ponts entre el passat i el present, per argumentar que aquesta tecnologia prolonga també una història del cinema que ja estava continguda en formes anteriors. Els vincles amb el cinema dels orígens, les avantguardes dels anys vint o el cinema experimental dels anys seixanta es reactualitzen mitjançant les possibilitats de la IA generativa a ple segle XXI. Encara que els resultats no es puguin extrapolar al context del cinema comercial, ens permeten establir les bases per pensar els processos creatius de la IA i imbricar-los en els de la cultura visual.

PARAULES CLAU

IA generativa; Estètica cinematogràfica; Arxiu; Posthumanisme; +RAIN Film Fest; Memòria; Cinema experimental.

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1. Uniting past and present: the human and technology, a hyperconnected whole

In her book *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017), N. Katherine Hayles explores current research in neuroscience on non-conscious cognitive processes to reflect on "unthought" (or thinking before it is thought) and conceptualise interactions between humans and technical systems at a time when the content of people's minds has extended far beyond their bodies. The American theorist, who in 1999 considered the question of how we became posthuman, focuses here on those processes of the "non-conscious" (not to be confused with the "unconscious") that occur between "sensors, actuators, processors, storage media and distribution networks, and which include human, biological, technical and material components" (p. 2), functioning as interfaces or systems. The dynamics of these systems, which surpass the more linear dynamics of rational thinking and which Hayles prefers to describe as an "assemblage" rather than a "network", serve as the foundation for generative AI tools themselves, but also for the conceptual, technical and creative processes of practically every audiovisual product generated with this technology. By the very nature of these dynamics, the artistic results generally have more in common with the technique of collage than with conventional storytelling. This raises one of the key questions for this study, which has to do with the possibility of a new aesthetic proposed by the films analysed below. These are films that focus more on the process and on questioning the very use of this technology than on telling a story in keeping with the classical tradition of cinematic narrative.

1.1. AI and early cinema: systems between systems

In aesthetic terms, the paradigm shift in contemporary visual culture proposed by generative AI is similar to the one that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century, with the invention of cinema and radiography (both in 1895), along with a whole range of scientific advances and artistic revolutions that mutually influenced one another. The various technological innovations associated with the emergence of new viewing devices are key to understanding the intimate relationship that existed between the arts and sciences at the time. In both fields, the idea of the hyperconnected modern subject was being consciously explored on both the technical and the phenomenological level. Even then, technology at the service of humankind was beginning to be perceived as a sort of bodily appendage that extended the capacities of our senses of perception and our connection with the environment, an idea that McLuhan (1964) would develop a few decades later. Although it has generally been overlooked in studies of early cinema, this notion of the interrelation of the human being with the world through technology was one of the central ideas in the choreographies and lighting designs

of the dancer Loïe Fuller, whose “serpentine dance” became an early cinematic genre of its own. While these popular choreographies had their origins in vaudeville, the Symbolists identified in this new art of movement a plasmatic energy capable of constantly creating new forms (Gunning, 2003). Not only did Fuller’s unique choreographies draw visually on the new energy source represented by electricity (the great technological revolution of her time), but her dancing itself made this electricity visible in an abstract way, as her body and its movements were positioned at the intersection between internal and external forces. It is thus significant that *Generation* (Riccardo Fusetti, 2022), which won the Grand Prix at the first edition of the Runway AI Film Festival (the first international festival for films made with generative AI) and was also screened at the first *+RAIN Film Fest* (Europe’s first AI film festival), is something of an heir to those dances captured on film in the early days of cinema. *Generation* could be categorised today as a video dance that uses AI to depict a cosmological vision in which the microuniverse of a woman’s body and the macrouniverse of outer space are interrelated in a continuous flow while also being a reflection of each other (Figure 1). It is a kind of visual metaphor that might serve as an illustration of contemporary theories in different scientific and philosophical fields regarding the interconnection between organic beings (humans, animals and plants), inorganic beings (minerals, but also machines) and their environment. This interconnection, which is also explored by Hayles, was already being posited by philosophers such as Whitehead (2021) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Far from an abstract notion, it can be seen expressed today in an aesthetic trend in

AI that uses its technological capacity to assemble and associate huge volumes of data.

Indeed, as Joanna Zylinska (2020) points out, “much of what passes off for AI today is really a product of coupling big data with statistical analysis. Impressive or even mysterious as some of the outcomes may look, they are the result of advanced calculations performed on large quantities of data” (p. 8). This vast capacity for managing huge volumes of data offers the possibility of representing certain contemporary themes that are central to visual culture, such as the climate change, the collapse of capitalism or posthumanism.

