

# Midjourney, Jodorowsky, and the end of reality. Artificial Intelligence as an animating technology

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## ABSTRACT

By the end of 2022, social networks started sharing collections of sophisticated images accompanied by suggestive comments as if they belonged to a forgotten past: photos of interrupted filming, lost ancient movies, modern traditions recreated in archaic settings, etc. However, these astoundingly realistic images were but simulations generated by the Midjourney AI, with which users can design pictures from textual descriptions. This article focuses on two series of images devised by Johnny Darrell to recreate a non-existent film: *Jodorowsky's Tron* (2022), as if the Disney film was directed by the visionary Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky. If Disney's *Tron* was known for its pioneering incorporation of computer graphics to recreate the inner world of the computer, the new simulations not only point to how AIs imagine the native environment of the AI but, unexpectedly, we may be seeing the preview of what the next-generation films will look like. Although these stylized visions of science fiction to come are, by the moment, just pictures and not *movie* pictures, they help us reflect on AI's implications in the visual arts and, specifically, about the generation of images that re-create alternative history lines. Likewise, the essay explores Mark Langer's suggestions in his article "The End of Animation History" (2002) about the critical moment that the traditional definition of animation – as opposed to live-action cinema – was going through at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, we will examine how the AI simulations propose a new scenario for our structure of reality.

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## 1. Introduction

This essay is about things that do not exist.

Or rather, about things that could have existed, as they could have been imagined, but only now start to become visible.

About a year and a half ago, I started checking frequently the posts on Midjourney's Facebook page. I would spend days looking on my phone at those posts by artists who used AI to create these fascinating images. One day, as I fell asleep slowly in a waiting room, I saw a kid sitting before me. My first thought was to count the fingers in his hand. It is possible that this was what was hidden underneath Goya's *Caprice*: "The sleep of reason produces monsters." As fantasy draws attention over itself, the simulacrum of futility goes unnoticed.

The truth is that imagination has never threatened our structure of reality so much. In this realm, not only the worlds that catch our attention because of their fantasy and impossibility come together but also those that present a paradox about a possible impossibility.

Taking these words literally – a *possible impossibility* – this essay is essentially about animation. According to Alan Cholodenko, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of those technologies that define an epoch due to its *animating* ability.<sup>1</sup> The same way it happened with clocks' mechanisms, photograph cameras or cinematographic machines, animating technologies set up patterns with which human beings can compare themselves: "'Today' is the era of the computer, an era in which the computer models the human, as the steam engine did before that, the clock before that, and the clay pot or spindle even before that" (Cholodenko 2015:33). Notwithstanding, as Ortega y Gasset stated emphatically, "Without technique man would not exist now and never would have" (2000[1933]:13), as humankind's relationship with technology has nothing to do with adapting to the environment, but about transforming the environment to the subject's very own reality (Sanchis Matoses 2014:188).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chronophotography made visible the invisible. Before Eadweard Muybridge published his photographic series of galloping horses, it had never been possible to examine thoroughly what lies hidden from the eye because of its speed. Photography established a brand-new relation towards images, an image created by a machine capable of setting an indexical relationship with what is real: what registers its objective is linked to a specific time and space. As Leland Stanford proclaimed when Muybridge's photos were flagged as falsifications, "the machine cannot lie" (Shaffer 2021:0:50:29).

Cameras cannot lie, but they reopen the question of how humans relate to what is visible. Film cameras, with their ability to manipulate time and animating capacity, postulate other chimeras. As Jean Epstein remarks in *Intelligence of a Machine*,

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<sup>1</sup> "all technologies, for me themselves animators, do, especially epoch-'defining technologies.'" (Cholodenko 2015:31).

“the cinematograph [...] precisely describes a world that starts from the end and advances towards its beginning, an anti-universe that, since then, mankind could barely depict” (2015[1946]:8). That ‘barely’ is significative, as only when the animation device’s motion is turned upside down – by making the pages of a folioscope or the mirrors of a praxinoscope spin – humanity could make that ‘anti-universe’ visible.

Cinema, as *animated photography*, reveals what is invisible to the eye. Epstein considered the cinematograph machine as “a robotic brain which was not intentional nor strictly commanded to perform an identical job to the living organ [the eye]” (2015[1946]:105). This way, Epstein opposes organic thinking to “mechanic thinking,” whose main capacity is that of structuring our relationship with time and space:

The cinematograph is in itself an experimental device that builds – that is, that conceives – an image of the universe; [...] It is just that this trick photography is extremely related to the procedure with which the human soul generally creates an ideal reality. (2015[1946]:109)

In the digital era, the ability to create images without starting from a model, without taking a picture or without sketching it first, being based purely on a brief verbal description – a ‘prompt,’ something that could be essentially done also by an AI – not only redefines our concept of the creator artist, but reality itself.

