Maxime Harvey 🆔 https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6004-2507
(Institut national de la recherche scientifique — Université du Québec, Canada)

Language Matters in the Geography of AI: French-Language Uses of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Filmmaking

Abstract

This paper examines how generative artificial intelligence (AI) reconfigures linguistic practices and labour in contemporary filmmaking. Building on relational-materialist approaches, it argues that recent controversies and transformations in the film industry, such as synthetic voice generation, AI-assisted dubbing, and prompt-based creative tools, are deeply entwined with issues of language. The case of French-language filmmaking serves to foreground the geopolitical and sociolinguistic specificities that are often flattened in global AI deployments. Through a critical analysis of discourse around AI voice technologies and ethnographic observations of Québecois filmmakers, the study explores how AI's integration into creative workflows reshapes voice, identity, and authorship in localized yet globally interconnected film cultures. The paper revisits foundational film theories on voice and language, connecting them to contemporary concerns over automation, labour precarity, and the platformization of cultural production. It highlights how dubbing practices, once tools of cultural domestication and resistance, are now battlegrounds for labour rights and identity politics in the age of AI. Moreover, the research situates prompt engineering as a sociocultural practice that redistributes agency between humans and machines, challenging deterministic narratives of AI innovation. By foregrounding language not merely as a medium but as a material condition of creation, this study calls for a situated, critical understanding of AI's role in media industries. It contributes to ongoing debates in film and media studies and critical AI studies by insisting on the importance of geography and language in shaping both the possibilities and perils of AI in filmmaking.

Keywords
artificial intelligence, language, voice and dubbing, creative labour, media materialism

Introduction

The past few months have been filled with discussions about the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in filmmaking.[1] The most notable controversies in recent times, at least in terms of their mediatic echoes, are related to the use of the tools offered by the company Respeecher in the making of two contenders in the 2025 awards campaign, *The Brutalist* (Brady Corbet, 2024) and *Emilia Pérez* (Jacques Audiard, 2024). To recall, some of the actors' voices were modified with AI: the Hungarian accent of the two leading performers was corrected in the former case, and the pitch of the transgender lead actress's singing was changed in the latter.[2] Other discussions about AI in the film business do not address actual controversies but rather the prospective impacts of the technology on workers' practices. Human capacities will be augmented while some tasks will be automated, making the dynamics on the labour market still uncertain.[3] Several fields are reportedly in greater danger than others, including translation and dubbing.[4] They might not be framed as such, but as this essay argues, discussions about the actual controversies and prospective impacts of AI are, more often than not, really about language.

In AI, notably its recent incarnation based on machine learning processes, language *matters*. Here are a few examples of this. Modern AI technologies usually incorporate natural language processing functions. These functions are designed using large language models, which are built from training algorithms on datasets that include textual data and other media tagged with textual metadata, such as images. The use of generative AI applications generally revolves around prompt engineering, the art of writing instructions to produce desired output. Images can be used to prompt, but text-to-text, text-to-image, and text-to-video models are the most prevalent. The interaction with chatbots, one of generative AI's most popular software models, occurs as a linguistic situation. As addressed earlier, the controversial use of generative AI in cinema has been linked to language issues, particularly in debates over voice modulation and concerns that language-centric professions may be replaced. These are examples of language matters in AI that intersect with film matters, ranging from using films as training material for machine learning without the consent of their copyright holders to the application of AI in filmmaking to generate artificial voices or dub foreign language movies automatically, as described in the cases below.

In the context of filmmaking, a common prophecy suggests that generative AI will radically transform the voice acting industry. The voice of an American actor portraying

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1) The draft of this article was first written at the beginning of 2025. The arguments presented here are embedded in a specific Zeitgeist, motivated in part by the overwhelming presence of AI in public discourses.

2) Andrew Pulver, "The Brutalist and Emilia Perez's Voice-Cloning Controversies Make AI the New Awards Season Battleground," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/jan/20/the-brutalist-and-emilia-perezs-voice-cloning-controversies-make-ai-the-new-awards-season-battleground.

3) Hye-Kyung Lee, "Reflecting on Cultural Labour in the Time of AI," *Media, Culture & Society* 46, no. 6 (2024), 1312–1323.

4) "Quel Impact de l'IA Sur Les Filières Du Cinéma, de l'audiovisuel et Du Jeu Vidéo ?," 2024, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.cnc.fr/documents/36995/2097582/Cartographie+des+usages+IA_rapport+complet.pdf/96532829-747e-b85e-c74b-af313072cab7?t=1712309387891.

Napoleon in an English-language biopic can be easily altered to sound French, for instance.[5] But to which French of the present (the film) and the past (its story) is this futuristic discourse referring? How are large language models trained on data mostly scraped from publicly accessible sites on a predominantly Anglophone Internet going to be used to (re)generate the accent of an 18th-century French military officer born in Corsica, educated in mainland France from the age of nine, and constantly moving between war and peace? How can the generation of such a voice be considered a better representation of a past era and its lost voices, given the scarce traces of this specific language instantiation that cannot be retrieved from today's Internet?

