

Arthouse Impersonations and Artificial Backbones

On Piotr Winiewicz's "About a Hero"

By Sergiu Inizian

Cinematic works function in a world of specifics. When filmmakers shoot a film, they construct a reality around accidental or deliberate images and visions. Incorporating them is an active choice that shapes the experience and its reception. Over the years, a filmmaker's sensibility can become recognizable, even iconic. Their visuals, characters and spaces become an extension of their personality, especially if their temperament takes them to a larger-than-life status.

Werner Herzog is one such filmmaker. His films are massive endeavors that explore humanity's arrogant ambition and our capacity to stare into the unknown. Despite directing both fiction and documentaries, and adjusting to various genres and budgets, his films possess a certain enigmatic quality that draws in the audience, regardless of the subject matter.

As AI technology emerges as the next ominous step in cinema, filmmakers are asking what will remain of agency, authorship and originality. They also question what will become of the specific methods that have enabled certain directors to leave a vast cinematic legacy. Piotr Winiewicz's experimental film "About a Hero", for which the director prompted an artificial intelligence program to write the screenplay, offers a vision of cinema in which the specific quirks and inclinations become a blueprint for impersonation. Posing as a documentary made by Herzog, the film seeks answers about Dorem Clery, a German factory worker who died in mysterious circumstances.

For his debut, Winiewicz trained an AI on Herzog's films and even cloned his famous voice. From the outset, the Polish artist tells his audience not to trust their eyes and ears, as some aspects of the narrative were generated with the assistance of AI. One final message stands out, written in red: "Good luck." It posits cinematic reception as a gamified experience, challenging us to guess what is real and what's not.

The illusion of a documentary then unfolds in a faux-Herzog style. Grandiose shots of factories and smoke set the scene for the investigation, while a strikingly similar voice introduces the viewer to Clery. Winiewicz stages interviews with real actors; however, the stilted dialogue lends the experience a flavorless quality. The documentary aspect of the experiment falls apart as the filmmaker clearly states from the get-go that the narrative is not real. In a sense, the "investigation" has no purpose other than to explore AI, which becomes apparent quickly. This stands in stark contrast to Herzog's own non-fiction works, which portray humans risking their lives against nature's most menacing incarnations.

As the sense of documentary fades, it becomes clear that AI has little understanding of non-fiction sensibilities. Documentary filmmaking is about actively seeking subjects in reality, focusing the lens on urgent matters without the embellishments of fiction filmmaking. Non-fiction films stem from the conscious decision to depict the world as it is. While this form of expression is not insulated from fictionalization, AI imagery originates from a label-based system that generates worlds rather than observing them. Throughout "About a Hero", reality and the

recording of reality are simulated in discussions that have a human face but an artificial backbone. The result is an experiment that gradually becomes absurd, even laughable.

The filmmaker is aware of this nonsensical aspect and stages meta moments in which Herzog's voice questions the project's direction and meaning. Winiewicz even creates conversations between Herzog and Kaspar, his ambitious programmed screenwriter. The AI refuses his direction and takes over, becoming some sort of HAL 9000 of film. Yet the viewer assumes that Winiewicz is in control. His meta inserts deconstructing the script start to contrast with the main storyline, in which the sentient computer The Infinity Machine, which might have killed Clery, increasingly becomes the focal point. Muddled in ambiguity, the film's alarmed attitude towards AI fades, allowing the mockumentary style to emerge. Although it remains uncertain whom or what it is mocking.

It's still unclear to me how much Herzog approved of the use of his image in "About a Hero". We hear a tape of his voice agreeing, yet the film issues warnings about its own audio-visual expression. His perspective is completely lost in an experiment that appropriates his work and voice. The viewer even gets to see his deepfake avatar being humiliated on a virtual TV show – a scene that casts an unfavorable vote in the debate over AI in cinema.

Winiewicz's attitude towards cinema in the age of generative images remains vague, but it feels cynical. While Herzog's work is not reproduced in this piece, it shows how arthouse film is distorted within the flattened world of artificial intelligence. Within this twisted logic, the artificial image of an established cineaste is seen as having no stance, allowing supplemental imagery to flood the space.