1.2. AI and experimental cinema: visual symphonies

While the conceptual and aesthetic approach of *Generation* suggests a relationship between AI-generated films and early cinema (in addition to focusing on key contemporary issues), another film screened at the third edition of the *+RAIN Film Fest* offers clear evidence of a connection between certain AI-made films and experimental cinema. That film is *Ethereal Rhythms, Everything Rhymes* (2024) by Brecht Vanhoutte, a Belgian multidisciplinary artist who made this short while investigating his own mental health and the recurring visions he suffered from (Figure 2). This film, which received its première at the Rotterdam International Film Festival,¹ looks back once again to the past to evoke another subgenre associated with video dance, although it is closer in experimental terms to the so-called choreocinema² of avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren.

Bearing many similarities in terms of its aesthetics and choreographic approach to the visionary film *Introspection* (1941-46)

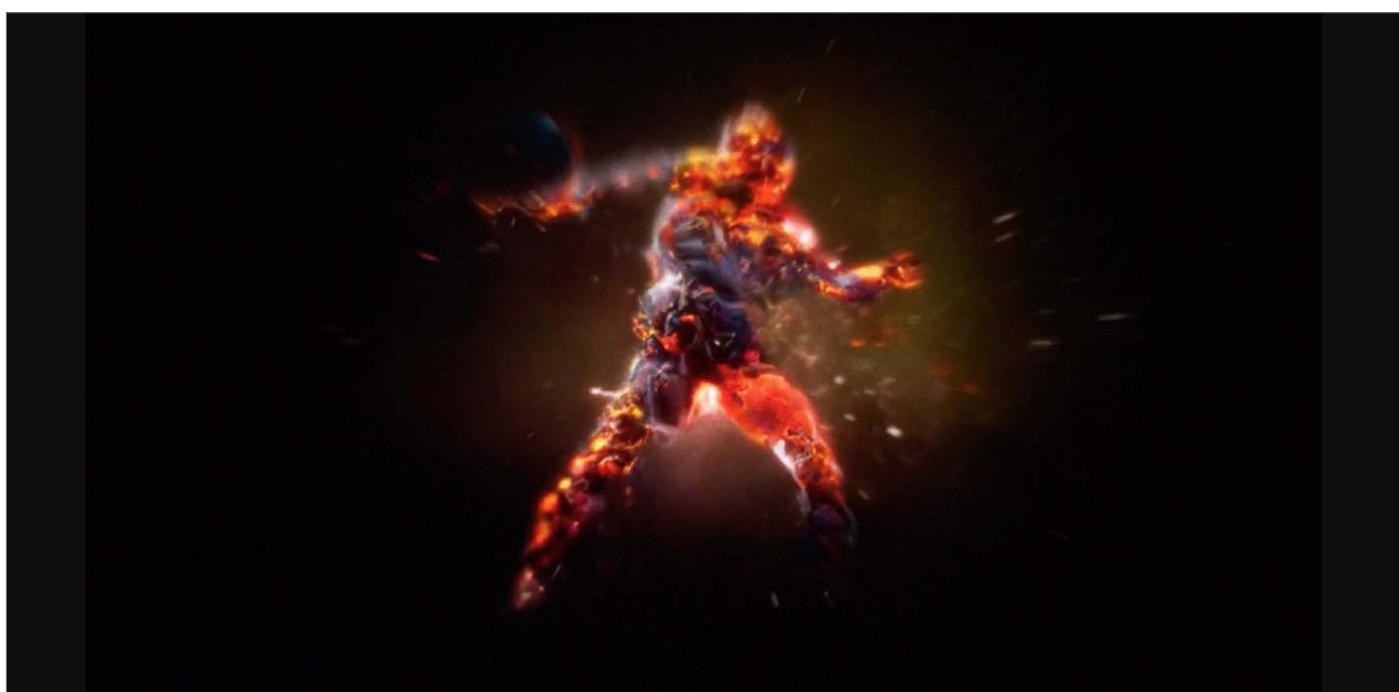


Figure 1. Still-frame from *Generation*. Source: Riccardo Fusetti, 2022. ©Riccardo Fusetti.