The rise of AI in filmmaking has raised new concerns about the intertwined materiality of film and AI, particularly in discussions on deepfakes and their visuality. This paper argues that we must also consider the role of language in relation to AI technologies in the filmmaking process. I will first focus on issues that relate AI to cultural references and to the embodied materiality present in language. I propose considering the arrival of AI as the re-actualization of old discussions on the question of voice in film, which has been theorized as an "attraction" in early cinema and as a "revolution" of the film medium in the age of the "talkies."[6] Through the description of a scene witnessed during ethnographic fieldwork in a filmmaking studio, I will argue that AI brings cinema to a new transition, selling voice as a particular kind of product that I conceptualize as an *interactional commodity*.

I will then address the political economy of linguistic matters through a critique of AI voice applications used in dubbing. The analysis of French-Canadian creative labour unions' discourses on the impact of AI on the dubbing sector in Québec shows a particular kind of construction and instrumentalization of the concept of "language" as it is related to the complex intertwining of national identity, its mediatic representation, technological means of production of those representations, and labour issues linked to the technology currently discussed. I argue that linking Québec's representation in film and television in the age of AI with prophecies of AI's impacts on the dubbing sector constitutes a cultural and economic performativity of "language" as a *voice of* and *for* cultural workers. In other words, for dubbers, language is presented as both their means of production (their voice as a tool for acting) and their means of mobilization (their voice as an abstract spokesperson, for mobilizing workers internally within the profession and externally toward the public and relevant stakeholders).[7]

Finally, I will discuss AI language and its critique through two film case studies. Analyzing Sandra Rodriguez's *CHOM5KY vs CHOMSKY* (2023) and Carme Puche Moré's short film *My Word* (2023), the goal is to constructively problematize AI and film through

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5) Brian Welk and Tony Maglio, "This New AI Tool Could Have Made Joaquin Phoenix's 'Napoleon' Sound French," *IndieWire*, March 13, 2024, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.indiewire.com/news/business/ai-tool-joaquin-phoenix-french-napoleon-deepdub-accent-control-1234958496/.

6) André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, "Cinéma et numérique : les avatars d'une révolution," *Création Collective Au Cinéma*, no. 7 (2023), 17–50.

7) Güneş Ertan et al., "Social Networks and Strike Participation: A Dynamic Analysis of the Hollywood Writers Strike," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 59, no. 4 (2021), 1108–1130; Rafael Grohmann et al., "Worker-Led AI Governance: Hollywood Writers' Strikes and the Worker Power," *Information, Communication & Society*, June (2025), 1–19.

a focus on matters of linguistic agency. Observing that they both work as much with the automation of AI as against it, we will see how their work is embedded in a *generative critique* of AI. We can conceptualize this type of creative practice as a language game, as prompting and generating content with AI only seems acceptable within the context of this reflexive critique of the technology that is used. In this sense, the use of AI in the making of those two films — and its present analysis — is relevant to the broader discussion in which the use of AI intersects with language matters in filmmaking, linking the issues of generating voices and AI dubbing with other problems with this technology, such as biases in databases and the sociocultural situatedness of prompting.

How can this study of AI help us to revisit film materialism? If this question is primarily theoretical, the answer I propose is based on early reflections from ongoing ethnographic research. For almost two years, I have been observing independent French-Canadian filmmakers, their use of generative AI, and the numerous debates surrounding it. The description of how the local appropriation of these technologies is grounded in linguistic matters remains incomplete, however, as the chain of film production is complex, both industrially and geographically. Finding ideas, writing scripts, sketching storyboards, creating images and sounds, dubbing, and accomplishing other ordinary tasks in filmmaking practices with AI are ontologically different activities for a Québecois than for a French, an Algerian, a Senegalese, or any other Francophone user of AI-based applications. Those realities must be taken into account in the development, integration, and rejection of AI in cinema.

Where is Language in Materialism?

The matter of language has been addressed throughout the history of film theory. André Bazin wrote his classic essay "The Evolution of Film Language" as an existential reflection on the arrival of talkies and the possible correspondence between a technological revolution and an aesthetic one.[8] For Bazin, the matter of reflection on film language is *mise en scène* and montage, as they work differently with the medium of film in representing reality, continuously in the former case and fragmentarily in the latter. Christian Metz's early work, for example, in "Cinema: langue ou langage?", shifted from Bazin's existentialist critique to a structuralist semiology, theorizing language in cinema and describing its complex semantic structure.[9] It is this structure, present in montage, framing, and even in a more literal, spoken language, that forms the matter of theorization for Metz. Taking a big leap in time, we may stop at Lev Manovich's *Language of New Media*.[10] Manovich's "language" is not defined internally, as in structuralist approaches, but materially, in relating arts and media to the materials of computers, and to visual and information cultures. Language, here, is not only spoken or projected but also screened as part of the interface of new media.

8)   André Bazin, "Lʼévolution du langage cinématographique," in *Quʼest-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 1958), 63–80.

9)   Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971).

10) Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

"Materiality" and "language" are both polysemic terms, as shown in those examples. As defined by David Samuels and Thomas Porcello, language as a conceptual entity has often been studied, but its material embodiment and social embeddedness as sound (or script) have mostly been overlooked.[11] Inspired by Claire Kramsch's linguistic anthropology, this article understands language at four distinct levels: at the *cultural* level, as a symbolic system with its associated worldview and mode of expression; at the *pragmatic* level, as a frame of social performance; at the *interactional* level, as historical and subjectively situated performativity; at the *political* level, as it relates to technology, as a means of power and control.[12] The latter level is especially relevant to the materialist approach adopted.