There is a broad consensus about how there has never been so vast the possibility to rewrite reality and, therefore, for mass deceit. Indeed, we did not need computers to conduct a simulacrum – what Jean Baudrillard described as the image that marks and denatures reality.<sup>2</sup> Photomontages emanating from many dictatorial regimes, aimed to lead public opinion and perpetuate their power, quickly come to mind. However, what has changed in the last decade is that, because of digital technology, what was only possible for a few now is in the hands of everybody (Venegas Ramos 2023:35-36).

As I write this text, in April 2024, the last beta version of Midjourney is the v6, widely applauded for being more versatile and realistic than its precedent, v5.2. AI-generated images are no longer found in some dedicated social platforms, where they can be easily identified, but *everywhere*. We see pictures of Rita Hayworth or Grace Kelly on the Internet with a high level of definition and color that we could not have before; photo albums of charming houses combine pictures of buildings that exist and those that do not exist. Park benches with unthinkable shapes, Third World kids that assemble all kinds of gadgets made of bottles, or swings shaped like

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<sup>2</sup> “Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.” (Baudrillard 1995[1981]:6).

giant cats challenge our credulity daily. Perhaps, in the face of deception, there only remains patient observation, the expertise to detect the inconsistent, oneiric detail: never a one-year-old baby and four kittens looked at once at the camera.

The idea behind this article was provoked by a series of images created by the designer Johnny Darrell using AI Midjourney: *Jodorowsky's Tron*, divided into two collections. These photorealistic images suggest how a film that does exist (*Tron*, Steven Lisberger, 1982) would have been if it had been filmed by Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowsky and its hypothetical second part.

Before becoming a cult filmmaker, Jodorowsky founded the Panic Movement alongside Fernando Arrabal and Roland Topor. The Panic Movement proposed a dialogue with Surrealism and aimed to re-structure reality through the imaginary. In my view, the acts of psycho-magic that the Chilean advocates are an attempt to transform one's reality through symbolic acts.

Johnny Darrell's *Jodorowsky's Tron* combines the stylized world of the Disneyan *Tron* with the stylistic traits of the legendary filmmaker, evoking his 1960s works *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (*La montaña sagrada*, 1973). Darrell also integrates elements from Jean Giraud's (aka Moebius) art into Jodorowsky's universe, evoking the French artist's participation in Jodorowsky's adaptation of *Dune* (1974-1976), a project never filmed.

In the course of this article, Johnny Darrell's simulation provides a case study that illustrates the idea of *the end of reality*: just as Mark Langer suggested in 2001, movies and animation share so many means that they can no longer be defined as opposites to



**Figure 1.** *Jodorowsky's Tron*. Johnny Darrell and Midjourney, 2022. Source: [https://www.johnnydarrell.com/jodorowskystron?fbclid=IwAR1OzqA-BUP-2tNuYhbDBCtBM8I\\_Gi\\_aIVxUK1X8yOjXr64MI2XWM7d0zY7M](https://www.johnnydarrell.com/jodorowskystron?fbclid=IwAR1OzqA-BUP-2tNuYhbDBCtBM8I_Gi_aIVxUK1X8yOjXr64MI2XWM7d0zY7M)

each other — what would hypothetically lead to the end of the history of animation —, AI-generated images propose a new scenario of what is real that will gradually cease to oppose its simulation, forcing us to redefine our structure of reality.

## 2. Animating technologies

This is also an essay about unexpected convergences.

If Steven Lisberger's *Tron* was a milestone for incorporating computer graphics into cinema to recreate the inner world of a computer, *Jodorowsky's Tron* is paradigmatic because it allows us to glimpse how AIs imagine their native environment.

At its release, *Tron* elaborated on one of the key elements facilitating users' interactivity with computers: videogames. The possibility of participating in a graphic story, driving a character, or overcoming an intelligence challenge redefined how we relate to a technology that soon shared with us the domestic sphere.

*Tron* also evoked the paradigm of the origin, the foundational milestone that led to the implementation of digital technology in cinema, although not even the filmmakers themselves believed in its continuity. In an interview with *Metal Hurlant* magazine, Steven Lisberger expressed his reluctance to accept that *Tron* could change the way movies were made at the time: "It was said very lightly that this film was the first in a series of computer animations... I don't think so at all. *Tron* is and will remain unique" (Manoeuvre 1983:48). For a couple of decades, Lisberger's skepticism proved to be correct: as Andrew Housman (2023:s/p) describes, while another landmark film in techno-fantasy cinema featured a mere 40 seconds of CGI – *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) – and a later movie as praised as *Terminator 2: The Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) had up to 5 minutes, in *Tron* there could be seen up to 15 minutes of film involving computer-generated visual effects. Undoubtedly, the fact that *Tron* had a very lukewarm critical and public success at the time of its release – in relation to its production costs – meant that its immediate influence was scarce.

In addition, *Tron* remained unique in its genre because Hollywood was slow to manage the film's innovative character and acknowledge its legitimacy. In 1983, *Tron* was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Costumes and Best Sound but was disqualified for the Best Visual Effects category because, according to Lisberger, using computer effects was considered "cheating" (Housman 2023:n/p), even though the vast majority of visual effects present in the film were analogical – the same effects for which the Academy had previously awarded prizes.