Figure 2. Still-frame from *Ethereal Rythms, Everything Rhymes*. Source: Brecht Vanhoutte, 2024. © Brecht Vanhoutte.

by the American artist Sarah-Kathryn Arledge, Vanhoutte's short has a blurred texture similar to VHS, in contrast to the hyperdefinition normally associated with digital images, and it is created partly out of sketches filmed frame-by-frame and converted by the artist to 4K. The result is a kind of visual symphony (with a meticulously developed and equally experimental soundtrack) that makes constant and highly unique use of slow motion, an effect exploited by filmmakers who understood cinema as an art form—such as Jean Epstein in the 1920s or the aforementioned Deren in the 1940s—with the aim of rendering the invisible visible. At the same time, it is articulated with images containing formal patterns that resemble hypnagogic hallucinations, the visions that appear behind our eyelids just before we fall asleep. Audiovisual experiences like these were explored by various American artists associated with the Expanded Cinema movement³ in the 1960s. One of the objectives of this movement—exemplified in projects such as the Dreamachine (1959) created by the artist Brion Gysin and the scientist Ian Sommerville—was to expand human consciousness (an aim which, significantly, is also very much in line with the founding philosophy of Silicon Valley, where generative AI technology had its origins).

1.3. Context and object of study

Based on the observations and basic principles outlined above, the hypothesis of this study is that generative AI engages with

cultural-technological cycles that return to certain forms already present in different ways in visual devices of the past, such as the serpentine dances of early cinema or the abstract dimension and immersive aspirations of experimental cinema in the 1960s. Thus, for example, André Gaudreault's research on early cinema has always explored the notion of "cultural series" (2013) to explain how new technologies developed around the digital image merely continue pre-existing cultural sequences. With this in mind, the main objective of this article is to offer an aesthetic, conceptual and thematic overview of the films screened at the three *+RAIN Film Festivals* so far (2023, 2024 and 2025), with the aim of identifying some of the recurring features of audiovisual productions either partially or totally produced using different generative AI models (such as Midjourney, Sora, DALL-E, Runway, ChatGPT, Stable Diffusion or Deep Dream Generator), which update cinematic forms and processes of the past in order to explore issues of the present. To this end, this article presents a comparative analysis of films from past and present based on the parameters of editing, sound, treatment of the image (in its materiality) and the artist's mechanisms of self-representation.

The fifteen films selected for the study corpus are all independent productions, in most cases made on very low budgets (sometimes even with no funding at all) or as artistic projects made at fine arts or film schools.⁴ The following criteria were established for the selection of the corpus: works that explore

aesthetic-narrative ideas that are not based solely on a classical or institutional mode of representation; works that reflect the various aesthetic-narrative trends that have characterised the three editions of the *+RAIN Film Festival*; and works that directly or indirectly reproduce some of the most paradigmatic imaginaries of the contemporary context. It is clear, of course, that the nature of this study poses the disadvantage that the conclusions drawn cannot be extrapolated or applied more generally to the film industry, which for some years now has been using generative AI in different stages of the film production process (Giralt Gris, 2025). On the other hand, it also offers the advantage that the conclusions can focus exclusively on the images and their creation processes, without having to take into account the mechanics of the film industry. For this reason, as noted above, much of the cinematic language of the corpus is associated with the tradition of experimental and avant-garde cinema and/or video art and not with the classical language of commercial cinema. This experimental dimension not only involves the filmmaking process, but also translates into a profoundly aesthetic affinity that informs a different approach to film history, one that explores the possibilities of the art of moving pictures while eschewing the tyranny of literary and classical narrativity and questioning its own nature. Moreover, the fact that the *+RAIN Film Fest* is an event organised by a public institution (Pompeu Fabra University in Spain) ensures that none of the films included in the corpus were selected based on commercial or industrial criteria, making them ideal material for research on the cinematic forms being developed by generative AI.

Finally, the theories of Katherine Hayles and her materialistic approach to images are drawn on in pursuit of another aim of this article, which is to demonstrate the close connection between the aesthetic proposed by generative AI and a number of themes associated with posthumanism and with the idea of a new relationship between organic, machinic and inorganic beings, which is reflected in an aesthetic balance between form and content that emerges as a common denominator of this new technology.

2. The gaze of the machine: between self-awareness and visual patterns

One of the clearest examples of the progressive industrialisation of viewing (Virilio, 1989, p. 77) is the overabundance in contemporary visual culture of what could be described as automatic images, like the footage recorded by video surveillance cameras, traffic control cameras, police vehicles, drones or X-ray devices at airports and train stations. These images are being recorded constantly, but not for viewing by human beings (there is no spectator most of the time). Instead, they are intended to be consumed by the machines themselves, operating on closed circuits and stored on servers until they are eventually deleted. CCTV camera images serve as the basis