Indeed, feminist scholars have long argued that the structure of language and its performativity reproduce power relations in society. Donna Haraway, for example, often refers to "political language," such as in writing, in order to theorize the forces of power in the hybridity of humans and technology.[13] The language of colonialism is translated in terms of modernism, for instance, through the co-construction of science, technology and society, in such concepts as "universal rationality," "common language," "new organon," "unified field theory," "world system," and "master theory."[14] In the visual field, Lisa Cartwright's Marxist/Althusserian-inspired materialist analysis focuses on the incorporation of the means of production into visual practices, i.e., on the apparatus and the place of the body in the material means of image production.[15] She and other feminist researchers in science and technology studies focus on subjectivity, pleasure, the body, and affect, rather than objectivity, knowledge, and professional practice, in the study of the visuality of science. Language, in this case, is criticized for its overwhelming cultural power: in science, knowing is often synonymous with naming.

This work can be related to several film materialist theories, which both descend from and depart from Marxist historical materialism, as seen in the work of Jean-Louis Baudry and Laura Mulvey. The most obvious filiation, however, is with Jean-Louis Comolli's critique of language.[16] Comolli's argument builds on both an economic and an aesthetic critique of Hollywood's hegemony: on the one hand, he argues that the rise of the talkies was motivated more by the internationalization of profits for U.S. companies than the valorization of national cultural values; on the other, the production of movies among a diversity of national languages was mainly modeled on one film language, following the commercial and formal norms of Hollywood. His discussion of "voice" in film history, based on this critique, addresses the problem of positionality within social structures but does

11) David Samuels and Thomas Porcello, "Language," in *Keywords in Sound*, eds. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 87–98.

12) Claire Kramsch, "Language and Culture," *AILA Review* 27, no. 1 (2014), 30–55.

13) Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).

14) Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

15) Lisa Cartwright, "Visual Science Studies: Always Already Materialist," in *Visualization in the Age of Computerization*, ed. Annamaria Carusi et al. (London: Routledge, 2014).

16) Jean-Louis Comolli, *Cinéma Contre Spectacle: Suivi de Technique et Idéologie (1971–1972)* (Paris: Verdier, 2009), 235–243.

not explore how actors incorporate the apparatus of sound technologies, as seen in feminist materialist approaches mentioned above.

To address the matters of language in AI-based filmmaking practices, this article borrows from the three materialist dimensions just identified: 1. the embodiment of technology and its political consequences for language; 2. the economics of film industries as they relate to the internationalization of production/distribution through the platformization of its practices, and their cultural consequences for language; 3. the aesthetics of AI-generated films and the performativity of subjective values through a critique of human-machine linguistic interactions. In the following sections, I will develop each of the three dimensions concerning language at the intersection of AI and filmmaking by associating them with the three problems related to AI and creation identified by Celis Bueno et al.: the problems of *automation*, *labour*, and *agency*.[17]

The Commodification of Voice and the Problem of Automation

For almost two years, I have been participating in several film organizations in Québec — including a film school, a studio, and a theatre — to observe the changes in filmmaking brought about by AI. During this time, I have witnessed many situations in which the use of AI was problematic on a linguistic level for the French-Canadian filmmakers I spent time with. When I first started, OpenAI had launched ChatGPT a few months earlier. The screenwriters I observed were experimenting with it, achieving poor results and a lot of frustration. The structure was not bad, but any speech, as dialogue, was very unrealistic. Québec's dialect, in terms of accent and regionalism, sounded clichéd. Moreover, when filmmakers started seeing AI-generated images on social media, many experimented with image generation. One filmmaker, while exploring Midjourney on Discord, found it difficult to write effective prompts to represent Québec. The "Plains of Abraham," for instance, just appeared as a generic historical battlefield instead of the landmark of Québec City.

The matter of language was most visible, however, when one filmmaker wanted to clone his own voice with AI. This filmmaker was an artist-in-residence at the independent filmmaking studio where I was doing most of my fieldwork. He had just graduated from college and was exploring new ways of making films. He experimented with ChatGPT to write his script and incorporated several AI and non-AI technologies to create original images. He wanted to explore sound technologies as well. At the time, the television show *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (Lucasfilm, 2022) had just come out, and many people in the film industry discussed how Disney collaborated with Respeecher to replicate the voice of James Earl Jones for the character of Darth Vader. Since his character was also a cyborg — a ghostly figure living in a digital version of the filmmaker's apartment — he wanted to give him a voice similar to Darth Vader. So, he decided to explore the tools of Respeecher.