Currently, many film festivals are disqualifying films for using AI in their production. In contrast, others try to regulate its use by quantifying the percentage of the movie in which it is used, deriving its participation into specific categories. Clearly, AI will not only transform our vision of art and the artist – as when photography emerged –

but will also demand regulation and criteria to value the art that comes from a machine. Although it is not the only automatic-learning-based image generator, Midjourney has become one of the most representative AIs, together with DALL-E and Stable Diffusion (Wankhede 2024). Midjourney was in closed beta for months until a public beta that began in July 2022 granted access to other users.

Artificial intelligence can create digital art in seconds, using just a few words describing the desired image. Midjourney is an example of generative AI capable of transforming words into images, known as ‘text to image.’ This process is based on two learning technologies: firstly, ‘language models’ are based on words, and the first learning technology allows it to understand the concepts introduced as prompts. Once this prompt is converted into a numerical vector, another complex process begins, guided by the second learning technology used by Midjourney: ‘diffusion.’ In a diffusion model, the computer gradually adds random noise to its image-training data set until it learns to recover the original image by inverting the noise. Calvin Wankhede describes it using the following terms:

When you enter a text prompt like “white cats set in a post-apocalyptic Times Square,” it starts off with a field of visual noise. You can think of this first step as equivalent to television static. The image doesn’t look like anything you’ve asked for at this point. However, a trained AI model then uses latent diffusion to subtract the noise in steps. Eventually, it will yield a picture that resembles objects and ideas in the real world. (2024:n/p)

In a way, the rough process with which Midjourney generates the images, *finding* them in the machine’s noise, the world’s noise, and the internet’s bustle, is by itself an animation process that feeds back on the digital image itself. Digital art, in the Internet era, is conditioned by *hypermediation*: the “processes of exchange, production and symbolic consumption that take place in an environment characterized by a large number of subjects, media and languages technologically interconnected in a reticular way with each other” (Scolari 2008:113). Nowadays, this condition of digital interactivity has made creating elements from scratch an exception because, as a rule, we start from existing material; in this way, artistic creation is fed on the image, digitized, and transformed into pixels.

Consequently, media content – none other than the content with which AIs work – has become “much more self-referential because, when all objects are designed, stored and distributed using a single device, it becomes much easier to appropriate the objects that are already there” (Venegas Ramos 2023:68). This situation is what facilitates the bloom of crossover contents in AI art: through the premise “what if?”, what is privileged in digital art is the playful exchange between different artistic and cultural legacies.

### 3. The memory of discarded futures

Isaac Asimov's science-fiction story *The Death Past* (1956) posed the existence of a machine that enabled the visualization of scenes from the past, although its range was barely more than a hundred years in time. However, this machine hid the danger of a voracious addiction: that of abandoning oneself to the contemplation of a more recent past, as in a television, seeking refuge in the memory of better times. By ingesting existing data, the AI machine re-animates what we consider history and contributes to its re-reading.

On November 23, 2022, Johnny Darrell first published a collection of 38 images under the slogan: *Walt Disney presents Jodorowsky's Tron*.<sup>3</sup> Two days later, he released his second collection, *Jodorowsky Tron 2*.<sup>4</sup> Both series of pictures had a significant impact, even on an audience that was not particularly familiar with new technologies. Darrell's work caught the attention of the international press and boosted the production of new collections that fed on nostalgia and cinephile mythomania.

In the weeks following the publication of Johnny Darrell's *Jodorowsky's Tron*, it was possible to find numerous series of images presented in deliberately hazy terms as if they were photographs of failed shoots and yet, desirable to our imagination: for instance, a *Little Nemo in Slumberland* directed by Terry Gilliam (Bruno Samper, 2022),<sup>5</sup> or a film that resembles *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) as if it had been conceived by Fritz Lang back in expressionist Germany (Dekomposer Artz, 2023).<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, it was possible to provide some movement to the images, suggesting head turns and facial expressions, such as those seen in the fake trailer of *The Lord of the Rings* directed by Wes Anderson (Curious Refuge, 2023).<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2.** Terry Gilliam's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. Bruno Samper and Midjourney, 2022. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialMidjourney/permalink/455451300079773/>

<sup>3</sup> Available in : [https://www.johnnydarrell.com/jodorowskystron?fbclid=IwAR1OzqABUP—2tNuYhbDBCtBM8L\\_Gi\\_aIVxUK1X8yOjXr64MI2XWM7d0zY7M](https://www.johnnydarrell.com/jodorowskystron?fbclid=IwAR1OzqABUP—2tNuYhbDBCtBM8L_Gi_aIVxUK1X8yOjXr64MI2XWM7d0zY7M)

<sup>4</sup> Available in: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialMidjourney/posts/454166656874904/?mibextid=HsNCOg>

<sup>5</sup> Available in: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialMidjourney/permalink/455451300079773/>