for the film that closed the first edition of the *+RAIN Film Fest*: *UNINVITED*, a collaboration between London-based artist Nye Thomson and the Swiss-Austrian-American duo UBER-MORGEN (2021). This iconic film portrays a synthetic organism that perceives the universe through millions of virally abused hallucinogenic sensors (CCTV cameras), "a radically new creature," as its creators describe it, "which looks at the world without finding meaning in what it sees." It is a life form that is evolving constantly through human and machine learning, and it defines its own existence and agency based on fear, instability, aggression and vulnerability. This film introduces a very interesting twist from the perspective of visual culture: images that were mere "waste" to humans come to form a narrative for the machine. We human beings are therefore not invited into this story exploring machine language, revealing a non-human consciousness that is incapable of making sense and order out of images that the human eye never looks at. How then do machines look at images? This is a question asked by the theorist Chávez Heras (2024) in his book *Cinema and Machine Vision*, which examines the transformation of different regimes of visuality by these "vision machines" that are already beginning to regulate what can be seen, when and by whom. While not all images circulating are artistic or cinematic images, the membranes between them are becoming increasingly porous, and conventions and styles of computer culture are infecting film images in the same way that film culture continues to influence digital culture, online platforms and video games.

The identification of particular visual patterns is in fact one of the main ways of training generative AI models. This is a kind of learning that translates into an aesthetic based on these same patterns: shapes that repeat themselves while at the same time they are constantly mutating, serving as a metaphor for and a representation of the contemporary hyperconnection and the constant flow of images in which we move. A paradigmatic example of this operation is Jeppe Lange's film *Abyss* (Denmark, 2022), a finalist in the first edition of the *+RAIN Film Fest* and also screened at the Visions du Réel Festival, which consists of a series of 10,000 images found using a Google Reverse Image Search. The visual development of this film is based on AI's misinterpretation of certain images, as it ignores scale, emotions and context and focuses solely on formal patterns, colours and correlations. On the one hand, *Abyss* displays an infinite connection of images linked by their formal appearance, exploring a territory somewhere between experimentation and video installation. On the other, it offers a good example of machine intelligence, the machine's particular way of "thinking" and processing images. Through this hyperconnection of the millions of images stored on servers in unknown locations, generative AI evokes early multimedia art, Marshall McLuhan's theories related to intermediality (1964) and Norbert Wiener's understanding of cybernetics (1948). Wiener's concept, which is based primarily on how organic and inorganic systems behave, relate to each other and mutually

affect each other, informs many of the films made with AI, not just as subject matter or an underlying theme, but also in formal and procedural terms.

With different aesthetic and narrative approaches, both *UNINVITED* and *Abyss* consider how the machine looks at the world. From a conceptual perspective, both films therefore raise the possibility of imagining a work of art in constant formulation, which is not limited to human viewing and can potentially be played or screened ad infinitum. This idea ties in with a concept defined by Hollis Frampton (2009), one of the key figures in experimental cinema, as the "infinite film":

The infinite film contains an infinity of endless passages wherein no frame resembles any other in the slightest degree, and a further infinity of passages wherein successive frames are as nearly identical as intelligence can make them. [...] If we are indeed doomed to the comically convergent task of dismantling the universe and fabricating from its stuff an artefact called the Universe, it is reasonable to suppose that such an artefact will resemble the vaults of an endless film archive built to house, in eternal cold storage, the infinite film. (pp. 114–115)

Frampton's metaphorical idea of the "vaults of an endless film library", which was foreshadowed by the pioneering multimedia artist Stan Vanderbeek in 1966 in his utopian *Movie-Drome* project,⁵ and which generative AI technology is making technologically possible, is useful for Chávez Heras (2024) to situate the conception of the algorithmic image developed in both the aforementioned films. Visual culture

theory has explored how this algorithmic image is generated, placing the focus on the "latent spaces" in which "immense mathematical matrices, networks of artificial neurons understand the world as a code and begin to learn to produce images and sounds on their own, to write, to translate and to speak" (Somaini et al., 2025). Although these may be abstract and mathematical constructions, as Somaini (2023) himself points out, their cultural and political implications should not be underestimated.

Another key feature of some of the films analysed here is the attempt to establish a direct dialogue with film history itself as a bridge to today's technology. A good example of this can be found in Tomas Rampula's *Time Metallurgist* (2024), which was presented at the second +RAIN Fest. This is an experimental film that uses AI to reconstruct historical events of 19th century California abstractly with photographs and letters (Figure 3). The place and period chosen are themselves significant: on the one hand, it depicts the arrival of Eadweard Muybridge in the Wild West, where he would eventually deconstruct the motion of a galloping horse using chronophotography; on the other, it shows the construction of the transcontinental railroad (the great technological advance of that time) and the massacres of Indigenous Americans and culling of the buffalo population that the construction entailed. And California, the film's setting, would of course become the home of cybernetics and artificial intelligence research in the 20th century.



Figure 3. Still-frame from *Time Metallurgist*. Source: Tomas Rampula, 2024. © Tomas Rampula.