The filmmaker faced significant aesthetic issues, as well as economic ones. First, to generate a voice with an accurate accent, he had to clone his own voice, which involved a

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17) Claudio Celis Bueno, Pei-Sze Chow, and Ada Popowicz, "Not 'What', But 'Where Is Creativity?': Towards a Relational-Materialist Approach to Generative AI," *AI & SOCIETY* 40, no. 2 (2025), 339–351.

great deal of work because it required recording long speeches with various intonations. This was particularly important for representing the specific accent of Montréal's younger generation, who celebrate their appropriation of the "franglais," a mix of French and English that is as much a cultural trend, influenced by today's dominance of U.S. popular culture, as it is a political stance toward Québec's extended history of French and British colonialism and recent debates between Québec and the rest of Canada over multiculturalism. In addition to the accent, in order to achieve the right emotional quality in the regenerated voice, the recording had to capture the emotions he intended for the output. Thus, cloning an actor's voice did not necessarily involve automating the process of creation, since he still had to direct his actor in his own recording. Finally, and most crucially, advanced tools were unaffordable for an independent filmmaker with a limited budget. Hence, he had to settle for cheaper applications than those used to clone James Earl Jones's voice. In sum, the proper expression of language in the voice he wanted to create, both in terms of accent and emotion, was only achievable through the interaction of his own voice and his actor's voice with the applications he used, which would generate a new voice by mixing those inputs with many other voices in its database. The filmmaker noticed that, ultimately, this investment can only be valuable if it is scaled up.

This example, together with the previous ones, show various language matters in the use of AI in filmmaking: generating dialogues in a script needed various iterations and reprompting to get past regional clichés and overgeneralizations; understanding the mechanics of AI tools was necessary to circumvent translation issues; and aesthetic direction and economical means were inevitable in cloning a voice with a French-Canadian accent. Those problems were not specific to using commercial AI applications in French, but for the filmmakers I observed, such issues seemed more frequent in this language than when they used them in English. Thus, many decided to write English prompts or find other ways to generate voices with Québecois accents. Moreover, many of those "technical" problems from 2022–2023 have been solved by new models and applications. Still, those technical solutions do not solve the main cultural and social issues that come with using AI: the appeal of those technologies is leading many creators to incorporate them into their creative workflow, even if it means reproducing the commercial and formal mode of production of social media and the Hollywood film industry. Instead of investing time in creating a single piece of work, AI automation enables the production of more content to share across various media, pushing creators to scale up and transform their artistic projects into mini-franchises.

The appeal of technology and the materiality of language, as just discussed, are not new, as they have been subjects of discussion throughout film history. Germain Lacasse, for example, addressed the role played by "lecturers"[18] in mediating the experience of silent film and its dispositif, arguing that lecturers were not just integrated into the apparatus of cinema alongside the cinematograph, but "introduced technology while combining local cultural elements: language, accent, practices, and context."[19] Later, when talking

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18) Also called "bonimenteurs" in Québec, similar to Benshis in Japan.

19) Germain Lacasse, "The Lecturer and the Attraction," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 189.

pictures arrived, language was seen as a barrier limiting the export of films, and so subtitling, dubbing, and reshooting were explored as translation solutions for overcoming it.[20] However, local audiences' desire to hear their native language boosted national and regional productions in France, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and India.[21] Even if this production mostly followed the hegemonic norms of Hollywood filmmaking, as discussed by Comolli, the global film industry was nonetheless somewhat diversified in the process.

Today, the appeal of AI is leading many filmmakers to walk a fine line between protecting the diversity of cultural expressions and exploiting the common language of cinema for economic gain. The embodiment of this tension is particularly revealing in the use of an AI voice generator, as cloning one's voice involves a complex balance between the politics of filmmaking and the automation of processes by AI. In the last case presented, for example, we observed that the generation of the character's voice was influenced by both the linguistic expression of a particular cultural identity, as embodied by Québec's younger generation's use of "franglais", and the adoption of Disney's film language, as seen through the influence of the infamous voice of Darth Vader. In such processes, voice is transformed into an *interactional commodity*, a product sold on the Hollywood model to perform any subjective identities through the interaction of one's voice and an AI machine. That is, only if you are willing to pay the price.

The Geography of AI and the Problem of Labour

In early March 2025, Amazon Prime Video launched a pilot program featuring movies and series dubbed in English and Spanish using AI technology. The program was framed as a matter of access for its Latin American audience: "AI-aided dubbing will help you enjoy titles that previously did not have dubbing available in select countries and territories."[22] Earlier during that same winter, the AI software company ElevenLabs, which specializes in AI speech synthesis, announced a partnership with the hybrid venture capital and film distribution company Lumiere Ventures to use AI to dub the French version of Sylvester Stallone's latest performance in the Amazon movie *Armor* (Justin Routt, 2024).[23] This project was framed as a tribute to Alain Dorval, the deceased voice actor who dubbed Stallone in France, whose voice would be recreated for the film. The former company claimed that artistic tradition and technological innovation can work together to preserve the audi-

20) Martin Barnier, "Réception critique et historique des technologies du son au cinéma 1," *Cinémas* 24, no. 1 (2014), 35–57.

21) Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2018).

22) Amazon Staff, "Prime Video Begins an AI Dubbing Pilot Program on Licensed Movies and Series," March 5, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/entertainment/prime-video-ai-dubbing-english-spanish.

23) "Lumiere Ventures et ElevenLabs collaborent pour honorer Alain Dorval dans le nouveau film de Sylvester Stallone," *ElevenLabs*, January 13, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025, https://elevenlabs.io/fr/blog/lumiere-ventures-and-elevenlabs-collaborate-on-sylvester-stallones-new-film.

ence's link with the beloved voice of Dorval/Stallone. Following both announcements, numerous articles, podcast episodes, and hundreds of Reddit comments emerged about those cases. While comments primarily focused on the "terrible dubbing" of both films and series, some general questions about the future of the industry were raised. Those experiments did not achieve AI's supposedly immense potential to lower the cost of the dubbing market and preserve original voices, but many commentators consider those objectives still reachable.