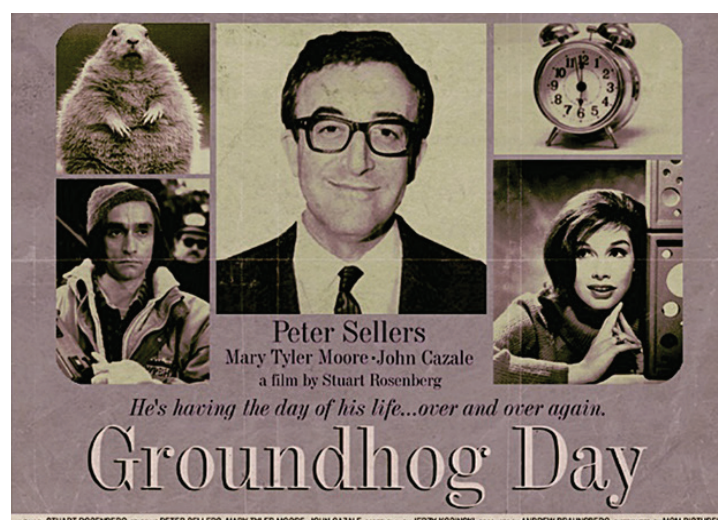
<sup>6</sup> *Hellraiser Metropolis 1927 Inspired* | Fritz Lang (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG2yPibwDYk>).

<sup>7</sup> Lord of the Rings by Wes Anderson Trailer | The Whimsical Fellowship ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrjL\\_TSOFrI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrjL_TSOFrI)).

Pictures that bring up a hypothetical past or reinvent existing imagery have been anticipated by photomontage and by the artistic interpretation that feeds on the idealization of the past – for example, Pre-Raphaelitism or even the Italian Renaissance. However, it has expanded considerably in the digital world as a phenomenon. A distant relative of these Midjourney collections is worth mentioning: the *mondo* posters, which are the creation of classic cinema posters or popular films by contemporary artists. The idea of offering an alternative vision of the film became seminal for some creators, such as Peter Stults, who published in the 2010s several collections of posters under the slogan “*What if...*” *Movies reimaged for another time & place...* His poster designs of contemporary films, mischievously disseminated through blogs and websites, suggested alternative casts and directors as if they had been shot in another era:<sup>8</sup> for instance, how would *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) have looked like if it had starred Peter Sellers in the 1960s? Or would it have been possible to see a young Natalie Wood in a vintage version of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009)?

Digital art has encouraged new readings of the past, which materialize through *remediation*: the reuse of previous content (more aggressive in digital than in analog media), the creation of *retroplaces* (stereotypical images that embody the spirit of an era for the public); the *pastiche* (the collection of media content superimposed in layers, such as mosaic, collage or photo-bashing); and the production of *ectypes* (a replica taken from the archetype, but never original or authentic). The relationship of indexicality that the photographic image had to reality disappears when it is combined and superposed with other images, aiming to provide verisimilitude – the quality of seeming real – to what is represented to favor the immersion of the spectator (Venegas Ramos 2023:52). Remediation connects deeply with those non-existent versions of films that, however, invite us to dream.

We can return to Peter Stults’ photomontages to illustrate the impact of remediation: because of their graphic style, many of these designs could have been made exclusively by analog means such as collage; however, the conceptual process that these images contain, which has to do with *uchrony*, is attained by the reuse of contents previously available on the net.



**Figure 3.** “*Groundhog Day*” *What If...?* Poster  
© 2012 by Peter Stults. Source: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/2783319/What-if-Movies-reimagined-for-another-time-place>

<sup>8</sup> First collection published in 2011, available in: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/2783319/What—if—Movies—reimagined—for—another—time—place>

The ectype, of which Deepfake is an example (when the image of a person is used to generate an image that pretends to be real) conforms, in Venegas Ramos' opinion, "a new historical realism completely photorealistic that questions what we consider real or not. In fact, there are many who have seen this technology as a threat" (2023:73-74). Ectype, which refers to the copy extracted from a relief mold or the impression left by a stamp, is a term coined by Luciano Floridi to describe a kind of copy with a unique link to the original, although it is not authentic. Taking a case study as a starting point, *Microsoft's Rembrandt* – a portrait of the Dutch master digitally extracted as an average of all his known portraits – can establish two classes of ectypes, taking into consideration their relation to their source: ectypes that would be 'authentic' in style and content, but not 'original' according to their archetypal source; and, on the contrary, there are ectypes 'original' in style and content, but not 'authentic' concerning their source: "In other words, ectypes can be authentic but unoriginal artifacts, like Microsoft's Rembrandt, or inauthentic but original artefacts" (Floridi 2018:319). An ectype that is original in style but inauthentic would be *JFKunsilenced* (2018): the synthesized voice of John Fitzgerald Kennedy's reading the speech he was scheduled to deliver on the very day of his assassination in 1963; although the *content* of the speech is genuine, the *form* – JFK's voice – is inauthentic.