3. Archive, memory and identity

Underlying the theory of latent spaces is the archive, which here refers to the material that feeds the datasets used in the process of training generative AI models. In the talk he gave at the third *+RAIN Film Fest*, Antonio Somaini spoke specifically about latent spaces as meta-archives, and of the internet as a cultural memory archive in vector form that processes data endlessly in infinite variations.⁶ It is thus a kind of "epistemic compression" that facilitates both the representation of existing data and the production of new data. In other words, the archive today not only stores but also generates, orders, redistributes, processes and transforms content. We are witnessing a renewed interest in the archive, in an update of the archival trend that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century with the advent of digital technology, described by Hal Foster in his article "An Archival Impulse" (2004). The archive as a concept and as the creator of an image selection and/or generation process also establishes a bridge with other pre-existing cinematic forms also associated with the field of experimental cinema—in this case, with films made using found footage, where the creative and visible use of editing lies at the heart of the creative process. As noted above, the selection and organisation of images has more to do with collage or palimpsest (similar in form and operation to the neural networks of latent spaces) than with the linear nature of classical narrative, and this selection and organisation is the essence of AI-generated films. It can thus be asserted that the directors who theorised about editing in the 1920s, such as the aforementioned Epstein, Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov, have become highly relevant figures in contemporary thinking about generative AI. The idea of systems and their arrangement as "assemblages" (again citing Hayles) is therefore closely related to the way AI tools function to create new content out of existing material, and to the type of editing common to many of the films analysed here, consisting of the compilation of fragments in a constant process of metamorphosis, which are developed across an extended spatio-temporal spectrum and possess a markedly phantasmatic quality (Martínez & Salvadó, 2025). The dramatic tension in these fragments, far from being the product of a narrative climax, occurs as a consequence of the juxtaposition of theoretically unconnected images. In the third edition of the *+RAIN Fest*, most of the filmmakers responsible for the films featured (Zirou Chen, Marco Talarico, Brecht Vanhoutte and Amaillia Bordet) explained that their works were based on images found on the web whose reuse served as a way of questioning identity and memory, whether individual or collective. The possibility of working with this "endless archive" changes our relationship with the past, allowing us to review it and create alternatives to it. In fact, this is one of the thematic, conceptual and procedural questions that appear

the most in the films screened over the course of the three editions of the *+RAIN Film Fest*.

For example, *Home Age To Avalokiteśvara* (Maria Thuý Hiên Than, United Kingdom, 2023) depicts an individual memory configured on the basis of an external imaginary. In this hypnotic film, the director reflects on the impact on her childhood of both a maximalist visual imaginary and the combination of Mahayana Buddhist and Catholic belief systems instilled in her by her mother. Using what Hito Steyerl defines as "poor images" (2014), with the same low quality as the images that filled her home when she was a child, the filmmaker creates a vast collage effectively constituting a chaotic mandala to illustrate the inherent contradictions of her spiritual education. With a completely different aesthetic, the film *Portrait of the Jungle People* (Eddie Wong, Malaysia, 2022) attempts to reconstruct the collective memory of a community using a tracking shot that takes us into a jungle. Constructed out of interpolations of images, the kinetic experience the film offers the spectator is reminiscent of some of the first experiments in early cinema, such as the technique of positioning a camera on the path of an advancing train. The lost collective memory—evoked by a voice-over recounting the historical events—is gradually constructed as the camera takes us into a constantly transforming lush landscape created by means of overlapping images. In the film that won the 2025 edition of the festival, *Who Was Here?* (Evi Stamou, Greece, 2025), significantly subtitled *A Posthuman Documentary*, the director seeks to fill the gaps in her father's biography at the time of the Greek military dictatorship by interacting with an AI tool (Figure 4). This exchange gives rise to different possible stories in which images, in the form of black and white photographs edited together, are constantly created and dissolved, erased and reconstructed.

On the other hand, the winner of the Emerging Talent Award at the 2025 edition, Amaillia Bordet's *No Home Movies* (France, 2024) explores the nature of memory and whether it can ever really be objective or honest (Figure 5). To make the film, in which an AI tool attempts to construct a memory of its own out of the images of others, half of the images Amaillia used were archive images, mostly found on the internet and in home movies of people she didn't know, which led her to the realisation that all of them could actually have been of her and her family as we all end up filming and photographing the same things. A notable feature of this film is its use of glitches as an aesthetic device (something that has become a conceptual, procedural and formal constant in films made with AI), prompting us to question the nature of our own reality and what we consider "real". On the subject of glitches (which can be both a cause and an effect of AI-generated images today), Somaini (2023) points out that in latent spaces you can never get the exact object you want, which is why they are able to reproduce the errors, gaps or imperfections of the human memory and the human mind.