Those cases offer a glimpse of the material situation of AI in the dubbing sector, which must be considered in the already complex practice of dubbing in the film industry. Tejaswini Ganti has written extensively on the political economy of language in filmmaking within the Indian film industries, which are intertwined with international media industries, particularly Hollywood. The globalization of cinema is now transforming India, as foreign films circulate domestically and Indian films reach foreign audiences through digital media. These shifts are tied to a hierarchical restructuring of language by creative filmmakers and crew. English, Hindi, and dozens of other languages, which are cultural markers of class, education, and regional origin in India, are also integral to distinctive social practices and professional roles in the local film industries: scenario writing, dialogue writing, script reading/hearing, directing, acting, producing, and critiquing — all of these standard practices are influenced by language intelligibility and strategic orientation of speakers in the Indian marketplace.[24]

Moreover, Ganti argues that dubbing is not just about broadening audiences to global media but also about nurturing cultural connections with local audiences to preserve media value outside cultural centres.[25] This local connection with national cultures — and with multiple linguistic and cultural communities within nations — is built on top of a connection between film industries, such as Hollywood and Bollywood. In other words, translation is a process of domesticating foreign content, whereas localization is an integral part of globalization. While a studio might be making local stories into content exportable globally, this can only be achieved by making global stories local.[26]

Hubert Sabino-Brunette described a similar dynamic in the context of Québec, where cultural references are also added in the dubbing process to adapt foreign content for the Francophone public.[27] In his view, while localization contributes to the economic success

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24) Tejaswini Ganti, "No One Thinks in Hindi Here'; Language Hierarchies in Bollywood," in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, eds. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

25) Tejaswini Ganti, "Creating That 'Local Connect': The Dubbing of Hollywood into Hindi," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London: Routledge, 2021), 118–131; Tejaswini Ganti, "'English Is so Precise, and Hindi Can Be so Heavy!' Language Ideologies and Audience Imaginaries in a Dubbing Studio in Mumbai," in *Anthropology, Film Industries, Modularity*, eds. Ramyar D. Rossoukh and Steven Charles Caton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

26) Tejaswini Ganti, "Global Stories, Local Audiences: Dubbing Netflix in India," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian Cinemas*, eds. Zhen Zhang, Sangjoon Lee, Debashree Mukherjee, and Intan Paramaditha (London: Routledge, 2024).

27) Hubert Sabino-Brunette, "Le doublage cinématographique au Québec : quand la culture de la société d'accueil s'exprime dans des oeuvres étrangères," *Nouvelles vues : revue sur les pratiques, les théories et l'histoire du cinéma au Québec*, no. 19 (2018), 1–18.

of international movies, it also acts as a form of resistance to globalization at the cultural level. Adding local value to the original work erases elements of its initial cultural identity by replacing them with representations of local culture. In addition to this argument, the political, cultural, and economic issues of dubbing practices in Québec must be understood within a multidimensional geopolitical framework, as Canada is facing the cultural assimilation of the United States while Québec deals with the linguistic dominance of France in the dubbing market.[28]

Now, the automation of translation with AI technologies might allow for the export of films and series to increase their economic value, without the cultural localization of their content. The combination of these financial and cultural arguments is generally used to defend voice actors in the context of Québec. The Union des artistes (UDA), for example, which is the creative labour union representing most Francophone actors in the province, has made protecting voice acting jobs one of its main focuses in recent years.[29] The union's concern is as much cultural as economic, as expressed by one of its representatives: "Dubbing with artificial intelligence software represents a serious challenge, precisely because it's a sector that employs almost half of our members, but also because it touches on our Québec cultural identity."[30] In other words, what is lost in AI translation is not only local jobs but also the jobs of those localizing films and series for Québec's public.

Accordingly, the cultural problematization of dubbing with AI faces the same paradox as the domestication of films previously reported by Ganti, and even earlier by Comolli: to adopt political solutions to the issues faced by voice actors, it seems necessary for film and television representatives to leverage local frictions while framing them in global problems. It is precisely for this reason that UDA joined the United Voice Artists network, "a global coalition of voice acting guilds, associations, and unions that have united to pursue their shared goals" in the face of AI.[31] Moreover, in association with other creative labour unions in Québec, UDA recently launched the manifesto "Art is Human," which was signed by more than 3000 organizations and individuals. One of their principles is specifically joining issues of labour and culture:

> AI reproduces our social biases, perpetuates our clichés, and reflects dominant ideologies. It offers a skewed view of the world. It threatens the diversity of cultural expression and, as a result, the cultural sovereignty of Québec — its distinctiveness and even the place of the French language in our cultural landscape. For these reasons, art is — and must remain — a uniquely human endeavour. Only works creat-

28) Robert Paquin, "Le doublage au Canada : politiques de la langue et langue des politiques," *Meta : journal des traducteurs / Meta: Translators' Journal* 45, no. 1 (2000), 127–133.

29) Jean Siag, "Intelligence Artificielle: Sauvez La Voix," *La Presse*, June 22, 2023, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/2023-06-22/intelligence-artificielle/sauvez-la-voix.php.