Sergio Martínez Luna describes the Barthesian dialectical image as essentially different from the historical image: "the dialectical image disrupts the present because it makes unclosed pasts and discarded futures penetrate it [...] it is not the death of the image, [...] but the re-emergence of other histories and other lives of the image." (2019:136-137). To sum up, AI art poses dilemmas that are related to the rewriting of non-occurring pasts. When digital artists propose these apocryphal versions of films, remakes, crossovers, or interrupted shootings, they throw a stone into the pond of the collective imaginary that generates a fascinating mirage: that of reanimating the memory of discarded dreams.

#### 4. *Jodorowsky's Tron: an analysis*

*Jodorowsky's Tron* is not a film, and it is not by Alejandro Jodorowsky. It does not even articulate a narrative. Instead, it is an unstructured image set that revolves around specific iconographic and aesthetic motifs. What these images suggest is more important than what they contain. Nevertheless, they conjure up something that demands analysis.

What role would Jodorowsky play as the conceptual axis of this simulation? We must deduce that it is related to the cursed aura surrounding the Chilean director in Hollywood, which provides the excuse for creative speculations of all kinds. Besides, the link between *Tron's* and *Dune's* universe is none other than the

common participation of the artist Jean Giraud “Moebius” in its design. When Moebius was asked about *Tron*, a film for which he designed storyboard and costumes, the Frenchman replied: “*Tron* is a mythical universe where a rather classical story is told” (Manoeuvre 1983:51). In fact, the cosmogony from Disney’s *Tron*, with its social structure, its power struggles, its initiation rites and messianic dimension, is comparable to the conflicts found in *Dune*.

Frank Pavich wrote an opinion article for *The New York Times* based on *Jodorowsky’s Tron* entitled “This Film Does Not Exist.” In a tone reminiscent of Maxim Gorky’s mythical 1986 chronicle when he first contemplated the cinematograph – “Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows” (quoted in Cholodenko 2013:99) – the article starts with a feeling of disbelief and estrangement towards the images:

I was recently shown some frames from a film that I had never heard of: Alejandro Jodorowsky’s 1976 version of *Tron*. The sets were incredible. The actors, unfamiliar to me, looked fantastic in their roles. The costumes and lighting worked together perfectly. The images glowed with an extravagant and psychedelic sensibility that felt distinctly Jodorowskian.

However, Mr. Jodorowsky, the visionary Chilean filmmaker, never tried to make *Tron*. I’m not even sure he knows what *Tron* is. And Disney’s original *Tron* was released in 1982. So, what 1970s film were these gorgeous stills from? [...]

The truth is that these weren’t stills from a long-lost movie. They weren’t photos at all. These evocative, well-composed, and tonally immaculate images were generated in seconds with the magic of artificial intelligence. (Pavich 2023:n/p)

Significantly, the author of this chronicle, Frank Pavich, was the director of *Jodorowsky’s Dune* (2013), a documentary about Jodorowsky’s project on Frank Herbert’s saga that never got into a film.<sup>9</sup> After the success of *La montaña sagrada* in 1974, the Chilean filmmaker undertook with French producer Michel Seydoux an arduous task to design the project, in which he invested approximately two years of working together with those he called his “spiritual warriors”: the designers Moebius, Christopher Foss or H. R. Giger, and special effects artist Dan O’Bannon; Orson Welles, David Carradine, Mick Jagger and Salvador Dalí also signed up to be part of the cast, while Pink Floyd would have composed the soundtrack. Expectations could not have been higher.

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<sup>9</sup> Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afji2sfduqk>

However, Jodorowsky never filmed *Dune*. In his own words, “*Dune* was the arrival of an artistic and cinematographic god. For me, it was more than a film; it was a sacred object, free, with new perspectives, because I felt like I was in prison at that time” (quoted in Pavich 2013:0:03:31). He wanted to carry out the book’s prophecy and change the world, sharing with the audience a ten-hours long film that would provide the same hallucinogenic sensations as LSD (idem:1:12:32), which was considered unfeasible by Hollywood producers. In Jodorowsky’s opinion, his project “was French and not American. Its message was not ‘quite Hollywood’” (1984:39). Ironically, during the following years, the designs and storyboards made by Jodorowsky’s team became highly influential to the development of science fiction films during the 1980s, to the point that emblematic movies such as *Star Wars. Episode IV - A New Hope*, Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) – with designs by Moebius and H.R. Giger – or also Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1981) showed how much Jodorowsky’s *Dune* art book inspired them.

Jodorowsky hints at the key to its influence at the crossroads between science fiction and fantasy cinema in the late seventies: “The project taught Americans the possibility of making science fiction films on a large scale and outside the scientific rigor of ‘2001 Space Odyssey’” (1984:39). The setback experienced with *Dune* was balanced by two comic book sagas written by Jodorowsky: *El Incal* (1980-1988), designed by Moebius; and *La casta de los megabarones* (1998-2003), which the Chilean began with Juan Giménez. Ironically, while David Lynch’s subsequent *Dune* (1984) became a commercial failure, Jodorowsky’s shadow has lengthened to the present day: now Frank Herbert’s saga has returned to the big screen, and Hollywood is planning to film *El Incal* (Bas 2024:n/p). In the opinion of filmmaker Richard Stanley in Pavich’s documentary, “It [Jodorowsky’s *Dune*] will forever be the greatest film never made because it exists solely in our imaginations” (2013:0:06:15).