Figure 4. Still-frame from *Who Was Here?*. Source: Evi Stamou, 2025. © Evi Stamou.



Figure 5. Still-frame from *No Home Movies*. Source: Amaillia Bordet, 2024. © Amaillia Bordet.

In Andrea Gatopoulos's *The Eggregores' Theory*, which opened the Venice Critics' Week in 2024 and is perhaps one of the most (if not the most) narrative films featured at the +RAIN Film Fest to date, its director explores memory, but from a dystopian perspective (Figure 6). The voice-over tells us of a man who cannot remember his past in a dictatorial society governed by signs established by a machine, which the citizens are unable to decipher. With the pretext of a love story in an "Orwellian" society, the film addresses one of the key issues in the operation of generative AI: the question of language and the relationship of words or prompts with images. Similarly, one of the finalists at the first +RAIN Fest, *My Word* (Carme Puche, 2023), examines the gender, racial and class biases that condition communication between human beings and machines. Despite their very different styles and approaches, both Gatopoulos's and Puche's films expose the "politics" behind a simple prompt. Moreover, not only are there works today in which words in the form of prompts generate images or vice versa, but the sum of word and image is in turn a generator of new images.

This perspective on politics and identity is complemented by a Kafkaesque character in Zirui Chen's film *Format Error Occurred at Offset* (Germany, 2025), in which the Chinese director offers an ironic account of the difficulties he faced emigrating to Europe, reflecting on the concept of identity in the world we live in, an identity that we can transform endlessly thanks to generative AI. Chen, who made his film mainly using images from Twitter, commented at the 2025 +RAIN Film Fest

that he had started using Midjourney and Stable Diffusion to see "what was going on inside" and to investigate the potential and metaphorical capacity of these applications. Indeed, *Format Error Occurred at Offset* is a metaphor for their flexible identity and mutating memory. In the film, Chen also reflects on the impact of the use of generative AI on different societies, as well as its potential benefits and dangers in different political systems and social structures. Marco Talarico also questions identity in his film *At Least I Will Be 8 294 400 Pixel* (Italy, 2024), which explores the use of AI as a way of understanding how both this technology and consciousness operate, based on the similarity of the latter to a database. Talarico's film combines live-action and AI-generated images as well as other recycled images.

4. The material and environmental dimension: posthumanism

Examinations of different aspects of AI often overlook its "natural" dimension, when the origin of what we know as artificial intelligence really refers to the first formulations of artificial life, based on biological systems (Varela and Bourgine, 1992). Also often overlooked, due to its apparently ephemeral nature, are the environmental impact and materiality of AI (i.e. its dependence on specific geological and physical phenomena and limited resources such as lithium and petroleum). These aspects reflect a tension between technological growth and environmental degradation on the one hand, and



Figure 6. Still-frame from *The Eggregores' Theory*. Source: Andrea Gatopoulos, 2024. © Andrea Gatopoulos.

the connections mentioned above between the biological, the mineral and the synthetic (the inert machinic joins the chain of living beings, and the mind is extended into storage devices and machines). These issues emerge in the films analysed in various ways, opening up to fields such as collapsology, postanthropocentrism and posthumanism.

In his film *Ripear un desierto* (2024), Felipe Elgueta maps and reconstructs the Atacama Desert in 3D using photogrammetry, NeRF and internet archives (Figure 7). The changing textures and materiality of the images in the film are comprised of mountains of clothing, tyres and industrial waste that portray the landscapes of northern Chile. These mountains, in addition to their literal ecological dimension, also represent the increasing, uncontrolled accumulation of images administered (at least at present) by nobody.

With the aim of expanding the new conceptions of the environment and interspecies relations developed by theorists such as Donna Haraway (2019) and Rosi Braidotti (2015), Hayles (2017) posits a definition of cognition applicable both to technical systems and to biological life forms. This new definition would open the door to other ways of perceiving and relating to the environment that could facilitate a transformation of life on the planet. She conceptualises this as a new "planetary cognitive ecology" that includes both human and technical actors based on new ethical principles. As noted above, the posthuman dimension is implicit in the very nature of AI and is expressed in different ways in the films analysed here.