30) « Le doublage avec des logiciels d'intelligence artificielle représente un sérieux enjeu, C'est un enjeu, justement parce que c'est un secteur qui fait travailler près de la moitié de nos membres, mais aussi parce qu'il touche à notre identité culturelle québécoise. » (translated freely with deepl). Jean Siag, "Intelligence Artificielle: Est-Ce La Fin Du Doublage ?," *La Presse*, April 7, 2023, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.lapresse.ca/cinema/2023-04-07/intelligence-artificielle/est-ce-la-fin-du-doublage.php.

31) "World Voice Professionals Speaking Up," *United Voice Artists*, 2025, accessed March 31, 2025, https://unitedvoiceartists.com/.

ed by human beings can and should be recognized as such under Canadian copy-
right law. [32]

Given this principle, the labour unions' campaign not only aims to amend Canada's Copyright Act but also to increase Canada's support for the UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. From this perspective, dubbing and other filmmaking practices that have language at their core strategically enter the political field. Indeed, unions and their coalitions strive to secure a proper place to protect actors' work and rights, rather than merely devising occasional tactics to circumvent Hollywood's global economic power.

Labour conditions in global economies, such as those in film and AI, result from complex interconnections among workers in the international division of labour, which intertwines with the production of local content. Amazon understands that, as it greenlit the AI dubbing of Stallone to connect its fans with a beloved artist who passed away. But a voice is one of the most powerful things to have, both literally and abstractly; cloning Alain Dorval's voice seemed more like an economic exploitation of his legacy than a cultural empowerment of his fans. While unions aim to empower their members, the menace of AI in Québec highlights a strategic battle between workers and their industry, occurring on the battlefield of language. Indeed, unions are increasingly turning to language to protect cultural identities and better represent their members. In this sense, voice is not only instrumentalized as a technical tool for actors' play, but also as a discursive tool for actors' representatives to negotiate and lobby for their rights. In a recursive logic, arguing for cultural diversity and defending the expression of French-Canadian culture through film and television dubbing becomes a way to protect actors' economic situation in Québec, which, in turn, will contribute to its cultural vitality.

The Artistic Critique of AI and the Problem of Agency

During my fieldwork, I collaborated with a filmmaking cooperative to help organize a series of activities that mobilized its members around a collective reflection on AI. One of the activities was a projection of AI-generated films in a local theatre. While programming the event, one film struck the co-organizers and me, since it was both made with AI and critical of its effects on the representation of diversity. Interestingly, it was also playful, critiquing AI through a kind of language game.

The short film, Carme Puche Moré's *My Word* (2023), used a text-to-image latent diffusion model to generate images that represent the identity of a woman narrator. As spectators, we observe the interaction between the narrator and a generative AI system tasked with creating an image of a doctor. Looking for an image that does not fall into clichés necessitates extensive interaction between the narrator's commands and the AI's visual iterations: not a male, but a female doctor; not a white doctor, but a person of colour; not an

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32) AQTIS 514 IATSE et al., "Art Is Human: Manifesto for the Protection of Authentic Creation," 2025, accessed March 31, 2025, https://lartesthumain.com/en/.

old doctor, but a young one, etc. Finding the correct language to describe the person she is looking for is essential to visualizing her "doctor" as "female," "black," "young," etc. According to Moré, the *mise en scène* of this categorization and the critique of the "implicit bias in technology" is also necessary "to be part of the debate on the unconscious biases generated by the patriarchal and colonial system."[33]

This critique, made by a Catalan filmmaker, seemed especially relevant to introduce to our fellow Québec filmmakers. Indeed, we live in a similar society, torn by a tension between the defence of one national culture and its distinctive language, and the harm this protection might bring to individuals from other cultures sharing the same territory. If cases of voice generation and AI dubbing highlighted the need to protect local cultures, the presentation of this film at our event was an invitation to reimagine our connections with other cultures on a global scale. The problem, however, is to achieve this reconnection through the materiality of AI technologies.

Another artistic critique of AI addresses this problem by confronting the broader issue of machinic representation of identity. In *CHOM5KY vs CHOMSKY* (2023), Montréal-based filmmaker and sociologist Sandra Rodriguez created an AI double of Noam Chomsky, nicknamed Chom5ky, with whom the spectator can interact: the goal was to converse about, with, and through AI by personalizing it with Chom5ky. One of the main problems raised in the exercise was to "reproduce" Chomsky's voice, including not only his way of speaking but also his philosophical reflections and linguistic theories. The filmmaker achieved this creation by using a large language model trained on generic Internet materials and Chomsky's specific digital traces. The idea was to create a balance in the interaction between the user and the machine through scripted and generated answers:

> While scripted responses help move the narrative forward at the right times, responses generated by a language model trained on Noam Chomsky's digital traces (interviews, writings, etc.) bring a certain degree of reflexivity, especially in those moments when the machine's inner workings are revealed to the audience.[34]

According to the producer of *CHOM5KY vs CHOMSKY*, interacting with a chatbot version of Chomsky, primarily through generated content, allowed for a form of reflexivity that revealed the materiality of the conversation system. This includes not only the machine's mechanics but also the role of its human interlocutor, who embodies the conversation as much as the AI system. This experiment aimed to motivate critical reflection among users, as people increasingly interact with generative AI chatbots that use similar language systems in their everyday lives. Interestingly, the producer also noticed that people have become more critical of the artwork since they have had more time to experiment with AI, such as instances of miscommunication between the chatbot and its user.