Johnny Darrell’s approach to Jodorowsky is not an isolated event in the hyper-mediated AI universe. Just a month earlier, on October 23, 2022, an anonymous author posted on YouTube a video montage from images synthesized with DALL-E and Stable Diffusion, showing realistic snapshots of the cast planned for *Dune*, with dresses, props, and sceneries alike to the artbook designs.<sup>10</sup> In addition, just one day after the publication of *Jodorowsky’s Tron 2* on Midjourney’s Facebook, Bruno Samper shared his version of the galactic epic generated by Midjourney, whose visual appearance was significantly closer to the vision that the same generative AI had offered of the hypothetical *Tron*.

In January 2023, when asking an AI (ChatGPT) about what the movie *Tron* would have been like if Alejandro Jodorowsky had directed it, I received the following answer:

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<sup>10</sup> Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qShRMiUggKE>

*Tron* is a science fiction film directed by Steven Lisberger and released in 1982. It is known for its innovative visual effects and its subject matter related to the digital world. The question of what *Tron* would be like if directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky is purely speculative, as Jodorowsky has a distinctive and unique style that differs significantly from the approach of Steven Lisberger, who directed the original version of *Tron* in 1982. Jodorowsky is known for his surreal, symbolic, and often experimental approach to filmmaking. His earlier films, such as *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*, are notorious for their unconventional storytelling and striking imagery. Had Jodorowsky directed *Tron*, we might expect a very different interpretation of the story, with visual and narrative elements that align with his distinctive artistic style. He might have explored more philosophical or esoteric themes, and the film would likely have had a unique production design and art direction sensibility.



**Figure 4.** Jodorowsky's *Tron 2*. Johnny Darrell and Midjourney, 2022. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialMidjourney/posts/454166656874904/?mibextid=HsNCOg>

as the visual effects used to recreate the computer world in *Tron: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, 2010) – but very little of the visual effects in Steven Lisberger's *Tron*. Pavich describes Darrell's proposal as follows: "The software gives you a kind of turbocharged pastiche. But there's still some fresh splendor in that imitation. It's succeeding at one of filmmaking's main jobs: transporting you to another time, to another world" (2023:n/p).

ChatGPT's response is thought-provoking since it does not point to anything concise, yet the set of images proposed by Johnny Darrell describes a very specific world. The simulations refer to a 1970s sci-fi imaginary environment that takes geometric patterns from a vintage era with pop resonances – as could also be seen in some environments of another stylized film, *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) – intertwined with aspects of dystopian cinema, such as the limited and cold chromatic range or the computer technology scenarios that today we feel obsolete, like *The Andromeda Strain* (Robert Wise, 1971). On the other hand, the settings are eerily imbued with the most modern possibilities of imaging technology, such

Moreover, the aspect that can be identified as most Jodorowskian comes from details akin to the director of *El Topo*. In fact, Darrell proposed this *Tron* as it was dated in 1976, the year when Jodorowsky's *Dune* was canceled (Bas 2024: n/p). ChatGPT's suggestion about exploring more philosophical or esoteric themes is hinted at in some images when the machine operators in Darrell's images are vaguely characterized as if they were monks or members of a sectarian cult. The symmetrical compositions, the hyperbolic costumes with spherical crowns – an evident wink to the initiatory eye in *The Holy Mountain* – or the tall wide-brimmed hat, the portrayal of characters as archetypes and, in general, the creation of an unreal and hypnotic space that is assumed to be the inner world of the machine as a metaphysical universe, are related to the Chilean filmmaker's imaginary to a certain extent. As Pavich points out, the AI artist determined the prompt, but “the creativity bubbled out of the machine”:

When Mr. Darrell generated these images, he didn't choose the colors, the framing, or what the characters would be doing. He also didn't determine some of the other choices that the A.I. program assimilated from 1970s science fiction: the seemingly all-white cast and the vintage gender roles. Whatever he might have had in his mind's eye was not what he was going to get. He needed to state his prompt cleanly and clearly. (2023:n/p)

Significantly, each image from *Jodorowsky's Tron* is purged of the obscene and transgressive elements from Jodorowsky's films; instead, they are conveniently aseptic and stylized. Perhaps the machine takes more into account that *Tron* is a Disney film than a potential Jodorowskian theme, so it avoids any allusion to the physicality that fascinates the Chilean so much: the effluvia of the body, putrefaction, mutilations, congenital malformations, sex, etc.