One of the most emblematic films made with AI in terms of ecology and posthumanism is *PLSTC* (Laen Sanches, USA, 2022), which presents an underwater dystopia created out of a combination of handmade and AI-generated images of sea creatures. The unsettling specimens depicted in the film are a symbiosis of the relationships between organic and inorganic beings; mutations resulting from the petrocapitalist exploitation of the planet by humans, with devastating consequences for marine life. On the other hand, *False Witness* (Flo Yuting Zhu, UK, 2024), which received Special Mention at the *+RAIN Film Fest* in 2025, transforms images recorded by video surveillance cameras located in a forest into posthuman mutations combining humans and animals. In this diary film, which mixes AI-generated images with images recorded by night vision cameras that track wild animals, the spectator becomes a complicit witness, required to complete the spatio-temporal processing proposed by the director. It is also an approach reminiscent of *UNINVITED*, the film discussed at the beginning of this article, screened at the first *+RAIN Film Fest*. Also worthy of mention are the mutations proposed by the Spanish director Fran Gas in *Of Youth* (2023), the winning film at the festival's first edition. While this film could be placed in the horror genre given its premise of a young woman's dream about being abducted by aliens who try to rob her of her youth, it could also be understood as a representation of the new interspecies relations described by Haraway, Braidotti and Hayles.



Figure 7. Still-frame from *Ripear un desierto*. Source: Felipe Elgueta, 2024. © Felipe Elgueta.

5. Conclusions: towards a new form of narrativity?

The *+RAIN Film Fest*'s mission statement mentions the idea of telling stories: "the festival is interested in the use of creative methodologies placed at the service of storytelling." However, a review of the AI-generated films featured at the festival reveals that many are profoundly anti-narrative or eschew the narrative principles of classical cinema. What does this mean? What are the narrative possibilities of this type of cinema?

Although it is still too early to determine the real impact of this technology on the filmmaking world, it is clear that the films featured at the *+RAIN Film Fest* raise questions about both the true nature of cinema and what storytelling means today in a world saturated with visual stimuli coming from so many directions. From the outset, as has been noted throughout this article, it is clear that most films made with AI are aesthetically related to experimental cinema and even to those works of early cinema associated with the concept for which film historian Tom Gunning coined the term "cinema of attractions" (1989), referring to a way of understanding a significant number of early film productions as sensory and aesthetic experiences for the spectator based largely on the fascination aroused by the moving image. Gunning (2003) used this concept precisely to connect early cinema and experimental cinema, given that the latter seeks to delve beneath the surface of filmmaking, re-exploring its nature, its basic elements and the way they are deployed, with attention to the process rather than to cause and effect. In this respect, the concept of "cinema of attractions" is absolutely valid and useful to describe one of the aesthetic approaches of generative AI and its effects on the spectator.

As the art historian Laurence Bertrand Dorléac (2018) suggests, the performativity of the machine—traceable in images—is one of the key questions underpinning the very first experiences with generative AI, such as *Love Letter Generator* (1952), a program that automatically generated love letters, created by Christopher Strachey and Alan Turing, or AARON (1973), the first robot painter, created by Harold Cohen. In the latter case, it was not the images themselves that drew attention, but rather the whole spectacle of a machine trying to draw or paint something right before our eyes.

For most creators today, the interest in working with AI lies precisely in learning about it and investigating it. However, the aim is not to control or domesticate it, but to take advantage of the new places it can lead us to by chance, accident, or error. It is these considerations, which tie in with the procedural methods of Surrealism, Dadaism and other avant-garde movements of the past, that differentiate the use of AI from other types of technology. The reason for its use in film creations lies precisely in the fact that the intrinsic defects, randomness and uncertainty of the applications can generate one or more aesthetic and reflexive layers. This aspect

once again connects the films analysed here—which are also characterised by the use of "poor images" (Steyerl, 2014)—to experimental cinema, and distinguishes them from the use of AI in Hollywood or mainstream cinema, where generative AI is used for precisely the opposite purpose: namely, to produce perfectly defined images that do not exist in reality.

In terms of process and aesthetics, it is also interesting to note that the creators who have participated in the three editions of the *+RAIN Film Fest* could be classified as animators, because what they are doing is animating digital images; moreover, their work shares common features with much of the abstract cinema tradition both of Europe (beginning in the 1920s in Germany⁷ and France as an extension of the visual avant-garde), and of the United States (where it can be traced back to the 1940s with artists such as the filmmaker Mary Ellen Bute). Thus, another of the aesthetic lines identified in the films analysed here involves what Lev Manovich defined in relation to digital media as "a subgenre of painting" (2001, p. 295). With the advent of generative AI, animation, having been marginalised throughout film history, is now very much a central focus of film theory (Gunning, 2014).