Both artists, Moré and Rodriguez, present complex arguments about the link between language, AI, and representation. AI is not approached as a universal model but is engaged

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33) Carme Puche, "My Word I Carme Puche Moré," *carmepuche*, 2023, accessed March 31, 2025, https://www.carmepuche.com/my-word.

34) Philippe Bédard, "How Does CHOM5KY vs CHOMSKY Work?," *NFB Blog* (blog), September 18, 2023, accessed March 31, 2025, https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2023/09/18/how-does-chom5ky-vs-chomsky-work/.

through the localization of language in the practices of creators and users/spectators, addressing the limits of representation with the tools they build and use. From this perspective, AI can still be seen as an attraction, but the revolution it might bring must be tempered. The aesthetic, cultural, and economic ramifications of work done with AI are localized in various ways, primarily through the interaction between a human (the user or the narrator) and a machine. Through a language game, the reflexive dispositive reveals the rules of the conversation and the deeper infrastructure sustaining it, such as the classification of social identities on the one hand and linguistic theory on the other. It is through this infrastructure that reconnection with others on a global scale must occur when AI is being utilized. Since a technology's infrastructure is usually transparent, an artistic critique is necessary to make its biases and limitations visible.

Indeed, AI's infrastructure is problematic. Emily Bender et al. discussed the dangers of overly broad language models, which, in addition to amplifying sociocultural biases, are programmed to probabilistically reproduce hegemonic ways of seeing the world.[35] As Dominique Cardon et al. describe, for AI designers, there's nothing too big to fit into the language of those models:

> While automatic language analysis pioneered the process of "embedding" words in a vector space, we are now witnessing a generalization of the embedding procedure that is gradually extending to all fields of application: networks become simple points in a vector space with graph2vec, texts with paragraph2vec, films with movie2vec, the meaning of words with sens2vec, molecular structures with mol2vec, and so on. In the words of Yann LeCun, the ambition of the designers of connectionist machines is to put the world in a vector (world2vec).[36]

From this perspective, an infinite world embedded in a mathematically ordered space is possible, but what about the limits of AI situated in the world?

As shown in the two cases presented above, AI is problematic because its technological infrastructure is built on partial and biased social structures, and because it is increasingly embedded in everyday practices. People have conversations with chatbots every day. Additionally, during my fieldwork, I have observed how the use of generative AI is mediated by platforms that host the tools filmmakers use. Indeed, many AI applications used by filmmakers are linked to social media, either directly on the platform or via a third-party service such as Discord. Creators discuss their personal experiments, examining what

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35) Emily M. Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big? 🦜," *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, (2021), 610–623.

36) « Si l'analyse automatique de la langue a été pionnière pour « plonger » des mots dans un espace vectoriel, on assiste aujourd'hui à une généralisation de la procédure de plongement (embedding) qui s'étend progressivement à tous les domaines applicatifs : les réseaux deviennent de simples points dans un espace vectoriel avec graph2vec, les textes avec paragraph2vec, les films avec movie2vec, le sens des mots avec sens2vec, les structures moléculaires avec mol2vec, etc. Selon la formule de Yann LeCun, l'ambition des concepteurs des machines connexionnistes est de mettre le monde dans un vecteur (world2vec) » (translated freely). Dominique Cardon, Jean-Philippe Cointet, and Antoine Mazières, "La revanche des neurones : L'invention des machines inductives et la controverse de l'intelligence artificielle," *Réseaux*, no. 5 (2018), 206.

other users have prompted, for example, and they reproduce these methods. We could argue that their practice is part of the broader "remix" culture often associated with digital media.[37] In this context, creation is mediated and, to some extent, appropriated by both users and machines. It is a social performance, acted by humans and AI technologies. The critique of the language of AI in filmmaking needs to address that voice is not just generated for synthesis and automated for dubbing, but also interacted with through AI systems. Users of the technology not only interact about AI, but also with AI, through a practice conventionally called "prompting." Seen as an interactional process integrated into sociocultural practices, "prompting" blurs "the line between conversational interaction and formal instruction."[38] Merging programming with natural languages, such as French or Catalan, contributes to the infiltration of computer infrastructures into diverse cultural sectors, and into human-machine interactions across multiple everyday practices. For users in diverse parts of the world, such as Francophone filmmakers in Québec, a critique of the cultural biases inherent in the systems they interact with in their filmmaking practices is necessary, as is an examination of their own position in the world relative to other cultures and their mediation through technology in everyday practices. If the critique of AI is an opportunity to re-evaluate humans' position relative to machines, it should also entail a re-evaluation of their position relative to others. [39]

Conclusion

Addressing the automation, labour, and agency problems of AI in filmmaking, we see that, along with the symbolic controversies surrounding this technology, there are material assemblages of actors that must be criticized. First, the new language in today's discussions of AI — such as synthetic voices, automated dubbing, and interacting chatbots — when integrated into cinema and related media, should not be framed as an evolution of the film language through the power of large language models. Shifting the perspective to how users incorporate AI tools into their language performance through creative practice reveals that the apparent neutrality of automation conceals unequal uses of AI.