Or maybe not. The AI deliberately excludes the visceral part of Jodorowsky's style during the 1970s because this is also absent from another AI simulation, this one based on an existing work by the tarot reader: *Holier Mountain* (1975), an alleged sequel to *The Holy Mountain* designed by Martin Lien and published on December 4, 2022,<sup>11</sup> which essentially responds to the same aesthetic patterns that unfold in *Jodorowsky's Tron*.

Pavich denies Darrell the rank of the creator. Generating is different from creating. Although Midjourney provides control over many variables, the case study offers sad evidence: the hypermediated image needs to be harmless, emptied of any countercultural nuance, because it is mainly based on what can be found on the Internet, on what can be shared (and published).

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<sup>11</sup> Available in: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialMidjourney/permalink/460589052899331/>



**Figure 5.** *Holier Mountain* (1975). Martin Lien and Midjourney, 2022. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialmidjourney/permalink/460589052899331/>

## 5. Discussion: the end of reality

*Jodorowsky's Tron* was the starting point for reflecting on which direction to take. The emergence of digital animation at the turn of the century was another such watershed.

At the 2001 Society for Animation Studies conference, Mark Langer delivered his proceeding "The End of Animation History," a provocative reflection on digital animation in which he postulated that we had hypothetically reached the end of animation's history as it was defined in opposition to live-action cinema. In 2001, digital cinema had already given birth to works such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski Sisters, 1999), in which digital animation effects became the standard in major Hollywood productions. If, ultimately, live-action film – becoming less and less live-action – and animation cinema can no longer be separated as they had traditionally been, in opposition to each other, then the history of animation as a distinctive way of generating moving images – frame to frame – or as a unique way of suggesting what cannot be suggested by other means, had ended (Langer 2002:8). The author notes: "Rather than reveling in its own illusory nature, much animation now seeks to make the illusory "real" – in other words, photoreal animation is indistinguishable for the overwhelming majority of viewers from live-action cinema." (ibid. 9)

Langer coined his hypothesis taking from Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which developed about the interruption of the historical process at the end of the Cold War – after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of rivalry between opposing ideological blocs. In turn, Langer also considered Samuel Huntington's response to Fukuyama in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), where it was pointed out that historical conflicts do not take place between ideologies but between civilizations and that in the future, the battlefield will be between identities.

Taking this idea of historical conflict to how animation and cinema have traditionally been defined – “Liveaction is ‘not-animation,’ and animation is ‘not-liveaction’ (ibid. 9) – Langer describes how these polarized definitions leave a wide gray area behind in which, by technological means, animation is also real image, and real image is *also* animation, such as rotoscoping or photocomposition, until both media have become digitally imbricated.

In other fields of discussion, such as photography, experts agree that the indexicality of photography fades out when it is transformed into pixels (Martínez Luna 2019:20-21). On the contrary, media, as evidently graphic, such as cartoons, are now available to documentary cinema because, as soon as photorealistic images have seen their credibility eroded, animation finds a larger room in the realm of non-fiction film (Ehrlich 2024:19).

Moreover, this ontological shift in a genre devoted to objective reality reveals that we increasingly tend to describe reality in terms of fiction. In a trial, we listen to the *narratives* of each part; in describing a conflict, we speak of *actors*; and when we foresee possible situations, we call them *scenarios*. The hypermediated digital world has boosted this fluent exchange between reality and fiction.

At the same time, as Langer already commented 23 years ago, “Animation is on the verge of being able to both perfectly simulate the reality of live-action AND to make that which cannot be expressed in live-action real.” [...] “(and I believe that true photo-real animation is just around the corner)” (ibid. 10). Nowadays, that space for simulation has been occupied by AI, which technological DNA announces how it will animate the future. But this may also be the end of art history, or even the end of humanity's history, if what we take into consideration to define humanity as opposed to machines is our creative capability.

At the turn of the century, Langer pointed to a myriad of film titles such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2001), Peter Weir's *Truman's Show* (1998), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), and *The Matrix*; films that depicted the identity crisis of individuals who are confronted to an ambivalent scenery. As Langer points out, not all these films contained hyperrealistic digital effects. However, many of these relied on them – which, over time, have become a constant in the films of Fincher or Nolan. As well,

many films of today develop anxiety towards a kind of technology that threatens to replace us, such as Ari Folman's *The Congress* (2013), *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), *M3gan* (Gerard Johnstone, 2023), *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017) or even *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008). A crumbling structure of reality becomes evident from a fiction that questions itself, which exposes its limits. Virtual reality, augmented reality, the metaverse, Snapchat filters, and *Pokemon Go!* have only been mere tests. The simulation begins now.

Langer could not end his article without first approaching the scenario that, 23 years later, is happening every day: "But now, we are at a point where the animated image and the spectator are beginning to merge" (ibid. 11). Langer depicts how conversational programs, such as Microsoft's Cartoon Chat, allowed the users to become avatars and talk to each other through graphic signs and comic strips. Although Langer is talking about the interactivity of social networks and online video games released 20 years ago, he anticipated the possibility that a user, *any user*, generated graphic art in conversation with a robot.