Based on this centrality of the creative process and the analysis of the use of AI itself in the productions analysed, the work with the archive is revealed to be another of the conceptual and thematic constants of many of the films in the corpus. The use of the images of others by creators to explain their own experiences while also giving new purposes or meanings to pre-existing images is a common practice in narratives associated with AI. Does the resemblance of the creative process to recycling or re-assembling images mean that the artist disappears from the creative process altogether? Will a filmmaker in the future be more like an "image curator"? In their discussion of the *Artistes & Robots* exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2018, Dorléac and Neutres (2018) point out that the robots do not replace the artist or the art; instead, they invite us to ask what a work of art is and what an artist is. It could therefore be argued that AI changes the rules of the game because, among other things, it forces us to rethink key questions related to the definition of artist and artwork, or to the identification of the creator, whether it is the artist, the engineer, the robot, the spectator or all of them at once. The films analysed in this article thus point to the idea that research on AI needs to adopt a different conception of creativity, as suggested by Zylinska (2020), drawing on the framework developed by Whitehead and based on "biological and social models of creativity". "For Whitehead, creativity is change that occurs in a way in which organisms act on their environments [...], AI research would also benefit from adopting a concept of intelligence 'based on attentive inquiry' and arising out of the relations of the human with the environment. [...] Naturally, artists do not construct these machines just to get 'help' but rather to probe the limits of the human idea of creativity and of human-machinic assemblages. These works

are thus described as collaborations between the artists and the robotic systems those artists have designed" (Zylinska, 2020, p. 18).

In light of the various points outlined above in relation to the creation process with generative AI, certain themes can be identified in the films analysed here that reflect these biological and social models, while also showing the artist's interest in establishing a dialogue with technology. In this respect, problematising the climate emergency and the self-awareness of the machine are two recurring themes in generative AI narratives. However, it is surprising to note that one of the main vehicles of expression in many of these films is what could be labelled "narratives of the self", which are characteristic of filmed diaries and cinematic correspondence. Rather than distancing audiovisual creators from their inner world, the new technology allows them to engage in an exercise of introspection in which the materiality and texture of pre-existing images, together with the voice-over, becomes a way of representing certain questions of identity while expressing a generational sense of melancholy and nostalgia.

Finally, the aesthetic, conceptual and thematic aspects identified in the films analysed here open up the possibility of rethinking the very nature of the work of art. Most authors focusing on generative AI, such as Joshua Krook (2024), revive the old debate around the concept of the "aura", introduced by Walter Benjamin in 1935 (2019). Krook argues that the aura disappears not only in the materiality of the artwork, but also in the artist, who is no longer human. This also goes a step beyond the proposition made in 1991 by the philosopher José Luis Brea, who, based on the concept of "cold auras", posited a "cooling" in the artwork resulting from the mass reproduction and distribution facilitated by technology, which has given everyday life a vaguely aesthetic dimension and expanded art beyond its traditional boundaries. In this context, the responsible use of creative AI today would involve the prioritisation of human vision over artificial vision. Audiovisual artistic works such as those featured in the *+RAIN Film Fest* to date are therefore essential for continued critical analysis—considering aesthetic and conceptual parameters—of the presence and use of AI in our lives.

Footnotes

1. It is important to note that many of the films mentioned in this article premiered at "conventional" international film festivals, reflecting the attention that these types of audiovisual productions are receiving on the so-called *auteur* film circuits.
2. This term was first used in 1946 by American dance critic John Martin (qtd. in Clark, Hodson and Neiman, 1988, p. 286) in relation to Deren's film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), which, according to Martin, augured "the beginnings of a virtually new art of 'choreocinema' in which the dance and the camera collaborate on the creation of a single work of art."
3. For more information on this movement, see: Mekas, J. (2017).

Cuaderno de los sesenta. Escritos 1958-2010. Buenos Aires: Caja Negra; Rees, A. L., White, D., Ball, S., Curtis, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*. London: Tate Publishing; VanDerBeek, S. (1966). Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema, A Proposal and Manifesto. In *Film Culture* 40, Spring, pp. 15-18, and in www.stanvanderbeek.com; Youngblood, G. (1970). *Expanded Cinema*. New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

4. The *+RAIN Film Fest* does not provide detailed information on the budgets of the films included in its three programs. However, in the post-screening talks with the filmmakers, the question of the lack or absence of funding for projects of this kind often came up. This information can be found at: <https://www.upf.edu/web/RAINFilmfest/canal-RAINstream>
5. For detailed information on this project, see Sutton, G. (2015). *The Experience Machine: Stan Vanderbeek's Movie-Drome and Expanded Cinema*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
6. The talk, given on 10 June 2025 in Barcelona, is available online at: <https://www.upf.edu/web/RAINFilmfest/canal-RAINstream>
7. In this sense, the production considered the first abstract or "absolute" work in film history (and also the first experimental animation film) is Walter Ruttman's *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921), composed entirely of colours and shapes, coloured by hand and with a soundtrack chosen expressly for the images.

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