In the first section, I have addressed the political relationship between film language, the language of AI, and a user's language by describing a scene observed in my field study, in which an independent filmmaker attempted to use a well-known AI voice generator software from the company Respeecher. I argued that using AI tools can transform voices into interactional commodities. Indeed, interacting with AI speech synthesizers using one's voice is a way to perform local identities within a mode of producing audiovisual content influenced by the cultural hegemony of U.S. film and media industries. If other scholars have addressed the power structures of embodiment in films, most famously Lau-

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37) Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

38) Sarah Burkhardt and Bernhard Rieder, "Foundation Models Are Platform Models: Prompting and the Political Economy of AI," *Big Data & Society* 11, no. 2 (2024), 6.

39) Hye-Kyung Lee, "Rethinking Creativity: Creative Industries, AI and Everyday Creativity," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 3 (2022), 601–612.

ra Mulvey in her critique of patriarchy as embodied in the "male gaze,"[40] the critique of AI voice synthesis must address the complex embodiment of voice within the assemblage of multiple human actors and technologies. While the younger Québec generation celebrates "franglais" as a political stance against conservative purity rather than a linguistic form of colonialist domination, a similar stance is emerging against the humanist dream of an "original" human voice: in cinema, voice has never really belonged to a person and has always been part of a film's apparatus, as a worker's labour has never been his own in capitalist economies.

Second, the role of language in the geography of AI was addressed through the case of dubbing, which exemplifies how actors use their voice to highlight their precarious economic status as workers in local film industries, even though they connect global media with local cultures. Accordingly, AI can be associated with an ongoing phenomenon throughout film history, or at least since the advent of the talkies, marked by a growing emphasis on the competition of developing global media in local markets. The interconnection of local sites of creative labour in the globalization of film production is also important, as dubbing and voice acting are just one type of work affected by AI within a long chain of production, distribution, and exhibition of films.[41] It is only through the description of those complex relationships that we can criticize the discourse of AI as an automation machine and a revolution for the film industry. It will also help us to situate AI in local contexts, where material conditions make labour an issue of cultural, economic, and political conflict. Dubbing is a site of dispute not only for employment reasons but also because it is a cultural practice that allows local actors to perform a diversity of identities within dominant global industries. At the institutional level, the problem of labour is rooted in the embeddedness of filmmaking in creative industries. However, labour is also a cross-sectoral problem, as the progressive reliance on technological tools for creation is infrastructurally linked to a platform economy.[42] In this economy, traditional networks are reconfigured to fit into the model proposed by platforms. The leaders in today's reliance on AI for automated translation are streaming platforms, such as Amazon Prime Video and YouTube. The tools they are now developing for their own production and diffusion needs will eventually be offered as new services. We need to see how they will affect both the dubbing sector's economy and the domestication of foreign films and series for local cultures.

Third, language is not only a matter of interpretation but of generation. As seen in two film case studies in which language is used as a generative critique of AI, interacting with generative AI systems is a distributed act of representation between humans and technology. However, even if agency is distributed, it is not shared equally between actors. Sandra Rodriguez's work reveals the apparatus that is usually invisible in AI, echoing Jean-Louis Baudry's famous critique of the impression of reality achieved through the integration of the subject in the apparatus of cinema.[43] The same is happening with chatbots, when the

40) Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6–18.

41) Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, eds., *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

42) Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

43) Jean-Louis Baudry, "Le dispositif," *Communications* 23, no. 1 (1975), 56–72.

impression of interacting with an actual artificial intelligence rather than a linguistic machine is gaining in realism, when the user is effectively integrated into the conversation. *CHOM5KY vs CHOMSKY* critiques this apparatus by revealing its material structure, including its technical mechanism and its institutional framing, the latter partially based on the control of information provided to the user of chatbots in the conversation. Inverting the balance of knowledge is a move toward shifting the power relationship between users and machines. Carme Puche Moré achieves a similar critique, but focuses mainly on the reproduction of ideology in AI-generated content. Without a user's reflexivity, AI would fall into patriarchal and colonial habits, embedded in linguistic categories inferred from biased databases.

The latter problem is linked to the critique of AI by Jonathan Roberge and Michael Castells, who framed the language problem of AI as its quest for agency: AI represents the world, through its categorization and indexing of language, but it also intervenes in it, through the integration of language models in applications, such as recommendation systems, and now most commonly in chatbots.[44] In other words, AI produces meaning, but it also performs actions. We have seen throughout this article how this plays out in filmmaking practices: AI is not just an abstract generator of voices, but is used to perform specific identities in the creation of accents, idioms and emotions present in language; AI is not just automating translation, but cutting economic investments in cultural adaptations; AI is not just generating conversations, but interacting with individuals, situating subjective and historical performativity within broader ideological frameworks. AI might be a technological innovation, but all those observations connect with critiques made by film materialists in the past. The matter of language is just translated into a new symbolic system.

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44) Jonathan Roberge and Michael Castelle, "Toward an End-to-End Sociology of 21st-Century Machine Learning," in *The Cultural Life of Machine Learning: An Incursion into Critical AI Studies*, eds. Jonathan Roberge and Michael Castelle (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 1–29.

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Biography

Maxime Harvey is a postdoctoral fellow at the Research Chair on Francophone Artificial Intelligence and Digital Media. He studies the adaptation of the audiovisual sector to artificial intelligence technologies and the cultural issues surrounding their use. He is generally interested in the appropriation of digital media and technologies in the context of creative practices.

Email: harvey.maxime.3@courrier.uqam.ca