And that *its* reality was as strong as yours.

That is what *Tron* was about, and that is what Midjourney has reminded us with Jodorowsky's *Tron*.

## 6. Conclusions

AI simulations such as Jodorowsky's *Tron* prove the need to evolve human thought to value the art produced within a machine. On one hand, for Frank Pavich, the art designed for Jodorowsky's *Dune* required mastery of drawing and painting techniques, while for the documentarian, it was the AI who did all the work in Jodorowsky's *Tron* (2023: n/p). On the other hand, for Dalí – in his essay "Photography, Pure Creation of the Mind" (1927) – machines free artists from physical limitations and open the possibilities of the imagination:

When hands cease to intervene, the mind starts to know the absence of murky digital flowerings; inspiration is extricated from the technical process, which is entrusted solely to the unconscious calculations of the machine. [...] New organic possibilities of photography! [...] grasping the most subtle and uncontrollable poetry! (Dalí quoted by Pou van den Bossche, 2023: 19)

AI art extends the idea of the readymade that the surrealists advocated for, whereby *anyone* could be an artist. The capabilities demonstrated by generative AI, particularly Midjourney, open up a stimulating landscape where users, regardless of their technical ability, can visualize the ideas they have in mind. This does not necessarily

displace the work of creative roles such as visual development or storyboard artists. Still, it does shorten the process of bringing a project to fruition, providing preliminary concepts, and facilitating workflow with the creative team.

We are only at the dawn of a new form of artistic expression: the audiovisuals edited from AI simulations do not yet reach the category of films because there is no structured narrative behind them, although this does not prevent us from thinking that one day we may take an existing or barely sketched script and shape it in a completely autonomous way. This possibility would not only reformulate the production of images but also their consumption, which, in fact, is already taking place.

Even though the simulations that make up *Jodorowsky's Tron* do not navigate deeply into the philosophy of the Chilean filmmaker, they allow us to (re)imagine a world populated by characters who face not only existential but spiritual dilemmas, going beyond the mere doubt with Cartesian echoes that could be heard in Lisberger's *Tron*: "Do you believe in the users?" The world of the machine, as an inner universe that reflects the world of the mind, offers a particular connection with the abstract spaces in which Jodorowsky's more metaphorical fictions unfold. However, this idea needs some clarification: the encrypted world of the computer is not the cryptic world of the psychomagician. The difference in meaning is enormous.

As we have seen in the case study, the algorithm does not interpret the artist's intentions but rather the material known and available to all. How Jodorowsky's work was selected, absorbed, and reinterpreted by the science-fiction filmmakers who followed him is essentially different from how the computer ingests and metabolizes his images. As Pavich suggests, "influence is not the same thing as algorithm." (2023:n/p). As aforesaid, with AI, any person can be an artist, but not just like any artist.

It could be discussed that the balanced statism in *Jodorowsky's Tron* staging, their *tableaux non-vivants*, not only obey the coldness with which the AI imagines its native environment – which, as in the Disneyan *Tron*, is visualized in a polished, stylized way – but a symptom of an art that is contemplating its birth, more alike to a wax museum than to the moving cinematograph that causes the same surprise as automatons and talking dolls and that, as Maxim Gorky would have said, "It is not life but its shadow, it is not motion but its soundless specter" (quoted in Cholodenko 2013:99). A silent specter, motionless but at the same time animated, neither alive nor dead, which leads us to the idea of the simulacrum:

Suggesting that there is always something 'inanimate' in animation and vice versa. What returns as the return, the automaton, neither (completely) dead nor (completely) alive, both alive and dead at the same time, is of the order of the simulacrum [...] – the illusion of life and the life of illusion. (Cholodenko 2007:503-504)

One last remark by way of epilogue: in 2013, Jodorowsky cried out before the *Dune* art book, “If I die, they can take this book and turn it into animation” (Pavich 2013:1:25:42). In January 2022, a group of cryptocurrency investors, under the common name TheSpiceDAO, acquired one of the original art books for the sum of \$2,9 million to produce NFTs from it, burning the physical copy and lately producing an animated film for which they went on to raise \$12 million (Westenfeld 2022: n/p). However, the initiative has led them to economic ruin and the dissolution of the group since they acquired the copy believing that, with it, they also acquired its copyright: they did not understand that, by buying the object, they did not automatically own the rights to produce and sell the film. The misunderstanding contains a profound irony that only provides evidence of the progressive fictionalization of reality: “In *Dune*, Herbert envisions a world without computers; as the lore would have it, “thinking machines” were once mankind’s greatest adversary. Maybe Herbert was onto something there?” (ibid.).

Will AI be able to carry out the visionary dreams of Jodorowsky, Orson Welles, and Oskar Fischinger, materializing their canceled projects that did not find a place in the reality of their time? Maybe one day, the version of *Dune* envisioned by Jodorowsky and his “spiritual warriors” will become a reality, but what is certain is that human beings will not be able to see it without an adequate ability to think.

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